

AUTO-FOCALISATION IN FILM NARRATIVE

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In this paper I intend to introduce the notion of auto-focalisation within the context of cinematic studies about the phenomenon of focalisation. Starting from a consideration of filmic focalisation as eminently mimetic I propose that the cinematic icon possesses the capacity to focalise itself, therefore offering the viewer an attitude about its own nature. Auto-focalisation is a reformulation of traditional focalisation which enables both external and internal notions of focalisation to include a wider range of possibilities, possibilities which stem from a new emphasis on the visual quality of the image.

Focalisation enjoys a central and engaging position in recent studies of both literary and cinematographic narratives which propose quite diverse definitions. Most studies on the matter have concentrated on the description of the differences between internal and external focalisation in both media, and have very often followed Genette's or Bal's accounts of the phenomenon. These two theories define focalisation as ultimately a selection of information that takes place in the story (Genette 1982, 49), a selection which may be carried out through the activity of perception (Bal 1985, 100). Both of them refer exclusively to focalisation as the means of constructing a text from the raw material of what they term "fabula", and this process is only concerned with the placing of information in a coherent, codified manner. These conceptions tend to reject the existence of any other signifying process in focalisation. Seymour Chatman has proposed a somewhat different and rather original definition of focalisation, where he includes the activity of *slant*: the capacity of characters, and also narrators, to have attitudes about things in the world of the narrative (1986, 197). It is this particular approach to focalisation,

also hinted at by other critics,¹ that I wish to use as a starting point for my discussion of auto-focalisation.

Cinematographic focalisation in the traditional sense can be of two types: internal or external, depending on whether a shot is introduced by the gaze of a character in the diegesis or not. What are the effects of such a focalisation? External focalisation has been interpreted as a sign of objectivity and detachment, while internal focalisation seems to first of all motivate the inclusion of the focalised object, an effect derived from Genette's and Bal's idea of focalisation as selection of information. Other critics argue that the internal focalisation device of shot/reverse shot deletes any apparent traces of explicit narration, transforming focalisation into a mark of classical narrative modes (Dayan 1974; Browne 1977). Classifications of internal focalisation strategies (Branigan 1984; Deleyto 1991) clarify the many different ways in which subjectivity can be inscribed in a text. These taxonomies reveal that internal focalisation relies heavily on reaction shots for its construction, as they close the structure of focalisation and therefore give it its motivation and meaning. Whether the reaction shot comes first or last in the structure, whether it motivates the structure or adds a final meaning and closure, it is always an essential component of such a textual device. A simplification of these strategies shows us that the pervading function of internal focalisation is to allow the film to present to its audience a character's reaction to what (s)he and/or we see.² Focalisation therefore gives preeminence to the process of conveying a character's attitude through his/her gaze. Focalisation has an attitudinal component.

In all the cases of internal focalisation the film always resorts ultimately to external focalisation, as in cinema it is difficult to offer the focaliser and the focalised in the same shot.³ This prevalence of external focalisation runs parallel to the iconic nature of cinema: external focalisation is not as mediated as (or is less mediated than) internal; iconic media are less mediated than symbolic ones. Focalisation in film is intimately related to mimesis; and it

¹ See Deleyto: "perception must be understood in such a sense that it may include an agent's world view (ideology, conceptual system, *Weltanschauung*, etc.)" (1991, 161).

² For a detailed account of the process of formation of these structures see Deleyto (1991, 171-6).

³ "In film . . . it is problematic to express the characteristics of the vision while showing its object, hence the resource to shots in external focalisation, in which the focaliser becomes focalised and in which we can analyse better how what he perceives affects him" (Deleyto 1991, 170).

could not be otherwise in such a mimetic medium as cinema, where each narrative device requires an iconic representation.⁴ The strategies of focalisation proposed by Deleyto and Branigan have as a common characteristic their strong codification, which means a low degree of self-consciousness as diegetic artifacts, turning themselves into supporters of a mimetic (here synonymous with unobtrusive) kind of communication. In literature the interventions of mediators like focaliser and narrator are necessary for the reader to build up a coherent heterocosm from the abstract (mediated) medium verbal language is. In the case of classical cinema, the faculty which the viewer exercises in order to create this heterocosm is his/her vision, a less mediated medium which shifts the emphasis from the intermediaries (focaliser, narrator) to the object of perception itself. The connotations of mimesis, rather than of diegesis, that focalisation has in cinema reveal the object of perception as the recipient of more functions than the heterocosm abstractly created in literature: in this case a certain part of the process of focalisation may be carried out by the image itself, and about itself.

