

## **CARVING CHARACTERS IN THE MIND. A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE RECEPTION OF CHARACTERS IN AUDIO DESCRIBED FILMS<sup>1</sup>**

### **La construcción mental de los personajes. Aproximación teórica a su recepción en películas audiodescritas**

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**ABSTRACT:** From early childhood on we are exposed to characters in books, cartoons, films, theatre plays, and video games. Through these media we enter fascinating fictional worlds that seduce our imagination with every page or scene. As the events unfold, we become captivated by the story and its protagonists, whose deeper feelings are outlined in a succession of words and/or images that the audience needs to endow with meaning. In their search for comprehension, readers and spectators “picture” the situations described in their minds by creating multimodal representations (mental models) about the events taking place, the place and time in which they occur and, especially, the people involved. This paper is an attempt to explore how audiences receive and understand audio-described film characters. Drawing on research from Cognitive Narratology, Film Studies and Social Psychology, it will be argued that spectators and audio-description users (re)create characters, that is, they extract information from the film and they endow it with meaning with the help of their own mental schemata. Through this process they create the initial mental model of the characters, which will be updated all throughout the film experience. At the core of the model is the characters’ psyche, which constitutes a conceptual framework that aids spectators by ascribing coherence to the narrative events. A case study analysing the step-by-step reception process

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of an audio-described character will be provided to explore how users create mental representations from the integrated information they receive from the film (dialogues and sounds) and from the audio description.

*Key words:* audio description, character, mental character model, reception.

**RESUMEN:** Desde la infancia estamos expuestos a los personajes de libros, dibujos animados, obras de teatro y videojuegos. Gracias a ellos, entramos en mundos de ficción fascinantes que nos seducen tras cada página o escena. A medida que se desarrolla la trama, nos dejamos cautivar por la historia y sus protagonistas, cuyos sentimientos más profundos se van perfilando en una sucesión de palabras o imágenes a las que la audiencia debe atribuir significado. Para comprender la historia, los lectores y espectadores proyectan en su mente las situaciones descritas y crean representaciones multimodales (modelos mentales) que reproducen los hechos, el lugar y el momento en el que suceden y, sobre todo, a las personas que allí aparecen. Este artículo pretende explorar la recepción y comprensión de los personajes de películas audiodescritas. A partir de investigaciones en el ámbito de la Narratología Cognitiva, los Estudios Fílmicos y la Psicología Social, se argumenta que tanto los espectadores como los usuarios de películas audiodescritas (re)construyen a los personajes, es decir, extraen información del filme y la dotan de significado con ayuda de sus esquemas mentales. Mediante este proceso, crean el modelo mental inicial, que luego irán actualizando durante toda la experiencia fílmica. Un componente central de dicho modelo es la psicología del personaje, la cual constituye un marco conceptual que ayuda a los espectadores a dotar de coherencia a la trama narrativa. Para ilustrar el proceso mediante el cual los destinatarios crean representaciones mentales a partir de la información que reciben de la película (en forma de diálogos y sonidos) y de la audiodescripción, se presenta un estudio de caso donde se analiza el proceso de recepción de un personaje audiodescrito.

*Palabras clave:* audiodescripción, personaje, modelo mental del personaje, recepción.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “Cognitive Narratology” was used for the first time by Jahn (1997) in a paper describing the mental processes developed by readers of

narrative situations. Fifteen years later, Cognitive Narratology has become a full discipline, characterized in what Herman (1999) calls “postclassical narratology”, a term that embraces research aimed at complementing the work of the classical structuralists with new methods and approaches. Cognitive Narratology explores the role of the human mind in the comprehension of narratives in any means of presentation: print texts, films, radio, face-to-face storytelling or virtual environments. Borrowing research principles and methods (mainly though not exclusively) from Cognitive Psychology, it covers a wide range of research topics such as the cognitive activities developed by narrative receivers and the mental representations that they create. The role that textual cues, prior experience, and cultural values all play throughout the narrative comprehension process are also topics of interest within Cognitive Narratology.

It is widely accepted that characters are of central importance to any kind of narrative. Acknowledging their prominent role, a specific line of research within Cognitive Narratology has dealt with the reception and comprehension of characters by readers and film audiences. It is the aim of this paper to review said literature and suggest a similar framework applicable to the field of audio description (AD).

As explained by Orero (2005: 7), “AD is the descriptive technique of inserting audio narrations, explanations and descriptions of the settings, characters, and actions taking place in a variety of audiovisual media, when such information about these visual elements is not offered in the regular audio presentation”. In other words, AD consists of an auditory track narrating the most prominent visual information in films, television series (Bourne and Jiménez 2007; Matamala and Rami 2009) or stage arts (Matamala and Orero 2007; Cabeza and Matamala 2008; Cabeza 2010). AD is delivered in the parts of the audiovisual product where no dialogue or relevant sound is heard, and it intends to provide relevant visual details that would otherwise be missed by a Blind and Visually Impaired (BVI) audience.

Characters in AD have been the focus of descriptive and theoretical research (Orero 2011; Benecke 2014) and have been mentioned in general papers on the AD of specific films (Orero and Wharton 2007; Chmiel and Mazur 2011). Most of the existing guidelines have also approached, with varying amount of detail, the issue of how characters should be described (ITC 2000; UNE 153020 2007; Georgakopoulou 2008; American Council of the Blind 2010; Media Access Australia 2010; Broadcasting Authority of Ireland 2012; Accessible Media Inc. and The Canadian Association of Broadcasters 2014). However, scarce research

has been devoted to the reception of audio described characters. From an empirical point of view, several reception studies have analyzed the perception of sighted spectators in order to assess the creation of common European guidelines (Mazur and Kruger 2012), and in order to find criteria that allow for a better prioritization of information in AD scripts (Orero and Vilaró 2012; Vilaró *et al.* 2012; Vilaró and Orero 2013; Orero and Vilaró 2014). Empirical research has also focused on BVI audiences to explore users' preferences regarding a variety of aspects (Rai 2009; Chmiel and Mazur 2012). Addressees' acceptance of text-to-speech voices (Mączyńska and Szarkowska 2011; Szarkowska 2011; Fernández-Torné and Matamala 2015), recipients' comprehension (Cabeza-Cáceres 2013), emotions (Ramos 2013), and users' involvement (Fryer and Freeman 2012) have also been tested. Characters have indeed been mentioned in some of those works (Rai 2009; Chmiel and Mazur 2012; Orero and Vilaró 2012; Cabeza-Cáceres 2013). However, as it will be further described in section 4.1, no study has focused specifically on their reception. This paper is an attempt to explore the said issue by suggesting a theoretical approach based on Cognitive Narratology that could serve as a point of departure for future empirical research in the form of reception studies.

