A Companion to Woody Allen
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The July 29, 2011 issue of *Entertainment Weekly* made it official: *Midnight in Paris* had surpassed *Hannah and Her Sisters* as Woody Allen’s top-grossing film. As the contributors to this *Companion* and many of its readers understand, “top-grossing Woody Allen film” is a term that demands significant contextualizing. (“By my meager standards, *[Annie Hall, Manhattan and Hannah]* did very nicely,” Allen told Douglas McGrath, “but certainly not very nicely by Very Nicely standards” (qtd. in McGrath 2006: 118).) Coming in at just over $46 million by September, *Midnight* accumulated profits a quarter of those claimed by another 2011 summer romantic comedy, *Bridesmaids*, while being eclipsed by the proceeds of the first week of *Harry Potter and the Deadly Hollows Part II* by an even larger margin. Few of the contributors to this *Companion* probably saw either of those movies, but many of them (as their chapters attest) watched *Midnight in Paris* with surprise and delight. They would have watched with surprise, for one reason, because many of them live in places where Woody Allen movies never appear except on DVD rental shelves. During one week that summer, *Midnight* was appearing on 912 screens in the United States, compared to Allen’s most financially successful recent predecessors, each of which earned approximately $23 million: *Match Point* (maximum 512 screens) and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (maximum 776 screens). (More improbable still, at the showing on one of those screens, in Boston on a Saturday night, one of the *Companion* editors was turned away because *Midnight in Paris* was sold out. A Woody Allen movie sold out!)* The contributors would have been delighted because, arguably at any rate, Allen hadn’t made a film of such substance and charm since *Hannah*. They would be agreeing with the estimation of Kenneth Turan, who articulated his personal surprise and delight in the *Los Angeles Times*: “Here’s a sentence I never thought I’d write again,” he acknowledged. “Woody
Allen has made a wonderful new picture, *Midnight in Paris*, and it’s his best, most enjoyable work in years."

“If you’re surprised to be reading that, think how I feel writing it,” Turan added. I’ve been a tough sell on the past dozen or so Allen films, very much including the well-acted but finally wearying *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. It seemed that everything he touched in recent years was tainted by misanthropy and sourness. Until now (Turan 2011).

In addition to *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (which closes with the two title characters grimly traversing the Barcelona airport, their disconsolate expressions expressing all that need be said about the psychic residuum of their would-be romantic summers), Turan was very likely thinking of *Whatever Works* (2009), in which the facile character reversals of the transplanted Southerners do little to clear the viewer’s mind’s ear of Boris Yellnikoff’s incessant existential kvetching, and *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, with its unrelenting emphasis on the delusions the human need for love and companionship delivers us mortal fools into desperately embracing. Contributors to the *Companion* make much more of these three films than I just have, of course, but none of them claims any of the three to be robustly cheerful, nor is any of them likely to find “misanthropic” and “sour” completely inappropriate descriptors of the emotional trajectories of *Midnight*’s trio of predecessors.

“With *Midnight in Paris*,” Turan continued,

Allen has lightened up, allowed himself a treat and in the process created a gift for us and him. His new film is simple and fable-like, with a definite “when you wish upon a star” quality, but, bolstered by appealing performers like Owen Wilson, Marion Cotillard and Rachel McAdams, it is his warmest, mellowest and funniest venture in far too long. Allen says he’s been enamored of Paris since he wrote and acted in *What’s New Pussycat?* in 1965. You can sense his continued passion for the city throughout the film, feel the extra pep in his step and pleasure in his heart (Turan 2011).²

Robert M. Polhemus, whose chapter in this *Companion*, “Comic Faith and Its Discontents: Death and the Late Woody,” treats *Midnight in Paris* at length, seems to concur with Turan in characterizing the movie as a “gamechanger” for Allen’s oeuvre, which assumes that, before this spring, Allen critics have been exerting themselves on a somewhat different field, and, therefore, one of the purposes of this Introduction, in addition to introducing the essays contained within the *Companion*, is to offer the reader a highly concentrated view of the pleasures, challenges, and occasional frustrations of being a Woody Allen film critic before – and since – *Midnight in Paris*.

