



## FICTIONAL LEVELS IN THE THEATRE WITHIN THE CINEMA Representation in the Film *Caesar Must Die* by the Taviani Brothers<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*This research project aims to examine the film *Caesar Must Die* in relation to the construction of the fictional planes that compose it and the implications of its intermediate condition within the phenomenon known as “theatre within cinema”. The film is approached based on theoretical considerations about fiction and the notion of theatricality in cinematographic art. This is done on the basis of tools of film discourse analysis and semiotic analysis of the scene, with special interest in the process of estrangement typical of Brechtian cinema.*

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1973 film *American Night*, François Truffaut assumes the dual roles of director and actor to present a metafictional account of the challenges encountered during the production of a studio film. The narrative follows Truffaut's character as he attempts to persuade the lead actor to continue with his work. "*Les films sont plus harmonieux que la vie, Alphonse, il n'y a pas d'embouteillage dans les films, il n'y a pas de temps mort. Les films avancent comme des trains dans la nuit*" / "Films are more harmonious than life, Alphonse, there are no jams in films, no dead times. Films move like trains in the night". In his plea, the director establishes a clear separation between a film and reality, between cinema and real life. This a priori distinction is well internalised in human understanding and brings to the fore first-order theoretical questions about fiction and its relation to the real. This distinction entails specificities for other media, such as the novel, or the theatre, where the materiality of representation is imposed through the bodies on stage.

This paper examines the fictional construction of cinema in its intermediate relationship with theatre, focusing on instances where codes of theatrical spectacle are incorporated into cinematic productions, a phenomenon also known as "theatre within cinema". The film *Caesar Must Die* (2012) by the Taviani brothers, which narrates the process of rehearsal and performance of a dramatic work by people in prison, is taken as the object of study. The dissolution of fictional planes proposed by the film through theatre is of significant benefit to the study of the relations between fiction and non-fiction in an intermediate context. Since the inception of cinema, there has been a growing interest in incorporating theatrical elements into film, a phenomenon that has extended beyond the domain of theatre as a form of content and has significant implications for the contemporary cinematic construction of fiction. The relationship between theatre and reality exerts an influence on the construction of film fiction through intermediate processes. An illustrative example of this phenomenon is the decision to revert to the use of puppets in the latest trilogy of the *Star Wars* saga (2015, 2017 and 2019), for certain characters that were initially created with computer-generated imagery (CGI) at the beginning of the 21st century.

This research employs an intermedial approach to the representation of reality in a context in which the boundaries between truth and lies have become increasingly blurred. The advent of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has led to the expectation of unparalleled access to reality. However, this has not been the case, resulting in a loss of trust and a heightened awareness of the significance of discourse, ideology and propaganda in a society with the capacity to challenge falsehoods through fact-checking. As the Hollywood studio system experienced a crisis in the dominant fictional model around the 1950s, it is now necessary to consider the possibility of a paradigm shift, augmented by the development of generative AI, in which a return to the physical and tangible materiality of the real is of interest. It is precisely in this area that theatre and the performing arts in general can make a significant contribution to the art of film.

## 2. Fiction: Theatre within the Cinema and Fictional Reflection

The comprehension of reality is contingent upon the delineation and classification of its constituent elements. The Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction establishes that something cannot simultaneously be and not be. In other words, it cannot simultaneously be the same thing and its opposite, as this change is fundamental for narrative to exist as a succession of cause and effect. The process of understanding is contingent upon the binary opposition that allows us to comprehend the low in relation to the high, the beautiful in relation to the horrendous, the good in relation to the bad, and to differentiate between the here and the there. This enables the construction of identities through their differentiation from otherness. These categories or plots that constitute reality are constructed through language. Edmond Cros posits that knowledge, understood as a function of consciousness, is only possible through the mediation of the sign. In other words, consciousness is impossible without a semiotic expression that organises and shapes the chaotic continuity of reality (Cros, 2011, pp. 112-113). As any language is a social institution, consciousness is linked to the collective, even at the level of the individual, where it is shaped by the individual's unique experiences.

