PONTIFICAL CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL (PUCRS)

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PROBLEMS OF VERISIMILITUDE IN FICTION WRITING

Avoiding an inconsistent narrative in the fiction writing process

Porto Alegre

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Monograph presented to the undergraduate Letters (English) program at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul as a requisite to obtain the licentiate degree.

Advisor: Dr. Luís Roberto Amabile de Souza Júnior

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Monography defended and approved on December 3rd, 2021.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The understanding of verisimilitude by a fiction writer can prevent damages to the narrative and, although many books and articles explore the surface of the concept, very few are dedicated exclusively to it, which leaves fiction writers and researchers in need of a material that puts together what is known so far not only about the mechanisms of verisimilitude that can be damaged, but also how to avoid or mitigate problems surrounding it. Since this information is pulverized, it is important to compile it into a cohesive unit. In this study, we will explain the origins of the term, how it got deviated from its original intention during the course of history and how it started to get back on track on the chapter Diachronic Analysis. We will also cover verisimilitude's relation with plot and present a parameter to help avoiding damage on it.

Key words: verisimilitude, fiction writing, coincidences, *felix culpa*.

RESUMO

O entendimento a respeito da verossimilhança por um escritor de ficção pode prevenir danos à narrativa e, embora muitos livros e artigos explorem a superfície do conceito, poucos são dedicados exclusivamente a ele, o que deixa escritores de ficção e pesquisadores em necessidade de um material que una o que é sabido até então não somente sobre os mecanismos da verossimilhança que podem ser danificados, mas também como evitar ou mitigar problemas acerca deles. Uma vez que estas informações estão pulverizadas, se torna importante compilá-las em uma unidade coerente. Nesse estudo, nós vamos explicar as origens do termo, como ele se desviou da sua intenção original durante o curso da história e como começou a voltar aos eixos no capítulo Diachronic Analysis. Nós vamos também cobrir a relação da verossimilhança com trama e apresentar um parâmetro para auxiliar a evitar danos a ela.

Palavras-chave: verossimilhança, escrita de ficção, coincidências, *felix culpa*.

SUMMARY

1 INTRODUCTION

Verisimilitude is a very important factor for fiction writing since, if not attentively respected, its lack will never let the quality of the final work unharmed. However, a widespread misconception of what verisimilitude is puts fiction writers far away from this crucial concept, once it is many times referenced as being the same as lifelikeness. In this scenario, not only it is important to get the concept of inner logic of the diegesis clear, but also deepen the understanding of why it decreases the quality of the story if neglected and how to avoid such neglection, which can happen unconsciously.

Many books and articles address this concept, but often these works have something else as its main topic and the conversation on verisimilitude is, as a result, sparse. It then becomes important to compilate valuable pieces of information from different sources to create a cohesive whole that contemplates verisimilitude in all its complexity. In order to address that, this study collects works from authors of various areas that could benefit this construct, such as literary theory, creative writing and psychology.

In the first chapter, we will address the reasons behind why verisimilitude was often misinterpreted as lifelikeness in a diachronic analysis of the term. In the second chapter, we will explain the connections between verisimilitude and plot, expand on some of Genette's important terms, discuss about the use of coincidences in the narrative and present a parameter for the limits of a positive relation of profitability when damaging verisimilitude for the sake of what the writer believes be a satisfaction that will excuse his transgression.

2 DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS

As far as the registers go, it all began around 330 BCE for verisimilitude. In the foundational work of Aristotle, *The Poetics*, we can find the first path laying stones for what would trigger centuries of discussions and perfecting around the verisimilitude aspect of works of fiction. When brought to the English-speaking readers in the beginning of the 18th century, the term that ignited it all was originally translated from the Greek as "verisimilitude".

> As in the disposition of the Subject, so in the Manners we ought always to seek the necessity, or the verisimilitude; so, that things happen necessarily or probably. (ARISTOTLE, 1705)

In the years to come, however, the term "probable" took the lead in the translations of Aristotle's work. Let us look at the same excerpt two centuries later:

> As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable; just as this event should follow that by necessary or probable sequence. (ARISTOTLE, 1922)

This loss in translation would be defining for misinterpretations to come, since what Aristotle refers to is not an aspect of lifelikeness, where events in the story should be probable as opposed to the real world, but an aspect of coherence with that which was previously stablished through chains of cause and effect, as it can be seen here "The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent" (ARISTOTLE, 1922) and here "[The poet] should also endeavor to admit nothing into his Subject which has not its Cause; and if that be absolutely impossible, then that which is unreasonable must be out of the Subject" (ARISTOTLE, 1705).

Aristotle goes as far as to say that it is correct to choose an impossible event, with the condition that it has a "resemblance to the truth" (ARISTOTLE, 1922). If lifelikeness were to be the goal – and thus the expected reader's interpretation of the originally translated "verisimilitude" - no such thing could be written by the author. As he states in the original translation, "The poet ought rather to choose impossibilities, provided they have a Resemblance to the Truth, than the Possible, which are Incredible with all their Possibility" (ARISTOTLE, 1705).