This obvious characteristic of images will be useful in my proposal of what I will term *auto-focalisation*. Seymour Chatman has supported a definition of focalisation, or point of view as he calls it, which bears resemblances to these previous considerations. He suggests that the point of view of a character can be obtained through the mere presentation of somebody showing an attitude towards what (s)he is doing. In a novel, he continues, a character's point of view on a situation would only give us what the character thinks of it, and we would have no other way of imagining it than through the information provided by him/her; imagination would then play a large part. But in film the showing of the action, when a character is the centre of it, gives us the possibility of enjoying two points of view at the same time: the looker's and the actor of the action's. This is so because of the iconic nature of cinema: photography shows things independently of human point of view. Photography cannot avoid representing things whereas the writer can restrict a point of view to a character: the writer does not need

⁴ The construction of subjectivity consists in the attribution of visual or aural material to a character in the diegesis. In order to achieve this, the text usually introduces this character as motivating the subjective material and this introduction is commonly effected by means of a visual representation of such character, a mimetic anchor for subjectivity. This is so in the cases of shot/reverse shot, eyeline match, semi-subjective shots and focalisation through *mise-en-scène* or camera movement.

to show the object to portray it convincingly because writing uses a more symbolic, abstract system of representation (1981, 135-6).

Cinema is therefore a rich vehicle of information as it contains a great number of codes which work simultaneously. A character may not only anchor other shots to the text by means of his/her gaze, but also these shots may include other characters who also provide information about themselves. This information, conveyed through his/her attitude and gaze, sometimes manages to make the viewer share the characters' feelings more strongly, this type of focalisation becoming therefore a vehicle of identification similar to traditional focalisation. The cinema provides a huge amount of information per shot and therefore inevitably presents the viewer with a highly redundant material when several characters focalise something in the same frame. The origin of this redundancy lies in the capacity of each photographic icon to focalise itself, independently of the focalisation through a character that the text may impose on it. This provokes an excess of informational codes which the division into several shots (except in the case of semi-subjective shots [Mitry 1965 and see Deleyto 1991]) solves, in those moments in which an accurate depiction of emotion is needed, by delimiting the amount of information each shot conveys. This does not mean that cinema rejects "crowded" compositions in emotionally fraught scenes. In any case I am dealing exclusively with visual reactions, and focalisation in a shot that includes a character and the object of his/her vision tends to rely, also, on dialogue rather than on purely visual editing devices: in an internally focalised scene between two characters, who are shown in the same shot, dialogue alternatively shifts the attention of the viewer from one to the other interlocutor, acting in a way similar to editing.

Cinematographic focalisation tends to prefer editing to compositions in depth during the presentation of strong emotional scenes. This tendency exemplifies how cinema is in a way conscious of its redundancy in such moments, and how it has searched for a textual strategy that helps discard such redundancy by isolating a single character's emotion within the limits of the frame, thus providing a corresponding increase in clarity and emotional effectiveness. Several examples from *The Birds* (1963) will be useful in order to clarify this point. A series of scenes in this film present a strikingly similar structure: a shot in depth construes an internally focalised situation in which one of the characters within the frame focalises the other, but when the scene comes to its emotional peak this composition is altered and the text resorts to editing. The first one appears during the meeting

