-HLENKA REGAINED:

IRONY AND AMBIGUITY IN THE NARRATOR OF WOODY ALLEN'S *ANOTHER WOMAN* [1]

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MY discussion of narration and narrators in film requires the previous acceptance of the fact that current narratological theories have primarily had novels as their objects of study. This fact constitutes a serious hindrance for the narrative study of movies which, as a result, have more often than not been inappropriately measured against literary standards.

Novels are not like narrative films. It is true that both are narratives and consequently have the same capacity for telling stories. However, their *modus operandi* is fairly different (see Chatman 1978: *passim*, esp. 146-260; and especially, Chatman 1990: 124-138). Literary story-telling and cinematic story-telling constitute two separate modes of narration because the kind of language used by each mode is also different. The former is based on the symbolic nature of any written linguistic utterance, as it is the role of the reader's imagination and competence to provide the signified of each of the existing signifiers, and of the novel as a whole. The latter, on the other hand, plays with the highly iconic quality of the images it is composed of.[2] Therefore, while the concept of narration in literature is usually

represented by the necessary presence of an agent, a narrator, who utters linguistic signs thus converting the initial story into the final text with which the reader is presented, the concept of narration in cinema is more complex in the sense that cinematic narration involves other textual components such as mise en scène, music score, sound effects or editing among others. Nevertheless this does not imply that such concepts as narrator or narration should be avoided when referring to films (see Deleyto 1991: 161-166). In fact, although narrators in cinema do not enjoy the same preeminence as narrators in novels do, a similar agent to the narrator in a novel may be found in many films. In this article the use of the term "narrator" will accordingly be restricted to the agent that actively tells a story or part of it in linguistic signs.

Graham McCann, the author of one of the most comprehensive books on Woody Allen's life, work, and persona, states that "American movies have always been passionately devoted to story-telling, and Woody Allen has become one of the great modern story-tellers" (1991: 227). In an unusually large number of Allen's films, there is always at least one character who engages in the act of explicitly telling a story. In *Manhattan* (1979), we hear Allen's peculiar voice as that of the extradiegetic narrator (Genette 1980: 228) in the difficult process of beginning his story; in *Annie Hall* (1977), we see him as a character-narrator directly addressing the audience from inside the diegesis and establishing himself as "the master of ceremonies, the person who will summon the characters and arrange the order and duration of the scenes" (McCann 1991: 31); in *Radio Days* (1986), we hear again Allen's voice, as an autodiegetic narrator (Genette 1980: 245) who recounts the golden memories of his childhood and youth from a distance; in *Zelig* (1983), Allen parodies documentaries and thus makes use of an objective extradiegetic narrative voice; even in some of his earlier comedies (*Take the Money and Run* (1969) or some parts of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (1972), for instance, there is also a certain emphasis on story-telling as a reminiscence of his period as a stage comedian. This agent reappears in his more recent films *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989).

Another Woman (1988) is no exception in this sense. Rather to the contrary, the story reported in this film is narrated by a main agent, a woman, Marion, whose role is quite complex and significant for the development of the story and for its meaning. What I propose in this article is a narratological approach to this narrator's role as a means to explain how voice-over narration generates ambiguity and irony by spreading

inconsistent and incomplete clues all through the film, by transforming the process of narration itself into a source of suspense and emotion, by consistently breaking the coherent temporal order of the events, and by constantly questioning and blurring the limits between different ontological levels.

The beginning of the film is quite interesting for several reasons. The opening scene, which I will analyse in some depth because of its peculiarity and narrative importance, lasts approximately ninety seconds. It is a kind of presentation which comes immediately after the Orion logo. There is no introductory title, no credits. No preliminary clue is presented for the viewer to create her/his framing expectations. On the other hand, what the camera shows —the objective images— is situated in a space and a time other than that of what we are told —the linguistic utterances—, although it may be said that the images visualize what the voice is telling.

