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Film and Postmodernism

Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*

DEFINING POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is such a notoriously slippery term that the word has become almost meaningless. This is ironically appropriate, because meaninglessness is a core concern of postmodernism. On the Internet, I came across the following quotation, which nicely sums up the indeterminacy of the term: “To some it’s an excuse to pile together oodles of wild and crazy décor, to others it’s another example of the weakness of standards and values, to others a transgressive resistance to the sureness of categories, to others a handy way to describe a particular house, dress, car, artist, dessert or pet and to others, it’s simply already over.”¹ I am not going to attempt a blanket definition of postmodernism in all of its many manifestations in art, architecture, literature, music, and film, but instead I will try to define what I mean by a postmodern cinematic sensibility by looking closely at Woody Allen’s films, and *Annie Hall* (1977) in particular.

Some of the funniest moments in many Woody Allen movies revolve around the main character’s depression, based on a horrified recognition of the meaninglessness of life. In *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer’s mother takes him to see the family doctor because “He’s been depressed. All of a sudden, he can’t do anything.” Alvy explains that he has read that the universe is expanding and “Someday it will break apart and that would be

the end of everything.” As a result he has stopped doing his homework because “What’s the point?” In *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), the theme comes up again, when the black prostitute Cookie asks Harry Block why he is so depressed and why he has to take so many pills. Harry, alluding to antimatter, which will cause the universe to implode in upon itself, asks her if she knows about “the black hole,” to which Cookie answers, “That’s how I make my living.”

Like many of Woody Allen’s one-liners, this one has more than one source of humor. On the one hand, we laugh because of the immense comic incongruity between two very different kinds of black holes, taking pleasure in Cookie’s carnal deflation of Harry’s cosmic angst. On the other hand, we recognize a certain plausibility in the connection. An addictive need for sex, the kind which could drive a man to seek a prostitute, could very well have its origin in feelings of vulnerability, fragmentation, and identity diffusion, projected onto a cosmos conceived as flying apart or collapsing into itself. In that sense, the black hole really is the means by which Cookie makes a living.²

It is also the means by which Woody Allen makes a living. From as far back as his days as a stand-up comic, Woody Allen has been trading on his ability to make jokes about human anxiety in a postsacred age in which the ontological rug has been pulled out from under us. With the loss of faith in God, an ultimate being from whom truth and moral values derive, human beings have only themselves to rely on in their quest to find meaning in life. Yet our belief in a coherent, unified self as a potential center of meaning has also come under attack by the teachings of postmodern psychoanalysis and philosophy, both of which suggest that the concept of a centered, unified authentic self is as illusory a hope as is that of an all-knowing God.

Sigmund Freud teaches that we continually struggle with conflicting internal impulses, some of them unconscious or repressed. Hopelessly split in our desires, and no longer certain of our motives, we literally do not know who we are or what we really want. Picking up where Freud left off, the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan theorized that our sense that our selves and lives form a coherent, and thus meaningful, whole is based on an illusory, language-based fiction we create in order to hold our selves, which are actually not whole but fragmented, together. Drawing upon Lacan’s observations, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that all concepts of truth (or meaning) depend upon language, but words refer to nothing concrete in the world, only to other words. Through the technique of deconstruction,

Derrida demonstrates that all our certainties are based on assumptions that are themselves based upon assumptions in an infinite regression. Woody Allen jokingly expressed the tenuous sense of self promulgated by postmodern philosophy in an early stand-up comic routine when he complains that his first wife, a philosophy major, was always demonstrating to him that he didn't exist.

POSTMODERN THEMES IN WOODY ALLEN'S FILMS

The first film in which Woody Allen overtly reflected on the predicament of human beings in a postsacred world is *Love and Death* (1975). Here, the main character (and by implication the audience) is given hope that there is a God and hence a meaningful, coherent moral world order, only to have the illusion rudely exploded. The night before Boris (Woody Allen) is to be executed for the attempted assassination of Napoleon, an angel of God appears in his cell to reassure him that at the very last minute Napoleon will pardon him. Now that he has proof of God's existence, Boris immediately begins spouting fractured biblical nonsense in the reverent voice of a true believer. At dawn he goes to his execution with a display of great bravery and coolness, only to be executed anyway. The angel of God's information was not reliable.

