Getting Away With Murder: The Film Noir World of Woody Allen

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Abstract

Although normally utilizing parody and humor when dealing with film noir, Woody Allen has made two films that deal more directly with the style and themes of classical noir cinema: Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989) and Match Point (2005). Both films differ from classical film noir, however, in the protagonist’s ability to enter into the criminal underworld and return unscathed by the experience. Whereas classical noir protagonists are isolated and unable to enter (or re-enter) everyday society, the protagonists in Allen’s films are able to do so, moving the focus of these films from an existentialist “fate” of the classical noir to an individualized morality based on choice and reason. This essay examines the noir elements of both Crimes and Misdemeanors and Match Point in an effort to expand current academic understanding of Woody Allen’s film oeuvre.

Keywords: Woody Allen, film noir, existentialism, film, film studies, noir, Match Point, Crimes and Misdemeanors
Much of the scholarship devoted to the cinematic canon of Woody Allen includes discussion of two oppositional cinematic categories: comedy and drama. These categories are broken down into more specific genre groupings depending on the film(s) being discussed, with the most common terms utilized being slapstick, romantic comedy, comedy-drama, tragedy, and parody. There is, however, a label that fits certain Allen films that has received very little attention, typically only being mentioned in passing when mentioned at all. This label (or genre, depending on who is being asked) is film noir. To be sure, Allen has been connected to film noir by certain scholars (most notably Mary P. Nichols), but only in relation to his parody of noir-type films. Allen’s most direct parodies of film noir include Shadows and Fog (1991) and The Curse of the Jade Scorpion (2001), the latter of which has been described as “film noir meets romantic comedy,” where the “result is something lighter than the former [yet]…more serious than the latter” (Nichols 256). Nichols’ description underscores the fact that Allen’s parodies of noir, while potentially being films worth studying, fail to contain the same thematic concerns as more standard noir films.

However, in addition to his noir parodies, Woody Allen has made two films that deal more directly with the style and themes of classical noir cinema, yet which have not been examined in this way. These two films are Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989) and Match Point (2005). In categorizing both Crimes and Match Point as noir films it will first be important to properly describe noir cinema to notice how Allen’s films actually have similarities with and departures from the classical model. It will also be necessary to discuss the significance of existentialism in noir cinema to see how both Crimes and Misdemeanors and Match Point share with yet also depart from the standard noir handling of existentialist ideals. What finally becomes apparent in categorizing Allen’s two films as noir cinema is the discrepancy between Allen’s protagonists and those of the classical period. Allen’s protagonists ultimately have an ability to enter into the criminal underworld and return unscathed by the experience whereas classical noir protagonists are isolated and unable to enter (or re-enter) everyday society. This alteration ultimately shifts the thematic focus from the existentialist “fate” of the classical noir to an individualized morality in Allen’s cinema based on choice and reason.

Classifying films as “noir” has been an area of debate since the mid-1950s. Many generic descriptions of noir cinema note “an urban setting in which psychotic members of criminal gangs freely roamed the dark streets,” in films that stylistically include “shadowy scenes, involving the extensive use of dimly-lit interiors and nighttime exteriors, [which] establish a forbidding, menacing, and sinister atmosphere” (Laham 51). Characters in this environment are often “alienated from each other and often turn to crime in order to achieve their aims” because they are either “psychopathic, lack a conscience, [or] are willing to engage in crime if it serves their self-interests” (Laham 51). More detailed explanations of noir as a movement add that noir “situates itself within the very criminal milieu” that other films merely examine from a distance, follow characters (both main and secondary) that are morally ambiguous (and who usually traverse in the mid-way point “between lawful society and the underworld”), and contain a pervasive theme of violence and crime that “abandoned the adventure film convention
of the fair fight,” and replaced it with “settling scores, beatings, and cold-blooded murders” (Borde and Chaumeton 20-22). Along with these traits is a recurring “femme fatale” character who is “frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared, [who] falls victim to her own traps” (Borde and Chaumeton 22).

