

BACHELOR'S THESIS

WHAT HOOKS US IN A FILM?

The Emotional Impact
of Film Narration on Subjective Reality

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Abstract

"We are all dreaming together" (Dugdale, 2025, 01:40:23), stated Hans Zimmer in his film *Hans Zimmer & Friends: Diamond in the Desert*.

This thesis explores how film narration influences the subjective reality and emotional responses of active viewers during the reception process. Building on interdisciplinary frameworks from psychology, sociology, and film theory, it examines the dynamic interplay between subjective reality, emotions, narration, and reception.

Challenging the traditional notion of film viewers as passive observers, this thesis presents a model that emphasizes the active role of viewers in constructing subjective realities through their interactions with films. By integrating the PKS model, which focuses on narrative structures, with Jens Eder's emotion transmission stages, the research highlights the importance of both conscious and unconscious processes in shaping emotional responses and subjective interpretations of the active viewer.

A model is developed that extends existing frameworks by incorporating emotional interactions and emphasizing the co-creation of meaning between film and viewer. Films are presented as catalysts, designed to trigger memories, experiences, and emotions within viewers. These emotional responses serve as the foundation for constructing unique subjective realities, allowing viewers to connect deeply with narratives and interpret them in highly personal ways. Empathy and sympathy are identified as crucial factors in fostering emotional engagement, with emotions forming the basis for shaping subjective realities. Using Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) as a case example for the developed model, the film's depiction of systemic failures, such as economic inequality and mental health neglect, mirrors real-world struggles and fosters emotional identification among audiences.

This research emphasizes the complexity of film reception as an active and dynamic psychological process, ultimately contributing to the creation of individualized subjective realities.

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1. Introduction

"[Film] is the only visual art in which the entire richness of our inner life - our perceptions, memory, and imagination, our expectations and attention - can be brought to life in the external impressions themselves.[...] The innermost part of humanity lies in its feelings and emotions."

(Münsterberg, 1915/1996, pp. 111–112, translated into English by Edgar Isenmann¹).

Cinema is more than just watching moving images on a screen (Emrich & Wildt, 2008, p. 157). It is the power of illusion - that willing "suspension of disbelief" in which the viewer² is drawn into the world of the film, that is the center of the filmic experience (Heckmann, 2023). This interplay between the viewer and the film is essential because the reality of cinema depends fundamentally on active participation in the creation of that reality (Wessels, 2023). In the 1950s, Edgar Morin discussed cinema as a reflection of human inner life and desire. In his work "The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man", Morin explores how cinema taps into the imaginary and the subconscious, creating a unique experience for the viewer (Morin, 1978/2005, p. 30). Annette Brauerhoch links cinema, dream, and desire, implicitly considering the seductive power of cinema (Brauerhoch, 1996, p. 44, pp. 61-62). She emphasizes that the audience's longing for film arises from a deeper desire to perceive images not simply as constructed representations, but as reality itself. By momentarily forgetting the artificial nature of what they see on the screen, viewers immerse themselves in a delusion that fulfills some of their most profound needs (Brauerhoch, 1996, p. 38). It can be thought of as an "artificial dream," a trigger for internal creative processes (Emrich & Wildt, 2008, p. 157). As early as 1900, Freud described this dream as a condensation of experienced reality (Stiglegger, 2023, p. 14). The viewer constructs a subjective reality, one that is shaped by their experiences, cultural background, and existing knowledge. The film on the screen essentially serves as a catalyst, activating the viewer's synapses to create a unique **subjective reality**.

¹ „Es ist die einzige visuelle Kunst, in der der gesamte Reichtum unseres inneren Lebens, unsere Wahrnehmungen, unser Gedächtnis und unsere Phantasie, unsere Erwartung und unsere Aufmerksamkeit, in den äußeren Eindrücken selbst lebendig gemacht werden kann.[...] Das Innerste des Menschen liegt in seinen Gefühlen und Emotionen."

² In this thesis, the terms "viewer" and "audience" are used interchangeably with "recipient." Many of the referenced sources use the term "viewer," which is therefore adopted throughout this work. Strictly speaking, "viewer" primarily emphasizes sight, while "audience" suggests a collective group; however, in this context, "viewer," "audience," and "recipient" are considered equivalent, and no distinction is made between them. All three terms are intended to capture the holistic nature of film reception, which involves a dynamic interplay of sight, sound, and even unconscious processes.

Emotions are intricately linked to the creation of subjective reality, which is why it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of them. The emotional dimension plays a central role in shaping how viewers interpret and engage with narratives, influencing the personal and subjective nature of their filmic experiences. No other art form evokes such intense and diverse emotional responses as cinema (Tröhler & Hedinger, 2005, p. 7). Nevertheless, the emotional experience of the viewer has only recently become a central focus of film theory. Historically, emotions have been viewed as opposing rationality and disrupting cognitive processes (Sorabji et al., 2010, p. 215). The complexity and dynamism of emotions - as well as the challenge of defining and structuring it - contributed to their historically subordinate role in film studies. Exploring the relationship between film and emotion requires multiple disciplines, including sociology, philosophy, and psychology. David Bordwell emphasizes the active role of viewers in film reception, arguing that they actively construct their own experiences based on cues provided by filmmakers (*Notes From David Bordwell's Narration in the Fiction Film*, 2014). While his approach initially focused only on cognition, it has since evolved to include emotional processes as well. In the last decades, comprehensive approaches to emotional film experiences have emerged. Scholars such as Noël Carroll, Meike Uhrig, Jens Eder and Ed S. H. Tan have made significant contributions to this field. Tan posits that cinema functions as an "emotion machine", underscoring the profound emotional impact of film (E. S. Tan, 1995).

Cognitive processes in film play a crucial role in shaping subjective reality. By selectively activating neural pathways through schema formation and unconscious processes, film narratives connect with viewers' personal histories, evoking emotions and memories that are deeply intertwined into their individual experiences (Sindelar, 2022). Historically, the unconscious processes have been largely overlooked; however, in recent decades, they have gained increasing attention and become a focal point in research (Wuss, 2020, p. 64).

Narration is essential in film for triggering subjective reality and emotions because it serves as a bridge between the viewer's personal experiences and the story being told. By structuring events, conflicts, and character perspectives, narration engages cognitive and emotional processes that allow viewers to connect deeply with the narrative. Peter Wuss, a prominent scholar in film studies, is widely recognized for his insightful perspective that perception extends beyond conscious awareness. He emphasizes the significant role of unconscious processes in the context of narration in shaping emotions and constructing subjective realities, making his work particularly relevant to this thesis.

It is important to understand that film viewers are not passive but active as they interact with the narrative of the film experiencing certain emotions that shape their subjective realities and influence their perception and evaluation of the story. In order to create meaningful films, an in-depth examination of how these components:

- subjective reality,
- emotions,
- narration,
- and the cognitive processes during film reception

are linked to each other. Therefore, the research question of this bachelor thesis is:

How does film narration influence the subjective reality of the active viewer during the reception process?

By examining these interrelated components, the thesis aims to elucidate the dynamic interplay between them, highlighting how film narratives shape the personal realities and emotional experiences of viewers. This research will provide an in-depth understanding of how these elements collectively contribute to the unique and subjective nature of the film experience. To visualize this complex interplay and highlight the crucial role of the active viewer, a model will be developed, adapted from the leading information processing model by Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding. This model will serve as a visual framework, illustrating how the active viewer's cognitive and emotional processes interact with film narration to create a subjective reality. By using this model, the thesis will offer a clearer and more structured understanding of the viewer's active engagement with film narratives.

The first part lays the groundwork for information processing, focusing on the distinction between unconscious and conscious processes as well as schema theory. This foundational knowledge forms a solid basis for understanding the complex interactions that occur between viewers and films. Building on this, the next chapter introduces the PKS Model by Peter Wuss, emphasizing its relevance to film narration. This model examines how narrative structures engage with viewers' cognitive processes. The third part addresses the role of emotions in film reception. Here, emotions are analyzed in terms of how they are evoked and how they contribute to the viewer's subjective experience. The fourth key component explores the concept of subjective reality, considering how individual perspectives shape the reception of film. In the following chapter, all these key components - along with the theories and models they encompass - are synthesized into a comprehensive model that illustrates

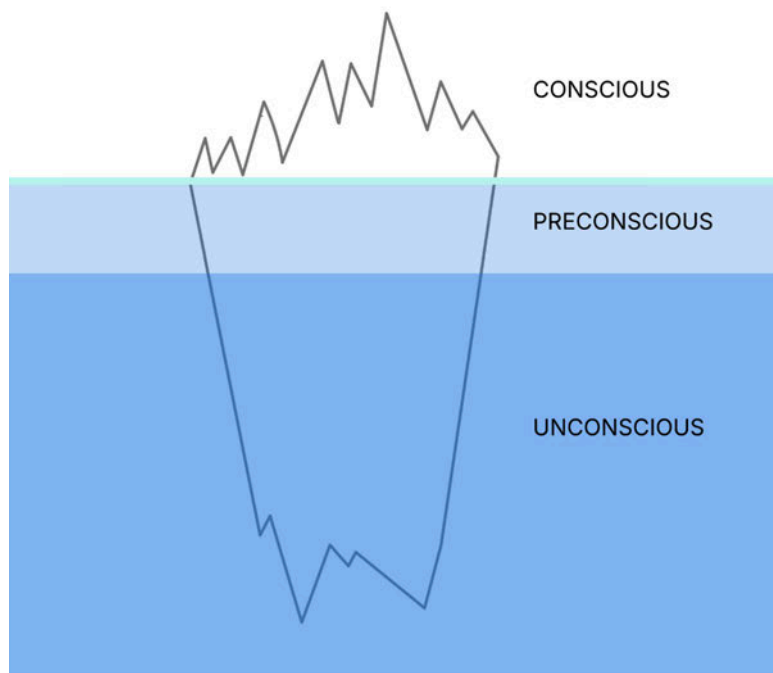
their connections and interplay. This model is then applied to Todd Phillips' film *Joker* as a case example, demonstrating how film can shape viewers' perceptions and emotional responses. The final chapter concludes the thesis with a critical reflection and an outlook on future research directions. By bringing together these components, the thesis offers a detailed framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between film narratives and viewer experiences.

2. Cognitive Information Processing

This section focuses on the complexities of cognitive information processing, examining how viewers receive and process information. Several key questions arise: Can information be stored below the threshold of consciousness, and if so, how is it stored? How does the learning process contribute to anticipation and prediction based on information? This chapter explores these fundamental questions and provides a broad foundation for the theories and models that follow.

2.1 The Interplay Between Consciousness and Unconsciousness

Freud's psychoanalytic theory posits that unconscious motives play a crucial role in shaping human behavior (Sidor & Dubin, 2024). According to him, unconscious motives could be repressed desires, unresolved conflicts, and unacknowledged fears. These motives, often hidden from conscious awareness, influence decisions and actions (Sidor & Dubin, 2024). Sigmund Freud already began exploring the concept of the unconscious mind in the 1890s (Rabstejnek, 2011, p. 2, p. 9). His work culminated in the publication of "The Interpretation of Dreams" in 1900, which marked a significant milestone in the development of his theories (Rabstejnek, 2011, p. 9). In his work, Freud introduced his topographical model of the mind, using the analogy of an iceberg (see figure 1) to describe the three levels of consciousness: the unconscious, the preconscious, and the consciousness (McLeod, 2024b).

**Figure 1**

Freud's iceberg theory

Note. Own illustration.

The conscious mind represents the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions we are actively aware of at any given moment. As Freud described it, "anything that I perceive at the moment, i.e. that I am conscious of now, belongs to the first layer" (Freud, 1900, as cited in Brunner, 2002, p. 25). This layer is often compared to the tip of an iceberg, representing only a small portion of our total mental processes. The conscious mind, representing about 10% of the mental processes, is responsible for active thinking, decision-making, and logical reasoning (Sinusoid, 2021; Lewis Psychology, 2022, 00:01:05). It's the awareness of the present moment that allows the viewer to analyze the environment and make conscious choices (Sinusoid, 2021).

The preconscious mind acts as a bridge between the conscious and unconscious. It contains information that is not currently in our awareness but can be easily retrieved when needed (Lewis Psychology, 2022, 00:01:45).

The unconscious mind is the deepest and most influential layer, containing repressed memories, desires, and impulses that are inaccessible to conscious awareness. Freud

highlights that "the unconscious mind is the primary source of human behavior" (Freud, 1915, as cited in McLeod, 2024b).

Carl Jung, who expanded on Freud's theories, described the unconscious as: "The unknown falls into two groups of objects: those which are inside and are experienced immediately. The first group comprises the unknown in the outer world; the second the unknown in the inner world. We call this latter territory the unconscious." (Jung, 1951/2013, p. 3). Jung distinguishes with this quote between two forms of the unknown: the external unknown, which encompasses unexplored aspects of the external world, and the internal unknown, which refers to the hidden elements within the psyche. This inner realm, identified as the unconscious, includes thoughts, feelings, and experiences that lie beyond conscious awareness.

One of the primary functions of the unconscious mind is its role in processing sensory information (Markowsky, 2025). Research indicates that while the conscious mind is limited in its capacity to process information - typically handling around 40 bits per second - the unconscious can manage approximately 11 million bits per second (Markowsky, 2025). This immense processing capability allows the unconscious to filter and interpret sensory data without the conscious awareness, guiding the responses to stimuli based on past experiences and learned behaviors (Markowsky, 2025). For instance, when encountering a situation that feels familiar or triggering, the unconscious may prompt us to react instinctively based on previous interactions, even if we are not consciously aware of these memories influencing the behavior (Zhang & Yuan, 2021, p. 1008). In addition, studies have shown that many decisions are made unconsciously before they reach conscious awareness (Haynes, 2008). Research by scientists at the Max Planck Institute has shown that brain activity associated with decision-making can be detected up to seven seconds before an individual consciously decides to act (Haynes, 2008). This suggests that the brain prepares decisions in advance. The findings indicate that while we are consciously directing our actions, much of this decision-making occurs below the surface, driven by unconscious processes (Farnsworth, 2024; Haynes, 2008). The philosophical resonance of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's concept of 'small perceptions' argued that our understanding of the world emerges from a multitude of tiny, often unnoticed perceptions that add up to a larger, conscious awareness (Wuss, 2020, p. 62).

Jung's theory posits that the unconscious mind has two layers: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious (McLeod, 2024a). The personal unconscious contains repressed memories and experiences that are unique to each individual, while the collective

unconscious is shared by humanity and contains universal archetypes (McLeod, 2024a). This "collective unconscious", as Jung termed it, contains archetypes - primordial images and patterns that shape the perception and behavior across cultures and generations (Boechat, 2017). Jung believed that these shared experiences influence how we perceive and interact with the world around us (Luton, 2020). As he explained, "The collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution born anew in the brain structure of every individual" (Jung, 1981, as cited in Luton, 2020).

For the purpose of simplicity, only the terms unconscious and conscious processes will be used throughout this thesis.

2.2 Attention - filter of the consciousness

Building on Freud's tripartite model of unconscious, preconscious, and conscious processes - which conceptualizes the mind as a system determined by thresholds of consciousness - the question arises: How does information move from perception to conscious awareness? The threshold between perceptual-level processing and conscious awareness is not a fixed point, but rather a dynamic boundary that is strongly influenced by attention.

Attention acts as a filter, selectively concentrating on certain aspects of the environment while deprioritizing others (Stevens & Bavelier, 2011, p. 30). This selective process is essential due to the limitations of the cognitive system in processing the vast amount of incoming sensory information (Müller & Krummenacher, 2008, p. 144). As the pioneering psychologist William James (1890) described, attention is "the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought." (p. 404, as cited in Groen, 2020).

