

## GREAT DIRECTORS: WOODY ALLEN

ENGL 491-01  
W. Taylor  
School: 206-296-5418  
Home: 206-860-6087  
btaylor@seattleu.edu

Tuesday and Thursday, 7:00 to 8:05

FILM 405-01  
Fall, 2009  
Casey 506  
MWF 11:00-11:45  
and by appointment

### Overview:

Over a period of forty years, Woody Allen has written and directed approximately forty films, in addition to acting in many films by other directors. This amazing productivity makes it very difficult to choose which films to study in a ten-week course. I have spent the past summer watching and rewatching all forty of them, and I have made some interesting discoveries. First of all, with the exception of his two earliest films, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* and *What's New, Pussycat?* (neither of which he directed and both of which he hated), Allen has not made a bad movie. They are not all equally good, of course, and some of his best have been financial failures, but there is not a film among them that is not at least good. The first few are virtually plotless, with only a vague storyline upon which he could hang his one-liner jokes. *Take the Money and Run*, *Bananas*, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex*, and *Sleeper* could best be characterized as inspired silliness, and the audiences loved them. There are some fans who wish he would go back to making that kind of film. Those films also established the Woody Allen "persona," and the audience expectations created by that persona have been among the greatest problems Allen has faced as a writer and as an actor in his own films. There are still people who believe, with astonishing naiveté, that this "nebbish" persona is the "real" Woody Allen, and that has led to egregious misinterpretation of his work.

*Love and Death* was a major advance. Basing the film (very loosely!) on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, he developed something like a plot, though the one-liners still predominated. But here we see several elements which will continue to be important throughout his later works, such as his delight in parodying scenes from his favorite filmmakers (especially Bergman and Fellini), and his use of philosophical and literary allusions which many in his audience, perhaps most, will not recognize.

*Play It Again, Sam* (1972), based upon Allen's stage play of the same name, is the best film in which he had yet appeared, and the screenplay includes many thematic elements that he has continued to develop to the present day. However, the film was directed by Herbert Ross, not Woody Allen, and since this course deals with Allen primarily as a filmmaker, I have chosen not to include it.

His next film, *Annie Hall*, was his breakthrough production, artistically and financially, and established him as a major filmmaker rather than a goofy escapee from stand-up comedy. It won four Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Leading Actress (Diane Keaton). Allen was nominated for Best Leading Actor. The Academy Awards are a very

unreliable indicator of artistic excellence, but the continued success of the film to the present day confirms that the Academy, this one time, at least, got it right.

Allen did not attend the Academy Award Ceremony—he was playing with his jazz band that night in a club in Manhattan.

So our course will begin with *Annie Hall*. The following twenty years, from 1977 to 1997, saw the production of the greatest of Allen's works, and all but one of the films for this course are selected from that period. Not all of them were greeted with critical or popular acclaim, and with each new film, some critics lamented that the great artist had at last lost his touch, while other critics announced with joy that he had at last recovered it. That split critical response has continued with each release since 1997, including the most recent, *Whatever Works* (2009), hailed by some, reviled by others.

We will take the films up in chronological order. For many directors, this might not be the best organization, but with Allen, it is very advantageous, because of the way he has developed his primary themes and his cinematic techniques over the years. It is highly instructive to watch him grow, as both thinker and filmmaker. This selection also attempts to represent the various types of films he has made, including his most difficult, *Stardust Memories*, and his most problematic, *Deconstructing Harry*. Allen appears as an actor in seven of them.

*Annie Hall* (1977)

*Manhattan* (1979)

*Stardust Memories* (1980)

*The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985)

*Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)

*Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989)

*Husbands and Wives* (1992)

*Bullets over Broadway* (1994)

*Deconstructing Harry* (1997)

*Match Point* (2005)

No doubt this list will dismay you, because it omits some of your favorite films. I entirely sympathize—it omits some of my favorites, too, at least a dozen of them. As the quarter progresses, you will grow tired of my encouraging you to see *Radio Days*, a lovely film, or *Interiors*, a harrowing tragedy, or *Mighty Aphrodite*, with its delightful performance by Mira Sorvino (Academy Award), or *Alice*, a pure fairy tale, or *Everyone Says I Love You*, a terrific musical, performed by actors who cannot sing—including Woody Allen! And so on. He has done forty films—and another one is coming soon. Check them out, all of them.

