

## WOODY ALLEN AND THEODOR DREISER: PARADOXES OF NEGATED AFFINITY

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*Abstract.* The paper is intended to explore the nature of the intertextual and intermedial relations between Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* and Woody Allen's London "exilic trilogy", including *Match Point* (2005), *Scoop* (2006), and *Cassandra's Dream* (2007). Though little is in common between a socially oriented naturalist and a self-reflexive ironist playing with cultural constructs and mythologemes, the comparative approach, complemented with adaptation theory, intermedial and genre studies, allow to analyze cultural mechanisms working in this "negated affinity" (Allen never admits the influence of the outdated socialist writer). It is argued that in post-Dreiserian American culture the story of Clyde Griffiths, captured with extraordinary artistic power by the great naturalist, acquires the status of a mythologeme, and in this capacity sporadically emerges from the depths of the cultural subconscious. Woody Allen's three movies of the early 2000s exemplify it in different media and genre modes. *Match Point* and *Cassandra's Dream* stand apart from other Allen's films about premeditated and self-justified murders (*Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Irrational Man* (2015) among them), featuring protagonists with manifest aspiration for social ascendancy. The findings of the research are relevant for literary history, clarifying the lasting significance of Dreiser's oeuvre, for theory of adaptation, highlighting the complicated character of Woody Allen's intertextuality, and for Culture Studies, demonstrating the work of mechanisms of cultural memory and their determinants.

*Key words:* Theodore Dreiser; *An American Tragedy*; Woody Allen; London exilic trilogy; intertextuality; intermediality; adaptation; mythologeme; mechanisms of cultural memory; comparative studies

## ВУДИ АЛЛЕН И ТЕОДОР ДРАЙЗЕР: ПАРАДОКСЫ ЭСТЕТИЧЕСКИХ РАСХОЖДЕНИЙ

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*Аннотация.* В статье исследуется природа интертекстуальных и интермедиальных взаимодействий между романом Теодора Драйзера «Американская трагедия» и лондонской кинотрилогией Вуди Аллена («Матч-пойнт» (2005), «Сенсация» (2006) и «Мечта Кассандры» (2007)). Хотя само существование таких связей проблематично в силу категорического несходства старомодного и тяжеловесного писателя-натуралиста, с одной стороны, и ирониста, чьи тексты пронизаны интертекстуальной игрой, декларирующего собственную асоциальность и нелюбовь к Драйзеру, с другой, сравнительный анализ в сочетании с теорией адаптации и жанровой теорией помогает изучить культурные механизмы, позволяющие предположить существование данной культурной преемственности. Запечатленная с незаурядной художественной мощью Драйзером история Клайда Гиффитса приобретает статус мифологема, и в этом качестве на протяжении всего двадцатого века то и дело всплывает из глубин культурного бессознательного, заявляя о себе более или менее явными, порой самыми неожиданными интертекстуальными и интермедиальными перекличками с Драйзером. Лондонская кинотрилогия Аллена рассматривается как один из возможных примеров этого явления. Тема преступления и наказания является магистральной для Аллена. «Матч-пойнт» и «Мечта Кассандры» выделяются среди других алленовских фильмов на эту тему («Преступления и проступки» (1986), «Иррациональный человек» (2015)) тем, что протагонисты, замышляющие убийство, одержимы в них мечтой о богатстве и повышении своего социального статуса. Сравнительный анализ сюжетики, образов протагонистов и их ценностных ориентиров показывает, что в своей трактовке проблемы преступления и наказания в этих двух фильмах Аллен, сам того не признавая, следует за Драйзером. Результаты исследования релевантны для истории литературы, проясняя значение драй-

зеровского наследия для современности; для теории адаптации, проблематизируя природу алленовской интертекстуальности; для исследований современной культуры США, выявляя в ней работу механизмов культурной памяти.

