**Film Study**

**Midnight in Paris – Woody Allen**

**Essay 1 – Time Bending as a Postmodern Aspect of Film.**

Woody Allen uses the postmodern technique of time bending to cement and compliment the theme of nostalgia and in particular, escapism within his film *Midnight in Paris*. The film itself stars a ‘Hollywood hack’ screenwriter turned novelest, Gil Pender as the protagonist. Pender has returned to Paris with his fiancé Inez to begin work on his novel, but soon becomes subconsciously dissatisfied with Inez, contemporary culture and society as a whole despite his monetary success in Hollywood. Pender is then offered a lucky break when the clock strikes midnight on one of his late night strolls through the city of love. A taxi styled from the early 20th century that is filled with various writers, musicians and artists from the era takes him to a party of the past. It is here, where Pender’s life begins to transform as he escapes to the past to live out his nostalgia and escape from his painful present.

The postmodern characteristic of time bending allowed for this change in his life. Pender is given a unique opportunity to live out the time period he had always dreamed of living in and more importantly, escape from his troublesome present. He is able to meet his role models as a writer, who then help him with his novel. Parallel to this help with his novel, he is given advice on his life that seems to be falling apart in the present day. Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, two literary geniuses of the era make the connection between Pender’s novel, and how he subconsciously feels about his present day situation so by helping him with his novel they help him with his life.

After reading Pender’s Novel, Hemingway tells Stein that it’s “Hard to believe the protagonist doesn’t see his fiancé is having an affair that’s going on right before his eyes.” Pender seems confused and replies; “With?” Stein continues, “The other character – the pedantic one.” Pender’s subconscious weaved Paul into the novel, without noticing. Interestingly enough, Pender says, “It’s called denial.” This reflects Paul’s opinion on nostalgia earlier in the film: Pender has been denying the problems in his life, and as Paul stated, embodies the fallacy of “Golden age thinking.”

Paul, the pedantic art enthusiast who Inez seems to be in love with, states in scene 10, “Nostalgia is denial. Denial of the painful present.” Pender embodies this very idea. Subconsciously he knows that Inez would rather be with Paul than himself, and so his mind frequently travels to a time he would rather be living in. This provides the premise for travelling back in time; Pender wishes to escape his own painful present. His engagement is falling apart and he would rather not face this truth and instead puts it in the back of his mind to the point where he is ignorant of it. This is where his subconscious takes a hold of this unwanted information, and he unknowingly writes about himself in his own novel through dramatic irony.

The protagonist of the novel itself is the owner of a nostalgia shop. A character that is unable to deal with the present pressure of society and would rather surround themselves with the past within their store. When Pender asks if this subject is a terrible idea, Hemingway states, “No subject is terrible if the story is true.” Which through dramatic irony is actually true, as Pender would rather not be with Inez, and instead escapes into the past through time bending and surrounds himself with nostalgia. The postmodern aspect of time bending had to have taken place for this to occur.

Furthermore, nostalgia itself is bittersweet remembrance. Sweet because we as humans, remember the past as being perfect and that there will be nothing like it in the present or future. Pender himself states, “There's no city like this in the world. There never was.” Yet nostalgia is also bitter, as we know that it isn’t possible to return to the past, to escape from the present or relive our memories. Allen has toyed with this barrier, and through time bending, Pender is able to break this barrier receiving an opportunity that we will never have.

I find the music of the film particularly strong in enforcing the time change. Our teacher Mr Clark did an exercise with the class to explain the impact that music has on our memories. We were told to play music from an era we grew up in, to help us feel nostalgia and reminisce of ‘better days’. Music too, plays a significant role in the film through both diegetic and non-diegetic music in a large number of scenes. The very opening sequence played music that was 60 years old to establish the very age of Paris itself, and transported us further back when Pender first visits the bar where Cole Porter is playing. Both we the viewers, and Pender are transported by this music, backwards in time through time bending.

Without time bending, the meaning of nostalgia would not be as profound or may not have even existed within the film. This is because time bending allowed Pender to experience a time period that he would not have otherwise experienced. He received advice from arguably some of the greatest people to have ever lived, and allowed him to change his life dramatically. Furthermore, he met Adriana, a mistress of Picasso’s, who helped him understand that escaping the present is pointless. She wished to escape from the 20s, her present, into the belle epoch, otherwise known as the beautiful era. Pender comes to the conclusion; “Yes, the present always seems worse than the past but it can't be.” It is not long after this conclusion they meet Paul Gauguin and Edgar Degas, the artists who represented this era. They describe their generation as “Sterile and empty,” and that it would have been “better to have lived during the Renaissance.” Without time bending, this realisation would not have taken place, Pender concludes: “I wanted to escape my present just like you wanted to escape yours. To a golden age. “ He then lists inventions such as antibiotics and anaesthetic that didn’t exist during this time period, which helps him understand that the present is actually far superior, and that he should look towards the future. “This is a choice between accepting reality or surreal insanity.”