In this sense the scene proves to be overtly stylized. Its artificiality is in a way laid bare. On the one hand, during the whole ninety seconds, all we hear is the sound of a clock plus a female voice, a woman who in an intimate, self-confident tone overtly expresses her attitude to life, introduces herself as the narrator and mediator of the story, and gives a quick but exhaustive explanation of her present situation both at a personal and a professional level. At the same time, the camera has been focusing on a long empty corridor until the figure of a middle-aged woman getting ready to leave her house approaches it. Invited by the woman's intimacy, so to speak, the camera follows her as she turns right and looks at herself in a mirror. This shot is followed by a cut to a close-up of her face. The woman is Gena Rowlands, an actress who is not too well-known for the general public and, most significant of all, who is not part of Allen's usual acting crew. Nevertheless, her relationship with the camera leads the viewer to infer that she may well be playing the main character in the story. This inference is further emphasized by the fact that she claims to be telling the story: "My name is Marion Post. I'm director of undergraduate studies in Philosophy at a very fine women's college though right now I'm on leave of absence to begin writing a book," she says, and the camera immediately tracks to the woman we have seen before, thus establishing the final identification of this woman with the voice that we have been listening to for the last few seconds.

Gena Rowlands is not the only unusual actress in Allen's cast, however. The same applies to the rest of the characters the narrator progressively introduces as her close relatives and whose photographs are simultaneously

scanned by the camera: her husband, Ken (Ian Holm); Ken's daughter, Laura (Marta Plimpton); her brother, Paul (Harris Yulin); her sister-in-law, Lynn (Frances Conroy); and her father (John Houseman). None of them had ever worked with Allen before —with the exception of Frances Conroy, who worked with him in *Manhattan* (Girgus 1993)— so once more the viewer's expectations, at least the ones based on previous experiences of Allen's films, are broken.

For Bordwell,

> [t]he sequential nature of narrative makes the initial portions of a text crucial for the establishment of hypotheses. Sternberg borrows a term from cognitive psychology, the "primacy effect," to describe how initial information establishes "a frame of reference to which subsequent information [is] subordinated as far as possible" (1985: 38).

It is interesting to note that, for the sake of ambiguity, the opening scene paradoxically and systematically conceals all kinds of background information from the viewer. Besides, speaking in narrative terms and this time for the sake of irony, the information provided is also scarce, superficial and misleading because all of the hypotheses concerning Marion that the viewer may establish as a frame of reference —her security, her success, her declared fulfilment in life— will be invariably proved false by the progressive development of the film.

Ambiguity is consciously searched for in this first scene. There is at least a spatial and a temporal distance between Marion as a character and Marion as a narrator. This is precisely what Sarah Kozloff (1988: 5) names "voice-over narration" which she defines as "oral statements conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen." It is clear that this narrator is, in Genette's terms (1980: 245), a homodiegetic narrator insofar as she places herself in the space of the fabula by means of the possessives she uses. She is also an extradiegetic narrator, a second level character-narrator, telling her story in the retrospect. The implications of this type of narrator are at least two-fold. First, by making the narration explicit, the text foregrounds the interplay between the story and the process of telling it, the discourse. Secondly, the narrating character enjoys a dual status, she is both the experiencing-I and the narrating-I. The final function of the interplay between the story and the discourse, on the

one hand, and the dual status enjoyed by the narrating character, on the other, is in both cases ironic, as this analysis will attempt to demonstrate.

Spatial distance is made evident from the very moment that we hear Marion's voice, as narrating-I, significantly accompanied by the sound of a clock, but we neither see her speaking nor perceive the clock anywhere in the scene. That is to say, both the voice and the clock are extradiegetic elements, they are outside the story which is being told. Later in the film, however, we hear the sound of a clock for the second time as Marion-narrator is speaking. But this time we *do* see the clock, for now the events she is describing do not take place at her home (as it occurred in the opening scene) but in the flat she rents as an office to write her book, the place where her life will be completely changed. So we may deduce that the process of narration physically takes place in that flat.

The question of the temporal distance between story and discourse in the opening scene remains a little bit more ambiguous. The first two sentences the voice-over narrator utters are in the past tense, giving thus the impression that the narration postdates the events on the screen:

> If someone had asked me when I reached my fifties to assess my life, I would have said that I had achieved a decent virtual fulfilment both personally and professionally. Beyond that I would say I don't choose to delve. Not that I was afraid of uncovering some dark side of my character, but I always feel if something seems to be working leave it alone.

