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ANNIE HALL

Producer: Charles H. Joffe for United Artists (AA)

Year: 1977

Director: Woody Allen (AA)

Screenplay: Woody Allen (AA) and Marshall Brickman (AA)

Running Time: 93 minutes

Principal characters:

Alvy Singer.....	Woody Allen
Annie Hall.....	Diane Keaton (AA)
Max (Alvy's friend).....	Tony Roberts
Tony Lacey (record producer).....	Paul Simon
Alison (Alvy's first wife).....	Carol Kane

Woody Allen has never been one to tell a straightforward story in a straightforward way. For example, in 1966, he took a Japanese-made imitation James Bond film and re-edited it. He changed the plot into an intrigue concerning an egg salad recipe by redubbing the film in English. He called it What's Up Tiger Lily? In 1971 he was co-author, co-star and director of Bananas, a film in which the plot about a Latin American revolution was merely a weak thread with which Allen tied together the series of physical and verbal jokes which made up the film. Annie Hall, for which Allen is once again co-author, in addition to co-star and director, is more disciplined than either What's Up Tiger Lily? or Bananas, but it is an obvious continuation of the spirit and style of those films. The importance of the film lies in the strength of each individual scene as it merges with others to form a bittersweet view of modern love. It is presented as memories of a romance after it is over, rather than as a chronological story of that romance. It uses a variety of techniques to explore, if not explain, the relationship between Alvy Singer and Annie Hall.

The fact that the film is not a standard narrative is obvious from the first moment, when Alvy Singer speaks, not to another character, but directly to the audience. He tells us that he has broken up with Annie Hall, that he is sifting the pieces of the relationship in his mind, and quotes a joke from Sigmund Freud in an attempt to explain his problems with women: "I would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me as a

member."

From this point on, we get a guided tour of Alvy's mind as he reflects upon himself and his romance with Annie. We find that he is a successful comedian, has been married and divorced twice, is a Jew sensitive to (or paranoid about) anti-Semitism, and he has been in analysis for fifteen years. We also learn the story of Alvy and Annie: they meet, fall in love, live together, split up, get back together, then split up for good. Annie then moves to Los Angeles to live with a record producer, where Alvy tries unsuccessfully to get her back. Ultimately, they meet in New York and reminisce about old times. We learn these things in no particular order. At times one scene may have no direct relationship to the next, but at other times one scene will suggest the next. For example, Annie asks something about Alison, Alvy's first wife, and we see a series of flashbacks concerning Alison.

Simple flashbacks are not the only cinematic devices used, however. When Alvy initially meets Annie, they have an awkward, exploratory conversation, consisting mostly of self-conscious, banal statements. It is funny and quite believable. The feelings which one has in such a situation are highlighted by subtitles which tell the audience what each character is actually thinking while they are talking.

In another scene Alvy asks Annie about her previous boyfriends. Rather than just hearing about them we see Annie and Alvy watching Annie as she was a few years before with each of her boyfriends. We see and hear both the younger Annie and her boyfriend as well as the present-day Annie and Alvy commenting on the scene. In

another use of the same technique we see an Adult Alvy visiting his grade school class.

Allen also uses a split screen technique to provide a contrast between the two characters. At one point we see Annie with her analyst saying that she is making progress, while on the other side of the screen we see Alvy with his analyst complaining about a lack of progress. Another time we see Annie's Wisconsin Protestant family side by side with Alvy's New York Jewish one.

Another device which is perhaps the most startling, though not the most meaningful one used in Annie Hall, is animation. It is used in only one short scene: Annie and Alvy are arguing and suddenly become cartoon characters as they continue the argument. A different, yet equally remarkable scene shows Alvy upset by the pontifications of a man standing behind him in a theater line. When the man begins quoting the ideas of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, Alvy leaves the line and pulls McLuhan from behind a sign to tell the man he does not know what he is talking about. Then Alvy turns to the camera and says, "Why isn't life like this?"

Both the fantasy scene with McLuhan and the animation sequence are techniques which are amusing and attention-getting, but fail to illuminate the characters or their situations as do most of the other devices Allen uses. What emerges, both as a result of, and in spite of, the cinematic devices used, is a comic, believable story about two people who are just right for each other on a certain level, but are unable to resolve their conflicts well enough to stay together.

We especially see their compatibility with each other in a high-spirited scene in which they are trying to cook live lobsters in spite of Alvy's fear of them. Later there is a telling contrast when Alvy attempts to recreate the mood with another woman, and she is completely unable to appreciate either his fear of lobsters or the humor of the situation.

The circumstances that eventually separate them are seen in their arguments about sex, about meeting other people, and about her mind. She says that he doesn't think her intelligent enough to be serious about, and he buys her books and urges her to take adult education courses. Perhaps Alvy's own assessment of the relationship is correct. He compares it to a shark: "It has to constantly move forward or it dies. I think what we've got on our hands is a dead shark."

A recurrent subtheme of Annie Hall is Alvy's preference for New York over California. The only cultural advantage to California, he feels, is that you can turn right on a red light. He first argues against California with his friend Max, an actor who moves to Los Angeles to star in a television series. Alvy is especially upset when he finds that the series uses canned laughter. Later the issue looms larger when he and Annie break up and she goes to Los Angeles to live with a record producer.

The faults of the film are primarily of its form. Since it is a succession of relatively isolated scenes, the weak scenes, such as the ones about driving cars, stand out more than they would in a conventional narrative, and the final section of the film, which covers in chronological order the events after Annie

moves to Los Angeles, has too little direction. It only gains momentum when it reaches the reminiscences, a series of short scenes from the rest of the film with Annie's voice singing "Seems Like Old Times" on the soundtrack.

The keys to the success of the film are the script by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman and the performances by Diane Keaton and Allen. Keaton possesses an undeniable screen presence as well as the ability to make every scene interesting and believable. Allen plays much the same character he has played in several of his other films, such as Bananas, Love and Death, and Play It Again, Sam, but in Annie Hall, his performance is more effective because he has toned down the clumsiness which marred many of his previous roles. The script, in all the best scenes, gives the characters lines which are witty enough to be funny, but not so funny that the characters and the situations cease to be real.

There is a good deal of autobiography in this film, even though Woody Allen may not be exactly like the character he plays. We know that Allen is a Jewish comedian who has two ex-wives and has had a relationship with Diane Keaton (whose real surname is, in fact, Hall). But to what extent Allen and Keaton are playing themselves and their own story is not important to the appreciation or enjoyment of the film itself.

The film was generally well received by critics and was a hit at the box office. It won Academy Awards for Best Picture, as well as Best Director and original screenplay for Allen, and Best Actress for Keaton. As an imaginative treatment of a romance which

ends neither happily nor tragically, Annie Hall might be called a Seventies film about a Seventies romance.

Timothy W. Johnson