Two primary attentional mechanisms influence this threshold: endogenous (top-down) and exogenous (bottom-up) attention (Pashler et al., 2001, pp. 631, 633–634). Endogenous attention is a goal-directed process that allows for deliberate focus on specific stimuli or tasks (Hagendorf et al., 2011, p. 8). It enables persistent concentration and flexible adaptation to changing demands (Kurtz et al., 2017, p. 1). In contrast, exogenous attention is a stimulus-driven process that automatically directs attention to attentional or new stimuli (Hagendorf et al., 2011, p. 8). It has a rapid onset of action, but its effects are generally of short duration (Kurtz et al., 2017, p. 1).

2.3 Dual process Theory

Dual-process theory is a foundational model in cognitive psychology that describes two distinct but interacting systems of information processing. Its conceptual framework has been extended to various disciplines, including film studies, where analogous cognitive mechanisms have been identified. It is closely related to the attention mechanism, and this chapter will explore these processes further.

The terms System 1 and System 2 were first introduced by psychologists Keith Stanovich and Richard West in 2000, but they were popularized by Daniel Kahneman in his 2011 book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (Hollingworth & Barker, 2019). This dual process theory posits that the cognitive processes operate through two separate but interacting systems, commonly referred to as System 1 and System 2 (Neeson, 2025).

System 1 is characterised by its rapid, automatic, and intuitive nature. It operates largely below the level of conscious awareness and requires little cognitive effort (Neeson, 2025). This system is responsible for making quick judgments, emotional reactions, and instinctive responses. It relies heavily on heuristics³ and patterns learned through experience (Schmitz, 2024, p. 9). System 1 is always active, constantly processing information from our environment and making quick judgments (Neeson, 2025).

In contrast, System 2 is slow, deliberate, and analytical (Hollingworth & Barker, n.d.). It involves conscious thought, logical reasoning, and effortful mental activity. This system is used when we need to focus on complex problems, make calculated decisions, or think abstractly (Neeson, 2025). System 2 is resource-intensive and requires concentration (Neeson, 2025). The emotions and intuitions generated by System 1 serve as the basis for the conscious decisions made by System 2. Essentially, System 2 takes the complex patterns automatically generated by System 1 and transforms them into structured, coherent thoughts (Hollingworth & Barker, n.d.).

David Bordwell, a renowned film theorist, introduced comparable processing concepts in his 1985 book "Narration in the Fiction Film". He distinguished between two types of cognitive processes in film viewing: the "bottom-up" process, which corresponds to System 1, is characterised by its speed and unconsciousness, while the top-down process, analogous to

³ Heuristics are mental shortcuts or problem-solving strategies that simplify decision-making processes. They rely on limited information, past experiences, and intuitive judgments to quickly produce solutions, especially in situations where cognitive resources are limited.

System 2, is more deliberate and reflective. It involves the viewer's conscious interpretation and analysis of the film's narrative and themes (Kirsten, 2021, p. 126).

2.4 Schemas - how we unconsciously process information

The concept of schemas plays a central role in understanding how we unconsciously store and process information. Schemas are flexible cognitive structures that continuously evolve with each new experience (Schenk, 2007, pp. 289). This process results in the formation of mental frameworks. They encode and store new information (Schenk, 2007, pp. 289–290). Consequently, while our behaviors and responses may share similarities with past experiences, they are never exact replicas, nor are they entirely disconnected from previous patterns (Bartlett, 1932, pp. 201–202).

The British cognitive psychologist Bartlett explored the concept of schema extensively in his influential book *Remembering* (1932). While acknowledging the usefulness of the term, Bartlett criticized it for being too vague and overused in psychology (Bartlett, 1932, p. 201). He suggested "organized setting" as a more precise alternative, but ultimately continued to use "schema" with the warning that it required careful definition (Bartlett, 1932, p. 201). Neuroscience posits that knowledge is stored in categories consisting of subcategories and supercategories (Anderson, 2013, p. 105). This categorical knowledge is stored in a structured form called a schema. When a particular schema is activated, other features associated with that category become available, creating specific expectations in the individual (Anderson, 2013, p. 106).

For example, the concept of 'hunt' is stored in different sub-categories with specific characteristics (Petkov & Petrova, 2019, p. 1). 'Hunt' can evoke a multitude of associations, such as prey, hunter, forest, and others, illustrating how a single idea can be linked to diverse mental representations. The interconnection of these categories leads to the formation of a pattern which, when activated by one feature, automatically retrieves other features of the same super-category (Petkov & Petrova, 2019, pp. 1-2). This process leads to an unconscious integration of perceived information with prior knowledge, which influences perception through specific expectations (Becker-Carus and Wendt, 2017, p. 74). Schemas have a significant impact on how individuals perceive and learn new information. When schema-inconsistent stimuli are new, interesting, or contrary to our expectations, they can actually be remembered quite well. This is because such information stands out against

the context of our existing knowledge, leading to more intense cognitive engagement and deeper processing (Schenk, 2007, pp. 290-291).

Schemata can be shaped by both individual and collective experience (Wuss, 1999, p. 39). They allow predictions to be made based on stored information within a category, which can simplify everyday life, but can also lead to generalisation (Anderson, 2013, p. 104). This generalisation can lead to the formation of stereotypes when a schema activates certain characteristics about people or groups that may not always be accurate in individual cases (Anderson, 2013, p. 104).

Importantly, schemas are not static. If a characteristic of a category contains deviations in reality, this can lead to a variation of the schema (Anderson, 2013, p. 106). As Bartlett (1932) noted, they are far from rigid or unchangeable, instead absorbing and integrating new visual, auditory, and sensory information from every situation we encounter (pp. 201–202). This flexibility allows for continuous learning and adaptation to new experiences. The reason for storing information in patterns becomes clear when the neurobiological mechanisms are explained. Individual nerve cells connect with each other through their endings, the synapses, and thus transmit information (Beck et al., 2015, p. 111). Depending on the way in which the individual nerve cells are connected to each other, the information is combined and represented by specific neural networks (Beck et al., 2015, p. 144). These neural networks are also known as activation patterns (Beck et al., 2015, p. 211). Consistent information ensures that individual nerve cells strengthen their connections during subsequent activations by enlarging their synapses (Beck et al., 2015, p. 210). As a result, activation patterns become more established and are easier to trigger next time (Beck et al., 2015, p. 211).

Another relevant model in the context of schema is Ulric Neisser's perceptual cycle model, which offers a framework for understanding how viewers explore and interpret film content (Chimir et al., 2005, p. 106). This model posits that initial experiences with similar stimuli give rise to invariant cognitive schemas, which subsequently serve as anticipatory schemas in future viewing situations, guiding viewers' expectations and interpretations. It implies that the brain is constantly forming, testing and refining schemas as we watch a film, often without us being aware of it (Chimir et al., 2005, p. 107). This cyclical process of perception and learning allows us to gradually make sense of complex visual information, forming stable perceptual patterns that inform the understanding of the film's content and structure (Wuss, 2020, p. 81).

Schemas serve as cognitive frameworks that not only organize prior knowledge but also influence how new information is processed, making them essential to the mechanisms of learning and knowledge retention, which will be explored in the next chapter.

2.5 Memory

Information is first processed in working memory, where it is actively manipulated and integrated with prior knowledge, before being encoded and stored in long-term memory for future retrieval. Memory can be broadly categorized into three main types: tertiary memory, long-term memory, and working memory (Wuss, 2020, p. 76).

Working memory serves as a temporary storage system for information that is essential for the performance of specific tasks (L. Bartsch et al., 2024, p. 2). It is characterized by its limited capacity, either in terms of the amount of information it can hold or the length of time it can hold that information (Villines, 2020; L. Bartsch et al., 2024, p. 2). The contents of working memory are the result of prior unconscious processing mechanisms that select and filter information before it enters conscious awareness through attentional processes (Oberauer, 2019, p. 1). In contrast, long-term memory allows information to be stored for longer periods of time, potentially years or even a lifetime (Pappas, 2022).

The concept of tertiary memory adds a new dimension to our understanding of memory processes. Tertiary memory is believed to store information unconsciously over exceptionally long periods (Wuss, 2020, p. 146; Matolyecz, 2016, p. 116). However, the existence is controversial because it proposes an additional memory system beyond the established frameworks of working memory, unconscious processing, and conscious long-term memory. Despite these challenges, Peter Wuss has remained committed to this idea (Wuss, 2020, p. 76). Recent advances in neurobiology have provided support for the concept of tertiary memory. Research has shown that perceptual information can induce lasting molecular changes in the brain, creating patterns that are stored unconsciously for long periods of time (*New Study Reveals Where Memory Fragments Are Stored*, 2022). These findings suggest that the brain has mechanisms for the long-term storage of information that operate below the threshold of conscious awareness (*New Study Reveals Where Memory Fragments Are Stored*, 2022).

Considering the concept of tertiary memory is important because it integrates with schema theory, which posits that we unconsciously build patterns in the unconscious. This integration

is particularly significant for the active viewer, as it enables them to build expectations and predict events without consciously being aware of it. By tapping into these unconscious patterns stored in tertiary memory, viewers can engage more deeply with narratives, anticipating plot developments and character behaviors based on familiar schemas.

2.6 Learning

Schemas are flexible, and learning is considered an important factor. With each experience or film watched, the brain is enriched with new information, which is then processed and integrated into existing knowledge. Learning is the process by which information is encoded and stored in memory. The cognitive mechanisms underlying learning processes will be analysed in this chapter.

Encoding is the initial step in memory formation, converting sensory information into a format that can be stored in the brain (Graham & Griffin, n.d.). During this process, working memory actively manipulates and processes the information (Graham & Griffin, n.d.). The basis of learning and memory formation lies in synaptic plasticity, where neurons in our brain form new connections or strengthen existing ones when we encounter new information (*Synaptic Plasticity*, n.d.).

Repetition strengthens these neural pathways (Grill-Spector et al., 2005, p. 1). Hebb's Law, often summarized as "neurons that fire together, wire together", suggests that repeated activation of the same neural pathways strengthens their connections (*How Neurons That Wire Together Fire Together*, 2021; *HEBB's Law*, n.d.). Learning is shaped by a combination of biological, psychological, and cultural influences (Myers and DeWall, 2018, p. 340). One aspect of this process is the ability to recognize patterns and connections during reflection, a phenomenon referred to as "learning through insight" (Becker-Carus and Wendt, 2017, p. 340). This type of learning relies on explicit memory, which allows us to recall information that has been consciously stored (Schermer, 2014, pp. 231–232). In contrast, implicit memory operates without conscious awareness, helping individuals draw on prior experiences to navigate new situations (Metivier, 2024). In this process, meaning-driven processing is not primarily used; instead, the processing relies mainly on sensory processing (Schermer, 2014, p. 244). In such cases, the brain processes perceptual data without relying heavily on semantic understanding (Wood, 2024).

The autocorrelation process refers to the processing of information through patterns, which represents an efficient form of coding: the entire pattern with stored information can be retrieved even when only partial information of the pattern is available (Roth & Menzel, 1996, p. 550). In technical terms, this is also referred to as "chunking": individual knowledge elements organize themselves through schemas into a complex unit of knowledge, thus occupying less conscious capacity (Wuss, 2020, p. 54). This makes it easier for individuals to solve problems without having to consciously think about every detail (Anderson, 2013, pp. 205–206). The autocorrelation processes involved in this mechanism are based on the perception and learning of probabilities (Wuss, 2020, p. 79). Through perceiving the environment during probability learning, the individual gradually approaches objective probability, which occurs through unconscious processing (Wuss, 2020, p. 80). This relies on the same mechanism as schemas: the automatically running processing procedures are stored via the interconnections of nerve cells within the cerebral cortex, where patterns become established and require less energy with each retrieval (Bouffard et al., 2022, pp. 3270–3271). This process of probability learning through environmental perception allows individuals to unconsciously align their understanding with objective probabilities (Wuss, 2020, p. 77).

2.7 Model of Information Processing by Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding

Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding's Model of Information Processing for Narrative Films provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how viewers cognitively process and interpret film content (Ohler & Niedinger, 2002, p. 12). This model, developed in the early 1990s, describes the following process:

- Sensory input: The film stimulus is initially received by the viewer's sensory organs.
- Short-term storage: The information is briefly held in modality-specific sensory short-term memory.
- Central processor: A central processing unit with limited capacity selects and processes the information (Ohler & Niedinger, 2002, p. 11).
- Situation model: The processed information is then transferred to the "situation model". The situation model is continuously updated with new information from both the film stimulus and the viewer's existing knowledge (Ohler & Niedinger, 2002, pp. 11-12).

- Long-term memory interaction: The situation model interacts with three types of knowledge stored in long-term memory: General world knowledge, Narrative knowledge and Knowledge of filmic forms of presentation. These types of knowledge are functionally related and influence how the viewer interprets and anticipates the content of the film (Ohler & Niedinger, 2002, p. 13).

This model in figure 2 emphasizes that film viewing is an interactive experience between the film and the viewer (Ohler & Niedinger, 2002, p. 12).

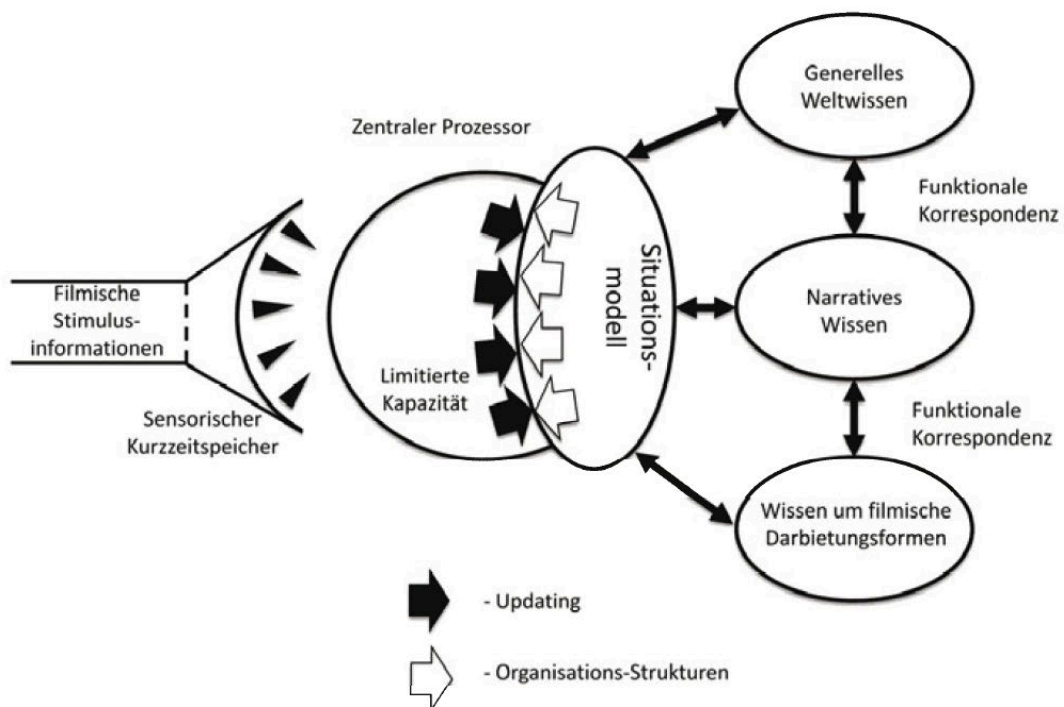


Figure 2

Model of Information Processing by Peter Ohler and Gerhild Niedinger

Note. From "Kognitive Filmpsychologie zwischen 1990 und 2000" by P. Ohler and G. Niedinger, in J. Sellmer and H. J. Wulff (Eds.), *Film und Psychologie – nach der kognitiven Phase* (p. 12), 2002, (<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14144>). Schüren.

3. PKS Model and Narration structures in Film

Over the last century, film has developed, and Aristotle's idea that narration must follow the typical three-act structure has been clearly separated from other perspectives. Other narration forms have emerged and proven successful, diverging from Aristotle's perspective and demonstrating that alternative approaches can also be effective. In this chapter, Peter Wuss' model will be explained, which posits that there are three distinct narration structures, each exerting separate cognitive and emotional impacts on the viewer. This is a descriptive model of filmic stimulus offerings that, unlike previous approaches which focused just on consciously experienced film structures, also captures those that are received below the threshold of consciousness. The PKS Model is particularly important as it examines the macrostructures⁴ of filmic stimuli, a key focus of the thesis. The foundation for these structures was established in the previous chapter, and they will be elaborated upon here.

