parasites abroad

Vicky Cristina Barcelona:
parasitical theory
and the psychosocial relationship
Vicky Cristina Barcelona

- Dir. Woody Allen, 2009 (UK) release
- Won an Oscar and had a total of 19 awards and 28 nominations
- Stripline: ‘Life is the ultimate work of art’
- Comedy romance, a ‘late-period highlight’ (Kermode 2009) for Allen which got the best reviews of his European movie quadtrych; a ‘romp’ with ‘Jules et Jim’ and ‘Three Coins in a Fountain’ similarities
- ‘The movie presents itself as a worldly-wise study of the impermanence of love once passion has disappeared’ (French 2009)

For me the film is an interesting reflection on love and relationships...and just as Serres turned to the classics to explain his thinking, I look at VCB as a modern fable... [*]
Starting with that premise then, the object of my study of the film was to:

Use parasitical theory to unravel the motivations of the characters in VCB and in turn to see what they could add to an understanding of Serres...but to also see how cinema, as a multifaceted medium with enormous social, political and philosophical as well as aesthetic ramifications, could add to psychosocial studies...[*]
I’ll start with a quick refresher of parasitical theory and key terminology to be mindful of as we go through this presentation.

Serres saw the human quest as that of becoming an ‘identifiable individual’ and thought of all human relations as dynamic and temporal, being ‘derived’, that is influenced by something external, this ‘third’ is required in order for relations to function and to be creating – this third is essentially is the parasite...the third could be real or metaphor, or the quasi-object which marks the subject/object position.

The parasitical relation is intersubjective – it is relational, its multiple - and is the atomic level of inter-relations;

a human group is organized with one way relations – semiconduction - where one ‘eats’ the other and where the second cannot benefit at all from the first; and generates a new relation by expulsion, scapegoating, essentially expelling the first member of the group.

This is the parasitical cascade which forms the ur-dynamic of social and cultural relations, that over-arching system, which is a complex system, several systems functioning within several milieu’s at any one time and in each group, each can play the third position as all positions are equivalent with the third, both included and excluded at the same time, ‘the parasite parasites the parasite’ as Serres would put it.

The system is not a stable one and equilibrium remains as an ideal - the parasite brings noise and complexity to a relation, thus transforming this system, creating a new one, which itself is interfered with and – and so on ad infinitum...[*]
I will focus on the two main relationship sets that we follow in the story in their atomic parts...[*]
The narrator speaks of Cristina and Juan Antonio as ‘a good fit’ and for Cristina, Juan Antonio represents all that she thought she was, and was looking for;

The liberal European lifestyle, he supports her notion of herself as a creative soul, this is an adventure, and she feeds off his peer respect and status as the lover of the creative man.

And Juan Antonio needs Cristina; he needs the energy of women in his life as a constant and Cristina is happy to play the role of devoted and admiring lover that Juan Antonio's ego demands [*]
So here we presented with a burgeoning love existing in its bubble, one that is self-absorbed but not without its parasites of sex, heightened emotion, discovery of self and other...but it cannot exist in that vacuum for long and is at risk of becoming a dead relationship – that is, of becoming a relationship where there is just signal and not noise...and it is thus that we meet Maria Elena
Juan Antonio's and Maria Elena's relationship is given mythical status throughout the film; they both say that they will always be part of each other – as Cristina thinks that pain is a part of love, she tolerates and then supports – as a liberal European - their rejuvenated relationship

Cristina is a quasi-object for; she is used to explore between Juan Antonio and Maria Elena the feelings they have for each other; by explaining their relationship to her, they use her as a therapist and sounding board and this way they also avoid direct communication; Maria Elena also goes as far as to say that the couple needs Cristina to function, their love cannot be ‘complete’ without the ‘missing ingredient’ that is Cristina and their sexual feelings for each other come back with the presence of Cristina and the three develop a sexual relationship...

Cristina does though feel excluded to begin with; they speak in Spanish to each other and share a creative talent that she is intimidated by and it is thus that photography comes in to play as a mimetic feeling and quasi-object; Cristina’s role is validated and equalled in the threesome by her promising photographic talent and of course aids Cristina’s search for purpose. So from at first being a liminal, excluded third, Cristina manoeuvres into ‘the good position’, a strong parasitical position with all to gain

But we also see that within the threesome the subject/object positions are fluid and each one has a parasitical position and advantage [*]
What we have here is their complex relationship of mutual desire and need, of a bonded three way relationship ... here we see that idea of the third being played by any one at any time.

