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Mapping Subtext by Using Thematic Coordinates

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss the notion of subtext in cinematic dialogue and to sketch a map of the main types of subtext, drawing on the principles common to the narrative theories elaborated by Robert McKee (1998), John Truby (2007), Dara Marks (2006), and Chris Vogler (1992). A pivotal concept in my argument will be the one of theme, as it is explained in the main screenwriting textbooks: the theme of a story is intimately connected to the protagonist's change in relation to the values at stake. A theme consists of the values that inspire the deep dramatic construction of the character – the moral need that defines him. Building on the importance of the moral flaw of the protagonist, I will identify four types of subtext, depending on whether it lies more in the flaws of the protagonist or in a hidden agenda he has, and on whether subtext is or is not shared by all the characters in the scene. In particular, I will discuss the emotional density of subtext when it stems from the moral flaw of the protagonist and when it is not shared with other characters. This happens when the writer uses dramatic irony and plays with the idea of fate.

Contributor Note

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1. Introduction

Cinematographic dialogue is a research field that is relatively unexplored. Few scholars have explicitly devoted their attention to this topic in film studies. Sarah Kozloff's (2000) classic *Overhearing Film Dialogue* has remained an isolated contribution for too long. Only recently Kozloff's work inspired new contributions in a collection of essays edited by Jeff Jaeckle (2013). Even in the field of screenwriting studies, the issue is rarely given specific attention. The exceptions are a chapter in a Jill Nelmes essay (2011) and my monograph devoted to this subject (Braga 2015). Dialogue is often discussed in screenwriting texts (e.g., McKee 1998; Truby 2007). However, even in this case, the discussion is mostly restricted to short chapters. Only in recent years has there been a more articulated reflection (Seger 2011; McKee 2016). In this context, the purpose of my article is to adopt the approach of screenplay studies and screenwriting manuals. The article aims to advance one step further the discussion on an essential element of film dialogue, subtext – which is defined as the implicit meanings conveyed by the lines spoken by the characters¹.

By adopting a different perspective from Kozloff's, I will not focus on the relationships between dialogue and film language (shots, editing, etc.), nor on the ideological or gender valences of the dialogues, or the specific dialogue patterns of each different film genre. My focus is elsewhere: on dialogue's

¹ By articulating it with different examples and drawing new conclusions, the article opens new development to the classification I proposed in Chapter 3 of Braga (2015).

dramaturgical contribution to the movie. The article is, in fact, dedicated to the subtext as it roots itself – and how it develops – into the conflict innervating the work in its whole.

In its general lines, the issue has already been sufficiently developed in a few screenwriting manuals, particularly in the aforementioned works by McKee and Truby. In them, the implications that the inner obstacles faced by the main character have on the implicit meaning of a dialogue are clearly exposed. These manuals clearly explain how the screenwriter can or must use these obstacles to endow the lines in a scene with subtext. In this article, I aim to bring to fruition these directions with a further objective: to sketch a map of the main types of subtext. It is an ambitious goal, destined inevitably to an only relative degree of detail and comprehensiveness – what can be hinted at, and what can be implicitly evoked by lines of dialogue pertains to the virtually infinite scope of what a person/character can communicate. In other words, it depends on the story and on what makes it original. I will show, however, that there are some general coordinates, and that these coordinates allow for a better understanding of film dialogue, especially regarding its connection with the thematic dimension of the story.

The first part of the article is aimed at identifying the cardinal points of the map. For this purpose, first I will explain which conception of subtext the article will draw upon. Secondly, I will identify: a) which are the two essential dramatic solutions a writer has at his disposal in order to endow a dialogue with subtext; b) the two essential communicative situations each one of these two solutions can be applied to. Thirdly, I will

show that this group of basic ideas – the two chief generators of subtext and the two communicative situations – can be used as compass points to build a map where four main types of subtext are outlined.

The second part of the article will then explore each one of the four regions of the 'subtext land'. It will be an overview of the many ways dialogue can shape and develop each type of subtext. This will be shown through a series of short analyses of scenes taken from different movies. Another path could have been taken – concentrating on a particular film and seeing how the subtext is produced in it. I find that a wide range of examples is preferable for two reasons: first, because it is a stronger confirmation of the effectiveness of the analytical framework I am sketching. It is also easier to see the general validity of the laws of subtext being applied in many different narrative contexts. In a particular film, on the contrary, the specificity of the story and the style of the author could have distracted from the intrinsic logic of subtext. Second, a wide sampling of verbal exchanges allows to test the productiveness of the model. The map helps to highlight the typical subtext mechanisms of recurrent types of scenes (i.e., mentor and/or protagonist confrontations, negotiation scenes, etc.) to see how the similarity of the dramatic situation goes together with a common construction of the scene in terms of the subtext. This aspect delineates the area of possible future research.

In the case studies part of the article a staccato-style scene analysis sequence is developed rather than along a plain, linear analysis of a single text. I, consider that taking this approach has made it possible for me to better stress some

fundamental ideas of a nascent area of study.

