

aus: Interfaces  
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## **A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL METHOD TO ANALYSE TV FICTION**

### **Part 1: Theoretical Frame of References: Cultural Historical Aspects and Arguments of a Theory of Human Activities within a Model of Symbolic Mediation**

With television as an integrated part of everyday life in the industrialised and consumer-oriented society a specific type of communication has developed. Three fundamental changes have occurred:

#### **(1) The Organisational Model of the Telegraph and the Media as Symbolic Objectivizations.**

In the process of industrialisation media and communication were subjected to the same basic structure of transport inherent in the telegraph and the railway. This led to categorisation based on the principle of the division of labour, into the central production, the distribution and the reception of the media.

#### **(2) The Combining of Communication with Consumption**

With the expansion of industrial production, all products are **consumed**. This means that **as many people as possible have products at their disposal, which they acquire both in the same manner and in a highly individualised fashion**. With the electronic media, particularly with television, individual consumption of similar offers is regarded as self-evident right from the beginning. The mechanism of the individualisation of media-

communication enables the recipient as a personal subject to act meaningfully.

**(3) The Media are integrated in Everyday Life by the Recipients in a Meaningful Way.**

"Television" as the leading media of current mass communication is integrated in everyday life. Therefore television is integrated both in the dynamic of industrial production and in the dynamic of human activities. The individualised consumption of pre-fabricated, standardised images only functions because human beings integrate these images with their meaningful actions and experiences. However this is only possible because they adapt their actions and experiences to the specific media and their images.

**Part 2: Operationalization and Analysis of "Media Communication".**

The elements of media communication can be represented with the help of the following model:

- characteristic topics specific to an individual personality and to age-group direct the action in a meaningful way (**activities structuring themess**),

- in different situations people meet the symbolic material of their culture (**media and its symbolism**),

- with this help they orientate themselves in the context of their respective **situations**.

- this orientation is the reason why children in particular subjectively acquire the cultural symbolism of the media and assimilate it thematically (**experiences and perception**).

This theoretical description of the technical media, as the symbolic material of our culture, integrates the media and the subjective activities of human beings. It is also for this reason that the organisational model of mass communication, the information transfer, can non longer receive the status of a theory. Because of this, **media analysis is always an analysis of meaning, in which the media are investigated as the subjectively-acquired symbolic material of our culture.**

**Part 3: Case study : "E. T." — the Integrated Analysis of a Film.**

Two boys, who are in the same class in primary school, are speaking to one another, because one of the boys, Sven, has problems with swimming and his swimming gear. At first it seems that the short conversation between Sven and Markus is rather limited and chaotic.

If research analyses seriously the "traces" the film E. T. "engraved" in the talk of the two boys, two types of "grounded / basic structures" ("Tiefenstrukturen") can be extracted from the transcribed talk:

- (a) a basic personal theme concerning the two boys (= basic structure of the personal subjects) can be explained.
- (b) a basic structure of the film can be discovered.

In order to do this the following stages need to be worked through:

**A. Analysing the Situation the Short Talk is Embedded in and Decoding the "Film Traces".**

(Explanations are written within brackets. These explanations are extracted from a description of the school and family background of the two boys provided by the female-teacher of the boys.)

*Teacher: So that you have everything with you, I want you to remember your swimming gear tomorrow, your soap and your money.*

*Pupil: yes, yes.*

*Teacher: Also, remember your goggles*

*Sven: No, I won't bring any goggles with me. I've had enough. I've wounded myself often enough. I don't want to have to try to do it any more. I did it once and never again!*

*(Sven is horrified about the unproblematic suggestion that he should bring his swimming gear and goggles. He reacts strongly and negatively to it. What does "to get wounded" mean to him? Sven is a child who is very ill over and over again, this means that he quite often has to go to hospital. When he speaks of "wounds", the "swimming gear" is therefore connected with depressing experiences. What could he mean here? Most of the time he is unable to fulfil his tasks for the next day at home. He*

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*doesn't get any help for this at home either. As well as this, his family definitely doesn't have the money for "swimming gear". Having to face this will surely open old wounds.)*

*Dieter: Really, why not?*

*Sven: It's as bad as.*

*I'm allergic to goggles.*

*Markus: Oh, yes, and I bet the teacher will buy that story too!*

*Sven: Me, I do get an allergy. Then everything gets sore and it really hurts — and then on top of all that my eyes hurt.*

