FICTION, SERIES, AND CREATIVITY: A CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT
The article presents an edited transcription of a scholarly dialogue held on March 9, 2026, at the Campus de Gandía of the Universitat Politècnica de València, within the research project "Aesthetics, Cognition, and Social Impact of Contemporary Series" (CIAICO/2024). The conversation brings together philosophers José Luis Villacañas Berlanga and Antonio Rivera García in a wide-ranging discussion on the cultural, psychoanalytic, and aesthetic dimensions of contemporary serialized fiction. Starting from the thesis that television series represent the narrative perfection of cinema — rather than its degradation — the dialogue explores the role of series as a modern form of ethical and temporal pedagogy, heir to the nineteenth-century novel. Key themes include the opposition between narration and monstration in film history, the legacy of the avant-gardes and the high/low culture divide, the Freudian concepts of the ego ideal and narcissism as frameworks for understanding the evolution from the heroic characters of classical cinema to the more human protagonists of contemporary series, and the political implications of identification as theorized by Laclau. The conversation also addresses the problem of explicitness in Spanish fiction, the neuroscientific theory of narrative simulation (Oatley), and the family as the fundamental institution of human experience. Together, these threads articulate a defense of the creative, emancipatory potential of serialized fiction when it treats the viewer as an active, adult subject.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

On March 9, 2026, we had the privilege of welcoming José Luis Villacañas Berlanga and Antonio Rivera García to the Campus de Gandía of the Universitat Politècnica de València, within the framework of the research project *«Aesthetics, Cognition, and Social Impact of Contemporary Series»* (CIAICO/2024). Both are full professors at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Villacañas is one of Europe's most prolific and original intellectuals, the author of more than sixty books spanning the history of Spanish philosophy to contemporary political theory; Rivera García is a specialist in political philosophy and art theory, with a particular dedication to cinema. The session, initially addressed to second-year students in Audiovisual Communication, was conceived as a space for open dialogue on fiction, series, and creativity. What follows is the edited transcription of the conversation they held after Villacañas's opening remarks, whose main arguments I summarize below.

Villacañas began with a provocative thesis: series are not a degradation of cinema but rather its perfection. If cinema is, as he maintains, "the greatest of the arts" — an art that draws on all others, from cave painting to theater, opera, and the novel — series represent the phase in which filmic expression achieves the narrative complexity previously available only in the novel. To illustrate this transition, he cited two works that, in his view, anticipated contemporary series: the television adaptation of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1982), which was already produced in a short version for theaters and an extended version in episodes, and Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), whose long version constitutes, according to Villacañas, a complete testimony of a historical era — something only serial extension can aspire to.

From there, Villacañas developed what was the central axis of his presentation: the idea that series have become "the pedagogy of the world." Just as nineteenth-century British literature functioned as a fundamental ethical institution — the one that shaped moral character, established the human type, and configured subjectivity — series have assumed that function in our time, with a decisive difference: they are the last media form capable of offering an organized temporality. In contrast to social media, which fracture temporality and short-circuit all mediation by reducing the subject to a merely reactive capacity, series require the viewer to connect elements distant in time and construct meaningfulness across an extended duration. Villacañas was emphatic on this point: having meaningful temporality is the condition of creativity.

This line of argument led him to Freud, who occupied a central place in his presentation. For Villacañas, reading Freud is an essential prerequisite for writing creative series, because it allows one to technify — to make reflexive — the mechanisms of the unconscious that operate in the slip, the joke, the dream: the language through which series connect with what the viewer does not yet know about themselves. To understand is to enjoy, he affirmed, and the enjoyment of understanding is recursive: each detail understood potentiates further understanding, so that a good series generates an "infinite commentary." The communication achieved by the best series is not direct or coercive — here Villacañas invoked Kierkegaard — but indirect: it must be internalized from the viewer's sense of freedom; the viewer must feel free while producing what they wish to internalize.

