

Hermeneutic case reconstruction in media research

Events are unforeseeable as long as they have not occurred. When they have taken place one can try to understand them, to explain them. One can link events with one another and retrospectively understand the logic of this linkage. In the present time there is nothing that has allowed one to predict what, under so many possible, imaginable and other completely unimaginable constellations, will finally occur."

(Claude Lévi-Strauss, "De Près et de Loin", 1988)

1. Stating the problem

German-language research into the effects of the media in the last few decades was, and is still to a large extent, orientated rather one-sidedly towards simple theoretical models and standardised empirical research methods. The Commission of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft DFG (German Science Foundation) was also forced to acknowledge this in its review (DFG 1986). Thus in some cases it was even demanded that only those studies could be scientifically recognised which exhibit a causal proof of effects. The procedures of collecting data and especially of data evaluation used in this connection give rise, however, to considerable doubts as to whether this proof can be furnished at all in this way. Moreover, the question also arises as to whether the assumption of effects from the point of view of causality is an appropriate prerequisite for the object area of the social sciences — and they include the media. It is not only that the field to be examined is very complex and that it appears almost impossible to isolate all the relevant factors, but the whole epistemological gain of such a research strategy becomes debatable. For if we take a closer look at the studies from the field of research, hardly any new knowledge about the object itself can be produced from the point of view of research logic. Thus the classic design, for example, first demands that a theoretical position on the object to be studied should first be taken up from which hypotheses to be examined are deduced. What the empirical phase that then follows can produce is either the confirmation or the rejection of the hypothesis advanced. In these approaches, too, reality is subject to prescribed categories, i.e. it is asked whether certain events fit patterns laid down previously. The process of generating hypotheses and forming theories here takes place outside the empirical research process and is based on the interpretation of the connections that are statistically demonstrated. From this point of view new knowledge cannot be generated on the object.

To distinguish this methodology which registers reality with categories, here a reconstructive approach is represented.¹ Central for this position is the assumption, based on anthropology and action theory, that human actions and thoughts are guided by rules. Unlike the term 'law' in natural science, the term 'rule' is regarded as being more appropriate for the social scientific object area. The reason given for this is the linguistic make-up of our consciousness and the structuredness of sociality in terms of meaning. Through language we produce social reality and through that we also communicate about this reality. The concept of meaning refers to the rule-governed connection between the object and its symbolisation on the one hand and the symbol and situation on the other. Adopting the meaning concept after the American social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1973) also implies that there are two levels, namely that of objective meaning structures and that of the subjective representation of these structures. The objective structuredness of reality means that the cooperative participation in society is dependent on intersubjectively available symbols which claim validity to make possible 'reasonable' actions and understanding between subjects. In this connection language, which contains this meaning structuredness, is to be regarded as a prominent means of communication (Habermas 1981).

Now the reconstructive approach would like to disclose the rules which generate these meaning structures. In doing so it uses hermeneutic procedures, that is, the way of opening up meaning. In expanding philological hermeneutics orientated to the literary text, the methodological approach which it is necessary to adopt sees itself as a social scientific one which extends the definition of the concept of text. By social reality appearing as being meaning-structured it gains the form of a text whose sense can in principle be opened up.²

It is precisely these meaning structures that structural hermeneutics wants to reconstruct. In order to disclose the appropriate meaning contents it avails itself of the implicit knowledge which we ourselves always use in our actions and speech acts to produce meaningful relations. It concerns those systems of rules which determine the pragmatics of our actions and speaking. So when these rules condition our actions and speech we can use it in exactly the same way to judge the pragmatic embedment, that is, the meaningful constitution of actions and speech in social reality. For the hermeneutic interpretation records are produced from this social reality, the interaction text, and these serve as a material basis for the reconstructive method (cf. Oevermann 1979 and 1986).

2. Hermeneutic case reconstruction

2.1 The character of case reconstruction

Whereas in the *case study* an effort is made to give an accurate description of all possible factors, data and conditions of the case so as subsequently to seek for a theory which can be applied to this constellation, that is, to advance an explanation from the outside, the *case reconstruction* claims to reconstruct the genesis of the case from inside, in the language of the case itself. Here it is assumed that each case contains a specific logic of its development and that the latter can be defined as a certain structuration logic. If this logic is disclosed by the hermeneutic-reconstructive access, then the case is 'understood' (*verstanden*) and hypotheses can be advanced about its further course. So case reconstruction is a matter of answering the question of how something has become what it is. Since the hermeneutic process is one of disclosing or approaching the structures hidden beneath the surface, the result of the reconstruction must always be seen as a hypothesis which has to be examined by further analyses.