The theoretical perspective I draw upon takes advantage of the principles of screenplay techniques presented in the main manuals, believing they are fully compatible (Yorke [2013] and McDonald [2013]) with a more scientific, or otherwise accepted, academic perspective, such as Wayne Booth's narrative rhetoric (1983 [1961]; 1968). Booth believes that the rhetorical work of an author of fiction is guided by the satisfaction of the reader's interests, the main one being the 'practical interest' – that is, the interest in the moral fate of the character. Knowing where the story leads the character in terms of values, learning if and how the protagonist can be or become in relation to the issues and events put into place by the story, is an answer that the reader wants deeply. In other words, feeling accompanied by an author in the discovery of a moral truth is an essential part of the experience of consuming a story. Now, even the main assumption of screenplay practice agrees with Booth's idea – that is, the spectator's deep involvement concerns the character's transformation effort (the 'dramatic arc') to appropriate a value he lacked at the beginning of the story. The theme of the story is the moral issue posed by that value, the dilemma opposing it to the opposing values.

2. A Specific Meaning of Subtext

It should be specified that the subtext I intend to map is 'dramatic'. It is not the cultural suggestions, nor the custom or mentality indications the words in a dialogue suggest on the margin of the ongoing action. I instead mean the implicit meaning linked to the active

conflict between the characters in the scene. I will focus on the unspoken link between the protagonist's conflicts with whoever is obstructing him – what in this action/reaction dynamic is communicated indirectly. To clarify: in a hypothetical dialogue between office manager and female clerk, the gender connotations of a character's words would not fall within the sphere of our interest – the concept of gender that the words suggest. They would only fit in that sphere if the central matter of the confrontation between the characters in the scene was actually gender, the values linked to masculinity and femininity.

Dramatic subtext is about what is actually happening in the scene, beyond what is openly said. To use the terminology of pragmatics (e.g., Austin, 1975 [1962]), it is the communicative action (inviting, deterring, deceiving, threatening, motivating, etc.) that the character accomplishes by screening it with the explicit meaning of spoken words. This unspoken layer among the characters is present because if its contents were to be explicitly stated, there would be an open and painful conflict. So, the dramatic subtext is what characters do not openly tell each other to avoid a clash where they would get hurt – a confrontation with the interlocutor or a clash with themselves when forced to deal with lacerating things one would rather forget.

The importance of the subtext for a scene's success is evoked by screenwriters when they write dialogue without it, labelled as 'on the nose'. The flatness, the superficiality of a dialogue lacking subtext is a writing weakness for many reasons. Let us resume and integrate McKee's reflection on this. We

can say that a dialogue without subtext lacks veracity (even in life, the implicit is a 'protected' ground on which two opposing interlocutors move to study mutual intentions and measure to which point one can push the other without causing hostile reactions). It lacks tension (the spectator has no expectation/fear for the open clash and its outcome). A dialogue without subtext, then, is not stimulating (fruition remains passive and there is no call to interpret the indirect meaning of the lines). Finally, even the acting suffers, as McKee observes, if there is nothing to communicate beyond what has been spoken – to express with face, gesture, tone of voice – an actor cannot act, he can only repeat lines.

3. The Map's Coordinates

In order to identify the main types of subtext, let us start with the previously mentioned centrality of the dramatic arc, then move to the writing of a movie and its ability to engage. On this point, the prescription of the manuals is confirmed by the analysis of the most critically and audience acclaimed movies: the more a story is written in service to the dramatic arc of its protagonist (Marks 2006), the more the scenes regard him by developing a path – a 'journey' (Vogler 1992) of maturation, the more the film ends up feeling organic and engaging. A script should be written and rewritten to make it as much of an expression of its theme as possible. The latter coincides with the need for the inner maturation of the character – the need to overcome a certain moral fragility, to gain solidity with respect to the specific value that story, precisely, 'thematizes' through its protagonist. The first pair of coordinates then arises from considering whether the

subtext of a dialogue originates from/is based on the protagonist's need (according to Truby's [2007] terminology), or not. *Need* can, in fact, create subtext because, explicitly referring to it, is usually a source of suffering for the character – depending on the case of embarrassment, annoyance, fear or a sense of inadequacy. Therefore, as the explicit reference is sensed to be the trigger of aggressive reactions and unpleasant consequences, the reference to it remains in the subtext.

The alternative obtained by exclusion – subtext that is not based on *need* – consists of the most frequent form of dramatic implicit in real life – the one originating from an ulterior motive. In a dialogue, when one tries to obtain something that cannot be declared because of the risk of complications for the most diverse reasons (it is illicit, socially unacceptable, circumstantially inappropriate), it is communicated through subtext. In order to complete the map, we need a second pair of coordinates. I obtain them by considering the way in which knowledge is distributed among the characters in the scene. We have to consider whether the interlocutors are aware of the subtext of the lines or not – if they both know and understand what is behind spoken words or not. Then a subtext can be shared (both characters know it) or not shared (it is known only by one of the characters and, through him, by the spectator).

With the two pairs of coordinates we can construct a map articulated into four types of subtext. I will list it here below, to later dwell on each type, starting from the first two – the basic ones, so to speak.

	MORAL NEED	HIDDEN AGENDA
SHARED SUBTEXT	Deep Subtext “We both know who, deep down, you know you should be.”	Strategic Subtext “We both know where you're trying to go with this, what you really want.”
NON-SHARED SUBTEXT	The Irony of Fate i.e. dramatic irony	Manipulation For example: “white lies”, wooing, etc.

