Even though it is in many ways his worst film, Interiors may yet prove to be Woody Allen's most revealing. As his first "serious" film, it is ample evidence that Allen's forte is indeed the comic film; more importantly, it demonstrates convincingly that insofar as Allen is an artist of "ideas," those ideas are rather conventional. As cold and sterile as Eve's decorations, from which the film takes its title, Interiors nevertheless provides an opportunity to examine Allen's ideas laid bare, as it were, and to evaluate more clearly Allen's larger, and very real, achievements as a comic filmmaker.

Beginning with Annie Hall, and perhaps even earlier, reviewers and critics have helped to create an image of Woody Allen as the serious funnyman, a kind of comic guru/philosopher/sociologist/psychologist/literary critic. Richard Schickel's comments on Manhattan are typical:

... a masterpiece that is that perfect blending of style and substance, humor and humanity that his friends and followers were convinced he would one day make. It is also a rare summarizing statement ... in which an artist casts a selective eye over the fantastical life of his time and shapes his observations into an unsparing, compassionate, always witty and radically moral narrative. Tightly constructed, clearly focused intellectually, it is a prismatic portrait of a time and place that may be studied decades hence to see what kind of people we were. (63)

It is hard not to see such praise as overkill, notwithstanding Manhattan's genuine merits. And Allen himself, of course, has seemed to encourage such grandiose interpretation, especially in Interiors, the film which immediately preceded Manhattan. Although Interiors received more negative reviews than any other Allen film, many critics took Allen seriously. Maurice Yacowar, writing one year after the release of Interiors, still maintained that the film was "a masterful harmonizing of form and content. Every nuance is expressive. In Interiors Allen achieves ... a symbolic transcendence of 'the darkness and dread of the human condition,' as Becker puts it, only this time he worked without the safety net of comedy" (196).

Yacowar's comment about "the safety net of comedy" is particularly telling. The implication of both Yacowar and Schickel's commentary is that comedy is at best tangential to the art of Woody Allen. Indeed, it would seem that once Allen was able to achieve that "perfect blend of style and substance" (or "masterful harmonizing of form and content"), he could dispense with comedy altogether. Why is it, one is led to ask, that in order to appreciate Woody Allen it is necessary to pretend that he isn't a comedian? or that a comic film can't be "clearly focused intellectually"? Is comedy only a "safety net" in Allen's best films?
Allen has always acknowledged his debt to what Diane Jacobs calls "the comic film tradition." When asked about influences, he has cited film comics from Chaplin and Keaton to the Marx Brothers and Jacques Tati. Allen's films certainly show a variety of comic influences: the Marx Brothers-inspired early films, the Keatonesque Sleeper, the social comedy of Annie Hall and Manhattan, the Chaplinesque Broadway Danny Rose. One of his best later films, The Purple Rose of Cairo, is a fascinating combination of Chaplin's comic pathos and Keaton's energetic self-reflexivity. But Allen has been equally free in his praise for filmmakers such as Bergman and Fellini, and critical opinion seems to accord more weight to these particular enthusiasms. And it was certainly to these "serious" directors that Allen turned in making Interiors.

That the critics received Interiors as badly as they did must have come as something of a shock to Allen, so universal had been the acclaim for Annie Hall as an intellectualized comedy. How better to follow it up than with a film which eliminates the comedy altogether, leaving only the intellectual message? Given the nature of the "message" in this case, one can hardly blame the reviewers for their reservations.

What is it that Allen seems to be trying "to say" in Interiors? In this movie, almost every character and every situation seem overdetermined, loaded with allegorical significance, mainly through the obvious use of oppositions: Renata the successful artist vs. Joey the frustrated aspirant; the angry, cynical Frederick vs. the committed, understanding Mike; most of all: the cold, repressed Eve vs. the warm, unpretentious, and vivacious Pearl. Interiors is a highly schematized movie, and none of the oppositions cries out so loudly as an artistic "statement" as the battle between the life force (Pearl) and the death force (Eve).

