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# Understanding characters

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**Abstract:** Characters are of central importance for our film experience, and they confront us with a multitude of questions concerning their production, structures, meanings, effects, etc. Subjective intuitions do not suffice to answer those questions and to analyze, describe, and discuss characters in differentiated and comprehensive ways. To do this, we need a set of conceptual tools, an infrastructure for argumentation. This article summarizes the central results of my book *Die Figur im Film* in those respects, starting from a heuristic core model. The “clock of character” distinguishes between four aspects of characters: (1) As artifacts, they are shaped by audiovisual information; (2) As fictional beings they have certain bodily, mental, and social features; (3) As symbols, they impart higher-level meanings; and (4) as symptoms they point to socio-cultural causes in their production and to effects in their reception.

**Keywords:** analysis, characters, conceptual foundation, film theory, heuristics, interpretation, narratology, reception

In today’s media societies, the characters of films and other audiovisual media are of immense importance. They provoke questions concerning their meaning and effects and call for different forms of understanding. Filmmakers discuss their creation, viewers the experiences they evoke, critics their interpretation, cultural theorists and practitioners their causes and consequences. Sometimes debates about characters even play a crucial role in lawsuits related to scandals (e.g., *A Clockwork Orange*, Staiger 2000: 93–124) or instigatory propaganda (e.g., *Jud Süß*, Königstein 2001). In all of those cases, it is crucial to capture the features of characters and to reach agreement about them.

Subjective intuitions and ordinary language often prove to be insufficient here. Whoever intends to really understand characters—and to convince conversational partners—is well advised to use additional systematic categories and procedures. The selection of these tools requires answering fundamental questions: What are characters and how do they originate? What kinds of features and structures do they possess? In what relations do they stand with other elements and structures of films? How are they grasped and experienced by the viewers? What are their relationships with culture and society? And what types of characters can be distinguished?



On these questions, many competing proposals exist. Most of them focus on selected aspects of characters such as sex and gender in feminist film theory, class and ethnicity in British cultural studies, object relations and identification in psychoanalysis, action and focalization in narrative theory, or stars and acting with Dyer (1999). In film and media studies, the books by Dario Tomasi (1988) and Murray Smith (1995) for a long time remained the only monographs that devoted themselves exhaustively to character analysis. Recently, research on the phenomenon of character has intensified, making a multitude of new treatments of specific problems available.<sup>1</sup> The same is true of other disciplines.<sup>2</sup> In communication studies, the “parasocial interaction” with characters has attracted new attention (e.g., Hartmann et al. 2004). And in literary studies, one should mention at least Uri Margolin’s groundbreaking articles (e.g., 1990), Ralf Schneider’s cognitive theory of character reception (2001), and Fotis Jannidis’s meticulous foundation of character theory (2004).

In my *Die Figur im Film* (Eder 2008b), I integrated and elaborated the results of such research in order to find answers to two key questions: How can one systematically analyze characters and corroborate statements about them? And how can one explain in what ways viewers experience characters and react to them with perceptions, thoughts, and feelings? This article summarizes some results.

### **What Are Characters, How Do They Originate, and How Are They Experienced?**

Even the definition of what are characters is highly controversial (Eder 2008d). Most frequently, they tend to be considered as imaginary human beings. Their spectrum, however, also encompasses smart animals (Lassie), singing plants (Audrey II), animated machines (HAL), gods, aliens, monsters, other fantastic creatures, or mere abstract shapes. All these beings are set apart from the other elements of fictional worlds—refrigerators, mountains, trees—by their intentional (object-related) inner life; that is, by having perceptions, thoughts, motives, or emotions. This inner life may be rudimentary (for instance, the cookie monster does not possess a particularly refined psyche), but it is bound to exist in some form or other. When characters move externally, we usually assume it is because of some internal process.

Although fictional beings seem to have an inner life, they also seem immaterial, elusive. Their mode of existence is, therefore, conceived of in very different ways: some consider them as mere illusions of language, others as signs, mental representations, or abstract objects. Such views have practical consequences; they determine the course of the analysis. Whereas hermeneutical or psychoanalytical scholars have treated the psyche as the essential core of a

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character, several structuralists have thought it useless to enter into deliberations about the inner life of characters and have focused on the structures of their construction instead.

The relations between such rival views of what characters are become comprehensible once feature films are considered to be instruments of *communicative games of the imagination*, in which the participants mutually create common fictional worlds. The basic rule of these fictional games is: Imagine . . . (but do not believe that all this is true). Even real persons like Napoleon can be fictionalized if they are woven into such games and their worlds as objects of the imagination.

Because human beings are shaped by the experiences of their lifeworlds (*Lebenswelten*), their imaginary worlds are always to some degree bound to their realities. At the same time, fictional worlds usually diverge from reality in order to appear as dramatic condensations or idealized amplifications, as escapist spaces or nightmarish counterpoints, as strange, remote, exotic universes like Tolkien's (or Jackson's) Middle Earth. Their events, actions, spaces, objects, laws, feelings, values—and most important their characters—can be formed according to lifeworld realities or be opposed to them. Imaginary worlds and their beings are sophisticated artifacts springing from intersubjective imagination. Like scientific theories or the laws of legal systems, they are products of a social praxis.

My proposal is, therefore, to envisage film characters as *identifiable fictional beings with an inner life* that exist as *communicatively constructed artifacts*. All the properties of such characters are ascribed to them in communication processes as films are manufactured and viewed. Filmmakers produce, and viewers process, the information contained in films. Both move beyond this information and supplement it with knowledge of their own in order to form vivid models of fictional beings. Nevertheless, characters are neither signs “in the text” nor mental representations “in the head” but collective constructs with a normative component. The individual character models of the filmmakers and the viewers resemble each other because they are built from comparable bodily and mental dispositions, among them shared knowledge about reality and media conventions. The development of character models, however, is not only founded on common knowledge but also on the rules of the imagination game. That characters possess intersubjectively valid properties is immediately evident by the fact that, having seen the film, we can quarrel about who has achieved the correct or best understanding of a particular character. Although each one of us may have a different conception of the same character in mind, we all believe that these conceptions are far from arbitrary. After watching *Casablanca*, anyone claiming that Rick Blaine is an extraterrestrial alien would certainly not be taken seriously. And any debate about whether Rick and Ilsa really love each other

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is firmly rooted in the conviction that there are more or less correct views about this.

