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## Verisimilitude and Film Story: The Links between Screenwriter, Character and Spectator

*Verosimilitud y relato cinematográfico: los vínculos entre guionista, personaje y espectador*

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**ABSTRACT:** Verisimilitude is an essential quality to the perfection of fictions, from the tragedy competitions in Pericles's Athens to current Hollywood screenplays. This article explores the structural and emotional resources available to the writer to build and tell a credible story. To get this aim, the Aristotelian notion of mimesis is taken as a starting point, the writer's creative motivations are discussed through thematic aspects and their reflection in characters building. At the same time,

human mysteries are considered as meeting points between writer, character and spectator. This study of narrative resources is done according to the dynamics of dramatic conflicts, present in every story. The article uses as references recent contributions of script experts, formulas to creative production and examples taken from film scripts.

**RESUMEN:** *La verosimilitud es una cualidad imprescindible para la perfección de los relatos de ficción: desde los certámenes de tragedias en la Atenas de Pericles, hasta los actuales relatos cinematográficos. El presente artículo explora los recursos estructurales y emocionales con que cuenta el guionista para construir y narrar una historia verosímil. Para ello, se parte de la noción aristotélica de mimesis y se analizan las motivaciones creativas del escritor a través de los aspectos temáticos y su reflejo en la construcción de personajes. Al mismo tiempo, se consideran los misterios humanos como puntos de encuentro entre guionista, personaje y espectador. El estudio de los recursos narrativos se realiza según la dinámica de conflictos dramáticos presente en todo relato, y para ello se acude a las aportaciones recientes de teóricos del guion, a fórmulas de producción creativa y a ejemplos tomados de relatos cinematográficos.*

**Keywords:** Verisimilitude, Screenplay, Character building, Emotional strategy, Narrative structure.

**Palabras clave:** *verosimilitud, guion cinematográfico, construcción de personajes, estrategia emocional, estructura narrativa.*

Towards the end of the first part of *Don Quixote*, while the knight-errant is driven to his village imprisoned in a cage, an interesting dialogue takes place about the art of fabling stories. Two characters accompanying the strange retinue, the Bachelor Pero Pérez and a canon, begin to discuss during on the way the poor quality of the books of chivalry that have caused the madness of Don Quixote, and end up discussing the dramatic keys that every writer should consider, either in novel or tragedy. Throughout this conversation, extended over two chapters, Cervantes synthesizes a true poetic rich in practical advice for creators of fiction of all time. At one point, the canon affirms:

Fiction is all the better the more it looks like truth, and gives the more pleasure the more probability and possibility there is about it. Plots in fiction should be wedded to the understanding of the reader, and be constructed in such a way that, reconciling impossibilities, smoothing over difficulties, keeping the mind on the alert, they may surprise, interest, divert, and entertain, so that wonder and delight joined may keep pace one with the other; all which he will fail to effect who shuns verisimilitude and truth to nature, wherein lies the perfection of writing<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> CERVANTES, Miguel de, *Don Quixote*, Sovereign, London, 2012, p. 442.

As indicated in this excerpt of the dialogue, the emotions and the interest that a good story raises in readers and spectators (alert, surprise, entertainment...), as well as the whole craft of the telling, are subject to a single principle: the pursuit of verisimilitude. With this principle, Cervantes is just reminding one of the fundamental principles prescribed in Aristotle's *Poetics*: when constructing a story, the imitation of life marks its extent of perfection. "The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities"<sup>2</sup>, the Philosopher gets to write. And he insists in the same text: "with respect to the requirement of art, the probable impossible is always preferable to the improbable possible"<sup>3</sup>. That is, the possibility or impossibility of fictions must not be taken as a yardstick to appraise quality in a novel or tragedy, or even in a screenplay, but rather the verisimilar imitation of events and characters taken from real life.

This paradox becomes especially highlighted in fantasy stories, where a peculiar wondrous element always reveals the impossibility of the narrated fiction. However, a fantastic narration may be more plausible than a realistic drama where characters act in an incredible way or are involved in strained situations, forced by an author-demiurge. This perception may occur both in literature and film, frame of this exploration about the plausibility of the script as a guarantee of dramatic and human interest. And thus it could happen that, as spectators, we recognize ourselves in the ethical dilemmas of an impossible millionaire such as Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), while perhaps rejecting by implausible the human portraits of Woody Allen in *To Rome with love* (2012), whose characters may seem less authentic than those previously designed in *Match Point* (2005).

The verisimilitude of fictions is a creative paradox already treated in the first text of History about the art of narration, the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Twenty-four centuries later this concept still constitutes a real touch stone in the construction of stories, a key to make them truly credible through the humanity of characters and the reflections arisen. Mimesis or artistic imitation of life, whether through film or literature, requires the dramatization of reality in order to the truth of the characters, even if artifices are needed and the boundaries of possibility are trespassed at times.

However, it often happens in the specific field of film that screenwriters and filmmakers lend greater attention to formal and structural aspects of the story, rather than thematic aspects that govern the behavior of the characters and their inner stories. When this happens, the verisimilitude deteriorates precisely because the construction of characters is then focused as a technical rather than human issue.