4. Deep Subtext

I call ‘deep’ the need-based shared subtext. It is, in fact, the most classic way in which the theme, the matter of value at the root of character building, is translated into implicit contents. As mentioned before, the inner lack of the protagonist is a ‘raw nerve’ that creates discomfort. From his point of view, therefore, it is understandable to instinctively protect this intimate and delicate part of himself by avoiding the issue. At the same time, it is understandable that when another character wants to face the issue with the protagonist, he feels that it is more prudent to do so in an indirect way to avoid defensive reactions. Both characters in the scene, though, know that if that problem is not solved, the protagonist will not realize his true self, that is, the full maturation of himself. He will fail to be the best and most complete version of himself, all his potentials available and no longer inhibited. That is why, whatever the specific need of the protagonist in a movie is, when a dialogue develops a deep subtext, it is always the declination

of a broader thought that the two interlocutors share: 'We both know it: what is at stake here is the person you want to be'. An obvious example of this is from *Schindler's List* (1993):

Oscar Schindler (Liam Neeson): What do you want me to do about it?

Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley): Nothing, nothing. We're just talking...

The Jewish accountant's answer marks the climax of an intense exchange between them. A few moments before, Schindler had just rudely turned away a Jewish woman coming to ask him to hire her relatives in order to save their life.

In fact, word got out – the woman tells him – that he is 'good'. Since this fame poses a serious threat, the protagonist angrily went to Stern who created the problem in the first place with his subterfuges trying to bring many Jews into the factory. With Stern, Schindler makes it clear that clandestine rescue is not good. However, he feels that danger is not good enough of a reason in the accountant's eyes. It is not good enough to refuse to help desperate people. That is why Schindler tries to add more arguments. He tries to debunk the moral monstrosity of Nazi officer Amon Göth (Ralph Fiennes) in this way – this is the subtext – in order to make a choice of indifference feel less grave. As Schindler argues aloud, Göth is not really a sadistic man. He would just be 'a wonderful crook' with a weakness for women and good food if too many worries and the war did not bring out the worst in him. These are considerations made to silence his conscience. Stern knows it well but he tells Schindler through subtext: by telling him that the day before Göth arbitrarily shot twenty-five

people in the head, killing them. The implicit message is that euphemisms will not work with this atrocity. So, when the protagonist, left against the ropes, asks: 'What do you want me to do about it?', the subtext of Stern's answer is opposed to the explicit meaning of the line. 'Nothing, nothing. We're just talking...' really means: 'We both know what you need to do. What you feel you must do in order to not betray yourself. We know you have to put others, the value of people's lives, before anything else'. Since this is also the transformation that the protagonist is called upon during the whole story, the subtext is thematic. Schindler is perfectly aware of the invitation. After a beat, in subtext, he takes on the challenge. By reading Stern, the name from the list of people the poor woman had lost while he was turning her away, the protagonist lets us know, through subtext, that he decided to go back on his steps.

Another example of deep subtext can be found in *Batman Begins* (2005). Full of rage, rebellious Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) is not growing up according to the standards of his family's tradition. After dropping out of Princeton, after a long absence, he returns to Wayne's mansion just to attend the trial of his parents' assassin, from when he was a little boy. He does not care that the criminal has repented and wants to cooperate. He does not care about justice. He wants revenge. He wants a sentence that will ruin the convict (we will discover that he even wants to kill him). When Alfred, the trusted butler (Michael Caine), takes Bruce back home, he knows these feelings. He does not approve of them. There is thus a dialogue in which the subtext regards young Wayne's true self. The issue is tackled obliquely. The two stop right on the border of open conflict.

Their explicit lines barely scrape the surface of the issue, to avoid pain and a fight. When Bruce says he does not wish to sleep in his parents' room which Alfred prepared for him, when he says that was his father's house and not his, when he says that the house is a 'mausoleum', he is actually saying he wants nothing to do with his paternal values. When Alfred responds that the house has 'sheltered' the Wayne family for generations, when he says that all of these matters to him because 'a good man' – Bruce's father – entrusted him with what he cared most about, Alfred means Bruce's education. Then in the climax of the scene the issue of the trial comes up. Here Alfred only hints at the idea of Bruce not leaving. In response, the young man opposes the idea of 'burying the past out there with his parents' – that is, in subtext, to give up revenge. This is an implicit that the butler picks up on, replying: 'I wouldn't presume to tell you what to do with your past, Sir. Just know that there are those of us who care about what you do with your future'. It is a hidden invitation to get rid of the bonds of the past – vengeance – to build a different reality based on justice, the theme of the movie.

As all these examples show a first major type of scene built on a deep subtext are the confrontations between protagonist and mentor/ally. And so, to cite other examples, such as in *Munich* (2005) when Carl (Ciarán Hinds), the senior member of the Mossad team led by Avner (Eric Bana), congratulates his superior in Hebrew ('Mazeltov', or 'congratulations') for the murder of a terrorist. Since moments before Carl had used the same term to congratulate Avner of his daughter's birth, the subtext of the second 'mazeltov' is: 'Congratulations, you became a father

and a murderer. You have little to be happy for...'. Avner suffers the blow. He does not know how to reply.

