

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VII, Number 3, 2015

General Issue

Indexing and abstracting

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SNIP, IPP and SJR Factors

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1	21100201709	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	0.313	0.034	0.1	0.271	0.038	0.116	0.061	0.007	0.101

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Appropriating Postmodernism: Narrative Play in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*

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Abstract

The idea that has been explored in the article is what makes a film postmodern and if there is an inevitable gap between form and content, between postmodern techniques and the narrative structure in the same. The article addresses how Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, which has been touted by certain critics as postmodern, adopts postmodern multiplicity of time and spaces and Allen almost plays with these ideas but does not entirely succumb to them. Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopia has been employed in studying the other space depicted in the film. The other space showcases Paris in the 1920s and Allen through his protagonist Gil highlights this as a celebratory digression and a moment's liberation. The narrative is plugged into modernist attitudes, including a narrative closure, which does not allow it to be regarded as a postmodern film in its entirety.

Keywords: Allen, *Midnight in Paris*, Space, Nostalgia, Postmodern, Belle Epoque, Golden Age, theoretical, cultural, heterotopia, Gil

The reception of films and the notion of spectatorship underwent a significant change with the emergence of film theory, which around 1980s started being closely associated with a number of theoretical concepts developing during that period. New forms of studies associating film with domains like science fiction, psychoanalysis and specific ideological concerns came under what is known as the wider spectrum of cultural studies. According to Fabio Vighi (2012), "In the light of [the] ... philosophical critique of Critical Theory, the study of narrative cinema, and especially *film noir*, provides a vivid cultural exemplification of the speculative identity of subject and object...Whether in its modernist or postmodernist guise, Critical Theory postulates the limit and deadlock of any representation of reality, which consists in the failure of such representation to give us an objective depiction of a stable other" (pp.116-121). From this perspective, the question that needs to be addressed is whether a film that imbibes critical thought in itself, can be so structured as to give an impression, quite explicitly, that a certain theoretical framework has been consciously applied in a visual medium. On the other hand, the film in the course of its narrative may as well address certain critical concerns, which in turn may not have been a deliberate move on behalf of the film-maker.

Whether we intend to make a Marxist or a Post-colonial or a Psychoanalytical reading of a film narrative, the maker may not have been aware of the possibility of such readings while the film was being made. It may not have been a conscious move but in the twentieth century, with the emergence of forms of art as representatives of a cultural milieu and for the understanding of conceptual frameworks in relation to reality and the society at large, films began to emanate explicitly from certain schools of thoughts. Dianne Waldman (1977), while elucidating upon Walter Benjamin's position on the changing contours of reception of films, says, "According to Benjamin, mechanical (as opposed to manual) reproduction created a profound change in both

the concept and function of a work of art...[yet] when the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based in ritual (the reason for the unique value of the authentic), it begins to be based on another practice – politics” (pp. 41-42).

From this standpoint the paper intends to explore whether the culture industry has made a claim to appropriate critical movements and theories and if there is a tendency to narrativize such a cinematic representation, in popular culture. The focus will be to explore the terms and conditions in which the idea of the postmodern was appropriated in one of the highly appreciated films of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The idea will be to elucidate on how a narrative structure juxtaposes certain mutually opposing tropes and the cinematic rendition ends up as an amalgamation of contrasting theoretical frameworks. For the purpose of achieving the same, the objective is to make an extensive reading of Woody Allen’s 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*, which was widely attributed as a postmodern film by critics post its release. In *Midnight in Paris*, themes like magic realism and intertextuality have been amply explored and according to the reviewer Ania Wroblewski, “[Woody]Allen exploits all the different cliches, epochs, literary and artistic references pertaining to Paris in a witty, clever, and, of course, self-conscious way without making them seem forced, irreverent or academic. The film is emphatically postmodern. It is a quick-paced, tongue-in-cheek pastiche meant to be taken lightheartedly and it succeeds at portraying one man’s struggle to define who he is and who he wants to be”(n.d.). Postmodern aesthetics have been strategically employed in films to achieve a certain stylization in artistic and cinematic efforts. Does that necessarily make it a postmodern film? Non linear and disjointed narratives are considered as some of the significant tenets of postmodernism but a sense of narrative closure leaves no room for that ambiguity.