But then the rest of the monologue is recounted in the present tense. Little by little Marion gives each and every detail of her present situation as if to make her audience believe that the narrative action, the story and the discourse are simultaneous in time. Yet, once the credits have been shown in their entirety, the narrator retakes her narrative and invariably uses the past tense till the end of the film.

In Genette's words, "[t]he use of a past tense is enough to make a narrative subsequent [i.e. the story precedes the discourse], although without indicating the temporal interval which separates the moment of the narrating from the moment of the story" (1980: 220). As it is finally made clear at the end of the film, the narrating-I knows perfectly well from the very beginning how her story is going to end, something which is subtly hinted at in the opening sentence of the film. Then, why does she choose the present tense for the presentation of her personal and professional situation?

In my opinion, two reasons may account for the use of this textual strategy. First, according to Genette, "[a] present-tense narrative which is 'behaviorist' in type and strictly of the moment can seem the height of objectivity" (1980: 219). This presentation scene fulfils a very concrete function which can be summarized as the narrator's attempt to create a strong degree of intimacy with the audience in order to achieve the highest possible degree of complicity. Marion's words have to be objective enough so that the viewer may trust her and suspend her/his disbelief. Furthermore, it is only by appearing as a reliable narrator that the ironic intention of this initial scene can be fully attained. Marion introduces herself as a woman who does not like self-analysis. Yet, all the elements in the story will precipitate her precisely into self-analysis and into the surfacing and acceptance of the actual dark side of her character, a despicable moral stance which has meant the sacrifice of others and of herself for the sake of an apparent success that will prove a fake, a delusion, as the film progresses.

The second reason is a consequence of the first. Once the narrator has gained the audience's confidence, she can manipulate their response to the film. Thus, the first scene in *Another Woman* shows an apparently omniscient secure narrator who controls the story she tells and who directs the viewer's perceptions and emotions. Her controlling power as a narrator is put at a level with the apparent control she has of her own life as a character. The illusion of unmediated reality is broken. Marion is the framing narrator (as we have seen, her voice is simultaneous with the film's opening shots), and for a long while what the viewer receives and accepts is her mediated story. In short, the story's significance will only be clear at the end of the film, its correct interpretation will only be possible when the viewer has patiently gathered all the important information that has been cleverly hidden from her/him till the final moment. Meanwhile the viewer is forced to go through the same experiences and to feel the same emotions as the experiencing-I, Marion as a character, undergoes in her unconscious mediated search for authenticity and truth. The simultaneous anagnorisis of both character and viewer allows for the process of narration itself to become a textual element, a source of suspense and emotion. No doubt, the final function of this strategy is ironic because, as I have already said, Marion's initial self-assurance both as a narrator and as a character is progressively eroded and proved only a mask behind which Marion's true self is hidden.

Another Woman is a rich, complex narrative and the function of its narrator is not exclusively that of providing external information. Yet, before

engaging in the analysis of the story proper and of the main strategies used in its telling, a brief summary of its fabula (see Bal 1985: 6-9) and its structure seems to be necessary in any narratological approach. *Another Woman*'s fabula is fairly simple. Marion Post, a successful philosopher, has taken a leave of absence from her job in order to write a book. Searching for quiet and silence, she sublets a flat downtown as an office. Instead of the expected calm, she finds that due to some acoustic problem she has direct access to the private conversations of a psychiatrist and his patients. Although at the beginning she refuses to pay any attention to them, she accidentally overhears a woman's voice. The intensity of her anguish overpowers Marion and makes her feel sympathetic towards the woman. Her initial curiosity progressively turns into an obsession: she spies on her, she follows her down the street, she even invites her to lunch. But her desire to know about the other woman's problems leads her to become aware of her own personal problems. After a series of encounters with an old friend, her father and her brother and by listening to the anguished commentaries of the other woman, she realizes that her egotistic drives have made her unable to maintain any true relationship with people, not even with those she loves the most, not even with herself. Her life embodies all the dreads and deceptions that the other woman fears so much. Her whole world tumbles down, she even has to go through a divorce. It is then that she recognizes her past mistakes and decides to adopt a more positive attitude to life. The other woman unconsciously engages her in the search for her true self and for the real values of life.

