

Hannah and Her Sisters (1986)

"The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless."
--Tolstoy

"The heart is a very, very resilient little muscle."
--Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters*

Major Credits:

director: Woody Allen

screenplay: Woody Allen

cinematography: Carlo Di Palma

editor: Susan E. Morse

cast: Mia Farrow (Hannah), Woody Allen (Mickey Sachs), Michael Caine (Elliot), Barbara Hershey (Lee), Dianne Wiest (Holly), Max von Sydow (Frederick), Lloyd Nolan (Evan), Maureen O'Sullivan (Norma), Julie Kavner (Gail), Sam Waterston (David)

Background:

His fourteenth film clearly marks an extension of Woody Allen's earlier work (a return to his own comic persona after absenting himself from *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a reprise of his interest in the personal relationships among affluent, artsy Manhattanites, a continuing focus on the lives of women characters, as well as such recurrent stylistic traits as voiceover in the opening moments, prominent diegetic and non-diegetic music to define characters and reinforce themes, and sophisticated verbal wit). In its concern for an ensemble of related characters and its upbeat ending, however, it also represents a new direction. Maurice Yacowar has called it "Allen's most optimistic vision of love" (unfortunately, the same critic describes the film as "a lyric of his happiness with Mia Farrow"). Sam Girgus deems it "the fulfillment of a promise about his artistic values."

Many of the scenes were shot in Ms. Farrow's real-life apartment with several of her children. The role of Hannah's mother is played by Mia's actual mother, Maureen O'Sullivan, adding resonance to their intimate scenes together and, together with Holly's two scripts, further blurring the distinction between reality and fiction as in *Zelig* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. intertitles--Allen interjects thirteen title cards that help to organize the chaotic lives of the major characters, providing a sense of structure to the film.
2. depth-of-field--Especially during the crowded apartment scenes but also during Holly's singing audition and her mother's post-binge recovery, Allen adds background details that complicate the action and enrich the long takes.
3. 360 degree panning shot--During the dramatic hotel lunch conversation among the three sisters, Allen uses the unusual panning movement to reflect the dizzying conflicts as well as the deep feeling that binds the women together despite their differences.
4. music--Allen employs his most eclectic sound track to date, including diegetic music from Cole Porter, Puccini, Bach, Rogers & Hart, and punk rock.

Topics for Discussion:

1. The architectural tour of the city, with its pseudo-intellectual talk followed by a thrilling montage of New York buildings, seems to reflect Woody Allen's characteristic ambivalence about highbrow culture. Later Mickey will offer a devastating dismissal of Socrates, Nietzsche, and Freud and ultimately finds salvation while watching the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup*. Elliot uses e.e. cummings' poetry as an instrument of seduction; Frederick's insistence on the integrity of his art comes off as ludicrous posturing. Does the film argue, with the poet, that "where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise"? Or is the unexamined life (such as Holly's when Mickey first met her) not worth living? What is Allen's attitude towards the intellectual life?

2. Some critics admonished the film for its contrived happy ending, which includes no less than three marriages and the ultimate surprise announced in the final moment. Is the film guilty of sentimentality? Has Allen compromised the integrity of, say, *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* by pandering to popular taste?