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El valor práctico de la teoría: Enseñar la Poética de Aristóteles a guionistas

The Practical Value of Theory: Teaching Aristotle's Poetics to Screenwriters

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RESUMEN: Esta comunicación presenta parte de la propuesta sobre ficción audiovisual desarrollada por Juan José García-Noblejas a partir de la Poética de Aristóteles y la noción de "refiguración" de Paul Ricoeur. La comunicación aplica esta propuesta a la re-escritura de un guión y propone que la "primera escritura" de un guión se centra en la estructura de la trama y los personajes, diálogos y acciones. La "re-escritura" se ocupa de estos mismos elementos, pero, sobre todo, de descubrir la estructura poética profunda que da sentido a la historia. Esta visión global permite al escritor volver a la trama para afinarla. Este movimiento entre lo particular y lo general se orienta a lograr la unidad y coherencia interna de la historia, iluminando así la exploración personal del autor sobre el sentido vital que la historia plantea y le plantea.

Palabras clave: poética, guión, reescritura, Aristóteles, Ricoeur, García-Noblejas, doble "navegación".

ABSTRACT: *This paper uses P. Ricoeur's studies on the Poetics, and his notion of "refiguration" as developed in the work of Juan José García-Noblejas, under the scope of the Aristotelian doctrine. It suggests that the "first writing" of a screenplay focuses on the structure of the plot and the characters, dialogue and actions. The "re-writing" deals with these same elements; but above all, discovers the deep poetic structure that holds together the story. From that point on, the writer is able to return to the plot and refine it. This back and forth movement ends up in coherence and unity of the story, and so illuminates the writer's personal exploration on the meaning of life.*

Keywords: *poetics, screenwriting, rewriting, Aristotle, Ricoeur, García-Noblejas, double "navigation".*

"The theater exists to deal with problems of the soul, with the mysteries of human life, not with its quotidian calamities".

David Mamet

1. Introduction

Is it possible to teach how to write for the screen? Does it make sense that a screenwriting school should seek to provide something other than mere technical rules about how to write a screenplay?¹

The issue at play in these questions is whether there are stable references and appropriate ways to attain a reasonable agreement on the artistic nature of audiovisual stories and, therefore, on the most suitable topics and ways to approach their writing. Against the backdrop of many negative answers to the previous questions², in this paper I would like to suggest that such principles do indeed exist and are to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*³. I would also like to put forth that one of the elements that most helps screenwriters to understand what their work as writers consists in and, in practice, to rewrite their history, is to get an in-depth knowledge not only of the theoretical or academic sense of the Aristotelian text, but also of its professional sense.

As is known, it is usual for screenwriting schools and the books that claim to teach how to write for the screen to refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*. However, more often than not, *Poetics* is quoted only as if it were a handbook on "how" to write stories⁴, despite the fact that, as some contemporary writers

¹ Part of this paper has been presented at the International Conference "Screenwriting Research: History, Theory and Practice", organized by The Film and Media Studies Section, Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, 9-11 September 2010. It was written in the light of some teaching experiences of the MA on Screenwriting and Audiovisual Development of the School of Communication, Universidad de los Andes (Chile), www.mgda.cl.

² Recently, Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian's* art critic stated his skepticism about the existence of a stable rule to judge works of art and the way in which he sorted out the issue: "If you believe there is only one 'correct' way to make art, or only one true style (a timeless classicism), then of course criticism is easy. You simply praise or condemn artists according to their fidelity to the norm. Only about one in a hundred people today believe in such a norm, and they are kidding themselves. We need critical standards that are contingent and temporal, rather than timeless and absolute. The only way to find these is by comparison, to say 'this is better than that'", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2010/aug/05/martin-creed-richard-wright-rivals>, 10-8-2010.

³ Aristotle's *Poetics* provides ample margin to extend what was initially said about tragedy to the activity of narration. Cfr. RICOEUR, Paul, *Temps et récit I*, Seuil, Paris, 1983, p. 56.

⁴ This is not the case with books such as TIERNNO, Michael, *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, Hyperion, New York, 2002, or COWGILL, Linda J., *Secrets of Screenplay Structure. How to Recognize and Emulate the Structural Frameworks of Great Films*, Lone Eagle, Los Angeles, CA, 1999.

have pointed out⁵, it also says something about the nature of stories, that is, “what” they are and “why” they are thus made up.

