

Woody Allen: Television as Crisis

by Alex Munt

“Renata Adler said television was an appliance rather than an artform.”

Woody Allen in *Meetin' WA*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1986

It was in high-school that a precocious Woody Allen (Allan Stewart Konigsberg) started writing jokes for print media. [1. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 44)] At seventeen he was published in Nick Kenny's column for the *New York Daily Mirror*, then Earl Wilson's column at the *New York Post*. [2. Garry Arnold, “Woody Allen on Woody Allen” (1977) in *Woody Allen Interviews*, Robert E. Kapsis, Kathie Coblenz, eds. (University of Mississippi Press, 2006), p. xxv.] Allen recalls, “One day after school I started typing jokes out and looking at them. And I immediately sold them at ten cents a crack to newspaper columns. I was working immediately so there was never any doubt about what I was going to do”. [3. Ken Kelley, “A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen” (1976) in *Woody Allen Interviews*, Robert E. Kapsis, Kathie Coblenz, eds. (University of Mississippi Press, 2006), p. 25.] This early commitment to a life of writing would find a diversity of creative outputs: print media, stand-up comedy, radio, theatre, essays, prose and screenwriting for television and feature film – which is the focus of this article. In 1953, Allen enrolled at New York University, taking an arts degree with a major in film production. He lasted just two semesters. [4. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 44)] After abandoning a formal education, and harbouring ambitions as a playwright, he turned to private tuition from Lajos Egri, having been an admirer of *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. [5. Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (New York: Touchstone, 2004)] However, Allen quit this path to formal screenwriting education and confirmed his ongoing commitment to autodidacticism. Some decades later, the character Gabe (Allen) in *Husbands and Wives* (1992) reiterates this, “You can't teach writing...it's not something you can teach...y'know you can only expose the students to good literature and hope it inspires them. The ones that can write can write when they come to my class and the others never learn”.

It was the momentum of the first “Golden Age” of television (the late 1940s to early 1960s) which propelled Woody Allen to screenwriting, and from New York to California. In 1955, he was selected to participate in a new NBC Writer's Development Program (Brunette 2006: xv) for *NBC Comedy Hour* (1956), *The Colgate Comedy Hour* (1950-55) and *Caesar's Hour* (1954-57), mingling with Bob Hope, Pat Boone, Mel Brooks – with Sid Caesar as his favourite. [6. Ken Kelley, “A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen” (1976) in *Woody Allen Interviews*, Robert E. Kapsis, Kathie Coblenz, eds. (University of Mississippi Press, 2006), p. 11.] Allen biographer, John Baxter notes of Allen's formative experience in writing for television that it, “...soured Allen not only on Los Angeles, but on the craft of writing comedy for TV”. [7. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 54)] Allen purportedly said, “You hack around from show to show and you're always worried – is the comedian you're writing for going to be dropped because of bad ratings?”. [8. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 54)] He would contribute to *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-71) and *The Tonight Show* (1954 - ongoing). In 1962, Allen remarked he had contributed 20,000 jokes for comedians. [9. Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003, p. 659)]

Whilst writing for television induced career anxiety for Woody Allen, it nevertheless supplied the discipline often derived from the pressures of working within a commercial context. To Eric Lax, his official biographer, he recalls, “You have to dip your pen in blood” referring to the non-negotiable writing deadlines for live-comedy television. [10. *Eric Lax, Conversations with Woody Allen: his films, the movies, and moviemaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009) p. 79)] At this early phase of his career he was unsure whether to direct his talents towards the screen or stage, noting, “In those days a screenwriter was nothing, just an anonymous name whose work was butchered. And a playwright was a big deal”. [11. *Eric Lax, Conversations with Woody Allen: his films, the movies, and moviemaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009) p. 87)] Allen fled Los Angeles, and writing for the networks, to return to New York in order to focus on his own projects, including plays and comic material. In 1964, the film producer Charles K. Feldman attended one of Allen’s stand-up appearances, which led to an offer to write (and perform) in *What’s New Pussycat* (Clive Donner, 1965). Allen’s mentors, then long-term producers, Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe would oversee his transition to feature film: first as a screenwriter/actor then screenwriter/actor/director. [12. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 85)] As an American film auteur, Woody Allen’s œuvre remains unrivalled with respect to the sheer volume of his artistic production.

