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## READING AND WRITING OF AUDIOVISUAL FICTION CHARACTERS: THEORETICAL PROPOSAL BASED ON THREE CASES

### LECTOESCRITURA DE PERSONAJES DE FICCIÓN AUDIOVISUALES: PROPUESTA TEÓRICA A PARTIR DE TRES CASOS

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#### ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research is to establish a theory on the evolution of the reading and writing of audiovisual characters through the examination of film scripts. To this end, it is based on the study of the classic dilemma of the character in the construction of drama. Three cases are used within the framework of the history of cinema in the 20th century. The methodology compares the scripts of Graham Greene, Paul Schrader, and David Mamet, as well as the creative processes declared by these authors. It is concluded that the literary writing of audiovisual fiction characters goes through three stages in its construction: the first stage focused on the personality of the mental states of the protagonists, the second stage, on the creative protagonism of the authors, and the third stage, on the staging of the interaction between the characters. A possible explanation for this evolution would be related to the process called re-enchantment of the world, where the supreme values are efficiency, control, calculability, and foresight, leaving a narrow margin for the possibility of magic.

**Keywords:** screenplay, film studies, character, identity, cinema.

#### RESUMEN

La presente investigación tiene como principal establecer una teoría sobre la evolución de la lecto-escritura de personajes audiovisuales a través del examen de guiones de

cine. Para ello, se parte del estudio del dilema clásico del personaje en la construcción del drama. Se emplean tres casos en el marco de la historia del cine en el siglo XX. La metodología compara los guiones de Graham Greene, Paul Schrader y David Mamet, así como de los procesos creativos declarados por estos autores. Se concluye que la lectoescritura de los personajes de ficción audiovisuales pasa por tres etapas en su construcción: en una primera etapa, centrada en la personalidad de los estados mentales de los protagonistas, en un segundo momento, en el protagonismo creador de los autores, y en una tercera etapa se incide en la escenificación de la interacción entre los personajes. Una posible explicación a la evolución señalada guardaría relación con el proceso denominado reencantamiento del mundo, donde los valores supremos son la eficacia, el control, la calculabilidad y la previsión ha dejado un estrecho margen a la posibilidad de la magia.

**Palabras clave:** cine, guion, identidad, lectura, personajes.

## **LEITURA E ESCRITURA DE PERSONAGENS AUDIOVISUAIS DE FICÇÃO: PROPOSTA TEÓRICA A PARTIR DE TRÊS CASOS**

### **RESUMO**

O objetivo principal desta pesquisa é estabelecer uma teoria sobre a evolução da leitura e escrita de personagens audiovisuais por meio da examinação de roteiros de filmes. Para isso, começamos pelo estudo do clássico dilema da personagem na construção do drama. Três casos são usados no quadro da história do cinema no século XX. A metodologia compara os roteiros de Graham Greene, Paul Schrader e David Mamet, bem como os processos criativos declarados por esses autores. Conclui-se que a alfabetização de personagens ficcionais audiovisuais passa por três etapas na sua construção: na primeira etapa, focada na personalidade dos estados mentais dos protagonistas, em um segundo momento, no protagonismo criativo dos autores, e no terceiro estágio, a encenação da interação entre os personagens é afetada. Uma possível explicação para a referida evolução estaria relacionada ao processo denominado reencantamento do mundo, onde os valores supremos são eficiência, controle, calculabilidade e previsão, deixando uma margem estreita para a possibilidade de magia.

**Palavras chave:** cinema, roteiro, identidade, leitura, personagens.

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Through language and writing we construct the world so that the limits of our world are marked by the silhouette of reading and writing (Wittgenstein, 2017). However, it is not the same to order the reality we circumscribe, focusing on the concept of "character" as on that of "action". From the Aristotelian point of view, "Poetics" is concerned with the mimesis of action, that is, the author's creative process must be focused on copying or imitating the nature of the action. In fact, the term "drama" etymologically originates from the Greek "action". For Aristotle, the character, as a

node of signification or linguistic category that orders our construction of reality, should not have priority in the way we mimic that reality.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Konstantin Stanislavski published his text *Building a Character* (1975), a milestone in the character-action dilemma. The Russian theorist establishes a working system to assist the actor in their craft and deploy a whole conceptual framework for stage acting. The idea is for each actor to explore something as complex as personality, which was beginning to take on a scientific dimension in the studies of modern psychology and sociology. The priority was shifting from the imitation of human interaction in the theatrical tradition to the imitation of personality. Undoubtedly, this had profound consequences for the classical Aristotelian paradigm and its neoclassical reformation. How was the actor to construct the character? How to get to it? And how deep should the actor go in this construction?