**Ключевые слова:** Теодор Драйзер; «Американская трагедия»; Вуди Аллен; «лондонская трилогия»; интертекстуальность; интермедийность; адаптация; мифологема; механизмы культурной памяти; компаративистика

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### Introduction. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and cinema

The history of cinematic versions of Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), similarly to the message of the novel itself, seems to correlate with the concept of mirage. It is an unattainable and unconscious longing for the mirage of wealth and luxury that guides Clyde Griffiths in the novel – not accidentally one of the early versions of its title was “Mirage”. The plotline of Dreiser's attempts to film the novel during his lifetime is marked by the same illusory, fantasmatic character: the script by Sergei Eisenstein, approved by the author, was rejected by Hollywood (1930), the movie by Joseph von Sternberg (1931), where sociological motives were thoroughly underplayed, was fiercely rejected by Dreiser who tried to sue Paramount but lost the case. George Stevens' post-war film adaptation *A Place in the Sun* (1951), shifting the action into the early 1950s with their less rigid class stratification featured a tragic love-story and protagonist's desire to dissolve into cinema-induced fantasy. The story was poetically performed by Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. Staying somewhat apart from *An American Tragedy* (though credited as an original source), *A Place in the Sun* was to become a cult film both for the intellectuals (Jean-Luc Godard included it into his *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988–1998), and for the mass media audience, the epitome of which can be seen in the main character Vikar of the novel by Steve Erickson *Zeroville* (2007) and of the eponymous movie by James Franco (2019). Ericson's novel starts with the characteristic description of the protagonist: “On Vikar's shaved head is tattooed the right and left lobes of his brain. One lobe is occupied by an extreme close-up of Elizabeth Taylor and the other by Montgomery Clift, their fa-

ces barely apart, lips barely apart, in each other's arms on a terrace, the two most beautiful people in the history of the movies, she the female version of him, and he the male version of her” [Erickson 2007].

Presumably, the history of the relationship between Dreiser's text and cinema can be perceived as a hypostasis of Roland Barthe's “death of the author”: appropriating a well-documented text of a real-historical author, cinema gradually and increasingly turned it into a space of intertextual play, from which the real author is eliminated and becomes a “mirage”, visible only to readers familiar with Dreiser's novel [Antsyferova 2021].

The reputation of Dreiser as a writer is notoriously low. A year after *An American Tragedy* was published, the prominent American literary critic Edmund Wilson wrote, “Dreiser commands our respect, but the truth is he writes so badly that it is almost impossible to read him”. The English critic F. R. Leavis remarked in passing that Dreiser wrote as if he did not have a native language, and Lionell Trilling in his influential essay “Reality in America” (1950) saw the critical “indulgence” of Dreiser as a case of American hostility to intellect itself [Denby 2003].

However, in a strange way, Dreiser's legacy reminds of itself again and again, sometimes in the most unexpected intermedial contexts, the most recent of which might be three Woody Allen's films, which cannot but evoke associations with the novel *An American Tragedy* in everyone who is familiar with it, despite the fact that there are no obvious or hidden allusions to Dreiser's name both in the credits and in the films themselves. My argument is that the story of Clyde Griffiths, captured with extraordinary artistic power by Dreiser, acquires the status of a *mythologeme*

in American culture, and in this capacity throughout the twentieth century emerges now and then from the depths of the cultural subconscious. Woody Allen's three movies of the early 2000s – *Match Point* (2005), *Scoop* (2006), and *Cassandra's Dream* (2007) – are considered here as yet another illustration to this fact. The paper is intended to explore the nature of the intertextual and intermedial relations between Dreiser's novel and Allen's movies. Intertextuality is understood as a mechanism of cultural memory, which allows to suggest that the use of motives and *topoi*, presumably dating back to *An American Tragedy*, is cognate to a special mythological code in Allen's film art. To this end, comparative approach is applied, supplemented with adaptation and intermedial studies along with genre theory.

### § 1. Woody Allen and Dreiser: A Case of Negated Affinity. Woody Allen's Intertextuality

Understandably, Theodore Dreiser can hardly be listed among Woody Allen's favorites. There is a famous catchphrase coming back to Allen's book *Without Feathers* (1975). Van Gogh in the comic fantasy "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists" complains to his brother Teo: "God! I have not even a penny left for 'Novocaine! Today I pulled a tooth and had to anesthetize the patient by reading him some Dreiser" [Allen 1991: 108].

