STRUCTURES IN CRISIS: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO ASGAR FARHADI'S FILMS

Dr. Aaron Rodriguez Serrano
Universitat Jaume I – Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicacion, España

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Abstract

This paper proposes an exploration of the films of Iranian director Asgar Farhadi. It employs a methodology based on textual analysis, focusing specifically on the structural design of his films and the focalization processes of his scripts. We will show how Farhadi's work can be understood as a coherent research project with a uniquely solid model based on chronological linearity as a way to explore the violent breakdown of different emotional communities: families, marriages, groups of friends, etc. At the same time, we will consider how all the focalization processes in his films are oriented toward two main concepts: *knowledge* (of the characters, but also of the audience) and *pain* (of living in a [narrative] world afflicted by meaninglessness).

Keywords
Iranian Cinema – Asghar Farhadi – Audiovisual Narrative – Structuralism – Textual analysis.

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01. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the filmography of the Iranian director Asghar Farhadi using methodological tools derived from structural and narratological textual analysis. Farhadi´s work offers an extraordinary object of study, not only for his international relevance or his eccentric and privileged position on the contemporary Iranian art scene (Loftalian, 2014; Naficy, 2012: 260-262; T. Edwards, 2016: 114), but above all, for the way that his formal decisions generate meaning for the spectator. Paradoxically, although he can be considered one of the key directors for making sense of the current state of the so-called “peripheral cinemas” (Elena, 1999), his work has scarcely been studied by international scholars – with a few remarkable exceptions, such as the monograph written by Tina Hassania (2014) or the book chapters quoted here, which mainly explore the effects of the Oscar he won for *A Separation* (*Jodaeiye Nader az Simin*, 2011). It is our purpose here to explore the specific aspects of his cinematographic style more deeply, thereby contributing to discussions of a filmography which, as we will try to show, offers a perfect example of the discursive clarity of constructive coherence.

The validity of the narratological-structural approach is supported by its long tradition and its remarkable results. We locate this research within the tradition begun by Roland Barthes (1990) and Christian Metz (2001), while drawing on other compatible fields such as semiotic analysis (Rodríguez Serrano, 2017; Zumalde, 2011; Zunzunegui, 2016), psychoanalysis (García Catalán & Sorolla, 2014; González Hortigüela, 2017; Palao Errando, Loriguillo López, & Sorolla Romero, 2018), and cultural studies (Sclater, 2000). In this study, we give special attention to the narratological concept of *focalization*, i.e., the relationship between the knowledge of the audience, the knowledge of the characters and the knowledge of the subject of the enunciation (Bacon, 2013; Drucker, 2017; Hühn, Schmid, & Schönert, 2009).

The term "focalization" carries with it some problems and misunderstandings, especially in its cinematographic application. Although the trajectory of the concept has already been successfully traced in other studies (see, for example, Horstkotte, 2009: 172), it is worthwhile establishing some initial clarifications in the context of Farhadi's filmography. The existence for the spectator of a narrative instance that pushes the action forward—but also deliberately conceals the most relevant information for the clarification of the dramatic events—generates a continuous gap between the three classical levels of narratological reception (Gómez-Tarín & Marzal Felici, 2015: 282): what the narrator (in this case, always invisible) knows; what the characters know; and what the audience knows. What often takes the form of a single question associated with the genre of the thriller—for example, "Who kidnapped the girl?" in *Everybody Knows* (*Todos lo saben*, 2018)—is actually an excuse to access those aspects of the intimacy and personal history of the main characters. Hence, the editing of each film is first and foremost a question of knowledge: at the close of each small dramatic unit, the viewer will always have the feeling that the old promise of the classical narrator—that of the "closure" of the knowledge offered—has been broken here. For Farhadi, "focusing" is, above all, the limits of what one can know (always only partially) about the affections and secrets of the protagonists.