The character's moral accomplishment is also the subject of the fast food scene in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) when all the family members oppose the protagonist Richard (Greg Kinnear) with whom they allied in the ridiculous enterprise he involved them in. Greg disapproves of the choice of his daughter who ordered ice cream. Instead, by boasting that choice and then enjoying the dessert with her, the other characters at the table try to make it clear to the protagonist that success is not a supreme value to be pursued at all costs (with thinness, physical appearance, etc.). They do not tell him loud and hard: 'you are very wrong'. They point it out to him in subtext and in spirit. Richard registers without agreeing to it (he will change his mind along the story).

The other main type of scenes with a deep subtext is confrontations between the protagonist and the antagonist, the ones in which the implicit is created by the friction between two different visions of the world and by inner weaknesses that oppose their affirmation from both sides. This type does not include the final confrontation scenes in the climax of a film, because in those scenes, usually the subtext of what separates the hero from the opponent becomes explicit and the conflict between them is manifested completely. An example of the type of scene in question is when, in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Miranda (Meryl Streep) corners Andy (Anne Hathaway) who clumsily accepts the offer to go to Paris instead of her friend Emily (Emily Blunt). To Andy, who resists hurting Emily by communicating the fact to her,

Miranda responds with a warning loaded with implicit: 'If you don't go, I'll assume you're not serious about your future. At *Runway* or any other publication. The decision's yours'. This is not just a threat but also a reference to the type of person the young woman intends to become – a woman capable of using others to get what she wants (as Miranda will say openly later in the main scene explaining the theme of the film). The hard subtext causes Andy's low point, in the following scene sad and lonely in the streets of New York, looking for resources to defend her innocence.

In the same movie, there is another example of a deep subtext between the protagonist and the antagonist – the famous last scene, the random encounter between Andy and Miranda, when everything has already happened. The implicit of the unspoken, entirely 'telepathic' confrontation, is Andy's thanks for the help Miranda has given her with an unexpected letter of recommendation. The scene's subtext is therefore Andy's reference to the good side of Miranda. Inside the car, by herself, reconsidering Andy's history, the *Runway* director will smile to herself after a few moments of sadness. In the subtext, with that smile, Miranda recognizes that, yes, even the devil can do something good. This is a deep subtext imprinted with the antagonist's need.

Finally, the subtext is deep in the dialogue between Prince Charles (Alex Jennings) and his mother Elizabeth (Helen Mirren) in *The Queen* (2006). Inside the car, the two discuss the Queen's decision not to send the grandchildren to Paris to mourn their mother Diana. Charles, who is trying to develop an autonomous strategy for his mother in her relationship with the

public, tells her that, if he had been the one dying, Diana would certainly have come with the children. He adds that Diana was 'always warm, physical, [and] never afraid to show her feelings'. The implicit message, a difficult one for the Queen to accept, is how much Elizabeth is different. The Queen grasps the meaning and prefers to continue the journey alone. The gap her son pointed out – the inability to deal with the people's feelings and her own – is the one the protagonist will have to fill in order to save her leadership. It is the theme of the movie.

It should be added that there is a particular category of scenes in which a deep subtext may not be shared. They are the scenes when the 'inciting incident' takes place – those in which someone or something drives the protagonist to engage in the story. These are instances where the character's need is unconscious or, alternatively, when the protagonist is still unaware of what moral dilemmas the event will bring forth.

For example, in *Whiplash* (2014), when the ferocious instructor Fletcher (J.K. Simmons) learns from the young drummer Andrew (Miles Teller) that his father is a writer but has not published anything, he spontaneously begins to tell him how the mentor of the great Charlie Parker harassed him. As to say, in this story you have to choose whether to be a fool like your father or if you are willing to abuse yourself to succeed. Andrew does not understand what he means. He still ignores the price Fletcher demands for perfection. But all of this is already present in Fletcher's implicit meaning – the theme of the movie.

5. Strategic Subtext

If a character has an unspeakable goal, they can pursue it indirectly. When their interlocutor understands what the unspecified line of action is and adjusts accordingly – by implicitly indulging or obstructing that goal – then there is a strategic subtext. In order to get what the character wants, the protagonist sends oblique messages to whoever is in front of them, looking for the best way to persuade them. Depending on if and how much it favours them, the other will reply with implicit signals of complicity or refusal. The thought behind this type of subtext can be formulated as follows: 'We both know what game you are playing. We both know what you are hoping to accomplish'.

A wide range of cinematic exchanges belongs to this subtext category. Negotiation scenes exemplify this well. After all, it can be said that all exchanges with a strategic subtext are a particular declination of the general pattern of negotiation – a situation in which the motives of the other must be interpreted and answered to. In negotiation, there is always a clever management of subtext. The counterparts know exactly what demands are likely to cause a rift as well as the result for which the other party is willing to make concessions. This mutual knowledge creates a subtext – moves and countermoves to avoid quickly running out of ammunition and having to walk away empty-handed.

A famous example of a strategic subtext negotiation is *The Godfather's* (1972) first scene. Don Vito (Marlo Brando) lets Bonasera (Salvatore Corso) unload about the violence suffered by his daughter. The godfather listens to Bonasera asking for revenge. However, he replies, by

complaining about the fact that, in the past, Bonasera has always stayed away from him – he never wanted him as a friend. In fact, in subtext, Don Vito is about to demand that Bonasera to join the mafia in exchange for revenge. This is a disadvantageous goal which cannot be spoken plainly for the unlawful obligations it would entail. Bonasera understands. Initially, in subtext, he refuses, trying to pitch in another direction, with a mere economic offer: 'How much shall I pay you?' Don Vito is offended by that: 'friendship' – not 'joining the mafia' – would be enough to immediately get 'justice', not 'vengeance' (even if that is what it is). At this point, not seeing any alternative, Bonasera accepts the proposal and asks for 'friendship' – that is, to join the mafia. This way, he will have his 'justice'. Don Vito then dismisses him by stating that the service is a free gift until something will be asked in return – or, in subtext, Don Vito points out that the agreement is binding and entails unpleasant obligations.

