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## **From a Text to a Method of Reading it**

### **Analysis of media experiences with memory work**

*7th year, German: They are working on a classic, the teacher is talking about the meaning of the piece and explains what the writer means to express. She herself would never have arrived at this interpretation and a creeping feeling, as she often does, that she is lacking in some fundamental ability. Thus she writes it down verbatim so that she has at least secured the material for the next test. Because she knows from experience that she when she revises, she will remember all the points that came up while she read the piece but that most of them have little to do with what the teacher is describing as the central theme.*

*Her thoughts wander - today "Prince Lionheart" is playing on TV. She is looking forward to it, especially to Berengaria, the lady of the court, who represents the ideal image of a woman for her. No-one knows that she only looks at this programme because of Berengaria and in order to live through how she behaves in various situations. Her father shakes his head uncomprehendingly about her enthusiasm for the TV series and thinks that a film with so many fights and violent scenes is really not something for girls. (Following Waste, 1995)*

This scenario shows us what the consequences of dealing with literary and other forms of text e.g. films are when the only valid way of reading them comes from experts in my contribution I want to deal first of all with the position suggested by the traditional understanding of literature in order to then argue in favour of starting from an individual receptive experience. With memory work I present a methodological approach that makes this possible. The conclusion is formed by the reception experiences of a film which are analysed using this method.

## **From a Text to a Way of Reading it**

In the conventional understanding of literature committed to the modernist project, literary texts are treated as autonomous works of art with senses and meanings permanently inscribed in the text itself (cf. Easthope's exposition, 1991). Accordingly a text-oriented approach dominates and for this linguistics and literary studies provide an extensive repertoire of methods. Experts trained in reading these literary texts are entrusted with the task of passing on their meaning and contents to pupils. Behind this lies the assumption that the students lack this competence because they are considered to be culturally "tabula rasa" They have to be made familiar with the "correct" and culturally valuable contents and concepts in order to develop a fundamental humanist attitude.

As is clear from the introductory example, working through a literary text understood in this light can become concretised in such a form that the interpretation of a classical work as presented by the teacher will be assessed by the pupils as simply factual and that, as with so much else in the school, it need only be reproduced. Whether the striven-for educational goal of humanist individuals can be achieved is rather doubtful. How can a connection be made between the text in question and one's own life when one's own thoughts and interpretations are experienced as irrelevant, intrusive or even wrong? It is not surprising, then, that when the free space that extracurricular media experiences represent are embraced with enthusiasm these are then the places where education takes place. Because it is here that the growing self tests the media on offer to determine its relevancy to one's own life, whether it gives answers to current questions, and provides help and suggestions about the subjects with which are of present concern. In our example the figure of Berengeria means a great deal because she represents away of being a woman that appeals to the girl.

For this girl, literature classes in which she can express her own interpretation without being afraid that these are going to be devalued as wrong would be ideal. Such an approach is suggested by recent developments in literary studies (cf. e.g. Corcoran/Evans, 1987; Easthope, 1991) for whom the meaning of a text is not fixed from the outset but is only constituted during the process of reading within the relevant socio-cultural context. So here it is no longer assumed that a text contains a specific meaning which is to be decoded. It is rather that the reader is ascribed an active role in meaning construction. Applied to our example this would mean that the pupil's interpretation is to be considered just as relevant as that of the professor. Lessons must then be appropriately structured so that different readings are made possible.

As soon as one starts to think how this can be put into concrete practice, a multitude of questions arise. Does this mean that there are many ways of reading a text as there are readers? And how should the various interpretations be dealt with? Are all of them to be accepted in the same way? What sense does it make to want to work with different readings except that it means a very pupil-centred teaching method? Is there not a danger that if all interpretations are equally important that then pupils are going to be left exactly where they already are? In school, when the interpretations and reactions of the pupils to a text being considered in class are taken up, then it usually happens by the pupils producing texts on a set text so that they either fill in gaps, write extensions to the text, take the story further or undertake changes to the text such as re-writing the end of the story, (cf. e.g. Adams, 1987). These approaches are evaluated as particularly positive because pupils write down their own experiences and interpretations and thus become writers themselves. Similar things also take place in relation to the pupils' own media experiences when they write an essay on a film that they particularly like. But in general it goes no further than the production of these texts and they are given no further consideration.

However, in itself, the experience that there are different ways of reading a text is valuable. It can be used in order to bring out the fact that textual interpretation are always coloured by the reader's context. Thus the meaning ascribed to a text is also determined by the life situation in which the percipients find themselves; their concerns, wishes and fantasies are taken into account in the same way as their media experiences. Seen from that point of view, the discrepancy in our scenario between the teacher's interpretation and that of the pupil is not surprising. On the contrary it is almost impossible to assume that a man whose profession it is to work with texts and who is perhaps centrally concerned with decision relating to securing his livelihood will ascribe the same meanings to a text as a pubescent girl. But what becomes very clear in the scenario is the self-evident dominance of the teacher's interpretation over his pupil's. A similar pattern is shown in the assessment of the TV series "Prince Lionheart". For the father it is a typical "man's film" – he doesn't seem to get the idea that his daughter might see something quite different in it than he does.

