

WOODY ALLEN AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF KITSCH

by Shaun Clarkson

Filmmaking, as a collaborative medium, is almost by necessity a conflicted art form divided between opposing ambitions for positive reviews and revenues, the critical and the commercial. Producers and studio executives do not normally share the same long-term goals of writers and directors, and because film is an industry, short-term financial arguments typically win out. Privileging economic over artistic concerns tends to result in what Walter Benjamin¹ calls the natural result of overproduction and what many consider to be art's antithesis: kitsch, vulgar sentimentality in the guise of art. The so-called Golden Age of Hollywood, marked roughly from *The Jazz Singer* up to the early 1960s, is primarily identified with achievements such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, and other classics, but it is most densely populated by works like *Devil Monster*, *Cain and Mable*, and other forgotten genre films that sacrificed innovation for prearranged format. Though many talented filmmakers were able to create unique works of art while operating within this system of restrictions, the vast majority of these early films fail artistically because they are expressly designed to appeal to the broadest potential consumer market. One filmmaker who makes ample use of this cinematic culture of kitsch through allusion, style, and occasional adherence to genre is the American writer, director, and actor (his order) Woody Allen. Allen has successfully navigated the line between auteur autonomy and budget-conscious professionalism in a prolific body of work that intersects critical and commercial success, largely due to his ability to simultaneously conform to and undermine traditional Hollywood conventions. His film titles alone evidence a deep appreciation for the films he grew up with (*Play it Again Sam*, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, *Hollywood Ending*), and his readiness to experiment with these genres and stylistic standards puts him in a unique position to critique and comment on the unrealistic world manufactured and packaged by Hollywood. Many scholars have pointed out directors and specific films they feel have influenced Allen's work, but these analyses tend to place excessive or even exclusive attention to "good" works—such as Fellini's *8½* and Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*²—while forgetting or discounting the "bad" genre films and their formulaic conventions that Allen internalized in "movie theaters [that] became his second home"³ before employing in his own films.

A central concern in Allen's commandeering of Hollywood kitsch is the disparity between the fantastic escapism films provoke and the harsh realities they ignore. In actuality, most films produced during the Golden Age of Hollywood were released during times of political or economic turmoil that are in no way reflected in the works themselves. Through much of the '30s and '40s when many of the emblematic classics of the era were released, the "Wild West" was an inhospitable dustbowl and few Americans felt like spontaneously bursting into song. Coinciding almost exactly with this Golden Age of Kitsch, the Motion Picture Production Code⁴ further skewed reality by enforcing a strict moral system on

¹ German intellectual whose essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" comments on the political function of art in the early 20th-century.

² Generally understood to be the models for *Stardust Memories* and *Interiors* respectively.

³ Eric Lax, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 25.

⁴ Also known as the Hays Code, these censorship guidelines were adopted by most major studios from 1930 to 1968.

Hollywood films that necessitated punishment for wrongdoing and forbid non-normative representations of race, gender, and sexuality. These strictures effectively dictated the plots and characters of genre and non-genre films alike until the code's dissolution in 1968. One year later, Woody Allen directed his first film.

Most of Allen's comedies incorporate some form of intertextual Hollywood satire and genre conventions. Early in his career, the comic subversions simply emerged from upended characterizations — nebbish as bank robber (*Take the Money and Run*), nebbish as sci-fi savior (*Sleeper*), nebbish as Casanova (the rest) — but some of his later experiments in genre run much deeper. Take, for instance, Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You*,⁵ a musical comedy that makes abundant use of the common genre plot twists and turns that lead ultimately and inevitably to a happy close. While Allen chooses to allow the plot formula to remain unchanged, separating and reuniting in turn the various love interests, he draws attention to the farce of spontaneous song and guaranteed resolution by insisting upon the unadorned (and mostly talentless) singing voices of the cast members who were not informed that the film was a musical until *after* they had signed contracts. Allen actually instructed Goldie Hawn to sing worse because her voice was too good for an ordinary person, and when Drew Barrymore refused to sing, he dubbed her voice with that of an unbelievably tone-deaf replacement. The effect is that the film works on two levels; the spectator can enjoy both the nostalgia *and* the parody of an old-fashioned genre, but Allen disallows the possibility of mistaking the obvious kitsch of his preset Hollywood ending for reality. In the final scene, Goldie Hawn defies physics and takes flight, establishing once and for all that though the cast may sing like real people, they are only actors and it is only a film.

