IRONY AND AMBIGUITY IN THE NARRATOR OF *A LETTER TO THREE WIVES*

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Current narratological theory distinguishes between external and character-bound narrators. The external narrator is not a character in the fabula, whereas the character-bound narrator narrates from inside it.[1] In both cases, this agent, defined as the one that utters the linguistic signs, is seen by some narratologists as the producer of narration, the activity that, in the case of a novel, transforms the story into a narrative text. Other agents have been recognized as subjects of the narrative text above and below the narrator, like the implied author, the enunciator, the focalizor or the characters themselves, but the narrator seems to keep a prominent part in any narratological scheme. In the novel, the reason for this prominence is clear as any linguistic utterance presupposes an agent that utters it. Thus, unlike the implied author or the focalizor, for example, the narrator is an explicit agent who never disappears from the text.[2]

In film the situation is rather different. There are agents who utter linguistic signs, but narration consists of much more than what is expressed in words. A similar agent to the narrator in a novel exists in some films, like the character who starts narrating events of the past and whose voice is eventually replaced by a visual flashback, the traditionally called voice-over narrator, or the intertitles of silent films and some sound films. These narrators, however, do not appear in all films and, when they do, their activity is limited to relatively short sections.

A film is a narrative, like a novel, and therefore the activity of narration is taking place, but, as Edward Branigan says, «we cannot ask for a biological person; instead we must seek a symbolic activity —the activity of narration (1984: 40). To say that the narrator is the agent that carries out this activity is, in David Bordwell's words, «indulging in an anthropomorphic fiction» because «in watching films, we are seldom aware of being told something by an entity resembling a human being» (1985: 62). Unfortunately both authors fall immediately after to the temptation of identifying this symbolic activity with the narrator, which Bordwell defines as «a construct of the spectator» and «a product of specific organizational principles, historical factors, and viewers' mental sets» (1985: 62). We prefer to restrict the use of the term «narrator» to the agent that, in some films, actively narrates *in linguistic signs*. Film narration involves other textual elements, which we could roughly group in four codes: mise en scene, cinematography, editing and non-linguistic sounds, or, from a more narrative standpoint, at least two other modes of narration: representation, focalization. None of these can, in any way, be attributed to the narrator.

The problem, in the end, is not just one of terminology, but of a narrative theory which is based primarily on novels. The terms narration and narrative seem to define accurately the activity and the final result of any rendering of a story, regardless of the medium. However, they are directly related to the linguistic signs which textualise stories in a novel. Their application to the same concepts in other media is smooth enough. It seems obvious that most films are narratives which «tell» a story through an activity of narration, like novels. The crucial word here is *tell*, because, while it describes precisely what happens in a novel, it only works metaphorically in a film (or, for that matter, in a play). Stories are not exacly *told* in these narratives: they are presented, dramatized, visualized, etc., but not told. The consequence is that the term *narration*, which defines something concrete in a novel, with an agent that performs it, the *narrator*, refers only to an abstract activity in film and one without a clearly identifiable agent. Therefore, only those agents that explicitly and recognizably narrate can be called *narrators*, while the term *narration* can still be kept to refer to the overall activity of textualization of a story, although it is an activity carried out in film in a more complex and composite way than in novels.

Consequently, the narrator or narrators in a film are those agents that tell stories in linguistic signs. All characters, as long as they speak, are potential and actual narrators, but our analysis must concentrate only on those agents who contribute actively, as narrators, to the presentation of the fabula.

Narrators can be in film, like in other narratives, external or character-bound. We have already mentioned the most frequent examples of both

categories in classical films. In other cases, we may have more complex narrators, whose status changes throughout the film. A striking example is the external narrator in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). This voice-over narrator has no remarkable characteristics as such, apart from the voice, which the spectator clearly recognizes as that of the film's director, until a point in which one of the characters seems to hear his voice from inside the fabula and replies to it. This frame breaking, a usual enough narrative strategy in modern narrative texts, casts a momentary doubt over the apparent omniscience of the narrator, but is not pursued in the rest of the film. However, at the end, once the fabula has finished, the same voice-over narrator introduces to us the most important members of the cast and crew in the making of the film. Finally, over a shot of a microphone, we hear: «I wrote the film and directed it. My name is Orson Welles.» This is the first time the narrator uses the first-person pronoun. The external narrator has become a fictional character whose name (and voice) is that of the film director.

