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FASCIST ART IN A POST-MODERN ERA:
WOODY ALLEN AND THE CULT OF NEW YORK

“This city is a knock-out,” says Isaac Davis, the protagonist of award-winning and critically acclaimed *Manhattan* (1976). He’s talking about New York City, looking wistfully at the Brooklyn Bridge in the moonlight. Woody Allen constructs a romance around New York, showcasing the city’s iconic landmarks, but he does not leave out even the menial symbols of city like a trashcan or a fire escape, making them appear breathtakingly pleasing and quixotic. New York city dwellers too, from beautiful women to eccentric media people, appear just as wistfully unreal, with curious lives and elaborate character depth. Walter Benjamin in his article “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” has another word for this artistic romance centered around New York; he calls it “aura”, and attaches onto it a meaning of historical ritual in traditional art. It seems important to discuss this aura: how is this aura produced cinematically and thematically? Fundamentally, how does aura fit into modern film? In order to answer these questions, we must first discuss Benjamin’s formal definition of aura, and then apply his late-1930’s discourse of film to modern day film.

AURA IN FILM

Walter Benjamin writes *Works in the Age of the Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) in a time of industrial change. He notes that mechanical reproduction has given way to a new emerging art because for the first time, art can be quickly and repeatedly reproduced. Suppose the artist starts with the “original”, for instance, the landscape of a pleasant mountain-side. Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be”¹.

¹ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 222

That is, the onlooker of this mountain-side recognizes its beauty in its evergreen trees or the natural bend of their branches, and hence feels reverent and full of awe. *The mountain-side is something aside from myself*, the onlooker thinks, perceiving it to be a distant, unattainable thing; a manual reproduction of this image like a painting or drawing only seeks to attain the uniqueness and permanence of the image. Such art is historically based on ritual, as rooted in a religious or cult tradition, as a medium in order to express a tribute to something. Therefore, an artwork in reference to its aura can never be separated from ritual.

On the other hand, *mechanical* reproduction produces new mediums of art like lithography, photography, and then film that are no longer parasitically dependent on the original image. “For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angel at will”². The same can be said of film. The montage, the close-up, the flashback, slow motion, rewind and playback as cinematic devices present to the audience a world that is beyond what the naked eye could perceive in one moment in time. Consequently, because photography and film ultimately change the way we view art, art as we know it has lost its authenticity in something that imitates reality, and has lost its uniqueness in that it can be reproduced mechanically.

I would like to address Benjamin’s description of film, and apply it to the way films are viewed several decades after such a description was written. Benjamin mentions results of film as an art form: first, the actor’s body in a film, meant to be a work of art, is disconnected from his audience by a cold, hard camera lens; second, through cutting and editing a film, it becomes by no means one piece but is a fragmented compilation of many separate performances. In response

² Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 222

to his treatment of the actor, it is clear Benjamin's primary attribution of the artist is to the actor in film. However, it is now convention in modern day film to attribute the final product of a film to the director, or more appropriately, the auteur, a term advocated by François Truffaut two decades after "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was published³. The concept of the auteur implies that despite (or perhaps because of) films being mostly of industrial creation, the distinction creative voice of the director is reflected through the film. Thus, actors, dialogue, chronology, props, backdrop, and lighting are all simply means to a final product that is orchestrated and manipulated by the auteur until he achieves the overall effect that he desires. Because it is not the actor body nor the landscape that is the art piece, but rather the sum of the parts designated by the auteur, what Benjamin argues is true; art in these modern times has lost its parasitic dependence on the "original". Now that we accept that the performance of the actor is not the original art but rather one part of the whole effect of the film, it is understood that slicing and editing a performance is no longer a loss. Instead, the use of multiple cameras and shooting from various angles only serve to give the viewer the illusion of a full perspective, thereby accomplishing the feeling of naturalness. The audience is not peering from a distance. They feel as though they are inside the scene, looking from one face of a character to another, and that is only possible with editing. It is as Benjamin says, "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web... [The pictures] of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant"⁴. In film there is no original and no distance, consequently

³ François Truffaut first brought up the term in "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema", published in 1954.

⁴ Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Pg 234.

there is no aura nor can there be a replacement of aura. The new effect and point of film is to recreate reality. Benjamin notes, “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed”⁵. What then, is the total function of art?

