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Crimes and Misdemeanors: A Retake on the Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg

Murder and infidelity, the existence of God and human responsibility, these are the issues raised by *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, a film that contains Woody Allen's most overtly philosophical statements about the tragedy and comedy of human experience to date. Unlike many of his earlier films, where he "deflates every venture into philosophy, making material and practical considerations the inescapable weight on every thought" (Yacowar 85), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* showcases major philosophical concerns. Never one to shy away from the big questions, Allen explores them with a seriousness made palatable by an aesthetically distancing overlay of humor.

This is a film that relies heavily upon eye imagery, not surprising given the visual medium that Allen has chosen for his art. But the optical references possess a haunting quality, something of a cinematic/literary *déjà vu*. These are the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, the oculist whose advertisement "brooded over the solemn dumping ground" (24) of the valley of ashes in *The Great Gatsby*, transposed and integrated into another medium. The theme of perception is realized by the use of the motifs of blindness and clarity of vision filtered through a labyrinth of doppelgänger relationships, primarily brothers and brothers-in-law.

Certainly the fact that Judah Rosenthal is an opthamologist is no accident as he himself suggests during his dedication speech for the new opthalmology wing of the

hospital. By way of explaining his interest in eyes, Judah reveals that his father, Saul, a religious man, claimed "the eyes of God are always on us." As a child, Judah says he imagined the eyes of God to be "unimaginably penetrating, intense eyes." Within the first few scenes, Allen manages to set up the major philosophical questions of the film with great economy.

Judah Rosenthal appears to have achieved the promise of the American dream; he is a highly respected, supposedly philanthropic doctor with a loving family and all the material accoutrements of success. The audience learns that he has been carrying on a two-year affair with an airline stewardess, Delores Paley. Now that Judah has tired of her, Delores threatens to confront his wife with their relationship and expose Judah's questionable financial dealings which border on embezzlement. Judah wrestles with the problem and uses various means to dissuade Delores from her proposed course of action but to no avail.

He confides in an old friend and patient, Rabbi Ben, who is losing his sight. The two men engage in a conversation delineating their opposing worldviews. Judah believes in a "harsh, pitiless universe" whereas Ben adheres to "moral structure, real meaning, forgiveness, and a higher power." He suggests that Judah tell his wife about the affair before Delores does and hope for her forgiveness, understanding and ultimately a better relationship with her. Judah does not have enough confidence in his marriage to take the chance. Instead, he consults his younger brother, Jack, who has connections with the mob. Jack suggests threatening Delores, but Judah is skeptical of the effectiveness of such a plan. When Jack proposes that he could have Delores killed, Judah is horrified, although one wonders what alternative solution he was expecting. Jack assures Judah that he would not have anything to do with this plan other than setting it in motion, i.e., he wouldn't have to get his hands dirty. Judah rejects this option, but as Delores persists with her threats and his anxiety escalates, he decides to have her murdered.

At the time that the two brothers discuss Judah's "double life" with its ensuing problems, they have a conversation similar to the one that has already taken place with Ben. Judah asks Jack if he thinks God sees their actions. Jack replies: "I can't afford the luxury of believing in God." The word "luxury" counterpoints the differences in their socio-economic status as well as their approaches to life. Judah is the privileged one who is testing their father's belief against Jack's more practical realism. Jack and Ben represent Judah's essential duality—his selfishness as well as his better instincts. Allen skillfully demonstrates how Judah's desire for social and material self-preservation overcomes any moral qualms he might have had about having Delores murdered. He is so thoroughly bound to the external manifestations of his success (the trappings rather than the substance of the American dream) that he is willing to sacrifice his humanity to preserve them.

Judah's use of the phrase "double life" to describe his affair with Delores is not simply a gratuitous choice of words. His double life operates in several significant ways. The first is obviously the double life that he is forced to lead in order to conceal his affair with Delores. From the moment he decides to authorize Delores's murder, he has condemned himself to a double life for the rest of his days. His outward demeanor and the respect he commands from his friends and family are based upon a lie. In order to sustain the charade, his whole life becomes a lie. The opthalmologist, a specialist concerned with the preservation of sight, becomes devoted to "pulling the wool over everyone's eyes" in order to maintain his position. Adding to the horror of inverted expectations is the fact that it is a doctor, someone who is assumed to be dedicated to the saving of lives, who is the secret murderer. Judah betrays his wife, his mistress, his profession, and finally himself. Allen's choice of name for his central character, Judah, only one letter removed from that of the archetypal traitor, Judas, deliberately evokes connotations of betrayal.

The motif of blindness is further developed via Delores's statement, "I'm not blind,"

when she tells Judah that she knows about his manipulation of funds. Ironically, she is blind to Judah's desperation and fatally misjudges his character. Later, when the detective questions Judah, the audience learns that she was "worried about her eyes." She had good reason to be. Symbolically, the eyes become instruments for the perception of truth.

