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Towards a Political Reading of Film

Bringing together Critical Media Literacy and Political Theory[1]

Abstract. This contribution asks how a 'political reading' of film can be conceptualized and how a critical film analysis can serve the purpose of democratic education and empowerment. For this, the discourse on critical media literacy (CML) serves as a reference, making clear that dealing critically with media means far more than questions of 'truth' and 'harm prevention'. It also requires regarding media as sites of political struggle and a politics of representation. There are several sources and reference points for engaging in critical film analysis thus understood, reaching from the analysis of conditions of production over reception analysis to content analysis. The article also asks how political theory as an academic discipline can be used productively in this context. Going beyond activist and everyday understandings of politics, political theory might offer deeper political readings. Against that backdrop, a systematic distinction of different approaches for a political reading of film with the help of political theory is presented, with 'raising awareness', 'situating politically', 'understanding concepts' and 'widening the horizon' as four ideal types. Finally, practical implications are discussed with respect to two worlds of film: the 'world of cinema' and the 'world of television'.

Keywords. Film analysis, movies, popular culture, culture industry, political theory, democracy

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Filme politisch lesen

Anregungen für die kritische Filmanalyse aus dem Diskurs der Critical Media Literacy und der Politischen Theorie

Zusammenfassung. Der Beitrag behandelt die Frage, wie Filme ‚politisch gelesen' werden können und eine kritische Filmanalyse begründet werden kann, die einen demokratiepädagogischen Anspruch verfolgt. Er nimmt zum einen Bezug auf den Diskurs zu Critical Media Literacy. Dabei zeigt sich insbesondere, dass sich eine kritische Medienpraxis über Gesichtspunkte der ‚Wahrheit' von Medieninhalten und der ‚Schädlichkeit' von Medienkonsum hinaus mit der Relevanz von Medien als Ort der Austragung politischer Deutungskämpfe und einer Politik der Repräsentation befasst. Eine solche Praxis kann sich auf verschiedene Quellen und Bezugspunkte beziehen, die von Analysen der Rahmenbedingungen von Filmproduktion über Rezeptionsanalysen bis zu inhaltsanalytischen Zugängen reichen. Zum anderen fragt der Beitrag danach, was die Politische Theorie als wissenschaftliche Disziplin für eine solche kritische Filmpraxis leisten kann. Dieser Beitrag wird in einer über alltagsweltliche und aktivistische Zugänge hinausgehenden Weise des Interpretierens filmischer Inhalte gesehen. Im Anschluss lässt sich eine systematische Differenzierung eines politischen Lesens von Filmen mit Hilfe Politischer Theorie vornehmen, die demokratiepädagogisch als ‚Erzeugen von Aufmerksamkeit', ‚politische Verortung', ‚Konzepte verstehen' und ‚Horizonterweiterung' gefasst werden können. Abschließend werden Überlegungen zu praktischen Ansätzen für eine kritische Filmanalyse angestellt, die sich auf ‚die Welt des Kinos' und die ‚Welt des Fernsehens' beziehen, wobei erstere in besonderer Weise für den Spielfilm, letztere für die Serie steht.

Schlüsselwörter. Filmanalyse, Filme, Populärkultur, Kulturindustrie, Politische Theorie, Demokratie

1 Introduction

How can we 'politically read' film? To what extent can such a 'political reading' be part of a critical media educational practice that takes social power relations into account? And: What role does political theory, being rooted in academic discourse and subject to scientific research as well as university teaching, play? In the following, I seek to explore those questions. In particular, I will focus on the link between the perspective of CML on the one hand, and film as a medium as well as film studies or rather film analysis on the other, and I will examine the link

to my own academic discipline, political theory. By doing so, I especially aim to show how the critical perspectives of theory and analysis can be used productively in critical film practice. 'Political reading' of film can be understood as a central approach to critical media education. In this context, popular culture acts as the basis for the struggle over power relations, media formats, content, and cultural semantic meaning (Rauter-Nestler 2018, p. 3).

