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THE DUPES STRIKE BACK: COMEDY, MELODRAMA AND POINT OF VIEW IN *THE APARTMENT*

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The aim of this paper is to analyse Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960) as a privileged example in the Hollywood canon of generic coexistence between comedy and melodrama. This coexistence produces a set of narrative and ideological tensions and conflicts which are analysed under the light of recent theoretical developments in the study of the two genres. The paper also explores ways in which the narrative concept of focalisation can be applied to the study of a film text and how issues of subjective and objective presentation relate to generic issues. As a conclusion, the text illustrates the proximity between the objectives of social melodrama and Aristotelian comedy but also the different uses that both genres make of point of view and focalisation. The coexistence of both genres, however, is only made possible by the way in which *The Apartment* presents different and apparently irreconciliable points of view simultaneously.

Recent studies of melodrama highlight the importance of the melodramatic formula in the constitution of the Hollywood narrative system, as borrowed from the popular stage melodrama of the nineteenth century. For Michael Walker, the classical Hollywood film is "dominated by action, spectacle, dynamic narrative, theatrical heightening and the externalizing of emotions" (1982, 28). For Robert Lang, the Hollywood cinema is, in its ideological and formal essence, all melodramatic (1989, 7). The presentation of the world in Manichaean terms of good and evil, the profoundly moral standpoint of the classical Hollywood text, the excess, clarity and plenitude of meaning in the use of cinematographic language, are felt to be an

inheritance of melodrama.[1] Film comedy, on the other hand, has generally been viewed as an extension of the history of the genre in the theatre and the novel (Mast 1979; Cavell 1981; Babington and Evans 1989; Nelson 1990), inheriting its basic forms: Aristotelian and romantic (Frye 1971), or, in more modern terms, a comedy that pulls towards socialisation and a comedy which regresses to the pre-Oedipal, or, from a slightly different standpoint, a comedy which emphasizes the disruptive force of laughter and a comedy that moves towards reconciliation and harmony (Nelson 1990). The Hollywood comic formulae seem to be heavily indebted to their Elizabethan and Jacobean theatrical predecessors, and largely consist of their basic structures adapted to the modern sensibility (see Cavell 1981). Generic interference between comedy and melodrama does not abound in the history of both genres,[2] but Hollywood cinema, with its privileging of melodramatic formulae and its repeated use of classical narrative comic forms, constitutes an ideal *locus* for the analysis of the interferences, tensions and mutual fertilisation between the two genres. In this essay, I propose an analysis of Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960), a film in which this generic mixture

[1] The following extract, from a screenplay manual of the silent period, when the classical code was already in existence, is illustrative of this tendency: "A story is the record of a struggle —a history of a conflict which has occurred or that might have occurred. Man's never-ending conflict with nature; the conflict of one man, as an individual animal, against another; the struggle of the individual against society as an institution; man's inner conflict of the 'good nature' against the 'bad nature' —of conscience against evil inclination— these and other general classifications embodying innumerable variations, contain the history of Life itself". This passage, by Fredrick Palmer, is quoted in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985, 180-1).

[2] There is one development of comedy in the eighteenth century —sentimental comedy— that can be viewed as a clear forerunner of nineteenth-century melodrama. This is how Oliver Goldsmith defines this type of comedy: "[plays] in which the virtues of Private Life are exhibited, rather than the Vices exposed; and the Distresses, rather than the Faults of Mankind, make our interest in the piece" (1986, 50-1). This definition comes very close to the type of plays that were beginning to appear around the same time in France, and which would evolve, around the turn of the century, into the new genre of melodrama, characterised by excess, dramatic intensification of bourgeois moral principles and the final triumph of virtue over evil (Brooks 1985, 14). Sentimental comedy has, of course, become a very popular sub-genre in Hollywood cinema.

is particularly noticeable and productive. I will concentrate on the narrative and ideological tensions and conflicts originated by the coexistence of the two genres and on the ways in which subjective and objective presentation of information relates to generic issues.

In the first scene of the film textual focalisation is clearly omniscient. We see a high angle tracking shot of Manhattan, then a dissolve to a tilt moving up a building, another dissolve to an office inside the building, and finally a cut to one of the employees in that office. This gradual concentration on the character who will turn out to be one of the protagonists of the story is typical of the establishing shot in classical cinema. The strategy, which parallels a famous shot in King Vidor's classical melodrama *The Crowd* (1928), already establishes a thematic tension between society and the individual, a characteristic of both melodrama and satirical comedy. The god-like quality of this external focaliser presupposes a morally superior vantage point for this external agent and an implied ideological positioning on the part of the omniscient narration with respect to the action which has not even started to develop. This is, however, not the complete description of this first sequence of shots. The images just described are accompanied by a voice-over narrator who gives some very accurate figures about the population of New York in November 1959 and then becomes subjective, identifying itself with an insurance company clerk whose name is C. C. Baxter. There is no realistic motivation for the juxtaposition of the visual information and the voice-over narrator, since the visual information that we receive is totally external to the character at the moment in which he first appears, performing his office duties. Temporally and spatially, his role as narrator and his role as character do not coincide and are not related by the text.[3] At the same time, the position of the focaliser is completely unmotivated by his gaze. In fact his gaze is

[3] This is by no means an original beginning in the history of film. See, to name one of many examples, *An American in Paris* (1951), for the use of a similar strategy, starting with a general presentation of a big city —Paris— and then gradually shifting the spectator's interest towards the main character, whose disembodied voice-over can be heard in the soundtrack.

not very important in the whole of the first scene, and when it appears to be more activated by the text, it is only in order to reinforce the omniscience of the presentation. The apparent subjectivity of the scene, provoked by the presence of the internal voice-over narrator, is not as important as the omniscient position of the text, explicit here not only through the use of external focalisation but also because of the nature of the information provided by the character narrator, as well as the background music and the mise-en-scène. Voice-over narration is subjective in as much as it is given by the text to Baxter, but its main function is not, at least now, to present the events from his point of view but to reinforce and make explicit through his words an implied textual irony with an obvious ideological intention: to present a satire of modern life in New York.