Issues such as the mimetic aspects of the story may seem closer to academic disquisition, when in fact they are the key to the construction of a good script. Apart from the tips of the classic, the dramatization of life through believable characters has been a continuous challenge since the end of the 1970s, when the first screenwriting manuals were published. Since then, story analysts, writers and theorists have struggled to design suitable dramatic tools in order to provide the delicate and complex interplay between two poles: the complex structures of the script and life, much richer in complexity on the other hand. That is, the interaction between fictional plot and spectator.

This work analyzes the structural and emotional resources available to the screenwriter to make a story credible, starting with the Aristotelian notion of mimesis. Secondly, the creative motivations are explored in connection with the thematic aspects as a starting point in the creation of the script and as a guideline in the construction of characters.

<sup>2</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, Donald A. Russell, ed., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, 1460a 27-29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 1461b 10-11.

The study of narrative resources is carried out according to the dynamics of dramatic conflicts present in every story, and this analysis considers recent contributions of theorists of the script, production formulas and examples taken from film stories.

### 1. *Poetic Mimesis. Self-recognition of Writer and Spectator in the Drama*

Verisimilitude as imitation of life comes to be an artistic *quid* which guarantees the aforementioned connection between writer, character and spectator, however this is a predicable concept and not an applicable resource. Also it can be considered a permanent target throughout the process of writing and rewriting, an overriding aim that allows a particular recreation of the world. The mechanism of this rebuilding boils down to this simple plan: moving to reflection through emotion. In the *Poetics*, the concept “mimesis praxeos” deals with the construction of true human characters through the imitation of his/her immanent actions: according to Aristotle, this is the soul of tragedy, literary genre of the time par excellence<sup>4</sup>.

Bettetini and Fumagalli regard this mimetic principle and its ethical dimension when they argue that the task of any narrator, either novel or film, is not a mere matter of language. This dramatic task ultimately entails the creation of a world inhabited by characters “that are loved or hated, approved or disapproved by the reader on the basis – not decisive, but in general strongly convincing– of expectations and argumentations created and proposed by the author”<sup>5</sup>. The experts continue alluding to its effect on emotions and reflections of spectators and readers: “According to the Aristotelian tradition, the essentials in a narrative work are the hopes and human fears, the participation in the vicissitudes of the characters to which a true human interest is born, even knowing they are invented”<sup>6</sup>.

From these considerations about ethics and mimesis can be inferred that both screenwriter and character must have a clear-cut principle of action. In the case of a writer, what is the true reason that encourages him/her tell a story. In the case of the protagonists, what is the intimate reason for their actions. The motives of the writer immediately return us to the thematic scope of the script, to the proposals for reflection that moved the artist to explore a human mystery, or simply to tell a lived experience. On the other hand, the characters motives are born always from an inner tension, from a dramatic conflict that leads always to an internal story.

In every filmic narration, the poetic mimesis finds its origin in the script, in the genesis of the story, and in a specific way in the interaction between the theme, the intimacy of the protagonists and the projection of the spectator in the drama: the triad writer - character - spectator. Let us stop briefly at each of them.

As indicated, the motivations of the writer are crucial to the credibility and excellence of the story. However, the screenwriter may not aware of these last reasons after developing a first draft, or the connections between characters and structures do not work with the proper consistency. According to Brenes, a screenwriter is more concerned in this “first writing” with structural issues: plots, characters, dialogue and units of dramatic action such as scenes, knots or sequences. However, during the process of “re-writing”, the screenwriter becomes more aware of the poetic deep

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1450a 40.

<sup>5</sup> BETTETINI, Gianfranco y FUMAGALLI, Armando, *Quel che resta dei media. Idee per un'etica della comunicazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2007, pp. 82-83.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

structure lying beneath the story in progress, beyond the structural resources, and then it is possible to reaffirm the ethical dimensions of the characters. As the expert explains:

When the screenwriter searches for the nucleus of the action that gives unity to the story [...] he can observe the main feelings and habits that appear initially in his characters – particularly in the protagonist– and ask himself which cluster of emotion or aspect of human life he is exploring. Reflection on these variables may help him detect which genre is working on and, on this basis, re-write the parts that strike the wrong chord<sup>7</sup>.

Though applied to the screenwriter, the processes of “first writing” and “re-writing” described by Brenes are inspired in turn on the concepts of “first” and “second navigation”, proposed by García-Noblejas and equivalent to the moments of *understanding* and *enforcement* of the narration. These are two main attitudes in the spectator or reader to the story, closely related to the writer’s stances along the dramatic process.

For García-Noblejas, the first navigation is linear in nature and associated with character and plot. However, the second navigation appears to be “rather ‘holistic’ and ‘synthetic’, almost instantaneous, although ordinarily –being itself reflection and review– it calls for further revisions when requested our personal condition and historical situation”<sup>8</sup>. This second navigation actually overlaps with the first one and, along the course, a spectator empathizes or even comes to identify with the experiences of the characters: “This navigation is similar, for example, to that one made affirm Flaubert ‘Madame Bovary c’est moi!’, being Mme. Bovary the complete work and not the main character in the novel”<sup>9</sup>.