Films are an essential part of popular culture because they can impressively create a tie between en masse experienced pleasure and social self-thematization. At the same time, this characteristic is shaped by the economic and political conditions of successful commercialization of film which is a medium that mostly demands heavy financial investments for production. Yet, the popular cultural medium of film is also able to cross the border in the direction of 'art' and 'alternative culture' (however socially constructed such categories are). Therefore, film does not only provide an (enjoyable) representation for mainstream recipients in a capitalistic setting but also gives vanguards, activists, and minorities the (political and artsy) possibility to express themselves in a space wrung from prevailing societal relations. Films imagine and discuss 'normal' but also 'alternative' forms of reality, while at the same time constantly creating a 'different' form of reality. This takes the shape of enacting and displaying, thus 'authentifying', what is narrated by the film. Daniel Frampton refers to a "film world" or rather film as "a cousin of reality", "the second world we live in" as well as "[a] second world that feeds and shapes our perception and understanding of reality" (Frampton 2006, p. 1). According to that view, well before the 'digitalization' of our life and the emergence of the 'virtual world', we have been living in more than what we consider our 'real' reality. A 'political reading' of film means raising the question of to what extent the reality being generated by film reinforces or challenges the ruling power relations in society.

In the following, I am going to further discuss the conceptual relation between CML and film. In particular, it will be shown that critical media practice in the context of CML means far more than just posing questions of 'truth' within the content and 'harm prevention' within the consumption of media. Therefore, the relevance of media as a site of political struggle over interpretation will be underlined. Additionally, it will be emphasized that films can not only serve as a tool for conveying educational content but also as a type of pedagogical text which should be based on an inherent democratic practice. By doing so, the analytic perspective on the representation of social values, interests, and conflicts in films will be combined with the requirement for the use of an inherent democratic practice. Against that backdrop, different sources of critical film analysis and ways to read film politically will be presented. As a result, there are many

ways to approach critical film analysis. They differ in their approach to the social framework of film production, the ways of film reception, and in understanding the language of the film itself. At the same time, the main contribution of political theory might be a specific way of decoding and interpreting film-related content. With the help of political theory, I propose a way to further differentiate the 'political reading' of film. I conclude with observations about the practical implications of critical film analysis in the context of CML will be discussed.

2   Critical Media Literacy, Popular Culture, and Film

Like other contributions to the special issue, the understanding of CML referred to in the following draws on Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (Kellner, Share 2005; 2007; 2009). In particular, the work of Kellner needs to be emphasized due to his focus on society-critical theoretical traditions (critical theory, cultural studies, American pragmatism, see Kellner 1982) and his outstanding achievements for critical film analysis informed by social research (Kellner 1993; 2010; Ryan, Kellner 1988; see Winter 2018). There is no other author doing film analysis on the basis of such an intimate knowledge of critical theoretical approaches and with such a broad inclusion of popular films. Kellner has offered impressive accounts of film production as embedded in struggles for hegemony. Contemporary society, according to his view, is shaped by a 'media culture' that illustrates and conveys identities, everyday practice, and political orientation – and in turn, is characterized by the (often latent) presence of hegemonic conflicts. At the same time, contemporary society is subject to the functional imperatives of the social system – particularly the imperatives of a commodity character and profitability in a capitalist economy.

What are the characteristics of CML and critical film analysis drawing on Kellner's work? On the one hand, despite its rootedness in critical social philosophy Kellner's and Share's understanding of CML relates to broader understandings of media literacy as it is formulated for example by the Association for Media Literacy (AML) and programmatically presented by the Center for Media Literacy[2] (see Kellner, Share 2005, p. 374–377), highlighting five key assumptions regarding media competence (Media Literacy):

2   Kellner and Share condensate the original eights 'key concepts', which are mentioned by the Center for Media Literacy referring again to the definition of the AML from 1987 (see Jolls and Wilson).

– Media is always constructed, but generally this is not made visible;
– Media uses (creative) codes (conventions, stylistic devices, narratives, quotations, etc.), which at the same time need to be anchored in society in order to be understood;
– Media gets (differently) decoded and appropriated by (different groups of) media recipients;
– The content of media is attached to the representation of values and political perspectives, usually in an ambiguous way;
– The production of Media is shaped by economic and political interests.

On the other hand, those five key assumptions are themselves obviously already influenced by a 'critical' perspective. They view media competence as a *representation* of social reality and political concepts – and not just a tool used for an assessment of 'information' (see Jolls, Wilson). This view contrasts with the (in the words of Browne and Brennan: "simplistic") understanding of media competence, which is primarily aimed at "to protect young people and other media users against a plague of fake news and filter bubbles" (Browne, Brennan 2018, p. 2). No doubt, the ability to detect fake news and to question predominant opinions within a filter bubble is necessary for responsible handling of information. Campaigns spreading disinformation are a serious threat to the public debate. However, the representation of social realities, moral concepts, and perspectives can't be divided as simply as truth vs. falseness, or rational discussion vs. sinister manipulation.