The pleasures are perhaps best epitomized by the delight so many of the critics take in their essays in moving from one Allen film to another, in critically linking
films of what is generally agreed upon as his major period (1981–1992: *Zelig* through *Husbands and Wives*) with the later movies that have tended to attract more equivocal responses from reviewers and critics (*Manhattan Murder Mystery*, *Celebrity*, *Hollywood Ending*, and *Anything Else* among them). Co-editor Sam B. Girgus and I encouraged our contributors to keep in mind that, in order that this book not replicate the earlier Allen critical compilations with their concentrations on *Zelig*, *Purple Rose*, *Hannah*, and so on, the majority of *Companion* chapters would at least touch on Allen’s post-major period films. Accordingly, in his chapter, “‘Raging in the Dark’: Late Style in Woody Allen’s Films,” Christopher J. Knight takes issue with the putative decline in Allen’s later films, pointing up the many moviegoer pleasures to be encountered even in his lesser efforts. “So while there is a perception that Allen’s work went into eclipse in the post-Farrow period,” Knight acknowledges,

this period has, in fact, included many fine achievements, and when it is taken into account that the director is responsible for all of a film’s facets, these achievements become more unarguable. Think, for instance, of the brilliant cinematography in *Husbands and Wives* (Carlo Di Palma, DP), *Sweet and Lowdown* (Fei Zhao, DP), *Match Point* (Remi Adefarsasin, DP) and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Javier Aguirresarobe, DP). Think of the scintillating performances of Judy Davis in *Husbands and Wives*; Dianne Wiest, Jennifer Tilly, and Chazz Palminteri in *Bullets Over Broadway*; Mira Sorvino in *Mighty Aphrodite*; Sean Penn and Samantha Morton in *Sweet and Lowdown*; Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Emily Mortimer, Brian Cox, Matthew Goode, and Scarlett Johansson in *Match Point*; Colin Farrell, Ewan McGregor, Tom Wilkinson, and Hayley Atwell in *Cassandra’s Dream*; Hugh Jackman in *Scoop*; Javier Bardem, Penélope Cruz, and Rebecca Hall in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*; and Larry David and Evan Rachel Wood in *Whatever Works*. Think of the choreography in *Mighty Aphrodite* and *Everybody Says I Love You* and of the music that so enhances *Everybody Says I Love You*, *Sweet and Lowdown*, *Match Point*, *Cassandra’s Dream* (Philip Glass, composer), and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. And think of Allen’s own script work in *Sweet and Lowdown*, *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, *Match Point*, *Cassandra’s Dream*, and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. There have been definite successes, and not to extend Allen his due should entail a serious misjudgment.

Knight’s inventory of Allen’s post-1992 achievements might be expanded to include the homage to Kafka and German Expressionist film techniques in *Shadows and Fog* (for an illumination of which, see Iris Bruce’s *Companion* chapter, “Lurking in Shadows: Kleinman’s Trial and Defense”), and the fact that, during an era in which Hollywood film has become increasingly mindless, most of Allen’s movies take viewers (and the critics secreted among them) seriously enough to offer them questions to ponder, to confront them with substantial human problems to contemplate. The existential conundrums these films pose are the special province of the philosophically oriented *Companion* critics, including Richard A. Blake, Mark T. Conard, David Detmer, Sander Lee, Patrick Murray and Jeanne A. Schuler, and Monica Osborne. If there is one reflection on his filmmaking career that the
Companion essays seem singularly devoted to confuting, it’s Allen’s contention that, “I never had enough technique or enough depth in my work to make anybody think” (qtd. in Lax 2007: 365). (Part IV, Influences/Intertextualities, of this Companion provides compelling evidence of how much of other writers’ and thinkers’ writings and thoughts have worked their ways into Allen’s films. William Hutchings’ “Woody Allen and the Literary Canon” demonstrates how pervasively Allen’s films invoke canonical authors, and J. Andrew Gothard’s “‘Who’s He When He’s at Home?’: A Census of Woody Allen’s Literary, Philosophical, and Artistic Allusions” makes an impressive first pass at charting such allusions. William Brigham is surely the only critic ever to view Allen’s protagonists through the prism of the French flâneur, and although Menachem Feuer is far from the first critic to view Allen protagonists as “schlemiels,” his conception of that venerable Jewish comedic figure includes a capacity for growth which hasn’t always been part of that mythos. The section concludes with Brian Bergen-Aurand’s reading of Vicky Cristina Barcelona as a “city of refuge” narrative illuminated by other Barcelona films by Whit Stillman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pedro Almodóvar, and Alejandro González Iñárritu.)