*Dieter: Hmm, he's a right there.*

*(The children are discussing whether an "allergy" will also convince the teacher. Therefore Sven lays the basis of his problem on illness. Dieter can now comprehend Sven's argument).*

*Sven: Me, of course I know that I'm not a human being.*

*Teacher: So what are you then?*

*(Being occupied with everyday organisation, the teacher cannot give her time and attention faced with such an alarming statement as that a child does not feel human).*

*Sven: An Autorifon. Oh, yes — I've been to hospital.*

*Markus: You know, like E-Tea. oh, what's his name again?*

*(To Markus it is clear what Sven means. He understands "Autorifon" in connection with "hospital". What he has understood he then explains by introducing the film and the character of E. T. into the conversation. E. T. is a clever, sensitive being from outer space, who is the same size as a child, with a similar body and features to those of a human being. However it can be regarded as a animal).*

*Sven: E. T.*

*(Sven reassures Markus that he is right).*

*Markus: How he gets ill.*

*(Markus is referring to a point in the films "E. T.").*

*Sven: Oh, yes. He's totally white. It's because he was homesick, that's why; and how he lay in the water!*

*(Sven agrees with Markus as to which part of the film is concerned. He emphasises here the threat of death which E. T. is*

really under in the film. In the film "totally white" means that E. T. is close to death. Sven refers to a second scene in the film, in which E. T. is also in danger: "how he lay in the water").

Markus: Aagh!

Sven: E. T., but like when he sat in the grass and then he said and then he did like that.— Aagh — Aagh!

(Sven is referring to a scene in the film, a young boy, Elliot, discovers the alien being E. T. Both were terrified of each other).

Markus: I think it's good at the beginning, when he, sort of— with the Smarties — ha, ha. (He laughs and smacks his lips as if he were eating).

(The boy, Elliot, and E. T. recognise each other as human beings. They carefully begin to build a relationship. In order to show this, the film uses "Smarties", the well-known multi-coloured chocolate sweets, which they both use, so that they can communicate with each other without language).<sup>1</sup>

## **B. Analysis of the Film**

### **(B.1.) What does E. T. Recount?**

#### **One Vein of the Film Story: To Feel Threatened, to Win a Friend.**

For Sven and Markus the film *E. T. — The Extra Terrestrial* (by Steven Spielberg — 1981) is about the friendship between the ten-year-old boy, Elliot, and the half-animal / half-human, E. T. — E. T. has come from another planet and is stranded on the earth. Elliot and E. T. develop their friendship to the point that Elliot directly experiences and understands E. T.'s thoughts and feelings. He does this without having to speak to E. T. — E. T. is homesick and because of this he becomes sick and dies. Because Elliot tells his dead friend that he loves him, he brings him back to life. On the other hand, the adults only want to capture the unknown and strange being, E. T., and place him under control for the purpose of their research. The children hide and then flee with E. T. — Elliot's and E. T.'s intimate friendship conquers adults'

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<sup>1</sup> This example has been documented and worked on by Anja Rehm, Andrea Menzel, Michael Botor, David L. Kellar, Walter Kell.

disruptive lack of understanding, gives E. T. his life back and also helps him to get back home.

**(B.2.) What Is Told / Described in Each of the Five-Film Episodes by the Boys Markus and Sven in their Conversation?**

During their short conversation, Sven and Markus, refer in six statements, to five scenes in the film, without describing them in a chronological order. Instead they go from the end of the film toward the beginning.

*"How he Gets Ill" (Markus)*

This fifteen minute episode is central to the film's story. Policemen, scientists and doctors have tracked E. T. down to Elliot's family's home and force their way into the house using a threatening military operation. The boy, Elliot, and E. T. are now lying in protective tents in a perfect medical emergency ward. Elliot is also in a highly critical condition, as his feelings are connected with those of E. T. and so his life force / energy is fading with that of E. T. Elliot tries to prevent an emergency operation on E. T.: "You can't do it. You're scaring him... leave him alone. Everything he needs I can do for him... You're killing him." Before E. T. dies he "separates" himself from Elliot, who can once more now live independently of E. T. Elliot makes his last farewells to the dead E. T., "Just look at what they've done to you... I'll never forget you... in all my life... not even for one day E. T. — I love you." Now E. T. 's heart begins to brighten once more. He is alive again and becomes completely healthy!

