

Empathic cues: Affect-language and philosophical theory of film

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Abstract:

The recipient of film operates with the structure of film in an active way. This operation is the empathic work of the recipient that takes place on figures and objects in film. This empathic work serves as the basal comprehension of film – it's the *film experience*.

Film experience and the semiologic process of empathy are based on the principle of data processing. The recipient extracts the relevant information from the screen representation and constructs an overall picture of narration and the structure of figures. This extraction proceeds in the structure of the *empathic field* (the dialectic generation of all perspectives and intentions of figures, animals or objects being part of the narration process) and with the decoding of the empathic cues (cues which organize the mental simulation of perspectives and intentions).

The empathic cues generate impact and contain significant indication character of signs – they are located in the code of the film. They are a textual method/process: The analysis of their structure helps us to understand the conditions which generate the understanding of the recipient and helps us to analyse the potential of the structure of comprehension.

The successful decoding of signs in the film-system - particularly with regard to the empathic cues - implies the understanding of the *affect-language* of film: empathic work decodes signs of film and generates impacts that lead to comprehension.

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1. Introduction

The audience is like a giant organ that you and me are playing. At one moment we play *this* note on them and get *this* reaction, and then we play *that* chord and they react *that* way. (Spoto 1983: 406)

The text at issue works on implied structures in movies, which have to be realized and decoded by the recipient. This is a kind of recipient-work that led to film/movie-understanding. The midpoint of our considerations is based in the constructs of *empathic cues* and *empathy* as a mode of understanding.

Naturally *empathic cues* are structured in TV-movies, series, commercials or radio songs too, but in our following arguments we specify *>movie<* as a cinematographic construct.

Our first thesis implies that the empathic processes in movies are structured and controlled by cues. These cues – we call them *empathic cues* – could be located on different code-sections (sign systems) of the movie. In the process of reception, the empathic cues will be decoded and offer the emotional participation at the *movie-experience*.

Empathic cues are the contingency for active reception: That leads to our second thesis, that comprehension of film is not a hieratic and passive behavior. The recipient has to generate a process of communication with the inner filmic processes (recipient interaction) and simulate an *empathic field* of different perspectives, which could surround the narrative world of characters, animals and objects.

The semantic content of diegesis and narration is generated and controlled by empathic cues and the decoding of inner filmic sign systems permits the active comprehension – the recipient work of understanding is a way of ‘signing in’ into the film.

Our theses will be developed with central aspects of empathic cues on the level of filmic image and filmic sound with the following examples: ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING (USA 1987, Chris Columbus), THE CELL (USA 2000, Tarsem Singh), ONE HOUR PHOTO (USA 2002, Mark Romanek) and REQUIEM FOR A DREAM (USA 2000, Darren Aronofski).

2. The term empathy

For years Psychologists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, media scientists and many more are using the term *Einfühlung* or empathy and often do not mean the same thing. That makes a scientific use of the term difficult and leaves many unanswered questions surrounding this concept:

Is empathy rational or irrational? Is it regressive or mature? Does it involve only affect, affect and cognition, cognition alone, or is the differentiation between affect and cognition false? Is empathy a form of projection or a mode of observation? Is it imitative or creative? Is empathy to be equated with intuition or are these two different processes? [...] Is empathy an end result, a tool, a skill, a kind of communication, a listed stance, a type of introspection, a capacity, a power, a form of perception or observation, a disposition, an activity or feeling? (Basch 1983: 102)

Current european research finally defines empathy as the cognitive ability to recognize and understand the thoughts, perspectives and emotions of another person (Song 2001: 102).

Related to film it is important to underline that empathic reactions are not only related to emotions, but also to intentions of actions of the filmic character. The empathic processes in reception of films must be understood as mechanisms of construction of the fictional social world or diegesis. Empathic activity makes the various goals of the actors and the structure of their complementary perceptions, their definitions of relationship and their cognitive and emotional reactions to another and to the events equally accessible (Wulff 2003: 136).

The fictional experience of a film rests on the interaction of various characters in a social field. Several figures step into social interaction with each other, in which the viewer reproduces their intentional horizons - he tries to understand the characters.

