

# An Analysis of Postmodern Narrative Film Technique in *Annie Hall*

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## ABSTRACT

The narrative techniques of postmodern cinema are characterized by playfulness and fragmentation. Woody Allen lends a special quality to *Annie Hall* through the subtle settings of the film's narrative techniques. Building on the explanation of montage in Pudovkin's *Film Directors and Film Materials* and the concept of the "fourth wall"[1] proposed by Denis Diderot, this essay analyses postmodern film narrative techniques in *Annie Hall* from two perspectives: the multi-temporal narrative and the intermittent narrative of breaking the fourth wall. Drawing on rich post-modern narrative techniques, the film reflects the perception on life, love and age, presenting a complex and fractured understandings of city life in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Annie Hall*, Postmodernism, narrative strategy, Montage, breaking the fourth wall.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The postmodern film *Annie Hall* tells the story of the twists and turns and regrettable love tragedy between Alvy (Woody Allen) and Annie (Diane Keaton). The film adopts a fragmented narrative and a montage technique to present a multifaceted space. At the same time, the film also features several instances of breaking the fourth wall --direct communication between the actors and the audience. This makes the narrative structure of the film less conformist, more respectful of individualism, more attentive to stream of consciousness expression and strongly postmodernist in character.

Most of the current research on *Annie Hall* tends to focus on the comedic style as well as the socio-cultural perspective. Alex Simmons, for example, in his essay "*The Conundrum of 'High Culture' Comedy: Why Annie Hall Has Ruined Woody Allen's Reputation*", states that: "Allen's ironic humor with tragic color in *Annie Hall* can bring more ideological touches to the audience, but at the same time, it can't give the audience the viewing effect of traditional comedy." [2] However, few scholars have studied the narrative strategies of *Annie Hall*.

In summary, this paper will analyze and interpret the narrative strategy of the film *Annie Hall* from the perspective of narratology. The first part of the main

paper will analyze the complex time and space from the perspective of montage, as well as the inner character and the overall depth of the film through the innovative childhood plot. The second part of the main text will analyze the expressive effects of the images such as the actors' monologue, the direct dialogue between the actors and the audience, and the separation of flesh and spirit from the perspective of the interstitial effect narrative of breaking the fourth wall.

## 2. MONTAGE AND MULTIVARIATE SPACE

The best thing about *Annie Hall* is that the use of comparative and metaphorical montage gives the film its spatial diversity. In his treatise 'The Film Director and the Film Material', Pudovkin explains the assertion that montage is an objective and fundamental law of cinematic art in the context of its developmental process [3]. Montage is a method discovered and developed by cinema to reveal all the connections that exist in life, from the superficial to the most profound.

Traditional romantic movies consist of a coherent narrative, a single character, and a fixed ending. *Annie Hall*, as a classic post-modern film, is characterized by the use of montage to create complex time and space, skip narration and neurotic characters, which reflect the

director's use of montage to express himself in post-modern films. Personalized and diversified, the montage completely breaks the stereotype of individual thoughts, and the director's perspectives are maximized in the film through montage, reflecting his personal style to the greatest extent. For example, the emotional entanglements of Alvy and Anne are always combined with the past plots of Alvy and his ex-wife. The comparative montage makes the image of Alvy more complicated.

### **2.1 Contrast montage makes the film narrative richer**

Alvy and ex-wife Alison know in the theater backstage, two people because of the discussion of politics and each other good impression, and because Alvy too rational too self closed lead to two people communication fruitless divorce. "Stop me, I don't want to make a fool of myself,"[4] Alvy reminds to Alison during a monologue about current politics, indicating that he was still full of humor and passion. However, it seems that his sensibility only exists in the love relationship. When the love relationship becomes the marriage relationship, he and Alison are more like "academic partners". They only need pure rationality to exchange views and give opinions to each other, without any mixed feelings. For example, Alvy suddenly soliloquized academic issues when he was intimate with Alison, which was the expression of extreme self-consciousness in Alvy's personality. He completely followed the jumping and even unconstrained heart, as long as he thought of problems immediately regardless of reality, just to solve their own confusion.