The contrasts between Eve and Pearl are obvious to the point of being belabored. Where Eve tends toward grays and other neutral colors, Pearl often dresses colorfully (we first see her in a red dress). Eve's preferences in art, as exemplified in her own interior decorations, are for the restrained and tasteful, whereas Pearl's, exemplified by her Trinidadian sculptures, are for the primitive and gaudy. Eve increasingly turns toward religion (in Renata's words, "Jesus Christ nonsense"), while Pearl believes in voodoo and fortune-telling. Everything about Eve suggests a life lived mainly inside—so much so that Arthur accuses her of constructing an "ice palace" around the family. Pearl, in Arthur's words, is "energetic, demonstrative, and open"; as she says of herself, she needs "pizzazz."

That we are to see Pearl as the necessary antidote to Eve--for Arthur, for his daughters--could not be more clear. Renata's comment at Pearl and Arthur's wedding party--"I've never seen him dance before in his life"--indicates the extent of Pearl's effect on her father. Renata herself reacts to Pearl in what seems her usual way: to avoid trouble, she puts on a sunny face. As she does with her husband and her mother, Renata refuses to say what she really thinks and feels. Like Eve, she lives an interior life, and over the course of the film she begins to act more and more like her mother--so much so that near the end of the movie death-obsessed Renata sits staring into the sea, clearly a foreshadowing of Eve's death. Renata seems beyond the reach of Pearl's salutary influence.

Joey, on the other hand, is clearly meant to be the character who benefits most from that influence. Even more than Renata, Joey becomes closely identified with Eve over the course of
the film. It is Joey who cares for Eve after her breakdown and who defends Eve most vehemently
against Pearl, ultimately making the pronouncement Renata will not: "she's a vulgarian." Joey is
obviously the most in danger of becoming another Eve. Like her mother, she is repressed and
tightly wound. Pale, gaunt, and unsmiling (with her spectacles, she even resembles Woody
Allen), she seems the inevitable product of the "ice palace." And it is Joey who follows her
mother into the sea and is on the verge of dying herself when Pearl, literally, breathes life back
into her. We last see Joey taking the first tentative steps toward self-expression by writing down,
in a diary, memories of her mother. Perhaps Eve's death will finally free Joey to find her own
way.

It is fitting that the movie ends with Joey in the act of writing. Much of Joey's frustration in
Interiors is a consequence of being a non-artist in a predominantly artistic milieu. She confesses
to an artistic temperament without the necessary talent: "I feel a real need to express something,
but I don't know what it is I want to express or how to express it." Yet, practically all of the artist
characters are at least as unhappy as Joey. Renata is a successful poet, but suffers from writer's
block caused by death anxiety. Her husband, Frederick, is a once-promising novelist whose
subsequent books have been received badly and who reacts by becoming bitter and cynical.
Flynn is a successful actress, but realizes that she is not taken seriously and can only work on
television because of her looks. Joey's lover, Mike, a political filmmaker, seems relatively well-
adjusted, but is unable to affect Joey as Pearl does (and is a relatively blandly drawn character
anyway). To a great degree, all of these characters are figures of accomplishment in their careers,
but they remain unhappy and dissatisfied. The eternal lot of the artist? It would seem so.

It is surprising that Allen's idea of a "serious" movie is one which makes "statements" so banal:
life is better than death; art is a poor substitute for life. They are, of course, the points Allen
makes obsessively in many of his films, but never so singlemindedly, so lugubriously, or so
unconvincingly, as in Interiors. Further, such "points" are never really the point of Allen's
comedies, which leaven such bald thematic posturing with healthy portions of irony. In short, the
all too obvious themes of Interiors are handled more adroitly in Allen's better films by playing
them for laughs.