The contents of this paper are organized as follows: in the second section, the seminal literature dealing with the reception of characters from a cognitive perspective will be reviewed. The third section will focus on Schneider's (2001) reception theory of literary characters, and will expand on aspects such as the role of the spectator's prior knowledge in film comprehension, the dynamics of the reception process and the prominent position of the character's psychology within the mental representation of the situation. The fourth section will explore the application of the theoretical model exposed in section 3 to the field of AD through the analysis of the reception of the audio described character Richard Hoover, from the film *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton and Faris 2006).

## 2. A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO THE RECEPTION OF FICTION CHARACTERS

Even though none of them focused specifically on the mental activities developed by receivers, the work of Chatman (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (1989) paved the ground for research exploring the reception of literary characters from a cognitive approach. Despite differences in their views, both authors understood fiction characters as human-like constructs that readers create with the help of

textual information. This perspective, though focusing on the attributions of characters themselves, indirectly highlights the role of the reader, responsible for gathering and putting together in his or her mind all the textual information required to give shape to characters. It is under this light that research exploring the reception of characters emerged within Cognitive Narratology, and Margolin (1983) is often credited as the precursor in this field. According to his view, characters are created by authors in the first place, but also by readers, who must (re)create them from texts. Characters should be approached as individuals or persons in order to facilitate the readers' emotional response to the narrative and, like real people, they possess some kinds of inner states. It is the role of the reader to ascribe mental states to characters in the process of (re)creation. This ascription may refer to individual properties (single personality traits) or to complex abstractions of those (personality types).

In a similar vein, Gerrig and Allbritton (1990) published a seminal paper exploring the assumption that character perception is based on the same principles as the perception of real people. They drew on Social Psychology and based on Brewer's (1988) account of impression formation. This states that some textual cues allow readers to generate expectations about the story with the help of their prior experience. From what they have read and with the knowledge of the world they possess in the form of memory schemata, readers will make hypotheses and have expectations about how the plot will develop. When those expectations are aimed at understanding the behaviour of characters, our memory activates category-based and person-based representations. Through the former, characters are conceptualised as members of a defined category and inferences are generated to logically match what is known about the individuals who belong to that group (*i.e.* if the character is a femme fatale, she will presumably be attractive, seductive and manipulative). Through person-based representations, characters are provided with specific traits that differentiate them from others in the same category (*i.e.* Marilyn Monroe's mole made her unique). As Gerrig and Allbritton (1990) put it, at first readers will try to fit their initial impression of the character in one of the categories already known, in order to trigger inferences associated to that group. Then, specific personality traits will need to be ascribed. This dual-process of impression formation allows readers to generate more accurate expectations about characters.

Margolin's (1983) key ideas about the role of the readers in the reception of fiction characters and their emotional involvement in the narrative, together with Gerrig and Allbritton's (1990) application of Social Psychology theories to the literary field, paved the way for interesting research within Cognitive

Narratology. This approach, dealing with the reception of written and, more recently, also with audiovisual narratives seems relevant for AD. As Vercauteren (2012) puts it, Cognitive Narratology could prove helpful to provide insights on the narrative reception process in AD, and it is our belief that it could serve as a theoretical basis to shed some light on the reception of audio described characters.

In the following sections, a theory of character reception within Cognitive Narratology will be presented and its relevance for AD will be explored.

### 3. MENTAL MODELS AND CHARACTER RECEPTION

Basing on the Mental Model Theory (Johnson-Laird 1983), Schneider (2001) proposes a model of literary character reception framed within the field of Cognitive Narratology that could serve as a point of departure to explore the reception of audio described characters. This section will expand on Schneider's (2001) theory to provide an account of the dynamics of the reception process (section 3.1), and will then draw on Persson (2003) to explore how spectators ascribe psychological traits to fiction characters.

#### 3.1. DYNAMICS OF CHARACTER RECEPTION

In Schneider's view, characters are a core part of the situation model created during the reading experience and, hence, readers must form some kind of mental representation, a specific model of them, to fully understand the story. Even though its exact nature remains unclear, the model is considered to be multimodal. It results from the receiver's interpretation of the original textual information with the aid of his or her prior schemata and it could be thought of as what he or she evokes when thinking about a certain character: a representation containing visual information (readers may usually picture characters in their minds as human beings with specific physical traits), auditory information (readers might imagine the sound of the character's voice), linguistic information (readers may envisage the character's specific accent) and so on (Schneider 2006). As it will be exposed in section 4.2, the model construction that Schneider describes for readers could be extended to the filmic context and, thus, it could also be applied to AD. Obviously, in the case of readers, models are created mainly from written narratives, whereas film spectators build them through a combination of sound and image. In the case of BVI audiences, their mental models rely on the information received

auditorily in the form of film dialogues, sound and AD. Even though the nature of the model might vary, the process of mentally representing characters could be shared by recipients of narratives in different means of presentation.

Taking his cue from Gerrig and Allbritton (1990), Schneider (2001) concentrates on the dynamics of the character reception process and states that four strategies of reception are activated when creating mental models of characters. First, readers try to fit the initial information they receive about a certain character into “categories,” structures of knowledge about people which are already known to readers. Culpeper (2001), who explored the reception of characters in play-texts, expands on this idea. Even though his research is framed within Cognitive Stylistics and his main focus is more related to Linguistics, Culpeper’s (2001) work includes some contributions relevant to this paper that could somehow complement Schneider’s approach. According to Culpeper (2001), each category is formed by an ideal element, the prototype, plus other less typical ones and addressees are able to discriminate them due to their previous experience. Following on Schneider’s theory, if readers can find a convenient category, “categorisation” takes place and a tentative mental model of the character integrating textual information and knowledge kept in the reader’s memory is created. Hypotheses, expectations and inferences coherent to that model will then be triggered. Readers are able to activate categories due to their experience with other fictional beings and genres (literary knowledge), with character descriptions provided in the text (textual knowledge) and through their experience with real people (social knowledge). Culpeper (2001) expands on the role played by social knowledge, which, according to him, involves personal categories, social role categories and group membership categories. Personal categories gather information about others’ preferences, interests, habits, personality traits and goals. Social role categories focus on the relationship of people to those around them (*e.g.* kinship or occupation) and group membership categories include aspects that may identify an individual as a group member (*i.e.* sex, race, class, age, nationality or religion amongst others).