This paper presents part of the theoretical proposal about the nature of audiovisual fiction developed by Juan José García-Noblejas, starting from the reading of *Poetics*⁶, and briefly outlines a way to apply it during the phase of rewriting the script.

The first part of the paper shows in some detail how this author understands the poetic myth following Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, and describes the process of “double navigation” or perusal of the stories as a way to approach the myth. The second part outlines a methodology for the application of this proposal during the phase of rewriting the script, on the understanding that there is nothing more useful to a screenwriter than to know what a good story consists in. Finally the paper presents some reflections on the practical nature of the screenwriter’s craft.

A preliminary clarification about the ground covered by the following pages is called for. This clarification is mainly addressed to readers that are familiar with the use made of Aristotle’s *Poetics* by authors such as Robert McKee⁷, John Truby⁸ and other screenwriting experts, who for quite a number of years have been lecturing all over the world on how to write a story that will get good reviews and be a box-office success.

These lecturers’ interpretation of Aristotle’s text is most relevant to get to know the right tools to tell stories in an appealing way. In the following pages I do not directly deal with such narrative tools as the story event, the inciting

⁵ Cfr. for example, RORTY, Amélie Oksenberg, *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, and ANDERSEN, Øivind, HAARBERG, Jon (eds.), *Making Sense of Aristotle. Essays in Poetics*, Duckworth, London, 2003.

⁶ For this paper, I have followed the work developed by GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, in “Pensar hoy un sentido trascendente para la catarsis aristotélica”, in FARO, Giorgio (ed.), *Lavoro e vita quotidiana*, vol. IV, Edusc, Roma, 2003; “Identidad personal y mundos cinematográficos distópicos”, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, vol. XVII, n. 2, 2004, pp. 73-88 (in English: <http://www.poetcom.org/2008/04/personal-identi.html>, 13-9-2010); and “Resquicios de trascendencia en el cine. ‘Pactos de lectura’ y ‘segundas navegaciones’ en las películas”, in JIMÉNEZ CATAÑO, Rafael, GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José (eds.), *Poética & Cristianesimo*, Edusc, Roma, 2005. The core of the proposal is in *Poética del texto audiovisual. Introducción al discurso narrativo de la imagen*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1982, in which it is first published in an explicit way.

⁷ MCKEE Robert, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, Methuen, London, 1999.

⁸ TRUBY, John, *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller*, Faber & Faber, 2008.

incident, the hook, the antagonist, the conflict, the difference between text and subtext, the quest, the object of desire, the arc of the protagonist, etc. What I intend to do is to explore in further detail *what* stories consist of and *why* they are written the way they are written. In this sense, their perspective and mine differ. Theirs can be called technical; mine is theoretico-practical.

My aim in what follows is to suggest a new reading of *Poetics* –associated with prudential decisions of writers and spectators– more humanistic and practical than technical or sociological in nature. To put it briefly and directly, the core idea of the following pages is that screenwriting is not only a technical matter focusing on the suitable use of narrative tools, but that it is a human activity in which other dimensions come into play. These dimensions have to do with the authors' and spectators' conscience and with their status and dignity as human beings that write or see screenplays.

This difference in perspective makes it advisable on this occasion to omit citing and referring to the aforementioned screenwriting experts, or to others such as Kenneth Atchity and Chi-Li Wong⁹; Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever and Sue Vidars¹⁰; Ansen Disbell¹¹; Syd Field¹²; David Howard and Edward Mabley¹³; Lew Hunter¹⁴; Robert Kernan¹⁵; Richard Krevolin¹⁶; Charlie Moritz¹⁷; Robin Russin and William Downs¹⁸; Linda Seger¹⁹; and Richard Walter²⁰, to mention just a few of oft-quoted names at screenwriting schools.

⁹ ATCHITY, Kenneth, WONG, Chi-Li, *Writing treatments that sell*, An Owl Book, New York, 1997.

¹⁰ COWDEN, Tami D., LAFEVER, Caro, VIDERS, Sue, *The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes and Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes*, Lone Eagle, Los Angeles, CA, 2000.

¹¹ DISBELL, Ansen, *Plot*, Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, 1999.

¹² FIELD, Syd, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting. A step-by-step guide from concept to finished script*, Dell, 1984.