Indeed, very little can be found in common between these two authors – a socially oriented naturalist drawing upon the raw unmediated life – and a self-reflexive ironist overtly playing with cultural constructs and mythologemes

If we choose to take Woody Allen's pronouncements at their face value, then we have to admit that his art is completely devoid of social meaning. "I'm one of those people that believes there's no social value in art," he confided to an interviewer in the 1970s, "I don't believe in art as a social force." [Guthrie 1978: 144]. Declarations like this immediately sweep Allen and Dreiser to opposite poles. However, one must take into account what William Hutchins calls "inconsistencies within his own self-presentation in interviews and his own writings" [Hutchins 2003: 360]. "At times, he frankly discusses literary authors with remarkable sophistication and aplomb, articulating a post-Sartre, post-Kafka, post-Beckett worldview and aesthetic. Particularly in the later years of his career, however, he has preferred to present himself

as a street-smart 'regular guy' from a Brooklyn blue-collar family – one who was thrown out of college during his first year, finds reading a chore rather than a pleasure (and does it mainly 'to keep up with my dates'), ardently follows his favorite basketball team on television, plays jazz, and drinks beer" [Hutchins 2003: 361].

Such far-reaching and at the same time dubious self-declarations may have also something to do with the multiple and unstable self-identity of a Jewish American who looks at the world through "the prism of double and multiple meanings simultaneously held and accepted". Reflecting on American Jewish humor Stephen J. Whitfield gives relevant historical background: "Heinrich Heine, along with Ludwig Boerne, is credited with the invention of the German feuilleton, the casual humorous monologue in which Jews have excelled, from the Viennese café wits to S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen. Heine helped to transmit to Jews who came after him the pertinence of irony, the prism of double and multiple meanings simultaneously held and accepted. It is the natural response of a people poised between two worlds: one, the matrix of ghetto and shtetl – to which they can no longer return; the other, the civil society of the West – in which they could not be fully at ease" [Whitfield 1982: 196].

Bearing this in mind, the comparative analysis (or juxtaposition) of these two authors proves not entirely ungrounded. In the early 2000s, Woody Allen shot three films in a row that can be putatively traced to Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (*Match Point* (2005), *Scoop* (2006), *Cassandra's Dream* (2007).

In one of his interviews Allen bluntly puts, "My heroes don't come from life, but from their mythology" and expands: "American mythologies are unbelievably colorful. If you live in the country, you like cowboys. Personally, I've never greatly cared for Westerns except for *Shane* which, for me, is a masterpiece. But all the others, *High Noon*, *My Darling Clementine*, *Red River*, I appreciate them, but they don't really concern me. But then, for city people like me, gangster films mean a lot, from *Key Largo* to *Little Caesar*. They're part of my heritage" [Ciment, Tobin 2016: 122]. I would admit that this thesis about mythological roots of his creations can hardly be related exclusively to Westerns or gangster films. Those are just a couple of examples of more numerous American mytho-

logemes shaping Woody's art, including Dreiserian tragic version of American dream (social climbing).

The complicated character of Woody Allen's intertextuality whether admitted or – which is more often – not admitted by the film director himself poses the problem of "unrecognized adaptation" referring to his films. German scholar Wieland Schwanebeck notes, "Tellingly, [...] only one of [Allen's] films gives credit to a literary source: his 1972 portmanteau comedy, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex*, which is a satirical take on David Reuben's popular sex manual of the same name. At the same time, *Sleeper* (1973, cowritten with Marshall Brickman) is the first Allen film to have its premise based on a single identifiable work of literature: H. G. Wells's *The Sleeper Awakens*" [Schwanebeck 2014: 362]. The fact that Allen is rarely credited as an adaptor of somebody else's material, however, "has not prevented critics from identifying some continuous key influences" in Chekhov's plays, Bergman's films, George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion", Dostoevsky's novels etc." [Schwanebeck 2014: 362]

Drawing upon early 2000s' controversy whether adaptations are distinctive instances of intertextuality [Hutcheon 2006] or should adaptations be understood as films that contain "a deliberate invitation [to the audience] to read them as adaptations" [Leitch 2012: 94], Schwanebeck, sharing Leitch point of view, justly concludes that the majority of Allen's films certainly do not represent adaptations and "an awareness of the many intertextual connections and hypertextual elements derived from the literary canon running through Allen's work will help the viewer acknowledge the pastiche character of Allen's films and, by implication, help deconstruct some of the romantic ideology surrounding the auteur-figure" [Schwanebeck 2014: 363]. In case of Allen/Dreiser negated affinity by no means can we speak about *adaptations* of Dresier's novel especially if Woody (as we shall see) addresses his viewer to Dostoyevsky or – more distantly – to Greek tragedy as the main source of inspiration for him. But Dreiser, unrecorded, is here.