Another example is *The Insider's* (1999) strategic subtext in the first dialogue between *60 Minutes* TV producer Lowell (Al Pacino) and the chemist Wigand (Russell Crowe). It is a meeting in a hotel room that the producer has struggled to obtain. The two do not know each other yet. They are there to discuss Lowell's counselling proposal that needs clarification on a secondary dossier on the tobacco industry for a TV segment. But the chemist's reluctance and indecision before accepting the meeting suggested to Lowell that perhaps Wigand knows bigger things and wants to expose them. Thus, the dialogue only apparently focuses on the barely relevant dossier the producer has. Actually, the dialogue is about what revelations the chemist

would share. When the producer promises to protect the source as he has always done, he apparently does so in relation to the smaller document, but in fact he is referencing the chemist's possible revelation. On the other hand, by testing the producer's deontology with the implicit content of his questions, the chemist evaluates the risk of opening up, and in exchange asks for maximum loyalty. Why did Lowell go from working for a socially conscious magazine to CBS? Wigand's question implicitly challenges Lowell – perhaps the producer's career is driven by ambition? Eventually, Wigand agrees to consult only on the secondary file; in subtext, he seems to refuse revealing the other things he knows. Before leaving, however, there is a turning point. Wigand reveals to the producer that he occupied a top position inside the company he worked for; in subtext, the line is a promise of significant revelations. So the chemist got the insurance he was looking for and, in subtext, he communicates that there is an agreement between them – he will speak.

Strategic subtext is typical of another type of scene – scenes of romantic attraction, of *chemistry*. Declaring your interest to a barely known person is not viable because it would be indelicate – there could be the risk of an equally direct and stinging rejection. An implicit invitation, however, makes implicitly negative responses possible, and makes it easier to pretend that nothing unpleasant happened if things do not go well. Furthermore, in such circumstances, it is convenient for the one proposing to demonstrate intelligence, showing the ability to start an implicit game that ignites complicity. In other cases, the implicit between a man and a woman is a forced solution

since there could be, or there already is, another person. Moreover, all of this is often accompanied by a subtext regarding power within the rivalry between the sexes: during confrontations, the woman in particular emphasizes that she does not and will not agree to a subordinate position.

A good instance of a flirting scene between characters can be observed in *Rush* (2014) when snappy and unattractive Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) meets his future wife, the beautiful and aristocratic Marlene (Alexandra Maria Lara). At a party, Lauda asks Marlene for a lift. They both want to leave. At first, there is no secondary goal: Niki is on foot, Marlene agrees, simply being polite. Once on the road, however, Lauda annoys Marlene. He makes her turn off the radio, because the vibrations show the car has problems. He diagnoses it with nagging precision, raising the woman's scepticism. The car, says Marlene, has just undergone an expensive tune up. This way subtext has now originated: Marlene's female pride has been teased – a clever man showed off his competence in a typical male-exclusive field in which a woman could not compete. But Lauda was right. The car breaks down in the middle of the countryside – a chance for Marlene to reassert herself now, in subtext, operating in a prominently feminine field ('Let me do this. Otherwise we'll never get out of here'). Since no one stopped for Lauda's thumbs up, she will hitch a ride counting on being a beautiful woman. At the same time, in subtext, Marlene begins to let out that during this rivalry, Lauda no longer feels completely indifferent to her: incidentally, she informs him that she left the party because she broke up with the owner of the house – so she is now free, in case

that could interest Lauda... Meanwhile Marlene's looks seem to have persuaded two Italian men to stop for them. However, it turns out the two were not persuaded to stop by female beauty; they did so because they recognized the great Lauda. They offer them a lift, but they want him to drive their car. Inside the vehicle, at this point Marlene is deeply interested in the man she has just met. She tries communicating it to him in subtext, boasting her disbelief: Lauda cannot be a race driver, since they usually 'have long hair, are sexy, their shirts are open to here'. In addition, Lauda drives like 'an old man'. The remark on this aspect – an issue on which the character is very susceptible – irritates Lauda, who then closes himself up inside a rationality more congenial to him: why, he asks, should he drive faster, increasing risk, without any incentives? In Marlene's reply, 'Because I'm asking you to', the sensual subtext game forces Lauda to choose whether to get in or to get out. He is in: he begins driving in a reckless and breath taking way, like a Formula One driver, on the country road. Marlene is won over by him.