In Woody Allen’s film, the protagonist Gil, an aspiring writer, indulges in a time travel that takes him back to the Paris of the 1920s from his modern day existence. These surreptitious time travels happen during the midnight hours, during his stay at Paris, which he considers to be drop-dead gorgeous in the rains and claims that there is no city like Paris in the world(Allen, 2011). He discusses the prospects of settling in Paris with his fiancée , to which she vehemently disagrees. Time and again Gil keeps associating the cityscape of Paris with writers, artists and the rains. The spatio-temporal premise of Paris gets muddled with romantic notions of idealism and nostalgia in his imagination. He quotes Ernest Hemingway’s famous saying that Paris is a “moveable feast” and talks about a restaurant where an acquaintance of his met the avant-garde writer James Joyce. The sentiments that Paris of the 1920s evoke in Gil can be paralleled to that of a lover or a muse and as Peter Eubanks (2014) rightly points, “... there is no one, true Paris that all observers objectively share; Paris is malleable...She lives and flourishes in [the] subjective subconscious of our imaginations”(p.170). This love letter that Allen writes, addressing the city of Paris, suspends the logic of time and space as Gil inhabits Paris of the present at daytime and experiences a rendezvous with the Paris of 1920s with the likes of Scott Fitzgerald and Salvador Dali among others after the clock strikes twelve at midnight. The past and the present co-exist and every night a car whizzes away Gil to the Paris in its “Golden Age”. The Paris of the 1920s is characterized by the inns and taverns, where Gil comes across the likes of Ernest Hemingway, who in turn sees Gil as a competitor and not as someone from a later time period who is almost in awe of him. The postmodern techniques of pluralizing cityscapes, bringing out multiple voices, intertextuality, magic realism and questioning a teleological notion of progress are exhibited in the course of the film but it is cardinal to note that the film may have hinged on postmodern tendencies but one should be careful before terming it as ‘ a postmodern film’.

According to Michel Foucault (1967), "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment... when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein"(p.1). The tendency to recollect the past and to see a present in continuum is a modernist trope, where there is both a revival and a departure from the past. The questions of modernity are intricately linked to the paradigm of a historical understanding and as Susan Stanford Friedman rightly puts, "it is not the erasure of history but its insistent return as nightmare and desire which marks modernity's stance toward stories of the past" (as cited in McIntire, 2008, p.5). Gabrielle McIntire further quotes Lawrence Rainey, who said that "the modernists were obsessed with history. They mourned it and damned it..."(p.5). Gil's nostalgia and recourse to history as a way of escaping from his contemporary existence hinges on an idea of a nostalgic desire that binds him in a mesh of extraordinary encounters with figures from the past. The lead character of his novel works in a nostalgia shop and his fiancée thinks Gil is one of those people, who thinks that their lives would have been happier if they lived in an earlier time. Allen in the course of the narrative explicitly posits a nostalgic return to the past vis-à-vis postmodern strategies, which facilitate the filmmaker to experiment with the cinematic and artistic form while the content indeed looks for an answer and provides its viewers with one in the end.

According to Frederic Jameson (1991), "Postmodernism [as a theory] is one of those attempts: the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age', or zeitgeist or 'system' or 'current situation' any longer...[it] is then dialectical at least insofar as it has the wit to seize on that very uncertainty" (p.10). Woody Allen's film allows the contesting and contrasting spaces of Paris, the two realities to exist simultaneously. The Paris with its Dior outlet and roadside cafeterias transforms into a Paris with its 20s jazz music and picturesque inns. This juxtaposition of spaces "seize on that very uncertainty" but *Midnight in Paris* distinctly harps on the idea of a "coherent thing as an 'age', 'zeitgeist' or 'system'..." This is marked by Gil's desire for the "Golden Age" with its thriving intellectual pursuits and iconic literary and artistic stalwarts. He comes to Paris with the stacked up images of its glorious past, of what he has read and learnt about the "Golden Age" from history books and literary accounts. His perception of what may have transpired in the Paris of the 20s has played a significant role in the proceedings of his midnight engagements. Gil essentializes Paris of the 20s but postmodernism hinges on an idea of anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism. The project of essentializing the cultural space is highlighted vividly when Gil claims that he is after all a Hollywood hack who never gave actual literature a real shot (Allen, 2011). His idealism involving the cultural space of Paris, prompts him to think that America is not the place where literature thrives but it is the French city of renowned philosophers and thinkers which nurtures "real" literature. The conglomeration of artists and literary characters, with Hemmingway from America and Pablo Picasso from Italy, to the Fitzgeralds from America and Salvador Dali from Spain, presents an eclectic mix to the land of pure imagination where Gil's artistic endeavours are waiting to take shape. To the viewers, Paris is shown as the heterogeneous space, which does not categorically bear a distinct identity and can be painted in the hues of ones' imagination and on the other hand, there is Gil's attempt to view it in its multiplicity, where he almost attributes the creative geniuses of the stalwarts of modernism to the artistic paradigm of the Parisien landscape. He says that "every street, every boulevard [in Paris] is a special art form"(Allen, 2011, Scene 39). It almost echoes what Allen himself claimed in one of his interviews that " [he] just wanted it to be the way [he] saw Paris – Paris through [his] eyes"(Ganley, 2011). A conscious reconstruction of the space into an artistic disposition can be

read as the late capitalist cosmopolitan world of Hollywood trying to find an alternative in the idyllic by lanes of Paris in its midnight hours, coupled with jazz music.