The next question then becomes: if, for Aristotle, the resemblance of truth can be achieved outside lifelikeness, where does it reside? What qualifies an event from

fiction as truth-resembling? In the *Poetics*, he explains that, as long as an event is inserted within a context which is considered to be the truth of the story and this event is capable of sparking an inferential process in the favor of its validity, it does not matter how absurd it may seem as a unit (ARISTOTLE, 1922).

Two centuries before being available in English, however, Aristotle's *Poetics* was already at the disposal of those who could read Latin, with the 1537 edition *Aristotelis Poetica*, translated by Alexandrum Paccium and Patricium Florentinum (ARISTOTLE, 1537). One of those Latin readers was Ludovico Castelvetro, an Italian literary critic who would influence dramatists across the centuries with his remarks on Aristotle's work entitled *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*, written in 1576. In his work, Castelvetro extols realism as one of his conclusions from Aristotle's work (CASTELVETRO, 1978). That would then reverberate across the centuries, notably influencing the French Neoclassicist dramatists, setting a very influential precedence of interpretation, which ultimately stablished a commonplace point of view for the *Poetics*' readers in regards to verisimilitude.

Even though this background did not manage to have much interference on the unknown translator of the 1705 English version of the *Poetics*, the ones who succeeded him have aligned more closely with Castelvetro's ideas, which solidified the misinterpretation. Articles and essays on a subject can be discussed and refuted, but when the source material is changed in translation, and that is the only language in which a person can understand it, no discussing can be done, no refuting takes place, as what is being read is supposedly the original ideas.

In the beginning of the 19th century, over two hundred years after Castelvetro's work, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English poet and essayist, joined the conversation with his autobiography called *Biographia Literaria*, from 1817. In it, Coleridge expresses his concerns with the "adherence [of the reader] to the truth" (COLERIDGE, 1817) in poems with agents or events in the supernatural spectrum. For him, a poem such as that would have the ability to sustain the reader's interest for the dramatic truth of the emotions present in it, which would have to seem like a natural effect of such supernatural situations, supposing that they were real.

However, it was this willingness to accept the reality established, or, in his words, a "willing suspension of disbelief", that constituted his main point, and the one

his work got notorious for. The pursuit of a semblance of truth, shared by him as the motivation for one of his projects, prepared the ground for the conversations to come. This willing suspension of disbelief, however, does not come solely from a reader's good will or desire to immerse oneself in a narrative, but from verisimilitude (HUNTER, 1993, p. 132), or, in Coleridge's words, a work in harmony.

> a specific dramatic probability may be raised by a true poet, if the whole of his work be in harmony: a dramatic probability, sufficient for dramatic pleasure, even when the component characters and incidents border on impossibility. The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this too with our eyes open, and with our judgment perdue behind the curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will: and meantime, only, not to disbelieve. (COLERIDGE, 1817)

Enters Gérard Genette; a French literary theorist who would, in the following century, not only point the discussions in the right direction again, but also expand on Aristotle's concepts and put forward important new terms on the table. In his work originally written in French and later translated to English entitled *Vraisemblance et motivation*, from 1968, Genette is quick to distinguish Aristotle's ideas from misinterpretations, as he writes:

> It has been understood since Aristotle that the subject of theater – and, generally, of all fiction – is neither the true nor the possible but rather the *vraisemblable*, yet the tendency has been to identify the *vraisemblable* more and more closely with the "should-have-been." (GENETTE, 2001, p.240)

Having established lifelikeness and verisimilitude apart, he then brings the original term back to the center stage to discuss new ideas. For example, Genette points that the verisimilitude aspect of a narrative would ultimately go through the perception of the reader/public while they make use of what he calls their "body of maxims" (GENETTE, 2001). This body of maxims refers to the corpus of assumptions constructed by the reader through the input gotten from the story as it progresses, in a process similar to labeling, such as "this character is sloppy" or "this ring can make its wearer invisible." This concept clarified the importance of working cause and effect by stablishing precedence. This process, however, should aim to be consistent (or as Aristotle puts it: if inconsistent, then consistently inconsistent) so that the full picture of an element of a narrative can be reliable to corroborate for its particularities, as Genette explains: "the generality determines and thus explains the particular, so that (for example) to understand a character's behavior is to be able to refer to it as a received maxim, and this reference is taken as a movement from effect to cause" (GENETTE, 2001).

Other important concepts of Genette's work, such as the relation of profitability, will be addressed further in the body of this article. In the next chapter, we will discuss how deviations from verisimilitude can affect the story in the plot level and discuss concepts that could prevent such problems and their negative effects during the writing process.

