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Media, Religion, and Culture:
Mediating Religion in the Context of Cultural Tension

“Movies, Mind and Meaning –
Studying Audience and Favourite Films”

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1. Introduction

Meaning construction outside traditional religion has become a vital focus of attention for religious studies and what individuals in the audience do with all messages circulated through media in everyday life has attended increasing interest within media studies (White 1997, Stout and Buddenbaum 2001, Schofield Clark 2003, Lövheim 2004). Motion pictures, soap operas, computer games or advertising are all examples of media contents which generate ideas among its audience which to a various degree are used as resources within the construction of identity (Jansson, 2001, Sjöberg 2002). The culture supplies worldviews. A “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” (Geertz 1973: 43).

The investigation of what modern humankind’s world views look like and what components they are composed of, in this context seems to be a topic of investigation (Holm and Björkqvist, 1996). The ways in which the development of media has effected the daily lives of individuals is of interest as is the nature of the self and the ways in which the process of self-formation is affected by the profusion of mediated materials (Thompson 1995, Hoover 2003, Rothenbuhler 2006). Stewart M. Hoover stress the capacity for popular culture to catch cultural elements deeply imbedded in society in a social and informal way. ”Modern myths of deep cultural meaning are thus expressed in such places as social gatherings and popular entertainment.” (Hoover 1988: s 102)


In the first part of this paper I want to make a short outline of some tendencies at the crossroad of film and religious studies. In the second part I present an example of a possible theoretical framework for interpreting meaning-making processes in the audience. In the third part I present some preliminary results from a Swedish case. In my study of audience reception of film and filmviewing habits I present some possible outcomes from personal interviews where 13 individuals with different socio-cultural background discuss their most appreciated and most important favourite film.

2. Film and meaningmaking

The intersection of film and religion is my interest within this larger frame even though the combination since long has been both problematic and intriguing. The topic is not exactly new but the combination of film and religion has during the last ten years resulted in a rapidly growing number of books by scholars interested in this field (Lyden, 2003). Film and religion is a kind of an awkward couple. Still in the middle of the 90s Joel W. Martin could reach the following conclusion while scanning critical studies of film as well religious studies hoping to find some models and tools for analysis of religious dimension in modern film. He was disappointed:

Scholars engaged in prevailing modes of film criticism have almost nothing to say
about religion. And scholars who study religion have almost nothing to say about Hollywood film. Instead of encountering an ongoing and stimulating dialogue about religion and film, I encountered silence. (Martin and Ostwalt 1995: 2)

Some exceptions has always been able to follow such as the theologian Margaret Miles, who inspired by cultural studies is one interesting example of a theologian in the middle of the 90s not afraid of being connected with Hollywood films as “The Whore of Babylon” while examining religion and values in the movies looking at film as ”one voice in a complex social conversation”. (Miles 1996: xiii) She emphasizes the need to study contemporary popular film as a transmitter of attitudes and values modern society. As a cultural critic she also understands film audiences as active interpreters of a film rather than as passive, helpless recipients of the information and values communicated through media. The development of the popular film industry coincides with tendencies in America during the 20th century where groups find ways to loosen the grip of churchly dominance and control. “Congregations became audiences as film created new public sphere in which, under the guise of entertainment, values are formulated, circulated, resisted, and negotiated.” (Miles 1996: 25).

At the millennium shift an increasing number of theologians are digging in the field of film and are taking a serious grip on what is projected on the screen with such titles as Robert Jewetts St Paul Return to the Movies, Bryan P. Stones Faith and Film, Theological Themes at the Cinema and Christopher Deacys Screen Christologies. Some also discuss the larger context about visual culture versus the written word. “It is an interesting question whether and when the visual text will supersede the written text as a source of religious ideas. Written text have dominated theological debate since the printing was invented.” (Marsh and Ortiz 1997: 42).

In recent years many initiatives has been taken in this field which has created a dynamic growth of new knowledge (Mitchell, 2006). Steve Nolan has presented an overview of a quite impressive sample of bookprinting in this area. (Nolan, 2003). One growing focus is on the role that films can and do play within the changing values and gradually evolving beliefsystem and in the West today (Marsh, 2004). Marsh’s point of departure is similar to my own. Viewers bring to a film life-experience, immediate concerns and worldviews and the exploration of this interplay between movies and the interpreting process of meaning making is the focus in this paper.