## § 2. Three Exilic Films of Woody Allen about Crime and Punishment

In early 2000s Woody Allen left the USA and started making films on European locations. Allen

himself referred to rising production costs in New York, and his success with European audiences as reasons for his "cinematic exile". Unmentioned but implied is also his sexual-abuse allegation which undoubtedly harmed his reputation among American audience. Whatever the grounds, the result seemed fruitful as often happens with talented artists.

The American film critic John Douglas Macready suggests the term "exile" for this trans-Atlantic passage: "The iconic American film auteur appears to be in exile" [Macready 2013: 95]. Correspondingly, he puts forward the definition "exilic period" for this phase of Woody's oeuvre. The term seems appropriate for at least two reasons: Allen's films of the period were marked "by his frequent absence as a character and/or by settings or locations outside the United States [...] The theme of exile is so pervasive, both externally and internally, that Allen's recent body of work might be understood as his exilic period" [Macready 2013: 96].

Whatever biographic and economic reasons for crossing the Atlantic might be, even more important at the time was Allens's expressed desire to make more serious films [Lax 2007: 184]. As a result, his exile opened "a new creative space in his cinema. This space is produced by an inherent tension in the exilic experience itself – a tension between being and becoming, leaving and returning, despair and hope [...] By dislocating his cinema from the United States, and removing himself from the screen, Allen has produced the necessary tension in order to enter a new creative period in his work" [Macready 2013: 96].

Different as they are in terms of a genre, the three European films under study here – *Match Point*, *Cassandra's Dream*, and *Scoop* – are clearly united by the theme of crime and punishment (central for Dreiser's *American Tragedy* as well), though in *Scoop* it is rendered in the comic vein. All three can be analyzed as contextually and meaningfully close as it is a well-known practice with Allen to accompany a serious film with its comic counterpart, as if transposing one theme in different modes (another example – *Zelig*, 1983, and *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, 1983).

## § 3. *Match Point*: crime and luck in an unfair world

In December 2005, reflecting on his recent film *Matchpoint* in the interview for *Vanity Fair*,

Allen stated: “It’s a serious picture and I haven’t done a serious picture in a long time. To me, it is strictly about luck. Life is such a terrifying experience – [...] Well, the truth of the matter is, you don’t make your luck. So I wanted to show that here was a guy – and I symbolically made him a tennis player – who’s a pretty bad guy, and yet my feeling is [...] – if the luck bounces your way, you know – you can not only get by, you can flourish in the same way that I felt Marty Landau could in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* [Allen’s 1989 film – O. A.], where he killed that airline stewardess he was having the affair with, Anjelica Huston. If you can kill somebody – if you have no moral sense – there’s no God out there that’s suddenly going to hit you with lightning. Because I don’t believe in God. So this is what was on my mind: the enormous unfairness of the world, the enormous injustice of the world, the sense that every day people get away with the worst kinds of crimes. So it’s a pessimistic film, in that sense ... I feel a cynic is what they call a realist – you know what I mean? Mark Twain was pessimistic. Freud was pessimistic. So what? That’s just a point of view of life.” [Biskind 2016: 175]. In another interview he clarified: “What I’m really saying [in *Match Point*], and it’s not hidden or esoteric – it’s just clear as a bell – is that we have to accept that the universe is godless and life is meaningless, often a terrible and brutal experience with no hope, and that love relationships are very, very hard, and that we still need to find a way to not only cope but lead a decent and moral life” [Lax 2007: 123–124].

Critics made a good job of tracing intertextual sources/parallels for *Match Point*. Thus, W. Scwnebeck recapitulates criticism finding the Dostoevskyan themes (and plot) of *Crime and Punishment* (e. g., O. Stuchebrukhov), and some motives of Patricia Highsmith’s novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (E. Bronfen) [Schwanebeck 2014: 363]. An LA film critic Scott Foundas finely delineates the intertextual horizons of *Match Point*: “Chris Wilton is a Highsmithian cipher who adopts bits and pieces of others’ personalities as he goes and, like *Crimes and Misdemeanors*’ Dr. Judah Rosenthal, he’s a man who will ultimately kill to protect his position in life. Yet if [...] Judah was wracked with guilt over ordering the death of his mistress, there’s barely a trace of compunction to be found in Wilton’s steely, blue-eyed gaze and sotto voce Irish lilt” [Foundas 2016: 177].