The crucial fact here, from a narrative standpoint, is that the status of the narrator has changed, together with the structure of the text. What we had all along was not an external narrator, as we thought, but a second-level character narrator, telling a story from within another story. In Genette's terms this narrator would not be heterodiegetic but homodiegetic and extradiegetic with respect to the second-level fabula. Framing this level, and including the narrator as an agent belonging to it (together with other agents, like actors and crew members) there is another level.

The final function of this strategy is ironic: the limits between reality and fiction are not clear, as what we understand by reality can be fictionalized at any point. Omniscience, as traditionally represented by the powerful external narrator, is also a fraud.[3] From the moment the external narrator becomes a character in another fabula, the illusion of omniscience is disclosed as just another narrative device.

The Magnificent Ambersons is a classic example of the modern mistrust in the transparency of narration, a basic characteristic of the classical text. There are, of course, other films in the history of cinema in which this mistrust is also felt and becomes a part of the overall sense of the narrative. We propose to analyse here the role of another narrator whose ambiguous position as such is sustained throughout the film. We are referring to Addie Ross in Mankiewicz's *A Letter to Three Wives* (1948).

Structurally, this film consists of a present time, which covers the first and last sections of the story, plus short intervals between the flashbacks, and three flashbacks (not in chronological order) which correspond to the memories

of the three main characters: Deborah, Rita and Laura Mae. If we were to analyse the three flashbacks without the present-day sections, the film would be, unlike *The Magnificent Ambersons*, a striking example of the classical mode of narration, with a camera which, with very few exceptions, tends to self-effacing, and a story which seems to be narrating itself. This initial adherence to the classical code makes, as we shall see, its subversion of it the more powerful.

The strategy of a story told in successive flashbacks ascribed to different characters appears in at least another two (later) films by Mankiewicz: *All about Eve* (1950) and *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). There is, however, a very important difference between *A Letter* and these two films. In the latter, we get primarily the story of one character —Eve Harrington, María del Monte— told by those around them (or, occasionally, themselves) in flashbacks. As a result, we finally get an accurate portrayal of the heroine, through the grouping together of contrastive versions, or, at least, her story told from different perspectives. In *A Letter*, the story does not revolve around one single character, but around the three of them, each flashback expressing the story of their personal relationships with other people in the town, more specifically with their husbands and, indirectly, with Addie Ross.

There is one more difference. In *All about Eve* and *The Barefoot Contessa* there is one present-time event (an award-giving ceremony and a funeral) from which the different characters present start remembering. On each occasion, the flashback starts with voice-over narration by the character who is remembering and then, through cuts or dissolves, we are visually transferred to the point in the past that the memory refers to.

In *A Letter*, however, the three returns to the past (Debbie's, Rita's, Laura Mae's) start with the characters thinking in the present about a time in the past which concerns some crisis or climactic moment in their relationship with their husbands: Debbie's arrival in the town (which is given no name, although it plays an important part in the fabula), Rita's dinner party for her employers and Laura Mae's problematic seduction of Porter. There are dissolves as a strategy of transition from present to past, but these dissolves are not accompanied by the voice-over commentary of the character who is remembering. In the first two flashbacks, we get the offscreen voices of two other characters: the voice of the girl who is reading the fairy tale in Debbie's, and Debbie's voice in Rita's. In Laura Mae's, these voices from the present are replaced by the tinkle of a leaking sink, which fuses visually with a similar one in the past (there is an almost perfect graphic match and an almost imperceptible dissolve, which make it difficult to pinpoint the exact moment at which, diegetically, the story has changed from present to past).

These voices and noise (the first two offscreen, the third one onscreen) have the clear function of precipitating the memory, in the same way as Proust's madeleine and tea. Immediately before the flashback, there is also, on each occasion, a dialogue —between Deborah and Laura Mae in the first case, between Rita and Debbie in the second, and between Laura Mae and Rita in the third— which also plays an important part as the cause of each flashback.