Our initial hypothesis is that Asghar Farhadi's filmography has been evolving toward a classical structural narrative design[1] that has developed especially in the more mature stage of his career. This design is defined by:

a) A first act that constructs a fragile but stable narrative universe. The relationships between the characters are always complex but the traumas (internal or external) can still be managed without excessive pain.

b) A violent rupture of that fragile balance due to an unexpected catastrophe, what according to McKee´s structural design model is referred to as an *inciting incident* (McKee, 1997: 181). This rupture takes place as an external and causal narrative element, demolishing or altering the expectations of both audience and characters, and ultimately functioning as a way of playing with *focalization*: during this second act of the story we witness the erosion of the main characters' self-perceptions, their understanding of the world and their relationships with others.

c) Finally, the structural design concludes with a third act in which the audience is presented with an incomplete closure of the story. Their knowledge of the film's world and its characters will never be complete. Here emerge the basic existential thrust behind Farhadi's work: in a world constantly threatened by violence from within and from without, moral barriers and self-perceptions are blurred. It is thus impossible to speak of any kind of narrative/existential closure.

In order to test the applicability of this design to Farhadi's films, we propose a chronological-structural interpretation of his filmography that divides it into three stages: his early period, when he is still learning his craft; the privileged case of *About Elly* (*Darbareye Elly,* 2009) as the first complete example of his narrative design; and his mature work as an internationally recognized filmmaker.

02. Evolution of Farhadi's narrative design

02.01 First works

Before he found international success, Asghar Farhadi produced a sort of unacknowledged trilogy in which we can trace the enunciative basis for his later films. In what could be viewed as a reflection of his learning experience as a filmmaker, the narratological processes of his early films become progressively complex, especially in aspects related to the focalization of the story.

Thus, in *Raghs dar ghobar* (2003) we find a symbolic confrontation between two main characters: Nazar (Yousef Khodaparast) and an unnamed old man (Faramarz Gharibian) on a deserted landscape. Farhadi's debut—at least as director of a feature film—uses a minimalist design that facilitates careful control of the *lines of flight*

[1] "Classical design" (as opposed to the design developed by Farhadi) refers specifically to the narratological tradition initiated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* but fully established in our field by authors such as McKee (1997) and Vogler (2007). In this structural design, the internal coherence of the world is guaranteed by a structure of three or five acts that basically adheres to the following order: beginning (presentation of the world), crisis (rupture of the initial peace by an unexpected event), climatic resolution (return to the initial state and improvement of the initial world). It is important to note that the coherence of the structure was, at the same time, the coherence of the narrative world: there was a concrete sense in the suffering, in the actions that defined the characters or in the way in which a particular and more or less explicit ideology was guaranteed in the conclusion. Obviously, as will be shown here, this design is incompatible with Farhadi's model, in which, of course, there will be no final meanings or master signifiers.

between the two figures. A year later, he would complicate the scenario in *Shah-re ziba* (2004) by introducing a strategy based on a *multiple focalization*: the friends and relatives of a young man condemned to the gallows will fight with the family of his victim in a complex web of ethical stances. Finally, in *Chaharshanbe-soori* (2006), we will find a more complex Farhadi, weaving various characters and different family traumas around the exploration of an infidelity. All three films offer open endings or unclear diegetic solutions.

Taking these three films, it is easy to trace a pair of parallel processes: as Farhadi progressively *urbanizes* and *complicates* the settings of his films (going from a sort of "mythological desert" to the suburbs of a big city, and from there to the apartments of the Iranian bourgeoisie), his movies becoming increasingly complex in terms of how they articulate the point of view. Moreover, the timeframe of the story is increasingly compressed: from the years that pass in *Raghs dar ghobar* to a single Iranian New Year's Eve in *Chaharshanbe-soori*. Spaces and times become more defined, suggesting a more focused writing.