Through the inner filmic interactions between the screen characters the viewer is able to reproduces the emotional and intentional horizons of the figures.

The described intentional structures Wulff calls *empathic field*, and he understands it as a symbolic context of the social life, the genre and the particular dramatic conflict (Wulff 2003: 110). The empathic processes of the audience are related to this empathic field and consist of a simulation process¹ - a reproduction of the intentional

¹ Gordon specifies it as „putting themselves in the other’s shoes“(Gordon 1987: 139).

horizons of the represented characters (Gordon 1987: 113). Therefore empathy must be understood as an analytical movement of the recipient on to the film, which includes both, the characters and their actions. The recipient is located in a process of mental simulation: the »mode of you« (Kurt 2004: 205).

3. Empathy and simulation

The concept of empathy is not only related to the inner filmic characters, but on the whole world if objects of the Diegesis. Empathy - as the term hereinafter will be used - also extends to the simulation of hypothetical and factual processes of action that generates importance. It also defines itself as imaginative and construct of interaction. Empathy as a simulation process not only enables the sharing of emotional, but also to affective neutral characters (i.e. a face without any expression), which causes the viewer to *simulate* emotions or initials of action *into* the character. The recipient will not only be able to understand or charge emotions of the characters, but also their intentional horizons. This means that the concept of empathy that empathic processes are also processes of understanding.

The so-called *simulative empathy* generates hypothetical and/or actual intentionality of the focused object, which rests on the basis of mental states and dispositions (see Wollheim 2001, 15f.) of the viewer. So the object comes to his importance and its possibility of being an agent. The simulative empathy due to the hypotheses of action initials, which do not need to be fulfilled within the narrative.

This kind of empathy will be possible if animate and inanimate objects be understood as intentional systems - in the sense Daniel Dennett: Intentional systems are - with Dennett - objects, whose behavior (at least sometimes) can be explained and predicted in the way, that opinions, desires and intentions can be attributed to this system (Dennet 1981: 306).

The empathic work, the spectator performs on figures and objects in the film, can only be done because it is included in an act of simulation which generates the *empathic field*. The *empathic field* is the synthesis of all hypothetical and actual actions in the context of empathic cues, which are related to another.

The symbolic character of the empathetic cues points out that empathic processes should be seen as semiologic processes - processes of the generation of importance.

4. The potential of empathic cues

Empathic cues are reference impulses that structure the empathic processes in the narration. The successful decoding of the *cue-structure* allows empathizing characters, animals and objects. We could describe the empathic cues as key stimuli that navigates the empathic modeling in the reception process.

With the localization and analysis of empathic cues we could assess the coherence of the empathic work of the recipient: If we work out the structural level of empathic processes with the help of examples, we are able to interpret the different elements in a *philosophical way of understanding film*.

Empathic cues can be emotional expressions of characters, colors, light, tracking-shots (for example the worm's-eye view to create "mighty objects"), calm and loud objects, external sounds (like film score) and also internal sounds/tonal structures like the ringing bell, the barking dog (Figure 1).

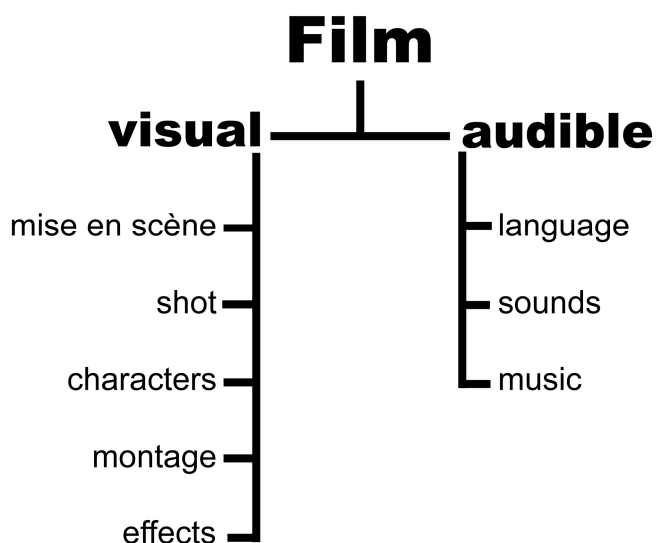


Figure 1

Empathic cues are helping us to emphasize with specific situations, actions and activities, characters, animals and objects. They control reception process and the structuring of emotional and intentional horizon of characters that we synthesize and simulate in an empathic field.