Today, Woody Allen’s career lies in a beleaguered state with the resurgence of allegations of the sexual assault of his adoptive daughter Dylan Farrow in 1992. With the momentum of the Me Too movement and with the advent of ‘cancel culture’ - Amazon promptly terminated a multi-project deal and quickly shelved distribution plans for *A Rainy Day in New York* (2019). A move that has resulted in litigation. [13. Erik Gardner and Tatiana Siegel, “Can Amazon Get Out of its Woody Allen Deal? It’s complicated,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/can-amazon-get-woody-allen-deal-it-s-complicated-1186057>] Meanwhile, the film has found alternative distribution in Europe (outside the United States) and Allen has returned to production, in Spain, for his 51st film with Mediapro studios.

TELEVISION AS CAREER CRISIS

Woody Allen’s experience in writing comedy for network television in Los Angeles, in the late 1950s, would provide him material which would inform his transition to ‘serious’ films and contributing to his ‘classic’ mid-career period, from the late 1970s to early 1990s. The creative ‘trauma’ of his relatively brief career in industrial television production would find shape in the creative crisis’ of metropolitan protagonists. This key motif of creative career crisis, in television, relates to the notion of authenticity in career choice and the conflict in the marriage of art and commerce. In addition, the geography of television production on the West Coast, and the brazen spirit of Los Angeles, is set against the ‘Old World’ elegance of New York City. In the films of Woody Allen, in his mid-career, television is used as a demarcation of cultural value, taste and authenticity – with television (as entertainment) at one spectrum, and cinema (as art) on the other.

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The screenplay for *Annie Hall* (1977) was co-written by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman, a collaboration which extended to *Manhattan* (1979) and *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993). *Annie Hall* traces a “nervous romance” (the original tagline for the film) between comedian Alvy Singer (Allen) and Annie Hall (Diane Keaton). [14. Donald

Liebenson, "The *Annie Hall* That Might Have Been: Inside Woody Allen's Anhedonia," *Vanity Fair*, 20 April 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/04/annie-hall-40th-anniversary-woody-allen-carol-kane-marshall-brickman>] Vincent Canby, reviewing the film at the time of its release, saw the influence of Allen's auteur-hero Ingmar Bergman: "essentially, Woody's *Scenes from a Marriage*, though there is no marriage". Canby notes the distinctive chronology of the film which "... moves back and forth in time according to Alvy's recollections". [15. Vincent Canby, "Allen at His Best," *The New York Times*, 21 April 1977, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/annie-re.html?scp=2&sq=%2522annie%2520hall%2522%2520and%2520%2522vincent%2520canby%2522&st=cse>] Brickman assessed an early cut of the film as: "like the raw material from which a film could be assembled – from which two or three films could possibly be assembled" [16. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 251] *Annie Hall* was a film also "written" in post-production, as we can see by the account of the film's editor Ralph Rosenblum in *When the Shooting Stops... The Cutting Begins: A Film Editor's Story* [17. Ralph Rosenblum and Robert Karen, *When the Shooting Stops ... The Cutting Begins: A Film Editor's Story* (New York: De Capo Press, 1986)] Canby addresses the use of Allen's narrative ellipsis in the film, saying, "Singer never commits himself enough to allow Annie Hall to give up her apartment and move in with him. Just why, we aren't told, though we can make guesses on the basis of the information furnished". [18. Vincent Canby, "Allen at His Best," *The New York Times*, 21 April 1977, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/annie-re.html?scp=2&sq=%2522annie%2520hall%2522%2520and%2520%2522vincent%2520canby%2522&st=cse>] For Woody Allen, *Annie Hall* was a step into the unknown. Allen stated at the time: "I was consciously trying for a more sentimental kind of film. The earlier ones were just for laughs, and I realize I might be safer sticking with that approach". [19. Garry Arnold, "Woody Allen on Woody Allen" (1977) in *Woody Allen Interviews*, Robert E. Kapsis, Kathie Coblentz, eds. (University of Mississippi Press, 2006), p. 30.]