Another example of a deeper concern with meaning making processes by the audience of feature films in contemporary society is the multilateral research project launched by Martin Barker at University of Wales Aberystwyth. Barker is the director of the international Lord of the Rings Audience Research Project in Wales coordinating media scholars from 20 different countries set up to collect viewers response and the audience reception of the Lord of the Ring-sequel at the time of the release of LOTR, The Return of the King 2003. Some nordic scholars are committed to this empirical gold mine for audience research such as Ann Jerslev, Denmark and Hege Rosså from Norway.2

It is possible to group scholars along three lines of approaches to the study of religion in the media. Some are studying traditional religion when communicated through the mass media as mediated religion. (Linderman 1996, Lawrence 2002). Others dwell on representations of religion and religious beliefs imbedded in popular culture and media; religion in the media. (Jewett & Shelton

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1 As for the range of approaches Robert Jewett is undertaking a critical examination with an exegetical method interpreting several films dealing with central themes as shame, guilt and redemption, Bryan P. Stone takes the Apostles Creed and illustrates every part of the creed with a fitting film and Christopher Deacy is analysing the film-noir tradition with a focus on the American director Martin Scorsese and his films.

2 See http://www.lordoftheringsresearch.net/ Two volumes about this project are planned to be published 2007.
A third group explore the religious significance of ‘secular’ media practices from a ritual perspective and the function of media habits in contemporary society; *media as religion*. (Lyden 2003, Marsh 2004). In my case I want to focus film reception mainly according to the second of these three approaches. I have examined how individuals comprehend film and what the meaning process look like as well as how individuals interrelate comprehension of filmic content and their personal worldview and belief system.

3. A socio-cognitive theoretical framework

Theoretically, the semeiological model of Alf Linderman is combined with a socio-cognitive approaches used by a number of Scandinavian media scholars developing perspectives in audience theory (Linderman, 1996 and 2002, Höijer and Werner, 1998). I want to develop the theoretical model developed by Linderman in which he links together both social and individual components related to meaning making. “We need a theoretical model in which the process of signification is related not only to semeiological structures, but to social and individual agency as well. In short, we need social sem(e)iology.” (Lindeman 1996: 40).

With a starting point in the semeiological theoretical model my purpose is to discuss how the socially provided meaning system is treated individually as a personal repertoire of possible meanings, and how just some patterns of the repertoire are activated in the individual meaning making process. The semeiological model is apt to point out some expected meaning making process because of the individuals dependency of being socialised into a social context with a formulated belief system. At the same time the model has deliberately built in a component of genuine creativity without which the model would remain static and predictable instead of dynamic and capable of dealing with the unforeseen. “If it were not for this “internal” dimension, the construction of meaning could be reduced to a formula consisting of the text, the external situation, and the individual’s background and acquired signification competence.” (Linderman 1996: 55).

In order to develop a theoretical tool for this internal dimension I was inspired by Birgitta Höijers cognitive approach with her use of a cognitive psychological approach in her audience-oriented research. (Höijer 1990, 1995, 1998b, 1998c and 2000) She elaborated a schema-theory based tool from social cognition theory. These schematic structures are internalised in social interaction. ”Through experience, we are said to build up a large repertoire of schemas” (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995, s 51). Some consensus has been formulated around sex basic schema structures (Taylor & Crocker, 1981, Fiske och Taylor, 1991, Augoustinos & Walker, 1995, Waldahl, 1998 Höijer 1995, Höijer, 1998c). I adopted the following six schema-categories for conducting my study on the interpretation of feature film.

Table 1. Cognitive narrative interpretation structures:

| • Person schema | • Role schema |
| • Selfschema | • Event schema |
| • Scene schema | • Storyschema |
In the process of interpreting fiction content people use several overlapping shemas. “Viewers use a mix of cognitive schemas from various experience spheres when interpreting television genres” (Höijer, 1992b: 283 ff).