A state of unconsciousness, or an inability to access reality, results in an absence, a void. Representation serves to address the absence of reality; it is a means of making an object, a person, or an idea present in order to respond to this lack. Consequently, it is the void that gives rise to

representation, which constitutes a tangible manifestation of reality (Cros, 2021, p. 1). Fiction can be defined as an act of representation, which makes a reality present in a tangible form. It is therefore important to recognise that the relationship between fiction and reality is not one of opposition, but rather a form of reality itself. It is therefore the distinction between the representative and the represented that enables us to differentiate between a novel, a film or a show and, in turn, "real life". In his 1991 work, Goytisolo (1991, p. 150) posited that the literary creative act is not a reference to reality, but a reality in itself. This mimetic, fable-like, or in contemporary terms, fictional speech act is not subject to the binary opposition of truth and falsehood. The concept of an internal logic to a fictional account, based on credibility and known as verisimilitude, was first articulated by Aristotle. This idea was subsequently developed during the Middle Ages and later during the period of classicism. In his analysis, Roland Barthes defines it as follows:

It can be reasonably assumed that any given work or discourse will not contradict any of the aforementioned authorities, namely tradition, the wise, the majority, or current opinion. The plausibility of a proposition does not necessarily correspond to what has been, or what must be, as evidenced by historical and scientific evidence. Rather, plausibility is contingent upon the beliefs of the public, which may diverge from the historical or scientific real. (Barthes, 1972, pp. 14-15)

In this manner, what is deemed credible aligns with the prevailing majority opinion, thereby establishing the boundaries of what is considered fiction based on the extent of cultural acceptance. Doležel (1999), for his part, incorporates the question into the framework of literary semantics. He argues that narrative worlds, understood as systems of fictional facts, are constructed by the authority of a narrative voice, the voice of the narrator. This voice is determined by artistic and therefore social conventions (p. 147). Consequently, literary fiction is characterised by the attributes of non-fictional assertions, namely the capacity to be either true or false. However, the object of reference is the creation itself, rather than reality outside the fiction (Martínez Bonati, 1991, p. 214).

The concept of fiction in other media can be better understood through the lens of literary theory. As in a novel, a poem or a dramatic text, the distinction between truth and falsehood in fiction in media such as theatre, film, comics or opera is meaningful only in relation to its own internal logic and is governed by the notion of verisimilitude. However, the demarcation between the fictional and the real does not operate in an identical manner across all media. To illustrate, the tangible reality of the fictional construct is especially pronounced in theatre, where the performer's body is exhibited on stage to personify the character. The act of speech or enunciation is evident in theatrical representation, whereas in film, conversely, the figure of the enunciator is obscured.

In this regard, Lotman (2000) underscores the significance of the spectator's perspective in both media. In contrast to the unchanging perspective of the theatre spectator, who maintains a fixed point of view, the film spectator is able to see through the camera, which is capable of movement, magnification, and even the adoption of the gaze of a character. This determines the functioning of sets and objects, which are subordinate to the performance in theatre. In contrast, in film they can be symbols, metaphors or characters in themselves, thanks to the possibility of zooming in, stopping over them and showing them repeatedly (pp. 72-73). The tangible reality of cinematic objects is amplified due to the fact that on the theatrical stage, the actor explicitly imbues objects with meaning, transforming them into explicit signs. In contrast, in film, the objects appear to be their own entities, as what is captured through the camera seems to be an objective representation of reality. Pérez Bowie (2007) posits that theatre maintains a dual enunciation, combining the represented fiction and the act of representation. In contrast, cinema tends to "erase any self-reflexive mark that highlights the process of construction of the diegesis," leading "the spectator to perceive the presented facts as objective, rather than as constructed elements of the narrative" (pp. 24-25). In other words, theatre makes the distinction between the real and the fictional evident, thereby generating dramatic tension through this relationship. However, cinema, which should provide a lesser sense of realism given that it is an enunciation on the flat screen, blurs the boundary between the real and the fictional, giving the impression of enunciating facts that are real and not fable-like (Linares Ávila, 2024, p. 607).

