

## **WOODY ALLEN Y EL ESPACIO DE LA COMEDIA ROMÁNTICA**

Celestino Deleyto

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## **SEEMS LIKE OLD TIMES: POSTMODERN NOSTALGIA IN WOODY ALLEN'S WORK**

Britta Feyerabend

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“I’m hard to get. All you have to do is ask”. With this famous line three of the best-known Hawksian heroines declared their professed love and unconditional allegiance to the male heroes played by Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne in three of Howard Hawks’s adventure films. Woody Allen is no Hawksian hero—he does not seem to have that much trouble asking—but one could easily put that line in the mouth of the present-day First Lady of France, Carla Bruni, as the news of her presence, in a yet to be defined role, in the next Woody Allen film was all over the press at the end of 2009. Bruni’s wide and multi-faceted professional experience has not included acting so far, but, as she made clear in her unconditional acceptance of Allen’s offer, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that simply could not be missed. This anecdote, which could almost be part of the plot of an Allen film, proves, among other things, the continuing relevance of Woody Allen as a cultural icon of contemporary society. With his characteristic comic touch, this extremely prolific artist has been recording cultural changes and offering his inimitable perspective on specific aspects of our world for more than five decades now. An obvious measure of this relevance is the vast amount of books and essays, both academic and journalistic, devoted to his *oeuvre*. From the classic early accounts of his films (Yacowar 1979; Benayoun 1987), through biographies and book-length interviews (Björkman 1993; Schickel 2003; Lax 2000) and the more complex and sophisticated interpretations of the 1990s and early 2000s (Lee

1997; Nichols 1998; Bailey 2001; Girgus 2003) to recent anthologies and compilations of essays (King 2001; Silet 2006), critics have attempted to disentangle from a variety of angles the intricacies of the director's movies and, inevitably, their relation to his life. These two additions to the extensive literature on Woody Allen's work aim to analyse and study in detail some of these aspects. Even though the two books may make related claims at some points, they are very different in both scope and approach: while Celestino Deleyto explores the role of romantic comedy in a selection of Allen films, Britta Feyerabend sets out to read a broad selection of Allen's work through the lens of postmodern nostalgia.

Deleyto starts his fluently-written and well-structured book by distancing his analysis from two recurrent trends in previous critical work on the director: biographical criticism and an excessive reliance on the author's interpretation of his own work. These approaches, Deleyto claims, do not enrich but impoverish the texts. He vehemently defends the role of film critics and scholars and the need to distinguish between authors and their work and between critical discourse and the opinion of the filmmaker. As he puts it: "los artistas ofrecen interpretaciones del mundo a través de sus obras y la misión del crítico es interpretar las obras de los artistas a través de su propia visión del mundo y de la aproximación o aproximaciones teóricas consciente o inconscientemente elegidas para llevar a cabo su tarea" (17), an obvious enough but, in the case of Allen, frequently forgotten point. Deleyto then goes on to advocate the role of humour and the comic as the starting point for a discussion of a variety of issues. Not only does he take issue with frequent dismissals of Allen's comedies as "minor" works which can never measure up to his more serious films, but, in line with the approach taken in his previous book *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, he also proves the relevance of comedy, and more specifically romantic comedy, even in those films in which comedy seems almost non-existent. For Deleyto, Allen's interest in romantic comedy does not end with the two films that are usually taken as landmarks of the genre, *Manhattan* (1979) and *Annie Hall* (1977), but rather traverses his filmic career and permeates most of his films. Deleyto's perception of romantic comedy as a constant in Allen's work is closely linked to the flexibility he advocates for the definition of the genre. A genre is not a body of texts but a set of conventions which are not just restricted to the instances we usually associate with that particular genre but can also appear in the most unexpected places. Among the ingredients that he finds central to the study of the genre, Deleyto's book focuses on Allen's particular articulation of the space of romantic comedy.

He defines the space of romantic comedy as a protective atmosphere which transforms the characters' social world, liberating them from their psychological inhibitions and the strictures of social convention, and allowing them to give free

