

Looking at *Husbands and Wives*, a film by Woody Allen.

Nadia FUCHS
Université d'Aix-Marseille III

In a recent issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine we were told that a television channel was planning to make a mini-series about Mia Farrow's lovers. When asked what he thought about this, Woody Allen answered that "it would take much more than a mini-series."

A great number of spectators and critics must have thought the same thing when Allen's film *Husbands and Wives* came out in 1992, namely that they were going to see a feature film about Woody and Mia's love scandal which had just broken out in the media. The film was actually released earlier than expected for this reason. As two of the lead characters are played by the famous couple, some critics started interpreting the whole film through this scandal. *The Woody Allen Companion*¹ states that of course at certain moments Mia Farrow's face looks all puffed up, evidently under the influence of the drugs she had to take after learning "the news".

Although this will not be our outlook on *Husbands and Wives*, there is some reason for this interpretation, first in the diegesis which depicts marriage and love relationships in the New York middle-class. Jack and Sally, who have been married for fifteen years, break up dramatically but not definitively. Jack has an affair with his aerobics trainer, and Sally with Michael, an editor in the arts magazine where Judy works. Judy and Gabe (played by Mia and Woody) are their best friends and have been married for ten years. Before divorcing, Judy gets interested in Michael and Gabe, a university teacher who lectures on writing, pursues or is pursued by one of his twenty-year-old students, Rain. In the end, Jack and Sally get back together again, Judy marries Michael, and Gabe leads a bachelor's life.

¹ Stephen J. Spignesi, *The Woody Allen Companion*, London: Plexus, 1992.

Spectacle et spécularité

But much more importantly, the film is a kind of documentary-study on these strange species called "husbands and wives" and as such is one step further in Allen's research on filmic narration and the way in which it constructs or rather, as we will see here, deconstructs the spectator.

The first words of the film are a reference to Albert Einstein, the choice of which is not innocent since we can see him as the symbol of modernism. The first shot is that of a man talking on television about Einstein and quoting his words: "God doesn't play dice with the universe" which puts the emphasis on the fact that everything is artifice and composition, a construct of the mind, be it that of the filmmaker or of any human being. *Husbands and Wives* illustrates perfectly the modernist idea of a narrative strategy of discontinuity, which preempts the spectacle and becomes the spectacle itself. This goes against the linear narratives of the nineteenth century realistic novels or of classical films, reorganizing the heteroclitic materials of existence, thus "confusing mere consecution of events with real consequence".²

The fact that Gabe (the husband played by Allen), who is watching this television programme, replies: "No, he [God] just plays hide and seek", can be interpreted as announcing the different masks the enunciator is going to wear in the film in order to deconstruct the narration and the spectator, deconstructing the latter by using another type of spectacle. The first and most striking element of deconstruction is the form itself which, as we shall see, is quite unexpected. We will then try and show how the filmmaker uses the effect this form has on the spectator to develop his ideas about marriage, and finally how, through reflexivity, he deconstructs the ultimate "conventional" marriage between the spectator and the filmic text.

A family video and "reality shows"

The form of *Husbands and Wives* has provoked numerous reactions from spectators because, especially at the beginning of the film, it comes as a shock. Indeed, one recognizes at the very beginning the usual titles of a Woody Allen film (at least of his latest ones): white characters on a very sober black background, and the jazz music is playing a song appropriate to the themes of the film:

What is this thing called love?
This funny thing called love?
Just look inside this mystery.
Why should it make a fool of me?

All this leads the average Allen spectator to think he/she is going to see a "normal" fiction film. But what follows takes us completely off our guard. What happens at a diegetical level may seem banal enough: Gabe reacts to the television programme

² About this particular point, cf. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Nadia FUCHS: Woody Allen

about Einstein, then switches channels where an advert is shown for taking writing lessons. He reacts negatively to this and tells his wife Judy how difficult he finds it to teach writing in his classes, although he has just had a gifted pupil who wrote a short-story called *Oral Sex and the Age of Deconstruction* (sic). They are waiting for their best friends Jack and Sally who arrive and announce that after sixteen years of marriage, they have decided to split up.

What is unusual is the filming. It is not filmed as a classical fiction film where the narration is meant to be monovalent, all traces of any narrator or enunciator being erased. On the contrary, it is shot like an amateur film, a family video (the irony of course being that Sally announces their separation, and not a happier event more customary of this type of film), or even a documentary. This filming is often described as the "Cassavetes style": the camera (even though we never see it) seems to be located on the shoulder of the cameraman who moves around freely, and the filming is jumpy, following the movements of characters very quickly and abruptly. The editing is also emphasized since there are frequent cuts in the same sequence, punctuating, for instance, the monologue of a character, the cut falling at the end of each sentence or group of sentences (this process is often used in documentary films to give a more dynamic flow to what a person is saying). The sequences are also "interrupted" before the end, or in one instance, in mid-sentence.

