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## Using Cinema to Understand Character Engagement in a Television Series: *The Truman Show* as Case Study

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Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is an archetypal example of how cinema depicts the figure of the film viewer by using a character within the film as a metaphor for that viewer. Jean Douchet describes Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart), the film's main character, for example, as "a spectator who makes himself his own cinema" (qtd. in Stam 43). Following Douchet, Robert Stam explores "the positioning of the spectator within [the cinematic] apparatus" (43). Like the movie audience, Jeffries remains immobile, in front of his personal "window-screen," through which he watches, like a voyeur, what happens in the courtyard of his building. In this condition, as Stam points out, he "embodies the living death of the dream-like spectatorial experience" (46). A more recent example appears in the HBO television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), where Dr. Melfi "provides a metaperspective on the spectator's relation to Tony" (Vaage, *Fictional Reliefs and Reality Checks* 223). The on-screen relationship between Dr. Melfi and Tony serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the character and the television viewer.

Historically, the viewer has been represented in film both symbolically and literally as an audience in a movie theater. Indeed, the first examples of a reflexive practice in cinematic history dealt specifically with film reception. In both Robert W. Paul's *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901) and in Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902), a naïve spectator is involved in a cinematic experience in which he believes that what is being projected is real. Later, Jean-Luc Godard offers his own particular tribute to these seminal reflexive depictions of spectatorship in *Les Carabiniers* (1963), in which another naïve spectator, attracted to the women projected on the screen, pulls down that screen to expose the cinematic

apparatus. Unlike Porter's and Godard's films, in which the protagonist is denied entrance into the fictional world being projected, in Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), the protagonist is admitted this privilege. Nevertheless, as I have suggested elsewhere, "entry into the screen is only possible in a dream: the projectionist, played by Keaton, falls asleep while the images of the film *Hearts and Pearls* flicker on the screen" (22).

Empirical research is commonly used to understand how audiences respond to certain cinematic strategies. For example, researchers in reception studies select a representative real audience and make use of particular tools to obtain data with which to draw conclusions about how the audience relates to film content. An alternative to this methodology could be the exploration of how the strategies used by authors provoke reactions in the audience via characters who depict them within films. Although these representations have mainly involved cinematic experiences in movie theaters, film history has also given us examples of the television viewing experience.

One excellent example of this is the film *The Truman Show* (1998), directed by Peter Weir. Truman is the unwitting protagonist of a television show that has won millions of viewers around the world, and a sample of this global audience is depicted in the film. Here, the ins and outs of the TV series are addressed reflexively, not only in terms of the audience but also the production team. Thus, one focus of interest is the editing room where Cristof, the show's creator, makes decisions. *The Truman Show* is therefore an example of "metafiction." When Patricia Waugh originally defined the term, she suggested that "the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (6). However, in the case of *The Truman Show*, the statement is not about the same fiction but about another fiction, the fictional world featuring Truman and represented as a

television show. Thus, two fictional worlds are interrelated in *The Truman Show*: on the one hand, the world inhabited by the creators and the audience of the television show and, on the other, the world inhabited by the television show's protagonists. To distinguish the real agents of this process from the fictional ones, I will call the former the "author" and "viewer," and the latter the "meta-author" and "meta-viewer".

One of the main goals of any narrative--whether in literature, film or television--is to provoke emotions. Aristotle recognized that emotions were the food of the soul for his audience. As Carl Plantinga points out, Aristotle "found the elicitation of emotion to be one of the key strategies of persuasive discourse" (*Moving Viewers* 2). In Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), when Ferdinand expresses interest in knowing what exactly cinema is, Samuel Fuller answers him with one word: emotion. Clearly, eliciting emotions from the audience is of vital importance in any fiction. But how can the author achieve it? The characters are one of the author's main tools to achieve this goal, since what happens to them can elicit the viewer's tears of sadness or joy. For Murray Smith, "our propensity to respond emotionally to fictional characters is a key aspect of our experience and enjoyment of narrative films" (1). However, to elicit emotional responses from spectators, the narrative has to engage them with the character and maintain and even intensify this engagement as the plot progresses. Cognitive film theorists call this relationship between character and viewer "character engagement" and view it as one of the main methods for provoking emotions in the audience.