According to Schneider (2001), as the narrative develops, two things might occur: either further information generally fits the initial model even though some details might need to be revised (*i.e.* readers might want to add specific traits of a character that make him/her unique and different from similar characters) or further information contradicts the initial model. The first scenario is known as “individuation” (Schneider 2001: 7) and could be considered a natural extension or improvement of the initial model. The second scenario, called “deategorization” (Schneider 2001: 13), involves

the non-fulfilment of prior expectations, inferences and hypotheses and will eventually break with the initial model. If decategorization takes place, a new category needs to be found that generates a new mental model which is able to allocate the new incoming information. On some occasions, readers might not find a proper category for the character. If that occurs, “personalization” (Schneider 2001: 13) may take place and bottom-up processes may be used to integrate single pieces of information into the model. Figure 1, inspired in Schneider (2001), outlines the basics of the dynamics of character reception.

All these reception strategies are cognitive activities ruled by the human mind, which has limited processing capacities (Miller 1956; Baddeley 1992; Cowan 2001). Taking this into account, Schneider (2001) suggests that, since categorization and individuation are derived from top-down processing, they demand less conscious attention and most likely, less working memory than personalization, which is the result of bottom-up processing. Therefore, categorization would be the first strategy that readers would try to apply in their will to understand characters. This might be the reason why strongly stereotyped flat characters are “easier to understand” than those with a complex personality. Also, he points out, mental models of characters are dynamic and can be updated throughout the reading process. They might be created in the first chapters and readers might elaborate only on the most relevant ones. However, readers might stop refreshing the model if they find the information provided to be excessive or too hard to remember. In Schneider’s view, memory limitations are the reason why mental models of characters do not incorporate all the information provided in, and inferred from, the text. Instead, readers use all those details to outline a somehow simpler mental representation including the most relevant data, that is, only those traits that help them “picture” the character in their mind. Memory limitations might be especially relevant in the AD context since information is delivered in a fragmented manner, at the fast pace imposed by films, and is received auditorily as opposed to visually and auditorily (Fresno 2014). Furthermore, in the case of characters, sighted spectators have continuous access to their physical appearance, whereas BVI recipients tend to be provided with the character description only once. Therefore, the models created by sighted spectators might be somehow different to those created by BVI audiences.

### 3.2. CHARACTERS’ PSYCHOLOGY AS THE CENTRE OF THE MODEL

If, as stated above, fiction characters are compared to real people in terms of reception, it would be logical to expect their psychological dimension

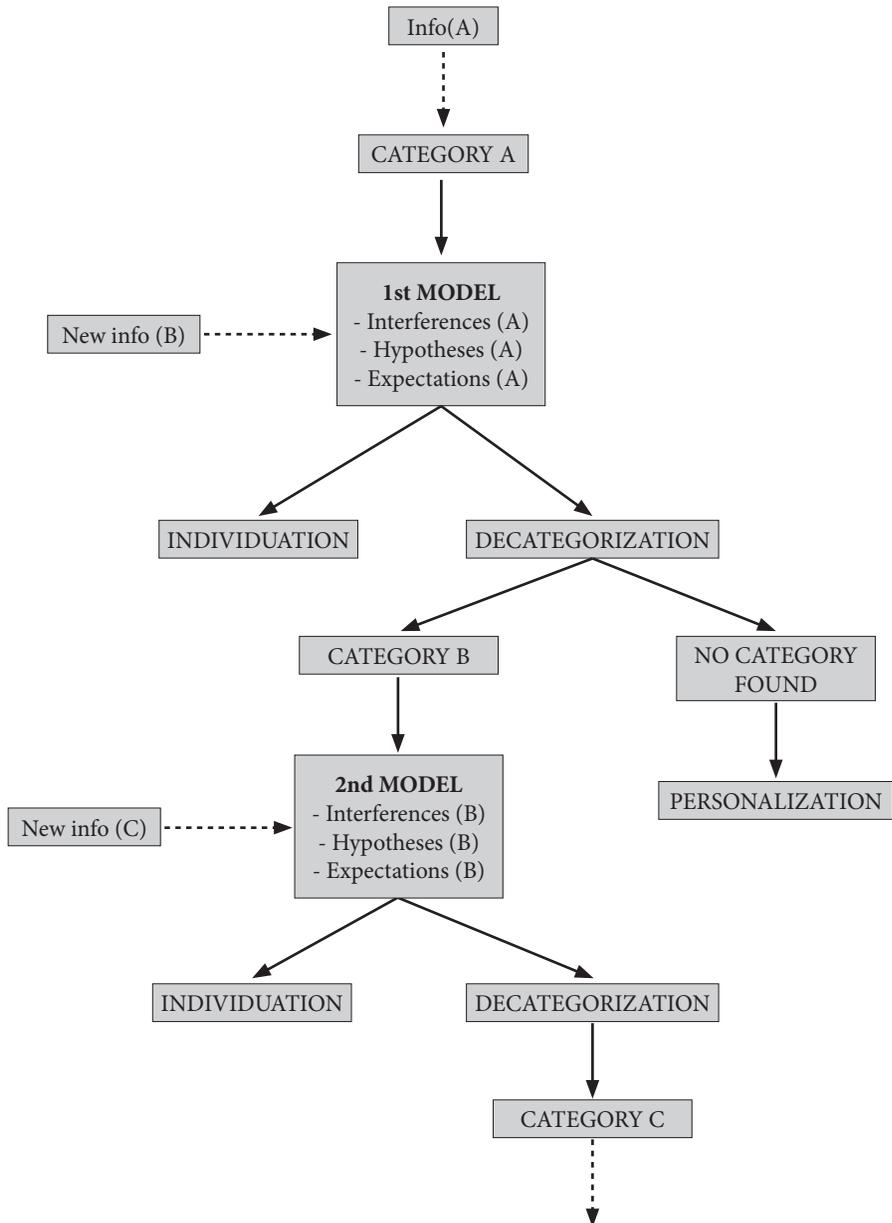


Figure 1. Dynamics of character reception (inspired in Schneider 2001)

to play a major role in narrative comprehension, just like understanding others' minds is essential in our daily life:

Understanding a character's psychology is a crucial step for understanding the narrative, given that Hollywood narratives are often driven by goal-oriented protagonists and that character psychology provides for a specific narrative development. As a film unfolds, the narrative constantly poses questions to the viewer: What will the protagonist do next? (Choi 2005: 19).