Knight’s inventory of achievements also points up in microcosm the most obvious – and yet hardest to fully appreciate – aspect of Allen’s oeuvre: its magnitude. How easy it is to type or say that Allen has made 41 films in 41 years; how difficult it is to grasp fully the consistently indefatigable creative energy that that accomplishment enshrines. Filmmakers get no awards purely for productivity, certainly, but Allen’s ability to produce a screenworthy script annually for four decades puts him in a class of American artists (Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth, and the late John Updike are other members) who constantly outproduced their critics’ capacities to say comprehensive things about their work. Then Allen had to shoot his. To be a critic of Woody Allen films is to feel incessantly surpassed by the amplitude of his production.

In a different sense, it’s a blessing and a challenge for Allen critics that he has been so prolific. We’re never at a loss for texts to write about and compare/contrast, and, unlike some reviewers who complain that his films tend to run together, we never confuse Broadway Danny Rose, Purple Rose of Cairo, Hannah and Her Sisters, Crimes and Misdemeanors, September, Husbands and Wives, Shadows and Fog, Bullets over Broadway, Everyone Says I Love You, Deconstructing Harry, Match Point, and Midnight in Paris. We understand that moviegoers less focused on movies than we are might experience some blurring among their memories of Allen’s movies, but, if the chapters here dramatize one thing, it’s their authors’ cumulative conviction of the remarkable variety that exists within Allen’s immense oeuvre. True enough, many of his films devote themselves to illuminating the human capacity for love, and yet, as Kent Jones argued in his review of Midnight in Paris (2011), Allen’s movies approach the subject from a number of moods and in a variety of tonalities:
The challenge with which his productivity confronts Allen’s critics?: Writing about three of the films without trying to incorporate six more into the argument.

Probably the most idiosyncratic element of the relationship between Allen and his critics is that many of them appear to value his movies substantially more than he does. Allen has consistently articulated his sense that *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Husbands and Wives*, and *Match Point* are the films in which he came closest to achieving what he set out to do in writing the scripts; he places *Stardust Memories* and *Zelig* in his second rank of cinematic achievement (Lax 2007: 255). Nonetheless, as he in 2000 told Eric Lax (whose voluminous interviews with Allen are quoted in the Companion nearly as often as are his movies),

I don’t see myself as an artist. I see myself as a working filmmaker who chose to go the route of working all the time rather than making my films into some special red carpet event every three years. I’m not cynical and I’m far from an artist. I’m a lucky working stiff (Lax 2007: 97).

Allen has made enough movies critical of the artistic personality (*Interiors, Stardust Memories, Shadows and Fog, Bullets over Broadway, and Tall Dark Stranger* are a few of them) to establish that “artist” is not necessarily for him an unambiguously commendatory title; nonetheless, the contributors to the Companion are certainly writing as if their subject is very much a creator of artistic films worthy of the most serious critical attention and of the most sophisticated critical techniques developed to illuminate cinematic texts.