As for generic hints, consequently, we seem to be almost overwhelmingly in the world of Aristotelian comedy: the comic connotations of the music, the comic irony in the presentation by Baxter of the figures of the population of New York —"if you laid all these people end to end, figuring an average height of five feet six and a half inches, they would reach from Times Square to the outskirts of Karachi, Pakistan"— and of the number of employees at Consolidated Life —"our home office has thirty-one thousand two hundred and fifty-nine employees, which is more than the entire population of . . . Natchez, Mississippi"—, the uniformity of all the employees at the office, forcefully heightened by the huge dimension and the uniformity of the office itself,[4] and the Bergsonian mechanisation of the movements of his head, accompanying those of the machine on his desk. There is little doubt that one of the objectives of the text will be to present a critical attitude towards this type of society, although the role of the hero has not been clearly defined yet. Satirical comedy works through the establishment of a clear distance, narrative and moral, between the diegesis and the

[4] The artistic direction of the film, justly famous for this office set, is by Alexander Trauner.

spectator. We always enjoy a superior degree of knowledge, which allows us to detach ourselves comfortably from the fictional world of characters and events. This seems to be the case of the scene under analysis. We are placed above all these people and are critical towards the way in which they have come to be in this situation.

The subsequent temporal ellipsis, emphasized textually by a striking combination of a dissolve and a graphic match, might be interpreted as reinforcing the omniscience of the presentation. However, on this occasion, the ellipsis is motivated by the words of character, still in voice-over, who explains that he frequently stays later than the rest of the employees, not due to professional ambition but to a problem with his apartment. Immediately we get a cut to Baxter walking along the street, just before he arrives home. What is happening here is probably that the persistence of the voice-over narration has gradually diverted our attention, from the general presentation of society to the individual on which the film is concentrating. Also the content of his words has shifted from the general to the particular. If initially his comments only reinforced the ommniscient presentation of his society, they are now more clearly the voice of an individual, with an individual life —working extra hours, having a problem with his apartment, walking home after work— on whom we concentrate our attention.

There is also an interesting treatment of time in this scene. The temporality of the image, whose referent must always be interpreted as happening in time and therefore taking some time to happen, is here counteracted by the iterative mode of the voice-over narration. That is, although the images are interpreted as belonging to a specific fabula time, the words of the narration turn them into an illustration of a description. We are to read that what we see happening on one single occasion happens regularly, or has been happening regularly for the past few months. However, as the scene develops, description starts giving way to narration —curiously enough, narration proper will start when the narrative voice disappears— and the temporality of the image starts gaining ground as we see Baxter walking towards the apartment and looking up at its window. By the time we are introduced inside his apartment, we are

already clearly immersed in the narrated present and our main interest lies in the specific events that are taking place, but the strength of what, elaborating on Meir Sternberg's concept, we could call "formal primacy effect", can still be felt.[5] We will concentrate on Baxter and, later, on Fran's predicament, but we will never forget that they have been presented as just an example of a much more general statement about society.

The prologue has established Baxter's story as a symptom of a more general disease, which the film, through its primacy effect, "promises" to examine critically. These expectations are carried by the viewer into the rest of the film and, specifically, into the first episode inside his apartament, in which, significantly, he is not present (the apartment, although his, is not as much his place of abode as he would like it to be).[6] This is in fact a standard practice of satire and social criticism. The text, even if it grounds its analysis in a specific story, uses all kinds of strategies to make it clear that the

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[5] Sternberg discusses a study by some psychologists on the effect that the order of presentation of information about an event influences the attitude of the subject towards it. He finds that the conclusions of these experiments can be profitably applied to literary studies: "the tendentious delay, distribution, and ordering of information can thus be exploited not only for creating and sustaining narrative interest but also for the equally dynamic control of distance, response, and judgment, as well as a variety of less emotively or ethically colored hypotheses" (1978, 97). The argument runs, in general terms, that the subject is ready to pay much more attention and give more weight to the information that he is given first. Sternberg, however, is referring only to the fabula information, about characters and events. I find that this principle applies also to structural strategies and stylistic devices. In this case, the generalising character of the opening sequence is felt to influence our perception of the rest of the film, even when, most of the time, the text concentrates on the specific story of a reduced group of characters.

[6] Throughout the film, the connections between the film's space and the protagonists' identity is increasingly emphasised. Baxter's initial —and frequent— absence from his apartment points at the basic moral flaw in his character: he is a mere puppet in the hands of the executives. One of the central episodes of the film, the aftermath of Fran's suicide attempt, metaphorically reestablishes Baxter in his "natural" space —his apartment— through her influence. Notice in this respect the relevance of the final scene in which it is again Fran who makes him stay when he was planning for a much more permanent absence. By the end of the film, Baxter's development as a *mensch* is metaphorically highlighted by his staying in an apartment which will probably never be empty again.

problems, contradictions, corruptions, and conflicts that are presented in it can be extended to much larger portions of society. On the other hand, melodrama, even when it is making statements about the place of human beings in society, does this in a more metaphoric, less direct way. The emphasis is on how the individual's virtue is attacked by society, rather than on how the individual's predicament becomes a symbol of the moral corruption of the society.