Two ideas mark Stanislavski's tradition here. On the one hand, the actor is prescribed to access the mental state of the character to construct its appearance. On the other hand, the ultimate goal is to make the character "come alive". This constitutes a real Copernican turn compared to the Aristotelian Poetics. It is not a matter of imitating something that the artist observes but of making what is observed emerge through the imitation of something that is not seen and that can only be communicated, the mental world. To complicate the actor's work even further, something bluntly elusive and diffuse is pursued: the actor is commanded to make the character "come alive". The performer is thus obliged to generate a simulacrum of identity. The term "simulacrum" refers to the myth of Pygmalion, the artist who created the statue that the gods brought to life. The actor has to behave like a god and give life to their creation. They must go a step beyond the humble imitation that Aristotle proposed for art. An actor in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Commedia dell'Arte learned the craft by studying different gestures, rehearsing different tones of voice, and generating interactions and scripts recognizable to the spectator of the time with other actors. Just as Ernst Gombrich (1993) pointed out for the two-dimensional painter, the stage artist learned to copy the gestures of the face and body on their own face and body. For the actor of Stanislavski's system, this art was considered old-fashioned and rigid, stereotyped. The ambition was to know how to read and recreate the mental world of the character so that on the stage the spectator could be amazed by the primal creation of the artist who generated with their work something that went beyond nature. From the humble intention of the comedian of language, actors moved on to the status of dramatic creators. Being an actor ceased to be a profession and became an art.

This was undoubtedly influenced by the emergence of psychology and sociology which, taking experimental sciences as a model, contributed to the idea that "personality" as a construct was as real as a chemical formula. Actors and stage directors had an arsenal of psychoanalytic and personality theories to explore that mental world which, in theory, science was unraveling and taming. The actor was in a position to lose themselves in the jungle of personality trait systems, classifications of psychopathological disorders, or the disturbing accounts of sexual stages that Freud "discovered." Any of those classifications told far more interesting stories about the subjects than anyone could observe on a day-to-day basis. In fact, they were infused with the aura of

science, and the personality, the subject, was thus referred to as something ideal and, paradoxically, more real than reality, because they were science.

A question now arises that will articulate the rest of our research: How did this paradigm influence Hollywood readers, writers, and screenwriters? When we say Hollywood, we mean the canonical system of cinema. This text hypothesizes that this influence was growing, and Stanislavski's system (and its American version of the "method") permeated the way of doing, not only of performers but also of screenwriters and stage directors. The hypothesis comprises an evolution in three stages.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A threefold method is followed: on the one hand, we have opted for a qualitative method applied to the object of study through comparative analysis; secondly, we have leaned toward the identification of three examples that allow us to examine the object from an evolutionary perspective since we take as a premise the existence of a conceptual evolution in the reading-writing of the audiovisual character; and, thirdly, we have analyzed this evolution by relating it to the historical development of the concept of personality, that is, of what it means to be a subject and how the "social sciences" of psychology and sociology have influenced the way in which the performing arts have solved the problem, especially since the seminal work of Stanislavski.

For all of this, we offer a series of relevant cases partially considered earlier (Price, 2011). It is, therefore, a complex comparative analysis of cases, and, as such, they cannot exhaust the variability and complexity of the film representations of the character but we understand that methodologically they constitute a solid starting point for future approaches.

The three selected cases respond to different historical moments and represent three different strategies in the construction of character carried out by Graham Greene, Paul Schrader, and David Mamet. The chosen works of these authors are, respectively: *The Third Man* (1949), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Glengarry Glen Rose* (1992).

For each case, documents related to the screenwriters' creative process were analyzed, as well as their works, that is, both the scripts and the films; although none of the three directed their films, the examination will reveal interesting aspects of the object of study.

- In the case of Greene, the author himself included an introduction to his novel *The Third Man* in which he concisely explains the process of creating the screenplay.
- In the case of Paul Schrader, the bibliography on his work and several interviews on the genesis of *Taxi Driver* were selected.
- And in the case of David Mamet, the research was facilitated by the fact that, besides writing, Mamet has theorized extensively on film poetics.