Another Woman is a psychological melodrama. There is very little action. The most important things always happen inside the characters' minds. In fact almost all the elements that make the narrative progress are either shared feelings provoked by common experiences between characters (for instance, Hope's and Marion's melancholic remembrance of a lost true love), or by shocking revelations about past events and unconsciously hurt feelings (Claire's withdrawal from Marion because of David; Paul's decision not to bother Marion any more). The film's symbolism benefits from this fact. Almost all the action takes place indoors. The locations may change — Ken and Marion's house, Marion's flat, her parents' house in the country, a theatre, a pub, a shop, an office, even a restaurant— but they are invariably enclosed spaces, interiors.

Only a few scenes are shot outdoors but they are most of the times mere transitional scenes (Marion and Laura in a car going to visit Marion's father; Marion going to see her brother). Nevertheless, four examples of outdoor

scenes are worth commenting upon for their narrative value. The first occurs very soon in the film. Marion has agreed to meet her sister-in-law but, as she does not show up in time, the protagonist decides to leave. Lynn appears just as Marion reaches the street. The encounter, although brief, takes place outdoors. Lynn tells Marion that she and Paul are going to get a divorce and she asks her for some money. Their conversation uncovers Paul's actual feelings for Marion:

> LYNN: You're deluding yourself. Of course, in a way he idolizes you. He also hates you.
> MARION: Sorry I don't accept that.
> LYNN: You're such a perceptive woman. How come you don't understand his feelings?
> MARION: Look. I'm late and … and, to tell you the truth, I just make it a practice of never getting into this kind of conversations. You know, they're fruitless and people just say things they're sorry for later. Why don't you just tell me how much you need and I'll discuss it with Ken. OK?

This is the first time Marion is asked to get involved, to do away with the amount of self-deceptions that are suffocating her true self.

The next two scenes are interrelated and they develop the symbolism still further. The first one is the scene in which Marion suddenly recognizes Hope, the woman whose voice she has been listening to and, moved by her curiosity, decides to follow her. Paradoxically, she does not learn anything new about Hope but, quite by chance, she meets her old friend, Claire, and her husband. This encounter provokes the second "unpleasant" revelation, another reversal of her golden memories of youth, and her second refusal to face the truth. The second one is the scene in which Marion meets Hope in a shop, while she is searching for an anniversary present for her husband, and invites her to lunch. For the first time, the film shows Marion cheerily walking the street accompanied by someone else. Again the restaurant Hope chooses is the place where Marion discovers that her husband is having an affair with their mutual friend, Lydia.

The final outdoor scene I will be commenting upon is, in my opinion, the most beautiful and touching of all because, in spite of its nostalgic tone, it opens a door to hope. I am referring of course to the last-but-one scene of the film. Marion has resumed her work. Free from any distraction she makes a pause and starts reading about Hlenka, one of the characters in Larry Lewis's (Gene Hackman) novel, which is rumoured to be based on her. The

images on the screen show Larry and Marion walking around on Central Park, taking refuge from the sudden rain and kissing. Meanwhile she reads: "Her kiss was full of desire and I knew I couldn't share that feeling with anyone else. And then a wall went up and just as quickly I was screened out. But it was too late because I now knew that she was capable of intense passion if she would one day just allow herself to feel."

The four outdoor scenes just described constitute in themselves four moments of reversal and recognition of a failure or a lack in Marion's apparently successful life. To such an extent, these four scenes ironically contradict Marion's self-assurance and personal fulfilment overtly stated in the opening scene of the film, and implicitly maintained by the narrative so far. Indeed all traditional human values such as familiar relationships, friendship, love and even self-identity are progressively questioned in Marion's life through these scenes. Thus, far from reassuring Marion's belief in her closeness to her brother, Lynn denounces Marion's self-delusion and misunderstanding of her brother and Paul's resulting feelings of hatred towards his sister; her friend Claire resentfully announces her voluntary withdrawal from Marion in order to free herself from her egotistic drives; Marion's relationship to her husband proves superficial, unstable, and inevitably condemned to failure; finally, she consciously hides her true feelings towards Larry consequently banning her own capacity for emotion and passion. Marion's recognition of failure is progressive, like the viewer's. It ranges from a merely bothering statement (Lynn's) to an unavoidable fact. (Ken's deceit). Yet, there is hope in Larry's final sentence in the last scene mentioned above: "I now knew that she was capable of intense passion if she would one day just allow herself to feel." Thus, only by losing her stability will Marion be able to rediscover herself and become "another woman" as the title of the film foreshadows.