At the same time, we can appreciate a journey from the dense symbolic elements of the first film—a sort of blend of fairy tale and theater of the absurd—and the subtle depiction of the everyday world in the last one. Farhadi´s debut is more connected with the traditions of the "magic realism" of the 1970s (Jameson, 1986): each visual element—the wedding ring, the frightening snakes lurking between the rocks, Nazar´s mutilated finger—seems to suggest an external meaning, a kind of significance to the events that invites a "symbolic" or "poetic" reading of their role in the story. But as his films move closer to the world of cities and marriages, Farhadi turns his search for poetic elements away from such props and toward the construction of each frame and the editing decisions. An example of this can be found in the opening to *Chaharshanbe-soori*, in which Farhadi presents two key images. The first is the soon-to-be married Rouhi (Taraneh Alidoosti), trying on her wedding dress in front of a rickety mirror in her small house in the suburbs. A couple of minutes later, the film's main credits appear on another reflective surface: the windows of the bus that splits the character's reflection in two halves.

Indeed, the main element driving the film's narrative will be Rouhi's *gaze*, which begins in the innocent territory of the sweet dreams of her own future marriage—fostered by her own family and her fiancée—and is spatially located in the suburbs of a big city. But the innocence of that gaze will be challenged by the real complexities of marriage with her exposure to selfishness, infidelity, suffering and unscrupulousness, embodied here in a supposedly "superior" urban bourgeois couple. The class struggle—a recurrent topic in Farhadi´s films, and always presented in extraordinarily complex terms—is directly connected with *the act of seeing*, with a loss of innocence through exposure to the betrayal and contempt experienced by all the main characters in his films.

In his second film, *Shah-re ziba*, Farhadi follows a strict pattern based on a linear, chronological structure. There are at least two main reasons behind this decision. The first is eminently practical: it eliminates the need to make any flashback to "explain" the symbolic weight of his textual operators (as he had to do in *Raghs dar ghobar*). But the second reason is, in our opinion, considerably more interesting: once the characters pass a "narrative point of no return", the linearity of the story can be experienced by the audience as a wild rush of events that drag the protagonists inexorably on.

In *Shah-re ziba,* from the moment that the audience discovers the impending doom—the death sentence against young Akbar (Hossein Farzi-Zad)—the temporal progression of the film becomes a constant source of anguish. Indeed, the whole narrative design is defined by two opposing forces: the quest to prevent Akbar's execution—led by his friend A´la (Babak Ansari) and his sister Firoozeh (Taraneh Alidoosti)—and the desire to see it done, represented by the father of the murdered girl, Abolqasem (Faramarz Gharibian). As will be shown below, in his subsequent films, whether the story involves a disappearance (*About Elly*), a court decision (*A Separation*) or a kidnapping (*Everybody Knows*, 2018). what matters is how Farhadi develops particular structures to convey this idea of time as something inescapable, and specifically, of how it forces us to *wait*. For Farhadi, the idea of *waiting* will work on three different but generally connected levels of signification: the first connected with some sort of narrative *hubris* (a foolish act committed due to the pride of the main character, as in *A Separation*), an exceptional and incomprehensible act of external violence (as in *The Salesman* [*Forushande*, 2016]), or a cold legal sentence (as in *Shah-re ziba*). In a formal sense, Farhadi's refusal to use flashbacks in his films suggests a tragic, Kafkian dimension to chronological time, whereby the act of waiting becomes a sort of mythological doom. The universe is depicted as dominated by cruel forces—theological or judicial—that impose their power by forcing us to wait, following a line widely explored in contemporary art (Köhler, 2017). In some extreme cases—*The Salesman* and *Everyone Knows*—this tension between *hubris* and the threat of the law may be depicted as a source of anguish: the protagonists will choose *not* to ask for help from the authorities in order to face the tragedy with their own forces. We will return to this idea shortly.