Nevertheless, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction must be nuanced. It must be acknowledged that literary, cinematic, and theatrical fiction is not constrained by a binary

truth/falsehood external to its intrinsic structure. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognise that fiction maintains a direct and intrinsic relationship with reality. This conflict is addressed in the film *Anatomy of a Fall* (Triet, 2023), in which the protagonist, Sandra, is a writer accused of murdering her husband. During the trial, the prosecutor introduces one of the novels written by the accused, to which the defence responds, "On juge pas des livres, on juge des faits" / "It is not the purpose of this court to pass judgement on literary works, but rather on the facts of the case". This is followed by a discussion on whether her novels, which present contrasting facts about the author's life, reflect the author's reality when one of her characters reflects on killing her partner. The defence responds with a vehement assertion that "Un roman n'est pas la vie. Un auteur n'est pas son personnage" / "A novel is not a reflection of reality. An author is not a character in their own right". The genres of autofiction, documentary, docufiction and documentary theatre are discursive and aesthetic propositions that purport to bring us closer to reality. They present events that have occurred or employ the aesthetic form of speaking of what has happened. However, like all texts in any medium, they are discursive constructions. It is not the function of fiction to establish models of moral conduct. However, "there must be a certain responsibility in the representation" (Sánchez López, 2023, p. 69). It is not the function of the novel, film or historical theatre, as fiction, to present an accurate representation of reality; however, it is expected that the narrative will be plausible. Nevertheless, the act of creation gives rise to a discourse that has implications for reality. Historical fiction, for instance, entails a discrepancy between the factual events and the fictional narrative. Despite not adhering to the scientific rigour typically associated with historical research, historical fiction frequently reproduces dominant discourses that resonate with reality. Examples of this can be seen in the implications of *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) for the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the 20th century, the patriotic perspective of the Second World War in *Dunkirk* (Nolan, 2017) or the colonial processes in *Shogun* (Marks and Kondo, 2024), as well as the capacity for national identity construction in the spectacles of the amusement park Puy du Fou Spain.

This question has had a significant impact on cinematic trends and poetic techniques throughout the 20th century, particularly towards the end of the 1960s. At this time, avant-garde filmmakers such as Godard and Gorin advocated for a surge in documentary filmmaking, challenging the long-standing dominance of fiction films by major American studios. This resulted in the dissolution of the boundaries between genres, whereby "fiction films began to introduce documentary quotations while documentaries used strategies from fiction films" (Cornago Bernal, 2001, p. 79). The development of fiction was thus confronted with physical and material reality, thereby establishing a direct connection with theatre, the nature of which is inherent in contact with the materiality of the body. In the context of the digital image and the dissolution of the boundary between representation and reality (Gaudreault and Marion, 2015, p. 69), the incorporation of theatrical elements in film persists as a mechanism of connection with reality and a manifestation of fictional self-perception, representing a significant form of intermediality between the two media.

The term 'theatricality' in the context of cinema encompasses a diverse array of tangible and intangible elements pertaining to the conventions of theatrical spectacle. The relationship between the two media has its origins in the inception of the cinematograph. A review of the forms of theatre within cinema reveals different phases of this phenomenon throughout its history (Pérez Bowie, 2010). Nevertheless, two distinct possibilities are identified in this study: the first is the explicit reference to theatrical practice, whereby theatre is presented as a core element of the narrative, either as an occasional insert or as a fundamental part of the plot. Although it may constitute a thematic resource in itself, Anxo Abuín classifies these inclusions according to some of their dramatic purposes. These include 'unfolding', whereby the scenic content is used for meta-cinematic reflection; 'counterpoint', whereby the socio-political conditions of creation in both industries are expressed through the use of cinematic art; 'philosophical reflection', which is a result of the *theatrum mundi* topic; and 'metafictional confluence', whereby different narrative levels are triggered (Anxo Abuín, 2005, pp. 139–140).

The second possibility is the notion of theatricality itself, understood as the insertion of codes inherent to stage representation that are included without explicit reference to theatre. The spatial limitation, temporal continuity, artificial light, black background, declamation and use of sets are just some of the codes present in a multitude of cinematographic works that entail the perception of theatricality on the screen. These two possibilities are not mutually exclusive categories; the second is a more encompassing concept than the first. In other words, the presence of theatre as content inevitably gives rise to theatricality, but not all instances of theatricality necessarily derive from the

presence of theatre as content. Consequently, theatricality is perceived in a broad sense as a fissure in the fictional construction, through which it is possible to gain access to the dialectic between reality and fiction, between life and cinema. Theatricality gives rise to an unresolved tension between fiction and non-fiction, in relation to Brechtian notions of estrangement and estrangement. In instances where cinema engages with theatricality, the implicit message is that the reality conveyed by cinema is, in fact, a constructed one. Accordingly, an investigation of theatre within cinema from this theoretical standpoint can elucidate truths situated in a border space between fiction and non-fiction. These truths are no longer confined to reality or fable, but rather transcend the separation between the representative and the represented.