The discrepancy in perspectives between filmmaker and critics is attributable partly to Allen’s penchant for comparing his films to *Bicycle Thieves, The Seventh Seal*, and similar cinematic classics and, consequently, unfailingly finding his wanting; he also regularly acknowledges a modesty of intentions, as in his titling of *September*: “I want a title that doesn’t promise much. That’s my confidence,” he told Lax in 1987, implying that his confidence wasn’t exactly sky high. “I try to take a soft-sell, nonpretentious approach, like one-word titles” (Lax 2007: 73). That discrepancy is exacerbated further by differences between Allen’s assumptions about responses to films and his own. As we’ll see, he seldom reacts to reviews or critical readings of his films, but in the few cases where he has done so, Allen decided that the movie failed to convey his point sufficiently (e.g., in *Stardust Memories* he didn’t communicate effectively to the audience that the last two thirds of the plot takes place within Sandy Bates’s unstable imaginings), or that the audience misinterpreted his meaning. Three of the Companion chapters cite Allen’s
extremely illuminating rejoinder to a suggestion that there is something ambiguous about the ethics conveyed in *Match Point*:

What I’m really saying, and it’s not hidden or esoteric – it’s just clear as a bell – is that we have to accept that the universe is godless and life is meaningless, often a terrible and brutal experience with no hope, and that love relationships are very, very hard, and that we still need to find a way to not only cope but lead a decent and moral life (Lax 2007: 123–124).

Where Allen doesn’t locate the problem, interestingly, is in the intricacies of cinematic communication themselves. He very politely disagreed with the conclusions drawn by a Catholic priest who wrote about *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in the New York Times, Allen assuming that the interpretation was predicated on the writer’s knowledge of Allen’s atheism. Allen objected that, “[the writer] made a wrong assumption . . . the film can’t honestly be read to imply I’m saying anything goes and that’s fine with me” (Lax 2007: 124). Many of the Companion critics would wonder, given that Judah asserts that the murderer in his imaginary screenplay only suffers the occasional moment of guilt over his undiscovered crime, why the interpretation that Allen is suggesting that “anything goes and that’s fine with me” isn’t valid, or isn’t at least arguable. In “Crimes and Misdemeanors: Reflections on Reflexivity,” Gregg Bachman argues very compellingly that all the self-conscious elements embedded within Allen’s plot and subplot render unambiguous ethical readings of the text extremely difficult to achieve, while Claire Sisco King’s “Play It Again, Woody: Self-Reflexive Critique in Contemporary Woody Allen Films” contends that such films as *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008) and *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010) can be read as self-reflexive meditations on Allen’s cinematic oeuvre itself. Through both narrative and stylistic choices, these films call attention to Allen’s characteristic tropes and iconography in order to critique the normative influence of Hollywood conventions and Allen’s complicity in their perpetuation.

In “Jazz Heaven: Woody Allen and the Hollywood Ending,” Christopher Ames maintains that Allen has “become a master of the varied ways of using a film-within-a-film to exploit the self-referentiality of that subgenre and to examine the interaction between filmmaker and audience.” Perhaps topping them all in terms of problematizing the understanding of Allen’s cinema is the argument of Colleen Glenn, who points out in “Which Woody Allen?” that,

As a star persona, therefore, Woody Allen presents a difficult case study because the man we know as Woody Allen comprises so many different real-life and fictional identities that it becomes nearly impossible, despite his iconic public image, to sort out exactly which of the Woody Allens we mean when we say “Woody Allen.”
However devotedly the filmmaker might soundtrack his films with American Songbook classics, many of Allen’s Companion critics consistently and energetically contest his refusal to enter postmodernity.

Richard A. Blake’s “Allen’s Random Universe in His European Cycle: Morality, Marriage, Magic” addresses later films than Crimes and Misdemeanors, but his general critical approach consists in a concerted, basically formalist effort to explicate “what [Allen is] really saying.” Blake’s thesis statement seems right in line with Allen’s invocation of a “godless universe” and his assertion that “life is meaningless.”

