

**Mila – a reconstructive case analysis according to the
Literary and Media Interaction Research approach (LIR).**

English Translation of:

*Mila – eine Fallrekonstruktion der qualitativ-psychologischen Literatur- und Medien-
Interaktionsforschung (LIR)*

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The essential goal of psychological Literary and Media Interaction Research (LIR) is to better understand what people actually do – mentally and psycho-dynamically – when they interact with fictional or factual/historical narratives – and inasmuch this may have effects on their lives. LIR basically asks how far an individual, when s/he is personally engaged in a mediated story (a film, a novel), associatively establishes – probably more unconsciously than consciously – a mental connection to personally lived-through experiences from her/his biography.¹ More specifically the question is: How and inasmuch does a person, while doing so, engage in processes of ‘working with’ such biographical experiences and ‘dealing with’ the ‘biographical and developmental challenges’ which are inextricably attached to them? Or/and how far does the person – always also – set up mental defence, avoidance and denial against doing so? Furthermore: What does the person’s individual mode of working-with and/or avoiding such challenges imply for her/his further real-life conduct, for the decision s/he makes and the stances s/he takes? In other words, the question is how media interaction, i.e. processes of ‘(media-)biographical work’, play itself out personally – and also societally – and to what extent they affect and support the individual’s continuous efforts to achieve ‘sustainable personal development’?²

Of course, these questions of ‘doing media interaction’ are of particular importance whenever experiences of emotional stress and/or violence are at stake, since they generally hinder ‘sustainable personal development’ in that they tend to lead up to ever more stressful and violent occurrences – unless they are adequately ‘worked-with’ and mentally integrated. Therefore, LIR’s is highly relevant for ‘doing history’ – be it vis-a-vis students of different kinds of schools be it in any public discourses about history. For, ‘doing history’ always implies to deal with media narratives touching upon seminal collective issues of a society – and thus having a direct effect on its ‘sustainable societal development’. Here again, those narratives are particularly important which pertain to events of violence and victimisation of social groups, because they entail an imminent need that ‘history does’ strengthen social

¹ The approach of LIR (HW 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) research originally developed from a European Union financed research project (2006-2008) which aimed to pursue a methodical and empirically sound approach to ‘doing humanities’ highlighting what it implies to apply/ use fictional and historical media narratives in teaching.

² In its second dimension LIR views the narrative itself (aside of the person absorbing it): Given its specific content and form, what role does a particular narrative play in its interaction with the recipients? More precisely: What are this narrative’s ‘textual interaction potentials’ regardless of how any empirical person actually interacted with it? – a question which is pursued in a separate methodological procedure (which cannot extensively be laid out here; cf. HW 2008a, 2011d, Stein xx).

resilience to resentment and violence and help halting the well-known – but difficult to deal with – circles of violence and destructiveness.

The underlying basic assumption, of course, is that people in fact do – constantly, unwittingly and inescapably – establish such associative mental interchange between the fictional and/or factual media narratives they absorb on the one hand and their (un)conscious life experiences and implicit ‘developmental challenges’ on the other. And: that this interchange matters both for the person’s further life and for the communities and discourses s/he forms a part of. However, while it seems pretty commonsensical to assume such mental dynamics, not much of cultural and historical research is devoted to studying them in any more concrete and methodical ways. Consequently, focal needs for a methodologically sound research design are unmet. Neither contemporary qualitative media studies nor so-called „media-biographical research“ (xx Mikos/Wegener, Ayaß Bergmann) – and certainly not any field of literary and culture studies (HW JfP xx) – has been able to provide an appropriate research design which is able (1) to involve both peoples’ factual life-world experiences and their mental (reception-) interaction with (semi-) fictional media narratives, while (2) also taking proper account of the dimensions of psychodynamics and developmental psychology, which undoubtedly are a feature of people's more or less involuntary processes of doing ‘(media-)biographical work’ with ‘developmental challenges’ – and thus ‘doing history’.

1 Reconstruction of Mila's life story and experience of violence

Literary and Media Interaction Research (LIR) aims at closing this methodological gap. In the following case study about the psycho-biographically determined media interaction of a woman – which here is named Mila – we attempt to give answers to the question of how this young person, and people in general, „do history and/or culture“ in the above defined sense.³

In its first step LIR reconstructs the person’s life history by applying a ‘biographical-narratives interview’, mostly following the existing methodological standards (Rosenthal, 1995; Fischer-Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal 2004 xx, Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2002; Riemann, 2006). However the interview questions – as well as the reconstructive evaluation of the transcripts thereafter – also draw on central psycho-diagnostic criteria from the OPD interview (Operationalised Psychodynamic Diagnostic xx) and on similar psychological resources as narratological psychology, systemic/ relational analysis, psycho-dynamics and/or psycho-trauma research. General guiding questions in evaluating the biographical interview are: How has Mila's life proceeded until now? What familial-biographical background and what contexts of life experience have had an impact? More precisely: What consequences have arisen for Mila – i.e. what „psycho-dynamic behavioural structural rules“ does she follow in her life path and what future „developmental challenges“ are implicit?