It should be noted, though, that in *Match Point* Allen is extraordinarily explicit about the literary predecessor of his protagonist Chris Wilton. After Wilton has arranged to rent a flat in London, thus inaugurating this Irish poor boy’s post-tennis effort to “make something of himself,” Allen pictures him alone in his apartment, reading. The guy has two different books, each of the titles the viewer can plainly see: Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and *The Cambridge Companion to Crime and Punishment*. “Wilton apparently doesn’t share his creator’s antipathy to criticism”, ironically comments Peter J. Bailey, putting his finger on this manifest allusion [Bailey 2016: 319].

Despite such misleadingly obvious authorial genealogy and despite the absence of references in *Match Point* to Dreiser’s novel, I would suggest that there are some features resonating with Dreiser, and quite a number of reviewers do recognize it. Among the critics who pay homage to Dreiser’s influence is W. Hutchins within his more general topic of viewing Woody Allen across the literary canon: “There are [...] notable structural parallels with Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*: Chris Wilton, like Clyde Griffiths, is an ambitious social climber whose social ascendancy takes him into a world of corporate respectability; he too carefully plans the murder of his mistress (who has refused an abortion) in order not to lose his opportunities brought by a much wealthier woman he loves (and, in Wilton’s case, has married); each concocts a devious ruse to make the death seem accidental (an interrupted drug robbery in *Match Point*, a drowning in *An American Tragedy*); in both cases, documents prove incriminating (Nola’s diary, Roberta’s letters). Of the two, however, only Clyde Griffiths is arrested, tried, convicted, and electrocuted for his crime; Chris Wilton, though obviously no less guilty, evades arrest because at a crucial moment an object happened to bounce one way rather than the other [...] A universe in which such apparent inequity and injustice occur – when so much depends on the all-important but uncontrollable bounce of a certain small object, controlled only by chance, the logistics of randomness, and the law of gravity – is the epitome of the absurd. Whether Wilton goes on to any Raskolnikovian remorse of conscience is left for each viewer to imagine; there is very little if any indication that he will” [Hutchins 2013: 371–372]. Clearly, the moral message of *Match Point* is per-

ceived as ambiguous which corresponds with authorial intentions expressed in Allen's interviews.

Several critics noted similarities between Allen's film and *A Place in the Sun* (1951), George Stevens's film version of Theodore Dreiser's great naturalistic novel: "In both films a young man of little means and great ambition impregnates a girl who will stand in the way of a marriage to another woman with all the money and luxury in the world. The latter qualifies only as a slight exaggeration for Allen's film in light of the ostentatious and apparently endless wealth and luxury of the setting and world of *Match Point*" [Girgus 2013: 567]. The comparison with George Stevens' films goes along the lines of asserting drastic change in ethical and moral expectations: "In *A Place in the Sun*, the young man, George Eastman, as played by the amazing Montgomery Clift, ultimately will die in the electric chair. [...] the language and ethical view of the film condemns him for the evil and self-centeredness in his mind and his heart. [...] In *Match Point*, of course, Chris Wilton, the tennis pro played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers, gets away with the premeditated murder of his girlfriend, Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson), who is pregnant with his child, and the planned murder of another innocent victim, Nola's neighbor, who was part of his scheme to make the murder look like the result of a burglary gone bad" [Girgus 2013: 567].

Though the final scenes of *Match Point* evoke associations with Greek tragedy ("the dead return like a Greek chorus to bemoan their fate and the living speak of the importance of luck") no catharsis is in store for the audience just as no repentance or atonement is expected from the protagonist. "In contrast, for all of its moralisms, rigid religiosity, cruel unfairness, and perversely punishing conscience, the film from the very middle of the last century, *A Place in the Sun*, also insists on the existence of a moral dimension to life and a transcendent ethical responsibility toward real people in society. *Match Point*, however, seems to insist on nothing, a void that fulfills Kristeva's vision of purposeless nihilism" [Girgus 2013: 568].

Surprisingly, the same tragic overtones lead Christopher J. Knight to completely different interpretation of the finale of *Match Point*. The critic is very definite about clear-cut moral message of the film: "Wilton, following the murders, is, like Macbeth, haunted by his victims' ghosts. They return; they take up residence in his conscience;

and they will not let him rest, though he, like Judah in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, still holds to the thought that this is possible. 'You can learn,' he says to the ghosts, 'to push the guilt under the rug and go on. You have to. Otherwise, it overwhelms you.' But the guilt does appear to undo, if not to overwhelm, him" [Knight 2013: 85].

