

*Over a Bridge, by Chance, at Night: The Fantastic in
Woody Allen's Midnight in Paris*

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Is there a better metaphor than Paris for a city of cities, a city that can contain all cities? New York, perhaps. Woody Allen doesn't forget to mention NY as he pays homage to an essentially romantic city that has always welcomed his work. In *Midnight in Paris* (2011) Allen uses the theme of the travel in time to free Gil (Owen Wilson),¹ a disaffected young American writer, from the claws of a yuppie prospect: marrying Inez (Rachel McAdams), his beautiful but shallow fiancée, who wants him to live in a Malibu dream-house and continue writing lucrative but uninspiring commercial Hollywood screenplays. Gil wants to stay in Paris — where he and Inez are vacationing with her ultra-republican parents — and “give actual literature a shot.” He is in the right place to finish writing a nostalgic novel, but he would rather be in another time: the 1920's.

His wish comes true. By means of an old device of the fantastic he is transported, at midnight, in a 20's Peugeot sedan, back to the days of the “Lost Generation” and of the surrealists. He meets the Fitzgeralds and Hemingway at a party for Jean Cocteau where Cole Porter plays his music at the piano. Later, at the famed Restaurant Polidor, Gil discusses his book with Hemingway who agrees to take it to Gertrud Stein for her opinion. Gil rushes out to get the manuscript but finds himself back in 2010. In place of the Polidor there is an LAVERIE, a laundry. No longer in a fantasy, he is back to “la vérité,” the truth. Next morning, waking up in his hotel room, he tells Inez about meeting the Fitzgeralds and Hemingway. She asks him, annoyed, if that's what he was dreaming about. Like us, Gil must certainly wonder the same thing because he will go back to the past the following nights, and his nocturnal journeys will

¹With a subtle personal touch, Wilson affects some of the mannerisms and voice inflections that characterized the semantic field surrounding young Allen's acting style.

take him, and us, into a dreamlike world.

He will enter the world of Dalí and Man Ray, of Picasso and Buñuel; a world which Woody Allen offers us with enchantment and humor, with tactful parody. There, Gil falls in love with Adriana, a fictional mistress of both Picasso and Hemingway. She is also the fictional subject of one of Picasso's paintings in Paris's Musée Picasso, *Baigneuse* (1928). Back in 2010, Gil uses the information he has learned about her in the 20's (including the "fact" that she was "a volcano in the sack") to deflate the pedantic disquisitions of Paul, a pseudo-intellectual to whom Inez is attracted. This is a permutation or rewriting of the famous scene in *Annie Hall* (1977) where Allen's character, who is standing in a theater line, pulls Marshall McLuhan from behind a poster to have him straighten a man pontificating loudly about McLuhan's ideas. Allen, we know, would have preferred to pull out Luis Buñuel. In his fictional dream world of the 1920's Paris at midnight, Allen in a way gets to fulfill this old wish through his alter ego Gil who not only has the opportunity to give Buñuel the idea for *The Exterminating Angel* (*El ángel exterminador*, 1962) but also to offer him an interpretation of his film.

But these oscillating transitions between two time-based semiotic registers (the 1920's and 2010, night and day) do not complement the metaphor of a city that can contain all cities, all spaces. So, Allen takes us down another level. Gil and Adriana are transported to Adriana's longed-for age: La Belle Époque. She prefers to stay there, in the the1890's, with Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, and Gauguin. Gil wants to return to the 1920's. We are confronted with the relative value of historical periods. Would it be better to have lived in the Renaissance? Was it better when Kublai Khan was around? How would it be to be in the court of Louis XVI? It certainly turns out to be an unwelcoming place for the detective hired by Inez's father to follow Gil at night. He never returns. We last see him being chased by guards obeying the King shout: "Off with his head!"

Like the pieces of a *matryoshka*, which may be dressed in different costumes but belong to the same family, there is a metonymic contiguity between historical periods. This becomes particularly evident when a number of periods are displayed, as in *Midnight*, to suggest the continuity of history. True, we may form metaphors by a juxtaposing the semantic registers of distant periods — say, the time of the Aztecs and a modern-day city. But even in this form of substitution there is an internal element that links the periods. In this case, that element is the human being, the actor, who is most often the principal sign in the composition of the cinematic shot. And in fantastic narratives such as Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*² or *Midnight in Paris*, the figure of the actor, with the semantic field that surrounds him, work as

²In this film the fantastic consists of a pendular oscillation between the registers of the real and the imaginary (actors appear to move in and out of the screen), which simultaneously effaces and makes us reflect on the semiotic frame.

a transitional device. Gil tries but cannot find love in another time; he is trapped by nostalgia, in love with another time, with a fantasy.

Reading the manuscript of his novel, Gertrude Stein advised Gil not “to be such a defeatist,” and Hemingway’s reading opens his eyes to the fact that Inez is having an affair with Paul (we thus know that Gil was writing a sort of *roman à clef*). So, our protagonist finds the courage to break up with Inez and to stay in Paris. Walking again the streets of the city he loves, he finds, by chance, on a bridge over the Seine, a beautiful woman, Gabrielle (Léa Seydoux). This is how the film ends. And this is the opening theme of Cortázar’s *Rayuela*, that great Parisian love story. Woody Allen adds the touch of midnight and the rain.