3.1 Cognitive invariants

Georg Klaus' tripartite model of cognitive invariants provides a framework for understanding how mental constructs emerge through iterative interaction with environmental stimuli. This model identifies three stages of cognitive development: perceptual invariants, conceptual invariants, and symbolic invariants (Wuss, 2020, p. 65). Peter Wuss' model, which builds upon the ideas of James J. Gibson and Georg Klaus, is based on this concept. Gibson's theory of invariance detection posits that individuals pay attention to constant properties in their environment, store them as patterns, and perceive through invariant information (Reed, 1988, pp. 36–37).

Wuss' PKS model incorporates these different levels of invariants (Wuss, 1999, pp. 57-58):

P (Perception) corresponds to invariants of perception,

K (Concept) represents invariants of thinking and

S (Stereotype) signifies invariants of motives (Becker-Carus & Wendt, 2017, p. 8).

⁴ A film is shaped by its macrostructure - addressed through narration - and its microstructure, which is realized through the composition of images, score, editing, etc. .

3.2 The PKS Model: A Framework for Analyzing Film Narration

The cognitive process chapter demonstrates that a significant portion of information processing occurs automatically through unconscious mechanisms. Since every acquisition of new information is linked to the recipient's in schemas stored prior knowledge, film scholar Peter Wuss views the reception process while watching a film as schema-guided information processing, based on his PKS model (Wuss, 1992/2024, pp. 25–26). First introduced in 1990, his PKS model was later expanded with additional insights three decades later, reflecting its evolving application in film theory and cognitive psychology (Ohler, 1994, p. 166). Wuss was able to explore and share his theories through lectures, which helped refine and disseminate his model (Wuss, 2020, p. 611).

According to Wuss' PKS model, watching a film activates various cognitive processes, which he organizes into three levels of information processing (Wuss, 1999, p. 56). These levels are shaped by what he calls the three invariants of perception, thinking, and motives: perception-guided, concept-guided (translated from the German *konzeptgeleitet*), and stereotype-guided structures. The acronym "PKS" is derived from these terms (Wuss, 1999, p. 56). Rather than treating these structures as fixed components of a film, Wuss emphasizes that they are dynamic states influenced by the viewer's engagement and the film's context (Wuss, 2020, p. 448). Wuss underscores that not all films utilize all three structures of the PKS model (Wuss, 2020, p. 447). Their effectiveness lies in how they shape viewer expectations over time. As the narrative unfolds, these expectations become more defined, reducing initial uncertainty and enabling a more manageable cognitive experience (Wuss, 1999, p. 114).

3.2.1 Perception-guided structure

Peter Wuss developed the perception-guided structure based on the invariants of perception (Wuss, 1999, p. 57). Traditional film theory struggled to explain these processes, but cognitive psychology in the late 1960s began to describe it as a form of unconscious information processing.

For instance, perception-guided structures could involve recurring depictions of a protagonist's character traits or similar behaviors and situations - details that may not be immediately noticeable, but gradually become apparent to the audience as these patterns

repeat over time (Wuss, 1999, p. 120; Wuss, 2020, pp. 144 - 145). These structures exhibit the following characteristics: These elements are absorbed and processed by the viewer's mind below the threshold of consciousness, making the structure itself subtle and imperceptible. Consequently, the perceptual structure has the weakest semantic stability⁵ of all three structures: The recognition of meaning remains incomplete due to the absence of conscious reflection (Wuss, 1999, p. 57). This structure relies on a rapid cognitive processing strategy known as "bottom-up" processing (Wuss, 1999, p. 140), where viewers process sensory information directly without relying on prior knowledge (Wuss, 1999, p. 57). The information are stored in the working memory, becoming almost inaccessible about an hour after watching the movie (Wuss, 1999, p. 58). This is why perception-guided structures rely on repetition to establish patterns that viewers can instinctively recognize over time. Wuss describes this as an autocorrelation process rooted in probabilistic learning, which was explored in the Learning chapter. This repetition is crucial for forming what Wuss calls perceptual invariants - consistent patterns that become recognizable over time (Wuss, 2020, pp. 77 - 78). Without sufficient repetition within the same film (intratextual repetition), these subtle structural elements may go unnoticed (Wuss, 1999, p. 58).

On a broader level, when this structure is applied to a film, it is referred to as a "topic sequence" (Wuss, 1999, p. 98). In dominant topic sequences, the order of individual actions is irrelevant because they are not causally connected (Wuss, 1999, pp. 120 - 121). This concept can be illustrated through the opening sequence of Aki Kaurismäki's 1988 film "Ariel". The scene depicts the closure of a mine: an explosive charge decommissions the site, a miner discards his tool belt, withdraws his money from the bank, closes his account, and then leaves the area. These actions share the same theme - they all signify endings (Wuss, 2020, p. 75).

3.2.2 Concept-Guided Structures (*Konzeptgeleitete Strukturen*)

The concept-driven structures discussed by Peter Wuss represent the fundamental patterns of thought (Wuss, 1999, p. 59). Unlike perception-guided structures, which often require repetition for the audience to notice and interpret patterns, concept-guided structures can be effective and meaningful even as a single occurrence. These elements tend to be explicit

⁵ Semantic stability is defined as the level to which a film structure maintains a consistent meaning across different contexts or viewings. This concept is important because it helps the viewer understand how reliably certain film elements communicate certain ideas or emotions to the viewer (Wuss, 2020, p. 70).

and immediately noticeable (Wuss, 2020, p. 78). These structures are particularly noticeable because they are consciously perceived by viewers, which is why they have historically been a central focus of research in classical film studies (Wuss, 1999, pp. 58–59). This results in high semantic stability, leading the recipient to form hypotheses about the further course of the action (Wuss, 1999, pp. 100-101).

The process of viewing a film often begins with recognizing familiar patterns within the narrative. Once these patterns are identified and interpreted, viewers actively compare them to their existing knowledge and experiences (Wuss, 2020, p. 77; Wuss, 1999, p. 58). Films construct their own "possible worlds" - unique realities distinct from those of the audience (Wuss, 2020, p. 77). At their core, these structures rely on a cause-and-effect framework that connects events into what Wuss describes as a "causal chain" (Wuss, 1999, p. 98). At the center is a special event with unknown development potential (Wuss, 2020, p. 144). For the recipient, this retrospectively creates the impression of a linear causal chain resulting from successive events that resolve the problem situation (Wuss, 1999, p. 110). Peter Wuss emphasizes that in most cases, a single event is not the cause of another, but rather multiple events form a complex network (Wuss, 1999, p. 111).

For example, in Aki Kaurismäki's film "Ariel", after a mine is closed, a foreman gives his car to a miner, then kills himself and the miner drives off in the car (Wuss, 1999, p. 58). These plot points are consciously processed because their singular occurrence is so dramatic and impactful that repetition is unnecessary. They are arranged in a causal sequence, each one building upon the last. The processing strategy used here is the slower and more deliberate "top-down" (Ohler, 1994, p. 167). The strength of concept-driven structures lies in their ability to engage viewers in active processes of meaning-making and prediction (Wuss, 2020, p. 84).

Character development in films is closely tied to these causal relationships. Characters' intentions frequently clash with one another, generating the central conflict that drives the plot forward (Wuss, 1999, p. 109). Pivot points⁶ in the narrative demand significant cognitive engagement from viewers (Wuss, 2020, p. 113). These elements are designed to be immediately identifiable and meaningful to the audience, triggering associations and interpretations (Wuss, 2020, p. 84).

⁶ Pivot points are critical plot points in a narrative where the story takes a significant turn, changing direction, stakes, or focus.

3.2.3 Stereotype-Guided Structures

The stereotype-guided structures were derived from the invariants of motives.

Stereotype-guided structures are not just individual mental constructs; they are stabilized through intersubjective communication within a society. This means that the recognition and understanding of these structures depend on shared cultural codes, which are established through ongoing social interaction and reinforced by media repetition (Wuss, 2020, pp. 86 - 87). For example, in film, certain character types (like the "hard-boiled detective" or "damsel in distress"), plot situations, or visual motifs⁷ (such as the showdown in a Western) become stereotyped because they recur across many works (Wuss, 2020, p. 136). Archetypes from the collective unconscious may also come into play during this process (Wuss, 2020, p. 341). These archetypes and schemas are shaped by cultural learning over time through processes such as autocorrelation and probabilistic learning (Wuss, 1999, p. 60). For viewers to fully engage with these elements, they need prior exposure to multiple films within the same cultural context (Wuss, 1999, p. 60). Genre films provide a clear example of how stereotype-guided structures function on a larger scale. Films within a particular genre share similar narrative styles and aesthetic conventions that evoke specific expectations in viewers (Mikos, 2021, p. 419). These genre films rely on familiar topic sequences and causal chains (Wuss, 2020, p. 141). The development of these structures is influenced by broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. They are shaped by the media environment, which is driving the formation and stabilization of such patterns (Wuss, 2020, p. 89).

The characteristics of stereotype-guided structures can be summarized as follows: Wuss uses the term "stereotype" generally for schemas, also considering typical conflicts and actions in films (Ohler, 1994, p. 168). Stereotype-guided structures vary in their visibility within a film. While some are consciously noticeable, others often go unnoticed due to habituation - viewers perceive them unconsciously because they are so familiar (Wuss, 1999, p. 60). According to Wuss (1999), the level of semantic stability varies (p. 60). Information processed by viewers is stored in long-term memory and can sometimes be transferred to the tertiary memory, where it becomes deeply ingrained and nearly impossible to forget (Wuss, 2020, p. 137). Understanding these stereotypes requires prior knowledge that viewers draw upon and connect with (Wuss, 1999, p. 60). For instance, in the film sequence from Aki Kaurismäki's film "Ariel" where the foreman commits suicide at a gas

⁷ Visual motifs are recurring visual elements - such as images, objects, colors, or symbols - that appear multiple times, both within a single work and across different works, to reinforce its themes.

station: Without showing the act itself, the recipient understands the situation because a revolver is cocked and a shot is heard after the person disappears into the restroom (Wuss, 1999, p. 60).

This type of storytelling relies heavily on stereotypes, which are often condensed into simplified chunks of information that help audiences process narrative elements efficiently (Wuss, 2020, p. 145). Wuss points out that films should present the viewer with something new that does not match the expectations of an existing schema (Schick, 2018, pp. 117–118). His understanding underscores the importance of schema-inconsistent stimuli - they stand out against the backdrop of our existing knowledge, triggering heightened cognitive engagement and deeper processing, as discussed in the chapter on schema.

3.2.4 Critical Examination

The PKS Model represents an attempt to systematize film reception. Wuss' work underscores the necessity of hybrid approaches that reflect both hermeneutic⁸ tradition and scientific inquiry. As film studies evolve, models like PKS must navigate the tension between universal frameworks and the irreducible individuality of audience experience.

Critiques of Structural Ambiguity

Corinna Meyer's 1996 analysis highlighted inherent ambiguities in the PKS Model's categorization system. She argued that the model's reliance on viewer subjectivity complicates consistent classification of film sequences. For example, concept-guided structures - intended to reflect deliberate, conscious processing - often overlap with perception-guided or stereotype-guided structures when viewers consciously recognize recurring patterns (Beck et al., 2018, p. 115). Wuss concedes this multifunctionality, noting that structures can shift depending on contextual factors like repetition or viewer prior knowledge (Wuss, 2020, p. 448). However, Meyer contends that such fluidity undermines the model's goal of providing a clear analytical framework, as it introduces interpretative variability among researchers (Beck et al., 2018, pp. 116 - 117).

Empirical Limitations and Cognitive Complexity

⁸ Hermeneutics is the study and art of interpretation, originally rooted in analyzing texts, particularly religious or legal ones, but later expanded to encompass broader cultural and artistic expressions, including films. It seeks to uncover meaning by interpreting symbols, narratives, and metaphors within a given context.

Monika Suckfüll's empirical work further exposed gaps in the PKS Model's applicability. In a 1998 study measuring heart-rate variability among 62 participants during film viewing, she demonstrated that cognitive processes are too dynamic and individualized to be fully captured by the model's tripartite structure (Morsch, 1998, pp. 351 - 352). While the PKS Model categorizes responses into distinct cognitive tiers, Suckfüll's data revealed that emotional and cognitive reactions often intertwine unpredictably, resisting neat classification. Wuss acknowledges these limitations, admitting that empirical methods struggle to account for the "neurobiological plasticity" of memory and perception (Wuss, 2020, p. 448). He argues that statistical approaches risk oversimplifying the interplay between conscious and unconscious processing, which his model seeks to bridge but cannot fully resolve (Wuss, 2020, p. 28).

The Hermeneutic Dilemma

A central tension in the PKS Model lies in its attempt to reconcile hermeneutic interpretation with objective analysis. Hermeneutics, which prioritizes subjective meaning-making through an analyst's cultural and intellectual lens, remains indispensable for decoding symbolic or thematic layers in films (Jordan, 2020, p. 13). Wuss critiques purely hermeneutic approaches for their lack of reproducibility but admits that his model cannot entirely eliminate subjectivity (Wuss, 2020, pp. 26 - 28). For instance, categorizing a film scene as "stereotype-guided" requires analysts to infer cultural schemata, a process inherently shaped by their own biases and knowledge. This paradox underscores a broader challenge in film studies: balancing interpretive depth with methodological accuracy.

4. Emotional response of the active viewer

Emotions are a crucial factor in the formation of subjective reality and in capturing the viewer's engagement with a film. This chapter will delve into one of the thesis' key components: emotions. It will be examined how they influence the viewer's personalized interpretation of a film and enable a profound emotional connection to the film.

4.1 Complexity of Defining Emotion

The complexity of defining emotions underscores the wide range of perspectives within emotion research. In 1981, R. Paul and Anne M. Kleinginna identified more than 90 different interpretations of the term (Uhrig, 2014, p.27). Before proceeding with the next steps, three definitions of emotions from leading experts are highlighted.

Keith Oatley describes emotions as fundamental mediators between the inner and outer worlds, relating personal meaning to external events. This mediation by emotions gives urgency to certain aspects of the lives of the viewer, prioritises goals, and makes some people uniquely important (Wuss, 2020, p. 202).

Robert W. Levenson describes emotions as efficient ways of adapting to changing environmental demands. According to his work, emotions are short-lived psychological-physiological phenomena that serve critical functions such as shifting attention, altering behavior, activating memory networks, and organizing physiological responses for optimal reaction (Levenson, 1999).

Nico Frijda defines emotions as changes in readiness to act, often triggered by emergencies or interruptions (Wuss, 2020, p. 203). His concept of action readiness highlights how emotions prepare the organism to respond to significant events by urging action or imposing action suspension (Scherer, 2009, p. 3459).

Based on these definitions, a definition has been created that encapsulates the main aspects of the three perspectives. This definition integrates the key elements of Keith Oatley's, Robert W. Levenson's, and Nico Frijda's concepts to provide a comprehensive understanding of emotions:

Emotions are fundamental mediators between internal experiences and external events, serving as adaptive psychological-physiological responses that prioritize goals, assign

urgency to specific situations, and prepare individuals for action. They facilitate effective responses to significant or unexpected events by altering attention, behavior, memory activation, and physiological states.

4.2 Conflict-discrepancy approach

Daniel Berlyne noted in his book "Conflict, Arousal and Curiosity" in 1960 that throughout the history of psychology, conflict has often been seen as the main source of emotion (Barnes, 2012). Underlying this theory is the concept of cognitive schema formation (Wuss, 2020, p. 204). The consciousness continually constructs and refines patterns of expectation based on the experiences and knowledge. In the context of film viewing, these schemas create a set of expectations about narrative flow, character behaviour and visual aesthetics (Barnes, 2012). However, the power of film often lies in its ability to disrupt or challenge these expectations, creating what Berlyne called collative variables - elements of conflict, incongruity, novelty or surprise that provoke emotional responses (Barnes, 2012; Wuss, 2020, p. 204). Understanding the role of conflict is crucial for both filmmakers and audiences. Conflict serves as the driving force behind narratives, pushing characters and viewers alike through a journey of problem-solving and emotional engagement (StudioBinder, 2024).