As you have deduced from the list of the ten films we are going to study, we will be doing one a week. I have been working very hard on developing the logistics for accomplishing this. There are several ways you can access each video. First, you can rent it from a video store. The problem

with that is that there are thirty of you looking for the same video. Alternatively, you can join Netflix and get each film from them. The same problem may arise here—they may not have enough copies in their local distribution center. None of these films are available for download from Netflix or any other legal source I have found. The third alternative, and perhaps the best, is to watch the films here on campus. Each one will be screened at 7:00 Monday evening in this room, starting next Monday, 9/28. It is more fun to watch a film in a group, especially a comedy, as most of Allen's are. So I encourage you to do that. If you cannot, because your work schedule or another class conflicts, then you will have to use video stores, Netflix, or another rental service. But the films should be more easily available if most people are watching them here.

Because we will be seeing a film a week, I have ordered only one text, a book essentially written by Allen himself. It is called *Woody Allen on Woody Allen: In Conversation with Stig Björkman* and is essentially a record of many conversations, over a period of years, between the two men. Allen read the book before it was published, and says that this one and a biography by Eric Lax are the only two books about him he has ever read. In fact about thirty have been written. See the selected bibliography appended to this syllabus.

But this is a film class, and only four or five people in here have taken my Art of Film course. We must spend some time on the fundamental ideas, techniques, and vocabulary of film art in order to see, understand, appreciate, and *discuss* the films. Rather than add another text book, we will use an online course out of Yale University called Film Analysis Web Site 2.0.

<http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>

I will send you an e-mail with this URL as a link for easy access. Bookmark it.

### **Course Objectives:**

The primary objectives of the course are that you become familiar with ten (or more) major films by Woody Allen and understand the writing strategies of his screenplays, the primary themes of his films and how they develop through his career, the filmic concepts and techniques he has employed and how his skills in this regard have developed parallel to his growing need for complexity and subtlety. In support of this study and potentially of other film courses, you will acquire an understanding of the basic concepts, techniques, and vocabulary of film art and how to apply this knowledge in the analysis of particular films.

### **Procedures:**

The classes will be conducted primarily through discussion: discussion of the readings in the text, the material on the Film Analysis Web Site, the assigned films, and the study questions I will provide for each film. Because of the way Allen's films relate to one another, we may find it productive, as the quarter progresses, for *you* to provide the questions for discussing the films. Because of the nature of the course, participation in the discussion is essential for us to succeed. This will be difficult with thirty people in the class, so I solicit your help in keeping the

conversation active and productive.

We will take a brief cell phone break at 7:00 PM.

### **Summary of Requirements:**

1. Check your e-mail every day. I will frequently send you information and study materials.
2. For each class, read the assigned pages in the text.
3. For each class, work through the assigned sections of the Film Analysis Web Site.
4. View the film for the week at home or on campus, Monday or before.
5. Write a one-page paper on an assigned topic related to the film, due at the start of class Tuesday evening. To start the discussion, I will ask two or three people to read their papers aloud to the class.
6. The discussion of the film may continue on Thursday. Most of our discussion of the text and the Web site will also be on Thursday.
7. We will decide together whether or not to have a midterm exam.
8. Prepare a final paper (combination final exam and term paper).

The one-page papers (single-spaced, standard margins and fonts) must be submitted at the start of class on Tuesday. After the class has discussed the topic, late papers have little value as personal or original work. The assigned topics will deal either with themes of the film or its use of filmic techniques.

The details of the term paper will be explained more fully later. Essentially, it will deal with a particular theme or group of themes in Allen's films, and how these themes are developed through the films studied in the course (and any other of his films you wish to include). It will be due on the officially scheduled day for the final exam.

