

## Annie Hall (Woody Allen, 1977)

Woody Allen spent a number of years as a standup comic before turning to film, and many of his films, including “Annie Hall” have the pace of a series of standup routines: a set-up followed by a punchline, then off to the next bit.

Woody Allen writes regularly for *The New Yorker* magazine—offbeat, comic pieces relying heavily on incongruity for their humour. One of his best-known essays, “The Whore of Mensa,” for example, features an enormously intelligent young woman who will come to men’s apartments to satisfy their craving for an intelligent conversation. Allen has said that he could accept a life without filmmaking, but that he would be very unhappy if he were unable to write.

But in fact Woody Allen has, over the years, produced a new film every autumn, and he has an almost monk-like devotion to this routine. “Annie Hall,” his breakthrough film, won the Academy Award for Best Film in 1977, beating out “Star Wars.” (Unless otherwise noted, quotations come from Sam Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen*)

### **What is the story about?**

*A stand-up comic turned writer exercises artistic control to redeem a failed love affair, failing to recognize control as the enemy of intimacy.*

### **How do you know that this is what it is about?**

#### **“A stand-up comic turned writer”**

1. Framing device: stories addressed directly to the camera
2. Series of scenes with the cadence of comedic numbers
3. Frequent on-stage action: auditorium, night-club, TV sit-com, play rehearsal

#### **‘exercises artistic control’**

1. language
  - a. stuttering vs. coherence (the deceptiveness of fluency)
    - Both Annie Hall and Alvy Singer speak in Woody Allen’s signature stuttering style. Diane Keaton, who plays Annie Hall, delivers Woody Allen’s stuttering style so naturally that you have to see her in another film to realize that she’s perfectly capable of talking like a normal actress. Allen’s stuttering style communicates an underlying sense of insecurity, but beyond that suggests Allen’s wariness of glibness and easy fluency. In the “perfect play” at the end of the movie, all the actors speak coherently.
    - In the famous scene with Marshall McLuhan, Alvy demonstrates the film’s major theme: he turns to the camera and states that only in art can one re-shape reality and have such complete control over life. “Boy,” Alvy Singer says, “If life were only like this.” But consider the language: McLuhan’s actual words are gibberish. “What is so devastating about Marshall McLuhan’s magical appearance is not his actual presence, but the pathetic submission of the bore when McLuhan talks complete gibberish at him. McLuhan says, “You—you know nothing of my work. You mean, my whole fallacy is wrong.” Such nonsense suggests our unconscious awareness of how all of us, but most especially academics, intellectuals,

and even artists, including Allen himself, are vulnerable to public deflation and embarrassment as a consequence of pretensions and ambitions.” (Girgus, p.53)

b. spoken vs. unspoken

In the memorable subtitle scene on the balcony off Annie's apartment with a cityscape in the background, their real thoughts are seen in thought-bubble subtitles (like from exotic foreign films) at the bottom of the screen as they carry on absurd, small-talk banalities in their conversation about photography. Their budding sexual attraction, exciting interest in each other, and courtship are beautifully evoked. Annie is obviously feeling that she lacks self-confidence and is intellectually inadequate, yet unconstrained by proper vocabulary when she comments on "aesthetic criteria" -"You mean whether it's a good photo or not?" She thinks to herself: "I'm not smart enough for him. Hang in there." The thoughts in the subtitles are more believable than their spoken words.

c. language links

- End of scene “another in a series of cold showers” leads to next “my serve is going to send you to the showers”
- End of “ghost” scene—“What is this, an interview? We’re supposed to be making love”—leads to next scene, an interview, in which Alvy hopes to become the gag writer for a very bad comedian

2. narrative

- asides to the camera or to complete strangers
- dislocated narrative (flashbacks, time-travel back to childhood; fantasy transformations (Alvy becomes a bearded Hasidic Jew while visiting Annie’s anti-Semitic family)

3. cinematic technique (more examples in the Narrative Structure table)

- split screens and conversations across two screens;
- double-exposed action (Annie’s ghost in bedroom scene);
- animation (the Snow White cartoon)

***“to redeem a failed love affair”***

1. Woody Allen and Diane Keaton

A real-life relationship and breakup did occur in early 1970 between Allen and co-star Keaton. Keaton's birth name was Diane Hall, her nickname was Annie, and she did have a Grammy Hall. And Woody Allen played a similar role as mentor to Diane Keaton (about New York life, politics, philosophy, and books), as did best friend Tony Roberts to Allen.

