

Sympathy for fictional characters: an examination of the factors involved from a social psychology and cognitive film theory perspective

La simpatía hacia los personajes de ficción: un examen de los factores implicados desde la psicología social y la teoría fílmica cognitiva

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Abstract:

Sympathy is the main affective bond that the viewer establishes with the fictional characters, being a necessary prerequisite for the elicitation of other emotions. Given its importance, the objective of this article is to detail the different factors involved in its constitution, in an attempt to delve into its understanding. To do it, we turn to different works framed in the field of social psychology and cognitive film theory, we describe some textual resources that audiovisual narratives use to exploit each particular factor, and we reflect on the effects that each of them has on sympathy and the other factors involved.

Keywords:

Identification; sympathy; cognitive film theory; fictional characters; narrative emotions.

Resumen:

La simpatía es el principal vínculo afectivo que el espectador establece con los personajes de ficción, siendo un prerequisite necesario para la elicitación de otras emociones. Dada su importancia, el objetivo del presente artículo es detallar los diferentes factores que participan en su constitución, en un intento de ahondar en su comprensión. Para ello se recurre a diferentes trabajos enmarcados en el ámbito de la psicología social y la teoría fílmica cognitiva, se detallan algunos recursos textuales con los que las narraciones audiovisuales explotan cada factor concreto, y se reflexiona sobre los efectos que cada uno de ellos tiene sobre la simpatía y el resto de factores que la fundamentan.

Palabras clave:

Identificación; simpatía; teoría fílmica cognitiva; personajes ficcionales; emociones narrativas.

1. Introduction

To investigate the way in which the spectator's involvement or affective relationship¹ with fictional characters is established and developed along a narrative is, as James Wood (2008: 171) notes, to engage in one of the two most extensive discussions on dramatic theory since Plato and Aristotle (the other being the nature of mimesis). Although the first epistemological current in the field of film theory that systematically approached the issue was psychoanalytic theory, in the last decades cognitive theory has taken over, specifying and exploring further the question with the help of the wide corpus of investigations and reflections provided by social psychology and neuroscience.

Although some authors as Alex Neill (1996), Berys Gaut (1999) or Amy Coplan (2009) defend the undeniable importance of empathy, most researchers attached to cognitive theory consider that viewers get emotionally involved with the narrative events mainly through their "sympathy" for the characters. Carroll (2008: 78) claims that "sympathy is the leading emotional bond between viewers and movie protagonists". And Plantinga (2009: 149) observes that "sympathy for a character leads the spectator to take a strong interest in the character's well-being and develop strong concerns about story outcomes". Although sometimes complemented by other processes, as embodied simulation, sympathy is the main mechanism by which the spectators are emotionally involved in the experiences of the characters, caring about the future of the events narrated.

Sympathy is an outwardly projected emotional state directed towards other people and defined as the presence of an affective inclination toward them. As Carroll (2008: 179) suggests, "it is our sympathy for the character that disposes us to regard her as inside our network of concern, and, therefore, to assess an injustice done to her as something perpetrated against one of 'our own'." It involves a positive attitude in their favor, which causes visceral reactions of affliction when the objects of our sympathy face problems and feelings of joy when they improve their situation.

Despite sometimes it is felt directly (mixed with the emotions that constitute it), sympathy usually functions as an emotional disposition that elicits other emotions related with it, depending on the degree of the established concern for the well-being of the sympathetic person.

¹ When speaking about the cognitive and emotional relationship between character and spectator, it's usual to use the concept of 'identification'. It is a term of widespread use not only in colloquial language, but in the Western philosophical tradition, traceable to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and especially popular in film studies since its systematic use by psychoanalytic theory. But given the vagueness with which the term is generally used, its association with an epistemological current whose postulates are rejected, and the problematic that the terms etymology erects (suggesting an equivalence or identity between spectator and character), cognitive film theorists privilege the use of other terms to allude to the emotional relationship between spectator and characters, as the expression 'character engagement' (Smith, 1995).

These related emotions, these “sympathetic emotions” (Plantinga, 2009), are the most interesting ones from a narrative point of view: suspense, jubilation, fear, sadness, anger, etc. But their dependence explains the sympathy’s definition as the main and foundational emotion that characterizes the relationship between the spectator and the character. Sympathy “provides the emotive optic through which we survey the narrative from one end to the other” (Carroll, 2008: 179), because it’s the sympathy towards a character that gives shape to our emotional reception of the actions in which she is involved.

2. Objectives and methodology

Given its significance, it is necessary to analyze how the sympathy towards the characters is constituted. With that in mind, the following section proposes and describes a series of factors that participate in the viewer’s affective bonding with any audiovisual fictional characters. In order to elaborate the list, factors previously proposed in film studies have been taken into account, contrasting and expanding the descriptions in every case with recent conclusions gathered from different studies in the field of social psychology, which is the branch of cognitive sciences that has privileged the study of affective bonds between individuals.