First of all, the affirmation of derogatory stereotypes and the essentialization of problematic qualities of specific groups within media coverage does not necessarily equal the spreading of 'lies'. It is rather the way of displaying reality or creating a fictional reality that often causes 'othering' – starting by the specific camera settings which suggest specific groups being fundamentally 'different', up until the regularly made connection between the 'different' groups and social problems without taking the living conditions faced by the affected group into account (see for example End 2014 for interpretative patterns characterized by anti-gypsyism in the German media).

Secondly, media or media culture and by this media education is not just about 'information' but also about 'infotainment' and 'entertainment' – with the sphere of entertainment being not less relevant for our view of society (Grubb, Posick 2021, p. 2). Likewise, the question can be posed how we can deal critically with the representation of societal relations, believes and experiences within media products centered around 'entertainment' (understood as an experience of pleasure in a fictional world). It is precisely because the media is part of the

entertaining-fictional domain, Kellner (but also Henry Giroux 2002) sees media and especially entertainment film as suitable for critical media education. In that way, we have a particularly broad access to different perspectives on how we view ourselves, the society we live in, and how to understand or possibly understand the political struggles we face today. Lies and conspiracy theories within the media that are spread by anti-democratic forces might in principle be quite easily exposed by individuals sharing a solid democratic attitude and sufficient knowledge or skills to gain it. It is a much harder task, though, to understand why lies and manipulative strategies are so efficient and how they change our society, in how far we still can find ways of approaching one another and engage in a dialogue, or where exactly the fine line between likable maniacs and those leaning toward fanaticism, etc. needs to be drawn. Taking theory and method as a basis, scientific research might be able to provide some clues. Having said that, day-to-day knowledge and related practices are much more reliant on narrative interpretations. Entertainment films are the medium for such narratives and interpretations – and precisely because of that they are a suitable subject for critical analysis: Through them, one can view and understand the world in a specific way, and therefore they are part of the interplay of media, culture, and power.

By going beyond "understanding" the world we live in and critically engaging with the ways in which film makes us understand it, though, the occupation with entertaining media also offers specific possibilities to learn how to deal with media in a creative and self-empowered way. At this point, the characteristically 'critical' move of CML in comparison with a protective but also a more aesthetic-artistical approach of media education (such as 'media arts literacy') can be illuminated. CML focuses on a widely shared media culture consisting of "products of social production and struggle", with the aim of "teaching students to be critical of media representations and discourses, but also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism" (Kellner, Share 2005, p. 372). In doing so, popular culture is regarded as a "relay of the articulation of power relation" and a (mostly implicit) "educational space" of utmost importance, since there pleasure is the vehicle of meaning-construction and identity-production (Rauter-Nestler 2018, p. 2, my translation). Film is the outstanding medium for this (probably only paralleled by popular music).

Against this background, it is necessary not to regard film as something "given" but as an initial text which allows many possibilities of connection and which thus can be continuously re-written, not least by its reception and by the reception of reception(s). In educational terms, when read politically in that way, film is not just "another tool teaching material" "but turns to an independent edu-

cational text which can help develop a critical media competence as it connects the private with the public sector" (Rauter-Nestler 2018, p. 2 with reference to Giroux). Following this, film "can [become] a mouthpiece for predominantly marginalized (subject-) positions as it opens up new spaces and possibilities" (ibid.). Democratic practice and education can't be strictly separated from one another.

3   Reading Film „Critically" and „Politically" – Critical Theory and Cultural Studies

In his standard work *understanding film* James Monaco mentions two critical approaches to film analysis: the semiotic perspective, which reads film as a system of signs, and the dialectic perspective that analyses film as a product, a mirror, and an expression of social (especially political and economic) relations (Monaco 2017, p. 33). If we take Kellner's understanding of critical film analysis as a basis, the two perspectives intertwine and get politicized. In the following, I am going to touch upon this double way of 'political reading' and its theoretical base. On that basis, I am going to propose a modified perspective which, first of all, takes the different ways of film reception by specific cultural players and social groups into account more systematically. Secondly, this proposed perspective will broaden critical film analysis by a programmatic approach one could call "working with ideas in film".

In Kellner's CML approach to film analysis film is regarded as a medium used for 'transcoding', in other words as a filmic translation of social experiences, identity, and conflict (Kellner 2020, p. 20). Films are read politically by understanding the transcoding it entails, considering who appears (or not) and in which way they appear (and not in a different way), whose perspective is articulated and whose perspective remains unseen and which ideals and concepts we are led to consider as 'normal' or to tackle. At the basis of this lies a specific connection between 'old' critical theory and 'new' cultural studies. Already Kellner's notion of a "multiperspectival" film theory and criticism (Kellner 1993) draws upon such a theoretical basis. This may raise questions. On the one hand, one may doubt that the reception and reflection of this theoretical basis is really essential or facilitates a critical film practice according to CML. On the other hand, one might ask whether this theoretical basis needs a revision in order to overcome rigidities not compatible with a real multiperspectivism.

