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From Having Sympathy to Showing Empathy for the Demented: A Narratological Study of the Perspectives of Characters with Dementia in *Away from Her*, *Still Alice*, and *The Father*

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Abstract

The present study discusses the challenge of choosing an appropriate narrative structure for representing the unreliable perspective of characters with dementia in cinematic adaptations. The argument is that the chosen frameworks and techniques should create sympathy and empathy in readers/audience, and the ideal empathetic adaptation should choose narratological frameworks with the lowest level of coherence, narrative distancing and external focalization. As prototypical examples, the study focuses on the cinematic adaptations of three literary texts which treat dementia as their main thematic concern: Away from Her *(2007),* Still Alice *(2014), and* The Father *(2021). The study employs critical categories and conceptualizations proposed by Per Krogh Hansen regarding unreliable perspectives, as well as the critical views of Gulce Torun, the latter of whom domesticates Endel Tulving's mnemonic functions of episodic memory in her narratological discussions regarding the rapport between unreliable perspectives and memory. The analysis identifies features of intranarrational, internarrational, and extratextual unreliability as well as corresponding features of semantic, episodic, archival, and constructivist memory in the adaptations.*

Keywords

dementia, unreliability, Per Krogh Hansen, memory, narrational perspective

Introduction

Choosing an apt narrative structure for representing dementia in literary and cinematic works is a long-standing challenge for both writers and film directors. The set of frameworks and techniques should be chosen in such a way that readers and the audience, as people theoretically not suffering from mental conditions, might have sympathy for the demented, while on the other hand these frameworks and techniques might create some sense of empathy[1] in readers and the audience. It is precisely the sense of empathy that could truly give the demented a representative voice in literature and cinema.

In choosing an effective narratological framework for representing people with dementia, their perspective is often marginalized as untrustworthy and erroneous. Referring to studies by Wayne Booth and Ansgar Nunning, Greta Olson presents two broad categories concerning the issue of unreliability in character perspectives: untrustworthy and fallible: "Untrustworthy [narration] suggests that the perspective deviates from the general normative standards implicit in the text.

1 While sympathy is a feeling of sincere concern for someone who is experiencing something difficult or painful, empathy involves actively sharing in the person's emotional experience. For a deeper differentiation between these terms, see M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015), 106-108. Tetiana Grebeniuk uses Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of "reader immersion" as well as Ryan's categories to discuss sympathy and empathy in her study. See Tetiana Grebeniuk, "Narrative Unreliability in Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* As a Strategy of Reader Immersion," *American & British Studies Annual* 11 (2018): 41, accessed August 2024. <https://absa.upce.cz/index.php/absa/article/download/2313/2043/4299>.

For this reason, the narrator cannot be trusted on a personal level. By contrast, inconscient and fallible imply that the narrator makes mistakes about how she perceives herself or her fictional world."[2] Olson deduces that "readers detect unreliability as they might diagnose mental illness: signs of irregularity are noted, and they are understood within the personal and literary schemata of unreliability."[3]

As MaoHui Deng comments, the reason for the emergence of unreliability in movies and adaptations about dementia is that demented characters in these works experience time differently, espousing sequences of "temporally relational worldviews."[4] These multiple entangled temporalities can be seen as having two layers.

> On one layer, […] dementia can be seen as a grotesque exaggeration of what human temporality, our condition as aging subjects, enacts, as people living with dementia's experiences of time increasingly pull away from the understanding of modern, homogeneous time. On another layer, it is important to note that dementia – more specifically, early onset dementia – does affect people who are in their thirties or forties. […] Even in the case of diagnosing early dementia, it has the potential to conceptually catapult the younger person into the terrain or imagery associated with the most vulnerable old. In other words, *all* dementia is synonymised with older age. Consequently, films about dementia heighten the fear of losing authority over/to time.[5]

This different experience of time by demented characters causes them to lose control over linear time and results in the emergence of a different kind of temporality. Truly acknowledging and trying to understand this difference would entail turning it into an enabling criterion that facilitates the recognition of common elements between multiple non-demented and demented characters through the examination of various narrative structures that address and depict this difference. In this way, "difference, celebrated, becomes a route to acknowledging a shared world despite the multiple variations of the actual forms that inhabit the world – in recognizing the heterogeneous commonalities."[6] As a result, turning demented characters into impenetrable absolute otherized figures becomes harder.

The question then becomes what narratological set of techniques and frameworks should be employed so that the demented characters' untrustworthy perspective could create both sympathy and empathy in readers and the audience. In order to limit the scope of this investigation, this study will pose this question regarding the cinematic adaptations of three literary texts. The first is *Away from Her* (2007), a loose adaptation of Alice Munro's short story collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001); the second is *Still Alice* (2014), an adaptation of Lisa Genova's novel of the same title; and the final cinematic work is *The Father* (2021), an adaptation of a play by Florian Zeller of the same name.

2 Greta Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators," *Narrative* 11, no. 1 (2003): 99, accessed May 2023, DOI: nar.2003.0001. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/37838/>.

3 Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 99.

4 MaoHui Deng, *Ageing, Dementia and Time in Film: Temporal Performances* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 5.

