

# A Transmedia Overturning: Direct Address from Theatre to Cinema<sup>1</sup>

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*Federica Cavaletti*

*Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Department of Communication  
and Performing Arts*

## Abstract

A direct address – in visual and audiovisual forms of communication – occurs any time one or more characters inside the fictional world look straight at the spectators, blurring the threshold that separates the images from flesh-and-blood reality. However, different forms of direct address can take place in several media contexts, based on the specificity of each given medium.

This is particularly urgent with respect to two types of direct address: the theatrical and cinematic ones. While the former has studied thoroughly, mainly based on Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgy, the latter – also known as “look at the camera” – is arguably less understood. In the absence of a dedicated conceptualization, the cinematic direct address has commonly been treated merely as a transmedia counterpart of the theatrical one, thus overlooking the peculiarities of the two.

This article restores the autonomy of the cinematic direct address and elaborates on its specific non-the-

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*Federica Cavaletti* is a PhD student in Humanities (curriculum: Communication, media and performing arts) at the Catholic University of Milan; she has published articles in national and international journals and she is the Italian translator of *Image Science. Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* by W.J.T. Mitchell; her main research interests are in aesthetics and media studies; her latest projects involve the study of virtual reality and how it changes the traditional relationship between the images and their beholders.

[federica.cavaletti@unicatt.it](mailto:federica.cavaletti@unicatt.it)

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atrical effects. First, it outlines the nature and functioning of the theatrical direct address as theorized by Bertolt Brecht. Then, by adopting a semiotic approach, it demonstrates that this type of direct address must not be confused with the cinematic one. Lastly, it introduces three non-Brechtian types of cinematic direct address: namely, the diegetic, the meta-filmic, and the documentary look at the camera.

**Keywords**

direct address, Brecht, look at the camera, cinema, theatre, medium specificity

An actor on the stage suddenly turning to the audience and acknowledging their presence, the blink of a superhero from a TV screen, the smile of Mona Lisa and Uncle Sam's pointing finger: they are all examples of what is defined as a direct address. In (audio)visual arts, and communication in general, a direct address occurs any time one or more characters inside a fictional world look straight at the spectators, turn their gaze at them, blurring the line that separates the realm of images from their reality of flesh and blood.

Although always jeopardising the radical opposition between real world and representation, not all forms of direct address are necessarily the same. As suggested, in fact, a direct address can take place in several different media contexts; and the nature and functioning of each medium tends to lend the act of looking at the audience very peculiar aesthetic meanings.

This is particularly important to bear in mind with regard to two types of direct address that have frequently been connected and even made equal in spite of their specificity in features and effects: the theatrical and the cinematic ones. While a quite widespread knowledge of the former exists, an in-depth and specific examination of the latter has often been lacking. Cinematic direct address, also referred to as the look at the camera, has commonly been considered merely a transmedia counterpart of the theatrical one, thus conflating and confusing the peculiarity of the two.

The present article aims to shed light on these separate objects of investigation, to restore the autonomy of the look at the camera, and to introduce some of its non-theatrical effects.

### **The theatrical direct address: an aesthetics of estrangement**

Our knowledge of the consequences of the theatrical direct address is mainly based on the dramaturgic theory and practice promoted in the first half of the last century by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht.

The author's interest in the direct address was grounded in political reasons. He aspired for theatre to train spectators, transforming them into a group of active, critical citizens; but he was aware that he could not take any advantage of the traditional theatrical model he had at his disposal (Brecht 2001). This model hinged on the concept of identification: the audience had to be psychologically involved in the fiction, sharing the characters' emotions and feelings, crying or celebrating with them. In Brecht's opinion, this led spectators to a passive and sentimental attitude, which appeared completely inadequate when transposed to the field of politics. The audience had to be woken up.

Identification typically requires spectators to acknowledge a certain degree of truthfulness to the representation, indulging in the so-called illusion of reality: in order to partake in the grief or joy that are shown on the stage, they must at least temporarily accept what they see as if it were really happening. To defeat identification, therefore, Brecht needed to prevent the audience from this kind of illusionism; he was in need, to use his words, of "devices of estrangement", or "alienation". In a short essay written around 1936, the author explains his model of theatre:

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding (Brecht 1974 a: 71).