In this area George Mandler developed the discrepancy-evaluation theory. He posits that emotional arousal arises from discrepancies between the expectations from the viewer and the stimuli they encounter (Allen & Carifio, 1995). This might manifest itself as an unexpected plot twist or character's surprising decision. The emotional response to these discrepancies, according to Mandler, results from the interplay of two key components: visceral arousal and cognitive appraisal (Wuss, 2020, p. 204). When watching films, viewers often experience visceral arousal, which is a physiological response to unexpected events. This can manifest as a fast heartbeat, a sharp intake of breath, or other bodily reactions (Vianna et al., 2006, p. 37). These immediate physiological responses are part of the body's automatic reaction to stimuli (Scherer, 2009, p. 3459). Cognitive appraisal is the interpretation of these physiological responses in the context of the film's narrative and the viewer's personal experiences. It involves evaluating the significance and meaning of stimuli, which can influence how emotions are experienced and interpreted (Israel, 2020, p. 3). This process helps viewers make sense of their emotional responses by attributing meaning to the physiological sensations they experience during the film (Kuchinke et al., 2013, p. 4).

This process of arousal and appraisal creates what Mandler describes as a phenomenal experience of emotion (Wuss, 2020, p. 204).

Frijda's work adds another layer to this understanding, indicating that even subtle deviations from our expectation schemas can generate emotional arousal (Ridderinkhof, 2017).

4.3 Problem-solving behaviour of the viewer

A film's conflict structure can be viewed from the perspective of cognitive psychology, particularly in relation to problem-solving behaviour. In psychological terms, problem solving becomes necessary when three conditions are met: (1) an unsatisfactory initial situation, (2) a desired goal state, and (3) barriers that hinder the transition between these states (Wuss, 2020, p. 186). This framework is closely related to the dramatic structure of films, where protagonists often face obstacles in their quest to achieve certain goals (StudioBinder, 2024). The resolution process in films mirrors real-world problem solving, involving the processing of information and the formulation of strategies to overcome obstacles (Wuss, 2020, p. 187).

Conflict is the starting point for the viewer's problem-solving behavior. It is the distinction between active and passive control (Wuss, 2020, p. 188). When viewers empathise with film characters, they engage in a sophisticated imaginative problem-solving process (Wuss, 2020, pp. 213-214; Willemsen, 2018, p. 34). This involves two simultaneous modes of engagement:

- Active control: Viewers imaginatively adopt the character's position and search alongside the character for solutions to the character's conflicts. This process allows the audience to become emotionally invested in the character's journey and decision-making (Wuss, 2020, p. 214).
- Passive control: Simultaneously, the audience attempts to anticipate and understand the unfolding events (Wuss, 2020, p. 214). While characters in a film actively engage with their conflicts and attempt to resolve them through direct action, the audience experiences these conflicts through passive control (Wuss, 2020, p. 188). This passive control satisfies what psychologists call the "primary need for control" in humans (Leotti et al., 2010, p. 1). By engaging with filmic conflict, viewers can exercise their problem-solving skills in a safe, imaginative space (Wuss, 2020, p.

188). Viewers attempt to gain "passive control" over the narrative by anticipating (Wuss, 2020, p. 207).

If the plot of a film is seen by the viewer as a problem-solving process leading to a particular decision, each step can be seen as a continuous negotiation (Wuss, 2020, p. 207). Each plot point serves as a narrative juncture, either initiating a new trajectory by opening a door to further possibilities, or closing a storyline by closing a door, thereby limiting or resolving existing narrative threads. Within this process, certain sub-goals or intermediate goals are achieved, marking crucial points where preliminary decisions about the outcome of the plot are made (Willemsen, 2018, p. 34). These moments, known as plot points or pivot points in the narrative, not only intensify the action on screen, but also increase the psychological involvement of the viewer (Wuss, 2020, pp. 207-208).

As plot decisions approach, the viewer's affective arousal increases even more (Winkler et al., n.d., pp. 10-11). The viewer becomes more cognitively and emotionally involved in the events, driven by a desire to resolve uncertainty about the course of the plot (Winkler et al., n.d., pp. 6-7). The study "Physiological responses induced by emotion-eliciting films" by Cristina Fernández and other researchers showed that films elicited measurable physiological responses, such as increased skin conductance and heart rate, particularly for emotions like anger and fear (Fernández et al., 2012, p. 73). Immediate physiological responses during climaxes were linked to anticipatory attention, as viewers sought to predict outcomes.

Pavel Simonov's idea frames emotion as a mechanism for compensating for information deficits (*Information Theory of P. Simonov. Simonov, P*, n.d.). He suggests that emotional responses serve to fill gaps in the understanding of a film's narrative or thematic content. These emotional shifts create "cognitive gaps" - moments of uncertainty or unresolved tension that lead viewers to engage more deeply in an effort to resolve them. When narratives introduce uncertainty or unresolved conflicts, viewers become more invested in resolving these gaps (M. Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 6). When a film presents ambiguous or complex information, the emotional responses act as a form of intuitive interpretation, helping to navigate the narrative landscape. If, despite the input of information, a deficit of pragmatic information remains, a negative emotion arises, according to Simonov (Wuss, 2020, p. 205).

4.4 Film as a Mediator of Emotions

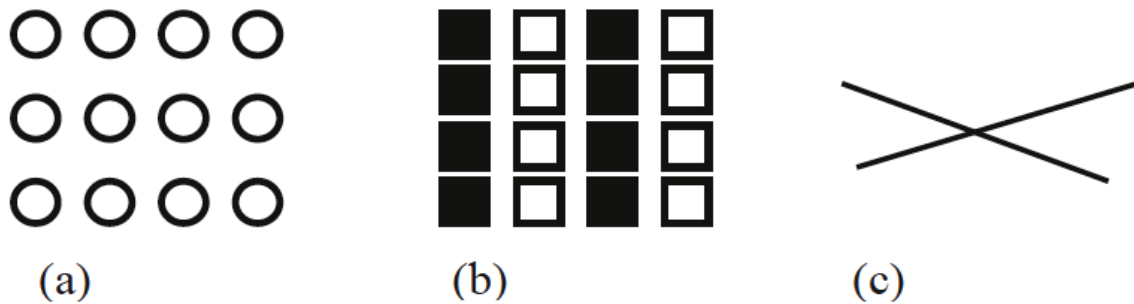
Films are powerful tools for eliciting emotions. To understand how this works, following a model of emotion management will be explored. It was developed by Jens Eder, who builds upon the work of Per Persson. Eder's model identifies four levels of emotion transmission in film: perceptual affects, diegetic emotions, thematic emotions, and communicative emotions. All of these levels interact and influence each other to create emotions.

4.4.1 Perceptual Affects

At the most basic level, emotions are generated through the perception of images and sounds (Uhrig, 2014, p. 48). Greg M. Smith emphasizes the importance of mood at this level. Mood, unlike a fleeting reaction, is a longer-term process that shapes our expectations and filters stimuli (Smith, 1999, p. 111). Films create mood through the use of consistent emotion cues that the viewer perceives. These cues, which are the smallest unit for analyzing emotional content, are constantly reinforced to maintain the mood (Smith, 1999, pp. 111–112). "Mood technique" refers to the organizational process of strategically assigning moods to film scenes, often using a score, even when these scenes are thematically independent (Uhrig, 2014, pp. 48–49). Jeff Smith notes that music can depict the emotions of a film character, reflect an overall atmosphere, or - most relevant to this study - elicit an emotional response in the viewer (Uhrig, 2014, p. 49). Film music has unconscious neurological effects on viewers, activating various regions of the brain and influencing emotional responses (*Music for Film & the Psychology Behind the Notes*, 2023).

This process is largely facilitated by System 1, which automatically processes vast amounts of information below the threshold of conscious awareness, rapidly generating emotional responses and intuitive judgments without requiring deliberate thought. Persson (2003) highlights: "These effects are not meanings in the normal sense of the word. They do not represent or refer. Still, they produce coherent experiences in the spectator." (p. 27) This concept is exemplified by graphic perceptual effects, as illustrated in figure 3:⁹

⁹ In the first example, a), the arrangement of circles influences perception due to the distance between them, rows of circles are perceived rather than columns. In example b), the apparent association between black rectangles and white rectangles leads to the perception of columns instead of rows. Last, in example c), two intersecting lines are perceived rather than two angles.

**Figure 3***Perceptual affects*

Note. From *Understanding cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (p. 27), by P. Persson, 2003, Cambridge University Press.

Perceptual Affects are immediate responses to sensory stimuli that evoke emotions without involving narrative content.

4.4.2 Diegetic emotions

Diegetic emotions refer to the emotions that are generated through the narrative content of a film, such as the plot and characters. Research in film studies has historically focused primarily on how these diegetic elements¹⁰ contribute to the emotional experience of the viewer (Uhrig, 2014, pp. 55-56).

The Greek philosopher Aristotle identified two fundamental conditions for a plot to have an emotional effect: the plot must follow a dramaturgical structure, and it must be supported by an acting figure (Landa, 2005). According to Aristotle, only when these two conditions are met emotions can be aroused in the viewer (Uhrig, 2014, p. 56). The significance of the figure as an emotion mediator has always been a central focus in film studies (Uhrig, 2014, p. 56).

Diegetic emotions arise from the narrative itself or from the experiences of characters within the fictional world. These emotions are tied to the events of the story, the development of the characters, and the imagined reality of the fictional world.

¹⁰ Diegetic elements are parts of a story that exist within its fictional world, such as characters' dialogue or objects they use, as opposed to non-diegetic elements like background music or narration that come from outside the story.

Sympathy

Murray Smith has studied the character as an emotional mediator, focusing particularly on the aspect of sympathy (Uhrig, 2014, p. 57).

Sympathy, in the context of film, involves a conscious understanding and evaluation of a character's situation. It's a cognitive process in which the viewer recognizes characters as distinct individuals with specific motivations, goals, and histories within the narrative (DeGuzman, 2024). The audience follows their journey, observing their actions and the consequences they face. This aligns with Murray Smith's "structure of sympathy", which proposes three levels of engagement, see figure 4 (Välisalo, 2018, p. 13):

Recognition (identifying a character as a distinct entity): The foundational level, where the viewer acknowledges the character's role and purpose within the story (Välisalo, 2018, p. 13). The viewer understands who the characters are and how they relate to the plot.

Alignment (accessing a character's thoughts/actions): The viewer tries to understand the character's perspective, seeing the world through their eyes. This can include spatial alignment (following their physical journey) and subjective alignment (accessing the character's thoughts and feelings) (King, 2018).

Allegiance (moral evaluation): This represents the audience's moral judgment of the character. The viewer evaluates the character's values, choices, and actions, and decides whether they support the character's goals, regardless of the character's flaws (Välisalo, 2018, p. 13).

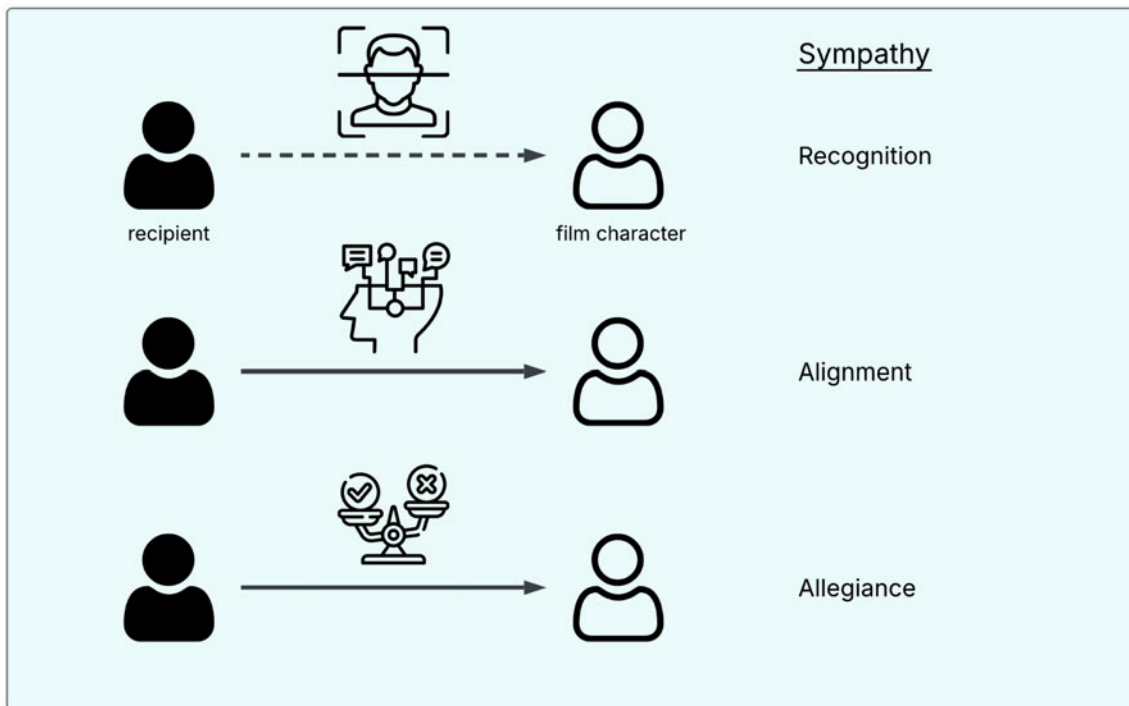


Figure 4

Murray Smith's "structure of sympathy"

Note. Own illustration.

Sympathy involves a cognitive and moral evaluation of a character. During these stages, viewers grasp the character's circumstances, assess their actions, and determine whether they support their goals.

Empathy

According to Carl Plantinga, the concept of sympathy cannot be clearly separated from empathy (Uhrig, 2014, p. 57). Both are understood as "the capacity or disposition to respond with concern to another's situation, and often an accompanying tendency to have congruent emotions." (Plantinga, 2009, p. 98). Sympathy means feeling for a character, while empathy means feeling with them, reflecting a deeper level of emotional resonance (DeGuzman, 2024). Empathy involves experiencing emotions that are congruent with those of another - what Plantinga refers to as "affective congruence" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 101) - sympathy does not require the emotions to be identical or "wholly shared" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 247).

According to Jens Eder, empathy arises when emotional identification is achieved (Eder, 2010, p. 34). Empathy is the ability to understand and share another person's feelings (Perry, 2022). It involves putting yourself in someone else's position and understanding their perspective from their point of view, as shown in Figure 5 (DeGuzman, 2024).

