Woody Allen after 1990: Introduction

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Common knowledge is that the past two decades have not been kind to Woody Allen. With personal scandal, declining box office numbers, and dramatic changes in his films' budgeting and distribution, both critics and casual viewers alike have argued that the filmmaker has been going through a creative crisis and that the shine has been fading from his once glorious star. After the heydays of his early standup work and comedic films (e.g., Bananas [1971], Sleeper [1973], and Love and Death [1975]), the critically acclaimed and award-winning cinema of the 1970s (Annie Hall [1977] and Manhattan [1979]), and the refined comedy-dramas, or seriocomedies, of the 1980s (Stardust Memories [1980], Zelig [1983], The Purple Rose of Cairo [1985], Hannah and Her Sisters [1986], and Crimes and Misdemeanors [1989]), it has seemed to many that Allen’s best film work was behind him. Biographers John Baxter and Marion Meade have documented the hits that Allen’s public image took after his highly public split with Mia Farrow in 1992, the shrinking popularity of his films, and the filmmaker’s near retreat from Manhattan, the city most closely associated with him and his work. Film critics such as Emanuel Levy and Peter Rainer have noted the steady decline of an American audience and the filmmaker’s apparent inability to connect with younger viewers. Allen himself has responded to this phenomenon in scathing and self-reflexive ways. Both Deconstructing Harry (1997) and Celebrity (1998) contain biting commentary on the media, his critics, and America’s obsession with celebrity—e.g., as Harry Block descends into Hell, we hear the elevator operator inform him that the seventh level, reserved for the media and immediately below that of right-wing extremists and serial killers, is all filled up—and in Hollywood Ending (2002) his filmmaker protagonist, Val Waxman, reacts to news that his new movie is a hit in France: “Here [in the US] I’m a bum, but there a genius. Thanks god the French exist.”

Yet if we take this general assumption of Allen’s cinematic decline on faith, then we are left with an incomplete, if not wholly inaccurate, picture. While not the cultural icon he once was—frequent talk show guest, intellectual darling, inspiration for a popular comic strip, neurotic genius, one of the sexiest men alive—Woody Allen has nonetheless continued to hone his craft, making films that rival, if not at times surpass, the kind of earlier movies that made his reputation. Certainly there are those works that fall short of the critical mark and fail to measure up to their initial promise, and viewers have been quick to point out the problems inherent in these films, e.g., that Allen’s age and limitations as an actor marred the casting of Curse of the Jade Scorpion (2001), or that Whatever Works (2009) is a script warmed over from 1970s and thus never fully formed. However, one could argue that the percentage of hits and misses in his body of work since 1990 is roughly equal to that in his earlier career. As a comedic filmmaker, it is difficult not to see the growing refinement in his delivery and the cohesiveness of his narrative. Compare, for example, the loose and episodic structure of Take the Money and Run (1969) and Sleeper (1973) to the more tightly developed light comedies of Small Time Crooks (2000) and Manhattan Murder Mystery (1993). The same
could be said of his overtly dramatic works. Whereas *Interiors* (1978) and *September* (1987) have roundly been called derivative—Allenesque translations of Ingmar Bergman and Anton Chekhov, respectively—later films such as *Match Point* (2005) and *Vicky Christina Barcelona* (2008) have been critically hailed both in the US and abroad.

The problem for many, critics and common viewers alike, may simply come down to ill-framed expectations. It is not going out on a limb to suggest that most moviegoers would merely like the Woody Allen that they grew up with, or the Woody Allen that they have heard of, and that they demand another *Annie Hall* or another *Hannah and Her Sisters*. And there is nothing wrong with these expectations, for they are definitely high points in Allen’s career. But when a preconceived understanding of a filmmaker discounts creative deviations and explorations of uncharted artistic territory, then the contexts of our appreciation should necessarily be called into question. This is not to suggest that Allen’s post-1990 work is without its weaknesses. However, it should give us pause and cause us to ask what we want from a filmmaker, where he fits into our culture, and what he means to us as an artist.

