

# ANALYZING CHARACTERS: CREATION, INTERPRETATION, AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE

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Most people agree that characters in books, films, games, or other media are important as objects of individual experiences, as socio-cultural influences, or as means to understand ourselves, others, and the world. But there is less agreement about two fundamental questions concerning characters. The first is: Do we need to theorize and analyze them, and if yes, why?

I will show that there are several very different reasons for doing that. This leads to the second question: *How* can we analyze characters systematically? I will give a brief overview of my own theoretical approach which is described more extensively in my book *Die Figur im Film* (2008, an English translation is in preparation).<sup>1</sup>

## THE DIFFERENT USES OF ANALYZING CHARACTERS

So, why do we bother ourselves with analyzing characters, at all? Is that really relevant? Why don't we just keep to our intuitive impressions and reactions? Consider the following situations:

<sup>1</sup> Some ideas and passages of this paper have been published previously elsewhere (e.g., Eder 2010). My approach owes much to the works of other scholars. Particularly, I would like to mention David Bordwell (1989), Murray Smith (1995), Per Persson (2003), Fotis Jannidis (2004), Hans J. Wulff ([www.derwulff.de](http://www.derwulff.de)) and Ralf Schneider (2001), but many others have also been helpful. For a more comprehensive bibliography, see Eder (2008b).

1. A group of literary scholars discuss the morality of Anna Karenina.
2. A group of theologians discuss the representation of God in the Bible.
3. A group of historians try to find out if the hero of the Gilgamesh epic refers to a real Sumerian king.
4. A scriptwriter has an argument with her producer who claims the protagonist of her script is unsympathetic and should be completely rewritten.
5. An advertising agency tries to convince their client to change their brand character because it does not fit into their transmedia strategy.
6. A court in post-war Germany disputes if the Nazi film-director Veit Harlan is guilty of psychological assistance to the Holocaust because of the anti-Semitic characters in his propagandistic film *JUD SÜSS*.
7. Anita Sarkeesian's video channel *Feminist Frequency* on YouTube causes an outrage among gamers by demonstrating how female characters in video games are regularly stereotyped as damsels in distress.

Those scenarios show three things: First, characters are of considerable socio-cultural importance and can have severe consequences. Second, they are causing conflicts. And third, they call for at least three different forms of analysis:

1. The scenarios (4) and (5) indicate that during the production of an artwork, questions of *creative analysis* arise, i.e. questions of how a particular *effect on the target audience* might be achieved by a character. Artworks or media texts are, in this connection, regarded as products whose artistic and economic success depends crucially on their characters. Their creation can be an extremely complicated

process. For instance, no less than seven screenwriters have been involved in the movie *Casablanca*.

2. When, by contrast, scholars seek to comprehend artworks, questions of an *interpretative analysis* pose themselves, as illustrated in the scenarios (1) and (2): How can the strangeness of a character be explained? What is the aesthetic strategy of characterization, and what does it contribute to the meaning of the work? In this context, multi-layered characters and artworks stand in focus, and the analysis aims at specific forms of *knowledge and aesthetic experience*. Many characters are enigmatic or polysemous. Some narratives like *L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD* not only refuse psychological explanation but fundamentally disintegrate their characters' identity, irritate conventions and images of humanity. It is one of the essential functions of characters to express novel perspectives on the human condition which often are not intelligible at first glance.

3. *Socio-cultural analyses*, again, concern themselves with the representation of humankind or of particular social groups determined by gender, age, ethnicity, etc. – like in the scenarios (6) and (7). They examine the communicative power and the *impact of characters on culture*, aiming to uncover hidden ideologies and their structures. Here it is usually highly popular and influential characters as well as common types of characters that are dealt with: How are Christians and Muslims, labourers and doctors, women and men represented? The most impassioned conflicts are stirred up by questions of whether certain characters convey distorted images of humanity, are exploited as ideological Instruments, or disparage social groups.

So, very different things can be expected from analyzing characters. Creators want to make them effective, interpreters to understand them better, cultural critics uncover their ideologies, causes and consequences. These three approaches to analysis are also focusing on different *audiences* and forms of reception: Creators try to predict

how their specific target audiences will react to their characters. In contrast, interpreters have an ideal audience in mind. Cultural critics, again, consider the impact on social groups in reality. Moreover, the three kinds of analyses are also connected with different value judgments: characters are evaluated according to their effectivity, their aesthetic value, or their cultural impact, respectively. The different perspectives can also be combined, and often, a historical, diachronic, or intertextual perspective expands the analysis (scenario 3). But for any kind of analysis it is of crucial importance to capture the features of characters precisely and to reach agreement about them. Analysis can serve the exchange of controversial views, eliminate misunderstandings, and render different reactions to characters comprehensible. Subjective intuitions often prove to be inadequate here. Whoever intends to really understand characters is well advised to rely also on systematic models and categories for analysis.