### ***The Truman Show*: Meta-Viewer and Meta-Author**

There are different levels of engagement with fictional characters that Richard Wollheim has ultimately classified as central and acentral. As Wollheim points out, "the distinction is

between iconic mental states", whereas the central "possess a point of view internal to that which they represent", the acentral does not (72). Smith draws on this division to articulate a new model of character engagement, using "empathy" for central imagining and "sympathy" for acentral imagining. Empathy can be defined as "feeling with" the character and sympathy as "feeling for" a character. Thus, viewers empathize when they share the character's displayed emotion, and they sympathize when they feel care and concern for the character. This process of examination allow us, as Noël Carroll puts it to "pith the emotive structure of the film" by "finding the aspects of the depictions or descriptions of the object of the emotion that satisfy the necessary criteria for being in whatever emotional state the audience is in" (*Engaging the Movie Image* 72).

In *The Truman Show*, the viewer quickly recognizes who the protagonist of the television show is: Truman, the only "true man", while the rest of inhabitants of Seahaven are actors who perform in the fictional world created by Christof. The first image we see of Truman is through a two-way mirror, which he stares at without realizing he is actually looking at a camera and thus the viewer. This opening title sequence also introduces the world of the "making of" the television show; Christof and the two main actors, Truman's wife, Meryl, and Truman's best friend, Marlon, are interviewed about aspects of the program. Christof, the creator of the TV show, represents one world, and Truman, the protagonist of the world created by Christof, represents the other. The evolution of the relationship between these two characters is central to the unfolding emotional structure of the film.

The narration invites the viewer to develop a double primacy effect<sup>1</sup> with Truman. In his bathroom talking to himself in front of the mirror Truman reveals his private facet, as he exhibits his nonconformist, determined, and somewhat ironic side, positive traits that will be central to

understanding his final decision at the end of the film. In his public persona, Truman is a cheerful, friendly, kind, polite, happily married man with a good job. Everything seems perfect; he enjoys a full life in an idyllic world. However, there is something wrong in his world, something that needs his attention. He wants to leave Seahaven and go to Fiji, where the woman he truly loves (Lauren Garland), supposedly lives. Obviously, this goal is contrary to the interests of the show's creators, who will go to any lengths to prevent Truman from recognizing the fictitious nature of the world in which he lives and thus bringing the program to an end. These two opposing interests are responsible for the main conflict that unfolds in the film.<sup>2</sup>

The film offers the viewer the first emotional sequence as tied to this effort to thwart Truman's intentions. Truman has to go to Harbor Island on business, which entails taking a ferry. In this situation, the meta-viewer is embodied in the extra who performs as the ticket seller. This meta-viewer shows some concern for how Truman will manage this situation; he is clearly aware of Truman's problem, so he feels concern or at least curiosity as to whether he will finally be able to board the ferry. Both meta-viewer and viewer are able to imagine Truman's dread of the trip through his inability to continue along the gangway, his fearful expressions, the mood set by the music, and his paralysis when he sees a sunken boat. However, their emotional responses to this situation are different because their level of knowledge about character's life is dissimilar. Meta-viewers know what the sunken boat means for Truman (Christof, in an effort to curb Truman's adventurous instincts, staged the death of his father at sea), so they can share Truman's feelings more fully. Thus, unlike the viewer, Truman and the meta-viewer share memories that make them both experience the situation more intensely. Therefore, the viewer has less knowledge about the character than the meta-viewer, and so viewer's and meta-viewer's responses to this scene are different.

The knowledge about the character's life is related to Smith's "alignment" concept, which is one of the three levels that define his "structure of sympathy." As Smith points out, alignment "describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel" (83). Smith posits "two interlocking functions" to explain the concept of alignment: "spatio-temporal attachment" and "subjective access" (83). According to Smith, spatio-temporal attachment is related "to the way a narration may follow the spatio-temporal path of a particular character throughout the narrative, or divide its attention among many characters each tracing distinct spatio-temporal paths" (142). On the other hand, he defines subjective access as "the way the narration may vary the degree to which the spectator is given access to the subjectivities—the dispositions and current states—of characters . . . from subjective transparency to opacity" (142). These two concepts are related to "range" and "depth"<sup>3</sup> and connected to "knowledgeability," a variable involving how much information about a story the narration provides to the viewer, how it unfolds and who is responsible for providing it.