While the *case study* is orientated towards a more typological description of its object and would like to reveal what is individually typical, *case reconstruction* is interested in what is general about the case. The dialectics of the particular and the general is a central, basic assumption of reconstructive hermeneutics. While the *case study* tries to understand the case with a theory to be brought in from the outside and thus proceeds with subsumption logic, the *case reconstructive procedure* claims to open up hermeneutically the meaning content and thus what is typical about the case. The latter means working out from the case itself those structural moments in which the particular appears as a principle possibility of the general and, conversely, the general arises as a specific individual variant.

2.2 The object of the case reconstruction in media research

Now, in media research case reconstruction can be applied in many areas. The formulation of the problem of a media research that proceeds reconstructive-hermeneutically can, for example, concentrate on the structural contents of media or media systems, of actions in dealing with media, thinking about media or about the influence of media on thinking. Since a reconstructive-hermeneutic method of procedure can thus aim at different object areas, it is important before every analysis to coordinate and formulate the problem and the analysis area. It is therefore a matter of what is actually the case to be interpreted in the case reconstruction. This may, for example in a film analysis, be the structural meaning content of the features of the movie, the interactions of the persons performing or the form of address to the recipients. But also the manner of dealing with certain media, the inner wishes and motivations as well as specific meaning patterns with regard to

the media can be hermeneutically reconstructed in this way. An interpretation example is taken below to make clear the connection of different perspectives and the interrelation of various case structures. The general theme is a media reception situation composed of several elements. Thus the medium, on the one hand, and the recipient, on the other, are central for such an analysis. But over and beyond this I am also interested in the socialisation background of the receiving subject to obtain elucidation on the manner of reception.

2.3 Concrete steps in the analysis

Using an example I should like to clarify the way the case reconstruction approach is applied in media research. I shall, however, restrict myself to questions which arise in connection with the media reception process. To analyse reception questions of this kind I have developed a method of procedure which comprises three different steps:

In the *first step* the objective meaning content of the medium or the medial presentation is analysed; i.e., for example, of the book or television programme. Here, too, it is important to lay down the analysis level in the selection of the case. It is also often sufficient to analyse the whole plot structure of a film or story. This step is based on the above-mentioned assumption that all social structures are characterised by an objective meaning content which can be reconstructed. Only in very rare cases is this meaning content directly accessible to the recipient, as it first has to be opened up interpretively. But it reflects those interpretation options which are principally available to the receiving subject.

The *second step* is directed towards the receiving subject. Interest is concentrated on the subjective way of reception. As interpreting is an understanding process, this step can also be described as the one in which it is a matter of understanding what the receiving subject understands. To this end the recipient is asked about his understanding of the plot or the characters in the story. His answers are, in turn, hermeneutically reconstructed with regard to their meaning contents. What is revealed in this phase are the meaning and interpretations which the receiving subject attaches to the medium. Now this second step does not stop at the interpretation of the recipient's understanding achievement: against the background of the analysis undertaken in the first step, the recipient's subjective interpretation is now confronted with the objective meaning contents of the medial presentation. Of course, this can give rise to differences, but it is precisely these differences which are interesting for the analysis. For if the subjective interpretation of a film, for example, deviates from the interpretation of the objective meaning contents, then this requires an explanation, since it must be suspected that here other criteria than intersubjectively valid ones are being applied to assess meaning contents. They might be discovered in the third step. In this second step of the analysis,

however, what interests us are the recipient's interpretation achievements and his or her subjective way of looking at the media contents in relation to the reconstruction of the objective meaning contents.

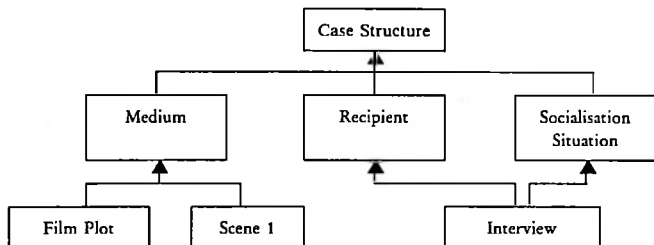
Now the *third step* examines how the subjective meanings of media and the specific motivations to turn to certain contents might have come about against the background of socialisation processes and socio-cultural influences. Here the familial socialisation processes, which in early childhood influence the formation of specific ways of interpreting the world, are likely to play a special role. For this reason here the socialisation conditions have to be ascertained. But these conditions can, at the very best, only be obtained by a special study for this purpose which goes into the receiving subject's family of origin. But as this, in practical research, is only feasible in very rare cases, one has to fall back on these data by means of biographical parts of the interviews and to open up the aspects of the family dynamics of the family of origin. Over and beyond this, however, aspects relating to the life-world and situation play a crucial role. They, too, have to be taken into account in the case reconstruction. So the purpose of this third step is to be able to understand the differences discovered in the second step between the objective and the subjective interpretations and motivations for turning to the media.