There is more in two of these flashbacks. In Deborah and Laura Mae's transitions (first and third), we also get the voice over of the narrator, Addie Ross. In the first one, she repeats , «Is it Brad? is it Brad? is it Brad?» (referring to the question that torments Debbie's mind, namely, whether her husband is the one that has gone away with Addie). In the last one, she says: «Maybe you haven't got everything you wanted after all.» Gradually, her voice acquires a metallic quality and gets fused into the sound of the water hitting the bottom of the bucket. In both cases, this voice over is external, that is, it is not heard (or imagined, or remembered) or indeed uttered by the characters who are remembering, and who are the subjects of the flashbacks. The importance of these remarks of Addie Ross's in the origin of such large sections of the film, as well as the general status of the narrator, make us wonder to what extent Debbie and Laura Mae (and indeed Rita, although Addie's voice cannot be heard in her flashback) are the only agents, or even the main ones, in the production of their memories. In general, it is the role played by this voice-over narrator that marks the originality of the film. It is also through this device that *A Letter* separates itself most blatantly from classical cinema.

Addie's voice-over commentary does not appear at all during the flashbacks. Her presence as narrator is limited to the beginning and end of the film (especially the beginning) and, as we have seen, very briefly, to two of the transitions. The ambiguity with which this agent is invested starts in the opening scene. At first it seems a normal enough opening commentary in which the narrator gives us a description of the place where she lives. It is clear that she is a character-narrator, as she places herself, by means of the possessives (*my* town, etc.) in the space of the fabula. Strictly narrative commentary seems to start when she concentrates on the first couple: Brad and Debbie. By the time her voice over stops we still do not know who the narrator exactly is, or whether she is a main character or a «witness» narrator, who observes the events of the fabula from the inside but does not play any relevant part in the action. Her ironic tone, held throughout the intervention, does point at some important relationship with Brad and Debbie when she refers to them as «my very, very dear friends.» Nothing conclusive, however, stems from this sustained irony. We do know that the images that accompany her voice and the scene that

follows at Debbie's house do not constitute a flashback with respect to the time of narration. Unlike many films which start with voice-over character-bound narration, the time of narration is here the present. That is, narration and what is narrated occur simultaneously. This, which will be confirmed by subsequent interventions, gives a high degree of omniscience to a narrator: in spite of being part of the fabula, she is capable of seeing what is happening in different parts of the town.

It is usual for a classical film to adopt an omniscience in the visual presentation of the fabula which contradicts the necessarily restricted scope of the character narrator with whose commentary they start. *Rebecca* (1940), for example, starts with a character narrator who refers to a dream she had the previous night (simultaneously we can see images from the dream) and then, very briefly, to the time in the past when the fabula starts. The rest of the film is devoted to this flashback and, although the character's focalization predominates over all the other character's, several events are shown at which she was not present or in which we have more information than her. What has happened here is that when the character's narration stops her story is taken up by an external focalizor that, while generally following her progress through the fabula, enjoys an omniscience which she cannot have. In fact, the viewer soon forgets that s/he is watching a flashback and takes the narrator's intervention simply as a way of introducing us to the fabula.

Even in films in which the character narrator reappears several times throughout the film, and our understanding of the text is heavily influenced by his/her commentary, like *Double Indemnity* (1944) or *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the dissociation between character narrator and external focalizor is still present, even though the more voice-over narration expresses the subjectivity of a character, the more focalization corresponds to her/him. The fact remains that, apart from the famous exceptions of *The Lady in the Lake* (1946) and the first part of *Dark Passage* (1944), we always see more than any of the characters, This is a fact of the classical code which we accept from our viewing competence and do not interpret as inconsistent.

The situation in *A Letter* is different because the tension does not exist between narrator and focalizor, or between voice-over and image, but within the narrator. Addie Ross shows features of an external and a character-bound narrator. Her position is ambiguous in the sense that the position of the narrator in *The Magnificent Ambersons* is ambiguous. But although she is closer to this narrator than to any of the other ones mentioned above, the difference is also clear: whereas the narrator in *Ambersons* is initially external and then becomes internalized, Addie seems to be both things at the same time.

