

2014

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Recommended Citation

Hugmeyer, Carl (2014) "Being a Non-Entity with Soon-Yi Previn," *Ellipsis*: Vol. 41 , Article 27.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46428/ejail.41.27>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol41/iss1/27>

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Being a Non-Entity with Soon-Yi Previn

Carl Hugmeyer

Sometimes I realize that I'm not really putting myself out there. Being pleasant and considerate towards those around you is important, but part of me still thinks there should be something else going on. I find it hard to track down my contributions, my expressions, my statements. Partially read *New Yorkers* pile up and Netflix still recommends more documentaries than sitcoms. There is kale in the refrigerator, yes, and a \$23 bottle of wine. Great. But is this supposed to be a model of beautiful living, to show to those who scream at their children, slapping them and then tugging at their arms as they wait for the tank to fill up at the gas station? To those who throw their Burger King wrappers out of the car window? It is dust accumulating, nothing, a mouse in the walls of the world that no one really sees or cares about except when it gets audibly worked up or so thoroughly stuck that a smell begins to emanate.

* * *

There is a scene—a flashback—in Woody Allen's most recent movie, *Blue Jasmine*, where the Bernie Madoff-like Hal is confronted by his wife, Jasmine, about his marital indiscretions. Cate Blanchett's Jasmine begins mildly empowered by the finally attained knowledge of multiple sexual affairs. This strength is short lived. Her attempt to reprimand her husband backfires as Alec Baldwin's perfectly composed Hal tells Jasmine that his relationship with their friends' au pair is not just sex but is love and that he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. "This is different. We want to spend the rest of our lives together," he explains. The deep voice of Alec Baldwin acts as a shield against the growing histrionics of the now plummeting Jasmine, and he leaves the scene with a peculiar sort of dignity—there is no red in his face, no hairs out of place. He knows he has transgressed, but he never *meant* to fall in love. But now that he did fall in love, soul rejuvenated, whatever—even in the face of his marriage failing, he maintains his composure. His career is not over.

* * *

I'm not obsessed with Woody Allen. I've seen *Annie Hall* a number of times, enough to know that watching it as a high-school virgin with his own

Hollywood Video card is different than watching it as a 26-year-old who has gone through at least one serious break-up. Even worse if that break-up was with a disarmingly earnest and dynamic Midwestern girl who had the cuteness, wisdom, and audacity to go as Annie Hall for Halloween one year. I had no idea what that meant in terms of her wisdom about herself and relationships and the inevitable heartbreak that was waiting for me. That being said, I've probably watched more than a quarter but less than a third of his 43 movies.

I've seen some of the slapstick, some of the classics, some of the not-so-great, and some of the more recent films. I could totally die tomorrow and wouldn't think twice about the fact that I never watched *Broadway Danny Rose* or even *Hannah and Her Sisters*. I've only read about 60 pages of Proust in my 30 years, so I'm okay with the idea that there are some things you just can't get to. The man is talented and is more than capable of making some compelling artistic works, but I don't believe he is an elevated spirit descending from an ivory tower to bequeath upon the masses humanity-illuminating works.

I'm also not obsessed with tabloids and gossip rags. One of my aunts would bring her old *National Enquirers* to my grandma's house in the days before recycling, and on stuffy, slanted-light afternoons, my sister and I would flip through them while my grandmother fell asleep in her La-Z-Boy to *Law and Order* episodes. Besides those brief forays, *People* magazine was as lowbrow as we got in my household. I can't visualize any Woody Allen vs. Mia Farrow issues—*People Magazine*. Vol. XX. Iss. XX. New York, NY. It's strange because there is a lot of recollection of pop culture moments that are distilled into glossy photos with text overlays—the associated *People* magazine covers: River Phoenix dying, Kurt Cobain dying, some missing child found, Woody Harrelson speaks out on hemp and oxygen, the “World's 50 Most Beautiful People.”

I do however remember my mom expressing disgust inlaid with disappointment (she had been a fan, had just recently rented *Sleeper* from the library to show my sister and me). John Tesh or Delilah, or the John Teshes and Delilahs of the early 90s, would mention some aspect of the Allen-Farrow scandal over the radio on the way to Tae Kwan Do practice, and my mom would get visibly worked up behind the wheel. Her eyes would dart over to my sister, trying to make sure she knew how disgusting Woody Allen's behavior was. Her eyes would center themselves in the rear view mirror, setting expectations for how I ought to behave when I became a grown man. I was around nine years old. A set of brown eyes reflected in a black framed rectangle speaking for comprehension: “That's wrong.” I nodded.