I propose that aura in film in the 70’s has been replaced by cultural relevance. No longer does the on-looker of this art think, *this film is something aside from myself*, in reverence. Rather he thinks, *how does this film portray reality as I know it*, or, *how do the themes in this film relate to me, my friends, my world?* Benjamin states, “Filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements about the situation... it can be isolated more easily”⁶. Further still, he is optimistic about this fact; film, penetrating deeply into reality and making available for the mass the ability to critique it as experts, empowers people towards their own understanding of their culture and world. Art is no longer perceived through a ritualistic distance, but as a way of taking apart politics and culture. Thus, if there *were* to be an aura in an art form, a part from ritual and religious tribute, Benjamin would most likely feel a cause for alarm. How can aura be manipulated into the art without ritual or an original? According to Benjamin, it is a function of fascism to “give these mass not their right, but the chance to express themselves... The masses have a right to change property relations, [but] Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.”⁷ Without empowering change and action through film, fascism uses art to rationalize the current state of the masses. Benjamin

⁵ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 224

⁶ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 236

⁷ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 241

reminds us of an example of such fascism in Marinetti, who says in his manifesto of Ethiopian Colonel War, “War is beautiful... it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns... it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire... the stench of putrefaction into a symphony... Remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic... may be illuminated by them!”⁸

Marinetti here uses eloquence to paint into being a pictorial beauty, in order to make harmony between industrial destruction and nature. Benjamin is convinced that the destructiveness of industrial machines is an indication that man has not yet been “mature” enough to cope with technology⁹, and attempting to reason such a destructive thing as war with “new literature and new graphic” is only fascism at work.

We also consider Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, a critically acclaimed film that covered the 1936 summer Olympics held at Berlin, Germany. Riefenstahl showcases the human body in athletics in a “festival of beauty”, yet at the same time glorifies political leaders (i.e. Adolf Hitler), the German flag, and armed marches as part of a grandiose spectacle of in a ‘festival of nationalism.’ It is through her slow motion, close-ups of bodies, and unique, strategic camera angles that Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* feels eerily ritualistic, grandiose, and cultish, and perhaps for those reasons was widely questioned as German propaganda. These pieces of art are known to be “fascist” in that they attempt to restore aura to art by inspiration not of religious or spiritual ritual, but national, political ritual.

Director, actor, and screenwriter Woody Allen could too be guilty of precisely that. In films that he shoots in New York like *Manhattan* (1976), *Annie Hall* (1979), and *Hannah and*

⁸ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 241.

⁹ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Pg 242

Her Sisters (1986), he constructs an aura around the city of the New York. While the populace in New York is in the midst of crime, gang wars, immigration, racial tensions, the onslaught of AIDS, and other crisis of the 70's, Allen depicts streets that are not struggling economically but are lined with beautiful women, intellectual writers, and entertainment people, whose lives are a grade school's recess and New York City is their playground. Whether these characters are silhouetted against the Brooklyn Bridge or chatting as they walk through New York's modern art museums, the culture and infrastructure of New York is portrayed as wistful, romantic, and old-world. According to Benjamin's model of art post-mechanical revolution, Allen's films would be irrevocably fascist and reactionary. However, anyone who has seen Woody Allen will be hesitant, if not reluctant, to call his films as such. There is something about the childlike quality of his romance of New York, and his films feel far too self-absorbed, nihilistic, obsessive of sex, and chaotically comedic for watchers to suspect fascism. Therefore, we look deeply into his films in order to answer the following questions: Are Allen's films fascist, looking to "preserve" New York when the masses should be empowered to change it? What is it in his films that make us forcibly opposed to thinking so? We shall look closely at Allen's most distinguishing approaches of film: his portrayal of New York's metropolitan infrastructure, how he turns inward into his characters' psyche through narrative tactics, and Allen's on-screen charisma in order to gauge how his films fits into Benjamin's model of art.

THE PLIGHT OF NEW YORK IN THE 70'S

How bad exactly is New York during the 70's? According to newspaper headlines at the time, New York seemed like a crisis faced with multi-faceted tribulation. From the New York Stock Exchange downturn, New York City's paralyzing black-outs which often result in looting, domestic abuse and violent households met with little remedy, increasing populations of immigrants resulting in racial tension, the public school systems no longer sustained, to constant

strikes from teachers unions, sanitation unions, and transport union workers the city seemed completely locked in its state of chaotic discontent, not to mention the downturn the country as a nation was experiencing with stagflation¹⁰.