Apart from the symbolic potential provided by the consciously chosen location of the events, one of the most successful strategies used by the narrative as a means to manipulate the viewer's perceptions and understanding of the film is the particular selection and temporal organization of the events themselves. The film primarily consists of a present-day recounting of a set of events that the narrator experienced in a relatively short period of her recent past. One of the functions of the narrator in *Another Woman* consists in aiding the viewer not to lose hold of a complex chronology. Marion's narration, with its past stance, has the role of establishing the necessary points of reference for the narrative. It usually provides expositional and temporal information and it also sets the pace of

the narrative. Thus, while she gives a detailed account of the events that took place during the first five days of the story, her narration does not specify how many more days go by till the end of the film. Her narrative puts a special emphasis on the events that bring about Marion's quest for authenticity. Very precise temporal expressions are used: "that first morning," "all day," "by late afternoon" or "the following morning." However, the decisions she takes after her cathartic experience are frequently condensed in sentences such as "the following days" or "once on a sunny morning."

Those expository chronological sections are complemented by six flashbacks (not in chronological order). Five of them are external, that is, they are prior to the first event represented in the story. Such external flashbacks invariably correspond to Marion's memories although they are motivated by several characters' recollections. For instance, the first flashback is motivated by Hope's confessions to her psychiatrist. She is questioning herself about real love and about whether she has made the right choice: "I've told you there was someone else once. The last time I saw him was several years ago, before I was married, at a party." This recollection makes Marion think of a similar episode in her own life. Her memories are shown onscreen as a flashback while the story is frozen for a while. The "other woman" also acts as a narrator in some parts of the film. She could be said to possess the typical qualities of an embedded or intradiegetic narrator (Genette 1980: 228). Her voice is off-screen and she talks to a concrete person, her psychiatrist. Nevertheless, her words have a wider audience because they are heard not only by Marion but also by the viewers of the film. She is not aware of her role as narrator but she leads Marion both physically and psychologically in her way to self-discovery.

The second flashback is motivated by the old photographs Marion sees at her father's house. This time Marion narrates off-screen and gives an extremely romanticized account of her family life and her youth:

> And here I am older. I could go up to the spare room and paint for hours. The time would just fly by when I was doing a picture. And there I am with my friend Claire. You know, she became an actress. We used to be so close but I haven't seen her in years. And there's my mother. She loved strolling round the grounds. And she loved all the beautiful things. She loved nature, music, poetry. That was her whole existence.

I have quoted part of this second flashback because such a dream-like romantic account ironically and painfully contrasts with the more down-to-earth objective revelations later made by the rest of the characters. This flashback is used as a technique to stress the commonly accepted fact that stories depend upon who tells them, and that there is no clear-cut distinction between reality and fiction.

The third and fourth flashbacks are both motivated by Marion herself. They recount two complementary aspects of the story of her first marriage. They are used as a device to add significant information prior to the story. And the last external flashback, which I have already mentioned, is motivated by Larry Lewis's written narrative. Its function is double. First, it is a kind of description of Marion's true self. Secondly, it is the only way of providing the film with a hopeful ending.

The single internal flashback, which tells about those events that occur within the temporal bounds of the story proper, is narrated by Hope, the "other" woman. Her narrative takes us back to the moment when Marion discovers that her husband and her friend Lydia are having a love affair. This information is delayed on purpose in order to provoke a stronger response from the viewer.

Like the previously analysed outdoor scenes, these flashbacks further contribute to establishing the ideology of this film, namely that "real" personal fulfilment lies with the recognition and the acceptance of one's "identity," in this case, a woman's identity, which the film locates at the side of emotion, lack of egotism, comradeship to other women, and motherhood. A series of attitudes that Marion is shown flashback after flashback to have purposefully rejected in her life in favour of personal, social and professional fulfilment.