* * *

Objectively, as far as my research has lead me, Woody Allen began having an affair with Soon-Yi Previn when she was between 19 and 20 years old. Soon-Yi was the adopted child of his non-cohabitating girlfriend/partner, Mia Farrow, and her former husband, Andre Previn. One day in the twelfth year of her relationship with Woody Allen, Mia Farrow found naked pictures of Soon-Yi on Allen's mantel, and he confessed to the affair. Permutations of this occurrence have probably appeared on *The Jerry Springer Show* at least twenty times, but for a period, it was the main scandal/tragedy/outrage of the era. Being a scandal, the tone was heightened, the words more caustic, the length seemingly endless, and the press fed upon it. Even if I can't visualize it, part of me knows there was at least one *People* magazine cover.

Going back to *Blue Jasmine*, I know it is a fallacy to try to equate the characters an author creates to the author himself, but at the same time, in this scene, it seems like such a damned plausible fallacy. Around the time of the ensuing custody battle, Woody Allen was questioned by *Time* magazine about the relationship he gained and the relationships he lost as a result of becoming involved with Soon-Yi. The interview ends with Allen reducing things to, "The heart wants what it wants. There's no logic to those things."

When Alec Baldwin echoes Allen's prior sentiments when *his* dirty laundry gets brought out, I can't help but find that maintained dignity at the end of the scene (and for Allen, 20 years on) somewhat troubling. Is it sympathy for the victim of the adultery? Sympathy for the uninformed young woman taken as some older man's mistress? Part of me thinks I resent their maintained productivity, especially in the case of Allen, who continued to produce movie after movie. It also makes me think of the other person there, the voice that isn't heard from. What does that heart want? Woody and Soon-Yi have been together for roughly 21 years. They have been married since 1997. Allen had long been a reluctant public figure, avoiding the Academy Awards, personal interviews, and featured profiles. But during the time of his and Soon-Yi's open relationship, he has made 23 feature length films, slightly more than one a year. Over this same span, she has only briefly appeared as herself in five documentary appearances, presumably always as Mrs. Woody Allen rather than as a Korean-American psychology student living in New York City. Additionally, in her early 20s she had her press agent release a statement to *Newsweek* magazine mid-scandal, telling the reading public to "not get hysterical" about her relationship with Mia's ex-boyfriend. Nearly all quotes attributed to her, even 20 years on, are from either one of the documentaries or the *Newsweek* statement.

Thinking about it, it is the disparity that really unsettles me about the whole thing. And not the age, the alleged wisdom of the elder overpowering the innocence of the youth. Not the financial independence of Woody Allen compared to the restricted living-at-home-and-commuting-to-college experience

of Soon-Yi. It's her relative silence, her unknown life, her identity as Mrs. Woody Allen, and little else in the public record to suggest that there is more to her than that. The creative, artistic output of one partner in their relationship occurs at a constant, near record-breaking pace, where it finds an amplified voice in both the European and American theatrical markets. The other partner...organizes the daily schedule? Picks out restaurants to try?

I suppose I should be frank. The example of Soon-Yi Previn frightens me because I worry that I have become like her or what I imagine her to be. There was a time when I was drawing, writing, singing, playing guitar for a majority of my waking hours. There was a consistent outpouring of creative energies. I would type poems with my eyes closed. When reading them, my friends would only encourage me more. I couldn't play more than one or two chords, and I didn't know how to build an arrangement, but I could write compelling songs that I didn't have the ability to replay, relying only on the answering machine and microcassette recordings that my friends told me they actually enjoyed listening to. Playing guitar, I would try to cop John Fahey's style, which led to certain failure. I had neither the mind nor the fingers. But being such an avid listener, I could discover my own lesser but still worthwhile tones and textures. Contextualized somewhere between John Cage, Half Japanese, and Lightning Bolt, as long as my music had a persistent rhythm behind it or a naïve persona out front, it was golden. Nestled within an isolated liberal arts college on the edge of Vermont's Green Mountains, I had fans.

Somewhere, though, I lost that intrinsic artistic confidence. Now when people tell me we should try to start a band, I respond with lukewarm agreement. When we get together to feel things out I can only respond without much technical skill to whatever it is they're doing. My artistic impulses swirl and seethe inside my gut, telling my mind that what we are playing is wrong, not interesting, without passion, but they never leave my body, never exit through my voice or my hands. The band idea is put on hold, and I am relieved when someone else starts infrequently jamming with my friend Stephen.

