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Characters in Film and Other Media

Theory, Analysis, Interpretation

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3. What Are Characters, How Are They Created and Experienced? (T)

3.1 Definition and Ontology: What Are Characters?

This chapter will be rather abstract and theoretical; it could be skipped by readers who are more interested in practical matters of character analysis. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the following argument to clarify fundamentally what characters actually are.[1] This question may seem strange. After all, characters are part of our daily lives, and we deal with them intuitively. We have no problem talking about them, and everybody can even invent their own characters and should, therefore, know first-hand what they are like. This presumed familiarity, however, gives way to a whole series of difficult questions on closer examination. How can I define 'character' precisely? What kind of objects are characters if they do not exist in reality? How can we share their feelings and thoughts although they are not real? What features do they have and how do they originate? How are they related to media texts, to human imagination and communication? The answers to these questions determine the way in which characters are analysed, as a look at the various possible statements in common analytical practices shows. We talk about characters in very different ways. For example, even simple statements about Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* assign him quite heterogenous attributes:[2]

- Social, physical, and mental features: Rick is the owner of the most popular bar in Casablanca. He has dark hair, is of medium height, around forty, and has an expressive face. A disillusioned idealist, he is cynical, relaxed, sentimental, clever, bold, sensitive, and controlled.

- Relationships with other characters and events in the story: Rick loves the resistance fighter Ilsa Lund; he saves her and her husband from the Nazis.

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1   This question is discussed more extensively in Eder 2008d and in philosophical works such as Abell 2020, Reicher 1998, or Thomasson 2003. Moreover, characters can be considered as elements of fictional worlds, storyworlds, or 'film worlds', which have been examined from different perspectives by authors such as Ryan 1991, 2003; Doležel 1998; or more recently Yacavone 2015.

2   More elaborate examples illustrating the following statements can be found in Holm 2002; Riis 2002; Nielsen 2002; Kau 2002; and Caviglia 2002.

- Relationships with medial means of presentation: Rick is played by Humphrey Bogart. Framing techniques frequently focus the attention upon him, and the camera often shows him in close-ups.

- Overall forms and functions of the presentation: Rick is portrayed in a differentiated way as an individualised type. As the protagonist, he pushes the action forward.

- Reception and affective potential: Rick is an easily comprehensible character that elicits affection and compassion and whose secrets make him fascinating. Sometimes we even share his memories.

- Comparisons with real persons and characters in other texts: Rick appears to be taller than the actor Bogart actually was. He is parodied or quoted in many other films.

- Larger meanings: Rick stands for a 'typically American' combination of sentiment and pragmatism, apparent cynicism, and hidden idealism.

- Typologies, contexts of historical genres, and mentalities: Rick embodies an ideal of masculinity of his period along with features of typical heroes of Westerns and gangster movies.

- Sociocultural functions and influences: the filmmakers intended Rick to be seen as a model American who abandons his isolationist stance and supports the war against Nazi Germany. His ways of behaving and speaking were imitated repeatedly.[3]

The survey in the previous chapter shows that each theory of characters favours different sets of the above features while neglecting others, depending on their definition of character. If characters are regarded as human-like entities, their personality traits will be the prime topic of investigation. If they are viewed as components of a text, the focus will be on structures of presentation. If they are assumed to be mental constructs, a psychological approach to reception will be applied.

The spectrum of common definitions admits all of these possibilities. Most frequently, the character is defined as an equivalent to a real person or a 'fictional analogue of a human agent' (Smith 1995: 17).[4] At the opposite pole are structuralist

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3   On the political significance of *Casablanca*, see Pontuso 2005. Rick is the earliest movie hero to be included in the popularity survey of the British magazine *Total Film* (see https://web.archive.org/web/20201220113738/https://edition.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/26/indiana.hero/).

4   Further examples: 'a represented person that corresponds by analogy to our understanding of personhood in real life without being confused with reality' (Michaels 1998: 4). '[…] "character" or "person" in narrative will be understood as designating a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world, and capable of fulfilling the argument position in the propositional form DO(X)—that is, a Narrative Agent (=NA), to whom inner states, mental properties (traits, features) or complexes of such properties (personality models) can be ascribed on the basis of textual data' (Margolin 1986: 205). See also Asmuth 1997a.

notions that specify the character as a sign constellation, a bundle of textual functions, or a 'paradigm of traits' (Chatman 1978: 107ff.).[5] The definitions are so antagonistic that one can neither presuppose some intuitive understanding nor simply accept one of the definitions, since most of them prove to be problematical. The divergence of character conceptions has led to numerous misunderstandings and a lack of exchange between theories. However, it is also not helpful to leave the concept of character completely open, because it needs to be clarified if different theories are to be systematically linked.[6]

A look at current character definitions reveals three central areas that need to be clarified: firstly, the anthropomorphic quality of characters, secondly, their ontological status and, thirdly, their relationship to neighbouring concepts like role, star, or actant.

The most widespread definitions correspond to the scheme 'a character is a fictional human being', but this is obviously too narrow, because the spectrum of characters also includes animals, aliens, gods, ghosts, robots, monsters, magical, or other non-human beings. Although most characters exhibit human traits, they can also differ significantly from humans in their mode of existence, physicality, sociality, or mental capacity, and their significance can lie precisely in questioning the criteria of being human. Even definitions that understand characters not as human persons, but more generally as beings capable of acting or taking action, are still too narrow, as some characters can also remain completely passive or immobile and only undergo mental processes.

However, there is one decisive feature (and also one decisive prerequisite for action) that is in fact common to all characters: they possess an—at least rudimentary—inner life and the capability of relating to objects with their conscious minds, for instance, to perceive, feel, or desire something. In the philosophy of mind, this ability to mentally represent objects is called intentionality. While in everyday life 'intentionality' generally refers to deliberate or purposeful action, in philosophy the term is used in the broader sense of the directedness of something at something (Searle 1983, 2004: Chapter 6) or 'the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs' (Jacob 2019). Furthermore, for a fictional being with the capacity for intentionality to be called a character, it must be recognisable. Extras whizzing by in the background or merging into crowds will not usually be considered characters. A first working definition might therefore be:

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5   E.g., Manfred Pfister attempts to specify a character as the sum of its structural functions in the changing and stabilisation of situations, and the moral quality or identity of a character as the sum of the relations of correspondence and contrast with the other characters of a text (Pfister 1988: 224). This recursive definition does not hold up against a logical examination because its definiens already presupposes the concept of character. Besides, character is defined solely through action although characters can also be construed independently of actions.

6   Thus Göran Nieragden (1995), for example, evades any definition of his own. Taylor and Tröhler (1999) do so, too, and conceive of character as a 'Facetten-Konglomerat [conglomerate of facets]' that may be defined by different aspects, none of which is necessarily present (Taylor and Tröhler 1999: 149; cf. also Tröhler 2007 and Taylor 2002: 13).

A character is a recognisable represented being with an inner life—more precisely: with the ascribed capacity of mental intentionality.

This definition is somewhat broader than in earlier editions of this book because it replaces 'fictional beings' with 'represented beings'. In this way, the definition also includes characters from documentary film or other non-fictional media. Nevertheless, it makes sense to first look at the more widely discussed (and more ontologically difficult) standard case of fictional characters here, of intentional beings that are represented in fictional media such as feature films.

So, what are fictional beings, what is their ontological status? In analytical philosophy all those objects are considered fictional that are represented by fictional textual utterances (Künne 1983: 291ff.; the German original differentiates more precisely between 'fictitious' [fiktiven] objects and 'fictional' [fiktionalen] texts, but this does not translate well into English). Fictional are all those descriptive texts for which their producers do not claim that the described objects really exist or that these objects really possess the properties ascribed to them (see Gabriel 1975; Searle 1979). Rick Blaine is therefore fictional because the movie *Casablanca* never asserted that he really existed. And the characters of historical feature films like Cleopatra or Napoleon are fictional because their makers do not insist that their real counterparts actually possessed exactly the same properties, the same looks and lives, as the actors or animated figures representing them in the film.

Thus, characters are marked as fictional by certain communicative contexts and media practices and as non-fictional by others. Viewers expect documentary films and other non-fictional media to correspond to reality, and their claims to concrete factual truth can even lead to legal disputes, for example over defamation. Fictional films, on the other hand, are seen as games of the imagination, inviting viewers to imagine worlds which, as the credits often emphasise, are 'free inventions' and in which any resemblance between their inhabitants and real people is 'purely coincidental'. Between fiction films and documentaries there are hybrid forms such as docudramas, reenactments or autofictions, whose degree of fictionality must be assessed in each case.[7] This definition of fictionality, which is pragmatic, context-dependent, and allows for differences of degree, applies not only to characters, but also to everything else in fictional communication, to entire fictional worlds.

A simple answer to the question of the ontology of characters might therefore be to define them as elements of such fictional worlds and refer further clarification to fictional worlds theories in literature and media studies.[8] Here, a fictional world is understood as a system of non-real, possible states-of-affairs, as a framework of

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7   On the problematic character of such statements see Tröhler 2002; I prefer a theory of fiction more strongly anchored in the pragmatics of texts than in textual structures.

8   Cf. Eco 1998; Ryan 1991 and 2003; Doležel 1998; Pavel 1986; Ronen 1994; Buckland 1999; Yacavone 2015. See also the instructive surveys by Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 123–34 and Surkamp 2002.

objects, individuals, space and time, events, laws, etc. that is construed by a fictional text (Doležel 1998: 16–23; Ryan 2001: 91). This reference to fictional worlds, however, cannot solve our problem. To specify fictional worlds ontologically, scholars refer to philosophical theories of possible worlds, which are themselves completely at odds regarding their ontology.[9] Theories of fictional or possible worlds thus cannot provide any clarification of the mode of existence of characters, because they are themselves battling with equally massive ontological problems.

As the scholarly discourse on characters is older and richer than the one on fictional worlds, it is advisable to make it the point of departure. The four central positions on the ontological status of fictional characters are extremely controversial.[10] (1) Semiotic theories consider characters as sign constellations or textual structures.[11] (2) Cognitive approaches assume that they are conceptions of imaginary beings in the minds of viewers.[12] (3) Some philosophers believe that characters are abstract objects existing beyond material reality.[13] (4) Others again think that they do not exist at all.[14] There are also attempts to connect some of these assumptions with each other.[15] Such considerations may seem unnecessarily abstract and dispensable, but they are not, because each position has far-reaching consequences for the practice of analysing characters. Those who view characters as textual structures will primarily examine the media text. Those who view characters as mental constructs, on the other hand, will focus instead on the audience's reception processes. And if characters are abstract objects or if they do not exist at all, then the question arises as to what one is actually analysing and talking about. Every definition thus entails a particular perspective and methodology. The pros and cons of the different positions cannot be dealt with in detail here, but I shall at least sketch out a few of the essential arguments.[16]

The assumption that characters are 'signs' leads to problems, whichever of the meanings of this word is selected. Fundamentally, three different meanings of 'sign' may be

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9   A survey of philosophical positions on the ontology of possible worlds is offered by Melia 2000.

10   Introductions to the philosophical debate are Proudfoot 1992; Howell 1998; Lamarque 1998. On the discussion within literary theory cf. Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 31–34; Margolin 1990a, 1990b, and 1995; the most detailed treatment is Jannidis 2004: Chapter 5. The problem of fictional objects is, of course, also of central significance for fictional worlds theories (Doležel 1998: 1–30).

11   Cf. Branigan 1984: 12 ('surface feature of discourse'); Wulff 1997: 1 [French ed.: 32]; and Jannidis' critique of (post-)structuralist variants of this position (2004: Chapter 5).

12   See in the psychological theory of literature Grabes 1978; Schneider 2000; Culpeper 2000; Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; and the critique in Jannidis 2004: 177–184. In the area of film theory, no comparably explicit version of this proposition is known to me although it seems to be suggested by numerous approaches, e.g., Bordwell 1992; Ohler 1994; Grodal 1999; or Persson 2003.

13   Thomasson 2003 and Reicher 1998; cf. also Howell 1998 and Lamarque 1998.

14   Künne 1983: 291–322; Currie 1990; cf. also Proudfoot 1992; Howell 1998; Lamarque 1998.

15   Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, for instance, assumes that characters have an ontological double structure as nodal points in a text and abstractions in the story (1996: 33; cf. also 29ff.).

16   A more detailed presentation of my argumentation is Eder 2008d. I agree with Jannidis's (2004: Chapter 5) critique of the conception of characters as signs and as subjective mental models, as well as with the argumentation by Thomasson 2003 or Reicher 1998 for considering characters as a particular kind of abstract object.

distinguished: as a thing standing for something else, as a physical carrier of signification, and as a relation, for instance between a signifier (expression) and a signified (content). Now characters may often stand for something else and thus function as secondary signs (e.g., as an allegory). But this is only a functional specification, not an ontological one. Ontologically, characters cannot be equated with any dyadic or triadic sign relation according to de Saussure or Peirce.[17] It appears to be counterintuitive that they should be abstract relations between signifiers and signifieds or between sign carriers, referential objects, and interpretants, especially since the question of how to define each of these relata would lead to great difficulties.[18] Could they be one of these relata? Certainly not the material sign carriers, because we speak differently about characters and concrete textual structures. In contrast to 'Rick Blaine has dark hair', the sentence 'Rick is this set of images and sounds' sounds strange. More importantly, characters may exist apart from their original text and its specific set of signs: after all, film characters can also appear in other films, novels, or computer games. Characters therefore seem to be a complex meaning of signs rather than these signs themselves.

However, this meaning cannot consist in the individual conception of a character formed by a particular viewer as suggested by psychological approaches (e.g., Persson 2003; Schneider 2000). The subjective conceptions or mental models of Rick Blaine formed by different viewers of *Casablanca* will certainly diverge from each other. They are not the same, neither numerically nor qualitatively, and they change during the film. The character Rick Blaine, however, remains the same (although Rick's personality changes). Viewers may even admit that they have formed a wrong picture of Rick. This suggests that particular norms determine when an individual mental representation of a character is 'right' and corresponds to the actual character. If characters are based on normative assumptions and abstractions, however, which are derived from an analytical perspective, then a character cannot even be an abstract type of mental representations. For a type in the sense of a mere generalisation based on the mental models of different viewers—i.e., based on what remains the same with these viewers—would no longer be normative but descriptive.

The comparison with ideas or texts representing real beings also contradicts the notion that characters are mental representations of viewers or complexes of signs. Neither a television programme about the former Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel nor the image that I as a viewer create of her are identical with Merkel herself. Fictional media do not correspond completely to this pattern, as characters do not exist like persons in material reality. But the analogy supports the assumption that signs and ideas are only external or internal representations of characters, not the characters themselves. We can say that Rick is portrayed by Bogart in certain sequences of the film *Casablanca* and that we have formed an idea of Rick on this basis, but we cannot meaningfully claim that the film sequences with Bogart or our individual ideas are identical with Rick. So, the provisional conclusion is:

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17 On dyadic and triadic sign models, see Nöth 2000: 137–41.
18 For more on that, see my small book *Was sind Figuren?* (2008d).

> Characters must be distinguished from their mental and textual (medial) representations, even if they are based on them.

Since the concept of representation is often misunderstood, I would like to emphasise again that representations are obviously not to be understood as abstract propositions here, but as mental or medial entities with a material basis. Mental representations or ideas of a certain character develop in the minds of the audience through various mental processes. Textual (medial) representations of characters, again, include all those textual elements that contribute essentially to those mental processes by evoking or influencing ideas of characters: images of the character's body, dialogues about their personality, or musical leitmotifs recalling the character. Both mental and textual representations are clearly necessary for the genesis of characters, but they are not identical with them.

Thus, the question of what characters really are arises again. Or do characters really not exist at all and talking about them is merely the result of a linguistic illusion? Some philosophers assume that all statements about characters are ultimately either statements about texts or about mental representations (e.g., Künne 1983: 310–14; Currie 1990: 158–62). 'Rick Blaine loves Ilsa' would then mean: 'According to the film *Casablanca*, Rick loves Ilsa' or '*Casablanca* triggers the idea that Rick loves Ilsa'. Whenever we believe to be analysing characters, we would in reality be examining external or internal representations although it would still remain unclear in what form this might happen. In addition, not all utterances are so easy to resolve. How could we, for instance, transform the following sentence: 'Rick Blaine is a multidimensional character invented by Murray Burnett, played by Humphrey Bogart, often shown in close-up shots, meeting an ideal of masculinity of his period, therefore re-emerging in several film parodies'? Here a simple introductory formula like 'according to *Casablanca*' is obviously not sufficient. The attempts at a reformulation of such complex statements in logical language by analytical philosophers therefore result in almost endless sentences twisted into something like a Gordian knot (for examples of that, see Currie 1990: 171–80).

There is, however, an alternative that will do justice both to practical character analysis and the intuition that we do in fact talk about characters. It consists in conceiving of characters as abstract social objects, as for example in Amie L. Thomasson's 'artefact theory' of fiction (2003). According to this theory, characters are comparable to laws, theories, or works of art: they are cultural artefacts created by textual utterances. Characters are abstract because they can neither be handled materially nor located spatio-temporally; they still are, however, contingent elements of our real world that originated at a particular point in time. Similar views are held by scholars with varying backgrounds.[19] My own version of the proposition in the German first edition

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19 See, for instance, Maria Reicher's concept of fictional objects as logical parts of the world layers of representational works (1998: 295); Roman Ingarden's 'abgeleitet rein intentionale, durch

of this book was: fictional beings are communicative artefacts that are created by the intersubjective construction of mental representations of certain beings on the basis of fictional texts. However, this proposition (developed in more detail in Eder 2008d) can be broadened to cover also non-fictional characters of documentaries or other non-fictional media (see Eder 2014, 2016; Plantinga 2018b):

> Represented beings are communicative artefacts that are created by the intersubjective construction of mental representations of certain beings on the basis of texts.