If the pupils' interpretations were made into a starting point for working with texts, the strong polarisation of work/duty and pleasure/desire characterised in our initial example would be rather unlikely. There the school practice in dealing with literature is equated with work and duty while the pleasurable enjoyment of the self-chosen media example relates to outside of school. And, in addition, the latter is also judged to be meaningful for one's own life.

Garbe/Groß (1993) come to an analogous division between private and compulsory reading in their results in assessing reading biographies of German studies students. "Almost universally those who later decided to become professional readers experienced phases of passionate, almost addictive reading in their childhood and youth. Reading for them meant: to lose oneself, to become immersed in another world and affectively experience what happened to the fictional hero(ine)..."

Right from the beginning a reading such as this is constituted by two points of view: that of the alternative world, a refuge, and that of exclusive understanding, a heartfelt relationship."

(Garbe/ Groß,1993,p.81)

The division into private reading and compulsory reading is specially associated with the upper classes of the grammar school and is more marked in German studies. "Almost all the pupils who were asked reported this division...they went on to accept, with more or less reservation, that it was the duty of science. They continued their studies without interest or conviction and shifted the 'real' reading back into the lap of the private sphere..." (Garbe/Groß, 1993, p. 85). This discrepancy often led to private reading being devalued and also connected with a feeling of having a bad conscience.

Garbe/Groß (1993, p. 93) deduce from this a need for university teaching that "instead of teaching science...the first thing should be to teach reading experience and science together." I would like to extend this even more to include such different "texts" as e.g. films.

Applied concretely to our initial example, this would mean that e.g. the experience with the TV programme "Prince Lionheart" should be discussed in the school and analysed. That would allow a start to be made directly connected to content which has meaning for the pupils. That that has not happened up till now has also to do with that fact that the appropriate techniques for dealing with media experience had still to be developed, as Garbe/ Groß (1993, p. 94) concede.

### **On the Discursive Nature of Experience**

Before I present memory work as a method that would be suitable for that purpose, a few clarifying remarks are needed on the importance of experience and language for our identity. In everyday life we tend to ascribe a large degree of explanatory potential and plausibility to

experience. What can be more authentic than that which one has experienced oneself? "The whole weight of individual subjectivity" (Weedon, 1991, p. 110) guarantees it. These experiences are mediated through language whereby language is usually regarded as a neutral tool for the reproduction of those experiences.

However, both philosophical and linguistic studies have also clearly shown that what we perceive as authentic experience is never as "direct" and unmediated as we think. 1 Experiences always already include interpretations on the basis of pre-existing concepts and terms. For us language already holds a series of specific historical possibilities with which we can give meaning to our experiences. "In assimilating language we learn to express our experience, to give it meaning and understand it according to particular ways of thinking, specific discourses that precede our entry into language. These ways of thinking form our consciousness and the positions with which we identify and structure our perception of ourselves, our subjectivity." (Weedon, 1991, pp. 49-50). Thus language is not simply an instrument for expressing thoughts and feelings or reflecting reality. Language is much more constitutive both for our view of the world and well as for our understanding of ourselves. In this post-structuralist view, meanings are not fixed for all time but concern temporary ascriptions of meaning that always take place within the context of a particular discourse. According to Foucault the way in which particular themes are thought and talked about within a society, conscious and unconscious thinking and the emotional life of the subject" (Weedon, 1991, p. 139).2 Within individual fields of discourse (such as the area of education and training) different discursive systems of meaning exist that often stand in opposition to each other and which can lead to differing interpretations and ways of looking at experiences and events. At the same time, not all discourses have the same weight but compete as to which meaning will be (temporarily) established. The setting for this battle for meaning is the subjectivity of the individual who is, "though an active protagonist, by no means sovereign" (Weedon, 1991, p. 59). The individual discourses make various subject positions available and each represents a way of being such as e.g. imagining what it means to be a teacher or a pupil, man or woman and which behaviours and forms of enjoyment are bound up with that. Discourses only become effective "in and through the acts of individuals...who become their carriers by accepting the forms of subjectivity on offer as well as their meanings and values and act in accordance with them" (Weedon, 1991, p. 51).

We are all familiar with the experience of feeling like different people in different situations. Thus we act differently in a group of professional colleagues than we do in a group of children, at a family celebration or, for example, as the representative of a citizen's movement involved in

political action. We know the social expectations attached to each of these situations and know what is regarded as appropriate behaviour in each case. We can fulfil the expectations by taking up the inherent subject position but we can also resist or reject it too. In any case a specific form of subjectivity is constituted. The conglomerate of the various subject positions which we assume form what we perceive as our identity. This "multiple" or "patchwork" identity is clearly different to the autonomous independent civic subjects of the enlightenment who maintained "their identity and their essentially humanist character were separate from and prior to their membership in any special social and political order" (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 210, quoted, in Keupp, 1994, p. 250). In everyday life, however, the individual believes that, when they assume a subject position, " they are the originators...of the discourse... who speak it. They speak and think as if they had control over the meaning. They 'imagine' that they are in fact the kind of subject that is talked about in humanism: rational, unified, the origin and not the effect of language" (Weedon, 1991, p. 47).