### 3. Method

The theory under consideration demonstrates that the boundaries between fiction and reality are not fixed, but rather, they can blur and intertwine. This phenomenon presents a unique opportunity for discourse to reveal insights that may not be accessible through a purely theoretical or practical lens. In this way, fiction and reality can serve as complementary sources of illumination, each offering a unique perspective that enhances our understanding of the other. Furthermore, it has been emphasised that the distinct nature of these media allows for an exploration of the potential to reveal truths in the context of theatre within cinema. The methodology of this study is to test the conceptual apparatus initially by examining its derivations and then by verifying through analytical application how it manifests in a film that exemplifies the use of theatre within cinema. The film in question is *Caesar Must Die*, directed in 2012 by the Taviani brothers. It is an ideal object of study for the reasons previously stated, namely its theatrical content and its metafictional construction.

The research aims to ascertain the manner in which theatre is utilised in the film, in accordance with the established theoretical framework. It employs film discourse theory to analyse the mechanisms of the story, the fable and its treatment, and to identify the fictional planes that occur within the film. In doing so, it considers the ways in which these are also a construct of reality, and thus an unveiling of possible truths or glimpses of truths from a fictional film construction. In order to achieve this, the tools of film analysis provided by Cassetti (1996) and Ramón Carmona (1991) are employed in order to examine the film as an object of study. In contrast, for inquiries pertaining to theatrical elements, the techniques of stage analysis as outlined by the semiotics of theatre, as exemplified by Ubersfeld (1998), among others, are employed. This methodological approach permits an initial examination of the text through a semiotic lens specific to the medium in question, after which the analysis can proceed to examine the relations between the text and the film.

Such an approach to the symbolic scope of the film also entails interpretative operations. Moreover, it is proposed that the veracity of the film is contingent upon the estrangement and distancing of the spectator from the fable. This theoretical observation is also subjected to empirical testing through a comparative analysis with other analogous works. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to consider the work of Jovanovic (2011), entitled *Montage and Theatricality as Sources of Estrangement. A Tendency in Contemporary Brechtian Cinema*. On this basis, a comparison will be made between the film by the Taviani brothers and the examples proposed by the author. The motivation for undertaking this comparison is not primarily based on the similarities between the two cinematic styles, but rather on their shared characteristics as described by Colin MacCabe (1974) in relation to Brechtian cinema. In conclusion, the analysis of *Caesar Must Die* is based on previous works carried out by different authors who have studied the film from different perspectives. These provide a starting point on which to base the methodological tools applied.

### 4. Performance in the Film *Caesar Must Die*

In Italy, the practice of theatre within the context of incarceration has been a long-standing phenomenon, spanning several decades. The Company of Free Artists Associates / Compagnia dei Liberi Artisti Artisti Associati) is a theatre company that has developed its activities within the context of penitentiary centres, including the Rebibbia prison in Rome. The directors Paolo and Vittorio Taviani attended a performance of Dante's *Inferno* from *The Divine Comedy*, performed by the company. They were fascinated by two aspects of the performance: firstly, the use of different dialects to recite the



verses that made up the play; and secondly, the parallelism between the narration and the situation of the actors in prison. This experience inspired the creation of the 2012 film *Caesar Must Die*, which documents the rehearsal and performance process of the staging of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The film won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The cinematic poetics of the Taviani brothers is defined by their explicit presentation of their formal methodology, which serves to disassociate the emotional content of the drama, accentuate the filmic artifice, and prompt the critical consciousness of the spectator (Reviriego, 2012, p. 40). His filmography includes *Father and Master / Padre Padrone* (1977), which narrates the experiences of a boy in Sardinia in the 1940s, and *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982). The latter film is based on a historical event that occurred in Italy during the Second World War. On that occasion, a bomb detonated in the church of the Tuscan village of San Maniato, where the inhabitants were seeking shelter. The film's narrative is centred upon a documented tragedy, which was attributed to German aircraft for decades until it was recently demonstrated that an American hand grenade was the source of the explosion. The film was shot on the same locations in Tuscany and, as a result, had all the ingredients of neorealism at its disposal. However, it was conceived as a performance rather than an account of historical events. *The Night of the Shooting Stars* was not conceived as an historically accurate account of the events in question; rather, it was intended to 'mediate reality through language, clearly revealing its fictional, spectacle-like nature' (Houcke, 2017, p. 166).