Estrangement devices contrast with identification by breaking the illusion of reality on which theatre normally bases its functioning, and thus, in the German playwright's opinion, they promote a more critical and distant approach to the events on the stage. In fact, once any possibility of considering them as real life is eliminated, the audience would not adhere emotionally to the characters' conditions anymore, but rather would analyse them to understand what they have been determined by and how they could be modified. Consequently, the performance would stop being perceived as a real time event to be lived together with its protagonists and would rather be considered as an explanation, a lesson to learn from.

In such a theoretical framework, direct address finds its place and meaning as a particularly powerful estrangement device. An actor performing a direct address, in fact, openly points at the presence of the spectators and, therefore, shows the artificial nature of theatrical actions. There is obviously no audience in real life; thus, when the spectators are revealed as such by the unmasking gaze of an actor, they are forced to admit that the

events that they are attending are prepared and staged for them. As the author states with regard to Chinese theatre, which deeply inspired his own:

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place (Brecht 1974 b: 91-92).

Direct address, as any other Brechtian estrangement device, works against identification by undermining the illusion of reality on which identification itself should rest: when struck by a look from the stage, the audience cannot assign any degree of truthfulness to the representation anymore. By disturbing the stability of the fictional world, the theatrical direct address promotes a lucid distance from the representation, which is recognised as such: this is the reason why it can be said, in Brechtian dramaturgy just like in theatre in general, to have an anti-illusionistic effect.

### **(Mis)understanding Brecht in cinema**

The Brechtian lesson had a very strong impact on contemporary dramaturgy, and its legacy remarkably persists to this day, often condensed into iconic formulas and ideas as the one of an actor looking directly at the audience. What is most interesting, however, is the fact that such lesson not only has affected the history of dramaturgy, but also has reached and influenced the field of film theory and practice.

Of great importance in this sense are the seventies, when a great revival of the German playwright took place. Several film theorists felt the urge, in this period, to call the established structures of cinema into question (Heath 1974; Mulvey 1975).<sup>2</sup> They accused Hollywood production in particular of transforming the spectators into daydreamers, sleepwalkers; of making them ready to accept as true and valuable whatever message a movie could convey. In their opinion, such manipulative power of Hollywood cinema was based on a particularly strong illusion of reality, imposing a high level of identification and empathic mirroring. In this ideological context, Brecht naturally came to be considered an undisputed point of reference. Most authors indeed felt they

<sup>2</sup> Most of these authors were gathered around the British journal *Screen*; thus, "the body of work in which direct address most frequently crops up as a subject of discussion is often referred to as »1970s Screen Theory«" (Brown 2012: 7).

shared the same need for critical attitude that had fostered the Brechtian revolution, and they basically aimed to dismantle cinematic illusionism like their master had dismantled the theatrical one.

Some of them also developed an interest in the direct address, as theorized by the German playwright, and started thinking of it as suitable for cinema as well. One of the authors who clearly exemplifies this tendency is the British film theorist Peter Wollen. In a brief essay first published in 1972, for instance, Wollen manifestly derives from Brechtian theory concepts and tools which he unproblematically transfers to cinema; and, importantly, he operates the same way with regard to direct address (Wollen 1982). In this essay, dedicated to the techniques Jean-Luc Godard employed in what is defined as an anti-Hollywood production, Wollen proposes a list of opposing terms referring to traditional and revolutionary values in cinema and links them to emblematic strategies through which they can be achieved. This is how the act of looking at spectators shows up in the essay: “Identification v. estrangement. (Empathy, emotional involvement with a character v. direct address, multiple and divided characters, commentary)” (Wollen 1982: 81). The author explicitly makes use of Brechtian vocabulary when addressing the two categories of identification and estrangement, and then maintains a Brechtian theoretical framework when connecting the latter to the device of direct address. The author does not even worry about clearly stating that a transposition has occurred between the two media contexts of theatre and cinema: their interchangeability is taken for granted, so that the direct address can simply be connected to estrangement, whether it is meant as a theatrical or as a cinematic one. The subsequent quotation includes an even more overt reference to the German playwright and confirms the impression that his lesson, in Wollen’s opinion, does not need to be discussed nor adapted when applied to cinema: “It is hardly necessary, after the work of Brecht, to comment on the purpose of estrangement-effects of this kind” (Wollen 1982: 82).

What Wollen and others in this period did was to establish an equivalence between stage and screen, between theatrical and cinematic audience; and to make direct address in theatre equal to its counterpart in cinema, the look at the camera.