Armed with this realisation, he returns to the twenties to get some final advice on his novel, before returning to the present. It is here where he has his heated argument with Inez, and ends their engagement. “I’m staying here. It’s not the romantic fling. Paris is Paris. It’s that I’m not in love with you.” He then leaves the hotel, and spots the woman from the nostalgia shop and introduces himself to her properly. Music unites them with the line, “You know, I thought about you the other day. My boss got a new album of Cole Porter songs.” It begins to rain and she says, “Paris is the most beautiful in the rain.” just as Pender had said earlier in the film, as non-diegetic music plays to enforce the time setting.

Therefore, the postmodern characteristic of time bending played a crucial role in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*. It provides the escape mechanism for Pender to leave his present and discover himself in the past. Without time bending *Midnight in Paris* would not be the same, and the theme of nostalgia would not have been as prominent or as easily understood. Allen wants us to realise that we should not dwell on the past, and instead look towards the future as we as humans advance our technology. We must avoid golden age thinking to move forward, and this characteristic of time bending helped us as viewers to understand this.

**Essay 2 – Magical Realism as a Post Modern Aspect of Film.**

Woody Allen employs the postmodern technique of magical realism to further enhance the theme of nostalgia within his film, *Midnight in Paris*. Magical realism as described by Professor Matthew Strecher is "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe."1 Pender’s trip to Paris is a highly realistic, detailed setting, but early in the film he magically travels through time. Unlike other movies such as Back to the Future, there is no explanation for this time travel, for example the DeLorean as a time machine. The clock simply strikes midnight, and he is suddenly in the past, where he can stay for as long as he wishes although if he loses sight of the past, he is transported back to the present. This is what is magical; there is no sense to the time travel, it just happens.

Magical realism allows Pender to escape from his present day troubles through time bending. This escapism is crucial to the theme of the film; nostalgia, which was explained in the previous essay. Not only is this time traveling hard for us as the viewers to believe, Pender also finds it hard to get his head around it, but soon learns to accept it. This is shown in the scene where Pender returns to the hotel. We see a close up of Pender pinching himself, and recounting the night’s events hastily. He seems excited the way a child would be the night before their birthday or Christmas. For Pender, this event is a dream come true. He meets some of the most revolutionary literary and artistic geniuses that have ever lived, including Picasso, Dali, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Stein. Inez, Pender’s fiancé, concludes that Pender has a tumour. This helps her cope with Pender’s mad ravings and facts that someone would only know if they actually met these people, as any rationally thinking person would believe.

Again, this magic works it’s way into his novel, “my book may be too realistic. I've missed some chances to let my imagination run wild.” Pender finds it hard not to be able to share his secret let alone have them believe it. He can’t tell people about his trip into the past, and so he works it into his novel subconsciously as a way of coping with this absurdity of time travel. Particularly as the merging of the present and the past is so seamless, which is what makes it seem truly magical.

Another magical aspect of Pender’s time travel is that his actions affect the past. This contributes to his nostalgia and particularly his want to escape and deny the present, in that he wants to travel back to the past more often. For example, he reads a diary of Adriana, Picasso’s mistress whom he fell in love with, and discovers that he is mentioned. “I am in love with an American writer I just met named Gil Pender.” Pender uses this information to manipulate the past further in that he brings her earrings. With this situation, Allen raises further complexity from the film: The moral question of whether it is right to manipulate the past. George Orwell noted, “He who controls the past, controls the future.” Pender had realised this and manipulated and interacted with the past not only for personal gain, but to ensure his future as a writer. It could be argued that he comes to his senses after spending a fair amount of time in the past and returns to the present. “This is a choice between accepting reality or surreal insanity,” as Pender said. Allen tries to educate us on the dangers of trusting history in an abstract way, as only the victors write history. This could also be related to the fact that when we experience nostalgia, we only remember good things and forget the bad through the fallacy of golden age thinking.

In conclusion, the post modern characteristic of magical realism allows for time manipulation which in turn allows for nostalgia and in particular, escapism to occur. I believe the quote from Pender, “This is a choice between accepting reality or surreal insanity,” explains the effect of magical realism perfectly. Despite being given an opportunity that many members of society would do anything to obtain, Pender simply realises that returning to the past is pointless, even when he has the potential to manipulate the future. Allen taught us that nostalgia is not something to dwell upon, as it stops you dealing with troubles in the present, and can hinder your future potential.

Bibliography

1. Matthew C. Strecher, Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki, Journal of Japanese Studies, Volume 25, Number 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 263-298, at 267.

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