

Final Paper

FILM 4600

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### In Love in the Movies:

#### The Female Perspective in Romantic Comedy in *Annie Hall* and *When Harry Met Sally*

Throughout cinema history, the loosely connected set of films we would call “romantic comedies,” have been both commercially successful and critically put down, centering simple premises and romantic tensions as the basis of stories derided as predictable and repetitive (Grindon 1-2). These films place an emphasis on whether or not a pair of characters will end up romantically happy with each other, and mines the resulting situational, sexual, and personal conflicts for humor (Grindon 3-8). These ideas have shaped many waves of films, such as screwball comedies, nervous romances, and the 1990s rom-com (Garrett 96).

The romantic comedy of the 1990s was a definitive movement of cinema that highlighted the female experience in the confines of heterosexual romance, self-consciously reorganizing elements of previous comedy movements in order to create a new, postmodern type of “women’s film” (Garrett 92-96). The larger romantic comedy genre of the 1990s posed a challenge to critics and viewers alike, with some decrying it as perpetuating sexist stereotypes and presenting an overly conservative view of romance (Garrett 99). A notable case of the split stances of romantic comedies comes in the juxtaposition of the massive success *When Harry Met Sally* (Reiner, 1989) and its clearest influence, *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977). While *Annie Hall* was cited

by many critics as the example of what intelligent romantic comedies should look like, as opposed to the perceived shallowness of *When Harry Met Sally*, the films offer two very different perspectives on the role of women both in the real romantic space and in the romantic film form.

*Annie Hall* is Woody Allen's best known film, a self-reflexive story of romance between unlikely lovers. Alvy Singer, Woody Allen's narrator in *Annie Hall*, explains in the opening scene the ways in which his inability to commit to romance has harmed his life. Alvy dives into a loose comedy routine delivered directly to the camera that mirrors Allen's own monologue style of standup comedy; Allen's self-aware style folds his real romantic past and his career into Alvy's story, setting the tone for how his romantic troubles will be laid out in the rest of the film (Grindon 152). Both in the opening and throughout the film, Alvy expresses his problems with women and sexual relationships, insecurely criticizing the women in his life for their hobbies, their drug use, and their affection towards him, usually to humorous effect. This is one of the dominant traits of the nervous romance style, that of exploiting the troubles of monogamy, marriage, and traditional romantic structures when they interact with rising neurotic tendencies and increasingly liberal attitudes towards sexuality (Garrett 98).

However, this notion of exploring faltering romance and the resulting humor is only through Alvy's perspective, in line with critic Frank Krutnik's assertion that Allen's particular style of nervous romance only critiques masculinity and monogamy through the eyes of a monogamous man, limiting the reach of its critique (Garrett 109). The film tells its story with strong subjectivity, breaking chronological order and any sense of the fourth wall to create a freewheeling trip through vignettes and flashbacks that tell the story of Alvy's relationship with Annie Hall through his own perspective, a perspective that is narrow in its scope (Yacowar 172,

180). While Annie is the subject of much of these rambling thoughts and the personal anguish Alvy feels, she is never the subject who communicates to us, so she is kept out of reach, and the film falls in line with dominant cinema to emphasize masculine subjectivity as our only option (Kuhn, 62).

*When Harry Met Sally* offers a perspective that is both rooted in the style of *Annie Hall* and departs from it drastically. The influence of Allen looms large over the surface level aesthetics of *When Harry Met Sally*, with nearly identical title cards, similar uses of montage sequences, jazz music, and location shooting in Manhattan, and a plot that revolves around a pessimistic Jewish man pursuing an optimistic WASPy woman (Grindon 168). The films also interrogate the form of romantic comedies through beginning them and grounding them in direct address, the Alvy monologues mirrored by the recurring scenes of married couples reflecting on their marriages in *When Harry Met Sally*. This shared trait also exposes the divergence in the two films, namely in who is speaking- in the scenes of framing narration, *When Harry Met Sally* provides the perspectives of both men and women as opposed to *Annie Hall*'s one-man show.

The more open perspective in *When Harry Met Sally* can be attributed to the film's screenwriter, Nora Ephron. Ephron developed the script based on a conversation she had with the film's eventual director, comedy director Rob Reiner (Grindon 160). It was Reiner's idea to frame the film around interviews with married couples, but it was not uncommon for Ephron to purposely zoom out from her own female perspective (Grindon 161). Her films were designed to give space for both male and female perspectives, a pattern followed up in her two biggest hits as a director, *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998) (Dance 94).

