

THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO (1985)

"What good is perfect if the man's not real?"

Major Credits:

director: Woody Allen
screenplay: Woody Allen
cinematography: Gordon Willis
original music: Dick Hyman
cast: Mia Farrow (Cecilia), Jeff Daniels (Tom Baxter, Gil Shepherd), Danny Aiello (Monk), Dianne Wiest (Emma)

Background:

Although Allen considers *The Purple Rose of Cairo* to be among his most ambitious works, it is generally classified by critics as "minor," something like Tom Baxter's place amongst the other characters in "The Purple Rose of Cairo." Earlier films like *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979) are more often considered his masterpieces, along with *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). By combining the farcical and parodic elements of Allen's earliest movies (*Bananas*, *Play It Again, Sam*, *Love and Death*) with the serious exploration of romantic and self-reflexive themes, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* recapitulates its creator's artistic development as a comic filmmaker.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. special effects -- As with *Zelig* (1983), the most immediate delight afforded by *The Purple Rose of Cairo* comes from the sight of Tom Baxter leaving and re-entering the movie screen, that is, from the film's visual presentation of an "impossible" event. This device should lead to a consideration of the relation between the producer Raoul Hirsh's movie and director Woody Allen's film and, in a broader sense, the relation of art to life.

2. black and white vs. color -- Allen used black and white film stock in two earlier films, *Manhattan* and *Broadway Danny Rose*--both contemporary stories--with very different effect. Here, black and white signifies both the antiquity of Hirsch's movie and, because of the lighting codes, its unreality. Yet the color film is equally stylized in its monochromatic drabness and low lighting. Allen deliberately undercuts the simple dichotomy that labels "The Purple Rose" as fantasy and *The Purple Rose* as realism, subtly reminding us that both films are adamantly "fictional," precisely the quality that limits Tom Baxter.

3. music -- All of Allen's recent films involve the expressive use of music (Woody is himself a talented clarinetist). The introductory theme--cleverly superimposed on the Orion Pictures logo of a circle of stars--is Fred Astaire singing "Dancing Queen" ("Heaven," it begins, "I'm in heaven"). It returns and is visually realized in the film's closing sequence when Fred dances to the same music with Ginger Rogers in *Top Hat*. Allen also employs older popular tunes in a more "realistic" context in the music store sequence, when Gil sings "Alabama Bound" (imitating Jolson) and "I Love My Baby"

(being himself?). And Dick Hyman contributes both a contemporary sound track that helps to define the contrast between classical Hollywood and contemporary American film styles and the night club singer Kitty Haynes' torch song ("Let's Take it One Day at a Time").

4. montage -- Allen balances two sequences--Cecilia's guided tour of the real world and Tom's "night on the town"--that illustrate the cinema's economical way of narrating linear events through rapid editing in which viewers "fill in the gaps." Taken together, these sequences also suggest a formal continuity in the technique of narrative filmmaking from the Thirties to the present.

5. close up -- Perhaps the film's most effective cinematic device is the final 25-second close up of Cecilia watching Top Hat in the Jewel Theatre. In relying on this long take, Allen follows the example of his mentor, Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, who believed that the human face was the particular province of the cinema and whose films are marked by precisely this kind of fascinated study of the subtle emotional mysteries revealed by the camera's capacity to magnify the physiognomy of the actor's face.

Topics for Discussion:

1. From its opening scene in which Cecilia is lost in reverie in front of the Jewel and then is almost struck by a falling letter from the marquee to Monk's last words as his wife leaves him for Gil ("It ain't the movies, it's real life!"), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* continually explores the relation between fantasy and reality, art and life. The resolution of this conflict, however, seems more difficult to define. How does Allen answer what Nancy Pogel has described as the film's central question: "Can art offer sustenance and the hope that may lead to risk taking and freedom, or does it merely exacerbate the problem by encouraging false illusions?"

2. In a related way, the film also examines the relationship between the artist--the actors, screenwriters (Irving Sachs and R.H. Levine) and producer of "The Purple Rose" as well as the director of *The Purple Rose*--and the audience in the Jewel and in our own theatre. Does the artist entertain and enlighten the audience or deceive and betray them? Is the relationship best understood as symbiotic, parasitic, or mutually degrading and therefore hostile? Examine the last close-up of Gil on the plane returning to L.A., and compare it with the final shot of Cecilia.

3. The scene between Gil and Cecilia in the music store seems in retrospect most crucial. Does it record the spontaneous discovery of their "true love" for one another, or is Gil merely re-playing his love scene with Ina Beasley in *Dancing Doughboys* to seduce not only Cecilia but ourselves in our search for a "happy ending" to Allen's film? Note how this sequence is paired with the one that immediately precedes it, Tom's visit with Emma to the brothel. There, the actors--the whores--are taken in by Tom's sincerity and idealism. "This guy just kills me," Emma softly concludes. "Are there any other guys like you out there?"

**“A Kiss is Just a Kiss”: Romantic Long Takes in
*The Purple Rose of Cairo***

The Carousel Scene: 2 minutes 12 seconds

Pan right to find Tom and Cecilia, perfectly framed in 2-shot, lit from above to create aura

Cecilia responds to Tom’s idea of living on love: “That’s movie talk,” followed immediately by non-diegetic romantic music

Tom offers evidence of what’s “real,” Cecilia responds, “You kiss perfectly”

Tom asks, “Where’s the fade out?”

Cecilia explains, then adds, “When you kissed me, it felt like my heart faded out...”

To his proposal of escape, Cecilia reminds Tom, “I’m married”//Isaac’s integrity when Mary proposes they begin seeing each other in the planetarium scene of *Manhattan*

Tom reminds Cecilia “it’s written into my character” to display courage and stand up for her against Monk

After Tom describes how he will spend the evening enjoying his freedom and dreaming of Cecilia, the scene ends to with a fade but a cut (to Monk, shaving)

The Music Store: nearly three minutes

Formal establishing shot outside precedes long take inside; Cecilia mentions how her father had taught her to play the ukulele before abandoning the family

Close up of ukulele, then pan and track out to establish scene with curtain (proscenium) continually framed in background

“Alabama Bound”: Gil performs Al Jolson for audience including elderly storekeeper

“My Baby Loves Me”: an encore prompted by old lady’s piano accompaniment; the couple now centered instead of framed on left

Theatrically timed phone call removes lady from the mise-en-scene, which now features framed show biz photos on the wall

Gil performs a scene from *Dancing Doughboys* with Cecilia taking the part of Ina Beasley

Track in on dialogue, which describes Gil’s character leaving Ina for Great War To Cecilia’s question whether it was fun kissing Ina Beasley, Gil replies that it was a professional “movie kiss”

As they kiss, extradiegetic romantic music

Scene concludes with Cecilia rejecting Gil’s request to see her later, replying that she’s “seeing Tom”

Straight cut to The Jewel