2. Alvy Singer and Annie Hall

Alvy Singer gives the affair a happy ending: “It’s my first play,” he apologizes, “and you want things to come out perfect in art because it’s real difficult in life.” Like that

play, *Annie Hall* reworks life into art, changing it around so that it comes out “perfect.” (84)

3. “relationships don’t last”  
Reflects Woody Allen’s basically pessimistic view of life

**“failing to recognize control as the enemy of intimacy”**

1. the stand-up comic’s illusion of intimacy

Woody Allen teases us into thinking that he is simply playing himself, and that there is no separation between who he really is and the role that he performs on stage. (7)  
Woody Allen is a fascinating enigma who is determined that we see him only through the inevitably transforming lens of his comedy. (14)

In *Annie Hall* Woody plays a stand-up comic, claiming on film the same kind of control over and intimacy with his audience that he enjoyed during his cabaret period. He begins with two comic anecdotes, looking directly into the camera and thereby establishing himself as master of ceremonies, the man who will summon the characters and arrange the order and duration of the scenes. (28)

But for all the semblance of baring his soul, the comic does not really engage in an intimate relationship with the audience—he keeps himself safely protected from intimacy. It’s all an illusion.

2. Pygmalion relationship (Annie’s singing career and intellectual development)

At the center of the jokes and assorted memories, *Annie Hall* is a story of an archetypal Jew who meets an archetypal *shiksa*. They’re equally neurotic. And indeed, their anxieties, insecurities, and social terrors draw them together in the first place. Alvy, though, begins to take advantage of Annie’s lack of self-confidence. He dominates her, taking over her life the way Allen takes control of the film—on one level Allen has made a movie about his own bossiness. ... Alvy is attracted to her precisely because she is someone he can mold. ... Their relationship is based on the premise that Annie is an idiot; and once she begins to question that, once she begins, however tentatively, to strike out on her own, cultivating friends and developing interests, the affair is doomed. (86)

3. desire for intimacy in which Allen will remain completely in control

Film-making and life: Allen is known for breaking a directorial taboo: he gives actors line readings, demonstrating the exact way he would like his words to be spoken. It’s no surprise then that we can catch Allen’s own inflections in the delivery of most of his performers. He is also tyrant-like in allowing his actors to read only the pages of the script in which their own characters actually appear. (221) Even the title of the film is usually shrouded until its release. This is a director in total control of his production.

**Scenes left on the cutting room floor**

(The film, originally titled “Anhedonia,” the inability to experience pleasure, ran 2 ½ hours long and covered every issue of Woody Allen’s adult life.

- (1) “the element”

With a voice-over introduction, Alvy Singer takes us to the Brooklyn neighborhood where he was raised and introduces his family.

Mother: It's not the same now that the element has moved in.

Alvy (appearing on the scene as an adult and addressing the audience): The element. Can you believe that? My mother was always worried that 'the element' would move in. It's like a science-fiction movie.

And with that we are presented with the opening scene of a black and white SF film called *The Invasion of the Element*: "Little did the small and serene community in Brooklyn realize," says the stern-voiced narrator, "that they were about to be invaded by the element." A moving van arrives and a black family emerges. White women faint. (Ralph Rosenblum, *When the Shooting Stops ... the Cutting Begins*, p.276)

(2) Kierkegaard on TV

A TV set is running continuously, tuned to a cheap giveaway show.

Alvy: This is the worst kind of show.

TV HOST (responding right from the picture tube): What do you mean this is the worst kind of show? This show is very popular.

Alvy: This is a popular show?

HOST: That's right. We give away a lot of prizes—that's fun.

ALVY: You're tranquillizing with the trivial—that's what Kierkegaard said.

HOST (genuinely bewildered): Who? Who? Kierkegaard? What show is he on?

(3) Kafka on the court

Failing to seduce Robin in the bedroom where she discovers him alone amid the piles of coats, watching the Knicks game, Woody turns back to the TV set. "Knicks ball—out of bounds—Jackson to Bradley—shot! No good! Rebound—Kierkegaard. Passes to Nietzsche—fast break to Kafka! Top of the key—it's Kafka and Alvy—all alone—they're both gripped with anxiety—and guilt—and neither can shoot! Now Earl Monroe steals it! And the Knicks have a four on two—"

In *Annie Hall* Woody Allen displays a flamboyant array of cinematic techniques and a manipulation of narrative time in three eras: the Forties, the Sixties, and the present (meaning the Seventies).