'Old' critical theory followed a critique of ideology and culture industry, which expands the Marxist critique of capitalism to the sphere of media analysis. In that way, critique of ideology was completed, since now the 'totality' of capitalist

relations was conceptualized to encompass all areas of human action. According to the original critic of Marx, dominant ideas must be unmasked as the ideas of a ruling class, and the 'wrong consciousness' of an alleged world of ideas and cultural values that is independent of the means of production and specific forms of existence must be uncovered. By this and in conjunction with a revolutionary movement, a revolutionary form of cultural production must be supported by siding with the oppressed class. Horkheimer and Adorno presumed the assumption that the dominant forms of consciousness and media production have an ideologic character and extended Marx's view by the analysis of a "culture industry" (Horkheimer, Adorno 1969). In the form of culture industry, the capitalist logic pervades and transforms also the area of cultural means of expression, and with that the last remaining realms of resistance vanish. Cultural products now mirror the nature of commodities and articulate and reproduce a mentality in line with the production of commodities. They are produced to gain profit and are customized for trouble-free consumption. Only rare 'real art' can escape this logic of 'objectification' by resisting complying to the mainstream scheme.

The remaining importance of Adorno's and Horkheimer's dialectic analytic approach, which is based on their conception of the culture industry, is that it succeeds in maintaining a societal-theoretical justifiable claim of objectification. Therefore it can help to argue against an uncritical postmodern arbitrariness or a constructivist indifference (see Kellner 2020, p. 29–31 and Prokop 2003). At the same time, the classic perspectives go hand in hand with a certain rigidity (Kellner 1982; Kellner 2020, p. 30). Firstly, it appears questionable that all products of the media are part of a coherent system that uses entertainment to reproduce ideologies which affirm existing relations and that recipients play a largely passive role. Secondly, the dichotomy of mainstream culture and advanced culture (or rather 'real art') seems problematic. It paves the way for an avant-garde understanding of art which enables art critics to glorify their elitist habitus as the highest form of society-critical vocation. Finally, the concept of cultural industry has an ahistorical tendency: The theory of society taken as a basis is set, individual phenomena are adjusted to fit into the timeless pattern, and a real empiric analysis that would approach the phenomena unbiased doesn't seem to come into play.

Therefore, a "multi-perspectival" critique of media according to Kellner (Kellner 1993; 2020) builds on Cultural Studies and makes four claims: Firstly, film is regarded as one of many areas of permanent struggle over cultural hegemony in society. According to Antonio Gramsci, this struggle is not about ultimate victory but a perpetual "war of position" between the ruling and the dominated class in which the ruling class always needs to compromise. Secondly, hegemonic strug-

gles have a multi-dimensional structure that does not allow power relations to be reduced to a single logic. The categories of 'race', 'class' and 'gender' – just like other categories in which specific groups play a subordinate role – have to be regarded as functioning each in specific ways, and the intersections between them needs to be taken into account. Thirdly, a multi-perspectival critiqueof media is based on the conviction that an individual film can never be fully captured by ideology. Even films that can easily be associated with one side of the struggle over cultural hegemony have semantic content that goes against this clear association or rather have facets that can be interpreted in a way 'against the grain'. Fourthly, multi-perspectival film criticism regards itself as part of a critical practice in which numerous individuals and communities with different motives and experiences having varied perspectives engage with media and therefore 'decode' its content in diverse ways (Kellner 2020, pp. 41–42 in reference to Hall 1980).