While Farhadi learned to use the chronological structure as a way of creating suspense through the oppression of the inexorable passage of time in his second feature, he would learn to use focalization in the same way in his third film, *Chaharshanbe-soori*. As noted above, this film is completely constructed around the way that a specific character's *gaze* (that of the cleaning girl Rouhi) *exposes* a private drama in an upper-class home. The key idea here is that the audience will acquire their knowledge of the story through a character who is external to it, and who follows it out of curiosity. Except in some very specific moments in the story, Rouhi's narrative function is not related to any significant or powerful actions. She does not push forward the development of the drama. Instead, she spends almost the entire film tidying up, cleaning the rooms, arranging the furniture… Farhadi uses a simple visual metaphor to reveal the narrative arc of the whole film: Rouhi has to remove the plastic covers that protect the furniture in the domestic space while the enunciation progressively reveals the complexity of the marital relationship. This gesture (*unveiling*) brings against the spectator that "truth inside the family", so that Rouhi may sometimes be associated with the subject of the enunciation while at other times she may represent the audience through focalization; in other words, we will have access to the main details of the drama through her gaze.

However, there are certain aspects of the structural design of *Chaharshanbe-soori* that suggest that Farhadi is still exploring the different possibilities of different enunciation processes. For instance, in the third act of the film Rouhi's point of view is abandoned in order to present scenes that cannot be told from her perspective. The most significant examples are the encounters between the cheating husband, Morteza

(Hamid Farokhnezad), and his lover, Simin (Pantea Barham), or his wife, Mozhde Samiei (Hediyeh Tehrani). In both cases, the camera abandons the cleaning girl's perspective to offer us some superfluous scenes with the sole purpose of "explaining", usually in contradiction to the final outcome of the story, elements that were already clearly suggested in the last scenes. This lack of faith in the audience's analytical capacity will fortunately be overcome in his subsequent films.

In concluding this section, and with a view to laying some groundwork for our final conclusions, we will briefly sum up with reference to our initial hypothesis. Farhadi began his work with a clumsy structure in *Raghs dar ghobar*, using flashbacks and temporal jumps to "explain" the symbolic content of the images, and focalizing mainly on the film's young male protagonist. In his two subsequent films, he would refine his narrative design on two levels: in *Shah-re ziba*, chronological, linear time is portrayed as an unstoppable, menacing force, while in *Chaharshanbe-soori*, point of view—located *outside* the core of the action—is the main tool employed to explore multiple focalizations.

02.02 *About Elly* as the consecration of the model

When *About Elly* is discussed as the film that placed Farhadi on the international stage, the arguments for its success usually revolve around historical and contextual facts (awards, festivals, interviews, etc.), with little attention given to the film itself. Without discrediting these external factors, *About Elly* should be understood as a milestone in Farhadi's work, where the research evident in his first three films finally results in a fully realized model. Indeed, as will be discussed below, all his films since *About Elly* would repeat this "basic design" with simple variations.

Superficially, the film appears to conform to the classical three-act structure based on the traditional model. The first act introduces the main characters—a group of friends—and the possible initial conflict—a romantic interest between a divorced man, Ahmad (Shahab Hosseini), and a mysterious girl, Elly (Taraneh Alidoosti). The second act is triggered by a violent and unexpected act—Elly's disappearance—and plays with multiple focalization between characters in order to reveal the secrets of the missing woman's past. The third act partially closes the story with the appearance of Elly´s real fiancée and the discovery of her dead body at the local morgue.

However, there are some formal disruptions that call into question this apparently "classical design". The most interesting of these is the visual depiction of Elly's drowning. Located thirty minutes into the film, this unexpected plot twist is edited with fifteen shots of Elly flying a kite. These shots were filmed without a tripod and are cut together in a way that lacks narrative coherence. The sequence looks chaotic, a kind of confused montage of smiles, gazes, gestures and movements in all directions. On occasions, Elly leaves the shot and we can only see an empty frame for a couple of seconds. Finally, two mysterious shots of the kite flying are used to close this meaningful sequence.