“By any measurement, Allen’s preoccupation with a universe without structure has become more prominent, and more oppressive, as his work developed through the years,” Blake maintains. “By the time he reaches his European cycle – Match Point (2005), Scoop (2006), Cassandra’s Dream (2007), and Vicky Christina Barcelona (2008) – his vision of a pointless universe has darkened to its bleakest degree ever.” If Allen ever did read film criticism on his work, it seems certain that he would have to applaud Blake’s essay for gauging accurately the bleak tonalities in Allen’s movies that the director perceives as “clear as a bell.”

On the other hand, Stephen Papson’s chapter, “Critical Theory and the Cinematic World of Woody Allen,” takes a very different approach to one of Allen’s most admired films. Papson writes,

Allen explores the intersection of meaning, pleasure, and identity in relation to the social and cultural contradictions of modernity. We encounter the most pronounced articulation of this in Zelig. As I will illustrate, the diegesis of Zelig is a direct extension of Fromm’s (1941) analysis of the underlying psychological conditions produced by modernity reflected in the rise of Nazism.

In addition to Erich Fromm, Papson’s essay is pervaded by quotations from theorists of the Frankfurt School of Sociology, who provide him with characterizations of the “social and cultural contradictions of modernity” that he also finds permeating Zelig. What Papson never explicitly contends – and this is where Allen’s “what I’m really saying” starts to seem inadequate as a critical stance – is that Allen has read Fromm or Adorno or Marcuse. Papson’s essay is artful because of his presiding assumption that Allen’s consciousness was formed amidst the “underlying psychological conditions of modernity,” and that he responded artistically through Zelig to the very same cultural tensions that inspired intellectual responses from theorists. “It astonishes me what a lot of intellectualizing goes on over my films,” Allen said in the 1980s, seeming to anticipate Emmet Ray’s self-conscious defensiveness about his art: “They’re just films” (qtd. in Carroll 1994: 93). Papson and other Companion critics would not dispute that Allen’s movies are “just films”; where they would disagree with him is in his implicit assumption that those films’ meanings are restricted to what the screenwriter/director intended them to mean. Many of the Companion critics would concur, alternatively, with a statement Gregg
Bachman makes in the context of his *Crimes and Misdemeanors* chapter: “my point is that our reads, as critics and scholars, are just as important as the filmmaker’s intention.” Cynthia Lucia makes the same argument in her chapter, “Here . . . It’s Not Their Cup of ‘Tea’: Woody Allen’s Melodramatic Tendencies in *Interiors, September, Another Woman, and Alice,*” when she distinguishes between Allen’s interview comments about *September* and the movie she experienced: “Although in Allen’s own view Diane ‘doesn’t act maliciously. She just does what she does because she doesn’t know better’ . . . the film itself adopts a more ambivalent attitude.”

Of course, the films he has produced have given Allen ample opportunity to exact revenge upon film critics for “what a lot of intellectualizing that goes on over [his] films,” which is what he does in, among others, *Sweet and Lowdown,* a film seldom remarked upon in the *Companion* essays. Blanche Williams (Uma Thurman), the wife of jazz guitarist Emmet Ray (Sean Penn), is a journalist fixated upon penetrating the secrets of artistic creation, and Allen delights in having her pose unanswerable questions to her husband (“What do you think of when you play? I mean, what goes through your mind? What are your real feelings?”), to which Emmet replies, “I don’t know. That I’m underpaid. Sometimes I think about that.”

Subsequently, Blanche decides that a key to Emmet’s psyche is concealed within his love of trains, and as the couple sits in a switchyard, she recommences her interrogation: “What is this fascination with trains? . . . Are you trying to recapture some feeling from childhood, when you dreamt of glamorous cities just out of reach?”