One could, perhaps, attempt to rescue Interiors by reading it as a parody of itself, as Ron Librach
does in a recent article. Librach sees the film as an "experimental effort to let an ostensibly
realistic drama gradually reveal the fallacies on which it is based." (177) In this view, the
intellectual pretension of Interiors is the object of Allen's satire:

Traditionally, comedy has been characterized as a celebrational response to experience, but many
of its great theorists have long been at great pains to describe the mean-spiritedness to which its
practitioners must momentarily commit themselves when they turn in the direction of satire or
parody, for the purpose of these comic forms is frequently nothing less than the annihilation
of an entire attitude towards life. What is annihilated is the ridiculous or the ludicrous. (177)

In this view, both the intellectual sterility of Interior's characters, as well as the film's own sober
mirroring of that sterility in its very tone and outlook, are targets for Allen's satiric deflation. The
film cannibalizes itself.
This is an ingenious argument, but it fails to consider one of our primary expectations of comedy: that it make us laugh. Librach's twisting of the merely portentous into the comic assumes that the appeal of a comic film is largely intellectual—or at least that Allen is working a very narrow view of intellectual parody, a propensity for which there is little indication in Allen's previous films. (With the possible exception of Love and Death, although that film still has its share of belly laughs). Certainly such an approach is at least as guilty of what Librach himself identifies as the "fallacy of believing that intellectual displacement is really a vicarious but valid way of striking a balance with oneself and with the world" (178), the mistaken notion which Interiors is supposedly attacking. Further, why attribute to Allen a more intricate conception than he himself would admit to? If, as Librach himself notes, Allen wanted to make a "serious" dramatic film, what purpose does it serve to deny the artist his premise because one doesn't want to believe Woody Allen capable of making a pretentious film? The warranted conclusion would seem to be that, despite Librach's rather tortured defense, Allen does not know how to handle "very heavy stuff" (166).

Librach's overly sophisticated argument is a natural consequence of his thesis that "Woody Allen's singularity as an important filmmaker results from his unique approach to philosophical problems" (165). While Librach is more clever than most who approach Allen from this angle, it remains a very oblique one by which to measure an artist whose chosen style is comedy. Although it is true that the great film comics (Keaton and Chaplin, e.g.) often dealt with subjects worthy of serious attention—another way of saying their films were not trivial—it seems needlessly contemptuous of Allen's comedic abilities to focus instead on his "unique approach to philosophical problems."

After Interiors, Allen's films fall more or less into a pattern which has persisted right up to Crimes and Misdemeanors (at this writing, his latest film). Manhattan, with its Annie Hall-like balance of comedy and moral inquiry, seemed to please everyone: the fans, the critics, and, presumably, Allen himself. Hannah and Her Sisters repeated this phenomenon eight years later. Stardust Memories, on the other hand, seemed to please no one. Critically panned and commercially disappointing, the film also seemed to embody Allen's annoyance at the demands his own insistence on being taken seriously had imposed. Although Stardust Memories avoids the leaden seriousness of Interiors—it contains, in fact, a number of comically ingenious moments Allen builds on further in Zelig—it still straddles uneasily the line between the comic exuberance of his "early, funny films" and the gloom of Interiors or September. A Midsummer's Night Sex Comedy is, like Interiors, an obvious imitation of a European art film (specifically, Bergman's Smiles of a Summer Night). However, since the film's tone seems simply flat—as if for Allen the attempt to make such a comedy of manners is just an exercise—we do not reach quite the depths of pretentiousness plumbed in Interiors. The film, like the later Radio Days, can only be seen as a trifle, lacking even the aura of Major Statement which emanates so clearly from Allen's earlier synthetic masterpiece.

The ambivalence and vacillation which mark this stage of Allen's career is seemingly confirmed with his next film, Zelig, but with a twist that makes all the difference. In Zelig Allen finally confronts this ambivalence head on. What better image of the conflicted artist Woody Allen than the "human chameleon," Leonard Zelig? In the same way that Zelig changes personalities according to his surroundings, Allen seems to be constantly in artistic metamorphosis, from
slapstick comedian on the one hand to "serious artist" on the other. Zelig tells the tale of the self-
reconciliation of the two sides of its maker, Woody Allen.

One of the most striking things about Zelig, which is beginning to look like one of Allen's most
successful films, is the way in which Allen is able to use the medium itself to work out his
artistic problem. He does so, however, while remaining faithful to the comic tradition
exemplified by such films as Never Give a Sucker an Even Break or Sherlock, Jr., films which
amply illustrate the inherent self-reflexivity of the American comic film. Allen had first mined
this territory in Stardust Memories; in Zelig he works out the implications of that film by taking
its self-reflexive aspects a step further: where Stardust Memories is a film about filmmaking,
Zelig is a film whose very existence is articulated through the self-conscious suturing and
manipulation of filmed images which do not cloak their own artificiality. It is, in the most literal
sense, a film about film.