Since relationship between character and viewer in a film is compressed into two or so hours, the character's traumas are often revealed using the flashback technique as a subjective access strategy. This strategy is less necessary in a television series since the relationship between character and viewer is longer. Thus, in these narrations the character and viewer can share life experiences that prove traumatic for the character and can therefore be invoked in the future because both share these memories. Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage call these memories "the shared history account" (28). Several authors consider the shared history account as an essential factor in any long relationship between two people (Blanchet and Vaage 28). This experience is more a feature of television series than it is of the cinematic experience, mainly because of "the series' longer screen duration and . . . because our own lives progress as

the series goes on" (28).<sup>4</sup>

Christof, taking advantage of a moment of loneliness, when Truman is sitting on a beach at night, introduces images of his father's death. This sequence has the purposes of sharing memories with meta-viewers, offering this knowledge to meta-viewers who may not have known about this experience in Truman's childhood, and, most importantly, presenting the experience to viewers, thereby leveling the knowledge possessed by meta-viewers and viewers about character's experience. Finally, viewers can fully understand the meaning of the sunken boat, and thus they respond with the same intensity as meta-viewers do. In short, this scene illustrates perfectly how relevant the level of knowledge about characters can be in order to explain viewers' emotional responses.

Earlier in the film, the meta-viewer and the viewer witness another scene offering access to the character's inner world. In this case, the narrative strategy is a dialogue between Truman and his best friend, Marlon, with whom he shares his intentions of escaping. Through this intimate confession, the narrative reveals to both meta-viewer and viewer Truman's goal to leave his comfortable life in Seahaven in search of adventure. Having established this goal, the television show's creators must articulate obstacles to complicate the character's mission, thereby provoking emotional responses in the viewer. Needless to say, Christof is the main person interested in thwarting Truman's goal, and therefore becomes his main antagonist. As Carroll points out, "The narrative trajectory usually involves the accomplishment of these goals and the satisfaction of these interests in the face of various obstacles. We follow this quest from the perspective of sympathy, cheering the protagonists onwards as they advance and feeling consternation when they falter" (*The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 179). Thus, viewers are concerned about whether the character for whom they feel sympathy (Truman) will ultimately



achieve his goal, and feel antipathy for the character who tries to obstruct it (Christof). Such concern may provoke one of two different feelings in the viewer: happiness, if things turn out well; and sadness, if things go wrong. Carroll defines these two feelings as "euphoric" and "dysphoric" respectively.<sup>5</sup> Thus, if the character finally achieves his or her goal, the viewer's response will be euphoric; conversely, if the character fails, the viewer will respond dysphorically.

An unexpected event paradoxically complicates Christof's efforts. The uncontrolled actions of Truman's father return him to the scene, resulting in an unscripted plot twist in Truman's life. This event is the trigger that makes Truman begin to suspect that strange things happen when he behaves unpredictably. At the same time, he is still thinking about his beloved Lauren. Truman turns to his trunk of memories searching for her sweater; this action provokes meta-viewer reactions. A waitress in a bar asks, "What's he doing?" Her colleague answers, "They got rid of her, but they couldn't erase the memory." This answer suggests two emotional responses: first, the waitress is emotionally sharing Truman's memories, as noted above; and second, she is expressing her sympathy for him and her antipathy toward the producers of the show. Christof again takes advantage of this new private moment of Truman's to introduce another flashback, this time explaining when Truman and Lauren met and how Christof and his crew terminated their relationship by sending her to Fiji.

This sequence also elicits meta-viewers' responses. In this case, the question is: "Why didn't he just follow her?" And the answer is: "His mother got really sick." This decision of Truman's, his concern for his mother, is evaluated positively by the meta-viewer, who describes him as "kind" and even as "too kind." Thus, characters who make selfless sacrifices for someone else might be equally evaluated in a positive way by the viewer, eliciting sympathy for them. It is

well known that the decisions made by the character in difficult moments are a useful strategy for defining a character's essential nature. These situations allow the viewer to evaluate the character's sense of morality, hence, we can define them as "criterially prefocusing", which, as Carroll points out, "predisposes [the viewer] to the varieties of emotional arousals that ideally the moviemaker intends to elicit" (*Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy* 7).

Criterial prefocusing is related to the decisions that the author makes to elicit particular emotional states in the viewer. Authors use a specific narrative strategy with the purpose of preparing viewers to experience certain emotions. However, as Carroll himself recognizes, this criterial disposition is not enough, but needs to be supplemented by concern or a "pro-attitude" toward the situation of the character who has won the viewer's sympathy (*Engaging the Movie Image* 70). Carroll's main contribution to the definition of sympathy is the combination of criterial prefocusing with pro and/or con attitudes toward the character.