¹³ HOWARD, David, MABLEY, Edward, *The Tools of Screenwriting. A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 1995.

¹⁴ HUNTER, Lew, *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434. The Industry's Premier Teacher Reveals the Secrets of the Successful Screenplay*, Perigee Trade, 2004.

¹⁵ KERNAN, Robert, *Building Better Plots*, Writer's Digest, Ohio, 1999.

¹⁶ KREVOLIN, Richard W., *Screenwriting from the Soul*, Renaissance Books, Los Angeles, CA, 1998.

¹⁷ MORITZ, Charlie, *Scriptwriting for the Screen*, Routledge, London-New York, 2001.

¹⁸ RUSSIN, Robin U., DOWNS, William M., *Screenplay. Writing the Picture*, Harcourt College Publishers, Fort Worth, 2000.

¹⁹ SEGER, Linda, *Making a Good Script Great*, Silman-James Press, 2010.

²⁰ WALTER, Richard, *Screenwriting: the Art, Craft and Business of Film and Television Writing*, A Plume book, New York, 1988.

Having said that, the relation existing between these and other similar writers and Aristotle's *Poetics* is worth studying in detail and will be dealt with in a future article.

2. *The Aristotelian myth as a principle of unity of the story*

The thesis put forth here is that Aristotle's *Poetics* gives the necessary guidelines to understand that there are some stable principles within the story, which make it possible to know the poetic consistence of a given work, and that this stability derives from the poetic myth.

As is known, in Chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle indicates that a tragedy consists of six elements: *mythos* (plot), *ethé* (characters), *dianoia* (the characters' thoughts), *lexis* (the language by means of which the previous elements are communicated), *opsis* (visual elements) and *melopea* (rhythm). He adds that the most important of them all is the myth, which can be likened to "the soul of tragedy"²¹.

García-Noblejas points out that Aristotle uses two ways of reasoning about the consistence of the poetic myth: one is more descriptive and psychological and the other is more synthetic and ontological:

In the first case, he associates it with the dramatic plot, insofar as it is "pragmaton systasis", a credible or necessary fabric of human actions and situations –which ordinarily are hardly fathomable– by means of characters that act as if they were persons. In the second case, the myth is considered literally as the "soul of tragedy", in that the soul is understood as the principle of immanent actions in living beings: it has the consistency of being "mimesis praxeos"²².

Given this second sense of the myth –as "soul of tragedy" and "*mimesis praxeos*"–, the poetic proposal suggests that a consistent story is one that has a vital principle which acts with respect to the other elements (characters,

²¹ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1450 a 40-41. The myth is «the "soul" (or life-source) of tragedy», as translated by Halliwell in HALLIWELL, Stephan, *The Poetics of Aristotle: translation and commentary*, Duckworth, London, 1987, p. 93.

²² GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Pensar hoy...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 271-272. The internal citations of "pragmaton systasis" and "mimesis praxeos" are from *Poetics*, 1450 a 4-5 and 1450 a 16-17, respectively.

dialogue, setting, etc.), “just like (the soul) acts”²³ with respect to the living being and, in particular, “the soul in persons insofar as they are capable of *praxis*, of self-perfective actions of an intellectual and voluntary nature”²⁴. This, therefore, assumes understanding that the highest immanent actions of “prattontas”, i.e. humans insofar as they act as living beings, necessarily include to a larger or lesser extent a capability for deliberation and freedom that is notable in any case. On the other hand, lower instances of “praxis” – more or less shared with the rest of living beings, and ranging from nutrition to imagination to cogitative power– assume spheres of a domain that, initially, is more associated with material sensitivity, yet should not be likened to animal instincts.

On this basis, the poetic proposal sustains that tragedy, *animated* by the poetic myth always has to do with human *praxis*, understood as *progress* towards what is inherent to the identity of human beings according to their nature, or, in the words of Aristotle, “towards themselves” (*epídois eis autón*). Such progress, both in the case of poetic works and in persons includes “not only the spiritual habits in pursuit of happiness, but also feelings and changes in sensitivity, which involve turning about ‘from the one to the other’ (*metaballein eis allón*)”²⁵.

Saying that the tragedy is always about human *praxis* also means saying –without thereby allowing grounds for subjectivist relativism– that it deals with the infinite variety of ways to pursue and attain (or not) “the same: happiness”, given that there is no technique and not even an empirically describable or measurable definition of what is happiness and how this necessary happiness can be attained, i.e. something that we, human beings cannot but wish and pursue.