The method they adopted, however, might need today to be questioned.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the direct address specifically, and from an essentially aesthetic

<sup>3</sup> The issue has been recently addressed by another British scholar, Tom Brown, already mentioned above, who has pointed at the widespread inaccuracy in Brechtian re-interpretations from the Seventies on (Brown 2012). The author’s framework and his interpretative tools, however, are mainly narrative ones and thus they slightly differ from the ones adopted in the present article, informed by aesthetics and media studies; the same is true, consistently, for the respective conclusions.

standpoint, such method authorised to select a device designed by Brecht with reference to the theatrical context and to re-use in order to obtain the same anti-illusionistic effect in a different representational situation. In this process the peculiar meaning of the cinematic direct address was neglected. This sounds problematic, since the implied premise is that a strategy devised to be employed in one medium would normally have the same effect in another one.

In what follows, this premise will be rejected. It will be argued, in consequence, that it is not possible to assume that the act of looking at spectators would maintain its nature and effects when transposed from theatre to cinema. It will be claimed, on the contrary, that such a transmedia shift of the direct address can provoke considerable variations, if not a complete overturning, in its aesthetic meaning.

For these claims to be supported, and for the cinematic look at the camera to be indicated as possibly very different from the Brechtian anti-illusionistic, anti-fictional device, both theory and examples will be presented. Firstly, an argument based on the concept of medium specificity will be proposed in order to explain why the theatrical and cinematic direct address should not be equated in their respective aesthetic meanings. Secondly, examples from selected movies will be described in order to introduce some of the non-Brechtian effects of the look at the camera.

Before the argumentation starts, however, a problematization of the definition itself of the “look at the camera” is required.

## Which look? Which camera?

The term “look at the camera” implies the idea that characters must turn their gaze in the direction of the recording machine in order to establish a connection with the spectators. However, does merely looking in the direction of the camera always mean addressing the audience? A careful reflection easily reveals that this is not the case. Suppose a subjective shot, corresponding to the point of view of a first character, is showing spectators the entrance of a house. Suddenly, a second character opens the door and cheerfully greets the first one: the effect would be the greeting character looking in the direction of the camera. Since the camera is temporarily adopting the first character’s point of view, however, this act of looking at the camera would not translate into an act of addressing the spectators. This is because the same direction of a character’s gaze can actually correspond to different destinations. A gaze that is directed at the camera, in fact, is generally supposed to be destined to<sup>4</sup> the spectators;

<sup>4</sup> Here and below, the expressions “directed” and “destined” are used in order to establish

yet, in the case of the subjective shot, and in other situations in which the camera's point of view is appropriated by diegetic entities, a gaze pointing at the recording machine would actually be destined to these entities. Since the latter are not cases of a direct address to the audience, they will not be examined in the present article.

Still, why do such cases constitute an exception to the general rule, according to which the camera is normally assumed to lead to spectators or even to coincide with them? Why has the term the "look at the camera" come to be identified with the idea of addressing the audience directly?<sup>5</sup> The field of film studies offers different answers to the above questions.

First, the camera could be said to lead to the spectators when referring to certain of this specific theoretical understandings. In this regard, it might be useful to draw on Edward Branigan's classification of eight possible conceptions of the camera (Branigan 2006). The author's aim is to "ask how the word »camera« functions in the language we use to talk about cinema" (Branigan 2006: 66), the assumption being that different discourses and theories use the same word differently. The look at the camera, for instance, might well be considered to constitute a direct address to spectators when the sixth of the possible conceptions listed by Branigan is adopted: when interpreted in its communicative conception, in fact, the device "provides the physical and psychological channel by which we enter and remain in communication [...] with a variety of implied authors, narrators, observers and characters, all willing to speak to us and provide information" (Branigan 2006: 82).

On the other hand, the place of the camera could be argued to coincide with that of the spectators' based on more factual and experiential reasons. One of these reasons is purely technical: given the dynamics of shooting and projection, an actor's act of looking toward the camera effectively results in the audience's impression of being looked at by him or her. In a more sophisticated way, spectators can be said to occupy the place of the camera if the concept of embodiment is employed in order to explain the relationship between the two. This is distinctive of several phenomenological and neuroscientific accounts of the filmic experience, in which the subjects watching a movie are claimed to get bodily involved in the perceptual and motor activity of the camera. The spectators would get to mimic and adhere to the camera's point of view by incarnating the human-like and yet invisible body outlined by the camera itself, and this is usually explained in terms of the recognition of an intentional consciousness at work

a connection with the notions of "direction" and "destination" respectively. That a gaze is "destined" to the spectators means that it is intended for, aimed at them.