Determinating the singular relevance of each factor through the analysis of different films is practically impossible: they are all interrelated, the same element of the text usually participates in the activation of several factors, and narratives always pursue their combined action. But different social psychology researches have analyzed the effect of each of them separately, through experiments defined to measure them. And a comparative reflection of the works in the field of film theory can help to clarify their relative importance. That is why, although it’s impossible to isolate them in practice, the theoretical distinction of all the factors allows to refine the analysis of every particular text, especially useful when examining works where the bonding between the spectator and a character is controversial (the spectator sympathizes with a character of questionable moral qualities), or fails (the viewer doesn’t sympathize with the character proposed by the text).

3. Results and discussion

Examining different scientific works dedicated to the analysis of the factors that participate in all interpersonal affective bondings, and taking into account the mediated nature of the relationship between the viewer and the characters of an audiovisual narrative, this article considers that there are seven fundamental feelings in the constitution of the of the spectator’s sympathy towards the protagonists of film fictions: approval, admiration, compassion, attraction, familiarity, homophily and intimacy. The following sections are dedicated to the detailed description of them, in order

to gain a better understanding of the particular articulation of each one of them, and the interaction between them, during the viewing process.

3.1. Approval

Cognitive theorists who have addressed the problem of sympathy point to the moral approval of the characters –of their acts, their intentions, and even their ‘moral background’– as the dominant factor in its constitution (Smith, 1995; Carroll, 1996, 2008; Plantinga, 2009). A moral primacy that is also defended by the ‘Affective disposition theory’ (Raney, 2004, 2011)², and can be explained by the very nature of narration, which, being articulated on interpersonal conflicts, inevitably arouses the moral appraisal of actions and intentions. This explains why most viewers don’t establish a positive bond with the protagonists of films such as *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), *Eye of the Needle* (Richard Marquand, 1981) or *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986), where the viewer is aligned with serial killers.

However, the moral approval of the characters is not categorical, but relative. All the authors agree that the moral approval of each character is established according to the position that she occupies within the internal moral structure of the work, where these values are organized in hierarchical positions of relative preference. A moral structure that varies throughout the work, and explains the “sympathy for the devil” phenomenon (Carroll, 2009; Smith, 1999, 2011), that is, the cases in which the viewer sympathizes with characters of reprehensible morality, such as Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) or Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), as they are usually more approvable than the characters against whom they strive.

At the same time, when watching a film the spectator flexibilizes her moral principles, being able to accept the moral structure of the film for pleasure and entertainment, even when that system conflicts with her beliefs. In this regard, Smith (1995: 189) observes a possible “suspension of values” while we engage in gangster films. Arthur Raney (2011) observes that the playfulness with which the viewer engages audiovisual fictions motivates him to obviate the cognitive demands involved in a deliberate moral evaluation, producing what he calls a “moral disengagement for the sake of enjoyment.” And Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2013) points out the “fictional relief” that narratives establish, whose ontological distance from the real world frees the spectators from the moral obligations of their real lives (to think about the consequences of the acts, to help those in need, etc.). Thus, a spectator can find pleasure in the violence with which

² Affective disposition theory (ADT) is mainly concerned with explaining how individuals evaluate and establish affiliations with media characters, and how enjoyment is affected by what happens to these characters (Zillmann and Cantor, 1976). Although they address the question from a psychological perspective, through experimental studies.

Harry Calahan liquidates Scorpio in *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), when that same behavior would be recriminated by the same spectator in real life.

While the film is being watched, moral approval doesn't arise from an objective and rational judgment of the moral orientation of the character, but generally from its automatic and unconscious evaluation. Following the postulates of the intuitionist model in philosophy and moral psychology³, we should conceive this evaluation as the result of an intuition, rather than a deliberate and elaborate deliberation (Haidt, 2001; Haidt y Kesebir, 2010). Approval is not based on ethical criteria, but on a series of assumptions, prejudices, biases and affective interferences that give rise to a quick and superficial estimation of the moral orientation of the character, susceptible of multiple nuances and modifications. Moral appreciation is dominated by the effect of basic emotions (such as disgust, anger), moral heuristics (such as the social taboo to incest) and mental biases (favoritism, partiality) that function as somatic markers of the morally acceptable or reprehensible, distorting rational moral judgment.

In this way, probably the most relevant bias is favoritism. Moral approval is conditioned by the degree of sympathy that the character awakens in the viewer at the time of being evaluated. As Arthur Raney (2011: 148) suggests, "our willingness to excuse or defend expectancy, inconsistent actions or motivations increases with the strength of our dispositional intensity toward the character". There is a noticeable circularity in the way approval and sympathy feed each other. Social psychology shows that we tend to show favoritism in our moral evaluations to those who we sympathise with (Haidt, 2012), probably as a result of the combined action of intergroup and confirmation biases. Moreover, showing favoritism (loyalty, understanding) towards those we care about is usually considered morally laudable, turning culturally the mismatch into virtue.

