

DIRK CLARA

WOODY ALLEN'S
PARALLEL WORLDS

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To my sweet friend Pollux (1994-2009) who watched (and sometimes slept through) many Woody Allen movies at my side or on my lap.

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INTRODUCTION

WOODY ALLEN: THE FIRST 74 YEARS

Allan Stewart Konisberg, later known as Woody Allen, was born in the Bronx, New York City, on December 1 1935. His parents, Martin and Nettie, were American Jews of Central European origin. The boy fell in love with the cinema at a very early age and spent the rest of his childhood frequenting movie theaters several times a week, often playing hooky to do so. In 1941, he discovered Manhattan, an experience he told his biographer Eric Lax about:

I was in love with it from the second I came up from the subway into Times Square. You can't believe what a thing that is to suddenly look up and see it – remember, this is before it degenerated. Every twenty feet there was a glittering marquee with a movie house. [...] There were no trash houses or porno houses [...] I was just stunned by it all [...]. I not only was totally in love with Manhattan from the earliest memory. I loved every single movie that was set in New York¹.

The director's love for Manhattan thus influenced his taste in movies. His own movies are often set in a stylized Manhattan, as fascinating as the one Allan saw for the first time.

Allan's childhood was not always a happy one. He loathed school and school teachers who forced him to learn things he was not interested in at all – except for reading and writing – and who kept him from indulging in his favorite hobbies: going to the movies, listening to the radio, playing the clarinet and performing magic tricks. At home the growing Allan often had to endure intense arguments between his parents. However, when he was 8, Martin and Nettie gave him a little sister, Letty, with whom Allan rapidly developed a close and happy relationship.

In 1952, aged 16, Allan decided to send jokes to various New York newspapers and signed them with a name he had just invented for himself: Woody Allen. This new name soon replaced his original name, even among his friends and relatives.

¹ Eric Lax, *Woody Allen A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 20.

Some of Allen's jokes were published immediately and he was quickly hired to write one-liners for celebrities.

Toward the end of his teenage years Woody Allen discovered the cinema of Ingmar Bergman who soon became his favorite director and, later on, influenced Allen's movies. When Allen directed his first non-comedic films, certain American critics reproached him with aping Bergman's masterpieces. However, similarities between the two artists' works should not come as a surprise given their kinship. Like Allen later on, Bergman's imagination allowed him to create deeply personal cinematic universes sometimes based on altered and vastly enriched autobiographical material. At a time both men bestowed a dream-like quality² on their movies and were terrorized by the idea of death which prompted them to probe this theme and to ponder the absurdity of life in many of their works (including comic films in Allen's case). Paradoxically, they sometimes suggested suicide³ to end all anguish⁴. Finally, like Bergman in his day, Allen is a workaholic and prefers the company of women whom he sees as stronger and more moral than men, an idea that resonates in both artists' movies. Nevertheless, to claim that Allen's serious movies are flawed copies of Bergman's is absurd. As with all great directors, they display unmistakable and distinctive characteristics. Unlike the Swedish master, Allen avoids long close-ups, uses a lot of music (except in *Annie Hall* and *Interiors*), and never tackles certain specific Bergmanesque themes such as humiliation, shame, incommunicability, physical

² In 1969 Bergman told his biographer, Peter Cowie, in *Ingmar Bergman A Critical Biography* (New York: Scribners, 1982), p. 46: "My films are never meant to be reality. They are mirrors, fragments of reality, almost like dreams."

³ Bergman told Derek Prouse (in "Ingmar Bergman: A Problem Genius", *Sunday Times*, 15 March 1964): "One has to settle for suicide or acceptance. Either destroy oneself (which is romantic) or accept life." Allen told Roger Ebert (in *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2 February 1986): "Not a day goes past when I do not seriously consider the possibility of suicide."

⁴ Four Woody Allen characters actually commit suicide: Eve (Geraldine Page) in *Interiors*, Sam (Philip Bosco) in *Another Woman*, the old philosopher (Martin Bergmann) in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and Terry (Colin Farrell) in *Cassandra's Dream*; several others try to commit suicide or contemplate that option: Boris Grushenko (Allen) in *Love and Death*, Mickey (Allen) in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Lane (Mia Farrow) in *September*, Hope (Farrow) in *Another Woman*, Jack (John Cusack) in *Shadows and Fog*, Betty Ann (Helen Hunt) in *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, Melinda (Radha Mitchell) in *Melinda and Melinda* and Boris Yellnikoff (Larry David) in *Whatever Works*.

isolation, “conflicts between compassionate tenderness and impassioned cruelty⁵”, and “God as both absent and tyrannically manipulative⁶.”

In 1954, one of Allen’s relatives suggested he should start out as a playwright, which prompted him to see numerous plays on and off Broadway. Around that period, NBC employed him to write comic shows and sent him to California for a few months. Allen then married Harlene Rosen, a 16-year-old Jewish girl from New York. Although he hated school and only read comics until he was 16, the young man, encouraged by his wife, developed a yen for literary culture and hired a University professor to discuss important works of literature every week.

Woody Allen earned a lot of money writing for television for a few years but he became increasingly dissatisfied with his anonymous status as one of the countless feeders of “the monster” and the fact that his work was quickly forgotten after being aired. In 1960, he decided to become a stand-up comedian to play sketches he wrote for himself. After a tough start, the artist became one of the most famous comedians in America and often got invited to the most popular talk shows of the sixties. On stage, he created a specific character for himself: the bashful and unlucky young man he would portray in his first movies a few years later. In 1962, Allen divorced Harlene Rosen and dated a young actress from New York, Louise Lasser, whom he married in 1966.

