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Essay # 1

Urban Neurotics at High Frequency

Woody Allen's 1979 film *Manhattan* is a romantic comedy about Allen's love for women and his love for New York City. While these may seem to be two oddly different things to love, for a New Yorker it may seem more common than not. This essay will explore the question of whether the urban environment can affect relationships or whether it is simply an artistic echo of the people who live in big cities.

Film critics have suggested that Manhattan, one of the five boroughs that form New York City is a character, perhaps the main character of this film. Rather, Manhattan is not so much a character as an organism in which the dramatic characters bump around like pinballs. In Manhattan, the physical buildings are not the organism, everything within the city is the organism. The city includes cars, music, construction and demolition. The city also includes movies and people and animals as well as classrooms, apartments, restaurants, and museums. Also adding to the structural effects are people's emotions, relationships, marriages, affairs, divorces, children, and relatives that all become part of what is in the city. Toss in some art, hot dogs, typewriters, theatrical openings and closings, a baseball game, planets and weather and we have the makings of what Manhattan is. These are all the pieces that make up the personality of

New York City. On a side note, Woody Allen has exploited the city as a character theme in two of his other films, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, and *Midnight in Paris*.

Even though it might appear to a non-New Yorker that Woody's Manhattan shows urban decadence and decay, in reality the film is about something bigger than the city. It is about the vibrancy, creativity, and neurosis of a man living within a hyper urban rhythm. Allen expresses these exact sentiments during the opening minutes of the film as the audience hears a voiceover of his character writing a portion of a new book, "Chapter One. He adored New York City. He idolized it all out of proportion." Uh, no, make that: "He—he . . . romanticized it all out of proportion" (Allen, W., Brickman, M., 1978).

At first one may think there is something odd about a forty-two-year-old man dating a woman who is less than half his age. We might also wonder why he complains about the alimony he is paying to an ex-wife. There's nothing decadent or immoral about any of the relationships and couplings within the film. It would be disingenuous to infer that divorces, affairs, gender preferences are any less normal in Manhattan than they are in a town of any size. Moreover, we certainly can't infer that the urban society has caused causality or even acceleration of these relationships. The chaotic urban life is merely background, a metaphor, and a counterpoint to Woody Allen's ever-present neurotic structure common to many of his romantic films. Allen makes no judgments about people other than, "What fools these mortals be" (Shakespeare, 1877). How he portrays his characters is in many respects how many New Yorkers are, they are a composite of their personalities and their environment.

What we can say about the city is that the cacophony, claustrophobia, and chaos of New York's vertical, apartment-centric, and close quarters are not a circle of hell (Dante, 1317). It is precisely those compact things that make New York beautiful, creative, and exciting. Allen's

themes of beautiful women, iconic images of beautiful bridges, and the hustle of New York street life is part of his love letter to Manhattan. What Allen portrays is not a terrifying, nightmarish New York, but a singular miracle. Manhattan is also not an Ayn Rand story of architectural supermen and destruction. Nor is it a split-personality futuristic world as presented in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, this is one of Woody Allen's personal stock of neurosis playing pinball around the comedy of errors that make up the other characters.

It is not necessary or even possible to say it is the urban environment that contributes to family instability, affairs, or compartmentalization of life. What can be concluded is that the characters are incestuously involved in publishing, writing, and academia. That they are thrown together professionally as well as socially, and it is this composite that exposes much of what Manhattan is.

Allen's choice to have cinematographer Gordon Willis shoot the entire picture in black and white is significant. Using the monochromatic medium allows the audience to focus on a heightened reality of urban line, form, texture, and motion. A Hollywood production shot in black and white was rare in the 1970's, the color was what sold the American audience. Allen's decision to shoot in black and white itself romanticizes New York. Allen idolized the great European Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini, who almost exclusively worked in black and white. Presenting Manhattan without color gives the audience a sense of glamorous nostalgia that sends us on a trip back in time to when Hollywood always photographed New York in black and white. Manhattan, it is a romanticized New York. One that, except for the fashions and some decor and cars, could appear in most anytime from the 1930s through the 1980s. Allen's choice to use music from George Gershwin as a soundtrack also sends us back in time to the 1920s and 1930s when Gershwin first composed that music.

Since 1979, some trends have conspired to make Manhattan even more of a city today. Increased gentrification and pushing out towards the outer boroughs, repurposing of industrial space as residential and conversion of older properties into luxury residences has spawned a new interest in the city as an international investment. It is not uncommon to see 1,200 square foot apartment sell for over a million dollars where that same unit thirty years ago had a rent of under \$700 a month. Urban is evolving faster in the Petrie dish of New York City as architecture, graphics, space, and living quarters are all designed on laptops, and more telecommuting becomes the norm. New York has always been the style and media center but with the technological boom New York draws on even more technical solutions to the challenges of living and work. The Manhattan in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* is still recognizable. The buildings, landmarks, and parks still exist. Some of the neighborhoods have changed over the years but that is expected. As the blended family evolved so do neighborhoods. But the evolutionary forces may push the city towards other movie metaphors such as that portrayed in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. A New Yorker viewing *Manhattan* even in 2016 would completely recognize the city and the energy level and not consider it anything other than normal New York.

References

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