They affect us to simulate and prepare hypotheses about mental/intentional events and mental states of a character.

The analysis of the filmed image and the disclosure of *empathic cues* is the basic principle to approach an *empathy-semiotics* of film. The distinct *sign-character* of *empathic cues* refer to the statement, that empathic processes are semiotic processes: That offers the possibility to extract an *affect-language* of film.

4.1 Empathic cues and the filmic image

The diegetic object-world is a constructed world. Within *mise-en-scène* and prop of a movie different object-scenarios in diegetic rooms are staged as *fields of relevance* in which the characters are acting.

The diegesis² creates context and area of action for the character interaction: the diegesis is a co-text – a partner of interaction – and refers to mental events and mental states of a character. The analysis of diegetic structure is an important and efficient factor in the analysis of empathic understanding.

The diegesis can be a symbolic space, which means, that the environment an the diegetic object-world can be understood as physical or objective correlates of mental states or attributes of the characters. But the narrated world and its menaing is not simply given the recipient, but must be actively constructed by him:

The diegetic encompasses more than what the picture shows. The diegesis is the product of a *synthesizing power* that is provided in the appropriation of the text and which I will call in the following *diegesizing*. (Wulff 2007: 46)

Thus the diegesis is structured not only as the simple sum of the information that the film conveys to the audience through the narrative world, but as the content of the mental construct that the recipient draws up in understanding the narration. This mental construct is described as *situation model*³ and builds the space for the

² The diegesis is the displayed world, the world of narration and characters. The diegesis is constructed in a process and synthesized by the recipient. Analogical to the empathic field it is possible to speak from a diegetic field – a simulated version of the whole diegetic structures. The construction of the diegesis is a method of extraction: the impressions out of the *mise-en-scène*, montage etc. are synthesized as a homogeny representation of the diegetic world (Wulff 2007: 39pp.; Fuxjäger 2007: 17pp.).

³ „A major feature of our model is the assumption that discourse understanding involves not only the representation of a textbase in episodic memory, but, at the same time, the activation, updating, and

interaction of the film's characters and the symbolic space of the incarnations of mental states and properties of figures. Within this symbolic space meanings are translated into visual forms that reveal themselves as objects and design parameters of the diegesis.

Because »symbolically« means as much as having meaning out yet another meaning. The decisive factor here for the film is that all things, without exception, are necessarily symbolic. For all the things make a physiognomic impression on us, whether we realize it or not. (Balázs 2001: 70)

The figures are linked to the diegesis, making it possible for the objects to maintain the constant presence of its occupant: “like household gods the objects live here, embody the affective bonds in this environment, the constant presence of the group [...]” (Baudrillard 2001: 24).

The diegetic object as a symbol is readable twice: As an object for itself and as a reference to a character - as an icon and as a symbol. Following Vischer remarks on the symbol, it can be characterized by the mode of confusion between image and meaning. And after Codruța-Elena Morari the symbol retrieves two types of reactions: the tendency for abstraction and the tendency for empathy (Morari 2008: 71).

Thus the diegetic world can be attributed a empathetic moment. In it empathic cues can be located that contribute to structure and transfer empathic perspectives: Items become incarnations of properties of a figure, devices become articulations of a character expression or psyche, they become representatives, alternates.

Thus diegesizing can be empathizing at the same time. This can take many forms in the movie.

4.1.1 ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING

In the beginning of *ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING* the movement of camera characterizes the main character: we see a typical room of a girl with CD's, books and photos. Not till then the camera turns to the singing and dancing Chris Parker. But before we see Chris Parker we already have an idea of her. It clarifies that a character in a film/movie is incorporated in a system of signs. Our “life-world is not the reality

other uses of a so-called *situation model* in episodic memory: this is the cognitive representation of the events, actions, persons, and in general the situation, a text is about” (van Dijk & Kintsch 1983: 12).

of things how they are themselves, it is with signs developed, interpreted, disguised or disfigured, in either case a shaped world (Oehler 2000: 13).