In 1964, the movie producer Charles K. Feldman hired Allen to write the script for a film called *What’s New, Pussycat?* directed by Clive Donner. Allen also got a supporting part in it, but much to his frustration, Feldman and Donner constantly tampered with his script during the shooting. Nevertheless, *What’s New, Pussycat?* became a great box office success, which turned Allen into a bankable screenwriter and movie actor. He took advantage of the endless shooting of this movie to write his first play, *Don’t Drink the Water*, which was quickly staged on Broadway. Thirty years later he adapted it for television.

In 1965, Allen agreed to improve a mediocre Japanese detective movie and replaced its soundtrack with extravagant

⁵ Risto Fried, “The Dream Content of Ingmar Bergman’s ‘A Shorter Tale About One of Jack the Ripper’s earliest Childhood Memories’”, unpublished manuscript quoted in: Frank Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 50.

⁶ Gado, p. 100.

dialogues he wrote with a few friends. As Jean-Pierre Coursodon put it, the final result titled *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* “is a parody of a thriller that is pretty much its own parody, and Allen’s jokes [thus] often sound almost redundant⁷.” That same year, *The New Yorker* printed one of his short stories, *The Gossage-Vardebedian papers*. During the seventies, he published more short stories in various magazines which appeared along with three brief plays in three collections: *Getting Even* (1971), *Without Feathers* (1975) and *Side Effects* (1980).

After playing a small part in *Casino Royale* (1967), and rewriting some of his dialogues in it, Woody Allen, who had just divorced Louise Lasser, wrote his second play, *Play It Again, Sam*, and acted in it on Broadway with Tony Roberts and a young debutante, Diane Keaton. She rapidly became Allen’s new companion and, even though they broke up in the early seventies, Keaton remained Allen’s leading actress and artistic muse from 1973 to 1979; they are still very close today.

In 1968, Allen wrote the script for *Take the Money and Run* for United Artists with his childhood friend Mickey Rose. After some negotiations, he got to direct the movie and play the main part. This launched Allen’s career as a movie director and made him give up stand-up comedy. Since then, he has devoted himself to cinema almost ceaselessly, directing a movie a year (except in 1970) for over 40 years, a feat unequaled by any post-war American director.

Take the Money and Run, a crude-looking movie with a loose plot and often extremely funny gags and sketches, heralds the future oeuvre of the director: it has the appearance of a documentary, like *Zelig* (1983), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), parts of *Bananas* (1971), and *Don’t Drink the Water* (1994). Like *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?* and most of his movies and short stories, it “recycles” works by other artists, spoofing memorable scenes of several famous movies (*The Hustler*, *A Man and a Woman*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, etc.). Moreover, like so many future Allenesque characters, the hero of *Take the Money and Run* seems unable to adapt to his environment.

Allen’s next movie, *Bananas*, resembles *Take the Money and Run* in tone, style and structure and features a similar, unlucky and blundering hero. In 1972, the director adapted *Play*

⁷ Jean-Pierre Coursodon, *American Directors Vol. II* (New-York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983), p. 13.

It Again, Sam for the screen. As with the play he acted in the movie with Diane Keaton and Tony Roberts but left the direction to Herbert Ross. After this, Allen directed three other “pure” comedies: *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (1972), *Sleeper* (1973) and *Love and Death* (1975), which showed increasing progress in his command of the *mise en scène* technique. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*, vaguely inspired by David Reuben’s book of the same name, features seven uneven sketches⁸. *Sleeper*⁹ parodies several science-fiction novels and movies, and refers to great American directors and comedians of the silent era. Allen shot *Take the Money and Run* and *Bananas* as quickly as possible to live up to his production company’s expectations and ensure profits, which partly explains the crude look of these two films. But from *Sleeper* in 1973 until the early nineties, the director paid particular attention to the visual aspect of his films. So much so that, when he found the light too harsh for his taste, he would risk exceeding the budget by halting a shooting for several days to wait for clouds. This preference for softer light has prompted him to shoot most of his movies in the fall.

Sleeper’s success allowed Allen to hire Gishlain Cloquet, the prestigious Belgian director of photography, to shoot *Love and Death*. This hilarious parody of *War and Peace* and a few other great Russian novels of the 19th century features frequent visual gags but privileges verbal humor. In fact, the character played by Allen often acts like a stand-up comedian. *Love and Death* likewise introduces weighty themes that Allen presents in much more detail in his serious movies: moral loneliness in an uncaring universe, obsessive fear of death, life’s meaninglessness, existential uneasiness and the temptation of suicide.

Certain reviewers have called the Woody Allen persona in his early movies a ‘schlemiel’. However, ‘schlemiel’ has a broad meaning that can be applied to any unlucky and clumsy Jewish character, and nothing indicates that Woody Allen based his early

⁸ Allen cut out an extra sketch, *What makes man a homosexual*, shortly before the release of the movie in the United States. The script of this sketch is published in *On Being Funny* by Eric Lax (New York: Charterhouse, 1975).