³ The case study has been published at significantly greater length in German language (xx) which itself is based on a triple as detailed case study manuscript (xx).

At the end of the biographical interview, the person is asked to name a literary text, a film or some other media experience that he or she would say has had, for whatever reason, an personal impact on them. Some time later the second methodological base element of LIR, the ‘narrative media-experience interview’, is carried out (after the person, in the days before, has independently and for themselves again viewed/read the appointed media narrative). In this – newly developed – technique of interviewing, the person's mental space of imagination and aesthetic inspiration becomes more relevant, insofar as he or she develops fantasies and ideas about – factual and/or (semi-) fictional – figures and events portrayed in the narrative.

Densely summarizing the methodologically intricate procedure of ‘interdisciplinary transcript analysis’ (HW 2009, 20011), it can be said: Both interviews are essentially based on procedures of systematic hypotheses formation and on contrastive comparisons of three potentially conflicting dimensions of human (inter-) action and mental activity: (1) the person’s actual behaviour/ actions in certain concrete situation of her/his biography, (2) her/his subjective – partly unconscious – experience of these actions at the time and (3) the later narrative account given by the person in the moment of the interview.⁴ The analysis of the ‘biographical interview’ focuses on formulating the ‘developmental challenges’ of the person while the analysis of the ‘narrative media-experience interview’ attempts to give answers to the question how the mental media-interaction behaviour of the person can be assessed in its biographical dimension, i.e. how the person – while taking in a media narrative – also works with her/his ‘developmental challenges’.

The first question thus is: How did Mila's life proceed until the time of the interview? What ‘psycho-dynamic behavioural-structural rules’ and what ‘challenges’ characterize her biography so far? What can be said in the all too short space available here (footnote 3) is the following: Mila at the time of the interview lives and studies in Austria and comes originally from Kosovo. There Mila, being the youngest of eight children, spent the first seven years of her life in a rural context in the family household, which was marked by patriarchal family structures and a Muslim cultural background. Mila lived there with her mother, her paternal grandparents and their sons and wives, in other words her paternal uncles and aunts, each family having one room – while her father had been working in Austria throughout Mila's lifetime.

All in all, Mila describes her childhood as having been close to nature and in many respects happy and lively. However her grandparents were „really nasty“ at times, as Mila says, at first cautiously. Scenes of anger and violent attacks, directed especially towards the aunts but also the children, appear to have been part of everyday life. Even by the standards of local customs, her grandparents were obviously rough: „Grandfather with his stick could be pretty nasty; he used to chase us (children), ... I ran away and locked myself in – for three hours until he went away, otherwise he would have beaten me.” Mila's grandmother was apparently also a bad-tempered, unpredictable person prone to violent outbursts, who could be cruel to children and animals. When an uncle died prematurely from an illness, his wife was so badly

⁴ aaa Therefore it is all the more astonishing that biographical research has not from the outset systematically integrated psychodynamic developmental-psychological resources.

treated and bullied that she felt forced to leave the house – and had to leave her son with the family, since he was seen as the property of the grandparents.

Mila's mother who had been married at the age of eighteen via a family arrangement also had a hard time there since her husband returned home just once a year bringing money; Mila's mother visited him in Austria two or three times a year. During her 27 years living with the grandparents she had given birth to eight children. There must have been a great deal of violence and humiliation in her mother's relation within the family, which sometimes went so far as Mila's mother being „beaten black and blue“ and „bleeding all over“.

Mila's father began working at 14 and as the eldest son bore responsibility for his brothers and sisters aaa – and yet did not receive much respect for this. Even in old age, Mila's grandfather had clearly expressed his contempt for her father, who, he said, „has always been a piece of shit and will always remain one“. Mila's father, for his part, also tended towards aggression and bad-temperedness vis-a-vis his wife and children. But Mila could also report scenes of affection and paternal pride. Physical attacks and beatings, Mila emphasises even today, „cannot be judged by western standards“: „At the same time you also saw that your parents were always there for you, unconditionally, you sensed that it couldn't be true that they didn't love you, that's stronger in the end.“ And yet, even in Austria, Mila at age ten had to experience firsthand how her father and her older brothers beat up one of Mila's teenage sisters so brutally that she received serious head injuries and was hospitalized for three months. The young woman had not returned home on time and the eldest sister spread the rumour that „there is a man“ – an incident which twenty five year old Mila had barely spoken to anyone about before the interview.

aaa The extent to which the relationship climate of this family must have been fearful, unpredictable and prone to violent disruption also became clear in Mila's description of a serious illness suffered by her mother. When the latter had to go to hospital after showing signs of a heart attack – which, as it turned out only much later, had come from a life-long chronic anxiety condition – she made her husband promise not to tell the children, so that they wouldn't worry. However Mila says, „we knew how aggressive he is, we thought he had killed her or taken her somewhere – and didn't want to say anything.“ Today, Mila's parents appear to be alienated from one another and Mila takes care of her mother.