On the other hand, we have methodologically taken into account the distinction between annotations and dialogues in the scripts. The comparison between how the different authors use these two variables is fundamental. So is the link between the

original works and how they have been translated into annotations and dialogues in the script or the film. For example, in Greene's case, the novel he wrote before writing his screenplay is fundamental. Paul Schrader did not start from any previous text, although it is possible to establish affiliations with Arthur Bremer's diaries. And David Mamet starts from a play of the same name, but the intermediality produces different results and, therefore, it makes sense to compare them.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. The reading of the character in *The Third Man* (Graham Greene)**

In the introduction to his novel, Greene describes his creative process with precision and conciseness. In his words, it all began with an opening paragraph he wrote himself on the flap of an envelope:

I had said my last goodbye to Harry a week ago when his coffin was being laid in the frozen February ground, so I didn't believe it when I saw him pass by the Strand, without a nod of recognition, through a crowd of strangers. (Greene, 1950)

Greene regarded that paragraph as a sudden enlightenment that was left jotted down to mature. Producer Alexander Korda commissioned him to write a screenplay for director Carol Reed about the occupation of the city of Vienna by the Allied powers after World War II. "Each power administered the inner city on a monthly rotation, and groups of four soldiers, one from each country, patrolled day and night." Korda was interested in the political and social situation in Vienna in 1948, but he agreed that the story should start from the paragraph Greene treasured.

The most revealing piece of information in this text has to do with the following quote, which is at the heart of Greene's creative process. Although it is a long quote, it is essential to understand the argument that follows:

For me, it is impossible to write a film script without first writing a story. A film depends not only on a plot, but also on characters, a mood, and a climate, which to me seems impossible to capture for the first time in the insipid outline of a conventional screenplay.

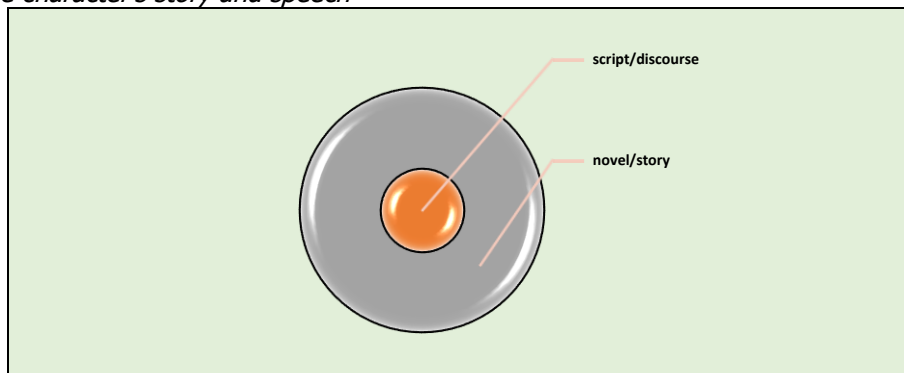
It is possible to reproduce the effect captured through another medium, the novel, but it is not possible to perform the first act of creation in the form of a screenplay. One must be sure to have more material than necessary to draw upon (although the full-length novel usually has too much). Although I never intended to publish *The Third Man*, I needed to be clear about it as a story before I began to work on the endless transformations from script to script (Greene, 1950).

A widely accepted convention recommends that one page of a screenplay is equivalent to one minute of a film so a standard screenplay is usually between ninety and one hundred and twenty pages. For Greene, the screenplay is a discourse whose story is the novel, even if it has not been previously written. The distinction between speech and story is the classic one established by Chatman (2013). In the screenplay, a series

of events are selected that refer to a larger story. Regarding the character, the story encompasses a continuous time and space and the discourse selects a series of events and spaces to tell that story.

As a metaphor, this idea translates to the relationship between the novel and the screenplay. The novel functions as a story and the screenplay as a discourse. One way to represent this idea is with a simple boundary drawn in two concentric circles (Figure 1). The inner circle is the character's discourse, the outer circle is the character's story. Everything that is discourse belongs to the story, but not the other way around.

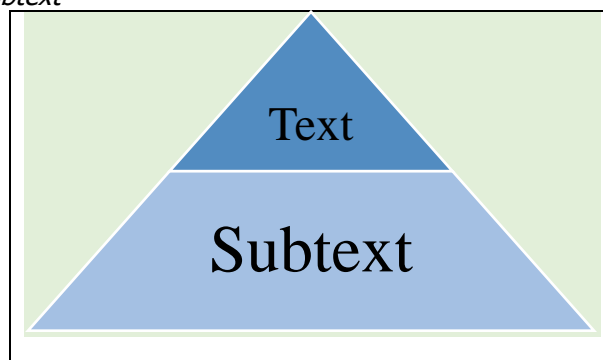
**Figure 1**  
*Outline of the character's story and speech*



**Source:** Own elaboration.

Greene's description of his intermediate process is in line with Stanislavski's method. When he proposes to build the character, he distinguishes in his theory the subtext of the text and shows how everything that goes underneath must be created for it to emerge and show itself to the spectator. He explores the character's story to strengthen his discourse. This is Greene's strategy when he says that he cannot build his script without creating a novel, a subtext, which is not shown, but which, in theory, is working.