Thus, characters are not purely subjective. Nevertheless, their *reception* is of decisive importance to the analysis because the nucleus of their genesis is the development of mental character models by the viewers. The fact that characters are understood, remembered, loved, or hated entails that they are mentally represented in some form or another. One could consider mental representations of characters as complexes of signs or propositions, as patterns of neuronal activations, or as connectionist networks. The approach with the greatest explanatory power, however, is based on the assumption that characters exist in our minds in the form of *mental models*. Mental models are multi-modal representations. They combine different forms of information processing—visual, acoustic, linguistic, etc.—into a vividly experienced unity. They are dynamic, and may change in the course of time. They are present in our working memory during the actual experience, and they may retreat and be preserved in long-term memory.

Character models represent the properties of a fictional being in a particular structure, with a particular transparency, and a particular perspectival orientation. They are closely connected with other mental models that the viewers have formed of the situations of the story as well as of themselves or other persons. Whenever we watch *Casablanca*, for instance, we form mental models of Rick, Ilsa, and the other characters, and we position them in situation models (the first encounter, the Marseillaise situation, etc.). Moreover, we relate character models to the models we have of ourselves, for example, by wishing we were as cool as Rick. The structures and contexts of character models are highly important if we want to explain in what specific ways we react to characters or identify with them.

The formation of mental character models is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of characters but certainly not the only aspect of their reception. It is, in fact, one of five *levels of character-related viewer reactions* that build on each other:

1. the primary perception of the images and sounds of the film;
2. the formation of mental character models;
3. the inference of their indirect meanings;
4. the construction of hypotheses about real (external) causes and consequences of characters; and
5. the aesthetic reflection on the modes of character presentation in this film and on our reactions as viewers.

An example may make these distinctions more transparent. Watching *Casablanca*, we initially perceive information about Rick Blaine—spoken words, images of Humphrey Bogart's body, the sound of his voice—only subliminally.

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Figures 1–3: Rick Blaine's exposition in *Casablanca*: the multi-perspectival construction of a character model.

Our sensory perceptual impressions are processed further in several steps to yield a mental model of Rick. In *Casablanca*, this process is a source of intense curiosity. At the beginning of the film, we get only acoustical information: Other characters constantly talk about Rick while he is not yet shown. When he finally appears on the visual track, we first see his writing hand (Figure 1), then his face and upper body (Figure 2), and, after that, what he is looking at (Figure 3). Not only is our visual perspective changing from shot to shot. We connect the partial views

of Rick's body and his movements with utterances of other characters about him, as well as with inferences about his inner life, to form the overall conception of a cynic exile with interesting looks in an existential crisis situation.

In the process, we draw on different kinds of explicit and implicit knowledge. We make use of our knowledge about real persons, for instance, humans in general, men, casino owners, uncles resembling Rick, etc. But we also draw on media knowledge about narrative structures, Hollywood lovers, reluctant anti-heroes, generic types, actors or stars. Many contemporary viewers were probably drawing on Bogart's previous star image as a hardboiled gangster or detective, while today's viewers might be more prone to romantic associations. After the construction of our Rick-model, we may recurrently shift from seeing Rick to seeing Bogart.

In the course of *Casablanca* the initial character model is continually transformed until we leave the film with a concluding picture of Rick that we will be able to recall at some later time. During the film we may already develop speculations about the deeper meaning of the character, his symbolism, and associated themes. We might assume, for example, that Rick stands for the conflict between love and duty or symbolizes the importance of moral in-

tegrity. Furthermore, we can ponder Rick’s relationship with the makers of the film or with particular audiences by asking ourselves, for instance, what aesthetic and political intentions the film team associated with Rick or how he affected the audiences of his time. Special mention must be made of the reflection of Rick’s presentation within the film, that is the character’s dramaturgical conception or Bogart’s acting skills. Each of these levels encompasses specific cognitive and emotional processes that build on each other and are in constant interaction with each other. The analysis of characters should, therefore, always take into account all five psychological levels of character reception.

As I demonstrate in *Die Figur im Film*, those levels correspond, more or less, to the structures of our everyday talk about characters as well as to various theories of meaning and of film analysis. From these correspondences, a simplified heuristics can be derived for the practice of character analysis: the *clock of character*. According to this heuristics, characters have four aspects, which can be examined based on key questions in aesthetic, mimetic, thematic, and causal respects (see Figure 4):

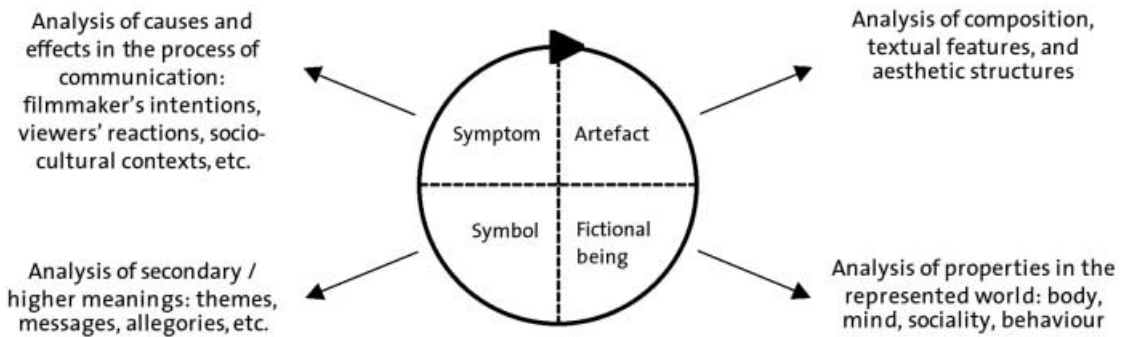


Figure 4: The clock of character.