Given this biographical background, for Mila the question is above all how far she would later on either (1) repeat the patterns of violent and destructive behaviour she had experienced in more or less altered forms (be it with a self-/outwardly-directed, psychosocial or psychosomatic impact), and/or (2) how far would she succeed in mentally processing and neutralising this experience (Fischer & Riedesser, 1998).

In this respect, what emerges at first sight in Mila's biographical interview is a relatively productive process: As the youngest daughter and „pet of the family“, Mila appears to have been seen from an early age as being particularly „talented“ –and in fact was talented in many respects. At the age of four she was already able to read and write, and went to visit her sisters at school two years before the school entrance age. She was also able to deal very

successfully with the family's emigration to Austria. She was one of just two pupils from her class of Austrian children to succeed in getting a place at a secondary school. This then was a school in which there were only three pupils with migration background, and for several years Mila was class spokesperson. At that time she also was very closely involved in various different youth cultures (hippie, punk, hip-hop, etc.). Having successfully finished school, she began a university course in media science and obtained an internship with a TV station, where she then was – at the age of 20 – given complete editorial responsibility for a weekly two-hour youth programme. However, just over a year ago she abruptly gave up both this job and her studies and began a course in her home city in social pedagogy, because, as she says, „she had increasingly discovered her social streak“.

2 Mila's „biographical behavioural-structural rule“

What were the findings from the systematic ‘narration-analytical reconstruction’ which was applied to the over one hundred page transcript of Mila's interview? As ‘central biographical and behavioural-structural rule’ of Mila's life-path up to now it could be deduced that she essentially followed a principle of „talented and energetic engagement of prevention of and compensation for violence and injustice“.

Despite the seemingly quite colloquial way in which biography research generally gives its ‘dense formulations’, such ‘biographical and behavioural-structural rule’ nevertheless is designed to serve as a highly compact, explanatory concept. This means (a) it is richly supported by evidence from many levels of the interview and (b) it in turn is able to – in one phrase – give causal explanations for a maximum of the ostensibly heterogeneous biographical phenomena therein. Thus Mila's behavioural-structural rule claims validity even where themes such as „violence, injustice, prevention, compensation“ cannot be perceived with the naked eye but are operational in less visible ways. This, for example, goes for Mila's entry onto the „engaged“ program of social pedagogy she took up following her „social streak” – which implicitly is directed against „violence, injustice”, however also – as we shall see – for much of her work in youth television.

This logically also applies to the other accompanying attributes. For example, the addition „energetic“ indicates not only Mila's general ability to strongly assert herself, but also the fact that in her manifold and sometimes impulsive acts of „engagement“ she sometimes tends to enter into escalatory conflict dynamics and to overstretch her personal resources and that of her friends. Equally, the attribute „talented“ indicates a high degree of general aptitude for goal-directed behaviour as well as the specific fact that as a child, Mila was considered „talented“ and in fact performed very well in school. However, „talented“ in the case of Mila also implies – in a psycho-dynamically more profound understanding of „talent“ (Miller, 1979) – the potential for over-exertion, parentification⁵ and thus partial developmental setback. For example, it emerged in the biographical analysis that „talent“ from the outset involved her carrying out the far-reaching familial-dynamic function of talented stress

⁵ I.e. Being obliged as a child to adopt adult and parental functions at too early an age.

prevention“ in that she acted as the favourite granddaughter of the often bad-tempered grandfather, or, as the youngest child, played the clown role in the family, thus carrying out the function of childish-ludic moderator of tension – which, of course, entails risks for Mila’s ‘sustainable personal development’. Also biographical rule formulations – understood as structural and as broadly defined – have to be simultaneously applicable to various phases of a person’s life. For instance, in Mila’s present life as young adult, being „talented“ and engaging in „prevention“ of stress and „injustice” also means for her that she has taken it upon herself to look after her sickly mother almost single-handedly, while her father seems rather distant and the other seven siblings are otherwise occupied.

aaa Of course, the formulation of a behavioural or ‘biographical-structural rule’ must always be supported by evidence that can be directly understood in terms of that rule. With Mila, for example, many elements of the rule are proved by her reports of her activity as a class spokesperson: a post that she carried out with a strong sense of „justice“ and often with a corresponding „energetic“, sometimes highly confrontational, but also „talented“ „engagement“. Narrative episodes about when she was at primary school show that already then, Mila spontaneously took the side of the outsider and the person being teased. At secondary school, Mila also identified strongly with various youth cultures, for example hippie, punk and hip-hop, that on the whole subscribe to an ethos of „justice“ and „engagement“ against repression, and on the whole also to an attitude of tolerance and anti-“violence“. aaa The behavioural-structural rule of „justice and compensation“ is perhaps evidenced most strongly by Mila’s choice of partner, a young man who is not from Moslem background and whose central characteristic and point of attraction for her is a consistent everyday attitude of opposition to prejudice and exclusion.