<sup>5</sup> This is true in relation to languages other than English, too. Consider for instance the Italian definition of "sguardo in macchina" and the French one of "regard caméra".



(Sobchack 1982, 1992) or in terms of processes of embodied simulation in more recent neuroscientific interpretations (Gallese & Guerra 2015).

These and other widespread understandings of the role of the recording machine and its relationship with the audience elucidate why normally it can be so smoothly implied that the act of looking at the camera equals that of addressing the spectators.<sup>6</sup> Though it is not necessary for a filmmaker to consciously endorse one of these specific conceptions of the camera and its role, sometimes a precise choice with regard to this issue clearly lays behind certain kinds of direct address.<sup>7</sup> After this quite lengthy discussion of the very definition of the “look at the camera”, it is possible now to go back to the two main lines of the present article.

### **Medium specificity and the nature of the signifier: the transmedia overturning**

In order to understand the theatrical and the cinematic direct address respectively, it is useful to introduce the concept of medium specificity, which refers here to the peculiarity of the structural features and consequently of the representational outputs of any single medium. The starting point is offered by a brilliant article by the Italian semiologists and film theorists Vincenzo Buccheri and Francesco Casetti (Buccheri & Casetti 1999).

The authors compare theatre and cinema on the grounds of the kinds of representational agreement these two media require their audience to accept. By this notion, Buccheri and Casetti evoke the set of implicit rules and norms that spectators (and readers, for that matter) must accept in order for artistic and media representations to work properly. Different representational agreements variably define the general and well-known principle of suspension of disbelief: “I know it is not A, and yet I decide to believe it is A”. Thus, in virtue of the acceptance of a medium-specific representational pact, a medium-specific illusion is set.

<sup>6</sup> Although its overall psychoanalytical framework suggests, due to its high degree of specificity, to keep it separated from the other ones listed above, it is hard not to mention another possible explanation for the phenomenon in question that has found exemplary expression in Christian Metz’s account of the spectators’ identification with the camera (Metz 1982). Since he is absent from the screen and thus he is completely located on the active side of perception, the author claimed, a subject watching a movie identifies with himself “as a pure act of perception”, “as look”; and once he does it, he “can do no other than identifying with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking” (Metz 1982: 49).

<sup>7</sup> This is true, for instance, with regard to the meta-filmic look at the camera, to be introduced in the next pages of the present article: this kind of direct address seems to rest more patently than others on a communicative conception of the camera as the one outlined by Branigan and reported above.

What Buccheri and Casetti theorise is that a radical opposition exists between the theatrical and the cinematic representational agreements. The most important reason for such an opposition is linked to the material, to the texture of the representation, which is made of flesh and blood in theatre and is made of lights and colours instead in cinema. In the first case real objects and bodies move on the stage, while mere substitutes of them are shown on the screen in the second case. Buccheri and Casetti express themselves in terms, respectively, of “not-sign” and “sign” [segno] (Buccheri & Casetti 1999: 27-28); however, it is also possible to read these terms as “not-images” and “images” when semiotically interpreting an image as something that stands for, or substitutes for, an absent entity to be found elsewhere.

This is exactly what the cinematic signifier does, indeed, according both to the Italian authors and to Christian Metz, as the latter has clearly expressed in his fundamental 1977 book *Le Signifiant imaginaire. Psychanalyse et cinéma* (Metz 1982). The French writer specifically reflected on the imaginary status of the cinematic signifier, often comparing it to the theatrical one. Both media, he held, are based on a particularly rich and varied perceptual given: what they use as signifiers is equally made of vivid visual and auditory material. And yet, “the theatre really does »give« this given, or at least slightly more really: it is physically present, in the same space as the spectator. The cinema only gives it in effigy, inaccessible from the outset” (Metz 1982: 61). In theatre, in fact, actors and objects on the stage are actually present, sharing spectators’ status and environment; in cinema, on the contrary, actors and objects on the screen are already absent, because they are the recorded trace of absent entities for which they merely stand. They are, indeed, their image. Thus, as Metz aptly put it, “what is characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, but the imaginary that it *is* from the start” (Metz 1982: 44); and what best defines the specifically cinematic scopic regime is “the absence of the object seen” (Metz 1982: 61).

