

FILM REVIEW

*Annie Hall*, with Woody Allen and Diane Keaton (Hoyts Entertainment Centre, Sydney; Village Cinema, Toorak, Melbourne).

Woody Allen builds into *Annie Hall* two counter-analytical devices designed to render his "sensitive", "honest", "moving" film critic proof.

First, he presents a film critic/academic as a posturing, petty, jargon-laden, insensitive bore - that's one in the eye for all those second-raters who try to wring Meaning, Message, Massage, or Deep Kulchural Significance from this little opus. Your Friendly Neighborhood Critic, reeling from the onslaught, then must confront the second barrier to understanding this film: the explicit introductory statement by Allen (who portrays Alvie) that the film is in the nature of a search for the causes of the break-up of a relationship. The story is thus made particular, concerning Alvie (a twice-married, twice-divorced New York Jewish comedian, sufficiently well-known to perform at Democratic Party political rallies) and Annie (an insecure WASP from an uptight, mid-West family, trying to break into the New York nightclub scene as a singer), and the implication is that the trajectory of their relationship - how two people "made it" together and then, somehow, sadly, lost it - bears no social significance.

It is clear that this is poppycock - even the self-indulgent Allen cannot believe that people around the world will pay money for the sheer pleasure of watching Woody and Diane Keaton disport themselves, absent some larger context than that of biography.

But still, given the public exposure of the characters' intimate fears, vulnerabilities, irrationalities and foibles - examination, you may argue, only undertaken by Bergman and long overdue in American cinema - how illegitimate it seems to apply the critic's cold tools to all that revealed emotional flesh. Of course, one might carp; at the film's male egocentrism; at the context, remorselessly crazy urban America (New York and Los Angeles), where neuroses, psychoses and a generalised autism seem to flower in desperate profusion; at the ending, despite the humor, so sad .... yep, Boy Eventually Loses Girl.

Against these quibbles is an array of what are widely regarded as Good Things: the honesty with which Alvie's and Annie's sexual and emotional hang-ups are displayed; the bitter-sweet humor of Alvie's capacity to encounter/handle/transcend emotional pain; the celebration of that sense of absurdity we all need to help us survive; and finally, the presentation of reality as relative.

Far and away the Best Thing, of course, is how true to life the picture of their relationship is - for

haven't we all "found" someone at some time, felt wonderful, revived, alive - and then felt the fabric fray, tear, and finally, bewilderingly, fall apart in our hands. How could we fail to respond, then, to the film's loving treatment of our own joys and resentment? How well we recognise ourselves in Annie Hall's use of child-like fantasies, ratifying our own attempts to make the world behave as you would like it to, if only for a moment: Alvie, standing in a movie queue, annoyed beyond endurance by the aforementioned academic's pseudo-isms about Marshall McLuhan, fetches the great man from behind a convenient billboard and blissfully hears McLuhan tell the prattler that he hasn't a clue what he, McLuhan is on about.

Given all this, *Annie Hall* seems a paragon of sensitivity and insight, giving us both an accurate picture of our own crazy, contradictory, and self-defeating emotions and a means of coming to terms with them, through a cautious, resilient zaniness. For Allen, this zaniness is grounded in the knowledge that the world is both doomed and absurd: We see the young Alvie refusing to do his homework; his science textbook has revealed that the universe is constantly expanding, thus constantly in danger of exploding, thus "what's the point of doing homework?" It is also grounded in the recognition of an existential necessity that keeps human beings active in this absurd and antipathetic world.

Allen, through Alvie, is pretty murky about the nature of the need which keeps us drearily plugging along despite a plethora of setbacks (in the film, the protagonist is an emotional two-time loser). But two jokes provide an insight:

1st Man: What a misfortune. It's Terrible. It's crazy. My brother thinks he's a chicken.

2nd Man: How awful! Why don't you take him to a doctor?

1st Man (anguished): How can I? We need the eggs!



1st Woman (in a restaurant): My God, the food in this place is terrible!

2nd Woman: Absolutely revolting! And not only that, but the portions are so small!

There you have it, folks; driven by necessity (the ubiquitous "eggs"), we must survive, somehow, the impossible struggle. Yet even while we writhe, pointlessly, in the toils, we feel how little time we have, how imminent is death .... and we resolve not to go gently into that good night, no matter what a relief it would be **logically** to have an end to our painful and hopeless contortions.