As can be seen, there are two issues being dealt with here. On the one hand, there is the *poetic work*, with the characteristics that make it duly poetical and, on the other, there is the *reality* that this work always imitates or re-presents: human *praxis*. In this case, to “imitate” not only means to “look alike” in the photographic sense, but mainly to “act like” in an analogical or rather metaphorical sense.

Bearing these two extremes in mind, García-Noblejas posits that in the same way as in man there is a final reason that coincides with human happiness, in poetic works there is a final sense that “pulls or draws” the poetic

²³ Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, 417 b 6-7.

²⁴ GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Pensar hoy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

oeuvre to its ontological end (*telos*), something that –if it is truly artistic– it cannot help wanting, beyond its strict end (*peras*) or mere denouement (*lusis*)²⁶.

The fact that the poetic work itself is drawn by its final sense to its own perfection produces an effect habitually known as the additional clause in the definition of tragedy, in which Aristotle claims that “through pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) such affections are purged (*catharsis*)”²⁷.

When García-Noblejas associates *catharsis*, as an effect inherent to a poetic work, with the tension of such work towards its end in the sense of *telos*, not only of *peras*, he is proposing a stable reference that permits to qualify or disqualify a given work as *genuinely poetic*, i.e. artistic, regardless of its author’s intention or the success it may have had with the critics or at the box-office. If the work does not achieve such cathartic effect, which consists in an increase in life knowledge, it cannot be said to be poetic because it does not “progress towards its own perfection”²⁸.

This is as far as I shall go in the consideration of the poetic myth, in its strong sense, as a configurator of texts.

From this starting point, we can understand the proposal for dual “navigation”²⁹. This proposal deals first and foremost with the reception of the story, but, as we shall see, it can also be applied to approach the process of rewriting.

Following Ricoeur when he speaks of “mimesis III”, García-Noblejas posits that in the encounter between film and spectator there are two moments that can be differentiated: that of *comprehension* and that of *application*. The former consists in the intellectual and technical *comprehension* of the text, whereas the latter is the real-life application of the sense of the movie by the person that is watching it³⁰.

²⁶ Cfr. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Pensar hoy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

²⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1449 b 27-28.

²⁸ “If a work by itself does not attain such effect [catharsis] (say, due to the ‘form of its content’, that joins together ontologico-aesthetic and ethico-political reasons), then it does not qualify for a high enough category to say that it is ‘poetic’, that it progresses towards its own perfection”. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Pensar hoy...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-273. In a note, he points out that “saying ‘by itself’ is equivalent to saying ‘before the readers or spectators’ as well as ‘on behalf of the artist’”. *Ibid.*, p. 272, note 29.

²⁹ It is worth noting that when this author speaks of “navigation”, he does not do it in the Platonic context. Cfr. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Identidad personal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

³⁰ When Ricoeur posits that there is no “brutal short-circuit between a fully objective analysis of the structures of narration and the appropriation of sense by the subjects” he alludes to these two moments, referred to the reading of a text. Cfr. RICOEUR, Paul, *Du texte à l’action. Essais*

The moment of *comprehension* (or “first navigation”, as García-Noblejas also calls it) consists in the spectator appropriating the *surface structures* of the narrative and dramatic plot. In turn, the moment of application (or “second navigation”) is that in which the spectator gains access to the *deep poetic structures* of the text or, in other words, the myth, by means of hermeneutical analysis.

It is worth clarifying that when García-Noblejas speaks of two different moments, he does not refer to a chronological distinction since, as a rule, comprehension and application take place at the very moment of watching the movie. However, there is perhaps a slight displacement into the future of application with respect to comprehension –as comprehension necessarily precedes and projects application. These are two different moments from an epistemological perspective:

‘Otherwise, comprehension would be an arbitrary act. Thus, to describe this notion, Ricoeur coins the term *refiguration*’, which is the one I use here. If I did not make this distinction rather than working as promised in Ricoeur’s shadow, I would be operating in the shadow of Richard Rorty’s ludic subjectivism. A view I cannot share as I prefer that offered by Umberto Eco in his meaning of the text³¹.