5 Deng, *Ageing, Dementia,* 9-10.

6 Deng, *Ageing, Dementia*, 9-10.

Based on critical categories and conceptualizations proposed by Per Krogh Hansen concerning unreliable perspective along with critical views of Gulce Torun,[7] regarding the rapport between unreliable perspective and memory, the study argues that *The Father* is the most authentic representation of the unreliable perspective of the demented, since the adaptation does introduce a wide range of manifestations of incoherence and non-linearity in contrast to the relatively conventional narratological structures to materialize an unreliable perspective in other selected adaptations. The narratological incoherence and non-linear experimentations in *The Father* would then represent a more faithful rendition of the demented character's own experience as compared to the more detached, external understanding of dementia represented in *Away from Her* and *Still Alice*.

Utilizing the categories of both Hansen – intranarrational unreliability, internarrational unreliability, and extratextual unreliability – and Torun – semantic memory, episodic memory, archival and constructivist memory – all three adaptations will be analyzed with the goal of identifying corresponding features between these categories and the adaptations. Hansen's three categories regarding unreliable perspective will be used to identify the ways the unreliable perspective of demented characters is materialized in the adaptations. Intranarrational unreliability is a kind of "unreliability established and supported by a large stock of discursive markers such as verbal tics — small interjections and comments that hint at an uncertainty in the narrator's relating of the events — or unresolved self-contradictions."[8] The second category is internarrational unreliability, which refers to "the situation in which a character's version of incidents is contrasted by another or several other characters' versions."[9]

Both intra- and the internarrational unreliability have a textual nature and have little to do with readers'/audience's preconceptions or horizon of expectations. In order to address the role of reader/audience in identifying unreliable perspectives, Hansen also introduces extratextual unreliability, a type of "unreliability depending on readers' direct implementation of [their] own values or knowledge in the textual world."[10] The present study's utilization of this category will be limited to the way the concept of extratextual unreliability can be employed to identify symbolic significances which may be broadly taken as instances of unreliability by general readers and the audience in the adaptations.

In addition to tracing these types of unreliability, the study will investigate various ways demented characters utilize their memories. As is the case with all of us, mnemonic references to the past are distorted and otherwise changed in the minds of the mentally disturbed. Under most circumstances, therefore, memories cannot represent an archival understanding of the past, as defined by Torun:

7 It should be emphasized that Torun utilizes Endel Turving's mnemonic categories from the latter's famous work *Organization of Memory* (1972). Torun domesticates these categories in her narratological discussions regarding unreliable perspective, thus Torun's more narratologically related renditions will be utilized in the discussions of this paper.

8 Per Krogh Hansen, "Reconsidering the Unreliable Narrator," *Semiotica* 165, no. 1/4 (2007): 241, accessed May 2023, DOI: 10.1515/SEM.2007.041. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/SEM.2007.041/html?lang=en>.

9 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 241.

10 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 242.

> […] the archival view suggests that memory is a resource to provide us with exact copies of what happened in the past. Since memory is considered to be something like a video recorder storing representations with a perfect accuracy and clarity and then make them possible to achieve truthful representations about the past occurrences.[11]

What mnemonic references provide is a wholly manipulative and constructivist representation of past events, i.e., memory as "a dynamic system which can respond to stimulus of the recalling moment therefore changing with respect to the expected needs."[12]

In addition to presenting these two views on memory, Torun, referring to Endel Tulving, introduces the two mnemonic subtypes – episodic and semantic memories.

> Semantic memory is the capacity which enables us to recollect general information about the world. For instance, it is to remember that Paris is the capital city of France. On the other hand, episodic memory refers to the capacity in which we recollect occurrences from the past. More specifically, episodic memory has to do with information about temporally dated episodes or events, and temporal-spatial relations among these events.[13]

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the present study's choice of primary corpora is based on both a representational and a more immersive understanding of dementia and the way it is depicted in these works. In analyzing the adaptations, the methodology is similar to that of a number of foundational studies such as Chivers' *The Silvering Screen*, Shary and McVittie's *Fade to Gray* (2016), and Medina's *Cinematic Representations of Alzheimer's Disease* (2018), in that the study seeks to recognize narratological frameworks and techniques with which dementia is passively and distantly represented. On the other hand, the discussions here also recognize the more active nuances and alterations in these very representational passive narrative frameworks and techniques, so that the more active role of these adaptations – especially *The Father* and to some lesser extent *Away from Her* – in showing demented characters' inner feelings, understandings and their lack of control of linear temporality might be recognized. This affective approach can also found in other such engaged works that compound it with a more narratological objective, such as Janet Gibson's *Dementia, Narrative and Performance: Staging Reality, Reimagining Identities* (2020), John David Keedy's "Re-Thinking and Re-Positioning Being in the Moment within a Continuum of Moments: Introducing a New Conceptual Framework for Dementia Studies" (2022), Tom Kitwood's *Dementia Reconsidered: The Person Comes First* (1997), Kate White's "An Attachment Approach to Understanding and Living Well with Dementia" (2018), Mike Nolan's "Towards a More Inclusive Vision of Dementia Care Practice and Research" (2002), and MaoHui Deng's *Ageing, Dementia and Time in Film: Temporal Performances* (2023).

11 Gulce Torun, "Unreliable Narrator: Memory, Accuracy and Function." (Master's diss., Bilkent University, 2019), 4, <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/server/api/core/bitstreams/f1c2acaa-384f-43d1-bd3a-61851a015aed/content>.