between Melanie and Anne, the school teacher, in the porch of the latter's house. Melanie has asked Anne the name of Mitch's sister but has refused to let her know the real reasons for her visit to Bodega Bay (an interest in Mitch). Camera movement destroys the previous composition in depth and isolates Melanie as she reacts to Anne's inquisitive questioning, which she interprets as a proof of Anne's love for Mitch. The text seems to discard the composition in depth as a useful device in the presentation of Melanie's reaction, because the depiction of an emotion seems to demand all the attention of the viewer, something the composition in depth does not seem to make possible as it includes more than one focus of attention. A similar process takes place in a later scene: while Melanie and Anne discuss Mitch's mother's possessive character, a phone call from Mitch interrupts them and motivates a composition in depth of Melanie in the background talking to Mitch and of Anne in the foreground sitting in an armchair. As the scene develops we realise Mitch is inviting Melanie to his sister's birthday party, an unequivocal sign of his interest in her. The composition in depth remains until Anne's growing jealousy becomes apparent; at this moment the text changes to a shot/reverse shot sequence which culminates when Anne hears Melanie (now offscreen) say she will be at the party: Anne shows her despair and bitterness in a very short and quick facial gesture which might have passed unnoticed to the viewer had the previous composition in depth been used during this portion of the story. In a similar case, *Citizen Kane's* depth of field was considered a too innovative technical development at the time; it did not succeed in initiating a new narrative mode and was soon rejected and replaced by previous, more codified, devices such as shot/reverse shot sequences (Bordwell et al. 1988, 341-53). Therefore film focalisation prefers the division of information into several signifying units, and this pervading practice seems at times to originate in an attempt to avoid the redundancy of codes and the resulting dispersion of interest which a unified shot of focaliser and focalised usually provokes.

Auto-focalisation is the capacity of the text to offer to the viewer an attitude about itself, regardless of whether focalised internally or externally. Auto-focalisation manages to attract the viewer's attention to the character who is portrayed in the focalised shot, and approximates the viewer to that character either by making him/her fully understand the character's feelings or, in the case that the shot refuses to provide this information, by presenting the character as pure iconic image, as materiality rather than as character. Auto-focalisation may also be relevant in cases of external focalisation: if

the character's performance manages to offer an attitude which contradicts the forces which have presented him/her externally in the first place (usually related to the development of the character within a given line of plot), then the character will arouse the viewer's sympathy; even if, on the other hand, the character does not manage to provide such attitude, the text may emphasize his/her visual presentation, the character's textual side, as a significative force. The first and third types would seem closer to models of internal focalisation whereas the second and fourth resemble external focalisation. One might argue that cases two and four are so similar to external focalisation that they should be called externally focalised shots. In my opinion, the term *external focalisation* carries connotations of detachment and lack of significative intention through textual devices which do not fit the description of focalisation I am proposing. It is therefore preferable to use the term *auto-focalisation* in order to refer to cases in which the textual, iconic nature of an image is emphasised as the source of signification.

Auto-focalisation is nevertheless different from internal focalisation, as it does not require a second character who would act as focaliser of the action: auto-focalisation is the confirmation of the capacity of cinema's non-mediated language to convey information. Auto-focalisation resembles external focalisation in those cases in which the effect of focalisation is not to make the viewer empathise with the character but to distance him/her from what appears on the screen. Nevertheless, on these occasions auto-focalisation emphasises the quality of the image showing the character, its physical, material side. It is different from external focalisation in that the emphasis of the shot is not on the absence of internal focalisation but on the visual quality of the contents of the shot, not on the shot's relationship to other shots in the syntagm but on the specifically visual, material features of the shot. One of the advantages of the use of the concept of auto-focalisation is therefore that it also opens up the possibility of considering examples of traditional external focalisation as somehow internal, when the character's gaze offers an attitude about what (s)he is doing. Auto-focalisation allows the existence of a more complex system of focalisation in the case of traditional internal focalisation. The shot in which a character is internally focalised by another agent of the text may also be providing auto-focalisation, because the focalised character's reaction to what (s)he is doing offers information about his/her attitude towards that action, about the character itself. It also makes it possible to consider traditional internally focalised

shots as somehow more objective and detached when they refuse to allow the viewer access to the character's inner thoughts through performance.