**Figure 2**  
*Stanislavski's text and subtext*



**Source:** Own elaboration.

Consequently, Graham Greene represents the classic idea used by the actors of Stanislavski's system when they "build their character" and configure a subtext (Figure 2). This involves creating the character's discourse by drawing on their story. Greene resorts to writing a novel. Stanislavski's exercises prescribed this technique. It was a

matter of constructing the character by diving into it, and exploring what was happening in the subject's life story. Not only in the sense of investigating their total history in time but also in exploring what they feel and think about the world. In fact, Stanislavski pointed out as an exercise the writing of a diary of the character by the actor. The goal of diary writing is to feel like the character by trying to understand what they think and feel. Let us imagine that the actor has a scene in which he meets a woman he wants to get to know. Stanislavski's actor would overflow the character's situation in two ways: first, by exploring, for example, the character's history with women. Second, by probing the character's thoughts and feelings about a supposed encounter with her. In both cases, what the actor does is construct something that is outside the scene and that is not observed.

If the scene is the discourse (or part of it) of the character, the actor tries to enrich or complete the discourse (in theory) by resorting to elements that the spectator cannot observe: the character's history and mental states. Both elements are, to use Erwin Goffman's term (1959), the character's plot, that which is hidden from the audience. To the spectator, these elements are not observable. They could be part of the writer's annotations or observations about the character that do not even appear in the script's notes. Greene's example is clear. His novel functions as a stage set for the character's discourse.

There would then be three areas: what is shown of the character (stage), what is not shown but appears in the annotations (set), and what the actor or screenwriter notes about the character but does not even include in the text. The latter we will call "scaffolding". Graham Greene used the novel as scaffolding for his screenplay. Some information about the character in the novel does not even appear in the script's annotations.

Following Stanislavski's guidelines, the actor performs the same process as Greene did with his novel. The actor relies on situations from a script or theatrical text and builds a scaffolding to support the character. This scaffolding can take the form of a diary, although they only need to know what happens in a scene, in the character's discourse. As Price (2011) rightly points out, this method of character-building is precisely what is also prescribed by manuals on how to write a screenplay or how to create a character.

It is not argued here that Greene relied on Stanislavski's system for his creation, but it is evident that the method he used in *The Third Man* maintains a series of concomitances with that of the Russian theorist's character construction. In essence, the relationship between what is shown and what is hidden in the process, and how what is shown must overflow to work on stage. "Going beyond the text," "overflowing the discourse with the story," or "building some scaffolding for the stage" are synonyms.

### **3.2. Reading the character in *Taxi Driver* (TD)**

The next step in the possible evolution describes a displacement of the boundary between the scaffolding, the set, and the stage. Stanislavski's actor was to overflow the text and create a subtext by turning to research on the character's feelings and

cognitions. However, as the term "subtext" etymologically describes, the effects of that research have to emerge in what is shown in the text, on stage. The text is the final station of a journey for the actor. The subtext is always hidden.

From the 1940s onwards, Hollywood begins to produce films that show something previously unseen: the mental state of the protagonists (Biskind, 2001), especially of subjects with mental pathologies. That which was part of the story began to be shown in the discourse. First, screenwriters and directors chose to directly represent the flow of the actors' thoughts as memories; then in dreams, reveries, or altered states of mind. David Bordwell (1985) pointed out that European Art Cinema is a new path to realism that considers the mental world as an indispensable part of the representation of the subject.

In *Taxi Driver*, Paul Schrader shifts the boundary between the scaffolding, the stage, and the set, converting part of the annotations into dialogues (although they are dialogues of the protagonist with himself). The mind of the protagonist is shown, as a way of going beyond the transparency of the play and the idea of the character as a story. This audiovisual text has been selected because, precisely, the technique that Stanislavski recommended to his actors, writing a diary about their character to build it. The protagonist's diary becomes in *Taxi Driver* part of what is shown of the character, giving more ground (at least, creating that illusion) to the viewer, who is allowed to enter the mind of the subject.

There is no text analogous to the novel created by Greene in the case of *Taxi Driver*. Possibly, Arthur Bremer's diaries were used by Schrader to create his screenplay (Boon, 2008). In 1972, Bremer attempted to assassinate and left George Wallace, Democratic candidate and governor of Alabama, hemiplegic from several gunshots. The central structure of the screenplay of *Taxi Driver* rests on the diary of its protagonist, Travis Bickle. Travis, like Bremer, attempts to assassinate Palantine, the Democratic presidential candidate.