This leads to the second question: *How* can we analyze characters more systematically? In the rest of the paper, I will give an overview of my own approach. For illustration, I will refer to the film classic *Casablanca* and its hero Rick Blaine. A short reminder of the story: In the early 1940s, Rick owns a café and casino in Casablanca, Morocco, on the escape route for Europeans fleeing from the Nazis. Two resistance fighters, Ilsa Lund and Victor Laszlo, are chased by the Nazi Major Strasser and try to get transit visa from Rick. But he refuses, because Ilsa once was his great love and then suddenly left him without explanation. Both Rick and Ilsa then have to choose between their love and their moral responsibility.

#### WHAT ARE CHARACTERS, HOW DO THEY ORIGINATE, AND HOW ARE THEY EXPERIENCED?

If we want to know how to analyze characters, we have to answer some fundamental questions: What are characters and how do they

originate? What kinds of features do they possess? In what relations do they stand with other elements of an artwork? How are they experienced by the audience? What are their general relationships with culture and society?

Even what characters are, is already highly controversial. The word itself does not provide us with a clue. “Character” is derived from the word for “stamp” in Old Greek. The words «figure», “figura” in Portuguese or “Figur” in German refer to any form that stands out from some background: not only characters, but also pieces of a game, figures of speech, or optical patterns. Most frequently, characters are defined as imaginary human beings, but that is imprecise: The spectrum of characters also encompasses animals, or even abstract shapes like Pac-man. Moreover, their mode of existence is conceived of in different ways: some consider them to be textual signs, others mental ideas, or abstract objects. Such theoretical views are not merely intellectual games but have practical consequences for the analysis. For instance, in contrast to hermeneutic approaches, some semiotic theories deem it wrong to deliberate about the psyche of what they consider to be ‘mere signs’, focusing on textual structures instead.

My own definition is that characters are *identifiable represented beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artefacts*. The first part of the definition, *identifiable represented beings with an inner life*, means that characters are set apart from other elements of represented worlds (storyworlds, or diegeses) by being ascribed an object-related inner life with perceptions, thoughts, motives, or feelings. Concerning the second part of the definition, *communicatively constructed artefacts*, I elaborate on Walton’s proposal (1990) to consider artworks as props in games of the imagination. In my view, the participants of those games create mutual imagined worlds by following certain dispositions and rules of communication. Accord-

ingly, imaginary worlds and beings are artefacts springing from intersubjective communication and imagination. Like laws or scientific theories, they are products of a social praxis. Individual authors and audiences have similar ideas about characters because they construct them on the basis of similar bodily and mental dispositions as well as mutually accepted rules of communication (like conversational implicatures or expectations of relevance).<sup>2</sup> Thus, characters are neither signs «in the text» nor subjective mental representations «in the head» but intersubjective constructs. That is made evident by the fact that, having seen a film or read a book, we often quarrel about who has understood a character correctly. Any debate about whether Rick and Ilsa *really* love each other is rooted in the conviction that there are correct views about this.

#### RECEPTION

Thus, characters are not purely subjective. Nevertheless, their reception is of fundamental importance to the analysis. Characters depend on communication, communication depends on reception. I'm drawing on Ralf Schneider's work (2001) here in assuming that characters are represented in our minds in the form of *mental models*. Mental models are multi-modal representations; they combine the results of different forms of information processing – visual, acoustic, linguistic etc. – into a vividly experienced unity. Character models represent the properties of a represented being in a particular structure and perspective. They change in the course of time, and may be preserved in memory. Character models are closely connected with other mental models. When we watch *CASABLANCA* we form models of Rick and the other characters, position them in situation models, and relate them to models of ourselves, for example, by wishing to look

2 Many of those rules are described in detail in Fotis Jannidis 2004.

as cool as Rick. The structures of character models are, therefore, highly important if we want to explain how we relate to characters.

The formation of mental character models is the second of four *levels of character-related audience reactions* that are built upon each other<sup>3</sup>:

1. the basic perception of material signs like the pages of a book or the images of a film;
2. the formation of mental models;
3. the inference of indirect or abstract meanings;
4. the reflection about real causes and consequences of characters; and – as an important subset on that level – about the aesthetic presentation of the character in the artwork.

For instance, in the case of Rick Blaine, we initially perceive the images of Humphrey Bogart's body and other information. These sensory perceptual impressions are processed further so as to yield a mental model of Rick: we connect, for instance, partial views of his body with utterances of other characters about him, so as to form the overall conception of a handsome cynic in an existential crisis situation. In the course of the film this initial model is continually transformed. During the film we may already develop ideas about the «deeper meaning» of the character. We might assume, for example, that Rick symbolises the importance of moral integrity. Furthermore, we can ask ourselves, for instance, what political intentions the filmmakers associated with Rick or how he affected the audiences of his time. And we can reflect on Rick's aesthetic presentation, e.g. Bogart's acting skills. Each one of these levels encompasses specific

<sup>3</sup> This distinction is based on a triangulation of Per Persson's work on "understanding cinema"(2003) with several other theories from psychology, philosophy, film and media studies

mental processes that build on each other and are in constant interaction with each other. The analysis of characters should, therefore, take into account all levels of reception.