As the film develops, more specifically, when the three friends receive the letter from Addie, we realize that there was more to the opening scene than we thought. The images of the railway station that we interpreted as descriptive contained some relevant narrative information which we were then not prepared to process: if we bear in mind that the time of narration is the present, the images that open the film are also present. Although they are used to describe the town, they are showing the town on the particular Saturday morning when the story (not the fabula) starts. More specifically, the train leaving is probably the one in which Addie leaves the town for good, apparently with one of the husbands of the other three. The subtlety of this shot illustrates another characteristic of this character narrator: to her ambiguity as a narrator we have to add her elusiveness as a character. If we accept the interpretation given here of the first shot, this is the closest we get to Addie's physical presence in the film's present time. Although we hear her commentary, we never actually get to see Addie.

Throughout the film her presence as a character is constantly felt. In the present-time scenes, the other characters talk about her even before they receive her letter. The letter, which she as a narrator reads to us as the three women (and the spectators) are reading it, places her, as a character, at the centre of the events in the rest of the fabula. The flashbacks include her relationship with each of the three husbands from their wives' viewpoint, since the three of them are more or less openly afraid that it is their husband Addie has left with. Debbie finds out, as soon as she arrives in the town (in the past), that everybody thought that Brad and Addie would have got married one day. Rita realizes she has forgotten George's birthday when he receives a rare record from Addie (which will later on be broken by Rita's uncultured employer). Porter has a portrait of Addie in his house when Laura Mae is trying to get him to marry her, and uses Addie as an example of the class that Laura Mae has not got. The three wives think that there are enough reasons for their husbands to have been the chosen ones.

In spite of her centrality in the fabula Addie never actually appears onscreen. The closest we come to seeing her, apart from the scene mentioned above, is in the two pictures that Brad and Porter have in their houses (but the pictures are both times framed from the back), and on another two occasions: in Debbie's flashback, at the party, Addie is talking to Brad in the garden, but, as Debbie looks, she is covered by a shrub (like in the train scene, she is onscreen but hidden from our view). In Laura Mae's section she is in the restaurant where Porter takes his wife on their first date. At one point, Porter looks offscreen but the expected eyeline match does not occur. Shot B, that of the object of the gaze, is missing. The high degree of artificiality in these two

unusual eyeline matches points to the fact that the film is curiously avoiding the physical presence or the character (much in the same way as male characters are avoided in *The Women*, 1939) and playing with her presence / absence. By the time Laura Mae looks at the photograph of Addie in Porter's house (the last of the scenes referred to in the manipulated order of the story), we already have the strong feeling that we will never get to see her or her picture.

One thematic implication of this textual strategy is that, although her presence and personality are constantly felt, her limited reality for the spectator makes her more a symbol than the actual origin of the three wives' predicaments. The evils of this small-town society, as illustrated in the lives of the three women, are within the society itself and only need the external agent to bring them into the open. Addie has more than one feature in common, at fabula level if not textually, with Horner in *The Country Wife*.

At the same time, however, the film is artificially separating the narrator (whose presence becomes intrusive at times) from the character (whose absence is ensured by textual tricks). To the tension existing within the part of the narrator we can now add the one between narrator and character, although both correspond to the same figure.

The second outstanding characteristic of this narrator is, as has been mentioned before, her irony. At the beginning, as Debbie and Rita are driving along, shortly before they find out about her secret, Addie introduces herself to the spectator for the first time. She adds: «Addie Ross, the person they always end up talking about.» Her words are perfectly timed. The next words are Debbie's: «I wonder whether she knows how much we do talk about her.» We may be expecting Rita's reply but, instead, we get a reply from Addie: «I know, but it doesn't matter; what matters is what *I* know and you don't... yet.» This character-narrator has the unusual power to hear what the other characters say, even though she is not present. The point is, of course, that she *is* present, not in flesh and blood but as a narrative device. She has all the characteristics of an external narrator but she belongs to the fabula. She can see or hear without being heard or seen. When she left on the train, in the first shot of the film, she seems to have left not so much for another town as for another narrative level. Her invisibility is so remarkable that even when, in the past, the other characters could see her, the spectators could not. More than with the narrators of any other film, her strongest connections are with the Shakespearean fairies Puck and Ariel, who, like the director of a performance on the stage, play at will with their puppet-like actors. Rita, Debbie and Laura Mae seem at times little more than puppets in her hands. In this scene, she teases them, without them being at all aware, into saying what she wants them to say.