As mentioned before, 'texts' are understood here as complex but coherent sign utterances or units of communication that are based on and shaped by the material, sensory, semiotic, and pragmatic specificity of certain media. For instance, filmic texts are shaped by the specific affordances of moving images and sound used as predominantly iconic signs in the pragmatic contexts of cinema.

Thus, characters do exist, but they are neither signs in the text nor subjective ideas in people's heads. They are abstract objects created through communicative practice and are in this way made part of an objective social reality—like numbers, laws, theories, or money. Karl Popper's philosophical 'three worlds theory' would assign them neither to world one of the physical-concrete nor to world two of the subjective-mental, but to world three, the world of objective cultural contents that exist independently of individual minds (cf. Popper 1972: 153–90). This position can best be made clear by showing how characters originate. The clarification will, at the same time, provide indications of how character analysis should proceed properly and how different theories of character could be combined with each other. In the following, I will focus on fictional characters in feature films. But it should be noted that most of what I will say about them could also be applied to non-fictional characters or to characters in other media.

3.2 Communication and Meaning: How Do Characters Originate?

Characters are created through communication: through interactions in which texts are produced and received in order to influence mental states such as thoughts and feelings, and through these often also behaviour.[20] To put it more precisely, characters

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Bedeutungseinheiten entworfene Gegenständlichkeiten [derivative purely intentional objects designed through units of meaning]' (Ingarden 1972: 230; quoted from Reicher 1998: 295); Peter van Inwagen's 'theoretical entities of literary criticism' (see Howell 1998; Lamarque 1998); Umberto Eco's 'formal individuals' (2000: 243–45); or Uri Margolin's *entiae rationis* (1990b: 847). There are also connecting points with Jannidis's conception of a character as the mental model of a model reader (2004: 252).

20   The approach I outline briefly in the following seems to correspond in many respects to Catharine

appear in two very different forms of communication: representational and meta-representational communication. Representational communication presents certain real or invented worlds and objects, while meta-representational communication (or simply meta-communication) focuses on the processes and results of representational communication. This is most evident in the field of fiction. Fictional characters appear in fictional and meta-fictional communication.[21] On the fictional level, feature films are produced and viewed. The films serve as an invitation to imagine, as tools to evoke ideas and feelings about invented worlds in the viewers and to let them experience these worlds. Some of the film structures are character representations, intended to induce intersubjective processes of character reception. In this way, fictional communication forms the basis of characters that may subsequently, on the level of meta-fictional communication, become the subject of conversations between viewers, of advertising, criticism, analysis, and interpretation. Usually, it is only at this stage that assertions about characters are made, that they are, for instance, said to be stereotypical or differentiated. Fictional characters are thus constituted through fictional communication and then become objects of meta-fictional communication. Or more generally, if we want to include not only fictional but also non-fictional characters: all characters are constituted through representational communication and then become objects of meta-representational communication.

I shall begin with the first level. The essential prerequisites for the emergence of characters are:

- producers and recipients who form ideas of characters;
- a text that includes semiotic representations of characters;
- a practical context of representational communication; and
- collective mental dispositions and communicative rules.

The genesis of film characters starts when filmmakers begin to develop ideas of the beings they want to portray—usually in a collective process in which writers, directors, actors, and other members of a film team exchange their individual ideas about a character and shape the film with the intention of evoking similar character conceptions and mental processes in the imagined audience. This kind of intended character reception will affect the film's creation in a mostly intuitive way. For example, dialogues will be rewritten, actors cast, or failed scenes removed to achieve the desired effects. When the film is finished, it is distributed, with peri- and paratexts such as

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Abell's later and much more detailed institutionalist theory of fiction (Abell 2020). I distance myself from a non-intentional notion of communication (e.g., Nöth 2000: 235–47) and take up, in particular, suggestions by Schützeichel 2004, Schmidt 1991, and Vogel 2001. A detailed description of the communicative construction of characters is given by Jannidis 2004; it leads to somewhat different conclusions than my own.

21   In the case of non-fictional characters, we could more generally speak of 'mimetic' and 'meta-mimetic' or 'representational' and 'meta-representational' communication.

posters, trailers, or press announcements designed to give the audience a preliminary idea of the characters.

Production and distribution of the film make up the first large part of the communicative context; the second part consists in the film's reception and appropriation. Viewers act in selecting the film, watching it, in various places, at varying times, and for various motives. They need not be the targeted audience, nor need the film trigger the expected reception. The filmmakers may want to enlighten the spectators may prefer to be entertained. They often use the text in ways that diverge from the planners' intentions, make it function differently. Besides, people of different age or gender, and members of different cultures, groups, and milieus, may experience the film in different ways. The character conceptions, imaginations, and evaluations of various viewers may thus differ from one another and from the intentions of the filmmakers.

At a basic level of understanding, however, audience reactions will most often be fairly similar. Even people who perceive, understand and evaluate Rick Blaine differently—who, for instance, admire him or take him to be a self-pitying macho—will still generally agree about his bodily features and actions. For most viewers, the film will evoke processes of character reception that are in many ways similar to those intended. Such intersubjective effects of the representations of characters are fundamentally conditioned by collective mental dispositions ranging from innate modes of reaction to culturally and media specific knowledge (Persson 2003: 8–13). Whenever spectators respond to a film and filmmakers attempt to anticipate their responses, they do so on the grounds of physical and mental preconditions with individual variations but also common biological foundations, cultural influences, shared experiences, and comparable reception situations. Some of these dispositions, such as folk psychology or social categories and stereotypes, are particularly relevant for character reception (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

The similarities between the mental dispositions of producers and recipients are not merely a matter of coincidence, nor do they automatically lead to similar reception processes. Instead, the context of communicative action correlates them with each other, and they are intentionally brought into correspondence.[22] Filmmakers and film viewers in this way mutually generate certain facts of a social reality, including films with an intersubjective meaning; communication forms like the feature film; categories and genres; the institution of the cinema. All these are 'observer-dependent' facts (Searle 2001: Chapter 5) that would not exist without a conventional agreement between the participants—in contradistinction to the objects of the natural sciences (at least to realist theories of science). They arise in intersubjective frameworks of action through collective intentionality and the attribution of functions by means of constitutive rules (cf. Searle 2001: 139–51).

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22   Various conceptions of the processes involved are described by Schützeichel 2004.

Collective intentionality means here that filmmakers and spectators pursue common goals on the basis of shared presuppositions that include very general mutual expectations: the screening of the film is intended to trigger mental processes, among them the imagination and experience of invented worlds and characters. The material object film, a succession of images and sounds, is thus collectively assigned this function. Some theorists speak of a 'communicative contract', an implicit agreement between filmmakers and spectators (Casetti 2001; Wulff 2001c). Genres, star systems, posters, or trailers promise the spectators experiences with particular gratifications, among them information, orientation, and learning; entertainment, relaxation, and emotional stimulation; development of personal identity; social integration and interaction (cf. Schramm and Hasebrink 2004: 472). This kind of communicative contract is linked to specific sanctions: filmmakers must be prepared to tolerate bad criticism, and spectators can be accused of having failed to understand the film correctly. The contract also implies that the promises of gratification will be kept as long as the spectators orient themselves by the reception as intended by the filmmakers. This is only an offer and not a command: the spectators are free to view the film in different ways and ignore the filmmakers' intentions. But then they cannot hold the filmmakers responsible if the gratification is not delivered. It is therefore part of the implicit contract that viewers try to comply with the intended reception at least in some sort of indirect way.

The possibility of approximating the intended reception and both the differences and the commonalities of reception processes are essentially grounded in the complex spectrum of physical and mental properties of the spectators, which extend from biological or bodily tendencies toward certain reactions to culturally and individually specific sets of knowledge and affect, biases and preferences. To a certain extent, universal dispositions such as innate systems of perception and affect automatically lead the spectators to experience the intended reaction, for instance that they recognise represented beings correctly. On this basis of automatic perceptual tendencies, a further network of more complex, higher-level processes of understanding comes into play, often concerning that which is not directly perceptible: What is the character planning to do, what is its moral quality, what does it symbolise, is its representation meant to be ironical? Processes of this kind require implicit knowledge and spontaneous inferences on the basis of communicative rules. Some of these rules are constitutive rules of the form: X in context K means Y (Searle 2001: 148). Whenever a person makes certain noises with their mouths, then this is taken to be a promise of marriage in our culture; whenever lovers switch off the lights in an old Hollywood film, they are probably going to have sex; whenever a cartoon character is shown with dollar signs in place of its eyes, it is meant to be greedy. However, such cultural rules, conventions, schemata, or codes (terminologies vary here) in no way uniquely determine the reception process; they are only points of orientation that may suggest associations or help make the intended reception comprehensible through inferences. Thereby spectators primarily draw on stocks of knowledge that are easily accessible and appear most relevant.

The communicative context plays a role in determining which areas of knowledge are used. Among the foundations are some general principles of communication, for instance the assumption that the film was made so as to serve particular purposes of the communication situation (e.g., entertainment, information).[23] The mutual recognition and consideration of the given communicative contexts and prerequisites takes place on the basis of communication rules. The filmmakers try to anticipate the reactions of their audiences; the spectators try to comprehend the intentions of the filmmakers. Depending on the kind of film communication, the responsibility may be shifted: producers of mainstream films try to please their target audiences as far as possible, so these audiences can expect to be 'served' without having to bother about the intentions of the producers. Conversely, the spectators of complex auteur films are conventionally expected to use knowledge about the filmmakers and their situation in order to understand the films. Thus, special features of film communication and its different forms must be taken into account, including that filmmakers and spectators are not in direct contact; that a film must not be seen only as a message but also as a commodity, a toy, an instrument of the senses; that the levels of narration and meaning of a film can be multifaceted; and that indirect meanings and sensory processes often play a central role (metaphor, irony, aesthetic experience). Fictional communication, as a rule, is more complex and open in its meaning than direct instrumental everyday communication; it is also split into different forms and practices. Generally, the activities of making or understanding fiction are also subject to communicative goals, norms, and conventions. They are geared to fulfil particular functions and therefore expected to meet collective dispositions and communicative rules to do so. This is the foundation for the constitution of characters as intersubjective objects.

A more precise understanding can be achieved by considering meta-fictional or meta-representational communication. In this context, characters are the prime object of debates between spectators, filmmakers, critics, interpreters, and censors. All the aspects of representational communication are dealt with: one may discuss the filmic means used to depict Rick in *Casablanca*, how Rick should be understood from the point of view of the filmmakers, how spectators actually reacted to him or might hypothetically respond to him. Beyond the responses of individual viewers, one may try to explore group-specific responses: How do men or women, Americans or Moroccans, perceive Rick at a certain point in time?

In all these cases one, makes essentially empirical hypotheses about the actual, probable, or intended reception of characters by individuals or social groups. Empirical statements of this kind play a role in film creation in order to gauge the future character reception (for example, in test screenings), and in sociocultural analyses in order to assess the effects of characters (for example, in youth protection committees). They may be supported by production and reception data, such as audience surveys, focus

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23 On communicative principles of cooperation, cf. Casetti 2001; Jannidis 2004: 52–60; Schmidt 1991; Wulff 2001c.

groups, or interviews with filmmakers. When available, they may provide decisive arguments for or against the asserted form of character reception.

Other statements about characters cannot be confirmed empirically, but need to be made plausible in other ways. Especially in film interpretation and criticism, one may encounter propositions that are openly or covertly normative or evaluative: character representations are supposed to have been understood 'correctly' or 'wrongly'; certain interpretations are called 'better', 'more adequate', or 'more interesting' than others. Such statements obviously measure the actual reception of characters against certain ideals. But what are those ideals and what standards apply? In other words, what could be a basis for an intersubjectively valid meaning of representations of characters? Three criteria are most often mentioned: the rules of communication, the intentions of the producers, and the interests of the recipients (cf. Jannidis et al. 2003).

A first criterion of ideal character reception could be its optimal correspondence with communicative rules and other collective dispositions. However, this would often leave the reception more or less open; it would furthermore raise the question as to what dispositions and rules are relevant in a given case. After all, there may be great differences between the dispositions and rules of different times and cultures—and thus between filmmakers and spectators. The intentions of filmmakers might be used as an additional or alternative criterion. Author-intentional theories of meaning assume that the ideal reception matches the reception intended by the creators; character representations should then be understood as the authors explicitly intended or implicitly presupposed them to be. Other positions, by contrast, emphasise the legitimate interests of the spectators: perhaps it is more interesting, entertaining, or enlightening to understand character representations in ways different than the producers intended.

The position taken here is that not one of these criteria is in itself sufficient to determine the ideal character reception, but that all three must be taken into account.[24] This is already implied by the framework of communicative action and its aims. Communicative action is ideally successful precisely when the interests of all participants, the communicators as well as the recipients, are optimally satisfied according to the given communicative rules. This would be the case when the viewers, due to their communicative competence, fully realise the intended reception and precisely through this also achieve the highest possible measure of gratification. Ideal communication in this form will most probably never be reached. How deviations from the ideal are assessed depends on how much weight is given to communicative rules, intentions of authors, and interests of spectators in specific contexts of film

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24 Communicative conventions are insufficient because they are variable, depending on historical and cultural contexts. When filmmakers violate communicative rules and produce character representations that are ambiguous and misleading, involuntarily comical, etc., then their intentions alone cannot be decisive. And the interests of the viewers certainly must follow communicative rules and intentions to some degree at least.

communication. In mainstream movies, for instance, the prime goal is to satisfy the spectators, even against filmmakers' intentions. Here the film is primarily a commodity and the client is king. For the auteur film, in contrast, the intentions of the filmmakers conventionally pull greater weight. It may be generally stated that normative statements and assertions about ideal character reception can only be justified by weighing up the three criteria, and that they thus depend on the particular contexts and practices of film communication.

A preliminary conclusion might then be: firstly, in meta-representational communication such as character analysis, empirical hypotheses are constructed about the probable, factual, or intended character reception of concrete (groups of) recipients—how might Rick be understood by future viewers; what conceptions of Rick would spectators of different times, cultures, and milieus develop; how did the filmmakers intend him to be understood? Secondly, in meta-representational communication normative assertions about ideal character reception are at least implicitly presupposed—what would an ideal understanding of Rick be, taking into account the intentions of the authors, the interests of the spectators, common dispositions, and communicative rules and contexts? Thirdly, statements about the characters themselves can be explained on this basis: they are based on implicit assumptions about the ideal character reception of competent viewers. Since the viewers' ideas of a character change over the course of a film, statements must furthermore generalize in order to ascribe certain largely stable characteristics to the character itself.

Representational (fictional) communication

Textual representation of character → reception → mental representations (character models of individual recipients)

Meta-representational (meta-fictional) communication
(e.g., analysis and interpretation)

Normative abstraction (aimed at intended or ideal reception)
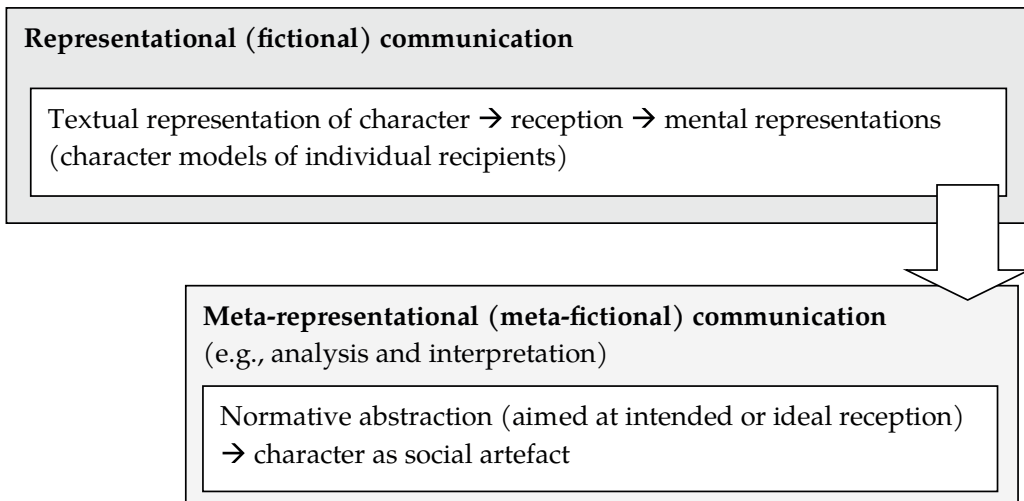→ character as social artefact

Diagram 1 From individual mental representations of a character to the intersubjective character
as a social artefact

The creation of characters as communicative artefacts thus proves to be a multi-layered process (see Diagram 1). At the start of fictional (or more generally: representational)

communication, producers create representations of characters in order to evoke imaginations of those characters in the recipients. Intersubjective correspondences of these imaginations are made possible by an interaction of collective dispositions of perception and experience, communicative rules, contextual knowledge, and the consideration of authors' intentions and recipients' interests. The same factors also enable the reconstruction of ideal character conceptions in meta-fictional (or more generally: meta-representational) communication. Abstracting from these ideal character conceptions finally leads to the character itself as a communicative artefact, an intersubjective abstract object, and a component of the meaning of the text.

The way in which characters appear and are discussed in meta-representational communication has far-reaching consequences for their analysis. The first concerns the scope and objects of character analysis. When characters are analysed, not only are they themselves discussed, but also all other aspects of representational (fictional) communication that relate to them, including the textual means and forms of their representation and all varieties of their reception (individual, group, ideal, intended, or probable reception). In previous character theories, statements about these different objects of investigation have not been clearly distinguished. The characters themselves have often been confused with representations or imaginations of characters. Pointing out the differences between such objects makes it possible to explain enduring misunderstandings between competing theories of character and to integrate their results. Roughly speaking, structuralist theories have concentrated on character representation, cognitive theories on character reception, and hermeneutical theories on the characters themselves. The different theoretical strands might thus benefit from each other exactly because they have focused on different aspects of the object domain, as will be shown later.

