

THE THREE BODIES OF NARRATION: A COGNITIVIST POETICS OF THE ACTOR'S PERFORMANCE¹

Audiovisual narrative theory has been based on the study and classification of elements specific to cinema, a perspective that has often led theorists to forget or overlook the contribution of other arts, such as sound or the actor's performance. This means that for most film scholars only framing and editing, techniques exclusive to cinematography, can narrate.

The most recent and influential theories on the theatre suggest that the issue does not start with cinema but much earlier, with the actor's performance on the stage, which of course precedes film acting by many centuries. Neither Erika Fischer-Lichte, in her ambitious theoretical assertion of the performative dimension of theatre (FISCHER-LICHTE, 2004), nor James Hamilton, in his highly refined philosophical argument for the independence of the stage from the text (HAMILTON, 2007), give the slightest attention to the narrative aspect of theatre. Nevertheless, the most widely read and respected treatise on narration in Western history is a poetics of tragedy; i.e., a treatise on theatre narration!

The origin of this mystery can be found right there, at its very thematic core, in the conceptual pair *diegesis/mimesis*, with which Aristotle separated and distinguished the epic from theatre, contrasting stories recounted by a voice with those played out through mimetic embodiments of characters. Although at no point in his treatise does Aristotle suggest that the two categories are mutually exclusive, his proposition gave rise to a whole tradition of defining narrative as stories written to be read, excluding from that definition anything written for the stage.

Of course, I will not be claiming here that most narrative theorists are unaware of the importance of the actor or the body. There are indeed major authors in film theory who demonstrate the significance of acting for narrative. The first of these was Méliès, who at the same time expressed dissatisfaction with his many experiences of filming with theatre actors and the indispensable nature of the gesture above the narrative qualities of the spoken story (DIEDERICHS, 2004: 36-37). Among Germany's silent film theorists, out



La libertad (Lisandro Alonso, 2001)

of the fascinating discussions that focused on classifying cinema among the artistic genres there emerged statements of the narrative character of cinema as one of its chief artistic qualities. For example, the theory of pantomime, dominant among German authors like Joseph August Lux, Herbert Tannenbaum, Walter Thielemann and Willy Rath, sustained that cinema was capable of imitating drama with its expressive resources, which would make it a genre more akin to theatre than to dance (DIEDERICH, 2004: 124-25). In the same decade in the United States, authors like Epes W. Sargent and Henry A. Philips characterised the action as a basic performative unit of narrative, making a theoretical effort to define its constructive qualities, a context more recently explored by Michele Guerra (GUERRA, 2014). But it is without doubt Bela Balasz who has made the greatest contribution to the research into gesture and facial expression over the course of his work, identifying in them the range of artistic qualities that differentiate the cinema, the only art capable of constructing the story through small variations in the external elements constituted by the gestures of an actor's performance (BALASZ, 1970).

However, contrary to these propositions drawing on silent film, modern narratology has fully embraced the dichotomy that dismisses the value of mimesis as narration. Gerard Genette, one of its founding fathers, formulated a science of narration using the literary model of the novel, which would be carried over into studies of film narrative based on the conception of a film as a text whose author is the director.

In this context, the highly influential Christian Metz not only returned to this mutually exclusive dichotomy in defining film as an epic art-form and theatre as a mimetic art-form, but also added elements to the opposition, identifying in theatre a close link to reality, while cinematic narration met the definition of 'de-realization' characteristic of any narrative (METZ, 1982: 66-68). While the influence of Metz and Genette has been less pronounced among theorists of American cinema, only one major author, Seymour Chatman, has developed the idea that the novel, the theatre and the cinema all share elements such as a plot, a cast of characters and a setting. Based on this he has also argued for the existence of instances of narration in stories without an apparent narrator (CHATMAN, 1990: 109). However, there is no evidence that these iso-

lated arguments have had an influence on subsequent authors. Contemporary French narrative theory appears to undervalue the contribution of actors to the narration, as can be seen in the earliest articles of authors like François Jost or André Gaudreault in the 1990s (GAUDREULT, JOST 1990), and a similar phenomenon is also observable in the work of the most prominent Italian theorists (Casetti, Di Chio, 1990). Although it is true that a decade later new perspectives would be opened up, such as the so-called semiotics of the body posited by Jacques Fontanille, I have not found a clear line of continuity in the development of these ideas. (FONTANILLE, 2004).