Therefore, characters' psychology could be expected to occupy a central position within the character mental model and, at least that of the protagonists should hold a prominent position within the general situation model. Cueing on this argument and drawing on Psychology and Anthropology, Film Studies scholar Persson (2003) provides a detailed theoretical framework analyzing how spectators make sense of film characters' mental dimensions. As it will be shown in section 4.2, Persson's account could apply as well to audio described characters. He departs from an argument borrowed from research exploring narrative text comprehension according to which receivers strive for coherence in their search for comprehension (Graesser *et al.* 1994). When it comes to characters in cinema, their psychology or, as he calls it, their mental states (their emotions, motivations, goals, hopes, beliefs, desires and feelings), provide a "conceptual glue through which large amounts of simple actions and behaviours become coherent" (Persson 2003: 153). Spectators put characters' actions in relation to their mental states and make use of their knowledge about real people to interpret their psychology. The schemata that enable spectators to attribute mental states to film characters belong to the Theory of Mind or Folk Psychology (FP), a body of natural, non-scientific knowledge about the mind that everyone possesses and that allows us to explain what others feel in common circumstances (Godfrey-Smith 2005).

FP may vary between societies and cultures (Lillard 1998; Vinden 1996, 2002) but Persson bases on the work of anthropologist D'Andrade (1987) and developmental psychologist Wellman (1990) in an attempt to describe how Western FP conceives human mental states and the relations amongst them. For the purposes of this paper it will suffice to limit the discussion to those mental states which are more relevant to fiction characters: emotions, beliefs and goals. Basically, actions are motivated by desires or goals, which in turn are influenced by our thinking activities and beliefs, as well as by our emotions. Our thinking activities and beliefs frame our desires or goals and our actions

(we act according to our beliefs because we think that we will achieve a certain goal). Emotions, on the other hand, seem to catalyze desires and goals causing people to act, again according to their beliefs (if someone hates his/her job [emotion] and he/she believes that he/she would be happier doing something else [thinking/belief], the desire to change his/her life will grow [desire/goal] and that will lead him/her to look for another job [action]).

As shown in figure 2, characters' emotions affect their desires and actions and, thus, making sense of them is essential for spectators. Emotions are context-dependant, so the same situation may cause different emotions to characters depending on other mental states (*i.e.* being transferred to a foreign country might cause great excitement [emotion] to a character willing to live overseas [desire], but might cause deep disappointment [emotion] to the same character if he/she wishes to settle down where he/she is living [desire]). Therefore, in order to assess their emotions, the expectations, desires and goals of characters must be taken into account, because as far as Western FP is concerned, emotions are considered positive when the situation events are consistent with the characters' desires or goals. A detailed account of the interactions exposed above in the context of AD will be outlined in section 4.3 via a case study.

According to this framework, the mental models of fiction characters should allow spectators to understand the characters' behaviour. In order to reach that understanding, spectators must account for the characters' desires

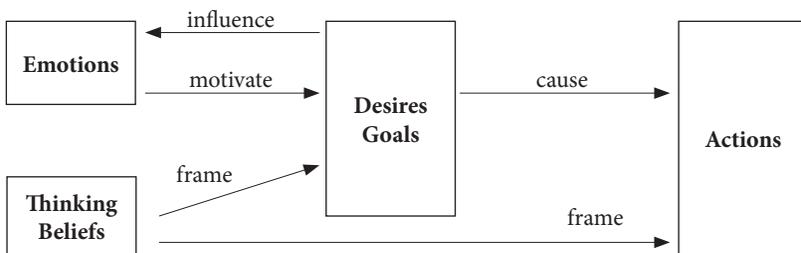


Figure 2. Diagram showing the relationship between emotions, beliefs, goals and actions.  
Adapted and simplified from Persson (2003)

and goals, which are influenced by their beliefs and emotions. As all of those mental states and the relationships between them are provided with meaning with the help of FP, spectators are able to categorize, individualize, decategorize or personalize characters according to their prior knowledge and are then able to infer, hypothesize and expect coming narrative developments.

#### 4. CHARACTER RECEPTION AND MENTAL MODELS IN AD

In the previous sections, basic ideas about the reception of characters in Literature and Film Studies have been exposed. According to the cognitive perspective presented, addressees outline mental models of narrative situations and specific representations of the people involved in order to comprehend books or films. In the field of AD, no specific line of research has been devoted to investigate how BVI audiences understand audio described characters and, therefore, mental models have not been explored under this light. However, a few empirical studies have touched on some aspects of character reception. This section will begin by reviewing them. Then, it will focus on mental models, which will be essential to outline a theoretical proposal attempting to explain how AD users receive film characters. Finally, a case study will be presented to illustrate the character reception process according to our proposal.

##### 4.1. CHARACTER RECEPTION IN AD

As pointed out in the introduction, characters in AD have mostly been dealt with from descriptive and theoretical perspectives (Orero 2011; Benecke 2014). However, specific aspects of their reception have been covered in various empirical studies. Using eye-tracking technology, Orero and Vilaró (2012) analyzed how sighted spectators perceived synthetic, thematic and mimetic characters in a research exploring the perception of minor details in films. Working with BVI audiences, Rai (2009) conducted an extensive research study for The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) aimed at finding out users' preferences regarding the AD of Bollywood films. Based on qualitative and quantitative analyses, the report provided a list of best practices concerning a variety of elements. One of the recommendations for audio describers was to consider characters' age, physical appearance, facial expressions, body language and clothing as possible traits to include in the AD script since that was the information most demanded by the participants in their research. The report also encouraged audio describers to mention

colours and to use adjectives such as “pretty” or “handsome” if those traits were relevant to the plot. Another recommendation included identifying characters by their name as soon as possible (in those cases in which their identity was not a mystery), and repeating those names frequently to avoid misunderstandings, especially in those scenes in which several characters talked to each other and identifying them only through their voice became difficult.

Character identification was also discussed in another reception study carried out by Chmiel and Mazur (2012). In their research they tested if Polish AD users preferred to know the names of characters right at the beginning of the film or after they had been mentioned in the movie. Participants in the experiment also listened to AD that clarified who was speaking. In scenes in which several characters were taking and distinguishing them through their voices could be challenging for BVI audiences, the AD mentioned explicitly the name of the speaker. This research also addressed the subjectivity issue in AD. Participants were asked to choose between two possible descriptions, one being more objective and one being more subjective, and most of them regarding characters’ appearance or actions. Finally, Cabeza-Cáceres (2013) explored the tight connection between character reception and comprehension. Focusing on the latter, he analyzed how the BVI participants in his experiment understood cause-effect relations in complete scenes. In those cases in which those relations were triggered by characters, understanding their mental states was found essential in order to reach comprehension.

As mentioned above, these reception studies deal with several aspects of character reception but none of them focus primarily on this issue. Therefore, it seems convenient to define a theoretical framework that allows for a deeper exploration of how BVI audiences receive film characters. It is our belief that the Theory of Mental Models (Johnson-Laird, 1983) could provide an interesting departure point.