1. *Artifact*: How and by what means is the character represented? In this context, characters are considered in their relations to stylistic devices and kinds of film information, which generate the perceptual experiences of the viewers (level 1 of reception) and later may be aesthetically reflected by them (level 5). Based on that reflection, characters are ascribed general artifact properties, such as realism or multi-dimensionality.
2. *Fictional being*: What features and relations does the character possess as an inhabitant of a fictional world, and how does the character act and behave in this world? The answer to this question rests on the formation of mental models of characters.
3. *Symbol*: What does the character stand for, what indirect meanings does it convey? The term “symbol” is to be understood here in a broad sense to comprise all forms of higher-level meanings, in which characters may function as

signs of something else. Of what, may be inferred from their features as fictional beings and artifacts.

4. *Symptom*: What causes the character to be as it is, and what effects does it produce? In this perspective, characters are taken to be symptoms, that is, consequences or causal factors of real elements of communication; for example, as the outcome of the work of the filmmakers or as role models for viewers.

In short, characters can be analyzed as artifacts, fictional beings, symbols, and symptoms. When viewing and analyzing films, the attention may move among those four aspects and eventually become focused on one or more of

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them. While watching *Casablanca*, we may be seeing Rick primarily as the casino owner in love, but we can very well, at times, admire Bogart's acting skills, grasp Rick's symbolism, or question the image of masculinity that he embodies. By reflecting on the character after watching the film, we elaborate our model of the character further and may concentrate more on the way he is shaped, on what he may signify, and of what he may be symptomatic. With certain characters these aspects may even be in the foreground already while we are

watching; characters whose appearance has been made particularly striking, for example, tend to be perceived as artifacts rather than as fictional beings.

The "clock of character" captures fundamental differences that are lost in many theories, which all too often restrict themselves to treating characters only as fictional beings. The "clock" offers a simple survey of the most general domains of features that can be ascribed to characters, and it closely connects them with the viewers' reception. It renders visible which features may be assigned to characters during an analysis, in what relationships the features stand to each other, and what concepts are suitable to describe them.

Moreover, the handling of the "clock of character" admits of great flexibility. When reconstructing short phases of character reception, one may read it clockwise; one can, for instance, describe how from the perception of the images of Rick's first entrance a provisional character model surfaces to which then ideas about Rick's symbolism, symptomatics, and aesthetics attach themselves. The majority of analyses probably does not concern itself with such short phases but rather with those features of a character that are important during the whole film. In such cases it is usually advisable to begin with properties that are intuitively most striking, and subsequently to establish their relations to other aspects. Some script-consultants insist that characters' motives for action are their most important aspect, but that is rather a rule of thumb for the effective styling of mainstream protagonists. Film

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characters and their properties are so multifarious, and the goals of their analysis are so diverse, that any of the partial aspects quoted in the following paragraphs can be made the special focus of attention.

If the predominant interest does not lie in tackling a specific question but in comprehending a character in its totality as comprehensively as possible, then it may prove useful to proceed as follows: one first examines the features of the fictional being, then its construction as an artifact and subsequently the relations between characters, actions and character constellations. One has thus prepared a good foundation for the investigation of characters as symbols and symptoms. Whichever way the analysis proceeds, the “clock of character” provides the general point of departure for the application of more differentiated conceptual tools that will now be surveyed.

### **Characters as Fictional Beings**

It is often reasonable to begin the analysis of characters at their core: with the features, relations, and behavior they exhibit as inhabitants of an imaginary world. That we perceive characters as thinking, feeling, and active beings is in many respects the most important aspect of their reception. The narration of mainstream cinema is primarily geared toward creating this kind of experience but it also underlies all other forms of character experience. The task of character analysis is not least to make explicit and to explain what we see, hear, or tacitly take for granted in films. Often, that is far from easy. Character descriptions are usually “thick,” in the sense of Geertz (2000). They presuppose interpretative inferences from externally perceptible sets of information to not directly perceptible mental and social aspects of the characters, for instance inferences from Rick’s facial expressions to his feelings or traits.

To ascertain and express precisely the features of fictional characters, it may be helpful to fall back on results from the scientific study of real humans and other beings. It would, of course, be naive to equate characters with humans. Our perception of characters is different from the perception of real persons. When we are watching films, we activate media knowledge and communication rules. We cannot interact with the characters but we can think about their meaning, causes, and effects, and we can shift our attention from the level of what is represented (Rick) to the level of presentation (Bogart). The symbolism and the communicative mediation of characters mark fundamental differences to the observation of persons in reality. However, there is no avoiding the fact that we need a vocabulary for the description of fictional beings and that our knowledge of reality has to play a central role in the development of character models. Consequently, I propose the following system of anthropological categories for the analysis of characters, which may, with a few modifications, also be applied to non-human characters—animals, monsters, aliens—as well as to real (media) persons.

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The three most general property domains of humans are *corporeality*, *mind*, and *sociality*. These domains contain both stable and transitory properties in past, present, and future. In human behavior, physical actions and mental motives combine, and both are mostly also social, that is oriented toward others. The domains thus overlap, but their connections can be specified, and they correspond to distinctions that have become customary in psychology and philosophy as well as in ordinary life and practical dramaturgy (e.g., Egri 1960). Character analysis may thus make use of more differentiated categories of these domains, which allow for more precise descriptions of fictional beings—though the corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behavior of characters can diverge significantly from those of ordinary humans (for instance, in Woody Allen’s *Zelig* [Figure 5]).

Beyond fundamental categories like gender, age, bodily abilities, or form, concepts deriving from research on non-verbal communication (e.g., Argyle 2004) are well suited for the analysis of the *corporeality* of characters. Those categories permit a rather precise description of external appearance and body language with regard to body shape, face, gaze, mimic, gesture, proxemics, posture, touch, hairstyle, clothes, and other artifacts close to the body. These categories enhance our ability to perceive subtle but powerful nuances of characters that might otherwise be easily overlooked; for instance Rick’s extraordinarily large and expressive face, the efficiency of his movements, or his alternating of absent, controlling, and wistful gazes.