A third consequence is that the features and structures of characters can at least partially be derived from the structure of their mental representations. Characters are not mere signs but are based on mental models of beings with physical, psychological, and social features, which are imagined based on the perception of the film. This means that character reception and mental character models are of central importance in the analysis. The next chapter will therefore deal in more detail with character reception and try to describe what makes it intersubjective. Film communication presupposes some universal dispositions of perception, comprehension, and affect, and since only communicative norms can guarantee the intersubjectivity of character reception, statements about characters will always be implicitly normative. Precisely because universal dispositions and collective norms are widely shared, this kind of normativity generally remains inconspicuous and rarely provokes controversy. However, when problems with characters arise and their proper analysis is required, then statements can ultimately only be substantiated by reconstructing ideal character conceptions and processes of abstraction, and by weighing up against each other collective dispositions, communicative rules, intentions of authors, and interests of spectators in specific contexts of communication.

Thus, a pragmatics of communication provides the most convincing basis for understanding characters. On this basis, characters can be defined as recognisable represented beings with the attributed capability of intentionality. They are constituted as cultural artefacts through representational communication and discussed in meta-representational communication. Characters are fictional when films are fictional and do not explicitly or implicitly claim that concrete beings with the same features exist in reality (even if they have been modelled on real persons).

One could also say that characters are elements of the meaning of a text, whereby 'meaning' must be understood as an intersubjective, ultimately normative construct. When we talk about characters, we always implicitly assume the successful joint construction of similar mental models in the communication between authors and audience. The success of such communication is determined based on a set of criteria that range from largely universal bodily dispositions (we could all see that the character has dark hair) to culturally specific conventions (for example, concerning the understanding of the characters' motivation). Due to processes of normative abstraction according to such criteria, characters are not simply generalisations of the diverse character conceptions of individual recipients—of what is the same in all these individual ideas—but of what should be the same in all of them. In short, characters are grounded in the normative abstraction of ideally intersubjective character models.[25] As communicative artefacts, they are multidimensional objects of meta-representational communication: When analysing characters, interpreting them, or simply talking about them, one can not only ascribe certain traits, actions and relationships to them as represented beings, but also describe how they are shaped as artefacts by textual strategies, or examine how mental models of them emerge in various types of reception.[26] The following chapters will describe how these different aspects of character analysis are interconnected and what the corresponding structures of characters are.

The ontology of characters outlined here could be extended to entire represented worlds (mostly discussed as 'fictional worlds' or 'storyworlds'): every such world is—just like a character—a communicative artefact that arises through the intersubjective formation of mental representations by means of (fictional) texts. Storyworlds are naturally much more complex structures than individual characters. They form a total framework, a system, which comprises not only characters and their interrelations but also all their spatio-temporal environment, inanimate objects, situations and events, norms, and principles. The structures of this system have been described in detail in the theories of fictional worlds, and character analysis might well profit

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25   In many ways, this approach resembles Fotis Jannidis's conception of a character as a mental model of a model recipient (2004: 185), but it seeks to avoid its inherent personalisation and attempts to elucidate how a character is constructed as a social artefact on the basis of communicative norms and practices.

26   This distinction of different forms of reception resembles the distinction of different constructs of recipients in Staiger 1992 or Iser 1994: 50–67.

from them.[27] As represented beings with intentionality, characters are particularly important and prominent inhabitants of represented worlds. Similar relationships hold between characters and stories (see also Chapter 1). A story contains a chain of events from a represented world that usually consists primarily of actions of characters. Ontologically, this chain of events is, just like the world to which it belongs, a communicative artefact that is mentally represented in the form of event conceptions or situation models. Character theory is thus not only closely connected with more general theories of fiction and narration, worldbuilding and storytelling, but can make relevant contributions to them. The conception of character presented here makes it also easier to situate the character concept in a field of related concepts with which it is often confused and to distinguish characters more clearly from persons, actors, star images, actants, parts, or roles.[28]

The question is now how characters and the aspects of communication connected with them can best be investigated in a systematic way. The essential purpose of communication and the precondition for the emergence of characters lies in reception, in the mental processes that emerge by interacting with (media) texts. The following chapter will therefore deal with how characters are (re-)constructed and experienced in reception processes.

3.3 Reception: How Are Characters Understood and Experienced?

How characters are perceived, understood, and experienced is crucial for their analysis. Firstly, the reception of characters is of interest in itself and plays a central role for the overall impact of a film (or other media text). Secondly, characters' traits can only be discovered through the reception process. The first question is therefore what processes produce the effects of characters. How is Rick Blaine perceived by the viewers, why is he admired or pitied? Whoever poses a question of this kind usually presupposes that the character is already unproblematically given for the audience and asks what further reactions it might trigger in its members.

However, the preceding chapter has uncovered a second and more fundamental meaning of character reception. The text, as a communicative tool, is functionally determined by its reception. Its structures are—beyond a purely physical description— objectively given only to such an extent as the properties of the participants in

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27 E.g., Ryan 1991; Doležel 1998; Surkamp 2002.

28 Such differences are blurred, for instance, in Gardies 1993: 54–63 or Blüher 1999: 64. Characters must be distinguished from real *persons* (while there is also an obvious relation, see Smith 1995: 20–22; Pfister 1988: 221f.). *Actors* and *stars* represent characters without turning into them. Their *star image* is a construct just like a fictional character but remains related to a real being outside a film (Dyer 1999). A further line must be drawn between a character and a *part,* understood as the basis, laid down in a script, for the representation of a character. *Role* refers to structural functions of characters; a well-known example is 'actantial roles' (Greimas 1972; Casetti and di Chio 1994: 176ff.). *Actants* as bearers of such abstract positions must also not be confused with characters; one and the same character can perform several actantial roles.

communication allow. Therefore, even the simplest attributes of characters can ultimately be revealed systematically only by recourse to ideal reception processes: how else could the proposition be justified that Rick did indeed act heroically and did not want to revenge himself on Ilsa? Or that he slept with Ilsa although this was not shown? Characters are created through imagination in representational communication. Watching a film triggers imaginations of a world and its inhabitants in the viewers. Statements about characters ultimately refer to such imaginations and to normative assumptions about their intersubjective validity. Propositions about Rick can only be verified if I know how ideas of Rick are formed during the viewing of *Casablanca* and under what circumstances they can be accepted as correct. Mental representations thus make up a basis of the analysis of characters. At least in problematical cases, the analysis should be capable of making the implicit assumptions about them explicit.

These mental representations (or ideas, imaginations, mental models) of characters are, at the same time, embedded in larger frameworks of reception. I shall subsume any perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes that contribute to the formation of mental character models or contain them under the concept of character reception. This is broader than the notions of other theories, such as 'parasocial interaction' (Hartmann, Klimmt, and Schramm 2004) or 'character engagement' (Smith 1995). Character reception begins even before the first reaction of viewers to represented beings like Rick sets in; it begins as soon as they start to reconstruct such beings from their first perceptions of character representations in the text. To summarise: a character is derived from mental character models, and these are part of the process of character reception, which in turn is embedded in the context of film perception and reception as a whole. The result is the following chain of indications:

> Reception of the entire film → character reception (as part of film reception) → viewers' subjective character conceptions → intersubjectively given character

All systematic character analysis, therefore, presupposes a model of reception.[29] Anyone who wants to investigate characters must know how they are perceived, recognised, understood, and experienced. Only by recourse to a model of reception can it be uncovered whether characters are incomprehensible or likeable or why audiences empathise with them. But even when reception processes are not as directly involved as in connection with statements about characters' physical, mental, or social qualities, propositions cannot simply be justified by reference to the film. It is precisely when films and characters are understood in different ways by different recipients that analysis is necessary.

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29   Some scholars explicitly or implicitly propound the rival thesis that the proper foundation of character analysis is not a reception theory but a text and meaning theory, i.e., a semantics of fictional texts (e.g., Doležel 1998). This seems insufficient for a differentiated analysis for two reasons: for one, any kind of semantics is ultimately only an abstraction from intersubjective communication centring on reception; and furthermore, semantic theories have the tendency to occupy themselves primarily with higher cognitive reception processes from an implicitly normative perspective, and to neglect more basic, affective, and non-norm-conforming aspects of reception.

The reception of characters encompasses diverse kinds of mental experiences, which can provisionally be arranged in the following way:

- Perceptual and sensory processes: perceiving or sensorially experiencing 'the character itself' or representations of the character; perceiving something connected with the character (objects, musical leitmotifs); perceiving the same things or situations as the character does.

- Higher cognitive (imaginative and epistemic) processes: developing an idea of a character, attributing traits to it; apprehending the external experiences and the inner life of a character; understanding its behaviour and its motives; sharing its opinions or thoughts; contemplating it; associating something with it; recognising its symbolism or its thematic content; considering it as the counterpart of an interaction; discovering similarities between a character and real persons; comparing oneself with it; analysing its structure and its mode of presentation.

- Affective processes: affectively responding to representations of the character, or to its appearances and movements; developing feelings toward a character; sharing its hopes and fears; experiencing similar emotions, feeling with a character, empathising with it. This sphere of the affective— explored in detail in Chapter 13 and Chapter 14—includes sensational and bodily processes (e.g., sensations induced by the representation or imagination of a character; imitation of movements; sharing the experiences of a character, such as dizziness in *Vertigo*) as well as conative processes (desiring the character; wishing certain things to happen to it; projecting goals on it; wishing to possess the character's abilities; sharing its goals etc.).

The perceptions, cognitions, and affects in reception can only analytically be distinguished, but are actually closely interwoven.[30] Apart from such transitory experiences, spectators may develop certain persistent dispositions and attitudes relating to characters, such as stable images of their personalities; expectations of actions; sympathies, antipathies, or indifference.

This provisional draft of the field of character reception will be systematised later; it already makes clear, however, that much-debated concepts like 'identification' or 'parasocial interaction' alone are insufficient for a systematic examination of character reception. Moreover, the provisional list already indicates why approaches to film reception that are based in direct perception theory or enactivism must fail—they cannot account for many more complex, higher-level mental processes.

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30   The interconnections between mental processes can be described not only in terms of psychology but also by recourse to the philosophy of mind, particularly phenomenology; see, for instance, Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1993).

A theory of character reception should describe its general structures, processes, and products comprehensively and systematically and answer at least four basic questions: What dimensions or levels does character reception have? What are its presuppositions in relation to the film, the viewers, and their contexts? How do character conceptions originate, and what role do they play in other conscious processes? How are they built up and structured (as mental representations)? A number of specific problems have been particularly controversial for reception theories (Staiger 2005: 7): How are cognitive and affective, conscious and unconscious, innate and learned aspects of reception related to each other? Are mental representations of characters related more to language or images, or neither? What is the decisive factor: text, spectator, or context? How active are the spectators? What are the basic and crucial structures of their minds? How does character reception relate to the perception of real persons? What are identification and empathy? What differences are there between characters in film and other media like literature?

Various theories approach these questions in very different ways (see Chapter 2): hermeneutics and reception aesthetics emphasise the historical differences between the horizons of expectation of producers and recipients and the necessity of the interpretation of characters. Phenomenology starts from the individual recipient's perspective and offers detailed descriptions of subjective experiences (but has difficulties in grasping processes that lie below the threshold of conscious experience). Semiotics regards reception as a process of semiosis, as largely culturally moulded sign processing and text decoding governed by conventional codes. Psychoanalysis sees the relationship with characters and producers as determined by the dynamics of drives in subjects, the conflict-laden relations between the id, the ego, and the superego, by conditioning in early childhood and experiences of lack as well as processes of desire, repression, or identification. Post-structuralism combines primarily semiotic and psychoanalytical models, whereas the cultural studies approach stresses the role of medial and sociocultural contexts.

These approaches dominated theory formation until developments in the cognitive sciences in the mid-eighties provided new impulses and increasingly became the basis for several sophisticated models of the reception of characters.[31] The most important contribution of cognitive theories of reception to solving problems of character analysis is that they model the fundamental processes of the creation and reception of characters in the first place, whereas most other approaches take characters as something simply given. In my view, cognitive theories offer further advantages (Eder 2003a), in particular greater conceptual clarity and differentiation, compatibility with

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31 See, for film and media studies, Bordwell 1985a, 1989, 1992; Branigan 1992; Ohler 1994; Currie 1995, 1999; Buckland 1995; Smith 1995; Anderson 1996; Tan 1996; Grodal 1999, 2001; Persson 2003; the contributions in Bryant and Zillman 1991; Plantinga and Smith 1999; Ohler and Nieding 2002; Anderson and Anderson 2005; and the special issue of *Film Studies* 8 (2006). For literary studies, see Grabes 1978; Margolin 1990a, 1990b; Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; Gerrig 1993; Riehl 1998; Schneider 2000; Culpeper 1996, 2000; Christmann and Schreier 2001; Hogan 2003a; Jannidis 2004 et al.

empirical research, integration of scientific findings, and an explanatory approach that is more comprehensive and better capable of explaining the relationship between media reception and everyday perception. Of course, other approaches have crucial advantages, too, which should not be lost. By keeping the cognitive foundation as open and inclusive as possible, many of their findings may be integrated.[32] As the cognitive approach is of relevance to many aspects of my argumentation, I shall now present it in greater detail.

Cognitive Theories of Reception

Since current cognitive approaches are still frequently misrepresented, it is necessary to first clear up some possible misunderstandings:[33] first, recent cognitive theories by no means consider only conscious, higher-level cognitive processes. They model reception as a psychophysical, partially preconscious process consisting of interlaced cognitive, affective, perceptual, and sensory responses to external or internal cues. Even attention towards certain textual elements may already depend on affective factors. Second, cognitive theories see cognition not as a detached computer algorithm, but as shaped by dynamic interactions between brain, body, and both physical and social environments—as embodied, embedded, and often also extended and enactive (4E cognition).[34] Consequently, the experience of films, stories, and characters is an active, bodily operation of completing, imagining, conjecturing, coherence-making, and sense-searching, embedded in specific communicative situations and co-determined by media structures and viewers' motives. The processes and results of this operation may diverge significantly from the everyday perception of real environments. Third, cognitive theories turn increasingly to sociocultural and interactional factors of cognition, including stereotypes, ideologies, power relations in society, or affordances of certain media (e.g., van Dijk 2015; Brylla and Kramer 2018). Fourthly and crucially, cognitive theories are not homogeneous but form a diverse field. For example, when describing processes of reception as 'information processing', the textual 'information'

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32   Thus the 'horizons of expectation' of hermeneutics and the 'codes' of semiotics may be described more exactly as systems of mental dispositions, and 'signs' as conventionalised textual stimuli. The term 'sign' suggests different assumptions: a sign is generally used consciously by a communicative instance, it is arbitrary, rests on cultural conventions, and possesses a stable meaning that is established in a relatively specific way by a communication community. I leave the question of whether all these things equally apply to film open. Whenever I speak of 'filmic signs', I also include textual elements that influence reception but cannot be assigned a clear communicative purpose or may even counteract some such purpose, and whose effects are grounded in modes of perception and cognition that may be independent of a particular culture and change from context to context. So whenever I speak of films as 'texts', this is also to be understood in such a wide sense. On the possibility of synthesising different fundamental theories of film and human experience, see also Bacon 2005.

33   Examples for misrepresentations or misunderstandings of that kind are Kappelhoff 2018 and Hochschild 2023.

34   See Newen, De Bruin, and Gallagher 2018; for a summary and application: Schiavi and van der Schyff 2018.

in question can be modelled in different ways as energy patterns, perceptual stimuli, textual cues, signs, external or internal representations, and the 'processing' can be modelled by reference to psychology, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, or combinations of these and further disciplines.

Despite their diversity, however, cognitive theories have certain basic principles in common (cf. Hogan 2003a: 29–31). They require that mental processes be described and explained as accurately and comprehensively as possible, in a logically coherent and empirically testable manner. Moreover, they start from a lower level than other theories such as hermeneutics or psychoanalysis. They try to offer explanatory models also for basic processes of reception, which are already necessary for the emergence of the idea of a character, which can only then become an object of interpretation or emotion.[35] Most cognitive theories also assume that a mental architecture with certain resources, possibilities and limits shapes both everyday experience and media reception. In order to explain why humans possess this mental architecture, evolutionary psychology is used by some; however, this is by no means necessary and I will not use it.

Three different basic models of cognitive theories can be distinguished, representing stages of increasing objectification: representationalism, connectivism, and neurobiology (see Hogan 2003a: 30–34; Thagard 2005). In everyday life, one describes one's own experiences and those of others—here: character reception—intuitively, from a subjective perspective, and in folk psychological terms. On a first level of cognitive theory formation, representationalism, such descriptions are objectified, clarified conceptually and empirically, systematised, and further differentiated. Here the assumption of mental representations plays a central role. By contrast, neurobiology seeks to reconstruct the concrete material correlates of mental processes, in particular the neuronal structures and activation patterns of the brain. Such materialist descriptions of mental processes have the advantage of greater objectivity, but entail the loss of the subjective perspective, detach themselves from ordinary language, require extensive experimentation, and rapidly turn exceedingly complex. Connectivism simplifies and abstracts principles of neuroscience by regarding consciousness, in analogy to the nervous system and the electronic computer, as a network of representational nodes through whose spreading activation (increasing neuronal action potential) information is processed in an associative and parallelly distributed way.