This new conception of focalisation should not be understood as an attack on previous notions of internal and external focalisation. It is a reformulation of focalisation which tries to emphasise the attitudinal component of focalisation and provide the text with a new capacity to focalise itself in certain circumstances. This reformulation does not affect a conception of focalisation as mere selection (perception) of information, but only allows the critic to add new nuances to a text, different from those offered by traditional accounts of focalisation. I think this new approach to focalisation allows richer readings of internal focalisation, because it lays bare a higher number of available signifying codes, and emphasises the importance of externally focalised shots for their own sake, which sometimes are almost neglected as they do not possess any relevance to internal focalisation, the most widely studied part of focalisation. This is a relevant aspect if we consider that all focalisation is ultimately external in cinema, as we suggested above.

From what I have said so far, auto-focalisation may seem to mix two aspects of cinema which should apparently remain separate. The capacity of a character to draw attention to itself as pure image brings together the level of character (and therefore its connotations of "real life", of cinema's attempt to present a heterocosm which resembles real life) and the level of the image, a purely textual one. Nevertheless I do not think this is an unacceptable mixture since the only material which the viewer has in a film is the purely textual one, and it is the text (a collection of images, light and shadow) that builds up the different characters through performance, dialogue, props, setting, etc. This mixture is the basis for the construction of a filmic text, and therefore inherent to the nature of cinema and not just a dislocation provoked by my analysis.

What are the implications of the existence of auto-focalisation in a text? Does auto-focalisation contribute to the inclusion or not of narrative material, as this seems to be ultimately the most essential function of focalisation according to traditional accounts? No, it does not, because this type of focalisation is posterior to the presentation of information. Therefore, what does this notion of focalisation contribute to the study of the phenomenon? Since the aim of focalisation is to give coherence to the text, auto-focalisation would seem a challenge to its organising principle. It would provide the

possibility of conflict between the connotations offered by traditional focalisation and those offered by auto-focalisation. Auto-focalisation may reveal itself as the mark of the dissemination of meaning that a text, with its complex web of codes, inevitably provokes (Derrida 1976, 141-64). If we understand that a character can direct our attention to himself/herself as iconic, material entity, then we will have to accept that not only the character but also the other components of the shot will be able to provide information about such a shot. When a character in a shot focalises something outside the boundaries of its frame, and offers a certain attitude about it through his/her gaze, this attitude may clash with and contradict the information (attitude) offered by the shot about itself. This information may be brought by any of the components of *mise-en-scène*. In this sense auto-focalisation may be said to disseminate meaning.

Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) provides a good example of this possibility opened by auto-focalisation. One of the first scenes in the film introduces General Mireau, the commanding officer in charge of the men in the trenches, and General Broulard, a member of the general staff who has come to visit and propose to Mireau a suicidal attack against a strong German position. The meeting takes place in a room of the chateau Mireau has chosen as his headquarters. The Generals sit at a sophisticated, elegant table, in delicate chairs, admire the paintings on the walls and walk around in a spacious, comfortable milieu heightened by the sunlight coming from a large window. After Broulard has disclosed the real reason for his visit, Mireau engages in an eloquent speech about the love he feels for the lives of his men and how they are more important for him than all the Generals in France. Broulard changes his tactics and tells him that his acceptance of this mission would improve Mireau's prospects of promotion. Mireau continues to explain briefly that the mission is impossible, but finally accepts the proposal and promises Broulard his men will take the position in the next few days. What seems a striking change of mind has nevertheless been foreshadowed by auto-focalisation during the talk between the two Generals. A combination of camera movements and shot/reverse shot sequences has alternatively shown us the two Generals, and has allowed us to notice Broulard's growing discontent at Mireau's idealistic speech. Traditional internal focalisation has offered us Broulard's contempt towards those ideas of human sympathy, and this information has helped us understand more clearly Mireau's initial position and his finally siding with

