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COMPREHENSION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ART AND COMMERCIAL MOVIE WATCHERS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON DIFFERENCES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE MOVIE *HIDDEN* BY MICHAEL HANEKE

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Abstract

In the field of film studies, numerous empirical studies and theoretical models in formalist, semiotic and cognitivist paradigms addressed the question of how we understand movies. In this article, the 'cognitivist' paradigm will be taken as basis of theoretical background. Cognitivism looks at general human perceptual and cognitive capacities to deduce understanding of the movies and claims that films prompt audiences to apply situation models to what they see. Situation models are mental representations of the state of affairs described in a written or audio-visual text. Audiences ask themselves what, where, when and why the onscreen events are happening while watching a film. They know the common template structure which consists of an introduction of settings and characters, complicating actions, outcome and ending. This study is designed to address what happens when a film is an art film, of which the narrative line is fragmented so that there is no seamless cause-and-effect storyline. To answer such a question, the contemporary art film Hidden *(2005) by M. Haneke was shown to two groups of participants (n:32), one of which was experienced in viewing art movies whilst the other group did not have any such experience. The results show that general world knowledge plays a bigger role than prior viewing experiences.*

Key Words: *Situation Models, Art Cinema, Michael Haneke*

Öz: Sanat Filmi Seyircileri ile Ticari Film Seyircileri Arasında Kavrama Farkları: Michael Haneke'nin Saklı *Filmi Üzerine Yorum Farklarına Dair Deneysel Bir Çalışma*

Filmleri nasıl anladığımız sorusuna biçimsel, göstergebilimsel ve bilişselci paradigmalar içinde deneysel ve kuramsal çalışmalarla cevap aranmıştır. Bu makalenin kuramsal arka planını bilişsel paradigma oluşturacaktır. Bilişselci değerler dizisi filmlerin nasıl anlaşıldığını açıklamak için insanın genel algı ve bilişsel kapasitelerini ele alır ve filmlerin insanların durum modellerini harekete geçirerek anlaşıldıklarını savunur. Durum modelleri, yazılı ya da görsel işitsel metinlerdeki durumların zihinsel temsilleridir. Seyirciler, film seyrederken de gerçekte olduğu gibi kendilerine ne, nerede, ne zaman, neden oluyor diye sorar ve durumları bu soruların cevapları ile anlarlar. Gerçeği algılarken olduğundan başka bir de filmlerin diğer anlatı formları gibi giriş, gelişme ve sonuç bölümlerinden oluşan nedensellikle birbirine bağlanmış olaylardan oluştuklarını bilir ya da varsayar, olaylar arasında mantıklı bağlar kurmaya çalışırlar. Bu makalede ele anlatılacak deneysel çalışma, bir filmin klasik/beklenen anlatı yapısına sahip olmadığı durumda; anlatı çizgisinin parçalı, olaylar arasında nedensellik ilişkisinin belirgin olmadığı sanat filmlerinde seyircinin filmi nasıl anladığını görmek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Bunun için sanat filmlerini bilen, izleyen bir grupla sanat filminin ne olduğunu bilmeyen ve hiç izlememiş olan iki grup katılımcı (n:32) bir ön teste tabi tutularak oluşturulmuş ve onlara Michael Haneke'nin Saklı *filmi seyrettirilmiştir. Katılımcılar filmi seyrederken durum modellerinin unsurları ile ilgili soruları cevaplamışlardır. Sonuçlar, seyircilerin filmleri anlamak için film seyretme deneyiminden çok genel dünya bilgilerini kullandıklarını göstermektedir.*

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Durum Modelleri, Sanat Filmi, Michael Haneke*

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of film studies, numerous artists and scholars have addressed the question of how we understand the movies with the use of empirical studies and theoretical models. Hugo Münsterberg, Sergei Eisenstein, André Bazin, Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, David Bordwell, and Noël Carroll are among those who tried to answer the question in formalist, semiotic or cognitivist paradigms. The 'cognitivist' paradigm of film studies will be taken as basis of theoretical background of this study.