#### THE CLOCK OF CHARACTER

From the model of reception, a simplified heuristics for the practice of character analysis can be derived. For mnemotechnical reasons, I termed it somewhat naively the *clock of character*. According to that model, characters have four aspects that roughly correspond to the levels of reception (image 1):

1. First, we may analyze them as *artefacts*: Here the question is «How is the character represented and constructed by textual devices?» In this context, characters are considered primarily in their relationships with the signs and structures of the artwork. Those textual structures, which are partly media-specific and partly transmedial, generate the perceptual experiences of the audience, but later can also become objects of aesthetic reflection.

2. Second, when we analyze characters as *represented beings*, the central question is «What features does the character show as an inhabitant of the represented fictional world?» The answer to this question rests on the formation of mental models as described above.

3. If we focus our attention of characters as *symbols*, again, the question is «What do the characters stand for, what indirect meanings do they convey?» The term «symbol» here comprises all forms of higher-level meanings, in which characters may function as secondary signifiers of something else, for instance virtues or vices.

4. Finally, if we consider characters as *symptoms*, our question is «What causes in reality formed the character, and what effects in reality does it produce?» In this perspective, characters are taken to be factors or consequences of real phenomena of communication, e.g. as role models for the audience or as products of their creators.

When experiencing and analyzing artworks, the attention may shift between these four aspects of characters. While watching *CASABLANCA*, we may be seeing Rick primarily as the casino owner in love, as a represented being (level 2). But we can very well, at times, admire Bogart's acting skills (artefact), grasp Rick's thematic meanings as a symbol of moral integrity or question the image of masculinity that he embodies, symptomatic of the time and culture of his creation.

This means that any character can be analyzed in all four respects: as artefact, represented being, symbol, and symptom. But usually, one of the aspects will be foregrounded or particularly interesting for analysis. Consequently, one may distinguish between *mimetic*, *artificial*, *symbolic*, and *symptomatic* characters, depending of the focus of attention. Much like Rick Blaine, most protagonists of popular literature or mainstream movies are perceived predominantly as represented beings. In contrast, other works foreground the artificiality of their characters. In the music video of Alex Gopher's song *THE CHILD*, for instance, the characters – a pregnant woman and her husband – are visually represented exclusively by computer animated typography which forms words describing their features. Characters in other works, again, are mostly symbolic like the gentleman in the black robe who personifies the eponymous tired Death in Fritz Lang's film "Destiny" (*DER MÜDE TOD*). And finally, we may be particularly interested in the symptomatic or ideological aspect of characters like the historically misrepresented Süß Oppenheimer from the anti-Semitic propaganda film *JUD SÜSS* (see scenario 6 above).

The 'clock of character' not only allow us to distinguish between those different kinds of characters. It also helps us in better understanding their emotional force. That characters evoke emotions is one of the most important reasons for our engagement with art-

works. But most approaches only consider one single level of emotional reactions, namely, emotions from desiring, empathizing or identifying with a represented being. In contrast, if we distinguish between four aspects of characters and four levels of reception, it is clear that any of those aspects or levels can trigger specific kinds of emotion: we react emotionally not only to Rick's coolness, but also to the form of his audio-visual presentation, to his message about love and responsibility, to his cultural influences, to Bogart's acting skills. Characters thus trigger feelings not only as represented beings but also as symbols, as symptoms, and as artefacts. This becomes obvious if we look at the protagonists of *The Child, Destiny*, or *Jud Süß*.

The heuristic model of the «clock» is just a starting point for analysis, serving as a simple heuristic survey of the most general property domains of characters. It renders visible which features may be ascribed to characters during an analysis, in what relationships the features stand to each other, and what concepts are suitable to describe them. Whichever way the analysis proceeds, the «clock of character» provides a general point of departure for the application of more differentiated concepts that will now briefly surveyed, giving a glimpse of what I described much more extensively in my book.