Moreover this form brings to mind a very specific type of documentary — this is where the first shot on a television screen takes on all its meaning — the new breed of "reality shows" currently blossoming on television, which are supposed to record realistically the every-day life of a group of people. Two examples can be mentioned here: *The Living Soap* on the BBC and *The Real Life* on the American MTV. In each case, the situation is built up as follows: five or six students rent a house together for the purpose of the film, the cameraman is present in all situations and becomes one of the persons living there, and there is a video room with a fixed camera to which each person/character comes to explain their feelings or to comment on something we have just seen happen. Hence, this filming constructs a special type of spectator — of television spectator.

The question is: why does it work, despite the fact that the whole situation is constructed and openly so? Why does the spectator assume he is seeing something living, real?

Two main reasons can be found to this (but do not exclude others). Firstly, as we have said, in *Husbands and Wives*, the spectator never actually sees the camera or the cameraman although their presence are very much emphasized. As Christian Metz puts it:

[...] la caméra, pour le spectateur, n'existe pas. [...] Elle n'existe pas comme objet, puisque c'est elle qui, en nous rendant visibles tous les objets, reste forcément dans un en-

Spectacle et spécularité

delà radical.³

and

Ce qu'on appelle "la caméra" n'est pas un objet réel profilmique, mais une construction du spectateur destinée à rendre intelligible l'espace représenté et la représentation de l'espace.⁴

So much so, that its presence-absence conveys to the spectator the adequate degree of consciousness to believe in what he/she is seeing.

Secondly, in this type of "reality show" filming, it seems that the primary cinematographical identification of the spectator is dual. Indeed, the comparison between the primary identification in psychoanalysis and the primary identification at work in cinema and especially the comparison with Lacan's "mirror stage" has been studied in depth by film theoreticians. According to this theory, the spectator in a cinema is in the same situation as a baby: he is sitting immobile in the dark, in the same way as a baby who does not yet have the full use of his arms and legs; furthermore, the screen is an equivalent of the mirror, except that the spectator obviously does not see his body on it but identifies with the source of vision, i.e. the camera, though this is not visible in the mirror either.

Hence, in *Husbands and Wives*, this function is dual since all the emphasis is on the fact that the spectator sees as if he was there and actually filming. This is reinforced by other elements, such as the sound variations, the sound being louder when the character is standing closer to the source of vision or certain objects of the setting. For example, in the first sequence, a bright red lampshade and stars on a wall recur several times and allow for the spectator to construct his position, his *locus*.⁵

As no one ever looks into the camera, the *locus* here is more particularly that of a witness, a TV show cameraman who is evidently present on the set but ignored by the characters, and who did not know beforehand what was going to happen, so that this witness has a central position but also reacts to the coming and going of people.

Another striking similarity between this film and the "reality-shows" mentioned above is the equivalent of a video room. It recurs all along the film, but we first see it in the second sequence. Judy — Gabe's wife — is deeply shocked by Jack and Sally's announcement and retires into her bedroom. She then appears some time later, facing the camera, in a close-up and, as if she had just been watching the sequence at the same time as the

³ Christian Metz, *L'Enonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film*, Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991, 92.

⁴ Metz, 92.

⁵ This term is used in an article by Nick Browne, "Rhétorique du texte spéculaire", *Communications* 23, *Psychanalyse et cinéma*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975.

Nadia FUCHS: Woody Allen

spectator; she then talks to an interviewer to explain why she was shocked at that moment. The interviewer is never seen and asks minimum questions in a low voice, which reinforces the construction of the spectator as witness, since he brings us directly into the diegetical world of the film, with questions such as "Tell *us* a bit about yourself so that *we* know who you are", so that the spectator may have the impression of sitting just behind the interviewer.

Furthermore, the use of this video-room and, on a broader scale, the form of the film in general, respect the rules of the documentary, which can be defined as an investigation into someone's life with a collage of different types of pre-existent documents, put together in order to demonstrate something. This can be illustrated by the fourth sequence of the film, where Judy and Gabe are seen some time later the same evening wondering whether they could have predicted this break-up. Gabe does remember something, and we have a flashback sequence of Jack in his office with a colleague who gives him a callgirl's phone number on a piece of paper which he subsequently throws away. Then there is a cut to a video-room sequence of the callgirl telling the interviewer how Jack came to see her regularly, and another cut back to Judy and Gabe who evidently do not know about this "document" the spectator has just witnessed. Judy says: "So he never called her? At least, he had the decency to throw the number away." This will be a recurring feature, with different characters giving their different points of view on the same events.