It should be made clear, however, that the application or “second navigation” cannot be performed on any work, but only on a text “endowed with an organic configuration in the strong Aristotelian sense, of poetic myth understood as *mimesis praxeos*”³². In other words, there is a necessary configuration requirement, as explained before. In addition, in principle, not any ordinary spectator is capable of “adding on” sense to the poetic work from his or her own life consciousness.

This takes us to the point I wanted to make. Like García-Noblejas in his reading of *Poetics*, we can say that an audiovisual story is artistic if its parts interact in “the same way” as the human person does in his or her search for a full life. And this is what poetic mimesis consists in.

d’herméneutique II, Seuil, Paris, 1986, p. 168, cit. in BALAGUER, Vicente, *La interpretación de la narración. La teoría de Paul Ricoeur*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2002, p. 47.

³¹ GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Identidad personal...*, op. cit., p. 75. The internal citation is from BALAGUER, Vicente, op. cit., p. 133.

³² GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Identidad personal...*, op. cit., p. 76. Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, VI, 1449 b 24, 1450 a 4.

In other words, a story will be “a good story”, in the sense of being consistent, if it has a “soul” that unifies all its elements in the same way as they are unified in a living being, and is not made up by the mere inorganic aggregation of such elements or by “decomposition”, which is the companion to death.

3. Plot rewrite and search for the poetic myth of the story

The screenwriters’ job at the rewrite phase assumes the reception of the story, given that they are “the first readers” of their text³³. In the light of the poetic proposal for dual “navigation”, rewriting can be understood as the search for the principle or unifying substance of dramatic action, which is already present in the story in an embryonic form when the writer has completed the first writing of the script³⁴.

“First navigation rewriting” is more analytic and consists in checking each of the elements of the story –exposition, characters and characterization, conflicts, sub-plots, scenes, dialogues, structure of the action, etc.– in order to detect whatever weaknesses the script may have: dialogues that are more exposition than action; characters that do not behave in a way consistent with their personality; jumps between scenes; insufficiently motivated actions, etc. In this phase the writer treats the characters like persons and requires their actions and emotions to have the consistency of actions and emotions of real-life people.

“Second navigation rewriting” is more synthetic. In this phase the screenwriter endeavours to make all the elements of the script aim at the point of the story. As Russin and Downs say: “It’s especially important to track the working out of your theme. If there are scenes or dialogue that don’t express *what your story is about*, they must be altered or cut”³⁵. When engaged in “second-navigation rewriting”, the screenwriter is concerned with the same elements as in “first-navigation rewriting”, but this time the focus is on the myth or the deep poetic structure that gives the story unity.

³³ Cfr. BRENES, Carmen Sofía, *El trabajo del espectador*, paper presented at the “International Seminar on Rethinking Fiction in Film & TV”, Rome, December 3-5, 2009 (forthcoming).

³⁴ It is necessary to bear in mind, as Kermode points out, that before getting to the end it is most likely that the work may still lack unity. Cfr. KERMODE, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.

³⁵ RUSSIN, Robin U., DOWNS, William M., *Screenplay. Writing the Picture*, Harcourt College Publishers, Fort Worth, 2000, p. 300. My italics.

This double shift can be likened to a pendulum that goes from the particular (a detail in the characterization, a dialogue) to the general (the sense of the story as a whole). And from there, once again back to the particular (the rewriting of the plot).

An example may help to clarify what I mean³⁶. A student (in my course) who was writing a story about two lovers was unable to achieve the unity of her story until she asked herself the following question: “Why does the protagonist refuse to stay with her beloved—even if this involves abandoning husband and children— if, in principle, it seems that she would be happier if she did?” When she was doing the rewrite of her story, she noticed that in the second act climax this woman refused to go to bed with her lover because of “generic guilt”. From this incident, this student came to the conclusion that her story was exploring the awakening of conscience. This awareness, triggered by the text itself, helped her to rewrite the plot. It made her realize that at the end of her story her protagonist could not possibly stay with her lover without betraying the soul of the story that she was trying to tell. This had to do, precisely, with the fact that “listening to the conscience leads to do things that can be very painful”. The student was capable of “seeing” the life sense of her story at a very advanced phase of rewriting, when she was concerned not with particular details but with the story as a whole.