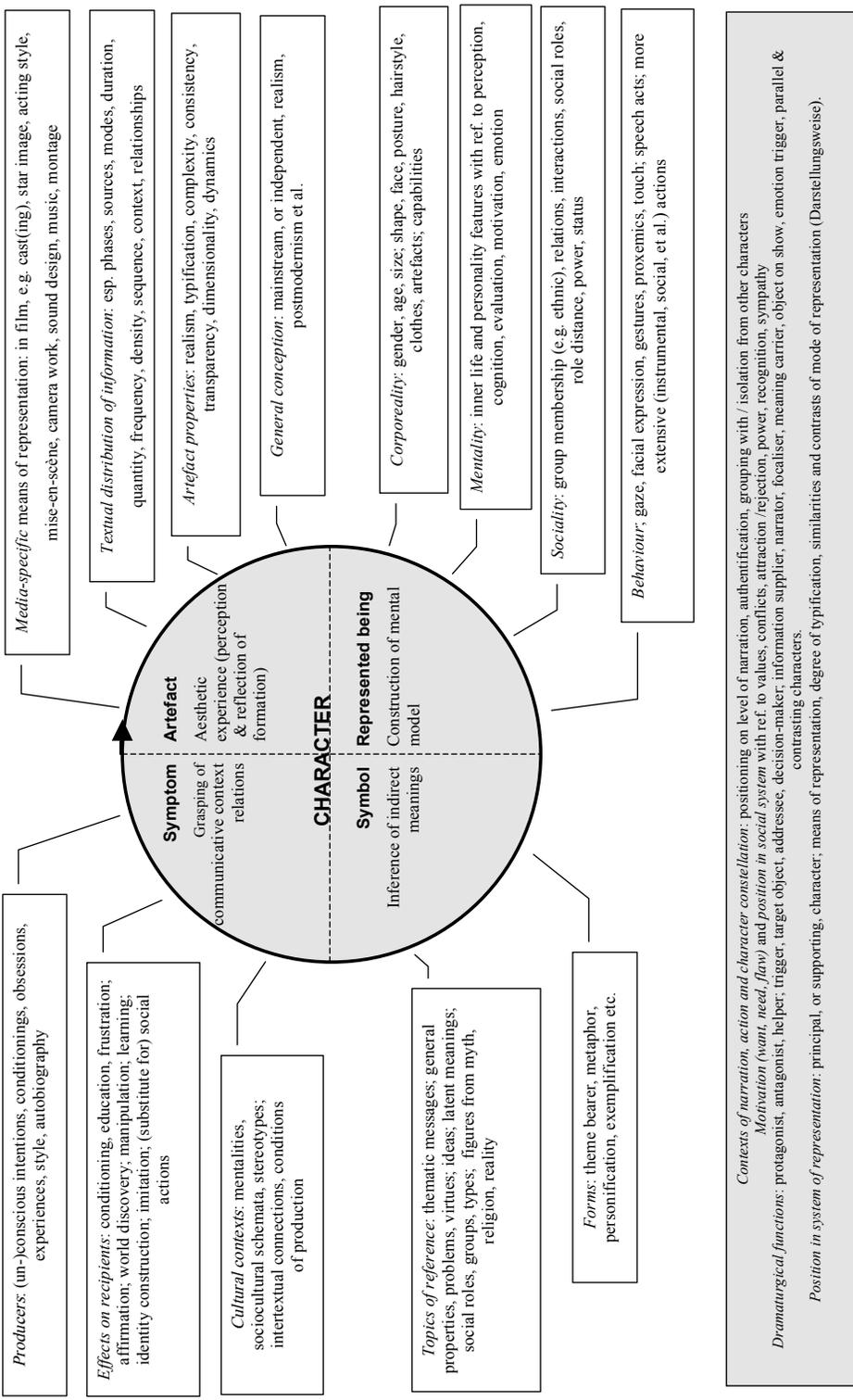


Fig. 1: The clock of character and its central categories

## CHARACTERS AS REPRESENTED BEINGS

The features characters exhibit as represented beings and inhabitants of the represented world often have considerable emotional force. Just think of their bodily, mental or social capabilities and disorders; their positions of power and status; their egoistic or altruistic actions and conflicts; their beauty, disease, or death. Think of Rick's interesting looks, his self-confidence, his love and moral integrity.

Often, it is quite difficult to identify and precisely describe such features. Descriptions of represented beings are always *thick* descriptions: they presuppose inferences from explicit textual information to implicit, not directly expressed or perceptible aspects of the characters, for instance inferences from Rick's facial expressions to his feelings or character traits. To ascertain the features of represented beings, we may use categories from the study of humans, but we have to be careful in doing that. It is, of course, inadmissible to equate characters with real human beings. Our relations to characters diverge fundamentally from relations to real persons. Nevertheless, we cannot do without a vocabulary for the description of represented beings. Moreover, our knowledge of real humans, our folk-psychology and folk-sociology, play a central role in the development of character models. Drawing on distinctions from everyday life, philosophy and practical dramaturgy, we can say that the three most general property domains of represented beings are their *corporeality*, *mind* and *sociality*. In *behaviour*, physical actions and mental motives are combined, and both are mostly also socially oriented towards others. The domains thus overlap but the associations between them may be specified precisely. Character analysis may thus proceed from more differentiated categories of these domains, which allow for more precise descriptions of represented beings.

1. When analyzing the *corporeality* of characters, their bodily or ‘external’ features, we can go beyond fundamental categories of age, bodily forms, or physical abilities, for instance by taking advantage of more specific concepts deriving from the scientific investigation of non-verbal communication. Those concepts function as heuristic tools and permit a more precise description of characters’ external appearance and body language, e.g. with regard to shape, face, gaze, posture, gestures, proxemics, touch, or their use of clothes, masks, and other artefacts close to the body. Such concepts enhance the ability to perceive subtle but powerful nuances of characters’ bodies, which might otherwise be easily overlooked, for instance Rick’s extraordinarily large expressive face, the efficiency of his movements, or his alternating between absent, controlling, and wistful gazes. From this we can already derive leads for interpreting the following domains.