Going back to Buccheri and Casetti’s framework, the authors’ strong proposal is the following: what each representational agreement requires is a shift from “not-sign” to “sign” in theatre, and from “sign” to “not-sign” in cinema. As they themselves state: “In the theatrical agreement the spectator is required to negotiate the nature of »fiction« (that is of sign) of the reality on the stage” [“Nel patto teatrale lo spettatore è chiamato a negoziare il carattere di »finzione« (cioè di segno) della realtà sulla scena] (Buccheri & Casetti 1999: 27); while in cinema “the spectator is required to negotiate the nature of »reality« of an imaginary world” [“lo spettatore è chiamato a negoziare il carattere di »realtà« di un mondo immaginario”] (Buccheri & Casetti 1999: 27-28). So in the first medium, Buccheri and Casetti claim, the beholders face real actors but are encouraged to forget them in favour of the images

they are evoking. For instance, when they face actor Jimmy White perform, they must take him for the imaginary Merlin the Wizard he is referring to. They know they are seeing a concrete person, and yet they decide to believe that he is an image. In cinema, on the other hand, spectators literally face images, but they must take them for real bodies and objects. They know they are seeing images, and yet they decide to believe they are concrete entities.

Summing up, and opting for the sake of clarity in favour of the terminology suggested above, for theatrical representations to be effective “not-images” must be transformed into “images”; for cinematic representation to flow smoothly, instead, “images” must be converted into “not-images”.

What is proposed in the present article is to adopt Bucerri and Casetti’s framework in order to investigate the impact of direct address in relation, respectively, to the theatrical and the cinematic representational agreements.

With regard to the distinction above between the categories of “images” and “not-images”, it should be asked, firstly, which one of them better describes or suits a direct address. It seems plausible to consider a direct address as something rather related to the realm of “not-images”, the realm of flesh and blood, because this act is destined to an audience which is not imaginary, but concrete and present; importantly, this is true both for theatre and cinema. In fact, it makes sense to assume that the act of looking and speaking to spectators, as a communicative act, must imply in some way a structural homogeneity of the agents of the exchange. In other words, both the beholders and the character turning to them should be equally assignable to either the category of “images” or the one of “not-images”. Since the nature of the representation, and hence of the character, is arguably more elastic and alterable than the audience’s, it is the former that is more likely to adapt and adhere to the latter. That is, whatever its original nature, the representation, via and together with the character looking at the spectators, will manifest a “not-image” structure when a direct address occurs. In sum, when a direct address is performed, whether from the stage or from the screen, the representational situation can be said to acquire a non-imaginary, flesh-and-blood tinge.

The point now is that this leads to opposite consequences in relation to the representational agreements in theatre and cinema. If theatre, in fact, struggles to overcome the mere bodily reality of actors in order to affirm their nature as images, and so as characters, a direct address will on the contrary re-affirm the bodily one. Direct address contrasts the theatrical representational agreement, it weakens the suspension of disbelief that theatre as a medium should determine, because when it takes place spectators cannot convince themselves that they are seeing images anymore. Thus, and in perfect coherence with Brechtian theory, the occurrence of a direct address in theatre determines an anti-illusionistic turn. Conversely, cinema strives

for giving materiality and bodily presence to the images on a screen; and thus it is actually reinforced when a character, i.e. an image, starts acting like a real body, getting in touch with a real audience. The look at the camera is compatible with, and even fosters, the medium-specific suspension of disbelief required by cinema and therefore cannot be said to constitute a subversive, anti-illusionistic device.

Based on this argument, it appears evident that simply equating the aesthetic meaning of a cinematic direct address to that of a theatrical one is not acceptable: observations and analyses that take into account the principle of medium specificity demonstrate that the look at the camera differs intrinsically from its Brechtian ancestor due to deeply and highly peculiar features of its medium of reference.

This is not to say, however, that the cinematic direct address should be deprived of any interest or importance, nor should it be disregarded as a dull, irrelevant event in the context of a movie. On the contrary, it can produce a variety of effects, often brilliant and unusual. Therefore, in the second part of the present article, three of these possible effects are concisely introduced and discussed in order to show how the look at the camera can be fruitfully integrated in the narrative structure of a movie.

## The diegetic look at the camera

Firstly, the look at the camera can be used to open a space for diegetic comments.

In several situations characters suddenly turn to spectators and give them a few words or a longer speech commenting on something happening in the world of the movie. Very often, characters try to establish an intimate contact with the audience in order to find understanding or even to share a sort of sneering complicity. This turning and speaking to the audience can become a permanent communicative strategy, and, in this case, the narrative structure of the movie is in fact partially dependent on direct address in transmitting its informative content.