The possibility of mimesis as narration in cognitivism

If we want to identify a first breakthrough of real consequence we can find it in the literary narratology of the English-speaking world, with various perspectives that were finally capable of accepting a dramatic narrative. The most substantial contributions are recognizable in Brian Richardson, who details and extends Chatman's account through numerous examples of dramatic texts that illustrate narratological elements, such as time, space, causality and even the beginning and end of the story, or minor aspects such as extradiegetic insertions that denote reflexivity (RICHARDSON, 2007: 142-155). It is important not to overlook the reflection of a theorist as recognized as Manfred Jahn, who had previously spoken of a 'show-er' narrator and had sustained that all narrative genres are mediated by an agency which, in a performance, could be a disembodied narrative function responsible for selection, arrangement and focalization (JAHN, 2001). But the decisive turn came with cognitivist literary studies. Monika Fludernik's idea of 'natural narratology' seemed to avoid the old prejudices with respect to differences between narrative voice and the body on the stage, focusing the interest on the performative stage narrative (FLUDERNIK, 2008).

But ultimately Fludernik particularly seems to have paved the way for others, such as Nünning and Sommer, whose most recent contribution posits plays as 'acts of narration', whose characters act as intradiegetic narrators (NÜNNING and SOMMER, 2008).

In this recent positive development it is no accident that the cognitivist line has been the one that has broken new ground in narratology. And although this breakthrough has not been as evident in film studies, this does not mean that these contributions can be ignored. On the contrary, from their origins through to the most important debates of this decade, they invite us to explore them and examine their foundations, without which it would be difficult to understand an actor's performance as a true *actio narrativa*. This is what I intend to do in this paper, although rather than an exhaustive exploration what I propose here is a brief reconnaissance that aims to resolve one particular problem.

If there is any one idea that underpins all the cognitivist contributions to and discussions of film studies, it is that the emotions are a primordial aesthetic element of the narration, which at once establishes the character as the main subject of investigation. It is well-known that this proposition has produced one of the major currents of thought, related to the concept of empathy, a topic still very much in vogue today (GOLDIE and COPLAN, 2011). It was Murray Smith, in an article that continues to inform key reflections following this line, who proposed a fundamental concept: 'Recognition describes the spectator's construction of character: the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous agent' (SMITH, 1995: 82). One of the distinctive features that Smith stresses is the cognitive line of continuity between spectator and characters. Recognition is presented not as an identification but as a re-identification, i.e., a process that produces a continuous identity

recognised as such by the spectator. The second key feature relates to the 'bodily' conditions for this recognition of the character. In a view that is critical of the tendency towards structuralist abstraction, Smith identifies the corporeality of actors as generative of a stable and continuous identity for cognitive recognition: 'Recognition in cinematic fiction is, then, a process in which iconic renderings of the physical features of the body, face, and voice typically play an important role, though language may contribute and interact with them' (SMITH, 1995: 116). This introductory concept to the general theory that Smith defines as the 'structure of sympathy' gives us three essential ingredients: continuity as an essential structure of narration, the value of the body of the characters and the importance of the spectator as a factor in narrative analysis.

A few years later, Carl Plantinga produced what in my view is a seminal work dedicated to exploring the emotional resonances, and their consequent narrative effects, of facial close-ups in cinema. In a clear line of continuity with the theories of Balasz, Plantinga sets out a series of theoretical guidelines to demonstrate the extraordinary power of the face in particular cases of narrative construction. In fact, he offers an analysis of the greatest impact that a face can have, in what he calls the scene of empathy:

'Many films feature a kind of scene in which the pace of the narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention. In this kind of scene, which I call the *scene of empathy*, we see a character's face, typically in close-up, either for a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of the character's face and shots of what she or he sees' (PLANTINGA, 1999: 239).

Plantinga's essay explores the degree to which such scenes are aimed at eliciting an empathetic reaction from the spectator. At that time, when the discussion of the concept of empathy had

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still yet to be developed, Plantinga was already defining with considerable precision some of the emotional and cognitive values that form part of this complex process, and based on these definitions he even identified certain tendencies in the location of these kinds of scenes: 'To contextualize empathy, films often attempt to elicit an empathetic response only after a protagonist has undergone some kind of trial or sacrifice, has neared the end of her or his life, or in some cases, has actually died' (PLANTINGA, 1999: 251). In any case, what Plantinga's work established was the possibility of defining the body of the performer as a generator of wide-ranging narrative effects, capable of definitively consolidating, for example, the ideological or moral values of a narration with communicative and emotional effectiveness. The communicative power of facial expression is thus a central feature, also highlighted in a line of argument that is quite different but nevertheless complementary to mine, also put forward by Murray Smith (SMITH, 2005).