12 Torun, "Unreliable Narrator," 4.

13 Torun, "Unreliable Narrator," 5.

Away from Her: Focalized Unreliability through and for the Sake of the Other

Away from Her (Polley, 2007) is a film about Grant and Fiona, an elderly couple dealing with Fiona's Alzheimer's disease. Throughout the movie, Grant reflects on his marriage while also contemplating his past infidelities. Fiona enters a nursing home when she begins to feel like a danger to herself, and her memory of Grant fades as she develops feelings for Aubrey, a mute man in a wheelchair who becomes her coping partner. Aubrey's wife Marian eventually removes him from the home due to financial difficulties, causing Fiona to fall into a deep depression and decline in physical health. Grant visits Marian to convince her to allow Fiona to see Aubrey again, and would rather see his wife happy with another man than miserable and alone. The meeting between Marian and Grant eventually leads to a tenuous relationship between them. One day, before bringing Aubrey to see Fiona, Grant spends a brief moment alone with Marian, during which Marian momentarily recalls Aubrey and the love she has shared with Aubrey as her husband.

Focalized through Grant's perspective, Fiona's dementia is initially represented through intranarrational unreliability. In the very beginning, moments when Fiona forgets where the frying pan is kept as well as later when she later forgets the word "wine," display how the adaptation seeks to utilize these "verbal tics and discursive markers [that] show unresolved self-contradictions."[14] These intranarrational hints are coupled with Grant's external focalization on Fiona's unreliability in moments that materialize what Hansen refers to internarrational unreliability. Grant's somber face from the very beginning along with his description of Fiona as being direct and sweet, yet vague and ironic give the impression that something is wrong when it comes to Fiona's perspective. There is thus no need for discursive markers for the materialization of this type of unreliability, with Grant – to put it in Hansen's words – functioning as "an independent witness" for exposing Fiona's unreliability.[15]

In *Away from Her,* Grant represents a background/controlling narration perspective, as described by Gregory Currie:

> A foregrounded perspective is one whose presence is signaled in the work itself, a backgrounded one is a perspective whose presence has to be inferred. The second distinction is one between controlling and noncontrolling perspectives. Background perspectives pertain to characters within the world of the fiction that are to be thought of as telling us facts, or lies, or deluded ravings – but not as telling us a fictional story.[16]

In *Away from Her,* it is Grant, not his wife Fiona, who controls the narrative and represents Fiona's jumbled thoughts in manageable, nearly conventionally coherent narrative structures. In this sense, Grant is the background controlling perspective used to expose Fiona's unreliability in an internarrational manner.

14 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 242.

15 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 241.

16 Gregory Currie, "Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, no. 1 (1995): 21, accessed May 2023, DOI: 10.2307/431733. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/431733>.

Besides these internarrational instances of unreliability, the caretaker's remarks on the difficulties of dealing with demented patients provide another source. She narrates how difficult it is to bear these patients' deranged insults and how one has to learn not to take the comments so personally, and to learn to take the job day by day. This sympathetic and insightful description of the unreliability of demented individuals is materialized from the privileged perspective of the caretaker. To use Olson's terminology, this exposition identifies the possibility that these patients "may falsely report fictional events (misreporting), or make mistakes of perception (misreading), or falsely evaluate events (misregarding)."[17] This unreliability is in stark contrast to situations in which an unreliable perspective represents falsity and inaccuracy intentionally, and is thus ideologically unreliable. Such perspectives may show unreliability "in their not telling enough about what is happening (underreporting), in their failing to grasp events completely (underreading), or their making incomplete value judgments (underregarding)."[18]

In addition to these intranarrational types of unreliability, which both rest on "textually observable issues, which are manifested as conflict,"[19] instances of extratextual unreliability can be found which depend on the prior knowledge and horizon of expectations of the audience.[20] The entirety of the film is shot in the snowy setting of Brant County, Ontario, with one scene showing Fiona getting lost in this harsh frozen setting, foreshadowing her advancing mental oblivion. As Grant's describes Alzheimer's disease as "like a series of circuit breakers in a large house flipping off one by one,"[21] lights are being gradually switched off in a large family home. Through these very conventional representations of stagnation and gloom, viewers readily identify the sense of obliviousness people with dementia experience in their unreliable perceptions of their surroundings.

Regarding literary works, Tamar Yacobi[22] conceptualizes the reader's active contribution to the identification of unreliability in five principles:

> (1) The genetic (the reader seeks out in a historical or biographical context); (2) the generic (genre is used as a frame for dissolving inconsistencies); (3) the existential (the reader compares to models from his/her own reality); (4) the functional (where an explanation is sought in the texts' aesthetic or thematic goals); and (5) the perspectival strategy (the reader attributes inconsistencies to an individual, fictional perspective in the text).[23]

The genetic, the existential and the functional principles could easily include the somber descriptions in *Away from Her* regarding the audience's active contribution in identifying Fiona's unreliability. The film ends with a quote from W.H. Auden's *Letters from Iceland*; representing another attempt at a genetic and a functional principle for viewers to identify with Fiona's oblivious

17 Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 100.

18 Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 101.

19 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 242.

20 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 243.