Similar evidence can be found elsewhere in the text. For example, when, later in the same scene, Baxter does manage to get into his house, he sits in front of the television in order to get some rest after the long day at work. The film is here concentrating on his individual problems and on how his very special relationships with his superiors affect his private life. The long sequence in which he unsuccessfully tries to watch the film *Grand Hotel* (1932), a classical melodrama, is narratively unnecessary to further the presentation of his problem. The text takes advantage of the relatively unimportant event —Baxter sitting in front of the television— in order to shift back to the social critique, in this case dealing ironically with the excess of publicity on television. Another example, more closely related with the tension between subjective and objective representation, occurs when Kirkeby and Sylvia finally leave the apartment. In this case, because of the clear comic objectives that the film has set out to accomplish, we find external focalisation predominating over internal, in a scene with a remarkable potential to emphasise the character's gaze. Their dialogue at the foot of the stairs is overheard by Baxter, but the fact that he is an internal focaliser —a potential eavesdropper— does not greatly vary the impact of the dialogue on us. Kirkeby's words express his lack of concern for his "girlfriends", his promiscuity outside marriage and his hypocrisy —"I'm a happily married man". These two characters and the rest of Baxter's colleagues at work, as well as his neighbours and other secondary characters, have the main narrative function of being representatives of the social order under criticism. The text is never interested in them as individual human beings; they are only interesting for us in as much as they become symbols of their society. This is the function of the dialogue which

is overheard by Baxter. The fact that he overhears, unlike in classical cases of eavesdropping, is not narratively relevant to our understanding of the social issue at stake. I am, then, arguing that the beginning of *The Apartment,* generically firmly grounded in the field of social satire, has used the individual only as a way of focusing on the evils of society. Baxter's story appears primarily as the illustration of a thesis: the corrupt and duplicitous morality of American society.[7] In order to achieve this objective, the text does not hesitate to shift from subjective to omniscient presentation whenever necessary. Omniscience, therefore, appears to be closely related to social criticism, and from the evidence analysed here, both omniscience and Aristotelian comedy are the prevalent modes in the opening scene.

I said previously that Baxter's presence on the screen in the brief dialogue between Kirkeby and Sylvia does not add anything to the scrutiny of society; it does however help to the general characterisation of Baxter: he not only has to lend them the apartment but he must also hide so as not to disturb. This is related to the theory that he later explains to Fran about "the takers and those who get took". Here he is metaphorically non-existent for them. He is the "dupe", the one that is used and derided by the rest of the characters. Nelson (1990, 103-11) argues that the dupe in comedy is always someone who deserves the trickery and derision of comedy. There is, in comedy, always some kind of moral justification for the suffering inflicted on these characters. From the classical *agroikos,* through the medieval Vice, to the Malvolio-like fool, the parasite and other types, these are people who fully deserve the treatment they are given. Baxter is, consequently, not a typical character of comedy, but, in spite of the comic context around him, much closer to the virtuous victim of melodrama. Unlike the

[7] This is the same strategy that we find in the great Billy Wilder comedies of the sixties: *The Apartment* concentrates on sexual and professional exploitation of employees by executives, *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) attacks the legal profession, *Kiss Me Stupid* (1964), artists, *One Two Three* (1961), the excesses of capitalism and the "farce" of diplomatic relationships between countries.

"duped" in comic plots, he enjoys almost total sympathy from the audience, who are much more closely identified with him (and later on, and probably even less unambiguously, with Fran) than with anybody else. The film is, therefore, planting even in its most satirical episodes, the seed of the melodramatic mode.

Melodrama, in fact, will not be absent long. In general, we could say that there is a gradual shift in the film from satirical comedy to melodrama, although the former never disappears or loses relevance, but, as the film progresses, an intensification of melodramatic elements and themes occurs, alternating with the satirical mode. Even omniscient presentation, clearly related in the first scene of the film to social satire, as we have seen, is also occasionally used to reinforce its melodramatic side. This is the case of the following example, still from the first scene. While a new couple, Dolbish and an anonymous Marilyn-Monroe-esque blonde, are enjoying themselves inside the apartment, Dr. Dreyfuss, Baxter's neighbour, opens the door of his flat to put the rubbish out. He hears noises and giggles next door and assumes —as he consistently does throughout the film— that Baxter, with whom he has already had a conversation on the matter a few hours before, has brought another girl to his apartment. He goes back into his flat, shouting to his wife: "Mildred, he's at it again". Cut to Baxter sitting alone in the park, not "at it" at all, but cold, sleepy —he has taken sleeping pills— and unable to go back home. The melodramatic music underlines his suffering. The cut matches Dr. Dreyfuss's reference to Baxter with his real situation, introducing the contrast between reality and appearance which is a central theme of the film and indeed one of the main thematic concerns of both Aristotelian comedy and melodrama, but one which is melodramatically heightened here through concentration on the victim/dupe. The shift from the critical presentation of Consolidated's corrupt society to its consequences for the protagonist of the film is made by a dialogue match which flaunts the text's omniscience. The strong presence of external focalisation, including in the same narrative segment the act of corruption and its consquences for the victim, and the linear presentation of the cause/effect chain, even at the expense of spatial

continuity, privilege, by placing it in the final position, the melodramatic drive of the sequence. Omniscience, therefore, while, in general, closely allied to the satirical mode of the film, can also occasionally be used to reinforce its melodramatic side: the audience's heightened sympathetic feelings towards Baxter.