In this touching episode two worlds collide: the world of the children with the world of the rational adults (doctors, scientists, policemen) who understand absolutely nothing about E. T. , the children and their friendship. Elliot's "E. T. — I love you" brings back his life and health. Elliot and the children "conquer", through their affection, the uncomprehending reason.

*E. T. "Is Totally White" (Sven).*

This short episode (about two minutes) directly precedes the "hospital scene". E. T. has not succeeded in contacting the beings of his species which are in outer space. As Sven rightly asserts E. T. becomes ill because of homesickness.

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*E. T. lies in the water (Sven)*

This scene (about thirty seconds) directly precedes the episode in which "E. T. is totally white". In the woods E. T. wanted to get into contact with his kind from outer space. He did not manage to do this. Whilst the helicopters are searching and pursuing E. T., the children look for him and find him lying helpless and groaning in a stream. The children hide E. T. The theme in this scene is E. T.'s helplessness. It becomes clear that E. T. cannot survive alone on earth. He also becomes like an embryo, or a new-born child, who is left alone under the threat of death, in his new world.

*E. T. Sits in the Grass (Sven).*

This short scene (about one minute) belongs to the beginning of the film. Elliot and E. T. meet for the first time. In the middle of the night the boy Elliot is woken up by an unfamiliar noise and goes out into the garden with a torch. Suddenly E. T. becomes visible. He is grunting in fear and gesticulating wildly and defensively with his arms. Elliot freezes with fear. They both run away from each other. It is also in this scene that the audience see E. T. 's full form for the first time. **He looks unusual, actually ugly, but in another way, fascinating.**

*"Smarties" (Markus)*

Elliot and E. T. meet for the second time. (length: about three minutes). In the woods, Elliot tried to lure E. T. with Smarties. Suddenly E. T. appears in the garden. Elliot gets frightened again. E. T. approaches him, making groaning noises. E. T. reaches out for him with his hand and lays the Smarties, which he collected in the woods, on Elliot's blanket. After this Elliot is seen laying out the Smarties in the corridor. E. T.'s hand slowly follows in the direction of the Smarties. Groaning is heard and then the contented sound of someone eating noisily. **Elliot smiles. The ice has been broken, they begin to become friends.**

Care is brought into the relationship between E. T. and Elliot through the Smarties: Elliot provides E. T. with food, so helping him to survive. In this sense food is also symbolic of Elliot's love and affection for E. T.



### **C. Exchanges between the Two Boys**

The boys respond to each other accurately and sensitively. At the same time they relate the scenes and episodes of a long film precisely to one another. **In so doing a new story is created.** The main characteristics of this story is that the order of events is reversed. The new story, now Sven's and Markus' tale, does not end like the film, with the children's exciting escape and the theme of freedom and independence. In the film the children escape, together with E. T., from the police. They manage to do this by jumping onto their cross-country bikes and taking off from the roads. Therefore they becomes unreachable to the adults who are pursuing them. (The ending of the film marked the first appearance of the BMW bike, which has by now provided a whole generation of children and youngsters with a feeling of freedom and independence).

In comparison, Sven's and Markus' story has the following topics:

- Being misunderstood, left alone and under the threat of death in an adult world.
- Surviving because a friend is in mourning.
- Overcoming the fear of something strange and acquiring a new friend.

Sven and Markus know the character E. T. The film (also on television and video) has left them with a feeling that they have been through an intense experience. Markus notices that Sven is in the state-of-mind which he has also experienced whilst watching E. T. He uses the elements of the film as a differentiated language and with their help has a conversation with Sven about his moods and what causes them. Sven feels that Markus understands him. Therefore he can escape from his mood, where he feels neglected and threatened. As in the film, where a friendship is formed carefully, Sven also uses the same subtle method to talk with Markus about friendship. Markus takes this up, as he refers to the Smarties-episode of the film and begins to laugh.