3 VERISIMILITUDE AND PLOT

3.1 Plot and causality

Before tackling the aspects of plot that intertwine with verisimilitude, it is important to clarify what plot consists in. For that, we can go back to Aristotle, who defines plot as the "arrangement of incidents" of the narrative (ARISTOTLE, 1922, p.25). For example, every person sleeps and eats, but in a narrative, if three days go by in story time, we will not necessarily watch or read about their night of sleep or their lunch. The selection of the events that are told and their disposition throughout the narrative is what constitutes plot. As McKee restates: "Plot is the writer's choice of events and their design in time" (MCKEE, 1997, p.43). This carefully constructed chain of events, however, is not birthed without a goal towards the reader/audience, as Dufrense defines: "Think of plot as the writer's arrangement of events to achieve a desired effect" (DUFRENSE, 2004, p.164).

These events, that are constituent parts of the plot, however, ought not to be disposed without criterion. As Assis Brasil notes, in order to deliver a cohesive, comprehensive whole, the writer must observe the causality connection between them (BRASIL, 2019, p.208). As he further elaborates:

> As fiction writers, we have to organize everything so that the story is comprehensible. For such, the idea that must prevail in the development of the plot is one of a *system*. In it, all elements are interconnected, one explains the other, all of them are indispensable, that is, no surplus; and also: a system is more than the sum of the parts that constitute it. (BRASIL, 2019, p.208, my translation)

This causality interconnection between story events becomes central to our discussion of the verisimilitude aspect of plot designing. Lifelikeness being dispensable for verisimilitude, as we saw on the previous chapter, what makes a plot respect verisimilitude then becomes its ability to link its events through chains of cause and effect. As Dufrense states, "Episodes do not necessarily make a plot. Plot is about the word *so*, not the word *and*. It's about *because of the reason given; consequently; with the result that; in order that*" (DUFRENSE, 2004, p.164).

But what makes cause and effect so important to plot designing? We have established that it aids verisimilitude, but why does it aid verisimilitude? As Dufrense states, "Motivations in collision create conflict" (DUFRENSE, 2004, p.171) and these

motivations are ultimately the establishment of precedence, that is, an "x" to do "y", a cause for an effect, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – Motivations in conflict
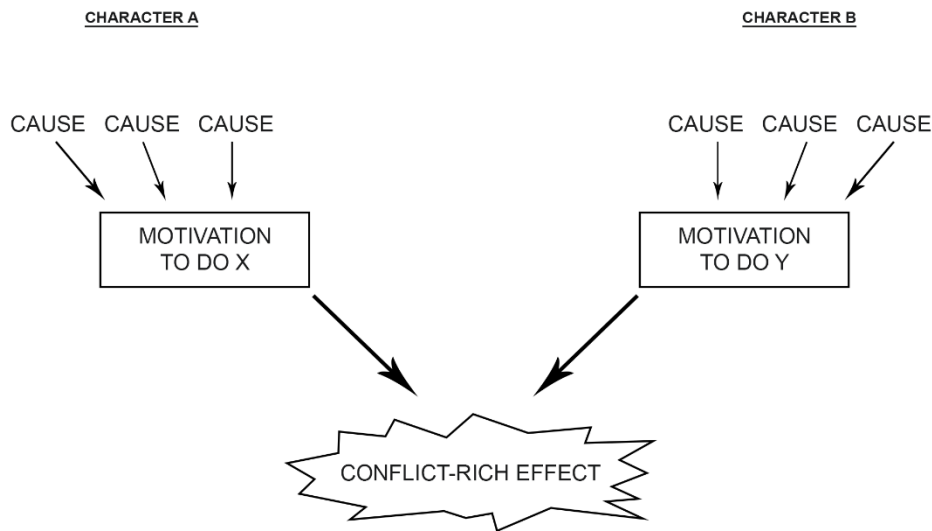
Source: Tiago Padilha

As character motivation to do something is directly related to cause and effect, and these motivations are what create conflict when collided, it becomes clear that cause and effect links are connected to one of the most central aspects of what makes a story appealing: conflict. Whether it is Lajos Egri asserting that any fiction writing is a crisis from beginning to end (EGRI, 1942, p.113), Johh Truby writing that great storytelling needs conflict not only between characters, but also between characters and their values (TRUBY, 2007, p.97) or Robert McKee's law of conflict stating that "Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict" (MCKEE, 1997, p.210), it is a very well stablished consensus how central conflict is for storytelling. Then, if those links of cause and effect are inexistent or weak, the conflict will also be weak, ultimately causing the story to suffer degradation in its quality. Cause and effect are at the core of conflict, or as McKee puts it, "The power of an event can only be as great as the sum total of its causes" (MCKEE, 1997, p.370).

To exemplify this concept, let us picture that a certain part of a story consists of a couple at home. The man's desire (we will call him George) is to go out, the woman's

desire (we will call her Anne) is for him to stay. They argue over it. Their desires oppose, but their motivations are not clear, therefore a weak conflict is the outcome. If, however, the reader/public already knows by this point in the narrative that George's motivation to go out is because that is the last day he has to pay for a loan to an unscrupulous moneylender and that Anne's motivation for him to stay is because she has been postponing telling him that she is pregnant and she simply cannot hold it any longer, the conflict becomes richer as the current event is causally connected with prior meaningful events.