One article, called “New York’s Last Gasp?” harks the bleak condition of the city after America gave New York a vote of no confidence a week before:

“The garbage began piling up on the streets again - a fragrant harbinger of hard times ahead. Disgruntled city workers blocked the Brooklyn Bridge.

The city's pint-size Mayor Abe Beame announced his umpteenth austerity plan, then lost his temper when he found out city workers were leaving the job at 3:30 in the afternoon.

‘How in the hell are we going to run a city with that going on?’ he shouted at sheepish aides.”¹¹

The article continues to note the trouble flight of middle-class workers from tax-paying properties, while poorer, minority inhabitants were continually increasing in population. A Miami Mayor considered this crisis not unique to New York, but a threat to all metropolitan American cities. “It's not just New York; that is only the tip of a whole urban iceberg”, he says.

METROPOLITAN MONTAGE

The city is trumped with economic stagnation, crime, racial tension, the onslaught of AIDS, working class dissent, yet Woody Allen makes no move in attending to this social tumult. Instead, through black and white shadowed montages in *Manhattan*, a brightly colored fairytale storytelling in *Annie Hall*, and trendy, artful shots in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Allen relays a

¹⁰ “Heart of Darkness.” *NewsWeek*. 25 July 1977: Pg 16., “The Political Tales of Two Cities; Blackout and Looting Further Scramble N.Y. Mayoral Race; New York After the Black Out.” *The Washington Post*. 25 July 1977: A1.

“Blackout Paralyzes New York City for Day; Power Failure Leaves New York Paralyzed for a Day; Power Is Restored In Most of Area; Con Ed Assailed.” *The Washington Post*. 15 July 1977: A1. “City Schools in Crisis.” *NewsWeek*. 12 September 1977: Pg 62.

¹¹Newsweek. “New York’s Last Gasp?” August 4, 1975

New York that is enchantingly magnificent in its rustic architecture and iconic buildings, and he often does it in montages.

Manhattan starts off with a montage of still shots in black and white of the Manhattan skyline to the simple, sharp sounds of jazz by George Gershwin. Allen's voice comes on, reading, "Chapter One. New York City. He idolized it all out of proportion. No no, make that – He *romanticized* it all out of proportion. Yeah, to him, no matter what season it was, this was still a town that existed in black and white..." Appropriately, the movie is shot in black and white. Allen starts over and continues to narrate until he has achieved the feel he wants, going through "too corny", "too angry", "too preachy", while the still shot montage continues to showcase New York architecture, both iconic and ordinary: a blinking sign reading "Manhattan", nearly vacant streets, Empire Diner, trucks moving down the street, laden with snow, a swap meet, and laundry hanging on a line held up by apartment windows. The rest of the movie too, will feel like this – disjointed murmurs of "this is *the* New York City", where even the laundry hanging from a line or congested traffic looks romantically rustic. It is as Leonard Quart aptly puts it: "every fire escape, tenement stoop, roof, garbage can, and huddle of people conveyed more of a calibrated aesthetic effect than a statement about urban entrapment"¹². Woody Allen's on-screen character, Isaac Davis, stares at the Brooklyn Bridge while sitting on a bench next to Mary (Diane Keaton) as the two are silhouette in the moonlight. He says, "Boy, this is really a great city. I don't care what people say, really a knock-out you know". "It's beautiful," Mary purrs in agreement. The characters in *Manhattan*, as well as other characters in Allen's films, are always in awe of the city they live in, while feeling marginally ill at ease in true nature. Allen's character in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) finds himself walking disgruntled through a desert

¹² Quart, Leonard. "Woody Allen's New York." *Cinemaste: Vol 19*. Pg 16

where he escaped gangsters, totally uncomfortable with his shoes getting dusty in the unpaved road; Alvy Singer, Allen's character in *Annie Hall* visits Annie Hall's (Diane Keaton) family's country home in Chickawaukie Falls in Maine, he is unsure of himself and makes jokes that no one in the family understands. Thus, the denunciation of nature in Allen's New York films is not only New York that Allen commits to as beautiful, but the entire metropolitan city structure as an urban concept.

In *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Allen presents a montage of New York, but only shows older, more antique buildings. An architect takes two girls out on an architectural tour of the city, and shots of only these high-rise, "cultural" buildings, omitting ordinary or poor buildings of the city. It is as if Allen is giving all hungry, city-deprived tourists the montage that they hoped for – the New York that is culturally ancient and historically profound. The two girls on their educational outing are constantly exclaim how "beautifully organic" the architectural structures are. We have a montage that is something of a tourist's guide to the New York, "conveyed more of a calibrated aesthetic effect than a statement about urban entrapment". Nowhere is there mention of blackouts, looting, racial tensions, and garbage piling in the streets.