3 Psychologically deepened analysis of Mila’s biographical interview

Biographical-scientific’s rule formulation does, however, come up against its limits when more in-depth and precise developmental-psychological questions arise, for instance concerning the ‘sustainability’ and conduciveness (maybe even healthiness, socio-ecology etc.) – both in its personal and social dimension – of the actions and behaviours implied by „talent“, „prevention“ and „energetic engagement“. It is only when the aforementioned psychological resources are considered that it becomes possible to get a clearer idea of the extent to which Mila’s conflicts with authorities or the arduous task of looking after her mother, „talent“ and „engagement“ notwithstanding, go hand in hand with development-retarding and partly psycho-traumatic (over)burdening of herself. And such behavioural pattern would only be explainable as the consequence of the high levels of stress, conflict and violence throughout her family- and life-history.

The extent to which such non-sustainable development-hindering biographical dynamic have been operational in Mila’s life-path so far, becomes clearer through taking notice of a psychological subject matter that in psychodynamic literature is described as „dependency-autonomy-conflict“ (Mentzos, 2000; Rudolf, 2008). These are mental conflict constellations that are caused by unconsciously strong psychic involvements with and/or dependencies on

(parental) relationship figures. They manifest themselves in behaviourally well-defined phenomena of „pseudo-autonomy“ or „lack of boundaries/ detachment“ and do quite regularly cause forms of suffering (of oneself and/or others).^{aaa} They for instance are likely to produce vehement aggression and conflicts whenever detachment does actually take place and autonomy is assumed, as illustrated by the numerous conflicts in which Mila has already been involved.

In Mila's case, this dynamic of ‘pseudo-autonomy’ and ‘dependency-autonomy-conflict’ – which Mila in her interview is entirely unaware of (!) – becomes particularly apparent at the biographically significant point at which she broke off her quite successful, promising and much liked work in youth television and in the media altogether and when she went back to her home town and began to study social pedagogy. For, what Mila did not tell out-right but became pretty unmistakably clear during transcript analysis was the following fact: While Mila committed to these quite far-reaching personal changes because she – as she said – „increasingly discovered her social streak“ and a desire to „make the world a better place“, other more concrete reasons must have played a role, too: Mila's elderly mother had again fallen ill around this time and had to be taken to hospital. In addition, her father, who spoke German only poorly and was inept in bureaucratic matters, had omitted to pay the health insurance, and was also otherwise of little help.

Such were the – at first untold – reasons which caused Mila to feel obliged to move near to her parents and to take over care for her mother. The decision to change her field of college studies was due to the simple fact that the university in her home town did not offer a comparable course in media studies. Hence, Mila's abrupt and disadvantageous career change, which required that she forfeit her independently attained place in life, was not a purely sovereign decision in the interests of her „social streak“, but a subjectively perceived obligation to once again – as in her ‘parentified’ position as child (cf. footnote xx) – act as the „talented one in the family“.

^{aaa} Just how high the stakes were for Mila and what precisely it was that she risked losing became clearer at the point at which she recounted that during her time at secondary school and with youth cultures she „was finally able to break out of the two worlds I had always lived in“. She „had been divided“ into „two personalities ... [and] was completely different as a person at school and also at home“. At home, she was on the whole „reserved“, mostly „down“ and quite often also „grumpy“; at school and with friends she was on the whole „up“, „happy“, „open“ and „energetic“. She also often played the role of the clown in school. What Mila calls being „divided“ shows parallels with what, in psychodynamics, is described as a tendency towards a „bi-polar, manic depressive position“ (in which a disposition of depression and/or chronic anxiety is compensated – compulsorily but also unstably – by auto-suggestive bouts of high spirits and energetic activity).

Moreover, the „dividedness“ of Mila can simultaneously be understood as part of a ‘trauma-compensatory pattern’ evoked by her family experiences (Fischer & Riedesser). For, what Mila is unaware of in the interview is that the high spirits and clown-role which she was able to adopt with her schoolmates was one she had had played already as a child, when, as the

youngest and favourite granddaughter, she carried out the function of a childish-ludic tension-reducer – and did not yet feel as „reserved“ and „grumpy“ as she did later on during adolescence. Plus, in a different sequence of the interview it became clear how this change came about: Mila’s playfulness and spontaneity which was much appreciated by the family when she was a child, seemed to have been systematically „trained out“ of her when she became older. Apparently, breaking Mila of her playfulness occurred by means of a cultural-specifically induced feelings of „shame“ and denigration, whose impact according to Mila could not be compared with any western concept of affect but required a deeper understanding of Muslim culture.