The film *Caesar Must Die* documents the rehearsal and performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* by the the Company of Free Artists Associates / Compagnia dei Liberi Artisti Associati, under the direction of Fabio Cavalli. The film employs techniques and elements characteristic of the documentary cinematic style. The rehearsals of the play, which are both scripted and fictitious, dramatise the fable of the play, in which a group of conspirators led by Cassius and Brutus comment on the well-known assassination on the night of the Ides of March. Nevertheless, the company's work is authentic and materialises in the form of a theatrical performance of the play before an audience in the Rebibbia prison theatre. Consequently, by meticulously analysing the alterations in camera angles during the filming of the performance, it is feasible to discern, based on the calibre of the visuals, minor discrepancies and the integration or exclusion of the audience, live footage captured during the performance and images recorded exclusively without the presence of the audience. The distinction between documentary and fiction is not the only factor that differentiates these two sets of images. They also represent two distinct forms of theatre recording, which, through audiovisual editing, constitute a fictional film. Conversely, the actors, both in the play and in the film, are prisoners who are living out their own personal history, serving their sentences and, in effect, are deprived of their freedom within the walls of the penitentiary. At a certain point in the film, it is explained that the prison theatre is undergoing refurbishment. This provides the Taviani brothers with an opportunity to relocate the rehearsals to different spaces, including cells, multi-purpose rooms, courtyards and corridors. This diversification of locations contributes to the confusion between the fiction and non-fiction shots that make up the film. The latter are structured as follows:

The work is based on the historical and factual events surrounding the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. These events are accessed through a variety of sources, which collectively form a comprehensive account of the incident. The assassination of the dictator in Pompey's Curia marked the end of the Republic and the subsequent proclamation of Octavian as the first emperor of Rome. The dramatic text, composed in the late 16th and early 17th centuries by Shakespeare, is based on these events and presents a fictionalised account of this historical period. The play, comprising five acts, is based on a conception of classical antiquity that was typical of the Elizabethan Renaissance, which occurred during the 16th century. In his portrayal, Shakespeare depicts a Rome characterised by violence and decadence, with Julius Caesar depicted as arrogant and self-absorbed (Miola, 2002, p. 194). The author's use of dramatic licence is therefore intended to resonate with the Elizabethan audience through the incorporation of "local historical references within the context of his fictional Rome" (Cazorla, 2021, p. 68). The play is performed by individuals from the same historical period as the film, who have been incarcerated and are serving sentences within the Rebibbia prison. The actors serve sentences of life imprisonment for murder, seventeen years for drug trafficking and fourteen years for membership of a criminal organisation during the staging of the play and the making of the film. The theatrical representation thus serves as a bridge between the experiences of the prisoners and those of the dramatic text, offering them a temporary solution to their need for release. The veracity of this

assertion is substantiated by the existence of documentary evidence external to the film. In this way, the film contains two distinct levels of reality: one is the historical reality of Julius Caesar, dramatised through Shakespeare's play; the other is the 'historical' reality of the prisoners, captured by the film through the filming of their rehearsals and performance. The rehearsals and performances serve to connect the two planes of reality, as the liberation of the prisoners from oppression is experienced in parallel with that of the conspirators against Julius Caesar.