The action of favoritism in moral evaluation and sympathetic attachment to the characters has different remarkable consequences. On the one hand, favoritism confirms the influence of the predispositions that the viewer brings to the theater: a slight sympathy or antipathy towards a character or an actor could condition future evaluations of his moral orientation (Raney, 2004). In a similar vein, favoritism illustrates the significance of first impressions on later evaluations, and therefore the effect ('framing effect') of the order in which the character's traits are presented to the viewer throughout the narrative (Appiah, 2008: 82-83). Finally, it shows "how stubborn we are as sympathizers", as Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2014: 279) points out in a text where she brings up favoritism to explain why the viewer sympathizes with the protagonist of the series *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008-2013) during its fourth season, in which he commits a long series of atrocities impossible to exonerate rationally.

³ The intuitionist perspective is founded on a dual conception of human cognition, in vogue in the contemporary cognitive sciences, where two paths of mental processing (Kahneman, 2012) are differentiated: an intuitive path (system 1), automatic, fast and subject to multiple biases; and a deliberative path (system 2), conscious, slow and neutral.

Thus, as Raney (2011: 147) suggests, in many cases “it might be more proper to say that viewers read or interpret the actions of liked characters as morally proper for the sake of maintaining and defending their positive attitudes about those characters, rather than morally evaluating them for their appropriateness.” As the narrative unfolds, instead of determining sympathy for a character in terms of its approval, the viewer approves the character based on his sympathy towards him.

In any case, the moral approval of a character by the spectators is conditioned by their own moral system, which governs not only their deliberate moral evaluations, but especially their intuitive ones. Every text is constructed with an ideal “system of values” or “co-text” in mind, that Smith (1995: 195) defines as the “set of values, beliefs and so forth which form the backdrop to the events of the narrative”, that is, “the context within the text”. Each text denotes a ‘co-text’, which is not the context in which it is received, but the context for which it was created and in which the film is expected to be received (and evaluated and answered) to function according to the intentions of its authors. The co-text of contemporary works produced in the same cultural space as the spectator is usually invisible, as long as it adjusts to the dominant social norms.

But it’s not difficult to find works that shock the viewer due to the temporal or cultural gap between their creation and reception, evidencing a ‘co-text’ with which she is expected to evaluate the characters but doesn’t coincide with the value system of the viewer. Smith (1995) posits *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) as a paradigmatic example of a co-text that clashes with ours. Austin Stoneman’s kindness toward African-American characters is assumed by the film as negatively charged, just as the paternalistic behavior of the Cameron family toward their African-American servants is endorsed by the co-text of the film (according to the co-text of the film, Stoneman is at best morally weak, at worst morally corrupt, the ‘evil’ within the moral system of the text). As the example reveals, the co-text of a film is important when analyzing the historical and cross-cultural reception of a film.

While moral approval is not the only factor involved in sympathy, it constitutes, as Smith (2011: 84) suggests, “a kind of center-of-gravity that amoral factors may inflect, but not displace.” Moral approval is not only the most important factor *per se*, but is also directly and indirectly affected by all the other factors listed in the next sections. This situation makes it difficult to find cases of films that elicit an intense sympathy for its characters based on amoral factors. In order to bypass the overdetermination of moral approval, studies interested in the affective attachment of spectators with fictional characters usually use texts where the viewer sympathises with morally questionable characters, which must show other traits that elicit the viewer’s sympathy.

3.2. *Admiration*

The aforementioned authors extend the moral evaluation of the characters to some traits of their personality, following a virtue ethics perspective⁴. This explains, for example, that Carroll (1996) highlights the courage and pragmatism of the protagonists of *The Wages of Fear* (Henri Georges Clouzot, 1953) when he evaluates them morally. As character and spectator share the same cultural space where these personality traits are appreciated, these virtues arouse admiration.

Characters elicit the sympathies of the spectator displaying their moral rectitude, their desire to be good. But also exhibiting praiseworthy personality traits such as strength, ingenuity, courage, temperance, or perseverance; and skills and knowledge worthy of admiration, whether athletic skills, technical expertise or cultural scholarship. The ability as a pilot and the scientific wisdom of the two protagonists of *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), as well as the bravery, determination and confidence with which they confront their conflicts, intensifies the general sympathy towards them.

Although social psychology predicts that admiration is an important factor in sympathy (Huston, 2013), at the same time it warns against perfection. Not only because the character's vulnerability is essential for the articulation of narrative suspense (Carroll, 1996). But also because, as the 'Pratfall effect' shows, sympathy for an admirable character increases when he makes some occasional mistake or presents some minor defect in his personality (Aronson, Willerman and Floyd, 1966). Aristotle (2006: 1453a) already warned that tragedy should be starred by a "sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just". After all, the classic heroes are not gods, but demigods, with a mortal nature.