All in all, the filmic enunciation form builds a specific spectator who, at a certain level, can believe he is watching a "real soap" and, as in the mirror stage, is able to go on to the secondary identifications with the different characters, commentators, interviewers.

Documentary vs. fiction

But once the spectator is placed in this situation and his vision is built up, the television show starts getting distorted, and the filmmaker exploits this to give us his views on marriage. The documentary gets infused with fiction and the rule of non-interference between different levels of narration is broken.

Throughout most of the film, we hear the voice over of a narrator who links up chronologically different parts of the diegesis. But suddenly, after a close-up shot of Gabe talking to the interviewer about his previous love-affairs, the former takes up the narration:

Anyhow, a few weeks after Jack and Sally split, we weren't speaking very much and we spent much more time with Sally, you know, we would try and cheer her up all the time.

This is accompanied by shots of the three of them going down a street, which evidently were not taken by him, so that we have a slight breach in the convention of an impersonal narrator

Spectacle et specularité

commenting images.

More interesting perhaps are the moments when the commentators comment on each other's words and have a dialogue, as if they had been interviewed at the same time and could communicate from one place to another. This happens several times, but the closest dialogue and funniest moment come towards the end of the diegesis, when Judy has married her colleague Michael, and they are both asked by the interviewer if they are now a happy couple. They both smile and do seem in love, but suddenly this image of happiness is interrupted by a shot of Judy's first husband (before Gabe) sitting on a bench in a park (as we have already seen him interviewed):

Look, I told you, she's passive-aggressive, somehow she gets what she wants. She wanted me, she wanted Gabe, she wanted the job at the magazine, out of her marriages, she wants Michael...

Michael (in the room): I disagree, when Sally went back to her husband, not at first but when I decided, I went after her.

Judy: Hum, gee, I hope I didn't push, you know, I wanted it to work, it's true...

A last example of this breaking of conventions of the reality show, or rather pushing it to an extreme, is the filming of Sally and Michael's lovemaking, still camera-on-shoulder and presented like another document with Sally's voice over, explaining what she was feeling at that particular moment. One cannot imagine that a middle-class New York couple would let anyone film such intimate moments. Of course, on a secondary level, the spectator can realize that this is a parody and a denunciation of the limits of these shows, but on a first level, it still functions since he/she has been "conditioned" to accept this from the start.

After these distortions in the verisimilitude of the narration and its conventions, we see a new mask of the narrators and commentators, that of the writer and reader. Gabe is a university professor and teaches writing to classes mostly composed of women, and has the beginning of an affair with a twenty year-old student, Rain. She asks him to let her read the manuscript of his latest novel, and she is first seen reading part of it alone, but as we hear Gabe's off-voice reading it aloud, images come to illustrate what is being said about relationships between men and women.

This sequence is very rich. We are just going to examine briefly what it tells us about the manipulation of images, how they can be used to reflect what is being said, and then, more generally, the idea of mirroring and reflexivity which is omnipresent in the film will be commented upon.

The first shots show millions of sperm from different angles going towards an ovule. These images are the ones we

Nadia FUCHS: Woody Allen

would usually see in a scientific documentary about fecundation, but they are accompanied by reflexions such as these:

[...] Mind-boggling numbers of sperm competed for a single egg. It was not the other way around. Of course, men would make love at any time in any place with any number of women, including total strangers, while females were more selective. They were in each case catering to the demand of only one small egg, while each male had millions and millions of frantic sperm screaming wildly: 'let us out, please, let us out now!'

This last cry being a very strong reminder of Woody Allen's earlier film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* where, in the segment entitled "What Happens During Ejaculation", he himself plays the part of a sperm waiting to be let out. Hence, these scientific images are perverted from their original usage and become a reflection of men and women's behaviour.

Reflection is also the main idea which is pursued in the next sequence when Gabe's text evokes a man named Felmann who is then shown as a scientist working in a laboratory.

Felmann longed to meet a woman who attracted him physically and had the following personality: a quick sense of humor equal to his, a love of sports equal to his, a love of classical music equal to his with a particular fondness for Bach, in short, he wanted himself, but as a pretty woman

In the laboratory then appears a mirror image of Felmann as a woman, dressed in the same white overalls and wearing the same glasses.

The mirror is indeed a recurring motif in the film. It can be found between characters — the two main couples, Sally and a younger equivalent of herself, Gail — in situations mirroring each other, thereby inducing a further comment. More generally speaking, reflexivity as a semiotic system pervades the film at all levels, but one of the most reflexive statements is perhaps one which Rain wrote in her short story: "Life doesn't imitate art, it imitates bad television."