The film's narrative structure is circular in nature, commencing in extremis with the performance in the prison theatre of the play's conclusion, wherein Brutus meets his demise and Mark Antony and Octavian deliver eulogies in act five. Following the theatrical performance, the actors are returned to their cells. Through a flashback, the film then returns to the casting process of the troupe. From this point onwards, the film is presented in black and white. This stylistic choice, as articulated by the Taviani brothers, is intended to disassociate the viewer from a realistic perception of the depicted events. This is because, as Calbi (2014, p. 235) notes, the association of reality with colour is disrupted by the use of black and white, which makes the intervention of the medium in the gaze explicit. Similarly, the employment of black and white in the film's central section, encompassing the casting and rehearsal processes, serves to differentiate the film's aesthetic from that of a documentary or reportage on life in prison.

The casting sequence represents the initial phase of the staging process, as devised by the company's director, Fabio Cavalli. Nevertheless, both the director and the prisoners are themselves being guided by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. It can therefore be argued that the casting sequence functions as a fictional representation of the casting process, serving as an introduction to the cast of the film (Houcke, 2017, p. 169). The convicts selected to perform in the play are depicted through close-ups and harsh overhead lighting evocative of mug shots, accompanied by a caption specifying the length of sentence and the crime committed. At the conclusion of the film, alongside the names of the principal actors, a concise account of their experiences and accomplishments subsequent to the film's production is presented. This is a conventional cinematic technique that imbues the filmic narrative with a sense of authenticity by illustrating the tangible reality underlying the fiction.

Once the characters have been introduced, the rehearsal of the play commences in various locations within the prison facility. The rehearsals of the play's opening scenes, including the soothsayer's warning about the danger of the Ides of March, the meeting of conspirators in the middle of the night, the assassination of Caesar and other scenes from the first, second and third acts, take place in various locations within the prison, including the corridors, cells, multi-purpose rooms and courtyards. The fourth and fifth acts, in which Brutus and Cassius confront Mark Antony for power, are enacted within the theatre as part of the play's performance. The most notable alterations to the original dramatic text are the removal of the female characters Calpurnia and Portia, wives of Caesar and Brutus respectively. This alteration is not motivated by practical considerations, as in other productions staged by Fabio Cavalli within the prison, some female roles were performed by male actors. This absence is intended to enhance the sense of social isolation suffered by the actors (Nappi, 2014, p. 44), and connects directly with the casting test, which required the prisoners to say goodbye, first with sadness and then with anger, to their loved one. Secondly, the staging is adapted to align with the dialect of the Italian actors. This alteration of the dialogue situates the actors and spectators within a more immediate and relatable context, blurring the boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional, and establishing parallels between the narrative and the performers' experiences (Lovascio, 2018, p. 5).

The blurring of the lines between reality and fiction is a pivotal element in *Caesar Must Die*. The dialogues written by Shakespeare in the seventeenth century establish symmetries with life, whereby the actors evade, blurring the boundaries between the theatrical line and association, memory or longing (Tassara, 2017, p. 86). In this manner, the shots that constitute the film are meticulously interwoven. During the rehearsal of the second scene of the first act of the play, *Cosimo Rega* and *Salvatore Striano* assume the roles of Cassius and Brutus, respectively. The rehearsal is conducted in an unoccupied room with only a window and a modest stage situated below it. In the scene, the two actors observe as Caesar, held in high regard by the populace, declines the proffered crown. The window through which the actors look constitutes an audiovisual out-of-field, which, together with the sound of an unrecognisable commotion, creates a scene imagined by the film's viewer. This scene could be interpreted as either the prison yard or Julius Caesar's coronation attempt in ancient Rome. At this point,

Fabio Cavalli's intervention in his role as stage director to correct Cosimo Rega's posture causes the audiovisual spectator to be immediately transported back from the reconstruction on the other side of the window, through the conversation between Brutus and Cassius as part of the drama, until they find themselves in an empty room in the Rebibbia prison with Cosimo, Salvatore and Fabio himself. In another scene of the film, Antonio Frasca rehearses Mark Antony's renowned monologue, which incites the people of Rome to rise up against the conspirators. The aforementioned rehearsal is conducted within the confines of the prison courtyard, a locale that is populated by a multitude of prisoners, who are observed to be exuding a state of considerable agitation as they are seen leaning out of their respective windows. The crowd, which is not part of the cast of the play, rises up without it being clear in which shot this occurs. The audiovisual spectator is unable to distinguish between a performance of the Roman people against the assassination of Caesar and the filming of a fictitious riot in the Rebibbia prison. The film traverses this ambiguity, wherein all responses are deemed valid, the fictional sequences are indistinguishable from reality, and the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are obfuscated.