Instead of using it as a tool to understand his character, as Greene would have done, Schrader shows Travis writing a diary that is heard as a voice-over, simulating Travis's thoughts in the film. That voice punctuates the course of the script and the film. It functions as an instrument of self-knowledge, just as Michel Foucault (1990) would understand it, as a "technology of the self". That technology, which had served for decades to form the subtext of the actors, is transformed in this work into part of the text.

A fragment of the script of *Taxi Driver* shows how Schrader dealt with the representation of thoughts:

*FIFTH AVENUE-THE SAME AFTERNOON*

*CAMERA TRACKS with crowded mass of MANHATTANITES as they ooze through the sidewalks toward their various destination. Individuals are indiscernible: It is simply a congested mass.*

*TRAVIS (V.O.)*



*I first saw her at Palantine Campaign Headquarters at 58th and Broadway. She was wearing a yellow dress, answering the phone at her desk.*

*Suddenly: Cut of the congested human mass*

*IN SLOWING MOTION, appears the slender figure of BETSY in a stylish yellow dress. The crowd parts like the Red Sea, and there she is: Walking all alone, untouched by the crowd, suspended in space and time.*

*TRAVIS (V.O.) (CONTD)*

*She appeared like an angel out of this open sewer. Out of this filthy mass. She is alone: They cannot touch her.*

*INT. TRAVIS' APARTMENT*

*He is at the table, writing in his diary.*

*CLOSEUP - His stubby pencil rests on the word "her".*

This fragment shows the coded way in which Schrader introduces the V.O. (Voice Over) in the flow of the images. Behind Travis' name, the acronym is written in brackets to indicate that what follows is not the sound that corresponds to the image. In the film, from a subjective shot of a steady cam, people are observed parading in front of the protagonist's gaze. Simultaneously, Travis' voice is heard. Then Betsy appears, while the voice describes her. Finally, the image merges with the next image from the diary, where the word "her" can be seen written (Figure 3). This is a memory or daydream that Travis evokes while writing his diary.

### Figure 3

*The sequence of Betsy's evocation the first time Travis saw her.*



**Source:** Taxi Driver.

The dialogue in this fragment functions as the actor's text. In Greene's case, that text could have belonged to either the script's annotation or the actor's subtext. The image would show Travis writing a diary. The actor should be thinking in that dialogue, in Betsy's imagery, but the viewer would not hear that voice.

In this displacement of the boundary between stage and set, the former has gained ground by entering the character's mind. In fact, Travis's diary would have functioned as an exercise for the actor but in *Taxi Driver*, it appears as part of the character's actions.

In the Art Cinema era, another way of making the scene "come alive" was also developed, following the dictates of Stanislavski's mandate. But it followed a different path. Instead of affecting the terrain that the actor had to conquer in the story and the mind of the character, it was a matter of appealing to the "here and now" of the scene. In other words, to promote the improvisation of the action. Rather than repeating rehearsals, one had to try to create the sensation that "it was happening". This was the philosophy of happening and performance. A dramatic solution consisted in turning the scene into a communicative game.

### **3.3. Reading the character in Glengarry Glen Rose**

Unlike Graham Greene, David Mamet does not consider it necessary to explore a story of the character that overflows the situation in which it acts, it is enough to deploy the dramatic situation in which a simple rule works: the characters want different things, they have goals that confront them. To deploy this rule, it is not necessary to go to the character's story; in any case, this story can emerge from the discourse itself, but not the other way around. The other way around is precisely what takes place when the story is constructed to justify the discourse, something that Graham Greene would recommend against Mamet's vision.

In the process of creation itself, Mamet is wary of all that he considers the Stanislavskian paraphernalia of character construction (Nadel, 2008). Mamet maintains, against Stanislavski, that the actor should not leave the circle of dramatic action to create the character; that is, the actor does not have to look inside themselves, in their childhood experiences, in emotional regressions, trying to be another, flowing, ceasing to be themselves to incarnate themselves in another, and so on. Mamet prescribes focusing on the resolution of the situation presented to the actor. Nothing more and nothing less. In fact, he asserts that the actor is never prepared for what is coming at them when they go on stage, no matter how much they dive into the story of the character (Mamet, 1997). Mamet seems to recommend an ethic of courage in the professional activity of acting. What the actor invents is their courage, as an agent capable of facing what is presented to them. To deviate from this idea is to procrastinate, to postpone the moment of action. The actor has to play the game. The rules are written in the script: it is the language they have to memorize to be able to handle it and develop the game.

This aesthetic recommends the same recipe to the scriptwriter. Focus on a game with clear rules, subjects, and operations. Mamet comes from a theatrical tradition in which he worked as an actor. His experience brought him closer to some of Stanislavski's ideas (the idea of the objective and the super-objective on stage), and to reject others (affective memory). The scriptwriter works within the discourse without the need to refer to a story so that the spectator focuses on what is happening on stage.