Now, the order of the steps presented here is, however, based on an experimental research design, as described elsewhere.³ First a film is analysed and subsequently the specific ways of reception by the subject are examined. In an everyday manner of proceeding one will, of course, come across a certain medium or certain media contents which, through utterances during an interview or through the observation of an interaction scene, may be of importance for the interviewee. In this case it is advisable to first take a closer look at the contents of the medium, that is, carry out the first step described above, so that, in a subsequent phase, it is possible to ask specific questions on this, which are then evaluated in the second step.

In the following Diagram the different levels – not steps – are represented on which the case reconstruction operates. The film and the interview are available as material on the lowest level. Only a summary of the plot and a scene from the film are selected. The material represents, on the one hand, the medium and, on the other, the recipient and, in our case, the socialisation history as well, that is, the question as to how the manner of reception might have come about. The middle level represents the statement of the problem: What makes a certain subject (recipient) turn to a certain medium and how can this fact of his turning to it be explained specifically with regard to the situation or socialisation? The interpretations of the individual steps on the different levels must, in the end, join together in a case structure description which embraces the whole case. On the basis

of the individual interpretation steps and their combination, it must contain an answer to the question which must not be seen as a theoretical access to the case, but it should result from this itself. But subsequently, concepts can be taken out from other theoretical approaches to arrange the case structure into a more general framework.

Diagram



1. Example of an interpretation

I should like to present the necessary steps and the concrete analysis process using an example. It is concerned with an excerpt from a larger project on the question of how recipients understand and interpret media contents and how these interpretations have come about by socialisation-conditioned effects. This approach is based on the assumption that, on account of inner motivations, we turn to certain media contents and these motivations themselves are in turn characterised by conditions which are specific to the life-world or relevant to socialisation. The latter aspect is, however, not discussed in the example, as no data are as yet available on it.

The following analysis refers to the question of what might have actually motivated young people to watch horror films. In the last few years viewing such films has become a very popular leisure-time activity among a considerable number of young people, which, however, is condemned by adults. The phenomenon of interest in such films usually arises at an age of between 14 and 17 years and disappears between 18 and 20. Only very few adolescents continue to enjoy this kind of film after this age threshold. Only in very rare cases did the debate on the consumption of horror by young people conducted in public by those interested in media education result in a closer examination of the reasons for such preferen-

ces. The following case reconstruction would like, however, to come a little closer to this phenomenon and make it understandable.

The case at issue⁴ is concerned with the specific interest of a 19-year-old young man in the horror film "The Evil Dead I", which is available as a video and which has been banned in Germany for some time. These videos play a decisive role in the everyday life of some young people for their leisure-time organisation and are frequently consumed in groups of friends of the same age. Although girls also look at such films, it is mainly male adolescents who are interested in horror films. As became clear from an interview with the young man, he had already seen the video film six times and this can be regarded as his favourite (horror) film. The example was selected for the following analysis not only because of the clearness of the method of case reconstruction, but also because of the age of the respondent, who at 19 is not altogether typical of the usual group interested in these films. It is thus all the more likely that a hermeneutic case reconstruction might bring out factors which suggest an inner motivation for his preference rather than outer reasons conditioned by the peer group.

In accordance with the steps described above, the film was first interpreted in detail and then the interview was dealt with. Since not only the interview is very extensive, but also the film, which lasts 90 minutes, does not admit of a detailed presentation, I have restricted myself to a small aspect, which in my opinion is, however, central for formulating the question. Nor is it possible here, for reasons of space, to make a precise interpretation of the whole film with its component parts, such as camerawork, editing or the interactions of the performers.⁵ I shall therefore only refer to the character of the plot of the whole film and one short scene, which was chosen by the interviewee in the interview excerpt that follows as a point of reference. It is the scene which the young man describes as the worst in the film. The reason given for selecting this part is that this scene must contain something that might give indications of his motivation for seeing the film. For if he has seen the film so often and each time accepts a cruel and ugly scene, then it must symbolically contain something which unconsciously fascinates him. Before I interpret this scene, the whole plot of the film should first be described.

On the methodological procedure in interpreting the film plot: The plot of the film is interpreted as if it were a real-life action, i.e. the fact that it is a film is ignored. From this perspective even the supposedly subjective view of a recipient plays no part, but only that of an objective third person who observes the scene. This observer represents the view of a reasonably acting subject or the rules of appropriate action. During interpretation scenes are looked for from everyday life which are similar to those presented, according to the motto "That's like . . ." or "What does that mean when . . .?" and are judged according to the rules or structure they are based on. Thus the structural content of a plot has been worked



“The Evil Dead I”: The root twines itself around the young woman’s neck

out. Afterwards an attempt is made to generalise this structure, i.e. to work out more general meaning contents which are to be seen in connection with other parts of the film.