The career of Woody Allen over the past two decades has indeed been fertile, and during this time he has produced some of his most diverse and some of his most innovative work to date. Indeed, since 1990 he has received six Oscar nominations for Best Original Screenplay, a telling indicator of his continued reputation in the industry. With *Shadows and Fog* (1992) he revisited a one-act play, “Death,” he had originally published seventeen years earlier in *Without Feathers* (1975), but this time giving the narrative a more anxious and imposing tone by employing techniques of the German expressionists. Immediately following its release was *Husbands and Wives* (1992), a film notable not so much for of its perceived autobiographical baggage, but primarily because of its ensemble structure—harking back to a narrative strategy he employed with success in *Hannah and Her Sisters*—and its innovative use of jump cuts and handheld cameras. The mid-1990s saw a string of successful comedies, beginning with *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (and a script developed from the unused portions of what would become *Annie Hall*, written with Marshall Brickman), *Bullets over Broadway* (1994, written with Douglas McGrath), *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), the musical *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), and the made-for-television remake of *Don’t Drink the Water* (1994). These works, along with *Shadows and Fog* and *Husbands and Wives*, demonstrate the ever-growing respect of Allen as a filmmaker, especially as an actor’s director. Instead of relying primarily on a safe stable of actors who have worked with him many times in the past—e.g., Diane Keaton, Mia Farrow, Tony Roberts, and Sam Waterston—these films establish a pattern that persists to this very day: the use of a highly eclectic cast of actors who have specifically sought to work with Allen, many of whom were willing to do so for scale (especially given Allen’s limited budgets). And this strategy has had its payoffs. Since 1992, eight actors have been nominated for Academy Awards for their performances in Allen’s films, three of them taking home Oscars.

During the late 1990s, Allen produced two striking works that, despite the filmmaker’s protests to the contrary, can be read as autobiographically influenced commentaries, especially as it relates to matters of public image. In *Deconstructing Harry*, Allen presents an unrepentant artist who has a knack for alienating those around him. *Celebrity*, by contrast, features a much less confrontational artist figure, but one who nonetheless finds himself caught up in the fame game and public scrutiny. Although they contain many of the same themes, these films are not mere rehashings of his earlier attempt at exploring celebrity, the largely misunderstood *Stardust Memories* (1980). The latter film centers around the broad American phenomenon of celebrity in its varied permutations, not merely an individual trapped by his fans. And instead
of exploring an artist’s confrontations with his audience, Deconstructing Harry focuses instead on an author’s understanding of himself through his own creations and how his relationship with those characters define his interactions with the world around him. Fame is also one of the themes of his 1999 project, Sweet and Lowdown. In this film, Allen uses a mock-documentary form of filmmaking to narrate the life of a fictional Emmet Ray (played by Sean Penn), a 1930s jazz guitarist—according to jazz enthusiasts, second only to Django Reinhart—who yearns for the kind of notoriety that unsettles both Harry Block and Celebrity’s Lee Simon (Kenneth Branagh).

What follows is a series of four comedies, films that received mixed (or in the case of some, mostly negative) reviews and, in many ways, went a long way toward securing in the public’s mind the image of Woody Allen as a diminishing talent. Small Time Crooks, Curse of the Jade Scorpion, Hollywood Ending, and Anything Else (2003) stand out not only as light, straightforward, and uncomplicated comedies—that is, comedies without the overtly nihilistic counterpunch found in such earlier films as Manhattan and The Purple Rose of Cairo—but also as the last string of films where Allen plays a leading role.6 Looking back on his work in the new millennium, Melinda and Melinda (2004) can be seen as a minor yet transitional film during this period of Allen’s career. It is the twofold telling of the life of Melinda Robicheaux (Radha Mitchell), one half of Melinda’s story told from a tragic perspective and the other from a more comedic standpoint. The film embodies the twin impulses underlying the filmmaker’s oeuvre, arguably paving the way for a string of mostly dark philosophical films, beginning with Match Point (the exceptions being the comedies Scoop and Whatever Works). At the time of its release, many critics heralded Match Point as a cinematic return to form. The movie broke a string of disappointing box office numbers and garnered widespread praise, obtaining a score of 72 from Metacritic, one of the highest of his career.7 This was followed by similarly sobering films: Casandra’s Dream (2007), a present-day morality tale; Vicky Christina Barcelona, a narrative of troubled relationships cast in the shadow of irresolvability; and You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger (2010), a grim ensemble piece sardonically exploring the many facets of faith in contemporary life. The response to these late-period films was mixed—with Match Point and Vicky Christina Barcelona receiving the vast majority of the critical praise and ticket sales—but all four of these dramatic films, along with Scoop, stand out for other reasons: they mark a turning point in Allen’s career where he forsakes his iconic Manhattan and shoots primarily in overseas locations, and they are films that rely more heavily on foreign investors—e.g., BBC Films and Ingenious Media (UK), and MediaPro, Versátil Cinema, and Antena 3 Films (Spain)—thus further associating Allen as America’s “European” filmmaker. It is almost tempting to read Allen’s earlier shout out to the French at the end of Hollywood Ending as rather prescient.