In *Annie Hall* the medium of television is present in multiple ways. Early in the film Allen inserts videotape material of himself from an appearance on the *The Dick Cavett Show* (1968). This use of archival television footage is used to imbue Alvy's status as a successful comedian with a public profile. The screenplay for *Annie Hall* has been described colloquially as, "pages from the life of Woody Allen, as "adapted by" Allen and Brickman". [20. Robert Hatch, "Annie Hall," *The Nation*, 8 January 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/annie-hall/>] The link between Alvy-as-Allen returns when a man on the street recognises Alvy from an appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962-1992) – much to the chagrin of Alvy unimpressed by this unwanted public attention – whilst waiting for Annie. She arrives late and they are forced to wait in line for the film and suffer quasi-intellectual "pontifications" (in Alvy's dialogue) of an academic standing in line with them. Passing time, he announces that the demise in modern culture: 'Y'know what it is? It's the influence of television'. He informs Alvy he has authority in this pronouncement – since he teaches a course at Columbia called 'TV, Media & Culture'. He cites Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* yet he muddles its theoretical framework to describe television as a 'hot' medium. [21. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964)] An exasperated Alvy is forced to then to (literally) drag in the real McLuhan (playing himself) as expert witness who states, 'You know nothing of my work...' Alvy: 'If life were only like this.' Next, we see the credits for *The Sorrow and the Pity* (Marcel Ophüls, 1969) which sets up the dialectic between television (as entertainment) and film (as art) which would present

as a key motif in Allen's mid-career. In this scene Allen also chooses to stage dialogue between Alvy and Annie in front of a poster for Bergman's *Face to Face* (1976). He confirmed to Ken Kelley, from *Rolling Stone*, "...really the only ones I have any interest in at all are Bergman, Antonioni, Renoir, Bunuel – basically serious stuff." [22. Ken Kelley, "A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen" (1976) in *Woody Allen Interviews*, Robert E. Kapsis, Kathie Coblentz, eds. (University of Mississippi Press, 2006), p.xi.]

IMAGE 1

Alvy (Allen) with Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall* (1977)

In *Annie Hall* Alvy and his friend Rob (Tony Roberts) share careers in television. Rob attempts to lure him to California with the promise, "All of show business is out there." Alvy's retort: "I don't want to live in a city where the only cultural advantage is where you can make a right turn on a red light." For Vincent Canby, Woody Allen represents "the first major American filmmaker ever to come out of a saloon", his screenplays idiosyncratic as a remediated form of stand-up comedy. [23. Vincent Canby, "Allen at His Best," *The New York Times*, 21 April 1977, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/annie-re.html?scp=2&sq=%2522annie%2520hall%2522%2520and%2520%2522vincent%2520canby%2522&st=cse>] Later in the film Alvy reluctantly visits Los Angeles. He is chaperoned by Rob and as they drive through Beverly Hills Alvy delivers a sarcastic response to the new surrounds: "The architecture is really consistent. There's French next to Spanish, next to Tudor, next to Japanese." Next to him, Annie attests, "It's so clean out here." "Because they don't throw garbage away, they make it into TV shows," says Alvy. With this dialogue Allen equates the physical city of Los Angeles, whose postmodern bricolage forms a *heteropolis* via Charles Jencks, with the pop-aesthetics of television entertainment. [24. Charles Jencks, *Heteropolis: Los Angeles, the Riots and the Strange Beauty of Hetero-architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1993)] Alvy's point of view through the car windscreen is a montage of commercial architecture: a food trailer in the form of a giant hotdog; the flimsy cardboard-like architecture of a Fatburger franchise and cinemas showing *Messiah of Evil* (Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz, 1973) and *House of Exorcism* (1975). For Allen, the physical fabric of the city represented as grotesque kitsch, doubles for the virtualised medium of "cheap" television entertainment. Alvy accompanies Rob to his production studio. Rob instructs the sound engineer to add more "canned" laughter for the soundtrack: a "medium-sized chuckle" here and there. Alvy protests: "Nobody laughs at it because your jokes aren't funny." He removes his glasses, rubs his eyes and says he feels unwell.