The film, however, does not permanently rely on omniscient presentation. I would like to turn now to the analysis of the use of restricted information and subjectivity, and the ways in which internal focalisation relates to the generic mixture of comedy and melodrama.[8] Even in the first scene, including such cases as the television episode and Baxter's ineffectual eavesdropping, we have been mostly restricted to Baxter's point of view. When, in the next

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[8] A distinction seems to be necessary here between textual focalisation and point of view. I take point of view to be more general than the former. Two differences are involved here: the first one is between what a character sees and what a character knows. Knowledge and information in film are received visually in most cases, but not always. Characters, even in silent films, can also speak and hear, and these are channels of information which are used constantly. The same applies to the viewer, who, most of the time, must be a "listener" and, occasionally, a "reader", too. Secondly, there is the difference of what can be called levels of analytical description. In this essay, I generally used Mieke Bal's tripartite division of the narrative text in *fabula, story* and *text,* which is an elaboration of the Russian formalist division in *fabula* and *sjuzhet,* and a variation on Genette's *histoire, récit* and *narration.* Although focalisation is a term coined by Genette, I start here from Bal's concept, which is not exactly the same as Genette's. Bal places focalisation, "what is seen", at the second level, that of the story, as an element which is present in all narrative texts but only made explicit through narration. I would like to argue that, if we are to apply Bal's concept to film, we must place focalisation at textual level or, in any case, at the same level as narration. However, not all focalisation is textual, since a gaze may be orally narrated, for example. Therefore, I suggest that we call *focalisation* any visual selection of information, whether textual or not, whereas *point of view* would concern selection of and access to information, at the level of the story, which may or may not be visual and which is textualised in different ways. In practice, a film like *The Apartment* can offer the point of view of a character like Baxter without emphasizing his focalisation, even if the information that we and the character receive is mostly visual. We see approximately what the character sees but not how he sees it, not exactly through his eyes. In other words, we may have access to the same information as he has but his subjectivity is not a relevant factor: the information we receive may be restricted but not subjectively presented. Restriction of information, the opposite concept from omniscience, can be motivated externally, or internally by the position of the character, but not by his gaze. This is generally the case in the first scene of *The Apartment.* See Bal (1985), Genette (1972) and also Chatman (1978).

scene, chronologically the following day at the office, Baxter and Fran have two brief dialogues in the lift, their faces are picked up in medium close-ups and occasional close-ups, and their gazes become more important, as a way of presenting their feelings towards one another. However, in these two episodes, the text does not use any particular strategy to underline their gazes. Notice, for example, that in both cases a single long take is used instead of the more usual shot/reverse shot.[9] External focalisation is still active and making its presence felt, for example, through the framing, which "arbitrarily" isolates the two protagonists from the rest of the people in the lift, most strikingly from Kirkeby, a character we have already been introduced to and who is, except at the beginning and end of the episode, completely ignored. Be that as it may, Baxter's point of view is still adhered to.

Of all the characters that have been presented throughout the first scene and the second one up to this point, it is with Baxter that we identify almost exclusively. He is the victim of a ruthless society and his suffering has progressively been underlined and intensified. Both melodramatic identification and comic attack on the social evils which alienate the individual have been presented through his personal experience. This is a narrative expectation that the film has established for us. Even in the brief episodes in which the text temporarily leaves him, one can feel that it will return to him almost immediately. For example, at the office, when he starts the chain of telephone calls to sort out the use of his apartment in the next few days, the text leaves him momentarily but we know that the last call will come back to him. It is through Baxter that we meet all the other characters, including Fran. Therefore, we do not know much more about them than he does. There are certain discrepancies, for example, in the speed with which we and he realise what is happening. Sheldrake's reason for calling Baxter to his office becomes obvious to us much before he realises that what his boss

[9] This is partly due to the wide screen scope of the film which, in general, makes cuts more "visible" and, therefore, less advisable for the classical film.

wants from him is his key. This comes as no surprise, though, because our identification with him is never complete and does not preclude the existence of a comic distance between character and text. In this case, this distance allows us to confirm that he is not a very bright person and that his chances of promotion through excellence in his work are not very high. The most relevant new information is, however, Sheldrake's similarity with the rest of the managerial staff in the exploitation of his workers, and this is again presented from Baxter's perspective.[10] Baxter's nature as a "dupe" includes, therefore, comic distance and melodramatic identification: we could not completely identify with a character whose dullness as a person makes him an easy target for the trickster; at the same time, we could not feel too distant from a character who is the victim of a corrupt society.

In the next shot, Baxter waits for Fran to finish work with the theatre tickets in his hand and invites her to accompany him to see the show. She accepts and the external focaliser accompanies them in medium close-up as they walk along the street. Again there are no cuts in the textual presentation of their walk and, although the camera is placed closer to Baxter's position than to Fran's, there is no clear intensification of either of their gazes. The expositional information which is provided here about Fran is given by Baxter, once again confirming our expectations of restricted presentation through this character. When they say goodbye momentarily —they are to meet again outside the theatre in a few hours— the text seems to be ready to follow the same pattern. The focaliser follows Fran as she walks away from Baxter, thus partially identifying its vantage point with his. Immediately there is a cut back to Baxter who watches her walk away, apparently confirming him again as the

[10] Like Fran and Baxter, Sheldrake's character is relevant for both the comic and melodramatic sides of the film. He is one more member of the humorous society but he also plays a crucial part in the specific consequences of the social corruption of the two protagonists and in the relationship between them. At the same time, it is his centrality in the fabula that allows the film to present him as the most accomplished representative of the comic vice exposed in the film, far above Kirkeby or Dolbish, for example. If the film had been only a sarcastic comedy of the *Volpone* type, he would have been, without any doubt, the main protagonist.

centre of the episode, and, practically for the first time, intensifying his gaze. However, the decision to follow Fran momentarily turns out to be not only part of an eyeline match but also an immediate anticipation of what is going to happen through editing. As a textual continuation of the previous camera movement, after the shot of Baxter, comes an unexpected cut to a tracking shot of Fran walking into a restaurant, already outside Baxter's range of vision, and once inside the restaurant, eventually joining Sheldrake, who has obviously been waiting for her.