#### 4.2. MENTAL MODELS IN AD

Mental models are not new to AD. Braun’s (2007, 2011) research offers some insights on the production and reception of AD and highlights the role that mental models play in narrative comprehension. According to her, the final auditory text that the BVI receive (that is, the coherent unit formed by the AD together with the dialogues and sounds of the film) must allow the

audience to create mental models of the situation similar to those created by sighted spectators. Vercauteren (2011) also used mental models to explore content selection in filmic AD, and Vercauteren and Remael (2014) rely on mental models to explain how audiences reconstruct spatio-temporal settings in films. This section will analyze the creation and updates of mental models in a new context: the specific case of audio described characters. Drawing on the research exposed in previous sections, a theoretical proposal will be presented that relies on the Theory of Mental Models (Johnson-Laird, 1983) to describe the character reception process in AD.

Section 3 has reviewed Schneider's (2001), Culpeper's (2001) and Persson's (2003) research. Whereas Schneider's work is devoted to literary characters, Culpeper deals with characters appearing in play-texts and Persson is concerned with film characters, the basic ideas exposed above could conform to a general framework that attempts to explain how fiction characters are (re) created by receivers, be them readers or spectators. Furthermore, it is our assumption that this theoretical posit about character reception could also apply to AD. There is no reason to believe that audio described characters are understood through different strategies. Like sighted audiences, AD users have to engage in the story cognitively and emotionally (Smith 1994; Tan 1996) and, in order to comprehend it, they must make sense of incoming information with the help of their prior and already existing knowledge. During the first scenes of an audio described film, users obtain valuable information which shapes their expectations (Remael and Vercauteren 2007) and allows them to outline a mental representation of the events. That representation, as it has already been pointed out, is neither necessarily nor exclusively visual (Kosslyn *et al.* 2006). As it is often credited, it may involve seeing with the mind's eye, hearing with the mind's ear, smelling with the mind's nose, tasting with the mind's tongue or touching with the mind's skin.

It is our belief that, since audio described characters are prominent elements of mental representations, users will devote efforts to the creation of their particular mental models. Receivers will categorize audio described characters as members of those categories that fit best with what has been shown on screen. An initial character model will then be created in the receiver's mind, which will be updated later on. Taking into account what has been exposed in section 3, character psychology will occupy a central position within the mental model and AD users will have to account for characters'

emotions, beliefs, desires and goals. Concurrently, social role categories and group membership categories will have to be identified. This information may be delivered by the character him/herself, by other characters in the film or may be expressed iconographically through auditory and visual body cues also transmitted auditorily. Character's proper name, age, skin colour, body size, linguistic register, accent or clothing amongst others, prompt inferences and are especially relevant to create the initial mental model of the character. As Schneider (2001) puts it, this information is essential for film spectators the first occasions that a character appears on the screen and we would argue that it is equally crucial for AD users. Later, as the film unfolds and the audio described character becomes familiar, the model becomes consolidated and those cues lose importance, as long as they remain coherent with the model and individuation occurs. If coherence is broken at some point, decategorization takes place and a new category, able to allocate the new conflicting information, is activated. A second character model will then be created and consistent inferences, expectations and hypotheses will be generated. However, if no suitable category is found, personalization will take place and single pieces of information will be gathered to create a brand new character model from scratch but at a higher cognitive cost.

#### 4.3. THE RECEPTION OF AN AUDIO DESCRIBED CHARACTER: A CASE STUDY

An example will illustrate better how the reception theory explained above can be applied to AD. The character of Richard Hoover in the film *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton and Faris 2006) will be used to explore the processes that AD recipients are supposed to undergo to create and update mental models according to our proposal. It is important to note at this stage that the AD is a discontinuous text that works in conjunction with the dialogues and sound in the film, and should be coherent and cohesive with both of them (Braun 2011; Remael 2012; Taylor 2014). Therefore, not only will information from the AD script be considered for the analysis, but the dialogues and the sound in the film will also be taken into account as part of the narrative unit received by BVI audiences.

The movie tells the story of the Hoovers, an American family from Albuquerque travelling by road to The Little Miss Sunshine pageant so that Olive, their seven-year old daughter, can take part in the contest. In the pursue

of her biggest dream, Olive will be accompanied by five members of her family: her father Richard, professionally-frustrated and obsessed with winning; her mother Sheryl, who tries hard to keep the family together; her grandfather, a drug-abuser expelled from a retirement house; her brother Dwayne, who has taken a vow of silence, and her uncle Frank, depressed and recovering from a suicide attempt. The 700-mile trip to California puts the family to the test, making all the ins and outs of their relationships emerge.

Ideally, Richard's model should be tracked all throughout the film. However, due to space restrictions, the analysis will be limited to three scenes from the first 45 minutes of the movie. The first scene portrays the first time that Richard appears in the film and will illustrate how the initial mental representation of him is created. The second scene depicts the second appearance of Richard on screen and will show the first updates of his mental model. Finally, the third scene shows the family on their way to California. Richard appears some times before, but this excerpt was chosen for two reasons: firstly, because it expands on the topic presented in the second scene (Richard's professional issues and his psychological attitude towards them), and secondly, because it is a clear example of how dialogues, sound and AD integrate to create meaning. Since this analysis is aimed at illustrating how audio described characters are (re)constructed by BVI audiences, it seemed appropriate to select a scene in which not only dialogues but also the AD contributed to the model update. In each case the term "scene" will be used to refer to what the AD users receive, that is the unit formed by the original sound and dialogues from the film together with the AD.

The first information we receive about Richard comes from his own voice 49 seconds after the film begins. He is speaking aloud, saying the following:

There are two kinds of people in this world: winners and losers. Inside each and everyone of you, at the very core of your being, is a winner waiting to be awakened and unleashed upon the world. With my nine step "Refuse to lose" program, you now have the necessary tools and the insights and the know-how to put your losing habits behind you and to go out and make your dreams come true. No hesitating. No complaining. No excuses. I want you to go out into the world... And I want you to be winners! Thank you.

His voice sounds calm but confident, and he makes good use of intonation and dramatic silences.

