

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Conversations, Body Language and Power in Screen Narratives: A Doorway to Extra-Textual (-Televisual) Geographies

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The etymology of the word *geography*, from the Greek *geo-* (Earth) and *-grafia* (writing), ‘writing of the Earth’, reflects the idea that language and space are not separated from one another and can mutually affect each other. For instance, human geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1991) argues that language plays an important role in place making, in different ways and situations. Conversely, Italo-Canadian poet Mary di Michele (2017) uses the concept of *landscape* to explain the influence of her origins and the landscapes of her childhood on her linguistic choice of inserting some non-translated Italian words in her English language poems. However, the influence of an individual’s territorial belonging and cultural roots on their ways of communicating is not limited to verbal, written or oral, language. Body language, as the combination of all bodily expressions (Argyle 1975; Ambady and Rosenthal 1998) – kinesics (body expressions), proxemics (body distance and body in space), prosodics (voice, tone) and accessories (clothes, physical appearance) – is a great deal culturally and geographically influenced.

These expressions are fundamental in both everyday-life interactions and the fictional conversations occurring in a narrative. In the latter case, they contribute to explicating meanings and characters' intentions and feelings (Plantinga 1999). They can thus affect the emotions, reactions and perceptions of readers or viewers (Højbjerg 2014). In addition, body gestures, often influenced by characters' embodied experiences of and engagement with their places of origin and their socio-cultural and territorial backgrounds (Englund 2021), help assert the nature of texts as spatial events (Hones 2008), in which different textual and geographical dimensions meet and dialogue. Arguably, this is particularly the case when characters use their bodies to establish their power and dominance over others. Through the accentuation of their bodily expressions, the differences in their origin, cultural upbringing and living contexts become more evident to audiences, helping them identify the different geographies of and within the narrative.

Crime drama TV series *Peaky Blinders* (2013-2022), set in Birmingham in the aftermath of the First World War and revolving around the misdeeds of Thomas Shelby and his gangster family, provides several examples of power-asserting, non-verbal interactions between the protagonist and opposing gangs, criminals and powerful figures. These contribute to conveying authority and dominance, to delineating personalities and motives, but, also, in many cases, to manifesting different geographic and social influences, origins and traits. A comparative analysis of the body languages of Shelby and some of his antagonists in relevant scenes can bring to the fore alternative ways of depicting intra- and extra-textual geographies that go beyond the representation of place through visual settings.

The protagonist of the series owes a great deal of his appeal to his physical appearance, but his poised and confident non-verbal language plays as important a role in presenting him to the audience as a magnetic and charismatic antihero and in establishing his power in the fictional world. Throughout the series, his posture, controlled gestures and direct gaze express dominance and inspire respect, while the instances in which his vulnerability emerges (for instance, when dealing with trauma or grief or when interacting with his close family) humanise him and make him more relatable for the audience. When analysed from a geographic and social perspective, and from that of his personal history, his body language succeeds in communicating the resourcefulness, resilience and limitless ambition of someone who has learned to thrive in as tough and competitive an environment as the underworld of Birmingham in the 1920s, someone who endured the traumatising experience of the war and who is willing to do anything for the success and wealth of his family.

Shelby's calm, confident and assertive presence sets a contrast with the attitudes and communicative styles of other gangsters and opponents, such as the Italians, the Jews, the Russians, the Gypsies, among others, who represent different cultural influences and backgrounds.

For instance, many scenes in Season 4 illustrate the differences in body language between the Shelbys and the Italo-American mobsters led by Luca Changretta. These become increasingly more evident as the tensions between the two families escalate. Thomas Shelby conveys his authority through his calm demeanour, straight posture, subtle gestures and firm eye contact. He is always in control of the situation, never revealing his emotions, intentions

and strategies to his enemy. This reservedness is one of his personality traits and a result of his life journey, but also, possibly, reflects his British upbringing. In contrast, the Italians, drawing on their cultural heritage, openly display their emotions of anger, discontent or frustration, through aggressive gestures and tones. Their expressiveness becomes particularly evident whenever they speak their mix of Italian American and Sicilian dialect among each other, as in a scene from Season 4 Episode 3 (from 24:30), where two of Luca Changretta's men are vehemently complaining about British food. The final confrontation between Shelby and Changretta in the Season's finale (from 28:40) is another example of their different non-verbal languages. When Changretta understands that the Shelbys have anticipated his every move and managed to defeat him, he loses his temper, starts cursing and gesturing, and pushes a table over.

The communicative style of the Russians, the main antagonists of the Shelbys in Season 3, is closer to that of Thomas Shelby. Nonetheless, some differences in their bodily expressions, related to their cultural heritage and traditions, stand out. For example, in a scene from Season 3 Episode 3 (from 50:40), during which a business meeting takes place between Thomas and Duchess Tatiana Petrovna and her aristocratic family, the behaviour of the Russian characters shows their approach to negotiations and their background. Like Thomas, they are all very observant and measured. However, what distinguishes them is also a subtle sense of superiority, pride and authority related to their privileged position in the Russian society. This is reflected in their upright posture, measured tone of voice and proper etiquette.

As these two of many possible examples prove, the extensive use of body language in the series helps delineate characters' personalities, emotions, intentions, but also stresses their different geographical and cultural backgrounds and their social status. These considerations on the power-asserting bodily expressions in *Peaky Blinders* are of course not exhaustive, and many other conversations take place between different nationalities and cultures, enriching the plot and the series. However, the proposed key of analysis succeeds in highlighting the fact that conversations on the geographies of and within a fictional story could benefit greatly from considering other ways of representing place, culture and belonging. Non-verbal language can be one of such ways, adding to the geographical meanings conveyed through visual, spatial *tôpoi*. Indeed, the bodily expressions of characters too can build coherent intra-textual geographies and help audiences shape their geographic imaginations. More in-depth analyses of this kind, which could extend to other cases studies – novels, films and other TV productions – could contribute to broadening academic conversations on textualities and narrative geographies.

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