Any spectator does not identify nor project on narrative structures nor feel hurt by an emotional resource. In the same way, it can also be assured that a screenwriter is not decided to write a screenplay strictly for dramatic or experimental reasons. The concepts of rewriting and second navigation allow us to delve into the true motivations of the writer, who comes to connect with a spectator through habits, feelings and reflections arose by the characters.

In this connection between the components of the triad *writer - character - spectator* the Aristotelian concept of the catharsis plays a central role. This second issue is defined on the *Poetics* as the purification detached in the spectator in a vicarious way, as a result of compassion and fear experienced during tragedy<sup>10</sup>. In a broad sense, the catharsis emerges as the result of a dramatic tension experienced by readers and spectators throughout the narration, as they are able to revive and suffer the characters’ problems (the “labors” of the classic heroes) by identifying with their innermost conflicts. Shakespeare refers precisely to the power of this purging feeling in *Hamlet*, at the end of a famous monologue. Aware of the effects of dramatic catharsis, the young prince hatches a trick to force Claudio, assassin of his father and new King, to betray himself during a theatrical play where the crime he has committed is rendered: “I’ll have grounds more relative than this –Hamlet says–: the play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King”<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> BRENES, Carmen Sofía, “The Practical Value of Theory: Teaching Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Screenwriters”, *Communication and Society*, vol. XXIV, nº 1, 2011, p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, “Resquicios para la trascendencia en el cine. Acerca de los ‘espectadores implicados’ y las ‘segundas navegaciones’ en las películas”, in JIMÉNEZ, Rafael y Juan J. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS (eds.), *Poética & Cristianesimo*, Edusc, Roma, 2004, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1449b 27.

<sup>11</sup> SHAKESPEARE, William, *Hamlet*, Random House, New York, 1988, II, ii, pp. 589-591.

Even when the outcome of the drama does not become fatal, the catharsis worked on the hearing happens through an emotional alteration strategically default by the screenwriter who, in the manner of the Danish prince, wish to access into the sanctuary of the spectator's conscience and remove it. García-Noblejas warns the necessity to override the superficial structures of the first navigation to enter the second, as it provides a deep reading of the story through poetic mimesis: the reflection and recognition in the drama, by both spectator and writer, allows to perceive the loss or gain of happiness and dignity experienced by the characters and, at the same time, to calibrate this measure by comparison with them. As the author explains, all of this

Ends up giving a special consistency to the stories of scripts and films, making them similar to ourselves. Not to the more or less conventional world where we live as democratic citizens, consumers or characters, but similar and equivalent to our personal intimate world and to our intangible dignity. And from there we judge those stories that claim to be genuinely real, being fully fictional<sup>12</sup>.

In other words, David Mamet also alludes to the close connection that poetic mimesis provides to writers, characters and spectators, and this filmmaker and playwright asserts that “theater isn't a place to go to forget anything, but a place to go to remember”<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Emotional Strategies and Verisimilitude

In the last quarter of the 19th century, both industry and the academic environment of Hollywood became especially interested in construction techniques of screenwriting. As a result, the studios increased their investments in the departments of analysis and development of stories. During those years, script manuals proliferated thanks to analysts like Syd Field, Linda Seger, Christopher Vogler and Robert McKee among others, all of them related to producer companies and trained in the job outside academia (Seger is an exception)<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, film schools fostered on college campuses writing programs according to a triple perspective technical, industrial, and academic. In their forums, Aristotle's Poetics was valued as the primary basis for any script structure.

Despite this sometimes bizarre acknowledgement to Aristotle in Hollywood, the influence of the classic text is scarcely recognized except for a simplified adaptation of certain resources such as peripeteias, revolutions or anagnorisis, and also for the division in three acts as main dramatic foundation. Brenes comments in this regard:

It is usual for screenwriting schools and the books that claim to teach how to write for the screen to refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*. However, more often than not, *Poetics* is quoted only as if it were a handbook on “how” to write stories, despite the fact that, as

<sup>12</sup> GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, “Prólogo”, in TOBIAS, Ronald B., *El guion y la trama. Fundamentos de la escritura dramática audiovisual*, Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, Madrid, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> MAMET, David, “Stanislavsky and the American Bicentennial”, in MAMET, D., *A Whore's Profession. Notes and Essays*, Faber and Faber, Boston, 1994, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Between 1975 and 2000, four outstanding manuals appeared in the editorial market and nowadays are still considered fundamental texts on the screenwriting subject: the pioneer *Screenplay* (Syd Field, 1979), *Making a Good Script Great* (Linda Seger, 1987), *The Writer's Journey. Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (Christopher Vogler, 1992) and *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and Principles of Screenwriting* (Robert McKee, 1997).

some contemporary writers have pointed out, it also says something about the nature of stories, that is, “what” they are and “why” they are thus made up”<sup>15</sup>.

