

THE FICTIONAL CONTRACT AND THE CONTEMPORARY DRAMATURGY

JORGE PAIXÃO DA COSTA

Universidade Lusófona — Centro Universitário de Lisboa

Graduated in Cinematography at the University of Stockholm in 1982. Attended the Masters School of the European Film Academy in Berlin in 1992. PhD and Masters Degree in Communication Sciences, from Lusófona University and Nova University, respectively in 2022 and 2002. **Jorge paixão da Costa** was the director of five cinematographic works: the feature films Adeus Princesa (1994), O Mistério da Estrada de Sintra (2007), Jacinta (2017), Soldado Milhões (2018) and Cândido (2024) He has also directed more than twenty television productions of fiction and documentaries, including television series, films, soap operas, sitcoms, short films and documentaries. He is a professor at the Lusófona University of Humanities and Technologies since 1997, having lectured at other European universities.

ORCID: 0000-0002-4670-9344

Corresponding author

Jorge Paixão da Costa
jorgepaixaodacosta@gmail.com

Acknowledgments:

Professor Dr. Manuel José Damásio, Professor Dr. Possidónio Cachapa, Oleksandr Lyashchenko

Schedule for publication

Paper Submitted: 15th October 2025
Accepted for Publication: 1st April 2026
Published online: 14th April 2026

Abstract

Dramaturgy and the fictional contract are closely linked in the act of fictionalising and dramatising. This action is revealed through writing, representation in the dramatic game, and the preparation work of the actors.

Dramaturgy, and its creation, development, and behaviour, must be considered in the teaching of different forms, genres, and models.

Keywords: Dramaturgy, fictional contract, work with actors, teaching.

*"A communication contract is a process whereby viewers are invited to perform a structured set of operations to produce meaning and affect; for example, the fictionalization contract, which means that a film will be read as a fictional film, is defined as an invitation to perform the following operations: figuration (construction of an analogical image), digitization (construction of a world), narrativization (construction of a story, a narrative), menstruation (production of an illusion of reality), fictionalization (construction of a fictional enunciator), narrative phase (vibrating to the rhythm of the narrated events)."*¹

In this work, we aim to address and establish foundations that support the resources and principles that underpin the set of declared and discussed fundamentals regarding the acceptance of the fictional contract made by actors in relation to the effectiveness of the actors' own work.

All of this must be, and is, addressed during the teaching of the subject 'Dramaturgy', which is part of the curriculum of the Master's degree in Film Studies at the Lusófona University of Humanities and Technologies. In this exploratory theoretical analysis and exposition, we focus on the work of the characters/actors. In my dramaturgy classes, we refer to actors from films proposed to master's students during the semester; practically all films produced nationally or in Portuguese are referenced in an observation supported by two essential concepts (facing each other), Dramatisation and the Fictional Contract, in an archaic relationship of exchange.

The classes in the Dramaturgy course are structured around two complementary axes. On the one hand, they incorporate the analysis of various cinematic works — including projects of my own authorship — guided by a critical perspective focused on the dramaturgical behaviour of characters, from their configuration in the script to their realisation on screen.

On the other, at a practical level, the classes include, whenever possible, student visits to the plateaux/sets of television series and films, with particular emphasis on productions I have directed. In these contexts, students are able to directly observe the processes of actor direction and character construction within individual scenes, as well as their articulation with the overall dramatic and dramaturgical fabric of the work.

Within these pedagogical environments, students have the opportunity to follow and understand the process of character conception, construction, and development, particularly regarding the actors' identification work with the roles they perform and the embodiment of the values and intrinsic characteristics of the figures they portray.

Before proceeding with the development, introduction, and theoretical framework of the proposed study, it is essential to address the origins of the concept of the "fictional contract" as a model applicable to literature and extendable to cinema and audiovisual media.

It is important to emphasise the relevance of characters in the construction of this "contract" in consolidating its meaning, particularly when embodied by actors who confer legitimacy upon it.

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the context or moment in which this term was originally employed to designate a concept grounded in the symbiosis between verisimilitude and the acceptance of fiction as a form of poetic reality.

In the nineteenth century, literature and its novelistic characters were examined in light of the so-called "fictional pact," a concept that came to be designated as the "fictional contract" in the 1970s.