In another, more prominent example, Allen reinvents the romantic comedy by denying facile satisfaction and declaring instead, “Love fades.” *Annie Hall*⁶ negates the entire premise of the genre by establishing from the opening monologue that the ending will not be happy and the couple will *not* be reunited. Even small joys are undercut because Allen jumbles the chronology of events to intersplice bitter arguments from the end of the relationship with sentimental scenes from the beginning. In the extended monologue that serves as prologue, the protagonist, Alvy Singer, explicitly admits his inability to distinguish between the reality of his childhood and the kitschy films he watched as he imagines a scene from his boyhood—himself as a child running on the Coney Island boardwalk alongside four emblems of Hollywood: Marilyn Monroe, a G.I., a marine, and a sailor. “You know,” he narrates, “I have a hyperactive imagination. My mind tends to jump around a little, and I-I-I-I-I have some trouble between fantasy and reality.” Alvy can't help but alter the outcome of his relationship with Annie when he writes an autobiographical play at the end of the film. Just as the rehearsal nears the irrevocable split, the lead actors in the play within the film embrace and declare their storybook love. Alvy looks into the camera and mutters, “Tsch, whatta you want? It was my first play. You know, you know how you're always tryin' t' get things to come out perfect in art because, uh it's real difficult in life.” Luckily, Allen himself does not succumb to this alluring veneer of fantasy and intentionally ends his film without a clear resolution or the emotional payoff audiences had come to expect from romantic comedies. Though some spectators find it unsatisfying, the ending breaks from genre and establishes its basis in reality.

⁵ *Everyone Says I Love You*, directed by Woody Allen (1996; New York: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

⁶ *Annie Hall*, directed by Woody Allen (1977; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

Many critics and fans, including Roger Ebert,⁷ point to the 1986 film *Hannah and Her Sisters*⁸ as Allen's most groundbreaking, masterfully crafted work, but its ending ultimately betrays that originality as its director's esteem for Hollywood tradition overcomes his skepticism of it and succumbs to cliché. The plot, broken up into "chapter" headings, is complex with the many primary characters weaving in and out of one another's lives, constantly betraying trust and destroying relationships. Almost every character commits or is the victim of adultery with substance abuse, terminal illness, and other mortal hazards looming large just behind the carefully maintained facades of the three sisters and the characters in their orbit. At the moment of greatest despair in the film, however, there is an abrupt shift in theme and tone. Mickey, Allen's character, runs into one of the sisters with whom he had gone on a disastrous date years before, and despite the lack of chemistry evident from the first date, they immediately fall in love. In the ensuing conversation, Mickey explains his recent suicide attempt: "I was perspiring so much the gun slid off my forehead and missed me." After this farcical failure to end his life, Mickey wanders around the Upper West Side for hours wondering what to do before finally entering a theater to watch the ending of *Duck Soup*, a Marx Brothers movie that is one of Allen's favorites, and deciding that suicide is "stupid... Look at all the people on-screen," Mickey exclaims, "you know, they're real funny...Geez, I should stop ruining my life, searching for answers I'm never gonna get and just enjoy it while it lasts." This sentiment echoes that of Allen's character Isaac from *Manhattan* who lists Groucho Marx first and foremost under "things that make life worth living."⁹ Hollywood and, specifically, genre comedies rescue both Mickey and Isaac from their misery as, alternatively, reason to live and reason not to commit suicide. This bend towards sentimentality continues throughout the rest of the film as the principle characters gather at Hannah's home for the film's third consecutive Thanksgiving dinner. Hannah's husband Elliot has broken off his adulterous affair with his sister-in-law who has, in turn, married another man. Mickey and Holly, also newlyweds, are shown reflected in a dimly lit mirror embracing and talking about their newfound happiness. Mickey declares that their unlikely union would "make a great story: guy marries one sister. Doesn't work out. Then, years later, he winds up married to the other sister. How are you gonna top that?" It is no surprise that the budding playwright Holly can deliver the perfect ending, as she informs the previously infertile Mickey, "I'm pregnant." The couple kisses passionately as "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" plays into the credits.