Broulard. However, auto-focalisation has been offering us extra information about Mireau's character: his stern face marked by a scar has described him as a man fond of battle, a man who believes in war as a means to achieve his concealed desires. The elegant room supports our consideration of him as a former soldier whose deeds in battle have quickly improved his status: he is a man willing to ascend to a higher social class through war. Besides, the fact that he lives separated from his men (the Generals and the introductory voice-over have mentioned the soldiers stay in the trenches) does not support his passionate words about comradeship. *Mise-en-scène* has provided through auto-focalisation many hints of Mireau's final decision to attack the Germans, and it was perhaps only the viewer's search for information about the characters through their lines of dialogue that prevented him/her from processing that information. Auto-focalisation has provided this part of the film with a conflicting web of signifying codes, a conflict which has been resolved in the course of the scene but which nevertheless suggests the capacity of auto-focalisation to disseminate meaning.

This previous explanation of the disseminative power of auto-focalisation has indirectly raised the issue of the relationships between *mise-en-scène* and auto-focalisation. Auto-focalisation is different from both traditional internal and external focalisation in that it allows *mise-en-scène* not only to contribute to the portrayal of a character as linked to another shot through a focaliser's gaze, but also to use that portrayal as the *mise-en-scène*'s qualifications of such character and all the elements contained within the boundaries of a shot. In this case, auto-focalisation clearly approximates the function of *mise-en-scène*. Auto-focalisation allows isolated, independent shots a great amount of signification, therefore proposing an area of communication and expression which does not require a syntagmatic chain of signs in order to exist. Whereas the connotations of traditional internal or external focalisation depend to a great extent on what has happened before a specific shot is presented to the viewer, in auto-focalisation this is not so: the context can be neglected in the construction of meaning. This notion openly contradicts traditional accounts of focalisation, as these invariably rely on the logic of events and the development of characters in order to determine whether a shot is on the one hand the source of identification and empathy or, on the other, of distance between the text and the viewer. Auto-focalisation works towards meaning irrespective of the film's line of plot, without regard to a syntagmatic conception of meaning.

Another of Kubrick's films seems the perfect example of such a notion of auto-focalisation. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is a film where the line of plot is constantly deemphasised while auto-focalisation foregrounds the presence of the machine or of outer space. In this case traditional external focalisation prevails throughout the film, but auto-focalisation discloses the iconicity in the presentation of the *mise-en-scène* as relevant for the understanding of the film's development. The inscrutable nature of the machine, to which the narrative confers such importance and to whose description it devotes such a long time, maintains the suspense as to what is going to happen next. The importance given to the machine or outer space as iconic material, which seems to deny us the possibility of knowledge about their real meaning within the text, suggests that the response to the film is not going to be a traditional one, reached through the culmination of a line of plot, but rather a response which is more related to the ambiguous visual material which is presented to us, and offered in such an ambiguous way too. The emphasis on the visual achieved through auto-focalisation proposes the final meaning of the text: outer space still remains beyond the reach of human intellect, an intellect which relies too much on logic and narrativity. Human beings will not understand the mysteries of the universe until they acquire a higher level of intelligence, which the film suggests is not so dependent on linguistic modes of knowledge as human intelligence is.

An interesting example of a film where this new definition of focalisation contributes to a fresh critical approach is Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1970). The film deals with the ordinary life of a group of nurses and doctors working in an army hospital camp during the Korean war. The narrative sets off with the arrival of three new surgeons (Hawkeye, Forrest and McIntyre) who will try to cope with the crude reality of war by investing each one of their actions with corrosive humour and insolence towards the representatives of military discipline (Frank Burns and "Hotlips"). The film is structured as a series of somewhat disconnected episodes where the surgeons and their friends ridicule those who take army regulations seriously, in an implicit rejection of the prepotency they think has caused the war and has brought them there. Sometimes the text acquires a religiously irreverent tinge which lays bare the incongruent presence of religion (represented by the chaplain) in the middle of a war. In the most moving scene of the film the surgeons enact a parodic Last Supper as a farewell party to one of their mates who, suspecting his own homosexuality, has decided to commit suicide. After taking what his friends have made him believe is a poisonous

capsule (in fact only a sleeping pill), an attractive nurse is conducted to his tent where she will have the rare privilege to bring a dead man to life.