Characteristically, the critic defines the late style of Woody Allen as *naturalistic*, bringing us back to Dreiser: "It is a naturalism that tends to place the viewer in a morally vexed space, for we find ourselves surprisingly anxious for the safety of the murderers themselves, be they Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) in *Match Point*, or Ian (Ewan McGregor) and Terry Blaine (Colin Farrell) in *Cassandra's Dream*. And in *Match Point*, we are especially set up this way for the reason that the film's opening monologue, addressed to the audience, is spoken by Wilton" [Knight 2013: 84]. So, the dubious character of *Match Point finale* is ascribed to naturalist aesthetics, in other words – to Dreiser's legacy.

#### § 4. *Cassandra's Dream*: crime and tragedy of moral sense

Filmed in the United Kingdom, *Cassandra's Dream* relates the story of two working-class brothers from South London, – Terry (Colin Farrell) who has a gambling addiction and Ian (Ewan McGregor), both longing for better life. The brothers buy a brand-new sailboat at a very low price and name it "Cassandra's Dream", after a greyhound that won Terry the money to buy the boat. Coming from blue-collar family, the brothers know nothing of Greek mythology (in contrast, probably, to any regular intellectual viewer of Allen's films who immediately decodes the signals) and are unaware of the ominous connotations of this name: as we know, Cassandra's prophecies of doom went unheeded by those around her. Both Terry and Ian badly need money – one to pay his gambling debts, the other – to finance his life with an actress he is in love with and to promote her career in Hollywood. To solve their financial problems, they ask their American uncle Howard, a successful plastic surgeon and businessman, for a help. He agrees to lend them a hand, but asks in return to murder someone for him. Eventually, the brothers succeed in carrying out the murder. However, Terry confides that he wants to turn himself in

to the police. Ian and uncle Howard agree there is no alternative but to get rid of Terry. Ian plans to poison his brother on the boat, but at the decisive moment he cannot bring himself to kill Terry. In the chaos, Terry knocks Ian down the steps into the cabin, accidentally killing him. The police later deduced after the unpremeditated murder Terry drowned himself. The last shot of the film features the boat “Cassandra’s Dream”, as beautiful as ever, despite the tragedies that happened on its board.

Cynthia Lucy is certainly right construing the main theme of *Cassandra’s Dream* as that of **status** – “how it is gained, lost, and internalized with consequences that cut to the very core of identity and self-esteem” [Lucia 2008: 40]. Reflecting upon the category of status in *Cassandra’s Dream*, Allen not accidentally cites: “In terms of the Greeks, themes of status *put morality to the test* [italics mine. – O.A.] to see just how far you’ll go to achieve what it is that you want – the social climbing, the notoriety, the fame, the fortune. Whether it’s *Macbeth* or some other work, it’s a standard motivating factor” [Lucia 2008: 42].

In this interview to *Cineaste* in 2008, Allen contemplates upon the very different outcome for the brothers in *Cassandra’s Dream* in comparison to protagonists of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point* who literally get away with murder, in other words – “is it largely a question of class – or one of conscience?” The artist again pessimistically and stoically insists that though he grew up “in a society and a culture where those who preached to us said that crime didn’t pay and that the bad guy always wound up trapped in the end and the good guy triumphed” it was clear to him that life was not that way, and it works the same for all classes and strata. “So I always felt that, barring a heaven and a hell – a religious solution, which I did not believe in – and barring the fact that the bad guy does not always get caught, the only thing you have is your own sense of morality... It’s not like a fairy tale; there is no penalty” [Lucia 2008: 42].

There is one more issue crucial for our argument. When asked if it is possible that the stories told in *Cassandra’s Dream* and *Match Point* could be adapted to an American setting, explicitly answers: “It’s not at all connected to that – that’s just a chance byproduct. I wrote *Match Point* originally about an upper-class family in the Hamptons [a popular seaside resort in Suffolk County, New York – O.A.]. I made the switch to England where

the social imperative gets magnified. The same is true of *Cassandra’s Dream*. I wrote that and set it in England but I could have easily made it about two brothers living in Brooklyn, Queens, or Manhattan and an uncle with a proposition and with the same tragic events that occur, though status does get magnified in the more socially-conscious, class-conscious society of London” [Lucia 2008: 41]. Even for the author himself the stories told by Allen are perceived as typically American stories of success, sort of “Trilogy of Desire”, where London setting is “a chance by-product”.