This is true, for instance, for the quite well-known movie *High Fidelity* (Frears 2000). The main character, Rob (John Cusack), is a thirty-year-old capricious loser, constantly struggling against tragicomic tribulations that revolve around the break-up with his girlfriend. Throughout the movie, Rob often talks to spectators about these unlucky episodes of his life, searching for comprehension and support.

This kind of direct address has long been employed in the genres of comedy and musical, normally less tightly bound to (or independent of) the classic

cinematographic rules: it must be kept in mind, indeed, that the look at the camera constitutes a quite rigid taboo in the traditional Hollywood paradigm. This is precisely because this paradigm basically hinges on illusionism and identification, while, as explained, the act of directly addressing spectators has commonly been thought to disrupt both of these. It has been demonstrated above that this is basically not true from a theoretical standpoint; it is now possible to argue further that this is highly questionable even when concretely examining how the look at the camera works within a specific narrative context.

Focusing again on the case of *High Fidelity*, it is evident that the diegetic and winking kind of direct address described helps the spectators gain a deeper and more precise understanding of the narrative situation: by listening to Rob revealing his feelings, they can form a more complex opinion about his personality and his motivations, and so they can better calibrate their judgements and expectations in relation to the plot. Thus, more or less consciously, spectators end up hoping for things to happen or not, for words to be said or withheld, and they ultimately find themselves much more involved in the events on the screen. By getting closer to one or more of characters' secrets and thoughts, in fact, spectators become increasingly interested in their destiny and engaged in their stories.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, and, in a sense, exactly in the opposite way than suggested by Brechtian film theorists, the stability of the fictional world is rather reinforced than undermined, together with the participation of the audience in the events that take place in it.<sup>9</sup>

## The meta-filmic look at the camera

The second kind of the look at the camera being introduced suggests that this device, however inappropriate for destroying fiction, is very suitable for

<sup>8</sup> It is worth remarking, however, as Brown correctly does (Brown 2012), that the mere fact that a character is confiding in the audience does not necessarily imply that he is being honest, nor that he deserves to be trusted. Consequently, although it generally provokes spectators to increase their involvement in the diegetic events, this kind of direct address does not always induce them to side with the character which it is being performed by. In the case of *High Fidelity*, for instance, spectators can decide either to trust Rob or not, and so to favour him or his ex-girlfriend, to take his parts or to blame him.

<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the idea of complicity this kind of look at the camera is able to elicit seems to connect the latter to the notion of "exhibitionism" as elaborated by Metz in his 1975 essay *Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)* (Metz 1982). In this essay the author defines exhibitionism as implying the reciprocal acknowledgment and the interactivity of the partners at play, while on the contrary describing cinematic pleasure as relying on the awareness that the object spectators are watching is unaware of being watched and unwilling to look back. Classic films, according to Metz, induce a form of voyeurism that does not comprise any element of exhibitionism and they conform to Benveniste's "story"

playing with it. Indeed, it can be brilliantly employed in order to realize not only diegetic, but also meta-filmic comments. This occurs when one or more characters talk to the audience, in the movie, about some aspects of the movie itself.

The meta-filmic potential of a direct address is due to the fact that it reveals the basic structural premises of any filmic product. A direct address, specifically, makes manifest the fact that a movie is created by someone and destined to someone else; in general semiotic terms, it materializes and clarifies the respective positions of sender and receiver.

Stimulating reflections about this kind of direct address are provided again by Francesco Casetti (Casetti 1998). The author's specific frame of reference is that of the "cinematographic enunciation", a term referring to "an appropriation of the expressive possibilities of the cinema which give body and consistency to a film" (Casetti 1998: 18). The enunciation process is based on a triad of "abstract categories that derive from the filmic text's fundamental articulation" (Casetti 1998: 46): the "I", standing for the "enunciator" or the origin of the enunciation; the "you", standing for the "enunciatee" or the recipient of the enunciation; and the "he, she or it", which refers to what is shown on the screen. Differently from the latter, the two former elements of the triad are normally present and yet invisible. However, when a direct address occurs, a specific disposition of the element of the triad is triggered: the "I" becomes visible by coming to coincide with the "he" or "she" of a character, and the "you" is overtly acknowledged as the recipient of the communication. So, the look at the camera can be said to figurativise the enunciator and also to highlight the presence of the enunciatee, although the latter remains absent in the visual field.<sup>10</sup>