To use the same example to illustrate how verisimilitude plays a part on these links and their contribution to conflict, it is enough to imagine that, instead, Anne's motivation for wanting George to stay home is because he had promised to cook some scrambled eggs for dinner. It would be a weak link if that motivation were to be portrayed as enough of an obstacle for someone who needs to pay their debt, as their life may be in danger. As Arnheim explains, "Aesthetically, behavior violates the demand of necessity if it is not dictated by its antecedents. It deprives the plot of its logic and makes it arbitrary and meaningless" (ARNHEIM, 2016, p.225). The conflict, in this case, with verisimilitude degraded, would not only be weak, but also push the reader/public away from the story. If Anne's personality is not previously portrayed as someone who would push that hard for something as simple as scrambled eggs for dinner (such as being a controlling and abusive character, for instance), then nothing would exist to complete the causality link and the outcome would be the one aforementioned, once "an action is incomprehensible, or 'extravagant' when no accepted maxim can account for it" (GENETTE, 2001, p.241).

3.2 Body of maxims

That becomes particularly important when we look at how people build their set of beliefs, as Dan Kahan, from Yale University, did with his co-autor colleagues Jenkins-Smith and Braman in their article entitled *Cultural cognition of scientific consensus*, from 2010. In it, the authors collaborate to our discussion by sharing their findings that the process through which someone build their set of beliefs is biased, thus not as much connected to reality as it is to their pre-existing beliefs. As the authors write:

> In the extreme, an individual might adopt the rule that she will assign *no* probative weight to any asserted piece of evidence that contradicts her prior belief. If she does that, she will of course never change her mind and hence never revise a mistaken belief, since she will necessarily dismiss all contrary evidence, no matter how fell founded, as lacking credibility. (KAHAN; JENKINS-SMITH; BRAMAN, 2010, p.22)

That does not mean, however, that a plot event should not confront the reader/public's existing beliefs in the sense of surprising them with a plot twist or similar tool, it only means that the reader/public will receive the set of rules from the narrative as it progresses, which will create what Genette called a body of maxims, and use that to judge the credibility of whatever comes next (GENETTE, 2001, pg.242). That is to say, the reader/public will not judge the narrative with the rules from the real world, but from the ones created by the author as the narrative progresses and, as McKee points out, when these rules are laid out by the author, he/she must stick to them and respect them (MCKEE, 1997, p.54).

The effects of inserting an event in the plot that contradicts what has been previously stablished as a norm (or maxim, to use Genette's terms), whether it is related to character personality, world building or event correlation, can be very distracting. This sort of problem is what causes the reader/public to be pulled out of what Gardner named a vivid and continuous dream, as he states:

> In bad or unsatisfying fiction, this fictional dream is interrupted from time to time by some mistake or conscious ploy on the part of the artist. We are abruptly snapped out of the dream, forced to think of the writer or the writing. It is as if a playwright were to run out on stage, interrupting his characters, to remind us that he has written all this. (GARDNER, 1985, p.97)

These intrusions by the writer that ignore the maxims stablished by him or her are fertile ground for arbitrariness, which makes the narrative shifts from the construction of a reality to a screening of wants of the author uncommitted to the creation of a cohesive whole. As Genette explains, this arbitrariness would unable any construction of a body of maxims, as these are constantly broken and proved unreliable (GENETTE, 2001, p.246). That is, what is guiding the story is not a body of maxims, but the wants of the author.

3.3 Coincidences

One of the signs that these harmful intrusions by the author are present, and consequently bolstering arbitrariness, is the use of coincidences. Although they happen naturally in real life, as Lodge states, the use of a coincidence "is all too obviously a structural device in fiction, and an excessive reliance on it can jeopardize the verisimilitude of a narrative" (LODGE, 1993, p.150).

Let us bring back our story example to illustrate this concept: The couple is arguing about George staying or leaving when he receives a phone call saying that the moneylender has tripped on the sidewalk and landed with his head on a hydrant, which caused him to die. The insertion of this coincidence would harm the story in many different levels, which benefits our discussion.

Firstly, it would damage the plot line as it deprives the public/reader of an obligatory scene. As McKee explains, whenever an inciting incident occurs, it generates a non-negotiable expectation on the public for an outcome, which becomes the obligatory scene (MCKEE, 1997, p.197). In our case, the reader/public expects to see George either be able to pay his debt or to suffer the consequences of not doing so. Expectations can always be subverted, but only if it is to deliver a richer experience, never a poorer one. Secondly, that decision damages agency by the protagonist. As Truby defines, "A story tracks what a person wants, what he'll do to get it, and what costs he'll have to pay along the way" (TRUBY, 2007, p.7), therefore, it is not beneficial for storytelling for a protagonist to passively obtain his or her goal; agency by the protagonist is an important part of the empathic relationship between the public/reader and the protagonist, which is central enough to be called a prerequisite for reader/public engagement, as McKee states: "we can empathize with any number of characters, but we *must* empathize with the protagonist" (MCKEE, 1997, p.347). Also, in that design, the protagonist does not have to face the antagonic forces to achieve his goal, as it is achieved without his participation, which also prevents him to undergo change (another important element of storytelling). Finally, and most importantly for our discussion, it is arbitrary instead of being part of the cause and effect structuring of the story, which consequently deteriorates verisimilitude. The event (death of moneylender) is not connected to anything but the very-evident author's desire.