1 Iris, n° 8. (1988). *Cinéma & narration*, 2, 121 - 139.

As Gonçalves dos Santos states in his article *The Fictional Contract: Connections between Work, Reader, Reality and Fiction*:

"Finally, the construction of the fictional contract—understood as a process of interpretative mediation—seeks to guide the reader towards recognising the boundaries between the real world and the equally real world constructed by the literary work."²

Through an exploratory approach, this study seeks to identify not only a structuring parallel with dramaturgy and pictorial narrative, as the foundational modes of communication in cinema and television fiction, but also an evolutionary continuity of the fictional pact, as well as the validation of the actions of characters/actors as agents in the construction of fiction.

"In the Latin word *figere*, the meanings of "to shape, to model" and "to imagine, to represent, to invent" (that is, "to model with imagination") can take on nuances that can extend to "to say falsely", and by extension, to the concept of "lying" ..."³

When we reflect on our conception of the "real world" and the interpretative system that allows us to imagine, speak, and think, we imagine and verbalise from our imaginative references, with the aim of characterising what we call "reality,"

which will later constitute the concept of "poetic reality", more specifically, fiction.

It is in these multiple and differentiated real and fictional worlds that the conventions agreed upon and accepted by the heritage introduced and recognised by the contemporary space are established.⁴

In the essence and nature of fiction, we find the vehicle that transports us to obtain a set of emotional reactions that are "*less a reversal of conduct than an absence of conduct*".⁵

These sensitive and suggestible moments range from emotion in the strict sense of the word, that which makes us laugh and cry, to the feeling of pure enjoyment that takes us out of the realm of reality, making fiction even more refined and sentimental than reality as we perceive it. As Segre points out, we could confirm that "(...) our perception of reality corroborates our critical faculties, revealing, through the paradox, forces and motivations (...)"⁶ and where "(...) the reality from which one departs can be precisely interpreted from the unreality into which one enters (...)"⁷.

We can acknowledge (as authors and creators of fiction) that there is the significant assimilation and creation of a sense of credibility that leads the viewer, in their innermost being and intellectual truthfulness, to a level of acceptance that is expressed in the process of fictional credibility, which is the result of the symbiosis between traditional narrative intrigue

2 Gonçalves dos Santos, J. E. (2018). O contrato ficcional: Liames entre obra, leitor, realidade e ficção. *Nau Literária: Crítica e Teoria da Literatura em Língua Portuguesa*, 14(2), 11–24. <https://doi.org/10.22456/1981-4526.68907>

3 Segre, C. (1989). *Enciclopédia Einaudi* nº 17 (*Literatura/Texto*), Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional / Casa da Moeda, 41.

4 "Whoever hears a marvelous tale considers obvious the presence in it of fairies, ogres, gnomes, with their supernatural powers; whoever reads an epic poem considers it normal to come across personifications, divine interventions, and similar things; and, if it is a Gothic novel, the absence of ghosts, animated skeletons, messages from beyond the grave would eventually be strange."

Segre, C. (1989). *Enciclopédia Einaudi*. Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional / Casa da Moeda, 45.

5 Sartre, J.P. (1965) *Esquisse d'une théorie*. Paris, Hermann, 25.

6 Segre, C. (1989). *Enciclopédia Einaudi* nº 17 (*Literatura/ Texto*). Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional / Casa da Moeda, 51.

7 Segre, C. (1989). *Enciclopédia Einaudi* nº 17 (*Literatura/ Texto*), Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional / Casa da Moeda, 51.

and the performance of characters who “recruit” the general public and viewers of this fiction in particular.

They constitute a sharing of the setting and the possibility of constructing a dramatic environment or composition between reality, the author’s concept of reality, and the actor as an active element in the entire process, using elements that only the actor can use: the voice, listening, and the entire intellectual method of enlisting the audience.⁸

This symbiosis also guarantees the creation of a “global” world view and its perception is based, obviously, on aesthetic assumptions originating in the aforementioned simulacrum.⁹

The effectiveness of this action on the part of the characters is conveyed through their involvement in the act of imitation – the key word for defining this action being “mimesis” – which is nothing more than the imitation of the nature of all art¹⁰. This is where “the hero embodies man’s capacity for affirmation in the struggle against the adversity of the gods and the elements”¹¹, represented by characters committed to performing an act of purification of emotions through art.

This is catharsis (kátharsis), a concept that has remained unchanged to this day.