Towards a poetics of actors' narration

In a more general sense than the very detailed work of Plantinga, what I wish to propose here is a framework through which to understand the main variants of the role in narrative construction taken by the actor's body. The first task is to explicate the way in which the bodies that the spectator identifies as characters with continuity in the story can be considered to have a narrative

function. I will now identify this element, which is without doubt the most important for my proposition here.

In practically all of its concepts, cognitive film studies assume that the emotional attraction of the spectator to the story is the cornerstone of the narration. Emotional attraction is understood here to mean any kind of emotional response by the spectator to the stimulus arising from the story, provided that it inspires the spectator to engage with the story rather than to lose interest in it. Therefore, if there is any one thing common to all of such moments of emotion, it is attention. When our emotional involvement with a character with a character grows, we feel that the range of emotions evoked in us tends to intensify our attention. Our feelings of sympathy for Don Draper, for example, prompt us to pay closer attention to the events that result in the end of his first marriage (*Mad Men*, AMC: 2007-). Our fascination and repugnance for the Joker, taken to a disturbing level thanks to Heath Ledger's performance (STERNAGEL, 2012), turns his confrontation with Batman into a magnetically charged event for the spectator of *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008).

The appearance of the mystery surrounding the name of Rebecca in Alfred Hitchcock's film of the same name (*Rebecca*, 1939) piques our curiosity about the life of the male protagonist, Maxim de Winter. The spectator's emotional experience always goes hand in hand with attention to the story, suggesting that a key condition of a narration is the fact that it has been conceived with the aim of catching the spectator's attention. This points to the underlying hypothesis of my article: the body narrates insofar as it is able to engage the spectator's attention. The following paragraphs outline the core of my analysis, presenting what I understand to be the main variants of the contribution to narrative made by the actor's

performance. Certain overlaps with the categories proposed recently by Vivien Sobchack will be evident; however, the phenomenological bases of the US theorist's work and the cognitivist bases of my proposal result in significant differences both in terms of objectives and of methodology (SOBCHACK, 2012).

The narration of the body in movement

My first point of reference applies not only to fiction, but also to reality in its most normal or even neutral dimension in emotional terms, since the body as a narrative element is part of everybody's daily experience. We have all experienced moments in which we have lingered on a person performing an action: watching a person walk, contemplating how a pair of hands wrap around an object, or observing a person's hair being blown by the wind. This could also apply to auditory experiences: listening to a conversation without following the meaning, or the sound made by any human action, is a major point of emotional cognitive attraction. Normal bodies in normal situations. Any action, even in its most isolated condition, is capable of captur-

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ing and holding our attention, without even necessarily arousing our curiosity.

Neuroscience has offered us a better understanding of the phenomenon without having to view it in terms of that contemplative predisposition so extensively explored and exalted by the Romantics. Drawing from studies of the attention, especially those taking an evolutionist approach, it could be assumed that attention to other bodies is an essential part of our learning process, and a necessary strategy of self-preser-

vation (KNUDSEN, 2007). Studies of intersubjectivity based on the discovery of the mirror neuron suggest that there is a mimetic mechanism whereby we submit each observed action to a process of embodied understanding, because to make sense of it we need to mimic it by replicating it almost as if we ourselves had experienced it. Seeing another body's action would be like starting to live another life, which is one of the fundamental theories of Vittorio Gallese's adaptation of the scientific paradigm to the interpretation of the arts, in collaboration with Italian film scholar Michele Guerra (GALLESE AND GUERRA, 2012). Consider, for example, *Freedom* (La libertad, Lisandro Alonso, 2001), a film that simply narrates a day in the life of a rural worker. While watching the film, through the attention captured by the actions of its only protagonist, played by Misael Saavedra, the spectator witnesses an essentialist embodied narration, something truly exceptional in cinema. Yet what we find in this unique film is quite ordinary. Much of our attention to the screen is devoted to following the actions of bodies in all kinds of situations: we see a couple slowly eat-