4 Sources and Theoretical Approaches to a Critical Film Analysis – A Broader Understanding

Against this background, it is possible to consider possible sources for film analysis in the meaning of CML and how they can best be used. Kellner himself distinguishes between three areas that have to be considered: (1) the area of political and economic relations as conditioning the production of media; (2) the "text analysis" as a way of addressing the codes, narratives, and tropes within a medium, (3) the analysis of reception concerning the manner how media is received by different groups of recipients and which discourse and practices it connects (2020, p. 36). On that basis, different sources and analytic points of reference can be differentiated (fig 1).
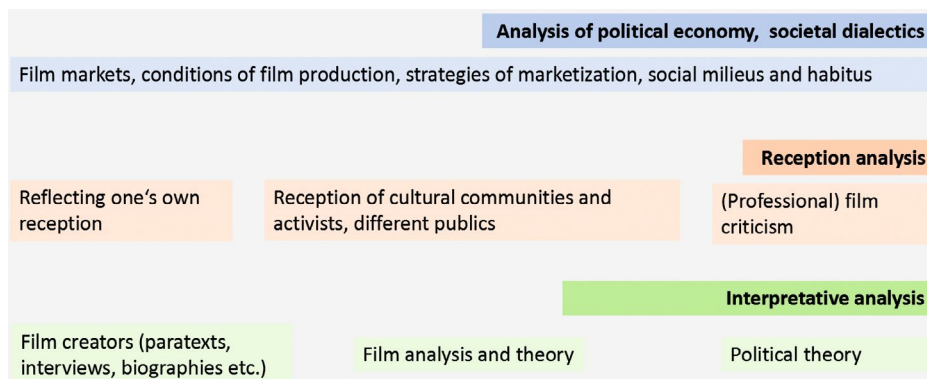

Figure 1: Sources of critical film analysis

A critical film analysis can thus draw upon a large number of approaches or access points – and in my opinion, one should honor all of them, while thinking also about their respective relevance for specific purposes and target groups. At this point, I am interested in the significance that is attached to the meaning of the term "political theories" in figure 1 – the field which deals professionally with fundamental ways of political thinking or the criticism and justification of social relations. In what ways can a critical film practice be stimulated by the reception of theory?

As already mentioned, especially the tradition of critical theory and cultural studies are not just an interdisciplinary context of discourse and research (cultural studies even more clearly) but both are discussed within political theory as important perspectives. Kellner and his congenial fellow campaigner for CML, Jeff Share, both acknowledge explicitly a normative concept of politics that is systematically reflected in the academic discourse of political theory, for example the concepts of "radical democracy" and "critical intersectional multiculturalism" (Kellner, Share 2005, p. 372–373; Kellner, Share 2009; Kellner 2020, p. 53–58). Concepts of radical democracy view democracy as a political project that frequently needs to redefine its normative basis and find societal support. Whereas it cannot rely on eternal certainty, it should be committed to a progressive agenda of combatting every dominant form of inequality and exclusion (Comtesse et al. 2019). Elite multiculturalism in the meaning of Kellner underlines the necessity of articulation of different identities while maintaining a joint framework of democratic citizenship.

Therefore, it is fair to say that CML already implies and presupposes a lot of normative 'political theory'! On the one hand that might be regarded as a burden, firstly because due to this firm positioning of oneself one becomes politically vulnerable; and secondly because it is necessary to follow up with abstract theoretical thoughts and texts before starting to work with the actual material. On the other hand, only by doing so this approach improves its specific critical profile and conceptual depth. It also escapes the accusation of being conceptually arbitrary as well as neglects the questionable expectation of being 'neutral' (see Wohnig, Zorn 2022). Therefore, a 'theory-free' film analysis does not present a convincing alternative. Instead of promoting 'less' theory, I want to make the case for 'more' but 'more open' and differentiated reference to political theory. It seems to me that the way Kellner deals with film analysis does not fully exhaust the potential that the critical use of political theory might have. In addition to a quite rudimentary way of reception analysis which is limited to established categories and the reception of prominent representatives of critical perspectives, I am missing a creative way of experimenting with political concepts that have

been developed, passed on, and critically reflected in the discourse of political theory and history of ideas. There seems to be a certain tendency to narrow film analysis down to a statement on a quasi-objective struggle over hegemony as well as the emergence of motives and negotiations of the different ways of reception. The critical theorist (in this case Kellner himself) still seems to overlook the whole scenery and issues relevant opinions – in a pleasing but quite confident ductus. He or she does not seem to be irritated by the individual film.[3]

No doubt, one can suggest, as Kellner does, that *Wonder Woman* (2017) is not only a thrilling superheroine movie, but that it can be read politically as a positioning in regards to feminism, and this certainly opens up a range of exciting possibilities for observation and evaluation (see Kellner 2020, p. 69–73). Such a political reading, focused on current hegemonic struggles, however, does not reach a level of interpretation that enables a deeper reflection on political concepts which have developed in the course of the history of ideas and that can help to make sense of experiences narrated in films. Such a deeper reading would require and simultaneously make it possible to focus on individual films instead of regarding them – as it is generally apparent in the case of Kellner – as a kind of more or less creative and entertaining commentary on the existing lines of conflict (in the United States).