The more discourses we know—such as through further education—the more we can choose between various subject positions and no longer see simply one position as the only natural one that can be taken for granted. This is not quite as rational a process as it might seem at first glance because unconscious processes such as fantasies, wishes and desires are always involved here as well. When a particular discourse is successful this means that a person has recognised himself as the addressee of the discourse and through this reaction becomes the subject of the discourse.

Narrative forms of language take a special role in our constructions of identity because it is always through narratives and stories that our life, and thus our understanding of ourselves, takes on meaning, (cf. Kerby, 1991). Social values, norms and prevailing discourses are normally not made public as a body of rules but rather those rules are made accessible to us in the first place through stories (in the form of personal reports or via mass media). And every individual develops stories themselves by constructing them in a specific way on the basis of their own experience. It is exactly this narrative form that holds together the past (memory) and the future (anticipation) in the present thus creating the meaning we give our lives. Our self-narratives are, appropriately, never a description of what "really" happened but are an instance of interpretations and selections we make and which are, in turn, influenced by the narratives existing around us and in which we are already living. The stories others tell about us belong here as do the various genres of narration which are customary in our culture. Therefore these

narratives are never neutral; they are always woven into social structures and practices and are thus ideological.

The processual character of our subjectivity also shows itself in/the fact that we are always in the process of writing our stor(y)ies. This can happen in various ways, as a continuation or a revision e.g. as a result of a confrontation with other narratives that contain new ways of seeing and systems of meaning.

### **On the Memory Work Method**

Since, within a predetermined framework, we are the interpreters of our experience and thus the constructors of our own identities, it is really quite clear that we have to look more closely at these constructions. This is where the memory work that has been developed by a research group centred around Frigga Haug starts. It is concerned with investigating how identity is constructed starting from individual experience. <sup>3</sup> Here, too, the basic presumptions I have previously sketched are determining. We are born into a historically and culturally determined society which has been marked by specific structures, forms of thought, ways of seeing and values which suggest certain positions to us. We don't simply take over these positions but engage with them in differing ways - we identify with some but reacted to others by resisting or developing multifarious forms of compromise. All of this takes place from the perspective that we acquire social abilities and are able to act.

Since we ourselves know best how we did and do that, we are now concerned with how to make this knowledge available. As the name implies, memory work uses the memories of one's own experiences for this purpose. These memories do not provide us with an objective picture of our past, they refer to what we hold to be important. Our past "is not simply available to us as such, it is already a construction, a selection of certain meanings that are important for our personalities today" (Haug, 1995, p. 11). In this way we construct our (hi)stories of ourselves. "E.g. each of us can feel they are a failure and keep appropriate scenarios available that prove it or the opposite or as always being successful without each having the possibility of having both memories available" (Haug, 1995, p. 11).

On the details of the methodological procedure: 4

It begins with writing down memories of experiences connected with a specific subject in as much detail as possible. It has proved an advantage when these memory scenarios are written in the third person. When written in the first person there is often a tendency not to take things as seriously because much appears to be very familiar in any case or is regarded as irrelevant.

These texts are then processed by means of a combination of ideological criticism, discourse and linguistic analysis. In this manner it is possible to examine the ways and possibilities which were chosen in a particular situation, which were rejected or not even seen, what was accorded meaning and how the person in question constructed themselves. The deconstruction work also includes investigating which social expectations, values and discourses become effective in the process. "Here there is a presumption that various voices—each deriving from a different experience and social expectation—will appear in the text and that as contradictory, or fragmentary inconsistencies they will be able to be de-coded out of the smoothing ascription of meaning which has been laid over them." (Haug, 1995, p.11). Our stories only seem clear at first glance. Looking at them more carefully, it becomes obvious how artful attempts are made to cover up gaps, ambivalence and contradictions in favour of the benefit of the ability to take action.

Haug recommends the following pragmatic procedure in dealing with the texts. In a first step every figure that appears in a text is investigated for the ways in which actions, feelings as well as interests and wishes occur. This can be performed as a purely mechanical listing of the relevant words in the three categories which are then examined for the linguistic structures used. Are e.g. actions described in the form of verbs or nouns? What kinds of activity are present, are they, for example, above all mental in nature and consist predominantly of considerations, thought experiments etc? Which feelings are in evidence and how – do they appear in passive constructions? Are clichés, empty phrases or abstract formulations used? Above all this approach has the effect that, right from the beginning, work is being done in deconstructing the text so that a sensitivity for linguistic staging is heightened and being seduced into possible interpretations of the text with reference to its writer is prevented. On this basis how individual figures are constructed as well as the way they fit together or appear differentially can be worked out. This takes place by engaging with characteristics such as e.g. the connection between actions and feelings or between wishes and interests and when these appear. These constructions can be even more clearly contoured in a further step when how the writer of the text establishes connections as natural are analysed; which evaluations appear in the text i.e. how what is positive and worth striving for or rejected is constructed. Here it proves useful to

have recourse to the pairs of opposites constructed in the process. Since meaning is created in our language on the basis of differences to other terms (e.g. the word "day" only makes sense because it differs from the word "night"), thinking about the other side that is not explicitly mentioned in the text can expose these constructions in their strongest form. Often there are contradictory constructions in the text such as the simultaneous striving for something which is also rejected thus leading to a certain inability to act. Finally, how these constructions are determined by specific social discourses, moral concepts etc. is also examined.