Salvador, the recent Netflix series, served as his counterexample. Villacañas considered it representative of a recurring problem in Spanish fiction: treating the viewer as if they were incapable of constructing meaningfulness on their own. He criticized its invasive explicitness — in the script, in the dialogue, in the redundant repetition of visually established information — its adoption of the language of public discourse, and its direct pedagogy that, paradoxically, annuls the ethical efficacy it claims to pursue. "Do not be explicit, never be explicit," he recommended to the students. "There is no Spanish series that could not be improved by cutting fifty percent of the dialogue."

The dialogue reproduced below proceeds from these premises. Antonio Rivera García responded to Villacañas by broadening the framework toward the tension between narration and monstration, the legacy of the avant-gardes, the problem of high and low culture, and the notion of classicity as the production of experience. In the subsequent discussion, a student's question about the evolution from the heroic character of classical cinema to the human character of contemporary series gave rise to a joint reflection by Villacañas and Rivera on the ego ideal, narcissism, Marcuse's and Lasch's Freudian readings, and Laclau's theory of democratic leadership, in which cinema, psychoanalysis, and political theory intertwine in a way that we believe justifies the publication of this exchange.

2. **DIALOGUE**

Antonio Rivera García: Thank you very much, Héctor, for inviting me to converse with my friend and mentor José Luis Villacañas. The truth is that, as he said at the end, speaking

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about what one does not know is what the philosopher has done from the very beginning: we speak about what we do not know; when we know something, it is no longer worth talking about in pursuit of truth or a shared opinion. For a long time, I have always wished that friends who are not specialists in this subject area would reflect on cinema, or on audiovisual productions, because sometimes an erudite reflection can be less productive, less illuminating, than one by someone who has read Kierkegaard and Freud. [*Addressing Villacañas*] So I have taken everything you said very seriously.

I took notes and I will try to say something about what you have presented, which is of great importance to me. Especially important is the end of your talk, which constitutes an appeal to an active viewer, a viewer who has come of age and is not treated as a child — as, however, the aesthetics of advertising treats us, an aesthetics that has largely invaded many audiovisual products.

Narration and Monstration: Ozu, Deleuze, the Avant-Gardes

I will try to follow the thread of your presentation. Let us begin with the thesis that series represent a perfection of cinema. While true with regard to the best series, it is also highly debatable. They could be so, yes, if we admitted that cinema is exclusively, or fundamentally, narration. But cinema is not only narration.

A good example of what I mean is Yasujirō Ozu. Deleuze, in his book *The Time-Image*, spoke of Ozu's invention of pure images and sounds — images that separate from the narrated story; that is, he invents empty landscapes and still lifes that constitute an interruption of narrative flow. They are certainly narrative films, but in them we find those dazzling moments when narrative time comes to a halt. That sequence mentioned by José Luis showing the two elderly spouses, in *Tokyo Story* (1953), gazing toward the horizon, constitutes a static moment within the film: the action has stopped. The sequence has meaning insofar as it breaks with narrative time, with the story understood as the set of characters' actions. But, fundamentally, the static moment only has meaningfulness through its contrast with the narrated actions.

Although what remains above all in our memory are the pure images that so fascinated the French philosopher, Ozu's stories are banal and he repeats them constantly. The Japanese director himself underscored the banality of his craft when he used to say that he made films like a tofu seller who always prepares the same recipe. Ozu's films are far from that utopian film in which narration would have been eliminated, leaving only a sum of shots showing either empty landscapes and interiors or compositions of objects and still lifes. The Japanese filmmaker's films are a testimony to the opposition between narrating and showing, and I believe that the beauty of his films lies precisely in this real opposition.

All of this relates to an essential contrast we find from the very origin of film history — one that takes place, for instance, between D. W. Griffith and Erich von Stroheim. Griffith perfects narration because he succeeds in making the transition from one shot to another invisible, while Stroheim is so exaggerated in what he shows that it becomes difficult not to be aware of the transitions between shots. Only then, when narration seems to enter into crisis, does the viewer acquire a special lucidity that elevates them to the level of the creator. I believe that art, especially after the avant-gardes, can hardly be an adult art if it does not have something metalinguistic about it, if it does not allow the viewer, as Benjamin expresses in his celebrated essay "The Author as Producer," to acquire awareness of the mechanisms of creation. The best series inherit all of these elements from cinema. They are those that do not merely propose to narrate, but also to show the world and the difference between it and the art that represents it.