It is true that this statement can be applied, for instance, to most of the characters who try to introduce art into their lives but without much success. Michael, Judy's colleague, who before marrying her has an affair with Sally, always tries to do very romantic things. On their first date, he takes Sally out to a Mahler concert then to an intimate dinner in a little out-of-the-way Italian restaurant. But all his romanticism is quickly undermined by Sally's comments. At the end of the evening, she has a sarcastic comment for each of the "romantic places" they went to.

Rain was named after Rainer Maria Rilke, her mother's favourite poet. Her parents have been married for twenty-five years, but seem to be in a very boring relationship, and their daughter is continually seeking a father figure by having affairs with older men, which she then analyses in a very down to earth manner.

Spectacle et spécularité

This is also true for Gabe; explaining why he always gets into complicated relationships with women, he declares:

As soon as there's very little chance of it working out or hurdles or obstacles, something clicks into my mind. Maybe it's because I'm a writer, but some dramatic component comes right and I go after that person.

Jack has a slightly different view on this topic when he says:

He grew up on movies and novels where doomed love was romantic.

Ultimately, we may say, in one more reflexive fold-back, that *Husbands and Wives* is art imitating life imitating bad television.

Reflexivity and film-making

Finally, this leads us to the status given to writing and text in the film through reflexivity. The references to books are numerous. Gabe and Rain are writers, Judy writes poems, we see that, in her library, she has books by modernist writers such as Joyce, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir.

When Rain criticizes Gabe's manuscript, he defends himself by saying: "I was exaggerating for comic purposes, to show how difficult it is to be married", which can obviously be a comment on the film, especially on the film as text. Praising Rain's short-story, Gabe explains that:

what was great was the way that you structured the story because the tension built up so beautifully, and you released all the energy in the last paragraph. It was very sophisticated.

In fact, this is what Woody Allen does in his film, using the classical form of narrative. We first have a prologue announcing all the themes; the diegesis starts as a crisis *in medias res*, there is a gradual unveiling of the events and characters, and a "denouement" with a Shakespearian unleashing of passions in a storm.

But this unleashing is once again ironically undermined, since during the storm, Judy forces Michael to marry her, Jack and Sally are reunited in bed but their sexual problem remains. As for Gabe, he kisses Rain in the rain at her twenty-first birthday party, the filmmaker creating a very "cinematographical" moment — which is reminiscent of another ostensibly cinematographical kiss in *Stardust Memories* — but subsequently Gabe's comment will be:

All I could think of was 'I hope that lightning can't come into a penthouse,' because I'd never been in one before and it was tumultuous out there, it was crashing all around, and you know, the scene just had to be tried out dramatically to be

Nadia FUCHS: Woody Allen

played. I mean, she was adorable, I wanted to kiss her and there was pouring rain, but there was lightning bouncing round the terrace.

Hence we can say that throughout the film, the classical filmic narrative and the spectator are deconstructed. Last but not least is the deconstruction brought about by the last shot. Gabe is being interviewed, looking straight into the camera, and informs us of what he is doing a year after his divorce.

[...] As I say, I'm working on a novel, a new novel, not the old one anymore, and you know, it's fine, absolutely fine.

Interviewer: Is it different?

Gabe: My novel? Yes, it's less confessional, more political....Can I go now, is this over?

This last remark ends the film, surprisingly so since Gabe, by saying this, constitutes a perfect mirror of our spectatorial position, wondering if the film is finished. For Christian Metz, the look at the camera is the main example of a reversible figure of enunciation, in which the spectator and characters can be alternately the source (le foyer) and the target (la cible) of enunciation.

[...] le regard-caméra, dont j'ai déjà parlé. C'est évidemment une figure de la cible; le point de la caméra coïncide provisoirement avec la place de la caméra [...]. Mais cette construction met aussi en valeur le foyer, clairement figuré, pour un moment, par les yeux du personnage-regardeur.[...] En fait, si le spectateur, réel ou imaginaire, ["tourne"] le texte dans le même sens que le regardeur diégétique, ce dernier fait office de foyer, mais aussi de cible car il est sous le feu (!) de la caméra. Et si on oriente mentalement le texte dans le même sens que la caméra, celle-ci devient la cible du regardeur, et fait pourtant exister ce regard même, puisqu'elle est caméra et donc foyer.⁶

In this study of *Husbands and Wives*, we have tried to show that Woody Allen uses modernism as a starting point and creates his film as a post-modernistic deconstruction of reality. The multiple looking on and in the film sends back to the spectator a fragmented and multiple mirror, but only because reality itself is fragmented and multiple.

⁶ Metz, 33.