For major plot events, such as resolutions, the arbitrariness of coincidences become even more problematic. Aristotle, for example, found it "evident that the unraveling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the *Deus ex Machina*" (ARISTOTLE, 1922, p.55). By "arising out of the plot itself", Aristotle is referring to effects generated by causes disposed throughout the plot; the resolutions, then, must have causality, which, as a consequence, will respect verisimilitude.

If by inserting a coincidence in the plot the author is lowering the story's potential to build tension as he/she "has established that a difficulty can be resolved by a *deus*" (CAIN, 2010, p.3), by using *deus ex machina* the author is sealing his/her compromise with delivering a compilation of wants to the detriment of verisimilitude. The term in latin refers to when, in ancient Greece, a god was brought down the stage of the theater by a crane at the end of the play to decide who dies, who lives, who marries and other important resolutions. In our present time, however, the term does not only refer to an event at the end of a story, but it can also refer to one that is the resolution of a problem that has arisen, wherever it is located in the narrative. Therefore, in regards to coincidences, *deus ex machina* is the most harmful to verisimilitude, as it strikes the most important plot point of a plot: its resolution.

Even so, coincidences are not elements that the author cannot get away with, although it will degrade, even if only slightly, the story's quality for the reasons already discussed. David Lodge offers two tools for disguising coincidences and mitigating their negative effects. One of them contributes to mitigate the damage on verisimilitude, the other one does not; we will discuss both. His first proposition is the use of foreshadowing, which would prepare beforehand the reader/audience, at a subconscious level, for the coincidence (LODGE, 1993, p.153). In our story example, it could be exemplified as the reader/public having seen the moneylender walking on the same street when that hydrant was open and pumping water onto the ground in a previous scene earlier in the story. Even though they are not connected causally, the scene serves the purpose of foreshadowing, which can lead the reader/public to be more receptive to the coincidence since it will feel less like it is coming out of nowhere. By substituting a cause with some sort of precedence, instead of linking it to nothing, the coincidence can disguise its lack of cause and effect link, consequently disguising

its damage to verisimilitude, though not completely. It serves, then, as a mitigation of damage, not a complete repair.

Figure 2 – Lodge's mitigation

LODGE'S MITIGATION

Foreshadowing (...) Coincidence Focus on outcome rather than on the surprise
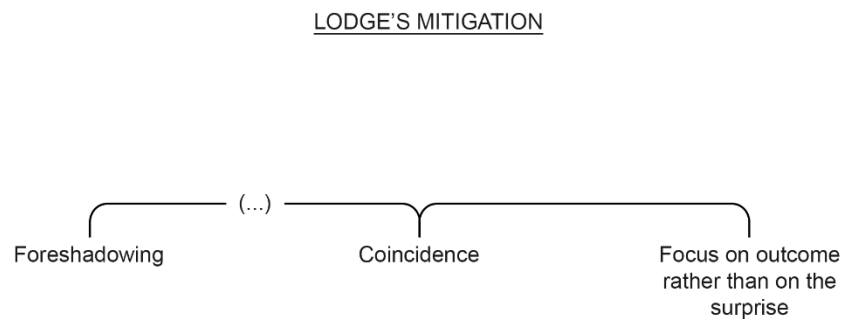
Source: Tiago Padilha

His other proposition to mitigate the damage caused by the arbitrariness of a coincidence inserted in the narrative is that instead of focusing on the surprise itself generated by the coincidence, the author should focus solely on the outcome, the consequences brought by the coincidence. The idea is to take the attention of the reader/public off the fact that they are reading/watching an arbitrariness unfold as fast as possible by pointing the spotlight back to the diegesis. This particular mitigation tool, nonetheless, does not help decrease damage on verisimilitude, as it does not operate in the vicinities of causality.

3.4 Limits of *felix culpa*

Whenever we discuss damage, we are not only concerned with "yes, there was" and "no, there wasn't", but also with how much of it has been done. With little damage, things can often still work, but enough of it can preclude their functionality. When we talk about damage to verisimilitude and how it affects the plot, it can too be too great for the plot to still be able to work as well as small enough to be excused. As Aristotle puts it, "not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically" (ARISTOTLE, 1922).

Satisfaction too has its nuances in degree. Usually, people are satisfied with something other than pure perfection. But there is also a limit below which a satisfied reader, for instance, becomes an unsatisfied one. For stories, satisfaction (in this case, of the public/reader) is also a varying factor and damage plays a role in this variation.