This for Cristina is a ‘graduating relationship’, where she deals with complex emotions, learns of herself and of others, and takes herself out of it when she realises it is not fulfilling her. When the relationship becomes ‘perfectly balanced’ in the ménage a trois, noise returns to Cristina by way of thoughts of ‘life’s direction’ and she leaves this state of apostasy [*]
With the removal of the third, the relationship breaks down yet the two cannot break from each other and we are left with a view of a dead relationship, a ‘functioning equilibrium’ almost, which of course means death to Serres, and we realise at this moment that their view that Cristina was the ‘missing ingredient’ was delusional, Cristina in fact prevented them from seeing each other’s true colours by her interception of their relationship

Without this interception, this disruption, theirs is co-dependent, conspiratorial and dysfunctional and Cristina’s leaving of the group contributes to the process of their falling apart, another essential role of the parasite for Serres...our last shot of them is rowing in the streets of the city and we are under no illusion that this is the pattern that will be repeated over and over [*]
In this story arc we can see how Vicky, once on the periphery of this story, comes into its centre – from being excluded she is now included.

There is a connection between Vicky and Juan Antonio and whilst he may feel this connection with many women, for Vicky this is significant due to its very rarity; Juan Antonio seduces her and relaxes her in herself to the point where she finds herself letting go and beginning to fantasise of a life in Spain.

She finds a meaning in romantic love with Juan Antonio – which she did not believe existed before and exposes her fears of a resigned life with Doug by wanting what for her symbolises its very opposite, and whilst she wrestles with her conscience, saying of her engagement ‘I can’t do anything about it now’, she eventually plays happy victim in Judy’s games to get them together.

This results in an elicit day together, which culminates in his further seduction of her which ends at his studio...[*]
This seduction is interrupted by Maria Elena – she comes into the studio firing a pistol at them and quite literally, represents the noise that shatters Vicky’s dreams – Maria Elena in that moment to Vicky is the vision of madness, of what happens when you live life ruled by the heart, which brings her thumping back down to her ‘sane’ life and she runs from the studio and hence from her fantasies...[*]
So we see an increasingly complex pattern of interrupted relationships here...

We have the connection between Vicky and Juan Antonio, which for Vicky is referenced externally with Cristina and Doug [*] and her obligations to them...

...and we have Judy [*] who fuels the relationship, vicariously righting the wrongs that she made in her own life through Vicky, so Judy both needs this relationship and is needed by it...

...and we have Maria Elena [*] as the character that puts an end to this potential but who needs the energy of the drama to keep herself alive [*]
story arcs

...or why you should always question what you read in books...
What a mess...and not all of the dynamics of the film are presented here either...

This is one of my points though...it is a mess, real life relationships can be and are layered with inter-subjective agendas and we might need parasites in a creative as well as a co-dependent way...and whilst terms like ‘derived relations’, ‘ur-dynamic’, ‘equilibrium’ and ‘cascade’ can all be seen here and are both helpful and illuminating, they are just that, terminology, and we are faced in our emotional lives with many ur-dynamics, many cascades at one and the same time, we are different players in each, sometimes we are that parasitical force, sometimes we are the ones that are at the subject end of a derived relationship and perceive this as one we have no control over...

I agree with Serres here on the complexity and ‘fuzziness’ of love and inter-relationships, and with blame being apportioned left right and centre in the film, the scapegoating theory would also be seen to be borne out...

Yet I am mindful of layering terminology too directly onto an emotional landscape...

With ‘semiconduction’ for example, yes, at the atomic level of detail, the relationship energy flows in the one direction, but one see also how there could be a two way flow of energy, with the complexity of the subject-object position and being able to be both at the same time, applying the term ‘semi-conduction’ I found one-dimensional and limiting

VCB could also teach us that the interference of a parasite is not always a creative force – of all the characters in the film, it is only Cristina that learns anything of herself, the others choose to ignore the noise and maintain an emotional status-quo.

It brought home to me the fact that as individuals with objective cognition, even as a parasite, we have a capacity to learn, adapt and make choice in how we behave and this is our very potency...which to me says that its not as simple as a one way flow and we can learn from our subject-object positions simultaneously...we may be a parasite only for a moment in time, we may only have a parasitical relationship for a moment in time, but we can carry the lessons of this forward...or make the choice not to as well....
...which brings me on to psychosocial learning...
The narrator plays an interesting role in the film... And we are mindful here of the agenda of who is telling us what, the first step in a psychosocial approach...

Serres thought as the observer as a maker of self-referential distinctions, with meaning and knowledge produced by this self-referential code, and this can be said of the narrator.

A theory started with Barthes is that in cinema the narrator organises the processes of sign production of desire, that the two are linked in the process of the search for self and identity and here the narrator is essentially the Woody Allen character, the voice of the internal dialogue that would normally be portrayed by Woody, the conflict of scepticism and idealism in the quest for selfhood.

But the voice is not neutral and his sardonic inflection and dry wit make implicit judgements, and ‘entrap’ the viewer into a constructed narrative discourse and this is his story, he chooses what to show us and what not to, controlling the meaning and experience of the film.