Therefore, it could be argued that a slight dent in the character's personality and ability has positive effects on the sympathy elicited. Not only due to the 'Pratfall effect', but also because there comes a time when admiration no longer has a significant effect. In such cases, it's more profitable for the narrative to seek another kind of bonding feeling, be it of experiential affinity, compassion, grace or tenderness (see following sections). An extended, although mainly intuitive application of this theory in cinema is manifested in the way that action movie heroes are usually characterized with multiple admirable traits but a disastrous romantic life, from the marital problems of *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) to the clumsiness of *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002). And conversely, following the same reasoning, it is not surprising that the protagonist of *Van Damme's Inferno* (John G. Avildsen, 1999) arouses less sympathy in the viewer than the aforementioned ones, taking into account the way in which the narration tries to present him as an admirable character in every way, including his sexual force.

⁴ Where morality does not depend on the evaluation of the intentions and actions of the characters on the basis of absolute rules (deontology) or relative consequences (consequentialism), but on the evaluation of their personality in the frame of some socially praised traits (virtues).

As has been anticipated, the character's virtues helps to exonerate him morally from reprehensible acts through favoritism. A phenomenon that explains, at least in part, that the spectator morally accepts the obsessed protagonist of *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), whose excessive obstinacy and recklessness are perceived as sublime, if almost pathological, virtues. On the other hand, one of the most recurrent resources in criminal cinema is to present a protagonist that believes in some kind of moral code whose following is perceived by the spectator as a laudable virtue (especially when compared with the complete immorality of their opponents), as the murderer who doesn't kill women and children (*Léon*, Luc Besson, 1994) or the thief who doesn't rob the poor (*Parker*, Taylor Hackford, 2013). Ironically, the display of moral rules in the field of criminal activity seems to partially exonerate the characters committed to them.

3.3. Compassion

Compassion is one of the central feelings on which sympathy is constructed in every narrative⁵. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (2006: 1453b) presented piety and fear as the two basic emotions of tragedy, a statement on which Lessing would return centuries later, concluding that compassion is necessary for the viewer to bond affectively with the character, creating a concern that makes fear possible (Smith, 2011).

It's common to present the protagonists of a film as victims of a painful situation or action likely to arouse the compassion of the viewer. The range of possible mishaps is wide. In *The Wages of Fear*, the characters at the beginning of the film are desperately trapped in a remote village from which they are materially unable to leave. In the opening of *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1976) we witness the vivid murder of the protagonist's wife, who from then on will seek revenge.

We may even feel compassion for a character we do not admire in any way, as the protagonist of *A Serious Man* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2009), a disheveled middle-aged teacher who deals with his problems with a discouraging passivity and confusion, but still produces compassion due of the rudeness and abuses to which he is unceasingly subjected. In any case, the importance of compassion goes beyond the biographical anecdote, spreading throughout the whole

⁵ Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish in the specialized bibliography when an author speaks of sympathy and when of compassion. A confusion fomented in English by the polisemia of the term sympathy, whose first meaning is equivalent to what in Spanish is understood by compassion or pity (feeling of commiseration towards those who suffer), and its second meaning makes reference to what in Spanish is identified as sympathy (affection, affinity), a feeling to which the English-speakers usually refer with the term liking. Thus, for example, Plantinga (2010: 42) uses the term to refer to the feeling "aroused by perceived unfair treatment, the need for protection, and similar non-moral factors". In contrast, Carroll (1996, 2008, 2009) and Smith (1995, 1999, 2011) tend to consider sympathy in a broader sense, as not only is demonstrated by the set of feelings that they suggest it constitutes (pity, fascination, approval moral, etc.), but the series of terms that they use as synonyms: affinity, loyalty, appealing or liking.

narrative: being constructed fundamentally around a conflict, in every story the protagonist faces a series of obstacles that reveal her vulnerabilities and frustrations, arousing some degree of compassion to the viewer.

Several factors influence the arousal and intensity of compassion. Sympathy itself has a significant influence on compassion, establishing a positive correlation between both feelings (Gabriel, 2015): the nicer characters are likely to produce more compassion when they are presented in trouble. And the intrinsic vulnerability (disability, fragility) perceived in the victim influences prominently the intensity of the elicited compassion. Loewenstein and Small (2007) suggest the existence of a possible moral heuristic that conditions the compassion produced by a victim according to their age and sex, being higher in the cases where the victim is a woman or a child. The bias, developed by the spectator's enculturation in a society where there is a repeated allusion to their vulnerability, is extensively exploited by cinema, especially in horror and suspense films, where the presentation of a female character in danger is used frequently. In *Wait Until Dark* (Terence Young, 1967) the protagonist is, in addition, blind.

Compassion towards a character also depends on the ability of the viewer to empathize with her. That is, the spectator must first put himself in the place of the character to understand and share the suffering that the situation produces, and then be able to sympathize with him from an external position. In this sense, Loewenstein and Small (2007) summarize a number of factors that influence the elicitation of compassion, four of which depend directly on empathy.

First, the importance of previous experiences of the viewer. Having experienced directly or vicariously –through a close acquaintance– similar experiences to those of the characters, increases the intensity of the empathy aroused by them and, consequently, the compassion. This encompasses intense sympathy for a character who suffers some aggression or traumatic loss (Barnett, Tetreault y Masbad, 1987; Christy y Voigt, 1994). But also to feel a certain pity for their daily difficulties, to which all spectators can refer to. Smith (2011: 84) argues that the viewer's sympathy towards Tony Soprano lies precisely in his characterization as a “regular guy”, whose daily difficulties lead us to “we sympathize with his anxieties, his vulnerability, with his everyday frustrations.”