2. In analyzing the *sociality* of represented persons, sociological concepts can be very helpful in describing their group membership (family, friendship, partnership, ethnicity, trade or profession, religion, nationality etc.), their interrelations, interactions, social roles, positions of power and status. It is thus of importance for the perception of the white American exile Rick that he, as the owner of a casino, occupies a self-sufficient position of power in Casablanca, that he moves smoothly among the conflicting groups of refugees, Nazi occupiers and French collaborators, and that he at first acts egotistically but then shoulders moral responsibility and sacrifices his love in the end.

3. Concerning the *mind* of characters, their fleeting inner life and their more stable personality, one may analyze on the most general level what distinguishes characters with regard to their mental processes or faculties: their perception, cognition, evaluation, motivation and emotion. As for Rick, it might be said, for instance, that his thoughts and feelings predominantly revolve around Ilsa, that he

takes up lost values anew, and that his emotional development runs from embitterment through longing desire to serious determination. Especially important and the essential interface between characters and plot is their *motivation*. As the characters carry out certain actions, we ascribe to them particular motives for doing so. Characters with incompatible motives get into conflict with each other, and often, individual characters are driven by conflicting motives. The central motives of characters are at the core of their personality; their development – for instance Rick’s change of mind leading him to give up Ilsa – is a crucial resource for themes of the artwork and the emotional participation of the audience.

One of the major difficulties in the analysis of characters’ minds (as well as their sociality) – and a constant source of conflicts between interpretive schools – is that one may fall back on very different approaches. We may – and have to – choose between (1) intuitive folk psychology, (2) various historical ideas of the mental, and (3) diverse current, often incompatible theories of the mind, e.g. psychoanalysis, the psychology of personality, or cognitive science. Theories and concepts of this kind permit more subtle and precise descriptions of represented minds, but they lead to completely diverging results. For example, we might describe Rick’s personality traits according to empirical psychology and its model of the so-called Big Five dimensions of personality, i.e. extraversion, conscientiousness, compliance, open-mindedness, and emotional stability. Initially we might be inclined to call Rick introverted, conscientious, non-compliant, not open-minded, and emotionally unstable, and during the film all that changes in the process of character development. However, if we go by psychoanalysis, we arrive at quite different results: we much rather hunt for Rick’s repressed wishes, desires, inner conflicts, neuroses, object fixations or imprintings from early childhood. For instance, psychoanalytical interpreters have tried to

explain Rick's relationship with Ilsa and her husband by referring to his Oedipal relationship with mother and father.

Deciding between such competing theories mainly depends on the goals of the analysis and on assumptions about empirical, intended, or ideal audiences and their dispositions. The proper elucidation of the goals, of consensual attributes of the characters, and of the qualifications of the relevant audience, will lead to a more substantial validation of the procedures and results of an analysis. At this point the initial distinction between creative, interpretative, and socio-cultural analysis gets important. *Creative* analysis will be based in assumptions about the target audience, *interpretative* analysis about an ideal audience, and *socio-cultural* analysis about social groups in reality, and those audiences will have different dispositions in understanding a character's psyche. For instance, we might ask if the historical audience really was familiar with (or influenced by) psychoanalysis, if the character was intended to be understood psychoanalytically, or if psychoanalysis is helping us to see him in new, interesting ways. Such considerations will lead to different results and fulfil different aims.

#### CHARACTERS AS ARTEFACTS

In any case, whenever audiences try to understand represented beings, they also use information from outside the represented world, e.g. narrator commentary or film music, which contributes to characterisation. What Rick and Ilsa are feeling when they say goodbye to each other is conveyed by the famous musical leitmotif of «As Time Goes By». Thus the above-mentioned concepts for analyzing represented beings facilitate their *description* but they prove insufficient for the *explanation* of their genesis and experience. For this purpose, characters must also be appraised as artefacts. If we do that, the basic question is how they have been shaped by textual structures

of certain media like film or literature. This question can be answered in different ways.

1. Some concern the specific mediality of characters and their *mode of representation*. Clearly, different media have very different potentials in representing and making us experience characters.<sup>4</sup> For example, Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings* may be imagined while reading Tolkien's books, may be seen on a large cinema screen, or may be played with in video games. Such different media not only allow for heterogeneous experiences and bestow a certain *aesthetics* on characters but they also form their features as represented beings, symbols and symptoms. For instance, it is more difficult to convey complex higher-level meanings in videogames where players have to act all the time than in literature where readers may read a passage again and again till they got a grasp on its meaning. For each medium, there are specific *representational devices* that can be studied in detail. For instance, audiovisual media supply characters with physical concreteness by way of their casting, acting style, camera work, music, editing etc. Such categories can also aid the description of characters' physical appearance. By stating, for example, that Bogart's face is shown first in low-key lighting and later in the film gets more key light, one makes visual experiences comprehensible, in which Rick appears «initially dark and hard, later on softer and with a brighter mood».