This strange way of "piquing" the expectations of the audience using a chaotic montage was rehearsed, with less precision, in a domestic sequence in *Chaharshanbe-soori*. Curiously, it was with the same actress, who in this case is shown opening and drawing curtains with no explicit narrative logic to hint at the imminent arrival of the breakdown. In *About Elly*, for the first time, the non-narrative use of ellipses will become the main absence that overshadows the rest of the film. Those thirty of forty seconds

omitted by Farhadi—the seconds in which Elly jumps into the sea to save one of the children, or maybe to kill herself—form the core of the *real* story. This particular trick in the narrative design will return in *The Salesman*, in which we never see the physical assault that lies at the heart of the story, and in *Everybody Knows*, in which the disappearance of the protagonist's daughter is only revealed after the wedding.

The interesting thing about such "lost seconds"—a kind of "narrative hole" that will become a central feature of Farhadi´s films—is the way they direct the attention of the audience onto their own ability to discern the secret meanings of the images: What have they seen? Have they missed an important clue? The spectators, like the characters, were looking in the wrong direction.

This "hole" in the signifying structure in Farhadi's films works in a very similar way to the one that Lacan explored through his own teaching. Thus, we could easily contrast an apparently "closed" cinematographic structure--Lacan's "circle", in which the signifying content is apparently exhausted in itself—against the "open" structure—the circumference—characterized by the mobility, movement and fluidity of the characters.

This metaphor is useful to understand that, as some Lacanian theorists have pointed out (Eidelsztein, 2011), what makes the symbolic register work (the exchange of laws, signs and words, rituals and mythologies) is precisely the hole, and not the symbol as it might first appear to be. Indeed, a critical glance around us shows that existence itself always resists signification, and that it is precisely from this flaw in our construction that our knowledge as subjects emerges: "a subject intervenes only in as much as there are, in this world, signifiers that mean nothing and must be deciphered" (Lacan, 2006: 712).

For Farhadi, the "absence of meaning" is precisely what allows the movement, the change, the mobility of those apparently designated places in the world (marriage, parenthood, or on deeper levels, self-awareness and the perception of one's own innocence) which, after being broken, allow the readjustment of signifiers. However, this rearrangement is always ephemeral: indeed, Farhadi´s open endings awaken in the spectator the disturbing certainty that—as in Lacan's own logic—experience is always marked by an excess, a burning and uncontrollable "beyond" that makes all our certainties ephemeral.

Characters, actions, and places are defined not only by the narrative game of signifiers, but by a *lack of sense* clearly represented here in the missing body of a woman. In *About Elly*, for the first time, it is this *lack of sense*—a lost body, a lost meaning, a lost signifier—that is the basic condition for making sense of the narrative structure.

In other words, the empty core of *About Elly* is necessary for the other characters to be able to *speak*. Because *Elly* is missing—because the "Elly signifier" has turned into an empty space—all the survivors must analyze their relationship with her. Even the title of the film points in this direction: *About*, a word that is usually associated with the beginning of an intellectual study. In this case, the study is *about what is missing*.

In the ninety minutes that follow her disappearance, Elly´s body becomes a problem linked to the uses of memory and language. In a subtle tension with the classical structure of the thriller, the interest of the story is not based on the discovery of certain clues, but on the *unveiling* of secrets and memories. Of particular interest is the very complex function in the story of Sepideh (Golshifteh Farahani), Elly's only

friend, and the only character in the film who knows almost all the pieces in the puzzle. In terms of focalization, at the beginning of the story Sepideh knows more than the other characters—and, of course, more than the audience. She *knows* that the whole trip is just an excuse to orchestrate a romantic encounter between Elly and Ahmad. Sepideh was the accomplice, the one who hears the private confessions of the two main characters, and the one who encourages them to break family tradition and religious law.