21 *Away from Her,* directed by Sara Polley (Capri Releasing, Echo Lake Productions, Foundry Films, Hanway Films, and The Film Farm, 2007), 0:44:00 to 0:45:00, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70055883>.

22 Nunning also presents a number of textual signals for readers to identify unreliability in a text. In this regard, see Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 97-98.

23 Tamar Yacobi, "Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem," *Poetics Today* 2, no. 2 (1981): 114, accessed May 2023, DOI: 10.2307/1772193. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772193>.

unreliable perspective: "Only the mad will never, ever come back."[24] Here through principles introduced by Yacobi, the movie's audience start to doubt the visibility of Fiona's worldview and would take Fiona's worldview – which is reliable, authorial and generic for Fiona herself – to be completely unreliable based on the properties of the fictional worldview of the film.[25] These properties, Tetiana Grebeniuk maintains, pertain to "the properties of the characters involved, [and] the formal functions and roles which a particular character plays in the narrative structure. Ideas regarding a lack of correspondence are formed within the scope of the narration itself as well as within the scope of other narrative and non-narrative means."[26] Grant's focalization in the adaptation – and the fact that Fiona resides in a nursing home – create this "lack of correspondence within the scope of [such] narrative and non-narrative means" (which Yacobi terms existential and functional principles) and Fiona's worldview, making her perspective unreliable.

The adaptation clearly shows that Fiona has difficulty hailing short term memory, what Torun calls episodic memories. Fiona does not remember the word "wine," does not know how or where to post a letter, cannot remember important dates or even how long she lived with Grant in the cottage. Even in her retrospective references to the distant past, she is not capable of recounting accurate facts, thus she becomes incapable of maintaining meaningful communication with Grant. Even taking into consideration that editing, manipulating and even constructing aspects are inevitable in the act of reminiscence, the rememberer must remain coherent and to some extent accurate to fulfill the social function of remembering, which is to strike communicative rapport with others. As Torun comments:

> Edited memory must include logical, coherent and suitable changes so that one does not lose his interest. While memories are shared with others, information exchange has to be reliable because listeners look for beneficial and trustworthy signals provided by a character, otherwise they lose their interest. It is reasonable to argue that if a listener believes that speaker's information is not reliable therefore does not provide him with useful information, he would stop taking heed of what he listens. Then, social functions turn out to be useless or even impossible in the case where it believed not to be true.[27]

The film *Away from Her* employs conventional intranarrational, internarrational and extranarrational types of unreliability to represent Fiona's dementia. In this adaptation, Grant and other minor characters, including the caretaker and Marian, have the privileged perspective, with no internal focalization utilized to represent Fiona's feelings or experience regarding her dementia. The only attempts to represent Fiona's mental view from dementia – along with its relative untrustworthiness – occur in two statements in her dialogue. One is when she says that "Half the time, I'm looking for something very pertinent. I just can't remember what it is. […] I think I'm beginning to disappear."[28] And the other case is when she justifies why she likes to be with Aubrey: "You see, he [Aubrey] does not confuse me at all."[29] These represent attempts by

24 *Away from Her*, 01:20:00 to 01:21:00.

25 Grebeniuk, "Narrative Unreliability," 37.

26 Grebeniuk, "Narrative Unreliability," 38.

27 Torun, "Unreliable Narrator," 27.

28 *Away from Her*, 00:10:00 to 00:11:00.

29 *Away from Her*, 01:10:00 to 01:11:00.

Fiona for Grant to understand her, accept her relation with Aubrey, and ultimately for her husband to have more sympathy for her. As Rebecca Anna Bitenc puts it, the narrative structures of such adaptations will eventually "continue to act within the bounds of language and at least minimally coherent narrative acts."[30]

In the next adaptation, *Still Alice,* a more empathetic representation of the unreliable perspective of Alice as the adaptation's demented character will be identified.

Still Alice: The Otherized Unreliability of the Demented Takes on Agency

The eponymous film adaptation of Lisa Genova's novel *Still Alice* (Glatzer and Westmoreland, 2014) depicts the early onset of dementia in the main character, Alice Howland, a linguistics professor at Columbia University. Alice is diagnosed with early onset familial Alzheimer's disease after episodes such as forgetting a word during a lecture and becoming lost during a jog on campus. As the film progresses, Alice's memory deteriorates further, and she is forced to resign from her job. Her condition worsens, as she also becomes disoriented searching for the restroom in her own vacation home. Alice attempts to end her life by overdosing on sleeping pills, but her plan is interrupted when her caregiver arrives. Alice's husband John moves to Minnesota, and her daughter Lydia returns home to care for her. In one of their interactions, Lydia reads a section of the play *Angels in America* to Alice, who can only respond with the word "love."