We knew that Sheldrake was going to go to Baxter's apartment with a girl. We also knew that Fran was meeting a man, but we lacked the necessary information to link both facts. Now everything falls into place. The film has broken the expectations that it had built up for us. It had repeatedly shown before its power to dissociate itself from the strategy of restricted presentation to which it normally adheres. Now it also flaunts that, while being able to conjure up omniscience at will whenever the need for narrative information required it, it was not being openly communicative either. It had suppressed some crucial information from us —Fran and Sheldrake's affair— while pretending to communicate everything.[11]

On the other hand, momentary omniscient presentation had been so far the only alternative to restricted presentation through Baxter's point of view. Now another alternative is used: restricted presentation through one character is replaced by restricted presentation through a different one. This strategy coincides with the moment in which Fran has been given enough narrative relevance to become the

[11] The terms communicative and suppressive are borrowed from Sternberg, who says: "The dichotomy of omniscience versus restrictedness, exclusively relating as it does to the narrator's potential range of knowledge, is obviously inadequate for describing the diametric opposition between the two kinds of narrator and narrative technique adumbrated in these statements. This blanket-distinction must be complemented by a more specific differentiation, on another axis altogether, which will account for the opposition in terms of the two narrators' actual practice of communication: Trollope's narrator is omnicommunicative as well as omniscient, while Fielding's is deliberately suppressive" (1978, 159-60).

second protagonist of the film. Throughout the three dialogues with Baxter her gaze has become gradually more relevant. Now her point of view acquires enough autonomy to dissociate itself from Baxter's and carry all the weight of the narrative during the rest of the scene and, from now on, it will share relevance with Baxter's. As in the case of Baxter, her prominence will be narratively presented through a mixture of focalisation on and focalisation by her. If formerly we could partially identify with Baxter, from now on we also identify with her.[12] That is, the film restricted itself to Baxter while it was narratively useful to do so. When a different strategy is needed, it does not hesitate to break previous patterns and create new ones. In this case, Fran not only rises to protagonism at the same level as Baxter, but, partly through accumulative effect, her predicament will be presented as much more serious than his. It will be precisely when both their positions as victims clash that they will get together and eventually produce the strength that will help them liberate themselves from a society that has unbearably repressed them all along.

Throughout the whole restaurant episode, Fran's gaze is more relevant than Sheldrake's. It is through her eyes that we find Sheldrake waiting for her; it is Fran who sees the other people from the office coming into the restaurant; it is through her that we find out about their past relationship, and his —false— plans of divorce come to both her and us as a surprise. At this point, for example, a cut to a close-up of her face activates her gaze, reinforcing the surprise. The dialogue is presented through shot/reverse shots and establishing and reestablishing shots, with a greater concentration on her face than on his. This, however, does not make us identify

[12] Laura Mulvey (1989) has led E. Ann Kaplan (1983), Robert Lang (1989) and others in arguing that the gaze in film is masculine, and the woman is always presented as the object of the gaze. This position is brilliantly defended from psychoanalytical and ideological standpoints, but narratively such affirmation is not tenable. In *The Apartment,* Fran's gaze becomes as important for the presentation of narrative information as that of Baxter, and certainly more important than Sheldrake's or that of the rest of the men. Her gaze, like Baxter's, becomes, at times, the gaze of the text.

particularly with his gaze.[13] The visual identification or proximity between the external focaliser and one of the characters does not necessarily signify narrative identification: other elements must be present for that visual proximity to become narratively active. In this case, the fact that the camera is more often placed close to Sheldrake than to Fran only in very general terms makes us feel emotionally or intellectually close to him. Our gaze, because of the narrative context, "refuses" to become his. Omniscience can be presented by means of a clearly external, superior narration, as is the case in the opening shot of the film, or, characteristically, by the successive or simultaneous activation of several individual points of view, as in many classical texts. Usually, a mixture of the two is used: presentation through external and several different internal agents. *The Apartment,* as I have tried to argue, uses omniscience whenever necessary, but, in the case of the alternation between Fran and Baxter's restricted points of view, the net result is not so much that of an appreciable intensification of omniscience as precisely the alternation of two subjectivities.

