

The Anhedonic Among the Camellias: Woody Allen and Reflective Love

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Roland Barthes's analysis of Alexander Dumas's "The Lady of the Camellias" describes the play's central character Marguerite, who "loves in order to achieve recognition, and this is why her passion (in the etymological, not the libidinal sense) has its source entirely in other people...Marguerite is *aware* of her alienation, that is to say, she sees reality as an alienation...is never anything more than an alienated awareness: she sees that she suffers, but imagines no remedy which is not parasitic to her own suffering."¹ Woody Allen's analysis of his fictional Alvy Singer describes the film's central character, who "would never belong to a club that would have me for a member."²

Alvy, in fact, serves as a makeshift Marguerite. If the clauses of Barthes' aforementioned analysis serve as topographical pinpoints on a map to anhedonia, the central protagonist of *Annie Hall* follows the blazed path. As the film opens, Alvy recounts himself as a character in relation to his estranged girlfriend (or, perhaps, he finds his source entirely in other people). His chronicled childhood memories are dominated by a classroom scene where he catalogues the future exploits of his classmates. ("I run a profitable dress company," says one. "I'm into leather," concedes another.) Even the film's

¹ Roland Barthes, "The Lady of the Camellias," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, 89-92 (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 91.

² *Annie Hall*, directed by Woody Allen, 1977.

title belies this insecurity, as a film ostensibly about Annie Hall's boyfriend retains her name on the poster—implying that any accurate definition of Alvy must principally include Annie.

Certainly Alvy is aware of his alienation (that is to say, he sees reality as engendering alienation). "The rest of the country looks upon New York like we're left-wing communist Jewish homosexual pornographers," he laments. "I think of us that way sometimes, and I live here." This situation, like Marguerite's, is the dual state of suffering and awareness of suffering. And Alvy, like Marguerite, imagines no remedy which is not parasitic to his condition. Of course, the remedy he tries is love, fulfilling the self-defeating cycle described by Dumas. In his relationship with Annie, Alvy's actions appear less like those of "The Lady of the Camellias" and more like "Pygmalion." His projection of himself onto the object of his affection manifests itself in the form of teaching the girl from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin how to be New York Proper.

But Alvy's attempts at palliative love are unsuccessful. "Why did I turn off Allison Porchnick?" he asks in a narrative aside. "She was beautiful, she was willing, she was real intelligent." Fulfillment, however—the removal of that awareness of alienation—never happened. Just before this awakening, Alvy spends his time alone in the bedroom with his wife contemplating the Kennedy assassination. This is not to say that attempts at love are not worthwhile. As Alvy and Annie sit in a deli ordering sandwiches, he recounts a second unsuccessful attempt at marriage.

Allen's cinematic treatment of love (in marriage or otherwise) argues that the experience is an ineffective but ultimately worthwhile palliative for anhedonia—the inability to experience pleasure or romantic fulfillment. Love, for Allen, is essentially unattainable, or at least incapable of bringing happiness, but it remains the best coping strategy at our disposal, and thus remains a worthwhile endeavor. Herein lies Allen's (like Dumas') backhanded endorsement of love: *You might as well, he tells us, because, if nothing else, love will lead to sex, which makes you forget death and loneliness until the next morning.* While Marguerite copes through servile behavior, making herself a social object, Woody Allen chooses mild narcissism—brooding over his alienation and functioning as an object of the recognition he seeks through his original conception of love.

Perhaps Allen's most effective presentation of that narcissism-as-escape comes in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.³ Clifford Stern, a documentary filmmaker, is trapped in a frustrating marriage devoid of that necessary reflective love. The situation leaves him brooding over his own inadequacies and spending his time trying to instill his values in his niece. It is no coincidence that the woman who captures his affection is a film producer, in whom he can find the reflection that can help him forget his lifeless, loveless marriage. Together, the two dissect the philosophy of one of Clifford's documentary subjects, professor Louis Levy. "What we are aiming at when we fall in love is a very strange paradox," declares Levy. "The paradox consists of the fact that when we fall in love, we are seeking to re-find all or some of the people to whom we were attached as children. On

³ *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, directed by Woody Allen, 1989.

the other hand, we ask our beloved to correct all of the wrongs that these early parents or siblings inflicted on us. So love contains within it the contradiction—the attempt to return to the past, and the attempt to undo the past.” For Levy, that attempt at love was necessarily reflective and, in its role as reflector, necessarily impossible.

It is also no coincidence that the philosopher commits suicide before the film’s conclusion. Paradoxes by their very definition are unsolvable. Love cannot be a verdict; it can only be a recess. Its presence as palliative, however, and its fundamentally selfish nature, make it neither wrong nor unnecessary. Though Clifford experiences the closing credits alone, Allen’s prototypical protagonist continues to appear, expanding on similar fears about death, loneliness, and a general existential abyss. His solution every time is another attempt at reflective love—a love in which he can see himself as the object of the affection of someone who will be the intellectual, emotional, and sexual embodiment of all of his preordained ideals. His attempts are necessarily ineffective, but, more importantly, they never abate. Love, presented in each film and in the collective Allen oeuvre, is the best option for staving off the harsh realities of life, even if, in the end, it is no option at all. So Allen presents a protagonist whose inability to be happy is postponed through fumbling attempts at reflective love, finding recognition in his passion (both in the etymological *and* the libidinal sense), its source entirely in other people. The director’s ambivalence toward love, his trenchant observations about it, and the reasons for his sustained devotion to the grand ideal lies somewhat hidden but ever-present—like Dumas’ lady, somewhere among the camellias.