Ideally the process should take place in small groups. This has many advantages. Thus it is not only very favourable when many different questions are asked about the individual constructions, it has also proved extremely productive to discuss other possible constructions and ways of acting. Generally speaking, working in a group very quickly clears up the oft-expressed fear, present at the first contact with the method, that it could become "too personal" since it is exactly through this process that "what from circumstances and society is perceived by individuals, how that is given meaning and built into their own lives" becomes so clear. Haug, 1995, pp. 160-161). It is as if we are shown the meaning of the statement "the personal is political". Although the idea that the writer of the memory scenario should be present during the deconstruction of their own text and even participate in that is received with scepticism at the beginning, it undergoes a similar process. Since in the concrete work it very quickly becomes clear here that there is no intention to interpret the person who wrote the text but rather the relevant constructions, this does not generally make for problems. However, at the beginning of the work with this method it has to be made clear—repeatedly—that the concern is neither an empathetic understanding of the text nor an evaluation of specific constructions as being either "right" or "wrong".

### **Memory scenarios of the film "Pretty Woman"**

On the subject of "when a film that I thought was bad still moved me" in our project about women's filmic experiences, memories of "Pretty Woman"—amongst others—were written down. The four selected texts printed below explain the differing acquisition of the film by the individual writers on the one hand and on the other, however, also how certain meanings suggested by the film are to be found again in the individual constructions. I will illustrate this using two aspects at the end. 5

### **Scenario 1 6**

*It was another one of those days when she sat bored at home. Actually she had planned to do a lot with the day. So she could assuage her bad conscience she had wanted to finish work that had been set aside. But she couldn't concentrate on the paperwork in front of her. Despite all her efforts she finally laid the manuscript to one side and thought about what she could do. But she couldn't think of anything appealing and very soon she found herself in a state of listlessness. She couldn't bring herself to study but at that moment there was no alternative on offer. Irritated, she picked up the telephone in order to tear herself out of her boredom. But this didn't bring the yearned-for success either. So she decided to spend the evening in front of the television and began rather listlessly to study the TV programme. In it she found "Pretty Woman", a film she had read and heard a lot about. All her friends enthused about the story of the handsome Richard Gere and the beautiful Julia Roberts. Now she had the opportunity to form her own opinion about a film she had already consigned to the category "kitsch". Despite that, or perhaps exactly because of it, she waited expectantly for it to begin. At last it began. From the first second she let herself be caught up in the story of the prostitute Vivian who falls in love with the rich businessman and stared spellbound at the screen. Right at the beginning she noticed that Vivian was not a real prostitute and was pretty dissatisfied with her life. She waited expectantly for Vivian to return to a "normal" life. She knew that it would be Edward who would take her out of her moral quagmire. Once again it would be the strong man protecting the weaker sex. And Vivian really does manage to escape from her dubious prostitute milieu because of Edward. She is also offered the possibility completing her schooling - to be made easier for her by an Edward Lewis scholarship. Despite that she wasn't satisfied. If the film would end now she would be disappointed and dissatisfied even though she knows very well that a happy end would make the film seem even more divorced from reality than now. She waits impatiently and is also "rewarded" for her persistence in front of the screen. Edward "saves" Vivian and as a sign of his love, overcomes his fear of heights. Overjoyed they fall into each other's arms... Touched, she sits in front of the television and tries to keep her tears under control. Hopefully none of her friends will come into the room and notice her emotionality about a film that she doesn't even like... After all, she always laughed at her friends who were thrilled by films like this. How can one take a story seriously when it is so unrealistically depicted?*

## **Scenario 2**

*She had already seen the film a number of times. But that didn't change her reaction - she was moved to tears every time. She likes the story so much. Yes, this modern fairy tale really did have a powerful effect on her.*

*She remembered very well the first time she saw the film. She sat expectantly in the cinema. She already heard the film music in her head having heard it on the radio. She liked it a lot. Because of it she had a positive attitude to the film from the beginning. The plot also fascinated her: the poor, beautiful, good-hearted woman who had come alone to the merciless city in order to build a new life had got involved with the wrong people. She lives together with a "girlfriend" with whom she went on the streets every night. But she wasn't really a prostitute, as the film itself emphasises because, in the final analysis, she has ideals and dreams of true love.*