According to the first film theorist Münsterberg, making sense of the movies does not require a big effort because "the photoplay (movie) obeys the laws of the mind rather than those of the outer world" (1916: 41). He correlates the main cinematic techniques to different mental functions such as attention and memory one-to-one. For instance, Münsterberg draws an analogy between zoom and concentration processes or flashbacks and remembering processes of mind. In brief, for him, making sense of the movies is possible without any prior knowledge and special cognitive skills. Understanding the movies is just like understanding the world itself. Such a remark becomes conspicuous with the appearance of cognitive film theory in the mid-1980s.

Before that, from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, during the 'heyday of film semiology' – to use Bordwell's expression - the idea that understanding movies rests upon relations governed by rules between the signifier (a material thing, like an image) and a signified (a concept) becomes striking. As Bordwell (2011) exemplifies; in the movie *Naked City*, we see alternating shots of two men running, and we 'decode' the whole scene as showing a man pursued and his pursuer. Shortly, for semiologists, film is a kind of audiovisual language, so they argue that we should learn the codes of cinema -film grammar- in order to make sense of the movies.

From the mid-1980s, cognitive film theory took the stage and began by considering the strategies which filmmakers use to deduce understanding of the movies. Such strategies are deduced from general human perceptual and cognitive capacities. Bordwell summarizes the idea (2011):

Perceptually, films are illusions, not reality; cognitively, they are not the blooming, buzzing confusion of life but rather simplified ensembles of elements, designed to be understood. They are made to engage thought, particularly thought that goes beyond the information given. Film narratives, like narratives in all media, abstract and streamline their real-world components for smooth pickup and invite us to fill in what is not shown and unsaid (…) In other words, films prompt us to apply schemas, or knowledge structures, to what we see.

As Bordwell states, human beings are tuned to pick up data from the environment and check them against the perceptual hypothesis. The hypothesis can be confirmed or disconfirmed; if it is disconfirmed, a new hypothesis is developed. Hypothesis making depends on the use of 'schemata'. To construct an intelligible story people use schemata, derived from transactions with the everyday world, with other artworks, and with other movies. On the basis of their schemata, they make assumptions, provoke expectations, and confirm or disconfirm hypotheses (Bordwell, 1985: 31).

In other words, the viewers go to the cinema already tuned, prepared to apply sets of *schemata* derived from context and prior experiences. They test the narrative information for consistency. They ask themselves what happens, where, when and why it is happening. They know the common template structure which is introduction of settings and characters – explanations of a state of affairs- complicating actions – ensuing events- outcome- ending. The drive-to-a-goal pattern makes also comprehension easier (Bordwell, 1985: 35). In the next section, the concepts of situation models and schemata are described in order to understand what Bordwell means more clearly.

Background Theory and Terminology

Situation model & Schemata

Both terms 'situation model' and 'schemata' were first used by the scholars who studied the comprehension of texts. Situation models

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are constructed from schemata. In the 1970s, text-comprehension research focused on the representation of the text itself. The surface structure and the meaning structure was a particular matter of attention. In the early 1980s, it was proposed that readers go beyond the construction of a representation of the text: they also construct a model of events that extend beyond the text itself. Johnson-Laird (1983) called these models "mental models" while van Dijk & Kintsch (1983) called them "situation models." As Zwaan explains "situation models are mental representation of the state of affairs described in a text rather than the text itself" (Zwaan, 1999: 1). They are constructed on the basis of information derived from the text as well as the comprehender's general knowledge. Inferring processes are the same when comprehending a sequence of events in the real world, in a text or a film (Zwaan & Madden, 2004).