For the analysis of the *sociality* of fictional persons, sociological and socio-psychological concepts are of primary relevance for describing their group membership (e.g., family, friendship, partnership, ethnicity, trade or profession, religion, nationality), 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. He at first arranges his social commitments according to pragmatic points of view, but in the end he shoulders moral responsibility, sacrifices his love, wins a friendship, and voluntarily joins the resistance fighters as his new in-group.

For the analysis of the *mind*—of the inner life and the personality—of characters, one may examine what is distinctive for characters with regard to their mental faculties of perception, cognition, evaluation, motivation, and emotion.<sup>3</sup> About Rick, for instance, might be said 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. For more differentiated analyses one may draw on time- and culture-bound ideas of the mental, from mythical or religious beliefs to diverse current theories. Although psychoanalysis might be the most widely used approach,<sup>4</sup> we can also draw on scientific re-

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constructions of folk psychology, the psychology of personality, or cognitive science.

Such concepts of the mind permit a more exact description of fictional beings, but they often lead to diverging results. For instance, we might describe Rick's personality according to the factor-analytical model of the "big five" dimensions of personality—extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism (Goldberg 1993). In the beginning of the film, we might call him introverted, conscientious, non-compliant, not very open-minded, and emotionally unstable. However, if we go by psychoanalysis, we arrive at very different results: we much rather hunt for desires, repressed wishes, unconscious reaction tendencies, inner conflicts, neuroses, imprintings from early childhood, or object relations, each of which is viewed differently by various psychoanalytical schools (see Fonagy and Target 2003). Rick has thus been described as an Oedipal character, and his relationship with Ilsa and her husband has been explained by his relationship with mother and father.

Deciding between such competing conceptual systems depends on several criteria. First, it depends on the goals of the analysis. Are we to explain how viewers perceived Rick in the past, or how viewers of the present or the future perceive him? Or are we to find out what kind of Rick-reception was intended by the filmmakers? Or are we to propose some kind of ideal image of Rick, that would be the result of optimal communication, or that would be particularly stimulating?

Second, we would have to check which of the traits of a character are at all controversial. Usually there is a consensus with regard to corporeality, external actions, and social positions. No one doubts that Rick is a dark-haired café-owner. What is often controversial are the nuances of his inner and social life. Reasons could be given, for instance, to justify the opinion that Ilsa really loves Rick and is not just after his visa.

Third, the assessment of such interpretations must take into account the qualifications of the empirical, intended, or ideal viewers. They comprise the social dispositions that are relevant in the perception of real persons, for instance folk psychology, emotional schemata, or social stereotypes. Furthermore, the media knowledge of the viewers must be considered, including their knowledge of communicative rules, genres, narrative structures, or character types. The qualifications of viewers extend from innate reaction tendencies through cultural conditionings to individual memories, and their intersubjective validity is a matter of degree. The proper elucidation of the



*Figure 5: In Woody Allen's Zelig, the eponymous anti-hero constantly adapts to his (in this case, partly) environment by way of changing central aspects of his body, mind, sociality, and behavior. Nevertheless, his Allenesque physiognomy and traits keep him instantly recognisable.*

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goals of the analysis, of the consensual attributes of the characters, and of the qualifications of the relevant groups of viewers, helps choosing between alternative concepts of mind and sociality and leads to a more substantial validation of the procedures and results of an analysis.

Whenever we attempt to understand fictional beings in this way, we do not restrict our attention to the level of what is represented (to the *fictional*

*world, diegesis, story, histoire*). It is true that we generally infer the mental and social properties of characters largely from their external features—names, appearance, behavior, dialogue, milieus, objects, and situative contexts. In this way, we *see* and *hear*, for example, that Rick remembers his time with Ilsa in Paris, that he has been disappointed by her, and that he wants to humiliate her. But there may be also information from outside the fictional world, such as genre scripts, narrators' commentary, film music, image composition or dramaturgical roles of characters, all of which contribute to characterization. The very casting of Bogart and Bergman suggests that Rick and Ilsa will restart their affair and that it would not necessarily lead to a happy ending. And what they are feeling when they say goodbye to each other is not least conveyed by the musical leitmotif "As Time Goes By." Thus the concepts of analysis that have so far been mentioned may indeed facilitate the *description* of fictional beings but they prove insufficient for the *explanation* of their genesis. For this purpose, characters must also be considered as artifacts.

### **Characters as Artifacts**

For the examination of characters as artifacts, the basic question is what formal structures they possess and how they have been shaped with the help of the devices and techniques of filmmaking. We can analyze character formation systematically by way of four aspects. The first two concern the *mode of representation*: specific stylistic devices give the stream of images and sounds concrete form, and this audiovisual stream transports character-related information arranged in particular structures and phases. The two other aspects relate to the *outcome* of this mode of representation: as artifacts, characters possess general artifact properties like realism or consistency. The combinations of several artifact properties may correspond to high-level conceptions of character, which inform the decisions of scriptwriters, directors, and actors.

The manifold *representational devices* of film impart characters with physical concreteness in image and sound. The primary contributing factors here are cast, star image, performance styles, *mise-en-scène*, camera work, sound design, music, and editing. These production-related concepts can aid the description of the mode of appearance of characters, which would otherwise be

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most difficult to grasp. By stating, for example, that Bogart's face is often shown in low angle close-ups, and that it is initially lighted with few, then with some more fill light, one explains the presence of certain formal qualities of the image and makes visual experiences comprehensible, in which Rick appears "close," "tall," "initially dark and hard, later on somewhat softer." However, the analysis of characterization devices of this kind yields a picture of the character as artifact, which is split into many different partial aspects.