2. While the analysis of characterisation devices of this kind splits up into many different partial aspects, narratological or rhetorical models of *information distribution* help to describe wider-ranging interrelations in this mosaic of momentary impressions. Textual signs transmit character-related information which is arranged in

4 The specific features of different media are differentiated in more detail in Ryan 2005 or Meyrowitz 2009.

particular structures across a text, frequently clustering into certain phases like exposition, dialogue scenes, plot points, and conclusion. The distribution of information across a temporal artwork allows for a *dramaturgy* of characters with specific effects on mental model formation, emotional participation, suspense, curiosity and surprise. Therefore, it is important to analyze how character information is structured, for instance, how much information we get in what sequence of a film or passage of a book. By way of their informational strategies, artworks may facilitate or complicate the construction of character models. Many protagonists are presented in condensed portraits right at the beginning; in other cases – as with Rick – information is delayed to create mysteries and curiosity.

3. While modes of representation and information distribution concern the temporal development of characters, further features relate to the outcome of this development: By way of abstraction, we ascribe general *artefact properties* to characters, for instance, by calling them ‘realistic’, ‘complex’, ‘consistent’, ‘multidimensional’ or ‘stereotypical’ (cf. Hochman 1985). Ultimately, such expressions tell us something about how the character model is structured. For example, if a character is called ‘inconsistent’, its features as a represented person seem to be not «in line» with each other. Furthermore, artefact properties imply certain relationships between the character model and other mental dispositions of the audience, for example, ideas about reality. If someone claims Rick’s readiness for sacrifice is unrealistic, that implies certain assumptions about the probability of sacrifices in reality.

4. On an even more abstract level, we can distinguish between certain *character conceptions* – that is, combinations of artefact properties, which repeat themselves in media history and become conventional guidelines for the construction of characters in media practice. They not only influence our aesthetic assessment but ulti-

mately also our images of humanity. For instance, the predominant character conception of current Western media production may be called *mainstream realism*.<sup>5</sup> According to it, characters should be easily understood, psychologically transparent, multidimensional, dynamic, individualistic, consistent and dramatic. Popular artworks thus convey an image of humanity that pictures humans as active, rational, emotional, morally unambiguous, autonomous and easily understood. In contrast, characters of modernist artworks may rather match the conception of *independent realism* in being more opaque, ambivalent, less dramatic, rather static, more inconsistent and passive. They convey an image of humans as basically incomprehensible, complex and incoherent, morally ambiguous, emotionally diffuse. Rick can be seen as a mixture of both: He is individualized, multidimensional and dynamic, but also rather passive and opaque across large parts of the film. Other character conceptions like that of post-modernist film and literature may even try to dissolve and irritate widespread notions of personal identity.

To summarize: One can analyse characters as artefacts by elucidating (1) their formation by media-specific devices, (2) the distribution of information about them, (3) their constellation of artefact properties, and (4) their conformity (or play) with existing character conceptions. The analysis could be carried out in great detail, and could for instance describe subtle details of particular sequences like the specific manner of Rick's exposition: how, after lengthy verbal announcements of other characters, Rick's first visual appearance begins with a shot of only his hand, heightening the feeling of suspense and anticipation until the camera finally moves up and we can see his face.

5 This distinction owes to David Bordwell's characterization between different modes of film narration (1985).

### CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS

The features of characters as represented beings and artefacts provide the essential clues for understanding them as symbols and symptoms. Those auxiliary concepts concern different aspects that are of particular importance for interpretative analysis as well as socio-cultural analysis. Again, understanding those aspects is facilitated by a reception-based approach. When we examine characters as *symbols*, we are asking what indirect, higher-level meanings they convey. From the perspective of communication and reception, this can be translated into the question of what meanings members of the audience either *infer* or *should* infer when they are trying to make sense of characters as secondary signifiers that are symbolising, exemplifying, or embodying virtues or vices, general themes or messages, problems or conflicts, ways of life or social groups, famous historical or actual persons, mythical or religious figures, political or natural events (like death in Lang's *Destiny*).

The symbolic or thematic use of characters to establish such higher-level meanings may be most explicit and elaborate in complex artworks or in certain movements and periods like Symbolist film or Baroque literature. But the example of *CASABLANCA* shows that symbolic aspects of characters are all but irrelevant in popular culture. Film critics claimed, for instance, that Rick embodied the archetypical conflict between love and responsibility, or that he stood for President Roosevelt or symbolized the change of the political position of the US in the Second World War. Besides such particular associations, a character may be also understood as a vehicle for general thematic statements; with Rick, for instance, the message that «personal sacrifice creates moral integrity». The association of a represented being with such meanings may spring from diverse sources and be achieved by different kinds of processes like generalizing over properties and developments of a character, identifying

similarities and analogies, or drawing metaphorical and intertextual connections. The characters in question are thus turned into personifications, allegories, citations, exempla, mouthpieces, theme carriers, or visual signs of the invisible.