Many of the narrative concerns associated with classical noir cinema are prominently featured in both Crimes and Misdemeanors and Match Point. Both Judah (Martin Landau) of Crimes and Chris (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) of Match Point are emotionally isolated characters who enter into morally questionable behavior (extra-marital sex), have their middle-class lifestyle threatened by a “femme fatale,” and decide to engage in criminal activity (murder) in order to serve their self-interest. It is this engagement with criminal activity that causes both characters to become directly involved with a criminal underworld that they were not initially connected with. Both films, then, offer examples of Durgnat’s “Middle Class Murder” category of noir in which the “theme of respectable middle-class figure beguiled into, or secretly plotting, murder” is prevalent (Durgnat 46).

Of course, narrative elements of noir must also be coupled with a visual style consistent with noir mise-en-scène. The degree to which all noir films adhere to a similar visual style is cause for much debate, but it is important to mention that many within the noir canon contain visuals that offer a “constant opposition of areas of light and dark,” greater use of a longer “depth of field,” and compositional imbalance that is “designed to unsettle, jar, and disorient the viewer in correlation with the disorientation felt by the noir heroes” (Place and Peterson 66-68). Crimes and Misdemeanors and Match Point also employ these elements, although more subtly than many of the oft-cited noir examples such as Double Indemnity (Wilder, 1944) or Detour (Ulmer, 1945).

Crimes and Misdemeanors’ noir-ish visual style is evident early in the film. The first post-credits image of the film is of the exterior of a banquet at night. Darkness surrounds the structure, which can only be seen because of the interior lights escaping through the windows. The lights are slightly reflected off of a nearby lake, but the majority of the screen is complete darkness. A sound bridge of applause connects the exterior shot to an interior shot of a large crowd inside the hall. This first interior shot initially appears normal, yet the wide-angle lens used distorts the spacing within the room so that both the floor and the ceiling are visible. Thus, even though the camera is positioned above the heads of the crowd and seems to be shooting at a direct angle, the ceiling still fills the top portion of the screen. The function of this image becomes apparent once the narrative moves forward a bit and the viewer finds out that this banquet is in honor of Judah Rosenthal who has, earlier in the day, almost been revealed as an adulterer. Judah’s internal angst and entrapment is visually represented by compositionally including the ceiling in the opening shots of the film. His claustrophobic feelings are being visually depicted, enhancing his perception that he cannot escape his situation.
A cut moves from the wide-angled shot of the banquet hall to a tracking close-up of Judah listening to both the master of ceremonies speak his praises and his family lovingly joke about his apparent nervousness. The camera pans, tilts, and dollies back and forth during this sequence, shifting its framing from a close-up of Judah to slightly wider shots that include Judah’s family, mirroring Judah’s mental focus which is shifting from the letter he found earlier in the day to his family’s comments. These shots, much like the majority of classic noir moving camera shots, seem to have been “carefully considered and…tied very directly to the emotions” of the character (Place and Peterson 69).

Judah’s honorary banquet is then interrupted by a flashback to earlier in the day. Again, the camera utilizes noir visual style in creating an unsettling atmosphere. The interior of the room seems only to be illuminated by light entering through the windows, giving the film a dull color and, since the characters are mostly lit from behind, casting shadows over the side of their bodies nearest to the camera. Objects within the frame also “take on an assumed importance simply because they act to determine a stable composition” (Place and Peterson 68). Miriam Rosenthal (Claire Bloom) is initially framed on the right side of the screen as she puts away her coat with the left side of the screen occupied by a large stone wall. As the camera pans from Miriam to Judah (after she walks down the hallway), the stone wall (which is revealed to be a fireplace) moves from the left of the screen to the right, becoming a very literal physical barrier between the couple. Judah also moves from the left of the screen to the right, with the left screen being filled with a couch and large bookshelves. Judah’s off-center positioning is disconcerting, especially when he finds the letter from Dolores (Anjelica Huston), and the seemingly unimportant objects to the left of the screen begin to gain significance as Judah reads the letter. The couch and bookshelves are visual reminders of what he would be losing if his infidelity was ever found out. The film again transitions from wide-angle shot to a moving close-up, tilting up from a close-up of the letter to a close-up of Judah’s face, remaining in close proximity to Judah as he peers around the room, moves to the fireplace, and burns the letter. Just as in the banquet hall, the camera’s movements represent Judah’s anxiousness and fear of being caught.