The sensorial intensity of the contemplated situation also affects the intensity of compassion. The more vivid the situation from an audiovisual perspective, the more effective the empathy and the greater the compassion. Current research in neuroscience (mirror neurons) shows that the direct observation of a face expressing suffering or a body that suffers an aggression produces an immediate body reaction in the viewer, of similar quality but reduced intensity (Keysers, 2011). This explains the usual presentation of the protagonists' faces for empathic purposes (Plantinga, 1999), a phenomenon that extends to their injured bodies.

But the vividness of the experience is not only a consequence of its audiovisual presentation, but also about its imagination. Different social psychology studies demonstrate that the empathy toward a character can be magnified when the observer has been primed to take the perspective of the victim, that is, when she not only observes the situation suffered by the victim, but also has been invited to actively imagine herself in the same situation (Bateson, et al., 2003).

Conversely, the narration may encourage the moral approval of some of the characters regulating the presentation of their most reprehensible acts, as well as their consequences. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the omission of Hannibal Lecter's atrocious crimes prevents visceral feelings such as disgust—physical and moral—from interfering with the character's appreciation. As the popular saying puts it: (espacio) 'Out of sight, out of mind'. In the same way, the omission of the suffering caused by his scams helps the spectator to sympathize with the main character of *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013); which can be explained, moreover, by the 'identifiable victim effect', which refers to the human tendency to feel a greater compassion towards specific, identifiable individuals than to vaguely defined groups (Small and Loewenstein, 2003).

The degree of somatic and pathetic coincidence between the situation of the viewer just before and the situation of the character during the scene is also important (Boven *et al.*, 2013). Entering to a scene in a state of sadness, hunger or fatigue, for example, intensifies the compassion elicited by a situation where the character feels those same experiences. Obviously, the film couldn't predict the spectators state when they arrive at the cinema, but it could guide their somatic and pathetic experiences throughout the work. For example, it could invite them to sympathize with a character loved by the protagonist before killing him or her, transferring the sadness of the spectator to the compassion for the protagonist. The film could also fatigue the spectator by an effective presentation a protagonist performing an intense physical activity, and then induce compassion in the moments in which the character shows her exhaustion. In short, the film can direct the reactions of the viewer in pursuit of an experiential framing that resembles the state of the character, intensifying compassion.

Finally, the novelty of the situation for the spectator is another important factor. While every new exposure to the suffering of others elicits compassion, as the number of exposures increases the intensity of each reaction is likely to be greatly attenuated. This phenomenon, known as 'gradual exposure' (Glover, 2001), explains the progressive numbing of individuals to the pain of others in certain historical contexts (the atrocities of Nazism) and controlled environments (Milgram's famous experiment). From the point of view of film narratives, the gradual exposure effect predicts the progressive inefficiency of presenting situations in which the character is subjected again and again to obstacles of similar nature.

Compassion has strong effects on the moral approval of the characters. The bursts of compassion exhibited by the protagonist for other, more vulnerable characters is one of the most recurring strategies for gaining moral approval from viewers (Carroll, 1996). And conversely, when the antagonists victimize other characters, they elevate the protagonist in the moral structure of the text (Smith, 1999). On the other hand, confronting the protagonists to painful situations not only awakens the spectator's piety, but allows them to demonstrate their capability for managing the pain and adverse emotions, inviting them to exhibit virtues such as temperance, discipline or prudence. Hence the habitual stoicism of the hero when dealing with pain, as manifested by the protagonist of *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, 1985).

Finally, the extereorization of moral feelings such as shame and guilt also acts positively on the moral approval of the characters, a particularly lucrative resource in criminal films, where usually the display of remorse helps to the exoneration of the execrable acts of the protagonist. It's the case of Tony Soprano, whose guilt, according to Smith (2011: 77), shows that he is a moral being, a "morally sentient" being.

3.4. *Attraction*

Another important factor in sympathy is the prosocial attraction that the character produces, that is, his ability to seduce, please or amuse the viewer.

First, sexual attraction induces a positive evaluation of erotic nature, based on sexual desire towards the other. Among the features that are taken into consideration are essentially his physical appearance, his voice, the way he moves and his personality. It is a feeling interwoven with approval or admiration, but with different dynamics.

Commercial cinema traditionally has resorted to the seductive power of the body and the personality of its stars to establish affective bonds between the spectator and the characters they embody, usually designed with the intention of enhancing attraction. Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and Tristan (Brad Pitt) in *Legends of the Fall* (1994) are notorious examples, almost caricature-like, offering both films passages whose narrative function is subordinated to a spectacular vocation founded on the exhibition of the actors.