Even less reliable than God, or God's agents, in Woody Allen's films are other people. His characters are often betrayed by individuals who seem to have bought the idea that since God is dead, everything is permitted. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), Allen's most completely worked-out rendering of this theme, Judah literally gets away with the murder of his mistress. Not only do the police not suspect his part in the crime (he has arranged it), but also, after a short period of fretting, he no longer feels any guilt at all for the murder and leads a perfectly happy, prosperous, and contented life. Only in fiction, Allen suggests, are wrongdoers necessarily punished either by their own feelings of guilt or by external forces. Thus, whereas Raskolnikov's guilt in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (to which the title of Allen's film alludes) leads him to collude in his apprehension by the police, the conclusion of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* suggests that in today's world, lacking belief in a God who punishes the unjust, the unjust as often as not go without punishment. Even the worst crimes are misdemeanors.

In *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), Allen foregrounds the theme that the only world in which morality, honesty, commitment, and love prevail is the world created in fictions, which are vitally important, never-

theless, because without fictions life would be unbearable. In this film, Tom Baxter, a fictional character from a 1930s escapist film comedy, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, emerges from the screen to court Celia (Mia Farrow), an abused Depression-era housewife with whom he has fallen in love because of her devotion to him. She has come back five times to see the film in which he plays a dashing Egyptologist and world-class adventurer. Gil Shepherd, the real-life actor who plays the part of Tom Baxter (both characters are played by Jeff Daniels) also courts Celia. She ends up choosing the “real” man over the fictional character, only to learn that the love of the fictional man was true (the ability for true love was written into his character), and the love of the real man was only a fiction. Gil Shepherd, it turns out, was only acting: pretending to love her in order to persuade his fictional character, whose escape from the screen could potentially ruin his career, to go back into the screen. Once his mission is accomplished, he abandons Celia with very little, if any, remorse. Celia finds relief from her crushing disappointment by going back to the movies.

Woody Allen’s postmodern sensibility goes deeper than the depiction of a disturbingly centerless, morally vacuous world, which is also a late nineteenth-century problem and not postmodern per se. What is more characteristically postmodern about Allen’s work is the highly self-reflexive, parodic way he uses the film medium. Most Woody Allen films mirror or imitate, not life, but only life as it is presented in other films. Unlike the classical Hollywood film, which, as I discussed in chapter 4, strives to create an illusion that the world we are watching is real, Woody Allen’s films blatantly call attention to their fictiveness or artificiality. We discussed how the modernist filmmaker Fellini does this as well, by using complicated and flamboyant film techniques which call attention to the medium and make us aware of the artist behind the artifice. Woody Allen undercuts the realistic illusion of film in a very different manner—through parody and pastiche. That is, he uses traditional forms but in an ironic way, to undercut their realist pretensions.³

As Nancy Pogel pointed out in her book *Woody Allen*,⁴ nearly every segment in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (1972) self-consciously imitates, parodies, or otherwise plays off of a particular film or television genre familiar to his film audience. In “What is Sodomy?” Gene Wilder plays a doctor who falls in love with a fickle sheep. Here Allen parodies the “dark naturalism” of films like *Sister Carrie* (William Wyler, 1952), based on Dreiser’s novel of the same title, and *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951), in which an upper-class male disastrously falls in love with a beautiful woman from a lower class. (Wilder

ends up in the gutter drinking from a bottle of Woolite.) “Why Do Some Women Have Trouble Reaching Orgasm?” is photographed in the style of Italian art-film director Michelangelo Antonioni, complete with English subtitles. “What Are Sex Perverts?” parodies TV game shows such as “I’ve Got a Secret” and “What’s My Line?” In “What Happens during Orgasm?” Woody Allen plays a soon-to-be ejaculated sperm with the odds of survival crushingly against him. This segment parodies both war films and science-fiction fantasies such as *Fantastic Voyage* (1966).⁵ Other segments of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* parody the horror film, the television sitcom, and the medieval historical romance.

Sleeper (1973) is another parody of the science-fiction film, while *Love and Death* spoofs the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, films that have been made of these novels, and the montage style of Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and V. I. Pudovkin. *Stardust Memories* (1980) is an extended riff on Fellini’s *8 1/2*, in both style and content: it is a wide-screen, black-and-white film about a world-famous movie director suffering from a creative block. *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) sends up the aggressive nonrealism of the musical. The film within a film of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* imitates the look of the thirties screwball comedy, while the frame story, which takes place during the Depression, imitates the somber look of social-realist films.