Narratological models of *information distribution* can help to ascertain wider-ranging interrelations and dynamic developments in this mosaic.<sup>5</sup> All those stimuli are considered as character-related information (signs, cues) that elicit rule-governed processes of character reception. The distribution of information across the film permits a dramaturgy of characters with specific effects on model formation, emotional participation, curiosity, suspense, and surprise. It is of decisive importance here, on the one hand, that the viewers are provided with information of variable functionality, relevance, modality, directness, and reliability by means of the film's various representational devices, sign systems, and instances of communication and focalization. It thus makes a difference that I can only *infer* the love act between Ilsa and Rick and cannot *watch* it. On the other hand, it is of equal importance to realize how all the kinds of character information are structurally organized across a film: their sequence, extent, frequency, duration, density, and contextualization as well as their interrelations with reference to redundancy, complementarity, or discrepancy.

With the aid of these categories it is possible to grasp and compare different forms of the development of character models. For instance, many film protagonists are presented in condensed portraits right at the beginning of a film; in other cases—as with Rick—they are unveiled only slowly; and some characters remain mysterious throughout because of informational gaps. The construction of consistent character models can thus be facilitated, compounded, or frustrated completely by a film's distribution of information.

In the course of the film relevant elements of character information are frequently bundled together into significant phases or sequence types that are of particular importance to the analysis of characterization: the exposition and conclusion of the film, culmination points in actions and decisions, sequences with typical or abnormal behavior, crises and changes, character-oriented deviations from the main strand of the action, scenes with significant dialogue, representations of mental processes (e.g., memories), or scenes of empathy. In the course of such phases, not only the character models of the viewers may change but the characters themselves as well, and not necessarily in exact correspondence. Therefore, characters may at some moment appear different from what they actually are at this time in the fictional world. One may, for example, fear for some time that Rick will actually hand over his rival Laszlo to the Nazis whereas he is in reality intent on saving him.

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The techniques and informational strategies employed by films to represent characters lead us to construct character models of a particular kind and structure. Based on such structure we ascribe *artifact properties* to characters, among them mainly realism, typification, complexity, consistency, transparency, dimensionality, dynamics, and their relevant counterparts.<sup>6</sup> For one, such expressions tell us something about how the character model is structured; for example, whether the properties represented in it are consistent with each other. Thus it was criticized as psychologically inconsistent for Rick, as a man disappointed by love and life, to treat himself indulgently to so many different kinds of drinks. Furthermore, artifact properties tell us something about the relationship between the character model and other mental contents of the viewers; for example, whether it matches mental prototypes (typification) or ideas of reality (realism). It is sometimes said about Rick that his coolness and his readiness for sacrifice are idealized and unrealistic.

Certain combinations of artifact properties are repeated in the history of film and solidify themselves to *character conceptions*, which in turn serve as guidelines for the molding of characters in the practice of filmmaking and are connected to certain modes of narration (cf. Bordwell 1985). They not only influence our aesthetic assessment of characters but also our images of human nature. According to the predominant character conception of *mainstream realism*, protagonists should be individualistic, autonomous, multidimensional, dynamic, transparent, easily understood, consistent, and dramatic. The mainstream film thus conveys an image of humanity that pictures humans as active, reflective, rational, emotional, morally unambiguous, comprehensible, coherent, and autonomous. The characters of *independent realism*—for example, the characters in Michelangelo Antonioni's films—are by contrast more opaque, more ambivalent, difficult to understand, less dramatic, rather static, more inconsistent and passive than in mainstream film. In this context, an image of humanity is conveyed that presents humans as basically incomprehensible, emotionally diffuse, driven by subconscious forces, subjected to internal and external impulses, complex and incoherent, impossible to assess unambiguously as to their morality. A number of other character concep-

tions—those of the post-modern or the surrealist film—distance themselves from conceptions of realism, and may, in the extreme, cultivate a large-scale fragmentation of characters (see Heidbrink 2005).

One can thus analyze characters as artifacts by elucidating their formation with reference to the stylistic devices, the dynamics of the information supply, the constellation of artifact properties, and the conformity with existing character conceptions. One can, for example, discover that the information distribu-

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tion in *Casablanca* does indeed place Rick Blaine at the center as the main character, but that it largely keeps his motivation and his true personality in the dark, thus sustaining curiosity and action-related suspense. Rick's actions and his verbal characterizations by himself and by others offer contradictory clues: everybody respects, admires, or desires him, but he remains cold and states that he would "stick his head out for nobody." Such contradictions are dissolved by Bogart's star image and his acting style that, in its mixture of idealization and realism, emphasizes Rick's profoundly wounded soul and at the same time makes us sense his potential for transformation. This again contributes to making Rick into an individualistic, multidimensional, and dynamic character. Because of his passivity and opacity, however, Rick does not fit the character conception of mainstream realism in all its aspects but seems in some parts closer to independent realism.

The analysis could be carried out in much greater detail, and could for instance describe the minute effects produced by the subtle details of particular scenes. These include the specific manner of Rick's protracted exposition: how after lengthy announcements Rick's first entrance begins with a shot of his hand, thus heightening the scene-related feeling of suspense, until the camera finally moves up to his face (see again Figures 1–3). Such descriptions also rest on assumptions of reception theory; their basic question is in what ways the film conveys character-related information, and what the experiences are that such information produces in the viewers. Moreover, neither the information about, nor the conception of, a single character stand on its own but they are closely connected with other things such as other characters and events in the plot.

### **Characters in the Context of Action and Constellation**

All characters are embedded in different kinds of contexts: as fictional beings in the world of the film, as artifacts in the film's textual structures, as symbols in its themes, and as symptoms in the socio-cultural frameworks of its production and reception. All of those contexts are important for the analysis of characters, but two of them stand out in particular: action/plot and character constellation.

The essential link between the characters and the plot of a film is their *motivation*. The characters carry out external actions, and we ascribe to them particular motives for doing so (e.g., needs, drives, emotions, values, wishes, goals, or plans). We explain the fact that Rick insults Ilsa by presuming that he wants to take revenge on her. In other cases, we may already know the characters' intentions and therefore expect them to carry out certain actions. We know that Rick is still in love with Ilsa, and so we ask ourselves what he is possibly going to do. The inferences from motives to future actions create action-related suspense. The inferences from actions to motives bring forth curiosity,

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orientation, comprehension of the characters' personality, as well as perspective taking and empathy.