Ebert unequivocally calls *Hannah and Her Sisters*, "the best movie [Allen] has ever made,"¹⁰ and Sam Girgus claims that the beginning of the film alone stands as "a testimony to his originality."¹¹ Allen himself, however, deems the film a failure. One of the film's chapters begins with a Tolstoy quotation: "The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless." Allen told an interviewer years later, "If I'd had a little more nerve on that film, it would have confirmed [that quote] somewhat more. But I copped out a little on that film, I backed out a little at the end."¹² He goes on to explain that the ending came out of "a habit from my growing up and from American films – trying to find a satisfying

⁷ Roger Ebert, "Hannah and Her Sisters," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Feb. 7, 1987.

⁸ *Hannah and Her Sisters*, directed by Woody Allen (1986; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2001), DVD.

⁹ *Manhattan*, directed by Woody Allen (1979; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

¹⁰ Ebert.

¹¹ Sam Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 109.

¹² Stig Björkman, ed. *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 156.

resolution. It may not be happy, but it's satisfying in some way."¹³ Actress Barbara Hershey told Maureen Dowd, "That kind of sweet ending really moved me,"¹⁴ which prompted Mia Farrow to respond, "He would hate to hear that."¹⁵ With all of the characters neatly paired off and safely integrated into normal family life once again, Allen allows an ending incongruously at odds with the bleak, realistic film of the first hour and a half and curiously adheres to the defunct Production Code¹⁶ that disallowed a positive portrayal of adultery (all of the extramarital affairs are replaced by reconciliations or engagements) and the endorsement of non-normative family structures. The drugs, depression, and physical illness that characters battled in the first half of the film vanish into an idyllic Hollywood ending that led, at least partially, to the film's wild commercial success and Allen's retrospective condemnation.

One year previously, Allen had mocked the "happily ever after" evasion along with broader Hollywood conventions in a lighthearted satire of Golden Age kitsch cleverly disguised as just such a film. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*,¹⁷ the protagonist Cecilia uses the cinema as a method of escaping her unhappy life in the Great Depression and coaxes Tom Baxter, a character from the film she endlessly watches, off the screen and into reality. Allen refers to *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the film within the film, as "what I called 'champagne comedies' — those comedies from the 1930s and 1940s with all those romantic people who wore tuxedos and went to the big nightclubs and lived in penthouses and drank champagne all the time."¹⁸ This is the world from which Tom Baxter emerges — a world that fades to black a few moments into a kiss and never requires real payment for lavish meals and champagne flutes of ginger ale. Dressed in a stage safari costume, Tom is a picaresque character whose naivety, along with the conventions of Hollywood kitsch, are comically satirized by his interactions with Depression era realities. Passing a Salvation Army soup kitchen, he hands his counterfeit stage money to someone in line. When another stretches out his hand, Tom shakes it and is hurried away by Cecilia. In another instance, Cecilia tries to explain the hardships of reality, specifically the Great War, but Tom mistakes the reference for a film: "I'm sorry I missed it."