The approach I would like to sketch here can also be understood as expressing a basically pragmatist understanding of (political) concepts: With the help of film, the interpretative strength and practical implication of concepts of political theory can be explored and at the same time problems of paradigmatic conceptions can be better understood. In that way, the classic texts and authors and their political ideas lose their standing as the timeless truth of hovering above temporary opinions – they get tested out impiously and are understood as a tool of reading film politically. Especially regarding an undogmatic, empowering, and divers media education, this approach seems to have significant potential. Learning and critical thinking, interpretation and political empowerment go hand in hand. Ultimately, also the great theorist of pragmatic education John Dewey can

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3   In regards to a detailed analysis of film involving an even broader research on reception as a desideratum to film analysis of social science, see in the follow-up to Kellner Winter 2012, p. 57. Kellner himself is cautious of over-emphasizing of the reception if the audience and a 'fetishization' of reception studies: „[I]n past years, media/cultural studies has overemphasized audience reception and textual analysis while underemphasizing the production of culture and its political economy. This type of cultural studies fetishizes audience reception studies and neglects both production and textual analysis, thus producing populist celebrations of the text and audience pleasure in its use of cultural artifacts" (Kellner 2020, p. 43).

be seen as the pioneer of a 'radical' understanding of democracy (Jörke, Selk 2019). He was not in need of grand Marxist or poststructuralist theory for this.

The outlined way of appropriating the legacy of the history of ideas and relying on a repertoire of political thinking can be empowering in its own way. From my point of view, being 'critical' cannot be reduced to mere reformulation of the old critic of cultural industry and holding capitalism responsible for everything. Moreover, it can't be understood as just a quasi-agent in support of a critical, intersectional multiculturalism whose duty it is to watch over racist, classist, and sexist messages and who regards itself as always fighting for the right side in a political struggle and therefore is able to categorize film accordingly.

In the second figure I distinguish between four approaches to critical film analysis accordingly. They refer differently to political theory and take a different look at film. Therefore, a particular meaning and educational value in terms of CML can be attached to each of them. The four approaches result from crossing two dimensions with two manifestations each and thus generate a four-field-matrix of critical film analysis.

In the first dimension, the role of political theory can be understood as either a *reflection on the 'political'* (in the sense established within the discourse on radical democracy), addressing the underlying power relations in film, or as a systematic reflection on the meaning of the guiding principles of politics. As a reflection of the 'political', theory servers primarily as a way of making transparent the terms of hegemonic struggles and the articulations of dominant and anti-hegemonic views and collective subjects. In doing so, political theory is, on one hand, a form of reflection that is targeted at the 'totality' of social conditions regarding media production, and on the other hand it is a theoretical version of the 'emancipatory' discourses of social movements. If one adopts the alternative view and understands the role of political theory rather as an *'ideator'*, enabling us to gain noval or inspiring perspectives on politics, society and its representation in media, one highlights the conceptual work done by political theory. Notions like 'democracy', 'justice', the 'state' are contested concepts and specific conceptualizations (for example 'elitist democracy', 'equal opportunities', 'responsibility' or 'social contract') can be used to interpret film material with a specific focus.

In the second dimension, I distinguish between approaches that view film either 'analytically' or 'holistically'. The analytical view means that film is regarded as a kind of data material that is scanned for specific aspects (similar to a content analysis within social research). The manifest occurrence of these aspects is of interest, everything else is tendentially regarded as unimportant 'noise'. On the

contrary, the 'holistic' view means that film is understood as a whole, an embedded oeuvre or a text within a text. It will then be viewed in a comprehensive social context to which it relates as a horizon of meaning and a site of complex political struggles and which it reflects, contests and/or transcends with the specific means of the medium film.

		Focus on film	
		analytical (motives within film)	**holistic** (film as embedded whole)
Role of political theory	**Reflection of „the political" (power relations)**	Representations of A (*race, class, gender*) in film X Ideological, utopian, transformative aspects **I** **Raising awareness**	Position of films in the hegemonic struggles of (a) society (incl. production and consumption) **II** **Localizing politically**
	Reflection of the meaning of basic concepts	Scenes and story-lines as exemplifications of basic concepts (e.g. power, trust, corruption, tyranny, poverty, justice) **III** **Understanding concepts**	Film as an interpretation of the (social) world, a way of seeing society, a vision of possible ways of life **IV** **Widening the horizon**

Figure 2: Relating political theory and film analysis.