3.1 Summary of the plot of the film “The Evil Dead I”

Two couples and a woman, five people in all, drive off together for a weekend in a lonely hut, far away in the forest. During the ride and also on arrival some mysterious things happen. On the first evening in the hut, a door in the floor suddenly opens. There the visitors discover a book with strange writing in it and a tape recorder on which a scientist recounts uncanny events and says the forest is alive. He also claims to know the spell which can revive the dead. In the course of the evening the woman who had come along alone is enticed by something unknown into the forest. There trees fall over and roots begin to twine around her. Parts of her clothing are torn from her body by these roots, and she is thrown to the ground. As if it were a rape, the roots force her legs apart, while she utters groans. Afterwards she releases herself and runs back to the house. Here the cam-



"The Evil Dead I": The young woman's face after the transformation

era perspective shown is always that of a pursuer. In the house she tells the others that the trees are alive. She wants to go home at once. As all the routes for a return have been blocked in the meantime they all have to spend the night in the hut. Now the women, one after the other, all begin to be transformed into eerie beings which threaten the men. By cutting up the women the men try to defend themselves, but the women repeatedly return to life and continue to pursue the two men. After one is already dead the other is threatened by all three women. In the end he manages to save himself by throwing the book with the strange writing that was found in the cellar into the fire. After that the corpses of the women decay and the man goes outside where the day is breaking. There he believes he has survived the horrifying night, but in the end he is also killed by the unknown something, represented by a subjective camera.

The structure of the plot and the subject of the film can be briefly summed up: A woman is changed by an invisible power into a man-hunting 'witch', infects the other women, and together they threaten the men, who can only defend themselves by trying to destroy the women.

I shall now turn to the presentation and interpretation of that excerpt from the film which is referred to in the interview excerpt that follows. It is the scene mentioned at the beginning of the story in which the third woman who had come without a man is lured into the forest by something magic. She wanders aimlessly deeper and deeper into the forest, branches strike her face and more and more roots come out of the ground and try to grasp her. They slowly entwine themselves around her, tear her clothes from her body and throw her to the ground. While she is pinned to the ground, her legs are pushed apart by the roots, and the camera, which up to now has been observing events with a certain distance, moves up towards the opened legs. At the same time a strong root penetrates into her body. At this moment the fearful screams of the woman mix with pleasurable groans. Shortly afterwards she manages to release herself from the roots and flees back to the house. There she is the woman who is transformed and threatens the men.

This excerpt from the film can quite clearly be interpreted as a rape scene in which the woman appears to be the victim of the mysterious powers of the woods. The action is, however, directed in such a way as if she allows herself to be seduced because she goes deeper and deeper into the forest, although the signs of impending evil are growing. She thus appears to share the guilt for her rape, i.e. in this way the victim also becomes in part the culprit. This ambivalence also emerges in her groaning during the scene, which is meant to indicate that the whole event gives her pleasure.

What can be concluded from this? By making the rape of the woman at the same time appear to be a willingness to be seduced violence is equated with lust or sexuality. Indirectly female sexuality and thus that of the woman in the film appears to be debased, since sexuality is no longer something alive and life-promoting, but also something destructive. If we now look at the overall plot of the film, this represents the beginning of the change in the woman. She had come along as a single woman with the other two couples and thus almost appears to be a saint who would not abandon herself to the passions a partnership involves. But this scene completes her transformation into a whore, who abandons herself to the unknown something which takes her by force. Thus once again the aspect of the debasement of the woman is brought up structurally.

What is significant about the scene is also the camerawork, which changes from a distanced to a subjective view. While her legs are being opened by the roots, the camera moves up to the woman's genital area so that the viewer not only becomes a voyeur of the events but can also place himself in the perspective of the imaginary rapist. The film pretends that the viewer is the rapist.

If we now detach ourselves from the concrete interpretation and ask generalisingly what significance such a structure can have, then the following in particular becomes clear: this scene, of course, creates an identification potential which

might possibly gain inestimable importance for the reception. A mingling of the perspectives of the imaginary something which rapes the woman and those of the viewer takes place. But as the woman went almost voluntarily into the forest and even experienced pleasure during the rape, this act can be more easily justified, and this also makes an identification with the imaginary something easier. Because the camera pretends that the viewer is the rapist, that is, it acts on his behalf, but at the same time no concrete person appears, this scene offers both distancing and identification. Thus this scene's central structural meaning content, which debases the woman on the level of the film plot, appears to be partly responsible for her transformation and offers identification and distancing through the formal camerawork, seems to be deciphered. If these two aspects are combined, it is possible to set up the first hypothesis on a motivation for the reception of this film. This film is likely to be of interest mainly to those recipients who see their own relationship to women reflected in the debasement of women and in a rape that is desired and accompanies it.

This working out of the meaning contents of the film, or a certain excerpt from it, now allows us to pass on to the selected interview in which the latter scene is mentioned.⁶ This concerns the above-mentioned, second step in the case reconstruction. In the interview interpretation the same procedure is actually adopted in principle as for the picture or film interpretation. Here, too, it is a matter of examining the question as to what an utterance actually expresses. The reference point for assessing the appropriateness is, however, not, as in the case of the interaction, the context, but the facts of the case that are described. When we interpret an interview we ask what the relationship of *what* is said is to *how* it is said. In interviews it is also important to analyse the interviewer's question as well, since a particular question also results in corresponding answer options. Here, too, it is important to compare the interviewee's answer with the intention behind the question. Then part of the structure which represents the motivation is already revealed in a possible deviation from what can be expected.