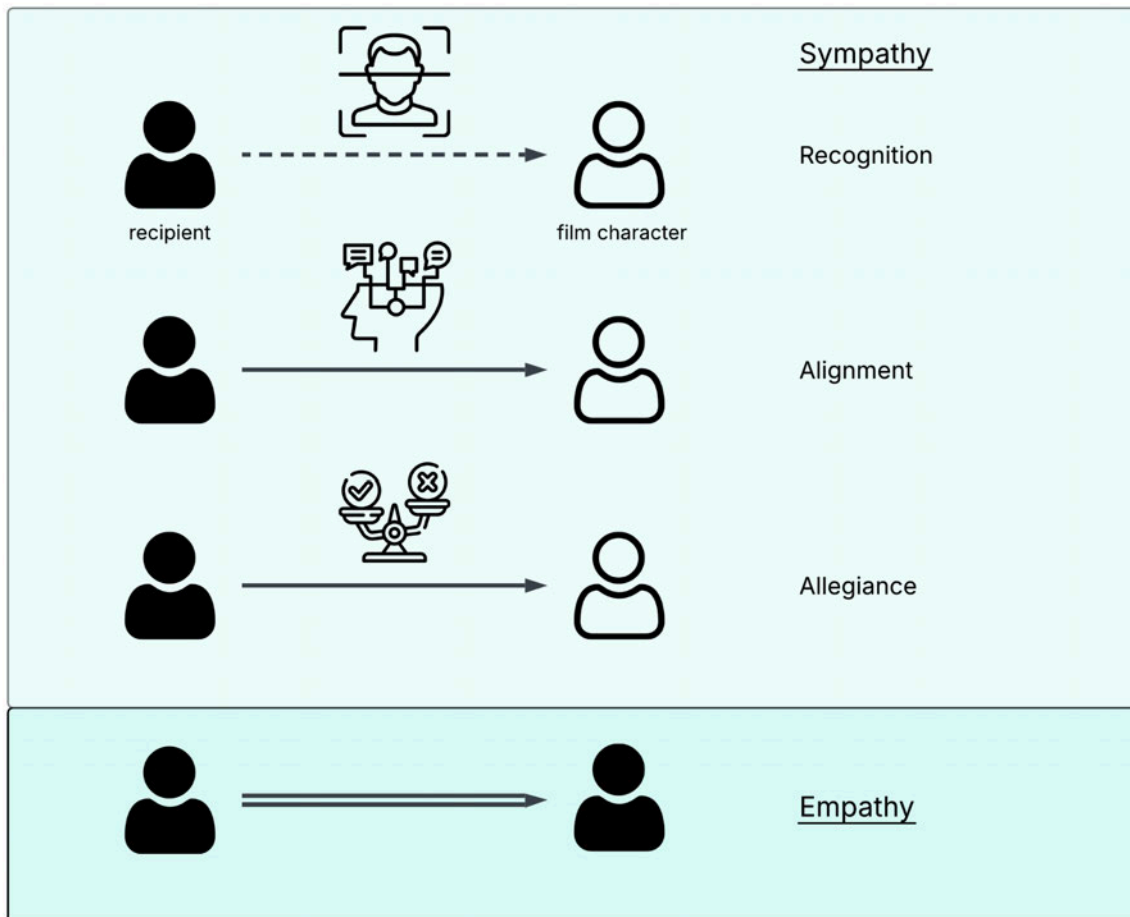


Figure 5

Empathy in connection to Murray Smith's "structure of sympathy"

Note. Own illustration.

In scientific research, there is agreement that emotional contagion and the ability to empathize with others represent a fundamental human need (Hess & Blair, 2000, p. 130). Facial mimicry in particular plays a central role in this process, allowing viewers to unconsciously imitate the emotional expressions of characters on screen, which in turn elicits similar emotional states in themselves (Uhrig, 2014, p. 58).

From an evolutionary perspective, this capacity for empathy has been crucial to human survival. It sharpened the foresight, improved the ability to plan, and promoted social cohesion - all essential for group living (Mahalingam, 2024). This evolutionary advantage also explains why viewers can feel empathy even for morally ambiguous or negative characters in films (Dorothy, 2021). The ability to understand and even vicariously experience the motivations and emotions of complex characters, regardless of their moral standing, broadens the understanding of the human condition and strengthens our social bonds (Dorothy, 2021).

A central factor in triggering empathy is the portrayal of the face. Plantinga emphasizes the importance of facial expressions in evoking empathy (Plantinga, 2009, p. 114). Drawing on Béla Balázs' analysis of close-ups in film, he notes that in a "scene of empathy", the narrative is often slowed down to bring the character's inner emotional experience into focus (Uhrig, 2014, p. 58). The unconscious mirroring of a character's facial expressions and body language activates similar emotional pathways in the viewer's brain, deepening the sense of shared experience. This phenomenon is known as mimicry (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021, p. 3).

The biological basis for 'emotional contagion'¹¹ lies in the function of mirror neurons (Keene, 2017). Discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti in the 1990s, these specialized brain cells activate both when an individual performs an action and when they observe someone else performing the same action (Häusser, 2012). Mirror neurons are integral to empathy because they allow individuals to simulate the experiences of others in their own brains (Pfeifer et al., 2007, p. 1). By mirroring the emotions and actions of others, these neurons enhance social cognition, strengthen interpersonal bonds, and facilitate understanding of others' intentions and feelings (Pfeifer et al., 2007, p. 3).

Dramaturgy

The second prerequisite for Aristotle is that the emotional impact of a film is rooted in its dramaturgy. Dramaturgy is understood as the structure or construction of the narrative (Krützen, 2006). It is considered one of the most important means of emotion control and is capable of directing feelings, answering or leaving questions open, confirming or falsifying hypotheses, and stimulating desires, hopes, or fears (*Film and Dramaturgy*, n.d.).

¹¹ Emotional contagion is a phenomenon where people unconsciously "catch" and reflect the emotions of those around them, often leading to a shared emotional experience.

According to Plantinga, dramaturgy and figure are two elements that arouse "concern" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 102). By connecting with a character and providing plot twists that create curiosity about a goal that character is pursuing, an emotional effect of concern is created (Eder, 2007, p. 247). Filmmaker Andrew Stanton is renowned for his storytelling approach, which involves elaborating on the plot through several key techniques. These techniques will be explored in the next subchapter, providing insights into how Stanton crafts narratives that engage audiences on multiple levels.

Andrew Stanton

Andrew Stanton, the filmmaker behind Pixar classics like "Finding Nemo" and "WALL-E," emphasizes the critical role of stakes in storytelling. For Stanton, stakes are the lifeblood of a compelling narrative, driving the plot forward and keeping audiences engaged (Stanton, 2012). At its core, the concept of "stakes" refers to what's at risk in a story. These can be physical, emotional, or even existential. It corresponds to Plantinga's term of 'concern'. Stanton argues that high stakes are essential for engaging viewers and making them care about the characters' journey (Stanton, 2012, 00:02:17). When there's something significant on the line, audiences become emotionally invested in the outcome. To effectively incorporate stakes, Stanton suggests several techniques. First, he advises storytellers to make a promise to the audience that the story is worth their time. This often takes the form of an intriguing opening scene or premise that hooks viewers from the start (Stanton, 2012, 00:02:27).

Another important storytelling principle introduced by Andrew Stanton is the "2+2" theory, which emphasizes giving the audience just enough information to actively engage them in piecing together the story for themselves (Stanton, 2012, 00:07:25). Rather than explicitly providing all the details ("giving them four"), storytellers present partial information ("two plus two"), inviting viewers to draw their own conclusions and remain curious and invested in the narrative (Walters, 2012, Miyamoto, 2024). Stanton argues that audiences naturally enjoy actively participating in storytelling - even when they are unaware that they are doing so - because it increases their emotional and cognitive engagement (Walters, 2012). This approach to storytelling is consistent with psychological findings that active participation and curiosity significantly increase audience engagement and emotional investment (*Serialized Storytelling Techniques for Increased Audience Engagement*, 2024). By inviting viewers to become co-creators of meaning, the "2+2" method fosters deeper reflection and emotional resonance (Miyamoto, 2024).

4.4.3 Thematic emotions

Thematic emotions arise when viewers uncover overarching meanings within a film (Uhrig, 2014, p. 62). This form bridges understanding and interpretation. It requires grasping complex situations or entering into the mental states of characters, allowing viewers to extract the central message of the film (Chase, 2024). The importance of symbolic and metaphorical content in film is revealed at this level of emotional involvement (Matloob, 2024a). In this context, the viewer's background knowledge and cultural or universal presuppositions are significant (Vokhrysheva, 2018, p. 159; Loane & Jyldyz, 2023, p. 12). According to the psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung, certain universal archetypes - such as the image of water or trees - instinctively evoke specific associations in the collective unconscious (Mathieson, 2024).

4.4.4 Communicative emotions: Reflecting on the film experience

Jens Eder structured perceptual affects, diegetic emotions, thematic emotions, and communicative emotions into a comprehensive model. In this framework, he identifies four levels of emotional transmission in film. The fourth and most complex level are communicative emotions, which reflect the film's overarching communicative intent. These arise from reflective evaluations of the film as an artefact, evaluations of actors and filmmakers, and meta-emotions (Uhrig, 2014, p. 62).

Bartsch explored the concept of meta-emotions in film viewing, showing that viewers' awareness and evaluation of their own emotional responses can significantly influence their overall film experience and appreciation (Bartsch et al., 2010). Another research by Bartsch and Hartmann underscores a significant connection between communicative emotions and 'eudaimonic satisfaction'¹² in media experiences (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017, p. 30). Their findings indicate that viewers who engage with films on a reflective level experience increased appreciation and allow a deeper emotional engagement (Reinecke & Kreling, 2022; Landmann, 2021). They explored the role of reflective thinking and social sharing in enhancing the emotional impact of films (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017, p. 30). Their research found that films that provoked discussion and reflection after viewing were often rated as more meaningful and impactful (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017, p. 45).

¹² Eudaimonic satisfaction refers to a deep sense of fulfillment gained from engaging with meaningful and thought-provoking content, often involving cognitive and affective challenges that enhance personal growth and reflection (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017, p. 29).

4.5 “Safe Space” in film

The interplay between fulfilling and withholding the audience's desire opens up many possibilities for filmic staging (Stiglegger, 2023, p. 9). The fascination lies in the breaking of the forbidden, in the desire to cross the taboo, in order to reach the forbidden 'other side'. In film, the depiction of taboo-breaking can serve as a crucial dramatic element, forcing viewers to confront social and cultural boundaries (Stiglegger, 2023, p. 10).

The concept of taboo-breaking as a desire fulfilled in film is closely related to the idea of transgressive cinema. According to Georges Bataille, transgression is the deliberate act of breaking a taboo, often associated with sexuality and death (Stiglegger, 2023, p. 5; Stiglegger, n.d.). This desire for transgression is driven by the existence of taboos themselves, creating a complex interdependence between the taboo and the act of transgressing it (Stiglegger, n.d.).

Murray Smith addresses the emotional engagement with morally questionable characters through the concept of “perverse allegiance” (Langkjær, 2002). This explores how audiences can form emotional bonds with characters who exhibit transgressive behavior, such as antiheroes or villains (Dorothy, 2021). A key factor contributing to this fascination is the concept of moral distance, Roland Barthes' idea of "amorous distance" parallels this notion (Yonts, 2024, p. 3). This refers to the psychological separation between the audience and the real-world consequences of the characters' actions (Yonts, 2024, p. 40). Narrative framing plays a crucial role in shaping audience sympathy, even when a character's behavior is unethical (Aertsen, 2017, p. 124).

Film provides a unique space where these taboos can be explored without real-life consequences. Cinema has historically been used to challenge social norms and taboos, providing a platform to explore forbidden or controversial topics in a controlled environment (*Breaking Taboos Created by Cinema | the Monthly Film Festival*, 2024).

5. Subjective reality

5.1 Inner and Outer World

Perception plays a significant role in shaping the cinematic experience. A film doesn't simply imprint itself on a blank slate; rather, it interacts with existing "inner images" (Emrich & Wildt, 2008, p. 157), past experiences, and individual learning histories. These pre-existing mental frameworks are essential for decoding and understanding the film's narrative and emotional content (Emrich & Wildt, 2008, p. 157).

Inner images arise from prior internal creativity in the form of reality hypotheses, internal constructions, and imaginative performances (Emrich & Wildt, 2008, p. 157). Imagination is essential in constructing a cognitive representation of the film image, using internal creativity to fill in gaps and interpret visual and stylistic details (Constantinescu, 2024). Immanuel Kant famously pointed out in the first edition of his Critique of Pure Reason in 1781 that "imagination is a necessary part of perception itself," a statement echoed by modern neuroscience (Matherne, 2015). Fictional reality allows viewers to compare the fictional events to their own lives, potentially influencing their understanding and behaviour in the real world (Tamir et al., 2015, p. 215). The brain actively constructs reality, constantly generating hypotheses and testing them against sensory input (Saplaoglu, 2025).

Kristina Schulte-Eversum adds that media realities are always interpretations of reality, where deliberate stimuli evoke an individual perception of "reality" in the audience (Schulte-Eversum, 2007, pp. 25–26). Anthropologist and filmmaker Edgar Morin highlights:

"The cinema may be reality, but it is also something else, a generator of emotions and dreams. [...] If its unreality is an illusion, it is clear that this illusion is, all the same, its reality." (Morin, 2005, p. 10)

Morin points out that the "unreality" of cinema refers to its ability to create illusions - stories, characters, and worlds that are not literally true but feel real to the viewer. He suggests that even though these illusions are not factual, they constitute a reality of their own within the context of the filmic experience. This reality is not about factual accuracy but about the emotional and imaginative impact cinema has on audiences.

From a communication science perspective, researchers such as Hans Kepplinger and Christiane Tullius have explored the connection between audiovisual media content and

fundamental aspects of everyday life (Kepplinger & Tullius, 1995). In their study "Television Entertainment as a Bridge to Reality", they examined the influence of socialization, education and gender on the reception of entertainment series, focusing on two German TV series: "Lindenstraße" (Geißendörfer, 1985–2020)¹³ and "Der Alte" (Ringelmann, 1977–2011)¹⁴. The research revealed a correlation between viewers' enjoyment and their perception of the content's relevance to reality (Kepplinger & Tullius, 1995). Viewers generally tend to relate the content they consume to their own life experiences. The more a viewer enjoys a particular content, the more likely they are to relate it to their personal reality. In turn, the more a viewer can relate a movie or show to their own life experiences, the more likely they are to enjoy it (Uhrig, 2014, p. 84).

A study by Bilandzic and Busselle found that narrative experiences, such as transportation and identification, significantly influence film enjoyment, suggesting that viewers engage more deeply with content that resonates with their life experiences (Bilandzic & Buselle, 2019). This relationship highlights the active engagement of viewers with media content, particularly on an emotional level.

This interaction of the active engagement can be described as an emotional interplay between the film and the viewer, in which the viewer enters into a kind of intersubjective contact and establishes a specific mental connection (Stern, 2007, p. 88). According to psychoanalyst Stern, this need to "look for experiences in others that resonate in ourselves" (Stern, 2007, p. 89, translated into English by Edgar Isenmann) is a fundamental human need (Stern, 2007, p. 89). Film can be seen as a "reflection of the life of the soul" (Blothner, 2003, p. 7, translated into English by Edgar Isenmann) as Blothner suggests, where the fundamental issues addressed in cinema correspond to those of the viewer. But: A film can only engage the audience emotionally if it truly deals with the complexities that affect the viewer (Blothner, 2003, p. 7).

Jean-Louis Baudry developed the concept of cinema as an apparatus that functions similarly to a mirror (Stiglegger, 2023, p. 13). Morin expanded on this concept, describing cinema as a "mirror-machine" (Wade, 2014, p. 204) that reflects both practical and imaginary realities, as well as the needs, communications, and problems of human individuality in its century (Wade, 2014).

¹³ Lindenstraße (Geißendörfer, 1985–2020) is a long-running German television drama series that explores real-life issues and daily life in a fictional Munich neighborhood.

¹⁴ Der Alte (Ringelmann, 1977–2011) is a crime drama series that follows the investigations of a seasoned detective and his team in Munich.

Roland Zag emphasizes that the relationship between film and viewer is based on the "human factor" (Zag, 2010, p. 16). This allows the viewer to "tune in" (Zag, 2010, p. 17) to the situation of the protagonists, creating an emotional resonance (Zag, 2010, p. 17). This concept is closely related to the reader-response theory developed by Wolfgang Iser, who argues that film contain gaps or blanks that the reader must fill in order to generate meaning. The meanings are formed in the process of understanding, as a product of an interaction between text and reader (Iser, 1994, p. 229).

Meaning can come from a variety of sources. Peter Ohler highlights that the viewer's decoding depends on different kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the world, narrative structure and filmic techniques (Wuss, 2020, p. 85). A viewer can recognise objects, characters and processes from their own knowledge of the real world, which enables them to identify what they see on the screen and assign certain meanings to it. It is through these processes and mechanisms that viewers not only interpret the film, but also engage with their own perspectives and experiences (Wuss, 2020, p. 85).

