
Sweet and Lowdown: Woody Allen's Cinema of Regret

By Lloyd Michaels

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Reviewed by Ana Maria Sapountzi

Over his sixty-plus years as a filmmaker, Woody Allen has wrestled with numerous complex existential and metaphysical questions that range from, but have not been limited to: Kantian ethics and the discussion of good vs. evil, Sartrean values and the debate of optimism vs. pessimism, and most prominently, both a Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean interrogation of God. Such existentialist dilemmas are traceable from his earliest projects in the 1950s through to his present-day films, and have been intensely written about and analysed by both Film and Philosophy academics alike. Although there exists a plethora of written material on the philosophical explorations found within Allen's cinematic works, Lloyd Michaels' *Sweet and Lowdown: Woody Allen's Cinema of Regret* (2017) seeks to add to the ongoing discourse by introducing the concept of "regret". By arguing that the notion of regret has been a theme commonly overlooked by academics and scholars writing on Allen, Michaels defends his monograph's publishing into a space in which an abundance of similar literature on Allen already exists. In doing so, Michaels aims to both authenticate and demonstrate the concept of "regret" as a legitimate and workable framework with which to reread Allen's films. Furthermore, by validating "regret" as a critical lens, Michaels hopes to establish a new line of criticism on the films and philosophies of Allen which has currently been narrowed down to scepticism and misanthropy.

Michaels draws on Aristotle's notion of *hamartia*, a fatal mistake conducive to the hero or heroine's tragic downfall, as the origin of the trope of an error followed by regret to examine both the frequency with which Allen as a director has utilised this motif as a plot point in his films, but also how this motif takes on a different meaning, and therefore reading, depending on its context. Michaels makes a case that slapstick is produced from the automatic reiteration of chronic errors from fool-like characters such as Virgil or Leonard Zelig (*Zelig* (1983)); melodrama, from the superficiality of the regret of remorseless villains such as Judah Rosenthal (*Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989)) and Chris Wilton (*Match Point* (2005)); and tragedy, from the epiphanies triggered by deeper regrets from artistic figures such as Isaac Davis (*Manhattan* (1979)) and Emmet Ray (*Sweet and Lowdown* (1999)).

Sweet and Lowdown is organised into seven individual chapters that can be read independently as essays that consider various aspects of Allen's work. Chapter One 'Regret and the Problem of Shallowness' briefly summarises the different artistic periods of Allen's career before delving into a meticulous analysis of *Sweet and Lowdown* to outline his thesis, which principally argues that his characters' errors and measures of regret render them centrally superficial. Chapter Two 'Apprentice Works' revisits Allen's early stand-up career and apprentice works to evaluate the joke-making that so many of his early filmic work depended on, such as *Love and Death* (1975). Here, Michaels argues that Allen's comedy is a sign of his insecurity as a performer, and how his imitation of figures of virtuosity and philosophical depth threaten to expose Allen's own creative shallowness. Chapter Three 'The Relationship Films' focuses on Allen's relationship films throughout his career that have featured his girlfriends, wives, mentors and friends and observes the protagonist's consuming regret of that missed opportunity to declare his love, which ultimately leads to further disappointment and transient consequences, as seen in *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) and *Annie Hall* (1979). Chapter Four 'The Murder Quartet' centres on *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, *Match Point*, *Cassandra's Dream* (2007) and *Irrational Man* (2015), exploring how guilt and shame is displayed throughout this specific crop of films. Chapter Five 'The Reflexive Films' examines Allen's depiction of artists; including magicians, fortune-tellers, and mediums, and considers the discord created between the artist's need to perform and the audience's demand to be entertained, such as in *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Shadows and Fog* (1991). Furthermore, Michaels, in this chapter, explores two central themes to Allen's work: talent vs. genius, and artist vs. the art. Chapter Six 'Nostalgia' looks beyond regret and explores the theme of "nostalgia" particularly through the use of Allen's soundtracks and nostalgia's sentimental significance in the narratives of films such as *Midnight in Paris* (2011) and *Café Society* (2016). Chapter Seven 'To Remedy Regret' observes the humanist aspect of embracing and being conscious of the emotion of regret, in particular the drive to act in "good faith", as in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984). The book concludes with a postscript 'Speculations' wherein the author reflects upon writing *Sweet and Lowdown* during the later stages of Allen's career, and thus reflecting upon his legacy as a director and his artistic significance within cinematic culture.