4. A Swedish Case Study

4.1 A questionnaire

First, with the help of a questionnaire autumn 2002 with 180 students I wanted to see if there are examples of young people enjoying movies and getting experiences from film similar to experiences triggered by traditional religion, for example altered states of approaches to life and changes in faith and beliefs, or even experiences associated with salvation or redemption for that matter. A brief summary can be given as follows regarding the meaning of watching films.

Table 2. Opinions about filmwatching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Films give me powerful experiences</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Film is entertainment</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Watching film gives me good opportunities discussing things with friends.</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Watching film helps me think about questions in life.</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Watching film is a good way of looking into the creative art of filmmaking</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Watching film is a good way to follow the work of art of a specific director</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An overwhelming majority states that film is both a possibility for entertainment and escapism but also a source for powerful experiences. Watching movies has an emotional dimension as well as a cognitive one as it is stated in the responses. Watching film is an opportunity not only for feelings but for thoughts about life as well. Less important to this sample of audience is filmviewing with a consciousness about the art and artefact of filmmaking. Several questions dealt with issues about the individual beliefsystem and personal worldview such as the one below.

Table 3. Films mentioned effecting respondents worldviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matrix</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Schindler's list</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American History X</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lilja 4 Ever</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight Club</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saving Private Ryan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Green Mile</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanilla Sky</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Sixth Sense</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once Were Warriors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No Mans Land</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Wars</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Requiem for a Dream</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sliding Doors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Men in Black</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi burning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example of quotes on above question:

Lilja 4 Ever. "You wake up from your protected little world and realise what is going on around you.” (Resp 13)

Sliding Doors, Matrix. "What’s life about? Who am I?” (Resp 34)

Star Wars. “I felt not alone in the world with a sixth sense.” (Resp 19)
What was striking in this list of films is the mainstream character of it. People in general are dealing with the big Hollywood cinematic industrial products, the blockbusters, even when pondering on deeper issues in life. One interesting exception may *Lilja 4 Ever* be as a Swedish production with an impact not only as a film but also, due to the skilful treatment of a troubling topic, trafficking, was able to effect the agenda on a political level in Sweden as in the European Union. The list is otherwise dominated by films like *The Matrix*, *American History X*, *Shindlers list*, *Fight Club* and the like. Even a science-fiction comedy as *Men In Black* is mentioned as a film with the capacity of shaking ones worldview.

After this outcome, I wanted to get behind the figures and quotes in my questionnaire to examine more thoroughly what individuals actually do while watching films that one gets more deeply involved in. For that reason I was doing an in-depth interview with a selected number of individuals with a careful definition of their background to get three distinctive groups with three different cognitive framework. I the interviews I was undertaking a close-up analysis of how they comprehended a deliberately chosen favourite film, how they interpreted the film and how they related this view of the film, whether it be implicit or symptomatic, to their own personal belief system in a specific moment of their life according to their own description of their life biography.

### 4.2 An interview with 13 individuals about their favourite movie

In my interviews I focused on some topics of more deeply rooted questions about the individual worldview of the respondent regarding his or her concepts of a list of “life-questions” related to ontological and ethical issues according the following list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. “Life-questions”:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Why we live and die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Purpose and meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Guilt and responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 What is reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 What is a human being?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 What is love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 What is God?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 What is right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Good and Evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Moral principles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below I present a model of the structure of my study. First, which kind of questions out of the list above where dwelled on in the talk about a film and second, I also tried to define within what kind of cognitive narrative structure did they processed their deeper concern about the themes of the movie.

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3 I asked all of the respondents following question in order to get them to participate in an interview. “I would like to make an interview with you about some favourite film which has made a powerful impact on you and which has been important for your personal worldview and your own feeling for life.”
The model sketched out in the above Figure 1, was first and foremost a theoretical tool for a careful reading of the transcribed interviews and for analysing the different topics that were dealt with during the talk. In other words, I did not ask directly about the respondents opinion about good or evil, moral principles or their ideas of guilt and God. Instead I tried to follow the respondents own interest about their favourite film and why they liked it so much. I tried to be sensitive for the individuals own directions and intellectual interests during uncovering different aspects of their favourite movie.