⁹ The American version of *Sleeper* includes a scene in which Miles (Allen) is perplexed by his reflection in a bathroom mirror. It was removed from the European version and replaced by Miles performing magic tricks for Luna (Diane Keaton).

characters on the schlemiels of Jewish-American literature. On the other hand, Steve Seidman demonstrates in his book *Comedian Comedy, A Tradition in Hollywood Film*, that the early Woody Allen persona descended from the most famous Jewish and non-Jewish comedians of American cinema: Bob Hope, Groucho Marx, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Jerry Lewis and Danny Kaye. Allen, who greatly admires these comics, especially Hope and Marx, explains:

Hope or Chaplin or Groucho or all of them, they're all scuffling to make money or scuffling to get the girl or escaping from some danger. I'm a standard comic that way, absolutely standard. I do one-line jokes like Hope [...], no different from what Charlie Chaplin was doing or Keaton going after the girl or scared of being lost in the boat. We're all out of the same mold¹⁰.

In 1976, Allen departed from the tradition of the great American comics when he directed *Annie Hall*. This movie chronicles the problematic love story between Alvy Singer, an intellectual stand-up comedian, and Annie Hall, an aspirant singer, during the seventies in New York. This movie signaled a spectacular turning point in the director's career: for the first time Allen used important themes and strategies which were to recur in his subsequent movies: 1) he created complex personas, much closer to everyday people than the stereotypical comic characters of his past comedies; 2) he introduced the theme of confusion between reality and fiction; 3) his movie was considered autobiographical (wrongly so, as we will see) by a majority of reviewers; 4) like many other subsequent Allen characters, Alvy unfavorably compares Los Angeles to New York and heaps praise upon the latter. *Annie Hall* also marks the beginning of a fruitful ten-year collaboration between Allen and Gordon Willis, one of the major directors of photography of his generation, who helped Allen to develop his visual style. The latter had filmed *Sleeper* and *Love and Death* in a "classical¹¹" way, but, from

¹⁰ Leonard Probst, *Off Camera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1975), pp. 254-255.

¹¹ With the term "classical", I refer to the method with which a director films his actors in full or medium shot from two or three different angles. He then asks his actors to play the scene again to film each of them in close-up. In the editing room the various shots are alternated, creating the impression that the long shots and the close-ups were filmed simultaneously.

then on, he endowed each of his movies with a particular style, appropriate to its topic and themes.

One year after *Annie Hall*, Allen surprised his admirers with his new movie, *Interiors*, a dark drama depicting the unraveling of a neurotic mother in her fifties, in which the director does not appear. Instead of praising the director's boldness and courage, several American movie critics took Allen to task for turning his back on comedy. Despite the movie's sincerity and its thematic consistencies with Allen's two previous movies, these critics dismissed *Interiors* as a pretentious Bergmanesque essay. Granted, some of its dialogues sound at times too literary¹², but the many impressive qualities of *Interiors* outweigh its flaws. *Interiors* may have been considered "Bergmanesque" because it belongs to a genre that has always been neglected by American cinema. However, Bergman's influence on *Interiors* does not exceed that of several other artists such as Anton Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill (four of Allen's favorite playwrights).

Manhattan (1979), a huge critical and public success, plunges us into the lives of a few intellectual New-Yorkers and goes back to a lighter tone closer to that of *Annie Hall*. It is one of Allen's finest feature films and one in which he uses Cinemascope to magnify New York City. *Stardust Memories* (1980), on the other hand, failed at the box-office and received indifferent reviews from many American critics. They assumed that Allen tried to ridicule them and his audience through his main character, a director who doesn't want to make funny movies anymore. Besides, many reviewers were confused by the labyrinthine structure of the movie. However, to me, and to Allen himself, *Stardust Memories* ranks among his most ambitious and successful movies, as I will try to demonstrate in the second part of this book.

¹² Allen has often pointed out this defect and explained that he had been influenced by the literary style of the subtitles of his favorite European movies. He even laments the coldness of *Interiors* which, in his opinion, could have been avoided, had he filmed it in warmer tones and introduced the warm character of Pearl (Maureen Stapleton) earlier in the story. The world of Eve, the main character of *Interiors*, is cold indeed but not the movie itself. If Pearl, who disrupts Eve's stifling environment, had appeared earlier, the story might have had less impact on the audience who would not have acquired enough knowledge about this world before its destruction. Nevertheless, every drama Allen has directed since *Interiors* has been filmed in warm tones.

After directing four challenging and artistically successful movies, whose form mirrored the mental landscape of their main characters, Allen wrote a new play, *The Floating Light Bulb*, and delivered a lighter film, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982). This marked the beginning of a new period for him, which can be called the Farrow period. In 1980, Allen started an amorous relationship with the actress Mia Farrow and, until their break-up twelve years later, she got to play varied and rich parts in thirteen of his movies. During the first half of the Farrow period (from *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* to *Radio Days*, 1987), Allen's movies were lighter and more optimistic than those of the late seventies. Moreover, they almost always end with the vision of one or several happily united (or about to be united) couples (except for the characters in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* in 1985); this is a rare feature in the director's oeuvre. The rosy¹³ Farrow period strikes us by its diversity; after *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*'s surprising ode to nature, despite Allen's well-known distaste for the countryside, the director invents an American idol of the thirties in *Zelig* (1983). Like Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane* this character partially appears in mock documents of the period, which Allen and his cinematographer Gordon Willis purposefully damaged to make them seem genuine. Then Allen pays tribute to small-time cabaret artists and their impresarios in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), his fourth black-and-white movie in five years. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a movie character escapes his cinematic world, and Allen brilliantly explores the "logical" consequences of this disruption of order for the "real" world. *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) looks like an optimistic remake of *Interiors*; both movies feature three relatively similar sisters but *Hannah and Her Sisters* mixes drama with humor. In this movie, Allen started to collaborate with a new prestigious director of photography, Carlo Di Palma¹⁴, who altered the director's style: Allen started to resort to longer and more intricate master shots and to many more zoom shots.