For Allen, love thus becomes a strategy for survival, or what anthropologist James Scott calls a “weapon of the weak.”⁴ That is, faced with existential crisis at every turn, Allen’s characters construct a way out through the idealization of the notion of love—rather than, say, the idealization of a particular person. His 1979 film *Manhattan* illustrates this in several respects.⁵ For one, the recurring motif of existential dread is expressed in several scenes, but perhaps most cogently in the sequence in which Allen and Diane Keaton, seeking escape from a downpour, tour the Hayden Planetarium. The metaphor is almost overbearing but still resonates: we are adrift in the universe, just as is Allen’s Isaac Davis. Indeed, love seems to be the only viable antidote to nothingness. Clearly, Isaac’s affair with the adolescent Tracy (Mariel Hemingway) signals his wish to recapture his youth, when love was all-encompassing. The pivotal break-up scene—set to brilliant effect in an old-fashioned ice cream parlor—reveals how absurd Isaac’s efforts have been. Indeed, in *Manhattan* all of the characters careen from one failed attempt at love to another.

The city itself represents a major character, but Allen consciously idealizes this as well. In the same year that Mick Jagger described the city as rife with vermin and disease, Allen offered an ode to the island.⁶ Carlo Di Palma’s lush camera work, set to Gershwin, underscores Allen’s conceit that Manhattan is a city of romance and dreams. It

⁴ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁵ *Manhattan*, directed by Woody Allen, 1979.

⁶ Rolling Stones, “Shattered,” from the album *Some Girls*, Virgin Records, 1978.

thus becomes significant to note that his 1985 *Hannah and Her Sisters* takes a more cynical, yet more realistic view.⁷ In the latter film the characters once again pursue doomed relationships (leaving romantic wreckage in their paths), but this time the sets—designed by Santo Loquasto—are bleaker and more desolate. Michael Caine’s feverish confession of his adoration for Barbara Hershey (his wife’s sister) is framed against a backdrop of graffiti and urban decay. Moreover, Allen’s date with Diane Wiest takes place in the Bowery, at the punk club CBGB. Although both films recognize love as the only means of coping with the world, *Hannah* presents a more sanguine view. *Manhattan* ultimately represents the stronger work, if only because Allen refuses to compromise his ontological position. In *Hannah*, the plotlines are neatly wrapped up: Allen escapes cancer and suicide, and even manages to find love. In *Manhattan* he insists that his characters stare into the abyss, that they face their own hypocrisy.

Allen’s most trenchant criticism is reserved for the character Yale, played by the often-brilliant character actor, Michael Murphy.⁸ Yale seeks renewal and meaning in extra-marital affairs, while longing to express himself creatively (he half-heartedly attempts to craft a biography of Eugene O’Neill). But ultimately, he chooses to buy a Porsche, and for Allen this marks his slide into decadence. In siding with the material, Yale has admitted defeat in the larger struggle to find meaning and fulfillment. In one of the film’s pivotal scenes, Allen and Yale argue beside a Cro-Magnon skeleton. The symbolism is clear:

⁷ *Hannah and Her Sisters*, directed by Woody Allen, 1985.

⁸ See, for example, Murphy’s performance in Robert Altman’s 1973 *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.

death is inescapable.⁹ One's only recourse is to have character and integrity. Referring to the skeleton as he berates Yale for betraying his friendship, Isaac puts it succinctly: "I'll be hanging in a classroom one day and I want to make sure when I thin out that I'm well thought of."¹⁰ Of course, Allen stops just short of making his own character, Isaac, possess integrity. Instead, he ignores his own moral code and begs his young lover to stay with him in the film's closing moments. (And this despite his earlier insistence that she leave him in order to improve herself.) Thus in *Manhattan* love does not serve as a mechanism for finding deeper meaning in life, but rather as a tool for deluding ourselves.

Allen spent much of the 1980s exploring new techniques, often with astounding, if under-appreciated, success. His mock-documentary *Zelig* further advanced the motif of man's inexhaustible quest to find acceptance, but critics and audiences tended to ignore the film's ideas in favor of praising its skillful mixture of genre: the seamless blending of newsreel footage, interviews (with real figures such as Susan Sontag), and still shots. All served to obscure its thematic nuances.¹¹ His other work of the decade returned again and again to the notion of love as an escape hatch. And if love proved unworkable popular culture would have to suffice, as films such as *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Radio*

⁹ Allen makes a similar point in *Annie Hall*, when he insists on buying for Annie a copy a of the 1973 pop psychology book, *The Denial of Death*, by Ernest Becker (New York: The Free Press, 1974). In interviews Allen has cited this book as a major influence on his thinking during the mid 1970s; indeed, the attempt to escape death informs the work of this period, if not his entire oeuvre.

