

Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*: No style, no substance

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The opening of Woody Allen's latest release is wastefully spent on three and a half minutes of cinematography pandering to the supposed universally accepted wisdom that Paris is the most romantic city in the world. Perhaps this is some type of tribute to the opening of Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). Allen is of course a self-confessed Bergman admirer, but, sadly, Woody's latest offering is anything but as memorable as the Swede's masterpiece.

Or maybe Darius Khondji's cinematography was Allen partaking in some self-reverence as a very similar opening (Allen fans will note) takes place in the filmmaker's wonderfully sparse drama *Interiors* (1978), a film arguably the closest Allen has ever come to emulating his idol Bergman's cinematic achievements.

Midnight in Paris is the story of an engaged couple visiting Paris along with the affluent parents of the wife-to-be, Inez (Rachel McAdams), who are apparently going there on business.

Her fiancé Gil (Owen Wilson) yearns for a more explosive literary existence than the mundane screenwriting Hollywood life he has settled into. And while his more pragmatic wife spends the Paris vacation mapping out their wedding, Gil embarks at night on a "voyage" into an antiquated Parisian world: the 1920s, a time when the French capital was home to some of the most important and innovative artists of the 20th Century.

Most pertinently for Gil, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway resided in the French capital then. Seeking inspiration for his novel, Gil feels sure he has stumbled upon fertile ground, and it is Hemingway he hopes will offer the wisest counsel.

Indeed an early interaction Gil has with the novelist, played charmingly by Corey Stoll, is one of the few highlights of the film. In this scene Hemingway, in an all too brief monologue, recounts some of his war experiences, unnerving yet somewhat humanizing Allen's protagonist. Here the director had a wonderful opportunity to surprise his audience, take us down a darker, dangerous road, but rather than sitting in and working through this potentially exciting confrontation, allowing it to unfold, Allen ends the scene just as it's getting started.

Genre, craft and style

Well, seeing as *Midnight in Paris* focuses on a young man's fascination and inclination to romanticize and delve into a bygone era, let's take a brief look at Allen's own past.

Lazy reviewers of Woody's work, in both their praise and criticism, have failed to fully engage with his appreciation, knowledge and indeed failings when it comes to genre, craft and style.

Cassandra's Dream, released in 2007, is patently a Greek tragedy that works well as an exhilarating piece of cinema mostly for the fine performances of Colin Farrell, Ewan McGregor and Tom Wilkinson. The seminal scene comes about when Wilkinson's character persuades both Farrell and McGregor to murder a business rival of his. This scene is played out in a wonderfully rough, free and almost improvisational manner that keeps the actors very much on their toes. In fact, the scene's so roughly portrayed it can appear to the naked eye that the actors don't know what they are doing.

Allen has of late been an exponent of what's known in the industry as "choiceless awareness." A style of acting that was first harnessed by John Cassavetes in the 1950s and 1960s, and has since been contemporized by British filmmakers Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, "choiceless awareness" implies that the actors are forced (at the last minute) to perform a scene with only a rudimentary idea of what it's about, and indeed very little text to play with. This method is designed to produce unforced and authentic actions and reactions from the thespians.

Alas, Allen has apparently abandoned this method for *Midnight in Paris*. Choosing instead to return to his self-absorbed, would-be witty repartee. However, it is clear to all and sundry that Allen is running out of gags, as every performance (excluding Stoll as Ernest Hemingway) is stilted, weightless, lacking in freedom and spontaneity.

Confined to Allen's "clever" dialogue with no room for "play," the actors have either chosen to cop out or seemingly mock the

text. This mocking is most notable in Adrien Brody's gratuitous portrayal of the remarkable surrealist artist Salvador Dali. Upon meeting Wilson's character, Brody pounds his chest, exclaiming "I am Dali! Dali!" (This introduction was obviously intended to elicit laughter!)

Brody's attempts at larger-than-life comedy are inconsistent and bear no relation whatsoever to the world—or the performers—around him. For Allen has every other actor interact with Gil in a bland faux realist fashion. And, unfortunately, this continues throughout. Allen seems uncertain, to put it mildly, how best to contrast Paris' golden age with the Paris of today.

As demonstrated in *Bananas* (1971), *Sleeper* (1973), and *Love and Death* (1975), Allen has a capacity for committing fully to anarchic, subversive clowning. He has shown the ability to pursue political, literary and historical epochs and figures through withering satire and thereby produce satisfying results.

Love or loathe the aforementioned films, you cannot dispute Allen's passion for genre and style in these pieces. In those works "naturalism" is absent. These comedies were effused with an intense desire to expose the ridiculous that lies within every portion of humankind. Unfortunately, *Midnight in Paris* is devoid of such a quality.

Moreover, basic questions are left unanswered after the film's 94 minutes. What makes Gil tick? Why has he such a fascination and longing for another time period? Here Allen's weak and dated script is not the sole culprit.

Wilson's representation of Gil is nothing short of inert. One could understand Wilson's choice of approaching the role of a Hollywood screenwriter with a whiney, deadpan, self-deprecating longing for something more from life than "style," if the film were set in its entirety in his hometown of Los Angeles. But come on, Gil, now you're free! You're in PAREE! Where's the panache?! Where's the urge to embrace this city that you purportedly love so much?! Where's the vigour?! Sadly, it's non-existent in Wilson's work. As Stella Adler once said, "The talent is in the choices." Owen Wilson's choice never once shifts gear.

This reviewer couldn't help but muse about transporting himself back to the mid-1970s when a younger, manic Woody Allen himself might have lit up the screen with one of his deranged neurotic performances. This is what the role of Gil undoubtedly required!

The fact that Allen unwisely chooses to change nothing other than the sets and costumes in the "style" of the period to which Gil is transported only highlights the lack of thought he and his cast and crew have put into this piece. Other thoughtless, craftless performances include Kathy Bates as a pedantic Gertrude Stein. Tom Hiddleston and Alison Pill, as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, are insipid in their respective interpretations of the literary giant and his spouse. The usually excellent Marion Cotillard mumbles her way through the film like a church mouse, as Wilson's love interest Adriana.

Yes, virtually every character Gil encounters in the "golden age" is portrayed in an embarrassing, one-dimensional manner. Where was the magic of this golden age?

Quality versus quantity

Interiors (1978) followed on directly from Allen's most lauded comedy, *Annie Hall* (1977) This was Allen's own "golden age." A time in his career when he showed an unbridled bravery in his filmmaking. In vast contrast to the latter film, *Interiors* rang true for its forthright, minimalist representation of a family torn apart, a mature drama of the highest order proving that Allen was as adept at dramatic scenarios as he was with comic ones.

There is no disputing Allen has proven to be remarkably prolific in a moviemaking career now spanning five decades. Sadly, however, the quality has been sacrificed over time. Repeating himself with clever, "quirky," middle class relationship films, which were to take precedence over honest, more socially conscious pieces.

Did Woody Allen ever have a social conscience? Apparently, yes! Allen himself has led us to believe that *Radio Days* (1987) was his most personal work. Allen narrates this story, seen through the eyes of a young boy growing up in the working class Queens neighborhood of Rockaway Beach in the late 1930s. The boy's family struggles to make ends meet, forcing them to live with their immediate relatives. Here Allen captures beautifully how such families often find solace and hope through humour and imagination. Although *Radio Days* is seriously flawed, its honesty is unquestionable.

Let's hope *Midnight in Paris*, Allen's latest pandering to the pseudo-intelligentsia, has not signalled the end of that honest moviemaking.



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