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The American Dream in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*

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Introduction

Woody Allen is one of the most well known and respected persons in the U.S. movie industry. His movies pick up on various social and psychological topics and criticism, respectively, and comments them in his very own way. Hence, a vast number of comments and analyzes circulate in literature, and in particular in movie forums on the internet regarding his messages. An aspect which his movies rarely had been associated with in these works is the American Dream. Nevertheless, I aim to find a connection between his movie *Manhattan*, released in 1979, and the phenomenon of the American Dream in the course of this paper.

However, before going in to detailed analysis, some groundwork has to be done: at first, a preoccupation with the highly complex phenomenon of the American Dream and its roots is necessary. Since *Manhattan* is not a stereotypical movie about the American Dream in the sense of „from rags to riches“, problems would occur if the entire analysis were based on the explicitly mentioned elements of the Dream only. Therefore, another closely related element is used as a go-between in this paper: The City of New York. This seems to be reasonable as this metropolis at America's east coast represents the American Dream more than any other place and the city, in particular its borough Manhattan, also has an important role in the movie. This correlation shall be examined in the second chapter. Subsequently, the basic essentials which will be necessary for the further analysis should be clarified. To fully understand the movie, though, a brief introduction of the writer and director, Woody Allen, will be given before the plot of the movie itself will be summarized. After that, Allen's *Manhattan* will finally be analyzed regarding its depiction of the American Dream. The first part of this chapter shall discuss the elements of the Dream explicitly mentioned in the movie, whereas the second part deals with these kind of features which occur when the relation between New York City and the American Dream is taken into account.

1. What is the “American Dream” ?

Before we can start to analyze the film regarding its illustration of the American Dream, this very popular and frequently used term must be clarified. Generally speaking, the term which was coined in 1931 by Truslow Adams sums up the main ideologies of the United States of America, of which the very basic are: prosperity, opportunity, public

virtue, equality, and of course liberty (cf. Fossum/Roth 1986).

In order to understand its content and its meaning to the people, it is important to have a look at its origin and further development. According to Müller (Müller 1994: 13-75) scholars so far have identified three basic aspects: The first but least graspable one, was a mystical element. In this regard, “America” stood for the vision of an ideal community of which the people in the ancient times already dreamt of. The second one, which is often denoted as the religious aspect, can be found in the beliefs of the Puritans who were among the first immigrants in large numbers. Based on a sermon of the puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company John Winthrop they perceived their new settlements as a “city upon a hill”. A perfect place and an ideal role model chosen by the Lord. Due to the subsequent secularization of their ethics, this idea was transferred from the religious to a more general or political self-conception. This might be one of the main reasons for the American exceptionalism and its strong sense of mission which are important elements of the American Dream and have also been strong influences on its genesis at the same time (cf. Müller 1994: 21-57, 66f and 73ff). The strong belief in the inevitability of a continuing expansion within the continent and beyond, the so-called Manifest Destiny, may also be, at least partly, motivated by these elements (for further information cf. *Manifest Destiny* in: Encyclopedia Britannica). The last and probably most important influence on the American Dream came from the political fields. Especially the comprehension of freedom, including the more political liberty, and equality. These elements have always played a major role in the settlers consciousness as a large quantity of them immigrated to the new world because they were prosecuted for religious or political reasons in their home countries (cf. Müller 1994: 13 and 59-75). An aspect which intensified the desire for these ideal were the experiences made with the geographical vastness of the land and the concomitant phenomenon of the American Frontier Life. Before the entire country was settled, as stated in the context of the frontier thesis by Frederick Jackson Turner, the existence of free land in the West and its conquest was the all-important factor determining American national development. It promoted individualism, dynamic, economic opportunities for everybody and enough room for self-fulfilment. Therefore established traditions had to be changed, finally paving the way for a modern and more democratic society (cf. *Frontier thesis* in: The Canadian Encyclopedia online). Democracy itself, and furthermore, “as government of the people,

by the people and for the people” is of course an important political element of the American Dream as well. Among others, all these factors mentioned above formed the American identity and were also important steps to America's long and eventful way to independence. During that period of time the liberal ideals gained even more importance and finally became codified in the United States’ certificate of birth, the Declaration of Independence, as many of these fundamental elements were included in the preamble with the Founding Fathers' political philosophy (cf. Müller 1994: 59-75).