Sepideh's superior knowledge is precisely the reason that her guilt and remorse is the greatest. The first turning point in the plot will lead her from *knowledge* to *contrition*. While the other characters speak at length about their own memories and feelings (who really *knew* Elly? Who could say whether she was a saint, a sinner, a good friend, suicidal, a savior?), Sepideh says nothing, turning into an enigma for the audience. Her inability to speak, to sleep, or to remain still begins to raise suspicion among her friends: her pain can be only understood as the product of concealed knowledge.

The relationship between *knowledge* and *pain* will return in Farhadi´s subsequent films, always with different nuances and consequences. Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that his most recent film is titled *Everybody Knows*, a clever inversion of *About Elly*: while in the earlier film only one character (Sepideh) knows the truth, in the new film everyone—except Paco (Javier Bardem), the protagonist—knows the reason for the disappearance. Ironically, when *everybody knows* why a young girl is kidnapped, the weight of the guilt is shared and seems almost insignificant: the secret has been whispered, passed on and shared throughout the village to such an extent that it ultimately seems of little importance to the community.

02.02 Mature work: Exploring meaninglessness

Since *About Elly*, Farhadi's filmography seems to have found a clear direction, organized around (as we suggested in our initial hypothesis) the breakdown of an initial day-to-day stability. In a certain sense, his most recent films confirm his interest in the external elements that threaten the apparent security of our mundane little existences.

In this final stage, the first act of every film is used to explore the controlled—and apparently humdrum—reality of a romantic relationship. The couple concerned may be divorced, as in *A Separation* or in *The Past* (*Le passé*, 2013); they may be young newlyweds; or they may be old lovers who meet again after several years. The common thread is the way in which Farhadi´s camera takes its time to portray the *rhythms* and the *spaces* of the ordinariness of life: kitchens, offices, classrooms, beds, rituals, objects. Every film begins with the evaluation of a certain way of living. And it is important to highlight the fact that for Farhadi, day-to-day life is always full of challenges, troubles, sharp edges: every character is suffering from a lack of love, or from economic hardships, or from grief over diseases afflicting their loved ones. That initial pain is constant and acute, but at the same time, it is presented as tolerable in the eyes of the audience. Time is not (yet) an excruciating mess: after an earthquake a new home can be found; after the end of a romance there is a friendship that can be cherished.

This characteristic of Farhadi´s mature work is, by far, one of the most original and remarkable features of his filmography. Usually, in the classical foundational story the initial state of every group or community is portrayed as perfectly balanced (Balló & Pérez, 1997). Here, every character is located in a bittersweet context, creating coherent

and credible narrative worlds, in which nobody is ever pure or perfect. On the contrary, they are presented as "survivors", human beings patiently and cautiously trying to get by with the personal skills they have cultivated in the years leading up to the beginning of the story. At the same time, the *mise-en-scene* may use specific visual strategies to display this initial fragile balance. For example, the first scene in *A Separation* frames the two main characters in a long static shot, "trapping" them inside the frame while they speak directly to the camera, trying to explain why they want a divorce. The spectator is thus placed in the space of the arbitrator, who in a certain sense will be invited to "judge" them throughout the rest of the film. Conversely, in the wedding scene in *Everybody Knows*, Farhadi uses very quick editing to show the threatening faces of the villagers: the poor, the working class, the immigrants, the angry spectators who have not been invited to the ceremony. Framing and editing is thus used as a complex strategy in these two films: a marriage ending, another that is beginning; a judge who must decide, and a whole village that has ruled harshly.