3.2 Interview⁷

Q: Which scene in "The Evil Dead" do you find the worst?

The question is directed at the interviewee's assessment of the film. Finding something 'bad' can refer to both cognitive and to affective aspects. This statement represents a cognitive judgement if it says something about the way the film is made, the expression contents or prejudices coming up in the contents or stereotypes. The term 'bad', however, is also used when the emotional consternation is to be expressed by the scene. It may involve being stirred up inwardly, disgusted or also being frightened with reference to the presentation or the course of the plot. For

a horror film the cognitively-orientated assessment can only be taken as a standard when this film is seen from a distanced, aesthetic point of view. The horror occurring in such a film would then leave one cold.

A: When the woman changes, when she goes out and changes because of the roots that are touching her.

That it is precisely that scene in which the single woman changes that is described as the worst is, at first sight, surprising, when the dreadful scenes of the rest of the film are known. The 'bad' refers to the change in the woman who had gone into the forest and was raped there by the roots. This scene is also the starting point for the transformation in the women, who then threaten the men. So what can be so especially frightening about the change in a woman? An empathetic reaction for the woman's situation can be ruled out, since no passive is used (e.g. "How she was changed"). The stress is on the active aspect, the change. But this can be hardly noticed outwardly, but concerns the relationship to the men. It thus becomes clear that the threatening of the men that accompanies the change in the woman is felt to be 'bad'.

I shall therefore try to make a first structure description: An utterance, like the one in which it is said that that scene is the worst in which the woman changes, can only be seen as 'meaningful' if the change itself can be understood as something threatening or similar.

Which motivation might be the basis for such an utterance is to be followed up below. Thus a first structure hypothesis on the case, i.e. on possible reasons for turning to horror films, could be set up.

Since the woman does not change outwardly in the film, but inwardly, in that a friendly relationship to the men and the other women turns into a threat for the others, possible reasons must be sought in the symbolics of such a change, which can be understood as a transformation.

Since the woman in the film does not threaten the viewer but the male partners in the plot, a strong identification with the men in the film by the interviewee must be assumed. Being threatened by women when they are no longer the people they once were or as they are known is experienced as something real. But now the question as to whether the transformation as such or the transformed woman is understood as threatening still remains open. Assuming the first aspect would mean that the woman withdraws from the control of the man through a transformation. He no longer knows where he stands. This way of looking at it would lead to the conclusion that the interviewee has a very stereotype attitude to women: women have to be predictable for him, otherwise the situation becomes a threat for him. The assumption of the second aspect would lead to the conclusion that his relationship to women is disturbed, which, although not unusual during

puberty in men, does make one take notice. Both hypotheses do not rule one another out, they even complement each other.

Methodologically, in interpreting the interviewee's first answer a procedure was adopted so that a sensible reason for such an answer was sought. As it does not fall within the area of normality implied by the question, I have looked for motivations for such an answer. They are no more than hypotheses which aim at giving an explanation of how an answer like the one that followed the preceding question might have come about and makes sense.

The previous interpretation will be checked by another point in the interview at which the above-quoted point of the change in the woman is again dealt with.

Q: When you see, for example, the scene in which the woman changes, where the roots come, when you ask yourself, "What kind of feelings do I have or what occurs to me?"

The question is now aimed more precisely at the feelings that the interviewee has when he sees the scene mentioned. Thus the cognitive component of the assessment is cut out and the affective one is called for. The interviewee has to concentrate on his emotional experience.

A: Yes, I have thought about it from the point of view of feelings, how hard that is for the other man when his girlfriend changes. How hard it must be, what he goes through, what nerves he needs and so on. The man, who certainly likes his girlfriend and doesn't know how much he loves her. And then he has to see her change, suddenly turned into a monster. He'll think, "What kind of a girlfriend have I got?" or thinks to himself, "Didn't she ever tell me that she turns into a monster at full moon?"

Again the interviewee emphasises the change in the woman as especially threatening, but relates the emotional assessment demanded not to this woman but to her friend.⁸ He thus again avoids the request for an emotional assessment. He himself does not comment on it, but he has 'thought about' what feelings the man in the film must have. It is not the woman who suffers but the man. If this utterance is related to the situation shown in the film, this one-sided empathy for the man's situation and less for the woman's is what is surprising. This can only be said by someone who has no time for the woman at all. The man is pitied, because the transformation of the woman takes place unannounced. The expectation that a girlfriend should tell her boyfriend about her imminent transformation is, of course, absurd. Reproaching the woman in this way is to ascribe to her indirectly some of the responsibility for her transformation and thus for the rape that occurs – at any rate from the point of view of the interviewee.