From my point of view, every approach is a legitimate and productive form of practicing critical film analysis and can play an integral role in critical media education. We can distinguish between four such roles related to the four resulting fields. If an *analytic* understanding is combined with an approach to theory that focusses on power relations (field I), the way how particular groups and identities are represented in film is central to the analysis. First and foremost, I would consider the purpose of this approach in drawing attention to the problematic representation of specific groups (for instance Roma people) using derogatory constructs and stereotypical images (of the 'Gypsy' in the antigypsyistic discourse, clearer in the German word 'Zigeuner'), to criticize and deconstruct such stereotyping and to demand alternative ways of representation. In contrast to that kind of critical film viewing, an analytical focus in connection with a conceptual perspective (field III) comes down to thematizing the exemplification, the illustration, and the interpretation of fundamental concepts in scenes and storylines. For example, we might see "Parasite" as a way of putting Bourdieu's understanding of the *habitus* into film motives. The two approaches within the *holistic* approach firstly thematize the positioning of a film in the hegemonic struggles of society (field II), which can be regarded as a 'political localization'; secondly, film is treated as a specific way of imagining the world and social coex-

istence in a way transcending ordinary ways (field IV), which in turn can be summarized as a 'broadening of the horizon' or as creative imagination.

It seems to me that political activists mostly lean towards approach I. Activism focuses predominantly on what is problematic in media representation, for example of groups, and the evidence of criticism seems highest when we have positively identified manifestations of stereotypes or ideological narratives ("white men save black men" etc.). Experiences with students of political theory in an academic context show that they find the first approach to be the easiest, too. The approach is supported by guides and methods, which have gained popular awareness, like e.g. the feminist 'Bechdel test' developed by the artist Alison Bechdel in her graphic novel *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1985. I would see Kellner's analyses as an example of approach II – it mainly draws from embedding film or rather a cluster of film into the concrete political disputes of their time which requires not only the skilled use of a theoretical vocabulary and intimate understanding of complex concepts but also a broad knowledge of historical (or contemporary) contexts and topics. At the same time, it can include all facets of popular culture and practices of reception. Professional representatives of political theory seem to lean more towards approach III. By doing so, the approach is often connected with the aspiration for political education explaining how political concepts are illustrated or played out by film or can be used to give film a more sophisticated reading (Besand 2018; Hamenstädt 2014; 2016a; 2016b). Approach IV can be found mainly in more philosophical and film theoretical work, stressing the aesthetic potentials and the political as part of or inherent in the artistic form (see for example Frampton 2006; Rancière 2013). It can take popular, practical forms (experimenting with media, trying out oneself extraordinary ways of expression etc., thus coming close to arts education), but is also affine to more vanguard types of discourse on the arts and cultural expression.

So much for the conceptual sources of reading film politically. These four approaches correspond to different paths for teachers to increase their professional competences and bring CML as critical film analysis into the classroom. To fully understand the challenges and potentials of a critical film analytical practice and how it relates to popular culture, we should also consider settings in which is experienced and how these settings can be transformed in CML settings.

5 Practical implications of film for a critical educational practice

What film actually is and how it affects us varies not only depending on the social and historical context and our position in society. It also depends on the setting

of film watching. Today, we experience 'film' mainly within the settings of two worlds: The 'world of cinema' and the 'world of television'. The ways in which film can be 'read politically' relates differently to those worlds. The world of cinema consists of an independent, time-consuming, and expensive system of producing film, its commercialization, and viewing. For a long time, particularly motions pictures were produced to succeed in this particular system – meaning primarily they needed to pay off the high costs of production. If not as a single product, the range of motions pictures produced by the studio needed to make a profit. At least within the European film industry, state subsidies for film have become an important source of funding which creates a different logic of film production. This logic is characterized less by a dependency on profitability but by the requirement to meet the funding criteria defined by politics and regulation agencies. Film production and distribution on the one hand and cinemas on the other have for a long time become separated so that, in effect, the 'survival of cinemas' as a place of film presentation has become a source of public concern. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new round of such concerns. In the world of cinema film is experienced more intensively. That is because films are often seen for the first (and only) time, the audience gives it their full attention, and a complex technology is being used. Only in the cinema setting may the 'politics of the form' have a chance for real articulation, since it most strongly relates to the artistic side of film (but will most of the time depend on public funding in one or the other way).

