**WOODY ALLEN’S MANHATTAN**

Dr Martin Hall

New York city is the backdrop to an enormous number of films and I expect that this wildly diverse space will appear in a number of entries within the CineCities archive laying credence to this city as the heterotopia that it truly is.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on which way you see it, I am not old enough to have seen Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*(1979) on the big screen when it first came out. I have seen the film at the cinema, at a retrospective and in its newest 4K restoration to celebrate its 40-year anniversary; a version of the film which is absolutely stunning. In an almost perfectly Allenesque comedy of errors, *Manhattan*was remastered and re-released in 2017 on the anniversary of his most beloved, cult-classic, *Annie Hall*(1977), but as the work on that film had encountered some issues, *Manhattan*was shown instead. And boy I couldn’t have been happier. But today, 40 years on (finally), the remastering of the film stands as a glorious representation of what is one of the best films ever made (feel free to @ me).

*Manhattan* wasn’t the first Woody Allen film that I ever saw, but it is the one which had the most lasting impact upon me as a viewer and ultimately as a scholar; as the title so urgently suggests, it was the city that really sold this film to me. *Manhattan* is an enduring classic that is loved by legions of fans. But not so much by Woody Allen himself, who famously never watches his own films once he has finished with them. After editing *Manhattan,* Woody Allen said that he was so disappointed by the result that he begged the studio to ditch it: “I didn’t like the film at all … I spoke to United Artists at the time and offered to make a film for them for nothing if they would not put it out”. Thankfully, United Artists disagreed with their director and delivered to us a rich and telling portrait of New York City.

It is no secret that Woody Allen is America’s foremost New York chauvinist. He has said a great many things about just how much he loves New York but this film, *Manhattan* obviously rings as one of his most passionate dedications to that great city of cinema.

Woody Allen has said, “of all the cities I’ve been to, I like New York the best because it is very exciting… active… it’s really the rhythm of the city. You feel it the moment you walk down the street, it has to do with nerves, with the blood that runs through the city. It’s dangerous, noisy. It’s not peaceful or easy and because of it you feel more alive.”

And indeed, *Manhattan*is an incredibly bustling and alive film. It’s really all about the rhythm of the city, to borrow Allen’s own phrase. You feel it the moment the credits begin. In fact, what more appropriate description is there of such a frenetic and fanciful film. One of Woody Allen’s biographers, many that there have been, pointed out that this film is the cinematic equivalent of one of those I love New York t-shirts that people from Manhattan began to chauvinistically support around that same time. Douglas Brode’s is right of course, and *Manhattan*is the film which any New York obsessed cinephile will wear as a badge.

The opening of the film expounds the protagonist’s devotion to the city, and it is more difficult with Woody Allen than with any other filmmaker, to separate the art from the artist and not read this as pure biography. As Isaac himself tells us:

“He adored New York City. He idolised it all out of proportion.” Uh, no. Make that, “He romanticised it all out of proportion.”

*To him, no matter what the season was, this was still a town that existed in black and white and pulsated to the great tunes of George Gershwin.*

The city here, exists as a space with multiple personalities, wearing different faces and performing different jobs, just as the film’s protagonist Isaac struggles to situate himself within the city and fails to choose between two loves before both relationships blow up in his face. As hectic and distracting as the city is, so too is Woody Allen’s Isaac Davis, a neurotic, untethered and frenzied individual who is twice divorced and has just quit his job out of the blue. He is dating Tracey, played by Mariel Hemingway, but falls madly in love with his best friend Yale’s mistress Mary (Diane Keaton) who he starts dating before she breaks it off to return to Yale (Michael Murphy) after he leaves his wife. Isaac realises that he truly did love Tracy and races to tell her just as she leaves the city to study abroad. Of course, for this New York chauvinist, a relationship with someone out of the city is certainly doomed to fail.

 The film comprises one of a thematic trilogy of ‘Manhattan’ films, including *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). All three of these films speak to ‘Manhattan’, and the city as a space, in a very passionate and quite similar way. In an interview, Allen once pointed out that his use of the city in films, that the city and the décor of film can be seen as a projection of the chaos and the imprisonment of one main character. Allen observed that the outside world is just a function of one’s own inner state in many of his films.

*Annie* *Hall* was a pioneering film for Allen and really change the trajectory of his career.  With this film Woody Allen found that he could produce comedy in a much more intellectual and deliberate manner, in effect eclipsing his “earlier funny ones”, which is a famous quote you may have heard before. The city in Annie Hall plays just as big a role as perhaps it does in *Manhattan*. The city plays a significant role in *Annie Hall* but it is much more muted and subtler. This cityscape contributes to a mood of serenity in the film.  What is more telling with *Annie Hall* is the powerful and lasting effect in the absence of New York has on the lead character Alvy Singer when he visits Los Angeles. Allen admittedly tries very hard to select scenes that will portray Manhattan in a positive light and that will emphasise the pleasures of an urban life.  A similar observation can be made of the film *Hannah and Her Sisters* from 1986 in which Allen’s character, characteristically suffering with existential anxiety finds that he can only find release and comfort in walking the streets of Manhattan. These three films are not so much blatant boosterism films for the city as illustrations that normal people can live good interesting lives in the midst of a comfortable but very urban landscape.

Trailer for Manhattan (1979) provides us with the opening sequence of the film soundtracked by Rhapsody in Blue.

A wonderful observation that one can make in reference to Woody Allen’s more recent European films is that the ghost of this film still lingers on in those films that aren’t explicitly set in New York itself. Allen remembers not necessarily New York specifically, but the spirit of the Metropolitan landscape itself. The clearest evidence of this comes in fantastical and magical-real time-travel narrative of *Midnight in Paris* (2011). What we see with this film, incidentally still his highest grossing film to date, is that the opening sequence almost directly mirrors that of 1979’s *Manhattan*.  That powerful demanding and drawing opening sequence with that fantastic George Gershwin Rhapsody in Blue soundtrack, is played out almost to the beat and to the letter in *Midnight in Paris* as the film opens on a montage of key shots of Paris with a beautifully romantic and compelling clarinet piece, just like that of Gershwin, but here Sydney Bechet’s *Si Tu Voir Ma Mere.*

Woody Allen has pointed out explicitly that these European cities; Paris, Rome, Barcelona and others, stand directly for his New York. In particular his 2005 film, *Matchpoint*, he points out, was written for New York. However, due to financial difficulties and funding he simply transported the film to London as, in his own words, New York and London are very much the same town. It seems to me that almost all of Allen’s subsequent films owe a great deal to his magnum opus of 1979.

Within *Manhattan,* the overriding message is that Isaac realises much too late what he has given up. The film is about pretentious Manhattan urbanites, full of downright fragile opinions about art and music and literature, constantly trying to impress one another with their half-baked intellectualism, and who miss the point of life, which is to find and nurture simple, loving relationships.

Woody Allen once said that “I’ve been working on the quantity theory. I feel if I keep making films, every once in a while, I’ll get lucky and one will come out OK. And that’s exactly what happens.” Thankfully, whilst I recognise the unique genius of this powerful filmmaker, I respectfully and completely disagree with him!

As I hope that you are inspired to take a look, or another look, at an absolutely brilliant film, I want to borrow a phrase from the opening narration of *Manhattan* and apply it in praise of Woody Allen himself:

“To us, no matter what the season is, Woody’s work still exists in black and white and pulsates to the great tunes of George Gershwin.”