After *Radio Days*, a cartoonish homage to the American radio shows of the forties, the Farrow period turned from rosy to dark. For the first (and last?) time in his career, Woody Allen shot five dramatic movies in six years: *September* (1987),

¹³ Two movies of this period actually carry the word "rose" in their titles!

¹⁴ Di Palma is responsible for the splendid photography of *Blow-Up* and *Red Desert*, both directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

Another Woman (1988), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), *Shadows and Fog* (1991) and *Husbands and Wives* (1992). The third and the fourth of these movies contain a few comic interludes but all of them deal with anguish in the face of aging and death, Weltschmerz in a godless world and the difficulties of love. Moreover, three of these movies base their plots on one or several murders. This line of five dramas is only interrupted by a comic short movie, *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989), and a deceptively light comedy, *Alice* (1990). *September* plunges us into the lives of a few, rather depressed vacationers at the end of a summer and suggests a Chekhovian play adapted for the screen; the entire plot takes place in one setting, a cottage. In *Another Woman*, Marion Post (Gena Rowlands), a fifty-year-old philosophy professor, discovers that she deluded herself for many years into thinking that her life has been successful. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* contains a disenchanting moral reflection with two parallel plots. In the first plot, a renowned ophthalmologist orders the assassination of his increasingly hysterical mistress and then finds himself gnawed by remorse. In the second (lighter) plot, an idealistic director of documentaries hopelessly endeavors to raise money for one of his projects while trying to seduce a pretty producer. The hero of *Oedipus Wrecks*¹⁵ is a successful lawyer plagued by the incessant interventions of his overbearing mother, a stereotypical Jewish Mama. Like Marion Post in *Another Woman*, the eponymous heroine of *Alice*, a bourgeoisie in her forties, suddenly senses the emptiness in her life. With the help of a healer/magician, she manages to start over again. In *Shadows and Fog*, a remake of the play *Death*, which Allen wrote in 1975, several characters, among them an elusive serial killer, wander the streets of a foggy town at night. The lighting and the black and white photography evoke the style of pre-war German expressionist directors, while the name of the main character (Kleinman), his feeling of alienation and other plot details recall Franz Kafka's work. *Husbands and Wives*, a splendid pseudo-documentary (shot by a cameraman who had to improvise his filming) depicts the lives of two couples, whose relationships are falling apart. To this day, it is Allen's only strictly dramatic movie in which he plays one of the characters.

¹⁵ *Oedipus Wrecks* is one of the three short movies that are part of an ensemble called *New York Stories*; Martin Scorsese and Francis Coppola directed the two other shorts.

In the middle of the shooting of *Husbands and Wives*, Mia Farrow and Woody Allen brutally terminated their amorous and artistic relationship and started to fight each other in court over the custody of their children. A new artistic period began for the filmmaker. In 1993, he directed *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, a comic homage to *films noirs* such as *Double Indemnity* by Billy Wilder and *The Lady from Shanghai* by Orson Welles. Then followed *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994), which spoofs movies of the Hollywood golden era about theater and gangsters. Next was *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), a “pure” and somewhat unbalanced comedy about a man who tries to find and then help the mother of his adopted son. After this Allen made *Everyone Says I Love You*, a playful musical with actors who cannot sing! In 1996, Allen wrote a brilliant one-act play, *Central Park West*. It was quickly staged on Broadway along with two other one-acters by David Mamet and Elaine May. In his next movie, *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), Allen underscores the chaos in the life of his main character, Harry Block (a blocked writer), through numerous jump-cuts. *Celebrity* (1998) satirizes stardom in the United-States of our time, and *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999) chronicles the life of Emmet Ray, allegedly the world’s second best guitarist of the 1930s and, in reality, a figment of Allen’s vivid imagination. *Small Time Crooks* (2000), whose hero reminds one of the blundering gangster of *Take the Money and Run*, marks Allen’s return to “pure” comedy. It was followed by *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001), *Hollywood Ending* (2002), *Anything Else* (2003) and *Scoop* (2006), four comedies replete with sparkling *bons mots* and classical Allen situations. In *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), the director presents us with a dramatic and a comic version of the same story. In 2005 and 2007 Allen directed *Match Point* and *Cassandra’s Dream*, his first “pure” dramas since the early 90s. Over the last years, Allen, ever the restless workaholic, also acted in movies by fellow directors and wrote, as well as directed, two one-act plays in 2003, *Riverside Drive* and *Old Saybrook*, and a dramatic play in 2004, *A Second Hand Memory*. In 2008, he directed an Opera (Puccini’s *Gianni Schicchi*) for the first time in his career and released *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, a bittersweet comedy set in the Catalan capital.

After the release of *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, Allen explained that he shot this light comedy to divert himself from the traumatizing battle in courts with Mia Farrow. He added he felt guilty about dedicating one year of his life to “an

unambitious undertaking [...], a trivial picture¹⁶”, and that, in normal times, he would never have succumbed to that temptation. However, in the following years, the director shot at least seven other “trivial pictures”. He has often mentioned how happy and serene his companion Soon-Yi has made him feel since 1993, a year that distinctively marks the beginning of a new “rosy” period in his oeuvre. Does this mean that the director’s light and dark periods correspond to happy and difficult periods in his life? Or did Allen direct mostly “rosy” pictures between 1993 and 2004 because he could no longer afford to direct non-comedic movies? (All his more somber movies from the previous period had been financial failures) *Match Point* and *Cassandra’s Dream* may mark the beginning of a new period since they became Allen’s first successful dramas at the box-office.