These three basic models do not exclude each other but can be understood as different levels of description of one and the same phenomenal complex. The representationalist approach, however, seems the best-suited for character analysis by far, because it

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35 Hermeneutics or psychoanalysis lack such a fundamental model. Structuralist semiotics, by contrast, uses a relatively rigid conception based on language and therefore unsuitable for film. Cognitive theories, however, unlike semiotic ones, explain the understanding of audiovisual narrations not primarily by reference to codes and in analogy to linguistic understanding but by recourse to psychological concepts (e.g., mental schemata) and in analogy to everyday perception (cf. Bordwell 1985a: 16–26; Grodal 1999: 13f., 74–77).

facilitates connections with practical analysis, folk psychology, and theories beyond cognitivism. Some cognitive and other theories (e.g., in film phenomenology) reject the representationalist approach and pursue the idea of a direct perception of both natural and audiovisual environments, for instance, following James Gibson's work.[36] In my view, this approach is unsuitable as a foundation of character theory: if my ontological considerations are correct, then it can neither consistently define what characters are nor explain their different kinds of properties and the ways we talk about them.

The basic notions of representationalism may be summarised as follows:[37] whenever items of textual information are perceived and processed, they are run step by step through relevant parts of a bodily and mental system. The images and sounds of a film are perceived by sensory organs and further processed in auditory and visual centres (associated with other centres of sensory perception). The resulting filtered information can directly affect the emotional centres and trigger basal affects. After further, partially parallel, steps of processing and experiencing, the items of information reach the working memory where they are synthesised and given the form of certain mental representations and higher cognitions that are, in turn, accompanied by conscious experiences and more complex emotions. All these steps of processing may simultaneously stimulate various bodily reactions.

The capacities and rhythms of the sensory, working, and long-term memories influence the outcome. The eyes, while scanning the field of vision in saccades at lightning speed, already focus on certain areas. Not all information can be taken in, experienced consciously, and stored; the limited capacity leads to selective attention, including additional control by affects and interests. The consequences have been impressively demonstrated by the famous film experiments on 'inattentional blindness' (Simons and Chabris 1999): many of the spectators focusing their attention on the change of the ball in a basketball game do not even notice a person in a gorilla costume intermingling with the players. What is perceived when watching a movie, therefore, not only depends on the availability of certain textual signs, but also on the spectators. Character conceptions and other mental representations arise when the mental and bodily dispositions of viewers interact with textual information. The objective information given in the film (its changing patterns of light and sound) is not received one-to-one, but processed selectively, modified in steps, and supplemented by memory contents. Such processes are fundamentally bidirectional, guided in varying degrees by the textual input (processing bottom-up) or pre-existing mental dispositions (processing top-down).

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36   Among cognitive theories, e.g., Anderson 1996.

37   The essential groundwork is provided by Hogan 2003a; Persson 2003; Grodal 2006; Lakoff and Johnson 2001. Their work is not mutually compatible in every single respect. I have therefore tried, in my summary presentation, to combine the consensual aspects with the most convincing controversial ones in a consistent manner.

In the empirical study of literature, the totality of the authors' and readers' dispositions has been called the 'system of preconditions' (*Voraussetzungssystem*) of the communication partners (Schmidt 1991: 71–74). It comprises the abilities, knowledge, general motivations, needs, and intentions of producers and recipients, as well as the influences of their sociocultural circumstances. Furthermore, it includes 'special conditions', i.e., assumptions about the other communication partners and their dispositions, the knowledge of communicative actions, roles, and expectations, situative physical and mental states (Schmidt 1991: 72). The spectrum of mental dispositions ranges from innate reaction tendencies, such as those concerning startle effects or optical illusions, to culturally specific beliefs and individual concepts of identity. Partial aspects have been dealt with under a variety of different concepts, the most common being categories, mental schemas, framing, knowledge, and memory.[38] A schema might involve, for instance, the preconscious expectations on a handshake; one assumes that it will last for two or three seconds and is surprised when it lasts much longer (Smith 1995: 51). All such dispositions focus attention, structure information processing, and direct expectations and processes of making meaning. They permit inferences going beyond the textual basis, which are usually of an informal and subconscious kind. A well-known example is the mental script for a restaurant visit. Entering a restaurant, one expects a particular sequence of events: sitting down, ordering, eating, paying, and leaving. This sequence is presupposed, so it does not have to be shown in detail in a film. Deviations from the script (such as eating without sitting down or paying), however, trigger surprise. Such dispositions influence the perception of characters on all levels: even the cut from one image to the next is conditioned by 'sensory-motor projections', implicit expectations on continuity of movement (in editing) whose disappointment, e.g., by jump cuts, will lead to perceptual micro-irritations (Hogan 2007).

Compared with hermeneutics, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, cognitive theories permit a more differentiated and empirically substantiated description of the system of mental dispositions as a hierarchically structured multiplicity.[39] In nearly every case, mental dispositions involve affects or could trigger or be activated by them. Some of these cognitive and affective preconditions seem to be universal, e.g., the basic capabilities to recognise certain affective patterns or to empathise. Others, such as knowledge of languages, stereotypes or complex moral emotions, are learnt in sociocultural contexts—also of watching films—and are connected to particular

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38   On the concept of mental disposition, see Persson 2003: 8–13.
39   Hermeneutics and semiotics attempt to apprehend the system of mental dispositions by means of their concepts of the 'horizon of expectations', or the 'codes' of producers and recipients, but their results remain relatively unspecific due to a lack of a proper psychological foundation. Psychoanalysis (in its earlier versions), by contrast, describes a relatively complex framework of dispositions that is, however, in many ways incomplete or speculative and also often conflicts with more recent empirical research results. (An integration of such research results into more recent psychoanalytic approaches has, for instance, been attempted by Krause 1998.)

times or cultures. A third group of dispositions stems from individual experiences, for example personal recollections that are evoked by sensory stimuli like particular smells or patterns of movements. A fourth group depends on the situation, for example the specific motives for going to the cinema or the expectations generated by the specific film itself. Within certain limits, however, intersubjective, generalisable statements about the connections between film, cognition, and emotion are possible.

I mention these distinctions here because, contrary to widespread views, they make clear that the reception of media and consequently of characters is not at all restricted to either everyday perception or the decoding of conventional signs, that it is neither the mere reproduction of textual information nor a process of understanding devoid of all emotion. It is, furthermore, neither biologically or culturally determined nor purely subjective. It is rather an experiential process with cognitive, affective, and somatic aspects, which is specified by dispositions on at least four levels: the biological, sociocultural, individual, and the situation- and text-specific levels. In order to talk about commonalities in reception, it is necessary first to clarify what correspondences may underlie these processes at each of these levels. Before dealing with those most relevant to analysing characters, it may suffice to say that there is a very general foundation for the basic understanding and experience of characters that transcends epochs and cultures, but upon which rest innumerable cultural and individual particularities.

A largely universal basic structure is already given with the mental architecture: most humans possess certain kinds of sensory organs, systems of short- and long-term memory, emotional and motor centres in the brain. The breadth of variation of this mental architecture and its capacities is relatively limited among neurotypical and able-bodied adults, but children, neurodivergent, blind, or deaf people, as well as intoxicated individuals, may perceive films in quite different ways. It is the long-term memory, however, that is mostly responsible for fundamental differences among spectators. Its material basis is in the plasticity of neuronal complexes throughout the entire brain. In a functionalist perspective, it comprises two main components: the procedural memory in which automatic skills and motor processes are stored (e.g., riding a bicycle, slicing onions, reacting bodily to certain perceptual stimuli), and the declarative memory that contains knowledge about the world and personal experiences (semantic and episodic memory).

The contents of memory are often modelled by the cognitive sciences (but also in semiotics) in the form of associative conceptual systems or lists of features. Stored items of information are combined to form more complex structures: schemata, prototypes, and exempla (Hogan 2003a: 44–48). Schemata are general structures of knowledge based on the constellations of features of human beings, things, or sequences of experiences (like the script of a restaurant visit mentioned above). They form an open pattern of alternative features arranged according to probabilities of occurrence. When Western people enter a restaurant, they will expect with decreasing probability that

they will look for a place themselves, that they will be led to a table by a waiter, that they shall have to wait at the bar, or that they are forced to help out in the kitchen. The fact that spectators also use schemata for particular groups of human beings or categories of fictional characters (waiters, cowboys, femmes fatales) will be dealt with later in greater detail (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

Prototypes are, as it were, the more specific default case of a schema: subjectively imagined constellations of typical features of particular kinds of human beings, things, or situations (Hogan 2003a: 45–46). Apart from the standard values of the schema, prototypes contain additional features that are considered to be average or particularly characteristic and that separate the category from others. Since a man is defined, amongst other things, by not being a woman (and vice versa), the prototypical conceptions of men and women emphasise their differences, and thus are oriented toward the concept of a 'particularly masculine' man and 'particularly feminine' woman, rather than towards, for instance, average cases. Prototypes are thus not far from stereotypes, although they may be linked to personal experiences. A third form of memory content are exempla, representations of exemplary individuals. Thus, if I see a Nazi in a movie, I might, for example, be reminded of Major Strasser from *Casablanca*.

The schemata, prototypes, and exempla stored in the memory form an important foundation for the understanding and experience of characters. As the examples already suggest, such memory content is not affectively neutral, but connected with affective reactions (emotional memory). The link with affects and emotions is perhaps strongest with regard to episodic recollections: when I recall my own personal love encounters or traumatic experiences of violent events, then the associated emotions will be re-awakened (Hogan 2003a: 155–65). Therefore, medial representations are, in this way, closely connected with personal experiences and feelings. Memories can be activated by the perception of particular features, which in turn may lead to the association of further features, affects, and expectations with what is perceived—often stereotypical ones: in a film noir, the appearance of a lascivious woman with black hair might make viewers expect difficulties for the male protagonist. Memory supplements the information perceived, making reception possible, but it can also often trivialise and automate the process to some extent. Schemata and prototypes may be changed and reflected, but this usually happens only when information contradicts them or makes them conspicuous. Nevertheless, most information processing takes place associatively and metaphorically, not mechanically or by logical reasoning and concentrated rational reflection. Many of the things stored in memory function like metaphors because they are not only activated by their original area of experience but are transferred to other areas as well.[40] This affects the perception of human beings and characters in many different ways: their bodies may be considered to be containers of their souls (*21 Grams*); sad music may be connected with their emotional

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40   On the theory of conceptual metaphors see Hogan 2003a: 87–154; Lakoff and Johnson 1999: Chapters 4 and 5. On corresponding metaphors in film, see Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012; Fahlenbrach 2016.

state; a skeleton may stand for death. The term 'memory storage' in itself expresses a metaphorical understanding of memory as a container.

Spectators acquire the schemata, prototypes, and exempla stored in their memory in the course of their socialisation through individual experiences within specific cultural contexts. Their memories and the associated emotions are therefore always to some extent individual and different; however, commonalities also exist. Shared forms of memory may be related to various factors. One area is that of biological, genetically determined bases and mostly universal tendencies, for example in regard to particular capabilities (e.g., empathy and linguistic competence), developmental stages (from childhood to old age), experiences (based on gender, age, size, etc.), interests and affective dispositions (sexuality, altruism, fascination with death and disease). A second group consists in sociocultural factors like cultural spaces (language, nationality); living conditions and group affiliations (milieus, classes, peer groups); social norms and rituals (for emotions, sex/gender behaviours, etc.); trades, professions, and other activities; and institutionalised instances of socialisation (family, school), including mass media. In view of this large spectrum of factors, differences and commonalities between human beings cannot solely be traced back to conflicts between drives and conditioning in early childhood, as older varieties of psychoanalysis seem to suggest. Memory is always formed in the interaction of multiple biological and social factors whose relative influence is still waiting to be explored systematically.

This brief summary of cognitive theories has not yet included their treatment of the reception of media. It presented a general picture of how human beings encounter the world: on the basis of a mental architecture possessing particular capacities and dispositions that are moulded biologically, socially, and individually and that show differences particularly (but not exclusively) in the area of memory. Cognitive and affective information processing (or more simply: text-induced thoughts and affects) starts from this basis and runs through several phases, particularly the formation of mental representations. Many cognitive theories assume that the reception of media is essentially based on the same foundations and mental dispositions as the ordinary perception of non-medial environments (Currie 1999a). They propose that the spectators are active individuals who are looking for meaning by means of ordinary cognitive procedures (Bordwell 1985a: 30–33). 'Instead of searching for a "language" of film we had better search for ways and means to make films in such a way as to release those activities of "cognising" that lead to understanding' (Bordwell 1992: 7); and one might add: that also lead to affective experience. In this search, however, it is of importance to pay closer attention to certain crucial differences between media reception and ordinary everyday perception: most importantly, communicative framing, media-specific input, and the activation of specific dispositions.

Recipients are usually aware of being in a communicative situation and perceiving a media text. Such reception is obviously preconditioned by the given media framework or dispositif (cinema, television, video/DVD; e.g., communal viewing; ticket;

darkened room in the cinema) and its paratexts (trailers, posters, advertisements).[41] This communicative framing and the film itself can activate specific dispositions: the knowledge of media-specific rules and conventions of communication; the feeling of not perceiving present objects and real situations and thus of not being able to interfere; the subliminal awareness of fictionality, of perceiving an invented story; the readiness to accept, therefore, even a non-realistic logic in the narrated world. At the same time, specific contents stored in memory are called up: media-specific knowledge about themes, genres, and conventions of narration, for instance types of characters and standard situations; knowledge about inter-textual and inter-medial references; knowledge about authors, directors, stars, and their images or intentions; and, finally, the assumption of the broader significance of what is shown, i.e., that the show is not just a randomly observed event but a consciously shaped component of a communicative process (see Culpeper 1996: 353). When, and to what extent, such dispositions are activated will depend on the kind of media text and its recipients (as indicated by debates about self-referentiality; Withalm 1999).

A further difference between everyday perception and media reception lies in the kind of input. In the case of media reception, this input basically comes from two different sources: the media text and the context of reception (who hasn't been annoyed by noisy neighbours in the cinema?). The recipients are able to shift their attention from one of these sources to another; they may, for instance, divert it from the screen to a neighbour. Furthermore, in contrast to the everyday world, media perception does not engage all the senses directly; for instance, film only indirectly involves the senses of smell, taste, temperature, or touch (see Antunes 2016). The most important difference, however, lies in the potential of media to guide the perception process in various ways. By way of that, they are able to generate more comprehensive knowledge about characters than is usually available about persons in the outside world.

Specific features and conventions distinguish film reception from other media like literature. Compared to reading, watching the audiovisual stream is more temporally bound (even in the case of video streaming), which influences the forms and rhythms of attention and experience. Films employ a polyphony of signs—moving images, stills, noises, music, writing, and spoken language—and some of them can be understood without relying on specific cultural codes.[42] As analogue, iconic signs, moving images,

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41   The Foucauldian term 'dispositif' is hard to translate into English. Broadly, it refers to 'a framework in which techniques and humans are arranged to make it possible to perform repetitive and distributed activities' (Larroche 2019: xv). In German media theory, the term 'Mediendispositiv' ('media dispositif') is widely used to talk about a medium such as television as an arrangement of technologies, organisations, professional roles, aesthetic conventions, and other elements that together enable certain forms of communication and establish certain power relations (e.g., Hickethier 2003).

42   See Grodal 1999: 7, 77. Psychological investigations support the assumption that 'film reception rests on principles at work in the perception of reality' and that small children or members of 'filmless' cultures can understand films without having to learn anything special about them (Schwan and Hesse 1996). Nevertheless, of course, the use of specific forms of representation makes more complex films into something whose understanding must be learned. But in many cases, 'even stylistic or

and sounds can be in many respects qualitatively identical with what they represent, for instance in their forms, colours, or rhythms. Moreover, certain stylistic strategies, like continuity editing, partially correspond to evolutionarily established patterns.[43] Films may thereby induce responses that are partly similar to real world perception. They tend to be mimetic in a stronger sense than literature and less conspicuously.[44] Cognitive theories also point to relevant differentiations: between elements of film reception that are quasi-natural and others that are strongly shaped by culture; between automatic, preconscious, and conscious reception processes, and between different kinds of cultural influences and cinematic conventions. For example, whereas mainstream films direct the viewers' attention predominantly to the represented events, some experimental films quite purposefully direct it to their conspicuous means of representation (Smith 1995: 41ff.).

Several basic assumptions of cognitive theories may thus be provisionally formulated. Film reception is an active sensory, cognitive, and affective process, which takes place in the framework of a certain mental architecture and includes the formation of mental representations, including conceptions of characters. Film information interacts with the dispositions of viewers, such as memory contents in the form of schemata, prototypes, and exempla. Viewers' dispositions are situated on several levels—biological, sociocultural, individual, and situational—and therefore exhibit both differences and commonalities that permit intersubjective reception without excluding individual and cultural differences. Based on these preconditions, film reception resembles the perception of the everyday world in some important ways, but also diverges from it significantly because of its communicative (and often fictional) framing and its media-specific inputs, conventions, and memory contents. This general summary of cognitive reception theories will now serve as the basis for the following more detailed analysis of the reception of characters.

Levels of Character Reception

How can character reception be modelled, and what does the model imply for character analysis? In the context of cognitive theories, there are various proposals to answer these questions, but as far as I know, there is no model to date that would bring together all the aforementioned forms of character-related perception, cognition,

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genre-specific conventions' are 'still learnt and applied by means of ordinary patterns of thinking' (Bordwell 1992: 7).

43   On the concept of 'signs close to direct perception', see Sachs-Hombach 2003; on the correspondences between audiovisual media and direct environmental stimuli, cf. Schwender 2001 and Schwab and Schwender 2007.