ing breakfast, a character driving for a while, another character descending a flight of stairs, and yet another on the verge of falling asleep. There is probably not a single human action that has not been embodied in a narration. And all such moments in which our at-

tention is held by apparently normal happenings are narrative moments that express the lives of the characters, as well as being an essential element in the cognitive continuity of the characters for the spectator. The attention aroused by the bodies in action is an omnipresent substratum, and although there are differences between a film by Eric Rohmer and one by Steven Spielberg, these extremes mark a continuous presence of narrative mimesis. The reference of this narrative dimension

to the cognitive level of mimesis and to the framework of *embodied simulation* does not presuppose that this mode is limited to the pre-reflective domain. Thus, this narration will be the site of more complex cognitive operations, such as empathy. From this point on I will use this term as it is defined by Jean Decety in neuroscience or Murray Smith in his most recent contribution to this research, as a process in which a subject A imagines perceiving, knowing or feeling, partially or wholly, that which is perceived, known or felt by a subject B, while conscious both that it is imagined and that it belongs to the experience of the other (DECETY AND JACKSON, 2006; SMITH, 2011).



Three Colors: Blue (Trois couleurs: Bleu, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993)

The narration of the exceptional body

The second mode in which actors' bodies engage the attention of the spectator tends to occur with greater intensity. This relates to a body's exceptionality as a source of sexual attraction, repugnance, amazement, curiosity, sympathy and practically any other emotion capable of increasing the spectator's attention to the story. This mode has some extremely interesting variants. Consider the fragile body of the old woman who tries to drop the empty bottle in the bin in *Three Colors: Blue* (Trois couleurs: Bleu, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993). Our attention is captured by the physical condition of this extremely old body which, almost incapable of achieving its objective, creates a moment of singular suspense. It is only a moment, but few spectators would not have felt the emotion and mnemonic and even metaphorical impact of this scene. It is possible to imagine that this scene, understood as a poetic expression of human vitality, makes a subtle reference to the ethics of life that underlies the narration and, by extension, all of Kieslowski's films. Kathrin Fahlenbrach has explored the complexity and significance of visual metaphors, including a section dedicated to body metaphors, making her analysis one of few recent works that are truly sensitive to the ex-

pressive value of the body. Fahlenbrach identifies with great precision the connections between the creation of meaning in the generation of metaphors and emotional dynamics with a powerful narrative function, such as the generation of empathy. For example, her reference to the effect produced by the body of E.T. (*E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, Steven Spielberg, 1982), whose monstrous body image at once signifies the strange and the extraterrestrial, and even the same emotions of repugnance provoked by other aliens, which is powerfully nuanced with humanoid features that start to appear on his face and in his voice, and guides the spectator towards moments of empathy and sympathy that are extremely important to the narrative. This example is a very clear case of the unique functions performed by an exceptional body (FAHLENBRACH, 2010: 229).

From such unusual examples we could go to more ordinary cases in which the exceptionality of the body becomes a continuous factor in drawing attention to the character. There is a significant mode of opening scene in classic films where the attention is to be captured from the first moment and we are given essential narrative information. In *Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941), the protagonist Johnnie

Aysgarth, played by Cary Grant, slips into the train compartment where his future wife is seated. The ticket inspector sees that he has a third class ticket and asks him for the difference. He doesn't have the money corners her into giving it to him. The situation arouses her suspicion, foreshadowing the attitude that she will maintain towards him through much of the film and which will be central to the narrative, insofar as the spectator assumes her point of view and adopts the numerous options for empathy that will be offered to him/her. But essential to this whole structure is the exceptional appeal of Cary Grant, with his elegant and expensive looking suit. From the outset it seems strange, and piques our curiosity as to why a man who looks like this would be short of money. The spectator would never take an interest in this opening scene if the characters meeting had been ordinary people. But the meeting of these bodies of exceptional physical beauty, elegance and expressiveness raises the expectation that something is going to happen.