Her function in the transitions may appear more clearly now. With her intrusions, she provokes the memories of the three women, and whether she or they are the origin of the successive visualizations remains unclear. Her intervention in both Debbie and Laura Mae's flashbacks supports this approach clearly. In the last one, the immediate cause of the memory is the noise produced by the leaking sink. But, as Addie's voice becomes gradually integrated into the sound pattern of the tinkle, it becomes difficult to differentiate between the two. The film has mixed both sounds into one. The same happens, in a slightly different form, in the first flashback. Addie's voice whispering «Is it Brad?» without Debbie being aware of it because they are at different fictional levels becomes mixed with the obsessive sound of an engine which may be the exaggerated but realistic sound of the boat moving in the water, or the imagined one of a train leaving, in Debbie's mind.

In other words, Addie the «spirit» narrator has become visible by turning into the object that originates the flashback. Her voice does not appear in the second transition but, instead, we see the smoke from a cigarette which the camera follows and frames in the centre immediately before the dissolve. For all we know, this may be Addie rendered visible again.

We said before that the internal narrator of a film is usually replaced by an external focalizor when the image takes over the narration in a retroversion. Therefore it is perfectly acceptable by the viewer that the character who originates the flashback may not be present at some point of the visualized section of the past. It is significant, however, that this happens in the last two retroversions of the film. In Rita's, we go back to the kitchen of her house where only Sadie, her maid and Laura Mae's mother's friend, is present. Shortly after, Rita comes in. In Laura Mae's, the return is also to her kitchen, where her mother and Sadie are playing cards. Laura Mae does not come onscreen until a few minutes after.

What we are suggesting is that, at least in these two cases, the external focalizor that replaces the character's memories in the past sections has, from the beginning, more connections with Addie than with the two women whose memories they are meant to represent. Addie has provoked the returns to the past at the level of the fabula by sending the letter and setting them to think. But, from the point of view of narration, she is also responsible for the production of the retroversions of the other three. She has made them remember, as a character and as a narrator, even though they are unaware of the latter.

The film finishes as Debbie leaves the table where all her friends are sitting and Porter and Laura Mae stand up and start dancing. An unexpected movement of the camera frames one of the glasses on the table which tumbles

and shatters. Addie's voice over says musically: «Hei-ho, goodnight everybody.» This final trick, of which we do not know whether the other characters become aware or not, because they have been left offscreen, emphasises her lingering presence in their lives after she has gone, as a reminder of their imperfections and the selfishness in their relationships. For the spectator, this is the final sign of the inexplicability of her status: a narrator who has the impunity to break a glass, an object of the fabula, cannot be accounted for in a fiction in which we expect the different narrative levels to be neatly separated. By this time, though, we are sufficiently aware of her very special powers as a composite figure of external and character-bound narrator, and we could not expect anything less from her.

Irony, ambiguity, elusiveness, fairy-tale impunity are then the characteristics of this unusual figure, Addie Ross. We have tried to describe her role in the film and to analyse it from a narrative standpoint. We have suggested the connections and also the narrative inconsistencies that appear between fabula, story and text throughout her performance. However, some questions remain unanswered. What does it all mean? How does her unique status contribute to our understanding of the film? We do not think that the ambiguity of her role allows us to give a definite answer to these questions. Ambiguity remains a key word. However, the points that our analysis has elicited do encourage us to try and probe a little further into the film, by suggesting one further connection between the development of the fabula and the narrative device.

Among the principles of narration which govern a narrative film, David Bordwell (1985) includes two kinds of strategies: *self-consciousness* and *communicativeness*.[4] He defines self-consciousness as the extent to which the narration displays recognition that it is addressing an audience (1985: 58). We could also define it as the extent to which the film is aware of itself as a narrative construct. A significant degree of self-consciousness has often been recognized as a characteristic of the modern film. In this sense, it is the opposite of classical *transparency*. In *A Letter*, it is the narrator that separates the text from the classical code. A classical film is a closed system in which everything ends up falling neatly into place. Indeed, much of the pleasure that we get from these films consists in witnessing the process by which all loose ends gradually disappear. Addie Ross does not fall neatly into any category. She is not completely a character nor an external narrator. To say she acts like the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may shed some light into her relationship with the other characters, but it does not solve the inconsistency inherent to her narrative position. Puck and the other fairies *are* characters, which just happen

to have the power to be invisible and to influence the behaviour of mortals, but only metaphorically can they be associated with agents external to the fabula.