**EMMET:** I’m not trying to recapture anything from childhood. It stank.

**BLANCHE:** Then I can only think it must be the power of the locomotive, the sheer, potent sexual energy of the pistons that arouses your manhood, the pistons pumping.

**EMMET:** You sound like you want to go to bed with the train.

Happily, Allen’s movies proved to the *Companion* critics not so intransigent to interpretation as the text of Emmet Ray does to Blanche.

As I have suggested, what we critics need not worry about at all is Allen reading our interpretations of his work and objecting to them. When asked by Lax (2007: 324) whether film critics or reviewers influence his moviemaking, Allen minced no words. Although he would

share many of the severest criticisms of my work if I hear about them, I have a very critical eye for my work, and for other people’s. I used to read about myself, but I completely stopped because talk about unhelpful distractions – the absurdity of reading that you’re a comic genius or in bad faith. Who needs to ponder such outlandish nonsense?
The chapters in *Companion to Woody Allen* spend no time on critical binaries like
the one Allen dismisses here, of course, and the critics in these pages resolutely
foresaw themselves to resist penning “outlandish nonsense.” Sam and I did
encourage them, however, to include critical perspectives on Allen’s oeuvre which
are anything but “unhelpful distractions” – for instance, Renée R. Curry’s “Woody
which argues that Allen’s determination to create movies that look like those
Hollywood products he happily watched at the Midwood Theater in Brooklyn as
a child has left him creating on film major urban centers nearly bereft of people
of color, thereby distorting the racial and ethnic realities of those cities. Similarly,
in “Love and Citation in *Midnight in Paris: Remembering Modernism, Remembering
Woody*,” Katherine Fusco finds a personal agenda working through this
“warmest” of recent Allen films in which he simplifies Gil Pender’s modernist
heroes in order tacitly to imbue himself with their canonical status. Joanna E.
Rapf’s title reflects gender ambivalences plumbed by her study: “‘It’s Complicated,
Really’”: Women in the Films of Woody Allen.” Although creating a *Companion*
unsympathetic to our filmmaker subject was never our intention, co-editor
Sam and I nonetheless agreed that recognizing and illuminating the contradictions
inescapably embedded within Allen’s film art is a necessary element of trying to
understand it.

Allen is on record, as well, as asserting another reason for ignoring responses
to his films, one that, in juxtaposing his movies against an unconquerable antago-
nist, resembles his negative estimation of them compared to *Bicycle Thieves*.

I don’t really know how people have responded to the film because I gave up check-
ing years ago, but if they liked it, great. If they didn’t like it, it doesn’t mean much
to me, not because I’m aloof and arrogant, but because I sadly learned that their
approbation doesn’t affect my mortality. If I do something I feel is not very good,
and the public embraces it, even wildly, that doesn’t make my personal sense of
failure feel any better. That’s why the key is to work, enjoy the process, don’t read
about yourself, when people bring up the subject of films, deflect the conversation
to sports, politics, or sex, and keep your nose to the grindstone (Lax 2007: 106).