Zelig is a fictional documentary, a form which Allen had used before in Take the Money and
Run. The earlier film, however, was more truly a "mock" documentary, using staged simulations
of documentary-like sequences, interspersing them with equally fictitious "conversations" with
those close to Virgil Starkwell, the film's hero. Take the Money and Run's documentary surface
merely disguises, in other words, the otherwise straightforward narrative that is the vehicle for
Allen's gags, much like the false nose-and-moustaches hide Virgil's parents' "real" identities--that
is, very transparently. Zelig, on the other hand, could pass as an authentic documentary--if only,
that is, Leonard Zelig had actually existed. Much of the newsreel footage included in Zelig is
authentic, and the mock-footage is carefully designed and shot to look as "historical" as possible.
We see nothing in Zelig that could not actually have been caught on film (or photograph), unlike
many of the episodes in Virgil's life, for which it is difficult to imagine any camera could have
been present.

Zelig is surely one of the most impressive technical achievements (in the more aesthetic sense of
"style" rather than special effects) in recent American film. It is in many ways a tour de force, a
triumph of both vision and execution. (n1) Certainly one of the joys of Zelig for the viewer not
emotionally tied to some exclusive preconception of a "Woody Allen film" is simple
appreciation of its formal virtuosity. While this may seem a questionable virtue to both those
who insist on the superiority of the "early, funny" films as well as those who take Allen seriously
as a social observer, such an approach is perfectly in keeping with other, similarly "postmodern"
developments in art and literature, and it is, at any rate, a much more fruitful avenue for Woody
Allen's forays into art cinema than the leaden "drama" of Interiors. To some, self-reflexivity may
be the last refuge of the desperate or the decadent, but it might also be seen as a way of
examining the vital issues traditionally explored through art by simultaneously examining the
ways in which art itself represents, or signifies, such issues. Thus, in Zelig Allen is able to
integrate his "serious" and "funny" sides into a comic whole informed by a truly serious concern
with the machinery by which the cinema creates its images.

Without diminishing the poignancy of his ostensible subject, Leonard Zelig, Allen is able to
explore the supposed distinction between subject and medium and to indicate the extent to which
the former is a function of the latter. Ultimately, Zelig the "human chameleon" is a unique
creation of film, a character whose "life" is completely dependent on its manifestation in filmed
images. We never actually experience Zelig's transformations; rather, we laugh at them as fait accomplis which have been caught by a camera. In a very real sense, we accept Leonard Zelig as an authentic subject for a documentary because of our willingness to accept the authenticity of the cinematic image itself.

Among the most interesting (and funny) sequences in the film are the so-called "White Room Sessions." Here we are able for the first time to see Leonard Zelig in the flesh, so to speak—previously we have seen and heard him only in still photographs and audio recordings, his elusiveness for the viewer mirroring the slipperiness of his identity as the "chameleon." But even here, of course, we are actually seeing Zelig second-hand. The White Room Sessions were filmed as a part of Zelig's therapy, and their existence is therefore merely fortuitous, a part of the residue left by the evolution of the technology of film and photography. The Sessions themselves, in fact, act as a kind of paradigm or recapitulation of the development of sound film. As a way of concealing the camera's presence, it is encased in a one-way glass booth. In addition, the camera's motor is muffled so that the hidden microphone does not pick up its whir. As anyone who has seen Singin' in the Rain (or read actual accounts of the period) is aware, this was the situation for filmmaking during the transition from silent to sound films. Further, the Sessions are filmed in a static, medium two-shot, representative of the limitations imposed by sound technology in its nascent state. These White Room Sessions, then, in which Leonard Zelig finally stumbles his way toward some firmer sense of himself, are presented as parallel with a similar groping for identity in the medium of filmmaking—and, most importantly, in the artistic development of Woody Allen. Perhaps Allen has in Zelig taken the advice given to him by the aliens in Stardust Memories and gone back to basics, using the Sessions as a metaphor for his own cinematic self-discovery. Through Leonard Zelig, the human chameleon, Woody Allen, the film chameleon, finally comes to terms with his influences. In a very real sense, Zelig is the first completely whole Allen film: by synthesizing his interests and influences—which results not in some derivative "outlook" on life, but a particular way of looking at film itself—and balancing his sincere desire to be serious with his manifest comic skills, Allen is able to "cure" his art (just as Eudora Fletcher is able to cure Leonard Zelig) of its incipient schizophrenia.

