

MANHATTAN (1979)

Major Credits:

Director: Woody Allen
Screenplay: Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman
Cinematography: Gordon Willis
Cast: Woody Allen (Isaac Davis), Diane Keaton (Mary Wilke), Michael Murphy (Yale), Mariel Hemingway (Tracy), Meryl Streep (Jill) Anne Byrne (Emily)

Background:

Manhattan is something of a "comeback" film for Allen after the public indifference and critical uncertainty about the serious, Bergmanesque Interiors. Here Woody returns to the romantic comedy of manners genre that he had mastered in the Academy Award-winning Annie Hall. Still, there are fewer gags and perhaps a sterner moral consciousness in Manhattan, which remains the director's most elegant film. It is a far cry from the blackout comedy and vaudeville of, say, Allen's first movie, Take the Money and Run.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. casting -- Most obviously, the film plays off the audience's knowledge of Woody Allen's life, his screen persona, and his previous films. Thus, we respond to the Isaac/Mary romance both from our memory of the Allen/Keaton relationship in Annie Hall (and earlier films) and our knowledge of their separation in private life. In a similar way, our response to Tracy is informed (on first viewing in 1979) by the fact that this is Mariel Hemingway's first film performance and by our recognition that her sister, Margaux, has already become a "spoiled" star; in retrospect (viewing in the present), we may be saddened by the apparent fulfillment of Isaac's fears about Tracy's future in the recent turns of Mariel's career. Finally, the role of Emily is played by Anne Byrne, who had recently been separated from her real-life husband, Dustin Hoffman.

2. music -- Allen uses George Gershwin's music not only to add grandeur to the magnificent images of the overture sequence but also to establish an emotional context for individual scenes. Gershwin song titles include: "Our Love Is Here to Stay," "They're Writing Songs of Love, But Not for Me," "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "S Wonderful," and "Embraceable You."

3. script -- As with Sleeper and Annie Hall, Allen's collaborator on the script is Marshall Brickman. The screenplay is unusually cosmopolitan and literate, filled with sophisticated allusions.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Most critics have noted an evolution of Woody Allen's screen persona in Manhattan. Compare Isaac to earlier Allen protagonists, including Alvy Singer in Annie Hall.

2. As in Annie Hall (and, less directly, several other Allen films), the director is exploring the character of the artist and the nature of artistic activity. Isaac, Mary, Yale, even Jill, are all writers. Perhaps by distinguishing among them, we can define Allen's attitude towards this theme in Manhattan.

3. The film's ending is ambiguous, Tracy's future left uncertain. Moreover, Isaac's list of things that make life worth living has sounded to some critics suspiciously similar to Mary and Yale's "Academy of the Overrated." Clarify the film's conclusions about the issues it raises.