Since 1983, there is empirical evidence for the claim that the readers construct situation models to comprehend the texts. (Johnson-Laird, 1983; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Morrow, Greenspan & Bower,1987, 1989; Glenberg, Meyer & Lindem, 1987; Fletcher & Chrysler, 1990) Zwaan, Langton and Radvansky (1995) stated that when we place ourselves in a situation, we have a certain spatial, temporal, and psychological 'vantage' point. Shortly after, Zwaan, Magliano and Graesser (1995) distinguished three dimensions of situational continuity: temporal, spatial, and causal continuity. During the same year, Zwaan and Graesser, this time with Langston (1995), published another article about the construction of situation models and they proposed and tested a model of how readers construct representations of the situations described in simple narratives. This was called the "event-indexing model". According to the event indexing model, events are the focal points of situations conveyed in narratives and are connected as memories along five dimensions: time, space, protagonist, causality and intentionality (Zwaan et al., 1995). Finally, in 1998, Zwaan and Radvansky determined four primary types of information composing situation models:

1. A spatial-temporal framework (spatial locations, time frames)

2. Entities (people, objects, ideas, etc.)

3. Properties of entities (color, emotions, goals, shape, etc.)

4. Relational information (spatial, temporal, causal, ownership, kinship, social, etc.)

Role of Situation Models on Comprehension of Movies

When all this information is carried into film studies, the cognitivist approach can be better understood. As Bordwell (1985) says "watching a movie may seem as effortless as riding a bicycle, but its visual, auditory and verbal stimulus demand active and complex construction" (33). While processing cinematic information, the viewers use situation models, which draw from information about spatial-temporal frameworks, entities, properties of entities and relational information. Their general knowledge about the world, about structures concerning narration as well as knowledge about cinematic representation forms, help when constructing situation models and comprehending the movies (Ohler, 1994: 33). For instance; to comprehend a scene in a movie showing a car driven fast in parallel with the images of children playing ball, the viewers use their general world knowledge about what a car is, how it works, where it is (they know it is the same car when it is shown in different shots since they have its properties in their situation model in a spatial-temporal framework), what it is like to play a ball, what can happen when a child suddenly runs in front of a fast-moving car (causal relation), for example. On the other hand, they expect something unusual to happen using their knowledge about the narrations (if the car just goes by the children without anything happening, then it would not be worth being told), additionally, they know from their prior film viewing experiences that parallel montage is usually used to show people, objects or events related to each other. In addition to which, the suspense music playing during the scene usually refers to a bad situation approaching. Thus, the viewers expect the ball to slip out of the hands of the child and roll on the street, and the car to hit the child chasing the ball. They also know

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which of the children will be the victim of the accident, in other words, who is the *hero,* by realizing the frequency of his images, dialogues and the shot scales he was shown.

Here, the question arises: what happens when a film does not have the above-mentioned classical structure, for instance when it is an art film, in which "the narrative line is fragmented so that there is no seamless cause-and-effect storyline" (Hayward, 2000: 17). After all, in an art film "characters' behavior appears contingent, hesitant rather than assured and "in the know" or motivated towards certain ambitions, desires or goals. (…) Psychological realism takes the form of a character's subjective view of events; social realism is represented by the character in relation to those events. (…) This cinema, in its rupture with classic narrative cinema, intentionally distances spectators to create a reflective space for them to assume their own critical space or subjectivity in relation to the film" (Hayward, 2000: 18).

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to determine how the viewers comprehend a movie when it does not have a classical narrative structure; when its narrative line is fragmented and when it has no seamless cause-and-effect storyline, when its characters' behavior appears tentative and hesitant rather than assured or motivated towards certain goals, when social realism is represented by the character in relation to the events presented in the movies, when it distances spectators to create a reflective space for them to assume their own critical space or subjectivity in relation to the film intentionally; in other words, when it is an art movie.

In this study, a semi-structured interview form has been used as the data collection method. In this form, subjects have been asked approximately 100 questions about time, space, characters, causality, goals, emotions and ideas of the scenes, which are determined based on the four primary types of information composing situation models according to the theory of Zwaan and his colleagues (1998) (See Table 1: 73).

Responses and interpretations were all recorded and decoded. All data was analyzed using Atlas Ti, which is a computer software program for qualitative analysis. Using Atlas Ti, codes were given to the responses and interpretations and they were categorized. Single phrases or the whole sentences were coded according to a list of categories and sub-codes. The patterns and connections within and between categories were identified.

Two groups of 32 undergraduate students (16 female and 16 male) from Istanbul University between the ages of 18-24 participated, one of which was a group consisting of students studying cinema, who were familiar with the conventions of art cinema, whilst the other group of students were unfamiliar with art cinema and had never seen one before. All participants were chosen according to their answers to 5 filter questions about art cinema and Michael Haneke.