As this book goes to press, Allen has just released *Whatever Works*, a comedy set in New York and based on a script he wrote in the 1970s.

PRESENTATION OF THIS STUDY

In this study, which addresses primarily readers who know Woody Allen’s oeuvre quite well and who wish to explore its thematic and stylistic aspects, I have chosen to analyze a recurring theme of the artist’s work: his characters’ desire to escape, in various forms and to different degrees, the world they come from to find refuge in another. This new world can be sociocultural, mental or fictional. I will analyze this yearning for another sociocultural world in the first part of the book and will discuss the theme of the Jewish Mama and the influence of Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* on Allen’s movies. I will also try to explain why the Allenesque hero always finds himself attracted to the so-called Waspish woman. In the second part, I will analyze Allen’s mental worlds and thus his “mental movies” in which all we see on the screen represents the main character’s world view. Here I will focus especially on *Interiors*, *Annie Hall*, *Stardust Memories*, *Deconstructing Harry* and *Another Woman*. This second part will also try to demonstrate the particular originality and logic of Allen’s *mise en scène*. The third part of the study will focus on Allenesque characters fascinated by “unreal” and/or magic worlds (movies, novels, etc.).

¹⁶ In: Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 255. See also: Régine Magné, “Entretiens avec Woody Allen”, *Sud-Ouest*, 13 October 1993.

Each part will examine recurring characteristics and resemblances of Allen's worlds and the dangers for his characters in passing from one world to another. I will also try to demonstrate that Woody Allen lures us into believing that his movies are autobiographical. However, the forms of some of the director's most ambitious works express, sometimes surprisingly, his preferences and his personality.

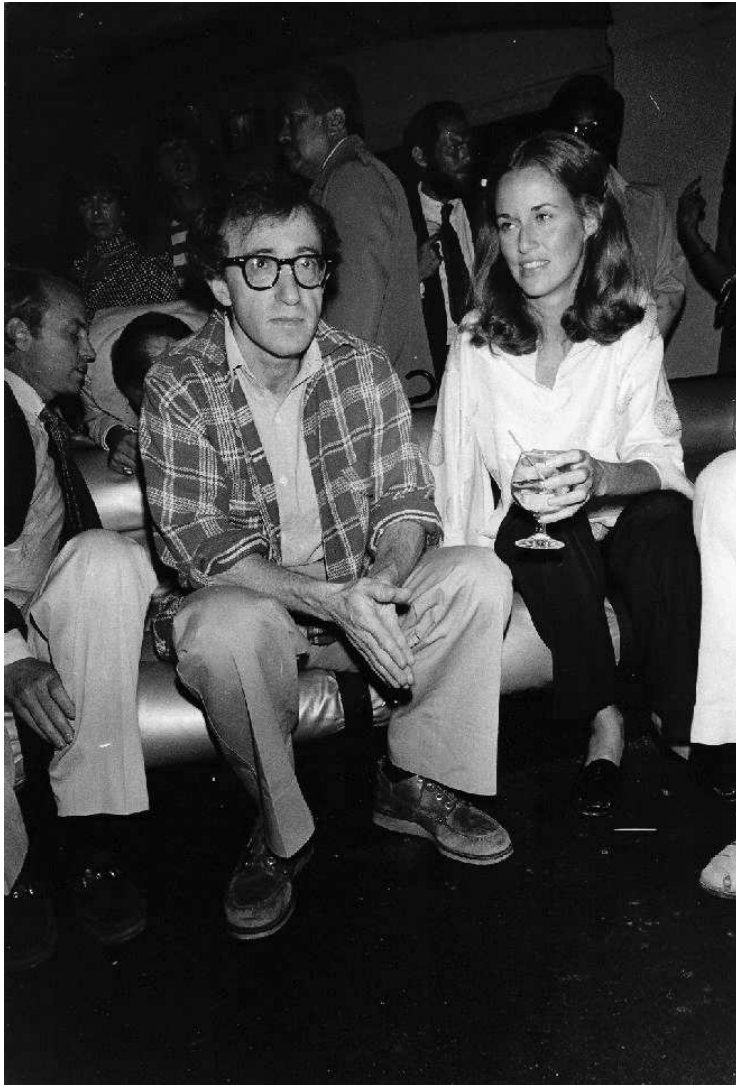
This study includes all movies written and/or directed by Woody Allen. However, some of them will not be analyzed in as much detail as others. This may be because they are either not as rich as the rest (e.g. *Bananas* or *Mighty Aphrodite*), or, despite their merits, are less relevant to my topic (e.g. *Zelig* or *September*). I will discuss *What's New, Pussycat?* only briefly since Allen wrote it but could not control it. On the other hand, *Play It Again, Sam*, though directed by Herbert Ross, will appear in several of my chapters, because Ross remained faithful to Allen's script. The artist's plays and short stories are usually less ambitious than his films but I will nevertheless analyze his finest play, *The Floating Light Bulb*, and one of his best short stories, *The Kugelmass Episode*, because they too are most relevant to my topic.