During this period at the end of the century, the trends in genre film screenwriting have emphasized the importance of structural paradigms, dramatic archetypes and master plots, often placing technique above Humanities. This commitment to purely formal or technical aspects of the story manifests itself in two phenomena. On the one hand, a tendency to prioritize the emotional impact on the spectator as a guarantee of interest. On the other, a reduction of narrative construction to a combination of structures and master patterns in order to obtain a succession of episodes enforced with the appropriate dramatic charge. Taken to the extreme, both phenomena would result in the disintegration of narrative unity and, ultimately, in a danger for the film as an organic – and therefore artistic– whole. In fact both phenomena are closely linked, since a reduction of emotional strategies to simple stimulation on the spectator would divert the screenwriter attention from the true core of the story, the characters’ intimacy, to the step outline: just a simple succession of dramatic beats.

Since the 1980s, in manuals and script theories it has prevailed this trend to reduce emotional approaches to actual impact. Thus the concept “emotion” is usually associated with “dramatic momentum”, and the evolution of the narrative intensity finally rests on certain structural incidents (turning points, climax, interest resources...). It is true that the audience voluntarily accepts its emotional manipulation, but also rejects the narration as implausible when the illusion gets broken and the dramatic mechanisms are exposed to view all. By ingenious to be a structural design, there is no screenplay that supports forced emotions by incredible characters.

When a writer aspires to create authentic characters, the emotional strategy of a script should start with the intimacy of the protagonists and the internal conflict within it. Without conflict, it is impossible to narrate or recognize a story, even if it runs through the intricacies of human soul.

The key of this intimacy in tension lies in the ultimate character motivation, specified in an *internal goal*. This concept can be expressed through the question “why is really acting a character?”, and the appropriate response provides the dramatic key to build the personality. We know the *external goals* pursued by Carl Fredricksen, the Duke of York and Clarice Starling in *Up* (Peter Docter 2009), *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper 2010) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), but these targets only provide the structures of their respective action plots: an exotic adventure, the defense of an endangered homeland, the resolution of a sordid whodunit. Their respective internal goals will provide in return the ultimate reason of their actions, their moral need and gravity center of their intimacies: to fulfill a promise made in childhood, to regain own voice and confidence, to overcome an old trauma. Internal goal is the engine of internal conflicts and the reason that gives real meaning to characters’ actions. Intimacy areas, on the other hand, constitute the main source of subtext in the scripts, such as Linda Seger has researched in a recent work<sup>16</sup> about hidden motivations and their links to dramatic mechanisms.

The usefulness of internal goal is not limited to equip a character with a minimum of depth, and its *raison d’être* doesn’t extinguish at the level of intimacy. This simple dramatic tool –true starting point in the building of personality– controls the evolution arc of characters and the tensions between them. In emotional terms, internal goals rule

<sup>15</sup> BRENES, Carmen Sofía, “The Practical Value of Theory...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>16</sup> SEGER, Linda, *Writing Subtext. What Lies Beneath*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, California, 2011.

the dramatic momentum along the whole script, above the necessary plot strategies and the dramatic beats outline.

### 2.1. “*Emotional Stake*” and *Internal Conflict*

Screenwriter and story consultant Karl Iglesias complete the importance of internal goals with the concept of *emotional stake*, which grants the writer a practical approach to characters motivations. Basically, the mechanics of the emotional stake consists in considering the personal risk of a failure if a protagonist does not reach an external goal. According to Iglesias,

Stakes are what is at risk or what is to be gained emotionally in the moment. What happens if a character fails? What happens if he succeeds? [...] If a character has no stake in the outcome, the reader won't care if he solves the problem or not. The more emotional the stakes, the more the reader will care about the character, and the more he'll want them to achieve their goal. In fact, stakes are more compelling when relationships are involved<sup>17</sup>.

As the American writer explains, the emotional stakes can be ranked in a practical way according to Maslow's hierarchy needs. This anthropological scale allows any screenwriter to establish a gradation of priorities, from the satisfaction of basic needs (survival, security) up to the higher (self-realization, spirituality). On the other hand, there is a direct connection between emotional stakes and the loss or gain of happiness in the characters, so the whole script may fluctuate in dramatic terms depending on the obstacles a protagonist find along the pursuit of an external goal. Ultimately, both the benefit and the emotional of characters are transferred to spectators through the experience of their internal conflict and reflection it causes on them.

The interaction between internal goal, emotional stake and internal conflict can be seen both in stories close to our experience (*possible*, as in social dramas) or extremely distant (*impossible*, as it happens in fantastic science fiction). Regardless the genre, the concept of emotional stake helps to value the internal goals inside each character, and also it facilitates the empathy or even the identification of spectators with the emotions and tensions in the drama. In order to expose these emotional mechanics in a graphical way, two examples of different genres can be compared.