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Woody Allen revisits the notion of television as a medium fuelled by "fake laughs" in *Manhattan* (1979) two years later – in a screenplay also co-written by Marshall Brickman. This time Allen's proxy is Isaac Davis, a television comedy writer in the midst of a career crisis. In the studio, Isaac (Allen) waves his arms around in frustration. The show is called *Human Beings*. He says, "It's antiseptic... It's not funny... there's not a legitimate laugh in that." Isaac declares that "fake laughs" are for "an audience raised on television" framing a career in television as an inauthentic creative pursuit. Isaac adds, 'standards have been systematically lowered over the years. These guys sit in front of their sets and the gamma rays knocking out the white cells of their brains out'. Here, Allen extends his view of the medium towards a Cronenbergian body-horror appraisal of the physical (in addition to

psychological) health risks. Isaac quits his job in television as, once again, the creative protagonist strives to divorce himself from popular trash culture. For Allen biographer John Baxter, there is a clear parallel between the career crisis of Allen's characters from his mid-career film and his own trajectory as an artist as a "professional transmutation from comedy writing and comic performance to the production of comic and then serious films". [25. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 61]

IMAGE 2

Isaac (Allen) writing comedy for television in *Manhattan* (1979)

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In *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) Mickey (Allen) is a live-comedy television producer caught between the support of his creative writing team and the commercially-minded censorship concerns of the network. In the back of house corridors of the studio one of these writers (John Turturro) reacts angrily to edits of his comic material – a sketch on the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation). The writer yells, "I don't want anybody tampering with my goddamn work without telling me." Mickey, to himself: "Christ this show is ruining my health" – another example of the link between television and poor health. In voiceover narration Mickey tells how his ex-producing partner has relocated to California, where "Every stupid show he produces turns out to be a big hit." The image in Mickey's mind is of his ex-partner hurtling through sunny streets of California, a backdrop of palm trees, gleefully bopping along to pop-music with headphones on. In the midst of a career crisis, Mickey asks, "What am I going to do with my life?" So, for Woody Allen, whilst television entertainment on the West Coast may prove lucrative – it's a sell-out from the perspective of an artist. This syncs with Allen's own experience having left the stability, and pay-check, of writing for network television in the 1960s (with Allen paid a substantial weekly salary) for the uncertainty inherent in developing his own creative projects. In *Hannah and Her Sisters* Mickey (first introduced with the title card "The Hypochondriac") has existential woes (related to his career in television) suffering a faux brain tumour, perhaps those "gamma rays" cited in *Manhattan*. Allen is clear in his view: if a career television doesn't kill you medically, then it certainly will artistically.

IMAGE 3

Mickey (Allen) as television Producer in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)

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In *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989) Allen plays Clifford (Cliff) Stern an idealistic documentary filmmaker. His plight forms a parallel narrative to that of Judah (Martin Landau) an ophthalmologist who has decided to end an extramarital affair, by violent means, in order to maintain his family life. Allen's preoccupation with authenticity in creative careers returns in this film. Whilst Cliff is devoted to serious documentary projects, this decision impacts on his livelihood. In the character's own words his realm is, "little films on toxic waste and starving children." His current project (without a budget to speak of) is a film on philosopher Professor Louis Levy – played in a cameo from Martin S. Bergmann, psychologist and professor at New York University. When bickering with his wife Wendy (Joanna Gleason) over his ailing screen career, Cliff cites an "honourable mention" at the Cincinnati Film Festival as his career highlight to date. Wendy retaliates, citing Cliff's professional jealousy of her brother Lester (Alan Alda) who is a rich, successful (and narcissistic) network television producer. Cliff says, "You think I'm jealous of Lester

because he's a television producer?" She replies, "No. I think you're jealous because he's a much-honoured, highly respected man and he's a millionaire 10 times over... and he's doing what you'd like to be doing."