¹⁰ The subtext of this line suggests Allen's own sense of his legacy as a filmmaker, a point he return to in, among other films, *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Shadows and Fog* (1992).

¹¹ *Zelig*, directed by Woody Allen, 1982.

Days suggest, which idealize bygone forms of entertainment. And both, significantly, allow Allen to stop time, as he continues to search for a stay of his own existential execution—a death by a thousand small cuts.¹²

Allen's 1992 *Husbands and Wives* marks a more potent expression of the anhedonic crisis that has gripped Allen's characters as far back as his portrayal of Virgil Starkwell in 1969's *Take the Money and Run*.¹³ Evoking Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Husbands and Wives* opens with the unraveling of a marriage. This opening sequence, once again shot by Di Palma, is done with hand-held cameras, injecting the film with a sense of realism, which is further enhanced by the documentary-style testimonials each character gives to an off-screen interviewer. Jack (Sydney Pollack) and Sally (Judy Davis) causally announce to Gabe and Judy (Allen and Farrow, whose off-screen relationship famously collapsed during the post-production of this project) that they are getting a divorce.¹⁴ The subsequent plot hinges on these four characters reacting to this revelation. All of them proceed to pursue their own respective relationships, with varying degrees of success. Jack, much like *Manhattan's* Yale, seeks sexual renewal in a youthful, if intellectually bereft aerobics instructor. Tellingly, she foolishly attempts to explain the prescience of astrology to skeptical academics at a dinner party—Allen has been steadfast throughout his career in deriding New Age escapism. Jack's estranged wife Sally struggles to

¹² *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, directed by Woody Allen, 1985; and *Radio Days*, *ibid.*, 1987.

¹³ *Husbands and Wives*, directed by Woody Allen, 1992; *Take the Money and Run*, *ibid.*, 1969.

¹⁴ For speculation on the parallels between Allen's personal life and *Husbands and Wives*, see John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2000), 259.

overcome her bitter resentment at the male species—the film’s funniest scenes trace her attempts to re-enter the dating scene. Critic Vincent Canby rightly called her one of Allen’s most “endearingly impossible characters,” and her seething rage nicely contrasts with Farrow’s “submerged anger.”¹⁵

Meanwhile Allen and Farrow engage in affairs of their own. Gabe quickly falls for Rain, a young creative writing student played by Juliette Lewis, and Gabe is wary from the outset, wondering if this affair isn’t like “\$59,000 of psychotherapy dialing 911.”¹⁶

Unbeknownst to Gabe, Judy tentatively pursues Michael (Liam Neeson) who works in her office, but who she initially introduces to Sally, only to fall for him herself. Described by her ex-husband as passive-aggressive, Farrow’s Judy is as Canby pointed out, a “waif with claws.” Indeed, she represents a remarkable, significant turn in Allen’s work. In *Husbands and Wives* the idea of love ultimately comes unhinged. Jack and Sally reconcile, and in doing so openly concede that love is imperfect, if not unattainable. The portrayal of love as expressed by Judy is revealed to be full of cunning—a strategy of conquest. Finally, Gabe laments at the film’s close that he is susceptible to “kamikaze women,” who crash into him, leaving him in ruins. But, as if to complete the circle begun by *Annie Hall*, he admits that he must continue to seek out new relationships. In the cold world of Allen’s films (a world ironically stuffed with one-liners and sight gags) love is all there is. That the endless search for it fails to bring fulfillment ultimately proves irrelevant.

¹⁵ Vincent Canby, “Husbands and Wives; Fact? Fiction? It Doesn’t Matter,” the *New York Times*, 18 September 1992.

Barthes reads this love as problematic. He describes the “mythological content of this love, which is the archetype of petit-bourgeois sentimentality. It is a very particular state of myth, defined by a semi-awareness, or to be more precise, a parasitic awareness.”¹⁷ Allen depicts the same parasitic component of love, but understands it as inevitable. After all, the character he chooses for himself is generally the parasitic lover. Love among the camellias, for Allen, is better than the abject absence of flowers. Or, perhaps his characters belong among chickens rather than flowers—animals rather than vegetables. “This guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, ‘Doc, my brother’s crazy. He thinks he’s a chicken.’ And the doctor says, ‘Why don’t you turn him in?’ Guy says, ‘I would, but I need the eggs.’” As the voiceover continues, Alvy leaves the street corner.

“I guess that’s how I pretty much feel about relationships,” he concludes. “They’re totally irrational and crazy and absurd, but I guess we keep going through it because most of us need the eggs.” Would that Marguerite would have felt the same about the flowering of her romantic entanglements. And would that she could have somehow crept into a club that would patiently have her as a member.

¹⁷ Barthes, “The Lady of the Camellias,” 91.