*She sat in the cinema and watched the film attentively. She was touched by the honesty and openheartedness of the main actress. She was sorry for her. But she knew that it would soon get better for her because she believed in something. And she judged the main character to be a woman who fought for her ideals. And in the end the poor woman was saved from her fate - she met "him". She was relieved. But why did she feel relieved? He just hired her, like all the other men had hired her before. Why did she forgive him for that? Perhaps because he was shown as a son who has been disappointed by his father and who became like he was because of this failed relationship and so couldn't act in any other way. "The poor man," she thought and so forgave him everything. She was convinced that, at bottom, he was a kind-hearted man.*

*During the film he provides her with everything—beautiful clothes, jewellery etc.—so that she will be accepted in his world. She was delighted with every step the leading actress took into his world. "Thank God the poor woman also has a bit of luck," popped into her head again and again while she was watching the film.*

*The scene at the opera touched her most. At the beginning of the performance he tells her that opera is something special. That there are only two possibilities: either it touched you or you will never understand it. She understood all too well what he was saying. She also felt that the opera was something special. She herself had been to the opera many times. Before every performance she informed herself about the plot and studied the music carefully. But it was only at the performance, in the atmosphere of the opera house, the singers and the stage that she was spellbound by the action. And she had also experienced once when an acquaintance was at the same performance and didn't like the opera. It really was a case that the opera hadn't touched her and that she hadn't understood it because she couldn't empathise with the story. *She knew right**

*away that the opera was a big hurdle for the leading lady because she had never been involved with it before. But as she was moved to tears sitting in the box, she was happy that the leading lady had also passed this test.*

*It was like this through the whole film. She was relieved every time the leading actress took another step forward. And when the two of them were happily united at the end, she left the cinema with tears in her eyes. But then she was angry. In reality the characters were represented in a very stupid way. And the scene in the opera. Why was the leading lady moved, why did she cry? First of all she didn't understand Italian and secondly she had no idea of the plot. And suddenly she found the film absolutely ridiculous. Other scenes came into her head. The business dinner scene where she had absolutely no idea which cutlery to use first. It also happened to her that a snail flew out of its shell and across the whole restaurant. But here again she was forgiven by her escorts. And again a weight fell from her when this had no consequences for the leading lady.*

*But now she was angry with the film and her reaction. Basically she was of the opinion that no-one would take a fairy tale like this seriously. But then it went through her mind that that she was emotionally very moved and she saw a danger in the film. The film could have an effect that women might—as did Vivian in the film—believe they have to do everything to play the perfect "female role" developed by the partner which, in the film, was only one piece of the "man" puzzle and that this part had to be carefully formed until it could be "finally" fitted in. And when that then fits perfectly into the puzzle they might think that they had found happiness. But that that is the point at which the real work of the relationship begins is not the message of the film. But she wasn't completely sure about the effect of the film. Basically it was only a fairytale. And, as everybody knows, fairy tales are not real, they take place in an invented world and what happens in that world doesn't happen in our real world. Or does it?*

### **Scenario 3**

*It's Saturday night and she is still busy in the kitchen. Just like every Saturday her eldest son is at his band rehearsal. Martin, the younger, is watching the sports news. Martin shouts: "There's something on the television for you tonight. You have to watch the "Pretty Woman" film with Julia Roberts, you know what I mean, the good-looking woman with the lousy guy." Curious, she comes up to the television and stands behind her son's chair, leans on it and watches. She likes relationship stories best. They draw her in completely. People are important for her - how*

*they meet each other, how they get to know each other and perhaps how they come to love each other. It's strange. In reality she is rather sceptical as far as love relationships and partnerships are concerned. But nevertheless she always watches relationship stories like this although the happy ends to these stories anger her. She regards finding the "ideal man" as rather difficult and problematic. Perhaps her partnership expectations are set too high. She is divorced, lives with her two sons alone and gets along quite well. She finds the woman who plays the prostitute very likeable. She admires her good figure and the courage she has to dress differently, even provocatively. The courage the woman has to be different fascinates her even though she doesn't like the way she dresses. Her way of talking, of approaching others, of seeing others, fascinates her. Well done, she also has a feeling for driving, better even than the man. He appears to like the woman.*

*The tension of the relationship in the making is physically perceptible for an audience. See how the man looks searchingly and with approval at the woman. Does she correspond to his wishes? What an honour for him, thinks the writer. The beautiful woman is too good for him, she thinks, and is already caught up in the story of the relationship. She puts her feet up and makes herself comfortable in her chair. A prickly feeling comes over her, perhaps because she doesn't let herself experience that feeling for herself. She is afraid of it. She enjoys it when the leading character can make the man enthusiastic in a natural and casual way and can enrich his atrophied emotional life. Yes, there are some exciting and suspenseful moments in life. Yes, but only in film, and it is only because she is so pretty and because she moves so gracefully and because her smile is so captivating. She simply captivates the man. Yes, men! They hesitate much too long. Why doesn't he see that she is not simply a prostitute, that she's somebody very special? Why doesn't he just admit that he's spellbound? Why does he only want one thing? Love is not important for him, it dies anyway. During the week they spend together he clothes her anew and she visibly enjoys it, choosing exactly what she wants; turning around in front of the mirror and being admired from all sides. She looks fantastic when she goes to the horse races with him and when she enthusiastically accompanies him to a business lunch. The writer always needs confirmation from others about her appearance. Praise from others is important to her. The viewer thinks he doesn't deserve her. He lets her feel that she comes from the street. Why is this scene so touching? Tears run down her face. Furtively she wipes them away. But her son has seen the tears and smiles. It's just too sad. Why do men not understand women at all? Why can't they put themselves in their position at all? Why do they go in such different directions?*