Another sound bridge is used to transition back to the banquet where Judah is now giving his speech. The high ideals and morally pure philanthropist described in the opening scenes is now shrouded in deception and immorality. A stationary medium shot of Judah captures his speech on “community, generosity, and mutual caring,” which, to the film’s audience, now sounds incredibly deceptive and phony. Judah is also positioned between two window frames, another visual representation of his emotional confinement. The sequence finally ends similarly to how it began, with a wide-angle shot of a large crowd that captures both the floor and the ceiling. This time the action is taking place on a dance floor and Judah is positioned much more prominently in the frame, but the functionality of the framing remains consistent.

Wealthy living and enjoyable entertainment is contrasted sharply with a tracking shot of Dolores walking down the streets of New York. Pleasant sounds of the banquet
band are replaced by people yelling and traffic noise. As Dolores enters her apartment it becomes quite apparent that her living space differs greatly from Judah’s large home and that this relationship pulls Judah from an upper middle-class living into a much harsher life-style. Within the confines of Dolores’ apartment the camera is unable to frame the actors in full shots and the walls of the apartment are consistently in frame. Barriers are also presented in front of the characters as they move in and out of view, which again throws compositions out of balance. For instance, in Dolores’ bedroom she and Judah are centrally framed as they argue until Dolores turns her back and moves behind the wall. The conversation continues, but Judah is the only character in the shot with nothing to replace Dolores except for her bedroom curtains. Then, Judah actually moves into Dolores’ spot, positioning both of the characters to the left of the frame (with no one facing the right). Instead of the camera following the action, it remains stationary, capturing the unsettled emotions of the characters rather than the physical actions. The ability for characters to move in and out of frame creates a more sinister and foreboding environment, one that is more suitable for people trying to hide. Also, just as in Judah’s home, the characters are mainly back-lit, casting dark shadows over the side closest to the camera. It is clear from this sequence that Judah is traversing in a more dangerous environment than he belongs and that his “normal” life is being affected by his immoral choices.

*Match Point*’s visual style is much more dichotomous, contrasting a very well-lit and “ordinary” world with a more dark and sinister one. As the narrative progresses the ratio of well illumined scenes to scenes of high lighting contrast diminishes, with the latter type of lighting style becoming more prominent as the protagonist becomes more involved with his criminal instincts. *Match Point* also uses close-ups to indicate a shift into a more morally questionable and noir-type environment. The first glimpse of the noir-ish visual style appears when Chris Wilton first encounters the femme fatale Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson). The scene is lit in much the same manner as the backlighting in *Crimes* with the main source of lighting coming from an exterior window, casting half of the characters in shadow. This visual style is supported with sexually charged dialogue and forceful contact. Nola’s first words to Chris betray her motives as she asks him, “so, who is my next victim?” After Chris showcases his aptitude for table-tennis, he then moves around the table and puts his arm around Nola, supposedly explaining to her proper ball-striking technique. With this action, the film cuts to a close-up of Nola’s face, followed by a reverse shot of Chris’ face. These are the first close-ups used in the film (save for a close-up of Chris reading *Crime and Punishment* in his apartment) and reveal an immediate physical connection between Nola and Chris. These close-ups are short-lived as Nola’s fiancé (and Chris’ friend) Tom (Matthew Goode) enters the room, causing the camera to return to its use of full and medium shots.

