

Pigeons or Catholics

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We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, not without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.

—Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd”

A smoothly rising clarinet glissando floats over black-and-white postcard shots of the hazy Manhattan skyline at dawn, finally resolving into the opening notes of Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” A symphony of movement follows: those initial shots of the city skyline, perfect in their composition, photographic in their stillness, give way to the bustle of New York City streets, changing through the day, from season to season. The movement of the city speaks for itself, as a stationary camera invites us into the frames to feel the energy of people, buses, and cars—moving, always moving. The towering buildings loom still above the cacophony of city life.

In the stunning opening sequence of Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*, “Rhapsody in Blue” accompanies one of the most well-known, beautifully photographed montages of New York City life in film history. Isaac Davis, a television writer played by Allen, recites the start of his latest book in voice-over, scraps the first few sentences, and begins again: “He adored New York City . . . no, no make that, he *romanticized* it all out of proportion.” This cycle of false starts happens again and again until he produces a satisfactory opening: “Chapter One. He was as tough and romantic as the city he loved. Beneath his dark-rimmed glasses was the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat. New York was his town and it always would be.”

Something in Allen's film seems, at first, to be out of place. On the one hand, it is a film made in the 1970s about a very particular type of upper-middle class, East-Side Manhattanite circa 1979. The characters are sophisticated, highly educated, and introspective to the point of being neurotic—suitable to the time period in which the film was created, nothing out of place. On the other hand, the film's Gershwin soundtrack and romantic, black-and-white cinematography seem intent on pulling the film back in time. It is a story about New York and New Yorkers in the modern world, but Allen decides to present us with a city that "still exists in black and white and pulsates to the great tunes of George Gershwin" (*Manhattan*). The film is both of the '70s and, at the same time, doing all that it can to pull itself free from the '70s.

So the film is difficult to place neatly into a specific school of filmmaking: it is a blend of old and new. The romantic, "black-and-white," Old New York of Gershwin's era coexists with the 1970s urban world of shifting relationships, psychoanalysis, "drugs, television, and the pill" (*Manhattan*). Even the romantic relationship between Isaac, the forty-two-year-old central character in the film, and Tracy, a seventeen-year-old high school student, creates a blending of generations; young and old coexisting together (in this case, in a mildly pedophilic way). It is also fitting that Allen starts his film with "Rhapsody in Blue," a composition that straddles the line between classical and jazz music, caught in its own musical identity crisis. Like Isaac in the opening voice-over, New York City in the 1970s was also in the process of redefining itself.

The crisis that led to the post-war decline of New York City emerged in the early sixties. The economy was shifting from an industrial economy to a service economy, costing many workers their jobs, particularly in the shipbuilding and garment industries. The huge influx of poor immigrants, moving to the city in large numbers from Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, created a changing urban culture, aggravating the already tense race-relations in the city. Race riots in 1964, the 1977 blackout, and the string of "son of Sam" serial murders in the same year put New Yorkers on edge (Jackson). New York was an "increasingly racialized city in economic decline," according to Professor Sabine Haenni. It is no wonder that, in 1979, Allen should want to pull away from the New York of the late '70s. His sentimental homage to an older, romantic New York becomes, in this light, more than simple nostalgia for another time. It becomes a temporary denial of the decay of his city, a way of coping with the urban problems of modernity by shifting emphasis away from the "decay of contemporary culture" (*Manhattan*).

The rest of the “New Hollywood” generation of filmmakers emerging in the 1970s wanted anything but a diversion from the harsh reality of an urban culture in crisis. Directors like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola were eager to confront the complexity and the unpleasant realities of modern city life. These directors, slightly younger than Allen, also chose to depict New York City in the ’70s, but they presented a gritty, crime-ridden, more realistic New York in films like Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972). In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle, played by Robert DeNiro, calls New York “an open sewer, you know. It’s full of filth and scum. [The President] should just flush it right down the fucking toilet.” This is a far cry from a romantic city pulsating to the tunes of George Gershwin, the city that is, as Isaac says, “really a knock-out.”

This group of New Hollywood filmmakers had studied the history of film, and many of their films were based on the Old Hollywood as a result. Allen’s romantic images of the city are a nod to the glamorized New York in films like Lloyd Bacon’s *42nd Street* (1933) and Vincente Minnelli’s *The Clock* (1945) (Bordwell). Allen does make reference to the urban glamour of those older movies, but his is a different type of film. Allen’s characters lack clear goals and seem not to have a driving mission—they are “unmotivated heroes,” to borrow a term from Haenni. In the older studio films, as Haenni notes, the couple always seems to emerge above the city. Any emotional complications are swept aside as the “excitement and cacophony of the city gives way to the presumed simplicity of the couple” (Haenni).

The simplicity of the ideal, perfect couple is no doubt missing from *Manhattan* (and from much of Allen’s work). The intertwining network of New Yorkers in Allen’s film are all in search of a fulfillment that they cannot find in their current relationships. The couples never emerge above the complexity of the city in romantic fulfillment. They remain within the city, a part of it. Allen’s long, tracking shots of conversations extend over entire city blocks, reminding us that the characters are only single people, surrounded by so many other New Yorkers like them, always moving in search of happiness and meaning in their relationships. In Allen’s New York, the ideal couple remains just that—an ideal, a perfect conception that does not exist. When Isaac’s seventeen-year-old girlfriend Tracy begins to doubt whether people should even try to strive for the ideal, long-lasting relationship, Isaac snaps back, “No, I think people should mate for life, like pigeons—or Catholics.”