He's also running away, running away from a situation that doesn't allow him to immerse himself. Through comparative montage, the marriage life of Alvy and Alison reflects the differences in their deep emotional needs, and conveys the author's point of view that they resolutely pursue their inner thoughts in love and do not change for others. After the marriage between Alvy and Alison ended, the camera directly cut into the scene of Alvy and Annie's lobster fight (Fig1). The lively atmosphere was in sharp contrast to the slightly heavy atmosphere of the former. Alternate plots of the past and present make the film narrative more skipping, and the film space and time more diverse and complex.



**Figure 1.** Alvy is catching lobster

The application of *Annie Holley's* metaphorical montage reconstructs the time and space of film, which makes film expression more innovative and attractive. Vertov a representative of the cinematic eye school, proposed that movies should "work and move in time and space, observing and recording impressions in a completely different way from the human eye." [5] "Movie eyes can turn back time." [5] He even thinks that the art of film exists only in montage. Only by reorganizing and arranging materials from life with montage techniques can film explain reality well and gain artistic appeal [6]. In postmodern works, strong self-consciousness and unique and innovative ways of expression enrich the artistic form and content. In the film *Annie Hall*, the montage technique makes the film go back in time and space, making the film's expression more diverse. Such as Alvy and Anne "through" back to Anne and former love life, two people break up because Annie is too idealistic and too naive, but Annie is still full of romantic and optimistic, but it also led to the Alvy and Annie love--Alvy and Annie know because of playing baseball, full of curiosity and passion and bold avant-garde collision sparks, two people began to love.

### **2.2 The metaphorical montage reflects the character's character**

The film uses a metaphorical montage to reveal the reason for Alvy's "weirdness". Like Alvy and Annie going back to their childhood, reliving their childhood experiences together. In his childhood, he was immersed in the theory of the expansion of the origin of the universe (Fig2), and his mother only thought he was a freak. His parents often argued, and his mother dismissed the nanny who stole money, but his father thought it was excusable. In his childhood, Alvy had many fantastic ideas, but his parents hardly entered his inner world, and no one understood him and listened to him. As a result, he became more and more addicted to his inner world, and became closed, rebellious and arrogant.

Postmodernism pays more attention to the analysis of personal heart, seems to disregard the standards and rules of the outside world, stubbornly maintain self-concept, seems to be full of lofty and aloof. Such as Alvy and Annie together talking and laughing joy fragments and

Alvy fragments stitching with ex-wife dispute, both comparative and intense at the same time, also expressed the Alvy irony of intellectual (fig3)--Alvy shrugged off his ex-wife mentioned celebrities from all walks of life, only feel boring than intimate contact relaxing, this led directly to the two people's marriage ended. By comparing montage and metaphorical montage, the plot of the film makes the characters more complex, and makes the film time and space full of gamification and fragmentation as well as dramatic tension.



Figure 2. As a child, Alvy liked to think about the universe



Figure 3. Alvy's satire on intellectuals

### 3. BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL OF THE INTERSTITIAL NARRATIVE

The 18th century Frenchman Denis Diderot proposed the idea of a virtual wall at the edge of the stage separating the audience from the actors, which gave rise to the concept of the “fourth wall”[1]. At its inception, the fourth wall referred to the existence of a non-existent “wall” at the stage entrance through the imagination of the actors on a framed stage. The purpose of this is to separate the actors from the audience, so that the actors can forget about the audience while performing and become more engaged in the performance[1].

#### 3.1 Monologue lines

But in *Annie Hall*, audience often find the fourth wall being broken. This “breaking” is in line with postmodern art, where the narrative structure of the film is less conventional and more respectful of individualism, creating a kind of interlacing effect[7]. The actors come out of the film to communicate with the viewer, often with allegorical lines that contain deep philosophies that will leave the viewer thinking about the film for a long time. At the beginning of the film, Woody Allen's male

protagonist Alvy tells a long personal monologue straight to the camera(fig4). This long internal monologue directly sets the tone of the film and breaks the traditional narrative structure of the fourth wall, allowing the actors in the film to change the previous rule of not being able to communicate with the audience and begin to communicate directly with them.



