Woody Allen's *Irrational Man*: The familiar flatness and lack of conviction

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Written and directed by Woody Allen

Woody Allen's latest film, *Irrational Man*, focuses on controversial philosophy professor Abe Lucas (Joaquin Phoenix) who arrives at fictional, liberal arts Braylin College in Newport, Rhode Island to teach a summer course.

A depressed Lucas, who sips from a flask at every opportunity, has clearly run out of intellectual and emotional steam. For years he has been trying, without success, to finish a book on Martin Heidegger and Nazism. A close friend of his has been killed stepping on a landmine in Iraq. Political activism, by which Abe apparently means "human rights" work in Darfur and other global "disaster areas," has failed him. Nothing energizes or excites him about life. He is also impotent.

Lucas becomes involved with two women, Rita Richards (Parker Posey), an unhappily married fellow professor, and Jill Pollard (Emma Stone), one of his brightest students. Lucas resists Jill's advances for some time, but they become constant companions and her youth and enthusiasm rub off on him.

Lucas expresses disdain for academic philosophy, asserting that there is a vast difference between "theoretical" reality and the "real, nasty world." He suggests to a roomful of students, including Jill, that much of human theorizing is a form of "verbal masturbation." He seems to favor an absurdist, existential view of things, referring in his classes and conversations to Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Dostoyevsky and others. I have "no zest for life… I've given up," he tells Jill. At a party he even indulges in a dangerous game of Russian roulette.

A conversation that Abe and Jill hear by chance, while sitting in a diner, changes things. (Anyone who doesn't care to know the central narrative wrinkle in *Irrational Man* should stop reading now.) The woman in the next booth is tearfully explaining to her friends that a particular judge is unfairly going to find for her husband in a bitter custody dispute. Supposedly, the judge has some prejudice in favor of the husband, but will not recuse himself.

As Lucas tells us in a voiceover, he there and then determines to become a vigilante for the cause of good and bump off the judge, calculating that this will be a "perfect murder," since he has no motive or connection to any of the judge's cases.

Having accomplished the deed, Lucas quickly comes back to life. Now everything starts "flowing." He has made his "existential choice… Life has the meaning you give it." Thanks to his "meaningful act," Abe can have sex with both Rita and eventually Jill. Unfortunately, this idyllic state of affairs is interrupted by a police investigation and the suspicions of several people close to him.

Allen's *Irrational Man* has the same fatal flatness and lack of conviction that have plagued his filmmaking for the past two decades, since *Husbands and Wives* (1992). Reality, personal and social, has clearly knocked the stuffing out of the writer-director. He continues to turn out a film a year, calling on the services of some of the most intriguing talent, but the works are largely drained of and starved for life. (And it is an indication of the state of the contemporary film world that performers are reportedly thrilled to work with Allen, for far less money than they normally receive.)

The idea content of the new film is very weak. Aside from the fact that Lucas's relatively undiluted and gloomy existentialism would have been far more appropriate—where is postmodernism, for instance?—to the period when Allen might have gone to university (he dropped out, in fact, in the 1950s), the presentation is full of clichés.

Particularly irritating is the sight of the two female leads—who are far more interesting and dynamic as personalities than Phoenix or his character—circling around an individual who hardly possesses a single original thought. When Jill exclaims worshipfully to Lucas, in a restaurant, "I love that you order for me," and Rita, equally adoringly, proclaims after their first successful sexual encounter, "What happened to the philosopher? Christ, you were like a caveman," one feels that the filmmaker (for whom every leading male character is a stand-in) has simply made himself a little foolish.

The faint, faint echoes of *Crime and Punishment* are evident. To mention the two works in the same paragraph, however, is inappropriate. Dostoyevsky, for better or worse, approached his novel with the utmost urgency and sincerity, intending to take up what he perceived to be pernicious nihilistic and atheistic views and attitudes. The dialogue and actions in the novel, with the exception of its concluding, falsely self-abnegating section, are thoroughly convincing.

There is terribly little that is convincing in *Irrational Man*. That Lucas, as personally miserable as he may be, would embark on a plot to murder another human being in cold blood on the basis of one snippet of overheard conversation is preposterous. In any event, far from carrying out a "perfect murder," Lucas allows himself to be seen at key moments by various eyewitnesses.

Flatness, lethargy, sluggishness, intellectual exhaustion: these are words or phrases that come to mind throughout.

It should not be necessary to begin from zero on the subject of Woody Allen's sad, protracted decline. In 2005 (*Melinda and Melinda*), we commented: "The Allen persona wore thin a good many pictures ago, but it carried him through until the early 1990s. Various factors, including personal ones, may have caused him to lose his way so dramatically, but no doubt social changes played a decisive role. The milieu that he lovingly, if sardonically, chronicled has disintegrated."