Just as Derrida shows that language is infinitely referential, deriving its meaning only from other words, Woody Allen’s films, through their self-reflexive borrowing or eclectic⁶ of past film styles and genres, make us aware that the reality that seems so transparently mirrored in the film medium refers not to some foundational reality outside the film but only to other films. His films thus make us aware that the meanings they construct are as insubstantial as the material of their construction, the bits of celluloid which are only reflections of reflections.

Allen’s intimation that there is no such thing as the truth and that film’s pretense of showing us reality “as it is” is just that, a pretense, is especially evident in his parodies of the documentary film, the film form devoted to dramatizing real life as opposed to fiction. His first film, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), was a pseudodocumentary on the life of an unsuccessful crook. Here, Allen takes particular delight in comically deflating the all-knowing “voice of God” narrator whose bombastic pronouncements are continually undercut by the film’s sight gags and absurd, surreal plot turns.

Allen also spoofs the pretensions of the documentary form to reveal

the “truth” in *Zelig* (1983). This film imitates the form of a compilation documentary, made up from fragments of other films—newsreels, documentary footage, even feature films. The subject of this pseudodocumentary is a human chameleon (played by Woody Allen) who can miraculously change his shape to become a replica of any man (the process doesn’t work with women) with whom he is in close proximity. When he is with African Americans, he becomes black, with Greeks he becomes Greek, with fat men he becomes fat. So great is his notoriety for this strange talent (a symptom of his pathological need to be accepted, to fit in) that he becomes world-famous, appearing in newspapers and newsreels alongside numerous historical figures such as Babe Ruth, Calvin Coolidge, and Adolf Hitler. In these impossible scenes, Allen foregrounds the ease with which photographic images can be manipulated through editing and special effects to make blatantly impossible actions seem real. Allen decisively undercuts the film medium’s pretensions to represent the truth by juxtaposing footage from a Hollywood movie made of Zelig’s life with “real” incidents of his life supposedly captured on newsreels. By putting Hollywood “reality” next to documentary “reality” Allen demonstrates that both modes rely on conventions. The “real” or documentary footage is just as contrived as the Hollywood footage.

Husbands and Wives (1992) is shot in a cinema verité style, imitating the style used to capture the dissolution of a couple’s marriage in the Public Broadcasting Corporation’s *An American Family* television series (1973).⁷ Cinema verité, which also informed the style of *The 400 Blows* and other New Wave films, but for different aesthetic goals, refers to a way of filming real-life scenes without elaborate camera equipment, the goal being to interfere as little as possible with the events being photographed. In *An American Family* (a precursor to “reality television”), a camera crew moved into the suburban home of a Southern California family and photographed the everyday life of the family members, with the intention of bringing real life as it is spontaneously being lived to the screen. But although Allen shoots *Husbands and Wives* in a cinema verité style resembling that of *An American Family*, he undercuts any pretense of documentary authenticity by using widely recognized professional actors (Mia Farrow, Judy Davis, and himself) in the main roles. By using a style which proclaims “the truth” in order to tell an obvious fiction, Allen foregrounds the fictional underpinning of all supposedly realistic films.

In *Deconstructing Harry* Allen foregrounds the film medium in still another way. The film is composed of scenes that alternate depictions of

Harry's life with flashbacks and scenes from his novels and short stories. The enactments of Harry's fictions are shot in the seamless style of the classical Hollywood film, a technique which hides the constructedness of the film world by smoothing over evidence of cuts and thus preserves the viewer's orientation in screen space. In contrast, scenes from Harry's "life" are shot in a highly mannered ultra-cinema verité style, complete with glitches in the sound track and numerous disorienting, jittery jump cuts. Here Allen visually dramatizes the fact that Harry can feel "real"—that is, coherent, or "together"—only in his fictions, not in his life.