What Allen does is aestheticize what *is* dull and dreary about a crumbling New York. The trash can, the fire escape are geneticized rather than shown as objects of metropolitan poverty. Richard A. Blake presents a biological and geographical explanation of why Allen's movies portray New York without "no crime in the streets, no poverty, no slums or crack houses, no racial tension or gang wars".¹³ First, Blake explicates that Allen grew up in the Flatbush, isolated in Jewish community, remote from the actual crime and tension of Brooklyn. The Manhattan that Allen portrays is one that a child remembers on his outings to the city – even the

¹³ Blake, Richard A. "Flatbush: Woody Allen." *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee*. Pg 105

smallest foreign objects like a fire escape are romanticized, considered rustic. Secondly, Allen moves in Manhattan after he's flourished in the comedy and filmmaking industry, and thus had the financial means to make New York what he wanted it to be. He lives surrounded by the social elite and intellectuals, where "Chinamen, prostitutes, and Italian gangsters" are only prototypes that he knows from the movies.¹⁴ Quart agrees, saying, "His New York has a narrow social and racial base, it's limited to an upper-middle class world of WASPs and Jews who are primarily artists, academics, or media people - people who share his world and values and are able to evoke some empathy from him."¹⁵ It is apparent that Allen's films reflect his ideology. In an interview with Allen, John Lahr showcases Allen's rationale behind showing this romanticized portrayal of New York. "'I've never felt Truth was Beauty. Never,' Allen says. 'I've always felt that people can't take too much reality. I like being in Ingmar's Bergman's world... Louis Armstrong's world... Because it's not this world. You spend your whole life searching for a way out. You just get an overdose of reality, you know, and it's a terrible thing.'"¹⁶

Woody Allen creates his own world of Manhattan, and uses it as a backdrop for something he is quite invested in: the lives of his characters. "His Manhattan is an extension of Allen's protagonist's personalities - its streets are places to walk in, hold conversations, have random and absurd encounters, reflect on both one's private angst and the city's plight, and mute or escape one's anxieties."¹⁷ It is perhaps for this reason that though his films build an aura around New York, impervious to the bleak reality of its current crisis, Allen's films still don't

¹⁴ Blake, Richard A. "Flatbush: Woody Allen." *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee*. 109

¹⁵ Quart, Leonard. "Woody Allen's New York." *Cinemaste: Vol 19*. Pg 18

¹⁶ Lahr, John. "Woody Allen: The Imperfectionist." *Show and Tell: New Yorker Profiles*. Pg 3

¹⁷ Quart, Leonard. "Woody Allen's New York." *Cinemaste: Vol 19*. Pg 17

appear fascist like Riefenstahl's *Olympia* or Marinetti's manifesto. The montage, a modern invention, provides a means to put together "different effects out of different times... space could be superimposed to create a simultaneous effect. By exploring simultaneity... modernists were accepting the ephemeral and transitory as the locus as their art."¹⁸ Allen's montages, however, rather than embodying the progress of the modern era, which seeks to find meaning in interposing different effects together, seem to push the effect to something less distinctively didactic. Allen's montages and his films seem more playfully narcissistic than Riefenstahl – he portrays an aesthetic New York with a child's romance and nihilistic self-absorption ("I love New York because of what it means to me"), rather than with a ritualistic aura like Riefenstahl's Berlin ("New York is something distantly divine"). Manhattan and Brooklyn seem to be important because Allen's characters are important... to themselves. It is this fact that brings us to Allen's next distinguishing cinematic mode: the narrative psyche of his characters.