Most of the jokes involving Tom and Cecilia are simple and rarely skew towards the darkest corners of Hollywood omissions and misrepresentations, but after Tom leaves the picture, the theater and screen confining the remaining actors become a staging ground for an investigation into the functions of kitsch and art. One angry woman emerges from the theater announcing to reporters, "I saw the movie just last week. This is not what happens!" The present tense of this latter sentence evidences the prescriptive nature of film genre, and she continues, "I want what happened in the movie last week to happen this week. Otherwise, what's life about anyway?" The woman, making the leap from fiction to reality without hesitation, recalls Cecilia's dependence on Hollywood to provide an inauthentic alternative to her own gloomy existence and grants the same possibility of salvation onto movies as Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Would this imply that the entire purpose of fiction for the various characters espousing this

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Maureen Dowd, "The Five Women of 'Hannah and Her Sisters,'" *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1986.

¹⁵ Girgus, 127.

¹⁶ The code was replaced in 1968 by the more indirect censorship of the current MPAA film rating system.

¹⁷ *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, directed by Woody Allen (1985; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

¹⁸ Björkman, 149.

view is to further reality and vice versa? The remainder of the crowd is less existentially divided about the issue of a film without a predestined arc. A small minority of “student[s] of the human personality” doesn’t mind “observing” the actors as they play cards and berate the audience, but the majority demands either a story or a refund. The actors themselves respond variously to the breakdown of their idealized world of fantasy and adventure. After Tom reestablishes on-screen free will, the licenses of Hollywood convention are tested. One actor suddenly begins espousing Communist views, declaring to the audience over the jeers of his fellow cast members, “The fat cats in Hollywood are getting rich on our work. [...] Unite, brothers, unite, and take action!” Marxist film theorists have long argued the existence of Capitalist ideologies embedded in and advocated by the very structure of Golden Age films, so Tom’s revolutionary act of leaving the screen allows for this political inversion to take place. Another actor suggests that their captivity is purely semantic: “Let’s redefine ourselves as the real world and them as the world of illusion and shadow. You see, we’re reality, they’re a dream.” By closing the distance between fantasy and reality, the film ultimately deconstructs preset genre while, at least superficially, holding to its precepts.

But Allen saves the chief subversion for the end. Gil Shepherd, the actor who portrayed Tom, fears that his career is in jeopardy and travels to New Jersey in order to get his fictional character back onto the screen. He meets Cecilia and they share a romantic afternoon and a kiss before he confronts her and Tom at the theater, demanding that she choose. Gil says, “Even though we’ve just met, I just, I know that this is the *real* thing” (emphasis added). The actors on-screen give conflicting advice: “Go with the real guy, honey. We’re limited,” and “Go with Tom. He’s got no flaws.” The counsel that seems to finally sway Cecilia is another actor prompting, “Choose one of them so we can settle this thing. The most human of all attributes is your ability to choose.” She chooses Gil. “I’m a real person,” she explains, “No matter how... how tempted I am, I have to choose the real world.” With the film at its happy conclusion but for the formality of a few final scenes, Gil announces, “I love you. I know, I know that only happens in movies, but I do.” Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, however, unlike the film within the film, is set in reality, not the fiction of Hollywood. Gil immediately abandons Cecilia, and she spends the remaining few minutes of the film again losing herself to fantasy to the tune of Fred Astaire’s “Cheek to Cheek” as she watches *Top Hat*. The outline of *Hannah* is reversed as the prescribed outcome of the comic genre, a happy ending, is replaced by sudden heartbreak, and once again, Cecilia’s only solace is in the narrative fantasy her lived experience negates. Though Allen still considers it the best of all his films, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* was the director’s first box office disaster (the prevailing logic being that the honest but unsatisfying ending soured commercial appeal), which could account for *Hannah*’s exaggeratedly pat ending.