Atticus Finch, the persevering attorney in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan 1962) strives to demonstrate his client's innocence and thus contribute to change an unjust society in the Deep South, during the Depression days. But this external goal only provides a shallow insight into the character. In his intimate dimension, Finch is a widower and father of two small children, Scout and Jem, and he worries that racial hatred of the society where they are growing up could corrupt their innocence. In this sharper perspective, the attorney's interior goal increases the interest in his immediate target, and the spectator is impelled to share the character's inner tension through the moral risk to their children (emotional stake).

In a very different script, *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan 1999) child psychologist Malcolm Crowe tries to cure his patient Cole Sear of a pathological obsession. This is not however a routine case inasmuch as Cole's symptoms and circumstances are identical to those of a previous Crowe's patient, who recently committed suicide. For the psychologist, Cole's cure does not imply one more external goal: it would also be the healing of Crowe's guilty conscious. Moral healing is thus the

<sup>17</sup> IGLESIAS, Karl, “What's At Stake?” *Creative Screenwriting*, January/February 2007, p. 38.



interior goal, reinforced with a double emotional stake: for the adult, the risk of not overcoming a depression, and on the other hand the risk of a fatal destiny for the child. When the emotional stakes of Finch and Crowe are examined, it is observed that both situations are built on the risk from an eventual failure (as a lawyer, as a psychologist), and the derived damages to children. On each story the screenwriters play with the fragility of children against physical and moral threats that stalk them, although their causes are as diverse as a bunch of lynchings in Mississippi or the realm of the dead. It may be that spectators do not share the professional experiences of Finch and Crowe, but certainly they know the tensions caused by responsibilities as a parent or educator, or at least they are able to understand the meaning of a moral debt.

## 2.2. *Pixar Scripts: an example of interaction between emotion and reflection*

Thinking and feeling are two inseparable actions in film spectators, so an emotional strategy strictly based on provoking sentiments on the audience would eventually damage the verisimilitude of the script and, as a result, the spectator's interest in the fate of the characters. In this regard, Henry Jenkins affirms: "Most of popular culture is shaped by a logic of emotional intensification. It is less interested in making us think than it is in making us feel. Yet that distinction is too simple: popular culture, at its best, makes us think by making us feel"<sup>18</sup>. These statements, provided by an expert in Comparative Media Studies, confirm the connection between the emotional involvement of the spectator in the experiences of the characters, and the reflection that their decisions arise at the audience.

On the other hand, Jenkins' consideration on the pre-eminence of feeling on thinking would be only acceptable as a matter of cognitive and aesthetic order thus, taken in the strict sense, the dramatic recreation of characters and situations could be affected in authenticity and moreover in sense and interest. A diegetic universe whose protagonists and secondary only perform on an emotional level would be subjected to the immediacy of their actions. Then, the building of characters would be limited to a superficial design, their interior goals would lose depth and would be diluted in a passionate dynamic, and therefore the freedom of the characters also would be diminished. As a final result, the spectator would find a group of *dramatis personae* sketched with poorness, tasteless for a spectator always expecting to be seen in the stories that truly enjoy<sup>19</sup>.

Since 1995, Pixar productions offer an example of interaction between emotion and reflection on the development of film projects. Among several factors, verisimilitude in the scripts comes to be one of the keys to the success achieved by the studio among diverse audience segments. Specifically, the depth of internal conflicts in stories as the *Toy Story* trilogy (the first two parts were directed by John Lasseter in 1995 and 1999, and the third one by Lee Unkrich in 2010), *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich 2003), *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird 2004) or *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton 2008)

<sup>18</sup> JENKINS, Henry, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, New York University Press, New York, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> It should be clarified that this "freedom of the characters", vital for the verisimilitude of the story, must be understood in the context of a "first navigation", where characters are regarded as authentic and complete people in psychological terms. From a global vision of the story, or "second navigation", characters are just tools to tell a narration and they receive their vitality through the poetic myth. Cfr. BRENES, C.S., "Buenos y malos personajes. Una diferencia poética antes que ética", *Revista de Comunicación*, vol. 11, diciembre 2012, pp. 11-12.

prove their creators interest in the building of solid characters, always faced with true moral dilemmas, and whose decisions refer to eternal mysteries of human life such as the search of home, the pursuit of happiness, the discovery of identity or the meaning of pain.

The preliminaries of *Up*, written by Peter Docter and Bob Peterson, are an example of Pixar interest in the building of believable plots and characters in order to ultimately enable reflections as the aforementioned, taking the emotions as a starting point. According to Docter, the first meetings held to create the story simply revolved around an old crazy man who eludes the nursing home by transforming his house into a huge air balloon. The idea could perhaps provide an attractive starting point, but they realized that the interest in the adventure could vanish soon. “We felt like we needed a strong emotional foundation on which to build all the goofy, funny stuff that happens later –the writer explained in 2009–, as well as all the action and adventure. I think if you just had that without the emotional weight behind it, it would be light and fluffy and fun, but it wouldn’t be something you’d take home with you”<sup>20</sup>.