Because Ephron was not the writer-director of the film as she was in her later romantic comedy hits, her authorship over the film is held in question by a strict auteurist reading of the

film in a way that Allen's role in *Annie Hall* is not, given that he is the writer, director, and star. However, despite Ephron's own insistence that *When Harry Met Sally* was a more collaborative creation, it fits neatly into her larger body of work and captures the themes she usually dealt with (Dance 162). Therefore, keeping with Annette Kuhn's ideas about auteurism and intent, it can be said there is both Nora Ephron the person and "Nora Ephron" as a way of categorizing certain themes, techniques, and tendencies in storytelling that appear in the film even if she was not the director (Kuhn 10). Regardless of what her role actually was on the film, her work and the film's success garnered her a heightened level of control on the future Meg Ryan-led rom-coms she would work on, and she would move into a position of mostly directing her own scripts (Garrett 106).

In the case of *Annie Hall*, the stilted perspective granted to Annie has an impact on the text and the form of the film itself, as the storytelling perspective and incessant male subjectivity scramble the order of the story so that the story arcs fall out of alignment. Maurice Yacowar emphasizes that the film has a "double structure" where the same events are seen by both Alvy and Annie, but they perceive different ones as the climax of the story depending on their own experience of them (Yacowar 173). He outlines Annie's musical numbers as the pivot points of her character's growth and pursuit of her dreams, while they serve as just another milestone in Alvy's romantic pursuit of her (Yacowar 173).

Where Yacowar falters in his analysis is his belief that the climax can change based on which viewpoint the audience considers. Although it is possible to understand Annie's perspective on a conceptual level, we are left with a film that does not consider her perspective so much as leave it open to being inferred by Yacowar or the viewer. He correctly asserts that Alvy is not so much based on Allen's own love life as much as on Pygmalion, the Greek myth

who fell in love with his own artwork, suggesting that Alvy's view of Annie is one of a creator (Yacowar 172). From the beginning of their relationship, Alvy is constantly trying to shape Annie through cultural forces, buying her books, taking her to see his favorite movies, and recommending college classes to take in her free time, a desire that ends up biting him when those interests turn her away from him. Again Alvy's opening statements ring true, as he can't stand being in a relationship with someone who wants to be like him.

This gap in perspective also rings out in how the films display sex. The two films offer strikingly different looks at women's sexuality, and particularly how the male leads react to self-assured sexuality in the women around them. *Annie Hall* presents a picture of masculinity in crisis when Alvy faces a sexual attitude that resembles his own, notably upset with Annie when he thinks she's seeing another man after they agreed it was alright to do so. Leger Grindon describes this shifting norm as the source of Alvy's anxiety and the crux of the nervous romance style, saying "the nervous man becomes fraught with anxiety as his role shifts between demands for an equal partnership and the traditional desire to be a dominant protector" (Grindon 159). In *Annie Hall*, the sexual frustration and paranoia of a man is played for laughs, but it is also treated with seriousness and existential weight, as Alvy's anguish forms the dominant emotional thread of the film. His frustration at Annie's use of marijuana before they have sex escalates from an annoyance to a deal breaker, showing his insecurity getting in the way of his ability to function. When shown only from the man's perspective, the tension that comes from being with a sexually assertive woman clouds out any other view of the situation.

This sexual frustration and embarrassment is also explored in *When Harry Met Sally*, but to a decidedly more comedic end. A pair of scenes flip embarrassment about sexual experience from Sally to Harry for comedic effect. When Harry questions Sally's sexual experience early on

in the film, she shouts in front of a crowded diner that she's had plenty of good sex, drawing the attention of everyone in the store and the smirk of an unbelieving Harry. Sally is at the end of the joke, an inexperienced young woman publicly humiliated for her attempts to assert herself (Garrett 110). Later on, the scene is mirrored by a diner encounter where Sally assures Harry that his confidence in his ability to bring women to climax is misplaced. Sally demonstrates the ease of faking an orgasm by doing so once again in a crowded restaurant, and the point she makes to Harry is clear- if this is possible in a public space, how much easier would it be when you're alone? (Steintrager 21) Harry is now the embarrassed one, his discomfort at Sally's outburst stemming both from the public disturbance and the way in which she has broken outside of his preexisting notions of her propriety (Garrett 112). She once again hits back at him on the topic of experience and knowledge, but on the second occasion Harry is rattled by the realization that Sally is correct. The alienation and dissonance created in men by the changing norms of sexuality form a central comedic moment in *When Harry Met Sally*, and one that both characters quickly recover from. In this way, the film takes an approach that is more progressive and more post-modern, making an ironic bit of humor out of something *Annie Hall* treats as serious, and moving on from it where *Annie Hall* lingers.