IMAGE 4

Cliff (Allen) as documentary filmmaker in *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989)

At a party later on, with a glamorous young woman in his arms Lisa (Daryl Hannah), Lester doesn't hesitate to remind Cliff of his "closet full of Emmys." Wendy urges Lester to hire Cliff to make the profile of him set to appear on public television – an episode in the fictional series *The Creative Mind*. With sharply contrasting values, and struggling with his own creative dissatisfaction, Cliff is clearly a poor choice to produce a hagiographic portrait of Lester. But he takes the work, and it leads to romance with the show's PBS producer Halley Reed (Mia Farrow). A deal is at stake: if Cliff can complete this project, Halley can help produce his "serious" documentary on Professor Levy. However, Cliff can not contain his contempt of the pompous Lester, and his base career in television, and instead delivers a satirical documentary which compares him to Mussolini and Francis the Talking Mule [26. John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 372] His win is short lived. Whilst Cliff has fallen for Halley, it is Lester that she ends up with.

IMAGE 5

Physicist Nicholas Metropolis on television in *Husbands and Wives* (1992)

In *Crimes and Misdemeanours* an excerpt from Cliff's work-in-progress documentary on Professor Levy is revealed as a "talking head" interview cut-away shot of the television monitor. Allen returns to this use of the television set in his *mise-en-scene* in the opening scene of *Husbands and Wives* (1992), where Gabe (Allen) watches the physicist Nicholas Metropolis on screen. He quotes Einstein: "God does not play dice with the universe." Gabe's response: "No, he just plays hide and seek." This represents another aspect of the portrayal of television in the films of Woody Allen, where the medium is presented as at least having the *potential* to be a portal for knowledge and ideas, not just mindless entertainment. Whilst this may be true for public broadcast television with limited audiences, it serves as an idealistic portrait of the medium, which in the broad sweep of the late 20th century veered towards 24-hour news, reality TV or informercial-laden cable television. In *Crimes and Misdemeanours* Cliff accompanies his young niece to the Bleecker Street Cinema – which offers a moment of respite from the travails of his creative career. Cliff counsels her "not to listen to her teachers, and especially not to go into showbusiness." The film poster shows the program: "Classic Films of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties". Cliff (Allen) is nostalgic for a different era of showbusiness and entertainment.

IMAGE 6

Cliff (Allen) at Bleecker St. Cinema in *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989)

'MEETIN' WA'

Following the premiere of *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) at Cannes, Woody Allen was co-opted to appear in an unconventional 'press conference' staged by Jean-Luc Godard in a Manhattan hotel suite overlooking Central Park. Whilst Allen's own career had shifted from television to feature filmmaking, Godard's career had moved in the other direction – towards the small screen – in the lead-up to his remix-videotape-collage epic *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998). In Godard's 'Meetin' WA' he uses an intertitle, "The Big Leap" to

introduce a discussion with Allen on the impact of television on cinema. Godard asks: “Do you think something has really changed in making movies because of the way TV is accepting or showing movies?” Allen replies, “I personally think that TV is a terrible influence on movies, absolutely terrible”. Allen conveys a degree of generational bemusement that “young people’s’ first experience of the canon is frequently via television” and relays the travesty of watching *Citizen Kane* (1941) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in a domestic setting.

IMAGE 7

Woody Allen in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Meetin’ WA* (1986)

In Jean-Luc Godard’s *Meetin’ WA* (1986) Woody Allen nostalgically recounts his own moviegoing experience in New York in contrast to the consumption of movies via home video – a precursor to Netflix “binge watching” television series. Allen reflects on the ritual of visiting the theatre, describing the experience as entering another “world”, an artifice formed by “beautiful carpets and brass fixtures” in contrast to watching films on television, cast as “a much smaller, petty experience.” Allen talks of screen scale: “to be able to sit there and see a big image.” At this point Godard cuts away from the interview to a shot of himself in a blue-screen production studio. Here, he narrates the titles of a collection of VHS cassettes, in a self-reflexive image for the remediation of cinema as home video and his own work with the medium. Returning to the interview, Allen returns to his irrational fear of the cathode-tube, telling Godard, “there is that theory that if you stand too close to the cathode ray tube, y’know you can get radiation poisoning, eventually over the long run.” Allen adds, “to me what’s insidious about it [television] is, it tends to quell your loneliness”. In this unconventional portrait of Allen, the key themes I discuss in this article are already elucidated. Whilst Godard had explored the communicative and aesthetic potential of television in his radical works of the 1970s – and remix projects into the 1980s and beyond – for Woody Allen television remains an inferior experience and the dividing line between film and television is across the binary relations of: art versus commerce; city versus domesticity; social life versus loneliness and authenticity versus bad-faith.