These 49 seconds lead us to create the first mental model of Richard. His voice and his words (elements from the film), together with our filmic and

textual knowledge (elements in our memory) help us understand the situation: a man (we do not know his name yet) is delivering a conference. Our knowledge of real-world conference contexts is activated and, more specifically, so is our knowledge of the people who deliver them. Since they are usually experts, we expect that man to be a life coaching authority speaking in front of a crowd. In addition, the fact that he is presenting his own program seems to support this idea. At this stage, we categorize the speaker as a “successful life coach,” we draw our first model of him and start generating hypotheses and expectations that logically match the individuals in that category. Probably, we will outline a portrait of him as a renowned professional with a committed audience following his method. This is someone important enough to deliver conferences here and there. In his own words, he is a “winner”. Some inferences may also be generated regarding his personality and economic status. If the speaker is a “successful life coach,” we could expect him to be self-confident, extrovert and sociable, and he will most likely earn a good living. We might even picture his clothing, probably an elegant (and perhaps also expensive) suit. These last inferences are not triggered by the information coming from the AD or the film, but from our previous experience with “successful life coaches.” This does not necessarily mean that we have actually met successful life coaches but rather, we might know about them from books, films or through conversations with people who have met them.

In this scene, no AD is delivered and only the dialogues and the sound in the film contribute to the creation of Richard’s initial model. Dialogues in the form of Richard’s words provide the necessary clues to trigger inferences about Richard’s professional activity (it is his speech about becoming a winner which allows us to understand that he is a life coach). In addition, the sound of Richard’s voice prompts inferences regarding his ability to perform his job and about his emotions towards it (his utterance is well delivered and he sounds confident and passionate, which indicates that he is a professional who believes in what he is saying and who enjoys his job).

Nevertheless, some seconds after he finishes his speech, only some half-hearted applause is heard and the AD says the following:

The speaker nods towards his unseen audience. Ten high-school class students gather up their books as the speaker, Richard, a neat-looking man in his late thirties, smiles and raises his projector screen on the stage behind him.

This new information provided by the AD opposes the first model of the speaker that we had created. The fact that only ten people are listening to his speech and that all of them are high-school students makes us aware that the category “successful life coach” is no longer valid (“deategorization,” in Schneider’s terms). It has to be replaced by another one that fits the new details about him, so the category “unsuccessful life coach” is activated (“categorization” in Schneider’s terms). A second model will then be outlined, which will include the new information provided in the AD. The speaker, Richard (we now know his name), will be conceived as an ordinary neat-looking man close to his forties who has not been able to make a name in the life coaching scene and, therefore, delivers talks in modest places such as high-schools. Hypotheses and expectations about the character will be generated to match this model. For instance, we might think of him as an extrovert and sociable man who earns a decent living (probably he earns much less than the “successful life coach” in the first model). We may also reconsider his clothing, still formal but probably not as elegant (and expensive) as before. Again, these hypotheses come from the traits that we have ascribed to “unsuccessful life coaches” throughout our lives.

Taking a closer look at the contribution of the AD in terms of model updating, it could be argued that it serves a double purpose in this scene: firstly, it defines some of Richard’s physical traits, which can be ascribed to his model for the first time. Secondly, it details the profile and the number of attendants to Richard’s speech, which activates the “deategorization” of our first model and launches the “categorization” needed to create a second representation (the “unsuccessful life coach” model). The sound of the film also helps here. Sporadic applause is heard when Richard finishes his speech, which reinforces the idea that his conference is followed by a reduced audience. Therefore, both AD and sound are responsible for the choice of the new category “unsuccessful life coach.”

The next time that Richard appears on the screen he gets home from work. His wife Sheryl is preparing dinner and the rest of the family are somewhere in the house. Right after entering his home, Richard checks the answering machine impatiently and gets disappointed to find no messages for him. Immediately, he gets the phone and calls his editor, Stan Grossman. The scene develops as follows:

AD: Richard comes in [his house].<sup>2</sup>

(...)<sup>3</sup>

AD: Richard dials a phone number.

Richard [annoyed over the phone]: Hi, Richard Hoover for Stan Grossman, please. Anyway to reach him or...? I'm just wondering if this darn book deal is done or not.

Yes. Ok, could you please just have him call me anytime over the weekend? He has my cell number. Just to let me know we're on. Okay? Thank you. Bye. [He hangs the phone].

Sheryl: So what happened with Stan Grossman?

Richard [annoyed]: He's in Scottsdale.

Sheryl: Why didn't he call?

Richard [annoyed]: Will you let me worry about this, please?

Through the AD we locate Richard at home and become aware of the phone call. The dialogues provide us with the necessary clues to understand what Richard is talking about and with whom, and the sound of his voice reinforces his message and attitude towards Grossman. But the most interesting aspect of this scene is that it provides important clues on Richard's psychology.

Following the theoretical framework proposed in section 3, our knowledge of social roles provides us with the necessary tools to know what to expect from a professional relationship between a writer and his editor. At the same time, it allows us to know what to expect from a personal relationship between a husband and his wife. On the other hand, FP schemata assist us in the understanding of Richard's mental states and feelings. In the beginning of this scene, Richard is impatient to hear from Grossman (Richard's emotion). He has written a book explaining his own life coaching program, which he believes to be a good motivational method (Richard's thinking/belief). He wants his book to make a good seller (Richard's objective/goal) and, therefore, he is expecting his editor to call (Grossman's action). However, Richard finds his expectations broken when he does not hear from Grossman. Furthermore, the editor's silence (Grossman's lack of action) annoys Richard (Richard's emotion). Moved by his desire to sell his book (Richard's desire) and by his bad mood (Richard's emotion), Richard finally phones the editor himself (Richard's action). However, the fact that Grossman does not answer his call (Grossman's lack of action) annoys Richard even more (Richard's emotion). At this stage, Sheryl happens

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2 Information in square brackets is added by the author for the sake of clarity in all the examples provided in this section.

3 Three dots within parentheses indicate omission of text (irrelevant for the purposes of this paper) in all the examples provided in this section.

to ask Richard about the editor and her husband answers back to her (Richard's action). His response ("Will you let me worry about this, please?") allows the listener to infer Richard's suspicions that Sheryl does not believe him capable of handling his professional businesses alone. Diagram in figure 3 shows the relationships between Richard's emotions, beliefs, goals and actions. Grossman's (lack of) actions have been included as well for two reasons: firstly, to show all the elements responsible for Richard's mental states and secondly, because characters usually influence each other's mental states in films.

All this new information about Richard fits nicely into our last model (the one under the "unsuccessful life coach" category), and it contributes in outlining a more detailed picture of Richard, individualizing him with specific traits. At this stage, our model begins to show a more or less comprehensive portrait of Richard, focusing on the most prominent aspects of his life: his appearance (physical dimension), his professional activities (social dimension), his family life (personal dimension) and his mental states (psychological dimension).