Harming verisimilitude will, as a consequence, inevitably degrade the narrative's quality, however, when faced with a small cost for harming verisimilitude that would generate big satisfaction on the reader/public, the author might find the trade a good deal and the public/reader can agree in the form of finding the fault excusable. This is what Genette calls a relation of profitability (GENETTE, 2001, p.250). For him, when looking at works of fiction critically, it is important "not to condemn a transgression *a priori*, but to look for what felicity it produces, to measure the one by the other, and to decide whether or not the felicity excuses the transgression" (GENETTE, 2001, p.250). When the relation of profitability is positive, it configures a *felix culpa* (happy fault, in latin).

Stating that the satisfaction must be greater than the cost would be a good enough guideline if we were dealing with a quantitative analysis, but, in our case, this relation of factors is not quantifiable. Both cost and satisfaction for this analysis are quite subjective, but they do exist and vary in degree. As we cannot express this degree in numbers, we can, then, create a parameter to categorize and establish what elements of the narrative are most sensitive from verisimilitude damage so that these can be preserved accordingly.

To address that, all sections of the pyramid in Figure 3 answer to the same question: what is the probability of the plot being able to still work if verisimilitude is harmed in one of these narrative elements? On the top section, this probability is very close to none, therefore those are the elements to protect the most from verisimilitude damage. On the midsection are the elements that, if harmed by verisimilitude damage, are unlikely to allow the plot to still work, but could be more willingly forgiven by the audience/reader depending on the felicity produced. Finally, on the bottom section, are elements that put less of a barrier on the plot still working if harmed by verisimilitude damage – which does not mean that no caution is necessary with them either. Within their sections, each element is not listed in an order of probability.

Figure 3 – *Felix culpa* parameter pyramid

FELIX CULPA PARAMETER PYRAMID
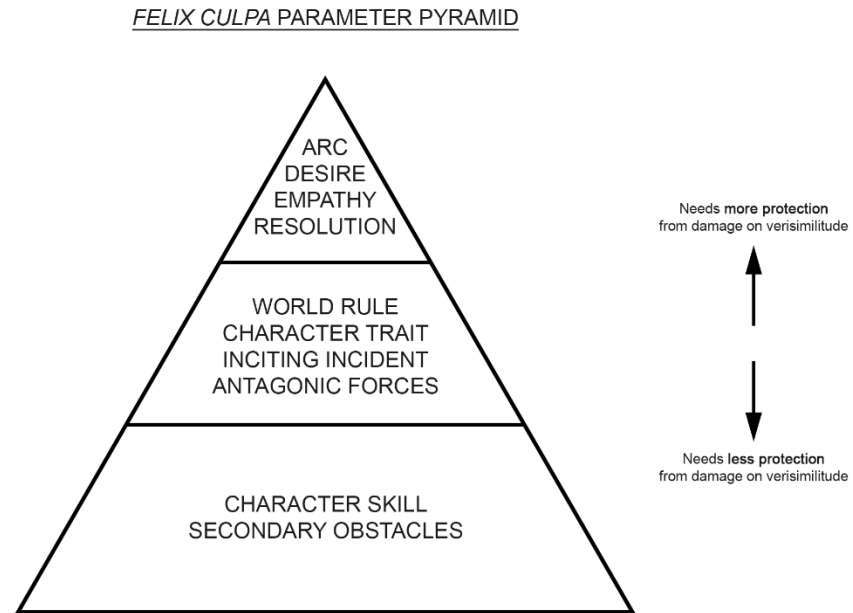
Source: Tiago Padilha

In the next parts below, we will proceed to justify why each element is placed in the section that it is.

3.4.1 TOP SECTION

On the top section we have four elements of storytelling: arc, desire, empathy and resolution. Much of the reason why they are placed there is connected to the reasons behind why we tell stories. Harmed verisimilitude brings heavy damage to any storytelling element, but those that are connected to the reason why humans consume stories are the ones that fully jeopardize its power.

In *Story*, McKee states: "The gift of story is the opportunity to live lives beyond our own, to desire and struggle in a myriad of worlds and times, at all the various depths of our being" (MCKEE, 1997, p.142). To be able to join in that opportunity, however, McKee clarifies that a condition for public/reader involvement is empathy (MCKEE, 1997, p.141). Without feeling empathy for the protagonist, the reader/public cannot place himself/herself in the protagonist's position, thus not being able to "live a life beyond his/her own." No satisfaction can come from witnessing a journey that one does not care about.

In our story example, verisimilitude damage on empathy could appear in the form of Anne being stablished as somewhat greedy and then shown donating four

semi-trucks for a non-profit organization that collects and delivers food for poor communities while George and her live in a small one-bedroom apartment in a bad neighborhood. It is not the unlikely nature of such event in real life that makes this harmful to verisimilitude (she could be donating an inherited fortune that she did not want, for example), but the fact that the maxim stablished beforehand was that she was somewhat greedy and did not have much money.

Truby tells us that stories track what a person wants (TRUBY, 2007, p.7) and that is where another element at the top section of the pyramid comes in: desire. For McKee, desire is "the primary unifying force that holds all other story elements together" (MCKEE, 1997, p.194). Truby's thoughts complement McKee's statement by bringing attention to the fact that desire permeates a story all throughout and consequences in all other elements tend to branch from repercussions of characters' desires.