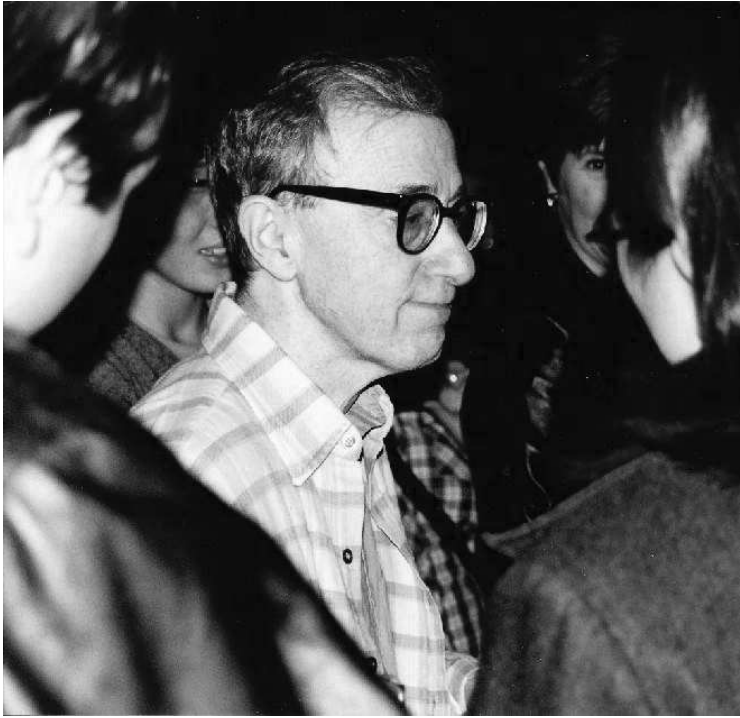
Page 13: Woody Allen in the 1960s.

Page 14: Woody Allen in a night-club in 1977. Copyright: Sygma.

Page 15: Woody Allen in 2001 in Oakland, California, after one of his jazz concerts. Copyright Jodie Kalikow and Hal Holway; photo by Jodie Kalikow.







– Part One –

“THE TWO ARE LIKE OIL
AND WATER”: ALLEN’S
JEWISH AND WASPISH
WORLDS

CHAPTER I: FROM ONE WORLD TO ANOTHER

The Jewish characters played by Woody Allen in his movies often live in an environment without other Jews. These characters keep their families at bay and usually make friends or seduce women in Waspish¹ surroundings. In other words, these characters, without openly admitting it, try to cut off their Jewish roots to merge into a parallel sociocultural world.

I.1. THE LEGACY OF NAZISM

The desire of Allen's Jewish characters to cut themselves off from their original environment could be attributed to their reluctance to accept their Jewishness in a century where millions of Jews were mass slaughtered. Most of Allen's heroes discovered the horror of the Shoah at a very young age, prompting them to refer frequently to the Third Reich regime, even when commenting on incidents which bear no relation to Nazism. Fielding Mellish (Allen in *Bananas*) declares that his former lover might want to date a Hitler look-alike. Allan Felix (Allen in *Play It Again, Sam*), left by his wife, pictures her riding a motorbike with a virile companion and calls the latter a Nazi. Miles Monroe (Allen in *Sleeper*) uses the same term to describe the rebel who seduces Luna (Diane Keaton). Alvy Singer (Allen in *Annie Hall*) watches *The Sorrow and the Pity*² and discusses it with Annie (Diane Keaton). In *Manhattan*, during the evening at the Museum of Modern Art, Isaac Davis (Allen) gets indignant when he hears about Nazis who plan to march in New Jersey and says they should be chased away with bricks and baseball bats. Later on, he jests that he never had a relationship with a woman that lasted longer than the one between Hitler and Eva Braun. Sandy Bates (Allen in *Stardust Memories*) quips lugubriously

¹ Waspish means characteristic of a descendant of American White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Wasps).

² *The Sorrow and the Pity (Le chagrin et la pitié)*: Dir. M. Ophuls. Scr. M. Ophuls, A. Harris. France (1969). This lavish documentary examines the disposition of the French during the German occupation in World War II.

to his childhood friend that “if I was not born in Brooklyn, if I had been born in Poland, or Berlin, I’d be a lampshade today, right?” Later on, Sandy explains to the police officers who arrest him that several of his relatives were victimized by the Nazis. The narrator of *Radio Days* claims he saw a German submarine off the New York coast (a questionable declaration, especially since he also admits to be prone to exaggeration). In *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Frederick (Max von Sydow) theorizes about Auschwitz, Elliot³ – like Max in *The Floating Light Bulb*⁴ – compares his wife to the Gestapo, and Mickey (Allen) likens his disastrous evening with Holly (Dianne Wiest) to the Nuremberg trials. Later on, he asks his father: “If there’s a God [...] why were there Nazis?” This question recurs in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* where Clifford Stern (Allen) tells his wife that he remembers so well the day she stopped sleeping with him because it coincided with Adolf Hitler’s Birthday. Clifford also admires the work of a survivor of the death camps, Louis Levy, a character reminiscent of Primo Levi⁵. Larry Lipton (Allen in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*) cannot stand Richard Wagner’s operas, which were highly appreciated by Hitler and, therefore, were once considered symbols of Nazism. Well aware of this fact, Larry explains that each time he listens to Wagner, he feels like invading Poland. In *Mighty Aphrodite*, Lenny (Allen) tells Kevin (Michael Rapaport) that Linda Ash (Mira Sorvino), a brainless hooker, got a part in *Schindler’s List*⁶. The narrator of *Everyone Says I Love You*, who is the daughter of the main Jewish character of the story, thinks her parents’ ill-tempered maid may have worked for Hitler. The hero of *Deconstructing Harry* exclaims: “not only do I know that we [the Jews] lost six million [in the Shoah] but the scary

³ Frederick and Elliot are obviously not Jewish, but, as we will see later in greater detail, they act and react like Allen’s typical Jewish characters.