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed[.]” (Declaration 1776)

Based on this prominent placing many people claim that the American Dream is rooted in this document. Similar paragraphs, granting individual liberties like freedom of religion, equality and democracy, can be found in the U.S. Constitution of 1787 and the four years later following Bill of Rights (cf. e.g. *Preamble* in: U.S. Constitution 1787 and *Amendment I* in: Congress 15.12.1791). By that time the main elements of the American Dream had been established in the society's self-conception, but hasn't been named yet.

In his book *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, Truslow Adams calls these ideologies a “dream” for the first time. He also offers a general definition of this American Dream. It reflects the above-named influential aspects as he sees it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” (Adams 1931, quoting: Library of Congress). Therefrom the U.S. was given the byname “land of opportunity”. For many centuries people from all over the world and with various cultural backgrounds have been decoyed by these ideas, left their homes and moved to the new world. Soon these diverse people adopted the American ideologies with the result of a new and specifically American model of society which is widely known as the melting pot. On closer consideration this can be seen as a part of the Dream as well as a result of its appeal to foreigners (cf. Müller 1994: 73f).

From an European point of view, today most countries of the Old World have overtaken the U.S. regarding wealth, liberal social structures, equal right and democratic government. So what does the American Dream stand for today? Although there is no “free land in the West”, anymore, as it was mentioned in the frontier thesis, the vastness of the country still enchants many people. The liberal attitude which has always been present allowed the emergence of copious intellectual, religious and sexual freedoms and numerous opportunities for individual fulfilment. Another important element which is closely related to the self-fulfilment and is also still very present is the vision of America as the land of opportunity. This is true especially in regard to the lively and innovative cities like New York. For this reason and largely influenced by American literature and movie-making, most people regard the American Dream as “from rags to riches” - the idea that anyone can achieve social and financial success by working very hard (cf. Jones: 1f).

Although the phenomenon of the American Dream is much more complex than it was described in this chapter, the main features and their origin had been expounded. Because of the illustrated diversity of this phenomenon, knowing this basic information is indispensable for the further analysis of the representation of the American Dream in the City of New York, resp. in the image of New York in Woody Allan's “*Manhattan*”.

2. New York: A city and the American Dream

The perception of cities is as diverse as mankind as any person connects its very own feelings, hopes and fears with them. The peoples perceptions reach from a very positive and inspiring to a dark and fearful one. Therefore the subjective assessment of the relation between cities and the American Dream may differ distinctly. One famous representative of the positive view of American cities was the poet Walt Whitman. In many of his works he describes them as vital, dynamic and progressive. These are indispensable location factors for people pursuing success and happiness (cf. Campbell/Kean 2012: 191). On the other hand there have also been numerous well-known representatives of a very negative vision. Thomas Jefferson for example. To him, the third president of the United States and principal author of the Declaration of Independence, cities were “pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberty of men” (*comment of Thomas Jefferson* quoting: Campbell/Kean 2012: 190). Here it becomes obvious that from his point of

view, life in the cities encourages vice, sin and indulgence and therefore is as threatening to the ideals of the American Dream as the plague is to human life. He underlines his opinion and also labels urban life as a threat to the democratic republic as he goes on that “those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God ... [and] the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of a human body.” From an objective point of view, neither of these versions is unconditionally true. But although the American city in general has become anything but a “city upon a hill”, it has been a focus for the desires and dreams of many people, at any time in American history. It has been the place where the promises of unlimited possibilities and success, are quite easily available (cf. Campbell/Kean 2012: 190ff).

The perfect role model for such a city is of course New York City. With its approximately eight million residents it is not just by far the largest city in the United States, but also the economic and cultural centre of the country. Despite recent crisis the Wall Street still stands for easy money and financial success. But also apart from the international capital market, this metropolis offers more potential to strive for success and upward social mobility through the realization of individual (business-) ideas than any other city. The same is true regarding arts and culture. For more than 100 years, young and ambitious artists from the USA as well as the rest of the globe have gravitated to the city with its countless cabarets, art galleries and the world-famous Broadway. This exceptional status and the concomitant influx made it the ethnically most diverse city in the country and therefore also the melting pot par excellence. Due to its economic power and cultural diversity it is not just the largest and most influential metropolis on the American continent, but there is also no other place in the country which has contributed more to the American self-conception. As this conception is closely related to the American Dream, New York also reflects the ideals of this Dream like no other city (cf. *New York City* in: Encyclopedia Britannica: 1 and 12f).