Everything could be used as a sign when it is interpreted as a sign (Bense 1965: 305). This thesis is assisted by the arguments of Hans J. Wulff who characterizes the prop of a film as an art to generate importance. The *field of relevance* or *field of importance* is closely connected to the acting character and the story itself:

All elements of the story are elements of the diegesis, but the diegesis ranges across the story. The diegesis contains information that are not only fixed in the system of actions. (Fuxjäger 2007: 21)

The common elements of story and diegesis underline the context-determination of individuals. The context-determination of our body depends to the concept of interaction with the environment. We are not bounded within our body, we are *opened* towards the environment (Stockmeyer 2004: 34). We are shaping our surrounding area with our acting and the environment could tell something about us.

The semiotic impetus of the environment is the disposition for the empathic moment inside the diegesis. In reference to the empathic cues the layered arrangement of the diegesis has to be pointed out as an important fact. The concept of perception-world has to be separated from the concept of physical world to diagnose the condition of signs.

4.1.2 ONE HOUR PHOTO

One example for *empathic cues* in the concept of physical world is ONE HOUR PHOTO. Sy Parrish works in a photo laboratory and little by little he becomes interested in the everyday life of the Yorkin's so that he barges in and becomes violently fanatic.



Figure 2

In one special scene we have a look at his room, a clean and cheerful place that fits into our opinion and hypothesis about him. But then we see (with the help of the camera) an accurate illuminated wall which is nearly complete laminated with private photos of the Yorkin's – all copies of photos that he had developed for them (Figure 2). The photos are representing the wishes and dreams of Sy Parrish and refer to his distinct psychosis that is connected with the supposed intact structure of the Yorkin's family life. In this scene the physical diegesis mirrors the mental states and intentions of Sy Parrish and we know that it could come to a bad end.

But more interesting is the analysis of empathic cues in the concept of perception-world in *THE CELL*.

4.1.3 THE CELL

THE CELL is structured with a high-level of symbolic functions in the diegetic world. The perception of the physical world represents the feelings and mental states of Carl Stargher. This symbolic function is a fundament and therefore a very important basis for empathic (re)construction of Carl Stargher's inner feelings, intentions and his personal identity.

The female psychologist Catherine Deane works for a medical institute with a revolutionary method of a controlled entering of patient's mental worlds – a kind of

medical controlled empathy.⁴ The serial killer Stargher has lost consciousness and Catherine Deane has to enter his psyche to detect the place where Stargher hides his last victim.

The psychic constitution of the different patients is symbolized in the different scenarios of their inner worlds. In the beginning of the movie Catherine has to enter the psyche of the autistic Edward: a big desert represents young Edward's isolation and the distance between him and the world of healthy people. The deserts bright light and Catherine's white dress are representing the innocence and pureness of Edward (Figure 3).



Figure 3

In contrast the psychotic inner world of Stargher is shaped by shadows, diffuse light, different portrayals of sadistic violence⁵ and a demonic manifestation of his psychotic self (Figure 4 and 5). All the elements of the diegetic inner world have one goal: the representation of the state of pain Carl Stargher is situated in.

⁴ Hier werden Parallelen zwischen Psychonautik und Psychoanalyse greifbar.

⁵ Stargher's diorama of his victims is a good example for his cruelty because it shows the murdered woman in cruel and absurd situations. The diorama symbolizes Stargher's potency and impulse to overall control – beyond the death of the woman he idealizes his power in his memory and it is shown in the diegetic structures.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Another example is the scene Catherine meets the young Stargher as a child. Carl is hiding behind a horse and suddenly lantern slides dismember the horse and offer the pulsating interior.

The horse symbolizes freedom and sexuality. The dismembering of the horse is more than a simple slaughter because it refer to a destruction of values in Starghers inner life: no more freedom only control through Stargher as a symbolic executive power.

The psychic inner world of Stargher is a construct of reference – it contains coded information. To empathize directly with Stargher is complicated⁶ and therefore we create a mode of empathy that works through the different layers of the diegesis –

⁶ The empathic structuring of Carl Starghers is also possible with a direct mode of empathy e.g. with his character before the coma, but for a deeper stadium of empathy we need the important information of the diegesis.

working with the signs unto the man *behind* as a structuring and restructuring of existent knowledge-schemata.