There is an interesting list of movies as the 13 respondents made their choice of favourite film to discuss and I have grouped them according to my definition of every respondents belonging to one of three cognitive beliefsystem, roughly labelled “Believers”, “Agnostics” or “Non-believers”.

Examples of films chosen range from Disneys Lion King (1994), sciencefiction and fantasy successes like The Matrix (1999) and Lord of the Rings (2001) or the next best movie ever according to www.IMdb.com The Shawshank Redemption (1994) as well as the Swedish blockbuster Så som i himmelen (2004), aka “As It Is In Heaven”. 
Some themes of existential nature is processed in all three groups such as questions about Moral Principles, Guilt and Responsibilities and Purpose and meaning of life. Among the non-believers there is some sort of an emphasis on the issue about What is a human being where three of the respondents in this group are mainly preoccupied with this question compared to none in the two other groups. And correspondingly three of the believers deal with the topic of Good and evil compared to one in the agnostic group and none among the non-believers.

Some topics are more in the foreground and some are very much in the background. Questions about What happens after death, What is God and What is reality are issues hardly dealt with at all among the respondents regardless of background or belief system. The issues of more philosophical and abstract character is obviously less regarded in this study while questions related to everyday life and responsibility and quality of relationship towards others are more discussed in all groups as well as the quest for a meaning and purpose in life on a personal level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Moral theme</th>
<th>Schema</th>
<th>Type of change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Guilt and responsability</td>
<td>Person/Self/Role</td>
<td>'dom/sub'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Mia&quot; age 26:</td>
<td>&quot;Weird Science&quot; (1985)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik</td>
<td>Moral principles</td>
<td>Self/Persoon/Event</td>
<td>'tuning'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Erik&quot; age 30:</td>
<td>&quot;The Last Emperor&quot; (1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>Guilt and responsability</td>
<td>Story/Person/Scene</td>
<td>'tuning'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Jon&quot; age 27:</td>
<td>&quot;Leon&quot; (1994)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radomir</td>
<td>What is a human being?</td>
<td>Person/Self/Event</td>
<td>'tuning'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Radomir&quot; age 24:</td>
<td>&quot;Fight Club&quot; (1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Purpose and meaning</td>
<td>Self/Story/Event</td>
<td>'dom/sub'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 “Non-believers”*: Respondents without a religious background and also without a religious practice.
6 “Agnostics”**: Respondents without a mixture of religious background and without a religious practice or vice versa.
7 “Believers”*: Respondents with a religious background and also with a religious practice.
Respondent | Moral theme | Schema | Type of change
--- | --- | --- | ---
Madde *Dirty Dancing* | What is love? Guilt and responsability | Person/Self/Event | 'tuning'
Victoria *Lion King* | What is love? Moral principles | Self/Person/Role | 'tuning'
Jakob *Shawshank Redemption* | Moral principles Good and Evil | Self/Person/Event | 'dom/sub'
Caterina *The Butterfly Effect* | Purpose and meaning Guilt and responsability | Person/Self/Event | 'conversion'

Respondent | Moral theme | Schema | Type of change
--- | --- | --- | ---
Karin *House of Angels* | Moral principles Good and Evil | Role/Person/Self | 'tuning'
Lena *Life is beautiful* | Purpose and meaning Good and Evil | Person/Self/Event | 'tuning'
Peter *Lord of the Ring* | Guilt and responsability Purpose and meaning | Person/Self/Role | 'tuning'
Maria *As it is in Heaven* | Good and Evil Guilt and responsability | Self/Person/Event | 'dom/sub' or 'conversion'

Still no far-reaching conclusion could be made about these embryomatic differences in pattern among the three groups due to methodological considerations. When analyzing the interview it was quite often difficult to decide whether a specific comment from the respondent should be categorized belonging to one narrative category or the other. Was it a talk about moral principles or was it a remark on the ethical topic what is right? The possibility to define and order the responses in several different ways should be a warning against finding patterns in these small sample of responses. What is important though, is that this theoretical framework is able to reveal aspects on the audience's use of filmwatching as potentially meaningful and possibly connected to the construction of a personal belief system as it can be interpreted in three examples of responses below.