Back to our story example to exemplify, verisimilitude damage on desire could be represented by showing that George has been searching for different ways to commit suicide because of problems not related to his debt. This way, portraying his desire to pay his debt to the unscrupulous moneylender as high would conflict with the established maxim that he wishes for death.

Another element on the top section of the pyramid is arc, the change undergone by a character during the course of the narrative. Even though character arcs are optional (in short stories, for example), when they are present, they bring the level of the story to the realm of satisfying one of the reasons why we have been telling stories for thousands of years: information on progress and decay. For Frank Rose, we tell stories to share our understanding of the world with others (ROSE, 2011), and the pursue of progress and avoidance of decay - whether individual or collective - are common ground interest for every human. Fiction, then, is a powerful medium to get the message across, as Aristotle explains:

> if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents (ARISTOTLE, 1922, p.27)

Verisimilitude damage on arc could be illustrated in our story example as George going from being addicted to gambling to being financially responsible without never having had to borrow any money or face any related

issues. The problem, again, is not how likely this sort of change would be to happen in real life, but the absence of a cause for an effect.

Finally, the last element on the top section of the pyramid is resolution. Just as the element "moral need" is divided into arc (when it is dynamic) and character trait (when it is static), the element of conflict is also divided in the pyramid. In this case, it is divided into its starting point (inciting incident), its aggravations (antagonic forces) and its end (resolution). It is divided in such way because, as we will see, verisimilitude damage on the latter is significantly more harmful than on the other two.

Arbitrariness in the resolution can not only bring all the negative effects of *deus ex machina* that we have already discussed, but also it can mean damaging that which is the most sensitive part of the story if it is the main plot. Aristotle reminds us that "the end is the chief thing of all" (ARISTOTLE, 1922, p.27), and for a good reason: the whole story is building up for this moment and expectations were inevitably built, comparable to the jump after the drumroll. As McKee points out, "If you fail to make the poetic leap to a brilliant culminating climax, all previous scenes, characters, dialogue, and description become an elaborate typing exercise" (MCKEE, 1997, p.108).

In our story example, verisimilitude damage on resolution could be present if, for example, instead of the moneylender dying from hitting his head, he simply forgave George's debt on a phone call saying that he does not need to pay it anymore. This would go against previously stablished maxims, such as "the moneylender badly wants his money back", and no previously stablished maxim could account for it; no cause for an effect.

3.4.2 MIDSECTION

On the midsection of the pyramid, we have four elements: world rule, character trait, inciting incident and antagonic forces. As we discussed earlier, both inciting incident and antagonic forces are part of conflict. For being a crucial factor in storytelling, as we have seen with McKee's law of conflict, it is unlikely that the plot could still work after being harmed by verisimilitude damage on these elements. Conflict not only reveals true character (MCKEE, 1997, p.101), but also allows for character arcs to happen, as Truby explains: "A character with certain weaknesses, when being put through the wringer of a particular struggle, is forged and tempered into a changed being" (TRUBY, 2007, p.32) .

For the inciting incident, verisimilitude damage on it could be exemplified in our story as the amount of money that George had borrowed from the unscrupulous moneylender were of three-hundred dollars, while he has a solid career and a well-paid job. If no cause is presented to explain why, then there will be no cause, thus being an effect without a cause. It causes great damage, since the inciting incident is what kickstarts the interest of the public/reader, as the name suggests, and if the author tries to spark this interest with a tainted event, it might prevent any interest from being kickstarted. However unlikely, depending on the execution, the author has a chance of getting away with it, since the inciting incident is not a main point of interest in the story, it just allows for a main point of interest to start.

As for the antagonic forces, our story example could help illustrate verisimilitude damage on it if George were a calm, responsible and (as far as Anne is concerned) financially stable person. In this case, there would be not a given cause for her inner struggle of not being able to tell George that she is pregnant. Pressure on characters has great appeal (and function, as we have seen), but pressure with no accountable good cause is unlikely to allow the plot to still work. Even so, the appeal of the pressure itself and the implications caused by it can produce enough felicity to enable the fault to be excused. This profitable relation is unlikely, though, and, even if it happens, it does not mean that the narrative got by unharmed.

A world rule stablishes how the place where a character is inserted works. It can vary from the culture of a company or of an indigenous tribe to the fact that a door lock has not been working for years, for example. It does have a very intricate relationship with the character, as, in a story, the world surrounding a character and its rules have a narrative role to play. While in the real-world people are born into an already existing world, in fiction, the world and its rules are thought to explore and express the characters, as Truby explains: "You don't create characters to fill a story world, no matter how fabulous that world may be. You create a story world to express and manifest your characters, especially your hero" (TRUBY, 2007, p.153). For Bakhtin, this blend between story world and character ideally accentuates the character joining him/her into "an artistically necessary whole" (BAKHTIN, 2011, p.17, my translation). As Brasil wraps it, "in fiction, there is no such thing as an innocent space" (BRASIL, 2019, p.330, my translation).