In order to design the interior goal of the old main character, that is the intimate reason for his journey, it was necessary to postpone the start of the adventure and enter a prologue presenting Carl Fredricksen and Ellie, his future wife, as children in the 1930s. Through a montage without dialogue the characters shared together a lifetime, during which his childhood desire –an exotic journey adventure to South America– was frustrated again and again. The long sequence, deliberately intimate, closed with an emotional blow to the spectator, the death of Ellie. For the screenwriter of the film, “this sense of unfinished business between Carl and his wife was what fueled the entire story”<sup>21</sup>.

*Up*’s prologue shows the double utility of emotional strategy as a resource of verisimilitude. On the one hand, screenwriter acts on the sensitivity of the spectator and connects him or her with the main character beyond mere empathy, making the audience to share the protagonist’s inner goal. The purpose of the journey is so important to Carl that it means itself a strong emotional commitment: to fulfill a promise made in childhood, frustrated by death. The intimacy of the old character is expressed in such a way that it is possible the recognition of the spectator in his internal conflict, as it appeals to human mysteries as death, the destination and reason for life itself.

In respect of the connection between writer, character and audience as a guarantee for verisimilitude, Docter recalls the experience of a woman in her eighties who wrote him to the studio. The old spectator had lost her husband months ago, and the screenwriter was upset when he read that she had gone to see Carl Fredricksen’s adventure to cheer herself up: “But it turned out to be a very restorative thing for her, because she said that as she watched the movie, she felt like she was getting to spend a little more time with her husband. It was very meaningful to me that that film could do that for someone”<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> ROBINSON, Tasha, “Interview. Peter Docter”, in *A.V. Club*, 28-05-2009 <http://www.avclub.com/articles/pete-docter,28465>, consulted on 20-09-2012.

<sup>21</sup> MUNSO, Danny, “Sky High. Screenwriter Pete Docter and Bob Peterson take us inside the making of Pixar’s latest masterpiece”, *Creative Screenwriting*, May/June 2009, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> GAITA, Paul, “Scene Dissection: ‘Up’ director Pete Docter on the film’s emotional opening montage”, in *Los Angeles Times*, 2010. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/feb/25/entertainment/la-etw-pete-docter25-2010feb25/2>, consulted on 15-09-2012.

### 3. *Three Structural Proposals to Humanize Interior Stories*

A common mistake in novice screenwriters lies in to confuse the inside story of a character with his/her transformation arc, and it would be tantamount to reducing the character to a functional structure with no life. The transformation arc –like the master plots, paradigms or archetypes– is nothing more than a structural device to design characters: something like a sketch to trace the setup, confrontation and outcome of the inside story that is about to narrate.

On the other hand, an interior story comes not disengaged from the basic plot of the script (the “archplot”, in a global sense): for each character of the drama there is an internal conflict and each one generates an inside story, whose structure in turn is integrated into the whole structure of the script through the transformation. However, the first manuals and script theories paid no much attention to the structural integration of characters throughout the story, as they tended to understand interior stories themselves as dissociated arcs within the archplots: a matter that should be dealt with in chapters apart, as if character design were a single structure overlapped to action design. The mythical archplot proposed by Christopher Vogler in 1992 as the *hero's journey*, tried to overcome a trend to consider the old persisting –and false– dilemma between action and character. According to the paradigm designed by this Hollywood consultant of stories, the adventure of every hero runs through various physical and mental thresholds, while tests and obstacles are aggravated in the form of deadly hazards. As a result, characters evolution crystalizes at the end of a mission in an epic forge and the birth of a new character.

Vogler's proposal indeed broke down the transformation arc of a character in twelve steps throughout the screenplay three acts: from the preliminary phases *Ordinary world* and *Call to adventure* to the final *Resurrection Hero* and *Return with Elixir*, passing through *Tests, Allies, Enemies* or the *Supreme Ordeal*. In addition, this archplot allowed explore mysteries of human existence, present in ancient initiation to life myths. Despite a contribution to the integration of characters in dramatic structures, this paradigm seemed more suited to epic action stories and to adventure fantasy genres, and also it offered a recurrent pattern of interior stories necessarily linked to plots of maturation, discovery and sacrifice.

John Truby, another Hollywood story analyst, made in 2007 an interesting proposal in *The Anatomy of Story*, consisting of a structural scheme applicable to a wide variety of diegetic universes. Truby showed a twenty-two steps archplot where the whole action depended upon the evolution of the main character arc. However, the expert took another step by introducing in his scheme two moments that highlighted the thematic reflection in the story, through conflicts between characters and moral decisions assumed by them. As he explains, the twenty-two steps “combine the character web, the moral argument, the story world, and the series of actual events that comprise the plot”<sup>23</sup>.

Truby's contribution sought to strengthen the central act of the script, the hardest of all in creative terms, by inserting fifteen steps to knot the conflict of every action with the main character's internal conflict. This interaction stands out over previous structural proposals, preferably focused on building beat outlines and external action plots. Also, Truby's scheme offered a segment of seven stages, a core where character's motivations prevailed over the rest of the script structures.

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<sup>23</sup> TRUBY, John, *The Anatomy of Story. 22 Steps to Become a Storyteller*, Faber and Faber, New York, 2007, p. 269.