Carroll's concept of pro and con attitudes can be compared with Smith's "allegiance," the third concept that explains his structure of sympathy.<sup>6</sup> According to Smith, allegiance "pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator" (84). To make such evaluations, the viewer needs to have a good understanding of the characters, such as their goals and intentions, the factors that led them to the situation they are in, and the context of that situation. As noted above, this information is obtained mainly through alignment, which to provide the viewer enough knowledge to morally assess the character. According to Smith, "On the basis of such evaluations, spectators construct moral structures, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference" (84). Thus, in a classical narrative the protagonist is assessed sympathetically because alignment makes his or her positive traits visible over the course of the narration, thereby encouraging the viewers' moral approval and, consequently, their allegiance.

On the other hand, the antagonist is evaluated antipathetically because only his or her negative traits are revealed and, above all, because this character constitutes an obstacle to the protagonist's objectives.

In short, criterial prefocusing and alignment are related more to a strategic process, while pro attitude and allegiance are the response this process elicits in the viewer. All of these terms, each one with its own specific role, attempt to explain the concept of sympathy. As Smith rightly points out, this acentral imagining involves the understanding of characters and their contexts, allowing a "more-or-less sympathetic or antipathetic" evaluation of them by the viewer, and ultimately provoking the viewer's emotional response "in a manner appropriate to both the evaluation and the context of the action" (86).

Since Truman's uncontrolled actions increase in frequency and his yearning to leave Seahaven increase in intensity, the obstacles placed in his way by Christof are less and less effective. In response, Christof again uses emotional blackmail to anchor Truman to Seahaven. To do this, he calls on his most effective weapon for emotionally manipulating Truman, his best friend, Marlon, who is responsible for bringing back Truman's father. Marlon appeals to Truman's emotions by citing their long-term relationship to convince him of the truth of the world in which they live. He says to Truman, "The last thing I'd ever do is lie to you," which is of course precisely what he is doing. He thus betrays Truman, encouraging the viewer to evaluate Marlon negatively. Viewers might resent Marlon for this betrayal, because they could want to see him as Truman's best friend rather than an actor performing a role.

However, this likely negative feeling toward Marlon is not shared by the meta-viewer for three reasons. Firstly, they are more absorbed in the suspension of disbelief than the viewer is. Second, for the meta-viewer Marlon's words seem truer because they have been witnessing what

looks like a real relationship for longer. And third, and above all, they do not know that Marlon's words are not really his own but Christof's, who dictates what he has to say to him using an earpiece that is visible to the viewer. Thus, while Truman's emotions are true, Marlon's are false, being the product of the manipulation orchestrated by Christof, who might be thus also negatively evaluated by the viewer. Therefore, once again the different levels of knowledge possessed by viewer and meta-viewer, which in this case, unlike the previous example, place the former at an advantage, constitute the main factor provoking different responses to the same situation.

Nevertheless, not all meta-viewers are unaware of this manipulation, or at least not all focus only on the entertainment value of the situation. On the contrary, there are some who raise the moral dilemma of making a person an unwitting captive in a fictitious world. Lauren is the representative of this group, which calls for Truman to be freed from his prison; she is the only meta-viewer who is disappointed with the reencounter between Truman and his father, because she is keenly aware of how Truman is being emotionally manipulated to thwart his goals. She thus feels concern for Truman, responding to this emotional plot twist in his life with sadness, whereas, on the contrary, the rest of the meta-viewers echo Truman's happiness over his reunion with his father. This event thus illustrates how the same situation can elicit different emotional responses in viewers depending on their knowledge of the situation. In this case, while Lauren, intimately aware of Truman's reality, responds sympathetically, the rest of the meta-viewers, focusing only on the fiction, respond empathetically. The viewer, who shares Lauren's awareness, should respond in a manner closer to her reaction. Moreover, Lauren is the one who best represents the metaphor for a real relationship, since she views Truman not as a fictional character but as a real person, and as Vaage suggests, "empathizing and sympathizing with real-

life humans may entail a moral obligation to help them" (*Fictional Reliefs and Reality Checks* 225).