### **Plagiarism:**

I include the following note as a formal policy statement, required of all syllabi in the College of Arts and Sciences. Plagiarism is the representation of the words or thoughts of another author as one's own. I anticipate no such difficulty in here, but it does sometimes occur in film courses, and other courses, because so much material is available on the Internet. Research in support of papers is laudable and to be encouraged. Be very careful, however, to document, not only actual quotes or paraphrases, but also all *ideas* taken from other sources, with or without the original language. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism and will result in a failing grade for the course and will be reported to the Dean.

### **Grades:**

You will be evaluated on your essays, your classroom contributions, the midterm (if we have one) and the term paper/final exam.

Because the class discussions are an essential element of the course, I take roll, and attendance is required. Absences in excess of 15% (three classes) will adversely affect your final grade.

Class participation:	25%
Film essays:	25
Midterm exam:	20
Final essay:	30 (or 50, if we have no midterm)

### **Recurring Themes: An Introduction:**

Allen is a difficult filmmaker (and writer) to deal with, because, though his usual mode is humor, he is an extremely serious artist, one who is engaged with some of the most profound questions of human existence and behavior. He is able to raise these questions through his comedy, and that is a remarkable ability. Great comic artists have always been able to do that—Shakespeare, Cervantes, Chaucer, Mark Twain, all of them, but none of them, I think, do it with such apparent triviality and off-handedness as Allen. His throwaway lines can be crushing if they land on *you*. Audiences very frequently, maybe most frequently, laugh at his jokes, his one-liners, and do not notice the very serious questions which lie behind them. A toss-off quip may address a major philosophical, or more often, moral, issue. (“I’m just human, okay? You think you’re God!” A Well I have to model myself on somebody!) (“I think people should mate for life, like pigeons, or Catholics.”) The first film we will study, *Annie Hall*, begins with Woody (or is it the character he is playing?) delivering two jokes directly into the camera. They’re both funny, but they also introduce two of the major themes that run through nearly all of his films.

Because we are beginning the course so quickly, and watching *Annie Hall* next Monday, before we have a chance to meet together again, let me suggest some of the themes that arise in his works, so you can begin watching for them with this first film. Do not worry—these are not spoilers, and I am not taking away from you the fun of finding them yourself. There is much more than I can suggest here, but they will give you a kind of head start, a grounding in some of the ideas he explores. For example:

There is no god, no supernal power, and the world is without meaning, without purpose. There is no way to understand it beyond the science of physics. The universe is expanding, and since that expansion is accelerating, the universe will ultimately dissipate completely. The fact that this will not happen for billions of years in no way alters the inevitability of the event, or the lack of meaning or purpose in the universe which that future makes evident. Religion is simply one more superstition, like the baseball player who crosses himself after getting a hit, and is careful never to step on the foul lines (my image, not Allen’s).

Given this situation, there is no objective grounding for any moral or ethical code of conduct beyond arbitrary social agreements. And yet we feel the need for a binding code. How can such a code be found in a meaningless universe? If it is not possible, how do we direct or govern our behavior?

One such approach, admittedly illogical, may be based on “common decency,” which includes such “virtues” as loyalty to friends, constancy in love, avoidance of compromising our professed standards for the sake of hedonistic or narcissistic satisfaction. And yet the current American culture seems increasingly to abandon its professed moral standards for exactly that kind of satisfaction.

The literary and artistic movement known as “Modernism” was fully aware of the absurdity of the universe and the lack of meaning in life, and answered that terrible circumstance by elevating art to the status of a virtual religion. Art was the answer to the abyss, and ordered the chaos of the real world into an aesthetic unity with meaning. Salvation, for the artist and for the world, was to be found in art.

But in fact, Post-Modernists have found that art offers no such salvation. It is, and always has been, merely an entertainment, an amusement for the educated, “cultured” classes. Its futility is obvious in the face of the overwhelming misery in world—poverty, starvation, war, cruelty, disease, and ultimately, universally, death.