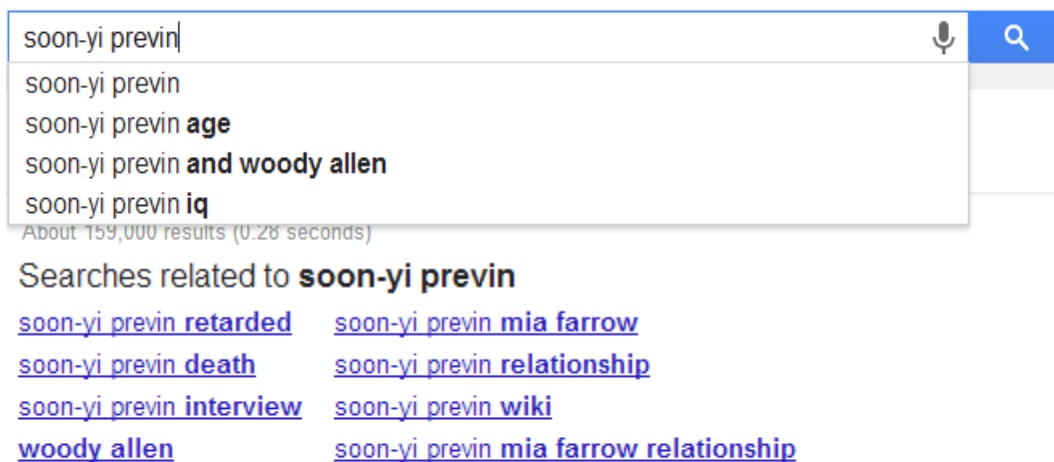
I go to art shows, large and small. I can talk about art. I'm on a friend's MFA thesis defense committee, trying to challenge and understand the work alongside tenured professors. He wants me there for the insights and connections I make. I feel competent in this arena, but when the question comes up, and it inevitably does in the circles I lurk around, "So, are you an artist?" I always say no. Lately, I confess to doing some writing, but only after I place myself firmly outside the "artist" camp.

My girlfriend is an artist, still in her mid-to-late 20s and already experiencing some mild successes with a few opportunities in the coming years that might place her on an even more successful track. I am nothing but happy for her. I also know I do not want to spend the mandatory amount of time on art

blogs, art websites, and Facebook that she puts in, nor do I want to engage in the comparisons and competitiveness that make up such a large part of the art world. But still, that question, “So, are you an artist or...?” and the ensuing tightness in my throat. I wonder, in their Manhattan circle of friends, if Soon-Yi gets asked the same question. I can see her sitting at one of her husband’s Dixieland concerts, being asked in a sort of asshole way, “And what do you do?” I just can’t picture how she answers.

* * *

The problem is that silences get filled in:



Particularly disheartening is the question of her low IQ and possible retardation. These were suggestions that came out of the Mia Farrow camp around the time of the scandal. Soon-Yi tried to publicly dissuade these suggestions, seemingly, only once. In her *Newsweek* statement she proclaims: “I’m not a retarded little underage flower who was raped, molested and spoiled by some evil stepfather—not by a long shot. I’m a psychology major at college.” It seems like a pretty clear statement of non-retardation, but her overwhelming silence over the years has let the allegations linger.

Many of the other related Internet searches paint a grim picture of her completeness as an individual. Our general conception of Soon-Yi is as a partner, as a daughter, as someone—“soon-yi previn death”—who may or may not be alive. We don’t know. A search for “soon-yi previn interview” turns up interviews of Woody Allen or Mia Farrow or close friends of the Farrow family from *Vanity*

Fair and (!) People. Soon-Yi is a subject broached in interviews, not someone who gets interviewed.

Is that wrong? Does she need to have something to say? We all know that not everyone is going to be an abstract painter, not everyone is going to be a ballet dancer, no matter what lessons our parents might sign us up for. I didn't even mention the issue of work ethic. The legends of Stephen King's wall of rejection letters, Woody's four hours of writing a day. Could it be that simple? Wake up and write, and then spend the rest of the day trying to find someone who will pay to make your movie? Am I okay living a good life, being decent with decent people? Or are the creative energies still there, pressing against the sides of the body like eels in a bucket, waiting to be used to either catch a big fish or slip the hook and find their own freedom?