4. *Reflections on the practical nature of screenwriting*

In the words of David Mamet, “[t]he theater exists to deal with problems of the soul, with the mysteries of human life, not with its quotidian calamities”³⁷. In turn, García-Noblejas says that a “screenwriter is basically an explorer of human condition and nature”³⁸. A screenwriter is not somebody who knows where the treasure is hidden, that is, the sense of the story, because he buried it and later pretends to have found it. On the contrary, a screenwriter, as a rule, is somebody who does not know what he will find until he writes the story and rethinks it. Seen this way, screenwriting is always an engaging craft that calls for commitment, since it involves exploring what may be worthy or unworthy in human life in fictional situations.

³⁶ I have been explicitly authorized by the student to use this case as an example.

³⁷ MAMET, David, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, p. 27.

³⁸ GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Prólogo*, in *El guión y la trama*, Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, Madrid, 1999, p. 11.

The reason for this is that the creation (as well as the reception) of narrative and dramatic works does not form part of theoretical knowledge in which something is or is not true; neither is the substance of creation/reception of a technical nature in which the evaluation criterion is whether they serve their purpose or not. In art there are no recipes that guarantee success. The sphere of the creation of literary or audiovisual works is that of *fabricated* truth, in which it is necessary to make decisions because, as Aristotle says, “to know what is to be done, it is necessary to do what needs to be known”³⁹. Therefore, it is an activity in which the capability for mistake and to learn from mistakes (as well as in life) is a constituent part. What is correct in the practical sphere and therefore in the field of poetic art is “what has been corrected”.

Another way of expressing the same idea is to say with García-Noblejas, that theoretical knowledge is “fully disinterested”; that exclusively technical knowledge is “univocally addressed to doing”; and that practical knowledge “is directly linked with the fragility that is typical of free human actions”⁴⁰. In the practical sphere, human beings must *make up their minds* whether to do something or not and it is in this decision-making process that man –as it were– *comes into being*⁴¹.

In script writing and rewriting, this means that the author can only know what he must do by doing it, and that it is in this doing that he expresses a vital commitment to what he does: when a writer writes, not only is this the embodied acting out of poetic (artistic) reasons, but also of the other four dimensions of practical activity: politics, rhetoric, ethics and aesthetics⁴².

In addition, as already mentioned, the central characteristic of the script as a “man-made” object that re-presents *praxis* is its internal unity. Therefore, as pointed out by Dorothea Frede after Aristotle, all the elements have the

³⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Eth. Nic.*, 1103 to 32-33.

⁴⁰ Cfr. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Introducción a la epistemología de la información. Curso 1992-93, pro manuscripto*, p. 3.

⁴¹ Robert Spaemann refers to this *coming-into-being* when he says that persons are responsible for their nature. “What they do is assume a new relation to their nature; they freely endorse the laws of their being, or alternatively they rebel against them and ‘degenerate’”. SPAEMANN, Robert, *Personen. Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen ‘etwas’ und ‘jemand’*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 1996, p. 42.

⁴² The relationship between literature and ethics from the perspective of the whole of the work (and not only in relation to the actions of the characters) has been studied, among others, in ESKIN, Michael, “On Literature and Ethics”, *Poetics Today*, vol. 25, Winter 2004, pp. 573-594.

character of “necessariness”⁴³. Nothing in a narration is there just by chance, everything has a cause. This dramatic need requirement prevents the use or instrumentalization of the work as a vehicle to communicate any aspect that is not strictly poetic.

These two questions, the practical nature of screenwriting and rewriting and the work’s need for internal unity inspire some closing reflections.

The first one is the fact that writing and rewriting stories (as well as reading or watching them on screen) belongs within the sphere of culture and not only of entertainment. The cinema and fiction contents on television have a humanistic dimension that, as such, can contribute to cultivating and understanding man⁴⁴. According to García-Noblejas, when we see a film – and, consequently, when we write a film– “we become involved as persons, not only as citizens or consumers”⁴⁵. Thus understood, the cinema becomes a place of encounter with one’s own identity, with the person one is coming to be, as Spaemann says. And also, if the viewer-subject is up to it and the film measures up, it may be the place of encounter with the foundational source of one’s own being.

The second reflection is that this poetic vision of a story permits an initial clarification in the sphere of genres, which may prove to be helpful at the time of writing a script. With no intention of joining in the academic debate on the issue of genre⁴⁶, suffice it to remember that genres as a rule are born to

⁴³ Cfr. FREDE, Dorothea, *Necessity, Chance, and “What Happens for the Most Part” in Aristotle’s Poetics*, in RORTY, Amélie Oksenberg (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 197-219.