In *Husbands and Wives*, *Deconstructing Harry*, and most of Woody Allen's other films, the foregrounding of the film medium serves to make us hyperaware that when we are watching a film, that most mimetic of all media, nothing we are seeing is really real. Everything is a construct—a product of the director's brain—even, or especially, when the main character in the film strongly resembles the auteur of the film we are watching—Woody Allen himself. Allen uses his appearance as the star in his own films paradoxically, to foreground another important premise of postmodern thinking—the death of the author, or in this case, the auteur. In his fiction, plays, and films, Allen continually undercuts the pretensions of an author to be the one who knows some ultimate truth about life and who thus is in complete creative charge of his creations. *Annie Hall*, which I would now like to analyze in some detail, seems on the surface to be the intimate tell-all confession of a writer, with teasing intimations that that writer is really Woody Allen himself. At the same time, Allen in *Annie Hall* deconstructs the very possibility of an author's ability to know and to be able to present some foundational truth about his own or his characters' lives. Just as Allen undercuts the pretensions of documentary truth in his parodies of documentaries, in *Annie Hall* Allen undercuts his own pretensions to provide us with filmed autobiography. Autobiographical truth, like documentary truth, he demonstrates, is just another fiction.

THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR IN *ANNIE HALL*

At the beginning of *Annie Hall*, after the credits fade out, we are stunned to see an image of Woody Allen himself in a medium close-up, speaking directly to the camera and by implication to us, the spectators sitting in the film audience. He is wearing clothing familiar to audiences who have seen him in his stand-up comedy routines or on late night talk shows—a tweedy sports jacket, a shirt but no tie, and his trademark horn-rimmed



Figure 60. Woody Allen seems to be speaking as himself directly to the film audience. (*Annie Hall*, 1977, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.)

glasses. (See figure 60.) He tells a joke about two elderly women at a Catskills resort. “Boy, the food at this place is really terrible,” one remarks, to which the other replies, “Yeah, I know, and such small portions.” Woody Allen then comments, “Well, that’s essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it’s all over much too quickly.” He then goes on to tell a second joke the essence of which is “I would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.” This joke, he claims, which he got from Groucho Marx, is the “key joke of my adult life in terms of my relationship with women.” Next he comments on how he has just turned forty and he guesses he is going through a mid-life crisis. This leads to some defensive claims that he doesn’t mind growing old (“I think I’m gonna get better as I get older”), a sentiment undercut by his vision of himself as “one of those guys with saliva dripping out of his mouth who wanders into a cafeteria with a shopping bag screaming about socialism.”

The extraordinary and surprising aspect of this opening monologue (captured in one long, uninterrupted take) is that the audience is confronted in such an intimate way with the author of the film—its writer,

director, and star. When he employs the first-person singular in his monologue, we all assume he is referring to his real self—the real Woody Allen, who in 1975 had indeed just turned forty. But Allen punctures our deliberately created illusion that we have been having an intimate chat with the *auteur* with the following line: “Annie and I broke up and I—I still can’t get my mind around that.” Subtly, the frame of reference has shifted. Before our eyes Woody Allen has become Alvy Singer, the character he plays in the film *Annie Hall*. As he begins to muse on the past in order to try to make sense of what went wrong, why he and Annie broke up, his speech takes on the kind of stuttering, pseudointimate tone that we recognize from episodes in his stand-up routines when he is musing about his life’s difficulties. But now, we are listening not to Woody Allen but to Alvy Singer, whose occupation in the film turns out to be that of a stand-up comedian. In retrospect, *Annie Hall*’s opening address from the very beginning can be read as one of Alvy Singer’s (not Woody Allen’s) comedy monologue routines. The screenplay of *Annie Hall* preserves the opening scene’s deliberate conflation of Woody Allen and Alvy Singer. After the credits, the screenplay states, “Sound and Woody Allen monologue begin,” but then indicates an “Abrupt medium close-up of Alvy Singer doing a comedy monologue.”⁸

By seeming to speak directly to the audience in his own person at the beginning of *Annie Hall*, and then seamlessly sliding into his film persona, Woody Allen makes us hyperconscious of the relation between himself as a director or writer and the character he creates. At the same time, even though *Annie Hall* is nominally about a character Allen has written and created—Alvy Singer—we are made to wonder if this might not really be a film about Woody Allen. Allen gives us a number of reasons to think so.