So far I have referred to the use of incomplete clues, the various functions of narration and the breaking of the chronological order of events as means of generating ambiguity and irony. Now, before putting an end to this essay, I would like to analyse the relationship between fiction and reality and the way in which this relationship is constantly questioned in the film as the last resource to create irony and ambiguity.

One way of underlining that there is no clear-cut distinction between what is real and what is fictional in this film was already pointed out when I referred to the function of external flashbacks. This metafictional aspect of the film is still more clearly symbolized by the fact that, all through the movie, Marion's life is fictionalized not only by herself but also by others in one way or another. First, we are offered Marion's own excessively

romanticized account of her youth and her family, which, as the film develops, proves to be quite far from the truth. Then, three very important passages of her life are literally represented in her dreams as if they were three different scenes from a theatre play. Claire and Marion are the actresses; Ken, Larry and Sam are the actors; Claire's husband is the director; and Hope, the "other" woman, is the audience. We find all the necessary elements to consider it a play within a dream within a film and therefore there is no doubt about its artificiality, about its metadiegetic quality as it is three times removed from reality. Ironically, it is in extreme artificiality that truth about Marion is to be found. This is a common trait of these overtly acknowledged fictional scenes which engulf three different truths that Marion keeps on denying in her deceitful but apparently more "real" life: the fact that her present marriage is coming apart, the fact that she feels she made the wrong choice and resents having lost the man she loved passionately, and the fact that her first husband, Sam, did not die accidentally but rather committed suicide. Finally, Marion's life is also turned into a fiction when Larry Lewis, a character in the film, transforms Marion into Hlenka, the central character in his novel. Again we find a literary narrative within a cinematic narrative and again it is the novel that is paradoxically taken as the revelation of Marion's true self, as the recognition of the other woman within, whose existence she has been systematically denying and slowly suffocating. Thus the film transcends its own fictional boundaries. It constitutes a multiple game of reflections. Woody Allen had already used this strategy in some of his films, as Graham McCann (1991: 40) has pointed out,

> As with *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Radio Days*'s movie theatre offers a sanctuary from reality, momentary yet memorable, the ever changing images seeming somehow to move to a logic more reliable than the logic of everyday life.

In *Another Woman* this multiple game of reflections, this technique of infinite regress is used in like manner to show that the fictionalization or textualization of reality can be used as a means of coming to terms with our own past and that, when trusted, it can be a good guide to the rediscovery of a hidden reality.

The opening shots of *Another Woman* show Marion looking at herself in a mirror. Being the symbol of self-consciousness *par excellence*, this mirror diegetically foregrounds the complex self-reflective nature of the film.

Simultaneously, Marion's diegetic act of facing her own image in the mirror, while her extradiegetic voice affirms that she is not afraid of uncovering some dark side of her character, contribute to presenting the viewer with an apparently self-assured accomplished woman. Yet Marion's initial self-reliance as a character soon contrasts with the ambiguity generated by the inconsistent and incomplete pieces of information that Marion, as narrator, scatters all through the film, as well as by her breaking of conventional chronology, and by her capacity to transgress the boundaries between fiction and reality. Her self-assurance is finally destroyed when the viewer finds out that indeed Marion has a dark side to un-cover. Ironically, hers is a dark side not because of its negative, potentially dangerous, features but rather because, despite its being her true self, it has unconsciously been suffocated and obscured for the sake of intellectual and social achievement. It becomes, then, noteworthy that the mechanism that firstly sets out the process of un-covering developed in this film is precisely the narration of similar fears and mistakes by "another woman" to her psychiatrist. Significantly, the other woman's name is Hope. Indeed, the final message of this film seems to be hopeful for, even if it is true that Marion loses her stability, it is no less true that, after her cathartic experience, she becomes "another woman," an independent, creative, emotive, new woman who, consequently seems to have gained her true self, and who for the first time in a long while feels at peace with herself. a

NOTES

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the Consejo Asesor de Investigación de la Diputación General de Aragón.

2. For a recent discussion of this issue, see García Mainar on focalisation (1993: 153-67).

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