

Annette Wernblad. *Brooklyn Is Not Expanding: Woody Allen's Comic Universe*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992, 164 pp.

"Some of us are real, some are not," says Gil Shepard, the actor played by Jeff Daniels, about himself and Tom Baxter, the fictional character he is acting, when he is trying to persuade Cecilia (Mia Farrow) to fall in love with him in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. Scenes like this enhance the multiple systems of discourse in Woody Allen's movies. His films tend to play with the obvious distinction between reality and fantasy, private and public, and author and audience.

Annette Wernblad problematizes the difference between Woody Allen and his fictional persona in her book entitled *Brooklyn Is Not Expanding*. She traces the central character in Allen's work claiming that he is basically a *shlemiel*, a traditional hard-luck type whose origins can be found in Yiddish folklore. Furthermore, Allen's character type is a feisty survivor in the contemporary mechanized world where he is constantly fighting with his own and his peers' sexual and intellectual expectations as well as with unruly machines and frustrating bureaucracies.

Basically, Wernblad's study is a chronological overview of Woody Allen's career. In addition to the films produced by 1989, it also includes his plays and books. Allen has evolved from a comic writer and stand-up comedian into a world-famous film-maker, and the central turning points in his career involve a number of significant transformations. According to Wernblad, *The Front* (1976) indicates the Allen persona's final dissociation from the *schlemiel* figure. As demonstrated in *Annie Hall* (1977), this state also marked Allen's development away from slapstick toward more verbal comedy. Wernblad maintains that Allen's vision darkened in the late 1970s, and his persona became "abnormally pessimistic" in *Star Dust Memories* and *Side Effects*, a book of essays, in the early 1980s.

*A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982) opens a new and more optimistic phase that "solves most of the obsessions of Woody Allen's earlier works," according to *Brooklyn Is Not Expanding*. With it, the Allen persona resumes his earlier role and becomes a fully developed mature *shlemiel*. Gradually, Allen's film narration turns inward and

becomes more self-reflective (e.g. *Zelig* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*). The late films like *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) are characterized by complex narrative structures with parallel stories and switching points of view.

One of the significant features that Wernblad correctly discerns in Allen's *oeuvre* is his persona's "preference for private as opposed to the public world, personal relationships as opposed to political solutions." Consequently, she tends to underline the non-politicalness of the movies. However, one may ask, if the personal is not also political.

Indeed, Woody Allen's social criticism is linked to his obsession with the personal. This is most evident in his humor. One of Wernblad's aims in *Brooklyn Is Not Expanding* is "trying not to over analyze lines that were meant purely as jokes." For this reason, she, for instance, defends Allen against those critics who have accused him of sexism. She believes that such charges reveal "not only a poor sense of humor, but more importantly, a rather paranoid inability to understand subtlety." A similar charge has frequently been leveled against women who try to assert their rights. It is true that humor can be used to serve many fictions, but, as some of Allen's films show, ridiculing others often leads to laughing at the expense of marginalized groups. Wernblad ignores the connection between Allen's comic universe and questions of power.

Interestingly enough, Wernblad tangentially deals with many topical issues in cultural and film studies, but she does not relate them to relevant literature. One of the issues is Allen's preoccupation with masculinity. She claims that men are as trapped in their role as women. This argument has been used by some male consciousness raising groups, but as recent scholarship on masculinity maintains, such a notion plays down the power that men exercise over women. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that some films manage to be both sexist and anti-sexist at the same time.

Covering a great number of diverse materials is one of the advantages of the book but the attempt to be inclusive also causes problems. One of the difficulties is that there just does not seem to be enough space for detailed analyses of all the films.

Although Allen's fictional persona lies at the heart of the study, Wernblad hardly discusses the ways in which the narrative strategies are employed to construct the protagonist. Her emphasis is on the thematic development of Allen's *oeuvre*. The following sentence is an extreme

example of the dilemmas connected with this kind of *auteurism*: "Because *Hannah and Her Sisters* is concerned with the typical Allenesque themes, and told with the typical Allenesque complexity, it succeeds where the previous family portrait *Interior* failed. Only the good movies are "Allenesque," while his less successful ones are not.

While traditional art criticism is concerned with the inherent value of works of art, Wernblad—enamored with an idealized Woody Allen—also tends to divide his works in two. Such a view suggests that the cultural significance of Allen's films can be reduced to their aesthetic value. But the aesthetic judgments presented by the author of *Brooklyn Is Not Expanding* hardly manage to tell us much about the various pleasures and meanings that the audiences derive from Woody Allen's highly stimulating movies.

Pirjo Ahokas and Martti Lahti

University of Turku