Post-Modern art (including literature and film) recognizes the emptiness of the “Modernist Project,” and goes beyond the “reflexiveness,” the self-referential awareness of the Modernists, and subjects itself to a constant, hypercritical evaluation of its own worth, which is found, at best, to be highly suspect, at worst, without significant value. From this point of view, Allen is clearly a Post-Modernist. Why does he go on making art? Certainly, his comments on his own works, which sound very modest and self-effacing, may reveal that he is highly skeptical of its value. And yet he soldiers on. In film after film, his characters are writers, novelists, poets, filmmakers, interior designers, musicians—artists all, and the significance or lack of significance of their work is always an issue.

This kind of constant self-criticism raises many other issues, such as the relationship of the artist to the world, to his or her own art, to the audience, to morality. What distinctions can be made between the man and the artist? When someone falls in love with an artist, does he or she love the person or the artist (that is, the artwork itself)? If an artist feels that the normal codes of behavior interfere with his functioning as a creative artist, is he justified in setting aside those standards, in service to his art? Does a different set of rules, or none at all, apply for the artist?

What is more important, art or life? In case of fire, does one rescue the last surviving copy of Shakespeare or an anonymous, unimportant human being (*Bullets over Broadway*)? If dealing with the needs of a spouse interferes with an artist’s creative work, is he justified in leaving that person, who may be severely damaged by the desertion?

There are several more issues that arise out of these few, as we will see.

There is also the matter of how Allen constructs his stories and directs his films. Most obvious and noteworthy is his apparent freedom in the treatment of time and space and of reality and

fantasy. His plots are labyrinths of flashbacks, dreams, breaking of the fourth wall, fantasies, inserted commentaries by characters, narrators, or unidentified voices. Many films (starting with *Take the Money and Run*, 1969) are constructed as faux documentaries, or use documentary techniques, though they are obviously not documentaries. This often creates the impression that his films are sloppily structured, but close scrutiny reveals just the opposite—they are tightly, meticulously built. But some of the effects of this approach closely connect to the questions about art I mentioned above. His films seem to be constantly calling themselves into question, knocking you out of the make-believe by doing things that are so *obviously* make-believe. Those incongruities are one of his sources of humor, but also a means of raising serious questions about the nature of narrative art, its relationship to reality, its manipulation of the audience, and the relationship of the audience to the work of art. He is astonishingly bold in his expectations of how far viewers will go in suspending their disbelief, and often telling them, through humor, that they don't *have* to believe it—and somehow, his serious themes emerge through this very oddballness.

### Schedule

Th 9/24 Introduction

[M 9/28 Screening of *Annie Hall*, 7:00 PM]

T 9/29 Paper due; Discuss *Annie Hall*; Textbook: Chapter 8

Th 10/1 Yale Film Analysis Web Site: Introduction; Basic Terms

[M 10/5 Screening of *Manhattan*, 7:00 PM]

T 10/6 Paper due; Discuss *Manhattan*; Textbook: Chapters 9 and 10  
 Th 10/8 Yale Web Site: Mise-en-scene

[M 10/12 Screening of *Stardust Memories*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 10/13 Paper due; Discuss *Stardust Memories*; Textbook: Chapter11  
 Th 10/15 Yale Web Site: Cinematography (Quality)

M 10/19 Screening of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 10/20 Paper due; Discuss *The Purple Rose of Cairo*; Textbook: Chapters 12, 13, and 14  
 Th 10/22 Cinematography (Framing, Scale and Movement)

[M 10/26 Screening of *Hannah and Her Sisters*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 10/27 Paper due; Discuss *Hannah and Her Sisters*; Textbook: Chapter15  
 Th 10/29 Yale Web Site: Editing (Devices: Transitions); Midterm (?)