#### Scenario 4

*Watching television was one of the few activities that she and her husband did together. And even here their interests were different. He loved films he could just "fall into" but also action and horror films. She preferred programmes like "Universum", reports about other peoples, animals and countries. She also liked detective films in which she could think about the solution to the case - even though she couldn't stand watching violence. The violence shouldn't be shown and then the films were like solving a puzzle for her. But she only remained really awake watching either problem films in which the action was not easily predictable or with exciting thrillers. Only sometimes, especially when she was tired, she loved watching fall-into-and-enjoy films together. She wanted to relax just as he did and to have a nice quiet evening - tucked up under a warm blanket. This time they wanted to watch "Pretty Woman" together. Really she wanted to relax, to close her eyes now and again and to let the film splutter away in fragments as an alibi for "doing nothing". But strangely enough she soon she fell under the spell of the story. A young prostitute (poor girl - got into trouble and is naturally not responsible) gets her millionaire. So what. That's going to be another happy end tear-jerker she thought at the beginning. And still she was amused just how casually this young woman succeeded in bringing the stiff, emotionless man closer to the important things in life. This pretty woman bubbled over with joie de vivre - everything about her was naive feeling. She was uneducated but by no means stupid. In her view of life she was way ahead of her partner. Whether it was laughing or crying she showed it without shame or pretence, with no consideration for her surroundings. Her smile was infectious but so was her crying. Here the writer began to ask herself for the first time why this film transported her emotionally. The man was not unpleasant but in reality the writer didn't like this kind of man at all. He was an exceptionally successful self-made man who enjoyed his success at the expense of others and rushed from success to success rather ruthlessly and coldly. He treated himself to a kind of "woman" that he didn't know. Why did the writer want them become a couple in the end? Was it the memory of Cinderella? In any case he didn't appear to be interested in an enduring relationship - she had fallen in love with him and didn't want to be his kept mistress who had to be at his beck and call. By loving him the young woman succeeded in leaving the milieu of prostitution. She decided to study in order to better her social standing by herself- and he let her go her own way. Suddenly self-respect had become important to her. Up to this point the writer had enjoyed the film, had allowed herself to become involved in the plot and felt almost no resistance. This pretty woman had so much that was lovable about her that she could wish her the start of a new life from the bottom of her heart. But the last thing that happened is that the man really does just pop up like a knight in shining*

*armour - converted to love and he rescues poor "Cinderella". The writer could not treat her as being poor since she was engaged in self-fulfilment in any case. That was the point where the writer began to get angry with herself – because she liked the happy end. True, it was terribly kitschy but the two got together! How is it in fairy tales? "...and they lived happily ever after." You must be joking!*

### **"Old Wine in New Bottles" - the Passive Woman**

In the individual texts the question that always played a central role in the socio-cultural definition of femininity is in evidence in various forms: how and in what form can women be active? The memory scenarios illustrate how the writers attempt to be capable of acting using various constructions within the framework of the still dominant ideology that only grants women active roles to a limited degree. The constructions that they develop run from total rejection of an active position for women through to extremely active women for whom emotions are only possible through the man.

Thus the woman in the first scenario can desire something but she herself cannot contribute anything to obtaining it for herself. Here, both writer and lead role are so constructed that both are unsatisfied with their situation and want to change it, but they themselves cannot bring that about. A change like that can only come from outside. Concretely, this means that women are expected to wait—as is the female figure in the film—till the man appears as a rescuer or, in the case of the writer, their listlessness is terminated by a film that is coincidentally playing. Thus women's desire is fulfilled by chance and without her having a hand in the matter.

No matter how much we reject this pattern from a feminist point of view it is nevertheless simultaneously very familiar to all of us. We know it from countless examples in the media. Thus in her analysis of the classic romance novel Modleski (1982) described how it also concerns, amongst other things, the difficult question of how a women can awaken male desires without presenting themselves as active. Very often the solution is to be found in desire being triggered by the man looking at the sleeping or unconscious heroine. We know the counter-position from melodrama in which the active desire of the heroine always end tragically, (cf. e.g. Doane, 1987).

In the second scenario the pattern is developed in a slightly more differentiated way. Here the main female figure is active and is also strong and competent, but as soon as the man appears

none of this can be shown any more. The writer talks, amongst other things, about the main female character pushing into the man's world which sounds very active but isn't. This is because the woman being in male territory is only possible because she brings the "right" qualities with her and has the man's support. He treats her mistakes and mishaps with leniency and offers, above all, material support which is not, however, a generous gesture on his part but selfishly serves to ensure that the appearance of the woman at his side is appropriate to his social status.