The interpretation up to now again shows the interviewee's identification with the

man in the film and his suffering. It is not the woman who suffers by becoming a witch, but her friend, who cannot influence this transformation. This utterance also indicates a very object-related relation to women, for it is only possible to keep control of things. Here again the fear of the loss of control over women becomes clear. In addition, the threat of the man by the woman is again the central theme. Thus the structure hypothesis advanced on the basis of the interpretation of the first answer has been confirmed in the case of the analysis of this answer as well.

From methodological points of view the interview ought to be further interpreted to support this structure hypothesis or to find points which refute it or make a revision necessary. These points can be selected according to two alternative modes of procedure when the interview is too detailed and one does not want to interpret everything. The first way is that of the random selection of further interview sequences; the second that of the contrast principle. The latter says that on reading the interview those parts are to be interpreted in detail in which a contradiction to the structure hypothesis advanced is intuitively noticed. If in both cases – the random and contrastive selections – this hypothesis is, however, confirmed, in that the same structure description was obtained, then the previous interpretation can be regarded as consolidated and other questions can be pursued. This situation is assumed in the analysis under discussion.

I shall sum up the previous interpretations of the two interview excerpts. The interviewee identifies very strongly with men in the film, who are threatened by the women. This threatening aspect is especially expressed in the transformation of the women, which means the men are no longer able to control it. The interviewee's sympathies are accordingly not directed at the women who are transformed but at the men who are taken by surprise by this transformation. This indicates that the film here touches on a theme which must be regarded as an inner problem for the interviewee. Only in this way is the motivation to be understood for the answers given which can find a direct relation to the meaning contents of the film.

Below I should like to compare the result of the interpretation of the film plot and of the short interview excerpt, that is, the result of the first step in the method with the second. What the film expresses in the structure of its plot and what was recorded as the result of the interpretation above – the threatening of the men by the women – is, it is true, understood as the contents in terms of meaning of the film by the interviewee, but it gains in personal importance by reason of the identification with the male figures. Thus the interviewee's answers can consequently only be understood as an expression of projections of inner problems onto the plot. The interpretations so far indicate that these inner problems can be tied down in the area of the interviewee's relations to women. It is to be suspected that the interviewee has a problematical relationship to women, so that utterances by

him on this subject might be particularly informative. To check this further-reaching hypothesis additional interview passages are included below which thematise the interviewee's relation to women. The first passage is one in which his mother is mentioned. I shall quote these passages in detail so that I can subsequently present an interpretation.

Seen methodologically, here the transition to the third step in the case reconstruction takes place by using situation- and socialisation-related data of the interview. This further analysis serves to help to discover better possible reasons for the motivation for watching such horror films as "The Evil Dead" assumed in the first structure hypothesis.

Q: You said before that you once scared your mother. Can you explain to me how you did that?

A: Yes, I bought one of those masks, a white one, yea, that covers up everything.

Q: Like in "Friday the 13th"?"

A: Yes. Then I drew scars on it with a waterproof felt pen, or cut the mouth out afterwards and the eyes, yea? . . . And I made slit-eyes in it, so that it wouldn't be so obvious, yea? . . . And then I put in Dracula teeth, and a black coat or like Dracula himself, there were two, teeth like Dracula and the mask like Frankenstein, yea? . . . And here gloves, white ones, yea? . . . and at one place I had an arm, which has a kind of hook or like the pirates, and then I walked like that across the street, yea? . . .

Q: And then you went to your mother. . . ?

A: Yes, opened the door and went into the bedroom, made noises, Mother woke up my father, she turned on the light. I went down like this, the sirup was running out of my mouth and she went, "Ahhhh" (scream). A scream, and I ran into my room and laughed. That's something I enjoy doing, giving women a fright.

Q: Why women especially?

A: Because they are the most afraid.

What is very astonishing about the interviewee's story is his transformation into a monster, a phenomenon which he felt was threatening in the film. Forcing his way into his parents' bedroom¹⁰ resembles an oedipal situation, especially since he relates his description to his mother and not to his father as well. To startle one's own mother in the bedroom in the guise of a Dracula indicates a great lack of respect towards women. But what can it now mean when someone enjoys terrifying women and particularly one's mother in the bedroom? If we take the young

man's age into account and consider a certain retarded development in his case, which showed itself, for example, purely cognitively in his difficulty in giving a full account of the film without mixing it up with the second film "The Evil Dead II"¹¹, then the assumptions about the problems of the adolescent phase would apply to him. Here the development task is above all the severance from his parents and especially from reference persons of the opposite sex and the reorientation towards women outside the family. In this phase ambivalent feelings towards the mother as well as towards other women have to be dealt with. The beloved mother cannot remain the object of oedipal wishes, but she has to be replaced by other women. Such an action as the interviewee describes can actually only be carried out when one has aggressive feelings towards one's mother.