⁴ Woody Allen, *The Floating Light Bulb* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 8.

⁵ Primo Levi (1919-1987), a Jewish Italian survivor of the Auschwitz death camp, wrote a momentous book about his experience of the Shoah: *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947). In April 1987, he took his life by throwing himself from the third floor into the stairwell of his apartment. Allen’s character takes his life in a similar manner: we are told he jumped out of a window.

⁶ *Schindler’s List*: Dir. S. Spielberg. Scr. S. Zaillian. Act. L. Neeson, R. Fiennes, B. Kingsley. USA (1993) This feature movie recounts how one thousand Jews were saved by the now famous Oscar Schindler during World War II.

thing is that records are made to be broken.” Later on, realizing he badly hurt his relatives, Harry compares himself to Hitler, Goering and Goebbels. C. W. Briggs (Allen in *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*) mentions Hitler twice, and Val Waxman (Allen in *Hollywood Ending*) yells that “if I drove around in a 1939 Mercedes, people would think I was Himmler”. In the comic part of *Melinda and Melinda*, Hobie (Will Ferrel), a married man, confides to a friend that he has fallen in love with his neighbor Melinda: “I dream of myself kissing Melinda and then I’m immediately on trial at Nuremberg.” Even *Love and Death*, the only full-length movie by Allen which takes place before the emergence of fascism, contains a subtle allusion to Hitlerism: when Sonia (Diane Keaton) mentions a quote by Attila the Hun to Boris Grushenko (Allen), the latter retorts indignantly that he cannot understand her mentioning a Hun to him. In a movie replete with esoteric plays on words and extreme anachronisms, Allen, who plays a Russian but reacts like a Jew, alludes to the second (derogatory) meaning of Hun: German.

Hitlerism seems to have traumatized Allen’s main characters⁷ to such an extent that they constantly refer to it. Some of them have particular reasons to feel traumatized as they live under Nazism or similar oppressive environments. The hero of *Sleeper* wakes up, after a two-hundred year sleep, in an Orwellian society where a citizen (one of Luna’s friends) displays a Swastika. Thomas J. Kinne also points out that the Volkswagen which appears in the middle of the movie was one of the symbols of Hitler’s Germany⁸. Boris Grushenko wants to assassinate Napoleon who, from a Russian point of view, shares obvious similarities with Hitler. Leonard Zelig (Allen in *Zelig*) goes to Germany just after Hitler has seized power. *Shadows and Fog* – the title alludes to Alain Resnais’ *Night*

⁷ And maybe Allen himself who wrote an essay about the Shoah, “Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind” (published in: *The Best American Essays 1991*, Joyce Carol Oates [Editor] [New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991]) in which we understand that he has read numerous books by death camp survivors, such as *The Night* by Elie Wiesel. Moreover, one of Allen’s short stories, *The Shmeed Memoirs*, focuses on Hitler’s (fictitious) barber.

⁸ Thomas J. Kinne, *Elemente Jüdischer Tradition im Werk Woody Allens* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 182. It is, however, possible that Allen merely likes that type of car which also appears in *Bananas*, *Play It Again, Sam*, and *Annie Hall*.

*and Fog*⁹ – features several references to Jews and Nazism: a Jewish family is accused of poisoning wells and being responsible for every misfortune in town. A policeman, helped by a priest, draws up a list of Jewish people they believe to be guilty of committing crimes, and Kleinman (Allen)’s boss announces that his employee is “a slimy, cringing vermin, more suited to extermination than life on this planet”, a libel reminiscent of the one uttered by Hitler against the Jewish people¹⁰.

Page 23 (top): In *Sleeper*, Luna (Diane Keaton) invites a few friends for dinner. One of them, enjoying what appears to be a futuristic version of Marijuana, displays a swastika. Copyright: United Artists.

Pages 23-25: The opening scene in *Stardust Memories*: Sandy Bates (Allen) tries to exit his gloomy train wagon to join a beautiful blond woman (Sharon Stone) in another train wagon, but to no avail. Copyright: United Artists.

⁹ *Night and Fog (Nuit et brouillard)*: Dir. A. Resnais. Scr. J. Cayrol. France (1956). A poignant montage of archives filmed and pictures taken in Hitler’s death camps.

¹⁰ “It is only right and fair that the world should be freed from an inferior race that proliferates like vermin.” („Es ist ja wohl nur recht und billig, die Welt von einer minderwertigen Rasse zu befreien, die sich wie Ungeziefer vermehrt.“) Quoted in the German version of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (Hamburg: Rowolt, 1989), p. 3 (My translation from the German).







The Allenesque characters' desire to leave the community of those eternally persecuted to become full members of the most powerful country in the world, that is Waspish America, could thus come from their urge to escape Nazism. This process is illustrated by the first scene in *Stardust Memories*, an extract of Sandy Bates's latest movie, where Sandy desperately tries to leave a train compartment almost exclusively occupied by Jewish people. Some elements in the scene (dilapidated suitcases, locked doors, pervading sadness) clearly allude to the trains which took Jews to Hitler's death camps. During this scene, Sandy tries in vain to get out of the aforementioned compartment to get into another filled with sporty and cheery young Waspish people. When he peers into this second much more attractive compartment, the camera, obviously adopting Sandy's point of view, lingers in close up on a ravishing young blonde woman (Sharon Stone). This detail expands the metaphor: escaping the deadly fate of the Jewish people by joining the winners of the Second World War can be achieved through the seduction of what the Nazis called Aryan women. Sandy's belief in this concept could explain why all the faces of Jewish characters in *Stardust Memories* are harshly deformed by wide angles while the three Waspish women who play an important part in Sandy's life are flattered by the camera.