[M 11/2 Screening of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 11/3 Paper due; Discuss *Crimes and Misdemeanors*; Textbook: Chapters 16 through 20  
 Th 11/5 Yale Web Site: Editing (Devices: Matches, Duration and Styles)

[M 11/9 Screening of *Husbands and Wives*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 11/10 Paper due; Discuss *Husbands and Wives*; Textbook: Chapters 21, 22, and 23  
 Th 11/12 Yale Web Site: Sound

[M 11/16 Screening of *Bullets over Broadway*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 11/17 Paper due; Discuss *Bullets over Broadway*; Textbook: Chapters 24, 25, and 26  
 Th 11/19 Review Yale Web Site material

[M 11/23 Screening of *Deconstructing Harry*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 11/24 Paper due; Discuss *Deconstructing Harry*; Textbook: Chapter27  
 Th 11/26 Holiday

[M 11/30 Screening of *Match Point*, 7:00 PM]  
 T 12/1 Paper due; Discuss *Match Point*; Textbook: Chapter28  
 Th 12/3 Last Class

Term Paper due: Wednesday, Dec. 9, 6:00 PM, in the classroom, or earlier, in my mailbox  
 For your reference, here is a list of films both written and directed by Allen. For a complete list of  
 all his professional activity, see the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB), <http://www.imdb.com/>

1. *Take the Money and Run* (1969)
2. *Bananas* (1971)
3. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex* (1972)
4. *Sleeper* (1973)
5. *Love and Death* (1975)
6. *Annie Hall* (1977)

7. *Interiors* (1978)
8. *Manhattan* (1979)
9. *Stardust Memories* (1980)
10. *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982)
11. *Zelig* (1983)
12. *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984)
13. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985)
14. *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)
15. *Radio Days* (1987)
16. *September* (1987)
17. *Another Woman* (1988)
18. *New York Stories* (Segment entitled "Oedipus Wrecks," 1989)
19. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989)
20. *Alice* (1990)
21. *Shadows and Fog* (1991)
22. *Husbands and Wives* (1992)
23. *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993)
24. *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994)
25. *Don't Drink the Water* (1994, TV)
26. *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995)
27. *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996)
28. *Deconstructing Harry* (1997)
29. *Celebrity* (1998)
30. *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999)
31. *Small Time Crooks* (2000)
32. *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001)
33. *Hollywood Ending* (2002)
34. *Anything Else* (2003)
35. *Melinda and Melinda* (2004)
36. *Match Point* (2005)
37. *Scoop* (2006)
38. *Cassandra's Dream* (2007)
39. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008)
40. *Whatever Works* (2009)

#### Selected Bibliography

Allen, Woody. The Complete Prose of Woody Allen. New York: Wings Books, 1994.

C. Four Films of Woody Allen: Annie Hall, Interiors, Manhattan, Stardust Memories. New York: Random House, 1982.

C. Hannah and Her Sisters. New York: Vintage, 1987.

C. Mere Anarchy. New York: Random House, 2008.

C. Three Films of Woody Allen: Zelig, Broadway Danny Rose, The Purple Rose of Cairo. New York: Vintage, 1987.

Bailey, Peter J. The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen. Lexington: Kentucky UP, 2001.

Björkman, Stig. Woody Allen on Woody Allen: In Conversation with Stig Björkman. rev. ed. New York: Grove, 1993.

Conard, Mark T., and Aeon J. Skoble, eds. Woody Allen and Philosophy: You Mean My Whole Philosophy Is Wrong?. Chicago: Open Court, 2004.

Girgus, Sam B. The Films of Woody Allen. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002.

Hirsch, Foster. Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life: The Films of Woody Allen. N.p.: Da Capo, 2001.

Kapsis, Robert E., and Kathie Coblenz. Woody Allen Interviews. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2006.

Lax, Eric. Woody Allen: A Biography. N.p.: Da Capo, 2000.

C. Conversations with Woody Allen. New York: Knopf, 2007

Lee, Sander H. Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed: Anguish, God and Existentialism. London: McFarland, 2002.

Nichols, Mary P. Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

Yacowar, Maurice. Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen. New York: Continuum, 1991