Therefore, the stakes Mila personally took when going back home was even higher than forfeiting some of her personal autonomy and giving up a promising and enjoyable professional position. In fact, the narrative streak around „dividedness“ made clear that quite substantial risks for her personal well-being were implied. ^{aaa} Only late in the second interview it became clear how painful and troubling this phase of Mila's life was for her, accompanied as it was by „dependency-autonomy-conflicts“. „I couldn't decide – family or study“; „at that time I would often burst into tears in the middle of town, then I couldn't go on any more“.⁶ Furthermore, Mila mentioned in passing that her „dividedness“ was „a characteristic that I sometimes still have to fight today“ and that she does regularly experience difficult days when she has „had enough“ and „when things fall apart ... above all in wintertime [when] the days are too short“. Although it proved almost impossible to gain more narrative self-statements from Mila concerning these experiences, it was quite evident that she had to regularly deal with depression as a result from family dynamics.

^{aaa} At the time of the interview, however, Mila feels calmer and is enthusiastically and diligently engaged in her new field of studies – in other words being, thankfully, quite successful and „talented“ again. However the burden – and biographical challenge – is still great. Mila takes classes and works part time, looks after her mother, tries to keep the family of cousins together and at the same time may not allow herself to openly by with her long-term pre-marital boy-friend. Moreover, Mila, here in her mid twenties, appears decided to take on no small burden in the future: She said she had talked to her (Austrian) partner of a year „about everything“, by which she meant that, if they do get married, her mother will move in with them.

4 Mila's „psychodynamic developmental-challenge“

Hence the evaluation procedure of LIR also integrates the mental and psycho-dynamic perspectives of life-path development and thus goes beyond the – more descriptive than analytical – approaches of state-of-the-art biography research. Thus, LIR was able to demonstrate that Mila's behavioural principle can, in psycho-biographical terms, be

⁶ To determine the extent to which this phase of Mila’s life was also influenced by the (first) Bosnian war and the extent to which family-historical issues from the Second World War came into play here, would have required additional explorations in interview and transcript analysis.

understood as a „trauma-compensatory pattern“ (Fischer & Riedesser) and be traced back to experiences within her family. These had caused Mila's psychic structure and mental sensitivity to be profoundly marked by (1) an unconscious dynamic of a deeply rooted „dependency-autonomy-conflict“, of psycho-traumatic „pseudo-autonomy“ and of trauma-compensatory „lack of boundaries“; more broadly (2) by „bipolar manic depressive“ mood swings; (3) a family-based relationship structure of „parentification“, predictably accompanied (4) by a dynamic of intense (detachment) conflicts.

However, what is the „psychodynamic developmental challenge“ that can be adduced from these analytic findings? This question can only be answered meaningfully when understood as a „psychodynamic“ question about mental structural changes. Only these – and not concrete life-world decisions vis-à-vis actions – can be reliably assessed as to their long-term impacts on Mila's subsequent biography path and the ‘sustainable personal development’ therein. Mila's „psychodynamic development challenge“ can therefore be defined thus: Whatever her future routes and ambitions are, whether she becomes more involved with her family or whether she pursues her own life-course, or a combination of both – Mila's challenge will be to increasingly do these things in a way that, given her current „lack of boundaries“, enables her to achieve more psychodynamic self-detachment and personal boundaries, and given her „autonomy-conflicts“ allow her to obtain at a greater „relational independence“ from internalised outside pressures – and thus acquire more genuine personal autonomy, freedom of action and creativity in work. Such gain in autonomy could be rightfully assessed as being sustainable and advantageous for Mila's future life-path, in that it is likely to reduce her risk of suffering depression, of getting into heated conflicts, of over-exerting herself and of over-burdening others.

People's media-interaction with fictional and/or factual narratives, where they constantly may process a range of psycho-biographical issues, seems particularly suited to first tentative explorations of such personal changes – to ‘mental rehearsals’, as it were, of new potentials of personal behaviour.

5 Mila's chosen film experience

Which media-narrative experience was it that Mila chose for the second interview? She selected a film that she said moved her whenever she watched it in a mix of „sadness“ and „joy“: the Hollywood production *I Am Sam*. Sam is a retarded adult man with the mental age of a seven year-old, living with his seven year-old daughter Lucy whose mother had disappeared upon her birth. Sam is loveable, helpful and endearing as a person, but, as might be expected, at times naive and quickly out of his depth. He does odd jobs in a restaurant chain and is well integrated among his colleagues and guests, as well as among a stable circle of male friends, a self-help group of variously handicapped men, all of whom are bizarre but very likeable all the same.

Sam had always been delighted with having a daughter, and the film portrays a father who, though ineffective in practical matters, is happy and caring. With some help from his well-

meaning and single neighbour Annie and together with his friends, Sam lives with his charming daughter Lucy. Soon, however, Lucy becomes smarter and can read and count better than her father – but does not want to show this, however. Emotionally, too, Lucy is far more stable than her father, who sometimes reacts nervously and angrily in new surroundings out of fear. Some scenes powerfully show how the alert and gifted daughter precisely assesses the abilities and limitations of her father and shows due consideration. All in all, though, Lucy seems to be very satisfied and happy with her emotionally attentive and playful father – as already the film's subtitle suggests: „All you need is love”.