44   Hans J. Wulff assumes, in contrast to Grodal, 'that the basic communicative relationship remains conscious in all phases of the communication process and that it appears differentiated in numerous markings on the surface of the text' (Wulff 1999a: 58f.). '*A film image not only shows something, but also shows that it shows*' (Wulff 1999a: 58; emphasis in the original). It does not necessarily mean, however, that such 'showing' is consciously foregrounded.

and affect in a systematic framework; most approaches restrict themselves to cognitive processes and focus on the level of the represented world.[45] Per Persson's general model of film reception, however, offers a promising point of departure, because it integrates a wide variety of research results and corresponds to numerous other models from film studies and other disciplines. In cognitive film studies, for example, Persson's model can be related to Bordwell's levels of meaning (1989) or Grodal's flow schema of reception (1999). Table 1 indicates that Persson's model is altogether more comprehensive and more differentiated (Grodal, however, establishes connections with affective processes).[46]

Persson 2003	Bordwell 1989	Grodal 1999
nonrepresentation	---	basic perception → intensities
perception 1	referential meaning	memory matching, association → saturations
perception 2		
situation models		mental models → tensities, emotivities
thematic inferences	explicit & implicit meaning	---
interpretation	symptomatic meaning	---

Table 1 Levels of film reception and meaning according to different theories

Persson distinguishes six levels of reception processes built upon each other that differ especially with regard to viewers' mental representations (2003: 32–33). The first level consists in the basic perception of objectless forms, colours, contours, movements, sounds, and rhythms ('nonrepresentation'). On the second level, objects and experiences are apprehended by the perceptual centres in a rudimentary way ('perception 1'); on the third level, they are roughly categorised and identified with

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45   For example, David Bordwell (1992) describes character reception primarily as an application of mental schemata and concentrates on the formation of character conceptions. Murray Smith (1995) supplements this perspective by processes of cognitive and affective engagement; Hans J. Wulff (1997) explores the limits and sources of character synthesis. Ralf Schneider (2000) describes in detail the formation of mental models in literary characters. Torben Grodal (1999, 2001) treats mental model formation as an aspect of his flow schema of affective film reception and assumes a simulation of characters' experiences. Researchers from media psychology and communication science describe character reception with the term of 'parasocial interaction' (e.g., Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006). Numerous other authors deal in detail with particular aspects like identification, empathy, social perception, etc. (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14 of this book). The most comprehensive works with regard to the breadth of reception processes considered seems to be Persson 2003 and Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006. Persson, however, excludes affect and emotion, and the model of Klimmt and his colleagues fails to clarify the systematic ties between the various processes.

46   Table 1 compares Persson's approach only with two other influential models of cognitive film theory. Of course, there are various further models that distinguish different levels of film experience (e.g,. Bacon 2005), including in later publications by Bordwell and Grodal. In addition, there are various theories in other disciplines such as literary studies (some are mentioned in Table 4).

the help of memory ('perception 2'). The fourth level ('situation models') comprises the formation of more complex mental models of characters, situations, and events—the construction of the represented world. On level five, theme-related inferences and processes of the interpretation of symbols and metaphors take place, which go beyond the storyworld ('thematic inferences'). The sixth level encompasses hypotheses about the pragmatic and communicative context of the film as well as its aesthetic analysis ('interpretation'). As Persson emphasises, this sequence of steps only shows the general tendency; the levels interact with each other in various ways.

Persson's reception model can be modified for our purposes in two respects. First, it may be simplified. The levels 2 to 4, which Persson does not separate precisely, can be combined, because each one focuses on gradually emerging mental representations of a storyworld (including its inhabitants) and thus differs crucially both from objectless perception and from the higher thematic and interpretative levels.[47] Furthermore, Persson's model can be supplemented: it only deals with cognitive processes, which should be connected with affective ones. All cognitions are also linked to affective tendencies, and all affects are induced or influenced by sensory and cognitive processes like perception or imagination (for more on that, see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14).[48] Thus, all the processes described in Persson's reception model can trigger affects—from automatic arousal through affective appraisals of characters to complex emotional episodes involving reflections on the film's cultural contexts. Such modifications permit the consideration of the whole breadth of cognitive and affective processes at various reception levels.

This modified version of Persson's approach forms the basis for a model of the film experience, which I have presented in more detail in other publications (Diagram 2).[49] Persson's approach can be triangulated not only with many other theories of film reception and art perception (e.g., Ohler and Nieding 2002; Pelowski et al. 2017) but also with various classical models used to describe and analyse the structures of artworks, from Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* and Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* (1972: 3–17) to Bordwell's and Thompson's *Film Art* (2001 and later editions). A comparison of such analytical models shows that they generally meet at four structural levels of works of art: (1) the formal structures of textual signs, for instance the images and sounds of a film (style); (2) the world or story represented from a certain perspective (storyworld, diegesis, narration); (3) higher-order or figurative meanings (themes, metaphors, symbols, implicit meaning, etc.); and (4) indicators of communicative pragmatics (under

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47 See also the comparison with Bordwell and Grodal in Table 1.

48 On the connections between cognition and emotion/affect, cf. Eder 2003a, 2007; Eder and Keil 2005a. Theoretical approaches to emotion in film studies include Murray Smith 1995; Tan 1996; Grodal 1999; Greg Smith 2003; Hogan 2003a; Zillmann 2005 as well as the contributions to Plantinga and Smith 1999; Brütsch et al. 2005; *Film Studies* 2006; Bartsch, Eder, and Fahlenbrach 2007. For a more recent overview on the relations between media and emotions, see Eder, Hanich, and Stadler 2019.

49 E.g., in my discussions of *A Clockwork Orange* (Eder 2007a), the WikiLeaks video *Collateral Murder* (Eder 2018), and other films.

keywords like 'implicit author', 'fiction signals', 'self-reference', 'symptomatic meaning' etc.).[50] These structural levels of films and other artworks (shaded parts on the left of the diagram) can be seen as elicitors or objects of particular reception processes, which are also situated on four levels (light parts of diagram): of basal perception (seeing moving images, hearing sounds), the formation of mental models (of worlds, characters, and situations), inferences reaching beyond the represented world, as well as the reflection of communication itself and its elements and contexts in extratextual reality.
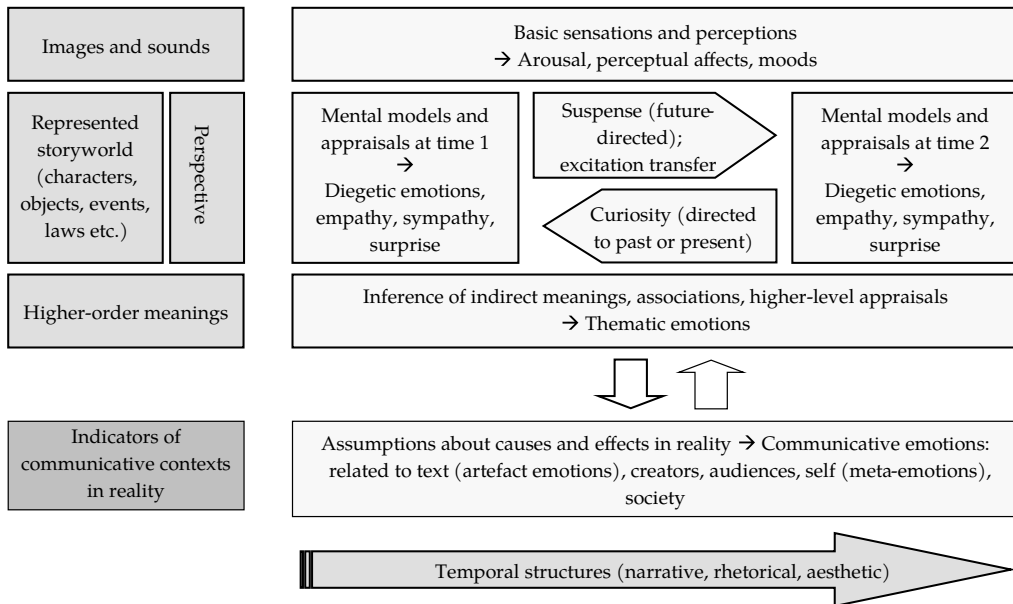
Images and sounds	Basic sensations and perceptions → Arousal, perceptual affects, moods		
Represented storyworld (characters, objects, events, laws etc.)	Perspective	Mental models and appraisals at time 1 → Diegetic emotions, empathy, sympathy, surprise	Suspense (future-directed); excitation transfer — Curiosity (directed to past or present)	Mental models and appraisals at time 2 → Diegetic emotions, empathy, sympathy, surprise
Higher-order meanings	Inference of indirect meanings, associations, higher-level appraisals → Thematic emotions		
Indicators of communicative contexts in reality	Assumptions about causes and effects in reality → Communicative emotions: related to text (artefact emotions), creators, audiences, self (meta-emotions), society		

Temporal structures (narrative, rhetorical, aesthetic)

Diagram 2 Levels of film structures and corresponding reception processes

On the first level (here referred to as 'basal perception', which is meant to exclude the recognition of objects), the film is perceived sensually as a sequence of colours, forms, structures, movements, and sounds, and it thus generates perceptual affects, subliminal sensations, and moods.[51] On the basis of these perceptual impressions, but only on a second level of further processes, the spectators recognise objects and construct the represented world with its inhabitants and events step by step (see Chapter 5). This construction always takes place from a particular perspective and consists predominantly in the formation of mental models: the spectators develop more or less detailed ideas of situations, beings, environments, and other elements of

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50   The structural distinction of different levels often happens implicitly; the widely known model of film analysis by Bordwell and Thomson (2001), for instance, distinguishes four levels of meaning (46–49), elaborates the 'referential' level of meaning with a model of narrative structures (38–90), and designates the level of images and sounds by the concept of style (155).

51   Torben Grodal here speaks of 'intensities' (1999: 59).

represented worlds.[52] These ideas are interconnected; character models are embedded in situation models, situation models in world models. From a narratological point of view, the changes in the situation and character models during the course of reception correspond to plot and character development, which can be described more precisely by means of time structures (time arrow at the bottom of diagram).[53]

The development and interaction of mental models has frequently been associated with the creation of illusion and—even quite physical—feelings of 'immersion', 'presence', or 'transportation', of plunging into the imaginary world as an observer or even a participant.[54] There are further connections with different kinds of diegetic emotions: the mental representations may trigger innate affect programmes, evoke affective associations and appraisals, or activate the emotional memory.[55] Basically, all mentally represented objects may become triggers of affects and emotions, whether they are situations (the farewell of Rick and Ilsa), represented beings (Rick), or passing details (Ilsa's facial expression). The viewers can share the feelings of the characters through empathy; they can evaluate the characters in moral and other respects, and develop persistent emotional attitudes of sympathy or antipathy towards them. Some of these emotions are tied to the temporal sequence of mental models and consequently to associated expectations: viewers hope and fear for the characters (suspense: Can Rick help Ilsa to escape?), are surprised by them (Ilsa threatens Rick with a pistol!), or search for information in order to close gaps (curiosity: What happened between Rick and Ilsa in the past?). Depending how the situation develops—fulfilling or disappointing wishes—the spectators will react accordingly. Their affective arousal may then spill over onto subsequent situations ('excitation transfer'; Zillmann 2005).

Beyond mental models and diegetic emotions, a third level of film experience comes into play: based on perceptions and sensations, viewers do not only construct imaginary worlds and events but also explore their figurative or higher-level meanings (see Chapter 11). These include various phenomena, which are treated under concepts like 'theme', 'symbol', or 'metaphor' in media studies, under the concept of 'macro-proposition' in Critical Discourse Analysis, and under the aspect of metaphorical thinking in cognitive science.[56] Up till now, this research has not been linked together; however, the phenomena in question show common features that justify their assignment

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52 On the concept of mental model, cf. Johnson-Laird 1983, 1989; for some specifications from a philosophical perspective cf. Metzinger (1999: Chapter 2).

53 On the narratological conceptualisation of time structures in film, cf. Bordwell 1985a: Chapter 6; Eder 1999; a survey for literary studies is given in Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 27–47.

54 On illusion creation, cf. Voss 2006; on immersion, Ryan 2001 Thon 2007; on transportation, Green 2004.

55 Bartsch 2007 and Eder 2003a, 2007, 2018 attempt to integrate different theoretical positions on emotion into a more comprehensive model. Cf. also Hogan 2003a: 184.

56 On theories of thematics in general, see especially Bremond, Landy, and Pavel 1995; on metaphor: Knowles and Moon 2006; Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4; Kanzog 2001: §7; Fahlenbrach 2016; on levels of image comprehension: Scholz 2004; on themes as macro-propositions: van Dijk 1985 and later publications.

to one and the same level: they all cannot be assigned to objectless perception nor to the formation of concrete world models, but they either contain mental representations of more abstract or general states of affairs beyond the represented world (themes, macro-propositions), or they require cognitive processes of 'seeing-as', i.e., the apprehension of something concrete (an object or character) as a sign for something else or something more general (a theme, symbol, or metaphor). To put it simply, in all these cases something concretely perceptible or directly represented stands for something else. Themes or macro-propositions may be understood as higher-level meanings; more precisely as global representations, which may be directly mediated through language but are more frequently derived from perceptual impressions and world-models through generalising inferences.[57] For example, from Rick's development up to his magnanimous farewell from Ilsa, one can infer the general message that personal matters should be subordinated to the common good. Roughly speaking, indirect or higher meanings, as in the case of symbols, metaphors, allegories, allusions or irony, are inferred by a mental representation (e.g., of a character) interacting with memory contents and calling up further representations from another domain that share certain characteristics with it.[58] Viewers of *Casablanca* can, for instance, associate Rick with the USA (commonality: attitude towards Nazi terror), or viewers of Lang's *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*) see the man in dark clothing as a personification of human dying (signifying that death is darkness, loss, weariness). The formation of such higher or inferred representations is again connected with feelings: thinking of dying may evoke sadness or activate emotional memories; a thematic attitude towards death can meet with approval or rejection. One may then speak of thematic emotions.

Again, we are not talking about a one-way-street of media experience here. The construction of the depicted world not only serves as a basis for exploring indirect meanings, but higher meanings and metaphorical thinking can in turn influence representations of the storyworld, for example when the theme of a film is already known from advertising and orients perception and cognition, or when melancholy music and a gloomy landscape are used to express the personality of a character. One may, however, speak of different levels of reception insofar as in the most cases, the represented world is earlier and more frequently used as the basis for significant thematic or symbolic inferences. These are, again, not conscious, logical conclusions, but heuristic activities of abductive information processing, which often emerge spontaneously and preconsciously on the basis of mental schemata, prototypes, and exempla.

Memory contents of this kind also underlie the more conscious, reflexive inferences of the fourth level of reception: communicative pragmatics (see Chapter 12). Here, all the kinds of information considered so far may be starting points for inferences: perceptual impressions, mental models of the storyworld, indirect meanings, and themes of the film. All of these can generate ideas about the elements involved in the film communication:

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57   Cf. the specifications of theme in Brinker 1995; Rimmon-Kenan 1996.
58   Cf. Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4, esp. 107–14; Whittock 1990.

ideas about the film as artefact, the filmmakers, the spectators themselves, the other recipients, the contexts, causes, and effects of the communication process in sociocultural reality. The mental representation of these objects in 'context models of discourse' (van Dijk 2008) is connected with characteristic reflective or communicative emotions (Eder 2007a, 2018). A few examples. Viewers may feel ashamed that they found scenes of violence in the film fascinating, or proud of their ability to deeply empathise (meta-emotions; Bartsch 2007). They may begin to speculate on the film's effects on other viewers and start to worry about moral depravation or a collective blunting of sensibility. At the same time, they may form ideas about the filmmakers' personality and motivation, evaluate their intentions in terms of morality or politics (e.g., as sexist, racist, opportunistic), become angry about their irresponsibility, or wonder what social factors influenced them. Beyond that, they may analyse the film's formal qualities and come to admire the skilful acting or camerawork ('artefact-emotions'; Tan 1996). Processes of this kind form a heterogeneous field; their common features, however, consist in that the mental representations involved refer neither to the represented world nor to general meanings but to concrete elements of communicative processes in a sociocultural reality. They can thus all be assigned to one level.

Hence, both film structures and reception processes can be divided into four interrelated levels. On the first level, the film's images and sounds induce perceptual impressions that are linked with spontaneous affective reactions and moods. These perceptual and sensory impressions are further processed into mental models of a world filled with particular characters and events that evoke a broad spectrum of emotions, among them affective appraisals and recollections, curiosity, empathy, sympathy, or antipathy. On this basis, spectators infer indirect and higher-order meanings that go beyond the represented world and can be related affectively to their personal lives. And, finally, they subject the communicative process itself, its elements and contexts, to a reflection that includes aesthetic, moral, and self-related evaluations and corresponding emotions.

Some theorists seem to assume that the reception of mainstream narrative films is restricted to the first two levels, the perception of audiovisual stimuli and the storyworld. Empirical spectator surveys, reception documents, and precise self-observation all contradict this assumption (cf. Barker 2006). They suggest that in mainstream cinema attention may very well be focused on the represented world, but it also allows for the search for thematic meaning and reflection about communicative contexts. Interpretation, reflection, and further processing are usually already taking place during the reception itself and continue afterwards. With other forms of film production, for instance experimental films or modernist art cinema, this is even part of the declared intention of the filmmakers who, following Bertolt Brecht, demand an analytical attitude from the spectators.

This general model of film experience can be transferred to the narrower domain of character reception, which thus also comprises four steps.

1. Basic perceptions. The audiovisual information making up filmic character representations is perceived in various mostly pre- or subconscious, but empirically observable and neuronally describable, processes of sensory experience and perceptual information processing, which are subsequently connected with each other (e.g., in the visual cortex) in milliseconds, even before the conscious identification and categorisation of the perceived objects begins.[59] The perception of forms, colours, patterns, movements, and sounds forms the foundation and a continuous undercurrent of character reception. It produces percepts and affective reactions even before it finishes in identifying the character. The basal perceptual processes are objectless, but they prepare the formation of mental models, accompany it, and also enter into it. This is particularly apparent in moments of transition: the face of a character emerges out of a blurred background; a sudden movement becomes the movement of a body; a noise turns into a voice; a puzzling close-up shot shows the curve of a lip, the texture of a skin, or the inside of a brain (*Fight Club*). Such perceptual processes already carry an affective charge (Grodal 1999: 59) that can be associated with the character in question.