The questions were: What is art cinema? What are the elements of an art film? What do names Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Alain Resnais mean to you? Is there a commonality between them? Do you know who Michael Haneke is? Have you seen the movies *Funny Games*, *Code Unknown*, *Time of The Wolf*, *Piano Teacher* or *Hidden*?

The ones who had seen *Hidden* already were left out of the study. The ones who understood the characteristics of art cinema and were familiar with the directors listed above as well as their filmographies and the commonality between them, were chosen for the group we called *experienced* participants (n:16) whilst the others were left in the group were called *inexperienced* participants (n:16). Both groups were composed of equal numbers of male and female students.

Choosing the material, the movie to be shown, was an important decision to take. It would have been easy to choose a well-known art movie from Andrew Tudor's list: *The Seventh Seal* (1956), *Wild Strawberries* (1957), *La Dolce Vita* (1959) or *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959); however all these well known art movies were already seen by our *experienced* participants. Therefore, we chose a contemporary art movie which was made in the same year that we made this study. It was the movie *Caché-Hidden* directed by Michael Haneke.

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Bordwell argues "the art cinema motivates its narratives by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity" (Bordwell, 2002: 3). Neale lists as elements of emerging national art cinemas "realism, humanism, lack of spectacle, lack of excess in style and technique"(Price & Rhodes, 2010:232). As the editors of the book *On Haneke* (2010) Brian Price, John and David Rhodes denote "Haneke carries on one of the most important modes of intellectual and artistic production in modern and contemporary culture: that of art cinema" (Price & Rhodos, 2010: 2). Haneke's film *Hidden* fits closely with the major definitions of art cinematic form proposed by Neale and David Bordwell.

The participants watched the movie *Caché-Hidden* directed by Michael Haneke in French with Turkish subtitles. (None of the participants had any difficulties with the subtitles.) The film was a co-production of France / Austria / Germany / Italy and won a lot of awards in European countries. (Cannes Film Festival: best director, Michael Haneke; European Film Awards: best film; best director, Michael Haneke; best actor, Daniel Auteuil; best editing, Michael Hudecek and Nadine Muse; FIPRESCI prize); 3 additional nominations (best actress, Juliette Binoche; best screenplay, Michael Haneke; best cinematography, Christian Berger) Etoile d'Or (French Film Critics): (best screenplay, Michael Haneke) San Francisco Film Critics Circle: (best foreign-language film) Southeastern Film Critics Association: (best foreign-language film).

The storyline of the movie makes it also possible to label the movie as an art movie as well as its cinematic representations.

The participants watched the film individually on a 63-inch monitor in a dim room at a two-meter distance. While watching they answered above mentioned questions orally. In addition, the participants were asked to say what came to their mind about the movie during the screening.

FINDINGS

The key findings of the study are categorized under 7 groups according to the titles of the questions in the form, which are assumptions about time, space, characters, causality, goals,

emotions and ideas.

Assumptions about Time

There were no significant differences between experienced and inexperienced viewers in their time assumptions. However, the homogeneity of the answers to the questions about time within the female and male groups was significant. During the first scene of the movie, when asked about the time of the scene, male participants answered "summer time" whereas all females answered in detail: "8 or 9 a.m. in the morning. It is spring time." All participants noticed the song of the birds but the male participants only noticed green trees as an indicator of the summer season, and they did not register that people were wearing coats, which could have helped them to interpret the season as spring. However, female participants did not miss this detail and stated that it was spring time without exception.

All participants were suspicious about the order of events just at the beginning when a short flashback scene was shown without any indication. Generally, both male and female experienced groups were more suspicious about the order of narration time. They often expected big leaps in time, either forward or backward. Twelve (7 male and 5 female) of the experienced viewers stated 4 times that there had been a big time jump; ten (6 female 4 male) of them inferred 3, 4 (2 female, 2 male) of them inferred 2 time jumps during the whole movie. The inexperienced group did not believe one had occured.