Christof, meanwhile, does his best to elicit empathetic emotions in the meta-viewer. The viewer sees how Christof orchestrates the formal elements of the mise-en-scene in order to create what Plantinga calls a "scene of empathy," that is, "in which the pace of the narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention" (*Passionate View* 239). Vaage refers to such situations as "small attraction scenes" (*Fiction Film* 172). After Marlon introduces Truman's father, the camera moves in for a close-up shot of Truman to capture his reaction to this completely unexpected event for him. Christof orchestrates a fog to create the right atmosphere, the use of a crane-cam to capture father and son coming together and, of course, a swelling of intensely emotional music to achieve the perfect mood. After this, everything is ready to present the last shot: a long close-up of Truman, accompanied by the most touching musical background, in which his overflowing happiness is the center of attention. In such scenes, full attention is focused on the character's face and gestures. In short, the "intended effect" of these textual cues is "to elicit in the spectator the feelings of the characters" (Vaage, *Fiction Film* 169).

Needless to say, this peak emotional moment provokes significant emotional responses in the meta-agents. The meta-viewers, fully engaged with the situation, choking back tears, watch the scene intently, anxious to know how it will end. Finally, when Truman's close-up comes they respond empathetically, sharing his happiness. To generate a contagiousness of emotion, the close-up provokes "embodied empathy," to use Vaage's term, an automatic and involuntary response provoked by direct perception (*Fiction Film* 163).<sup>7</sup> Secondly, it provokes "imaginative empathy," since the meta-viewers can imagine how important the reunion with his father is for

Truman, provoking a similar emotional response in them (Vaage, *Fiction Film* 163). In addition, the meta-authors, Christof and his crew, feel an enormous satisfaction with their achievement; they all congratulate one another, and even the producers come to applaud Christof for this great television milestone. Christof has thus successfully overcome the crisis—that of Truman's nearly culminated awareness of his watched life—as the program achieves its highest ratings ever.

However, Christof's glorious moment paradoxically becomes the beginning of the end of the program. Just when everything seems back to normal, while Christof is concocting a new strategy to keep Truman anchored to the island (via a new romantic interest), Truman is planning something unexpected. In so doing, Truman proves Lauren right when she warned Christof that he underestimated Truman's willpower. To do this, the author returns to our first image of Truman, in which he reveals his more private facet, reminding the viewer of his rebellious, individualistic temperament. Truman stares into the mirror once again, but this time he knows that he is looking at a camera. And the nature of his gaze leads Christof's crew to question its meaning: "Is he looking at us?" "You think he knows?" Truman's next action promptly dispels their worries: he makes up a new world called Trumania, leading them to conclude: "He's back to his old self." But, this time it is Truman who deceives them by concealing his real intentions. In this way, he takes control of his own fiction, taking over Christof's role. This might be evaluated positively by the viewers, when they discover through Christof that Truman has finally set out on his journey toward freedom. The viewer inevitably takes Truman's side, feeling an allegiance to him and an antagonism toward Christof, and favorably evaluating the questionable strategy undertaken by the former to achieve his praiseworthy goal.

Having overcome the initial obstacles, Truman goes on to the final battle, the climax in which the uncertainty over whether he will finally achieve his objective is resolved. At this stage,

the process of criterial prefocusing is almost complete and the viewer's pro-attitude toward Truman has been fully established. There is no doubt that he deserves the viewer's concern for his fate. Thus, the viewer embarks on this last stage of Truman's journey hopeful that Truman (for whom the viewer feels sympathy) finally achieves his goal at the expense of Christof (for whom the viewer feels antipathy). This concern for Truman is represented on screen through the meta-viewers who drop everything else to focus exclusively on Truman's fate. For example, in the bar, customers and staff are glued to the television screen as if they were watching an NBA final; on the edge of their seats, they are anxious to see their team victorious, to see Truman finally win the match against his opponent Christof. This collective experience is quite different from the individual experience of film viewing. Although in a movie theater the emotions can be equally shared by the viewers, the atmosphere (the audience sitting in a dark room facing the screen) invites them to experience the film alone. On the other hand, television viewing in an illuminated public space that allows movement encourages viewers to share and express their emotions more openly.

Christof resumes transmission when Truman is found, sailing toward his longed-for freedom. Christof moves from a long to a medium shot to capture Truman's facial expression, with the purpose of showing the image of the hero. Christof's answer to the question of one of the producers—"How do we stop him?"—is to localize a storm over Truman's boat, giving Christof the quality of a mythological god unleashing his fury on a disobedient human. Thus, the final match that Truman has to play is a matter of life and death. The potentially fatal nature of the confrontation thus awakens the viewer's full engagement and deepest concern for Truman. The furious Christof strikes Truman with lightning so that he falls into the water. The threat to Truman's life arouses serious worries not only among the meta-viewers but also among the film

crew, and even the producers, who warn Christof that Truman "can't die in front of a live audience." Truman struggles to keep from drowning and reaches the boat again, eliciting relief from the meta-viewer. This sympathetic response is followed by another empathetic response, in which a meta-viewer in the bath firmly grips the shower curtain in imitation of Truman's action on screen, as if encouraging him to hold on.