#### CHARACTERS AS SYMPTOMS

Like «symbol», «symptom» is also an umbrella term, referring to all the different kinds of causes and effects characters may have in reality, especially as links between production and reception and as socio-cultural factors. When we examine characters as symptoms, the two general questions are: What factors in reality, including their creators, their intentions, and their cultural contexts, have contributed to making the characters the way they are? And what impact do they have as represented beings, artefacts, and symbols on real or possible audiences and their cultures?

Once we have formed mental models of characters, thoughts may flash through our heads about why they are as they are, and what effects they might have on other members of the audience. On the side of production, we may consider characters as expressions of the individual creativity of their authors, or as indicators of collective mentalities in history. With Rick Blaine, for instance, we can admire the political commitment of the filmmakers taking a stand against the Nazis, but we can also query the time-specific image of patriarchal masculinity underlying this character.

On the side of reception, characters can trigger processes of learning, they can contribute to enlightenment, to the development of worldviews and images of humanity, or to the affirmation of the societal status quo, they can provide building blocks for the construction of identities, provoke copycat actions, mitigate social deficits or block social activities. Rick, for example, functioned as a role model for many viewers; to wear a trench coat like his became a fashion

statement. The challenge of analyzing as symptoms is to provide intelligible reasons for such presumed effects, or to appraise them critically by reference to all the aspects of the characters in question that we have previously dealt with, looking for the best possible explanation. How significant such effects may become is demonstrated by the characters of propaganda films like *Jud Süß*: Witnesses have reported that after the film was shown to the wardens of a concentration camp, they brutally beat up the prisoners.

#### CHARACTER CONSTELLATIONS

Until now, this paper has focused on singular characters. But all the particular characters of a film are embedded in various *contexts*: as represented beings in the represented world, as artefacts in the artwork's textual structures, as symbols in its themes, and as symptoms in its socio-cultural frameworks. We can analyze all those relations, but let me concentrate here on just one important aspect: the *character constellations and configurations* of artworks. In temporal artworks, characters interact in changing *scene-specific configurations*: In the beginning of *Casablanca* we first see Rick and Ugarte together; then Rick and Renault; then again, Rick, Ilsa and Laszlo. By generalizing over those configurations one can identify the general positions that the individual characters occupy within the *constellation of characters*, i.e. the total system of all the characters and all the relations between them. The extension of such constellations ranges from the one-person narrative (e.g., *Krapp's Last Tape* by Beckett) to narratives with hundreds of characters (e.g., television serials like *Six Feet Under*). The individual characters are positioned in a network of relations with other characters, a network of hierarchies, functions and values, interactions and communications, similarities and contrasts, attraction and rejection, power and recognition. Characters stand in a hierarchy of attention as principal and supporting characters; in a

social system as represented beings; in a network of action and conflict as protagonists and antagonists; in a system of values as heroes and villains; and in permanent comparison as parallel or contrasting characters.

The positions of characters within this network contribute massively to their characterization and significance. Characters are usually perceived through the comparison with other characters, and this comparison emphasises their proper features: In *Casablanca*, the submissive and garrulous Ugarte accentuates Rick's self-confidence and reticence; and the heroic Victor Laszlo is the touchstone for Rick's moral development. The distribution of moral principles, physical attractiveness and other value-laden attributes among the characters results in a value structure of a certain bandwidth and orchestration, which effects the assessment of individual characters. For instance, in the *serie noir* practically all characters are corrupt, and the audience rather relates to those characters that act in the least immoral way. In contrast, the moral bandwidth of *CASABLANCA* is enormous, it spans between the idealistic Laszlo and the evil Nazi Major Strasser. Rick rises from the middle ground of that moral spectrum to its positive extreme: At the end he does not only surpass Laszlo in power and humour (as he did from the beginning), but also with regard to morality.

The character constellation, however, is not just a moral and social system but also a system of characters as artefacts. In this respect, characters fulfil certain *dramaturgical functions*: they contribute to the development of the plot (as protagonist, antagonist, object, or helper), they reinforce realism effects, communicate information, perspectivize the narration, create intertextual connections, trigger specific emotions and aesthetic experiences. A special position in the *hierarchy of attention* is allotted, as a rule, to the protagonists and antagonists that propel the action forward. The patterns of conflict in different narratives may extend from the inner conflicts of individual

protagonists through the quarrels of *odd couples* and relational triangles to collective or multiple protagonists that are confronted by equally multifarious hostile forces.

Not only as represented beings but also with regard to the manner of their formation and their artefact properties, as well as concerning their symbolic meanings, do characters stand in particular relationships of *similarity and contrast* with each other. Characters can be grouped together or rather isolated – with sometimes considerable sociocultural consequences. Ethnic minorities that are marginalized in society appear frequently in the form of stereotyped characters who are pressed into the function of antagonists or helpers and represented in unfavourable ways. *CASABLANCA* is not free of this: the Moroccans only figure as extras or as cheating traders, and the relationship between Rick and the black piano player Sam is a friendly but unequal one.