CRISIS IN SIX SCENES

Woody Allen’s six-episode series *Crisis in Six Scenes* (2016), for Amazon Prime, represents a return to television, returning to the medium which launched his screenwriting career, over fifty years ago. With a few exceptions Allen has been committed to the feature form. In 1971 Allen completed *Men of Crisis: The Harvey Wallinger Story* for PBS, a satirical short television mockumentary targeted at the Nixon administration which proved too controversial to air. Reportedly Allen vowed to “stick to movies” after this experience – which he largely did. [27. Mark Zaloudek, “TV Producer Kuney earned many honors”, *Herald-Tribune*, 16 November 2007, <https://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20071116/tv-producer-kuney-earned-many-honors>] In the mid-1990s, Allen wrote and directed *Don’t Drink the Water* (1994) for ABC Network as a television adaptation of his own 1966 stage play which had earlier been adapted as a feature film by others (Howard Morris, 1969). Allen’s foray with Amazon (some twenty years later) reflects the strategy of the streaming studios to woo high-profile film auteurs to the small screen. In light of the severing of Allen’s contract with Amazon, discussed earlier, his ‘return’ to television appears to be short lived.

IMAGE 8

Sidney ‘S.J.’ Munsinger (Allen) in *Crisis in Six Scenes* (2016)

Crisis in Six Scenes opens with a montage of archival footage from protest movements of the 1960s, with images of anti-war and civil rights marches. The slogans, symbols, gestures and spirit of the period are revisited. In one clip, the Black Panthers carry “Free Huey” placards (a reference to the jailing of Huey Percy Newton). This montage is set to the Jefferson Airplane song *Volunteers*, which includes the lyric: “One generation got old, one generation got sold.” As a prelude to the drama series to follow this serves to establish the social upheaval and generational divide of the period. The cut from the archival footage is to Sidney Munsinger, or S.J. (Allen), at the barber. Allen holds a picture of James Dean as the inspiration for the haircut. “Give it your best shot is all I’m asking,” he quips. This opening scene establishes Munsinger, in the late 1960s, as a retired advertising copywriter – and aspiring writer in his later years. The barber gives him cold comfort in his review of his recent creative output. Munsinger tells him he’s changed track and is now “working on an idea for a television series.” He adds, “Y’know it’s very lucrative and there’s not a lot of money in novels” (later in the series Munsinger, will refer to his own TV project as “that idiotic television thing”). In *Crisis in Six Scenes* television is positioned early on – as a conduit to the 1960s period and as a self-reflexive statement on Woody Allen’s return to the medium. In addition, it represents continuity with respect to the relationship between Woody Allen and television, framed in this article, and returns as a key mode of “crisis” in the narrative.

The series was not well received. It was marked “for Woody Allen completists only” and resulting in “an ugly, miserable relationship, the narrative requirements of TV hate him [Woody Allen] back by reducing his masterful skills of character, dialogue and pacing to staggering weaknesses”. [28. Nick Allen, “Amazon’s “Crisis in Six Scenes” is for Woody Allen Completists Only”, *Roger Ebert.com*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/demanders/amazons-crisis-in-six-scenes-is-for-woody-allen-completists-only>] For Charlie Lyne, writing in *The Guardian*, the series proved “a failure to engage with the medium in which it exists”. [29. Charlie Lyne, “Crisis in Six Scenes: Woody Allen’s TV show is proof he’s finally lost the plot”, *The Guardian*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/28/crisis-in-six-scenes-woody-allen-miley-cyrus>] For Matt Zoller Seitz, “the most telling thing is about it is its structure: There isn’t any to speak of. Allen seems to have paid no attention to the demands of the serialized narrative; his version of a TV series is a feature-length motion picture meat-axed into 23-minute chunks”. [30. Matt Zoller Seitz, “Crisis in Six Scenes Is Woody Allen’s Mad Men, Except Completely Tone-deaf”, *Vulture*, September 28 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/09/woody-allen-crisis-in-six-scenes-review.html>] So whilst it is often suggested that streaming forms provide additional flexibility for screenwriters to determine the flow and duration of their narratives – this mode of criticism demands adherence to new ‘norms’.

