

FIL 1001, SPRING 2003 TERM
Introduction to Understanding Film
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Woody Allen
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One could surely say that Woody Allen's movies are something different, in the myriad of Hollywood movies and styles. When Allen stars in the movies he directs, his flavorful character could best be described as an energetic conductor in one of Gershwin's rhapsodies. Everything and everyone revolves around him, and watching him act in different movies seems like a *deja-vu*.

Typically his movies are about broken or dysfunctional relationships, schizophrenic-like characters, or comic situations. The camera is only an accessory that facilitates the story and the viewers are rarely, if ever, aware of its presence. Narrative economy is an important element of Allen's movies, because it allows the characters to develop and manifest their major traits. Every object in the room also aids in the development of the story, sometimes contributing to comic situations—for example, in *Annie Hall*, the lobsters that are supposed to be dinner end up on the floor, and the main characters have to recapture their dinner. The viewers can't help laughing hysterically. The story seems to develop almost naturally, although according to Allen it only seems that way: "While other directors might set up quickly and shoot a lot of coverage, I spend most of the time setting up, perhaps until three in the afternoon. When everything is choreographed just right—actors crossing through the frame to various places, lighting just so—when it's finally ready, I shoot it, and that's it. I don't do any coverage." (DGA Magazine, Par. 16).

One element that's vital and predominant in Allen's movies is the interaction of the characters through dialog; the expression "talking heads" often comes to mind. Maybe that's why there's a love-hate relationship between Allen's movies and his viewers--but this interaction clearly informs the viewers at all times of what exactly is going on. There are no hidden feelings and surprises for them—only for the characters. There's no room for interpretation, because Allen does a great job at clearly presenting on screen even the smallest details that are relevant to understanding the whole picture. No other director approaches a movie like Allen does. If Charlie Chaplin makes people laugh at his gestures, Allen makes them laugh because of his words. The camera is his accomplice, following him closely and many times being locked in a still position, "witnessing" the perusing of characters and their interesting—or not—stories.

Allen's movies seem "two-dimensional," because the camera captures only the depth and the width of the shot. Once set in place, it never pans up and down, and it moves only back and forth (the depth of the shot), and left and right (the width of the shot). It's amazing how one can be captured by otherwise common stories. It's Allen's magic that captivates the viewers' attention by carefully capturing and managing the element of mise-en-scene displayed on screen. For example, in *Annie Hall*, the discussion between Annie and Alvy seems casual; but when Allen adds subtitles who express their real thoughts, their dialog becomes captivating, because the viewers are part of something private that one can rarely witness—that is, people's most private thoughts and opinions. This introspective in people's hidden thoughts is an interesting way of capturing the viewers' attention.

Another characteristic of Allen's movies is that he involves the audience by always presenting two sides of an argument. If for example one character likes to socialize, the other doesn't, and the viewers feel tempted to smile and look at the person sitting next to them or think of someone who is exactly their opposite.

Music is also another constant and important element of Allen's movies, because it sets the mood and eases the transitions between different scenes, but it also becomes more than just an invisible part of the movie, when a character decides to express herself—or himself—by singing or dancing. The songs reminisce at Gershwin's good old times, just like Allen's unfulfilled love stories aspire to the ideals of the old-fashion family, even if, at first, one may think otherwise. Although most of the characters Allen portrays on screen live in modern times, reading a book is sometimes one of the most interesting activities that they enjoy doing. They are also old-fashioned when it comes to their feelings and the way they handle them.

Overall, Allen's movies are unique compared to other directors' style, even if they are so "typical" to his own style. There's something special about his stories, maybe because we can all identify with the struggle of being accepted, respected, and loved by others, whether in New York or elsewhere. Allen's movies provide the viewers with insightful information about our society. He says it best in his movie, *Hollywood ending*, "Only New Yorkers talk so much about their problems, and only in Woody Allen films!" (DGA Magazine, (Par. 4).

Works cited

Annie Hall, dir. Woody Allen. Rollins-Joffe Productions, 1977.

Geffner, David. "Woody Allen's Hollywood Ending." *DGA Magazine*. May 2002

<http://www.dga.org/news/v27_1/feat_woodyallen.php3#top> .