Every character constellation, therefore, displays structures that are effective in multiple ways and in many different respects like degree of attention, dramaturgical function, aesthetics and artefact properties, similarities and contrasts, physical, mental and social features, interaction and social life, values, perspectivity, closeness and distance as well as emotional participation. The collective power of all these different structures finally also contributes to the symbolism and the symptomatics of characters – the roles they play in the meaning structure of the text and in establishing certain overarching thoughts and messages.

Those considerations concerning character constellations indicate that the «clock of character» facilitates not only the analysis of particular characters but also the comparison of characters within one artwork or certain groups of artworks. It makes it easier to find out what exactly distinguishes the characters of particular genres, oeuvres, movements, cultures, or historical periods from each other.

## CONCLUSION: USING THE MODEL

I started my paper with two central questions. The first one was: *why* should we analyze characters at all? I tried to show that there are different reasons for doing that in the three practical contexts of creation, interpretation, and socio-cultural critique. The second, more challenging question was: *how* can we analyze characters systematically? My suggestion was that the heuristic ‘clock of character’, which builds upon the theoretical foundations I just outlined, can be of help in doing that. The model can be applied in different ways. The most obvious possibility is to work systematically through the «clock», from the inside to the outside, from the most general to the more specific categories, until the research question is answered (or one is running out time). But in other cases one might rather want to start with those features of a character which are intuitively striking at first sight, and expand the analysis from there to cover other, less salient or even hidden aspects. And third option would be to start by analyzing the whole constellation of characters, identifying their most important interrelations and positions, and then focusing on those that are most relevant concerning one’s research aims. So, my programme of character analysis pleads for openness and flexibility. The “clock” presented here is not a rigid schema for ticking off but just an aid to be employed at everybody’s discretion.

However one wants to proceed, analysis may tend to generate over-complexity, which has to be dealt with. This complexity can be reduced by focusing towards clear goals and research questions. Depending on the specific question asked, different features become more or less significant. For instance, the four aspects of characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols and symptoms seem to have different weight in the three forms of analysis I introduced in the beginning. Creative analysis usually focuses on characters as represented beings and artefacts. Interpretative analysis, by contrast,

shifts focus to characters' symbolic qualities, their contribution to themes and messages. In cultural criticism, again, symptomatic features become a focal point. My book offers guiding questions for analytical practice regarding each of those aspects.

The criteria for 'good' analyses and interpretations are manifold: the relevance and clarity of research questions, the careful selection of material and methods, precise and sensitive observation, adequate verbalization of the non-verbal, convincing inferences from the explicit and perceivable to the implicit and non-perceivable, original and well-grounded claims, the sensible reduction of complexity, and finally, the creation of overall coherence in meaning or explanation. I hope my approach can contribute to achieving this and to help understanding characters, their fascination and significance in the fields of creation, interpretation, and socio-cultural critique.

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## ABSTRACT

Why do we want or need to analyze fictional characters, at all? Why don't we leave our understanding of characters up to individual intuitions and gut feelings? Or, phrased differently: What are the possible uses of systematical theories, methods, models, and categories for analyzing characters? In my paper, I will propose that there are at least three areas of practice where systematical theories to character analysis are put to different kinds of use: (1) creation, (2) interpretation, and (3) cultural critique of characters. In those contexts, nothing would be more practical than a good theory, like Béla Balázs famously said. However, the criteria for what makes a theory "good" or "useful" also depend on how it is to be used. To illustrate those kinds of questions, I will give a brief overview of my own model for analyzing characters and indicate some of its possible uses, drawing primarily on film characters as examples. For instance, theoretically distinguishing between four general aspects of characters – as fictional beings, artifacts, symbols, and symptoms – may sometimes be helpful in all three areas of practice, albeit in different ways.

*Keywords:* Fictional characters analysis, film narration, mental models, socio-cultural analyses.

## RESUMO

Afinal, por que razão queremos ou sentimos necessidade de analisar personagens? Porque é que não confiamos a compreensão das personagens às nossas intuições e sentimentos individuais? Ou dito de outra forma: quais são as aplicações possíveis de teorias sistemáticas, de métodos, de modelos e de categorias para a análise de personagens? No meu texto proponho que existem pelo menos três áreas práticas em que as teorias da personagem se prestam a diferentes usos: (1) criação; (2) interpretação e (3) crítica cultural de personagens. Nestes contextos, e citando uma frase célebre de Béla

Balázs, nada é mais prático do que uma boa teoria. Porém, o que torna uma teoria boa ou útil é o uso que dela é feito. Para ilustrar este tipo de questões, apresentarei brevemente o meu próprio modelo de análise de personagens, indicando alguns dos seus usos possíveis, primeiramente esboçados, a título de exemplo, em personagens fílmicas. Às vezes, a distinção teórica das personagens em quatro categorias gerais – seres ficcionais, artefactos, símbolos e sintomas – pode revelar-se útil nestas três áreas, ainda que de formas diferentes.

*Palavras-chave:* análise de personagens ficcionais, narrativa fílmica, modelos mentais, análise sociocultural.