Like in the previous films analyzed, in this adaptation Alice's verbal tics and discursive anomalies identify her unreliability in an intranarrational manner. Alice's initial bewilderment while jogging on her daily route, forgetting her pudding recipe, inability to recall the details of her teaching syllabus, and later confusion regarding where the bathroom represent only some of the instances of the jarring discursive markers for identifying intranarrational unreliability in the adaptation. Along with these instances, the film is filled with scenes featuring internarrational identification of Alice's unreliability. Her neurologist's report that she has sporadic memory impairment totally out of proportion to her age as well as the faculty's dean informing her that it has been reported that she has turned into an erratic lecturer who cannot administer her classes coherently are some of the instances of internarrational unreliability. Apart from other characters exposing Alice's unreliability in an internarrational manner, an interesting encounter occurs between a more in-control version of Alice and a mentally deteriorated Alice when she accidentally plays an old computer video clip of herself named "Butterfly." Here, the recorded version attempts to give Alice instructions that if she no longer remembers details of her personal life, she should commit suicide. The way "Butterfly" gives these instructions to Alice is quite patronizing, as the Alice watching the video is infantilized and othered by mingling of two perspectival versions of the main character. Hansen, borrowing concepts from Seymour Chatman, comments further:

> [The perspective of the unreliable character or narrator] becomes an active and significant part in the diegesis, and not only the diegetic mediator of the actions and events. Even though it is obvious

30 Rebecca Anna Bitenc, "Dementia Narratives in Contemporary Literature, Life Writing, and Film." (PhD diss., Durham University, 2017), 117, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12157/>.

> that these are two fundamentally different angles to view the same phenomena from, there seems to be a sort of conceptual mixing of them.[31]

This passage shows that if the unreliable perspective actively participates in the act of narration, the representation of the narrative difficulties of characters with dementia may be materialized through external focalization of other characters. In this case Alice herself is this external patronizing focalizer, making the process of internarrational mingling and the contrasting of the two perspectives even more intriguing and effective.

Regarding the extratextual identification of unreliability in *Still Alice,* two scenes may serve as examples by which the viewer's active participation in this type of identification is elicited: Alice's search for a nursing home, and when she paints her face white with toothpaste. In both instances, readers refer to their existential principles – to use Yacobi's term – so that Alice's acceptance of her dementia and going mentally blank may be identified. Besides these scenes, two other examples are featured through which the adaptation – to utilize Nunning's terms – expresses "conscious attempts to direct readers' sympathy" toward Alice.[32] She says that she feels ashamed of her ailment and wishes that she had cancer instead. In another scene, Alice tells Lydia (her daughter who is a struggling theatre actress) that she wants Lydia to have some sort of job security before her mother leaves, showing Lydia comparing her demented condition to a person who is near death. These lines of dialogue show the extent of the excruciating kind of experience Alice feels in her interactions with others, eliciting sympathy of viewers toward Alice based on their general familiarity with the repercussions of cancer, dementia, and death.

Like other adaptations, *Still Alice* depicts Alice's difficulty in remembering immediate dates and events. In her difficulty remembering these things, Alice is an unreliable perspective in terms of remembering details belonging to the distant past. From forgetting the details of her pudding, inability to recall the details of her teaching syllabus or even her academic field of study, to forgetting the identity of her loved ones, her command of both episodic and semantic memories is shown to deteriorate in this adaptation, swiftly turning Alice's perspective into a completely point of view.

Although it seems that Alice's memories of the past would not have no social or communicative function behind them – since as Torun believes the most manipulated and "edited memories must include logical, coherent and suitable changes so that others do not lose interest[33] – Lydia finds a degree of logic in Alice's system of remembering. The uncaring and cold Anna – Alice's other daughter – comments in one part of the adaptation: "Why should she [Alice] worry about remembering something she doesn't have to remember?"[34] On the other hand, Lydia believes that Alice should be given the space to express her communicative efforts, e.g. in her answer to Anna: "If you just let her do it, she won't worry. What's the problem? You don't have to talk about her like she's not sitting right there."[35] Deng describes attempts like the one made by Lydia as "apt

31 Per Krogh Hansen, "When Facts Become Fiction: Facts, Fiction, and Unreliable Narration," in *Fact and Fiction in Narrative: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Lars-A. Skalin (Orebro: Orebro University Press, 2005), 297.

32 Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 98.

33 Torun, "Unreliable Narrator," 27.

34 *Still Alice*, directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland (Killer Films, Lutzus-Brown, BSM Studio, Big Indie Pictures, and Shriver Films, 2014), 00:55:00 to 00:56:00, <https://www.netflix.com/pl-en/title/70301350>.

35 *Still Alice,* 00:56:00 to 00:57:00.

hesitation" in favor of the demented through which the un-demented character (here Lydia) could materialize "an opportunity to expand her critical-ethical vision by allowing her perceptual field to be reoriented by others [here Alice]. Through hesitation, [Lydia] is putting both her worldview and [Alice's] new worldview into a relational conversation so as to engender a reconfiguration of the network of attachments."[36] Unlike Anna, Lydia strives toward expressing "radical empathy which involves engaging with someone else's experiences, rather than one's own, while at the same time suspending the usual assumption that both parties share the same space of possibilities."[37] Anna is stuck in her own un-demented realm of possibilities, creating a situation in which she is unable to see the point or value in Alice trying to recall these simple details. Anna remains distant – and at best sympathetic – toward Alice's circumstances.