Close-ups are not used again until the next time Nola and Chris meet. This time, both Chris and Nola are with their respective spouse-to-be, and the sequence begins with a series of medium shot-reverse-shots from over the shoulders of Chris and Nola. As the conversation shifts focus to Nola’s career, the camera abruptly cuts to a close-up of Chris staring at Nola. The conversation continues with the same shot-reverse-shot method,
only now using close-ups of the two main characters (with occasional close-ups of the other two). It is during this series of close-ups that the conversation moves into a discussion of fatalism, chance, and luck, all of which are major themes in noir cinema (and will be discussed in more detail later in this essay).

Chris’ emotional distancing from his fiancée Chloe (Emily Mortimer) and his sexual desire for Nola lead him down a path similar to Judah’s, culminating in entrapment. The visual motif of confinement that was used so prominently in the opening moments of Crimes and Misdemeanors is replicated when Chris takes a job at Chloe’s father’s office. A wide-angle panning shot captures both the floor and the ceiling of the high-rise office, and the pervasive presence of windows and metal pillars overwhelm the frame. Parallel lines are everywhere, making it seem as though the roof is descending on Chris and he is being imprisoned. Chris’ emotional imprisonment is also supported in the next scene at his apartment, which has bars on both his front door and the windows.

Match Point’s noir visual style is fully in effect during the scene in which Chris and Nola succumb to their sexual urges. As Chris stands inside a dimly lit room (again only lit from an exterior window), he notices Nola walking outside in the rain. After the camera pans to the right, away from Chris to capture more of Nola, Chris re-enters the frame, creating an over-the-shoulder shot that showcases his eye-line focused on his sexual interest. Chris is foregrounded, in shadow, as Nola moves deeper into the distance that is blurred by rain and visually blocked by trees. The film cuts to a hallway almost completely filled with shadow as Chris moves from utter darkness toward the gloomy light of the exterior door. His descent into infidelity is nearly complete, and the visual style reflects this descent.

In addition to the classically noir-ish narratives and visuals of these two Woody Allen films is a prominent thematic focus on existentialist philosophy. The connection between film noir and existentialism is most directly made in Robert Porfirio’s article, “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in Film Noir.” It is Porfirio’s contention that existentialism “places its emphasis on man’s contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates” (Porfirio 81). Existentialist philosophy, then, has both a so-called “positive side” that focuses on terms such as “freedom,” “authenticity,” “responsibility” and “the leap into faith,” and a “negative side” which “emphasizes life’s meaninglessness and man’s alienation” (Porfirio 81). It is this “negative” and darker side that Porfirio rightly connects with the existential thread present in classical film noir. Classical noir protagonists such as Walter Neff (Double Indemnity), Christopher Cross (Scarlet Street), Al Roberts (Detour), and Myra Hudson (Sudden Fear) act “from desperation rather than rational choice, reacting to an inchoate, contingent world dominated by blind chance that is always threatening, carrying an undercurrent of violence that can strike at any moment” (Spicer 48). It is quite arguable, then, that classical film noir “is imbued with a strong fatalism that emphasizes not freedom but constraint and entrapment” (Spicer 49). Fate is, thus, more powerful than human choice.
or human will. The tactical planning of a crime cannot overcome the fatalism of a situation because fate is stronger.

What makes the classical noir films so interesting in light of this seeming obsession with existentialism is that fate always seems to pass moral judgment on characters. Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity* are killed because of their nearly perfect murder plot (whereas the morally righteous Barton Keyes lives). In *Sudden Fear*, Lester Blaine and Irene Neves are killed for their perfect murder plot while Myra Hudson, who was supposed to be killed and even plotted a perfect murder of her own (but did not go through with it) lives. *Detour*’s Al Roberts, who blamed fate for everything wrong with his life, is picked up by a police car at the end of *Detour* since he stole the identity of a dead man and ended up killing another woman (whether it was accidental or not). Even a noir character who seemingly gets away with murder, such as Christopher Cross in *Scarlet Street*, is so tortured and goaded into his moral downfall that fate seems just to have him merely go insane rather than to jail him for his crime.