In cultural studies, John Fiske has been influential in exploring audience activity in relation to popular media content within the framework of the Active Audience concept. Fiske notes that the underdetermination and simultaneous polysemy of the text result in an activation that enables the audience's role in creating meaning from media content, allowing for multiple interpretations and uses of popular culture (Becker et al., 2009). The process is subjective and individualized, as the reader produces meanings that emerge from the intersection of their social history (Fiske, 1987, p. 82).

From this research, a definition for subjective reality can be developed:

Subjective reality in film is perceived by the viewer as an evolving reality that is shaped by the viewer's background knowledge, personal experiences, and inner values, as well as selective aspects of the film that serve as triggers. These triggers activate the viewer's internal frameworks, leading to a unique interpretation of the film that is influenced by their individual perspective.

5.2 Inquisitiveness: crafting subjective reality

Suspense is one of the factors that keeps us hooked on movies. It transcends genre, finding its way through thrillers and romances alike, proving to be as multi-dimensional as it is powerful. The concept of suspense brings together many of the insights from the preceding chapters, which will be further explored in this chapter. Suspense will be analyzed from the viewpoint of its impact on the viewer's imagination, and how this, in turn, affects the formation of their subjective reality (Wuss, 2020, p .265).

At its core, suspense is a delicate balance between knowledge and uncertainty. It's the art of giving viewers just enough information to spark their imagination, while withholding crucial details that keep them guessing (Delatorre et al., 2018, Chapter 2.1). This cognitive balancing act engages the audience on multiple levels - intellectually, emotionally and even physically. The heart races, the palms sweat and the mind works constantly trying to anticipate what will happen next (Bente et al., 2022, para. 1; Schmälzle & Grall, 2020). To understand suspense, we must examine its psychological foundations:

- Cognitive Anticipation: Suspense engages our minds in a process of constant prediction and expectation. As viewers, we're constantly processing information and trying to anticipate what's going to happen next. This mental engagement is critical to the experience of suspense (Chun et al., 2020, p. 4).
- Emotional investment: Suspense is most effective when we care about the characters and their fate. This emotional connection heightens the suspense and makes the potential consequences feel more significant (Bork, 2018).
- Uncertainty: Uncertainty is the fuel that drives suspense. When we're unsure of the outcome, our minds race to consider different possibilities, creating a state of heightened alertness and engagement (Bentz et al., 2024, p. 12).

The effectiveness of suspense doesn't always diminish with familiarity. The 'paradox of suspense' suggests that we can experience tension and anticipation even when we know the outcome of a story (Delatorre et al., 2018, Chapter 2.2).

Hitchcock's definition of suspense revolves around the idea of providing the audience with crucial information that the characters in the film lack (Jones, 2024). This information disbalance creates a heightened sense of anticipation and involvement for the audience.¹⁵ Hitchcock's techniques tap into the psychological mechanisms that create suspense in the audience (Jones, 2024). By providing the audience with information, he creates a sense of anticipation and concern for the characters. This cognitive and emotional engagement keeps viewers invested in the narrative (Wuss, 2020, pp. 269-270). Suspense is heightened when the characters come close to discovering the truth or narrowly escape danger. These near misses and close calls serve to maintain and intensify the audience's emotional involvement throughout the scene or film (Cannistraci, 2023).

Narrative tension in film exploits a fundamental human behavioural situation: the encounter of an individual with a new, changing environmental situation. In order to approach this situation, humans are pushing for the "control theorem" (Wuss, 2020, p. 271). This theorem¹⁶ is based on the human need for control over one's life situation, which leads to activation processes within various psychological systems (Mansell, 2020, pp. 122-124). Control competence refers to the ability to influence one's environment or inner world according to one's wishes (active control) or to foresee future developments (passive control) (Wuss, 2020, p. 271). Tension in the storytelling process arises whenever the active control of the situation by the protagonists and/or the passive, cognitive control by the viewers are significantly challenged (Wuss, 2020, p. 271).

Emotions in narrative tension are reactions to perceived or anticipated loss or regain of control (Wuss, 2020, p. 272). Film techniques often manipulate this sense of control at pivot points, shifting the emotional state of the audience (Willemsen, 2018, p. 34). Each turning point in the plot marks both the end of one emotional episode and the beginning of another, potentially moving towards either negative or positive emotions (*Turning-points*, n.d.).

This leads to the role of a key neurotransmitter involved in anticipation and reward processing: dopamine. Dopamine plays a central role in encoding the discrepancy between expected and actual outcomes (Bogacz, 2020, p. 2). When the actual reward surpasses

¹⁵ To illustrate this concept, Hitchcock often used the example of a bomb under a table. In this scenario, the audience is aware of the presence of the bomb and its imminent explosion, while the characters are unaware of the danger. This knowledge gap allows the audience to experience a prolonged period of suspense, as opposed to the brief moment of surprise they would feel if the bomb exploded without warning (Wuss, 2014, p. 268). This is often referred to as "letting the audience play God" (*Alfred Hitchcock's Definition of Suspense: Letting the Audience Play God - 594 Words | Essay Example*, 2025).

¹⁶ The use of "theorem" emphasizes the systematic and universal nature of this concept.

expectations, dopamine release increases, reinforcing the behavior that led to the positive outcome and signaling that it is worth repeating (Bogacz, 2020, p. 2). In the context of film viewing, this mechanism becomes particularly relevant. This constant shift between loss and gain of control creates an emotional rollercoaster for the audience. It's this dynamic interplay and inquisitiveness of the viewer that keeps viewers engaged as they empathise with the characters' struggles and triumphs (Schmidt et al., 2023, p. 18; Wuss, 2020, p. 272). Through the narrative, the viewer's curiosity is further heightened as they become increasingly engaged and exposed to the control theorem.

Narrative tension is fundamentally linked to the viewer's imagination. Without the audience's ability to imagine and anticipate, the events in film stories would remain static and lack dynamism (Wuss, 2020, p. 272). This link between suspense and imagination stems from the human need to resolve uncertainty about future events, thus providing a sense of passive control over life's processes (Lehne & Koelsch, 2015, p. 6). This unsettling of the viewer, with its consequences for emotional processes and sudden shifts in perceptions, appears to be essential for ensuring an engaging experience (Wuss, 2020, pp. 272-273).

5.3 How our brain perceives film as reality

This phenomenon - where audiences are fully aware of the fictionality of a film and yet experience genuine emotional responses - is what Carroll calls the "paradoxes of the heart" (Carroll, 1990). He attributes this to the role of belief in shaping emotion (Mills, 2018). As a result, viewers can have strong emotional reactions to a film even if they do not believe that the events on screen are real (Uhrig, 2014, pp. 36-37).

“We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.” (Picasso, 1924, p. 10)

In this statement, Pablo Picasso addresses two central poles inherent in art: “truth” and “lie.” The connection between these poles is manipulation - the element that allows the audience to perceive the lie as truthful (Keazor, 2018, p. 12).

Considering the dichotomy of “truth” and “lie” highlighted by Picasso, films face a paradox. They are deliberately fictional - firmly rooted in “lies” - still we try to evaluate them using concepts like “truthfulness.” The audience believes in the world the film portrays, allowing ourselves to be convinced of the “truthfulness” of its lies. While the boundaries of reality are

clearly limited in mediums like painting or sculpture, moving images push the boundaries of perceived reality further than any other art form (Wuss, 2020, p. 411). This paradox lies in film's unique ability to simultaneously capture reality and create fiction, a duality that distinguishes it from other forms of artistic media.

The duality of diegesis and mimesis are two fundamental concepts in narrative theory and storytelling, each representing a different approach to the presentation of a story. Diegesis, comes from the Greek word for 'narration', refers to the act of telling a story through narration guided by a narrator (Halliwell, 2012). Mimesis, on the other hand, comes from the Greek word for "imitation" and refers to the act of showing or enacting a story (Ralphs, 2014). This fictional aspect of film taps into what psychologists call our sense of possibility - the ability to imagine alternatives to reality. Through film, we can explore "what if" scenarios, alternative worlds and potential futures (*Multiverse Movies Analysis: Understanding Their Unique Impact*, 2024; Wuss, 2020, p. 399). This engagement with possibilities is not just entertaining, it can also be intellectually and emotionally enriching, helping to develop our capacity for empathy and understanding of different perspectives (*The Impact of Visual Storytelling: How Films Create Empathy and Understanding*, 2023).

The power of film as a medium lies in its ability to seamlessly blend these two aspects - the factual and the fictional (Wuss, 2020, p. 409). This creates a unique viewing experience where the viewer simultaneously engages with the film as a document of reality and as an imaginative construction. This is one of the reasons why film is more convincing than other art forms in depicting this illusion of reality. When the film provides these stimuli, we interpret them as factual (Wuss, 2020, pp. 379-380). By comparing this constructed "fact-document" with their own reality, audiences undergo a process of authentication, appealing to their sense of reality (Schulte-Eversum, 2007, p. 31; Wuss, 2020, p. 411). The concept of suspension of disbelief was first introduced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 (Odin, 2014). Often, these effects of reality are accompanied by emotional responses, leading the audience to believe in the "truthfulness" of the lie. Another explanation lies in the audiovisual nature of film. By selectively shaping reality through cinematic tools, films engage the audience's perception in ways that align closely with human sensory processes (Schulte-Eversum, 2007, p. 31).

Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Weinberg explain why our brains perceive film as reality through the mind's ability to imagine (Nichols, 2007). Imagination plays an important role in the emotional experiences of our daily lives. It enables to mentally simulate situations, anticipate outcomes and even experience emotions based on hypothetical scenarios

(Nichols, 2007). In the context of film, the ability to imagine allows the viewer to bypass the awareness that what we are seeing is fictional (Uhrig, 2014, p. 37).

Torben Grodal, a Danish film professor at the University of Copenhagen, introduces a division in film reception between local and global processing systems and explains the impact of fictional film content by the parallel processes in the brain (Ros & Kiss, 2018, p. 91; Uhrig, 2014, p. 37). While the global system evaluates phenomena based on authenticity and truthfulness, directly engaging with the viewer's consciousness, the local system simultaneously processes perceptions and triggers corresponding responses (Ros & Kiss, 2018, p. 75). This aligns with neuroscientific findings that emphasize the crucial role of mirror neurons (Ros & Kiss, 2018, p. 75). According to these findings, intentional actions activate neural responses in the brain that are identical to those caused by our own active actions - whether we are observing someone in real life or on a screen (Uhrig, 2014, p. 37).

6. Model: Subjective Reality of the Active Viewer

6.1 Purpose and Objective

The concept of the active viewer in film studies underscores the dynamic and participatory role that audiences assume in interpreting and engaging with films. This perspective diverges from the notion of the passive viewer, where audiences are seen as passive recipients of information. Instead, active viewers derive meaning from their personal experiences, knowledge, and emotional responses, ultimately crafting a uniquely individualized subjective reality. This model has been designed to synthesize and visually depict the theories outlined in this thesis, highlighting the interplay between the key components: subjective reality, emotions, narration, and the reception process. By doing so, the model provides a deeper understanding of the viewer's active role in evoking emotions and constructing a subjective reality in response to cinematic stimuli.

While the existing model by Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding offers a solid foundation for understanding information processing in film viewing, this new model extends their framework by incorporating emotional interaction and the active viewer's role in co-creating meaning and reflection. In addition, this model differentiates between consciousness and unconsciousness. Historically, numerous film studies have focused solely on one aspect of film reception: the conscious experience. In contrast, Peter Wuss, notably through his PKS model, has advanced the understanding of film perception by incorporating unconscious processes. By integrating the PKS model, the information processing model by Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding, Jens Eder's emotion transmission model, and additional theories and models discussed in the thesis, a comprehensive model, shown in Figure 6, was derived from the analysis of the thesis' research question:

How does film narration influence the subjective reality and the emotions of the active viewer during the reception process?

In the future, it can serve as a framework for understanding the active role of the viewer and, consequently, the creation of possible subjective realities within existing films. This deeper insight ultimately lays the foundation for developing new, meaningful films.

The theoretical foundation for this model is provided in the thesis. As such, each theory will not be elaborated in detail again, but rather synthesized into a cohesive framework that builds upon existing knowledge in the field.

6.2 Testability and Applicability

This model is primarily visual and serves as a framework for understanding the complex interactions between viewers and films. It combines theories rooted in scientific research and insights from professors in psychology, sociology, and communication sciences. Given its focus on subjectivity and the inherent diversity of film interpretations, practical testability is not considered essential. Specifically, it addresses the process by which these multiple interpretations emerge, highlighting how different viewers can derive unique meanings from the same film experience.

6.3 Structure of the Model

6.3.1 Viewer's Background

The active viewer brings their unique cultural background, which shapes their life experiences. This background informs their general world knowledge, narrative understanding, and familiarity with filmic presentation forms. Unlike Peter Ohler's and Gerhild Nieding's information processing model, this model consolidates various knowledge types into a single "background of the viewer" column for simplicity. It encompasses the viewer's experiences, memories, and moral compass.

6.3.2 Information Processing

The model differentiates between two main reception processes of filmic stimuli and narrative structures:

- Unconscious Reception: Aligns with the fast System 1 process in dual process theory, correlating with bottom-up processing.
- Conscious Reception: Corresponds to the reflective, slower System 2 process, involving top-down processing.

6.3.3 Emotion

This section combines Peter Wuss' PKS model and Jens Eder's emotion transmission stages. The viewer's background plays a crucial role in emotional arousal.

Unconscious perception: Perception-guided structures and the resulting topic series, combined with perceptual affects, generate subtle yet essential emotions that shape the overall mood. Unconscious processes indirectly influence all conscious processes through bottom-up mechanisms, meaning that every decision made by the conscious mind is shaped by the unconscious.

Conscious perception: The emotional experience of a film is shaped by all of its structural elements, but is primarily driven by its narrative structure and characters. Key moments such as pivot points create concept-guided structures that form causal chains within the story, making them especially easy recognisable due to their narrative significance. These structural elements, together with the characters, evoke diegetic emotions that draw the audience into the film's world. Stereotype-driven structures represent the third characteristic of narrative structures. They draw on viewers' pre-existing knowledge and learned schemas. They require audiences to recognize familiar symbols and patterns, enhancing their understanding and engagement with the story. Each of the three PKS structures plays an important role in fostering emotional engagement. The emotional impact arises when viewers are able to form a synaptic connection between the film and their own personal background through cognitive processes. As viewers reevaluate and reflect on these elements, their emotional experiences evolve into thematic and communicative emotions. Thematic Emotions arise when overarching meanings or themes are identified, requiring an understanding of complex narrative elements. Communicative Emotions involve reflective evaluations of the film, including critical analysis and interpretation of its artistic and cultural aspects. While these emotions are influenced by unconscious perceptual processes, they must be consciously processed to uncover meaning or enable reflection. The unconscious provides the raw emotional foundation, while conscious thought refines and organizes these emotions into coherent interpretations.

6.3.4 Engagement

All these emotions and narration structures contribute to the emotional film engagement, encompassing both empathy and sympathy. The viewer's engagement acts as a filter, highlighting specific synapses within the film's narrative.

6.3.5 Subjective Reality

Viewer-generated emotions frame the subjective reality. Imagination is crucial in constructing cognitive representations, filling gaps and interpreting visual details. The resulting reality, created and influenced by the viewer, continuously channels and integrates newly acquired information into the viewer's schema through learning behaviors. It is the interplay between the viewer's emotions and subjective reality that creates a connection to the film.

6.3.6 Inquisitiveness about the film

The subjective reality triggers viewer inquisitiveness. This involves conflict and problem-solving behaviors, rooted in the control theorem. Viewers engage in both active control (imaginatively adopting characters' positions) and passive control (anticipating events). This process is a continuous negotiation, with each plot point offering new possibilities or resolving existing narrative threads.