However, childcare authorities become aware of the situation and, understandably concerned, begin to take action. There are court hearings which result in the separation of father and daughter and in Lucy being transferred to a foster family, with Sam given limited visiting rights. After the separation Sam is depressed and at first neglects to keep his appointments with the foster family. At the end, however, everything turns out well: the foster family and Sam move homes close to one another, and after a few small scale and charming upsets and complications they realize that if they are going to look after Lucy in a responsible and selfless manner then neither the foster family nor Sam can do without one another. Sam's essential qualities at the emotional level are immense, and the loving father-daughter relationship is irreplaceable. Finally, it even appears – more or less realistically – that Sam might in some respect grow out of his handicap and establishes a close relationship to a woman.

6 Mila's media-experience interview

What precisely happened during Mila's media experience? What did she do mentally when viewing this film (repeatedly)? More precisely: What conscious or unconscious processes of ‘mental biography work’ took place? The evaluation of the ‘media-experience interview’ using the recently developed procedure of ‘interdisciplinary transcript analysis’ (Weilnböck, 2008a, 2009) manages to integrate all empirical areas of the LIR approach: (i) the person's biography, (ii) their mental interaction with a fictional media narrative, and (iii) the content and the structure of the narrative itself. As first step of this analysis hypotheses are formulated about ‘potential biographical issues and needs’ that the film could have caused Mila to process. What can have moved Mila to select this film and to speak about it the way she did in the interview?

The frequency and openness with which Mila talked about Sam, his daughter Lucy, and their relationship allowed the probable – but by no means self-evident – assumption that a central issue/ need of ‘psycho-biographical work’ in Mila's film experience may lie in her personal relationship with her father and/or – so it turned out later – with a single parent (which in her case was the mother up to age seven). This assumption was further supported by how Mila referred at length to Annie, the single neighbour and Lucy's godmother, who despite – psycho-traumatically induced! – anxieties helped Sam as best she could to care for Lucy during her infancy and childhood. Also, Mila talked a lot about the self-help group that Sam belonged to, as well as his workplace environment as team member of a restaurant. Here, the

– later on corroborated – assumption was that Mila's biographical experiences in her extended family and her later peer-group surroundings in school, with friends and in youth cultures played a role.

One crucial hypothesis regarded Mila's experiences of familial violence: Firstly, the fact that Lucy was a seven year-old protagonist and Sam a retarded man at the mental age of seven represents a striking equivalent with the age at which Mila moved to Austria. Thus, it was logical to assume that Mila's late childhood phase was the one being evoked in particular during her film experience, a phase that covered the change of cultural sphere as well as a particular intensity of stressful and violent familial events which Mila had experienced mostly until the age of ten. 'Needs' for a retrospective mental processing of unresolved conflicts and experiences from this period of childhood were also assumed to be effective in Mila's perception of the seven year-old protagonist Lucy. Just as Mila perceived in Lucy a highly competent and unusually talented child who is impressively able to deal with her uncommon and challenging family situation (with a retarded father), Mila in her biographical interview presents herself as competent and particularly talented in many family and school situations. Hence, bearing in mind Mila's 'developmental challenge', one important focus of reconstructive evaluation would be, whether issues of over-exertion, parentification, idealization and sporadic depression, which were found to be attached to Mila's being a „talented daughter", also belong to her mental engagement with the film and how she perceives them.

What precisely was it that could be evinced in the narration-analytical evaluation of Mila's media experience interview – and of the case reconstruction on the whole? A major finding emerged early on in the data analysis, via a thematic omission: that of familial violence. Despite being a central aspect of Mila's biography, she had only rarely and relatively unemotionally taken up the theme. This is all the more astonishing since the film – while it portrays a widely non-violent father – contains many turns of the plot in which the topic of „domestic violence against children“ is directly dealt with – mostly in the extended courtroom scenes. Firstly, the lawyer for the adoption agency suggests that, because Sam was raised in a special-care home, he was probably subjected to violence and is therefore actively prone to violence himself. The emotional distress this causes Sam movingly emphasises quite vividly that he was indeed victim of corporal punishment as a child. Equally moving is the scene in which it becomes clear that Annie – the helpful neighbour who attests to Sam's abilities as a father – has not left her flat for around two decades because she suffers from serious chronic anxiety. This in turn – the court scene strongly suggested – can be traced to psycho-traumatic events of familial violence by her father.

However in her media interview Mila did not even mention these two aspects of serious familial violence which are so akin to her own family biography. aaa Even more targeted narrative enquiries by the interviewer did not cause her to touch upon this issue (the significance of which she, as a social worker in training, must have been aware of). Likewise Mila did not refer in any way to the Annie's chronic anxiety disorder which constitutes a striking parallel between the film character and Mila's own mother – and goes back to familial violence. aaa This corresponded to Mila's biographical interview insofar as Mila

recounted her personal experiences of violence in an entirely non-emotional manner. Given these and similar findings from transcript analysis, the conclusion was drawn that, at the time of the media interview, Mila was in a phase of her life where she did not take the opportunities provided by the film to process her biographical experiences of violence, but rather blocked these psychologically.