Bitenc believes characters like Lydia treat characters with dementia like semiotic subjects, a concept developed in the validation therapy. On opposite view would be that the needs of these individuals should be taken into account and met with respect:

> Validation therapy argues we should acknowledge and validate the point of view and emotions of the person with dementia. *Still Alice* validates the perspective of the person with dementia by foregrounding her point of view above all others. It thereby makes the emotional reactions of a person with dementia understandable. This work's strategy here could be described as either ambassadorial strategic empathy or broadcast strategic empathy in that its calls upon readers who are not suffering from dementia to feel with members of a group – here, early-onset Alzheimer's patients – by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations.[38]

It is this empathy that makes Alice retain her communicative rapport with Lydia until the very end of the movie. Lydia has difficulty uttering even a single word, but understands Lydia's love discourse regardless of the arbitrary connection between signifiers and signifieds in language. This love is also materialized earlier in the adaptation when Lydia asks Alice about her experience as a demented person.

> Alice: You know, it is not always the same. I have good days and bad days. And on my good days, I can, you know, almost pass for a normal person. But on my bad days, I feel like I can't find myself. I've always been defined by my intellect, my language, my articulation, and now, sometimes, I can see the words hanging in front me. And I can't reach them. I don't know who I am. And I don't know what I'm gonna lose next.
> Lydia: That sounds horrible.
> Alice: Thanks for asking.[39]

In these two instances, Lydia still acknowledges her subjectivity by trying to help her mother form a relational identity, which is, As Bitenc explains, rooted in our "professional roles, our memories, and reside equally in our everyday encounters with others and our capacity for relationships."[40] Relational identity here functions in two ways: not only does the daughter honor

36 Deng, *Ageing, Dementia*, 13.

37 Deng, *Ageing, Dementia*, 14-15.

38 Bitenc, "Dementia Narratives," 92.

39 *Still Alice*, 00:57:00.

40 Bitenc, "Dementia Narratives," 94.

her historic relationship with her mother, but she also acknowledges a new form of relationship with her, one which is not situated on her role as mother or her ability to recognize her daughter. In this sense, "the film, perhaps more realistically and less sentimentally, underlines Alice's capacity to engage with others in the moment. Her relational identity and her humanity are enacted in such encounters with others."[41]

These instances show how Alice – while drowning in her oblivion and dementia – experiences genuine communication with her daughter. By showing this relationship, the adaptation approximates itself to representing a more comprehensive rendition of Alice's unreliable perspective, one not filled only with blankness and inaccuracy. Another instance through which a more genuine understanding of unreliability is represented is how Alice as a person losing her cognition is aware of this process. Apart from the earlier example, another scene in the adaptation in which Alice is asked by her neurologist to deliver a speech in Alzheimer's Association Care Conference shows this cognizance. Here, the self-awareness of Alice provides the viewer a telling picture of the cognitive capabilities that a demented individual may show to the very end of their mental decline:

> Good morning. It's an honor to be here. The poet Elizabeth Bishop once wrote "The art of losing isn't hard to master. So many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster." I am not a poet. I am a person living with early onset Alzheimer's. And as that person, I find myself learning the art of losing everyday. Losing my bearings, losing objects, losing sleep… but mostly, losing memories. [...] Everything I've worked so hard for… Now all that is being ripped away. […] Who can take us seriously when we are so far from who we once were? Our strange behavior and fumbled sentences change others' perceptions of us and our perception of ourselves. We become ridiculous, incapable, comic. But this is not who we are. This is our disease. And like any disease, it has a cause… it has a progression… and it could have a cure. […] But for the time being, I'm still alive. I know I'm alive. I have people I love dearly. […] And please, do not think that I am suffering. I am not suffering. I am struggling. Struggling to be a part of things… to stay connected to who I once was. […] One thing I will try to hold onto, though, is the memory of speaking here today. It will go. I know it will. It may be gone by tomorrow… but it means so much to be talking here today… like my old, ambitious self who was so fascinated by co communication. Thank you for this opportunity. It means the world to me. Thank you.[42]

As Bitenc explains, it is occasionally said that at least a person with dementia is spared the knowledge of his or her mental decline – a statement that suggests that a person with dementia completely loses self-awareness. However, testimonies such as Alice's suggest that the recognition of one's own decline is precisely what makes the progress of dementia such a painful experience.[43] Such glimpses into this dark world from those experiencing it can provide for outsiders a more genuine picture of the unreliable but speckled with self-awareness perspective of sufferers of mental decline.

As observed, in *Still Alice,* various types of intranarrational, internarrational and extratextual unreliability are present. In this adaptation, Alice has difficulty recalling both short-term and long-term memories; yet she – with Lydia's help – manages to preserve some extent of the social function of remembering. This, alongside the representation of her self-awareness of her mental

41 Bitenc, "Dementia Narratives," 94.

42 *Still Alice,* 01:07:00 to 01:10:00.

43 Rebecca Anna Bitenc, "Representation of Dementia in Narrative Fiction," in *Knowledge and Pain,* eds. Esther Cohen, Leona Toker, Manuela Consonni, and Otniel E. Dror (Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodolpi B.V., 2012), 305-306.

decline, helps us glean a more genuine insight into Alice's own experience of dementia, thus moves us toward having more empathy with her. It needs to be emphasized that this adaptation's narratological frameworks also remain coherent.

Like in *Away from Her,* in this film adaptation, Alice's radical alterity is slowly being erased, but is ultimately contained through the work's controlled and logical narratological framework. No instance of randomness, fragmentation, or incoherence are featured nor any non-linear jumps in timeline. These are features which could have given Alice's unreliable perspective a kind of internal focalization of the kind which more formally represent Anthony's narrative unreliability in *The Father*, our next film adaptation to be analyzed.