The beauty, sensuality, charisma or garbo of the characters not only produce pleasure *per se*, inducing a positive attraction in the spectator, but also conditions favorably the character's moral appreciation, as evidenced by empirical studies on the so-called 'Halo effect', a cognitive bias that leads to extend the positive –or negative– perception of a trait over others with which it does not have a direct relationship.

Multiple investigations have confirmed that physical attractiveness is the variable that evokes the halo effect with most intensity, which means that someone perceived as attractive due to their physical traits is generally perceived as a more intelligent, generous, honest or successful person, regardless of the gender of both the subject evaluated and the ob-

server. In addition, beyond its personality, it has been demonstrated that the halo effect has consequences in the moral evaluation of the actions of other individuals, finding a study that the people perceived as more attractive are usually sentenced to lower sentences than the unattractive people, even though they committed the same crime (Efran, 1974). Thus, although a minor factor, the physical attractiveness of the characters slightly inclines the viewer towards her moral approval.

Along with this eroticized dimension of attraction, we can place another one more affable: tenderness. It's a prosocial feeling that leads the viewer to consider the object of his tenderness as a sweet, delicate being, worthy of love, affection and care. Different studies in social psychology suggest that viewers are predisposed to sympathize with characters whose facial features conform to what the ethologist Konrad Lorenz described as a 'child scheme' (large head, wide forehead, wide and round eyes, small nose, small chin, round cheeks, etc.). The 'child scheme' not only motivates feelings of affection and concern towards the subject, but also influences positively their social perception, being valued as more pleasant, friendly, healthy and competent (Glocker *et al.*, 2009).

Thus, it has effects on other factors such as moral approval (which favors) or compassion (which intensifies). It's a factor usually exploited in the animation cinema, observable in characters as Mickey Mouse (Gould, 2010) or Bambi (Etcoff, 1999). And it has been used in fiction films both to ensure the sympathy of the viewer, for example in *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), and to complicate their antipathy towards antagonists, in *Who Can Kill a Child?* (Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, 1976), as the title itself points out.

Finally, the gracefulness or comic nature of the character is another important factor. Firstly, because the ability to amuse the spectator, to make him laugh, is a powerful mechanism to obtain the viewers sympathy. And secondly, because the comic nature of the character lightens the moral appreciation of her intentions and actions, exonerating the character of an otherwise more rigorous moral judgment (Jones, 2011). Characters that do not stand out for the morality of their acts and intentions, not even when compared with the rest of the characters of the work, but still they are funny or attractive, sometimes receive our sympathy throughout the story, as happens with Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman) in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Wes Anderson, 2001) or Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz) in *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009).

3.5. Familiarity

Familiarity with the character may be another relevant factor in the constitution of sympathy, although different types of familiarity may be distinguished. Firstly, mere perceptual familiarity with the character can affect positively the sympathy he elicits on the viewer, as predicted by the 'mere exposure effect' or 'familiarity principle', studied in social psychology (Zajonc, 2001). Demonstrated with objects as diverse and neutral as Chinese characters or geometric fig-

ures, it's a psychological phenomenon by which people tend to develop a preference for things merely because they are perceptively familiar with them. It follows that the viewer tends to sympathize slightly more with the characters that are more exposed on the screen.

Secondly, the transtextual familiarity of the viewer may lead him to transfer his sympathies from external factors to the text itself. This transtextual familiarity includes a series of predispositions towards the characters and actors who embody them that do not depend on the way in which they are characterized by the text itself, but on previous expectations and links. In the case of sequels, remakes and adaptations, viewers habitually tend to arrive at the theater with a certain set of affective bondings established in previous encounters, that predisposes them to sympathize or dislike the character (intertextual familiarity). For example, it's difficult for a viewer of the British series *Sherlock* (Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, 2010-) to avoid a strong predisposition to sympathize with the protagonist as soon as it is presented on the scene.

At the same time, spectators also drag their sympathies and antipathies towards the stars who embody the characters in the fiction, predisposing the valence of the bond that they will establish with them (extratextual familiarity). Even those actors for whom the spectator does not have a formed opinion will end up having effects, hean opinion formed have effects on the sympathy they elicit, if only by means of the perceptive familiarity they induce. A phenomenon that explains, in part, the importance of the stars system in the film industry, given its impact on the emotional response of the viewer⁶.

To which one must add a possible predisposition to sympathize directly with the character who is recognized as the protagonist of the story by the mere fact of being the protagonist (architextual familiarity). That the protagonist acts virtuously and the antagonist in a reprehensible way is one of the most common narrative expectations, establishing a prejudice that can condition the sympathy and antipathy of the viewers even before they can evaluate other features of the most important characters (Raney, 2004).

It is possible to speculate that these transtextual predispositions, although they are influential at the beginning of the work, diminish significantly in importance as the narration advances. But they can still condition further evaluations, given the human tendency to interpret the actions of sympathetic people with favoritism.