As mentioned before, the third wheel is a frequently used tool in strategic-sentimental subtext. Let us take the scene in *The Next Three Days* (2010) with the first encounter between the protagonist, college professor John Brennan (Russell Crowe), and Nicole (Olivia Wilde) at the playground. The two, who only have seen each other before once, have taken their children there. When the woman approaches John to invite him and his wife to her daughter's birthday party, Brennan replies that his wife will not be able to make it, adding that 'it's complicated'. Nicole thinks of a separation or of a difficult relationship with his spouse, always away from home

for work. So she replies with a subtext where she begins to manifest interest, mentioning that it is complicated for her too, meaning she is also alone, thus opening up a possibility. Nicole then plays the lunch with the kids' card. A move which, given the supposed analogy between their ended marriages, is a veiled reaffirmation of her interest in him. While walking in the park, convinced of her hypothesis, Nicole asks John how he manages his time with the child (implying he's a divorced parent). The fact that John's kid is always with his father – although John points out that his wife would like to spend a lot more time with the baby – suggests Nicole another point to seal the similarity between their situations: 'I guess it's all about priorities, isn't it?'. As if to say, 'I've heard that already, I've been through that. There's affinity between us. We deserve better'. At that, however, still being in love with his wife, Brennan feels he has to dismantle the subtext. The mother of his child is never there because she is in jail, even if he believes she is innocent (the film shows the teacher's attempt to get her out of prison). The woman is nonplussed by this last piece of information. The embarrassment with which Nicole affects optimism about the fate of John's wife while closing the dialogue has a precise subtext strategic sense: 'I should not have pursued that ulterior motive, I made a fool of myself'.

The third wheel is well employed as well in a chemistry scene in *Drive* (2011). The melancholic and lonely hero (Ryan Gosling), a getaway driver who in his day job drives as a Hollywood stuntman, gives a lift to his young neighbour Irene (Carey Mulligan) and her son, left on foot after their car broke down. He barely knows them. In the kitchen, the driver asks Irene who's the man in the

photograph she keeps there. That is her husband, she replies, who's currently in prison. The fact that the woman is married confines any possible sentimental message to the subtext. The message, in fact, is sent when Irene, after learning of his guest's job in movies, simply asks whether it is dangerous. That is enough to turn on the subtext between the two lonely souls, supported and fed mainly by the interpretation of the two actors in the pause that opened up. The face of the girl suddenly glows with sweetness, an affection that promises to become something more. Their glances meet and hold on for a few moments, they do not say a word. Then he replies: 'It's only part-time. Mostly I work in a garage'. Meanwhile, the expression on the young man's face, who until that moment had been hiding all his emotions, relaxes. He lowers his defences in order not to waste that note of tenderness he received from her eyes. But it is too soon, and perhaps that feeling is not even allowed.

Finally, the third fundamental form of strategic subtext: the one that is based on a taboo. It is typical of those dialogues where there is an unspoken agreement between the characters to avoid dealing with a burning issue. The secondary goal, the hidden object that drives the dialogue, is the intention to avoid the problem. Among many possible examples, there is one from *Moneyball* (2011), the scene where Billy (Brad Pitt), general manager of a second-tier baseball team, goes to meet his teenage daughter. She lives with her mother (Robin Wright) who is now married to another man, Alan (Spike Jonze). If Billy leads a life full of tensions, with few comforts, forced to face the economic troubles of his team, the living room where we see him welcomed

exudes wealth and sophistication. Alan, sitting with Billy's ex-wife on the couch, is the antithesis of a rugged sportsman. He looks like a pasty rich man addicted to softness. He also demonstrates incompetence in the baseball questions with which, unwillingly, Alan ends up embarrassing himself and unintentionally emphasizing how things are professionally bleak for Billy. The dryness of Billy's answers, the fact that he does nothing to nourish the conversation, carries a shared implicit meaning between him and his wife: I do not like this family environment, I do not like that my daughter is here, but for the sake of a quiet living let's not say it out loud. Or at least until Billy can no longer contain himself, and upon learning that his twelve-year-old daughter has now a cell-phone, he takes the subtext almost up to the surface: 'Big parenting decision...'

In this type of scene, we also find the scenes in which the real person behind a masked hero talks to someone who knows his true identity in the presence of a third person who does not and must not know. Keeping the secret is a perceivable part of the line of action that guides the explicit meaning of the words between the two persons sharing the potentially disruptive truth. Think of the scene in the *Dark Knight* (2008) where Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale), Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal), who knows about him, and Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), who does not know about him, discuss Batman's fate.

In addition to this classification, a cross-section category of strategic subtext needs to be mentioned. All of the forms proposed above can, in fact, be solved in an interrogative way. This is what happens when a character fails to understand if and what a secondary goal

his interlocutor is pursuing – what game is he playing. For example, in the miniseries *The Night Of* (2016), protagonist Naz (Riz Ahmed), after being detained, cannot figure out whether the inspector questioning him is sincere when he offers to help him out or if he is just using the good cop strategy to manipulate him and force him into a confession. It is an uncertainty shared with the spectator. Again, in *The Circle* (2016), during the job interview the young protagonist Mae Holland (Emma Watson) is subjected to at the multinational headquarters where the story is set, the interviewer's questions suddenly turn personal. The interviewer asks, 'Do you want to go out with me?' forcing the candidate to quickly decipher the true intentions of the questions: actual proposal or just a test to see how the girl copes with uncomfortable situations?

6. Manipulation Subtext

When in a dialogue a character pursues a secondary objective – known to the spectator – without the other interlocutor realizing it, the strategic subtext is manipulation. Deception, lies, entrapment – the selection is massive, and there are virtually endless examples. There are movies in which dialogue develops a manipulation subtext, *The Truman Show* (1998), for example, where the protagonist is oblivious to the fact that everyone around him is an actor trying to influence his existence. One can also consider movies where the protagonists are in disguise, such as *Tootsie* (1982) or *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Incognito* (1998) or Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) with his parents during the Fifties in *Back To The Future* (1985).