With its geographical position in the northeastern part of the U.S., at the mouth of Hudson River and East River into the Atlantic Ocean it has always been the gateway to the country. There the Statue of Liberty, a true monument of the American Dream which is located in the New York Harbour welcomed the visitors or those who came to stay. More than 50% of all people who have ever come to the country have entered it through

this ports. Many of them left their home countries chasing the American Dream. Although life was not always better in the U.S. and many of them struggled to start a new life, the idea of sailing into the harbour, passing the Statue of Liberty is still a vision which is in close relation to the American Dream. How close success and failure are in this dynamic city is strikingly summarized in the applicable article in the Encyclopedia Britannica (cf. *New York City* in: Encyclopedia Britannica: 1 and 13).

“It always meant possibility, for it was an urban centre on its way to something better, a metropolis too busy to be solicitous of those who stood in the way of progress.” (*New York City* in: Encyclopedia Britannica: 1).

By this example it becomes apparent that for many people living in New York can also have its down sides. Someone who cannot prevail or cannot keep pace with the development falls by the wayside. According to Adams definition, though, it is also an important element of the Dream, as he promised a better life „with opportunity for each *according to ability or achievement*“ [emphasis added] (Adams 1931, quoting: LoC). As a consequence thereof the principle of efficiency and a certain pressure to progress might be an omnipresent element of life in New York. Another interesting assertion of the statement above is that New York is perceived as a living entity. Because of its sheer dimensions as well as its already mentioned dynamic, the single individual person living in it is immaterial for its existence. As opposed to this, it must be assumed that the city affects their lives significantly. These factors result in an area of tension between the ideals of the American Dream, the dynamic of the city and the individual needs of the residents which probably cannot be found anywhere else but in New York City.

3. The city and the American Dream in Woody Allan's *Manhattan*

Now that the basic features of the American Dream and the associated characteristics of New York City have been clarified it is time to specifically analyse the specific movie. Before the movie can be analyzed regarding its depiction of New York City and, by association, the American Dream, it might be reasonable to investigate the main characteristics of the director as well as to give some general information about the movie and a brief plot outline.

3.1 The director: Woody Allan

Allan, who also wrote the story, was born on December 1, 1935 in Brooklyn, New York to an orthodox Jewish family. He was given the name Allan Steward Konigsberg (cf. Biography). From early years on he was interested in movies. An important source of inspiration has been the Marx brothers as he saw and admired his first Marx brothers movie at the age of seven. Less than ten years later he made his first steps in the field of entertainment as he began performing magic tricks. The following years, he also started co-writing for newspapers before he entered into comedy-writing in 1955. As he quit his writing job at NBC in 1959 he was one of the best paid comedy writers in the country. But instead of financial success he was longing for something more personally satisfying, hence, he went back on the stages and became a stand-up comedian. Also with great success. In the mid 1960's he resumes writing as he was asked to write the script and also to act in "What's new Pussycat?" by Charles K. Feldman. Due to its enormous success he was able to make his breakthrough in Hollywood. He also became one of the highest paid nightclub performers, issued several record albums and writings, wrote Broadway plays and started publishing in newspapers again. But his focus had been on making movies. Up to now he has written, directed, and/or acted in more than 35 movies (cf. Schwartz 2000: 7ff).

Also his personal life has had its ups and downs. He was married three times and had several romantic relationships whereat he often was drawn to much younger women. Some of his relationships ended in discord. His best-known personal crunch was as his long term girlfriend Mia Farrow learned of Allan's affair with her adopted daughter Soon-Yi, with who he still is married today. They subsequently got divorced and during this long and public custody trial Farrow also accused him of sexually molesting her other adopted daughter. In the end he got acquitted due to insufficient grounds but lost the custody and the visitation rights for their children (cf. Schwartz 2000: 7-12).

The content of his movies often reflects profound experiences or developments in his own life. Hence, important influences have been his several relationships and his affection for young girls as well as psychoanalysis which he has followed since 1959. Other basic themes, which could be deduced from this, have been anxiety and neuroses, the meaning of life and morality (cf. Schwartz 2000: 8-13). Some of them also occur in the

movie *Manhattan* which will be analyzed in the following chapters. Also his affection for the city of New York is a main theme in his movies quite often.