rather than "discourse", since they present themselves as closed and unresponsive objects in which actors behave as if they were not conscious to be seen. Based on these premises, it can be expected that a look at a camera would produce a shift from "story" to "discourse" and from voyeurism only to exhibitionism. This gesture would probably have, in the context on Metz's theory, an anti-fictional effect as long as it would undermine consolidated ideas and expectations about how cinematic fiction should work. While worth considering, this possible interpretation of this kind of look at the camera is not problematic in relation to the theses exposed in the present article, in which the psychoanalytical assumption that fictional cinema must function as a voyeuristic device is not embraced.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of enunciation and its use have been widely discussed in the field of film theory (Eugeni 2014).

With regard to Casetti's book cited in the present article, specifically, a fundamental critique has been made by Christian Metz (Metz 1991). Above all, the French theorist contests Casetti's use of deictics, such as the personal pronouns of the first and second person mentioned. In Metz's opinion, in fact, cinematic enunciation "does not give us any information about the outside of the text, but about the text that carries in itself its source and its destination" (Metz 1991: 762) and, therefore, it is better expressed in reflexive rather than deictic terms. When strongly influenced by deixis, any enunciation model forces the nature



Both a general semiotic analysis and Casetti's specific contribution suggest that a direct address provokes the structural elements of the filmic communication to be unusually emphasised and peculiarly disposed. Once such disposition has been set, and a meta-filmic space has been opened, the look at the camera can be used to amplify it and to play with other premises or aspects of the construction of the fiction. Often the focus shifts from theoretical semiotic issues to playful and more concrete allusions to behind-the-scene aspects of the cinematic production. Indeed, light-hearted comments, or more penetrating observations, about the differences between fiction and reality are very common too. Also, sometimes, simply revealing the representation as such can provoke a subtle kind of amusement.

In the final scene of the movie *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Black 2005), for instance, the main character, Harry (Robert Downey Jr.), sitting at a desk, directly speaks to the spectators and tries to sum up the most important themes of the movie so that they can leave with a message from it. Another character, his colleague Perry (Val Kilmer), shuts him up and takes his place, giving the spectators more information about the movie and even reminding them to validate their parking tickets when leaving the cinema. Some of the characters' comments in this scene are, as in the case of *High Fidelity*, diegetic ones; yet, the aim of the scene as a whole is clearly to underline the presence of the audience and the fact that they have been attending something prepared for them.

It must be stressed that playing this way with fiction, and also revealing it, is not the same as breaking it. On the contrary, the efficacy of a meta-filmic look at the camera very often rests exactly on the overall persistence of the cinematic illusion. In the instance of *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, it is precisely because the spectators perceive the diegetic world as still organic and autonomous that the main characters' allusions feel puzzling and thus hilarious: the meta-filmic direct address does not require a complete disruption of the fiction, but on the contrary must stand as a figure on the ground of fiction itself. With no doubt, cases exist in which reflections about the structural premises of the filmic representation are pushed so far that the credibility of the representation itself is irreversibly undermined; and in such cases a Brechtian reference is more appropriate, although inevitable discrepancies in the functioning of the device remain, due to the medium specificity of the cinematic context. Nonetheless, meta-filmic tricks that expect spectators to keep believing in what they see are definitely widespread if not prevalent,

of the cinematic representation and thus contains "three main risks: anthropomorphism, artificial use of linguistic concepts, and transformation of enunciation into communication" (Metz 1991: 758).

which definitely allows to rule out any easy equation between this kind of look at the camera and Brecht's paradigm of breaking the fiction.

## The documentary look at the camera

The last effect of the cinematic direct address being presented shows the possibility of this device to function as a genre-converter. The look at the camera, indeed, sometimes confers a documentary tinge on the conventional diegetic situations in which it is employed: this is because a certain kind of addressing the audience is a well-established genre feature in most documentaries, especially the traditional ones. The "genre-converter" kind of look at the camera occurs when one or more characters look and speak to the audience manifesting an explanatory attitude toward specific subjects in the movie. By performing such peculiar direct address, characters deliberately copy the behaviour of scientists, journalists or experts in general who conventionally converse with spectators in documentaries.