PSYCHE FOR A POST-MODERNIST AUDIENCE

When Allen endorses its iconic look in montages, he seems enchanted with the city's aesthetic value. However, the films also reveal disenchantment with moral depravity of the social elite. In is in those moments that Allen views Manhattan like a "long-term visiting anthropologist",¹⁹ curiously observing foreign people and the interactions between them, and then depicting them at an arm's length. Such is the commentary that Allen confronts in urban decay: not the crumbling city infrastructure, but moral failure on the part of a certain subset of educated people in Manhattan. Blake explains this commentary as a post-modern element in Allen's films, making the argument that Allen's movies portray a personality crisis in all his

¹⁸ David Harvey. "Modernity and modernism". *Passage of Modernity to Post-Modernity*. Pg 20

¹⁹ Blake, Richard A. "Flatbush: Woody Allen." *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee*. Pg 105

characters, usually most poignant in his own acting. In a heated argument between the protagonist and his best friend in *Manhattan*, Allen's character takes on a moral stance against the moral depravity of the social elite. Taut with frustration, Isaac Davis is stuttering with disbelief when he sees his best friend get back with the girl with whom the best friend is having an affair. "I'm not a saint, okay," his friend says. "But you're too easy on yourself!" Isaac cries, "You rationalize everything! You're not honest with yourself. You want to write a book, but in the end you'd rather buy the Porsche. You cheat a little bit on Emily, and play around the truth out on me... and the next thing you know it you in front of a Senate Committee and you're naming names, calling out your friends!"

Consequently, ethnic identity and racial tension don't make it into Allen's movies; such issues suffice as light jokes or side-plot. We see this in *Manhattan*: during a montage of Isaac and Mary's trek in the city, the two start to walk into a restaurant, and step aside when three seemingly Arabic men walk out. They look upon these men interested, as if with a child's amusement, and proceed in the restaurant and along with their personal, inward turned plot.

It seems here that we've come to another matter. Allen does not portray New York in its current events as it is, but rather, is invested in portraying a separate truth entirely. He compares the era of his comedy with that of Keaton and Charlie Chaplain's, where the pervasiveness of mechanical reproduction and industrial revolution spoke a vocabulary into what people wanted to see. Whereas, " 'I came along after Freud, when the playing field had shifted to the psyche,'" he explains, "It was interior. What was interesting to people suddenly was the psyche. They wanted to know what was going on in the mind."²⁰ David Harvey, though widely known as an opponent of postmodernism, validates this assertion: "Modernism... became preoccupied with

²⁰ Lahr, John. "Woody Allen: The Imperfectionist." *Show and Tell: New Yorker Profiles*. Pg 9

language, with finding some special mode of representation of eternal truths,”²¹, where as he describes postmodern as a way of thought that focuses on “process/performance/happening”, “decreation/deconstruction/antithesis”, “metonymy”, “signifier”, and “scriptable.”²² We will see that Allen’s films are indeed quite invested in the deconstruction and metonymy of a character, a symbol, or social dynamic.

Just as Chaplain’s meddling with telephones has been successful in speaking to the 1920’s audience whose relationship to the physical, mechanical world was rapidly revolutionizing, Allen too has been successful in communicating narratives of the psyche in his characters. Portraying psychoanalysis as something like a ruse, Allen’s films consistently show characters’ idiosyncrasies in their amateur psychoanalytic comments: ‘it’s worse than hostile, it’s aggressive homicidal,’ a girl will say of a writer’s upcoming book; “I read in some of the psychoanalytic quarterlies, two mothers are fine”, to which Allen’s character replies ironically, “oh I always thought people had a hard time surviving one mother”; “Oh it’s the worst, I have a dachshund, it’s a penis substitute for me”²³; and everyone has an analyst, whose vocation seem more like people paid to complain to than a true therapeutical science. Allen speaks to the audience explicitly about the psyche through his characters, but his true commentary on the psyche and narrative are subliminal, implicit, and actually more playful than the psychoanalytic gloom that his characters seem invested in.

In *Annie Hall*, Allen uses playful cinematic tactics in a mockumentary style to teeter-totter between reality and Alvy’s psyche. For instance, when waiting in line for a movie with

²¹ David Harvey. “Postmodernism”. *Passage of Modernity to Post-Modernity*. Pg 20

²² David Harvey. “Postmodernism”. *Passage of Modernity to Post-Modernity*. Pg 43, Table 1.1: “Schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism.”

²³ Manhattan. Screenplay by Woody Allen, Charles H. Joffe. Dir. Woody Allen.