When Judah learns that Delores is dead, he responds by exclaiming *sotto voce*, "God have mercy on us, Jack," and washes his hands in a manner reminiscent of Pontius Pilate. Athough he has not been actually physically involved in Delores's death, he feels contaminated by the event. Such a statement is characteristic of Judah, who often invokes the name of God in empty epithets, thus foreshadowing and reinforcing his hypocrisy. He seems to examine his face in the bathroom mirror for signs of change, a gesture often associated with the motif of the double. Like a murderer who is compelled to return to the scene of the crime, he rushes to Delores's apartment to retrieve any articles that may implicate him. A flashback shows Delores asking Judah if the eyes are the windows to the soul. He looks at Delores's body and notes that there is "nothing behind her eyes—all you saw was a black void." Is the black void confirmation of humankind's lack of a soul or the moral darkness in which people flail about endlessly searching for meaning in a meaningless universe? Allen keeps the audience guessing.

Following the murder, Judah asks himself what dream he was following—the dream of having it all and not having to pay for any of it. His dream turns into a nightmare as he approaches a nervous breakdown and is about to make a confession to the police, but the breakdown is averted, and Jack all but threatens him to prevent him from going to the police. Time passes and life goes on. Judah resumes his old life, Ben goes blind, Clifford loses Hally to his unworthy rival, Lester, and Louis Levy commits suicide. The "bad guys" win. The film ends with Judah and Clifford sitting off by themselves at a wedding. Judah "confesses" his crime to Clifford as he allegedly gives him an idea for a movie plot.

The subplot of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* consists of the rivalry and misdemeanors of two brothers-in-law, Lester and Clifford, who are both filmmakers; the former makes successful television programs, the latter, documentaries on such topics as starvation and toxic waste, that don't sell. Against his better judgment and compromising his integrity (his motivation is entirely financial), Clifford accepts an offer to make a documentary about Lester. This is his first misdemeanor. Expecting the documentary to be a flattering portrait, Lester fires Clifford when he sees the not so subtle comparisons Clifford has drawn between himself and Mussolini. In the course of this embedded narrative, the audience catches glimpses of another documentary that Clifford is working on about a philosopher named Louis Levy who posits a "God that cares but demands that you act morally." The notions of Levi and some of Lester's pronouncements about film operate as touchstones for the themes and structure of the main narrative that revolves around Judah Rosenthal.

Clifford and Lester are rivals in love as well as work. They both compete for the affections of Hally Reed, who is producing the documentary about Lester. Clifford's second misdemeanor consists of his attempts to become romantically involved with Hally while he is still married. As in most other spheres, Lester eclipses Clifford in this one also.

Just what does Ben's blindness mean? That there is no God, no moral structure, no meaning to life? Perhaps. But his is a physical, not a moral/ethical blindness. Ben and Louis Levy are the spiritual and ethical centers of the film. Ben goes blind; Levy commits suicide. Allen seems to be saying that this particular brand of moral idealism cannot survive in the world as we know it, a world where crimes remain unpunished and the careless rich "[smash] up things and creatures and then [retreat] back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it [is] that [keeps] them together" (*The Great Gatsby* 184).

There are two triads in this film, each dominated by a major character. Judah is torn between Ben's and Jack's vision of the world. He vacillates between Jack's practical realism and Ben's spiritual idealism, experiences angst, but ultimately chooses the practical, skeptical, materialistic position represented by Jack. He struggles with himself but with luck and time retreats into his former world of riches, self-satisfaction, and prosperity. Apart from the odd twinge of guilt from time to time, he suffers no punishment for his crime. His Aunt May's statement that if a person commits a murder, gets away with it, and chooses not to be bothered by the ethics of situation, then he's home free, is borne out by the film's conclusion. But Allen doesn't leave it at that.

Clifford is contrasted with Lester and Louis Levy; once again a realistic worldview is set against an idealistic one. Although Clifford is devastated by Hally's engagement to Lester, shocked by Professor Levy's suicide, and fantasizes about murdering Lester, his perspective is the one propounded by the film. When Judah tells his story under the guise of a movie plot, Clifford remarks that he would end the film differently. He would have the murderer confess, thus assuming responsibility in a Godless universe and adding a tragic dimension to the film. Clifford does not assert the existence of God as Ben and Judah's father do, but he does subscribe to the necessity of some sort of moral structure with a humanistic base—existentialism perhaps.