The central and enduring motives of characters are part of the core of their personality and identity; their development—for instance, Rick's change of mind leading him to give up Ilsa—is a crucial resource for film themes and the emotional participation of the viewers. For the analysis of motivation, suitable models are provided by philosophy, psychology, literary studies, and screenwriting manuals. Psychological concepts help to distinguish different levels of needs—from the need to breathe to the need of beauty and transcendence. Of prime importance are social needs and motives that are often conditioned by group membership and social roles and show varying degrees of egoism or altruism. Ilsa is torn between her two roles as Victor's wife and Rick's former lover; she acts altruistically by fighting against her own desires in order to protect her husband. Characters that pursue incompatible goals find themselves in conflict with each other. But many characters are also driven by internally conflicting motives. Some screenwriting manuals distinguish by way of simplification among *want*, *need*, and *key flaw* (J. Newman 2001). The protagonists of mainstream films have, as a rule, a concrete external goal (*want*), a true inner *need*, and a central weakness (*key flaw*), which is usually connected with their backstory. All three types of motives can conflict with each other. They need not be clearly recognizable. Rick Blaine, for instance, over a long time only acts by omission: he refuses to give Ilsa and her husband the visa they need to escape. Why he does this remains unclear: Does he want to win time, win Ilsa back, revenge himself, or force an explanation? All these possibilities remain open but they all contradict Rick's fundamental need to reconcile himself with Ilsa and to re-establish his integrity. It is his central weakness that prevents him from doing so, a mixture of egoism and embitterment, which he overcomes in the course of the film.

The social motives and conflicts of the characters do not only connect them with the film's plot but also with each other. During the film they interact in changing scene-specific configurations: Rick and Ugarte; Rick and Renault; Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo. Abstracting from those scenic configurations one can identify the overall positions that the individual characters occupy within the film's constellation of characters, that is the total system of all the characters and all the relations between them. The extension of such systems ranges from the one-person film to the ensemble film with hundreds of characters. Their structure is determined by the relationships of the participant characters as fictional beings and as artifacts. The constellation positions the individual characters 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, as main and supporting figures, stand in a hierarchy of attention;

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

The positions of characters within this network contribute massively to their specification and significance. Characters are usually perceived through comparisons with other characters, which emphasizes their proper features and developments: the submissive and garrulous Ugarte accentuates Rick's self-confidence and reticence; the idealistic Laszlo is the touchstone for Rick's moral development. Moral principles, physical attractiveness, and other value-laden attributes are shared in variable ways by the characters, resulting in a value structure of a certain bandwidth and orchestration, which takes effect in the assessment of the individual characters. In *Casablanca*, the bandwidth between good (Laszlo) and evil (Strasser) is enormous, and Rick rises from the middle ground of the moral spectrum to the pole of its positive extreme. At the end he does not only surpass Laszlo in power, humor, and attractiveness but also in morality. In contrast, in film noir there are often only corrupt characters and one orients oneself by those that act in the least immoral way.

The character constellation is not just a fictional moral and social system but also a system of characters as artifacts. In this respect, characters fulfill certain *dramaturgical functions*. They contribute to the development of the plot (as protagonist, antagonist or helper; as releaser, goal object, receiver, or decision maker); they reinforce realism effects, communicate information, perspectivize the narration, convey super-ordinate meanings, create intertextual connections, and possess their own intrinsic aesthetic or emotional value. The attention that we bestow on main and supporting characters depends on, among other things, the density of their functions and the intensity of the information supply. As a rule, a special position in the hierarchy of attention is allotted to the protagonists and antagonists that propel the action forward. The patterns of conflict extend from the inner conflicts of individual protagonists through odd couples and relational triangles to collective or multiple protagonists that are confronted by equally multifarious antagonistic forces.

Characters stand in particular relationships of similarity and contrast with each other not only as fictional beings but also with regard to the manner of their formation and their artifact properties. Because of this, structures that group or isolate characters emerge, with sometimes considerable socio-cultural consequences. Thus societally marginalized communities (e.g., certain ethnic groups) are frequently stereotyped in mainstream cinema, pressed into the function of antagonists or helpers and represented in unfavorable ways (for an overview, see Benschhoff and Griffin 2004). *Casablanca* is also not free of this: the Moroccans only figure as extras or as cheating traders, and the relationship between Rick and Sam is a friendly but unequal one.

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Every character constellation, therefore, displays structures that are effective in multiple ways and in many different respects: degree of attention; dramaturgical function; style of formation and artifact 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 is an important basis for analyzing the symbolism and the symptomatics of characters.

### **Characters as Symbols and Symptoms**

“Symbol” and “symptom” are used here as umbrella terms, each of them covering a wide range of phenomena. When we examine characters as symbols, the question to be answered is what indirect meanings they convey. When we examine them as symptoms, the question concerns the causes in the production process that lead to their specific properties, and the effects of them on the viewers during and after reception.<sup>7</sup> Symbolism and symptomatics occupy different positions of relevance in different forms of analysis. During commercial film production scriptwriters, producers, and directors usually concentrate on the aspects of the fictional being and the artifact because they are expected to bring about the strongest effects during the film experience. By contrast, one of the essential purposes of scholarly film interpretation often was to recognize the symbolism of the characters, particularly their contribution to film themes. When considering films in the context of cultural criticism, the symptomatics of the characters again plays a more important role because it can elucidate cultural mentalities or the socio-cultural consequences of particular films. In all these cases, the analysis must fall back on the aspects treated previously: corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behavior; mode of representation and artifact properties; motivation and constellation form the foundation of investigating the symbolism and the symptomatics of characters.