In the shift from Baxter to Fran's point of view, omniscience clearly plays a part, but the increasingly melodramatic contents of the film is, at this point, most clearly presented in the way that we had expected melodrama to operate: through the individual rather than through the social group and, simultaneously, through subjectivity rather than through omniscience. I would now like to analyse a very brief episode in the restaurant scene, in order to examine how an element with clear comic potential is turned into melodramatic by means of an almost imperceptible change in the direction of the subjective gaze of one of the characters. After the retarded exposition of the relationship between Sheldrake and Fran and the abrupt shift of attention from Baxter to her in the, as yet,

[13] Notice the difference in treatment between this scene and, for example, the telephone conversation between Baxter and Dolbish. In the latter, the film exploited the comic potential of the situation, by allowing itself some concentration on Dolbish's point of view, to which we respond only comically. In the restaurant scene, we do not care very much about Sheldrake, only about the suffering that he is inflicting on Fran.

most melodramatic episode, our attention is changed for a brief moment to Miss Olsen, Sheldrake's secretary, who has only briefly appeared once before. From the evidence given on that earlier occasion and the way her entrance in the restaurant is presented, it looks as if she is going to play a relatively unimportant part in the narrative. In the tension between reality and appearance she seems to be a representative of that section of society from which secrets must be kept and for which a false mask must be worn. Without relapsing into comedy, her intervention seems to be directed at bringing back to the fore the characterisation of that morally corrupt society in which people gossip and pretend, which the film has so far been showing from a comic perspective and which, in the last few minutes has been abandoned for a more melodramatic narrative development of the two protagonists' predicaments. Miss Olsen's intervention in the scene is very carefully orchestrated in terms of focalisation. Fran sees her coming in with some friends from the office. There is an eyeline match, from their position, as Sheldrake turns to look. We see them arriving and sitting at the table. Cut back to Fran and Sheldrake, who stand up and leave the restaurant, with the camera following them. As they walk past Miss Olsen, trying not to be seen, the camera stays with the secretary, who puts her glasses on, looking offscreen to where the other two are supposed to be. It is now her eyeline match that we are given, as we see Sheldrake tipping the pianist and the receptionist. So far, there has been nothing unusual about the presentation of the sequence. We are still sharing mainly Fran's point of view, and feel concerned about her moral weakness being discovered by her colleagues and the consequences that this might bring for her. We are still very much in the world of melodrama. The momentary change to Miss Olsen's point of view is only introduced to enlarge our knowledge and increase the suspense, as we are kept wondering what is going to happen now that somebody knows about the affair. Miss Olsen can be added to the gallery of corrupt characters like Kirkeby, Sylvia or Dolbish, from whom Baxter and Fran stand out, not really so much because they are not like them, as because the film concentrates more on their predicament. She is potentially a character of Aristotelian comedy,

but her momentary intervention here and the omniscience shown by the external focaliser when the camera stays with her rather than continue its track on Fran and Sheldrake, mainly function to enhance the melodramatic impression of suffering looming ahead for the heroine. The immediate textual developments might lead us to think that comedy is beginning to gain ground again over melodrama, but this impression will be contradicted by the significance of her gaze.

In the next shot, our expectations are once again, if not frustrated, significantly modified. After the last shot described there is a cut back to Miss Olsen, now in close up, still looking, taking her glasses off and lowering her eyelids as if trying to stop herself from crying, while the background music, both internal —piano— and external —accompanying violins— reaches a very short climatic moment, which had not occurred since the initial titles of credit. In the brief space of two or three seconds our impression of her has drastically changed, and, if we could stop to think for a minute —which while watching the film normally we probably cannot—, we would also be able to look at Fran and Sheldrake from a new, wiser perspective, too. In narrative terms, Fran's point of view has been replaced, although only momentarily by Miss Olsen's. From comic she turns into a melodramatic character. Her point of view, from just narratively functional, becomes central, as a sort of extremely reduced summary, for our understanding of the film. Later on, at the party scene, we will find out that Miss Olsen has been one of several mistresses that Sheldrake had in the past, with whom he has behaved exactly in the same way as he is now behaving with Fran. But now, in this brief shot we can already anticipate this information.

In *The Apartment,* internal gazes on the hero and heroine are threatening and ususally misleading. Baxter's neighbours look at him but do not interpret correctly what they see. Later on, Kirkeby sees Fran in Baxter's apartment and again misinterprets the meaning of her presence in it. There is a gap between what the protagonists look like to others and what they really are, because people around them have not learned to look properly. The extent to which Miss Olsen can harm Fran by seeing her with Sheldrake at the restaurant appears to be dictated by her failure to understand that Fran really loves her

boss. But appearances are deceptive, even for the spectator, who had come to believe in his/her omniscience and superiority over the characters. Narration in *The Apartment* might be omniscient but it is also devious. We are sure that we are right when we occasionally identify with Fran or Baxter's gaze, because they are pure and honest, because they look at the world from the same untainted moral vantage point as we do. Consequently we are confident of the sound moral distance between the gaze of the other characters and ours. We do not identify with them because they are not like us. In both cases we are wrong. Our recognition of the hero and heroine's corruption will come about at the Christmas Party scene, and will be discussed below. Our moral distance from Miss Olsen is made to disappear here. She puts on her spectacularly-rimmed glasses in order to see better. In a sense, they are a metaphor for the film camera, except that, unlike it, they serve the wrong purpose. They provide a measure of our disgust at the gaze. But when, after they have left, she takes them off, we notice their resemblance with a carnival mask. When she takes off the mask that she has been wearing in society, we see a different person. We see, above all, because we are redirected in our gaze. She is now looking at herself and, simultaneously, making us concentrate our attention on her. We now realise that her gaze at Fran was not one of threat but one of recognition. Stripped of all masks, she has become a mirror image of the heroine. Her corrupt gaze has become pure but, at the same time, ineffectual, like that of the Griffith heroines. Enclosed by the frame, incapable of breaking its barriers by looking offscreen, Miss Olsen, Fran's foil, is a new melodramatic heroine and, unlike Fran, one with no future. In the last scene of the film, Fran runs along the street, with her gaze fixed ahead and offscreen. Then, back at the apartment, she and Baxter will look at each other. Miss Olsen can only look at herself and contemplate what she has become, inviting us too to do the same. Our gaze has undergone the opposite process from hers: from pure to corrupt; corrupt, because we have been too hasty in our judgement, like the other characters in the film, and have consequently become one of them. The comic distance has become melodramatic identification. Outside the hero and heroine

the film has also proved its melodramatic potential when the external, distant gaze has become intensely subjective.