This is the same conversation in which the subject of tragedy is raised. Lester has earlier defined comedy as "tragedy plus time." Time provides the distance that allows one to perceive the absurdity of human existence—a kind of black humor deriving from the meaninglessness inherent in the cosmic joke. Judah describes his murder plot to Clifford as a chilling one. It is chilling insofar as audience expectations are unmet. The murderer goes unpunished; in fact, he prospers and walks off "happily-ever after" style with his wife planning their daughter's wedding. The chill results from the tragic situation that has assumed the structure of comedy by violating the accepted forms of morality and justice. Allen ironically assures the audience, through the old movie inserts that comment on the action of the film in the manner of a chorus, that "it only happens in the movies." Judah tells Clifford that if he wants a happy (translate "just") ending, he should "go see a Hollywood movie." Thus Allen underscores the inversion and deconstructs the notion of an inherently moral universe. The audience has been witnessing the tragedy of human being for the last hour and a half.

Allen utilizes the doppelgänger motif in his selection of brothers (Jack and Judah, Ben and Lester) and brothers-in-law (Lester and Clifford) to highlight some of the film's major themes. Jack and Lester describe themselves as realists immersed in the real world doing what needs to be done to survive. Judah, originally torn between two opposing philosophical outlooks and a self-described skeptic, adopts a realistic stance. Ben, literally and perhaps symbolically blind as well, maintains his spiritual idealism and personal integrity and subscribes to a view similar to that put forward by Judah's father, Saul. When asked how he would feel if he were to discover that his belief in God is unfounded, Saul replies that in any case, he will have lived a better life. Asked to choose between truth and God, he chooses God. The last scenes in the film are of Ben dancing with his daughter at her wedding. He may be blind, but he is happily living the "good" life.

Clifford, it would seem, prefers the truth, and while he likes and admires his brother-in-law, Ben, looks to Louis Levy, the philosophy professor, for answers. Despite his horror at Professor Levy's suicide, his comments to Judah indicate a humanistic idealism, an existential position that reinforces Levy's statement that we define ourselves by the choices we make. Ben's image and Levy's voice end the film in a life-affirming manner in spite of blindness, suicide, and murder. The audience watches a Hollywood movie that manages to synthesize and portray both the tragedy and comedy of human experience. Clifford's documentary and Lester's commerical success come together in an unlikely but coherent cinematic statement that only Woody Allen could have conceived and executed.

But what of the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg? As Nancy Pogel points out, *The Great Gatsby* is a work to which Allen frequently alludes (190). *Crimes and Misdemeanors* begins with Judah's reference to the eyes of God. In *The Great Gatsby*, Wilson tells Michaelis that he had spoken to his wife, Myrtle, telling her: " . . . God knows everything you've been doing. . . . You may fool me, but you can't fool God! . . . God sees everything" (163) as he looks at the fading paint of Dr. Eckleburg's advertisement. Wilson may equate the ad with God, but he takes justice into his own hands and kills the wrong person, Gatsby, to avenge his wife's death. The true culprits, Daisy and Tom Buchanan, like Judah Rosenthal, go unpunished and retreat into their riches and carelessness" . . . and let other people clean up the mess they [have] made" (184). In both Woody Allen's film and Fitzgerald's novel, the eyes of God have no more reality than a fading, weathered billboard.

Justice? Once again, no. But like Nick Carraway, the narrator and moral center of *The Great Gatsby*, who "wanted the world to be at a sort of moral attention forever" (2), Clifford Stern becomes the touchstone figure in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. His is the lens that ultimately tells the truth of the story of Judah Rosenthal and all those who commit crimes and misdemeanors of varying proportions.

It was Gatsby's infinite capacity for hope, his unrelenting romantic idealism that fueled his dream and allowed him to believe that one could repeat the past. Professor Levy describes love as a paradox in which one attempts to return to and undo the past. Gatsby's dream was doomed to failure, as was Myrtle's, Delores's, and Wilson's. Levy's indirect explanation of his own suicide would seem to elucidate Wilson's also: there was not enough love in their lives. Fitzgerald's tragic vision exposes the corruption at the center of the American dream while asserting the necessity for hope. Allen, through black comedy, reveals the hollowness at the center of the dream and like Fitzgerald, illustrates the importance of human responsibility. Gatsby's unwavering idealism lends him tragic stature while Judah's hypocrisy denies him his humanity altogether. But both film and novel assert humankind's incorrigible capacity for optimism. The eyes of Dr. Eckleburg have been debunked but not the value of what they represent.

As one considers the ending of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, it becomes clear that Allen is playing with the cinematic equivalent of metafiction when he has Judah give Clifford an idea for a movie. The film that has just been viewed becomes Clifford's (played by Woody Allen) next film where he is able to maintain his artistic integrity, utilize his footage on Professor Levy, tell Judah's story, and achieve commercial success. Allen takes the best of both worlds and comes up with a product richer than either. The segments from old movies spliced into *Crimes and Misdemeanors* help to blur the distinctions between the screen and reality, "the movies" and the film the audience is watching. Art imitates life which imitates art. Dr. Eckleburg's billboard may be long gone, but the lens of the filmmaker is still trained on the valley of ashes searching for something of redemptive value.

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