The choice between happy and sad endings, realism and sentimentality, is not always so clear-cut. The best example in Allen’s canon is *Stardust Memories*,¹⁹ a film that is able to have it both ways — kitsch *and* art — because it deconstructs not only the concept of genre, but also the medium of film itself. Allen plays Sandy Bates, a director whose movies have become darker and less commercial, as he attends a career retrospective and tries to interact with his grotesquely comic fans. Like *Annie Hall*, the film is nonlinear and springs mostly from Sandy’s subjective consciousness or unconscious. After a ten-minute setup, Sandy sees a dead rabbit that “reminds him of his own mortality. And then the rest of the film takes place in his mind.”²⁰ Throughout the film, he is peppered with critiques and barbs extolling his

¹⁹ *Stardust Memories*, directed by Woody Allen (1980; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

²⁰ Björkman, 123.

early, funny films at the expense of his latest art house pictures. This duality between stark reality and whimsy is dramatized in the first scene, an excerpt from Sandy's newest film, in which two trains idle side-by-side before starting off in opposite directions. Sandy's train is straight out of a Bergman film or Kafka novel,²¹ full of stern, vaguely hostile bespectacled passengers; locked doors and windows; and sand-spewing suitcases. The train on the other side of the tracks is filled with Hollywood iconography including champagne, fur coats, a ukulele playing man, and Sharon Stone (in her very first credited role), showing off some kind of award while provocatively kissing the window. Sandy, feeling that he has mistakenly gotten onto the wrong train, argues with the attendant in vain as he is whisked away to a seaside garbage dump à la Beckett's *Breath*,²² where he and his fellow passengers wander around the mounds of rubbish, eventually meeting up with the shocked passengers from the Hollywood train. As the footage ends, the actual setting is revealed to be a screening room with a group of investors in silhouette objecting loudly: "I thought this was supposed to be a comedy!" "Just Horrible!" "Twelve million dollars for that garbage!" They decide to "take the film away from him! We can reshoot it. We can recut it. Maybe we can salvage something." They suggest ending the film, not at the garbage dump, but in *Jazz Heaven*, a fanciful cloud land where winged musicians play pleasing standards. When Sandy objects, one of the producers explains, "This is an Easter film. We don't need a movie by an atheist. [...] I've been on this side of the business for four years now. Too much reality is not what the people want." Sandy refuses to relent in his insistence on realistic pessimism: "You can't control life. It doesn't wind up perfectly. Only art you can control. Art and masturbation. Two areas in which I am an absolute expert." For Sandy, there is no control. Instead, success in anything is pure luck out of sheer chaos — the opposite of predestined plot — but when he seriously explains this theory to a roomful of fans, the audience laughs hysterically. In a later scene, he tells a childhood friend that his own successful career and the friend's relative failure was little more than an accident of birth. "If I had been an Apache Indian," he explains, "those guys didn't need comedians at all, right? So I'd be out of work. [...] I was a lucky bum." He abandons comfortable one-liners in order to expand this belief to include victims of the Holocaust and a childhood friend just diagnosed with an incurable disease. This kind of luck is different from the serendipity and farfetched coincidences built into so many genres — it's chance that swings both ways and comes out of a world that (unlike the movies) is not created or predestined.

Stardust Memories also critiques Hollywood through the juxtaposition of dual representations of art and kitsch. The trains from the opening are the most explicit example, but opposing elements often awkwardly share the same screen: Sandy argues with his ex-girlfriend as a convent of nuns tap dance in the background; he chats pleasantly about and makes light of a friend's recent sexual assault; a fan pitches a comedy based on the Guyana mass suicide. Allen reveals the artifice behind celebrity, plots, and Hollywood in general with these sudden interjections of inassimilable reality into an otherwise whitewashed world. After he is shot to death (and before he is suddenly, unexplainably resurrected), Sandy's psychoanalyst eulogizes his former patient, implicitly repeating the recurring critique of Sandy's recent films: "He saw reality too clearly. Faulty denial mechanism. Failed to block out the terrible truths of existence. In the end his inability to push away the awful facts of being in the world rendered his life meaningless. Or as one great Hollywood producer said, 'too much reality is not what the people want.'"