Itemizing of the diegesis is to equate with the psychoanalytical analysis of the person Carl Stargher. In *THE CELL* we understand the diegesis as a *process*⁷ partial as a process of empathy. By strategies of externalization the movie demonstrates how mental states and processes can be translated in diegetic structures, that must be decoded by the recipient to gain information for modeling the empathic perspective of the absent Carl Starghers.

It seems difficult to penetrate through the discourse on the real story, because the interaction of mise-en-scène, lighting, color and shape demand quite a bit of reception work by the viewer, because each image leads to new images, which are placed outside of the actual movie. And only when these images have been assembled into a totality of its references, it results in a complete model of the empathic perspective of Carl Stargher, whose character psyche was fanned in a mosaic of interrelated diegetic space images.

If we want to understand Carl Stargher, we need to resort ourselves in a semiotic act of diegesizing and trace and decrypt his inner world. Then within the diegesizing proceeds a empathising, which is structured over the symbolism of the diegesis.

4.2 Empathic cues and structure of sound

The effectiveness of isolated empathic cues on the level of sound was demonstrated by Annabel Cohen. She highlighted moving geometric figures with different kinds of music for an experiment with test persons that had to describe the structure of the scene. The outcomes had shown that the different styles of music at the one hand influenced the manner how the test persons experienced the characters and at the other hand that the respective style of music influenced the interpretation of actions (Cohen 1988: 95). When the graphical material contains a minimal or ambivalent basis for empathic processes the music contributes the interpretation of characters and actions at a high level: music could influence the processes of impact (Schmidt 1976: 296).

⁷ The diegetic process runs in a symbolic context – this process moves close to psychoanalysis. „The linguistics and the psychoanalysis are both „key sources“ of semiotics, the both exclusive disciplines that are through and through semiotic.“ (Metz 2000: 24).

But not only music or film score are able to serve as empathic cues, as well the structure of sound (noise, notes etc.).

The compensation of *affect-neutrality* (also passivity or neutrality of characters, objects and animals) and whose inversion into significance could be created in the structure of narration with the interconnection of tonal structures.

Comparably how verbalized information through characters could evolve the comprehension of the recipient also tonal structures could do it. For instance the drone of a refrigerator, followed by tonal growling, growling in guttural fashion to the point of abrasive connoted film score as *attack-music* - all moments of escalation relative to the object-qualities of a fridge in the movie REQUIEM FOR A DREAM (Figure 6).



Figure. 6

4.2.1 REQUIEM FOR A DREAM

Refrigerator-Metamorphosis – SOUND-PICTURE-INTERCONNECTION

Layer 1: → the refrigerator as a normal and still object in the diegesis.

Layer 2: Sara is reading in a diet book, thereafter we hear the drone of the refrigerator (but: but no visualization) → the refrigerator as a normal and loud object in the diegesis >>0:13:38-0:13:50<<.

Layer 3: Sara tries a diet (grapefruit and egg), drone of the fridge AND Saras stomach is growling as a kind of answer → the fridge is focussed, as a normal and loud object >>0:18:37-0:18:57<<.

Layer 4: The drone of the fridge is present in face of secondary tonal structures, split screen (on the left: Sara; on the right: the drone of the fridge is present during his visualization on screen)

→ the fridge is not longer part of the normal object-world, autonomous process of fridge activity >>0:19:36-0:20:03<<.

Layer 5: The drone of the fridge is present. The fridge changes his physical structure (we can have a look inside because of transparency); enticement of the fridge → proceeding autonomous process; Sara talks to him: „Shut up!“ >>0:25:20-0:25:39<<

Layer 6: Sara’s consultation; action of a drug („Speed“). Sara talks to him: „There's my three meals, Mr. Smarty-pants” and she gets biscuits out of the fridge and chews them provoking in the fridge’s direction → the fridge is now AGAIN a normal object because of the drugs action. >>0:30:05-0:30:58<<

Layer 7: Drugs action decreases (addiction) + drone of the fridge → Fridge is moving (proper motion); autonomous process (jumps – up and down) >>0:48:00-0:48:14<<