Psychodynamic sources were used here to draw on the long-established finding that particularly in the mental processing of violent experiences, an „inability to mourn“ is likely to occur and instead affects of melancholy, depression and anger prevail, thus causing significant hindrances to the person’s well-being and further sustainable development. This seemed to hold true for Mila, since the feelings of „sadness“ she vaguely referred to in general, were clearly ineffective in these sequences of Mila's film perception – in which they would have been most conducive with regard to her ‘developmental challenge’. Instead „sadness“ for her rather seemed to signify an „emotion“ of melancholy/ nostalgia and pertain to entirely different scenes of the film (mostly about the motive of father-daughter separation) that, in Mila's own words, made her „unsure whether to laugh or cry“.

On the other hand, Mila appeared to be able to receive a greater range of developmental impulses from one sector of mental action that may be viewed complementary to grieving: the sector of emotionally positively-toned, subjectively joyous and non-aggressive interactions with friends and supporters. These dimensions of Mila's mental film experience were reconstructed in reference to how Mila reacted to the scenes about the broader circle of Sam's supporters and helpers. These Mila appeared to associate with her own biographical experiences with larger social contexts (extended family and home village, school, youth cultures, fellow students). Clearly, such capacity of mental – and social – action is suited to strengthening psychological resilience against any contestations through arising life circumstances. However, regarding one particular ‘developmental challenge’ in this sector – the ability to deal with conflict among friends and to avoid the tendency to idealize and overburden them, respectively over-exert herself with supporting them – transcript analysis found that Mila did not explore it very much.

Mila's film experience in the light of her „dependency-autonomy conflict“

How did the narrative analysis succeed in going beyond findings concerning processes of dealing with issues of violence and self-strengthening in a narrow sense, and arrive at observations about how Mila, in her film experience, dealt with the central psychological element of her most prevalent personal ‘developmental challenge’: namely the dependency-autonomy conflict – which appears to cause so many unfortunate frictions and blockages in her present life? Significant information about this can be gained from Mila's comments about the scene where Sam tries and fails to exercise his right to visit Lucy at the home of her foster family.

The staging of this scene in particular follows a sensitive dramaturgy which subtly accentuates a general human issue which – of all possible issues – is: developmental

‘dependency-autonomy conflicts’. The scene shows how Sam holding a bunch of flowers approaches the house and sees Lucy from a distance sitting with her understanding foster mother in the garden, an easel and boxes of paint in front of her, restlessly waiting for her father to come – and Sam seeing this, turning around and going away. Disappointed Lucy sits for a while, but then begins to paint a striking picture in which she employs a new style with a colour combination unlike any she had used before. Sam, however, is then seen sitting in his darkened flat showing signs of depression – however, shortly thereafter, happens to develop a new personal relationship with a woman.

The methodologically separate analysis of the film narrative (cf. footnote xx, HW 2008a, 2011d, Stein xx) had made it clear how the dramaturgy of *I am Sam* on the whole and this scene in particular produce a the specific ‘textual interaction potential’ to be picked up on by the viewers. In this ‘potential’ the film guides the viewer towards arriving at the insight that the loosening of Lucy's all too close relationship with her father – although it might seem heartbreaking at the moment – is good for her personal development as a seven year old child (and also for her father). Because, through this, Lucy as a seven year old child may experience an important increase of “personal boundaries” and „relational autonomy“, of “freedom of action” as well as of “creativity in work” (or in painting) – which is precisely what has been formulated above as Mila's (!) developmental challenge!

Now, how then would Mila view – and mentally appropriate – this central scene of the film narrative? Mila expressed above all regret and disappointment about the failure of the meeting between father and daughter to take place. And when prompted to elaborate, Mila expressed sympathy for Sam and indicated that Sam in this scene must have „felt ashamed“ because here he again was obliged to see „how inadequate he is as a father“.

Clearly, Mila does not empathise either cognitively or emotionally with the film daughter's (Lucy's) detachment from her father (Sam). Lucy's gain in personal autonomy and freedom of action played no role in Mila's mental media interaction with this film.⁷ Much rather she appeared to psychologically block this strikingly presented theme of the film – i.e. its specific „interaction potential“. To begin with, Mila on the whole seemed to identify much less with the daughter position – including her own mental self-representation as child – than with its parental opposite number, in other words with Sam as father whose supposed shame, in a highly parentified position, she sympathised with and worried about (aaa while the film seems to indicate that Sam might rather feel depression – which is significantly different from shame – or that he even has some insight in the fact that the foster mother is indeed a good thing for

⁷ aaa Further support for this conclusion could be mustered looking at the sequences in which Mila did not react at all to those scenes of the film that highlight Lucy's premature role as an adult (i.e. her parentification), for instance the scenes in which seven year-old Lucy speaks to her father in distinctly premature and adult manners telling him that tomorrow is her first day of school and that she wants to get a good night's sleep and therefore can't, as Sam wants, read her favourite children's book one more time (which Mila had been knowing by heart for quite some time). These scene which the film staged as both eerie and charming Mila took as proof of Lucy's talent. In psychodynamic terms, this means that Mila's developmental issues and challenges stemming from the area of her own biographical experience of „early talent“ and parentification remain unmet.