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Four years later (*Whatever Works*), we wrote that it was impossible to detach Woody Allen's decline, notwithstanding its individual twists and turns, from the general fate of considerable numbers of quasi-cultured, semi-bohemian, once-liberal, upper middle class New Yorkers in particular.

"Intellectually unprepared for complex social problems, culturally shallow, ego-driven and a bit (or more than a bit) lazy, exclusively oriented toward the Democratic Party and other institutions of order, distant from or hostile toward broad layers of the population, inheriting family wealth or enriching themselves in the stock market and real estate boom...for a good many, the accumulated consequences of the past several decades have not been attractive."

In 2014 (*Magic in the Moonlight*), we noted that "Woody Allen's new film seems very distant from life, including his own life." Over the course of the previous year, Allen had been subjected to a scurrilous campaign, spearheaded by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, the champion of imperialist "humanitarian interventionism," over unproven 20-year-old allegations of child molestation. We added that "Allen seems too self-absorbed and too limited at present to be able to bring into his filmmaking the central dilemmas of our time, even when they involve him directly. So, as a consequence, his work resembles life less and less."

Nonetheless, Allen remains a cultural presence, largely and residually based on his earlier comedy and film work and also in recognition of the fact that he has never entirely thrown in his lot with the Hollywood system.

His pessimism is not attractive, and it has consequences, whether he recognizes that or not. At the drop of a hat, Allen tells interviewers how miserable he is and how he finds life pointless and absurd. For example: "I'm a great believer in the utter meaningless randomness of existence… All of existence is just a thing with no rhyme or reason to it. We all live subject to the utter fragile contingency of life." (He seems to have gotten over his view in 2009 that "now we're entering into at least a period of some hope, of some human possibilities for the country … we've made progress, and elected our first African-American president.") To preach such things to young people in particular is highly irresponsible.

Allen also declares, whether sincerely or not, that most of his films are "failures," a judgment, unhappily, that one is obliged to agree with.

The writer-director has dealt before with the protagonist-criminal, most notably in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), *Match Point* (2005) and *Cassandra's Dream* (2007). The first of those films is perhaps the most important and deepgoing in Allen's career: a wealthy ophthalmologist (Martin Landau) faces a crisis due to the increasingly strident demands and threats of his mistress (Anjelica Huston). He turns to his shady brother (Jerry Orbach), who hires a hit man to take care of the woman.

In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen no doubt, consciously or otherwise, took a look at the filthy, money-grubbing ethos of the "Reagan years," but more generally, he alluded to the moral and social shift of an entire social grouping, the erstwhile liberal, Jewish, New York middle class, which was suddenly finding itself wealthy and obliged to support the most ruthless measures in defense of its riches.

Unfortunately, *Irrational Man* is almost entirely bereft of that historical and social concreteness. It floats like an inconsequential straw in the breeze.

While the film may be relatively negligible, it raises some issues that are far from negligible.

Allen's title deliberately refers to the well-known 1958 study (and promotion) of existentialism of the same name by William Barrett. The latter, an American academic, who, after "flirting" with Trotskyism in the 1930s, like many of his generation, converted to anticommunism and irrationalism under the intellectual influence of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre. Barrett ended up a sour neoconservative.

Barrett's *Irrational Man*, which was almost mandatory reading in American high schools and universities in the 1960s, was one of the milestones marking the move of significant sections of the intelligentsia toward anti-Marxism. "Marxism," Barrett pontificated ignorantly, "has no philosophical categories for the unique facts of human personality, and in the natural course of things manages to collectivize this human personality out of existence." (Have we ever heard this kind of thing before?)

Marxism, he goes on, is one of the "relics of the nineteenth-century Enlightenment that have not yet come to terms with the shadow side of human life as grasped even by some of the nineteenth-century thinkers themselves." (Again, is this the slightest bit familiar?)

The Marxist "picture of man," according to Barrett, "is thin and oversimplified. Existential philosophy, as a revolt against such oversimplification, attempts to grasp the image of the whole man, even where this involves bringing to consciousness all that is dark and questionable in his existence. And in just this respect it is a much more authentic expression of our own contemporary existence."

To what degree Allen takes this reactionary viewpoint at face value is unclear. But to the extent that this type of ideology has remained in the background of his thinking, it gives a clue as to some of the difficulties at work.

One of the peculiarities of *Irrational Man*, the film, is that Allen on the face of it subscribes to Lucas's outlook. Presumably, as long as one sits around and discourses pseudo-profoundly about the meaninglessness of life and doesn't poison or push one's fellow creatures down elevator shafts, existentialist nihilism retains its allure.

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