Dialogues, sound and AD all contribute to the update of Richard's model in this scene. Dialogues serve four objectives: firstly, Richard's conversation on the phone allows the hearers to infer that Richard has been working on a book. Secondly, those words provide the recipients with the necessary clues to infer Richard's relation to Grossman. Thirdly, they transmit Richard's emotions about Grossman's lack of interest ("I'm just wondering if this darn book deal is done or not"). Fourthly, through Richard's brief conversation with Sheryl we are able to infer that he feels professionally underestimated by his wife. This is obviously emphasized by the sound of the film in the form of Richard's voice, unkind and cross on the phone, and irritated by Sheryl. Finally, the AD plays a subtler role at this stage of the film. It does not support or oppose our current model of Richard but it is vital to locate him in his place and to clarify that he is talking on the phone. Even though the AD is not directly responsible for our updates of Richard's model, it is indeed of great help because it facilitates users' immediate understanding of the scene. Without AD, it would take longer and more effort to reach global comprehension.

The last scene that will be analyzed begins when the family is on their way to Little Miss Sunshine's beauty contest. They spend a night in a motel, where Sheryl and Richard share a room and, next to them, Dwayne and Frank share another one. Richard has finally reached Stan Grossman on the phone and has received bad news concerning his book. The AD and dialogues are as follows:

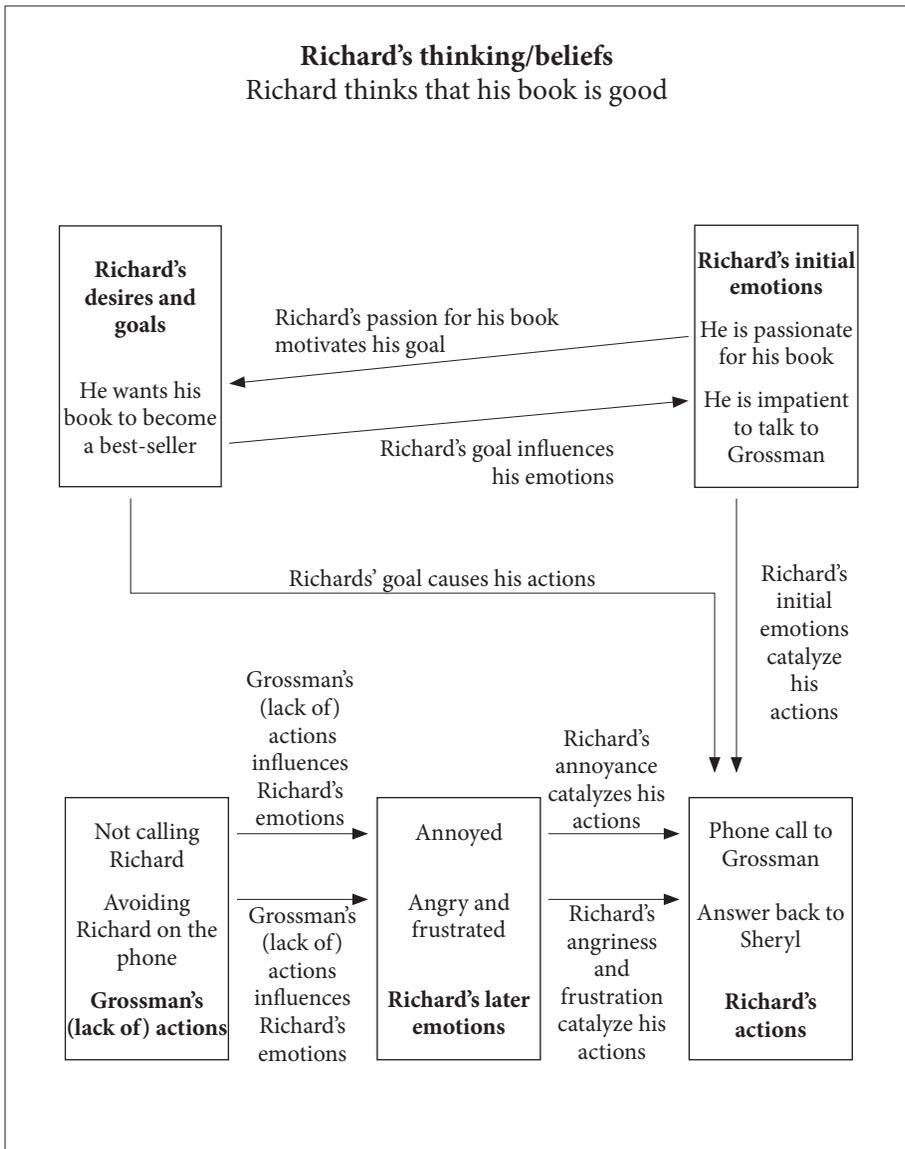


Figure 3. Diagram showing the relationships between Richard's emotions, beliefs, goals and actions.

AD: Next door, Dwayne lies morosely on the bed listening to the angry voices (...).  
 Sheryl [shouting]: You said this was a lock! You said it was a done deal!  
 Richard [shouting]: Stan Grossman said it was a done deal!  
 Sheryl [shouting]: I'm not married to Stan Grossman!  
 Richard [shouting]: I trusted him! You gotta trust to be trusted! That's step six!  
 Sheryl [shouting]: Oh, fuck the nine steps, Richard!  
 AD: Dwayne lies back with his hands behind his head. A slow smile spreads across his face.

Again, filmic, textual and social knowledge provide the whole picture leading to reception. Focusing on the latter, personal categories (those referring to preferences, interests, habits, and personality traits amongst others) are useful to define Richard's attitude towards his job. His words show a profound conviction on his coaching programme, which he applies in his everyday life. Nevertheless, Sheryl's reply and the tone of her voice indicate that she is sick of listening to the same story over and over again. Social role categories (those focusing on the relationship of people to those around them) help us infer some implications: usually, a wife is expected to support her husband's projects or, at least, she is not supposed to oppose them as rudely as Sheryl does in this scene. Sheryl's reaction adds to Grossman's lack of interest, leading us to suspect that Richard might not be suited for life coaching. Furthermore, we find out that his son (also supposed to support his father) is happy to hear the argument between his parents. Our model of Richard is individualized once more to show an ordinary unsuccessful neat-looking man close to his forties who wears formal clothes and who is alone in his professional venture. Neither his editor nor his closest relatives believe in his coaching program, which irritates and frustrates him profoundly. His portrait is now closer to that of a loser, instead of the winner that we had imagined at the beginning of the film.