When an already stablished world rule is broken by the author, it conveys that the validity of any world rule thereafter is subject to ephemerality with no good cause. In our story example, if people tripping at the same spot on the sidewalk that the moneylender tripped and hitting their heads on the hydrant were portrayed as a recurrent problem on that street, one to which all pedestrians survive with minor injuries, but when the moneylender has the same accident he dies, it would be an example of verisimilitude damage on a world rule. What is guiding the story is not a well-tailored, causally related string of events, but whatever the author wishes to happen. This sort of damage makes it unlikely for the plot to still be able to work, however it can be more willingly excused for the sake of the felicity it produces, especially if the main satisfaction sought by the reader/public is one of adrenaline or laughter, hence the success of stories such as *Raiders of the Lost Arc*, to quote one example, and countless others which contain verisimilitude damage on world rules. It is important to remember that verisimilitude does not respond to realism and the rules of the real world, but to the maxims stablished by the own narrative and its particular world. Even in the mostly unlikely occasion of the damage being excused, it still does not lessen the harm inflicted upon the story.

Lastly for the midsection are the character traits. They are also very important maxims received by the public/reader along the story. While it is not necessary for the reader/audience to like the things that a character does, it is very important that he/she is understood (TRUBY, 2007, p.77). This understanding cannot happen if character traits are stablished and then discarded without a cause. A character's behavior that does not respond to what was stablished as who they are precludes the apprehension of an identity. As Bakhtin explains: "the author's response to the isolated manifestations of a character is based on a single response to the totality of the character, whose particular manifestations are all important to characterize this whole" (BAKHTIN, 2011, p.4, my translation). This way, for character behavior, the particular should respond to the whole, not contradict it. To prevent problems of such nature, Bakhtin states that it is important for the author to maintain an appropriate distance between him/her and the character during the writing process, since, otherwise, the result could be a shifting identity (BAKHTIN, 2011, p.17). Therefore, a careful character creation process is key to prevent unconscious damage to verisimilitude.

Verisimilitude damage on character trait would be present in our story example if Anne, who is struggling to tell George that she is pregnant, does it in another moment just as easily as if she was telling him that she is hungry. Even though the generated anxiety is situational, the character is responding to it with who she is. If such a massive shift in behavior happens with no cause presented before or after the shift, the inconsistency then leans towards what constitutes that character, bringing about the issues discussed.

3.4.3 BOTTOM SECTION

Character skill, however, does not concern who they are, but what they can do. That is the main reason why it is placed on the bottom section of the pyramid. Skills are also often not reliable all the time, thus naturally inconsistent. For the moneylender from our story example to have tripped and fallen, being as proficient at sidewalk walking as anyone else, there would not necessarily be a need to portray him as clumsy beforehand to back the effect with a cause, once it is already present. The cause for the effect of a suddenly decreased or increased cunning, then, becomes "living being's skills fail them sometimes" or "living beings often succeed in an attempt of something despite their poor skill." Though character skill can be bent and stretched with more easy acceptance, how much the story relies on it can define how much of a problem it is, even if it happens only once. The moneylender's death, then, serves the purpose of exemplifying this concept, since, while it can be justified as we have discussed in this paragraph, too much of the story relies on that particular event, even if it is the only occurrence of such problem. Even though it is placed at the bottom section of the pyramid, a story should avoid relying on arbitrary shifts in character skill.

The last element in the pyramid is secondary obstacles. Though harming it with damage on verisimilitude is still problematic, it is placed at the bottom section of the pyramid since it benefits from not being related to the main focus of the story. In our story example, it could be exemplified by a failed attempt by George to leave the house, determined to pay the impatient moneylender in the time scheduled, because the doors and windows are jammed. If they were never shown to be faulty and suddenly they are, with no good cause, then verisimilitude damage on a secondary obstacle is present. Though it benefits from not having many functions and important long-lasting implications, putting together a secondary obstacle that

produces satisfaction while having verisimilitude damage will unlikely be a better choice that one which still produces as much satisfaction while respecting verisimilitude.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have addressed the goal of centralizing and widening the scope of information on the relations of verisimilitude and plot, as well as providing information to prevent damages of such nature to narratives. We observed the cause-and-effect nature of verisimilitude as opposed to the misconception of lifelikeness often attributed to it, and why this deviation took place during the course of history. We also discussed the use of coincidences in fiction writing as well as expanded upon some of Genette's important concepts, such as the one of body of maxims and of relation of profitability.

This conglomerate of information put together, analyzed and expanded can lead to a better understanding of the intricacies of verisimilitude, especially regarding its relations with plot, and ultimately allow fiction writers to avoid damaging it. The centralizing of information nature of the study also provides a good source for future studies of scholars on the topic. Finally, the *felix culpa* parameter pyramid can offer a new take on the establishment of a framework for avoiding verisimilitude damage to narratives.

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