Addie is a mechanism of the narration to expose a narrative convention. She shows, in her inconsistency and her impunity at blurring limits between levels, the limitations and arbitrariness of the role of the traditional narrator. She is not a complete character or a consistent narrator because there is no reason why she should be. She can certainly be described as a joke on the spectator because she is a joke on the expectations created on us by the classical code. We said before that if it were not for this element, the film would be a fair example of a classical text. She spoils our fun by destroying our «willing suspension of disbelief» and calling our attention to the absurdity of her position. To this extent, *A Letter* is a self-conscious film and more cruelly so because it has all the ingredients to become self-effaced but it blatantly wastes them.

Communicativeness refers, according to Bordwell, to the willingness of the narration to communicate all the information available to it to the spectator (1985: 59). *A Letter* is communicative in most respects but it remains mysterious about the big question of the fabula: which one of the three husbands did Addie run away with? This is information that is obviously available to the narration but which is consciously concealed from us. Addie makes all sorts of uncalled for comments and manipulates us and the other characters at will. She knows who the unfaithful husband is and yet she ironically keeps it a secret from us.

The secret is apparently disclosed at the end of the film. Debbie comes back home and Brad is not there. She, the other two women and the audience, believe that Brad is our man. Just before the glass is shattered, however, Porter confesses that he was the one who left with Addie and later changed his mind. The explanation is credible enough as Brad had said at the beginning that he might not finish his business in another town in time to return in the evening. On the other hand, Porter's final decision accounts for the renewed happiness in his relationship with Laura Mae.

There is no clear reason why we should not believe his words. Yet, there is something contradictory in his attitude and in the understanding that the other characters seem to share with him. We feel that he may be trying to make Debbie happy for one more night before she discovers the truth in the morning. The phrasing of the dialogues is careful enough so as not to break the ambiguity. When Porter says that he wants to spare Debbie the suffering of one night, he might mean that she will not suffer again after the night or that she will. Rita says: «She would have known in the morning, anyway.» But we still do not know for sure what it is she will find out. In the end, the fabula remains

open and it is left to us to interpret the clues and decide one way or the other. Or, since the narration chooses not to say, we may dismiss the solution of the problem as irrelevant. The point would be not whose husband it was but that Addie had threatened (in more than one way) the precarious relationship that the three women had with their husbands and has, at the same time, helped them in their learning process, bringing about a final reconciliation.

If we take the role of the narrator, at the level of the text, and the secret, at the level of the fabula, to be the two most important driving forces of the narration, we must also agree that both of them remain inconclusive in the end. The film's lack of communicativeness runs parallel to its self-consciousness. The inexplicable narrative mechanism and the unexplained fabula resolution work together to provide a deeper insight into the world of the film. The joke that the narration plays on us, through the role of the narrator, is not just a joke. It is, in the end, a metaphor of the outcome of the fabula. Without leaving the comic world in which the film is firmly rooted, a world of self-preservation of the human species through love, tolerance and adaptability, the easy solution is denied us because the real world does not offer easy solutions, just like, in the film's reflexive approach to fiction and narration, the neatly ordered, closed text is not possible any more.

NOTES

1. We use here Mieke Bal's terminology and concepts (1985). Genette (1972) refers to the same concepts with the terms heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrator, introducing also the autodiegetic narrator, who is a homodiegetic narrator that happens to be, at the same time, the protagonist of the fabula. These are more accurate divisions than the traditional ones between first-person and third-person narrator, since a narrator always narrates in first person.

2. It is true that, starting from Emile Benveniste (1966, 1974), another critical trend tends to approach the narrator, or the subjects of a narrative in general, as the products rather than the producers of narration. See in this respect Jesús González Requena (1987).

3. This same idea, which pervades the whole of Orson Welles's filmic career, is the central issue fo his last film, *F for Fake* (1972).

4. Bordwell borrows here from Meir Sternberg's categories (1978). There is one more category, *knowledge*, which Bordwell takes from Sternberg.

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