Depending on whether the protagonist is the manipulator or the manipulated, the spectator is stimulated to enjoy the manipulator's astute game of words and his bravery in facing the risk of being discovered, or to pity the victim of the game. I will point out that in the first of these two cases, there is a trend in the mainstream American writing school to accentuate the spectacular nature of lying by pushing the protagonist to risk more than is necessary, to enjoy the taste of the game – being reckless. In *Scent of a Woman* (1992), when a blind colonel Frank Slade (Al Pacino) is stopped by a policeman, while at the wheel of a Ferrari next to his young friend Charlie (Chris O'Donnell), he pretends to see and to be the boy's father. The attempt is successful, but Slade is still not satisfied: instead of leaving, he continues the conversation, teasing the officer for not having served in the army but merely in the coast guard. In *Collateral* (2004), while speaking through the taxi radio, Vince the killer (Tom Cruise) is not satisfied with having tricked Max's (Jamie Foxx) boss, the taxi driver he kidnapped, into thinking he is a public official. Gun to his head, Vince forces Max to insult his boss, whom from the station is completely unaware of what is happening in that car.

It is worth mentioning those manipulative subtexts that originate from lies used for good, or 'white lies'. Even in this case, there are movies that make large use of this type of implicit meaning. Let us take *Room* (2015) with the protagonist (Brie Larson) kidnapped by a maniac, locked up for years in a shed with the baby she conceived from his rape. The child, born in there and never been outside, can survive and grow because his mother, in order to protect

him, has always made him believe that the world begins and ends inside that room, and has kept him from having any kind of contact with their jailer. It is the same kind of subtext used in *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), when Guido (Roberto Benigni) makes his child believe that life inside the concentration camp is a game in order to protect him. It is a kind of 'touching' subtext: the implicit is vibrant with the silent sacrifice made by the protagonist keeping all the suffering to himself. This subtext always has profound values because it concerns the effort of moral realization of the protagonist. It can also be observed that this is a/the subtext typical of farewell scenes, where the one saying goodbye forever, or knowing that things will never be the same, does not want to procure suffering, and keeps the emotional cost of separation to himself. Dr. Greene's (Anthony Edwards) farewell in *ER* (Season 8, Episode 18), Ted Kramer's (Dustin Hoffman) from his son in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), Andy giving away his toys at the end of *Toy Story 3* (2010).

7. The Irony of Fate

If the category of non-shared strategic subtexts is manipulation, the one of deep non-shared subtexts is Dramatic Irony or, more precisely, the Irony of Fate. It is implicit in dialogue where the interlocutor, without knowing it or wanting to do so, says things that seem intended to the protagonist's need. Specifically to the main character marked by 'that' inner knot – just right in the moment in which that knot is causing him some struggle – someone, almost as if it was on purpose, speaks of 'the problem' – underlines its presence, in some cases the gravity of it, alludes to the possible implications and solutions.

The public, knowing the whole story, is in a position to understand the inner implications for the hero of the lines which were not supposed to stir any of those things. On the other hand, in the eyes of the hero, a character, who inadvertently has touched his very soul, looks like a manifestation of fate, reminding him of the knots of his existence, validating the righteousness of the changes made up to that point, or pointing him towards the right direction.

In *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), for example, during their hopeless escape from the tyrannical Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), Max (Tom Hardy) asks Furiosa (Charlize Theron) what motivates her. The answer is laconic: 'Redemption'. This is a line that carries a painful implicit reference to the woman's past, probably accomplice to many of the tyrant's horrors. The spectator, however, unlike Furiosa, knows from the very beginning of the movie that Max, too, is tormented by a deep sense of guilt. The film showed him having flashbacks in which a little girl from the man's past appears. We can guess that Max was not able to save her. That is why Furiosa's reply strikes Max. As if fate, through the heroine, was telling him that the adventure in which he has been involved was also intended for him, for his true self. In fact, soon after that, Max, who wanted to leave the party, will change his mind.

Another example is the scene from *Crash* (2004) in which Daniel (Michael Peña) hugs his daughter, who miraculously escaped the ambush of one of her father's clients. Due to an oversight, the aggressor's gun fired blanks. Daniel, who thought he had lost her, realizes that the child was not hit. She then tells him: 'It's okay, daddy. I'll

protect you. It's really a good cloak'. The child believes that she was saved by the invisible coat that her father invented a few nights before to make her fall asleep. It is a detail Daniel had completely forgotten in those dramatic moments. The words of the girl appear to him to be a sign of fate emphasizing how much it has done for him. Since he is a good father, it could not have ended up that way.

Last example is from *ER*. In the aforementioned farewell episode, Dr. Greene's (Anthony Edwards) last patient is a little girl telling him about her school recital where they told Orion's myth. The little girl cannot imagine that the battle between Orion and the scorpion sounds to Greene like a metaphor of the battle he has waged for years against emergencies, diseases, and death. That tale is his tale. Through the words of the little girl, fate honours him.

In dialogues with this type of subtext, therefore, we share with the character the shift that comes from a synthetic, comprehensive and unexpected summation of his own life.