Indeed, while the body, with its visual and auditory impact, has produced numerous effects recognisable as narrative resources, the most universal is the effect of beauty. Little has to happen once a character has seen an-



Paulette Goddard in *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936)

other of exceptional beauty. All that is needed is for their gazes to meet, and at once the spectator starts to imagine the beginning of a story. It could practically be asserted that this body imposes an empathetic gaze, as the spectator recognises as beautiful or attractive the very character who becomes the object of desire in the narration. Thus the spectator will be able to anticipate, taking a step towards metanarrative awareness, a possible development in the form of expectation, or of imaginative play, easily justifying the desire of a character in the story. An even more explicit case than the one above, with a charge of sexual intensity, can be found in *Bitter Rice* (Riso amaro, Giuseppe de Santis, 1949), when Silvana Mangano uses her voluptuous dancing to attract a criminal on the run, played by Vittorio Gassman. The effect can adopt unique and ironic formulas, as in *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936), where after the appearance on screen of the formidable beauty of Paulette Goddard, highlighted in close-ups of her face, her first encounter with Chaplin, instead of the classic gaze, is a frontal collision that brings them falling to the floor, but locked in an embrace, in a body metaphor that foreshadows the amorous relationship that will develop

between them. What is important in all these cases is not only that an exceptional body is associated with an expectation arising at a particular moment in the narrative, but that in all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, the emotion and meaning produced becomes a central feature of the character for the spectator, usually in a way that is reinforced to increase the narrative intensity.

In *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), we witness a similar effect in reverse, where ugliness displays a power on a par with its opposite. In this case, the image of the protagonist does not establish an expectation, but reinforces one already established. By the time Peter Lorre's egg-shaped head and bulging eyes appear, the central narrative element has already been made clear: everybody is searching for a child murderer. Lorre appears contorting his face in front of the mirror while we hear an expert report on his handwriting, which betrays the insanity of the suspect. As the plot advances, the dominant expressive component becomes a complement to the key emotions that come into play, especially in the suspense because, having seen the murderer's evil nature revealed in his strange appearance and insane expression, the objective of the

search for the killer established previously now takes on an emotional urgency for the spectator.

The narration of the acting body

Another decisive narrative feature of the actor's performance is its artistic dimension, the product of study and technique, as well as the personal qualities of the actor him- or herself. This aspect is extremely important to the narrative, and for its analysis we must look to where cognitivism explores the emotional factors that have the biggest influence on the narration, i.e., those determined by a stable relationship between the spectator and the characters in the story, which Murray Smith also proposed with his central category of *allegiance*. Smith uses the term *allegiance* to refer to the cognitive and emotional evaluation that engages the spectator more sympathetically than empathically, leading him/her to rank the characters in the story according to a system of preference (SMITH, 1995: 84-86). Smith gives a non-artistic element – morality – a central place in narrative understanding of films, especially applicable to classic cinema, easily recognisable in the Hollywood mainstream (in this respect, the critical dialogue established with Smith by Plantinga [2009] is particularly interesting), and also evident in more complex contexts in contemporary television series (MITTELL, 2012-13). This interest in morality in audiovisual fiction has developed to such an extent that Tony Soprano has ignited a protracted debate leading to an exhaustive review of the influence of moral qualities in emotional experiences of sympathy and empathy. But this debate at the same time reveals an often overlooked and yet extremely significant aspect. Murray Smith dedicates one of his best articles to explaining the unique dimensions of *allegiance* provoked by Tony Soprano. In the article he explores the aspects that compensate for the negative moral classification of James Gandolfini's character in an analysis that is exhaustive, precise and disturbingly ra-

tional, because he reveals that no single aspect is sufficient on its own (SMITH, 2011). In his analysis, however, it is also possible to detect an absence; an aspect similarly overlooked by others who had taken part in this debate (EATON, 2012). Towards the end of the article there is a moment when Smith asks whether it may be the overall artistic effect that determines our relationship with Tony Soprano. He refers for the first time to a factor of artistic influence, but associates it with the overall impression. Having concerned himself exclusively with a single character, why does he not mention artistic aspects of that character, or, more precisely, attributable to the actor who portrays him, James Gandolfini?

The question that Smith leaves open is this: if morality facilitates the formation of strong and stable bonds between spectator and characters, and the main effect of this is to strengthen the narrative qualities of the story, why not admit that the aesthetic properties of an actor's performance may also have narrative effects, such as influencing the spectator's emotional relationship with the character?