Paris of the 1920s that Gil slips into during the midnight hours is the other space, which may not perhaps co-exist with the cosmopolitan Paris of daytime. Even though, Allen juxtaposes the two to weave a fascinating tale of contrasting spaces, which in turn makes way for its postmodern premise, one wonders why the rendezvous happens during midnight alone and whether it is only at those hours when the ‘unreal’ space of Gil’s Paris may be allowed to exist. In order to elaborate on this other space that Woody Allen brings forth on the celluloid, I would like to enunciate on what Michel Foucault calls “heterotopia.” According to Foucault (1967), “[There are] places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality,” and these unreal, virtual places act as a mirror in which individuals see a shadow of themselves even when they are perhaps literally outside it (p.4). Allen reconstructs the glorious past of the creative pantheon and places his American hero in the midst of it. The heterotopic space of the midnight hours stands for unfulfilled desire and its subsequent disenchantment.

In literary records, one may have read about Hemingway’s fascination with the city of Paris and his acquaintance with the likes of James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein during his stay in the city but do we really know if he would offer a ride to an upcoming writer in his vintage car and take him to meet Stein for the purpose of critiquing his competitor’s work? Or for that matter, do we know if Zelda Fitzgerald actually tried to commit suicide by attempting to plunge into the river Seine, when she doubted the loyalty of F.Scott Fitzgerald towards her? At an art exhibition when Paul, a guest lecturer at Sorbonne University, talks about the inspiration behind one of Pablo Picasso’s famous paintings, Gil interrupts and says that he had perhaps got his facts wrong because it was Adriana, his supposed mistress at that time, who prompted the painter to paint the same. Many critics have noted that even though Picasso had a number of mistresses, a mistress by the name of Adriana was nowhere mentioned in historical records. “Picasso and Matisse, who appear in the film, also had a rivalry, barely acknowledged in the film, with the two artists echoing — some critics say swiping — each other’s themes”(Berger, 2011). This is where the ambiguous narrative of micro history plays out, in the heterotopic space of Gil’s artistic maneuver. History is represented in the form of incidents that have been recorded in public discourse but at the same time contested by Allen’s speculative portrayal, which in turn is spurred by his protagonist’s Golden Age thinking, who regards the past as a glorious and intellectually thriving counterfeit to the mundane present.

Foucault coins the term “heterotopology” to signify the “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live”(p.4). These heterotopic spaces may be heterotopias of crisis or deviation, the other spaces where “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons...”(p.5). Gil during his midnight rendezvous exists in one such heterotopia of deviation, but this space is a result of a magical imagination, where perhaps literary pursuits take shape, and not a space of oppression or rehabilitation. When Gil discloses before his fiancée that he met Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso at midnight, Inez confides in her parents that Gil goes somewhere at midnight but she has no inkling about where he must have been going, indicating that he may have been embroiled in some devious activity or perhaps has been

betrayed by his mental faculties. Foucault also talks about heterochronies, “[where] the heterotopia begins to function full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time”(p.6). Woody Allen appropriates the idea of a heterotopic space but instead of portraying it as a space of oppression or even of the dead, as understood from Foucault's example of a cemetery that represents both loss of life and perhaps eternal bliss, he sees the juxtaposition of contesting spaces in the light of a celebration of this deviation and heterogeneity. In this heterotopic space, Gil is engaging in a dialogue with the past but according to Linda Hutcheon (1988) , “[postmodernism does not imply] a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary of architectural forms” (p. 4). Gil's return to the past is a nostalgic and idealistic return, where he takes recourse in the past to find the answers to the problems that plague him in his contemporary existence. The film in this respect, in its paradigm of a very modernist narrative adopts postmodern tactics like mixing of genres, wherein we are not sure whether to call it a romantic adventure film or a historical film, but it cannot be termed as a postmodern film in its entirety despite its simultaneous reconstruction and deconstruction of history and spaces.