Indeed, Allen’s latest film, Midnight in Paris (2011), is an homage to the French capital and America’s place in its history. More notable, it has proven to be one of the most successful films of his career, demonstrating once again that reports of Allen’s post-1990 decline are exaggerated. As of 15 March 2012, the film has grossed over $56 million domestically and more than $91 million overseas, turning it into the highest grossing film Allen has ever produced. What is more, Midnight in Paris has received a metascore of 81 from Metacritic, making it the third highest rated film in Allen’s career, behind Hannah and Her Sisters and Manhattan.10 Although these numbers and rankings may not be the ultimate indicator of a film’s quality, its impact, or its critical longevity, they nonetheless suggest that Allen’s sustained output does indeed have an audience and that many of his viewers remain convinced that Woody Allen continues to be one of America’s most significant filmmakers.

The nine essays in this special issue of Post Script bear this out. They cover almost the entirety of Allen’s career since 1990, his films, his television work, his audience,
narrative styles, and his ongoing engagement with the various themes and images that have come to define his oeuvre. While the focus of these essays specifically concerns the past two decades, the authors are nonetheless mindful of Allen’s earlier films, using them not as touchstones by which to gauge what some have come to believe as the artist’s diminished talents, but to demonstrate the ongoing development of Woody Allen as an innovative filmmaker. The collection begins with Woody Allen in his own words, a brief interview that I conducted with him concerning his work since *Alice* (1990). Following that is Richard A. Schwartz’s survey of Allen’s 1990s films and their common theme of personal growth and self-knowledge. He demonstrates how Allen is in many ways concerned with morality and argues that his characters grow through their art, their personal relationships, and the actions they choose to perform. In this way, Schwartz holds that Allen continues to explore those themes that best define his earlier films, suggesting that there is no clear qualitative delineation between the early and the late films. Jonathan Ellis and Neil Sinyard, on the other hand, are of a slightly different mind. They do not contest the argument that Woody Allen’s greatest work is rooted firmly in the past and that his work after 1990 suffers by comparison. However, they adamantly point out the merits of two films of the early 1990s, *Shadows and Fog* and *Husbands and Wives*. As they aptly demonstrate in their contribution to this collection, those are two of Allen’s most underrated works, films that scholars would do well to revisit.

In many ways, Thomas Aiello and Brent Riffel pick up where Ellis and Sinyard leave off. They focus specifically on Allen’s 1994 films, *Bullets over Broadway* and *Don’t Drink the Water*, and argue that these films are a comedic reaction to the filmmaker’s personal difficulties that surfaced in the early 1990s. Aiello and Riffel believe that not only do these films shake off the darker tone found in *Shadows and Fog* and *Husbands and Wives*—and even in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*—but they also set the stage for the vibrant comedies that follow, *Mighty Aphrodite* and *Everyone Says I Love You*. Sam B. Girgus follows with a study of Allen in light of Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of “divine comedy.” This concept, according to Girgus, “suggests the paradox of the impossibility of the inescapable moral demand that responsibility and the other places upon the individual,” and the author applies this reading to a brief survey of Allen’s early films before moving into a detailed analysis of *Celebrity*. Girgus goes on to compare this film to Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960), arguing that both works dramatize the artistic and ethical dilemmas articulated in Levinas’s philosophy. My own contribution to the special issue is concerned with Allen’s narrative style, specifically as it relates to the mock-documentary form. I contend that although this is a narrative strategy successfully employed in a couple of his earlier films, *Take the Money and Run* and *Zelig*, the filmmaker goes one (or two) steps further in two of his later films, *Husbands and Wives* and *Sweet and Lowdown*. These works, I argue, not only set their sights on the documentary form, but in a meta-cinematic way, focus on the very act of mockumentary (and filmmaking) itself and question any clear distinctions among cinematic genres.