First of all, the fact that Allen plays the title role dressed as himself, or at least, as the self that he has constructed for his stand-up comedy routines, plays into the illusion that we are seeing a first-person autobiographical film. In his biography of Woody Allen, Eric Lax points out that the clothing of Allen’s stand-up and film persona is identical to the clothing Allen himself typically wears.⁹ The connection between Allen and his screen persona is further reinforced by Allen’s giving Alvy a name similar to his own—Alvy is close to Allen, with the “y” taken from the “y” in Woody—as well as his own past profession of stand-up comic. The boundaries between life and fiction are further muddled when we see a clip of “Alvy” appearing on the *Dick Cavett Show*. I put Alvy in quotes because the clip we see is actual documentary footage of Woody Allen

appearing on the show in 1975. In the reverse of what happens in the opening monologue, Allen turns his fictional persona back into his real self.

As if further to encourage the audience to connect his screen persona with himself, Allen gives Alvy some recognizable features of his own past relationships with women. Like Allen at the time he made *Annie Hall*, Alvy has been divorced twice. It was also well-known to audiences at the time that Allen had had an affair with Diane Keaton, the woman who plays the part of Annie Hall, and whose loss Alvy is trying to get over. In a further conflation of life and fiction, Diane Keaton's real name was Diane Hall. If you subtract the "di" from Diane, you get "An-e" Hall. Through these teasing references Allen creates the impression that Alvy Singer is a thinly disguised version of Woody Allen, who is using film as an instrument of self-analysis to figure out why he cannot have an enduring love relationship, and how he ever could have let someone as wonderful as Diane Keaton get away.

But most of *Annie Hall* is fiction. Allen's first working title for the film, according to John Baxter's biography of Woody Allen, was entitled "Anhedonia," a clinical term describing the inability to enjoy life.¹⁰ This version *was* based on aspects of Woody Allen's own life (and unused parts of it reappear in both *Stardust Memories* and *Deconstructing Harry*), but he dropped much of the personal material in order to focus the film around Alvy's relationship with Annie, most of which is indeed fictional, made up by Woody Allen and his cowriter on the script, Marshall Brickman. Alvy Singer's wives, as they appear in flashbacks in *Annie Hall*, bear little resemblance to Woody Allen's actual past wives, Harlene Rosen and Louise Lasser, and the character Annie Hall, despite the life and vitality given to her by Diane Keaton, has only a superficial resemblance to Diane Keaton the person. Nevertheless, when Woody Allen complained in interviews that people got it into their heads that *Annie Hall* was autobiographical and he couldn't convince them that it was not, he is being disingenuous. In *Annie Hall* Allen deliberately sets up the illusion that the film is a personal recounting of his life, feeding the hungry voyeurism of the film audience, while mostly presenting them with fiction.

Woody Allen, it would seem, knows something about voyeuristic desires. Throughout his career, beginning with his stand-up comic days, he has joked about his own fascination with voyeurism, the desire to look into the secret recesses of someone else's life. In *Annie Hall* he repeats a joke from an early stand-up comic routine about being thrown out of New York University during his freshman year for cheating on a meta-

physics final exam, because he looked within the soul of the student sitting next to him. In numerous other films, from *Take the Money and Run* to *Deconstructing Harry*, including *Zelig*, *Another Woman*, *Alice*, and *Everyone Says I Love You*, Woody Allen invites the film audience to peep into that most private of private realms in which people bare their souls—the psychotherapy session.

Within the fiction of *Annie Hall*, that Woody Allen is confessing all, is the fiction that Alvy Singer is baring his soul, confessing everything, as if to his analyst (for whom the movie audience stands in), in order to get to the bottom of what's wrong with him, why he can't accept himself, and why his relationship with a woman he still loves broke up. In this sense *Annie Hall* can be viewed as the film equivalent of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, which also features a Jewish man with relationship problems who tells all in a series of flashbacks to his analyst. Philip Roth, of course, explodes Portnoy's belief that his confession is the truth about his life in the famous line, spoken by Portnoy's analyst, that concludes the novel, "Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" Allen also calls into question the authenticity or adequacy of Alvy's confession, not only by having Alvy's self-analysis end inconclusively, but also by foregrounding the fictional, reconstructed quality of Alvy's memories of his past. Some of Alvy's flashbacks in *Annie Hall* are photographed in a realistic mode, heightening the impression that we are seeing literal images of Alvy's past—the scene in which Alvy and Annie battle with the lobsters comes to mind, as well as the scenes in which Alvy recalls incidents from his first two marriages. Yet the delightful originality of *Annie Hall* derives from primarily patently fictional metaphorical images, not from Allen's realistic presentations of moments in Alvy's past.