rein to their desires. While most romantic comedies tend to smoothly blend the characters' social and comic worlds, Allen's particular contribution to romantic comedy lies in his constant exploration of the limits and the workings of the genre by consciously separating these two worlds. This has resulted in two main tendencies in Allen's cinema: a realistic one, which calls our attention to the mores and protocols of the social space, and a fantastic one, which transports characters to an ideal space clearly separated from their everyday worlds. The first three films analyzed in the book, *Hannah and her Sisters* (1986), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Husbands and Wives* (1992), are examples of the first of these two tendencies. The social spaces constructed by these films are used to articulate a variety of discourses on love and relationships which constitute a propitious scenario for the type of transformation that is usually associated with romantic comedy. Yet, of these three films, *Hannah and her Sisters* is the only one in which the characters end up fully immersed in and protected by the spirit of romantic comedy. Through an insightful and detailed analysis of both the multi-protagonist narrative structure of the film and its visual style, Deleyto demonstrates how the film posits love and humour, that is, the spirit of romantic comedy, as the answer to the film's big existential questions. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, though, the social and the comic world always remain separate. The space of romantic comedy is there but the film's main characters, Judah and Cliff, are never allowed to fall under its benign influence. The comic space is finally deployed in the last scene, one of the most memorable in the director's career, but the two protagonists are abandoned just outside it and deprived of its influence. Outside the narrative proper, this space is further articulated in the final montage sequence, which finds hope and regeneration in love understood in a more general sense —not sexual and romantic love but love between friends or family members. The anxiety-ridden social space of Judah and Cliff becomes even more omnipresent and suffocating in *Husbands and Wives*, a film which, partly through its use of the conventions of the documentary, refuses to articulate an alternative space and, therefore, a solution for the couples' crises. The discourses on love and sexuality articulated in the social space of the film only bring about anxiety and frustration, making the space of comedy in this film even more conspicuous because of its strongly felt absence.

Deleyto uses *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993) as a bridge between the two tendencies mentioned above. As he argues, in this hybrid of comedy and thriller, the Liptons' married life shares most of the traits of the social worlds of the movies analyzed in the previous section: boredom, psychological and sexual anxieties and different degrees of hostility between the partners. Yet, the characters are finally able to leave this anxiety-ridden social space behind because it harmoniously coexists with a comic space which the film articulates through endless allusions to

previous filmic texts. Film references have been a recurrent way of solving all sorts of problems in Allen's films and *Manhattan Murder Mystery* is no exception here. Through the thriller-esque plot, the couple are able to enter a fantasy world—in this case the world of cinema—which brings about the transformation necessary for their reunion. Yet, Deleyto argues, the comic space in this film does not just function as a mere escapist fantasy but ends up providing a complex battlefield for the divergent ideological and sexual discourses embodied by the characters.

This balance between the social and the ideal space is lost in the last two films Deleyto analyzes in this book, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982) and *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001) in which the action is lifted out of the social world and transferred to an entirely comic space. As Deleyto argues, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* revisits the cultural discourses of texts like *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* but the overwhelming comic atmosphere of the later film guarantees a more optimistic perspective on those issues. This comic space is articulated on a sort of palimpsest of the original magical forest of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—a liberating space where desire proves both arbitrary and unstoppable—to which are added later versions of the text by Felix Mendelssohn, Max Reinhardt and, especially, Ingmar Bergman. Rather than the source of anxiety, sex in this comic space becomes a privileged vessel for personal fulfilment and communication and the road to happiness. Released in 1982, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* is, for Deleyto, Allen's personal swan song to the liberal sexual politics of the 1970s as a radical backlash was starting to take hold in US society. *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* uses similarly intertextual ground, the conventions of both film noir and screwball comedy, to lay the foundations of its comic space. As Deleyto argues, the conventions of these two classical film genres, the eroticism of the former and the hostility and verbal sparring between the sexes of the latter, provide the perfect comic environment to explore present-day conflicts between men and women. The prevalence of the comic space makes credible in this film, as was also the case of *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, the utopian possibilities of the couple. Yet, as Deleyto argues, since the comic space was fuelled by the antagonism of the screwball genre, once this antagonism gives way to the couple's final reconciliation, the film's erotic utopia loses most of its interest and allows us to glimpse the resilient patriarchal social space on which it was based.

*Woody Allen y el espacio de la comedia romantica* smoothly combines textual analysis with a wide range of critical and sociological theories. The book uses an original approach to Allen's films, which attests to both the coherence and the evolution of Allen's *oeuvre* through the decades. In this study the analysis of humour and the conventions of romantic comedy are perfectly integrated within the director's take on intimate and sexual protocols. Deleyto's latest book is a pleasure to read and it

should be of great interest to film scholars and aficionados of Woody Allen alike and to anyone interested in film genre in general and romantic comedy in particular.

Britta Feyerabend's study of nostalgia in Allen's work is not restricted to films but includes his plays and short stories, as well. Maybe because she chooses to take on board more miscellaneous materials, she foregoes the stylistic and visual analysis which, especially in the case of the filmic texts, would have made her points and insights more forceful, and would have clarified the particular place that nostalgia occupies in the filmmaker's fictional universe. Nostalgia is not only a question of film plots but can also be represented visually and it is this kind of specificity that the reader often misses in this book. When she, rather extensively, quotes dialogue lines from the scripts —parenthetical remarks included— she appears to be analyzing a written text rather than a visual medium. Yet, Feyerabend's analysis of the different meanings and uses of nostalgia in Allen's work shows her to be well-versed in the critical and sociological literature on the topic and she never loses sight of its main aim, which is to explore nostalgia in Allen's fiction as a psychological tool, that is, as a mental process that can help individuals to come to terms with their past, to overcome present crises and traumas and to have hope for and believe in the future.