For Allen “*Cassandra’s Dream* is about fate. When asked how the theme of fate figures into the visual design of the film, the author characteristically recurs to the aesthetical discourse for many years connected with idea of determinism: “I thought the film should be shot *naturalistically* and that things should unfold in a simple narrative. It was not the kind of film that should have any stylization-it shouldn’t have any dream sequences in it; it should be a *naturalistic* evolution of that particular idea” [Lucia 2008: 42; italics mine – O.A.]. Conceived as a very serious film on the level of Greek tragedies, Allen chooses the discourse of naturalism to make it clear that the only hope in the unfair world is “your own sense of morality”, in other words – conscience. “As Terry says to his brother Ian about the murder scheme – forced upon them by their uncle Howard, whose large business dealings will unravel if his associate is allowed to testify against him – “this is wrong, Ian, it’s just wrong.” [Knight 2013: 85].

On the whole, *Cassandra’s Dream* proves to be a tragedy of Greek proportion. Ancient Greek tragedy overshadows the narrative about two brothers living in South London and striving for a better life. It is signaled by the references to Euripides, Medea, and Clytemnestra, as well as by the sailboat’s prophetic name.

### § 5. Scoop: a comic interlude

I have mentioned already the way with Woody Allen to transpose the same theme into different genre registers (or modes). “Tragedy is a form to which I would ultimately like to aspire. I tend to prefer it to comedy. Comedy is easier for me. There’s not the same level of pain in its creation, or the confrontation with issues or with oneself, or the working through of ideas”. This statement, made in 1979, as if looks forward to *Match Point*

and *Cassandra's Dream*, for these two films figure, even more so than *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, as **tragedies**, wherein the hope for reconciliation – the hope that defines comedy – is experienced as tenuous [Knight 2013: 86]. For Allen, **tragedy's** form assumes a special appeal late in his career, for it allows him to pursue questions, philosophical and theological, that he conceives as more challenging than those presented by comedy.

The point should be made though that Allen does not entirely forego comedy – *Scoop* (2006) is largely comic, being also an exception in another sense. Woody returns as an actor and makes himself visually present on the screen as a comic character of magician Sid Waterman, aka “The Great Splendini”, demonstrating the habitual Jewish American in-betweenness and adaptability, which culminates in the final scene of the film where Sid Waterman, Splendini, already dead and is now a passenger on the barge of death, continues performing for his fellow spirits the same magical gags and comedy routines he did in life.

In terms of genre, *Scoop* can be called romantic crime comedy, in terms of plotline it seems to have very little in common with the two serious films discussed earlier. It can be viewed as a comic interlude between them, and also as a playful paraphrase of *Match Point*, subtly hinting to crucial episode of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* – to the episode of the attempted murder of a girl-mistress in a boat on a lake, the murder this time failed. (The girl turned out to be a good swimmer, and the attempt was also rigged by her). The irony to the situation adds the fact that the two parts – cruelly murdered Nola in *Match Point* and happily surviving and very resourceful Sondra Pransky – are played by the same Scarlett Johansson.

### Conclusion. Dreiser or no Dreiser?

From this brief survey of Woody Allen's exilic London trilogy it might be deduced that Dreiser's pervasive presence in it is sensed by the majority of reviewers. The picture would be incomplete if we ignored another very categoric stance – the Socialist one. Joanne Laurier from *World Socialist Website* emphatically states: “Woody Allen directs *Match Point*: No Dreiser”. Her juxtaposition of Woody Allen and Dreiser is definitely in favor of the latter. In largely sociological vein (vulgar sociological, I would call it) she claims, “In their effusive praise for the film, a section of the critics

have invoked Dreiser's *American Tragedy* as the source material for *Match Point*. This is an unjustified slight against the great novel, which is a scathing indictment of a social mechanism that encourages dreams only to mercilessly use and destroy those who attempt to pursue them” [Laurier 2006]. Tracing *Matchpoint* to the real-life background, the socialist critic reminds her readers of the Scott Peterson case (Peterson was convicted in California in November 2004 of murdering his pregnant wife) and laments: “At the time of the Peterson conviction, the WSWS wrote: “Who is writing the Scott and Laci Peterson ‘tragedy?’ As far as we know, no one. America has no Dreiser today, or anyone resembling him – not even a Truman Capote, who attempted to trace certain pathological tendencies in American society following a cold-blooded killing in Kansas in 1959.” [Laurier 2006]. So, the evocation of Dreiser's name in connection with Woody Allen's trilogy is considered an insult to the name of the great socialist writer.