2. Formation of mental models. The perceived audiovisual information activates processes of understanding as well as contents of the memory and causes the spectators to begin developing character conceptions or, more precisely, mental models. This is a particular kind of mental representation, which integrates information from different sources into the total image of a represented being (e.g., Rick Blaine), and which naturally keeps changing in the course of the film (see Chapter 5).[60] Depending on what kind and how detailed this model is, the character can remain rather abstract or have a strong quasi-natural presence. The process of developing such representations is complex and can be further subdivided into the provisional identification of the being, its categorisation and contextual placement, the attribution of external features, and the completion of an elaborate mental model of the character's mind and social relationships (cf. Persson 2003: 28–30, 152). While neuroscientific studies have repeatedly shown that objects in images can be identified and roughly categorised within milliseconds, the development of character models generally requires considerably more time and cognitive effort. The spectators make use of their mental dispositions in order to construct a consistent model, to

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59 On the kinds and levels of perception, cf. LeDoux 1996: 56–64; for the philosophical view, cf. Dretske 1969; for the psychological view, cf. the article 'Wahrnehmung' in Städtler 2003.

60 Definition and development of mental character models in literature have been extensively analysed and described by the Anglicist Ralf Schneider (2000); his precise presentation can be transferred to film with modifications. Later chapters of this book will treat this matter in more exact terms.

close gaps in the information, to build up expectations, to enable inferences, and to position the character in relational and situational models. The construction of the character model is closely linked to processes of 'identification' and cognitive and affective engagement with the depicted being. All in all, this level represents the core of character reception. While several theories have dealt with it rather extensively already (e.g., Smith 1995; Schneider 2000), the following important levels of reception have scarcely been taken into account.

3. Inference of higher-level or second-order meanings. Starting out from their mental model of a represented being, spectators can develop more abstract thoughts or associated meanings, for example that Rick stands for the USA in the Second World War or that he demonstrates the necessity of sacrificing personal interests for the greater good. In connection with cognitive theories of metaphor and discourse analysis, such indirect meanings can be related to partially preconscious inferences and considered to be products of associative metaphorical thinking or as thoughts about general thematic statements.[61] The common features of such higher or indirect meanings are that the character model triggers (or becomes a part of) other, usually more complex or abstract, representations. In this way, the character can exemplify properties or represent ideas, embody virtues or vices, transport metaphors, function as a sign or symbol for something, serve as an allegory or personification, or convey more general topics (see Chapter 11).

4. Reflection on communicative contexts. Spectators can reflect on each one of the previous reception levels and make assumptions about their connections with the communicative reality (see Chapter 12). These inferences concern the production and reception of the character, its causes and effects, as well as its design as an artefact. Critics can question the motives of the filmmakers, censors speculate about the film's impact on particular audiences, other spectators may muse about their own reactions. The character model thus serves as a starting point for inferences on the totality of communicative and pragmatic contexts in reality, which are represented in the form of mental 'context models' (van Dijk 1998). These considerations are aimed at concrete and general causes and effects of characters in this reality, including the motives and attitudes of the participants in communication. The spectators, finally, can make the character the object of an aesthetic analysis and evaluation. They can, for instance, ask themselves why the character Rick is portrayed as he is, evaluate how Bogart plays the role, or search for other reasons for his fascinating effect on audiences.

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61   Cf. e.g., Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4; van Dijk 1985.

The model of reception proposed here sets itself apart from other approaches through several assumptions. Character reception is not taken to be a one-dimensional, merely cognitive understanding of represented beings, but understood as a multifaceted process of cognitive, affective, embodied experiences that comprises not only the formation of mental models but also the sensory perception of textual signs (film images and sounds), the exploration of indirect and superordinate meanings, and the reflection on communicative contexts. The level of mental models is the core area to which the other levels either lead (perception) or upon which they build (superordinate meanings; communicative reflection). While perception and model building must be present if one wants to talk about character reception at all, this may not be required for the two higher levels. It is conceivable that superordinate meanings and pragmatic reflections do not play a role, or only a marginal one, in the reception process of certain films. Whether spectators are constantly aware of communication and fictionality is unclear; they can certainly also become absorbed in the perception of the fictional world. Most films, however, seem to activate all four levels of reception; it would therefore be a mistake to restrict the analysis to fictional worlds.

Each of the reception levels is internally complex and involves very different phenomena. Even basal perception of the film's material stimuli or signs, its images and sounds, is not only visual and auditive, but also triggers associations with other senses such as smell or touch (Antunes 2016). Mental models are included in diverse forms of the imagination: one may have the impression of seeing, hearing, even smelling represented beings (*Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*); one can guess at their innermost thoughts and feelings, hope and fear for them. That the field of indirect meanings is also structured in a complex way is clearly shown by the traditional distinctions between various kinds of rhetorical tropes such as symbol, allegory, metaphor, or metonymy. A wide variety of elements of communication may become objects of reflection, and the character model may be connecting with a correspondingly wide range of reflection. Multiple layers and internal complexity are exhibited not only by such cognitive processes, but also by the affective engagement in characters. Emotions and somatic effects induced by characters occur not only on the level of storyworld beings (identification, empathy, sympathy) but also through basal perception, thematic relations, and the reflection on real contexts.

Among further important features of character reception are its temporality and variability. On all four levels, character reception develops in time. Simultaneously, the attention of spectators may move back and forth between the levels. In the mainstream narrative film, represented beings are generally the main focus of reception, but experimental and auteur films demonstrate that characters can very well be regarded as sensual spectacles, symbols, expressions of personal feelings or symptoms of

sociocultural influences. Furthermore, all the levels are in constant interaction. Their arrangement in the model suggests a dominant bottom-up direction of reception—the lower levels are prerequisites for the higher ones—but the stream of reception does not only flow in this one direction. The higher levels also affect the lower ones, e.g., by focusing attention. Mental models direct perception (in philosophy and psychology, such influences are discussed as 'cognitive penetration' of perception), and their development itself is influenced by assumptions about thematic and other functions of characters.

This also suggests that 'comprehension' (as the unproblematic understanding of the represented world) and 'interpretation' (as the conscious application of more complex mental schemata) cannot be rigidly divided. Usually, for example, spectators already have some knowledge about the characters before reception, often gathered from criticism and other forms of interpretation. Many spectators of *Casablanca* know from the beginning that Rick will do certain things and fulfil thematic functions. Such pre-existing information may lead to the construction of a basic mental model of the character before watching the film and will influence the reception process. For this reason, understanding and interpretation cannot be confined to clearly separated processes of reception; their borders are blurred.

Characters are also experienced to varying degrees consciously or unconsciously, perceived as sensually concrete or reflected upon as meaningful. Depending on the extent to which spectators explore themes, decode symbols, or reflect on the communicative process and its contexts, one might speak of degrees of reflective meaningfulness of characters. Some characters are perceived as allegories, personifications, or mouthpieces of the filmmakers, others rather like real beings, or as visual and acoustic spectacles. Most processes of basal perception and mental model building will occur preconsciously, rapidly, automatically, uncontrollably, and without reflection. It would be overhasty, however, to assume that the processes of one reception level would per se always be conscious, preconscious, or unconscious. Even the perception of colours and forms can take place in a state of concentrated attention and aesthetic awareness, and even the exploration of complex themes or communicative backgrounds may happen in forms of spontaneous associations on the basis of conceptual metaphors.[62] Thus there is a tendency of gradual increase in the degree of awareness from the lower levels to the upper levels of reception, rather than a principal line of division between conscious and unconscious processes.

Concentrating on the level of the represented world, one may state that character models integrate different kinds of ideas about physical, mental, and social features of characters and that they may therefore exhibit different degrees of abstraction or

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62 On the theory of conceptual metaphors and preconscious, embodied metaphorical thinking, cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999: Part I; Fahlenbrach 2016.

concretion. It is possible that a character model is predominantly composed of language-like propositions, e.g., when a character like Rick, at the beginning of *Casablanca*, is described exclusively in language. The character model can also integrate intensive sensory impressions like the sound of the voice or the visual perception of a close-up and thus in phases reach a high sensory presence. Character models may also be more or less concrete and detailed, depending on the input information.

The sensory concreteness of character models corresponds with reception phenomena that have been discussed under keywords like 'transportation', 'presence', 'illusioning', 'realism', or 'immersion' (Green 2004; Voss 2006; Thon 2007). The basis for immersion, the illusory 'transportation' into an imaginary world, is a shifting of attention to mental situation models that come with a strong sensory presence and—in the case of realism—largely match reality conceptions of spectators. The characters are usually central in this. The character model is positioned in the context of representations of the storyworld and its components; of particular importance in this respect are the character constellations and story events that the viewers grasp in situational models. More generally, characters are always contextualised; at every level of reception they are in the context of, and in close interaction with, further representations. Character models are formed out of perceptual impressions that are connected with other perceptions not directly involved in building character models. They are embedded in situation models and connected with schemata of stories and genres, with ideas about actors (such as star images) or other real persons (such as the spectators themselves, the filmmakers, or acquaintances resembling a character). Furthermore, character models are a starting point for the exploration of indirect and higher meanings and the film's themes, metaphors, and symbols. Communicative reflection also often refers to characters as components of the complete film. From the perspective of production, characters are not just positioned in such contexts of perception, narration, plot, character constellation, themes, symbols, metaphors, and real communication, but also fulfil particular dramaturgical functions (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10).

The model of character reception outlined here proposes a general basic structure into which more specific assumptions can be fed. In this way, more plausible and differentiated hypotheses can be made about the reception of characters by certain groups of recipients by taking into account the specific mental dispositions of these groups. The model also offers clues as to how different structures of characters trigger certain types of perceptual, cognitive, and affective reception processes. Last but not least, it also provides a clearer picture of the objects and questions that a theory of characters should deal with. The following chapters will take a closer look at all this.

3.4 Consequences for the Analysis of Characters

The preceding considerations have far-reaching consequences for the analysis of characters, films, and media texts in general. Every analysis is based upon explicit or implicit presuppositions as to how its object is defined, how relevant data are selected and observations expressed, what methods, models, and concepts are employed, and what is accepted as evidence for analytical conclusions. The quest for a systematic foundation therefore involves the clarification of at least three fundamental questions:

- What phenomena are examined in the analysis of characters?

- What are the essential structures of these phenomena?

- What methods are best suited for their investigation?

The results achieved so far provide a foundation for answering these questions. They contradict several widely held assumptions by making clear, for instance, that character analysis investigates much more than just characters themselves, that the discourse about characters often hides something else, and that there are diverse forms and goals of the analysis, which require different methods. However, they also show that various theories identify common basic structures that provide an orientation for analysis. In the following, I will summarise (partly in the form of theses and tables) some considerations from the many years of research work that preceded the writing of this book, so that its focus can remain on analysis.

General Principles of Analysis

One might think that character analysis is limited to investigating, well, characters. But that would be too simple; the field of investigation would be far too narrow. To get to the characters, we also need to analyse reception and communication. The previous chapters have shown that characters are recognisable represented beings that are created as communicative constructs by producers, who use texts to evoke mental character models in recipients (such as Rick Blaine models through the film *Casablanca*). Intersubjective criteria for such mental models of characters and their properties are given by the rules and mental prerequisites of communication; whenever there is a dispute about the 'correct' understanding of the character Rick, these criteria can be invoked. All talk about characters is thus ultimately based on implicit normative abstractions about the ideal formation of the respective character models. In addition to the development of mental models, the reception of characters also operates on further levels: the basal perception of concrete text elements (images and sounds) and inferences to higher meanings as well as to real communication contexts (e.g., effects on an audience). Affective reactions take place on all these levels. On the basis of their

perceptions, viewers form a mental model of Rick, link it to ideas about themes and real contexts, and react with often complex emotions.

Each of these areas may be of interest, raise questions, and lead to controversial ideas. In practice, character analysis can frequently contribute to the exchange of different views, can help to solve misunderstandings and make conflicting reactions of viewers comprehensible. For these reasons alone, the task of analysis is certainly not only to reconstruct particular characters or ideal character models but, more generally, to clarify the different forms of character-related communication and reception on all levels:

> Character analysis is the systematic investigation of individual characters as well as of all related aspects of texts, reception, and communication.

This definition refers, amongst other things, to character representations 'in the text' of a film and 'in the heads' of filmmakers and spectators. A basic model of character analysis should at least be able to capture, in a systematic way, the interrelations between the following aspects:

- represented beings and their features (characteristics of human and non-human beings);

- character representations in the text (means and structures of representation, such as language, acting, or editing);

- reception processes (perception, model formation, thematic inferences, reflection, affective reactions) and their products (character conceptions);

- dispositions of producers and recipients (e.g., cognitive and affective capabilities, reaction tendencies, memory-based character prototypes and schemata); and

- communicative contexts and rules (such as principles of cooperation and relevance).

The consideration of these aspects and their interrelationships does not remain constant within the analysis. The reason is that a further widespread assumption is incorrect, namely that character analysis always consists in the same kind of activity, pursues the same goals, and employs a uniform set of methods. It has become clear that characters, on the contrary, are analysed for quite different purposes and in very diverse practical contexts, for instance in media production, aesthetic evaluation, or sociocultural critique. The varying goals of analysis lead to different foci within the object domain and to different approaches and procedures. In brief:

> The procedures employed by character analysis depend on its practical goals.

It would be desirable to develop a general model for character analysis, not least to facilitate exchange between different areas of practice. However, such a model of analysis would also need to be adapted to the specific aims, interests and practices of researchers. Such adaptations often presuppose a clear disciplinary division of labour with regard to concepts, methods, data, and types of information in the analysis: film studies and literary studies are considered competent to study the text, its structures, and characters on a semiotic basis; psychology and communication science are said to be responsible for the empirical study of reception processes and audience reactions. However, this type of disciplinary division presupposes that on the one hand there is a text with objectively describable content, structures and characters, and on the other hand there are recipients whose contingent reactions to these given stimuli can be captured using the empirical methods of psychology. However, both views do not apply in this form, because text content and characters cannot simply be claimed to be pre-existent. They are already products of a communicative negotiation process about the 'correct' reception, perception, and model formation and can ultimately only be described objectively through the reconstruction of these processes. It can therefore be asserted:

> Every form of character analysis presupposes at least implicit models of reception and communication.

Previously, I proposed a model of character reception based on cognitive theories, which can now also serve in developing a clearer idea of character analysis. Within representational communication, e.g., when watching a film, a large part of the reception process, especially perception and mental modelling, takes place spontaneously, preconsciously, and nonverbally. However, as soon as one begins to talk about the film and its characters, one enters the level of meta-representational communication, the realm of conscious verbalisation and reflection on representational communication, its processes, and results. Character analysis does nothing fundamentally different from talking about characters in everyday life, only on the basis of clear concepts, exact data, and methodical observation. An essential task of character analysis is therefore the well-founded reconstruction and explanation of the processes and products of communication and character reception.

The advantages of such a foundation become apparent if we look at attempts to grasp objective textual meanings (including characters) only through semantics. Every kind of semantics ultimately rests on strong abstraction. Models of semantic analysis that exclusively concentrate on textual structures, intersubjective codes, or rules of meaning always involve a drastic simplification of communicative pragmatics and

reception. Such a simplification is sensible at times in order to make complex issues manageable, but it inevitably leads to the neglect or distortion of essential aspects. The approach to character analysis proposed here re-evaluates such aspects, for instance the way films steer the reception process; the affective and bodily experiences of spectators; biological, cultural, and individual prerequisites of reception; differences in the experience of different individuals and social groups, as well as connections between medial and non-medial environments.

Semantic positions, as a rule, restrict themselves to the cognitive aspect of 'denotative' textual meanings and thus exclude bodily processes of experience, affects, associations, and 'connotative' or indirect meanings. Furthermore, they essentially presuppose an ideal spectator when trying to establish meanings, generally an able-bodied (male) middle-class adult, with a particular basic set of mental dispositions and communicative capabilities, and whose cognitive processes operate largely untouched by emotions. The diverse reactions of real spectators cannot be registered this way, and thus no mutual understanding among them can be fostered. Therefore, a semantic approach is unsuited, at least for narrative and sociocultural analysis.

Furthermore, the idea that the meanings and structures of texts are something objectively given and can be analysed using semantic methods alone has already been questioned by reception aesthetics and constructivist approaches in literary and media studies. The aesthetics of reception assumed that every text only conveys basic information explicitly, but always contains 'gaps' that have to be filled in individually by the recipient (Ingarden 1972; Iser 1994). The poetic image introduced to illustrate this idea was the starry sky, in which the spectators must discover the constellations themselves. Constructivism, on the other hand, claimed more fundamentally that even the stars in the sky, i.e., the 'explicit' textual elements, are nothing other than constructions of the viewers. Accordingly, talking about text structures, including the characters and their properties, would ultimately only be a shorthand for presenting ideal reception results. For every description of texts—except a purely physical one—implicitly already presupposes certain reception processes as given. Whoever speaks of Rick Blaine presupposes at least that the character models of the communication partners represent a congruent represented being with the same identifiable features.