After a brief introduction which highlights the relevance of Woody Allen's work in relation to the main topics of the book, nostalgia and postmodernism, the author provides a detailed account of the concept of nostalgia as both a psychological and an analytical tool. One of Feyerabend's most interesting points here is her exploration of the concept of dystalgia, a term she takes from speech communication scholar James A. Janack, to refer to "negative nostalgia", that is, the longing for a past age with the conscious awareness of the shortcomings, hardships and even horrors of that time. Unlike the nostalgic subject, the dystalgic one is consciously torn between desire and repulsion for the past. The following chapters are detailed explorations of the uses and meanings of nostalgia in a wide selection of texts by Allen. She distinguishes three types of nostalgia in them: the author's nostalgia, the audience's nostalgia (these two types she calls exterior nostalgia) and the characters' nostalgia (which she calls interior nostalgia). Interior and exterior nostalgia, she argues, constantly interact and overlap to create a complex web in which both intertextual references and mnemonic recollections, which Allen takes from a wide range of areas of both high and popular culture, simultaneously trigger this affect in the characters and in the readers/viewers, and are in turn a reflection of the author's own nostalgic feelings.

Feyerabend structures her textual analysis in four chapters, each devoted to a specific area of Allen's fictional universe: childhood and family, love and sex, death and anxiety, and reality and fiction. The conclusions she reaches in each of these chapters follow the same pattern: in spite of the highly nostalgic nature of all the

texts under analysis, Feyerabend does not regard Allen's exploration of nostalgia as a mere exercise in playful escapism but as a therapeutic tool. Rather than being trapped in a futile longing for the past, the texts use nostalgia as a vantage point from which to read the present and on which to build the future. Chapter 3, "Childhood and Family", examines the role of the family as a site of nostalgia in two plays, *Don't Drink the Water* (1966) and *The Floating Lightbulb* (1981), and three films: *Radio Days* (1987), *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Interiors* (1978). In spite of their almost full commitment to the centrality of both its interior and exterior forms, these texts, Feyerabend claims, always use nostalgia in a reflexive way, being aware of its dangers as mere escapism and of an individual's need to keep a critical distance from the past. Chapter 4, "Love and Sex", analyses relationships as sites of nostalgia in a short story "The Whore of Mensa", a play, *Central Park West* (1995), and four movies *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan* and *Husbands and Wives*. As she argues, in matters of love and sex, Allen employs nostalgia primarily as a tool to show a character's longing for a past relationship and as a tool to get into the narrator's stream-of-consciousness. Even if the author relies a little too heavily on autobiographical criticism in this section — *Central Park West*, for instance, is almost exclusively read in the light of Allen's divorce from Mia Farrow —, Feyerabend's interpretation of nostalgia in Allen's work captures the diametrically different attitudes of characters in these texts: while the nostalgic feeling of trying to relive a past experience only leads the characters to frustration and unhappiness, productive nostalgia allows them to reflect on why a relationship went wrong so that they can avoid making the same mistakes in the future. In Chapter 5, "Death and Anxiety", Feyerabend deals with the topic of nostalgia in relation to some of Woody Allen's well-known existential dilemmas. The texts she chooses include three films — *Sleeper* (1973), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Bullets over Broadway* (1994) —, a short story "The Lunatic's Tale" (1977), and an assortment of plays: *Death Knocks* (1966), *Death* (1975), *God* (1975), *My Apology* (1975) and *Riverside Drive* (2003). As in the previous chapter, these films show that, if used in a productive way, nostalgia can help individuals overcome present-day crises on the basis of how similar crises were handled in the past. Yet, if nostalgia is understood in a merely escapist fashion, the excessive involvement with the past may seriously hinder an individual's development. A similar conclusion regarding productive and unproductive uses of nostalgia is reached in Chapter 6, which deals with the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction in two plays, *The Query* (1975) and *Old Saybrook* (1973), one short story "The Kugelmass Episode" and five films — *Stardust Memories* (1980), *Play It Again, Sam* (1972), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Zelig* (1983), *Deconstructing Harry* (1997). In some of these texts, Feyerabend argues, Allen openly mocks escapist nostalgic fantasies which prevent the characters from coming

to terms with their own crises and traumas. Nostalgia, she claims, should never be restricted to just fruitless longing for the past but needs to be critically revisited, integrated into the present, and used for the future.

*Seems like Old Times* fervently defends nostalgia not as mere longing for the past but as both an individual and a collective way of interacting with the future and as a key notion to an understanding of Allen's career. Part of the book's interest lies in the impressive coverage of a wide range of his work and in its frequent and very welcome focus on non-filmic texts. Feyerabend succeeds in demonstrating the explanatory potential of nostalgia in the case of Woody Allen and thus adds one more pertinent perspective to the already voluminous and ever-expanding bibliography on the New York artist. Rather like Carla Bruni, cultural and film scholars continue to find Allen's *oeuvre* an endless source of pleasure and fascination, and the novelty of the approaches offered by the two critical studies discussed here attest to the inexhaustible nature of his artistic output.

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