The reflection of the writer on the film about the relationship of the sexes is so constructed that the man is the active part - he shapes the role for the woman that she then "plays". This construction leads to a concealed form of female activity. In that the expected or demanded behaviour is declared to be a game, the woman can distance herself from it. Simultaneously the position of the dominated person is redefined as one in which she has control because it depends on her whether she plays it or not.

Anyway it is not a problem for a woman to be active in areas are considered to be "typically female". This becomes clear from the constructions in the third scenario. The woman there—writer and protagonist in equal measure—is very relationship oriented (the writer is almost addicted to relationship films, the protagonist is described by means of her relationships to other people). Feelings play a central role - thus the protagonist appears in an area that is "typically male", car driving, with her "feeling for driving". The female lead is however, also active in that she presents herself as sexually attractive and thus submits herself to the man's appraisal.

The woman in scenario 4 is very attractive. The way the writer is constructed here appears really radical in comparison to the scenarios of the other writers. But this construction too remains rooted in classical gender definitions even though the position of man and woman are switched. Here the writer is defined by mean of her intellect and work and her husband by his feelings. The female lead is also active although that is triggered by the man who elicits feelings in her simply by being himself and gives the impetus to her self realisation. In this construction it is interesting what happens when the man becomes active. His activity is connected with love and this is equated with restrictions on the woman because the man makes himself into the woman's rescuer in a situation in which she doesn't need to be saved.

Even though they are all very different, these constructions have one thing in common - they grant the man a dominant status. Women can be active and show competence in areas that are

accepted and approved of as being "feminine". One of the preconditions for a relationship with a man seems to consist of women avoiding and infringements of that border.

The texts presented various possibilities with which women attempt to cope with the socio-cultural definition of femininity and its attendant demands and expectations. In that way gender roles can be exchanged, male dominance is inwardly redefined as female dominance or is accepted as the price for communality and a relationship with a man who declares himself to be the woman's saviour. It becomes clear how difficult it is to take up a position completely outside the ruling ideology since one gives up all the advantages associated with a generally accepted position.

The meanings that the film offers tend in the same direction. The development of the female lead can be read as a modern version of "Cinderella" or "Pygmalion" in which the social ascent of the central female character is only possible with the help of men. 7 Bernie, the hotel manager, stands at her side with fatherly advice, the material and social foundation is provided by the male character. Criticism— especially that expressed from the feminist perspective—can be levelled at the film "Pretty Woman" (as well as similar, current films concerning the development of a woman) on the grounds that this development is only possible because of the man's support and usually ends with the woman fitting into the established social order.

In the film the image of the man as saviour is also present in the hopes of the leading actress that her dreams will become real. She says that when she was a little girl she always dreamed that she was a princess waiting to be freed from her tower by a prince. Dreams like this are not foreign to us. Fairy tales and their modern versions which are then flicker across the television screen as "fairy-tale weddings" confront us with it continually.

### **A Disruptive Contradiction - the Tension Between Feelings and Reason**

The discrepancy between feeling and reason is not only the subject on which the scenarios that have been presented here were written. But it is also the central theme of all the film experiences of women we have collected in our project. The scenarios make clear that in watching the film the concern is first and foremost about participating in feelings that cannot stand up to assessment by our reason. It appear that it is not possible for the women to combine the two.

This is made very clear to us in, for example, scenario 4 where "female nature"—feeling, *joie de vivre*, smiling—means self-realisation can only take place through reason and by overcoming this female nature. Simultaneously this means that feelings represent a threat to reason and only have a place in rare moments or niches (such as when watching a film).

The division between reason and feeling can also be seen in the second scenario though here with reversed signification. In this construction love and care of others is equated with empathy that eliminates all criticism (consider e.g. the evaluation of the male lead by the writer). The writer does have one area in which feeling and reason can be brought together and that is the opera which stands apart from her everyday life.

In the emotional experience of the viewer her fantasies and wishes take on form. Films are specially predestined to be stages for viewers' dreams and longings. In "Pretty Woman" this is addressed at the end of the film directly: "Welcome to Hollywood, what do you dream of? At some time or other everyone comes here, this is Hollywood, the land of dreams. Some dreams will be fulfilled, others won't. But don't stop dreaming, this is Hollywood, the land of dreams. So don't stop dreaming."

That films can serve to live out all the yearnings and wishes that cannot be realised in one's own everyday life is brought out in the third scenario. Concretely these are all the "exciting and suspenseful moments" involved in the development of a relationship and that the writer experiences physically when watching the film. This is abruptly ended, however, as soon as the writer becomes involved with the male lead. Through him she is once again confronted by what she defines as reality - that the relationship to a man imagined by her is not possible. Dreams and yearnings are only indirectly expressed in the first scenario and that is by means of the writer's dissatisfaction with her own situation and the fear of a happy end which fails to materialise.