Allen’s casual juxtaposition of reactions to his films with the inexorability of his
mortality suggests why so many of his movies – *Love and Death*, *Shadows and Fog*,
*Deconstructing Harry* – include among their cast lists actors playing the role of
Death. (In *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, Roy [Josh Brolin] turns the title
formula for romance deadly, telling his mother-in-law, promised by a psychic that
amour is in her future, “I believe, unfortunately, that you will meet the tall dark
stranger that we all eventually meet.”) Perhaps the most resonant recent image
of Allen’s death-conscious, death-defying art is that of the recently deceased magi-
cian Sidney Waterman, Allen’s character in *Scoop*, continuing to perform card
tricks on a boat captained by the Grim Reaper which is ferrying the magician and
his deathly audience to the afterworld.
Implicit in this mortality-obsessed stance is another of Allen’s rationales for perpetuating his regimen of making a film per annum – a strategy that has both practical and magical intents. “I make these films to amuse myself, or should I say to distract myself,” Allen told Lax, and he readily admits that it is from the unanswerable questions and terrible truths of existence that the making of films distracts him. “[Shadows and Fog] fulfilled that desire that keeps me working,” Allen continued, “that keeps me in the film business. I do all my films for my own personal reasons . . .” (Lax 2007: 127). Like the characters in Manhattan who buffer themselves against issues of human ultimacy through their preoccupations with their erotic entanglements, and like Steffi (Dianne Wiest) in the closing scene of September, whose best counsel to the griefstricken Lane (Mia Farrow) is, “Soon you’ll leave here [Connecticut], and you’ll start all over again in New York. There’ll be a million things to keep you busy. It’s gonna be all right,” Allen’s interviews suggest that, for him, too, sometimes in life self-distraction is the best that can be done. To this extent, all of his films fulfill their motives of distraction, and his indifference to audience/reviewer responses as well as his lack of enthusiasm about many of them are, arguably, products of his movies having already served their primary personal objective for him before they’re ever released. Small wonder that Sandy Bates looks so demoralized after the screening of his film at the end of Stardust Memories.

Allen put a far more positive slant on his filmmaking regimen in his interview with Richard Schickel, likening it to living 10 months of every year of his life in magic.

[When you see a magic trick, it’s something that defies reality. You know, my way has been movies. I live for a year in the movie. I write the movie. I live with those characters. I cast the movie. I’m on the set. The set is maybe a 1940s nightclub, or maybe it’s a contemporary thing, but I live in a fake world for ten months. And by living in that world I’m defying reality in a way – or at least hiding from reality. But that’s what it’s all about for me . . . To me, that’s the impetus for the work (Schickel 2003: 145).

At the end of The Purple Rose of Cairo, Cecilia (Farrow) is, notwithstanding her recent personal confrontation with the fraudulence within the movie screen, gradually sucked back into the lushly romantic sham of Fred and Ginger’s Swing Time terpsichore magic, her heartbreakingly brightening face evoking the intensity of her deepening delusion. She, too, is “defying reality,” but the poignancy of the moment derives from our knowledge that, before long, she will once again have to “choose reality” by leaving the theater and reentering the desolate Depression world lorded over, for her, by her husband, Monk. In one of his more provocative comments to Schickel, Allen asserted that the reason that he had Pearl (Maureen Stapleton) doing magic tricks in Interiors is that, “for me, reliance on magic is the only way out of the mess that we’re in. If we don’t get a magical solution to it we’re not going to get any solution . . .” (Schickel 2003: 136). Pearl
does succeed in resuscitating Joey (Mary Beth Hurt) when Eve’s daughter fails to rescue her mother from her suicidal drowning, but, more often in Allen’s films, the magicians are too conscious of the mechanics of their illusions to save anyone – themselves included. Typical of these self-consciously impotent magicians is Scoop’s Sidney Waterman – Splendini – who, before dying, knows all too well that his “agitating molecules” to make subjects disappear in his dematerializer box is all a scam. When Sondra Pransky (Scarlett Johansson) embraces the box’s magical powers because she encounters the spectre of a dead reporter inside, Waterman asks her,

What do you think? There’s spirits? A world of departed people? . . . Not me. I’m a prestidigitator. I do coin tricks and card tricks . . . This [the mystery Sondra is inspired to begin sleuthing by the reporter] is not for me. I do occasional bar mitzvahs and children’s parties.

As Patrick Murray and Jeanne A. Schuler demonstrate in “Disappearing Act: The Trick Philosophy of Woody Allen,” the tension between the possibility of a “magical solution” and the far greater likelihood that any such solution would only be a trick, an act of prestidigitation, pervades Allen’s films. As Allen told Schickel (2003: 78), “my way [of defying reality] has been movies.” Sometimes the magic works; sometimes not. When Manhattan opened, Allen, as he told Lax, skipped the premiere:

So people think, He doesn’t care, or He’s too aloof, or He’s snooty and arrogant, but, as I said, that’s not it. It’s more like joylessness. It doesn’t thrill me. It just doesn’t really mean anything. [He smiles.]