The reason he gives, namely that he enjoys terrifying women because they are afraid, shows up another aspect of his personality. It is, of course, simple to terrify those people who are afraid, because one has nothing to fear from them. So by seeking out weak points in others one can appear to be strong oneself. But since his idea of women is based on stereotypes, he will, of course, be all the more disappointed when women act differently from what he expected. This consideration also makes his fear of the transformation of women in the film understandable, since transformed women no longer react as expected.

The fact that he can put his supposed strength to the test vis-à-vis his mother of all people while dressed up in a Dracula costume indicates a weak mother, who fails to interpret his behaviour appropriately and thus does not react to it in the proper way. The almost grown-up son forcing his way into his parents' bedroom ought actually to call for a reprimand for his behaviour, but it seems – which does not emerge very clearly from his account – that it does not take place. So there is likely to be an unresolved tension in his relationship between him and his mother and women in general, which is to be examined in the further course of the interview. To do this, other places are taken up in which his relationship to his girlfriend is thematised. They are now reported on in conclusion.

A: My mother, my mother always says, hmmm, "You can never be without women. You always have women on your mind." Then I say, hmm, "That's fine, er, if you have the harem, you have to have it," is what I always tell her. She says, er, "Go on with you, Dad will be mad." . . . (incomprehensible), hm, At the weekend I bring three of them home, always different girls. . . . He says, hm, "How many have you got? I thought you had one girlfriend." Yes, I do have only one. These are replacements, in case the other one breaks it off . . .

In this account the boy poses as a lady-killer. The treatment of women from an object-related point of view (three girls) also confirms his relationship to women worked out above.

A: That's something I simply can't understand. Always these women. When a woman is in love with you and then another man comes along, makes eyes at her, bye-bye, you can go, she goes off to the other man . . .

Q: Do you feel that's how it is?

A: Yes, not all of them, but some. I know a lot who are like that. It's best to be alone. Then you don't have any problems. Always going out with your girlfriend, and when you go away you have to ring her up. I always go and fetch her on Friday. And when I go away otherwise, she says no, stay with me . . .

In these sections he now criticises precisely that aspect of women's behaviour which he shortly before had claimed for himself. Whereas he had previously mentioned the large number of his girlfriends and referred to them as 'replacements', this is now the point which he does not like about girls. His very one-sided point of view in his relation to women is also reproduced. When women act independently he regards this as a threat and would like to flee. The latter is expressed in his desire to be alone.

3.3 Summary

In the summary an attempt is to be made to reconstruct and generalise the case of the media reception of horror films, examined in the light of the example of the horror film "The Evil Dead I" and a 19-year-old young man. It is a matter of bringing together the lower levels shown in the Diagram into a comprehensive description of the case structure. Over and beyond this, further-reaching hypotheses are to be made on how the case came about, i.e. the motivation for reception, and theoretical approaches are to be quoted which are capable of theoretically describing the case.

The interpretation of the film or a film scene and an interview with a 19-year-old who describes this horror film as his favourite film has brought out interesting connections between the meaning contents of the film and the inner problems of the interviewee. While in the film the threat to the men by transformed women is taken as the subject, the recipient's disturbed relationship to women in everyday life seems to find here a corresponding confirmation. Subjective perspectives presented in a film, such as the rape scene at the beginning of the film and the aggressive and destructive resistance by the men in response to the women's threat, constitute further possibilities of identification. The horror film offers themes on which the recipient can act vicariously out his unresolved problems in dealing with women. Thus these themes of the film correspond to the interviewee's inner themes. From this comes the answer to the question as to what constitutes the motivation for watching the film. The adolescent finds a possible way of coping

with his problems in his relation to women in the symbolic presentation of the relationship of the two sexes.

Wagner-Winterhager (1984) has interpreted these problems generally and against the background of theory elements in depth psychology. According to this, this kind of horror film is so attractive to adolescents "because and insofar as these adolescents find in the sadistic-sexually tinged sections of the plot possible ways of living out inner conflict tensions of a sexual kind in a harmless way voyeuristically" (p. 363). The authoress refers above all to the aim-shifted actions offered in the film by the actions of certain figures. This means that the viewer, for example in the projection to a murderer of women, can see him as 'not-me' and thus does not come into a conflict of conscience if this ambivalent attitude to women is his or her theme. This is also one of the findings of our interpretation. On account of the dramatics of the film plot, this plot then even undergoes a moral justification. In our film "The Evil Dead" this comes about through the transformation of the woman into a witch, which she is partly responsible for causing – she allowed herself to be seduced – and through the threatening of the men by the women, which can only be warded off by using force. The – probably unconsciously motivated – preference for such films suggests, according to Wagner-Winterhager, that the psycho-sexual process of severance in adolescence has been inadequately coped with. This interpretation also applies to our case. His unresolved themes – his relation to women – become symbolically resolvable for the interviewee in the film.