For a more detailed theoretical consideration of these aspects I am going to turn to the ideological function of phantasy and bring psychological concepts into play. In psychoanalysis, fantasies are not seen as the opposite of reality; fantasies are much more the material from which the reality of our wishes is made (cf. Cowie, 1990). Fantasies refer to "the psychic reality of desire", they are the staging of our desire and form, so to say, the setting for wish fulfilment scenarios which are acted out using material from our everyday experiences. Lacan talks of phantasm as being the scene in which desires can be realised and staged. This is because desire

is not something that "pre-exists but rather something that has to be constructed—and this is exactly the role of the phantasm: to set coordinates on the subject's desires... it is only through the phantasm that the subject is constituted as desiring: through the phantasm we learn to desire." (Zizek, 1992, p. 9)

As far as the phantasm of romantic love that plays such a central role in the film "Pretty Woman"—as well as in Western culture as a whole—one can concur with Lacan (in Lepsley/Westlake, 1993, p. 186) that people would never feel romantic love if they had never heard it being talked about. 8

It is also on the level of phantasy that the ideologies of social reality are structured. Thus deviating from Marx's point of view that ideology consists in the fact that people do not know what they are doing or have a false perception of social reality Zizek (1991, p. 116 et. seq.) points out that the illusion exists at the level of acting itself. Or in other words: people are exactly aware they are following an illusion in their actions but still do it nevertheless. What they don't know is that social reality itself is determined by an illusion, a phantasy. Thus here we are concerned with an (unconscious) phantasy that itself structures our social reality. For the film "Pretty Woman" this might consist in viewers no longer believing in romantic love (how could they with the divorce rate as high as it is and the amount of violence within marriages) and know that it is an illusion. At the same time they act on the basis of the phantasy.

In order to better understand how individuals allow themselves to become involved in such phantasies and how, in this way, certain ideologies become effective, Ducrot in SalecPs concept (1994, p. 43 ff.) is very helpful. According to this, the set of meanings on offer (for a statement, a film etc.) have to be written in relation to its ideal continuation. If a particular discourse is successful then concrete people have recognised themselves as the addressees of this discourse and thus identified with it. Thus this discourse has constructed a symbolic space, a standpoint, "from which we can view ourselves as lovable" (Salecl, 1994, p. 47).

Concretely this means that this space can be filled with images of how we would like to see ourselves. In the process, support by means of a phantasmal framework plays an additional and essential role which, although it is not directly addressed, is nevertheless essential in that it consists of mobilising various phantasies in the individual.

Our example "Pretty Woman" concerns, above all, the phantasm of romantic love which produces phantasies of happiness and sexual fulfilment, the idea of two complimentary sexes producing a harmonic whole together and making it possible to overcome loneliness and the separation of body and soul (cf. in this context also Belsey, 1992).

The memory scenarios make the rending situation that results for women clear. The discrepancy expressed in the texts is one between enjoyment dominated by the phantasm of romantic love and our knowledge of the patriarchal roots and one-sided codification connected with it. What we need is a change of phantasmal framework so that phantasms become possible and in which both enjoyment and critical reason have a place.

### **Notes**

1) I cannot go into details of these works here but can only draw attention to the comprehensive presentations that are particularly useful for the subject under discussion such as Weedon (1991), Kerby (1991) und Scott (1992).

2) Thus the works of Elias (1976), Foucault (1986) and Butler (1991) are especially relevant in making clear how deeply our emotions and feelings are determined by social influences and subject to their own historical development.

3) The memory work was developed during a research project on the socialisation of women and represents an attempt to put into practice some of the central demands of feminist criticism of science. Cf. the expositions by Haug (1990) and Haug (1990).

4) Detailed descriptions of the individual steps in the methodology of memory work can be found in Haug (1990) and Haubenreisser/Stockmann (1993).

5) The detailed evaluation of the texts can be found in Hipfl/ Ehlers/Geistler/Lederer/Strohmaier in Haug/Hipfl 1995, pp. 52-108.

6) Sometimes, in the first phase of processing individual aspects which would have been relevant for understanding were not elaborated by the writers. We then asked the writers to do this. Passages of this nature are highlighted in normal typeface.

7) The aspect that in the film there is also a parallel development of the male lead character into a sensitive man only comes into the memory scenarios peripherally.

8) According to Lacan "...the phantasm is connected to the way in which people organise their enjoyment: the way they structure their desires round a traumatic element that cannot be symbolised. The phantasm gives consistence to what we call "reality". Social reality is always permeated with a fundamental impossibility, an antagonism, that prevents reality being symbolised completely. The phantasm is what this tries to symbolise or put another way, what tries to fill this gap in social reality. Thus the phantasm functions as a scenario that covers up fundamental inconsistencies in society." (Salecl, 1994, pp. 13 -14). The phantasm of romantic love covers the from Lacan postulated impossibility of a relationship between the sexes. (Cf. here Lapsley/Westlake, 1993).

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