IMAGE 9

Lennie the Revolutionary (Miley Cyrus) in *Crisis in Six Scenes* (2016)

Richard Brody observes of *Crisis in Six Scenes* that this return to the period for Allen proves to be both “secondhand and spectatorial”, given that his 1960s “weren’t an age of protest and activism but of trying to establish himself, tooth and nail, as the filmmaker that he had decided to become”. [31. Richard Brody, “Woody Allen’s Secondhand Sixties Radicalism”, *The New Yorker*, September 30 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/woody-allen-crisis-in-six-scenes-radical-chic>] Allen, at eighty years old, returns as an actor playing a suburban protagonist who shares a comfortable domestic life with his wife

Kay (Elaine May), a marriage counsellor who operates from a home office in their tasteful Briarcliff Manor residence. The “inciting incident” that disturbs Munsinger’s semi-retired idyll is the arrival a young 1960s radical Lennie Dale (Miley Cyrus), a friend of the extended family, who breaks into their house in the middle of the night, drawing out Munsinger in his pyjamas, one step behind his wife. Lennie is on the run from the authorities in the wake of the bombing of a draft board office as protest against the Vietnam war. An act of “terror” in today’s parlance. Lenny is a member of the “Constitutional Liberation Army”. Allen, as Munsinger, mentions The Yippies (Abbie Hoffman is name-checked) and The Weather Underground to contextualise the radicalism of the time. In screenwriting terms, Munsinger’s ‘goal’ is to remove this unwanted intrusion and return to a suburban bourgeois idyll. A complicating factor is that Lenny has gained the support of Kay and introduces her (and the all-women book club she chairs) to the manifestoes of Mao, Lenin and Marx.

To add to this, Lenny draws in the Munsingers’ house guest Alan (John Magaro), the son of their friends, who is engaged and on-track to replicate his parent’s conservative path. When Alan meets the dynamic Lenny – he has second thoughts. The household, and Munsinger by default, veer to the Left, but his primary objective is to evict Lennie and in the denouement, he achieves this goal by becoming her “getaway driver”, delivering her to freedom. Brody finds parallels between *Crisis in Six Scenes* and Tom Wolfe’s essay *These Radical Chic Evenings* first published in *New York Magazine* – in reference to an evening that united Manhattan’s cultural elite with the Black Panthers. [32. Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970)] The evening hosted at composer Leonard Bernstein’s Upper East Side penthouse was a social event and fundraiser for legal fees and family support of imprisoned members of the Black Panthers. For Brody:

This readiness of many people to fall for the virtuous-sounding but hollow, reckless, dangerous, and destructive rhetoric of dictatorial revolutionaries is the very through-line of the series. In that sense, “Crisis in Six Scenes” isn’t just Allen’s “American Pastoral”; it’s also his version of “Radical Chic”— Tom Wolfe’s vision of a social set in the nineteen-sixties, his social set, whose members came under the influence of a romantic ideological illusion and found themselves unintentionally spouting cant and defending terrorists and tyrants. [33. Richard Brody, “Woody Allen’s Secondhand Sixties Radicalism”, *The New Yorker*, September 30 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/woody-allen-crisis-in-six-scenes-radical-chic>]

In *Crisis in Six Scenes*, which begins with a prologue of archival protest footage, the television set returns as part of the *mise en scène* within the suburban setting. After a dinner party with friends, Sidney and Kaye retire to their lounge to watch the news, which features reporting on Vietnam and an update on the actions of Lennie’s “Constitutional Liberation Army”, foreshadowing her arrival late that night. In Allen’s direction for this scene, he places the camera in the position of the television set to capture the gaze of the characters towards the screen. Later, in Episode 5, Sidney reluctantly (encouraged by Kaye) agrees to collect a suitcase of 30,000 Cuban pesos for the revolution and as one more step towards removing Lennie from his life. They become accomplices in this pursuit which brings them back into the city and adds excitement to their relationship. Kaye welcomes the adventure and so does Sidney without admitting it.