Narrative Structure

Place	Time*	Characters	Cinematic Device	Clips
		Alvy as narrator tells two Groucho Marx jokes	direct address to camera	1: "There's an Old Joke" (:35)
Doctor's office; Coney Island; Schoolroom	early flashback	Young Alvy	flashback, then present character interjected into scene	2: Childhood in Brooklyn (1:44); Classmates (1:21)
Manhattan street	present	Alvy and Rob: anti-Semitism		

		conversation		
Beekman Theater; The New Yorker Theater	present	Alvy and Annie	sudden production of a real-life character	3: At The New Yorker (2:39)
Bedroom	present	Alvy and Annie		
Auditorium; bedroom	middle flashback	Alvy and Allison (Alvy's first wife)	flashback; address to camera	4: Alvy and Allison (3:57)
Beach house kitchen	present	Alvy and Annie (lobster scene)		5: Lobster (4:15)
Movie theater; brick-walled apartment	middle flashback	Alvy and Annie observe Annie's boyfriends	present characters interjected into past	
New York apartment	middle flashback	Alvy and Robin (Alvy's second wife)	flashback	6: Alvy and Robin (2:54)
Tennis court	present	Alvy, Rob, Annie, Janet: first encounter		7: Meeting Annie Hall (2:46)
Lobby, then New York street	present	Alvy and Annie: first conversation		
Annie's apartment	present	Alvy and Annie	subtitles that contradict the action	8: Family Stories (2:22)
Night club	present	Annie sings "It Had to Be You"—start of relationship	photographed from a distance—Annie portrayed as small, timid figure	
Sidewalk; deli, darkened bedroom; bookstore; Central Park; street at night; Alvy's apartment	present	Alvy and Annie (he wants to make her like himself: a death-obsessed, intellectual, New York Jew)	park scene includes Truman Capote cameo	
Country house at night	present	Alvy and Annie	double-exposed action (Annie's ghost scene)	9: Out to the Hampshires (2:30)
Theatrical agency	middle flashback	Young Alvy	flashback	
Theater	present	Alvy doing stand-up at college auditorium		10: At the University (1:21)
Annie's parents'	present	Alvy, Annie, her	split screens and	11: Annie's Fami-

home		family, his family	conversations across the two screens	ly (2:45); Halls and Singers (1:23)
Duane's bedroom, night drive	present	Alvy, Annie, Duane		
New York street; kitchen; street	present	Alvy and Annie argue	direct address to camera; animated sequence from Snow White	12: The Wicked Queen (2:10)
Alvy's bedroom; Annie's apartment	present	Alvy and Rolling Stones Report; Annie (spider scene: parallels earlier lobster scene)		13: A Big Black Spider (4:23)
Coney Island; Alvy's house	early flashback	Alvy, Annie and Rob	present characters interjected into past; yellow tinge to flashbacks	14: Return to Brooklyn (1:30); "She Stole" (:30); Joey Nichols and Tessie Moskowitz (1:09)
Apartment	present	Alvy and Annie		
Night club	present	Annie sings "Seems Like Old Times"; Tony Lacey	close-up camera contrasts with distant camera in Annie's earlier song	
Two psychiatrists' offices	present	Alvy and Annie	split screens and conversations across the two screens in two offices, one bright the other dark	15: Psychoanalytic Duel (1:21)
apartment	present	Alvy (cocaine scene)		
Beverly Hills street; TV control room; Tony Lacey's party	present	Alvy, Annie, Rob, Tony Lacey	emphasized sun and brightness	16: Los Angeles (2:30)
Airplane interior	present	Alvy, Annie	"dialogue of thoughts" voice-over	17: A Dead Shark (1:27)
Alvy's living room	present	Alvy, Annie breaking up		
Beach house	present	Alvy and girl	strangers in	18: "I miss Annie"

kitchen		date (lobster scene)	street enter dialogue	(1:58)
Sunset Boulevard café	present	Alvy and Annie		
Rehearsal hall of theatre	present	Alvy's first play		19: Art Reflects Life (1:41)
		Alvy as narrator	direct address to camera	20: Finale (:20)

\*Early flashback: 1940s (1942 written on schoolroom blackboard; 1945 for end of war Welcome Home party)

Middle flashback: 1960s (Stevenson rally takes place in 1960; Annie's boyfriend stands in front of a movie poster from 19961)

Present: 1970s (Alvy stands in front of a movie poster from 1975)

Allen: The whole concept of the picture changed as we were cutting it. It was originally a picture about me, exclusively, not about a relationship. It was about me, my life, my thoughts, my ideas, my background, and the relationship was one major part of it. But sometimes it's hard to foresee at the outset what's going to be the most interesting drift. The guesses we started out with, many of them were wrong. But we wound up with the right guesses." (Rosenblum, p.283) [And they really were the right guesses: the film won Oscars for Best Actress, Best Picture, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay.]

Reworking life into art gives the artist the illusion of complete control, but control is the enemy of intimacy: relationships (based on control) don't last. (Alvy Singer, the Woody Allen character, says "Relationships don't last." I suggest that this is true of relationships as defined by Alvy/Woody.)