Assumptions about Space

The assumptions about space were correct by all groups every time they were asked. On the other hand, female and male viewers paid attention to different elements of the settings within the movie. All of the 16 female viewers both experienced and inexperienced realized that they have been looking at the living room of George's mother when they saw Majid's childhood, because they remembered the brown leather armchair they had seen previously. This enabled them to realize

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that the former scene with Majid's childhood was a flashback. This also enabled them to make better assumptions when analyzing the personality of characters and the idea of the movie. 13 female participants (7 experienced and 6 inexperienced) also commented that the TV was located between the books in George's flat just like in his TV program. On the other hand, 10 male viewers (6 experienced 4 inexperienced) realized that it was not a continuation of the previous scene by noticing that there were different cars in front of the house. The inexperienced female participants did not notice this change, but the experienced female group noticed that the cars were different colors.

Assumptions about Characters

The differences between interpretations were evident from the answers to the questions about characters and their relationships with each other. However such difference of interpretation were not between experienced and inexperienced groups but between the male and female groups again. For instance, when male participants were asked to define the relationship between George and Anne (his wife) they described it as "unfriendly", "unkind"; whereas all female participants defined it as "monotonous". Another example which depicts the differences significantly: male participants defined Anne as "a good wife" and "a good mother" without exception (only 3 experienced male audiences added "but a little bit tense") whereas female participants defined her as "nervous", "irritable", "jealous" or "officious". The opinions about George, by contrast, were very similar in all groups: he was "unfriendly" (15 participants), "unjust" (10 participants), "unfeeling" (14 participants), "uncaring" (8 participants), "racist" (8 participants) and "fearful" (5 participants).

Assumptions about Causality

All participants comprehended the cause-effect relation between the events. They used all given information to construct a consistent story as expected. However, the inexperienced groups expected "some action" (as they called it) in the movie. They also expected a clear final ending. In addition, the experienced participants expected the characters to make confessions about their history and their relations. All participants expected the characters to develop morally. On discovering that no such a development takes place, the experienced viewers tried to understand the director's intentions, while the others thought that there should be a "Caché 2" movie to answer the unresolved questions.

Assumptions about Goals

All participants made correct assumptions about what the characters would do about the detection of "crime". For instance, they rightly predicted that George would go to the Majid's apartment to find his lost son instead of going to the police station. But their assumptions about what the characters would do in their personal relations were usually incorrect. Many participants, both experienced and inexperienced (14 inexperienced, 13 experienced), expected George to tell everything he knew and all he remembered to his wife but he did not. All participants assumed that he would not tell the truth to his boss, but he did. They all expected George and his wife to react with passion when their son was lost, but they did not.

Assumptions about Emotions

The members of the both female groups felt sorry for George. They said he could not be judged for what he did when he was a child and that he needed the support of his wife, but she was not on his side. All participants including both male groups always tried to find traces of guilt in George's heart. All participants commented that they felt pity for both Majid and George's mother. On the other hand they were suspicious of George, Anne, their friends and even about their 13-year-old son Pierrot (the difference was not significant between the experienced and inexperienced groups). All groups described the family relations between George, Anna and Pierrot as "cold", "broken", "insincere." However, both inexperienced male and female participants asserted that the reason was "being French," whereas the experienced group claimed that "modernism" and "alien-

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ation" were the reasons for the "cold" family relationship. Both male groups offered similar thoughts about Anna on her relationship with her "lover" (as described by them). A typical male interpretation was: "She is feeling bad and Pierre is trying to abuse her feelings." The female participants, without exception, interpreted the relationship as a cheating affair. That is to say, male participants had a tendency to accuse Pierre (the lover of Anna); whereas female participants found Anna *guilty* for the cheating affair.

Assumptions about Ideas

After the end of the film we asked the participants what the film was about. The expressions listed below are the typical answers representing their groups. It was interesting to see the commonality between the interpretations of the participants in the same group.

Inexperienced male participants: Everyone has something hidden in his past and capitalism iscolates people.

Inexperienced female participants: What you have done even when you are child can have a great effect on your life.

Experienced male participants: The movie was about racism. It is still a reality, even though France tries to forget about it.