Layer 8: Withdrawal syndrome + insomnia. Walk through the room (2x view to the fridge with 2x threatening and brute sounds) → during the 4th view the fridge is moving towards Sara (is hopping) and dramatic film score; Sara escapes into her bedroom >>1:03:30-1:04:23<<

Layer 9: Sara walks back to her chair (calmness, no sound, no film score in face of the fridge’s visualization) → the fridge is moving towards Sara (1. step, then 2. step and 3. step), accompanied (from the 3. step) with brute sound – growling as an association of a lion. Spotlight onto the fridge (vision of the TV show, Sara’s alter ego in the TV, audience and show master are saying: „Feed me, Sara“ (circa 10x), parallel the fridge is growling; the fridge walks hectically towards Sara.

Layer 10: Finale activity mode of the fridge (transformation + final metamorphosis). The fridge becomes an >>object-actor<<. → The fridge hatches his upper part and offers a red lighted jaw with teeth (pinnacles of metal and wires); SOUND: a brute growl in a guttural fashion.

- Step 1. >>1:05:55-1:05:58<<
- Step 2. >>1:06:28-1:06:33<<
- Step 3. >>1:06:45-1:06:51<<
- SARAS THEME: INSANE-MUSIC >>1:08:37<<
- Spotlight onto the fridge: >>1:09:16-1:09:53<<

The example points out: An object that is modulated with SOUND-PICTURE-INTERCONNECTION offers a perfect base for simulative empathy of the recipient in the context of fictional film-experience.

The recipient accepts the connection between the brute sound and the activity of the fridge and he could absorb the perspective of an attacker, enemy and antagonist:

The tonal structure supplements our information we get from the screen and influences or controls our analytical view.

The tonal structure is an important factor in the structures and processes of empathy and simulative empathy with objects. When objects have a tonal structure they will rise above the diegetic and narrative calmness and focus comprehension and the process of hypotheses.

When the recipient could directly decode the SOUND-PICTURE-INTERCONNECTION, like the growling of a lion in the context and visualization of a fridge, he could understand the *object-oriented* intentionality of activity without the need for physical movements – *the tonal structure functions as an activity-phenomenon in the storyline.*

In this mentioned scenario it is possible to upgrade the *object-status* into an *advanced-object-status* to incorporate it into the structure of social interaction of narration – analog to the status of a character (or figure).

Even though the advanced-object does not act like a human actor its functionality inside the narration of the object-world is changed. The object will not become an actor but an Aktant according to Bruno Latour (Latour 2001: 302).

5. Affect-language and theory of film

The recipient of film operates with the structure of film in an active way. This operation is the empathic work of the recipient that takes place on figures and objects in film. This empathic work serves as the basal comprehension of film – it's the film experience.

Film experience and the semiologic process of empathy are based on the principle of data processing. The recipient extracts the relevant information from the screen representation and constructs an overall picture of narration and the structure of figures. This extraction proceeds in the structure of the *empathic field*, which is the dialectic generation of all perspectives and intentions of figures, animals or objects being part of the narration process, and with the decoding of the empathic cues, which organize the mental simulation of perspectives and intentions.

The empathic cues generate impact and contain significant indication character of signs – they are located in the code of the film. They are a textual method/process: The analysis of their structure helps us to understand the conditions which generate the understanding of the recipient and helps us to analyze the potential of the structure of comprehension. How intensive the recipient works with the empathic cues depends on his attendance and on the quality of the empathic cues (how they structure the comprehension).

The philosophical theory of empathic cues is a relevant concept, because of the placement of impact in the dialectic of cognition and emotion – empathic cues are an important factor in a theory of emotional comprehension. Empathic cues are a mechanism to support the work of the recipient, so that he has the possibility to synthesize the open range of impact structures.

The successful decoding of signs in the film-system - particularly with regard to the empathic cues - implies the understanding of the *affect-language* of film: empathic work decodes signs of film and generates impacts that lead to comprehension.

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Filmography

ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING (USA 1987, Chris Columbus)

ONE HOUR PHOTO (USA 2002, Mark Romanek)

REQUIEM FOR A DREAM (USA 2000, Darren Aronofski)

THE CELL (USA 2000, Tarsem Singh)