This investigation is facilitated by a reception-oriented approach. With regard to symbolism, the question of what indirect meanings characters have then changes into the question of what meanings the viewers are supposed to infer. The viewers can further process the character information grasped in the process of mental model building. They can associate different meanings with the properties of a fictional being, such as social types and groups, general virtues and vices, repressed fears and desires, mythical and religious antetypes, or historical personalities. Some critics maintained, for instance, that Rick stands for President Franklin Roosevelt or for the US isolationist stance in the beginning of World War II. Over and above such particular associations, a character may be understood to be the vehicle of general thematic statements; with Rick, it may be “personal sacrifices create integrity.” The association of a fictional being with such ideas may spring from diverse sources:

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generalizations over properties and developments of a character; the identification of similarities and analogies; metaphorical connections. The characters in question are thus turned into *Schlüsselfiguren*, personifications or allegories, exempla or theme carriers. Such higher levels of reception are rarely suggested expressly, most often in auteur films like Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. But the example of *Casablanca* shows that symbolic and thematic aspects of the characters are all but irrelevant in mainstream cinema. The aim of entertaining an audience excludes neither profound meanings nor messages of propaganda.

This points to the symptomatics of characters, its causes and effects. The umbrella term "symptom" refers to reflections of viewers with regard to characters as socio-cultural factors and as causal links between production and reception. Once we have grasped characters as fictional beings, artifacts, and symbols, we may question why they are as they are, and what effects this might have on the (other) viewers. We can consider characters as the voluntary or involuntary expression of individual creativity, or as indicators of collective mentalities and images of human nature. We can admire the political commitment of the producers and speculate about Bogey's influence on the shaping of the character Rick, but we can also query the image of masculinity underlying this character.

On the side of reception, we can develop assumptions about Rick's function as role model, identification bid, or behavioral paradigm for the viewers. Characters can trigger processes of learning, 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. The public criticism of the characters in highly controversial scandal films like *A Clockwork Orange* demonstrates how significant the presumptions of such effects may become for the experience of characters. The point of the analysis is to provide reasons for the assumption that a character has such effects, or to appraise them critically by reference to all the aspects of characters with which we have previously dealt. If we want to understand how characters affect their viewers, we need also to understand in what ways they can trigger feelings.

### **Imaginative Closeness and Emotional Involvement**

That characters elicit feelings or emotions in us is one of the most important reasons for our watching films at all. But in what ways do our feelings arise? The model of reception developed in my book provides indications: we perceive the character depictions of the film, build up mental models of the characters, associate with these indirect meanings, and infer socio-cultural causes and effects. Specific kinds of emotion are connected with each level of recep-

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tion. We can react emotionally to Rick's coolness, to his thematic message, his presumed effects, or to Bogart's acting skills. Characters thus trigger feelings not only as fictional beings but also as symbols, as symptoms, and as artifacts. The dramaturgical discussion, however, has so far focused only on the emotional participation in fictional beings. As this aspect has remained a subject of highly controversial debate, I consequently focus my attention on it.<sup>8</sup>

The involvement in characters is often described by means of concepts like "perspective," "identification," "sympathy," or "empathy." The clarification of these concepts reveals that we, in our analysis, ascribe a mental perspective both to viewers and to characters—a specific way and manner in which they perceive, understand, appraise the represented world and react to it with wishes and feelings. When watching a film, we often assume an external observer's perspective on the characters: we accompany Rick Blaine through the film and learn more or less about his experiences, infer his inner life, and feel for him in a way that may diverge from his own feelings (*sympathy*). Second, we enter into particular *relations of perspective* with the characters: the way in which we experience the represented situations through our perceiving, thinking, evaluating, wishing, and feeling, may approximate the experiences of the characters with reference to any of these aspects. A point of view shot brings us closer to Rick's visual perception without compelling us to share his feelings: we may see Ilsa from a point of view similar to his, but while he is angry with her we are feeling compassion. Whenever we are assuming the perspective of characters in relevant respects—for example, our knowledge about a situation matches the characters' knowledge—we are involved in (partial) *identification*. When we are additionally developing feelings similar to those of the characters—for example, when we are watching the separation of Ilsa and Rick and relive emotions associated with our own experiences of separation—then we are practicing *empathy*.

Such perspectival relationships are only a part of a more comprehensive system of *imaginative proximity and distance* with regard to characters, which is formed by numerous other factors: we feel spatially close to characters (close-ups) or are synchronised with them in our experience of time (slow motion). We accompany characters in their experiences and perceive the same situations and action opportunities. We understand the psyche and the sociality of characters well or not so well. We compare ourselves with characters and develop the feeling that they are familiar to us, resemble us, or are completely different. We place them in our in-groups or out-groups, project our wishes onto them or have the impression that they interact with us (facing the camera). The most important sense of proximity to characters is when we develop strong positive feelings for them or share their emotions.

Thus, we can feel close to, or distant from, characters in many different ways: spatially, temporally, socially, cognitively, and emotionally. Conse-

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quently, we assume different attitudes toward them, confront them as external observers, participant empathizers, or distanced analysts, experience them as our interaction partners or substitutes. With mainstream-film protagonists the typical aim is imaginative closeness in as many areas as possible. In *Casablanca*, many techniques are employed to bring Rick close to us, for instance the narrative focusing on his experiences, the dialogues about his inner life, the memory flashback, the convergences with his visual point of view, the musical creation of moods, or the evocation of inner processes by means of *mise-en-scène*, camera, and editing.

The way a character is designed directs our emotional reactions by focusing on its features and situations that serve as emotion triggers. But how can one describe the emotional potential of characters in a differentiated way? Based on current emotion research one can assume that characters and their situations evoke in viewers' perspectivized appraisals that are associated with particular body reactions, thus becoming emotions. These appraisals occur on different levels of information processing and are influenced by nature, culture, and individual experiences. Our emotional involvement takes multifarious forms. At least three of these are directly related to properties of characters: in *objective* appraisals we assess their corporeality, personality, sociality, and behavior by intersubjective (e.g., moral) criteria and react with corresponding feelings (e.g., moral appreciation). In *subjective* appraisals we assess characters by our individual interests and react with directly self-related feelings, such as fear of or desire for them. In *empathic* appraisals we allow ourselves to be "infected" by the feelings of characters in different ways. At the end of *Casablanca* we might feel moral respect for Rick or Ilsa, find them attractive, or feel emotional contagion by their sad faces (Figure 6). In all this, we always take a particular perspective on the characters.