There is a limitation in this device in film – it makes the film tell more than it shows and I think clues are lost with the constant distraction or expectation of the voiceover.

This awareness means that the narrator becomes a parasite; by involving himself in the story, he becomes observed; the narrator is the story telling, part of the story, cinema theorists often term a narrator is a ‘surrogate character’ and the narrator has all to gain from this position, as well as enjoying it, what Serres would describe as ‘observers observing the observed’.

And I need to note my bias here to you as well and of my role as, alongside the narrator, a co-producer of meaning in this story, – I have lived in Barcelona on and off for many years and just as I found myself becoming
increasingly despising of the characters, I found myself becoming increasingly pitiful of Barcelona having to have these despicable characters in its streets, even though, as parasites, it needs them to continue to thrive... [*]
There is one other major player in this and that is of course Woody Allen and whilst he may normally be associated with Freud I began to see Woody Allen as a psychosocial, and working outside of psychology’s parameters.

Allen challenges notions of narrative, gender and sexuality and presents an ur-dynamic in films with multiple plots, psychodynamic character studies and gives a slice the human condition.

with his idiosyncratic cinematic style of integrating dialogue, setting, action, music and characterisation into a unique cinematography, he gives a complex, multidimensional view of subjects and reflects on notions of modernity and how in the modern world we are obliged to make decisions based on emotions, giving a rendering of the fragmentation of subjectivity and identity.

His is a flawed world where love is valued to overcome moral corruptness, but not in any way does restitution come easily; this is conveyed by his dramatisation of psychic and social displacement and the turmoil this causes and the often tortured development of identity and subjectivity, the ‘unspeakable unconscious and the conscious search for meaning’ (Girgus).

For Allen, love does not solve the problems of the human condition, and can in many cases add to it, but it does help the human mature through the self-reflexive process it provokes.

In his European films Allen is also subverting the American dominant ideology (cultural and of the cinema) and we see here the potential for cinema to engender and engage with cultural agency and revision and I also feel that Allen, with strong female characters as his muse and with his deconstruction of gender relations, is promulgating a need for major change in the gender dynamic.
So I began also to see common ground between Allen and Serres

Both concerned with the psychosocial issues of
the ‘affective component’ of social relations
Both inhabit a social world of relations governed by conscious and subconscious emotions
Both realise the interrelatedness of the individual, society and social phenomena

They ask the same questions; what relations do we have with each other? How do we live with each other? Who or what prevents us from eating with whom, from sleeping with whom? What really is this system which collapses with the slightest noise and who or what makes this noise?

They share the same notion of the observer; a maker of self-referential distinctions, that the observer is making second-order, filtered observations

Serres asserts that as humans we are seeking to be ‘identifiable individuals’, a conceit as a quest for ‘true identity’ that runs through all of Allen’s work; Allen reflects this back to us in a way that resonates at the atomic level – we may not all have knowledge of the cultural world that Allen operates in, but we have faced the problems of his characters and posed the same questions of ourselves that he does in his films

‘The intuition of the parasitologist makes him impart a common relation of social manners to the habits of little animals, a relation so clear and distinct that we recognise it as being the simplest’

Both realise that in order to function a system cannot be ‘perfect’ but has to be dysfunctional, and this is where the interest lies for both; both know non-functioning remains essential for functioning
So what can we learn from VCB as a psychosocial thinker?
Whilst I have mapped Serres theory onto the film, and found this useful in getting to grips with it, life is of course made of subtleties and whilst his theory holds out, we must be mindful of too literal a mapping...there is not an objective truth, but a narrative one, and many truths, and we must always be mindful of the context of a situation and who is presenting that context to us and remember that human interrelations are both complex, fluid and interchangeable.

VCB is a study in itself of the internal struggle to live in modern society – one of supposed individual choice but also of immense social conditioning and the friction there is in living that, the confusion, the suppression of desire, the curbing of emotion and behaviour...as Rabinow would have it, the problematization of modern life and decision-making, and these decisions now being based on emotion agendas

We also learn that any idea of society can be picked apart to its atomic levels and here we will find desire, envy, expulsion...and its these ‘ugly’ drives that are so very necessary to keep society functioning – it fuels love, commerce, family groups, nations...

So its all too apparent that humans, and en masse as society, are parasites, interfering, fulfilling our own agendas and that we can only function with this dysfunction.

Habermas’s idea sustained self-reflection undoubtedly can bring about change, and a parasitical relation is a creative one – but, as flawed beings, humans can equally choose to ignore the truth they find and remain un-emancipated and deny their creative potential.

We see the struggle in the characters of this lived experience and the expression of it, and how we struggle with our drives in the quest to be a ‘good human being’

We seem to believe in this idea of a fully formed selfhood, an idea ‘us’, free of issues, but will of course never achieve that ideal; it’s the equilibrium that Serres metaphorical asserts equal death...that is the human condition.