*Annie Hall* and *When Harry Met Sally* both place a large emphasis on references to other films, and the way their protagonists interact with films is defining and wildly different. Once again, *Annie Hall* takes a narrow masculine approach, allowing Alvy- and by extension, Allen- to shape the film with his own observations on film. These references, such as trips to see *Face to Face* (Bergman, 1976) and *The Sorrow and the Pity* (Ophuls, 1969) are peppered with jokes and references about other films. Alvy balks at the loud opinions of a pretentious man standing behind him in line, and the irony is in how Alvy's exasperation parallels the non-reaction of the

woman being regaled with these opinions. Alvy can't help but be frustrated that he is trapped with noxious ideas just as this woman is, and so he transfers that frustration onto us, breaking from the line to directly address the also-captive audience and inundate them with his own thoughts. Other moments seek to impress or make jokes, with a recurring theme emerging of Alvy trying to implant himself inside of movies. He jokes to Annie about being in the movie *The Godfather*, the irony being that Annie is played by Diane Keaton, an actual star of that film; other scenes see Alvy imagining himself inside of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or speaking with subtitles like a foreign film. The prevailing notion is one of escape and personal engagement- in order for Allen to communicate Alvy's cinephilia, he must show him telling his own story by engaging with other films. Here the cinephilia of the characters and the engagement with film history is solely to advance the characteristics of the male protagonist, providing insight into Alvy and not much else.

Nora Ephron frames critical conversations in *When Harry Met Sally* around the classic *Casablanca*, setting up a pattern she would follow in her later film *Sleepless in Seattle*. In both films, the central couple's notions of romance are informed by popular classic films that pop up in conversation. Harry and Sally's debate surrounding *Casablanca* concerns its ending, disagreeing about the merits of Elsa's choice between stability and sexual excitement, an argument founded in a misremembering of the way the film actually ends- Sally's assurance that she would choose as Elsa did to get married and live a safer life is undercut by the fact that Elsa doesn't actually make that choice for herself (Garrett 110). This mutual misunderstanding gets at the heart of Harry and Sally's interactions with film- a slipperier, less focused, and more common way of engaging with cinema. Neither Harry or Sally are particularly knowledgeable about movies, fumbling details about something as ubiquitous as *Casablanca*. Instead of repertory

theatres or arthouses, Harry and Sally share a viewing of the classic over the phone from their respective half-lit rooms and mediocre television sets. Rather than debating film form or the nuances of different directors, they bicker about the surface level choices made by the characters, showing that Ephron understood the way typical people and couples thought about movies in their daily lives. Films like *Casablanca* not only inform the characters but the audience, as Ephron stated it was her intent to use movie history to create expectations and then subvert them (Dance 119). She also had lofty goals for how she wanted *When Harry Met Sally* to be thought of, aiming to create the kind of movie that would be influential on public opinions of romance just as *Casablanca* was, saying the goal “was to make a movie about how movies screw up your brain about love, and then if we did a good job, we would become one of the movies that would screw up people’s brains about love forever” (Dance 119).

*When Harry Met Sally* and *Annie Hall* each made bold plays to interact with the popular lexicon of film, engaging with cinema history in order to be placed within it, and in both cases it worked, as both films have gained status as exemplar pieces of romantic cinema. The fundamental difference is in the chosen reference points and the attitude towards cinema that each movie takes, a difference that illustrates the gap in these two films. Both are core pieces of what we would call romantic comedy, and they each offer succinct looks into the lives of anxious and romantic people. In the end, the profound personal insight that *Annie Hall* gives us into the neuroses and complexities of its protagonist drown out the ability for us to hear much from the perspective of the titular character, making her to be a dreamy and desirable object. *When Harry Met Sally* skips past the depths of character exploration in order to find something more rounded and woman-focused, offering a glimpse at love from both sides. The personal and witty styles of both Woody Allen and Nora Ephron work to elevate these films beyond simple setups and genre

trappings, but it is Ephron who brings the necessary voice to argue that there is something more than exploring than your pain. Perhaps Krutnik and other critics were correct that Ephron's view was too optimistic, but there is something refreshing about what *When Harry Met Sally* reminds us of, that love makes more sense when you can see it from all angles.

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