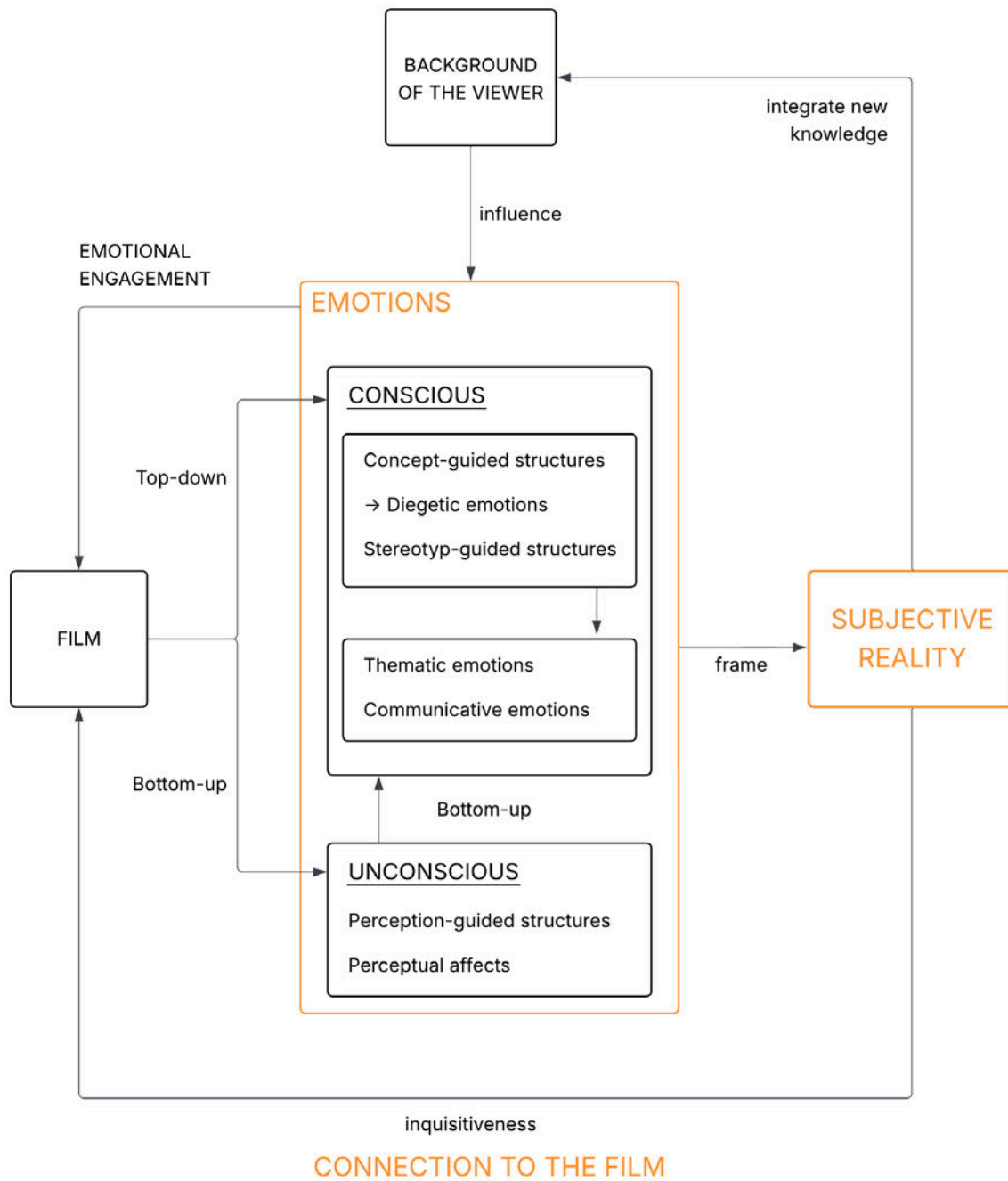


Figure 6

Model: Subjective Reality of the Active Viewer

Note. Own model. A simplification of the cognitive processes is present.

6.4 Key Messages

The key finding of this model reveals a profound insight into film reception: A film essentially functions as a catalyst, triggering emotions through the viewer's personal experiences and knowledge. This process shapes an individual interpretation of the story, resulting in a subjective reality of the film. This dynamic interplay between the viewer's inner world and the filmic reality fosters a deep connection, enhancing emotional investment and cognitive engagement. By actively interpreting and relating to the narrative, viewers become co-creators of meaning, which is a fundamental aspect of the film experience and subsequent reflection. Reflection plays a central role in this process. As viewers engage in problem-solving within the film and consider the situations of characters, they are prompted to reflect deeply on their own lives. Another key aspect of this model is its focus on distinguishing between unconscious and conscious processes in film perception, emphasizing the significant role of the unconscious - especially in arousing emotions - and demonstrating its impact on the overall film experience.

7. The Emotional and Social Impact of Todd Phillips' Joker on Audiences

This chapter examines the background and foundational elements of the film *Joker* (2019) by Todd Phillips from the viewer's perspective, laying the groundwork for its use as a case example in which the developed model is introduced to the existing film. It is important to note that the model is not intended for general application or objective analysis in this case example. Instead, only a few selected subjective realities are highlighted as exemplars.

7.1 Short Synopsis

Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) is a psychological drama that serves as an origin story for the DC Comics villain, the Joker. Set in the fictional Gotham City during the 1980s, the film follows Arthur Fleck (played by Joaquin Phoenix), a mentally ill and socially marginalized man who struggles to find his place in a harsh and unequal society (*Joker Summary*, 2023).

Arthur works as a clown-for-hire while caring for his ailing mother. He dreams of becoming a stand-up comedian but faces constant rejection and ridicule. His life spirals downward as he endures physical assaults, social humiliation, job loss, and the discovery of troubling family secrets. These experiences push him further into isolation and despair, culminating in violent acts that transform him into the character Joker (Bose, 2024). The narrative explores how Arthur's personal suffering intersects with broader societal issues. His transformation into the Joker becomes a symbol of resistance for Gotham's underprivileged masses, who adopt his clown persona as an emblem of rebellion against the wealthy elite.

Todd Phillips' *Joker* draws significant inspiration from Martin Scorsese's films *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1982), both of which delve into the psychological unraveling of morally ambiguous protagonists. Arthur Fleck, the central character in *Joker*, shares thematic and narrative parallels with Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver*, an alienated Vietnam War veteran whose descent into violence stems from societal neglect and personal isolation. Similarly, Arthur mirrors Rupert Pupkin from *The King of Comedy*, a fame-obsessed comedian whose rejection by society leads him to morally questionable actions. Like Travis and Rupert, Arthur is a victim of systemic failures - his lack of access to mental health care and his economic hardships push him to his breaking point. However, his choices blur the line between victimhood and villainy, forcing audiences to confront the ethical complexities of his character.

Joaquin Phoenix's performance earned him an Academy Award for Best Actor, and the film's score by Hildur Guðnadóttir received an Oscar as well (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). *Joker* sparked widespread discussion for its unflinching portrayal of mental illness, violence, and social critique, making it one of the most talked-about films of its year (Sims, 2019). The film earned over \$1.074 billion at the global box office¹⁷, solidifying its status as the highest-grossing R-rated movie¹⁸ of all time. Remarkably, with its relatively modest budget, *Joker* became one of the rare films to surpass the billion-dollar milestone (*Joker - Box Office Mojo*, n.d.).

7.2 Background information of the diegesis and its connection to the real world

7.2.1 The Environment: Gotham City

The film is a critique of societal structures. Gotham City is depicted as a late-capitalist dystopia marked by economic inequality, social unrest, and the erosion of public services (Bose, 2024). Arthur's descent into madness mirrors the collapse of societal cohesion, highlighting themes of class struggle, alienation, and systemic neglect (Uysal, 2023, pp. 404-405). Gotham City emerges as a dystopian urban landscape that mirrors societal decay.

Gotham City is portrayed as a collapsing metropolis filled with corruption, poverty, and despair. The physical environment itself is oppressive: the streets are littered with garbage, the infrastructure is visibly decaying, and public spaces are marked by graffiti and crime. This visual decay serves as a metaphor for the moral and social collapse of the city's institutions. The strike - a recurring theme in 1980s New York City that inspired Gotham's aesthetic - symbolizes the broader neglect of the needs of the working class (Sreepada & Partida, 2022, p. 183). The city's government is depicted as failing its citizens at every turn. Public services are systematically defunded, leaving vulnerable populations without access to essential resources. Arthur's own life reflects this neglect; his mental health support is

¹⁷ The box office refers to the revenue generated by ticket sales for movies shown in theaters. It is a key measure of a film's financial success and popularity.

¹⁸ An R-rated film is a movie rating assigned by the Motion Picture Association (MPA) in the United States. It stands for "Restricted" and indicates that the film contains content that may not be suitable for children under 17 years of age.

abruptly cut off due to budget cuts, leaving him without therapy or medication. This moment starkly illustrates how austerity measures disproportionately harm society's most vulnerable members. Gotham's institutions - meant to protect and uplift its citizens - become symbols of indifference, pushing individuals like Arthur further into isolation and despair. Variety chief film critic Owen Gleiberman highlights: "As the basic security of the American middle class frays before our eyes, the primal anxiety is starting to tear at the fabric of people's well-being." (Dodds, n.d.).

The economic disparity in Gotham is central to the film's critique of late-stage capitalism. The wealthy elite, personified by Thomas Wayne, live in opulent isolation while the working class struggles to survive in dilapidated neighborhoods. Wayne's arrogance and detachment are emblematic of this divide; he dismisses Gotham's poor as "clowns" while positioning himself as their savior through his mayoral campaign (Philipps, 2019, 00:39:38). His rhetoric underscores the disconnect between those in power and those they claim to represent.

This stark divide fuels growing unrest among Gotham's disenfranchised citizens. Protests erupt across the city, driven by collective frustration with systemic inequality. The riots that follow are not simply acts of chaos but expressions of deep-seated anger at a system that prioritizes profit over people. Arthur Fleck inadvertently becomes a symbol for this rebellion when his clown persona is adopted by protesters as an emblem of resistance against the establishment.

7.2.2 Arthur

Bradley Cooper, one of the producers of *Joker* stated, "Take probably the most famous villain and say, 'Okay, what if we humanize this person? Let's see what could be possible causes for who he becomes, and where can we, as a community and a society, find our own way to see how this could happen and how this could be remedied?'" (Dodds, n.d.). This perspective highlights the film's ambition to delve deeply into the psychological and societal factors that shape Arthur Fleck's transformation into the Joker.

At the start of the film, he engages in mundane activities like watching television and checking his mail, only to find his mailbox empty. In an early scene, when bullies steal his advertising sign and assault him, Arthur shouts out for help, but no one intervenes. These moments state his isolation and invisibility in society.

Arthur Fleck's personal story serves as a microcosm of Gotham's societal decay. A failed comedian battling mental illness and abandonment issues, Arthur embodies every deficiency in Gotham: corporate greed, apathy toward poverty, bullying over medical conditions, and unchecked violence. He suffers relentless mistreatment - from being ignored by social services to enduring bullying and physical violence. His descent into madness culminates in acts of extreme violence against Gotham City civilians. Arthur Fleck's social worker encapsulates the indifference of Gotham's failing social systems when she tells him, "They don't give a shit about people like you, Arthur. And they really don't give a shit about people like me either." (Philipps, 2019, 00:39:38).

7.2.3 Active viewer - everyone struggles

Arthur represents countless others who feel crushed by systemic injustice and choose vengeance over resilience. Gotham City is portrayed in an exaggerated and extreme manner, but for many large cities, this dystopian vision has already become a reality, affecting countless people. Todd Phillips described Arthur Fleck in an interview with *Variety*¹⁹ as "the guy you see on the street who you walk right past - or over." (Linhardt, n.d.). At its core, Phillips asserts, *Joker* is "a portrait of a society devoid of empathy." (Linhardt, n.d.). This theme is encapsulated in Arthur's words: "If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me! I pass you every day, and you don't notice me. Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy." (Philipps, 2019, 01:43:11).

Arthur Fleck is portrayed as a lonely individual navigating life in a sprawling, indifferent city - a struggle that resonates with many. This examines how audiences can form emotional connections with characters like Arthur Fleck. As Owen Gleiberman observes, "There's no denying we feel something for him - a twinge of sympathy, or at least understanding." (Dodds, n.d.). The film's narrative framing plays a pivotal role in shaping audience sympathy, even as Arthur's actions become increasingly immoral. While Arthur is undeniably a victim of systemic injustice, his actions are unjustifiable. One appeal of the film lies in the audience's ability to empathize with such a character, as well as the transgression of social taboos. This resonates with the concept explored in the chapter on "safe spaces" in film. The depiction of taboo-breaking often serves as a powerful dramatic device, forcing viewers to confront and question social and cultural boundaries. Murray Smith explores the emotional engagement with morally ambiguous or questionable characters through his concept of "perverse

¹⁹ *Variety* is a prominent American entertainment trade magazine and website that focuses on the entertainment industry, including film, television, theater, music, and digital media.

allegiance". A key factor contributing to this fascination is the concept of moral distance, Roland Barthes' idea of "amorous distance" parallels this notion. This refers to the psychological separation between the audience and the real-world consequences of the characters' actions. The line between cinematic fiction and real-world reality can blur for some viewers, raising questions about the psychological impact of such narratives. For instance: How should individuals respond to social injustice? What methods are both effective and ethical in combating systemic oppression?

Five months after the movie's release, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. A study published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in August 2020 revealed that 40% of adults in the United States reported struggling with mental health issues or substance abuse during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, approximately 11% of U.S. adults experienced symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorders - a figure that nearly quadrupled during this period (Czeisler et al., 2020). The economic fallout was also severe; as PBS News noted, over 30 million Americans lost their jobs during the crisis, exposing stark social inequalities while simultaneously uniting people under the shared threat of a global health emergency (Rugaber, 2020). The hardships depicted in *Joker* - isolation, financial instability, and societal neglect - mirror the struggles faced by many during these challenging times. Arthur Fleck's descent into despair resonates deeply with viewers who have experienced similar feelings of alienation and hardship. As discussed in relation to "safe spaces" in cinema, depictions of crossing societal boundaries can serve as powerful dramatic tools, forcing viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about their own social and cultural contexts.

This example centers on emotional identification. The potential impacts of the film will be highlighted solely to illustrate how emotional connections with the narrative and characters are established:

Arthur's violent rebellion resonates with Gotham's disenfranchised citizens, who see him as a symbol of defiance against their oppressors. The protests in the film - where rioters wearing clown masks wreak havoc in the streets - mirror real-world movements that oscillate between peaceful demonstrations and destructive riots.

The film inspired protestors worldwide to adopt the Joker's imagery during demonstrations. In Chile, protestors used Joker masks during protests sparked by rising subway fares. In Lebanon, see Figure 7, demonstrators incorporated the Joker's image into protests against political corruption and the concentration of wealth among the elite. Similarly, demonstrators

in Hong Kong opposing the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill embraced Joker imagery as a form of resistance (Sreepada & Partida, 2022, p. 178). These movements collectively represented a global wave of anti-government sentiment, resonating with people who have grown increasingly frustrated by systemic inequality and governmental neglect of the working class.



Figure 7

Lebanese protester dressing up as Joker

Note. From *Joker is becoming the face of the fight against injustice in Lebanon, Chile*, by S. Majumdar, 2019,

(<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/international/joker-is-becoming-the-face-of-the-fight-against-injustice-in-lebanon-chile>).