High Culture, Popular Culture, and the Avant-Garde

The democratic and metalinguistic character of contemporary art is related to what you mentioned, José Luis, about the distinction between high and low culture — a distinction that troubles me greatly. It is true that we admire Gramsci, and he provides a good starting point when he critiques that distinction, but Gramsci is insufficient because he had no sensitivity toward the avant-gardes; his taste was nineteenth-century. For him, art was fundamentally narration. This strikes me as outdated, but I share his aesthetic ideal, which consisted in abolishing the profoundly antidemocratic and elitist separation between a high-culture art and a low-culture one. Walter Benjamin, who was sensitive to cinema — as can be seen in his celebrated essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* — observed that there are disruptive, avant-garde, and metalinguistic mechanisms that were rejected by the public when it came to the supposedly superior arts, but were accepted, even by subaltern classes without any contact with university culture, when it came to cinema. With all of this, I want to oppose the thesis of Ortega in *The Dehumanization of Art*, who saw in the avant-gardes, in the most contempo-

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rary art opposed to the Romantic taste for narration, an art made for élites and profoundly antipopular.

Godard said in this regard, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in a melancholic vein because he reflects on "what cinema could have been" and ultimately was not, that it could have been a more democratic art if it had had a more active, creative public. Benjamin's "The Author as Producer" suggests this once again: art in the age of the avant-gardes was democratic because it wished to abolish the absolute barrier between the author, the creator, and the viewer. And you [*addressing Villacañas*], at bottom, were saying this earlier: for a work to be creative, the viewer must be creative as well.

This is the opposite path to that followed by series and cinema contaminated by the aesthetics of advertising. I recall Baudrillard in this regard; in his texts from 1968, he said that advertising occupies the place of the mother: it makes everything easy for us, even desires on our behalf; it tells us, in short, what we should think and, above all, desire. It seems to me that the critique of this advertising aesthetics is related to your critique of series that are too explicit, too pedagogical, that treat us as minors. We must always leave room for the viewer's creativity.

Classicity as Experience

Your defense of the creativity of series contains a genuine praise of classical cinema: beginning with the meaningful temporality of John Ford. But cinema is contradictory and complex because it emerges at the same time as the avant-gardes appear in other arts, and because it receives their influence. It is true that as soon as the studio system is established in the United States and the Soviet Union — what Noël Burch called the institutional mode of representation — a very classical narration, perhaps excessively classical, would prevail. Debord, in one of his Situationist writings, even said that cinema had become in just a few years the oldest and least innovative art, and that the only filmmaker who was on a par with what was being done in other arts was Alain Resnais.

The problem of the triumph of the classical in cinema, at a time when other arts had already abandoned that path, becomes evident when we draw on Rancière's analysis of art history — that is, when we start from his division into various regimes of art. Classical cinema, or the very series that bring cinematic narrativity to perfection, would correspond to what the French philosopher calls the mimetic regime of art, which can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where it is stated for the first time that great narrators construct stories, narratives, more coherent than History itself. You yourself, in your latest book, *Senderos que se bifurcan* [*Forking Paths*], insofar as you aim to offer a narration of History, are compelled to do something of the sort — but you certainly introduce avant-garde elements, a temporality open to different possibilities, that already belong to the aesthetic regime of art, to a regime where temporality becomes more complex and enters into crisis...

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: But here I would advocate for a broad sense of "classical," because for me the classical is temporality... and it is true that there are many temporalities: it need not be an explicit or successive temporality, but it must be one in some form. It cannot be a temporality built from interrupted elements. *Solaris* has a temporality: of course, the protagonist comes and goes in a way that is completely striking and strange to us, but it adheres to a temporality. Why? Because in the end the child emerges before the father, and this is filmic temporality: to be understood, to be constructed, your temporality must emerge. The viewer is creative when their temporality is creative, when they are able to bring layers of their existence, their experience, into play. For me, this is the essential word: classicity is a work that produces experience. I am very much reminded here of Benjamin: what is happening to us, that we no longer have experiences? Why the destruction of experience? Classicity is that which produces experience.

