



### Woody and the Big Apple

The three Woody Allen films we'll be seeing today are his homage to the Big Apple. They are full of nostalgia for the New York of his childhood, and even more, for a New York he never knew.

We all know that looking back plays a bigger role in your life as you get older – Allen is now 79 – but he has always looked back. In 2011 a tv-reporter drove with him through Brooklyn to feed this nostalgia and to see how it had changed since his youth. I expected a warm glow of childhood memories, such as we will see shortly in his movie *Radio Days* from 1987, and perhaps some wistfulness about what had changed. One of his anecdotes was typical Woody, about how after the last baseball game in the local Ebbets Field stadium he took an envelope of dirt home with him from the playing field. And then pained himself for years trying to figure out what to do with it.

But I was surprised by how outspoken he was on screen about all the things that he *didn't* like. He hated his schooldays during the war, where the kids had to wear plastic ID tags so that their bodies could be identified in case the school got bombed. (The US was never bombed during the entire war). He hated the weekly dinner at his grandparents' house, he learned to ride a bike but he hated bikes and still does.

So I had to laugh when I read an interview with him this week in NRC about his new movie *Irrational Man*. “I’m a timid bourgeois kind of guy”, he says. “I am not a curious person. I don’t like experiments, I don’t like to travel. If it were not for my wife I would never leave my zipcode area.”

And judging by his movies we could add to that: “and I am constantly in fear of contracting some horrific disease”. In the NRC interview he did admit that he loves thinking up secret plots on the best way to murder someone. There is definitely a black streak in there, and to tell you the truth: I’m glad.

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Allen’s gift is that he uses his movies to create a universally recognizable character who by expressing his own fears, expresses ours. He is our timid bourgeois Everyman and by doing so liberates us, leaving us free to be the heroes of our own lives. There is a wonderful scene in *Hannah and Her Sisters* when he runs out of the doctor’s office and goes jumping and leaping for joy down the street, a typical Upper West Side street in Manhattan, having just heard that does not have cancer. All of a sudden he stops dead in his tracks. And because we ‘know’ Woody Allen, we know that his relief was brief indeed, and that the realization just hit him that he will nevertheless at some point die.

The backdrop for all these fears, love affairs, memories and nostalgia is, of course, New York – the Big Apple. The films we are going to see today are an ongoing cinematic chronicle of this lifelong love affair. In the opening scene of *Manhattan* we hear the novelist Isaac Davis – Woody himself, of course – practice the first sentences of his novel. ‘He adored New York City. He idolized it out of all proportion. He thrived on the hustle-bustle. No matter what the season it was, this was a still a town that existed in black and white.’

In a later interview Allen described this movie as “a shamelessly sentimental portrait of the city, made with silly, reckless love. My heart beats to the rhythm of New York.”

The city is the film's main character, perhaps even more than Isaac Davis. That iconic image of Woody Allen en Diana Keaton on the bench looking out over the East River at the bridge to Queens, with Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* as soundtrack, is engraved in our collective memory – Americans and Dutch alike, and across generations.

And then there are the unforgettable images of the skyline, and then a parking lot, the flickering neon letters of a hotel named 'Manhattan', piles of garbage, Park Avenue in the snow.

Did you know that the scenario of *Manhattan* was also published as a book? Not only in English, but also in French and in Dutch. That tells us something about the status of the movie, or rather: its stature as an homage to the Big Apple. Anyone who goes to New York for the first time, has cinematographic images in his mind's eye. How often have I heard: it was just like being in a movie. People who have never been there feel right at home right away because it all feels so familiar.

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Woody Allen was of course not the first to idolize New York on film. In his essay 'Imagining New York City: Literature, Urbanism and the Visual Arts 1890-1940' professor of media studies at the University of Amsterdam Christoph Lindner writes that 'skyscraper films' were a mainstay of American commercial cinema as early as the 1890's, not only in movie houses but also in peep-show machines.

"They served a double function", he writes, "both as entertainment for the masses and as an indoctrination into a shared perception of the modern age: a dynamic image of New York as a futuristic site of urban change and wonder."

By the '30s, says Lindner, the result was "the creation of a mythic, cinematic version of the city that continues even today, through the films of Woody Allen, Spike Lee and Martin Scorsese, and dominates the popular perception of New York worldwide."

The French philosopher Baudrillard goes so far as to claim that the true identity of the city is to be found on the screen, not on the streets.

We have come full circle. It's time to watch the first of today's three movies.

It is possible that the New York we'll see on screen never really existed – it's a fiction, a dream, a personal collage. And at the same time Woody's Big Apple is a kind of hyperreality, bigger than life. He may have hated his school and the ID tags, he may have hated the weekly lunch at his grandparents and he still hates bikes – but his love for the city that binds all these memories, all these people and places, is unflagging. It's his city, we're his guests.

Thank you for joining us here at EYE and the John Adams Institute, and enjoy the movies.

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