I would rather remember another real-life case: all three Allen's films were shot around 2006 – the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gillet-Brown's case, which served as the main source for Dreiser's *American Tragedy*. This anniversary did not pass unrecognized by media. Thus, the *Journal News of Westchester, New York*, commemorated the centennial of the Gillette-Brown case, recalling both the murder trial and Dreiser's lawsuit a quarter of a century later [Merck 2007: 2]. Besides, on the eve of the hundredth anniversary of the 1906 case, a new opera based on it was given its world premiere. Composed by Tobias Picker with a libretto by Gene Scheer, *An American Tragedy* debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on December 2, 2005” [Merck 2007: 6].

There is something ironical in this revisiting of Dreiser's novel in connection with the anniversary of the real-life Gillet-Brown's case he documented in his novel. Mandy Merck even derives the name of Woody Allen's *Match Point* character Chris (Wilton) from Chester (Gillet). As if there were no Dreiser's novel...But would anyone remember Chester Gillet today but for Clyde Griffiths?

The survey of critical reception of Woody Allen exilic London trilogy demonstrates that Dreiser's pervasive presence in it is sensed by the majority of reviewers, but almost none reflects upon the nature of this paradoxically negated affinity. Kate Marshall seems to be a telling exception hypo-



thesizing that “the persistent recasting of the novel [*An American Tragedy*] throughout the twentieth century” highlights “its insistent techniques for rendering its own mediality: this is, in part, what its adaptations pick up on and reincorporate into the cinematic form” [Marshall 2013: 242]. The critic tends to consider Woody Allen’s 2005 film *Match Point* as one of *An American Tragedy*’s “afterlives in the range of real and imagined film adaptations throughout the twentieth century” [Marshall 2013: 242].

I would foreground another aspect of the history of the relationship between Dreiser’s text and cinema. In post-Dreiserian American culture the story of Clyde Griffiths, captured with extraordinary artistic power by the great naturalist, acquires the status of a mythologeme, and in this capacity emerges now and then from the depths of the cultural subconscious. Woody Allen’s three movies of the early 2000s – *Match Point* (2005), *Scoop* (2006), and *Cassandra’s Dream* (2007) – present yet another illustration to it.

Allen is very sociologically minded in *Match Point* and *Cassandra’s Dream* dealing with socially meaningful themes of crime and punishment and also of social status and its cost. These themes are among permanent hot issues for Allen and cannot be limited to *Match Point* and *Cassandra’s Dream*. Before them: in 1989 Allen shot *Crimes and Misdemeanors* about the dentist Judah Rosenthal who ordered the death of his now-unwanted mistress to preserve his family peace and who suc-

cessfully gets away with the murder. In 2015 Allen returns to the same theme in *Irrational Man*. The protagonist – a university professor Abe Lucas experiencing a spiritual crisis – tries to overcome it by administering justice in his own very special way – by killing an unfair judge. The perfect murder leads him to another attempt at homicide – of his girl-friend who presses him to go to the police. But this time luck is against the protagonist: Abe, who has recently started enjoying life, attempts to kill Jill by pushing her into an elevator shaft, but stumbles backward and falls down the shaft to his death. The second murder is rather ironically prevented by the murderer’s death.

*Match Point* and *Cassandra’s Dream* stand apart in this cluster of Allen’s “murder films”. The two represent cinematic narratives where the protagonists are social climbers committing murders to achieve a better social status and prosperity. A very Dreiserian theme, indeed. No one else before the author of *The Trilogy of Desire* and *An American Tragedy* managed to explore with such artistic power the tragic side of American dream – yearning for money and social success. In his exilic films shot on London location Allen also renders this theme in tragic mode, specially underscoring that the setting of the films – whether European or American – does not matter much.

In his social analysis of crime and its moral consequences Woody Allen *volens nolens* follows Dreiser’s footsteps.

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