The world of television is defined here as the privatized type of film consumption: in the comfort of one's home, with the use of privately owned and supplied technical devices, and in company with persons one knows and mostly likes (or alone). The streaming of programs, over a computer or a receiver, falls in this category in the same way that playing a DVD or something similar does. In comparison to the cinema, the experience of film in the world of television is less intensive as an aesthetic experience even if private technical devices have better quality than they used to have and are more and more affordable. At the same time, the world of television has more options for an individual to choose from, it is part of cultivating individual taste and identity. Furthermore, there is higher control: film material can be replayed or be watched in controlled sequences which serve as a good basis to enter into a deep film analysis. The privacy can be used for self-organization, e.g. activist groups sharing political beliefs and seeing common film watching as part of their broader critical activities. The world of television for one part consists of films that have originally been shown in the cinema and of films that are produced for the very format of television. Most importantly, however, the world of television (regarding fictional entertainment) consists of *series*. Today, series are viewed as a particularly suitable material for

a critical film analysis characterized by CML. Not only do they score high regarding fascination, identification, and consumption. In the last decades they have also massively improved in quality and variety. Finally, series can offer particularly interesting insights into the interactive effects between filmic narratives and reception. The extension of a (successful) series to the next season often mirrors the way how the series has been received. Whereas films shown in the cinema (particularly in alternative ones or at festivals) are generally more disposed to approximate 'art', series have an advantage regarding interactive social reception.

A critical film practice can connect with both worlds by using the potential each of them offers. It is less important to pick the 'right' film or to limit oneself to 'exemplary' films. Within the outlined critical film practice, the way of dealing with the material is often more important than the material film itself. Accessing the world of cinema for purposes of CML first of all means using the intensive experience of fully concentrating on a technically complex presentation of film and connecting it with a public thematization of political readings. In contrast to television, cinema has always been characterized by the fact films are watched together with other people who are not friends or relatives. Having said that, within this basic framework, cinema is factually targeted at the minimization of the public – and the maximization of an individual experience of consumption. Generally, in the commercialized world of the cinema no conversations are happening and the notification of others is regarded as something tendentially negative (the sound of popcorn, annoying talks, heads that block the view). Rather, than watching the film together, the challenge is to tolerate the presence of the others if one wants to experience the film in a cinema. Therefore, to put CML in the world of cinema into practice, cinema needs to be transformed into a public space of conversation again or at all. This by the way relates to the early film theory proposed by Vachel Lindsay (see Monaco 2017, p. 468). In order to transform cinema into a place for watching together rather than alongside with others, public events are essential. For critical media education, the right thing to do could be to organize a public film event, for example together with students, pupils, and committed individuals (see Haus 2021). In doing so, practical experience in debating over a suitable film, interacting with civic society, campaigning for subsidies, the organization, and implementation of a movie night with public interaction can be gained. Such an event is also possible with fewer resources in the context of school or higher education. Important is the shared experience of watching the film together and talking about it.

As mentioned, in the world of television, series are particularly suitable for achieving CML. Compared to the cinema setting, critical film practice here aims

at a more intensive analytic analysis of filmic material, making use of the wider limits of time and ownership. At the same time, only specific 'others' (fellow students or classmates) can come into question and are therefore rather regarded as co-analysts than a real 'public'. A wide range of sources can be used and interconnected. Reception analysis regarding a) professional film criticism and journalistic reviews, b) discourses among activists and minority communities and their supporters, and finally c) academic analysis of film can be carried out. A higher level of common knowledge on political theories can be achieved, students can become researchers. The same potential cinema has for generating a public sphere, the format of television has regarding analytic intensity. It is relevant for personal relations, too, as many people within society regard a series or a specific series as a story accompanying their daily lives (and for some, it is an opportunity to connect to others via practices of fandom and to step out of daily routines). In accordance with that, such a practice opens the opportunity for a critical self-reflection regarding one's own 'gaze'. Finally, in the world of television the turn towards the public sphere can be attained by creating (media) products that can be used by others, for example as a digital learning unit for a specific series. This can be a vehicle to enter into a public debate.

6   Conclusions

I have outlined the theoretical-conceptual basis of CML and its implications for a critical film analysis on the premises of media education, and I have discussed the question which theoretical tools are useful regarding critical film analysis and especially what my own discipline, political theory can contribute. As it has become clear, Kellner's and Share's concept of CML and the connected critical film analysis of Kellner is characterized by the tradition of critical theory and cultural studies. By that, political theory is already considered the starting point in what can be considered the most important approach presented so far. Having said this, in my opinion, a broader approach that not only focuses on neo- and post-Marxist approaches and commitment to intersectional multiculturalism seems promising. In line with American pragmatism, I have supported the idea of a reckless experimenting with political concepts on filmic material. By doing so, the basic approaches to critical film analysis could be systematized and hopefully inspiration for practicing distinct ways of practicing critical film analysis was given. Such practices can then be based on the distinction between the 'world of cinema' and the 'world of television' and can establish a transformational practice of reading film politically together with others. For the purpose of teacher education, my account can serve as a conceptual road map for finding a way to practice critical film analysis with peers and establish it in school.

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