Experienced female participants: There is a metonymic relationship between George and French society. He tries to forget about his "dirty past", like the French society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

All of the participants had similar interpretations of the characters, and a similar understanding of the spatial, temporal and causal elements of the movie with the help of their previous film viewing experiences. However, as Zwaan and Radvansky (1995) stated, when we place ourselves in a situation, we have not only certain spatial, temporal and causal vantage point, but also a psychological vantage point, which has two dimensions as revealed from the study: The ideas and the emotions. The comprehension of the ideas of a movie,

which has also a great effect on the perception of the situations in a movie, depends on the intellectual background or so called general world knowledge of the audience. Both female and male inexperienced participants could not decode the ideological codes of the movie, because they did not know about the social and political history of France. On the other hand, emotions, which have determined the main differences between the groups in the study, were more closely related to personal and cultural backgrounds. When evaluating the personality of the characters in the movie, personal backgrounds of the participants and their general world knowledge played a substantial role.

The interpretations of what the movie was about clearly demonstrated the role of intellectual background of audiences (general world knowledge) on comprehension. It is possible to say that people who watch art movies have a bigger interest in what is happening on the world stage. This is why we additionally asked participants what kind of books they read after showing the movie. European art movie viewers from the study stated that they generally like to read not fiction, but also psychological, philosophical, historical and political books, whereas the others just read fiction and popular historical and psychological books. The study also revealed that false assumptions can result from cultural differences between the cultures of the audiences and the society shown in the movie. For instance, all subjects thought about the possibility that she might be the nurse of George's mother who brought Pierrot (their son) back. The inexperienced participants were almost sure that it was her despite significant visual differences between the actresses. This means that they expected the grandson to visit his "poor and lonely" grandmother (as described by them), which is one of the most important family values in Turkish culture.

Some other false assumptions resulted from the lack of information about the social structure of the country shown in the movie (France). For instance, all participants thought that Majid's parent's farmhouse was not a house, but a kind of rehabilitation center, since they did not know it was a typical farmhouse in France. Another example was that they thought that Majid's

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apartment was an asylum or prison since they did not know the typical French ghettos. This can also be seen as an evidence of the role of general world knowledge on comprehension of the movies.

It was also valuable to discover that four of the participants from different groups found similarities between the themes of *Caché* (the original French name of the movie) and *Kaşağı*, a children's book about a boy's feelings of guilt, who had lied to his father and caused his brother to be punished. Such a connotation was most probably because of the similarity of the words but it led the participants to a particular interpretation based on the feeling of guilt.

There was also a significant similarity of interpretations between the participants of the same sex (p<0.05). Taking the important role of gender on general world knowledge into consideration, it would not be false to argue that general world knowledge plays a bigger role in comprehension of the movies than former film viewing experiences. Further studies should be done to test such an argument. While the role of gender on comprehension and interpretation of the movies was not the initial question of this study, the results revealed that gender should also be considered when examining movie comprehension. Previous studies on gender differences during film viewing usually addressed different emotional responses to the movies (Cantor & Reilly, 1982; Mundorf et al., 1989, Tamborini et al., 1987). This study shows that the other components of situation models should also be searched as possible roots of comprehension and interpretation differences between the genders.

Finally, answering our initial question about what happens when a movie does not have a classical structure; audiences adjust their expectations and search for new explanations based upon their general world knowledge and former film viewing experiences. They do not give up seeking for a coherent story beyond the style and during such seeking process gender also plays a significant role as a kind of a filter to general world knowledge.

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TABLE

Questions about time: Which season is this/ what time is it? When do the events take place? What is the order of events?	Questions about space: Where does it take place or where is it? What can you tell me about this place and its decoration?
Questions about characters: Who is he/she? What is the relationship between these people? What is his/her personality? How does s/he feel?	Questions about causality: What is happening now? Why is it happening? How does it relate to the previous events? What comes next?
Questions about the goal : What is s/he aiming to do? What is s/he going to do?	Questions about the emotions : How does she/he feel? How do you feel? Do you approve of what he/she does? What would you do?
Questions about the ideas : What was the film about? What does the director try to say? What is the message of the film?	

Table 1