### 4.4. Examples of different respondents

**A non-believer response: Radomir and *Fight Club* (1998)**

Radomir is 24 years old and he is the one respondent in my sample with his specific background as an immigrant with both of his parents being Moslems from former Yugoslavia. He has grown up in a Stockholm suburb in a more or less multicultural surrounding and consider himself a secularized moslem in belief and practice.

He is outspoken and very expressive in his views and opinions. The film *Fight Club* has been an important input in his life since the end of his upper secondary school in the late 90s. According to Radomir the film is touching on a cultural conflict which he has been reflecting about since long and that is what is typical masculine or feminine today. The film is dealing with this topic as well as it is dealing with and criticising the consumer society and the dominant ideology of consumerism and its false promises about happiness through consumption. The issues concealed because of this in Radomirs view is far more important and it is about what is actually needed for survival in life. Radomir appreciates the combination of two central themes in the film which are vital for him in a striking and convincing critique of contemporary society.

Apart from the criticism of consumerism, Radomir also believes the film describes the problem of people avoiding aggression and strong emotions. “You’re kind of supposed to close yourself up. You’re
expected to behave like a neat and tidy individual never ever getting mad.” (Radomir: 21) He likes the question asked in one scene of the film where the two main characters at one moment discuss why on earth they ever did learn the word “down comforter”.

Why do we know this sort of words? Why is that important? [ ] In what way is it vital for our survival? It isn’t. You have exchanged this physical thing with a lot of rubbish which doesn’t matter at all. And I feel that something is missing about masculinity? (Radomir: 20)

This absorbs Radomir and he discusses the conflict he identifies in the swedish emotionally self-controlled society of today, a conflict between chaos and order which corresponds to the main characters in Fight Club. One character represents order and a pendantic obsession of gadgets and the other character represents a passionate and self-destructive disorder and turmoil. “They are sort of two extremes. He is this super-duper-society. This is how it should be. Neat and order. And the other guy is this…kind of chaos, life…passion. (Radomir: 27).

Radomir is struggling with these two aspects of life and one could hastily get the impression that he would prefer the more violent and passionate chaotic state of mind but it is not that simple even if the chaotic state contains both feeling and passion which he finds difficult to express in a swedish cultural setting. “The solution must be somewhere in between. You must have a little of both. [ ] You have to adjust to some kind of order and obey the law. But one has to live life, loud, too. (Radomir: 27) He is much aware of the films portrayal of a character gone over the line, a person dangerous and destructive for himself and society in Tyler Durdens character. Radomir sums up his own view about the message in the film dealing with passion, chaos and life which Radomir consider summarizes some important moral principles of life.

I see the movie as if we are too shut in and closed. I mean, this [passion] does not exist as it it seems. As if his is not supposed to be. That it should not be. And that’s the problem. That creates the problem. That’s what makes us …hunger for something. Something is missing. But I don’t know what. And you have this … ”By this, and your life will be better!” And somehow you get cheated. You’re tricked over and over again. (Radomir: 29).

To summarize the life-questions dealt with in the interview with Radomir we have been mainly touching on the topic of What is a human being. To some extent also questions about what is required in life to be fulfilled and happy in relation to questions about Good and evil and Moral principles. The most crucial existential topic though in our talk about Fight Club is for Radomir the quest for Purpose and meaning in life in a consumer society of today.

From the theoretical cognitive perspective Radomir did comprehend the themes in Fight Club to some lesser extent within the narrative cognitive cathegories of story and scene schema. A little bit more extensive he is interpreting the film through the cathegories of event schema and role schema but most of all through the cognitive structure of person schema and self schema.