In similar filmic situations, the use of a specific genre feature inevitably triggers a connection to the targeted genre. Spectators cannot avoid superimposing a documentary filter over the diegetic scene they are attending; therefore, the characterisation of such situations slightly shifts from fictional to non-fictional, and thus to referential.<sup>11</sup> Movies in which this happens are not documentaries. However, because of the documentary form they adopt, they tend to be approached as if they were such. Consequently, they invite the audience, if not to take what is shown for real, at least to consider it as if it were real. When a documentary look at the camera occurs, what spectators see does not become true, and yet it is not entirely fictional anymore. Therefore, this specific use of the look at the camera gives rise to a hybrid genre that, while fictional, can also aspire to convey a quasi-referential content.

Since a quasi-referential content seems simultaneously to aim at a correlative worldly object and to miss it, it might be worth it to clarify the relation between such ambiguous content and reality. The issue can be explored by considering the functioning of the television series *House of Cards* (Willimon 2013).<sup>12</sup> The main character, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), is a democratic congressman in the insidious world of contemporary American politics and shows the audience the mechanisms and traps of the latter, by system-

<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, such shift cannot be considered an anti-illusionistic one, since the fact that the filmic contents are referential constitutes an illusion itself and might only be true from the audience's standpoint; paradoxically, spectators abandon the first fictional situation just to be transferred into another fictional one.

<sup>12</sup> A television series is associated here with movies, since arguably a substantial similarity



atically making use of the direct address. The explanatory nature of Underwood's speeches is markedly reminiscent of the documentary genre and gives this precise tinge to the television series, questioning its purely fictional nature. Thus, the relation between *House of Cards* politics and the real political scene becomes complex: the series never overtly states that the represented world is the real one, and yet it constantly invites spectators to establish connections between the two. By inducing, via acting, an attitude of receptivity that would better fit a referential situation, *House of Cards* offers a fictional path, or interpretative frame, to the non-fictional object of contemporary American politics.

This actually mirrors the widespread tendency in contemporary media to blur the line between fiction and reality, and to refer to the latter by means of the former. Such tendency is obviously most dangerous not when the audience is instructed to take the media product as ultimately fictional, as in the case of *House of Cards*, but when it is offered a fictionalized product that is nevertheless declared as informational and referential. It is evident, in this second case, that merging fiction and reality to describe the latter easily allows concealing what, in a supposedly referential presentation, is actually a fiction-based manipulation or bias. A deeper investigation into the documentary look at the camera, considered as a symptom and an instance, could possibly help clarify the origins and the impact of the tendency described.

## Conclusions

In conclusion of this article, and recollecting what has been sketched above, it has been observed that a cinematic direct address can show at least three possible declinations: it can coincide with the sneering look and words of a character, giving rise to a diegetic comment; it can be performed as a meta-filmic move, offering spectators a glimpse of the functioning of the cinematic representation; or it can suggest a link with another genre, particularly the documentary one, by imitating one of its formal features. All these possible aesthetic meanings of the cinematic direct address, it has been noted, are equally independent of, if not contrary to, the anti-illusionistic function this device is supposed to support when treated as a mere translation of the Brechtian theatrical direct address. Therefore, although limited, the range of types of the look at the camera introduced in the present article should be sufficiently persuasive for the need to reject similar simplistic and uncritical interpretations of a device that, even if derived from theatre, has developed in a completely autonomous way in its new media context. Confiding in spec-

between the two categories exists on the level of media features and structure.

tators or imitating a referential genre does mean performing an anti-illusionistic act, nor playing with fiction must necessarily provoke any rupture in the case of the meta-filmic look at the camera. Thus, the transmedia move of the direct address from theatre to cinema can truly be said to constitute a transmedia overturning.

This should actually come as no surprise, if the hints provided by Buccheri and Casetti's article and the following discussion are kept in mind. Indeed, when the concept of medium specificity is brought to attention, theatre and cinema reveal themselves as peculiar in their structure and functioning. The Italian authors were helpful in clarifying this point by concentrating on the respective representational agreements these two forms require; and their observations made it possible to provide a strong semiotic argument about the reasons why, given the distinct media premises and contexts in which it takes place, a direct address determines different overall effects in theatre and cinema. It was within such a theoretical framework that the subsequent analysis of the non-Brechtian functions of the look at the camera became both conceivable and fruitful.

A wider aim of the present article, after all, was precisely to show, through the case study of the direct address, how important it is to take into account the specific media context of a communicative strategy when it comes to identifying its aesthetic meaning. This can be considered a methodological cornerstone to be always borne in mind when conducting any investigation in the fields of (audio)visual arts and media studies.

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