Antonio Rivera García: Yes, you are right, but there are other temporalities, and there are also magnificent series and films that address the crisis of experience. There is no shortage of audiovisual stories in which absolutely nothing happens, in which what is shown is waiting without hope, the very rupture of linear time...

Freud and the Family as the Nucleus of Experience

Another aspect of your presentation that I would like to highlight is the importance you grant to Freud. You cited the great series *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), which is the story of a family... at bottom, almost all great series narrate family stories. Even in the best political series, the theme of the family reappears, since the ruler often occupies the function of the father. Horror films and series, which almost always tell stories concerning a family, draw on Freud and his essay *Das Unheimliche* — on the familiar that has ceased to be so and has turned into its opposite... Let us recall that, during

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the writing of the screenplay for *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick was reading and drawing inspiration from Freud's essay on the uncanny...

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: This is the real problem, Antonio: humanity has not configured an institution capable of producing experience other than the family. Period. It does not matter how we understand it... if that germ of experience that is the family does not exist, it is impossible for there to be experience afterward. And this is a good description of what is happening to us.

Antonio Rivera García: Freud is very suggestive... for the time being we will stop here... Thank you very much for this dialogue, which we now open up to respond to any question that sparks your curiosity.

DISCUSSION

Héctor J. Pérez López: If you like, I'll begin — I want to introduce a small supplement. For me, one of the authors who has most impacted my thinking about what series can do inside our heads — I study series, I research them, I teach a fourth-year course in which we make narrative maps of series — is a Canadian author I fell in love with when I saw him give a talk at a conference in the United States. He is a neuroscientist, a scientist, but he gave a talk about Dante.

Keith Oatley has a theory according to which, when we watch fiction, what our mind does is simulate. We undergo a simulation, and his primary approach is that we simulate socially — it is a social simulation. He is a scientist who has mapped our entire evolution as human beings, in which the key to our survival has consisted in becoming social beings, in sharing the same story over millions of years.

When José Luis referred to God and series, I thought the following: according to Oatley's thesis, as viewers we actually simulate many times the lives we have never had. When we place ourselves in the position of a character whose life we could never have, that character can probably teach us things, in the sense that it teaches us to know ourselves, because what we feel when we follow the situation of a character entirely distant from our own life are emotions and feelings that can help us better understand what we carry inside.

By the way, José Luis — have you seen *Riot Police* [*Antidisturbios*]?

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: Yes, that one is good — that Spanish series really is good. Its success lies in the fact that its main character is a true force of character, and he transmits that character to everyone around him. This man, heavyset, permanently on the verge of a heart attack, compels everyone around him to be different. They all know that when he is present, they must be more rigorous. That capacity to radiate austerity, authenticity — it was truly formidable in that series.

Antonio Rivera García: In connection with what you said, Héctor, I think the act of simulating can be related to the old question of the viewer's identification with the characters. It is true that, especially from the 1960s onward, cinema was greatly influenced by Brecht, and that, rather than fostering identification, distanciation was considered more important. However, already in this new century, Kaja Silverman — who is also the co-author, with Harun Farocki, of a book on Godard — has written a work, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, in which she ends up offering a great praise of heteropathic identification — that is, identification that, in contrast to the habitual or classical kind based on external similarities, leads us to approach individuals who are very different from ourselves. Audiovisual productions, films and series, can achieve, for example, that a white, bourgeois man identifies with a Black, proletarian woman. That viewer is then compelled to make a genuine effort: to put themselves in the place of someone who is very different from themselves and to try to understand them. This proves that identification need not always be alienating; it can also be emancipatory.

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: At bottom, this is something very Freudian: the function of art consists in allowing us to desire without shame things that in normal life we would not allow ourselves to desire. All psychic mechanisms reduce to two: identification and projection. And art, cinema, is an extraordinary power for both, because it plays with something that, as the last line of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) says, is electively akin to the unconscious — to the stuff that dreams are made of.

What is the filmic image? This is what I understood from Antonio's magnificent book, *The Cruelty of Images* [*La crueldad de las imágenes*]. The filmic image is not the propagandistic or advertising image, because it is realistic — realistic in the sense that we also construct our own dreams with it — and it must be connected with our real desire, not with

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the sweetened desire that advertising gives us, which does not want us to be the source of desire but to be itself the origin of desire.