This core started with the stage *weakness-and-need*, where a moral need [or interior goal] is introduced and then explored along the rest of the story. Truby notes the importance of this step in the design of the script: “Writers who know that the story doesn’t galvanize the audience until the hero’s desire [or external object] kicks in sometimes get a little too smart for their own good. They think, ‘I’ll just skip the weakness-and-need step and start with desire.’ They’ve just made a pact with the devil.”<sup>24</sup>

Truby’s statement may be noticed in the opening sequence of *The King’s Speech*, where the screenwriter David Seidler shows an example of forceful setup in emotional terms, while simple in structural terms. It introduces the Duke of York minutes after addressing a speech during the closing ceremony of the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley in 1925. The moment was written and filmed from the main character’s point of view, as if it were a public execution, so the audience shares the anguish of the future George VI in a solemn but terrifying atmosphere where the radio is highlighted as a link between the Empire citizens. For the protagonist, however, the microphone is just a scaffold. Both interior goal and internal conflict are vividly laid out in order to establish from the beginning an empathic connection between public and character through an inner story about overcoming matters.

According to Truby’s scheme, interior stories move through changes happened in interior goals, as internal conflicts are ultimately a succession of tensions deep inside, in the privacy core. Characters tension only disappear at the outcome of interior stories, a moment called *self-revelation* by Truby: then, protagonists complete their transformation and become aware of a change in their identities. In the case of *The King’s Speech*, the inside story of the Duke of York progresses through ups and downs, while the character fights to eradicate a psychological defect that prevents him from carrying out the mission everybody expects. The climax of this inner plot occurs in Westminster, during the coronation preparations scene. The king –Bertie, as his speech therapist calls him– finally finds his voice in a long waited emotional self-revelation. However, the inner evolution reaches its end at the scene of the war declaration discourse, true climax of the script, which shows a very different character to the one introduced at Wembley.

Finally, along with the contributions of Vogler and Truby, Dara Marks offers in his book *Inside Story* dramatic an elaborate scheme, based explicitly on building inner stories<sup>25</sup>. The expert presents a detailed model of transformation arc and, unlike Truby scheme, its peculiar structure superimposed on the outline of the plot of action, according to the traditional division into three acts. In Marks’ opinion, inner stories run along a four-quadrant cycle, extended from *the unknown* to the character’s *renewal*, after crossing two phases marking the second act of the script: *saturation* and *the known*. In addition, Marks explains that the transformation arc itself pivots between two attitudes: strength and docility to a change that eventually marks the character’s personality.

Beyond this structural scheme, the most significant contribution of Marks refers to the themes of a script. The expert underlines the importance of themes and reflections proposed in the conception and development of the script, and she argues that “a story has no real impact without it because theme is what gives meaning to the activity of the plot and purpose to the movement of the characters”<sup>26</sup>. As Marks affirms, the theme

<sup>24</sup> *Ibíd.* p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> MARKS, Dara, *Inside Story. The Power of the Transformational Arc*, A&C Black Publishers, London, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibíd.* p. 73.

vivifies the very genesis of the script and it should reflect the values and personal views of the writer. In this sense, the thematic aspects explain the true reasons why a writer decides to tell a story, as mentioned at the beginning of this article: in the same way characters express their particular views and the ultimate reason for their actions through interior goals, so writers express their worldview, convictions, passions, explorations or human experiences through themes.

#### 4. *Theme as an integrator of dramatic structures. Importance of relationship conflicts*

Even though there is a deep connection between the theme and the inner tension of the characters, a same theme can be found in very different films in genres or stories, as it is a concept that transcends the dramatic structures. The happiness of the weaker members of the family as a true success in life is an idea that runs through the script of *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris 2006), but also in the stories of *Win Win* (Thomas McCarthy 2010) or *In America* (Jim Sheridan, 2003). The protection of children's innocence as a requirement of parental sacrifice is another thematic proposal found in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan 1962), but also in *Road to Perdition* (Sam Mendes 2002) or *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni 1999). And the need to overcoming old traumas as an impulse to face heroic challenges animate animates aforementioned stories as *Up* and *The King's Speech*.

A theme should not remain in the form of a moral discourse, added or embedded in the script through dialogues or exemplary actions. Rather, themes and reflections should be embodied ultimately in inner stories and in the action plot itself: "It's important to see – as Marks reminds– the relationship between plot and character development not as a random or accidental occurrence, but as one that is purposely designed to express the writer's thematic perspective"<sup>27</sup>. For instance, one of the themes in *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg 2002), revolves around the need to take control of our destiny as a premise to close old past wounds. This idea is expressed in the inner story of Detective John Anderton, who has not overcome the loss of his young son and is obsessed with preventing suffering of citizens. At the same time, this character becomes involved in a plot in which the state, in an attempt to ensure national security, has violated the presumption of innocence as a fundamental right. In the area of the inner story, the first theme animates the character development, his final liberation from trauma and the beginning of a new life with his wife. In the area of action plot, the investigation highlights a second theme: a critical reading of the exceptional laws taken in the United States after 9/11, as ineffective in eradicating social injuries to face the future.