What follows is a series of four essays that explore Woody Allen’s output since 2000. In his contribution, Peter J. Bailey concentrates on Allen’s work in the first half of that decade. Specifically, he argues that the comedy-dramas *Anything Else* and *Melinda and Melinda* are transitional films, reactions to the earlier string of lighter fare—*Small Time Crooks*, *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, and *Hollywood Ending*—that embody Allen’s late-life ambivalence about comedy. At the same time, Bailey points out that these two works also pave the way for the darker pieces that follow: *Match Point*, *Cassandra’s Dream*, and *Whatever Works*. Celestino Deleyto is also interested in this period of Allen’s late career, but unlike Bailey, he bases his reading on the uses of romantic comedy. He argues that despite the common belief that Allen largely
turned his back on this genre after *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, it is one that he has returned to again and again. In demonstrating this, he provides an analysis of *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, reading it as a curious mix of classic screwball comedy and film noir that addresses heterosexual desire in a post-feminist world. In her essay, Toni-Lynn Frederick uses as her springboard the old Jewish proverb that for every ten Jews that suffer, God creates an eleventh to make them laugh. Woody Allen is this “eleventh Jew,” particularly when it comes to confronting trauma and atrocities. Frederick maintains that in *Anything Else*, Allen has refashioned the “little man” persona established early in his career as a way to struggle with the moral and metaphysical dilemmas coming in the wake of the Holocaust. By doing so, he gives voice to the anxieties that have arisen in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and as such, performs humor as a means of resistance. Finally, Kathy Merlock Jackson takes a completely different approach to Allen’s recent body of work. She points out that while many of his films continue to turn a small profit, his audience has nonetheless diminished, especially when it comes to young viewers. In her astute article, Jackson examines the reasons underlying this phenomenon and links it to Allen’s cinematic practices as well as recent trends in the entertainment marketplace. She also suggests possible ways for Allen to meet the challenges of the twentieth-first century, including varying the way he handles casting, characterization, and promotion.

In all, the nine essays in this special issue provide a broad and insightful overview of Woody Allen’s post-1990 cinematic work. These are complemented by a series of reviews focusing on several Allen-oriented texts published over the past several years. It is our hope that the reader will come away with a more complete, and more profound, understanding of Woody Allen’s oeuvre, and not just the earlier films by which he is most commonly known. As demonstrated time and again by previous scholars of Allen’s work—e.g., Diane Jacobs, Foster Hirsch, Sam B. Girgus, Julian Fox, Peter J. Bailey, Sander H. Lee, Richard A. Schwartz, Mary P. Nichols, Aeon J. Skoble, and Mark T. Conrad—there are defining themes and threads of discourse that run throughout the filmmaker’s body of work. These dialectics extend well beyond his films of the 1970s and 1980s, and their significance, in all of their stubbornly irresolvable glory, remain with us and are evident up to this very day.

Notes

1 See, for example, Levy’s discussion of the American reaction to *Melinda and Melinda* (2004) and Rainer’s review of *Anything Else* (2003). For biographical information surrounding Allen’s public image, his shrinking popularity, and his increasing reliance on foreign backing, see Baxter (410-11, 425-27) and Meade (309-11, 318-19).


Although many viewers at the time read Husbands and Wives as the filmmaker’s reaction to his troubled relationship and highly public split with Mia Farrow, Allen has pointed out that to Eric Lax that the script was written two years before these problems (54).

Diane Wiest won Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Bullets over Broadway (her second in an Allen film), Mira Sorvino won it for Mighty Aphrodite, and Penélope Cruz for Vicky Christina Barcelona. Judy Davis was nominated for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for her work in Husbands and Wives, Jennifer Tilly for Bullets over Broadway, and Samantha Morton for Sweet and Lowdown. Chazz Palmintari received a nomination for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for his performance in Bullets over Broadway, and Sean Penn was nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role for Sweet and Lowdown.

Allen does indeed act in one other later project, Scoop (2006), but his role in that film is arguably less central and more supportive of the work of Scarlett Johansson and Hugh Jackman.

According to their website, the online resource Metacritic compiles their numbers, a metascore, by surveying the reviews of the most respected film critics and distilling their opinions into a single tabulation, with 100 being the top score.

Vicky Christina Barcelona’s score from Metacritic is only slightly less than Match Point’s, 70; and according to Box Office Mojo, both films grossed over $23 million domestically and over $60 in foreign markets, two of his six top grossing (and most profitable) films to date.

Match Point, Scoop, Cassandra’s Dream, and You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger were all shot in London, while Vicky Christina Barcelona was filmed in various Spanish locations.

According to Metacritic, Hannah and Her Sisters achieved a metascore of 90 and Manhattan one of 82. It is important to note, however, that Metacritic has not yet tabulated the response to any of Allen’s films prior to 1979. Regarding ticket sales, Box Office Mojo reports that Midnight in Paris has had the biggest domestic gross, followed by Hannah and Her Sisters (with over $40 million), Manhattan (not quite $40 million), and Annie Hall (just more than $38 million).

Works Cited