Annie, Alvy Singer becomes increasingly annoyed with an obnoxious academic speaking loudly behind him about films and filmmakers. He complains to Annie Hall (played by Diane Keaton), but when she responds exasperatingly, he turns to the audience with, “What I wouldn’t give with a large sock with horse manure in it... what do you do when you get stuck in a movie line with a guy like this in it?” The pontificating academic, in turn, (and at this moment we know we are in Alvy’s psyche, his fantasy), too comes up to the camera, asking, “What, can’t I have an opinion?” Alvy responds, stuttering, “You don’t know anything about Marshall McLuhan’s work... I happen to have Mr. McLuhan right here”. Gesturing towards the camera to follow him, Alvy pulls the filmmaker Marshall McLuhan himself from behind the wall, who tells the academic, “you know nothing of my work... how you get to teach a course in anything is totally amazing.” “If only life were like this!” Alvy says, mock longingly with a smile to the camera.²⁴

A similar switch from real life to fantasy is found in a flashback. Alvy is explaining his childhood, a young boy “expressing a healthy sexual curiosity” with “nervous tendencies”. Alvy is back at school as a child. His voiceover says, “Sometimes I wonder where my classmates are today”. The children stand up and state what they’re doing as adults in innocent voices. “I was a heroin addict, now I’m a methadone addict” says one of them. “I’m into leather,” says another. Such flashbacks make it possible for Allen to make points, but in a playful and subliminal way. In the case of the children, Allen is showing the inevitability moral depravity of a metropolitan milieu, when they all came from an innocent and unmarked childhood. He will commonly allow dialogue between characters in order to show true emotional and personality depth, but often through playful devices. For instance, when Alvy Singer and Annie are talking about the practice of art, you can hear what they are visually saying, with underlying “what they are really

²⁴ Annie Hall. Screenplay by Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman. Dir. Woody Allen.

thinking” subtitles that hardly resemble what they are actually saying. It is as Alvy says in *Annie Hall*: “My mind tends to jump around a little, and I have some trouble between fantasy and reality”. We jump too and from what Alvy experiences in real life, with real people, and then to what he thinks about in his past or his fantasy, until reality and the psyche become nearly one. Harvey says of post-modernism, “radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate.”²⁵ We find reality becoming deconstructed, where children embody their adult selves and where adults’ deepest, inner thoughts are read out in comedic captions; in essence this is the metonymy of post-modernism.

It fits, then, that rather than addressing crime, racial tensions, and gang wars, Allen’s thematic dilemmas usually consist of relationship dynamics between well-educated Jews and WASPs and the moral depravity of the upper-class elite. By creating narratives for his characters, Allen unwraps the constructs of social dynamics by diving into the minds of the social milieu of academics, writers, actors, and media dynamics – “people who share his world and values and are able to evoke some empathy from him.”²⁶

And the material that Allen chooses to portray does seem to resonate with his audience. He pokes fun at post-modern thought of the psychoanalysis, yet still narrates into the conscious minds of his characters. It seems crucial that there is craft in order to be successful with his audience. Thus, Allen is doing what the cameraman is said to do in Benjamin’s article. He “penetrates deeply into the web” of the reality of the social elite by moving fluidly through the psyche of the characters. The fact that the audience can attest to the truth extrapolated in his films due to Allen’s craftiness confirms Benjamin’s commentary that “[the cameraman’s] distance

²⁵ David Harvey. “Postmodernism”. *Passage of Modernity to Post-Modernity*. Pg 41

²⁶ Quart, Leonard. “Woody Allen’s New York.” *Cinemaste: Vol 19*. Pg 18

comes from the craft in which he moves around the reality”²⁷. “By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives.”²⁸ Allen does close-ups on not only familiar objects, but on the familiar dialogue and familiar personalities of supercilious academics, stuttering nervous types, and beautiful yet insecure women. It is through “the focus of hidden details” that the audience feels as though they are extrapolating truth from Allen’s films. And the postmodern audience ought to, according to Harvey, who notes, “Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change... to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity... [it] emphasizes the deep chaos of modern life and its intractability before rational thought.”²⁹ No doubt, Allen’s audience easily extrapolates truth from chaotic cinematic devices, regardless of how irrational the situations posed may be.

ON-SCREEN AUTEUR

What seems to add to his aura as an auteur is Allen’s on-screen personality. Robert Sickels describes Woody Allen as a “d(m)ock(k)umentarian”, with frightfully real depictions of emotion and society dynamics in a mockumentary execution. According to Sickels, Allen character in screen has a self-deprecating, intellectual bashing, stuttering, and personality crisis-having continuity, making him as an auteur of invented identity. “The name and picture of Allen conjured up imaged and ideas, notion and values that provided a basis for developing his

²⁷ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Illuminations. Pg 233-234

²⁸ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Illuminations. Pg 236

²⁹ David Harvey. Postmodernism. Passage of Modernity to Post-Modernity. Pg 44

fictional screen characters.”³⁰ Ryan Gilbey too considers Allen’s “public image” so prolific and invasive that he calls it a vocabulary: “Allen crafted a film vocabulary that would flounder without the express collusion of the audience...which were an extension of that persona, with its flibbertgibbet digressions and scatterbrained allusions.”³¹ He presents some analysis similar to Sickels in his evaluation of the director-audience relationship for Allen: “If you didn’t buy into Allen himself, then you didn’t buy into his movies,”³² he says, harking today’s convention of replacing the actor with the auteur.