On the basis of the available data little can be said, of course, about the family-dynamic conditions of coping so inadequately with the adolescent process of severance. But it should be asked whether there are not also societal reasons for the development that took place on the video market in the 70s and 80s with the great demand for horror films. In our interpreted case there are, in my opinion, some indications that the emancipation movement of women causes difficulties precisely for those men who in their thinking are closely attached to traditional and stereotype role patterns. The transformation of women in society into self-confident and independent human beings must seem frightening to precisely these men. The media offer these men a projection sheet for their fears of women, in that in horror films they can symbolically defend themselves against the transformation of women.

By including considerations from the viewpoint of depth psychology I have tried to theoretically describe and not to explain the interpretation result of the hermeneutic case reconstruction. This assumption has not been placed like a kind of sheet over the case at the very beginning, but was first brought in at the conclusion. The structural elements of the case have appeared through the hermeneutic interpretation of the case itself.

4. Conclusions

As the present hermeneutic case reconstruction should have shown, in media research a qualitative mode of procedure which is orientated towards the individual case can be carried out so that it results in gaining knowledge. The way presented tries to do justice to the complex phenomenon of media reception and of its possible reasons, by including and relating to one another different factors, such as the film and processes of understanding in the recipient. What distinguishes traditional individual case studies from case reconstruction is that the latter tries without theoretical categories but solely with the aid of the interpreters' everyday knowledge to understand the case. Using the case-reconstructive approach, processes and dynamics at a lower level can be deciphered more precisely than with other methods. In spite of the reference to an individual case, statements are obtained during interpretation which extend beyond what is particular about the case, since when interpreting an action or an interview utterance the normal case, i.e. the general, has to be reconstructed. In this sense the dialectics of the particular and the general are to be seen in case reconstruction, since it always contains both at the same time.

One question that is still open for hermeneutic case reconstruction is the generalisation of the results, which is expressed in the term structure generalisation. In order to be able to place the results obtained in the individual case reconstruction on a broad basis further case reconstructions have to be undertaken, which should be pursued exactly as suggested here. In doing so the selection of the further cases should be made according to the principle of 'theoretical sampling' of Glaser/Strauss (1967). The theoretically conducted search starts with the interpretation result of the first case and looks for further cases which help to generalise the structure hypothesis or case description advanced. In the case under discussion this search would have to be carried out in two directions: firstly, the assumption of a disturbed relationship of men to women as a possible motivation for the reception of horror films should be examined; secondly, the question must also be asked as to which reasons girls or young women might have for receiving such films. By using a strategy of this kind the phenomenon of media reception described in this article could be further clarified and thus make a contribution to an understanding of dealing with the media in our everyday life.

Notes:

- 1 For the reconstructive approach compare the two essays by Jürgen Habermas: "Die Philosophie als Platzhalter und Interpret" and "Rekonstruktive vs. verstehende Sozialwissenschaften", both in: *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. Frankfurt 1983, pp. 9-28 and 29-52.
- 2 The text concept of this structural hermeneutics was worked out by Ulrich Oevermann (1986).
- 3 Compare Stefan Aufenanger, Stephanie Ester and Barbara Ludewig: *Das kindliche Verstehen verstehen. Erste Versuche zu einer qualitativen Analyse von Rezeptionsweisen und -bedingungen bei Kindern anhand von Fernsehfilmen*. Oldenburg 1989, pp. 111-128.
- 4 I am indebted to Denise Chervet for making the interview available and for the joint interpretation.
- 5 An example of a detailed structural-hermeneutic interpretation of a television scene using a film script can be found in Margrit Lenssen; Stefan Aufenanger: *Zur Rekonstruktion von Interaktionsstrukturen. Neue Wege zur Fernsehanalyse*. In: St. Aufenanger; M. Lenssen (edit.): *Handlung und Sinnstruktur. Bedeutung und Anwendung der objektiven Hermeneutik*. München 1986 (Kindt).
- 6 The interview was conducted in Swiss German, so that some words used had to be commented on.
- 7 The interviewer's question is abbreviated below with 'Q' and the interviewee's answer with 'A'.
- 8 Here too the scenes have again been mixed up. The woman in the film who was transformed by the roots had come alone, but later she transformed the other two women as well. These three women then fought together against the men. The description therefore refers to a later scene and not to the forest scene.
- 9 "Friday the 13th" and "Mother's Day" are two of the best-known horror films.
- 10 At another point in the interview he narrated the same scene, but does not mention his father: ". . . and afterwards I woke up Mother with this mask. She got a real shock. She didn't go to sleep all night".
- 11 This confusion arose right at the beginning of the interview when he was asked to give an account of the contents of the film. In his description, scenes from the first film ("The Evil Dead I") were mixed up with the second film ("The Evil Dead II"). The plots of both films are, however, very similar.

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