Like all good therapy patients, Alvy begins his search for the sources of his adult neurotic hang-ups in his childhood. "I swear I was brought up underneath the roller coaster in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn," he tells us. Then we see the literal image of a house with a roller coaster built over it (figure 61) and then a shot of Alvy as a child eating soup and reading a comic book as the house convulsively shakes, presumably because a roller coaster is passing overhead. Because of the bizarre nature of the image, we do not take Alvy's image as literal but as a surreal representation of a figure of speech. This is analogous to the process of the dream work as Freud describes it, in which abstract ideas (the latent dream thoughts) are transformed into the concrete visual form of the manifest dream.¹¹ Interestingly, this strange construction was not a figment of Woody Allen's imagination, but a "found object." Woody



Figure 61. The house where Alvy grew up. (*Annie Hall*, 1977, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.)

Allen had planned to base Alvy's childhood more literally on his own childhood until his set designer, Mel Bourne, drove him to see the Cyclone roller coaster at Coney Island, which actually had an apartment built into it. "This is where Alvy grew up," Allen supposedly said. "We're going to use this."¹² Woody Allen seems to have immediately understood that the image of a house built into a roller coaster was an apt image for the experience of a child who grew up surrounded by so much emotional turmoil that it felt like he lived underneath a roller coaster. Later in the film, Alvy, accompanied by Annie and his best friend Rob, go back into the past and witness one of Alvy's parents' crazy fights, which apparently were so unsettling to little Alvy that they shook the foundations of his security in childhood. (The memory of the fighting parents is one way in which *Annie Hall* could be considered autobiographical. Images of and jokes about fighting parents occur in many Woody Allen films, and Allen is quite public about their autobiographical basis.)¹³

Another example of an obviously fictional but emotionally apt image from Alvy's childhood is the image of Alvy's father directing traffic at a bumper-car concession. Not only is this a perfect image for conveying

the idea that his father was not a very distinguished role model in terms of having a meaningful occupation (the one thing people do not need on a bumper-car ride is a traffic director), but it is also expressive of a father who failed miserably at teaching his son impulse control. Near the end of the film when Alvy runs amok in a California parking lot, smashing into several cars, images of Alvy as a child bumping into cars at his father's concession flash on the screen. As if to confirm that this vivid image of Alvy's past is not to be taken literally, Alvy confesses immediately before the images of his father at his bumper-car concession appear on the screen, "You know, I have a hyperactive imagination. . . . I have some trouble between fantasy and reality."

In another telling distortion of the past, Alvy pictures his mother sitting at the kitchen table in Alvy's childhood home, vigorously scraping carrots (read, castrating mother) as she harangues him about his character deficiencies: "You always only saw the worst in people. You never could get along with anyone at school. You were always outta step with the world. Even when you got famous, you still distrusted the world." Interestingly, in this scene Alvy's mother appears as a young woman (the way his mother looked to him as a child), even though she is speaking from the perspective of the present, after Alvy has grown up and become famous. By putting the words of his mother in the present into the mouth of his mother from the past, Allen is suggesting that Alvy has heard the same message over and over again and thus has become fixated on the criticizing, castrating mother of his childhood.¹⁴ (In Allen's next film, *Manhattan*, the main character's work in progress is an expanded version of an earlier short story about his mother entitled "The Castrating Zionist.")

Alvy's fixation on his castrating mother comes up later in the film when Alvy complains that even as a kid, "I always went for the wrong women. . . . When my mother took me to see *Snow White*, everyone fell in love with Snow White. I immediately fell for the Wicked Queen." Allen then cuts to a cartoon image of Disney's wicked queen from *Snow White*, but with Annie's face and voice. (See figure 62.) Here, we are not being shown an image of the way Alvy experienced the wicked queen in *Snow White* when he was a child, but as he perceives her as an adult, now with the face of Annie. Alvy's making Annie, who has none of the qualities of the wicked queen, into such an imago reveals that Alvy has projected or transferred the frustrating qualities of his mother onto both Annie and the wicked queen. Here, the distinction between life and fiction totally breaks down, because both the people in life (Annie) and fantasy images on the screen



Figure 62. Annie as the wicked queen in *Snow White*. (*Annie Hall*, 1977, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.)