Here we recognize the relationship between Woody Allen and his film watchers in a however disjointed interaction. *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* are not simply films made by a director named Woody Allen, but that the movies *are* Woody Allen – the unorthodox lingering cinematography, the quick-witted allusions, the dynamic characters and their moral dilemmas – all speak of the on-screen Woody Allen. These 70’s films are not the films Benjamin mentions, where the artist (the actor) and the audience are separated by a cold camera lens, but the artist is the auteur, the director whose persona commands every entity of the film to the point that the audience feels like they know him personally. Sickels concedes that Allen’s film appeals majorly to “intellectual humor” but the comedic playfulness and “linguistic versatility” is universally enjoyed by lesser-educated audiences.³³

CONCLUSION

³⁰ Sickels, Robert. ‘It Ain’t the Movies! It’s Real Life!’ Cinematic Alchemy in Woody Allen’s “Woody Allen” D(M)oc(k)umenatry Oeuvre.” *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*. Pg 180

³¹ Gilbey, Ryan. “Woody Allen.” *It Don’t Worry Me: The Revolutionary American Film of the Seventies*. Pg 163

³² Gilbey, Ryan. “Woody Allen.” *It Don’t Worry Me: The Revolutionary American Film of the Seventies*. Pg 163

³³ Sickels, Robert. ‘It Ain’t the Movies! It’s Real Life!’ Cinematic Alchemy in Woody Allen’s “Woody Allen” D(M)oc(k)umenatry Oeuvre.” *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*. Pg 188

Therefore, to answer our original question, are Allen's films fascist and what is it in his films that make us forcibly opposed to thinking so? First, his portrayal of New York's city-structure is hardly ritualistic. Though New York is upheld in a romantic, dream-like quality, horribly unrepresentative of reality, it is only done so in a self-absorbed, nihilistic fashion of "I love New York because of what it means to me." Rather than the city itself, Allen's films promote the study of social dynamics, using creative license and the flexibility of filmmaking to delve into the minds of people. Speaking to the post-modern audience who is most interested in personality crisis and consciousness, Allen remains most prolific in deconstructing the dynamics of the social milieu that he is most knowledgeable of. Because the era of when Benjamin's article was written has changed from distinctively modern to post-modern, we notice those who receive Allen's films find it less than fascist. The films' subject material is what mechanical reproduction has made possible: the study of culture through art and craft. Thus, the aura that emanates from Allen as an auteur is from the craftiness in which he makes films, rather than the aestheticism of some cultish ritual to his subject material (New York). His films are not as reactionary as they are what Benjamin says of film - penetrating deep into reality in order to parcel the world out in what the masses (in this case, Allen's on-screen character's social elite circle) perceive the world to be.

This fact is empowering. Because the aura brought back into film, aura from Allen's auteurism and from Allen's portrayal of New York, social commentary of a persuasive kind is made possible. What Benjamin predicts of mechanical reproduction in art – a utopian society where people can express the need for change through art – is reiterated in Woody Allen's speech at the Oscars in 2002. In lieu of the events surrounding the fall of the New York Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the Academy asked Woody Allen to come in and introduce the montage of

films made on New York – *Manhattan*'s opening montage being the first of them. In the midst of economic tension and political tumult, Allen implores the audience of filmmakers and actors to continue to film in the crisis-ridden city. He says, "For New York I'll do anything... It's a great place to come and work... it's still a thrilling, exciting city. I plead with you to please come make the films there. It remains a great, great city."³⁴ While aura has made its exit from art forms in the current era, social reform and change is made possible with film. And rather than interpreting such films which present a fantastical, ethereal representation of a film as fascism or reactionary, this era can use such films to change, empower, comment on, and play around with these great metropolitan spaces.

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³⁴ Oscars 2002, Woody Allen. The Daily Motion.com

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