The emotions generated by contemporary fiction amplify the affective manifestations applied through the technical work established and refined by the actors playing the characters, which is of paramount importance to the phenomenon’s effect on viewers and constitutes one of the key points in the development of the Aristotelian theory in the construction of contemporary fiction.

It must be considered the emotional work of the actors, as they are also subject to and exposed to mental and psychological elements, often drawing on the actor’s past experiences.¹²

All of these social elements, and especially the psychological ones, are an integral part of the act of dramatising and of dramaturgical construction.¹³

When applied to the content of contemporary drama, especially when developed in television fiction, Aristotelian poetics cannot (nor should) be abstracted from the advances that determine the action. Above all, it must consider the effective

8 Consequently, the actor must become familiar with the entire past of humanity- and be it said that these researchers must not be superficial, 205

Eyes enflamed and fiery are the genuine effect of choler and anger; eyes quite, and calm with a secret kind of grace pleasantness are the offspring of love and friendship

Thus the voice, when loud, discovers wrath and indignation of mind, and a small trembling voice proceeds from fear - Cole, T., Krich, H. & Chinoy. (1970). *Actors on Acting (the theories techniques and practices of the world’s great actors)*. Three Rivers Press, New York, 101

9 “This ‘feigning’ is nothing more than an imitation, a disguise, an appearance that creates a new reality which has come to us from modern drama, which has its heritage in the classical form of fictionalizing.”

10 “The great actor observes phenomena; the sensitive man serves him as a model...” DIDEROT, Denis, *Paradoxe Sur le comédien*, Castenau-le-lez, Editions Climats, 1991, 59

11 Reis, C. & Lopes, A. C. M. (1991) *Dicionário de Narratologia*, Coimbra, Livraria Almedina, 193 - 354

12 “Above all, they must seek in art what is pure and try to understand it” (27). “It is not enough to express only the external life of the character. It is also necessary to adapt to it all the proper human qualities, to pour into it one’s soul. The fundamental aim of our art is to create the deep life of a human spirit and to express it in artistic form” (30). Stanislavsky, K. (1979). *A Preparação do Ator*. Arcádia, Lisboa

13 Most characters have a defining phobia or neurosis. If not, than is up to the actor to come up with something that makes the character stand out. (152)

Who we are today is an accumulation of past events, our reactions to these events and other people’s reactions to us. This is also thru for any character you are playing (195) Chubbuck, I. (2005). *The Power of the Actor*. Gotham Books, New York

result of the action produced by the characters and their hosts, the actors.

Murray Smith is an author who cites examples of the development of a theory regarding the importance and recognition of actors as a continuation and interpretation of texts written by other authors.

Smith and his work highlights very positive and assertive examples when he adds all these dynamics to a very complex and simultaneously controversial process, as he states that "(...) in general, emotions are part of the rational system of human beings."¹⁴ Meaning, that the foundation for building credibility in actions and characters already exists naturally, residing in reality itself (be it that which is made apparent).

Regarding this issue, we can glimpse a very relevant and decisive concept, which is nothing more than poetic reality, i.e., our concept of reality and primary fiction are established by the parameters we find in the essence of what we consider "our reality."

The parameters are recognition, focus, and identification.¹⁵

Recognition describes the viewer's perception of the character based on references to narrative continuity. Focalisation relates the viewer to the characters' actions, placing the passive participant in an active position through the simulation of emotional identification. Finally, identification is based on the viewer's adherence to the character's moral values.

When we observe the renowned actress Eunice Muñoz in the soap opera *Banqueira do Povo* (1993) or in the role of

"Grandmother" in the film *Amadeo* (2023), as well as the actor Tomás Alves as the protagonist of the film *Cândido: The Spy Who Came from Football* (2024) and in the television series *O Atentado* (2020) in the role of Arengas, or, in an international context, William Macy as Jerry Lundegaard in the Coen brothers' film *Fargo* (1996), or as Frank Gallagher in the series *Shameless* (2011–2021), we understand from the outset that actors and actresses are performing roles. That is, they are portraying fictional characters. We recognise them from previous performances, in which they embodied different fictional realities without ever conflating their identity as performers with the characters they represent.