It is also important to notice the social context for Radomir when he is struggling with his identity as a young male immigrant with other cultural roots related to a tension between different cognitive frameworks around culturally expected male and female behaviour. Radomir knows he has to negotiate between the moral framework of some of his Swedish friends, especially the emancipated feministic female friends at the university and aspects of his family’s moral framework with its more traditional lifestyle on these matters.
An agnostic response: Madde and *Dirty Dancing* (1987)

Madde is 25 and she has lived in a Swedish town in a well-to-do middle-class villa area. Her best friends family did early in the 80s get a video-recorder which made it possible for her and her friends to gather and watch videos. And the film they loved most of all when at intermediate level in school was *Dirty Dancing* and the story about Baby and her vacation at Kellermans summer camp 1963. They watched it over and over again. They where singing along in the soundtrack of the movie and learned the dialogue in the most sensitive parts of the love affair by heart. Still in later years when Madde was gathering her friends they could watch favourite parts of the movie as a warming up and to set the mood during girls dinner before getting out at night. Madde has watched the movie approximately 10 times and the most cherished parts maybe 25 times and she knows the whole story by heart.

When Madde was thinking about *Dirty Dancing* her main focus was on the message about the nature and power of love as a force which conquers all boundaries. She also made an interesting reference to her own biography when as a teenager her family went to summer camps together thanks to her fathers commitment to an organisation working with summer camps for handicapped children.

> I know I sometimes associated to this film and I was thinking …"hey, now I'm going to this kind of a summer camp somewhere and…[ ] maybe I'll meet this guy, a nice summer-flirt-boy.
> (Madde: 6)

Apart from this parallell to her family life the film is depicting very vital ideals about what it is to be a young woman for Madde. She is very much preoccupied with Baby as a character and she makes associations to her own self-image. It started when she was a young girl and she wanted to have this curly hair exactly like Baby in the movie. Later on she could also identify herself with her when Madde her self was dating older boys. But it is also a question about moral principles in the film which has had an impact on Madde and her values about how important situations in life should be handled.

> When they are dancing and that things. She is smiling and it is a lot of giggle and this joy. And in that way I could very much identify myself with her because I believe I am quite like her in my ways, this smiling and joy but also that you care about injustices in the world, that you want to struggle for that. So I believe I was effected a lot when I watched the film…her ways of behaving.
> (Madde: 13)

Madde is stressing that Baby is balancing a natural sexy look, being cute and feminine and at the same time having this sensible values and a will to change the world and fight injustices. Madde is discussing the characters reasons and driving forces in different relations and conflict. But while talking about the film she is shifting focus to more extra-textual considerations and references to the non-fictious life.

She thinks this is a very good love movie with a nice message of a kind which was very inspiring for her. She thinks it would be a good alternative for young people today compared to some of the contemporary love movies. When it comes to depicting the relationsship between man and woman Maddes opinion is that several films today has more porny touch which she dislikes because it often has a degrading and humiliating twist. She consider *Dirty Dancing* being a rolemode example of a film daring to deal with sexuality in a sensual way without transgressing the border to something exploiting . Instead it allows both the male and the female character being active and respondent within an equal relationsship of mutual respect for both the feminine and the masculine. In short, it is "the dreamscenario for how a love story should be." (Madde: 12).
One aspect in Maddes reception of *Dirty Dancing* is this nature of love where Madde is processing the question *What is love*. The other vital dimension is concerning her self-image and her own important life values. Baby is for Madde a complete character corresponding in several crucial ways with Maddes own perception of herself with a balance between world improvement and commitment to others injustices combined with the willingness to bring yourself out as an attractive young woman. This question is charged with potential tension related to the contemporary feministic discourse according to Madde and she gets upset when she discusses her difficulties upholding this ideal of being a smart, well-read girl, knowing what is going on in the world as well as being an attractive, sexy woman. It must be possible to be both in Maddes opinion.

*You don’t have to be naive and stupid just because you’re interested in your own sexual appeal, this kind of sexy and cute thing she [Baby] has. She is also having this very wise and sensitive values.* (Madde: 13)

Maybe this was not present on a conscious level when she watched the film the first time many years ago. But Madde posits that she as a 11-12 year old girl understood that Baby upheld a courage and inner strength loyal to her own beliefs which Madde identified herself with. Madde may not have known exactly what a peace corps was but she understood that Baby had the guts to take a stand on behalf of her new friends, the marginalised working-class individuals at Kellermans smallscale class society, against her privileged father, a medical doctor, when her friends were falsely accused of wrong doings. As a contrast to Baby in the movie Madde also noticed Babys sister as the typical narrowminded girl, obsessed with her own beauty and maked up appearance and simply “very stupid”, the one type of girl you don’t want to be.