Before its comic resolution, it only remains now for the film to examine the other side of the coin: the satirical comic dimension of its moral attitude towards the protagonists. This happens shortly after, when Baxter has already been promoted to a managerial job, at the central Christmas Party scene. I mentioned the double function of Miss Olsen's glasses at the Chinese restaurant: to underline the gaze and act as a mask. She takes them off in order to look at herself and also, as in carnival, in order to strip off her mask. The present scene will also be a scene of glasses and masks or, to be more precise, of carnival and mirrors.

The establishing shot and the sequence of shots before Baxter and Fran step into their new office, return to the bitter attack on the evils of society. The Christmas celebration has become a celebration of the sleaziness and squalor of the office. In the context of the film, the couples kissing here and there suggest prostitution rather than pure feelings. The sense of the slow tracking shot over the party is anything but conciliatory. The carnival atmosphere, in spite of the masks, shows all the characters for what they really are.[14] The two prospective lovers emerge out of this atmosphere. When Baxter takes Fran into his office, he finds another couple kissing in the armchair. He throws them out in an attempt to emphasize his and Fran's distance from the other characters. As he closes the door, the camera frames them with the party in the backbround, separated from them by another glass. This framing articulates the main ambiguity of the film with respect to the hero and heroine. Is this glass stating their —moral— difference from the rest or, rather, working as a mirror, prompting us to see Baxter and Fran reflected in the rest of the people at the party? Are they the melodramatic hero and heroine in conflict with this society or are they also, as comic protagonists of

[14] Comedy is, as Bakhtin argues (1968), closely related to carnival and festive madness, but the morally degrading context in which it is presented in the film, at least in this scene, is totally absent from Bakhtin's theory. Much closer to Bakhtin's view is the New Year's Eve scene, in which Fran finally liberates herself from Sheldrake and moral enslavement.

satire, its representatives? Glasses to look offscreen or mirrors to look at oneself. The answer is not a simple one for the rest of the film, but in this scene, the distance between the two worlds, which is also the distance between the comic and melodramatic poles, is made to disappear. Baxter tries to convince Fran of the viability of their relationship by reminding her of his new executive position. Miss Olsen has just reminded her how much she is like the other girls that have proceded her for Sheldrake's affections. The difference between Baxter, now he wears a junior executive hat, and the other members of his "club" has diminished. As for Fran and Miss Olsen, there has already been a suggestion of the ways in which they are similar, but there is nothing now to stop from extending this similarity to Sylvia and the rest of the office girls. The glasses in this scene are not transparent; they provide reflections.

The famous climax of the scene includes a mirror in a carnival atmosphere.[15] A mirror in film is, like the Platonic concept of art, a reflection of a reflection, but, simultaneously, in a Lacanian sense, it provides self-awareness on the part of the subject of the gaze.[16] Distance and identification run parallel in the mirror. The comic distance, by extending into the world of melodrama, becomes self-reflective. Thus for the spectators identification is turned, in the mirror, into confirmation of comic distance from ourselves. Awareness and self-awareness are of course the general goal in all narratives. At the climax of the film, the tension between past unawareness and incipient knowledge is crucial for the analysis of the development of the characters. The film carefully exploits

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[15] Fran will come to realise about Sheldrake by means of a mirror, in Baxter's bathroom, and again at the end of the film, in a carnival surrounding —New Year's Eve.

[16] See, in this respect, Christian Metz (1977). For Metz, identification in film works through an analogy with the *mirror stage* posited in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This of course does not say anything on the presence on the screen of real mirrors, but it may account for the uneasiness of the spectator at their appearance, as they constitute the real origin of our subjectivity, for which the film-watching experience is only a substitute. In a different sense, the onscreen mirror is constantly reminding us of the lack of transparence of the screen, by denying our own image in the mirror; this is why classical film always mistrusts mirrors.

Baxter's unawareness of Fran's suffering and of the object of her suffering. The mirror will be the climax, but before, we have the Christmas card that Baxter shows Fran. Our sympathy for her is connected with our Lacanian/Metzian sense of loss in our own experience of the filmic image. In the same sense as we are witnessing something which is like us but, in its perfection, cruelly different, Fran's experience of the card is like looking into a distorted mirror. Everything that she wants is there: Sheldrake, the Christmas tree and the family. Everything except herself. As in the case of the viewer, everything except the subject of the gaze. That is the perfect world that she can never be a part of. Another distorted image of this perfection will be given later on, in Baxter's apartment: Sheldrake's pile of presents for his family are made to contrast with Fran's image of loneliness next to Baxter's Christmas tree, and the $100 he gives her as a present, which, once again, join her with Sylvia through the motif of the necklace of the first scene.