8. Conclusions

The map we sketched suggests some final considerations. First of all, the general classification of the types of implicit drama highlights a further reason for the utility of subtext, in addition to the ones listed above – its functionality to the image. A subtext enhances the visual nature of the cinematic medium. When a character is pressed by his need, and we as viewers understand this, when he pursues a secondary objective, when he manipulates, when he listens in

amazement to words that touch his soul regardless of the intentions of its interlocutor and is led by them to question the direction his life is taking, then our attention is drawn to the face of the protagonist in order to read in his expression the emotions that, combined with the dialogue, reveal the true meanings in the film. Direction and editing, with the choice of frame widths and through the choice to go tight on a close up, follow the spectator's inclination to seek the meaning of the story wherever it is offered in the most convincing and credible manner – that is, through the image, not the words. In fact, the sense of sight maintains a primacy over hearing when it comes to confirming the intent of an action or the profound disposition of people. Furthermore, since cinema as a medium promises to offer this particular visual evidence of the interiority of its characters (cinema, unlike theatre, has editing), the dramatic subtext makes it so that words, too, can keep the intrinsic promise of the tale of the screen. Therefore, knowing the four types of subtext and noticing their recurrence in movies contributes to developing the phenomenology of the experience of vision – to focus more on what the viewer does/wants to do/ would love to do when watching a movie: looking deep inside the faces, along the four lines we outlined.

Secondly, even in terms of dialogue, it is confirmed that the script is a theme exploration practice: a text created to deepen the meaning of certain values and the struggle to achieve them (Braga, 2014). The importance of the dramatic arc – the change in values – as we have seen, proves to be a profitable hypothesis in the classification of subtexts. Two types of subtext – Deep

subtext and Irony of Fate – are actually based on it. These two types actually are required to ensure that in dialogue, the confrontations between characters do not exhaust themselves in aggressive forms, as it might happen if the screenwriter would limit himself to the other two types (B-movie productions limit themselves to strategy and manipulation, with subtexts either threatening or seducing, and lies, like in soap operas). Indeed, the invitation of manuals to make the screenplay as cohesive around its theme as possible, can be interpreted as an invitation to write dialogue in which we try to combine the less directly thematic types to the more direct ones. An emblematic example is the beautiful scene in *The Lives of Others* (2006) in which Agent Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) tries to dissuade actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck), who does not know who he is, from selling herself out to the DDR minister of culture. Wiesler manipulates the woman, because he speaks to her by pretending to be an admirer. In doing so, he uses deep subtext with indirect references, talking about the actress's talent, but more truthfully to the woman's conscience. In the eyes of the woman, however, that stranger encountered in a bar is a manifestation of fate that puts her in front of her moral responsibilities, therefore, the Irony of Fate. As if this was not enough, in order to anchor the scene even more firmly to the theme there is the line with which the actress closes the dialogue. Christa-Maria defines Wiesler as 'a good person' referring, without knowing it, to a conversation the spy had overheard some time before and which had driven him to question himself. Therefore, again, it is the Irony of Fate.

Thirdly, since the rhetorical instrumentation produced by screenwriting manuals is not only of value for producing mainstream American cinema, my classification, which relies on the theoretical bases of that instrumentation, too, has a more general validity. Calibrated on different ways of making cinema such as independent cinema or non-western cinema, the four types are also traceable outside Hollywood. It should suffice to consider a European film such as *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) to find in it the use of a deep subtext (the nurse who refuses to perform euthanasia on the protagonist does so moved by the fact that there are people who love him, a fact that throughout the story the main character has to realize in order to fulfil his need) or the Irony of Fate (by reading in the description of a character from *The Count of Montecristo* the prefiguration of his own misfortune [Braga [2017]]). Still, in *The Salesman* (2016), Iranian director Asghar Farhadi mixes manipulation with deep subtext in verbal exchanges the protagonist has with the man who raped his wife, with the sole purpose of making him suffer.

Finally, we wish to conclude with a broad aesthetic-narrative reflection on the Irony of Fate in dialogue. The importance of dramatic irony in a script is underlined, for instance, in Terry Rossio's (2007) research. If narrative pleasure does not consist solely in staying with a character, but at the same time in being with the author, if it is true that the spectator always follows the plot with the expectation that it has been chosen and articulated by someone because it exemplifies a profound truth that has the ability to enrich him (Fumagalli 2008), then in the Irony of Fate this presence becomes noticeable in a peculiar way,

within the same mechanisms of drama. While the spectator shares the sense of revelation and impasse of the character facing the fate that questions him, he also feels that that particular circumstance has been designed to help those who are witnessing the story to penetrate the subject. The author studied the way in which the character was to be casually touched in what matters to him the most: as viewers, we like this coincidence to be exceptional, though always possible given the way the author has set it up. We sense the author's ability directly challenging us in events, actions, words of the world of fiction,

without violating the pact of suspension of disbelief of the story because he has been able to properly devise the circumstances of those lines of dialogue.

As it is in the cases when the set up/pay off symbol technique suddenly sparks surprising metaphorical references to the theme (e.g., Walt's car in *Gran Torino (2008)*, Andy's cell phone in *The Devil Wears Prada*) (Braga and Fumagalli 2016), even in the Irony of Fate, we sharply feel that we are within the story and in the company of the author. That is why I consider it to be the most sophisticated form of subtext.

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