Film dialogues, sound and AD contribute to update our model in this scene. Dialogues indicate Richard's blind confidence in Grossman ("I trusted him!"), his devotion to the coaching method he has designed ("You gotta trust to be trusted! That's step six!"), and Sheryl's disappointment with her husband ("fuck the nine steps, Richard!"). Sound in the form of Richard's and Sheryl's voices reinforces their annoyance (Richard's irritation to Grossman and to Sheryl, and her anger to Richard). Finally, the AD locates Dwayne in relation to his parents and it describes his reaction to their argument. Dwayne's smile is a visual element with two purposes: on the one hand, it is essential to understand Dwayne's mental states in this scene (and so far in the film). On the other hand, his smile is indispensable to consolidate Richard's model since

it is through Dwayne's reaction that we understand that Sheryl is not the only one who has doubts about Richard's professional capacity.

This example provides a step-by-step description of how the model of a certain character is created and updated as the film unfolds and new information is available according to the theoretical proposal explained in section 4.2. It explores how recipients may ascribe physical traits and make sense of the psychology of the character with the help of their prior knowledge and elements in the filmic narrative, be them AD, sounds or words uttered by the character him/herself or by other characters in the film. It illustrates theoretically how AD users (re)create characters according to the same strategies used by spectators of non-accessible movies, with the help of their filmic, textual and social knowledge. This analysis shows how the dialogues in the film, the sound and the AD integrate and complement each other in the final audio track received by BVI audiences. Furthermore, it highlights how a convenient information selection in the AD script is essential to guarantee the coherence of the unit and the inclusion of those details needed to create a proper mental model of the situation and its participants.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Previous sections have explored the existing theoretical body of research dealing with the reception of fiction characters from a cognitive perspective. It has been discussed that, in their attempt to understand characters, receivers create models, that is, multimodal mental representations that help them grasp the essence of the character so that inferences, hypotheses and expectations about them can be generated. The psychology of the character seems to form the most salient part of the model and receivers make sense of it with the help of their prior and existing knowledge. Through schemata belonging to FP they are able to unveil characters' mental states and to understand the complex network of relationships between characters' emotions, beliefs, desires, goals and actions. This general framework has explored new applications of Cognitive Narratology and Cognitive Psychology to AD, and has proven valuable to describe theoretically the mental processes that BVI audiences undergo to (re)create film characters.

It has also been exposed that mental models are not believed to contain all the information transmitted to receivers. Apparently, the gist of a situation is recalled over its specific details due to memory limitations (Schneider 2001),

which could also apply to the mental models of audio described characters. On the other hand, visual information seems to be processed and learned more efficiently than auditory information (Shepard 1967; Standing 1973; Biederman 1981; Graber 1990; Basil 1992; Brady *et al.* 2008; Cohen *et al.* 2009) and the common belief that the BVI have a better memory than their sighted peers for non-visual material remains a controversial issue (Röder *et al.* 2001). Therefore, empirical research should be undertaken to explore the real effects that memory limitations have in AD and, more specifically, in mental models created by users. When it comes to character reception, recall experiments could help describe the properties of the character model. Four questions worth exploring come to mind: what kind of information do users remember (and forget) about characters and how intensely? Do models created by AD users differ from those created by sighted viewers in terms of quantity and quality of information? How does the amount of the information provided and its presentation influence the mental model created? Furthermore, are there any cross-cultural differences regarding the reception of fiction characters? If the (re)creation process is indeed influenced by our mental schemata and FP, both acquired and developed within a certain culture, dissimilarities in the reception of characters could perhaps emerge between users from different cultural environments.

This paper includes a case study exploring the reception of an audio described character from the film *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton and Faris 2006), which focuses mainly on the dynamics of the process and concentrates on the creation and updates of the character mental model. This case study has provided an example of how the theoretical body exposed in section 3 could be implemented in an analysis, and could be replicated in the future. However, other aspects which have not received attention in this paper could be analyzed in relation to character mental modelling. Users' emotions, for instance, have been analyzed from a descriptive perspective, generally based on case-studies or corpora (Salway and Graham 2003; Igareda 2011), or from an empirical approach as measures of users' engagement (Ramos 2013). Nevertheless, research on users' emotions could also be aimed at exploring their emotional involvement with the AD, for instance, investigating whether the development of positive or negative dispositions (Smith 1994) affects the character model (perhaps by influencing the users' interest in and empathy with the character). In fact, emotions could be a valuable indicator of users' engagement and they could perhaps contribute to a better recall of the events.

It is important to note that films simulate complicated situations in which more than one character is usually involved. Often, the mental states

of each character are influenced by and have an effect on other characters' mental states, and it becomes hard to understand the behaviour of one of them without taking into account the emotions, beliefs, desires and goals of the rest of the constellation. Therefore, spectators must not only create and keep updating a model for each character in the plot, but they should account for the network of relationships weaved between them. Empirical research could be undertaken to explore whether mental models created from simple narrative films, with few and independent characters, vary from those generated from highly interdependent characters. Empirical research could also investigate mental models taking into account the prominence of each character in the film. Since receivers are supposed to devote more effort to the creation of the models of main characters, it would be interesting to test how they differ from those of secondary characters. Demographic approaches could also contribute to find out if people with dissimilar visual impairments integrate different information into their models. Perhaps AD users with low vision or those who have acquired blindness late in their lives integrate more visual details into the models than congenitally blind individuals.

Cognitive approaches inspired by the Theory of Mental Models (Johnson-Laird 1983) could be a useful tool to explore not only character reception, but also some other issues concerned with the narratological aspects of AD. Kruger (2010) conceives what has traditionally been called AD as a continuum going from explicitly descriptive AD to audio narration (AN). The former would include strictly objective descriptions as those found in documentary films, whereas AN would prioritize the (re)construction of the narrative in the film, focusing less on the visual signs themselves and more in the effect of those. Of course, this implies that occasionally "the narrative will seem to ignore something that takes a very prominent position on-screen, although it will focus on the effect of the action or object." (Kruger 2010: 234). In a similar vein, Finbow (2010) states that complex films could benefit from narrated descriptions, even if that means creating more subjective products. As he puts it, AN, instead of traditional AD, would allow for more precise texts able to provide full filmic experiences to its audiences. Despite the fact that Kruger's (2010) AN is not the same as Finbow's (2010), AD and AN would probably lead users to different mental representations of the situations exposed in the film. Exploring the mental models created by users in each case could, perhaps, shed some light on the degree of "narration" needed and preferred by AD users.

To conclude, this paper has adopted a qualitative approach with a strong theoretical component to explore how receivers (re)create fiction characters by drawing research in Cognitive Narratology, Film Studies and Social Psychology close to Translation Studies. Even though they are key figures within books, play-texts and films, not much empirical research exploring the reception of audiovisual characters has been undertaken. Accessibility in general and AD in particular could benefit from multidisciplinary approaches covering this line of research which offers endless and fascinating possibilities.

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