IMAGE 10:
Interior congestion in *Crisis in Six Scenes* (2016)

For *Crisis in Six Scenes* Allen exploits the low-budget model of “Containment” for screenwriting. [34. Michael Brindley, “Writing the Low Budget Feature: Concept, Collaboration, Cast, Control and Containment” in *Low Means Low: The Collected Papers*, ed. Catherine Knapman (Sydney: Australian Film Commission)] The six-part series was in production for three weeks with Woody Allen working at a rapid pace as usual. His directorial approach to television is consistent with his approach to feature film production based on wide shots (and master shots) over close-ups or cutaways in order to minimise camera (and lighting) setups to work sustainably at (relatively) low budgets. Interestingly, whilst the story is centred around a single location (the Munsinger’s family home) the arrival of Lennie resulted in a “metropolitanisation” of the suburbs. That is, as the story progresses, Sid and Kaye’s domestic quarters become a site of increasingly frenzied activity and congestion. This is most pertinent in Episode 6 where the hallways and living spaces of the Munsinger residence are at capacity, with Sid and Kaye, their social set, the young fiancés, the radicalised book club, members of the CLA, the Black Panthers and other players all occupying the scene. Allen pulls and pushes this sea of characters from one cramped domestic space to the next. So, whilst it is uncharacteristic for Allen to centre a screenplay on the suburbs this, in fact, proves a ruse, to the extent that he imbues the suburban spaces with the congestion of a New York City sidewalk. Against the criticism of the series, Allen’s *Crisis in Six Scenes* reveals a more classical approach to screenwriting, and the staging of dramatic scenes, for television. In contrast to the typical gloss of “high production values” as prestige television, and as a proxy for “the cinematic”, Allen’s contribution to contemporary episodic television draws on the writer/director’s experiences in the traditions of the cinema from the 1930s and 1940s.

Crisis in Six Scenes is consistent with the key premise of this article, which examines Woody Allen’s relationship with television as one of crisis. At the outset of the series, Sid Munsinger’s barber probes his creative anxieties and remains sceptical of Sid’s transition from literary writing to screenwriting, when he asserts that “a TV show is considered low-brow compared to a book.” In Episode 3 this assessment comes to fruition when Sidney pitches his “high-concept” television show to a pair of corporate “suits”. His pitch: “A kooky family... they live in caves... but they’re Neanderthals.” He introduces Mel (Bobby Slayton), his writing partner, as a screenwriter “great at jokes”. Sidney adds: “I’m very good at texture.” The *mise en scène* encasing the executives features their golden award statues next to piles of (unproduced?) manuscripts. Once again, Allen ridicules the status of commercial television development.

By Episode 6 of *Crisis in Six Scenes*, Sidney’s transition from literary writing to screenwriting for television has failed. In the dénouement it is a case of literary mis-identification that ultimately sets Lennie free, when a (less than sharp) policeman mistakes S.J. Munsinger for the novelist J.D. Salinger. He asks for an autograph – which enables Lennie to flee. The final scene in the series shows the marital couple, Sid and Kaye, resting in bed. He confides his creative anxieties to his wife asking, ‘Do you think it’s in me to write a novel as good as *The Catcher in the Rye*?’ It is at this point that Sidney abandons writing his television show and returns to literature – following the advice of his barber in Episode 1. Consistent with the view presented here on Woody Allen’s relationship to television – as one of creative crisis in the search for authenticity – it is in the act of aiding Lennie’s escape that Sidney Munsinger returns to his authentic creative self, and retains his bold ambition to write the Great American Novel. Using this analogy, from literature to screen, Woody Allen has consistently found creative

ways to shape the narratives of his films using the dramatic tension between commercial and artistic impulses. His characters, their career-crisis and the *mise en scène* reiterate that whilst the lure of industrial, commercial television may be ever-present, for true artists - television remains a site of inauthenticity. Allen's characters are repeatedly forced to make a (dramatic) choice. In the body of films analysed here, from Allen's middle to late career, this dramatic tension is expressed when the characters choose to exit the financial comfort of writing or producing television and embrace the risk and uncertainty of more personal, and artistically rewarding, pursuits with the ambition to lead a more authentically creative existence.

