

Breaking The Fourth Wall

by Ece Hasgül

On Netflix's new film based on a book, Enola Holmes, we are welcomed by the main character in the very first minutes. She looks straight to the lens and starts to tell her story directly to the audience, us. An unusual way to start, but still a fairly used method in movies: Breaking the fourth wall. The history goes as far as Ancient Greece when the first examples of theatrical plays took part. Still, in modern-day plays and musicals, it is very common for the fictional characters to refer and/or talk to the audience.

The term emerges from the way sets are constructed, three walls surrounding a scene. Whenever a fictional character acknowledges the camera lens and therefore himself being in a work of fiction, it's called breaking the fourth wall. It is a powerful tool that can be interpreted in many ways in work. It may take part as to introduce humor, horror, intimacy; it may come once in a blue moon for its impact, or the character may be in constant conversation with the audience. No matter how many times you came across it in different works, it still carries the element of surprise within and the impact of it does remain.

In Deadpool and House of Cards, both the main characters are aware of the audience and constantly share what goes on in their minds. While Deadpool makes his sarcastic comments and funny jokes in between, Frank Underwood shares his "secret" thoughts that the other characters in the fictional world cannot know. In these examples, it is only the one recognizing the audience. In The Office, both UK and the US version, however, all of them knew about the camera regarding its "mockumentary" style in which stands for "a type of movie or television show depicting fictional events but presented as a documentary."¹ Even though characters know that they are being filmed and do not necessarily acknowledge that they are in the fictional work when they make eye contact, it's not the camera lens they are engaging with. It is still the audience members they are projecting their own feelings into. The Office's moments of those don't fit with the formal description of the method, but still, deliver the humor and create a more intimate relationship with the viewer.

Likewise to how it can improve the work, breaking the fourth wall may destroy it too if not preceded properly. If you don't find the right moments to break the fourth wall to make a joke, it may not deliver the humor therefore only become empty words and wasted opportunity. Or, similar to what happened in The Cats Movie 2019 version, it may ruin the plot because the filmmaker tried to change the nature of the media from a musical to a movie and avoid all the times that there would have been a wall break but still use the method at the very end of the film where it's unnecessary. Not that the lack or the existence of the wall breaks was the only problem within that movie, nonetheless was connected to the other problems too. That is why ignoring the original media, which was a play designed to be musical theater, and its natural state caused chaos.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mockumentary>