*M*A*S*H* presents its viewers with a striking prevalence of external focalisation. It is nevertheless true that focalisation is sometimes internal but this is usually achieved through such obtrusive mechanisms that focalisation is finally perceived as external, because no character can be understood to have been the origin of the self-conscious move the narrative has made. In the scene in which Frank Burns leaves the camp in a straight-jacket, as a result of the constant mockery he has had to bear, camera movements combined with zoom shots produce a very unusual rendering of the action which cannot be considered internally focalised. The camera follows Burns, who is taken into a jeep, and then follows the jeep as it turns round at the end of the camp and finally exits. In the course of this long camera movement the image of Burns disappears at certain moments and the camera shows other characters who observe the action from their tents' doors: the Colonel and Forrest form one group, Hawkeye and McIntyre form the other. Although they provide visual cues in order to "anchor" this scene's information, the camera movement and violent zoom shots among the three focuses of interest cannot possibly be attributed to any of the characters' vision, therefore flaunting the externality of the presentation of the action.

This external focalisation has been used by critics to support a reading of the film as a parody of military authority and ultimately of war. The first appearance of Hawkeye Pierce in the film seems to support these considerations. The Panavision lens includes Hawkeye in the background on the right hand-side and the blurred contours of somebody in the foreground left. He emerges from the latrine in a telephoto lens shot which crushes the planes of depth and destroys perspective as he walks what seems a long distance without actually seeming to move at all while the extradiegetic music sounds, a mixture of military and football game tune. In the left hand-side part of the screen the encouraging, patriotic words (making reference to the Korean War) of General McArthur and Eisenhower appear superimposed. All these elements form a comic juxtaposition of the ideal and the actual reality which is obviously parodic. Kolker dismisses this reading and proposes that the film in fact enjoys the reality it offers without the slightest hint of a rebellious attitude:

The war is not really present in *M.A.S.H* (the bleeding bodies have no faces and merely provide more foils for the antics of the

heroes) and therefore need not be confronted. There is a smugness not merely in the characters but in the way the narrative allows them to prevail without forcing them to confront anything –such as a notion of why they are where they are. (1988, 324-5)

Kolker nevertheless still argues that this effect is partly obtained through the compression of space and crowded *mise-en-scène* which deprives the audience of any contextual information about the war, a context which would add a clearer sense of commitment to the text (1988, 324). The same textual elements of dislocated juxtaposition and close mixture of signifying units are used by both advocates of the film as parody and as mere relish. This same double attitude can be perceived in a great number of the scenes in *M*A*S*H*. In the same initial scene of the film the soldier who has just scolded Hawkeye engages in a slapstick-like fight with his men once he notices Hawkeye has stolen his jeep. The fight is rendered from a distance through external focalisation, and the stylisation of the men's movements is so obvious that the whole scene produces a mixture of detached parody and engaging comicity.

These readings of Altman's film rely on a conception of external focalisation as a mere complement to the internal one, therefore assuming that the only effect of externality is detachment, which may only lead to criticism or laughter. Auto-focalisation introduces a fresh consideration of external focalisation, as it allows the focalised object to express an attitude about himself/herself, and ultimately emphasise its nature as mere object of the audience's vision, which means a revaluation of the material presented on the screen for its own sake.