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Course of the conversation; what the boys say:	What happens in the film scenes which the boys talk about:	The boys' themes, themes in the film, scenes the boys talk about:
<p><b>Sven</b> feels threatened by a simple task. He speaks of wounds, allergy pains and the hospital, saying that he isn't a human, rather an "Autorifon". Markus forges a link with E. T. and describes this.</p>	<p>The adults are not in a position to perceive the half-human, half-animal being, E. T., as a needy and loveable creature / child. For this reason E. T. becomes critically ill and dies.</p>	<p>Overtaxed Threatened by pain and illness To be quite different not like a real person</p>
<p>"How he gets sick" (<b>Markus</b>)</p>	<p>The critically ill E. T. in an emergency ward is the central part of the film's story. E. T. has to die, because the adults have no sympathy for him. The boy, Elliot, brings E. T. back to life, because he loves him.</p>	<p>Under the threat of death. Not being understood by adults. To be loved by a friend and to be brought back to life</p>
<p>"is totally white — yes because he was homesick" (<b>Sven</b>)</p>	<p>E. T. is white. He is depicted as dying. The reason for this is his homesickness. The mother is afraid of the deadly pale E. T.</p>	<p>Desire for security which the mother cannot fulfil, because she is shocked by the strange being and flees.</p>
<p>"and how he lay in the water" (<b>Sven</b>)</p>	<p>E. T. Lies in the water. E. T. is like the endangered newborn.</p>	<p>Helpless in a strange and threatening world.</p>

"but how he sat in the grass and then he said, and then he did like that — Aagh — Aagh!" (Sven)	E. T. sits in the grass. Elliot and E. T. are very scared. They both overcome their fear of each other.	To be scared of a strange being and to overcome fear.
"I think it's good at the beginning, when he, with the Smarties — ha, ha (laughs and smacks his lips) (Markus)	E. T. and Elliot succeed in becoming friends with the help of the Smarties	To carefully find a friend whom you can understand even without speaking

#### **Part 4: Areas and Sequences of Research of a Reception Oriented Film Analysis.**

Areas and sequences of the research in film analysis are heuristic and structuring proposals. They mark out the frame for a methodical way of an integrated analysis. Depending on the situational activities, the "media traces" and the media itself, it is possible to define specific areas and sequences of research work.

Research analysis has the character of a vice-versa or circular interpretation within a spiral-like procedure, in which the film and the situational activities are successively analysed.

Despite the complexities and the ambiguity of a special case study and of the interpretative methodology three areas of work can be described as obligatory:

##### **First Area of Research Work:**

##### **The Text with the Situation and Activities — to Identify the Media Traces.**

First of all a text is required which describes in a holistic way the dynamic of activities in a situation. The leading aspects are the individual subject with their personal themes, their curriculum vitae and how these subjects interact with each other. Within this text indicators of explicit or implicit film traces will be looked for. (Explicit films traces are indicators of media experience, situations of reception, the personal use of the symbolism of the media, the description of film

episodes etc. The implicit traces of the media are usually similarities in the presentation style of the media and in the style of individual or group activities). These indicators help to identify and analyse a specific film or media. Relevant sequences of the film or components of its presentation style need to be isolated and described.

**Second Area of Research Work:**

**Producing a Written Version of the Film.**

The written text can never completely represent a film. However texts objectify the subject of research in the perspective of specific questions. To objectify situations, activities and the media in the form of written documents, a hermeneutic sequencing must be presupposed.

**A. Description of the Film's Themes, Guidelines of the Story, Presentation Style etc.**

Description of the plot of the film

- Description of the presentation style of the film
- Description and detailed representation of film takes
- Description of the context of specific sequences of the film

The film is analysed as a symbolic objectivization, which is, in principle, independent of this perception, but which is always produced in a cultural context which refers to other symbolic objectivizations.

**B. To Identify and Analyse the Symbolism of a Film or Aspects of the Film's Story, which the Recipients Refer to.**

The film is analysed as a symbolic objectivization, which has been individually received and acquired, used meaningfully in interactions and for communicative purposes.

**C. To Work out the Meaning of the Film Symbolism or the Aspects of the Film's Story in the Context of the Film.**

Again the film is an object of research as a cultural symbolic objectivization, independently of its being received.

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**Third Area of Research Work:  
Comparison of the Film Texts and the Situational  
Texts.**

The search for correspondence and differences or inconsistencies between the film text and the situational text is important. To know about what they have in common and where the differences are provides the basis for the working out of similar patterns of perspective or interpretation. In this phase of research work, the film helps to interpret situations and activities or personal themes. And vice versa the knowledge of the situations, activities and personal themes helps to interpret the film.

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