Fran's unawareness is also exploited when she hands Baxter the compact case so that he can look at himself in its mirror. The complexity of the episode is related with the fact that Baxter, like Miss Olsen in the earlier episode, redirects his gaze, or, to be more precise in this case, refocuses it: what becomes the main object of his attention is not his own reflection but the mirror itself. His broken image as we see it from his point of view is a metaphoric complex which at the same time foregrounds his gaze and transcends it. It transcends it because, whereas he can only see the —broken— frame, we can notice both the frame and the framed. He looks at himself but he can only see Fran. The mirror shows her to him in a different light. As if to underline the point, the next shot frames Baxter in medium shot, still looking at the mirror, which reflects a light on his forehead. The mirror has brought new knowledge to him, a knowledge that completely changes his world: Fran, his only hope of purity in the corrupt society, is shockingly revealed to be one more corrupt member of it. But what Baxter —metonymically (Fran's mirror represents her) and metaphorically (it represents her corruption)— sees is, after all, only a reflection, not the real truth.

By trusting the mirror, Baxter, like the other characters of the film, is trusting appearances. The frame in cinema divides onscreen from offscreen space: what we see from what we do not see but nevertheless is there. In the same way as the spectator must learn to "read" the whole space of the film, including offscreen space, Baxter, metaphorically, must learn to see beyond the mirror. His knowledge, therefore, is greater than before but not complete yet.

What *we* see, on the other hand, while including his gaze, is much more. We do not learn anything new about Fran —we already knew about her, but by presenting her relationship with Sheldrake from her point of view, the emphasis was on the melodramatic suffering of the character rather than on the comic criticism of her conduct— but about Baxter, literally because we both see what he sees and see him looking. A few seconds later, Fran will say that the broken mirror reflects how she feels. For us, however, it is now, above all, a reflection of *his* broken heart. If the text had turned comedy into melodrama when we first saw Fran and Sheldrake together by shifting into her point of view and making us identify with her, now the strategy is the opposite: our awareness of his suffering because of appearances and the corrupt society is brought to us by means of a distance. We do not identify with Baxter but, by knowing much more than him, by painfully positioning ourselves on a superior plane, we learn to pity him. A thematically melodramatic structure is presented not by means of identificaction but by means of a distance. This first distance is then brought about by a new shift in focalisation. And yet this is not the only distance. The second distance is enforced through *parallelism.* When we see this shot, we see still more. We are reminded of a similarly framed shot, in the former scene, when Baxter, who has found the compact case in his house, gives it back to Sheldrake.[17] Sheldrake looks at the mirror,

[17] *The Apartment* is fond of repetitions of similarly framed shots. Another example of this strategy is provided by the several shots of the door to Baxter's apartment from the position of the Dreyfusses' door. This repetition is thematically connected to the tension reality/appearance and becomes gradually more complex when to its Aristotelian comic dimension —the Dreyfusses thinking that Baxter is always bringing different girls into

and then we also see his double image. In that case, the double image was not a metaphor of Sheldrake's broken heart but one of duplicity and hypocrisy: by offering a distorted image, the mirror was presenting his true nature and elevating him to supreme representative of the ironic society under attack. The repetition of the same frame in this scene underlines the similarities between Baxter and Sheldrake. Baxter now sees Fran in a new light, but we see *him* in new light, too. He is not only the supreme victim of the exploitative society but a full-time member of it. This is therefore a comic distance. Through the melodramatic distance in focalisation we are superior to Baxter in awareness; through the comic distance brought about by parallelism we are morally superior. The double attitude of the text towards the character is confirmed, and the dupe returns, in a sense, to his natural position in classical comedy.

In its first climatic moment, *The Apartment* has reached a fusion between satirical comedy and melodrama, by underlining the common thematic element of social unfairness and corruption, and combining, not just alternately but also simultaneously, different points of view on the same event, but points of view which are, in both cases, omniscient, as the text emphasizes the distance between characters and narration. This distance, which is provoked by a —distorting— mirror, becomes a metaphor of the kind of distance provided by the film screen between the spectator and the fiction, as analysed in the psychoanalytic approaches mentioned above. There are two aftermaths to this climax: Baxter's short telephone conversation with Sheldrake, comically and melodramatically, the main agent of their separation; and the beautiful tracking shot which ends the episode before it dissolves into another overhead tracking

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his apartment— is added romantic comic momentum: first Baxter rushing upstairs thinking that Fran has tried to commit suicide by turning the gas on, and later, at the end of the film, Fran hearing what she thinks is a shot —Baxter attempting suicide— but is really a champagne bottle being opened. Through these repetitions the dichotomy reality/appearance is used as a bridge between the pessimistic satirical main body of the film and its romantic conclusion. This, in turn, confirms the generic proximity, which is not explored in this essay, between melodrama and romantic comedy.

shot of the bar where Baxter is getting drunk. At the party the camera follows Baxter from his office, past the area where the Christmas celebration is taking place, a celebration which has now degenerated into a sordid disgusting affair; stops with him when Kirkeby tries to persuade him to lend him his apartment the next day, and follows him down the big empty room, as he physically and metaphorically unwalks the distance from his new job to his old position in the firm. This tracking shot can be used as a closing summary of the tension between comedy and melodrama in the film as it has been discussed in this essay: in its perfect balance between character and context, between identification and detachment, it illustrates the proximity between the objectives of social melodrama and Aristotelian comedy but also the different uses that both genres make of point of view and focalisation. It is only through the complexity that a filmic text like *The Apartment* allows for the simultaneous presentation of different and apparently irreconciliable points of view that both genres can coexist, drawing strength and potential for signification from one another. The two main characters, who had enjoyed our sympathy for most of the film, were distanced from us by means of parallelisms and omniscient "comic" presentation. In the last scene, once they, like the spectator, have learned to see, the distance disappears again and the dupes, the "took", to use the film's own term, gain a melodramatic victory, which reinstates them in society, and a comic victory, which allows them to build a new society, away from Consolidated.

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