Two questions dominated Maddes considerations about *Dirty Dancing*. First and foremost the ideal and image of the essence of loves nature, the question of *what is love* and the conditions of an ideal scenario in the story of two lovers, equal in mutual respect and deep affection and loyalty for each others. The second question taking a grip of Madde is the topics of *guilt and responsibility* and a discussion of *moral principles* where Madde has a concern and a commitment to the question of conducting as a decent human being with a worldview containing a core of humanistic values. Baby represent all this according to Madde. The identification with truth and what is good, a concern for the weak and marginalised and the will to fight injustices and making the world a better place for all.

From the theoretical cognitive perspective Madde did comprehend these themes in *Dirty Dancing* to some lesser extent within the narrative cognitive categoriees of *story* and *event schema*. To some extent she was also dealing with the film through a *role schema* categhory but most of all through the cognitive structure of *person schema* and *self schema* where she was constantly making moves between considerations about the main characters personalities and her conceptual selfimage.

**A believers response: Maria and As It Is In Heaven (2004)**

Maria is 26 and she is taking courses in religious studies at the university. She has a religious upbringing within the pentecostal movement and has been a member in the pentecostal congregation since in her teens. Now she is struggling with her faith and the foundation for her beliefsystem. She has a self-reflexive attitude and has an ongoing discussion with herself about life. She is questioning parts of her inherited beliefs as she is working towards a more integrated and personal consonant way of life and faith.
Before seeing *As It Is In Heaven* she was thinking about different love movies to discuss, such as *Titanic* (1997) or *Ljila 4 Ever* (2002) but after watching *As It Is In Heaven* it was no question at all what would be the film for her. Maria said that in the other movies it could be some crucial scenes, a certain theme or some minor or major important details, making great impact on her. “But if it is something you can relate to your whole life, that’s something else!” (Maria: 1)

Maria was one of the respondents that spontaneously very early in the talk made parallels between on-screen and off-screen life, between fiction and her own reality. She describes in detail the message of the film and the relevance for her. She has in recent years felt an increasing dissatisfaction with the Church’s bad record on female issues and the history of the suppression of women’s freedom and female sexuality in the Christian tradition according to Maria. And these questions she believes is confronted very radically by the film which is taking a strong stand on behalf of the creative power of sensuality. Maria was glued to the screen while watching *As It Is In Heaven* as she puts it and she can tell that the film is confirming her total worldview and her aims in life.

”…a kind of a vision for my life…to believe in your dream…to follow your heart…encouraging you to be who you are…empowering you to stand up for yourself and express yourself and your opinions. [ ] It is pepping me.” (Maria: 1)

It was almost like a sermon in her opinion about how we should live on earth. The film was very convincing and took to the edge her own faith which she believed became stronger and deeper “when you see it front-face in a movie what you already believe yourself”. And Maria could also formulate how she envisioned life and what it is about. “The meaning in life for me is, I could say …it is to be happy. And that is about following my dreams, to follow my heart”. (Maria: 4) And *As It Is In Heaven* as a film effected her in the same way as certain inspiring people, namely taking her “back to the core” (Maria: 4). “And it really did, I think. It boosted me and made me feel happy, strong, positive when I left.” (Maria: 4)

The film *As It Is In Heaven* was both confirming and sharpening her most appreciated values in life and as Maria puts it, the film helped her to come back to the core of her own faith in life when straying away in different directions and tending to forget what is important.

I asked if it was possible for her to experience the same kind of confirmation and reassurance of this in talks with friends and family members. Interestingly she consider it possible to some extent but she believes it is much stronger and inspiring when you dedicate yourself to a thematic confrontation of something in a film. She is a filmloving individual who is really hooked on the complete range of filmic sensations; light, sound, acting, facial expressions and music.