Mamet states that the character does not exist. What does he mean by this? He is not referring to a postmodern idea of identity but to something more practical in the creative process. The character does not exist because the character is constructed. Since there is no reference to anything that is not on stage, the protagonist emerges through symbolic interactions with other characters, it is never told. One should not

resort to telling that Hamlet is melancholic but allow the viewer to perceive this by observing the interaction with other characters.

An analogy may serve to clarify Mamet's aesthetics: let us understand film storytelling as a game whose rules are learned as we go along. For example, consider an audiovisual text such as the classic cartoon Roadrunner and the Wile E. Coyote. To design it, Chuck Jones (1999) invented a set of rules that mediated the relationship between the protagonists (Figure 4). If the character is viewed as a system of rules, the plot consists only of imagining how those rules can be executed given an initial condition. It is not necessary to go beyond those rules to develop a scene. That initial condition and the rules can be represented visually as a circle equivalent to the discourse, with the difference that now it is not narrated but only the rules are stated.

Self-containment consists of staying within the circle by complying with the rules applied to the characters. Such a narrative system constitutes an example of a game that resembles, as Jones pointed out, the routines used by comedians in their performances. One might also add that they are reminiscent of a cooking recipe or a computer algorithm. A set of rules are invented, shared with the audience, and developed to make up the characters at that moment.

**Figure 4**

*The Nine Rules of Wile E. Coyote and The Road Runner*

1. The Road Runner cannot harm the coyote except by going "Beep-Beep".
2. No outside force can harm the coyote – only his own ineptitude or the failure of the ACME products.
3. The coyote could stop anytime – If he were not a fanatic (A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim - George Santayana).
4. No dialogue ever, except "Beep-Beep!".
5. The Road Runner must stay on the road – Otherwise, logically, he would not be called a "road runner".
6. All action must be confined to the natural environment of the two characters – the Southwest American Desert.
7. All materials, tools, weapons, or mechanical conveniences must be obtained from the ACME corporation.
8. Whenever possible, make gravity the coyote's greatest enemy.
9. The coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures.

**Source:** Own elaboration.

Consequently, the rules are easily auditable by the viewer. They are either complied with throughout the plot or they are not. It is a game "without trap or trick". In any case, the aesthetic pleasure of the spectator derives from the partial ignorance of the rules. The spectator discovers the rules. It is even possible that the scriptwriter follows the rules without being aware of them; they simply put them into play. Their notes will be minimal and precise. No additional explanations about characters or situations are required. What happens on stage is the product of the functioning of the rules of the game. There is nothing beyond the game and when the game is over, the plot is over.

In this paradigm, there is no need for a past or a future, beyond what happens during the game. Neither the Roadrunner has a past nor the Coyote expects a future. All that matters are the nine rules. It should be noted that each rule is equivalent to countless stories. For example, rule number two states that " no outside force can harm the

coyote – only his own ineptitude or the failure of the ACME products." This is a drama for Coyote. He hurts himself but it is not necessary to express it through a past that explains that Coyote as a child had a drunken father who mistreated him and a mother who slept all day long on opioids. The only thing that matters is that the author proposes a game with rules and shares them. In fact, the main rule does not even need to be made explicit and all the spectators understand it: Wile E. Coyote wants to eat the Road Runner. The other nine are less important.

In Chuck Jones' book, one of the cartoonists points out that he never saw those rules written down. Whatever. Let's imagine that Jones never actually wrote them down. The key is not that they exist but that they are practiced, i.e., that they are not broken and, if they are, an explanation is given as to why. The viewer sees the consequences of these rules and, unconsciously, confirms their consistency (they will never see that something external harms Wile E. Coyote, for example). It can be affirmed that in the Roadrunner cartoons, the story and the discourse are identical.

### **3.3.1. Glengarry Glen Rose as a set of rules**

The Roadrunner example serves to understand the case study selected for David Mamet, Glengarry Glen Rose. The analysis reveals that the characters hardly talk about their past or their future. They hardly talk about subjects other than those in the scene. It is constructed only from the subjects shown and the language they employ, emitting the barest references to the world outside that microcosm of salesmen. Does that mean it is a self-contained plot?

Mamet aspires to make the plot seem self-contained and have a maximum of coherence. He avoids annotations, which are nothing more than speech overflows, notes to explain what is shown. Mamet trusts that his dramatic text, what his characters do and say, is sufficiently explanatory to require minimal annotations. In reality, he tries to produce the illusion that the text does not overflow the discourse and everything happens in the scene but it is obvious that in the process of reception, the meanings always refer to external elements.