The time during which the film was made can be held significant because of the crisis the American middle class was facing then and a recourse to a reconstructed ideal past of the Lost Generation of Paris could be an appropriate getaway from the present. As Maria Teresa Castilho(2014) points out, “At a historical moment of accelerated rhythms and crisis in the United States, the American middle class, who used to dream about the future, declares that it wants to recover the comforting security and self-confidence of the past, while the majority announces that they haven't yet recovered from the Great Recession”(p.179). Films can never be devoid of the politics of its time and art, in this case, acts as a mechanism for reflective recalling, a reaction to the upheaval of its time. The anxiety synonymous with the fin-de-siecle that had triggered the nostalgic return to the past in the face of the alienation of modernity seems to have been taking a cyclical path to find a manifestation in a film made in the twenty-first century. This highlights that the modern condition of seclusion and lamentation over the loss of the previous order is prevalent even in a later century and popular culture appropriates postmodern nuances to highlight that sense of loss but the attitude towards the past is far from the postmodern condition of nonchalance or denial.

An important shift in the narrative comes in the climactic section of the film when Adriana takes Gil to a time even further away from the Jazz age, to the era of Belle Epoque. Adriana declares that she yearns to be a part of the Belle Epoque of 1890s . When Gil tries to persuade her that they should go back to the 20s, she refuses and adds that she would like to stay back in the Belle Epoque. On the other hand, the artists of the Belle Epoque when asked about their favourite age, they talk of the Renaissance. This acts as a critical turning point in the film where Gil suffers a disillusionment with the idea of a nostalgic return to the ideal past. He understands that what encounters him is a choice between embracing reality or indulging in surreal insanity (Allen, 2011). The narrative at this point engages in a critical re-thinking of the fanciful longings of human desire for a past decade. Allen in his film demonstrates categorically that the surreal spaces of human imagination perhaps can exist only as an unfulfilled desire, that cannot be materialized. The film brings about a narrative closure, where Gil chooses to be in Paris, but in the Paris of his time in the company of a possible love interest from his own time. His attraction towards Adriana from the 1920s meets a tragic deadlock when she declares that the 1890s is the era where she wants to stay back. His enchantment with Adriana is representative of his desire for the Paris in the 20s. Once, he realizes a sense of a meta-nostalgia especially through Adriana's displeasure towards her present time of the supposed “Golden Age”, Gil is almost forced

to reconcile with his present where the postmodern realm of simultaneous spaces can no longer exist. Gil emerges from the other space, with an experience that enriches his understanding of the present time. The postmodern ardour serves as a moment's monument in Allen's film and as he himself confesses, "[his] perception is that you are forced to choose reality over fantasy and reality hurts you in the end, and fantasy is just madness... like life it's a lose-lose situation" (Lax, 2007).

The film ends with Gil taking a stroll in the rain, thereby he eventually experiences what he perceives as the epitome of beauty, that is, Paris in the rains but at that moment he can no longer rest on the assurance and warmth of a glorious past. Allen applies a modernist trope in prioritizing one space over the other, one narrative over another and the postmodern experience of Gil simultaneously occupying two distinct spaces gives away for a closure, that even brims of a notion of hope. It is quite evident that Allen's idea was not to make a postmodern film but as Sam B. Girgus (1993) points out, "As part of [his] involvement in understanding and representing the American experience today, his films deal with broad social and cultural subjects, themes that comprise core of contemporary life... the subjects that comprise the body of his work often include a self-reflexive consideration of cinema itself as an art form, the relevance of middle-class values to the complexities of modern life..." (p. 8). The ending of *Midnight in Paris* harps on the point that the way out of contemporary crises does not lie in the idea of a nostalgic solace and Allen's protagonist Gil in this case becomes an alter ego of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History whose "face is turned toward the past...The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed, [the modern anxiety brought forth by the wars]. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned" (Childs, 2000, pp. 16-17). In Gil's case though, he is being made to turn away his face from the likes of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, whose writings in the "Golden Age" were an expression of the modern angst that enveloped the society around them. Perhaps, it is a message for contemporary writers to write about the times that they live in, rather than to discard it as uninspiring and mundane. There are patches of the postmodern irony with Gil telling Tom Stearns Eliot that in the part of the world that he comes from "they measure out their lives in coke spoons" (Allen, 2011, Scene 49). Despite the stylistic techniques adopted by Allen starting from the main poster of the film with Gil and the famous Van Gogh painting in the background to the opening shot of the film being a montage of moving images captured in the city of Paris, the film cannot be termed as a product of a particular literary movement but it incorporates certain postmodern strategies to underline the problematic aspect of a nostalgic return to the past.

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