*It is getting stronger in a film. You have the music, you have the images, you have the actors, very skilful in acting. You kind of see the feeling in their acting, their eyes, gestures, everything. [ ] And as a person I’m so imaginative and feels kind of taken away from reality. I forget I’m sitting there.*
I'm almost in the movie myself. So, they have a great effect on me. (Laughing) A real kick.
(Maria: 18)

She agrees wholeheartedly to the films emancipatory points. But at the same time, embracing the film from the bottom of her heart, Maria had also the intellectual maturity of taking to surface some of the intriguing remarks in the film that left her troubled and confronted her with statements to which she had no convincing answer. For example the notion in the film that there is no death.

To summarize, Maria is in her faith and personal worldview alert to several existential topics in the film As It Is In Heaven. She addresses to some extent the questions about Purpose and meaning as well as Guilt and responsibility. She was dealing with What is a human being and maybe the only one mentioning the nature of reality. But at the core of Marias commitment to the film is the issue of What is love and her vision of What is good, Moral principles to follow and live by in relationships to all others.

From the theoretical cognitive perspective Maria did comprehend the themes in the film As It Is In Heaven to some minor extent within the narrative cognitive cathegories of story, event and role schema. Most of all Maria was understanding the film through the cognitive structure of person schema and self schema where she, as also Made did and in fact most of the respondents, was moving between considerations about personalities of the main characters and her conceptual selfimage. She was processing both ideal images of herself and images of the one person she also actually is with an interesting and important notion of a conscious reflexion of the discrepancy between ideal selfimages and her real self where the film is providing her with vivid images of self ideals.

5. Conclusions

It was not very easy to find patterns of meaning-making according to some theoretical outlines as the semiological socio-cognitive theoretical model would predict. The way individuals choose films and the way they create meaning is a very complex issue where you have to look closely to the social internalised cognitive framework in a broad sense as well as the very specific social situation of the individual when discussing a film which has had a more or less profound impact.

The 'interpretative horizons' or the 'moral framework, given either by tradition or basic certainties of life, function as an 'implicit knowledge' or as a pre-discursive background structure from which all thinking, action and interpretation proceed. This implicit knowledge is a reservoir of non-problematic assumptions, of rather diffuse convictions, which assure the basic understanding. Hence, the construction of meaning which is made possible by interpretation is not arbitrary; it is not the outcome of the pure will of the interpreter, on the contrary, it is limited by the historicity and situationality of the concrete conditions under which occurs. (Moreira Maia, 2001: s 40f)

It is an interplay between several variables. "Media effects arise through a complex interplay between the potential meaning inherent in the content of the media, the potential interpretation by its public, and the social context within which media use takes place." (Wahldahl 1998). This multi-disciplinary approach is elaborated by Theo A. van Dijk in several works where he tries to combine theories about cognition, society and discourse. “Discourse should be explicitly related to the structures and strategies of the personal and social mind, as well as those of social situations, social interactions and societal structures.” (van Dijk 1998: vii) He also acknowledges
the need to take current cognitive science into the theoretical framework. “Very few of the large number of studies about ideologies ever get down to the mundane job of describing what the actually look like”. (Van Dijk 1998: 7) That is one important reason for me why I adopted the schema-based theory as a tentative theoretical framework for discussing the meaning making process in the minds of film-consuming individuals.

There is also a need for combining the cognitive theoretical framework with emerging theoretical elaboration of emotional responses in film-reception studies. (Platinga & Smith 1999, Lyden 2003, Marsh 2004, Jerslev, 2006). Film and cinema is part of “the whole web of interpretative strategies by which human beings make sense of their experience.” (Marsh and Ortiz 1997: 24).

Culture is thus a complex field of enquiry, because it potentially includes all forms of human creativity - whether consciously meaning-making or no: art, music, TV, film, poetry, fiction, drama etc. "Like all models, conceptual models have two lives. They live within each of us as private forms of feeling and thought. And they inhabit our public spaces, as models-in-the-world.” (Shore 1998) The individual is the one who makes the choice, both in what kind of social activities he or she is engaged in, and in what way the cultural provided meaning system becomes valid to him or her.

References