Now all of this is so much hooey, the product both of Allen's carefully unpretentious pretentiousness and of a broad-spectrum positivism which sees social reality as static,

struggles as individual, ontological givens, and the present as all-engulfing. More importantly, it reflects the concerns of what Christopher Lasch has called the Narcissist Society!

Firstly, the film celebrates emotionalism, and in this sense is generally part of contemporary cinema's interest in mass producing the extraordinary - no emotion/psychic state is too bizarre to be explored on the silver screen. The particular emotionalism portrayed here is that deriving from an awareness of self - self seen not in any historical or relational sense, but as the locus of "feelings", the most important being the sense of **personal** well-being derived from a recognition and articulation of one's individual needs and demands. **Annie Hall** lauds the characters' "knowledge" of themselves, a knowledge inherently flawed because it deals with **how** they are what they are rather than **why** they are what they are. Thus, for them, it is important to gain access to their personal idiosyncrasies in demands and needs; once these are fully and frankly out in the open, with and without the assistance of therapists - one can then see how the sets of demands in any relationship (for sexual-ego-intellectual-political satisfaction) mesh. If they do, fine; if they don't, well, too bad, on to the next relationship in the (probably vain) hope that we'll be luckier next time.

In **Annie Hall** there is virtually no notion of people mediating their demands. The "honest" thing for Annie and Alvie to do once they've discovered their incompatibilities, is regretfully draw a line under their relationship. In our recognition of their pain, their bewilderment, their reluctance to part, we run a serious risk of overlooking the significance of their "defeat" of the abandonment of a relationship that doesn't quite "make it". Such disposability illustrates a major capitulation to instrumental rationality of late capitalism, where people - like commodities - are viewed as collections of characteristics, and personal relationships as merely the mutual reinforcement of emotional demand curves.

Secondly, human needs - the "eggs" in the joke - are reified. Today's needs - potent sexual responsiveness, instant emotional gratification, etc. - are seen as trans-historical and it becomes impossible to ask **whether** today's needs were yesterday's needs, **why** private, emotional security might achieve paramouncy under, say, corporate capitalism as opposed to entrepreneurial capitalism, etc.

There is a sleight of hand at work in **Annie Hall**. Despite its scenes of love and pain, it really reinforces our everyday notions of the transitoriness and atomisation of human relationships. The best we can do, it seems to say, is to grin and bear it - other people are pretty impossible, but because we need them (in a hazy, ill-defined way) for our existence, we must pursue

the limited, fleeting and fortuitous "happiness" they offer us, and move on when the happiness is dissipated. The film's emotionality, then, is defined within concepts of self and the present.

Within **Annie Hall's** terms, the future/posterity doesn't exist; it is remarkable that none of Alvie's self-analyses ever involve the question of children. It is clear that he sees us trapped in a continuous present, on a treadmill, and it is only the here and now that matters.

Yet such abandonment of "impossible" relationships is incapable of bringing relief or respite. Locked in a continuous present which lacks any political, public dimension, one responds by seeking emotional intimacy. But intimacy makes one vulnerable, dependent. To counteract this, Annie and Alvie - like many of us - contract their "intimacy" in specified terms, indicating a degree of manipulation, insensitivity and closure which almost negates any possibility for the intimacy which we initially sought.

The stratagems adopted in the narcissistic society maintain and advance the very processes and institutions which give rise to the anxiety in the first place.

**Annie Hall** is very much a '70s film, framed in the context of widespread political despair and disillusionment. It throws us back into ourselves, it "explains" away our indulgences, cruelties and obsessions, excusing them on grounds of The Human Condition - a kind of permanent cultural insanity. Yet it is easy to believe this film, in its honestly portrayed emotions, in the accuracy of the behaviors and attitudes displayed. But it is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Our experiences are historically specified. Of course we need other people, but the way we need other people will vary. We are **not** locked into a treadmill, where impossible demands are constantly made upon inadequate people. The logic of capital argues for static concepts, for a loyalty to personal survival based on satisfaction of individual needs, individually constructed, rather than loyalty to a process which affirms the social construction of needs **and** the possibilities both of a rational posterity and an end to domination.

Don't be fooled by **Annie Hall's** stiff-upper-lip, take it with a smile, realism. It is a counsel of despair, of capitulation. The social reality it presents - of inexorable fragmentation and atomisation - is only accurate to the extent that we do not struggle against those institutions and understandings which fragment and atomise. In the case of **Annie Hall**, for instance, we must strive for definitions of emotion, commitment, understanding, love, and tolerance which transcend the film's commonsense notions of these terms as operationalised under capitalism.

- *Kathe Boehringer.*