The Father: The Experimental Representation of Demented Unreliability Develops Audience Empathy

The Father (Zeller, 2021) follows Anthony, a dementia patient, through a fragmented, non-linear narrative reflecting his disjointed memories. After dismissing another caregiver, Anthony's daughter Anne warns him he must accept care or face placement in a nursing home. During an interview with the new caregiver Laura, Anthony remarks on her resemblance to his estranged daughter Lucy. It becomes evident that Anthony has been living with Anne for years, despite his belief that he lives alone. Anne and her husband, who is alternately called Paul or James and is portrayed by two different actors, argue about a canceled holiday due to Anthony's needs. In the final scene, Anthony awakens in a hospital corridor, thinking it is his flat, only to find himself in a nursing home. His nurse, who has previously been identified as both Anne and Laura, introduces herself as Catherine and explains that Anne lives in Paris and visits on weekends. Overwhelmed by confusion and Anne's absence, Anthony breaks down, and Catherine comforts him, promising to take him to the park later.

Like in the other adaptations, instances of intranarrational, internarrational and extratextual unreliability are portrayed. Anthony's initial forgetting of where he put his watch, not knowing who bought groceries, not knowing where to put the garbage, and uttering contradictory remarks regarding his autonomy and lack of autonomy are some of the examples through which intranarrational unreliability is materialized in the film. As can be deduced, most of these examples show Anthony's lack of command of episodic short term memory as well.

Anne can be regarded as the narratological referent point for identifying Anthony's internarrational unreliability in this manner. Whenever she is present as the only narrative agent in a sequence, the narration structure experiences no jumps or unpredictability, which also give Anne, in turn, narrational authenticity and privilege. In one part of the film, Anne comments about Anthony: "He is too intelligent that sometimes, he even surprises himself."[44] This emphasis on the adverb "sometimes" gives us the hint that on most occasions, Anthony's perspective should not be trusted, a clear identification of internarrational unreliability. Throughout the film, the of Paul – who we led to believe is Anne's husband – as well as the ultimate presence of Catherine

44 *The Father,* directed by Florian Zeller (F comme Film, Trademark Films, Ciné-@, AG Studios, Les Films du Cru, Film4, Orange Studio, Canal+, and Ciné+, 2021), 01:04:00 to 01:05:00, <https://www.netflix.com/br-en/title/80231331>.

and Bill – Anthony's caretakers in the nursing home – can be regarded as other agents exposing Anthony's internarrational unreliability. Nevertheless, due to Anthony's unsettled presence and his repeated misidentification of the other characters, Anne is the most reliable reference point for exposing Anthony's unreliability in an internarrational manner. As Hansen describes, in having such a multiplicity of perspectives

> it will often be possible to reconstruct a Master Tale (that is, a privileged fabula) on the basis of the different perspectives, but it is different in cases where the different perspectives' rendering of the same events are incommensurable and no superior version seems to emerge. None of the perspectives has a privileged body of knowledge or a privileged position that authorizes their version. In this case, all perspectives are unreliable and the text is established as conflicting multiperspectivism.[45]

In this film, other characters' perspectives remain "incommensurable," thus Anne acquires the only "privileged knowledge and position."

Trying to find a watch and cleaning a CD when it does not play properly might be regarded as the two prominent symbols by which the audience's participation in identifying Anthony's dementia and unreliability is elicited in an extratextual manner. Both instances show Anthony's symbolic desperation to acquire clarity and agency in his life. As Yacobi explains, through utilizing existential and functional principles, viewers may easily identify these figurative efforts as markers for Anthony's clouded mentality as well as his efforts to dismiss and compensate for his unreliability. The film's focus on Anthony's occasional self-awareness of his dementia could be regarded as another extratextual hint to sway readers toward accepting Anthony's perspective with grain of salt. In one part of the adaptation, he relates his suspicions to Catherine, who we eventually realize is his caretaker: "Strange things going around us. Haven't you noticed? There was this man claiming this was not my flat. […] This is my flat, isn't it?"[46] Such acknowledgments precede Anthony's ultimate confession that something is wrong with him through poignant mixed metaphors, conflating childhood and an aging tree: "I want my mommy to come and fetch me. I want to go home. I feel as if I'm losing all my leaves, the branches, the wind and the rain. I don't know what is happening anymore. Do you know what is happening? I have nowhere to put down my head anymore."[47] These heart-wrenching comments could be regarded under both of these categories presented by Nunning: "an admitted lack of reliability, memory gaps, and comments on cognitive limitations, and [the text's] conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy.[48] In the film, the sympathy for the demented character is evoked in the viewer through the identification of unreliability in an extratextual manner.

As mentioned above, Anthony struggles to recall short-term memories, but he also has difficulty hailing memories from more distant past. The old man cannot even remember that his younger daughter Lucy has passed away in an accident. In order to compensate for such mnemonic impairment, he constructs a number of conflicting memories, yet another factor that causes his perspective to seem extremely inaccurate, untrustworthy and incoherent. As he does not recall

45 Hansen, "The Unreliable Narrator," 241-242.

46 *The Father,* 00:24:00 to 00:25:00.