These forms of appraisal are the foundation for our developing durable *dispositions of sympathy or antipathy* for characters as well as for siding with or against them in situations involving their interests. We hope that Rick and Ilsa are united; we fear that there is no happy solution for them; and we are content when they are able to maintain their integrity and when the ruthless Strasser receives what he deserves. The emotional siding with or against the protagonists and the antagonists usually develops, as in this case, into a longer and increasingly gripping emotional episode.

The emotional engagement with the characters and the appraisal of the situations relevant to them is influenced by diverse contexts, among them not least the reactions to the characters as artifacts, symbols, and symptoms. A



Figure 6: Rick's and Ilsa's farewell at the end of *Casablanca*.

variety of emotional involvements is given by the different forms of perspectival appraisal of characters and their situations. It is also given by the huge number of emotion-triggering properties, among them especially bodily, mental, or social capabilities and disorders; beauty, disease and death; group membership, positions of power and status; egoistic or altruistic motives; pro-social or anti-social actions as well as the emotion expressions of the characters themselves. This abstract enumeration already indicates the significance of character analysis for an understanding of our cultures and our existence.

### **“The Fundamental Things Apply”**

Not even in the sphere of emotionality are characters a purely subjective affair. The important point in their analysis is to handle their complexity in a sensible way and to avoid arbitrariness. The spectrum of character analysis can be narrowed by making the goals of the analysis clear and by orienting the use of heuristic models toward these goals. There are different ways to do this. One could, for instance, work systematically through the “clock of character,” from the general to the specific. It might be more efficient, however, to begin directly with those aspects of a character that are especially striking or seem of immediate interest, and to expand the analysis from there to cover other sets of features. With Rick Blaine, his progress toward being a better person is perhaps most remarkable, and one could then deliberate how this development is organized dramaturgically, how it is shaped audio-visually, and what thematic functions it has. In this way, the “clock” may facilitate not only the analysis of particular characters but also the comparison of several characters within one film or a group of films. With its help one can target specifically what it is exactly that distinguishes the characters of particular kinds, genres, oeuvres, cultures, historical periods, or forms of production. A typological approach may be helpful here. The heuristic model I outline in this article permits the derivation of typologies of characters on various levels:

On the most general level, one may distinguish between *diegetic*, *artificial*, *symbolic*, and *symptomatic* characters, depending on whether the focus of attention is on the aspect of the fictional being (mainstream movies like *Casablanca*), the artifact (experimental films or video clips like *The Child* (Figure 7), the symbol (allegorical films like *Der müde Tod*), or the symptom (propaganda films like *Jud Süß*). Closely related are typologies of characters by their *artifact properties*—such as individualized versus typified and realistic versus non-realistic characters, and by their *character conceptions*—mainstream realism, independent realism, estrangement, or postmodernism.

The general property domains of fictional beings may also be foregrounded: some characters are predominantly *body-centered* because of their shape, attractiveness, and physical abilities, most frequently in the genres of action, pornography, horror, science fiction, or fantasy. Other characters are

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Figure 7: The video to Alex Gopher's song *The Child* foregrounds the artificiality of its world and characters: The visual appearance of "woman" and "husband" is exclusively formed by letters describing their looks and traits.

primarily *mind-centered*, such as those in character studies or mind-game films, in which the inner life is presented in great detail or partially focalized through the characters themselves. The characters in many melodramas or problem films are *sociality-centered* because their most important features involve their group membership, their roles, and social relations.

Fictional beings can, furthermore, be classified as *human* and *non-human*, among them *natural* (animals), *synthetic* (robots), and *fantastic beings* (aliens, deities, monsters, living things or plants), which may all turn out more or less anthropomorphic or hybrid. More differentiated are the numerous human *social (stereo)types* determined by age, gender, ethnicity, social role, or personality (e.g., employee, communist, housewife), and also the conventionalized *genre types* (e.g., cowboy, mad scientist, femme fatale).

The list of such typologies might be continued by referring, for example, to the position of characters within a constellation (e.g., protagonists, antagonists, main and supporting characters); to their motivation (e.g., egoistic or altruistic; biological, social, or mental needs; reachable or unreachable goals), or to their modes of representation (e.g., primarily visual or auditory). Almost any distinction introduced before can be made the source of a character typology.

In view of such complexity the question suggests itself: what is *the* most important, the decisive, feature of film characters? The answer might well be: their variety and their multilayeredness. The central feature of characters in general does not exist; depending on the question asked, different features may turn out to be significant. This claim is connected with a program of character analysis, which is directed against one-dimensionality and dogmatism and pleads for openness and flexibility. The heuristics outlined in this

article (and elaborated in my book) are, quite unequivocally, not designed as rigid schemata for ticking off but as aids to be employed at everybody's discretion. Far too long have film characters been reduced to their position as "actants," to their mode of representation, to their psychoanalytical diagnosis, or to their motives of action. It is high time to expand our field of vision to (dis)cover the abundance of their forms and features.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To name just a few: Michael Z. Newman's (2007) dissertation on characters in US independent films (2007); Margrit Tröhler's (2007) book on plural character constellations; Hans J. Wulff's (1997) essay on character, cognition, and empathy; and the contributions on characters and emotion in Plantinga and Smith (1999).

<sup>2</sup> For an interdisciplinary bibliography on characters see Eder (2008b).

<sup>3</sup> For a brief historical overview on those kinds of distinction, see Scherer (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Evidenced by the multitude of psychoanalytically inspired manuals for scriptwriting, acting, and directing (e.g., Blumenfeld 2006).

<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the analysis of film can benefit from Jannidis's (2004) work on literary characters.

<sup>6</sup> Baruch Hochman's work (1985) on those kinds of properties is a good starting point.

<sup>7</sup> Among other sources, my distinctions are based on Teun van Dijk's work in the field of critical discourse analysis (see <http://www.discourses.org>).

<sup>8</sup> I have outlined my approach—which owes much to work by Murray Smith, Greg Smith, Carl Plantinga, Patrick Colm Hogan, and other scholars—in somewhat more detail in Eder (2008a).

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