Back on the boat, Truman is the one who takes control of the situation. He definitely has left behind all his fears and weaknesses to such an extent that he is willing to die before giving up on his goal. He even tries to provoke Christof: "Is that the best you can do? You're gonna have to kill me!" Enraged, Christof ignores the pleas of his crew and even the threats of his producers and tells his assistant to turn up the wind. The assistant, emotionally involved, with tears in his eyes, is not able to do it. It has to be Christof himself, without any trace of mercy, who carries out the action. The high probability that Truman will die places the meta-viewer in suspense since, as Carroll points out, "the emotive criteria appropriate to regarding an event with suspense is such that the event promises that an undesired outcome appears likely, while the desired outcome seems unlikely" (*Engaging the Movie Image* 82). However, the focus of this dramatic moment is Christof, who is paradoxically the only person with the power to prevent the seemingly inevitable. Finally, he yields to Truman's tenacity, much to the relief of his crew, who at the same time responds with admiration for the exhausted but resolute Truman as he hoists the sails and resumes his journey.

After a short break in the tension, the next emotional moment in this climactic sequence comes when Truman finally collides head-on with reality. This allows him to recognize once and for all that his world is not real but a television set. Scenes in which characters make important discoveries about their lives are always touching, "setting up the possibility of viewers feeling



for the misguided character" (Greg M. Smith 101). In this case, the emotional response in the viewer is initially aroused when Truman's hand touches the wall that simulates the blue sky, symbolizing his recognition. At that very moment, his sigh and the timely entrance of the emotional music elicit the intended emotional response in the viewer. Immediately after this, Truman exteriorizes his frustration and anger by hitting the wall, while viewers, who understand exactly what this means for Truman, might express their sympathy for him through a mixture of sadness and pity for his situation. Once again, Truman overcomes the obstacle and heads for the exit, where he will face his last hurdle, represented directly by Christof, who, in his last effort to prevent his creation from abandoning the family home, talks to him directly from "heaven," thus depicting the god/father position that Christof has metaphorically performed over all the years of the television show. Christof again resorts to the strategy of recalling shared experiences as the best weapon for emotionally disarming Truman.

However, what seems sincere words are not, as Christof soon reveals his true face. Truman, struggling to resist these emotional tricks, does not respond to the appeals of an increasingly tense Christof, who finally reveals his real interest, which is nothing more than the success of his TV show. Not only Christof, but also the meta-viewer and the viewer, await Truman's final decision. His exit provokes a euphoric collective response from the meta-viewers; for example, in the bar, everybody jumps with joy when Truman finally achieves his goal. Everyone shares the euphoria except Christof, who resignedly accepts that Truman is free and therefore can make his own decisions, even if it means leaving behind a comfortable life and venturing into an uncertain future. The viewer might evaluate Christof's dysphoric response as deserved, eliciting satisfaction at his failure and happiness for the consequent success of Truman. Truman's success entails his abrupt disengagement from Christof, his crew, and the meta-viewer.

The last shot of the film shows how the meta-viewer, as two garage guards, return to normality as if the long relationship with the character had never existed. Thus after the television disconnection, the show's emotions finally give way to a boring, routine reality until the viewers find engagement with a new protagonist.

## **Conclusions**

The depiction of television meta-agents in *The Truman Show* shows how the author seeks to elicit emotional responses from the viewer and uses narrative strategies to provoke them. Author is responsible for articulating a more or less communicative narrative about the character. The more attachment and subjective access to the character the author provides, the more knowledge about the character the viewer acquires and, therefore, the closer the relationship with that character will be. This provokes deeper and, above all, sympathetic responses. A character's trajectory is extremely important to the elicitation of sympathetic responses, since the pro-attitude is being shaped by the evolution of the relationship between character and viewer. Hence, the longer the relationship, the stronger the bond and the deeper the viewer's care and concern for the character's well-being. Although the empathetic response is related more to a situation than to a process, knowing the reasons behind the characters' emotional responses helps the viewer to imagine better what they are feeling and therefore share their represented cognitive states more fully. The process of understanding the characters is not necessary but increases the possibilities of feeling with them. Thus, that process can be considered an elicitor that supports or an information base that guides imaginative empathy.