Third, it is important to note the importance of the motivational familiarity with the character, that is, the degree of understanding of his motivations to which the text has allowed us to access. This understanding has special effects on the moral approval of the character. Smith (1995: 223) admits that "a developed picture of the motivations as well as the

⁶ The global success of Hollywood cinema lies not only in its aggressive distribution strategies but also in its ability to make its most prominent actors internationally known stars. A perfect example of what Joseph Nye (2004) calls 'soft power'.

actions of a character [...] may serve to exonerate actions which, viewed in isolation from this larger picture, might be easier to condemn". Wayne Booth (1961: 245-246) calls this phenomenon "insider's sympathy".

By knowing more about the characters and the context in which their actions are framed, we are more prepared to understand them and, consequently, to be understandable with them. The field of moral psychology has developed different studies in this respect, finding a tendency to favor and act with partiality with those whose story we know. For example, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2008: 104) states the following case:

We know, too, how easily an engaging story can defeat our allegiance to this or that dictum. Should cars parked in front of fire hydrants, such as one belonging to Bob the accountant, be towed? Sure. Now tell me a story about Joanna, a good woman who's having a bad day, with details about her hopes and dreams, her kindness to an ailing friend, her preoccupation with a troubled child. I don't want *her* car to be towed.

Knowing only one side of the story biases our moral approval, a phenomenon that Kahneman (2012: 86-87) labels as the WYSIATI principle ('What You See Is All There Is'). Being familiarized with the story of the other person counteracts the 'fundamental attribution error' or 'over-attribution effect', that is, the tendency or willingness to overstate internal personal dispositions or motives when it comes to explaining behavior observed in other people, giving on the contrary little weight for this same behavior to external reasons such as social role or situation. For example, we consider the actions of Bob the accountant as the result of his arrogance and indifference to social norms, while in Joanna's case we evaluate the same action as the result of the plight of an eminently kind person. Knowing the motivations of the moral offender, as long as they do not reveal a purely immoral intentionality, they lead us to be indulgent. And in many cases they induce compassion.

The favoritism produced by motivational familiarity is a normal phenomenon during the film watching. De Vaage (2014: 270-271), for example, reflects on a scene from *The Sopranos* in which Tony intercepts and threatens to his uncle's oncologist on a golf course, who neither answers nor returns the insistent calls of both. According to her, from a moral perspective Tony's behavior is reprehensible, but the series makes sure that we know his motivations (the concern for the well-being of his uncle, the frustrated attempts to get in touch with the doctor), whereas we know nothing about the doctor's situation (beyond his silence, and finding him playing golf).

3.6. *Homophily*

Homophily or attraction to equals also influences sympathy towards the characters, although it is possible to distinguish different ways of understanding this positive inclination towards the similar.

On the one hand, social homophilia refers to the inclination towards people who have similar social traits, such as age, sex, race, class or sexual orientation. It's a phenomenon that both psychoanalytic theory and multicultural studies propose, rather by intuition than by observation, as crucial in the processes of identification with film characters (and their perversions). And that some research developed within the framework of cognitive theory (Raney, 2004; Eder, 2006), based on what social psychologists call 'in-group bias' or 'intragroup attraction' (Berreby, 2008), partially supports.

Homophily not only helps to establish an affective bond with the character, but may also influence slightly her moral approval, especially when justifying her reprehensible behavior (Schiller, Baumgartner and Knoch, 2014). Anyhow, despite its possible impact, mere character similarity is not a good predictor of affective attachment to the character (Cohen, 2006), being undoubtedly a minor component in the constitution of sympathy.

Dispositional homophilia, that is, similarity in terms of experiences, values and attitudes, is much more important. In a classic research, Zillmann and Cantor (1976), using jokes involving relationships between superiors and subordinates (i.e., fathers-sons, professors-students, and employers-employees) found that individuals whose life experiences were closer to those of the superior group enjoyed more the jokes where the victim was the subordinate, and vice versa, regardless of their social traits.

The effect of dispositional homophilia is explained, in part, because the similarities facilitate the viewer's understanding of the character's motivations and reactions, which not only ensures a greater immersion in the flow of the narration, but also increases the motivational familiarity and the possibilities of empathizing with her.

In addition to these indirect effects, dispositional homophilia directly elicits sympathy through two routes. First, by establishing a sense of adhesion or fellowship with the character (Eder, 2006: 71), given the congruence of concerns and interests in relation to the events narrated. By sharing similar goals within the narrative, the viewer cares about the character's well-being and success, which fosters sympathy for the character. And second, dispositional homophilia elicits sympathy through the so-called 'confirmation bias', according to which individuals tend to favor information and persons who confirm one's preexisting beliefs. So the spectator not only aligns himself narratively with the character, but the mere fact that they show similar vital perspectives brings him closer to them.

The distinction between social and dispositional homophily is essential, since it allows to delve into the analysis of spectators' complex and diverse reactions to audiovisual narratives, beyond reductions based on race or sex, towards which some multiculturalist and feminist proposals have been inclined. For example, it helps to explain the success of Hong Kong kung-fu movies of the 1970s, as Bruce Lee's films, in countries such as the US or Japan, where these narratives would be enjoyed by a young public who found in the rebellion against authority demonstrated by the protagonists an experiential element they could bond with (among others), beyond their racial identity (although the villains were usually Japanese or North American).