If Mamet says "a sales office", he is creating a communicative space that goes beyond "that particular sales office" shown in the script and refers to all sales offices. The audience infers meanings about "office" and "salesperson" regarding contemporary society. He then goes on to make inferences about the conflict of "being unemployed" which in capitalism is "being excluded from the group, set apart, isolated, a mode of ostracism in a consumer society". Mamet does not need to make that explicit, he simply assumes that the audience understands the threat of being fired from a job.

As far as possible, the author does not resort to the construct of "personality" to explain his character. It is not known whether he does so in the process of creation, that is, whether he constructs a personality that surrounds the character's discourse to support it and then removes the scaffolding. Of course, the analysis reveals that elements of the story do not appear in the discourse. Ricky Roma's behavior seems to explain itself within the setting of the scenario (bar, office), without recourse to his past, or even to

a long-term future. The viewer understands the rules: Ricky Roma wants the Cadillac, and Levene doesn't want to be fired.

However, there is one key detail in the creation of the script. This play is based on a play of the same title, which premiered on Broadway, and for which Mamet received the Pulitzer Prize. In the film script, the key scene is about Mr. Fuck-you's (Alec Baldwin) visit to the salesman's office. That scene was not in the play. By incorporating it, Mamet makes two points: on the one hand, the play is always a living device that can evolve. On the other hand, the most important here is that with this incorporation Mamet refines his own rules or, as mentioned, his own aesthetic bet. This scene is the confirmation of the author's dramaturgical aesthetics because it stresses the need to declare sufficient rules to keep the characters within the discourse.

The basic rule that governs the relationship between the characters is presented by Mamet through the character of Mr. Fuck-you. It is written on a blackboard, shown to the salesman and, of course, to the viewer of the film. It is so simple that it is literally an ABC, Always Be Closing contracts. The rule would imply nothing without specifying its consequences, which are limited to three: the one who sells the most wins a Cadillac; the second, a set of knives; the one who sells the least gets fired.

If it was not clear enough in the play, Mamet now specifies it in the script. It is only a dramatic game with rules of relationship that do not seem to come out of a temporal and spatial circle in which the characters interact. It only seems so since that game is a representation of the game of capitalism in crisis, which reveals a functioning in the sub-text of that moment in which Mr. Fuck-you makes appear, like a magician, the set of knives (Figure 5). The problem of that game lies in its zero-sum condition. There is no middle ground. It is a wild game in which the winner takes all and the consolation prize is absolute precariousness. The loser is expelled from the game.

**Figure 5**  
*The set of knives*



**Source:** Glengarry Glen Rose.

As Mamet himself has stated, his work refers to his personal experience as a salesman in Chicago in the 1970s, in an office similar to the one depicted in the film. Thus, Mamet overflows his discourse by referring to his own life experience. In the process of reception, the viewer exceeds the discourse to interpret what is shown within it. They glimpse that zero-sum game that takes place in capitalism in crisis. It is not necessary to know Mamet's experience in Chicago. There is a whole multiple reality behind that representation in which Mr. Fuck-you shows the set of knives. The key to the style lies in the fact that to refer to it there is no need for a meticulous annotation. The scene seems self-contained.

Another character, Levene (Jack Lemon) just doesn't want to get fired. Everything has an atmosphere of being present, of happening here and now. The viewer does not need to hypothesize about Ricky Roma's or Levene's past; the main focus is on what is happening in each moment, or as Mamet says, what is going to happen next. Not on what happened fifteen years ago and how that influences what happens now; or what will happen fifty years from now and how we prepare for it. No. What's going to happen in the next five minutes?

What best describes the process of Mamet's aesthetic gamble? A game of strategy. Games are parentheses in the time of subjects in which, suddenly, there are new rules and objectives. Once the game is over, the rules disappear and one returns to everyday life. Mamet's texts are games that invent a set of rules and follow them consistently. It must seem to the spectator that there is nothing other than that game, in the material sense, i.e., what unfolds on stage is what exists and no external explanation is required to understand the rules once they are explained. These are power games, like card games. In fact, his characters literally play cards, for example, in *House of Games* (American Buffalo, year). Viewers can participate because they know the rules of the game or can learn them as they go along. Erwin Goffman (1959) called these rules and their context social scripts, precisely from a dramaturgical perspective.

Mamet's aesthetic wager implies that if in the process of creation, the author tries to limit himself to his rules (as an exercise), the spectator will replicate that process with more probability of not overflowing the discourse. Mamet especially avoids the risk of what the Greeks called *deus ex machina*, which consisted of surprising the audience with an explanation of the plot outside the initial logic.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The reading of the fictional character is a concept that is constructed in the mind of the spectator. This text has contrasted three different strategies to offer the audience that construction.