In the case of Tony Soprano, might not the thrill of watching the suffering gangster be an aesthetic pleasure? One of the main lines of Smith's argument is that Tony Soprano, while being a gangster capable of violence and cruelty, also exhibits behaviours that help the spectator to understand him and appreciate him as a normal person. Indeed, Gandolfini embodies the Mafia boss who reveals his inner life for the first time in that central setting that is Jennifer Melfi's psychiatric office, where the spectator will see Tony agonise, cry and struggle with his demons. To produce a catalogue of expressions of fragility and make them coexist with brutality is obviously no easy task, but Gandolfini expresses the fragile side of the mobster so skilfully that it seems quite normal. When a performance makes a character so convincingly realistic, it paradoxically becomes more difficult to distinguish the artifice that makes it artistic.



Kevin Spacey in *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, Netflix: 2012-).

It would be easier to support my theory here, for example, with reference to Sheldon Lee Cooper, the protagonist in *The Big Bang Theory* (Chuck Lorre, CBS: 2007-) who arouses fascination in spite of his egocentricity, pathological lack of empathy, inflexible reasoning, infantilism, obsessiveness, arrogance... in short, in spite of his extraordinarily repellent personality. In contrast with Tony Soprano's normal appearance, Sheldon's personality and idiosyncrasies are a conglomerate of eccentricities. Jim Parsons, who portrays Sheldon, constructs an equally eccentric body puzzle and gives him an extraordinary fluidity to make it plausible. It is amazing to observe the coexistence of the long list of quirky effects of his body, voice and gestures from one shot to the next: the almost mechanical turn of his head, the subtle stiffness of his gait, the contained vehemence of his gaze when asserting an important conviction, the sheer absence of empathy in his eyes during conversations, the lifelessness of his angular hand movements, his curved back, the impatient and aggravated expression in his eyes when he desires something...

But his great achievement is not only constructing a personality out of these elements, but doing so to achieve

an artistic effect: comedy. Is it not this comic aspect, which is the main source of aesthetic pleasure offered by the character, a factor that influences our emotional engagement with Sheldon, as it allows us to enjoy spending time with someone whom we would probably find unbearable in real life? We should probably even explore how these aesthetic effects interact with emotional aspects characteristic of television series, such as familiarity, recently explored in a specific line of research (BLANCHET and BRUUN VAAGE, 2012; BRUUN VAAGE 2014).

I have outlined my perspective almost exclusively with reference to the power of the body, but the voice is also one of the points of aesthetic attraction for the possibilities it offers in an artistic performance. One field where this is easy to appreciate is animation, a domain in which we generally find the best voice actors. Some of the most recognisable figures of the history of animation are remembered for their voices, such as Bugs Bunny, voiced by Mel Blanc, whose articulation and expressive brilliance, together with the unique timbre of his voice, give the sound of this character a leading role, with genuine qualities of creativity and decisive narrative impact on nearly every level imaginable.

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Returning to the cognitivist debate about anti-heroes, I must inevitably offer a reflection on cases in which the protagonist is presented not with a mixed profile of dark and positive traits intertwined in an effort to keep from repelling the spectator, but as utterly dark and morally repellent, such as the character of Frank Underwood in the US version of *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, Netflix: 2012-). Underwood does not exhibit a single feature that arouses sympathy, yet many would agree that Kevin Spacey's character is fascinating. A case like this may in fact reinforce my hypothesis, as in the absence of *allegiance* and with a performance as outstanding as Spacey's, aesthetic pleasure can be generated as a key to the emotional bond formed between spectator and character. *House of Cards* deploys some powerful resources to elicit empathy. The whole narrative architecture of both the first and second seasons requires the spectator to adopt the perspective of the protagonist, as expressed in the direct appeal to the spectator made by Frank Underwood in his gaze at the camera. Few actors are capable of combining their bodily traits and technique with vocal control like Spacey, whose seductive tone ultimately transforms his voice into a powerful instrument for inspiring empathy.

With respect to the most general aspects of the plot, for example, both seasons offer a *crescendo* of situations that threaten to thwart Underwood's objectives. In the first, his plan to secure his nomination for vice president nearly fails due to the phalanx of Republican congressmen against him and the problematic Peter Russo; in the sec-

ond, after his manoeuvring to become the only voice with influence over the president, he faces a tough battle with the man he has displaced from this position, the multi-millionaire Raymond Tusk. Both these plot developments reach a major emotional climax that is interesting from a cognitive point of view. The tension provoked by the increasingly serious and radical threats that place Underwood in a critical situation inspire an expectant anxiety in the spectator to know how things will turn out. This expectancy, which is a response that is crucial to the narrative orchestration of each season, does not depend on sympathy with the protagonist; the spectator does not need to hope for the character's well-being. The desire that Frank Underwood will overcome these critical moments depends on the development of an empathy in which the emotional responses to the character's expressive use of gestures, for example, are extremely important. Sympathy doesn't seem necessary, in spite of the fact that the whole series relies on an orchestration of the spectator's interest in the fate of Frank Underwood.