⁴⁴ Cfr. LLANO, Alejandro, *Deseo, violencia, sacrificio. El secreto del mito según René Girard*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2004, p. 14, and RICOEUR, Paul, *Temps et récit III*, Seuil, Paris 1985, p. 247, in which Ricoeur points out that reading is a “*expérience vive*” (“vital experience”). When narrating his experience, playwright José Rivera holds that he decided to write screenplays because in it he saw “the chance to really leave your fingerprints on the culture”. RIVERA, José, “Split Personality: Random Thoughts on Writing for Theater and Film”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 45, Issue 2, Winter 2006, p. 92.

⁴⁵ GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Resquicios de trascendencia*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴⁶ As Pablo Echart points out, the study of cinematographic genres has been linked, for a long time, to the literary and has only been studied independently since 1990. Echart provides a historical overview of the academic literature on genres, particularly romantic comedy, and includes the interesting account by Alastair Fowler on genres, which draws on Wittgenstein’s thesis of “family resemblances”. ECHART, Pablo, *La imagen de la felicidad en la comedia romántica del Hollywood de los años treinta*, Doctoral thesis, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, 2001, pp. 219-239. On film genres in general, see ALTMAN, Rick, *Film/Genre*, British Film Institute, 1999; NEALE, Stephen, *Genre and contemporary Hollywood*, British Film Institute, 2002; and GRANT, Barry Keith (ed.), *Film genre reader III*, University of Texas Press, 2003. For a closer look at particular genres, see HIGGINS, Scott, “Suspenseful Situations: Melodra-

group together stories that are similar and that, at the same time, the way to define a genre is based on the observation of the characteristics of the stories already included within it. This “empiricist dilemma”, as Pablo Echart calls it citing Marzal, consists basically in the circularity involved in the study of genre, which makes it impossible “to determine what comes first, the members of a genre or its characteristics”⁴⁷.

The poetic proposal outlined in these pages may in practice help the screenwriter to overcome this difficulty⁴⁸. If the stories are representations of human *praxis* and if it is possible to arrive at the crucial action that gives them unity, i.e. the poetic myth, through the affective manifestation of the feelings embodied in the characters-in-action in search of their end –not only as *peras* (a strictly literal end), but as *telos* (a teleological end)– then we can develop a genre classification based on the set or clusters of habits and feelings highlighted in any story⁴⁹.

From this perspective, it is possible to say that Action and Adventure movies operate on the basis of a trio of emotions or passions –hope, anger and boldness– in the presence of evil. Romance stories add to these three sensitive components a strong dose of tension between the yearning for a good that is absent and the enjoyment of a good that is present at the end of the story. Terror movies are articulated round the effect of fear produced by the

matic Narrative and the Contemporary Action Film”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 47, Issue 2, Winter 2008, pp. 74-96; EVERETT, Wendy, “Lost in Transition? The European Road Movie, or A Genre ‘adrift in the cosmos’”, *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 37, Issue 3, 2009, pp. 165-175; SÁNCHEZ-ESCALONILLA, Antonio, “Hollywood and the Rhetoric of Panic: The Popular Genres of Action and Fantasy in the Wake of the 9/11 Attacks”, *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, vol. 38, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 10-20.

⁴⁷ ECHART, Pablo, *op. cit.*, p. 231. Cfr. also MARZAL, José Javier, *Melodrama y géneros cinematográficos. Reconocimiento, identidad y diferencia*, Episteme, Valencia, vol. 122, 1996.

⁴⁸ Authors such as Fowler and Selbo work on the relationship between genres and the act of screenwriting. Cfr. FOWLER, Alastair, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Harvard University Press, 1982, and SELBO, Jule, *The Constructive Use of Film Genre for the Screenwriter. The Relevant Knowledge Component of The Mental Space of Film Genre*, paper presented at “Rethinking Screenwriting”, University of Art and Design Helsinki, Sept. 10, 2009.