- In the first stage, the scriptwriters, as well as the actor, focused on the personality and its construction through the research of the mental states of the protagonists. In this stage, authors created their characters by gathering information about their life story and their "mental world", even if later they only showed in their scripts the observable behavior, from which the viewer had to infer the mental world. Graham Greene imagines characters revealed through their behavior in situations. The character is a discourse that requires a story

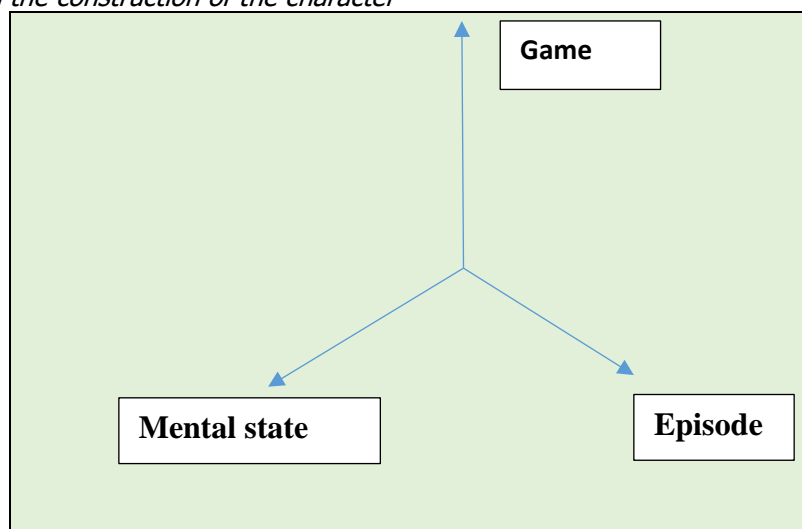
assembled from fragments related by setting, time, and theme. The reading of the character becomes fragmentary.

- In a second stage, in films of the second half of the twentieth century, after the war, the authors were not satisfied with exploring these mental states, but also began to represent them on the screen, as if actors were showing their creative process, the stage machinery of their work, in an attempt to exhibit the transparency of their creation and the complexity of it. In short, shifting the focus of attention even more towards the personality in the character-action dilemma and, at the same time, towards the authorship of the work. Through the ability to show the subtleties and complexities of the mental world, the author presented himself as a true creator. European Art-house cinema and New Hollywood exploited this aspect during the following decades. Paul Schrader focuses attention on the mental states of the protagonist, thus extending Greene's idea not only to a story made of observable fragments but including the mental state he reconstructs for the viewer. The reading becomes fragmentary and mental.
- In the third stage, already in the last decade of the twentieth century, the power of personality as a construct is devalued and the emphasis is on the staging of the interaction between the characters. In this stage, the representation of mental states also occurs but it is more normalized and enters into an expanded scheme. It should be noted that this stage is still open. David Mamet does not focus on the episode but on the procedure. He imitates an ideal game in which the spectator discovers and confirms the rules of the game between the characters. The reading becomes fragmentary and scientific.

The proposed models are not exclusive categories but rather related axes of action (Figure 6). Any scene that follows rules for interactions generates sequences of behaviors and mental states. The choice is to decide which axis is used in the dramaturgical work and the relationship between what is shown and what is hidden.

**Figure 6**

*Strategic axes in the construction of the character*



**Source:** Own elaboration.

Everything that is shown to the spectator in the communicative space that the author creates is the result of a selection: there is a set of personal creation (notebook and notes, the author's mind), a set of what is shown in the script to the director and the actors (annotations) and finally a stage (images of the film or what is indicated in the script that must be seen or heard by the spectator: dialogues, gestures, etc.). The boundaries between these three zones have varied in the evolution of art and representation. The tendency has been to show more and more of what happens in the first (acotations) and the second set (the author's mind).

A possible explanation for this evolution could be related to the process Max Weber (2010) called the re-enchantment of the world. In essence, a rationalized society in which the supreme values are efficiency, control, calculability, and foresight has left a narrow margin for the possibility of magic. Stanislavski's system and the work of the modern actor rely on the science of personality and behavior. Critics believe that this system is effective but mechanical. Re-enchantment has followed various strategies that depart from the Hollywood institutional way of representing characters to address values such as immediacy and authenticity, especially after May '68 and existentialist philosophy.

Two issues stand out in the continuation of this research. On the one hand, the deepening of the hypothesis on the evolution in the construction of the character in the light of new examples. On the other hand, the study of the differential effects on the spectator of these three strategies associated with the creations of Greene, Schrader, and Mamet.

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