Older constructivist approaches still resembled traditional semantics in several ways. They distinguished, for instance, between the comprehension of a text and its interpretation. Fundamental levels of meaning (e.g., the reception levels of perception and mental model formation) were seen as principally comprehensible. According to this view, the represented world and its characters would be objectively given for the viewers, who are also conceived in terms of ideal types. Higher-level meanings and inferences about the filmmakers and their contexts, by contrast, are considered subjective and problematical, requiring 'interpretation'. The two cognitive levels (comprehension and interpretation) were, in addition, considered to be separated from affective processes.[63]

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63   Cf. e.g., Bordwell's description of the spectator and his distinction between comprehension and

The discussion so far shows, however, that both the restriction to an ideal-type recipient and the strict separation of comprehension and interpretation, as well as of cognition and emotion, must be rejected (see also Chapter 11 and Chapter 12). If character analysis aims to improve the understanding between different positions, then it must be able to explain how and why concrete spectators react (often differently) to characters. In addition, scientific findings show that cognition and emotion are closely interconnected.[64] Consequently, the thesis that 'comprehension' of the represented world is essentially unproblematic is untenable. Even if the 'explicit', consensual information of a text can be identified, it is still always supplemented by individual inferences that are at least partly shaped by affects and emotions. Film editing may, for instance, leave out events that the viewers fill in in various ways through their imagination. Such inferences depend on culturally and individually divergent, partly affective, dispositions and therefore often lead to varying results. Characters, in particular, show that the sphere of 'comprehension' is anything but simple. It would certainly be absurd to dispute the facts that Rick owns a café and has dark hair. However, disagreement about the mental and social qualities of characters is common, often even about physical actions. It is therefore possible to argue about whether Rick and Ilsa sleep with each other in *Casablanca* or not, whether they truly love each other, or why Rick lets Ilsa go (cf. e.g., Maltby 1996). It may thus be generally asserted:

> Character analysis takes into account the interplay between cognition and affect and avoids a general separation of allegedly problematic and unproblematic reception levels (e.g., comprehension and interpretation).

Any misgivings that film and media studies would lose its identity as a discipline or be encroached on by media psychology if it based its analyses on reception theory are unwarranted. Grounding character analysis on reception theory does not mean it should deal only with empirically observable reception processes or should rely entirely on methods from empirical psychology. Film analysis is not reducible to psychology (as Persson 2003 occasionally seems to suggest), already because it does not occupy itself only with the experience of concrete present-day spectators. At least three different kinds of reception phenomena may be foregrounded in film analysis, which correspondingly require different procedures for data collection and analysis:[65]

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interpretation as well as between referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic meaning (Bordwell 1989). For criticism of concepts of the ideal spectator, cf. Staiger 1992.

64 Cognitions are always affectively tuned, emotions have cognitive components. Cognitions trigger emotions and vice versa; emotions direct even basal perception and influence all further information processing (Eder and Keil 2005a; Eder, Hanich, and Staiger 2019).

65 This distinction between forms of reception shows parallels to the distinction between different constructs of recipients, cf. e.g., Janet Staiger 1992, and in literary studies Wolfgang Iser 1994: 50–67.

- the empirical reception of concrete spectators and audiences in the past, the present, or the future (how was or is Rick actually or probably understood and experienced at a certain point in time by certain people?);

- the reception intended by producers in the past (how should Rick be understood and experienced according to the filmmakers?); and

- the ideal reception, which is normative and only indirectly tied to the producers' intentions and target audiences (how should Rick be comprehended and experienced in the context of communicative rules and action goals in an ideal way, i.e., according to certain criteria of optimal experience and interpretation?).

These three perspectives on phenomena of reception become relevant in different practical contexts. Ideal and intended reception are mostly objects of interpretation in media studies. By contrast, empirical reception is the object of practice-led analyses in media production; investigation in regard to psychological experiments, history, discourse analysis, or cultural theory; and predictions about effects in the social sciences and law.[66] The thesis on the connection between character analysis and character reception can now be stated more precisely:

> Character analysis can be based on assumptions about different kinds of reception: about the intended, ideal, or empirical character reception in the past, present, or future.

Consequently, every form of character analysis is based on reception, but not always in the same way. The goal of the analysis will determine which specific models, methods, and data are employed. This distinguishes the approach described here from purely psychological or phenomenological theories. While both psychology and phenomenology may play important roles in the analysis of characters, the approach outlined here is more encompassing and makes their different perspectives visible and comparable.

Phenomenology, the thick description of one's own subjective experience, provides an indispensable starting point for analysing most forms of character reception. However, it is limited to first-person accounts of viewers who present their own experience to others for discussion, and omits certain data and methods necessary to substantiate claims that go beyond this subjective experience. Therefore, it is not possible for phenomenology alone to make well-founded statements about the

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66 The distinction between empirical, intended, and ideal reception is consistent with current theories. Cultural studies, for example, distinguishes between hegemonial, negotiated, and oppositional readings of a text, which represent different forms of empirical and hypothetical reception.

empirical reception of other people. Psychology, on the other hand, becomes important exactly when trying to determine this empirical reception by combining scientifically tested theories with solid information about actual recipients and their dispositions. For this purpose, psychological theories prove to be essential. However, they do not necessarily have to be fed with empirical data, and in many cases, it will even be impossible to acquire such data. If, for example, a prediction is to be made about the likely experience of a character by a target group in the future, one could obviously not conduct a survey of their reactions, but only work with assumptions about the mental dispositions of this group.

Moreover, neither phenomenology nor psychology are sufficient to determine forms of intended or ideal reception. If one is interested in the intended reception, then a psychological or other scientific theory is of little use; instead, the focus here must be on the producers' implicit, pre-scientific ideas of how reception works, based on their everyday knowledge and their conception of the target group. Both will not necessarily correspond to scientific standards and can usually only be derived from biographies or production documents. The most complex case is the ideal reception; here, both the intentions of the producers and the dispositions of their target group must be evaluated together on the basis of the communication situation, its norms, and criteria of success.[67]

Consequently, arguments and methods in analysing characters may be based not only on different models of reception, but also on different types of information about producers, recipients, and their communication. In addition to the media text, various other data may need to be used to conduct and substantiate an analysis. The amount of data that can be collected and evaluated using social and natural science methods (as preferred by many cognitive and psychological theories) is limited. For example, data on empirical reception can be collected through experiments, questionnaires, interviews or focus groups, but usually only with a high workload of the researchers, for a limited number of viewers, only a posteriori, and under different conditions than the natural reception situations (watching a film in a laboratory is different from watching it in the cinema). In addition, empirical psychology reaches its limits when future, past, intended, or ideal reception is the subject of the study. In such cases, qualitative and interpretative methods beyond psychology must be used to obtain data. For example, if you want to assess how an audience might react in the future when a film is made, you can only make general probability assumptions about the situations and dispositions of the target group. If you are interested in the reception of films in the past, you have to work with historical methods and corresponding sources, for example written reviews, fan discourses or reports of

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67   The reconstruction of an ideal reception process is even more complicated because recipients can (or should) take into account the intentions of the producers, which creates feedback loops. A methodical approach to ascertaining ideal meanings has been suggested by the school of objective hermeneutics in social science (cf. e.g., Oevermann 2002).

all kinds. A predominantly historical approach can also support reconstructions of the reception intended by the producers; data can then be obtained in particular from production documents such as interviews with filmmakers, diaries, production notes and the like. In all these cases, different data and methods are required than in empirical psychology.

Analysing ideal reception—and thus also the characters themselves and their properties—is the most complicated undertaking, partly because it depends on which of the various theories of meaning and interpretation in philosophy and textual studies one follows. Here I can only say that I follow neither a purely author-intentional nor a purely reception-oriented theory of meaning, but one that is based on communicative pragmatics.[68] Accordingly, meaning (including characters) cannot be reduced to either its 'encoding' or its 'decoding' in Stuart Hall's terms (2003). Instead, the analyst must find out what communicative rules and conventions were in force in the original communication, what goals the producers and the recipients were pursuing, what their positions were in the communication process, and what mental dispositions and communicative knowledge they possessed. The relevant communicative rules may be as general as the Gricean conversational implicatures (Grice 1989) or the principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1995), but may also be quite specific and related to certain text types, genres, or subtle, affective dispositions of authors and audiences.[69] As all meaning is ultimately normative in this sense, analysing the ideal reception of characters must consider communicative practice in its specific, situated normativity. Psychological models that equate meaning with individual mental representations are unsuitable for this task, because they cannot account for the pragmatic and normative aspects of communication.

To briefly summarise the central result: psychological or phenomenological theories of reception can be used for some purposes of character analysis, but not for all (especially not for the analysis of ideal or intended character reception). Moreover, in many cases it is not sufficient to use psychological or phenomenological methods to collect the data on which the analysis is based. For these reasons, character analysis cannot be reduced to either psychological or phenomenological approaches. An approach that takes communicative pragmatics and cognitive-representational theories of reception as its starting point and, depending on the issue at hand, incorporates different, mostly qualitative methods and data appears more comprehensive and more suitable overall.

The following table gives a summary of the prerequisites for a successful analysis of the relevant phenomena of reception (Table 2).

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68   For more on that, see my book *Was sind Figuren?* (2008a) and Part VI of this book.
69   Different concepts in this connection have been developed by Oevermann 2002 and Jannidis 2004.

Object of investigation	Basic theoretical models, methods, and data
Empirical reception in the present	Scientific models of reception (e.g., from psychology or sociology) / phenomenological description of reception
	Information on contemporary recipients and reception situations (e.g., from demography, observation, descriptions by participants)
	Empirical data (experiments, surveys, measurements, etc.)
Empirical reception in the past	Scientific models of reception (e.g., from psychology or sociology) / phenomenological description of reception
	Information on historical recipients and reception situations (e.g., from historiography)
	Historical reception documents (criticism, etc.)
Empirical reception in the future	Scientific models of reception (e.g., from psychology or sociology) / phenomenological description of reception
	Information on future target groups and probable reception situations (e.g., from marketing scenarios)
Intended reception	(Implicit) folk-theoretical model of reception held by producers / phenomenological description of reception
	Information on producers and production situations (e.g., from historiography, biographies)
	Production documents (interviews with producers, advertising, etc.)
Ideal reception	Scientific models of reception / phenomenological description of reception
	Information on producers, their model of reception, and their intentions
	Information on target groups, their perspectives and interests (e.g., enjoyment, education, etc.)
	Information on original communication and valid communicative rules and conventions (e.g., from social semiotics)
	Normative criteria for optimal experiences (e.g., from theories of interpretation)

Table 2 Objects, data, and methodological starting points of analysing characters and their different modes of reception

However data and procedures may differ, textual interpretation and phenomenological description remain essential, although rarely explicit, prerequisites in all forms of character analysis (including empirical psychological ones). In many cases, other adequate data are not available. In other cases, the data themselves need to be interpreted, and although talking about characters is often a shorthand way of talking about ideal reception, it is often less problematic than interpreting the historical production documents or empirical

experiments intended to support analytical statements about characters. Thus, in any analysis, one must see where the greatest demands of explanation and justification lie. In view of the multitude of possible objects of investigation, reception phenomena, and associated models, methods, and data, one can say:

> Any systematic character analysis needs to be able to explain to what extent it refers to empirical, intended, or ideal character reception in the past, present, or future, and how the chosen reception theories, methods, and data can lead to adequate results in this context.

As outlined above, character reception can be divided into the four levels of basal perception, mental modelling, thematic inferences, and communicative reflection. When analysing characters, certain aspects on these levels are often taken as given (e.g., the characters' external appearance). Further statements about more controversial aspects (e.g., mental states or symbolic meanings) are then made on this basis. Often, viewers also continue to think about characters long after the immediate reception process. This post-receptive or post-filmic elaboration can involve all levels. After the film, we can further develop our mental model of the character, for example by trying to understand the character's motives better than was possible while watching the film. We can focus on the higher meanings and communicative functions of the character and look for further information, for example about the filmmakers or cultural contexts. Or we can think further about the aesthetics of the character, the forms and techniques of their representation and related sensory experiences. Such types of elaboration are based on reception, but usually take place in social interactions that are influenced by the goals and social roles of certain groups of viewers, such as critics, connoisseurs, or fans.

In summary, the features of the proposed approach to character analysis may best be clarified by contrasting them with a simplified 'standard approach' of analysis (see Table 3).

	'Standard approach' of analysis	**Proposed new approach of analysis**
Goals of analysis	Only one (usually interpretation)	Various, among them creative production, interpretation for art appreciation, sociocultural evaluation and critique
Theoretical foundations	Semantics	Communicative pragmatics and reception theory

Object of study	Particular characters	All character-related communication processes and their products
Status of textual meanings	Objectively given	Dependent on communication and reception
Focus	Textual structures	Processes and products of reception and their elaboration
Forms of reception investigated	No distinction, usually orientated towards intended reception	Empirical, intended, ideal reception in past, present, or future
Levels of reception	No clear distinction	Perception, model formation, theme-related, and communicative inferences
Relationship between cognition and emotion	Separation, restriction to cognition	Interlinking cognition and emotion
Relationship between comprehension and interpretation	Separation, comprehension not problematised	Interrelated, comprehension contains interpretative components
Relationship between cultural studies and social sciences	Separate disciplines and areas of competence	Problem-related interdisciplinary cooperation

Table 3 Differences between the approach to character analysis proposed in this book and the usual 'standard approach' (simplified)

The relevance of these distinctions for practical analysis may be illustrated by an example. A core area of character analysis is the psychology of characters, the ascription of mental properties. Psychoanalysis exerts great influence in this field. Some psychoanalytically oriented scholars (e.g., Gabbard and Gabbard 1990) might, for instance, claim that Rick Blaine's personality and his behaviour are shaped by an Oedipus complex, and that he finds himself repeating an Oedipal situation: Ilsa takes the position of the desired mother, his rival Laszlo the position of the overpowering father against whom Rick nurtures a death wish, until he finally manages to overcome it. If this interpretation is challenged, the psychoanalysts (like anyone ascribing properties to a character) would have to offer arguments for their thesis and reveal its implicit presuppositions. In light of the theoretical discussion thus far, we now can easily see that such theses about characters' psychology are based on a whole range of presuppositions and are highly ambiguous. Taking the distinction between empirical, intended, and ideal reception into account, it becomes apparent this claim about Rick can have at least three basically different meanings. We are actually dealing with three different theses, each of which is derived differently and which, if questioned, would also have to be substantiated differently in each case.

The first meaning could be that past or present viewers consider Rick to be an Oedipal character. This case of empirical reception could be verified by examining relevant reception documents; presumably they would show that only a small group of psychoanalytically informed individuals explicitly regard Rick as Oedipal. In the absence of such documents, the film could be linked to the psychological dispositions of the viewers in question. If the viewers are familiar with the concept of the Oedipus complex and Rick's behaviour in the film fits this concept, it could be assumed that Rick is indeed seen as Oedipal. As most viewers will probably not be familiar with the concept, it could also be that they unconsciously recognise and share Rick's Oedipal trajectory because they have had such experiences themselves. However, this would require a psychoanalytic theory of reception that is incompatible with many other theories. Ultimately, this theory would be the dividing point between a psychoanalytic and other views of Rick's personality and would therefore have to be justified itself.

Secondly, the Oedipus thesis could also refer to the intended reception instead of the empirical reception of the characters. In this case, it would not be a statement about the real viewers, but would mean that the filmmakers wanted to give their audience the impression of Rick's Oedipal personality. To test this thesis, one could try to find out from production documents whether the filmmakers were actually influenced by psychoanalysis (like, for instance, Woody Allen or Jane Campion), whether they assumed their target audience had prior psychoanalytic knowledge, or whether they unconsciously gave Rick Oedipal traits (in which case one would have to apply a psychoanalytic model to creative processes).

The third possibility might be that the thesis of Rick's Oedipal personality was meant normatively rather than descriptively, thus referring to an ideal character reception in the sense that Rick should ideally be understood as Oedipally conditioned. 'Ideally' could here be understood in such a way as to open up a new, interesting, and illuminating perspective on Rick and the film. This would leave open alternative visions of Rick. But it could also be meant in the more strongly normative sense that an optimal communication process would lead to understanding Rick as having an Oedipal personality. This could only be judged by relating the communicative norms and goals of the producers and their target group with one another in a specific reception situation. On the one hand, the intentions of the producers play a role here: Did the filmmakers want Rick to be understood in this way? On the other hand, it would be of relevance to know whether the spectators were able to form this particular image of Rick on the basis of the film, their mental dispositions (e.g., knowledge of psychoanalysis), and valid communicative norms and contexts (e.g., the Production Code).

With all due caution, one may suspect that an explicitly Oedipal understanding of Rick is not supported by any unambiguous indication from empirical, intended, or ideal reception. If Rick is (or should be) implicitly experienced in this way, then a particular psychoanalytical model of reception must be presupposed. In this case, the

sustainability of the thesis depends on the plausibility of a psychoanalytical reception model. Ultimately, the dispute about characters thus turns out to be a dispute about spectators and their dispositions.

The example can be generalised and draws attention to a fundamental problem of character analysis. Analyses in everyday language and in the language of media studies produce many apparently simple and trivial statements about characters (as about Rick above). It has become clear, however, that such statements often cover only a part of the analysis or that they are ambiguous and rest on presuppositions in need of clarification. Frequently they hide statements about forms of character reception whose derivation and justification require different procedures and data.

The most precise procedure of analysis would now consist in the detailed reconstruction of the relevant phenomena of reception and all their presuppositions. However, this procedure would be extremely laborious and in general unnecessarily complicated. Speaking about 'characters', by contrast, allows us to act more efficiently and simply: characters and their properties can be seen as the products of successful reception and elaboration. Then one implicitly presupposes that perception and mental model formation are carried out for the most part in an intersubjectively unproblematic manner. It is presupposed that the spectators' reception processes are largely comparable in that they construct a sufficiently similar mental model of a represented being with particular identifiable properties. Accordingly, all competent spectators develop similar images of Rick Blaine and thus consensually identify the same fictional being. These core features of ideal character models form the implicit basis of all discourse about characters. Then statements may be added that are based on a richer set of presuppositions. The simplification achieved by speaking about characters (and not individual character models or diverse reception processes) thus consists primarily in that fundamental processes of perception and model formation can simply be presupposed and the analysis may immediately start out from a higher level of observation.