These symbols of the ideal relationship, the “pigeons and Catholics” of our imagination, occupy the same space in our psyche that the city buildings occupy in the lives of Allen’s characters; they loom over us, their presence

constantly felt. In *Mansfield Park*, this romantic ideal is suggested by the lush arrangements of Gershwin's beautiful melodies and by the shimmering skyline at dusk, flickering through the leaves of trees in Central Park. In the film, the presence of the ideal—the perfect romantic couple, the perfect romantic city—coexists with the realities of contemporary culture: divorce, romantic frustration, a lack of individual integrity, existential angst.

The coexistence of these ideals with an imperfect reality complicates the tone of the movie. At the end of the film Tracy realizes, much to Isaac's disappointment, that she has to go to London and must leave Isaac. After their parting exchange, Allen cuts to the image of the picture-perfect skyline silhouetted against a hazy sky as Gershwin's romantic score builds in intensity—a moment that would be fitting, had the two just walked off arm in arm. The film's score and imagery suggest the ideal, but the story line, composed of unstable relationships and uncertainties about life, is much more closely tied to a gritty reality.

The death of the Old Hollywood studios in the '70s was accompanied by the death of the simple Hollywood ideal, the reductionist version of love and life so commonly used by old Hollywood filmmakers to wrap up loose ends of a story into tidy, easily digestible fantasies. New Hollywood filmmakers like Allen were able to capture the co-existence of the ideal and the real, the disparity between what we strive for and what we actually get. His characters are searching for fulfillment and love, but none of the main characters seem to be entirely fulfilled at the end. This is not a "happy ending," but it is hardly an unhappy ending. It is a *real* ending, a *real* moment in a film that acknowledges the presence of ideals in our lives—in this case, the promise of a long-lasting and fulfilling relationship—but does not allow those ideals to dictate the story, to turn it into an unrealistic fantasy.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel, in his essay on the absurdity of life, posits the idea that we view our lives from two different perspectives: the internal and the external. From the internal perspective, we can't help taking ourselves seriously and chasing after the things we want in full earnest. But we also can't help stepping back and lapsing into moments of reflection, doubting what we take seriously. After all, we are reflective creatures. We experience both perspectives; they "collide in us" (Nagel). But it is part of the human condition to vacillate between these two perspectives. It is the clash between the two perspectives, Nagel says, that makes life absurd.

Allen's unique style of filmmaking, a style that straddles the line between Old Hollywood and New Hollywood, is effective because he incorporates both perspectives, the "internal" and the "external," into his work. There are

moments in the film when characters live life in earnest—dancing together romantically to a record in a dark apartment, rowing a boat on Central Park Lake, playing basketball together. But these sequences are interwoven with moments of reflection and contemplation—resting on a bench beneath the Queensboro Bridge at dawn, Isaac’s reflecting on the meaning of life in his apartment, Tracy questioning the reality of the ideal couple. His characters go about their lives searching in earnest for love and happiness, but they also step back and reflect on the ideals and values that guide them.

Allen incorporates both of Nagel’s perspectives into his film, but it is up to the viewer to decide which to adopt. Should we spend more time in the external state of constant reflection and doubt, comparing our lives to the ideals that we value? Or should we strive to live uninhibited, always taking our lives seriously, thereby eliminating doubts and neuroses? Maybe there is no need to choose. Our lives are enriched by this collision, this simultaneous existence of earnestness and doubt. It creates within us an awareness of ourselves: perhaps a spirituality, certainly a complexity. We are able at once to *be* ourselves and *see* ourselves. And what more enjoyable way to step back and *see* ourselves than to go to the movies.

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Title: Like Pigeons and Catholics. Summary: Steve decides to drop in on Danny one Saturday morning only to find his partner more than a little under the weather. Written for the Running Hot comment-fic meme/a being hosted at the LJ of ariadnes_string. Catholic or Christian? By Geoffrey Wale April 26, 2017 6 Comments. Some years ago while I ordered lunch at a restaurant in the food court at the University Centre, at the university where I work, I asked the young man serving me if he and his family celebrated the Day of the Dead . I had gotten to know him a little in snippets of conversation we had during times he served me and I learned he was from Mexico.Â When I told him I was Roman Catholic, he retorted "I used to be Catholic, but now I am a Christian." Best pigeons quotes selected by thousands of our users!Â I believe people ought to mate for life...like pigeons or Catholics. Woody Allen. Believe, People, Catholic. 3 Copy quote. It doesn't matter what people call you unless they call you pigeon pie and eat you up. Evelyn Waugh. Pie, People, Matter. Both dove and pigeon refer to the 308 species of birds from the Columbidae family, Sweet says. There's no difference between a pigeon and a dove in scientific nomenclature, but colloquial English tends to categorize them by size. Something called a dove is generally smaller than something called a pigeon, but that's not always the case. A common pigeon, for example, is called both a rock dove and a rock pigeon. "People just have their own classification for what makes them different," Sweet says.