

First-time film viewers give new insights how to comprehend film

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A joint German-Turkish research study with first-time film viewers shows under what conditions viewers understand – or do not understand – stylistic devices and scenic sequences in films.

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Since the first projection, provided by the Lumière brothers more than 100 years ago, the film genre has become omnipresent in everyday life and has sustainably influenced modern societies. Lots of findings about the psychological impact of film that have been discussed among the public quite lively have come to the fore. However, about the psychological pre-conditions to understand actions and stories in films hardly anything is known. Can we really assume that films are self-evident?

With adults who had never seen a film or even a TV before, researchers from the Knowledge Media Research Center Tuebingen, Germany, and from the Istanbul University, Turkey, now entered uncharted territories in the field of film studies. As a basis for their current study (recently published in *Psychological Science* 21 (7), p.1-7) researchers recruited 20 adult inexperienced film viewers from isolated mountain villages in southern Turkey and showed them 14 short film clips. Each film depicted a situation that was familiar to the participant (like preparing tea) or contained one of seven different types of perceptual discontinuities that are characteristic for the film genre; for example: a continuous change of perspective, an abrupt change of perspective or an abrupt change from outside to inside positions (showing a house from the outside and then showing the interior), abrupt switches of perspectives or the skipping of a time segment.

The results give new insights in the perceptual and cognitive basis of film. The study refutes myths from the origins of cinema: mistaking film for reality. “We did not find any evidence with our first-time viewers for that” states Prof. Dr. Stephan Schwan from the Knowledge Media Research Center. Together with his Turkish colleague Dr. Sermin Ildirar from the University of Istanbul he was responsible for the conceptual design of the study. “Rather the contrary effect was observed”, says Cognitive Psychologist Schwan. Certain clips were easier to interpret for the inexperienced viewers than others: scenic sequences that were similar to the daily life of the test persons were easy to understand; static scenes, however, proved problematic: changes from an outside to an inside viewing position, for example, as well as switches from the position of an external observer to the subjective viewpoint of an actor. Inexperienced viewers could not logically link both scenes to an action line.

The results show that for comprehending films the reference to conditions of natural perception is less important than assumed. More important seems to be the existence of a line of action or a line of events. Both can even help to compensate problems that arise with shots which provide discontinuities. Without such a line, first-time film viewers had great problems to interpret stylistic devices within the film correctly – opposite to a comparison group with film experienced viewers who did not show any problems in comprehending the devices.

Schwan’s and Ildirar’s results demonstrate that comprehending films roots in cultural preconditions – such as to be familiar with typical stories and lines of action – as well as in higher cognitive processes such as being used to filmic design and presentation. “From a research perspective”, says Schwan, “the situation in southern Turkey was a stroke of luck. It gave us empirical evidence that watching films has to be trained as similarly as one trains reading and calculating.”

Below, you can download illustrative pictures for this press release:

www.iwm-kmrc.de/presse/first_time_film_viewers/

The Knowledge Media Research Center

The Knowledge Media Research Center (KMRC) in Tuebingen, Germany, investigates teaching and learning with digital technologies. Scientists from cognitive, educational, human behavioural sciences, and social sciences investigate how individual and collaborative knowledge acquisition in media settings work. Since 2009, the KMRC runs Germany’s first ScienceCampus, a close research network between the University of Tuebingen and the KMRC. The ScienceCampus Tuebingen deals with empirical educational research in the field of “Informational Environments”. For further information please visit us at www.iwm-kmrc.de.

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