#### **4.1. Theatricality and Estrangement in *Caesar Must Die***

Theatricality is an indispensable element in the construction of the filmic artefact in *Caesar Must Die*. Theatre serves as the primary impetus for the narrative, which is shaped through the casting, rehearsals, and performance of the play. The scenic elements facilitate the disruption of the identification process that is characteristic of Aristotelian-rooted cinema. The act of disclosing the artifice inherent to the fictional pact produces in the spectator a phenomenon of distancing or estrangement, derived from the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung* in its German original. Despite the fact that Brecht's interest in film was not a constant presence, his figure is still widely referenced in the field of cinema and is related to the work of directors such as the Taviani brothers. In his 1974 work, 'Realism at the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', Colin McCabe was among the first to discuss the concept of Brechtian cinema. This form of filmmaking is characterised by self-reflexivity, estrangement and political engagement, three concepts that are evident in *Caesar Must Die*.

The film's use of wooden swords, unconvincing acting, declamatory style, limited camera movement and static positioning of the actors in front of the camera are some of the theatrical references that can be identified. The use of theatrical references is more plausible when the film explicitly references theatrical practice. Conversely, the use of anachronistic, false, or decontextualised props, the appearance of curtains, dark backgrounds, the framing of the scene, or the declamatory performances serve to enhance the strangeness of the props and make it difficult to perceive them as plausible. Although '*Caesar Must Die*' is an example of a film in which the appearance of theatrical props is justified by the script, the film's high level of abstraction means that the possibility of Julius Caesar being killed with a wooden sword seems entirely feasible at times.

The work, entitled "Montage and Theatricality as Sources of Estrangement, A Tendency in Contemporary Brechtian Cinema" (Jovanovic, 2011) provides an excellent illustration of this issue. The text discusses two films in dialogue with the Taviani brothers' film, the first of which is *History Lessons* (1972) by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, a directorial duo who were prominent figures in the new German cinema of the 1960s. The film, which is based on an unfinished novel by Bertolt Brecht entitled *Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar / The Enterprises of Herrn Julius Caesar* (1938-1939), progresses through the streets of Rome in a carriage with a driver and a number of companions who assert that they have had direct contact with the Roman dictator. As in *Caesar Must Die*, the film eschews the norms of descriptive realism, thereby underscoring its artifice. Both films combine contemporary costumes for some characters and Roman-era togas for others, an anachronism that raises questions about the narrative space-time continuum. In *History Lessons*, a parallel is drawn between slavery as the dominant model in Caesar's Rome and capitalism as the dominant model of contemporary society (Jovanovic, 2011, pp. 117-118). In contrast, in *Caesar Must Die*, the parallel drawn connects Shakespeare's text with the lives of the prisoners, as well as the Elizabethan image of a decadent Rome imagined by the playwright with life in a prison. The distinction between the two films is that *History Lessons* does not incorporate theatrical practice as a central element of its narrative. The togas worn by the characters are presumed to be authentic within the context of the plot, which is predicated on an anachronism that serves to reinforce its fictional nature. In *Caesar Must Die*, there is a possibility that



the recorded material is authentic, given that the prisoners' costumes form part of an internal fiction within the film, which corresponds to the theatrical representation.

The second film discussed by Jovanovic is *Antigone*, the abbreviated title of *Sophocles' Antigone in Höderlin's Translation as Reworked for the Stage by Brecht* (1991), which was also directed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. The title of *Antigone* itself evidences the film's palimpsest character, and the film includes fragments of the theatrical production previously carried out by the pair of directors. While *History Lessons* and *Caesar Must Die* prompt the viewer to contemplate the dissolution of the theatrical material into the cinematic, *Antigone* explicitly elucidates the relationship with the materials preceding the film as an adaptation. These include the inaugural performance of the play, *Hölderlin's Antigone*, *Brecht's Antigone*, and the theatrical version of the drama conducted by the directors (Jovanovic, 2011, p. 121). The theatrical content is more explicit and closer to the theatre recording than that of the Taviani brothers' film. The fixed camera, reminiscent of the traditional gaze of a theatre audience, the simplicity of the filmmaking and the editing, facilitate the theatricality, which is deployed through the text, the acting and the location of the film, which was shot in the theatre of Segesta in Sicily. As in *Caesar Must Die*, the use of off-camera is fundamental to the film *Antigone*, directing the spectator's attention and constructing suggested spaces. Together with the camera movements, these elements prompt the spectator to reflect on the present and the represented, on illusion and reality (Jovanovic, 2011, p. 124).