Finally, it is worth noting the effect on sympathy of the body states synchrony between the spectator and the character, a phenomenon that could be labelled embodied empathy or homophily. As mentioned, the degree of coincidence between the spectator's somatic and pathemic state with the character during a scene influences her cognitive and emotional empathy with the character, which has consequences over sympathy. But embodied empathy also has direct effects on sympathy, as demonstrated by different researches focused on the phenomenon of motor and emotional imitation (Chartrand and van Baaren, 2009). Thus, the continuous spatial-temporal follow-up of the characters, as well as an intense corporal activity demonstrated by these, may influence the sympathy that the character elicits.

3.7. *Intimacy*

Finally, the degree of intimacy established with the characters can also be a factor with some impact on the sympathy elicited by them. As with intimacy, again, you can consider multiple aspects.

Proxemic intimacy, in the first place, as a purely spatial proximity. Visual proximity to the characters has consequences on other factors, such as familiarity and homophily. But it can also encourage unconsciously a positive feeling of intimacy with them by allowing us access to his personal space, to which we only allow access in real life to people with whom we have an intimate, physical relationship (Eder, 2006: 72-73). Proxemic intimacy grounds, to a large extent, the affective bond of the spectator with the protagonists of *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959). But it can also produce the opposite effect in case of excessive use, as in *Keane* (Lodge Kerrigan, 2004), where the incessant close-ups of the protagonist produces a sensation of discomfort, given the mutual invasion of the other's most intimate space.

Similarly, we can conceive the effect of a situational intimacy, induced by the access to private moments of the characters. The narrative gives us access not only their secrets, but also to delicate and embarrassing situations of the characters, promoting a sympathetic attitude towards them based on a feeling of complicity and shared intimacy (Eder, 2006: 72). It's a understudied factor, impossible to dissociate from other factors with which it interweaves, such as compassion, homophily and experiential familiarity. A common resource in this sense are the images where the character is

presented crying in the shower or the bed, inviting the viewer to access a space normally banned in real life due to the mutual desire for privacy of the victim and consideration of the viewer. Romantic comedies usually turn to this strategy, establishing a feeling of closeness with their protagonists by their presentation, for example, in the restroom (the term itself refers to the privacy of what happens inside those walls).

Finally, it is worth mentioning a dimension of intimacy that has been analyzed empirically, and that could be called interactional intimacy. Literary studies have shown that a first-person narrative increases the affective attachment to the character (Nodelman, 1991), a conclusion easily extendable to the case of audiovisual narratives. In this sense, as the research in the field of ‘Parasocial interaction’ (PSI)⁷ shows, when the character treats the spectators as if they were participating in a real social interaction, for example by greeting or addressing them directly, the degree of affective bonding increases (Auter, 1992). The strategy has been used repeatedly throughout the history of theater, and nowadays is increasingly common in audiovisual narratives. The producers of *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, 2013-) privilege this strategy –known as ‘breaking the fourth wall’– since its first scene, where the series presents its questionable protagonist.

4. Conclusions

The affective relationship of the spectator with the fictional characters of a movie is one of the central foundations of the filmic experience, being the main conditioner of the emotional reaction of the viewer. Sympathy has a complex genealogy, that depends on the interaction of multiple factors interrelated to each other, all susceptible of inducing different degrees of sympathy or antipathy towards the character. In this regard, given the complex interaction of the feelings that constitute it, differentiating between the different factors involved in the establishment of sympathy is useful in order to understand how different narrative artifacts produce various reactions in diverse viewers.

This theoretical work allows, firstly, to analyze the way in which texts organize their elements in order to ensure certain preferential readings, emphasizing positive factors to guarantee that the scope of the spectator’s sympathy towards the protagonist is as wide as possible (increasing, therefore, the distribution possibilities of the film). Secondly, it helps to explain why the viewer sympathizes in different degrees with the different characters presented by a narrative, a situation that is especially relevant in the cases in which these characters are confronted in the story. Thirdly, it provides a

⁷ Parasocial interaction (PSI) is concerned with the affective bonding of viewers with media products, although it’s mainly developed in the area of psychological studies of television reception. The characteristic features of newsreels and talk shows have oriented their research towards issues different from those that usually occupy the agenda of other theories, emphasizing the importance of direct appeal to the viewer by the show hosts, the persuasive power of media personae on the spectators, and even the separation difficulties that some spectators go through when the program ends its emission (Klimmt, Hartmann and Schramm, 2011; Eyal and Cohen, 2006; Lathera and Moyer-Gusea, 2011; Branch, Wilson and Agnew, 2013).

suitable framework for analyzing how certain works get their viewers to sympathize with characters that show characteristics that should produce their rejection (i.e., 'sympathy with the devil'), and how the work modulates throughout its development these sympathies and consequently the emotions derived from them. Finally, it allows us to explain why the same work is experienced in an unequal way, sometimes completely different, by different viewers, a matter of special relevance for (multi)cultural studies.

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