Well, I invite you to watch a Norwegian series — it is not only the Americans and the British who make good series — that is available on Filmin. It is called *A Better Man* [*En bedre mann*]. I invite you to watch it. It is a strange series, but you have to endure the opening, which is a bit tough because it mainly shows a repellent character. But then you will see an actor who transforms and who plays, wonderfully, three different roles... all in just four episodes.

From the Ideal Hero to the Human Character

Student: In relation to what you said earlier — that cinema is ultimately a consequence of earlier arts — could it be that series are related to the novel, to the chapter structure?

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: Yes, yes. I forgot about that. Antonio mentions it often... And series are not only related to the novel's division into chapters; we can also speak of the influence of opera on cinema. When one watches Fritz Lang's early works — *Die Nibelungen* (1924), for example — we have the impression of being before an opera: with each change of sequence we are placed in a new scenic frame, within which the action takes place. It is truly operatic.

Insofar as cinema and series contain narration, there must be parts, divisions. Even a film as completely abstract as *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) is divided into movements: first movement, second movement... As soon as there is temporality, there must be some kind of fracture and some kind of order, of montage. It does not matter whether it is by tableaux, by movements, by chapters.

The division into parts is also very relevant in relation to the study of cultural consumption. In the case of series, it is essential to understand that a substitution of popular habits has taken place. When people of my generation read a novel in bed at the end of the day, everything was designed so that you could get sleepy while reading a chapter. Now cultural consumption habits have changed: before going to bed, we frequently watch a series until we get sleepy. That is why there are twenty-five-minute series, because some people fall asleep before the forty minutes that standard series usually run. These consumption habits are habits that order temporality, that order the vital rhythm. We are temporal beings; we need this kind of thing: rhythm, habits, fractures, passing from one thing to another. Nothing rests the psyche more than passing from one thing to another.

All of this means that we are dealing with an extraordinarily powerful industry, one that needs to incorporate not only psychologists but also sociologists, advertisers, and so on. And that is why we can say, as Antonio said earlier, that the best series constitute a "cardiogram" of society, in the sense that they are the result of the gaze of many professions organically integrated. And I believe this is the key to the failures of Spanish series: they are not conceived in an organic way, but as an inorganic set of sequences. These are, evidently, two entirely different modes of representation.

The Ego Ideal, Narcissism, and the Evolution of the Character

Student: You spoke about identification with characters and how we invest a certain part of our humanity in those characters, who, moreover, allow us to discover things about ourselves we did not know. But you also mentioned John Ford, and for me Ford's characters — and not only Ford's, but also those of Hawks or Wyler, for instance — are not characters you identify with, but rather ones you admire. The characters played by John Wayne or Gary Cooper do not exist in real life: they are ideal characters. This is a constant of classical cinema: they are ideals you aspire to be, but not so much characters you can identify with. What I wanted to ask you is this: what do you think accounts for this shift from nearly heroic characters, proper to the modern epic that is the western, to the much more human characters of today, in whom we can actually see part of who we are?

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: That is very interesting. I recalled Ford because Antonio was saying that often the director's cut does not need to be longer. Ford used to say that in reality the producer had a better sense of what the edit should be and that he agreed with many of the cuts made.

Your question is an abyssal one, and I will try to respond as concisely as I can. Perhaps Antonio has a different perspective, but my impression — more than an impression — is that this is clearly related to an evolution proper to modern society, one whose fundamental theorist is an author who strikes me as extraordinarily important for understanding the entire evolution of culture: Christopher Lasch and *The Culture of Narcissism*.

This evolution is fundamentally conditioned by the abandonment of superego instances, the abandonment of ideal

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instances. What Freud called the superego — that set of elements that must take root unconsciously within us for the production of affect — has largely disappeared. Classical cinema was still a cinema that shaped the superego, that configured the central element of every superego: an "ego ideal."

The "ego ideal," in Freudian terms, is designed to produce something that looks like the same thing but is not: the "ideal of the ego." Classical cinema produced an "ideal of the ego" to which we were bound in an extraordinarily affective way and which necessarily configured both what we identified with and what we understood as our representative.