It is as if in Zelig Woody Allen has discovered that "serious" themes such as sex, death, or identity are made problematic by the artificial nature of all cinema, whether comedic or dramatic. Further, Zelig suggests that one way of approaching this dilemma is to expose the artifice deliberately, to explore the interplay of signifier and signified in the communication of "meaning." Thus, Zelig not only raises the "problem" of identity as we commonly think of it, it enacts the problem before our very eyes. It relates the fictional story of Leonard Zelig, a man in search of an identity, while also telling the story of a similar quest for identity in the medium itself. In addition to the White Room Sessions, such a device as the insertion of scenes from The Chameleon Man, Hollywood's reputed version of Zelig's story, acts as a commentary on the role of the Hollywood cinema's influence on our perceptions, as well as the role of the fiction film vs. the documentary, ultimately calling into question the claims of both as authentic versions of the truth. Ultimately the film also calls into question the viewer's own identity as moviegoer. Those scenes which feature Zelig appearing in historical film clips (the shot depicting Zelig "on deck" at Yankee Stadium, for example) require the viewer's active scrutiny of the mise-en-scene if he/she is to appreciate their humor and ingenuity. The passive spectator will be lost in the cinematic puzzle which is Zelig. The film asks implicitly that the viewer think about his/her own
relationship to the movie-going experience, and such an activity, seriously pursued, leads inevitably to a consideration of nature and function of film. In short, Zelig encourages us to define and re-define our notions of what a movie properly is.

This readjustment of artistic priorities in Zelig seems to have a liberating effect on Woody Allen. The jokes and gags in the film are most reminiscent of the "early, funny" films such as Bananas or Love and Death. A few examples include the list of crimes with which Zelig is charged: "adultery, bigamy ... and performing unnecessary dental extractions"; Zelig's insistence that if he's late for his masturbation class "they'll start without me"; and the narrator's assertion that Zelig's transformation into a rabbi is so convincing that some Frenchmen request that he be sent to Devil's Island. The effect is that Allen seems to have renewed faith in his facility for joke-making and is able to integrate such jokes into the larger formal structure of Zelig with impunity. The canard with which Allen has long struggled is the assumption that comedy and seriousness are incompatible (an assumption which this essay has argued led Allen astray in Interiors). The unsettling resonances in the Devil's Island joke suggest the extent to which Zelig is able to set this canard aside. Like all of Allen's best jokes, it makes us laugh because of its cleverness, but also disturbs us because of its insight. The same could be said of Zelig itself.

The Purple Rose of Cairo continues the experiment in self-reflexivity begun in Zelig and although an analysis of this film is beyond the scope of the present essay, Purple Rose must be counted, with Zelig, as one of Allen's most impressive films of the 80s. Unfortunately, his subsequent films have not built on the promise fulfilled in these two films. Allen again seems to be in a period of artistic uncertainty, exemplified perhaps by Crimes and Misdemeanors, in which Allen's conflicting impulses, ostensibly allied, actually compete with each other rather uneasily. The film, although much more compelling than either September or Another Woman, derives much of its interest from the unresolved tensions between "comedy" and "drama" which again give the film a schizophrenic feeling. Further, while the film has a morbid fascination, in other ways it could be seen as merely another in the series of claustrophobic dramas Allen announced in interviews following the release of Radio Days, films predicated largely on ease and simplicity of production.(n2) But Woody Allen has proven to be frustratingly unpredictable as a filmmaker and often circumspect in his comments on his work. We can surely still hope that he will once more make films worthy of the serious, probing, comic artist of Zelig.

Notes

(n1) All due credit should go indispensable in the task of creating such a film as Zelig.


Works Cited