Then he added, as if anticipating the film that would turn his career around, “But Paris thrilled me” (Lax 2007: 116).

Notes

1 As of January, 2012, the domestic gross of Midnight in Paris was $56.5 million, making it the top grossing independent film of 2011 (Daily Variety, Jan. 27, 2012).
2 At significant risk of deflating Turan’s enthusiasm, it needs to be acknowledged that the Companion essay on Woody Allen and France by Gilles Menegaldo depicts a much more equivocal relationship between Allen and that country – particularly with Jean-Luc Godard – than Midnight so compellingly creates.

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PART I

Biography/Autobiography/ Auteurism
Woody Allen’s films have always addressed particular aspects of American culture – Jewish humor, local identities (Brooklyn, Manhattan, California), politics (his aversion to Republicans), and aesthetic tastes (his love of Hollywood classics, art cinema, jazz). But the director’s channeling of cultural identities and debates goes beyond the plots of his films. Allen’s public image, a combination of his screen persona and his public discourse, has invariably embodied a tension that was central to the definition of a film culture in the United States: that between “high” and “low” cultural objects – to put it bluntly, between enduring art and disposable entertainment.

It is a well-known fact that the French-born idea of the auteur became a valuable tool in the ascription of cultural value to films. The term’s designation of stylistic and thematic consistency, as well as of a director’s self-expressive needs, counterbalanced the formulaic and ephemeral aspects of industrial objects produced for mass consumption. We are also aware that Allen’s recurring themes and stylistic tropes have placed the majority of his works in the realm of auteur cinema, especially after *Annie Hall* (1977), which marks a transition to more complex narrative structures and profound themes – the film was immediately followed by *Interiors* (1978), Allen’s first incursion into the domain of drama. At the same time, the director’s experiences as a gag writer for columnists and television comedians, and as a stand-up comedian both on stage and on TV, charge his auteur identity with elements of popular culture that for long existed in tension with auteur attributes, and which, as I explain later, largely precipitated the skepticism towards Allen as a serious filmmaker among American critics.

It is tempting to detect a transition, in Allen’s career, from the realm of popular comedies to that of auteur cinema; in other words, from the slapstick, the

What I here hope to contribute to these and other studies of Woody Allen's films is the investigation not so much of the artistic merits or the philosophical relevance of his comedy, but the coexistence, in Allen's image, of the stand-up comedian with the ambitious artist, as he combines fleeting comments on current affairs with timeless metaphysical questions. This discussion calls for a brief account of the role of the cinematic author in the critical debates about the place of film in American culture, as they imply the interdependency between artistry and individual authorship. This overview will ground my analysis of the ways in which Allen embodies this tension, which in turn destabilizes traditional approaches to the auteur, and indeed adds a new dimension to this figure. I will subsequently look at the director's topical treatment of cultural debates, the residual traces of his stand-up persona, and its implications for the problematic opposition between auteur and popular cinema.

The Place of the Auteur in American Film Culture

If in its romantic formulation the auteur is defined by the enduring and universal aspects of her work, Allen offers us a different model, defined as much by perpetual themes and elements of style as by the treatment of topical issues – in other words, current events in American culture, from politics to the mores of everyday life. And whereas Allen's recurring themes and stylistic tropes place the director in the realm of auteur cinema, his exceptional productivity (at least one film per year since 1971), the usually limited budgets of his films and their constant recycling of similar material attach to Allen's productions the seriality that is typical of popular culture. Allen personally articulates some of the tensions that have permeated the designation of the place and value of film in American society: tensions between uniqueness and repetition, universalism and topicality, and auteurism and commercialism.