

Zelig (1983)

Major Credits:

Screenplay and Direction: Woody Allen

Cinematography: Gordon Willis

Music: Dick Hyman

Cast: Woody Allen (Leonard Zelig); Mia Farrow (Eudora Fletcher); Susan Sontag, Irving Howe, Saul Bellow, Bruno Bettelheim, John Morton Blum, Bricktop (as themselves)

Background:

Zelig follows the enormous critical successes of *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979) but also the puzzling "serious" films that turned off Allen's admiring reviewers as well as the general public, *Interiors* (1978) and *Stardust Memories* (1980). In *Zelig*, Allen returns to the parodic style and nebbish protagonist of his popular early movies, with predictable success. But *Zelig* was made with quite serious intentions. "I wanted to make a comment with the film on the specific danger of abandoning one's own true self, in an effort to be liked," Allen has said. "I think the ultimate result of giving up one's own personality and feeling to be able to blend in for protective reasons... is that you're perfect material to be led by fascist persuasive powers." Most critics, however, have complimented the film's technical achievement at the expense of its thoughtfully related themes.

On one level, as Maurice Yacowar has pointed out, *Zelig* resembles Welles's *Citizen Kane* with its investigation of the life of a representative, celebrated American. (There is even a specific shot of the mansion that appears first in *Kane*.) "But where Welles pursued the (unsolvable) mystery of a powerful man, Allen's subject is a *schlemiel* who is distinctive only for his ability to become indistinguishable." Ultimately, *Zelig* can be understood as a unique creation of the cinematic medium, a "life" totally consisting of its own filmed images.

Cinematic Aspects:

Zelig parodies the realist tradition of the Lumieres while advancing the expressionist tradition of Melies, but its strongest appeal is to primitive film's preoccupation with fascinating, previously unseen images, what has come to be known as the "cinema of attractions." Allen delights in the sheer magic of his character's physical transformations, none of which, it should be noted, are actually recorded in process. The originality of the film's technical achievement (like that of its precursor in this respect as well, *Citizen Kane*) has been successfully imitated in numerous advertisements (e.g., Dean Winter: "We measure our success one investor at a time") and contemporary movies which employ digitalized images and morphing techniques.

Special attention should be paid to the contributions of Dick Hyman's original music. Note, too, how historic performers like Al Jolson and Fanny Bryce are made to appear to be singing about the Chameleon Man.

The film's self-reflexivity is obvious in every frame, but especially in the "White Room" sessions, which neatly recapitulate production conditions for the earliest talkies. Note how *Zelig* consists of a pastiche of various film forms: documentary, home movies, newsreels (among them, "Hearst Metrotone News"), stagings, "rare German footage," and the marvelous parody of a Warner Bros. biopic, "The Changing Man."

Topics for Discussion:

1. In his final assessment of Zelig's significance, Irving Howe asks, "Has America changed that much? I don't think so." How does the film reflect American attitudes towards celebrity?

2. Many of Woody Allen's films deal with psychiatry, usually with satiric intent. To what extent, if any, does this film modify its director's famous criticisms of psychotherapy? On a related issue, how does the movie treat its real-life intellectuals, whose interpretations of Zelig seem to parody the technique used with serious intent in Warren Beatty's recent Academy Award winning *Reds* (1983).

3. Yacowar has suggested that "Zelig lives a recurring Allen gag: his one regret in life is that he is not someone else." What are the serious implications of the film's inquiry into the nature of conformity?

4. While reflecting Allen's own stardom at the time of its making, *Zelig* (again, like *Citizen Kane*) also anticipates its creator's fall from grace after his scandalous break with Mia Farrow. In what specific ways does the film anticipate as well as reflect Allen's real-life experiences?

5. As with his next film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which a fictional character in a 1930's movie leaves the screen to pursue the love of a devoted fan, *Zelig* deliberately blurs the distinction between illusion and reality. Beyond the sheer delight in creating such magical moments for spectators, what idea about the relation of art to reality is Allen trying to express?