²¹ Ingmar Bergman the film director and Franz Kafka the writer—artists not particularly known for their mirth.

²² Samuel Beckett's 1969 play consisting of a stage littered with litter and a prerecorded sound of a single breath.

Even extraterrestrial beings come to earth in order to berate Sandy about his career moves. Though the voice is modulated, it is obviously Woody's stammer: "We enjoy your films. Particularly the early funny ones. [...] And incidentally, you're also not Superman, you're a comedian. You want to do mankind a real service? Tell funnier jokes."

Despite his incessant pessimism, Sandy (and Allen) provides a kind of happy resolution. After mistakenly calling out another woman's name at the hospital, Sandy follows his current girlfriend, Isobel, onto a train and begs her to marry him. He simultaneously woos her and dictates the new ending to his film: "We're on a train [...] and I have no idea where it's headin' ... could be the same junkyard. [...] But it's not so terrible as I originally thought it was because, you know, we like each other and, you know, we have some laughs, and there's a lot of closeness, and the whole thing is a lot easier to take." Like in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, the argument is not a reason to be happy or to live, but instead only a reason not to be sad or to kill oneself. Isobel has a different objection. "It's too sentimental," she complains. He claims that it is "good sentimental," but she continues, "I don't think it's realistic." Sandy responds, "Now? You're going to bring up realism? This is a hell of a time..." Knowing just the ending he needs, he begins to narrate, "I know one thing: that a huge big wet kiss would go a long way to selling this idea. I'm very serious. I-I think, I think this is a big, big finish." With the distinction between actor and director gone, the music swells and the lovers kiss. The train engine sounds and the couple is carried off-screen left to right (the direction of the Hollywood train from the beginning) before the setting shifts again to reveal an applauding audience watching Sandy's film (though this new ambiguous reality suggests that it could be Allen's). The actors-turned-spectators dissect their roles, gossip about the director's tendency to stage-kiss inappropriately, and head towards the exit. The final audience member to leave the screen, designated in the credits as "Old Jewish Man," complains, "From this he makes a living? I like a melodrama, a musical comedy with a plot," before continuing off-screen in Yiddish. Sandy or Allen, depending on individual interpretation, reappears to fetch his sunglasses and, before leaving the auditorium, stares at the blank movie screen within the frame. He leaves slowly and the entire picture fades to black.

Predictably, critics and audience members were upset by what they took to be a slight from Allen — that they were overbearing and stupid for rejecting his dramas and gushing over his comedies — a claim that Allen vehemently denies: "If I did think that, which I don't, I would be smart enough not to say it in a movie."²³ While *Interiors*, his black and white attempt at making an English language foreign film, engendered mostly disappointed curiosity, *Stardust Memories* provoked hostile attacks. Expressing the reverse of his mistrust of *Hannah's* commercial success, he told Tom Shales of *Esquire* that he knew it was "the best film I ever did" because "it was my least popular film. That may automatically mean it was my best film."²⁴ Such a precise method of ranking quality proportionally against profit is, of course, a facetious notion, but it is true, at least with these three films, that Allen's adherence to the norms and mores of traditional Hollywood ensured popular success while undermining those traditions resulted in irritation and poor box office performance. After the financial fallout from the 1992 sex-scandal with Soon-Yi Previn and Allen's subsequent marriage to her in 1997, Allen has found it necessary for the first time in his career to put monetary concerns ahead of artistic ones and reach out to Hollywood as a partner rather than a foe, going on press tours for his films and even appearing at an Academy Awards ceremony.

²³ Björkman, 128.

²⁴ Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen* (New York: Continuum Press, 2001), 228.

Despite this increasing tendency to embrace the entertainment side of film, Allen still cleverly distances himself from the pitfalls of sentimentality and kitsch by balancing his deep respect for the masterpieces that defined the style with his pessimistic distrust of convention and custom that allowed for his earlier films to be unique from and defiant of those kitschy classics from the Golden Age of Hollywood.

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