(the sexualized image of the wicked queen) are shown to be distorted by the fantasies we construct about each.

Allen not only demonstrates the way our experience of the present is distorted by our experiences in the past, but also the reverse—the way our knowledge in the present can reshape and reconfigure memories from the past. In a flashback from Alvy’s grade-school days, for example, after a teacher scolds him for kissing a little girl, humiliating him in front of the entire class, suddenly we hear Alvy’s adult voice answering the accusation: “Why, I was just expressing a healthy sexual curiosity.” The camera pans over to reveal a grown-up Alvy sitting in the back of the classroom, authoritatively contradicting all charges against him. He goes on to counter the teacher’s obnoxious ploy of invidiously comparing him with one of his classmates (“Why couldn’t you have been more like Donald. Now, there’s a model boy.”) by directing Donald to reveal what he became when he grew up. “I run a profitable dress company,” Donald replies. To underline the point that Alvy turned out better than his classmates, a number of other children also report on their boring or dubious futures—“I’m president of the Pinkus Plumbing Company”; “I sell tallises”; “I used

to be a heroin addict. Now I'm a methadone addict"; "I'm into leather." Allen then cuts to a television screen that shows Alvy appearing masterfully funny on the *Dick Cavett Show*. By mixing Alvy's past with these glimpses into the future Allen provides little Alvy with an ally (his adult self) who defends him against the narrow-minded, puritanical teacher who was blind to his special qualities and talents. He also literalizes the fantasy many of us have that if we could only relive our childhoods, knowing what we know now, we would not have had to suffer so much.

Just as Alvy rewrites his past by bringing his adult self in as an ally against his overbearing teacher, in another flashback he inserts into his past the famous media critic Marshall McLuhan. Here his purpose is to take revenge on a pretentious Columbia media professor who irritates him with his know-it-all pontificating about Fellini and the theories of Marshall McLuhan as Alvy is standing in line at the movies with Annie to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*. When the professor protests that he has a right to his opinion because he teaches media studies at Columbia, Alvy summons McLuhan from behind a large movie poster. McLuhan tells the professor: "You—You know nothing of my work. . . . How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing." Alvy, after all, is narrating his story and he can conjure up anyone he wants in order to prove a point. Speaking directly to the film audience, he says: "Boy, if life were only like this!" Again we are reminded that what we see of Alvy's life is often a fantasy. He tells us his past as it felt, as it is remembered, as it is wished, through a creative rewrite of the script of his life.

Near the end of *Annie Hall* Alvy literally does rewrite the script of his life. Soon after the scene in which we see Alvy and Annie break up at a health-food restaurant on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, we see Alvy, now a playwright, watching a rehearsal of his play in which this very same scene is reenacted. An actor who looks like Alvy and an actress who resembles Annie are arguing, using the exact words we have just heard uttered by Alvy and Annie. But the scene in the play ends very differently from the scene we have just witnessed in *Annie Hall*. In the film, Annie refuses to go back to New York with Alvy, and drives away from him in anger and disgust, leaving him at the curb ranting about the hollowness of award ceremonies in Hollywood, thus undercutting Annie's pride in all the awards for which her new boyfriend has been nominated. Alvy then gets into his car and begins smashing into the other cars in the parking lot, ending up in jail. In Alvy's play-within-the-film the scene is quite different. In contrast to Alvy in "real" life, the actor playing Alvy is in total control of his emotions. He says, philosophically (if a bit flatly):



Figure 63. The mirrored mise-en-scène underlines Allen's postmodern skepticism about the capacity of art or language to reveal an essential reality. (*Annie Hall*, 1977, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.)

“You know, it’s funny, after all the serious talks and passionate moments that it ends here . . . in a health-food restaurant on Sunset Boulevard. Goodbye, Sunny.” At this point Sunny/Annie does not drive away, but cries, “Wait. I’m—I’m gonna . . . go with you. I love you.” “Tsch, whatta you want? It was my first play,” Alvy says in another direct address to the film audience, apologizing for the forced and implausible happy ending. Unable to make things turn out well for himself in life, Alvy does so in art.