This way of understanding the construction of the first act will make us view the outburst of external violence as something more vicious. In the structures of classical cinema—for instance, when faced with the perfect families of golden-era Hollywood movies like *The Desperate Hours* (William Wyler, 1955)—the audience would *long for* the introduction of a narrative breakdown in order for the story to really get started (Higueras Flores & Rodríguez Serrano, 2018). In Farhadi´s recent films, the initial instability—the divorce, the reunion of two old lovers—could be understood as the main direction of the film's emotional development. Of course, when the disaster strikes, all the characters are as surprised and confused as the spectators themselves. The external violence will always be unexplainable and unexpected. The (il)logical appearance of the destruction will obliterate every single element of their lives: their work, their faith in others, their perception of themselves. The painful event—an abduction, an undesired abortion, a wild beating at the hands of a stranger—can only be understood as a dramatic force imposed by a figure external to the narrative, a sort of mysterious god who has decided to test the strengths of his creations. But contrary to the tradition of the hero of classical cinema (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2002), Farhadi´s protagonists are not destined to find protection or aid in their own power or wit. They are humble human beings dominated by their own fear, anguish, selfishness and pain.

In terms of structural design, the closure of the story ultimately seems impossible. Farhadi´s most recent films offer open endings as a decision that is fully consistent with the internal rules of the narrative worlds he creates. If the subject of the enunciation decides explicitly to break with the order and stability of human existence, how can the *meaning of the (narrative) world* be guaranteed? Once again, in contrast with the structural rules of classical cinema, here we always find open questions, shadows, overwhelming problems. In *A Separation*, for instance, the camera remains outside the courtroom in which the couple's daughter is deciding which parent she will choose to live with. The lines of the frame and the different depths of field will split the couple as the credits roll over the screen. In *Everybody Knows* there is a long fade to white and a loud noise that prevent us from seeing or hearing the final, definitive conversation between two characters.

As mentioned above, in the face of such an unexpected tragedy, there seems to be no way to close the story and guarantee the meaning of the narrative world. But this

should not be deemed a fault in the design of the filmic structure, as Christian Metz explains:

> A narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world and opposes it to the "real" world. It is true that certain types of narrative, culturally highly elaborated, have the peculiarity of cheating on the ending (conclusions that are withheld or are evasive, "mirror" constructions in which the end of the recited event establishes and explains the conditions that produced the instance of recitation, denouements in an endless spiral, etc.), but these are only secondary elaborations, which enrich the narrative without destroying it, and which are neither intended nor able to remove it from its basic requirement of *enclosure* (Metz, 1974: 17).

Farhadi is certainly not trying to cheat us, but rather to draw our attention to the gap between what Metz calls the "requirement of enclosure" and the very impossibility of offering us an easy resolution without breaking the rules of the narrative game.

3. Conclusions

In this paper we have attempted to analyze Farhadi´s work in terms of the structural design of his films. Following the advice of José Luis Pardo (2011) in relation to the "inner movement" of every creator, we believe that a chronological study of Farhadi's films reveals a clear, well-defined search for a very specific vision of the world. We have shown how, starting with a structure based on the use of flashbacks and with only two main characters in *Raghs dar ghobar*, the director has chosen to use chronological designs based on multiple focalizations articulated around two main narrative concepts: *knowledge* and *pain*. At the same time, the use of an unexpected violent accident as the *inciting incident* in each design has necessitated an open ending in every film. We have shown how *About Elly* can be understood as the first film to make systematic use of the main parameters of Farhadi's personal narrative design, and in which he fully explored the possibilities of formal experimentation (free editing, match-cut ruptures, and hand-held camera shots) and of an open narrative structure (although the plot *seems* to be resolved, the circumstances leading to Elly's death will remain unknown to the audience). And finally, Farhadi´s mature work undermines our trust in the design of the fictional world by offering an explicit rejection of narrative closure.