According to Marks, a theme is expressed in the script through a double dimension: the internal conflict and the plot action conflict. However, like Vogler and Truby, this expert does not consider a third area of dramatic tension useful both to discuss thematic proposals and to make possible characters evolution: the relationship conflicts.

Every story of a relationship between characters is built on a tension basically boiled down to a clash of their interior goals, either through a romance, a friendship, a family link or a link master-disciple: those are the main possible relationships between human beings, whenever there is any intimacy. Throughout a relationship, characters have the chance to interact, influence each other and even share their personalities. The higher the contrast or opposition between its principles, world vision or attitudes to life, the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibíd.*, p. 83.

more attractive a relationship will be in dramatic terms. Nevertheless, both characters must share a similar situation to let them sympathize: otherwise it would be impossible any approach between them.

The links between relationship conflicts and themes can be noted in two aforementioned examples, *The King's Speech* and *Up*. In the first one, the Duke of York and the speech therapist Lionel Logue show a clear contrast. One is angry, distant, true English, descendant from a high and noble family. The second is patient, uneducated, commoner subject, came from the far colonies. In either different case, their interior goals are marked by anguish and hope. However, both men share a common situation: they are rejected in their respective social environment, thus the Duke does not seem up to the task everybody expect from him (his father anticipates that early), and Logue is not accepted to perform Shakespeare's characters because of his Australian accent. This is an eloquent paradox that a despised commoner reinforces the King's will and trains him to afford his royal task as a true leader during the imminent hard times: this transformation is possible in the script through a relationship between master (Lionel) and disciple (the King) that displaces the main character's interior goal (a fear turned into self confidence) as to let him do a hard duty (the country's defence). As a basic idea, the theme of this story about overcoming could be summarized in a simple reflection: the rejected can also serve their country or society at the highest level, the human one, considering that both characters –king and subject– are marginalized in their own fields.

The dramatic contrast between Carl and Russell in *Up* is even more evident. The first character is a cranky old man, full of nostalgia and recently marked by a sad experience. The second is an optimistic perseverant child, always eager to learn. Their own views about life are completely opposite. Carl clings to the past and his house, which he identifies with his wife Ellie, but when analyzing Russell's character it is even difficult to specify an interior goal thus children's personality itself is still a project. However, both characters share a common passion for adventure and they are introduced in a state of loneliness, as Carl recently widowed and Russell suffers lack of attention from their parents.

Relationship conflicts between characters enable the evolution of personalities through an internal goals clash, ultimately resolved in an alteration of intimacies. As a result, internal conflicts become more interesting and dynamic for the audience. Pusillanimous Duke of York would never have been brave king George VI without the stimulant speech therapist Lionel Logue. And a misanthrope like Carl Friedrichsen had not made his real adventure nor had overcome his sorrow without the vitalist intrusion of little Russell. At the same time, relationship conflicts offer the screenwriters a third dramatic field –in addition to action plots and inner stories– to develop their reflections: those themes that really move them to write a script.

## 5. Conclusions

As every producer knows, it is impossible to make a good film without a good story thus the script, despite its fragile appearance, is the beginning of all cinematic adventure. Neither an increase in production values, nor a careful casting election, nor the most ambitious marketing campaigns could mask the defects of a story doomed to never work. In this regard, classics like Aristotle, Cervantes or Shakespeare warn that

perfection in storytelling consists in the verisimilitude of events and characters as a way to involve the audience in a narration.

As imitation of life, verisimilitude is a key that ensures a close connection between writer, character and spectator. At the same time, as Brenes, Fumagalli and Bettetini explain in previous works on the subject, this concept implies a searching attitude in the writer in order to undertake recreations of the world that move to reflection. As argued, these dramatizations of life originate through a building process of characters, plots and situations inspired by human mysteries, which let the audience to recognize itself in the story.

In approaching the design of credible diegetic universes, a scriptwriter should know the purpose that drives him to tell a story and understand the whole story as a human exploration: in this way, themes or reflections will be profiled from the starting point of the creative process, and they will be expressed during the script development through emotional resources and structural strategies.

In order to achieve dramatic unity and credibility of the characters, themes must precede the story structures –or at least they must be set in the “second navigation” of the writer–, and animate the design of inner stories. In this process, the intimacy of characters arises from an internal conflict and the dramatic tension lies in the concept of interior goal, the ultimate reason for character motivations. Furthermore, the emotional strategy in the script, key to the involvement of the audience in the drama, is mainly based on the moral needs of protagonists and the risks derived from a possible failure: these supports are critical to cause both empathy in the audience and momentum in the dramatic action.

Finally, in recent years it can be noted in screenwriting techniques a trend to delve more deeply into themes and design of inner stories, as integrators of the narrative structure as a whole. Samples of this trend are publications of experts and story analysts like John Truby, Karl Iglesias and specially Dara Marks. Nevertheless, relationship conflicts, vital to outline characters evolution, still have not received the attention it deserves in the dramatic concept of the script and they remain as an attractive research object.

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