Since Allen has explained that the greatest part of *Stardust Memories* is created in the protagonist's mind, it becomes obvious that Sandy himself makes his Jewish counterparts look repellent¹¹ and contrasts them with three beautiful *shiksas*¹² (Charlotte Rampling, Jessica Harper and Marie-Christine Barrault) who symbolize for him the wondrous world he craves to be part of.

Because they want to seduce *shiksas* for the aforementioned reasons, Allen's heroes identify with prestigious and seductive Waspish men. In *Play It Again, Sam*, Allan Felix endeavors to imitate Humphrey Bogart who, in movies of the forties, acted the part of prestigious heroes who seduced pretty Waspish women and sometimes fought fascist forces. This is obviously the case in *Casablanca*, the ending of

¹¹ Filmed by a non-Jewish director, such images would probably have been considered anti-Semitic.

¹² A *shiksa* is a non-Jewish woman, especially a young one. See Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: Pocket Book, 1970).

which is shown at the beginning of *Play It Again, Sam*. In *Annie Hall*, when a paparazzo bothers Alvy Singer, the latter pretends to be Robert Redford, a quintessential representative (and one who attracts beautiful women on the screen) of the sociocultural world Alvy wants to be part of. In *Zelig*, Leonard Zelig emulates Charles Lindbergh, one of the great American heroes of the twentieth century, when he flies (upside down!) over the Atlantic and then parades in the streets of New York to the cheers of thousands of people.

Also, in *Manhattan*, Isaac Davis nicknamed himself Ike, an uncommon short version of the name Isaac, which was the nickname of Dwight Eisenhower, general commander of the allied forces fighting Germany in World War II and US President from 1953 to 1961. Likewise, Sheldon Millstein (Allen in *Oedipus Wrecks*) changes his name to Mills in spite of his mother's strong disapproval.

That citizens of the powerful post-World War II United States should want to negate their Jewishness because of the Shoah can only be explained by the immense trauma felt by Jews in general after the pitiless attempt to eradicate them, an attempt that may have convinced them they were universally cursed. A few years ago the moviemaker Oliver Stone confided in the magazine *Movieline* that his father, in spite of his American citizenship, had warned him shortly after the end of World War II:

My father also said, "don't tell the truth [about being Jewish]. Because the persecutions are going to come again. [...] Don't tell anybody you're Jewish. [...] They'll get you, they'll come back." And maybe he was right. We don't know the end of the century yet¹³.

In her book about the Jewish sense of humor¹⁴, Judith Stora-Sandor quotes a passage from *Portnoy's Complaint* about Nazis being an excuse for every awkward occurrence in the narrator's household. She explains that the long chain of persecutions suffered by the Jewish people in Europe, of which the last was carried out by the Nazis, affects their general behavior and leads to specific Jewish neuroses transferred from one generation to another. Allen's heroes suffer from those

¹³ Lawrence Grobel, "The First Stone", *Movieline* (October 1997).

¹⁴ Judith Stora-Sandor, *L'humour juif dans la littérature de Job à Woody Allen* (Paris: P.U.F., 1984), p. 218.

neuroses but, for reasons we shall examine later in this book, not their families.

In another chapter of her study¹⁵, Judith Stora-Sandor analyzes the paranoid behavior of the eponymous hero of *Stern*, a novel by Bruce Jay Friedman. She explains that only a Jew, whose paranoia has been stimulated for centuries, has such a capacity to widely exaggerate his mishaps. Stern's paranoia, which functions as a defense mechanism, resembles that of several Allenesque heroes; Rob (Tony Roberts) calls his friend Alvy Singer a paranoiac because the latter detects anti-Semitic allusions in banal questions addressed to him. Sandy Bates panics when he finds a pigeon in his apartment and declares it probably carries swastikas under its wings. When police officers interrogate him about a handgun they have found in his car, he tells them, "I carry a pistol, I've a thing about Nazis, it's a little... it's a little paranoid weakness I have." In *Anything Else*, Dobel (Allen) claims he overheard anti-Semitic comments in a club, but Jerry Falk (Jason Biggs), who spent the evening with him, obviously believes his friend imagined those insults. Later into the movie, Dobel buys a survival kit and a rifle for Jerry because he believes that, as a Jew, his protégé needs all the protection he can get.

The behavior of Allen's heroes likens them to the heroes of certain Jewish-American novels and short stories of the sixties and seventies such as *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth, *How To Be A Jewish Mother* by Dan Greenburg, *Scuba Duba* and *A Mother's Kisses* by Bruce Jay Friedman, *The War of Camp Omongo* by Burt Blechman, *Teitlebaum's Widow* by Wallace Markfield and *Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories* by Saul Bellow. The Jewish heroes of these stories also reject their culture to blend into the Waspish world, particularly through the conquest of Waspish women. They do so for the aforementioned reasons but also to free themselves from their overbearing mothers. In the United States such vampiric and castrating mothers are called Jewish Mamas or Jewish Moms. They do not seem to feature in Allen's movies (except in *Oedipus Wrecks*) but the fact that the director's Jewish characters and the above-cited heroes of Jewish-American novels behave similarly points to the contrary.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 240.