3.2 The movie: *Manhattan*

Manhattan was released in 1979. It was written and directed by Woody Allen, who also plays the main character Isaac Davis. It co-stars Mariel Hemingway (Tracy), Michael Murphy (Yale), Diane Keaton (Mary), Anne Byrne (Emily) and Meryl Streep (Jill). It was nominated for the Academy Awards in two categories. These were *best original screenplay* and Hemingway for *best supporting actress*. Without winning one, though. But it received many alternative honours and prizes. It is also quite often considered as one of his most popular movies as well as a prototype for a *Woody Allen movie* “as something funny, serious and romantic with a large cast of eloquent characters navigating extreme ends of human emotion” (Gilks). The entire movie is shot in black-and-white, wide-angle photography and employs several elements of ancient silent movies. The combination of his camera work and the vibrant music which is played (written by George Gershwin), makes *Manhattan* to one of Allan's most visually sophisticated and striking movies. According to Allan, the movie actually evolves from listening to overtures from Gershwin as he later states:

“This would be a beautiful thing to make a movie in black-and-white, you know, and make a romantic movie.” (Woody Allen, quoting: Schwartz 2000: 162)

To a certain extent, it became a romantic movie, but, as it is to be expected from an Allen movie, it is much more than a dull love story. The story is set in Manhattan's intellectual scene of the 1970's. Isaac is a TV writer in his 40's, struggling with his life. He does not like his job and, hence, decides to quit and look for something more satisfying. But also his private life is not really fulfilling. He is divorced twice and now dating a 17-year-old girl, Tracy, which also gives him remorse. Jill, one of his ex-wives, who now lives with a woman, is about to write a confessional book on their failed marriage. Just as Isaac, also his best friend Yale is having relational problems. He is married to Emily, but is having an affair with the intellectual journalist Mary. At first, Isaac does not like her very much, but later on he gets attracted to her. As he always felt that he

might be too old for Tracy, he encourages her to make a study trip to London. After Yale and Mary break up, Isaac leaves Tracy and asks Mary to go out with him. They become a couple very soon. After some time of dating and going out with Yale and Emily, Yale feels like resuming his relationship with Mary, which of course results in a conflict with his best friend. After a couple of discussions between the two friends Isaac remembers the good times he had with Tracy and tries to prevent her from finally going to London, again.

All in all it can be said that Woody Allen created a poetic, amiable comedy on his favourite topic: the complexity of relationships between intellectuals. Isaac, Mary and Yale are torn between their qualms, their longings and emotions as well as their desire for a well-ordered life. In spite of their intelligence, or maybe precisely because of their intelligence they are unable to talk reasonably to each other and solve their conflicts (cf. Wunderlich).

3.3 Representation of the American Dream and the City of New York in the movie

Considering America's national identity and its leading role in movie-making, it is no surprise that the American Dream has become a very popular subject in films. It has been portrayed in many different ways - directly and indirectly as well as consciously and unconsciously. But they all have one thing in common: they primarily represent the political component of the American Dream: political and individual liberty, unlimited opportunities, the pursuit of happiness and (in particular) the vision of "from rags to riches". Also some elements of religious origin made their way into movies as the U.S. is often portrayed as exemplary for the rest of the world regarding its liberal ideals. This perception of America's exceptionalism and the will to propagate these ideals evidently goes back to Puritans vision of America as a "city upon a hill". To counteract the impression that all these movies are just a dull glorification of the Dream and especially its reality, it has to be added that at least half of them imply cynical or critical elements (cf. Jones: 1f).

As it can be seen in the plot, *Manhattan* is not a stereotypical movie about the American Dream. But on closer consideration many elements of the Dream as well as its representative, New York City, can be identified as important influence quantities on the char-