⁴⁹ This line has already been explored by screenwriters such as Russin and Downs, when they propose the classification of stories into five categories according to the emotions that they trigger in the viewer: 1) Courage, 2) Fear and Loathing, 3) The Need to Know, 4) Laughter, and 5) Love and Longing. Cfr. RUSSIN, Robin U., DOWNS, William M., *op. cit.*, pp. 197-231. Also Pablo Braga has dealt with this topic in BRAGA, Paolo, *Dal personaggio allo spettatore. Il coinvolgimento nel cinema e nella serialità televisiva americana*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2003.

evil that is absent yet possible. The Comedy genre is more radical because its specific characteristic underlines the condition of inferiority of the character and, at the same time, encourages a merciful look from the viewer. If mercy is done away with, comedy is no longer comedy: what is left is cynicism, and this does no longer elicit laughter but sorrow. Thus, comedy is the genre with the strongest claims for an opening to transcendence⁵⁰.

When the screenwriter searches for the nucleus of the action that gives unity to the story in the phase of “second navigation rewriting”, he can observe the main feelings and habits that appear initially in his characters – particularly in the protagonist– and ask himself which cluster of emotions or aspect of human life he is exploring. Reflection on these variables may help him detect which genre he is working on and, on this basis, re-write the parts that strike the wrong chord.

There is one last reflection derived from the practical nature of script writing and rewriting. Just like it is only a good man that habitually does good actions, and it is those very same actions that make him good and even better, in a poetic work –in as far as it is practical in nature– the elements (characters-in-action, vicissitudes and insights, dialogues, sub-plots, etc.) will be good insofar as they make “the work good” or, in other words, insofar as they achieve the unity and ultimate perfection of the story.

This implies that when the screenwriter undertakes his “second navigation rewriting”, in his evaluation of the story as a whole, his assessments of the characters, which in his “first writing” were of a moral kind (in terms of flaws and virtues), this time in the course of this more synthetic process of “rewriting” become more technical. Characters will be “poetically good” even if they are “morally bad” in the diegesis identified with the real world, if they are suited to the unity of the story being narrated. Just like Aristotle said that wine should be “good” not in itself, but good to whoever drinks it⁵¹, the screenwriter should know that for some characters to be “good”, they must be “great villains”.

⁵⁰ As seen by Flannery O'Connor when she points out that only when the actual possibility of salvation or damnation is considered real and “only if we are secure in our beliefs we can see the comical side of the universe.” O'CONNOR, Flannery, *Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1970, p. 167.

⁵¹ ARISTOTLE, *Eth. Nic.*, 1155 b 28-33. This quotation is from book VIII, on friendship. Aristotle explains it would surely be ridiculous to wish wine well; if one wishes anything for it, it is that it may keep so that one may have it oneself, whereas in the case of a friend we ought to wish what is good “for his own sake”. In the case of wine the “good” is of a technical nature (good “for”).

This does not mean that ethical, political, rhetorical or aesthetic considerations should be marginal to “second navigation rewriting”. On the contrary: just because the art of story-writing is a practical activity it is at the time of searching for the thematic unity of the work that the author *makes up his mind* and takes decisions on what has been written. The previously mentioned example of the student who wrote a story about two lovers may help to see what this means.

That student wanted to give her story an open ending and not disclose whether the woman would leave her husband or not. In fact, the story is entitled “Shall I see you tomorrow?” But what the student could not help “closing” was her personal decision (her decision as author) about the reason for that ending, that is, deciding that the woman’s actions prior to the climax necessarily (with the *necessariness* of fiction that Aristotle refers to) led the woman as a character to an unhappy ending, because she did not want to hear the voice of her conscience just beginning to “wake up”. By not opting for a close-ended ending, what our student did not want to do –or did not know how to do– was to make up *her mind* (as person) about the action that she was showing. In other words, she was personally unable to accept the crucial proposal made by the fiction that she herself had written, which could be expressed in the active correlation between a treacherous action and unhappiness.

The foregoing considerations may appear to be theoretical and, in a way, they are. It is one thing to know how to rewrite a script and another quite different one how to actually rewrite it. When the screenwriter works at rewriting, he needs to get feedback on his work so as to get to know what the core of the story is, which poetic myth rules it. And this accounts for the importance of story editors, story doctors, analysts, etc.

A screenwriter who knows about these matters will undoubtedly know more than if he only knows the technical rules of “how” to write a story. Such knowledge will be of great use at the time of doing as much rewriting of the script as necessary until he succeeds in showing what he had intuited he wanted to tell from the very outset. And here lies the practical value of being familiar with Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

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