Although already released in 2019, *Joker* appears to predict or reflect societal tensions that later manifested in movements like Black Lives Matter and events such as the Capitol Hill riots. The relevance underscores that issues like inequality, injustice, and alienation have long existed. Rather than offering a direct solution or message, the film uses Gotham's descent into chaos as an opportunity for viewers to reflect on what went wrong within this fictional society. Many questioned whether *Joker* glorifies violence or irresponsibly portrays Arthur Fleck in a sympathetic light. The controversy sparked broader debates about the moral responsibilities of art and its potential societal impact. In response, director Todd

Phillips stated in an interview with *Vanity Fair*²⁰, “We’re making a movie about a fictional character in a fictional world, ultimately, and your hope is that people take it for what it is. You can’t blame movies for a world that is so fucked up that anything can trigger it.” (Hagan et al., 2019). This statement reflects Phillips' stance that while the film is fictional, the thematization of violence does not function as an endorsement, but as a realistic exploration of complex issues. Warner Bros. similarly emphasized that neither the character nor the film condones real-world violence, asserting that the storytelling's role is to provoke challenging conversations around difficult issues (Petersen, 2019).

7.3 Analysing Joker's cognitive process through the model

Using the model in chapter 6 to analyze the impact of the active viewer, this section transfers it to Todd Phillips' *Joker* as a case example. The previous subchapters established the background for the viewer's perspective; now, the model will be integrated by examining key components such as subjective reality, emotion, narrative, and the cognitive processes involved in film reception.

Unconscious reception phase: Perception-guided structures emphasize identification for the character by highlighting Arthur Fleck's struggles as a marginalized member of the working class. His daily experiences - checking an empty mailbox, enduring workplace humiliation, losing social support, and descending into despair - serve as stark indicators of societal neglect. These repeated scenarios, which lack direct narrative connections, are processed unconsciously and collectively underscore the loneliness of the individual. Combined with perceptual effects, these elements evoke subtle yet essential emotions that influence the film's overall mood. This emotional resonance is further enhanced by Hildur Guðnadóttir's evocative score and Lawrence Sher's cinematography, which profoundly shape the mood of the audience's experience.

Additionally, concept-guided structures dominate through singular, impactful events that are consciously processed by viewers. Key moments include Arthur's killing of three Wayne Enterprises businessmen on the subway, his discovery at Arkham State Hospital that his mother adopted him and allowed him to be abused, his subsequent murder of his mother, the revelation that his relationship with Sophie was imagined, and his climactic appearance

²⁰ *Vanity Fair* is a famous American magazine that focuses on culture, fashion, politics, and current events.

on The Murray Franklin Show, where he kills the host on live television. These events are interconnected in a causal chain where each action leads directly to the next. The narrative progression drives diegetic emotions tied to Arthur's story while fostering emotional engagement through empathy and sympathy. Arthur's statement on The Murray Franklin Show, "If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me" (Phillips, 2019, 01:43:18), resonates deeply with the viewers by humanizing his frustration and despair. This emotional connection allows the audience to reflect on their own cultural contexts while understanding Arthur's actions.

Stereotype-guided structures also play a significant role in the film *Joker*, particularly for viewers familiar with the DC Universe²¹. The film incorporates elements that align with established portrayals of Gotham City as a crime-ridden and corrupt metropolis. Themes central to the *Joker* character - chaos, anarchy, and societal collapse - are explored in ways reminiscent of DC comics such as *The Killing Joke*.

Beyond its connections to the DC Universe, *Joker* draws heavily from Martin Scorsese's films *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1982). Both films influence *Joker*'s themes, character development, and narrative structure. Like Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, Arthur Fleck is an isolated and mentally unstable individual navigating a decaying urban environment. Both characters fabricate relationships - Travis idealizes Betsy while Arthur hallucinates a relationship with Sophie - and rationalize their violent actions as responses to societal failures. Similarly, parallels to Rupert Pupkin in *The King of Comedy* emerge through Arthur's obsession with fame and his climactic appearance on The Murray Franklin Show. Both characters seek validation through extreme measures: Rupert kidnaps Jerry Langford to secure airtime for his comedy routine, while Arthur murders Murray Franklin live on air. These intertextual references function as schema-guided mechanisms within the film. By activating stored knowledge from other media or personal experiences, viewers interpret new information through pre-existing schemas.

Ultimately, *Joker* elicits diegetic emotions tied to Arthur's narrative alongside thematic emotions that underscore its central message: societal neglect can drive vulnerable individuals to destructive extremes. Communicative emotions evoked by the film encourage reflection on broader societal issues. Gotham City serves as a microcosm of inequality, illustrating tensions between the wealthy elite (embodied by Thomas Wayne) and

²¹ The DC Universe is a fictional world created by DC Comics where superheroes like Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, along with many other characters, cities, and stories, all exist and interact with each other.

disenfranchised masses. Arthur's metamorphosis into Joker symbolizes the anger and despair felt by those abandoned by society. The connections established in the previous subchapters may play a crucial role in emotional arousal and the formation of subjective realities, depending on each viewer's individual background.

By acting as a catalyst for memories and emotions within viewers, Joker enables audiences to construct unique subjective realities shaped by their personal experiences and cultural contexts. In the subchapter on the active viewer, several connections to the film can be highlighted that contribute to the creation of subjective reality. Emotions serve as the cornerstone of this process, establishing a profound connection between recipients and the narrative. Each viewer interprets the film's moral aspects differently, prioritizing certain themes over others based on their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Film is inherently subjective, allowing viewers to interpret and weigh its moral aspects differently based on their unique perspectives. These factors shape how audiences reflect on the film's message. All of these components interact to shape the subjective experience of the active viewer. Through this interplay of unconscious processing, conscious reflection, and emotional engagement, the film transcends its status as mere entertainment to become a reflective exploration of societal dynamics and personal struggles.

The divided opinions surrounding Joker strongly correlate with the subjective reality of the viewer. The controversy surrounding the film would not have arisen if audiences passively absorbed its content without critical engagement. Instead, each viewer brings their own background, personal experiences, and moral compass to the viewing experience. This is what defines the active viewer in this example. This individuality of the active viewers shapes how audiences interpret the film, form emotional responses, and build connections to the characters and narrative. These varied reactions highlight how deeply personal factors influence the way people engage with art and reflect on its themes.

Ultimately, as Owen Gleiberman observed: "Joker resonates across gender, race, and age groups because it speaks to universal human struggles." (Dodds, n.d.).

8. Conclusion

"[Film] is the only visual art in which the entire richness of our inner life - our perceptions, memory, and imagination, our expectations and attention - can be brought to life in the external impressions themselves.[...] The innermost part of humanity lies in its feelings and emotions."

(Münsterberg, 1915/1996, pp. 111–112, translated by Edgar Isenmann²²)

The thesis begins with a quote from Münsterberg (1915/1996), which sets the framework for the central question of this work: "How does film narration influence the subjective reality of the active viewer during the reception process?" This question is answered as follows: Film acts as a catalyst for memories and personal experiences that the viewer has lived through. It challenges the notion that the viewer is merely passive - instead, the viewer actively engages with the film, forming subjective realities through emotional connection.

Film is inherently a complex interplay of various components, and this thesis focuses specifically on four key elements: subjective reality, emotions, narration, and the reception process. These components are examined in relation to one another through an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates theories and models from psychology, sociology, and film theory.

A model was developed to visually explain how active viewers create subjective realities through their interaction with film. This challenges the traditional notion of viewers as passive observers. Instead, it is argued that film acts as a catalyst - triggering memories, experiences, and emotions within viewers, who then construct their own unique interpretations of the narrative. The PKS model, which emphasizes the narrative structure of film, was combined with Jens Eder's emotion transmission stages to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the research question. The findings demonstrate that it is not solely conscious processes, which are historically more frequently studied, that drive emotional engagement or subjective reality formation. Instead, the unconscious mind plays an essential role by processing vast amounts of information beyond conscious awareness. The conscious and unconscious processing of information plays a crucial role in film reception, as it triggers moments from the viewer's past, fostering an emotional

²² „Es ist die einzige visuelle Kunst, in der der gesamte Reichtum unseres inneren Lebens, unsere Wahrnehmungen, unser Gedächtnis und unsere Phantasie, unsere Erwartung und unsere Aufmerksamkeit, in den äußeren Eindrücken selbst lebendig gemacht werden kann.[...] Das Innerste des Menschen liegt in seinen Gefühlen und Emotionen."

connection to the film. These processes allow viewers to engage with films on a profound level, with empathy and sympathy serving as essential components for emotional engagement. Emotions are thus identified as central to subjective reality; they form the foundation upon which viewers connect with narratives and answer the essential question: "What hooks us in a film?"

For a film to resonate emotionally with viewers, it must establish connections by activating synapses linked to background knowledge, moral frameworks, or cultural contexts. Cognitive processes in film are essential for shaping subjective reality. By selectively engaging neural pathways through patterns and unconscious mechanisms, film narratives tap into viewers' personal histories, eliciting emotions and memories that are closely intertwined into their unique life experiences. These connections enable schema formation - the mental frameworks through which viewers interpret new information and simplify complex narratives. Schemas are flexible cognitive structures that evolve with each experience, allowing viewers to navigate intricate storylines while maintaining emotional engagement.

This process of triggering synaptic connections ultimately shapes emotions, which in turn establish subjective reality. Imagination plays a pivotal role in this active viewer experience by bridging the gap between the inner world of personal perceptions and memories and the external world depicted on screen. Subjective reality allows viewers to engage more deeply with fictional narratives, shaping their interpretations and emotional connections to the story while filling in the film's individual gaps through their unique perspectives.

In conclusion, this thesis illustrates that films are far more than passive visual experiences; they are dynamic tools for exploring human psychology. By eliciting emotions and activating both conscious and unconscious processes, films empower viewers to create deeply personal interpretations that reflect their inner worlds. This interplay between narrative structure, emotional resonance, and subjective reality demonstrates cinema's profound ability to connect with audiences on an intimate level, transforming it into an art form capable of significant psychological impact.

8.1 Critical Reflection

A critical reflection is essential in order to thoughtfully evaluate the limitations, and broader implications of the thesis and its findings.

A challenge in this research is the inherent complexity of cognitive processes and the formation of reality perception. A central outcome of this study was the development of a model to capture and visualize these intricate dynamics. The model is intended solely for illustrative purposes and cannot be directly applied. The designed model confronts a challenge for which no solution currently exists: the precise measurement and processing of unconscious mental processes (Shanks et al., 2021, p. 113). This presents the greatest challenge: the unknown nature of the unconscious. This framework was constructed through interdisciplinary integration of theories and models developed by scientists and professors across diverse fields, ensuring methodological reliability. It is extremely difficult to fully comprehend unconscious processes, which is why the model serves only as a simplified representation of these complex mechanisms. The outcomes of the model - particularly the subjective realities constructed by viewers and the emotional arousal - are challenging to measure. Each viewer is unique, and different elements of a film unconsciously trigger distinct responses. Capturing the full range of these processes is difficult, since viewers can only express what they are consciously aware of.

The PKS model by Peter Wuss faces similar challenges. It relies on hypothetical, often unobservable cognitive processes - particularly those operating below the threshold of conscious awareness - which makes empirical validation difficult, as many of the model's mechanisms cannot be directly measured or observed in viewers. While the model is theoretically well-grounded, its practical application to actual films and empirical media effects research remains limited; it is primarily used for conceptual exploration rather than direct experimental research with audiences. Although the PKS model does incorporate affective (emotional) phenomena, its primary focus remains cognitive. Some critics argue that this emphasis tends to underplay the role of affect and embodied experience in film reception, aspects that are increasingly highlighted in contemporary film studies (Pibert, 2019, p. 145). In the developed model presented here, this critique has been addressed by incorporating Jens Eder's stages of emotional transmission, which place a much stronger emphasis on the role of emotions. Overall, this model provides a comprehensive overview of the actual cognitive processes involved, ultimately facilitating the integration of the active viewer. By explaining the viewer's background in relation to the film, the model specifically

highlights the significant role the active viewer plays in the film experience, showing how the film's macrostructures function as "triggers" for individual engagement and interpretation.

8.2 Methodological Challenges in Measuring Unconscious Phenomena

Difficulties in measuring unconscious phenomena are commonly encountered in this field, and this challenge is especially evident in both the thesis and the model. For this reason, a more detailed examination of this issue will be provided.

Epistemological constraints emerge from three primary limitations:

1. **Hermeneutic limitations:** Traditional interpretive approaches are constrained by subjective frameworks influenced by ideological positions, material interests, and cultural contexts. The hermeneutic circle - where interpretation, description, and evaluation become intertwined - further complicates objective analysis of unconscious reception mechanisms.
2. **Measurement objectivity issues:** Significant discrepancies persist in empirical assessments, as demonstrated by studies showing contamination of objective measures through unconscious processing.
3. **Neurocognitive complexity:** The interaction between emotional triggers and cognitive schemas operates below conscious awareness, creating layered processing systems that defy simple quantification. Neural synapses involved in engagement patterns with cinematic stimuli remain particularly resistant to conclusive modeling.

The challenge of capturing unconscious processes in film analysis arises from the inherent difficulty of uncovering the deep connections between cinematic works and the viewer's unconscious mind. These processes, which play a crucial role in shaping emotional responses and narrative interpretation, remain elusive due to their hidden and intangible nature.

Research has revealed that unconscious processes are integral to how viewers experience and interpret films. By activating unconscious memories and emotions, films allow viewers to construct unique narratives that resonate deeply with their inner worlds.

8.3 Future Outlook

Although methodological progress has been made, the precise capture and analysis of unconscious processes remain ongoing challenges. The elusive nature of these mechanisms complicates efforts to bridge subjective interpretation with empirical validation. Future research must focus on refining models that explore deeper connections between film structures and unconscious reception mechanisms. By developing approaches that integrate psychological theories with advanced analytical techniques, researchers can aim to better understand how films interact with the unconscious mind and influence emotional and cognitive responses.

Empirical methods such as surveys and questionnaires were excluded from this study. This decision was based on the understanding that viewers naturally have different interpretations of a film. At this initial stage, it is more important to focus on understanding the fundamental processes underlying film reception. These foundational insights can later be applied and tested through empirical approaches in subsequent research phases.

An extended analysis could focus on how filmmakers actively manipulate both unconscious and conscious processes in viewers. This exploration could be enriched by incorporating interviews with renowned filmmakers to gain deeper insights into their creative strategies. These interviews would allow for a comparison between established theories and models and the filmmakers' statements, offering a unique perspective on their methods. Through these conversations, the active processes employed by directors to evoke specific reactions in audiences and the techniques they use to achieve these effects could be examined in detail.

Another point that could be explored more deeply is the way viewing habits are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by broader historical forces. Technological advancements, such as the rise of streaming platforms, have significantly expanded access to media, while cultural and societal shifts have influenced both the types of stories being told and how they are received. This connection demonstrates how media serves as both a reflection of society. In this context, the evolution of viewing habits cannot be separated from their historical backdrop. By examining the relationship between changing habits and historical context, valuable insights can be gained into how media evolves alongside societal transformations and continues to shape collective experiences.

While this thesis focused primarily on macrostructures - such as narrative and characters - it largely omitted the analysis of microstructures like editing, cinematography, and score.

These microstructures significantly shape the emotional experience and interpretation of scenes, representing a vast area for future research (Kragel et al., 2019, p. 1).

Furthermore, this research paper examined only one aspect of the active viewer: the direct impact of film reception. However, the viewing experience is influenced by a range of simultaneous processes, including the viewer's initial selection of films based on factors such as cast, budget, and genre. Future studies could investigate these selection mechanisms in greater depth, as well as the broader context of audience engagement, including pre-viewing expectations and post-viewing reflections.

Let's keep dreaming.

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Disclaimer

The thesis was reviewed for grammar and spelling using DeepL and ChatGPT, an AI language model, with the prompt: "Please proofread the grammar and spelling of the following text. Keep the meaning the same." The content and ideas are entirely my own; only language corrections were made. Each sentence was subsequently checked to ensure the accuracy of the content.

Declaration of Academic Integrity

I hereby confirm that the present paper / thesis

How does film narration influence the subjective reality of the active viewer during the reception process?

Title

is the result of my own independent scholarly work, and that in all cases material from the work of others (in books, articles, essays, dissertations, and on the internet) is acknowledged, and quotations and paraphrases are clearly indicated. No material other than that listed has been used.

Edgar Isenmannn, April 17 2025

Name, Date

