



“Seems Like Old Times: Staging, Control, and (Mis)memory in Annie Hall”
A video essay by Max Tohline, 2021
Mise-en-scène 6.2

Link to the video essay on Vimeo:

<https://vimeo.com/480424534/b9b38f32f8>

Abstract

The refrain that viewers can (or should) ‘separate the art from the artist’ relies on the assumption that a problematic artist does not leave traces of their transgressions in their work. But the techniques of manipulation that a potential criminal might leverage to gain control over others significantly overlap filmmaking techniques designed to shape audience perception, such as framing and editing. This essay proposes to “de-edit” or “re-spatialize” some moments from Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977) to bring attention to the modes of gaze, address, and manipulation exerted by the director throughout the film. This method resituates the film from its popular image as the scattered chronicle of an underdog neurotic to a more critical portrait of a narcissist deploying the reflective apparatuses of memory and cinema for a project of distortion and, ultimately, self-deception.

Further discussion

Multiple times in *Annie Hall*, characters enter and inhabit the mise-en-scène of memory – for instance, when Alvy, Annie, and Max return to Alvy’s childhood home in Brooklyn to poke fun at his family. Elsewhere, split-screens or simulated split-screens allow different spaces, like the offices of Alvy’s and Annie’s therapists, or the dinner tables of Alvy’s and Annie’s families, to enter into dialog. Beyond this, more conventional eyeline matches establish the link of the gaze between Alvy and other spaces, like a Los Angeles party or a public park in New York. Throughout the film, moments of direct address and voice-over seek to extend a similar vector from Alvy (or, simply, Woody Allen himself) toward the film’s audience.

In all cases, the links between these spaces are hegemonically mediated and defined by Woody/Alvy, as he seeks to exert control over others, over the world, over perception, and, most of all, over memory. These attempts at control permeate the text of the film’s narrative, as illustrated by Alvy’s inveterate insulting of Annie and others around him; his periodic lies, exaggerations, and mis-memory; and his bids to restage his own life, as seen in both the “second lobster scene” and in the rehearsal of the revisionist play Alvy writes near the end of the narrative. The rehearsal of this play immediately precedes the “real” end of the story, wherein Alvy encounters Annie again outside a screening of *The Sorrow and the Pity* (Annie’s fourth time seeing the film) and later reminisces with her over lunch. The proximity of these scenes suggests that Woody/Alvy wants us to read the former as a harmless wish and the latter as truth.

But this second version – a flashback montage – is also a revision, hidden in plain sight: comparing the shots used in the flashback montage with those that appear earlier in the film, we see that every single one is a different take. Thus, the editing functions as a prism of mis-memory (even Annie’s performance of “Seems Like Old Times” has changed). Re-reading the

rest of the film with this revision in mind puts every other technique of memory, witness, and commentary into a new light. The split-screens no longer register as self-effacing jokes against his family or neuroses, but a way of grabbing two-thirds of the screen away from Annie for himself. The subtitles in the balcony scene transform a gag on the difficulties of communication into an assertion of dominance over Annie's perceived lack of intelligence. Likewise, the moments of direct address attempt to cow the audience into interpreting Alvy's character as a loveable neurotic and ignore his pervasive self-centeredness and micro-abuses toward everyone around him.

Despite Alvy's own insistence that he is not "crazy" (and other scholars' reiteration of this position), both Alvy's character and Allen's idiosyncratic mode of filmic narration (editing, shooting, staging, and so on) display the classically narcissistic desire to control the world beyond the self. And whether Alvy witnesses or addresses the world around his character, the diegetic past, or the filmic spectator, his line of sight – the vector of control – tends to be oriented toward the camera's lens. Thus, this video essay proposes to "rotate" those vectors of memory, witness, and commentary by 90 degrees, so that both subject and object may be simultaneously viewed as facing each other, from the side. In one respect, "de-editing" the film in this manner seeks to deprive Woody/Alvy of some of the techniques of dominance exercised during shooting and editing. But more crucially, this re-spatialization aims to make his apparatuses of control visible and return some power to the audience, to the surveilled, to the objectified, and to the otherwise-disempowered in Woody/Alvy's fantasy of "underdog" narcissism.

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