It is this fatalist existentialism in classical noir that actually marks the first major departure from the noir-world of Allen’s films. To be sure, Allen’s protagonists are very aware of existentialist philosophy, but they (and the films which they inhabit) are much more concerned with the individual’s ability to create his own morality than with the fatalistic whims of an uncaring universe. In Allen’s noir universe the criminals can actually commit murder without being fatalistically captured or killed for their actions. The only obstacle to living contented and complete lives (fully re-integrated into the society that they nearly abandoned for sexual satisfaction) is individualized morality that can be controlled by the criminal.

Judah’s ability to overcome his fear of moral reckoning is one reason that *Crimes and Misdemeanors* has been described as being “haunted by the existential uncertainties that hover over Allen’s work” (Hirsch 211). In fact, the final conversation of the film that takes place between Cliff Stern (Woody Allen) and Judah actually represents Allen’s departure from the classical noir resolution. Cliff desires “the moral void where God’s judgment once existed to be filled by the perpetrator’s own ethical decision, humanity taking upon itself the task of imbuing the universe with its own self-projected moral imperatives even at the terrible personal cost of self-condemnation” (Bailey 135). This is the type of existentialism that would lead Walter Neff to confess his transgressions into his audio recorder, or would lead Myra Hudson to refrain from killing her adversaries, even though she may die because of it. Cliff’s thinking is what causes Christopher Cross to confess his guilt, even if it is not believed by the court, and what propels Al Roberts to confess his actions to the audience through voice-over. Judah’s “idea for a movie” about “a villain who benefits from his evil and accommodates himself to his own duplicity, deception, and dishonesty makes Cliff uneasy,” yet it is exactly what Judah is able to accomplish (Girgus 145). As Judah tells Cliff, “if you want a happy ending, you should go see a Hollywood movie.”
Match Point ends on a very similar note to Crimes, and Chris Wilton’s ability to get away with the murder of Nola Rice, her unborn child, and an unsuspecting neighbor “clearly suggests that luck supersedes morality” (Bailey and Girgus 567). The ending of the film actually provides proof of Chris’ thesis on fate and chance in relation to hard work that he offers earlier in the film. Match Point’s final close-up of Chris suggests the protagonist’s ability to mentally and emotionally persevere through any individual doubt that may betray him. He is able to “lay aside any ethical code or deep understanding of life” and “cope with fear” so that he can “notice that, although there are many things which are beyond our control, this is not always negative” (Barbera 13).

Thus, Woody Allen’s Crimes and Misdemeanors and Match Point align themselves with classical film noir in many ways. Both films employ narratives dealing with sexual lust, murder, and hidden middle-class deceit that could have easily been lifted from noir’s classical period. Allen’s films also utilize a very distinctively noir-ish visual style that relies on lighting contrasts, unsettling and imbalanced framing compositions, and a deliberate use of close-ups and moving cameras. There is, however, ultimately a major thematic difference between Allen’s films and those of the more classical noir period. The difference centers on the results of existentialism. Whereas classical noir protagonists are isolated and unable to enter (or re-enter) everyday society because of their actions (often resulting in their fatalistic demise), the protagonists in Allen’s films are able to fully recover their livelihood and escape moral judgment. The lack of human control over situations is muted and, even though luck and chance play a part in Allen’s noir world, these elements are not necessarily detrimental to the protagonists. Instead, an individual’s ability to create his own morality allows Allen’s characters to emerge from the noir underworld unscathed. Classical noir fatalism is, thus, replaced by individualized morality, allowing Allen’s characters to get away with murder: both physically and emotionally.
References