At one point in this scene, Allen does not photograph the actors reading his play directly, but instead shows us only their reflections in a large mirror with Alvy listening to them in the foreground in front of the mirror. (See figure 63.) Here the mirrored mise-en-scène underlines Allen’s postmodern skepticism about art’s, or language’s, capacity to reveal an essential reality. Everything is a reflection of a reflection. The actors are only fragments in the mirror of Alvy’s mind, just as the characters in *Annie Hall* are only fragments in the mirror of Allen’s mind, in an infinite regression. In *Annie Hall*, we are repeatedly reminded that nothing is real.

At the same time, Alvy's happy ending to his play is carefully constructed by Allen to be a foil to the much more "realistic" or plausible ending of the film *Annie Hall*. While the scene in which "Sunny" declares her love for the Alvy stand-in may give an audience a momentary jolt of happiness, because we are conditioned to want couples who have separated to get back together, everything we have learned about Alvy in the film suggests that his relationship with Annie is impossible. After all, he defines himself in the film's present as being someone who would never join a club that would accept him as a member. If he did get Annie back, we can infer, he would quickly lose interest in her again. If they married and moved in together, she would be as suffocating to him as he would be to her. Woody Allen also broached the theme of reciprocated love bringing not fulfillment but suffocation in a darkly comic way in *Love and Death*. Boris pursues the rejecting Sonia throughout the film, but when he is finally rewarded with her love, instead of being jubilantly happy, he tries to hang himself. Whether Allen is suggesting that Alvy is too neurotic to love, and all the psychoanalysis in the world cannot help, or whether he is positing a malignant mechanism in the human psyche that dooms even the best relationships to failure, is hard to determine. The answer seems to be both. Yet we do not feel utterly dismal at the end of *Annie Hall* because Allen gives us the possibility of finding a kind of salvation, not in life, but in art. The pleasure of watching a brilliantly executed film about an inevitable breakup somehow mitigates the sadness of the ending in the same way that De Sica's technique in telling his story makes the loss of the bicycle bearable at the end of *The Bicycle Thief*.

While Alvy's happy ending for his play is facile and implausible, Allen's *Annie Hall* ends, if not happily, at least artfully. As Alvy begins to relate how after their breakup he and Annie did meet again, the voice of Annie singing "Seems Like Old Times" is softly heard on the sound track. Alvy relates that Annie has moved back to New York and has taken her new boyfriend to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the film that Alvy was always dragging her to see because of the importance and seriousness of its message. He calls this "a personal triumph," presumably because it suggests that Alvy is still alive in her mind: she has internalized his values. She has also left the shallow viciousness of Los Angeles to return to New York, another indication that Alvy's values have affected her life choices.

In keeping with the postmodern attitudes of skepticism and irony, *Annie Hall*, like so many of Allen's films, is less about love than about its

loss or impossibility. But since this is a Woody Allen film whose main character is a stand-up comedian, *Annie Hall* does end with a joke. In the film's final monologue, Alvy relates the story of a man who goes to a psychiatrist complaining about his crazy brother who thinks he is a chicken. When the doctor asks, "Why don't you turn him in?" the man answers, "I would, but I need the eggs." Alvy compares the illusory eggs to the illusory hope people hold out that despite the irrational, crazy, absurd nature of relationships, maybe the next one will actually work out. Without that illusion, life would be too sad and lonely to endure. The implication is that all of us are like the man in the joke, who is clearly as crazy as his brother. We all need the eggs—the fictions or illusions which make life bearable. The bad news at the end of *Annie Hall* is that all we have to go on are illusions. Only in fictions (Alvy's play) do relationships end happily ever after. The good news is that life itself can be thought of as a work of art. Memories, the only traces left of lived experience, can be rearranged, rethought, and reinterpreted in the montage of our minds, as Allen/Alvy demonstrates brilliantly and entertainingly throughout *Annie Hall*. If the postmodern philosophers are right, and our lives are merely a compendium of fragmentary multiple fictions, Woody Allen's art seems to tell us that at least we are free to rearrange the parts until we come up with a better picture.