47 *The Father,* 01:18:00 to 01:20:00.

48 Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 98.

Lucy's death, Anthony begins confusing Anne with Lucy, and defensively patronizes Anne in this comparison: "My daughter [Anne] has a tendency to repeat herself, but you know what it is like; it's an age thing. […] Unlike Lucy, Anne was like her mother; sober. Her mother was the same. The soberest woman I've ever met!"[49] Anthony couples these concocted observations with other bizarre claims. He claims that in his youth he was a tap dancer, despite Anne's disclosure that in fact he was an engineer. Through categories introduced by Torun, it can be claimed that for hailing memories – both voluntary and involuntary – Anthony cannot maintain the fluid boundaries among edited and non-edited memories:

> Editing process of memory takes place in utilizing one's memories. Here, the reason why you call on a memory can be crucial for editing. One basically goes over his memory to edit before making use of it whereas unedited memories are generally used in the same way one has it [*sic*] in his mind. Having this general description in mind, we can look into the crucial part where they articulate the connection taking place [*sic*] between voluntary versus involuntary and edited versus not edited memories. […] voluntary memories are generally edited with respect to the expected needs of the rememberer.[50]

For Anthony, the reason for sharing memories is to prove – quite defensively – that his perspective still matters. Nevertheless, due to the inaccuracy and incoherence of his mnemonic references, he is not able to uphold the division between his purely fabricated and edited memories and non-edited ones (whether they have been hailed voluntarily or involuntarily).

What makes interesting this film's particular identification of intranarrational, internarrational and extratextual types of unreliability along with its representation of Anthony's mnemonic references is the materialization of internal focalization for Anthony. Anthony's seemingly zero focalization gives the viewer – the classic invisible observers – the illusion of objectivity of his perspective in some parts of the movie. When this sense of continuity is shattered by abrupt shifts and changes in the identification of the people and places performed by Anthony, the audience realizes the ultimate subjectivity of this pseudo-objective perspective, thus at least momentarily we are placed directly into Anthony's disjointed perspective.

In this perspective, all one can experience is abrupt jumps, utter randomness and a non-linear understanding of the events in Anthony's life, features which are not experienced in the same way in through the coherent and external focalization on the demented characters' unreliability displayed in the other films. Until the very end of Zeller's *The Father*, viewers cannot know for sure whether Anthony is living in his own flat, has a room in nursing home, or is in a waiting lounge of the hospital where Lucy dies. It is only through the ultimate exposure of his confinement in the nursery home that all the merits of his seemingly objective/camera-like/zero focalized perspective are shattered, and till this point, all we can experience is the non-linear (and potentially frustrating) fluidity of Anthony's unreliable and perspectival take of his surroundings.

Unlike the other films, *The Father* makes great use of cinematic means for bringing the audience right into Anthony's unreliable perspective. By advancing the majority of the film's narrative through Anthony's jumpy, non-linear, utterly fluid and inaccurate perspective, the spectator – to use Brutsch's description – becomes "restricted to the experience of the central character in a much

49 *The Father,* 00:30:00 to 00:32:00.

50 Torun, "Unreliable Narrator," 19-20.

more fundamental way than at first seemed the case. The dynamic is thus one from objectivity to subjectivity."[51] Due to the seemingly objective focalization in *The Father*, no – or at least very little – distance exists between viewers and Anthony as the demented character until the very end, only a mutual liminal space "implicitly between the spectator and the narrative text [of the adaptation] as a whole, which becomes explicit in the final revelations."[52] This lack of distance and our shared experience of Anthony's unreliable perspective with minimal narratological distancing results in the audience having empathy for Anthony, rather than pitying him with external sympathy. The paradox is that, while at the end of the film we find Anthony an otherized entity ending his life in a nursing home, we must recall that over the course of the narrative we have in fact shared his perspective and way of being.

Conclusion

In *Away from Her* as the more conventional film adaptation, the employment of external focalization as the means for representing the unreliable perspective of demented characters can be identified. Intranarrational, internarrational and extratextual types of unreliability represent demented characters as otherized figures with whom the audience should have mere sympathy, with none of the internal experience and feelings regarding dementia revealed to the viewer.

In *Still Alice*, the otherizing narrational techniques and typology of unreliability can also be found, but Alice as the demented character is situated in a semi-demented situation, so that her self-awareness regarding her mental ailment and deterioration – and in turn her internal experience of dementia – may to an extent be shared with the audience. This gives the audience the opportunity of bestowing a relational identity to Alice, and thus developing a degree of empathy for her.

It is in *The Father* that almost all conventional and externalized representations of demented unreliability are done away with. Despite remaining an otherized figure, Anthony as this adaptation's demented character provides the audience an almost unfiltered and internalized, thus more highly subjective, interpretation of his surroundings. This gives the audience a glimpse of the utterly unreliable, fluid, jumpy, constructivist, and non-linear nature of such a perspective, including the mnemonic references and identifications of both places and people. These formal techniques empower these characters, eventually also empowering the audience to have genuine empathy for the demented and live in their stead, at least momentarily. Our analysis thus concludes that the more incoherent and experimental narrational techniques and frameworks are used, the more genuine and empathetic is the work in representing unreliability in characters with dementia.

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