*M*A*S*H* shows signs of being aware of the effects of auto-focalisation, as it reveals the enormous communicative potential of focalisation, and such potential is the origin of auto-focalisation. The film exemplifies how attempts at internal focalisation between several characters within the same frame result in redundancy, lack of effectiveness and finally their transformation into external focalisation. The film parodies this risk in scenes in which a great number of characters fill the flat screen and talk at the same time. In the reception scene of Hawkeye and Forrest, the screen appears full of bodies who approach the two men in the canteen and introduce themselves: the Colonel, Radar and the other surgeons all speak at the same time, making communication impossible. A reading of this scene from the point of view of traditional focalisation would inevitably confirm that redundancy

dissolves into incommunication, and that the scene is therefore externally focalised, with the implicit meaning of attack or parody this involves: communication among people is impossible within the military organisation. However, if we agree that each character can focalise itself too, then we could say that the scene shifts attention from the relationships between the individuals to the individuals themselves, transforming the characters into the real object of the audience's gaze. External focalisation means the disappearance of the film's capacity to draw the viewers closer to the characters' feelings; this would result in detachment between the text and the viewers. Auto-focalisation allows the establishment of a new close relationship between text and viewer, now based on considerations of the image as iconic material. The text emphasises this iconic, purely physical state of cinema and manages to alter the viewer's concept of the character in question by means of its external textual representation: in *M*A*S*H* the text celebrates the characters' most human qualities, their value as mere human beings, engaged in a war that seems to be the negation of such values.

Thus, other similar crowded compositions focus their attention on the characters, offering an atmosphere of friendship and comradeship reminiscent of some of Hawks' films, such as *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) or *His Girl Friday* (1940). A good example is a scene at the operating room in which the light goes out and all the surgeons and nurses working there start singing together, while they continue to operate by the light of torches. The scene starts with the tracking shots the text consistently uses in every scene that takes place in that room. The describing function they fulfil is accompanied by a great self-consciousness which denies it the possibility of being labelled as internal focalisation, as the camera movement does not reveal any character as the focaliser of the scene. In this case external focalisation might equal detachment and isolation, but the capacity of characters to autofocalise provides a feeling of humanity in the midst of pain and hardship, of final sympathy for the characters. The emphasis conferred on the material depiction of the characters is in part also a revaluation of the characters themselves, since the construction of characters is carried out through the text. This capacity of the film is independent from the meaning created through a succession of scenes. It has nothing to do with a syntagmatic relationship of signs but rather with the specific quality of an isolated sign. This capacity of cinema's signs to focalise themselves therefore reveals their potentiality to create meanings which may clash with those offered by the

succession of events; auto-focalisation contains the power to present contradictory meanings, which subvert the apparently most important ideology of the film. In *M*A*S*H* the privileged meaning of parody seems to be replaced by a praise of the characters' human nature, therefore introducing a component of sympathy.

This approach to the film, from the point of view of auto-focalisation, also allows us to perceive in the film certain traces of subversiveness and attack, since it shifts the emphasis of the text from the relationships between characters to the iconic nature of the shots. The crowded compositions (rendered even more oppressive because of the closeness of the camera to the characters) and telephoto lens shots produce a flat space in the scene which clearly contradicts classical assumptions about representation. In traditional narratives it is perspective and distance that allow focalisation to work. Instead, the narrative mode in *M*A*S*H* emphasises the absence of depth of field and the rejection of linear perspective. This type of perspective is usually understood by critics as the mechanism through which the self as subject is set into place. Linear perspective uses depth in order to create a vantage point of observation which is given to the observer. By means of this mechanism representation manages to convince the subject of his/her superior position as observer of reality, and to present the represented as a "natural" (in the sense of not constructed) view of reality (Baudry 1974/75, 41-2; Nichols 1981, 52-7). Auto-focalisation emphasises the material presence of the cinematic sign, and in Altman's film this means emphasising the absence of depth in most of its compositions. By subverting the ideological process of socialisation of the subject, by refusing to keep linear perspective as a model, Altman's film provides its audience with a view of the process of the construction of reality that cinema is, and therefore offers him/her the means for its deconstruction.

Auto-focalisation therefore appears as an extra significative channel which can be added to traditional accounts of focalisation, both becoming complementary sources of meaning. Auto-focalisation increases the power of both internal and external focalisation to throw light on the relationships among the different elements of a film narrative; it allows new critical approaches which emphasise the capacity of internally and externally focalised characters to focalise themselves, and to foreground their iconic nature, with the move towards celebration of the text as such this involves.

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