The three films illustrate disparate manifestations of cinematic theatricality. *Caesar Must Die* occupy a position somewhere between the dearth of theatrical content in *History Lessons* and the filmed theatre of *Antigone*. The specific conditions of theatrical practice depicted in the Taviani brothers' film establish a parallel between life and theatre, wherein the notion of space serves as a fundamental nexus. The spatial limitations of the prison are more akin to the theatrical space than to the filmic space, which is afforded greater freedom of movement. This establishes a physical equivalence between the stage and the prison space, which is, however, opposite on a symbolic level. The enclosed space is a space of power, authority and oppression. In theatre, however, the enclosed space of the stage represents a challenge to the prevailing power structures. It provides a symbolic opportunity for subversion through artistic expression. The film's depiction of the prison as a space that is simultaneously confined and expansive, through its portrayal of the prison as a stage, allows for the exploration of other areas within the prison, thereby providing insight into the lives of the characters. This constitutes a rupture of the scenic space on the physical plane, analogous to the Brechtian rupture of the fourth wall. From a symbolic perspective, the entire prison can be viewed as a theatrical space, and it becomes possible, through artistic expression, to challenge the authority and influence of this institution. The performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* elucidates this process of struggle against oppressive power. The actor-prisoners represent the conspiracy against Caesar through which they express their longing for freedom. Consequently, at the conclusion of the film, upon the conclusion of the performance and the actors' return to their cells, Salvatore Striano gazes into the camera and utters the final sentence of the film: "Since I have known art, this cell has become a prison".

## 5. Conclusions

The concept of fiction and its relation to the real has been identified as the theoretical starting point for the study of the limits between fiction and non-fiction present in the film *Caesar Must Die* by the Taviani brothers. Similarly, the concept of theatricality in film has been approached in two distinct ways: firstly, in a broad sense, as a set of codes associated with theatrical practice; and secondly, in a specific sense, as a form of theatre as content. A methodology based on the analysis of film discourse, supported by semiotic analysis tools specific to cinema and theatre, has been employed to study the film. This has enabled the relationship between the fictional planes of the film and its use of theatre, which was the objective of this research, to be elucidated.

The film *Caesar Must Die* employs a combination of fictional and documentary techniques, with the intention of obscuring the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. In order to achieve this, the film makes use of theatrical practice, which is presented as the main content of the film. The theatrical plane represents a reality that serves as a bridge between two other planes: the narrative of the assassination of Julius Caesar through the dramatic text of William Shakespeare, and the lives of a series of prisoners in the Rebibbia prison in Rome. The fiction is situated within the narrative of the dramatic text and in

the fictional reconstruction of the rehearsals with stage director Fabio Cavalli. The historical events narrated, the living conditions of the inmates and the theatrical performance itself, presented in front of an audience in the prison theatre, are all situated within a reality that is not simply a representation but rather a complex interweaving of fact and fiction. The dissolution of the shots with the confluence of cinematographic and theatrical media serves to establish a parallelism between the life of the prisoner-actors and the dramatic fable. This parallelism highlights several key truths, namely the capacity for artistic expression to serve as a conduit for liberation and as a means of challenging the status quo, particularly in the context of incarceration and the denial of freedom.

The theatricality of *Caesar Must Die* is evident throughout the production, from the stage to the rehearsals, the performance itself, the actors' positioning in relation to the camera, the use of props, costumes and other theatrical elements. It has been demonstrated that the reality factor of theatrical representation has implications for the fictional construction of film, particularly when an intermediate phenomenon of theatre within film is produced. The presence of theatricality in cinema calls into question the conventionality of the cinematic medium itself. This results in a sense of estrangement that calls into question the representational nature of cinematic art. In this interval and in the fissure that emerges, a more penetrating and dynamic examination of reality is possible.

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