It is important to highlight, as a paradigmatic example of the articulation between content and form that is progressively more differentiated and guided by clear objectives, the role of the actor in the process of character construction. In this context, particular emphasis should be given to the work of actor Tomás Alves, with whom I had the opportunity to collaborate, as stage director and filmmaker, on the project *Soldado Milhões* (2018).

This case is especially noteworthy regarding the actor's preparation, development, and performance in the feature film. To construct the character, Tomás Alves attended meetings with relatives of Aníbal Milhões, the historical figure who inspired the narrative, and also undertook a brief recruit training experience under the guidance of military professionals. This experience was carried out alongside the extras portraying his company within a trench setting, enabling him to acquire not only practical skills but also a deeper understanding of the values, mindset, and lived experience of an illiterate yet patriotic and dedicated soldier in the context of the Battle of La Lys.

¹⁴ Murray, S. (1995). *Engaging Characters, Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 59.

¹⁵ ...recognition, alignment and allegiance. These concepts are however systematically related, together constituting what I term the structure of sympathy"

Murray, S. (1995). *Engaging Characters, Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 73.

Mixing up a fictional character with the actor who plays them does not fit into anyone's concept of the real world. When we hear accounts of actors being approached in the street by viewers who confuse them with the characters they play, we consider such behaviour to be bordering on schizophrenia. This minority, insignificant in sociological terms, is composed of spectators who have distorted their understanding of fiction, confusing it with myth, because they have not consciously accepted the events and characters as fictional. That is, they have broken what we might call the contract between reality and fiction.

However, we must avoid disturbances that can be devastating to the actor and to the character's development within the act of dramatisation.

The actor must have the discipline not to disrupt the character's development by drawing on their past experiences, reasoning, knowledge, and imagination. Above all, they need time to select and process this information in light of their knowledge and the organic and emotional reactions that derive from their immediate and past life practices.¹⁶

If they are staging a drama and want the audience to engage with the characters, their difficulties, and their adventures, it is essential that the actors listen. Without listening, a dramatic scene is just "my turn to speak, your turn to speak"; it becomes a scene about

two actors performing rather than a scene about a relationship and an event in that relationship.¹⁷

We can conclude that while fiction serves to discover things or experience moments of exciting "reality," changing according to the need to make sense, the serious work of the actor and the character are "agents of stability"¹⁸. When the exercise of representation and fiction becomes indistinguishable, the rules of the contract between the viewer and the fictional world are broken.

The introduction of techniques and technical devices, as well as the problems surrounding the current analytical concepts applied to fiction, alert us to the importance of the characteristics and attributes that the performers/creators of this 'new culture of emotions' embody. I refer to their legitimacy when drawing up the parameters of the contract that transforms reality into fiction.

As discussed in this work, the fictional contract, understood as a concept derived from the notion of the fictional pact, can be defined, in general terms, as an implicit agreement between the author, the reader, and the spectator. Within this framework, the latter accept the rules, settings, values, and, above all, the intrinsic verisimilitude of a chimerical universe, thereby suspending "objective" reality.

16 Let the actors have the freedom to discover a scene with very little input from you.

All scenes contain a dramatic logic that will not be ignored. If staging doesn't work, look to the scene for the solution.

Never permit actors to do their own stunts (143)

Wait as long as possible before saying a word to your cast. You've been studying this material for a long time and they are just coming to grips with it. They need time to internalize the script make it organic. Give them the time to work it out. Give them some credit for intelligence. (96) Badham, J. & Craig, M. (2006). *I'll Be In My Trailer (the creative wars between directors & actors)*. Michael Wise Productions, Studio City, CA.

17 If you are directing drama, and if you want the audience to engage with the characters and their predicaments and adventures, it is essential that the actors listen.

Without listening a dramatic scene is just "my tur to talk, your turn to talk"; it becames a scene about two actors performances instead of a scene about a relationship and an event in their relationship - Weston, J. (1996). *Directing Actors*. Michael Wise Productions, Studio City, CA (77)

18 Kermode, F. (1967). *The Sence of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of fiction*. Cambridge, Oxford University Press, 51.