Figure 4. Alvy's monologue

#### 3.2 break the traditional film narrative approach

At the heart of the traditional film narrative approach lies continuity editing - a continuity montage to make the audience feel realistic, not realising that it is in fact fake, not feeling the presence of the editing, creating an immersive effect. *Annie Hall*, on the other hand, breaks with this traditional narrative technique and has an interstitial effect.

Alvy Singer and his girlfriend *Annie Hall* two in the cinema in a long line to buy tickets, and at this time in line behind the two men have been talking about, and discuss all such as Canadian communication scholar McLuhan, others are obviously not interested in the topic, the man has a clear desire to show, so that had to stand in front of him Alvy very distressed. Alvy couldn't stand the man's long-winded speech and started talking to the camera (actually to the audience): “When you're in a line of motionless movie tickets. What if there is a guy like this behind you?”(fig5) At this time, the man in line behind Alvy also began to say to the camera: “Wait! Why can't I have an opinion? This is a free country!” [4]Then the two men started arguing, and the man went on to talk about McLuhan and his theory of communication. At this point, Alvy couldn't help himself and pulled McLuhan out from behind the panel to rebut the man's long-winded arguments.

This conversation to the audience was actually exactly what Alvy had in mind, because in real life he could not have stepped out of line to speak to someone who did not exist. This reveals that Alvy himself is also a man with a strong desire to express himself. Deep down, Alvy has a desire to debate with noisy men, but he does not want to become one of those noisy men who are so annoying, so he has to hold back. This form of direct dialogue with the audience is unique in breaking the traditional closed space, expanding the field of communication to the group of movie-goers, dissolving the difference between “creation” and “criticism” and

merging the two into the concepts of “interpretation” and “deconstruction”[8]. In the flashback sequence between Alvy and his ex-wife Alison, Alvy refuses to have sex with Alison for various reasons, and when Alison reveals his true thoughts, the camera pans to Alvy and Alvy laughs at himself to the camera. In addition to this there are many scenes such as: Alvy walking into his young life and watching himself coldly at that time; Annie's soul would leave her physical body and talk to other people(fig6); interviewing passersby... These forms replaced the plot and became the main means of conveying the film's intentions and ideas.



Figure 5. Alvy speaks to the audience



Figure 6. Annie's soul leaves the body

### 3.3 The significance and effect of breaking the fourth wall

Breaking the fourth wall such a form of communication is fully in line with the deconstruction aesthetics of postmodernism, and also dissolves the conventional narrative deconstruction, embodying the pluralism of postmodern narrative characteristics, anti-centered narrative [9]. Moreover, through such direct communication with the audience, the emotional changes between Alvy and Annie are also clearly shown, and some internal activities that are difficult to be externalized are also communicated with the audience through such a form, fleshes out the protagonists and makes the characters come alive. Breaking the fourth wall has a strong narrative effect of expanding the field of communication, allowing the space of the work to expand and the communication to flow[10].

## 4. CONCLUSION

*Annie Hall* exhibits many of the characteristics of a rich postmodernist artwork. Firstly, the work shows

Woody Allen's rejection of uniformity and monolithicism, employing montage to create complex time and space, opting for a diverse, fragmented and free narrative. Secondly, the work also shows Woody Allen's rejection of fixed structures and his adoption of the effect of breaking the fourth wall of the interstitial narrative, bringing the audience a new perspective and a new world. The research significance of this paper is to enrich the perspective of post-modern film research. From the perspectives of montage and breaking the fourth wall, the film research field has more research directions. However, this paper lacks certain research on the psychological and social background of the audience and expects more innovative directions for the future post-modern film research. Nowadays, the aesthetic ability of the audience is increasing, and the traditional narrative structure and method can no longer meet the audience's aesthetic demand for film and television works. The study of *Annie Hall's* subversion of the traditional narrative language of video helps to enrich the narrative style of film and bring audiences a fresher experience.

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