A good example of this is the scene in which Underwood meets with Tusk and Lanagin, after having witnessed the violence and consequences of their attacks. At this moment they offer him a pact, but then, just when Underwood appears to be cornered, he terminates his confrontation with them with greater aplomb than ever, with extraordinary expressions of self-assurance and the full range of self-affirming gazes that Spacey is capable of, and in particular with the parting gesture of throwing the steak they offered him

into the pool, thereby closing the scene with an act of defiance (#2x8: James Foley, Netflix: 2014).

The narration compels the spectator to take Frank Underwood's side. There are various factors that influence this: first, the antagonists are the same as or worse than Frank; second, focalization almost always determines that the spectator will support the character privileged by the perspective of the narration; and finally, there is the aesthetic factor, as Underwood's gestural repertoire must be entertaining because it is an exceptional expression of a personality. Spacey constructs a character when he compels us even to appreciate his gesture of hypocritical arrogance as an expression of sheer cunning, of tireless dedication to his goals and of nerves of steel in bringing his intelligence to the table in any situation. Underwood's exceptional character is not merely bodily but artistic, as Spacey takes these virtues to an expressive level that makes them appreciable to us, even in a man whose philosophy is that success in politics comes through hypocrisy and victims. Thus, if there is anything valuable that the spectator doesn't wish to lose when Underwood faces a critical moment, it is the character.

Conclusions

The examination of the narrative properties of acting adds a layer of complexity to the aesthetic analysis of audiovisual fiction proposed by cognitivism. The narration of the neutral body, the product of the overlap of perceptive experiences in the real world and on a screen, means a focalization of central and omnipresent attention, which is the mimetic substratum of any narrative. The second mode, the narration of the exceptional body, inspires and conditions expectations and empathetic and sympathetic involvement by marking the experience of the narrative with the extraordinary erotetic power of the image. In doing so, many of the emotions that people are capable of provoking come into play, ranging from physical reactions, such as sexual attraction

or admiration of beauty or strength, to the common associations of appearance with character, the intrigue provoked by impenetrability, moral repugnance for a strange face, compassion for a fragile face, or sympathy for a kind face.

Finally, the narration of the acting body engages all of our cognitive resources to the maximum in our reaction to gestures, adding narrative meta-awareness, which entails consciousness of being immersed in an aesthetic experience, to the whole range of motor-sensory responses of bodily narration and new appeals to the imagination through empathy. The pleasure resulting from the product of an actor's performance is a source of practically stable emotion in any narrative context.

The distinction between these three modes is an abstraction, as they do not normally occur separately, and thus the narrative scenario suggested by this perspective is rather more complex than has been proposed to date, although perhaps close to that posited by Grodal with his PECMA model. What is important is not to fall once again into the mistake of simplification. Everything that has been posited here about the qualities of an actor's performance needs to be understood in the full context of the films' narrative resources, without overlooking those aspects that have been given the greatest consideration by researchers up to now, but situating them in relation to these aspects, in a richer and more complex framework with greater cognitive and emotional depth, and with an appropriate identification of the origins of each emotion.

Notes

- 1 The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is his responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)
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Héctor J. Pérez, (b. Madrid, 1971) is Associate Professor of Audiovisual Narrative at the Universitat Politècnica de València [Escola Politècnica Superior de Gandia]. He received a European Ph.D. in 1999 from the Universidad de Murcia, and undertook pre-doctoral studies at the Musikwissenschaftliches Institut of the Universität Leipzig and post-doctoral studies at the Università degli Studi di Milano (Dipartimento di Estetica). A main line of his research is the study of corporeal narration, especially in opera, and also works regularly in the cognitive aesthetics of television series and the relationships between mythology and cinema. His most recent book is *Cine y Mitología: de las religiones a los argumentos universales* (Berna: Peter Lang, 2013) and he is the editor of *SERIES, International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*.