Although statements about characters can ultimately be referred back to statements about character reception, in most cases it is much simpler just to speak of characters. One should, however, remain aware that this way of speaking is often ambiguous and contains a simplifying abstraction that can be re-examined critically whenever necessary. The distinctions suggested here will help to reveal such simplifications, ambiguities, and implicit presuppositions, and thus clear up misunderstandings that frequently arise through the confusion of empirical, intended, and ideal reception in the past, the present, and the future or between creative, interpretative, and sociocultural analyses. In brief:

> Statements about characters often permit a useful simplification of more complex states of affairs, which can be made explicit in the analysis whenever needed.

It has thus become clear that making and substantiating statements about characters frequently needs to refer to theories of reception and communication, as well as to different kinds of methods and data. It appears reasonable, therefore, to proceed in an inter- or transdisciplinary way in character analysis and to consider research results from humanities as well as natural and social sciences. The transdisciplinary basis that I developed in the previous chapters has its foundations in the analytic philosophy of language and meaning (modelling the ontology of characters), in linguistic, semiotic, and philosophical pragmatics (modelling the communicative constitution of characters), and in the cognitive sciences, particularly in psychology and philosophy of mind (modelling the reception of characters). The recourse to these theories proved necessary and opportune because they provide the most thorough answers to the questions of what characters are and how they are constituted and experienced. This foundation has, on the one hand, made possible the more precise definition of the subject matter of character analysis. On the other hand, it lays out the basic outlines of a cognitivist reception model that can be linked to methods and data in the form of textual and phenomenological descriptions, empirical investigations, historical information, and others, in order to develop and support assertions about characters and both empirical, intended, and ideal character reception.

Facets of the Character as an Object of Study

The upshot of these considerations is, put simply: whenever we talk about characters, we talk about more than just characters. Moreover, often it is not even clear what we are talking about. This causes a problem for analysis. On the one hand, using simplified statements about characters enables us to proceed economically and to use ordinary language. On the other hand, more exact analyses may require the reconstruction of different forms and aspects of character reception. A way out of this dilemma is to continue speaking about characters in the analysis as usual, but provide precise clarification whenever necessary.

It is obviously necessary to orientate the analysis towards basic structures of the object. The four-level model of character reception offers such a fundamental structure: the distinction between perception, the formation of character models, the association of higher meanings, and the reflection on contexts in sociocultural reality. Each of these areas can be further differentiated. The question is now whether basic structures of the characters themselves correspond to this general configuration. This would not only make it easier to make more precise statements about characters in connection with their reception, it would also be a prerequisite for applying various concepts of character research and integrating them into a more comprehensive model of analysis. After all, most character theories merely produce statements about characters, without considering their hidden ambiguity or problems of reception. It is therefore necessary to compare three areas with regard to shared fundamental structures: the everyday

discourse about characters, the discourse of character theory and research, and the processes of character reception. It will become apparent that such a comparison is indeed capable of revealing fundamental structural commonalities between these areas.

It is best to start with statements about characters. Both in everyday talk about characters and in professional discourse about them, we ascribe to them certain properties (Rick Blaine has dark hair, is cool, complex, etc.) and relations to other objects (Rick loves Ilsa, is played by Bogart, stands for the USA, etc.).[70] The wide and varied range of such statements can be subdivided by classifying their predicates, relations, and objects, thus revealing four basic structural dimensions of characters. At the same time, crucial commonalities between various theories of film, literature, and art, as well as various approaches in aesthetics, semantics, and narratology, become apparent. They all suggest a division of character-related statements into four areas, which show striking and by no means coincidental correspondence to the four levels of character reception outlined above. It is not easy to find a convincing terminology for these general structural areas; I shall speak of characters as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts.[71]

1. The character as a represented being (see the more detailed Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 9). Statements belonging to this area answer the question: 'What is this character—what properties and relations does it have as a being in a represented (story)world?' This includes its physical, mental, and social features, its behaviour, fleeting experiences, and relations with its environment. Rick Blaine, for example, is of medium height, cynical, sentimental, and in relations with other characters ('loves Ilsa'), objects ('hides two transit visas'), times and places ('lives above his café'), events ('supports Ilsa's escape'), and abstract rules ('violates orders of the Vichy government'). What such statements have in common is that they concern characters as parts of a represented world and in many cases also as parts of a story. Represented worlds and their inhabitants are treated in theories of mimesis, diegesis, or narrative worlds, among others. Thus, one could also speak of the mimetic, diegetic, or representational dimension of characters. In philosophical semantics, one speaks of 'intra-fictional' statements about characters (Künne 1983: 295ff.), which may be prefixed by a fiction operator, e.g., 'according to the story, Rick loves Ilsa'. This test according to the logic of language does not, however, yield meaningful statements in connection with the following statement forms.

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70 Predicate logic distinguishes between statements about properties and statements about relations. The former fit the schema 'Ef' ('The character f has the property E'), the latter the schema 'fRx' ('The character f stands in relation R to object x'). Some statements are also relational without appearing to be so.

71 The terminology was inspired by, amongst others, Ed Tan's suggestion of 'artefact-emotions' (1996) and by Bordwell's suggestion of a 'symptomatic' level of meaning (1989).

2. The character as a symbol (see Chapter 11). Statements of this kind answer the question: 'What does the character stand for—what indirect meanings does it convey?' Characters can function as the bearers of themes, metaphors, personifications, or exempla, in brief: as complex secondary signs that stand for something else. 'Symbol' is here understood in a broad sense and refers to all forms of higher-level, second-order, or indirect meaning. Allegorical characters are only the most significant examples: a man in dark clothing stands for Death (e.g., in *Destiny*). In interpretation, characters are often linked with indirect meanings, e.g., 'Rick symbolises the transformation from egoism to responsibility' or 'Rick stands for integrity'. What a character stands for usually depends on its features as a represented being: a character not only *has* particular problems, virtues, or vices, but *exemplifies* these as abstract qualities, embodies them in a metaphorical way, or contributes to conveying general statements about them. How this happens is treated by, amongst others, theories of symbolism, metaphor, and themes; one could accordingly also speak of the symbolic, metaphorical, or thematic dimension of characters.

3. The character as a symptom (see Chapter 12). Statements of this kind answer the questions: 'Why is the character as it is, what factors played a causal role in its production, and what effects does it have on its audiences and beyond?' Here, calling the character a 'symptom' does not mean something pathological, it means quite generally that it may be considered an indicator of states of affairs in reality, a phenomenon of culture and society, in particular with reference to communicative and media contexts. To put it more precisely, characters are ultimately ascribed causal relations with elements of the communication process, especially with recipients ('Rick was a moral model for many spectators'), with producers ('Rick was fashioned by several authors'), with other media texts ('Rick recalls Bogart's earlier gangster parts'), and with sociocultural and historical contexts ('Rick embodies a contemporary ideal of masculinity'). Such connections have been investigated by, amongst others, theories on *auteurs, dispositifs* (frameworks) of media production and distribution, media effects, intertextuality, and the pragmatics of communicative interaction; one could accordingly also speak of the context-related or pragmatic dimension of characters.[72]

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72 As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the Foucauldian term 'dispositif' is hard to translate into English. Broadly, it refers to 'a framework in which techniques and humans are arranged to make it possible to perform repetitive and distributed activities' (Larroche 2019: xv). In German media theory, the term 'Mediendispositiv' ('media dispositif') is widely used to talk about a medium such as television as an arrangement of technologies, organisations, professional roles, aesthetic conventions, and other elements that together enable certain forms of communication and establish certain power relations (e.g., Hickethier 2003).

4. The character as an artefact (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). Statements of this kind answer the question 'How is the character designed and presented, and what aesthetic structures does it possess?' Such statements about the 'make-up' of characters and their relationships with a media text or artwork will occupy an important position in the analysis. Characters are here ascribed relations with means of their (re)presentation ('Rick is often shown in close-up shots') as well as with roles and functions in narrative or rhetorical structures ('Rick as the protagonist drives the action'). In addition, such features of characters are bundled together under generalising artefact properties ('Rick is a multidimensional, idealised character typical of classical storytelling'). Traditionally, statements of this kind are made by aesthetic and narrative theories of the form, style, and experience of art,[73] so that one could here also speak of the aesthetic, textual, or stylistic dimension of characters.

The variety of statements in character analysis can thus be classified into these four groups: from a diegetic perspective we can discuss them as represented beings, from a thematic perspective as symbols, from a pragmatic perspective as symptoms, and from an aesthetic perspective as artefacts. Each area is complex, involving a large variety of properties, relations, and objects of reference. The following chapters will introduce differentiated models and concepts for investigating them.

Level of reception	Mental model formation	Association of indirect, higher-order meanings	Inferences about real communication phenomena	1) Basal perception 2) Aesthetic reflection
Aspect of character	Diegetic: fictional or represented being	Thematic: symbol	Pragmatic: symptom	Aesthetic: artefact
Basic question	*What* is represented? What properties does the character have as a represented being?	*What* does the character *stand for*? What indirect meanings does it convey?	*Why* is the character as it is? What causes and effects does it have in reality?	*How* is the character represented? What means, structures, and strategies are employed? What basic perceptual experiences are induced?

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73   Cf. e.g., Martinez and Scheffel 1999; Bordwell and Thompson 2001: 155.

Ascribed properties	Diegetic properties in a storyworld	Thematic, symbolic, and metaphoric relations	Contextual relations with reality (of communication)	Representational relations with means and structures of the text (character representations)
Relata	Elements of the represented world	Abstract themes, properties, propositions, etc.	Communicative contexts and their elements	Textual elements
Counterparts in character theory **(Phelan 1989)**	Mimetic dimension	Thematic dimension	-----	Synthetic dimension
Counterparts in narratology **(Martinez/ Scheffel 1999)**	*What* is narrated: diegesis, story	*What* is narrated: themes	-----	*How* the story is narrated: form, discourse
Counterparts in theories of meaning **(Bordwell 1989)**	Referential meaning	Explicit and implicit meanings	Symptomatic meaning	Film form and style

Table 4 Fundamental structures of character analysis and their equivalents in different theories of film and literary studies

This classification is grounded in a number of ways (for an overview see Table 4). It corresponds to established categories of mimesis, symbolism, pragmatics, and aesthetics, and it takes up the central questions of all textual analysis: What objects are represented in what ways, for what reasons, and with what effects? In addition, it fits with several theoretical criteria that all point in the same direction. Firstly, the statements of each area have their own semantic and logical structure, which becomes apparent through linguistic indicators. As represented beings, characters possess particular properties 'according to the story'; as symbols they 'stand for something'; as symptoms they 'allow for inferences' about causes and effects, as artefacts they are 'presented and formed by the text'. In all of the four perspectives, characters are related to specific objects with a distinct ontological status: to storyworlds, abstract meanings, real production and reception contexts, and textual forms and structures. Thus, the dimensions of characters refer to different elements of communication: the media

text, different levels of its meaning (represented worlds, higher-level meanings), and the communicative situation. These basic categories are supported further by their correspondence to other theories of character,[74] narrative,[75] textual motivation and information,[76] the philosophical explication of fictional statements,[77] and levels of meaning in film and art.[78]

The proposed classification is thus substantiated by a meta-theoretical comparison and triangulation. However, it is more comprehensive than the individual theories mentioned. It allows for supplements, links, differentiations, amplifications. In particular, it interlocks with the theory of reception, since all four kinds of analytical statements about characters correspond to levels of character reception. In the first three cases, the relationship is clear. Statements about characters as represented beings imply the formation of mental character models: the statement 'Rick is cool' presupposes that the model of a cool man called Rick is developed (or should be developed). Statements about characters as symbols imply inferences about higher meanings: the statement 'Rick stands for the USA' presupposes that the model of Rick is or should be connected with a particular idea of the USA. Statements about characters as symptoms imply inferences about communicative contexts: the statement 'Rick influenced the contemporary audience' presupposes that the model of Rick is or should be connected with an image of the audience and the impact on it.

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74 Phelan (1989) distinguishes between the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic dimensions of a character, which largely correspond with the aspects of the represented being, the symbol, and the artefact. Margolin (1990: 106) considers characters as non-real individuals in fictional worlds (fictional beings), as thematic elements (symbols), as topical entities of discourse (symptoms or artefacts), and as artificial constructs (artefacts); he then concentrates on the first of these aspects.

75 Here the *what* is distinguished from the *how* of a narrative, i.e., the represented content (*story*) from its mode of representation in *plot* or *discourse*. The level of what is represented is divided in diegesis and themes (cf. Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 20–26; 134). Diegesis, theme, and mode of representation correspond with the character-specific division into fictional beings, symbols, and artefacts; the aspect of symptoms is missing.

76 As for the functions of character related textual information, Jannidis distinguishes between final, causal, reader-oriented, and compositional motivation (2004: 221–29); Bordwell distinguishes between compositional, realistic, inter-textual, and aesthetic motivation (1985: 36ff.).

77 Künne explicates intra-fictional, trans-fictional, inter-fictional, and status-related statements (1983: 295–96). Intra-fictional statements concern the fictional being, trans- and inter-fictional statements are two forms of symptom statements. Status-related assertions belong to the artefact level but do not cover it completely. For alternative explications, see Currie 1990.

78 Panofsky lists three layers of meaning of the work of art: the primary or natural *sujet* (character as represented being), the secondary or conventional *sujet* as the subject of iconography (character as symbol), and the proper meaning as the object of iconology (character as symptom) (cf. Panofsky 1972; Büttner and Gottdang 2006: 20ff.). According to Bordwell, four kinds of meaning are involved in understanding film (1989: 8f.). On the level of referential meaning, spectators construct the represented world (including the represented beings). On the level of explicit and implicit meaning, they work out the general messages (e.g., through understanding characters as symbols). On the level of symptomatic meaning, they grasp the involuntary expression of the producers (e.g., through characters as symptoms). However, the symptom aspect of characters as understood in this book goes beyond Bordwell's concept of symptomatic meaning because it is supposed to comprise any actual causes and effects of characters (see also Chapter 12 of this book). Artefact properties of characters do not appear in Bordwell's model of meaning, but they correspond to his concepts of 'film form' as the 'overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film' and the 'stylistic system' as 'patterned and significant use of techniques' (ibid.: 2001: 40, 155).

Statements about characters as artefacts are more complex; they have a double structural correspondence in reception. On the one hand, they are linked to basal perception (the lowest level of the reception model). However, perceptual experiences of shapes, colours and sounds are often preconscious, fleeting and correspondingly difficult to verbalise. They can often not be described directly in the analysis, but only with recourse to the means of representation and the text structures that evoke them. For example, by saying that the camera shows Rick in close-up, we might want to refer to the experience of spatial closeness that this type of shot evokes. However, this indirect way of describing perceptual experience implies an aesthetic reflection on the relationship that exists between the viewer's experience of the character and the shape of the audiovisual text. For example, the statement 'Rick is often shown in close-ups' presupposes, among other things, that the mental model of Rick is linked not only to perceptions and memories of film images, but also to ideas about their production in camerawork. Such forms of aesthetic reflection could be assigned to the fourth level of the reception model, the reflection on communicative contexts. In view of their close connection to aesthetic experience, however, it seems more sensible to consider them as a separate aspect. In short, statements about the aesthetics of characters and their design as artefacts correspond to two levels of reception, basic perception and aesthetic reflection. This is in line with a widespread understanding of aesthetics, which also links sensory experience and reflection.

In summary it may be stated that the subject area of character analysis can be structured in two ways (Table 5). Firstly, we make statements about characters as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts, which each imply particular reception processes. Secondly, we formulate theses about different forms of character reception and elaboration: the empirical reception by different spectators in the past, present, and future; the reception intended by the filmmakers; and the ideal reception according to communicative goals and norms.

	Perception	Model formation	Exploration of meaning	Exploration of context	Aesthetic reflection
Statements on characters	Character as artefact 1	Character as represented being	Character as symbol	Character as symptom	Character as artefact 2
Empirical reception	Empirical perception	Empirical character model	Empirical inferences about meanings	Empirical inferences about contexts	Empirical reflection of representation

Intended reception	Intended perception	Intended character model	Intended inferences about meanings	Intended inferences about contexts	Intended reflection of representation
Ideal reception	Ideal perception	Ideal character model	Ideal inferences about meanings	Ideal inferences about contexts	Ideal reflection of representation
Elaboration after reception	---	↓ Elaboration of character model	↓ Elaboration of meaning	↓ Elaboration of context	↓ Elaboration of aesthetic reflection

Table 5 The field of character analysis, its objects of investigation, and the relations between statements about characters and about reception

The preceding explanation of basic principles and structures in character analysis may seem too abstract and pedantic. However, it is necessary because its results go against many widely held theories of character and can highlight their problems and blind spots. In Chapter 4, a simplified model of analysis which should be easier to understand and apply is developed on its basis and illustrated with examples. In the following chapters, this general model is concretised. They develop specific concepts for the analysis of characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms and finally bring them together into a comprehensive system. In doing so, they attempt to integrate preliminary work from hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, semiotic, and cognitive theories as well as practical manuals. These different approaches must be evaluated comparatively in order to make the complexity of the characters understandable. In attempting to integrate their findings, I follow certain rules. Internal consistency and plausibility have top priority. Cognitive-perceptual theory (in conjunction with phenomenology) forms the basis and the central approach; concepts from other approaches will be modified and adapted. When necessary, I will weaken strong theses and interpret specific concepts more openly. Concepts that seem consensual will be tacitly integrated, while problematic cases or choices between alternatives will be explained in more detail. Ultimately, however, my proposal for a comprehensive model of character analysis will have to stand on its own and convince by its usefulness.