In the context of cinema and audiovisual media, this contract enables the spectator, in a state of immersion, to engage deeply with the narrative, accepting the imaginary as if it were genuine, particularly through the contribution and performance of characters and actors.¹⁹

In contemporary fiction, this pairing becomes even more noticeable and undeniable as we see the need to support the fictional characters' strategies of enticement through the use of the same technical devices²⁰. This is reflected particularly in the actions and behaviour of the characters and in the essence of the emotions they create. This influence, even in the digital age, is so strong and decisive that the Aristotelian matrix prevails in the construction of modern dramatisation. Technical means do not invalidate the intrinsic rules of Aristotelian poetics where fears and adversities, that is, the soul of modern drama, remain directly related to Greek tragedy. This is evidenced in the references to poetics that reveal this intimate relationship which, in Aristotle, is translated by the action of the hero who embodies 'man's capacity for affirmation in the struggle against the adversity of the gods and the elements...' ²¹ and where a typical passion is emotionally based on a "pleasant and painful feeling, as well as a type of opinion about the world." ²²

REFERENCES

- Aristoteles. (1994). *Poética - (Poet.VI, 1459b 33,34 segs.)*. Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional / Casa da Moeda
- Badham, J. & Moddero, C. (2006). *I'll Be In My Trailer (the creative wars between directors & actors)*. Michael Wise Productions, studio city, CA
- Chubbuck, I. (2005). *The Power of the Actor*. Gotham Books, New York,
- Cole, T., Chinoy, H. K. (1970). *Actors on Acting (the theories techniques and practices of the world's great actors)*. Three Rivers Press, New York.
- Diderot, D. (1991). *Paradoxe Sur le comédien*. Castenau-le-lez, Editions Climats.
- GONÇALVES DOS SANTOS, José Eduardo (2018), O contrato ficcional Lia. mes entre obra, leitor, realidade e ficção NAU LITERÁRIA, crítica e teoria da literatura em língua portuguesa – <https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/NauLiteraria/article/download/68907/48673/347703>
- Iris, nº 8. (1988). *Cinéma & narration 2*
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1994). *La fragilidad del bien, fortuna y ética tragedia y la filosofía griega*. Madrid, La Balsa de Medusa.
- Paixao da Costa, J. (1988), Telenovela (origem, evolução, e genealogias de um modo de produção)

19 "This understanding presents contours similar to the cinematic or audiovisual fictional contract, which constitutes the object of analysis in this exploratory article. In this context, it is also necessary to consider—analogously to novelistic characters—the emotional labour of actors, as subjects exposed to mental and psychological dimensions, who frequently draw upon prior experiences in the process of constructing their characters (actor/character). All these social elements, and above all the psychological ones, constitute an integral part of the act of dramatization and of dramaturgical construction." Silva de Lima, E., Rodrigues, T., & Pedro, H. (2015). Na ordem do discurso: rasgando o contrato ficcional? *Revista de Teoria da História*, 7(13), Universidade Federal de Goiás (ISSN: 2175-5892).

20 Technological and artistic means, where their recruitment and manipulation resemble the common praxis of fiction, where there is even often the development of a script along the lines of a fiction screenplay. These devices materialise, for example, in: several cameras that follow the characters everywhere; special effects; videographic effects; sound environments and ambient noise; stereophonic music; and editing/montage with the manipulation of images and sounds.

21 Reis, C. & Lopes, A. C. M. (1991). *Dicionário de Narratologia*. Coimbra, Livraria Almedina, 193.

22 Nussbaum, M. C. (1994). *La fragilidad del bien, fortuna y ética tragedia y la filosofía griega*, Madrid, La Balsa de Medusa, 475.

Kermode, F. (1967). *The Sence of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of fiction*. Cambridge, Oxofo University Press.

Silva de Lima, E., Rodrigues, T., & Pedro, H. (2015). Na ordem do discurso: rasgando o com trato ficcional? *Revista de Teoria da História*, 7(13), Universidade Federal de Goiás (ISSN: 2175-5892),

Smith, M. (1995). *Engaging Characters, Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press.

Reis, C. & Lopes, A. C. M. (1996). *Dicionário de Narratologia*. Coimbra, Livraria Almedina

Sartre, J.P. (1965). *Esquisse d'une théorie*. Paris, Hermann.

Segre, C. (1989). *Enciclopédia Einaudi* nº 17 (Literatura/Texto). Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional / Casa da Moeda.

Stanislavsky, K. (1979) *A Preparação do Ator*. Lisboa, Arcádia,

Tierno, M. (2002). *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*. Hyperion, New York.

Weston, J. (1996). *Directing Actors*. Michael Wise Productions, studio city, CA.