Frank Capra's entire body of work is filled with this configuration of an "ideal of the ego" built upon "ego ideals," but which at bottom aspires to configure a democratic society. This strikes me as very important: insofar as all viewers end up sharing a communal structure of values configured by those ideals, that structure can then be represented by political structures. Cinema, in this sense, had a fundamental political pedagogy of identification with the great American nation, with the great American epic. We are not talking about just any era: that cinema arose from the New Deal; we are talking about the period in which the United States built its democracy.

All of this enters into crisis from May 1968 onward, from Marcuse's book *Eros and Civilization*, where, against the Freud who had shown the dangers of this dimension, Marcuse begins to speak of the productivity of Narcissus — Orpheus and Narcissus. From that point on, all manner of ideals are deconstructed, because Narcissus blesses his own thoughts, his own experiences, not because they are good or ideal, but because they are his. In this sense, contemporary art contains elements of narcissism: elements that lead to blessing everyday life, blessing the life we are, and that neutralize all superego, ideal structures.

Now, as with everything, if you break the equilibrium on the side of the ideal superego, you get depression, anguish at not living up to ideals. If you break it on the side of narcissism, you lose structures of equilibrium and narcissism can recursively develop and become a pathology. In fact, today, analysts whose work involves therapy hardly encounter the neuroses produced by the ego ideal anymore; instead, they mostly deal with narcissistic pathologies.

And this is what advertising knows, what social media knows. For these new psychic needs they have built powerfully narcissistic techniques that foster paraphrenia: words are confused with reality, and a psychic system is built that is closed upon itself, open to no criticism, in which you only let in what you already are. And, of course, no ideals — because ideals are what we are not.

Laclau, the Democratic Leader, and Classical Cinema

Antonio Rivera García: It is a great theme. I share José Luis's analysis of the "ideal of the ego." Allow me to return briefly to the question of the supposedly impossible identification with the characters of classical cinema by Ford, Hawks, and others. Despite the fact that we may feel very distant from the hero of the western and the epic of cinema, I think classical cinema would have failed if it had not managed to make the viewer identify in some way with such characters. Let us think, by contrast, of *Ivan the Terrible*, the magnificent work Eisenstein created in the 1940s: it is true that it is impossible to identify with Ivan the Terrible. Stalin can identify with the tsar, but we cannot. You will agree that Tsar Ivan is very different from the sheriff played by Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (1952).

In relation to this subject, I must recall what Laclau writes in his book *On Populist Reason* about the figure of the leader. The book begins by analyzing, with the help of Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, the theme of identification and the "ideal of the ego." The brothers — that is, the governed — do not identify with the ruler, but among themselves, since they share the love they feel for the father. This would be the case of Russian viewers in the 1940s, who could not identify with Ivan, with the tsar who was the counterpart of Stalin, but rather with one another through the love they felt for the Soviet leader.

Laclau, as a good reader of Freud, is not content with that answer, however, and continues asking whether the possibility of a democratic leader exists, and if so, what such a democratic leader would look like. Freud himself suggests the answer: it would be democratic if the brothers also identified, in some way — though not completely — with the father. Such a circumstance is only possible if the brothers' ego still retains something of its earlier narcissistic self-contentment. Analogously, classical cinema allowed identification with the heroes of fiction because it fostered a balanced relationship between the superego dimension and the narcissistic dimension of the viewer. Classicism always implies an equilibrium or harmony of this kind.

I am convinced that classical cinema — and hence its contrast with Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*, which is wonderful but with which the public cannot empathize — had great popular success because the viewer did not feel inferior: they

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could, to a certain extent, identify with the Gary Cooper of *High Noon*. Even greater was their identification with that American hero staged by the director José Luis referred to earlier: Frank Capra. So, ultimately, the democratic hero par excellence of classical American cinema, with whom anyone could identify, was another of those heroic characters, those democratic leaders, played by Gary Cooper: John Doe [*Juan Nadie*].

Héctor J. Pérez López: We will stop here, as the students need to go to class. Before we take a break, we want to thank you both very much for coming and for this dialogue.

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