Mila). Simultaneously, Mila completely overlooks the strong possibility that Sam himself – like Lucy – might undergo a conducive personal development towards the position of an adult capable of having a mature relationship (with the women he met). This, in quite concrete terms, deprives her of an opportunity to gain a more profound understanding of her own experiences of depression and how they correspond with relational and family issues.

As to the reasons why Mila is blocked in this respect, transcript analysis concluded that – aside of the major factor of domestic violence which always does hinder processes of building personal autonomy – another specific reason is to be seen in the counter-developmental impact of the shame, which is so prevalent biographically and culturally with Mila.

To conclude, by choosing *I am Sam* and encountering it with great emotional attention („it moved me“/ „sadness“/ „joy“), Mila placed herself directly at the centre of her personal psychodynamic developmental challenge (e.g. the experiences of domestic violence, resilience formation, dependency-autonomy conflicts). In her affection for this film Mila is on her own track, as it were. However, what stood out in the form that Mila's actual media interaction took, was how she was currently still blocking the ‘potentials’ for ‘sustainable personal development’ inherent in the film. Therefore she is not able to take any use from it in terms of engaging in mental work with her pattern of ‘dependency-autonomy conflicts’ which constitutes her central ‘developmental challenge’. By the same token not much metal biography work seemed to have occurred pertaining Mila’s disposition of parentified „talentedness“, her tendency to overburden, idealize and get into conflict within friendship circles as well as her burdensome experiences of domestic violence and the resultant psycho-affective complex of ‘sadness versus melancholia/ nostalgia and anger’.

Hence, if Mila is indeed “on her own track with this film”, then it is also the case that many of the developmental-biographical issues it offers are still awaiting her in her future viewings of her favourite film – and in her future life.

In closing

Now, what does all that mean for ‘literary theory’ proper? And most importantly what does it mean for the practice of ‘doing/ teaching cultural and historical research’? Principally, such case studies may serve as an appeal to all humanities to integrate methods of qualitative-empirical research and to consult evidence-based resources of psychological knowledge. This, in a word, means for literary and historical theory to become empirical and scientific in the sense of (a) granting the basic assumption that ‘literature’ and/or (culture) historical media narratives are always also – and probably most importantly – about the persons that read and write them, which calls for empirical research with persons (and not only with texts) and (b) that each of these individuals are endowed with a human psyche with all its complexities of life-long experience-based development and intricate forms of mental conflict transformation, which calls for psychology.

In more practical terms, whenever a (young) person like Mila does not – yet – take up opportunities/ ‘potentials’ for mental, psycho-biographical processing and personal development which are contained in an emphatic media experience, while s/he at the same time seems involuntarily to want to approach these but is unable to do so (for whatever reasons which might include, as with Mila, the psycho-traumatic effects of incidents of violence and victimisation), then a situation is defined which brings up concrete issues of teaching-research, media-education and ‘doing history’.

Put as an open question: How would ‘doing/ teaching cultural and historical research’ look like when it – aside of presenting factually appropriate narratives about events of (cultural) history – focuses on the developmental issues of its addressees? What would it mean to take to heart – empirically and pedagogically – events/ experiences of violence, victimisation, and psycho-trauma? Would that at all be advisable and ‘useful’ for cultural and historical studies (in the sense of the European Commission’s research funding requirement of usefulness)?

Mila, personally, is likely to agree, since already the experience of doing these in-depth interviews seemed to have triggered some highly appreciated processes of personal awareness formation – i.e. so-called posttraumatic growth – with her. And just imagine how Mila would have taught this film to a class of students, before and after taking part in the interview project. To what extent would these students have profited from Mila’s teaching personally – and above all those students who likewise are much entangled in ‘dependency-autonomy-conflicts’, which – in modern, liberal societies – are after all pose a permanent personal challenge for just any young and not so young person?

To ask this in a more general and at same time also more ominous context: Imagine how Mila (who actually is in training for becoming a social worker and teacher) would have taught a seminal cultural and/or historical issue which directly touches upon the students „dependency-autonomy-conflict“. This would – most notoriously – be the case whenever issues around mass-charismatic, violent-extremist leader figures have to be dealt with, who caused colossal havoc and total wilful self-subjugation with their followers, i.e. they miraculously solved their „dependency-autonomy-conflicts“. Here, teaching narratives about Hitler, Stalin, Mao to the respective post-havoc societies is at stake (for Mila this could mean teaching about Ex-Yugoslavian history), since these are societies which found themselves still much attached to their atrocious leaders despite of abundant evidence of their monstrousness.

Clearly, Hollywood films about fathers and daughter are not just about fathers and daughters, literary theory is not just about texts and ‘doing (cultural) history’ implies much more than getting the facts right.