The second main area discussed in this study is related to focalization processes and what each character knows. As mentioned above, the first experimental design in this area was Farhadi's third picture, *Chaharshanbe-soori* (2006), where he used an external character, a young cleaning girl who becomes an incidental witness to the dramatic breakdown of a marriage, to provide the audience with a more objective, complex depiction of the events. However, this approach poses some problems, as in the third act Farhadi is forced to change the focalization technique in the interests of underlining certain aspects underlying the conflict. Again, it is in *About Elly* that we find the filmmaker's first fully effective use of the multiple focalization technique, as the connections between the secrets, betrayals, confessions and silences of a whole group of people will offer the audience a fresh take on the codes of the classical thriller. In this sense, and having studied the whole evolution of the director's work, we can confirm our initial hypothesis by means of a brief comparative structural analysis of two of the auteur's most important works: *A Separation* and *The Salesman*.

Both films begin with a first act that lays down the basic lines of the narratological universe. In both cases we have a protagonist couple and an apparent line of dramatic development. In *A Separation*, it seems that the story is structured around the affective, economic and social consequences of the break-up of the couple, while in *The Salesman* it is the urgent need to find a new place to live after an earthquake. In both cases, the characters have apparently coherent reasons for their decisions and for their management of adversity: roots, future projects, opposing interests, etc. Both films thus begin with an apparently classical and rational narrative approach.

Now, this state of "initial (tolerable) imbalance" will start to break down dramatically once the first turning point is crossed. In the first film, a pregnant woman slides down the stairs after being shoved out of the apartment by the male protagonist. In the second, the female character is attacked in her new home after unwittingly opening the door to her aggressor. In both cases, what really interests us here is the camera position and the way it manages the viewer's knowledge. Curiously, both scenes are configured through a single textual operator: the door, the threshold. The camera does not respond to what happens on the other side: either it stays close to the protagonist or remains stationary, pointing toward the corridor from which the evil will emerge. What is significant here is that Farhadi thus blocks the possibility of his spectator being able to judge or attain a clear view of the events. Chaos does not respond to anyone's will or motives: it simply manifests itself and sweeps the surrounding reality away. The case of *The Salesman* is even more powerful in that it is highlighted by a cut in the editing: the assault will take place in the off-screen space and, therefore, we will never be able to gauge the brutality or the most violent details of it at any moment in the film.

This turning point therefore modifies our expectations about what we have seen in the previous minutes of the film: divorce or looking for a new home has lost its dramatic weight, and instead, much more serious questions are raised: what legal and emotional consequences will these discoveries have for the protagonists?

As is the case in other Farhadi films, like *Everybody Knows*, after the disaster the management of point of view will focus primarily on the male protagonist. The apparent initial equilibrium between characters will shift mainly towards the man, insofar as he will have to embody brutality, revenge, or searching. The woman is overshadowed by pain, and her decisions will always be subtler, more precise, even more reasoned. Conversely, the dramatic thresholds of the male character are based around an almost fundamental inability to face reality: outraged by what they consider a terrible injustice against them—and certainly not against their wives or daughters—they will react with savagery. In both films, the rest of the structure will be dominated by the way the men cross their own ethical thresholds: lying, attacking, beating, humiliating. With each new decision, the world around them progressively demonstrates that the lack of meaning identified in this article as a feature of Farhadi's work is inevitable: reality falls apart because there is no guarantee of a possible unifying meaning. What remains is the pure psychoanalytic drive, forced to propel the characters in a circuit that will not be able to close the cinematic design itself.

Through this analysis we have confirmed our initial hypothesis of a specific structural narrative design as outlined at the beginning of the article. Obviously, Farhadi is still a young director and in the coming years it is to be hoped that he will add further to his filmography, reinforcing and developing the same structure, and perhaps

exploring new directions other than the problems of knowledge and pain. In the meantime, we believe that we have hinted here at some fields of exploration that may be of interest to other scholars of Farhadi´s work: How do the theological elements present in his screenplays connect with the apparent meaningless that pervades them? How does his narrative design compare with those of other important Iranian directors, and how do they intersect with postmodern European independent cinema? How is his design connected with the French (*The Past*) or the Spanish (*Everybody Knows*) traditions of narrative structure? These are all thought-provoking questions that could be explored in future studies taking this research as a point of departure.

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