acters' lives, besides their neuroses and their need for personal integrity. The following chapter shall analyze the movie regarding these elements as well as the cinematic techniques which Allen used to depict them. Regarding the American Dream, the movie is less concerned with the pursuit of wealth, in the sense of *from rags to riches*, instead it is about the pursuit of happiness in the proper meaning of the words. Namely the fulfilment for oneself. Almost every character in the movie is doing something constructive, at least as a hobby. Yale, for example, is writing a book besides his job as a teacher. So does Isaac's ex-wife and his present mistress Tracy is about to become an actress. This urge to self-fulfilment becomes the most obvious in the life of the main character. Referring to Allen himself, Isaac quits his well-paid job as a writer for TV-shows, to do something of more value, although he suffers heavy financial losses. He also manages to overcome his fears related to this uncertain situation. Quite according to the American Dream he finally writes a good and successful book (cf. Schwartz 2000: 165). Other aspects of the American Dream which are reflected by the characters are personal liberties. In particular the intellectual liberty, which already is represented by the setting of the story in Manhattan's intellectual scene. To make this setting clear from the beginning, Allen makes use of a very simple technique in the first scene. The establishing shot. Before the pub-conversation between Isaac, Yale, Tracy and Emily takes place, the neon sign of the „Elaine's“ is shown, a bar which is known as a gathering place for New York artists and intellectuals. Also the following (pseudo-) philosophizing about courage and morals emphasizes the embedding of the story in these circles. The same conversation also introduces another personal liberty. The sexual liberty. In contrast to Isaac himself, his relationship with a girl so much younger than him does not bother his entourage at all. Also the self-evidence with which he is talking about his various failed marriages does not seem to cause a stir at all. Although sexual liberty might not be a classical element of the American Dream, it may be associated with the liberal principles and the self-fulfilment.

A much more prominent element in the movie is the depiction of New York City, including all its connotations regarding the American Dream. That the city, and in particular the borough Manhattan, will have a special role in this movie can already be seen in the title. Also the entire trailer is dedicated to it. It shows a series of impressive pictures of the city and climaxes in a spectacular fireworks in front of the Manhattan skyline.

The (almost) glorification of New York is emphasized by Gershwin's vibrant „Rhapsody in Blue“ (cf. Schwartz 2000: 162). In the meantime the invisible narrator tries to find a definite description of the city he loves, but struggles to do so (cf. Campbell/Kean 2012: 192). Also during the course of the movie, Allen romanticizes and even personalizes the city, including everything it stands for, by his camera work and the music. Besides the above-mentioned features of progress, hope, possibility and liberty, New York is first of all grand in Woody Allen's eyes. Compared to it, with its sheer dimensions and its noble buildings, the little human characters, as described in chapter 2, are dwarfed by it and are in fact immaterial. Moreover, the city „[...]literally intrudes on their lives and sometimes subsumes them“ (Schwartz 2000: 163). In one scene, for example, the traffic noise almost drowns out their conversation. Another example is the scene, when Isaac meets Tracy at her school. As the camera shows them in long shots, it is almost impossible to discern them from the crowd (cf. Schwartz 2000: 162-165). On the other hand Allen did not ignore the negative elements of life in New York, like the decay of society and the immorality. But he does not pillory them as such, instead he rather depicts them as exciting side-effects of urban life. This can also be seen in the trailer, during his quest for a definite description of his feeling for the city (cf. Campbell/Kean 2012: 192).

All in all with *Manhattan* Allen pays homage to his beloved home city. In his very own way, though, he emphasizes how substantial the city as a dynamic construct is for living in it. Due to New York's status as the city representing the American Dream the most and the above mentioned explicit depiction of certain elements of the Dream, Woody Allen picks up several features of it in *Manhattan*, without forgetting to offer some cynical criticism for its decay.

Conclusion

Although it might seem unlikely at first sight even in rather untypical movies, like Allen's *Manhattan*, several elements of the American Dream can be found. Especially when the City of New York is of such outstanding importance in the movie. Besides some elements of the Dream which are explicitly shown, like the pursuit of self-fulfilment and various individual liberties, it is Allen's image of New York/Manhattan as the city of constant progress and unlimited opportunities which clearly connects the movie

and the American Dream. Due to Allen's camera-work and the music he chose, the city becomes much more than just the setting. It appears as a living and almost omnipresent character which notably influences the human characters' lives. For better understanding of the matter, the phenomenon of the American Dream as well as its roots has been illustrated in the first chapter. Subsequently, an attempt was made to point out the relation between it and New York City. Clarifying these fundamentals was necessary before moving on to the actual analysis of the movie. Within these analysis the writer and director, Woody Allen, was introduced and a brief plot-summary was given. After having done this groundwork the elements of the American Dream in the movie Manhattan could be identified successfully.

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