According to Jens Eder, "'Being close' to characters might seem to be a precondition of 'being touched' or 'being moved'" (68). David Bordwell echoes this idea when he suggests that

"living through the years along with the characters, watching them change in something like real time, brings them closer to us" (*Take It from a Boomer* n.p.). Closeness is akin to the concept of "familiarity"<sup>8</sup> introduced by Blanchet and Vaage to underline the advantages of engagement in television over its cinematic equivalent, since the characters in a television series "become more and more familiar" (24).<sup>9</sup> Thus, the complex process of character engagement is experienced differently in television and film and is related to the length of the relationship between viewer and character. The long-term relationship between viewer and character in television results in a different experience of engagement, since a better understanding of the characters elicits different emotional responses.

In this sense, Carroll's criterial prefocusing and Smith's alignment process are extremely important for the "structure of emotional elicitation" (Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 161). Through this process of developing the plot, the author foregrounds narrative situations that reveal what characters are like so that the viewer gets to know them better. In addition, the process engages viewers' moral sentiments of approval or disapproval of character behaviors or actions to confirm or undermine their pro-attitude toward and allegiance. In so doing, the author attempts to elicit emotional responses from the viewer to key moments in the character's story that are shaped by a deep concern for that character's welfare, and this is done through the articulation over the course of the narrative of one of the most powerful mechanisms for eliciting such responses: character engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> The "primacy effect" is a psychological term that explains the effect in which the first items in a series are relevant for the interpretation of the behavior of the series. One of the first theorists to adapt this idea to narrative process was Meir Sternberg in his book *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (1978). Related to our case, the first information provided about characters builds a first impression of them which is relevant for their posterior reading.

<sup>2</sup> As Greg M. Smith suggests, "[g]oals and obstacles are highly foregrounded in the narrative, and so they create highly marked opportunities for moments that are significant both narratively and emotionally" (53).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of attachment responds to David Bordwell's question: "What range of knowledge does the narration have at its disposal?" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 57). The answer is related to how restricted the narration is, as the narration may be attached to a single character or, conversely, may follow the spatio-temporal paths of several. The second question that Bordwell asks is: "how profound is the knowledge available to the narration?" (*Narration*

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in the Fiction Film 58). In this case, the answer is related to how deeply the narration gets inside the characters, examining their thoughts, feelings, desires, and so forth. From this point of view, the narration can be subjective or objective, depending on whether the character is more or less transparent or more or less opaque.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the question of whether the long-term narratives of television series make a difference for character engagement, and what these differences might be in contrast to feature films, see Blanchet and Vaage.

<sup>5</sup> As Carroll acknowledges, both notions come from Keith Oatley's work *Best-Laid Schemes* (107–9, 174–77) (*Engaging the Movie Image*: footnote on page 87).

<sup>6</sup> The first one is "recognition", which "describes the spectator's construction of character" (Smith, 82) and the second one, as we have seen above within the article, is alignment.

<sup>7</sup> As Smith suggests, this reaction in the viewer has been called "mimicry" and "has its modern scientific roots in the work of Theodor Lipps, [who] described a kind of involuntary neuromuscular response to physical forms" (98). Carroll defines this automatic contagion as "mirror reflexes", linking this concept with "what neuroscientists call mirror neurons" (*The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 186). This "mirroring process", a term used by Amy Coplan, is similar to the "emotional contagion" defined by psychologists Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo and Richard Rapson as "the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally." Quoted in Coplan (*Empathic engagement with narrative fictions* 144; *'Catching Characters' Emotions* 26-7; *Empathy and Character Engagement* 105).

<sup>8</sup> Familiarity is related to what in psychology is called the "mere exposure effect" or "the familiarity principle" (Blanchet and Vaage, 22).

<sup>9</sup> In communication studies, as Blanchet and Vaage suggest, "the friendship/relationship metaphor can even be considered one of the oldest and most prominent concepts researchers have used in their attempts to describe the effects of television viewing" (20). Donal Horton and Richard Wohl in the mid-1950s described this relationship between television agent and viewer as "parasocial interaction (PSI)" (quoted in Blanchet and Vaage, 21).