

Woody Allen loves Federico Fellini, too

With Bergman, Woody Allen is playing creative games with the ideas of another genius: with Fellini, he's improving on the ideas of one who moved from genius to charlatan.

But if you talk of influence, Allen gets nervous and evasive:

SB: But there is a kind of Felliniesque touch about the film [*Stardust Memories*]. I gather that Fellini is someone you respect or admire.

WA: Oh, sure! Absolutely. I love his movies. There is a certain group of film-makers whose films I love. Renoir is one, Kurosawa is one, Bergman of course. And Fellini is right up there with them. He's great.¹

It could be a line from one of his own films: "I gather you like English poetry." – "Oh, sure. I love it. There's a certain group of poets I really admire. Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton of course. And Eliot is right up there with them ..."

8½ (Federico Fellini, 1963) and *Stardust Memories* (Woody Allen, 1980)

When interviewers try and pin Allen down, he gets Jesuitical:

If I compare those two sequences [*the openings of 8½ and Stardust Memories*] there is a complete difference in content. You see, one is a dream and one is a movie sequence. In the Fellini film it is much more personal, it is a dream. And in that dream a man feels that he is being suffocated, his life is being held down. He is stuck in traffic and would like to get out and fly, and then he is pulled down to earth by his accountant and these mundane people. And that's a dream. Mine was metaphorical in a completely different way. Mine has to do with a sense that one is on ... a loser's train bound for a bad life with other losers. And then there are other people on another train going in a completely different direction. And this train is full of people who are having fun. They are beautiful and they are rich, and you're on the one with these grimy looking people. And you want to get off your train and get onto that train. You're fighting but you can't get off the train. And in the end both trains end up in the same garbage dump. So mine was more philosophically metamorphic, whereas in *8½* it was a personal character trait of the lead character in the movie.²

"Philosophically metaphoric" could be another pseud phrase from one of his own comedies. Both sequences are dreams *and* movie sequences – what is a movie sequence, but a manufactured dream? Although at the start of *Stardust Memories* there's an alternative train (in *8½* everyone's stuck in the same traffic-jam in an underpass), the happier people in the other train look cheap (Sharon Stone, in her very first movie, blows him a kiss through the train window), and we have no confidence that they'll be any happier when they reach their destination. The start of *8½* is much *less* personal than that of *Stardust Memories*, not *more*, because in *8½* you don't see the protagonist's face (he's not yet been revealed as Marcello Mastroianni), whereas in *Stardust Memories*, he's Woody Allen himself.

Both sequences are about claustrophobia and panic; it's just that in Allen's version the claustrophobia is compounded by envy. Both have a character trapped, and both have others trapped with him who stare with expressionless indifference or hostility. To say that Allen rips-off Fellini here is not to be negative, but to point out a creative debt, and a creative development. No shame in borrowing. Shakespeare was the biggest borrower ever.

Stardust Memories doesn't at first seem as self-referential as *8½* – it doesn't appear at first to be a film about its own making – but then neither does *8½*, all the time. Still, both works examine what it is to make films. They depict the director as surrounded, not by a creative team, but by parasites – producers, co-scriptwriters, backers, would-be theoreticians, journalists, academics, festival organisers, autograph-hunters, would-be actresses, has-been actresses, priests, cardinals, casting directors, groupies, and fans, all of whom exist to annoy.

1: Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (Faber 1993), p.123.

2: Ibid.

Though Allen / Allen is always very polite and patient with them, as is Fellini / Mastroianni with most of them (it's only his producer he hates), they're all stupid, and plain: to have been cast as a bit-player in *Stardust Memories* was no compliment to your looks.

The lighting cameraman is a notable absentee from the list of parasites. Both films are shot (by Gianni di Venanzo and Gordon Willis), in a black-and-white which often, via slight over-exposure, makes everything look brighter than bright, as if you, the viewer, are about to faint from sunstroke.

Both protagonists are surrounded by women. In the case of Mastroianni / Fellini, they blur into one another. He has a muse, played by Claudia Cardinale, whom he alone can see and speak to. She is, according to him, full of spontaneity and innocence, though as she does and says virtually nothing we can't check this. Mastroianni / Fellini has a sensible wife (Anouk Aimée, in Nana Mouskouri spectacles), who can't tear herself away from him even though she hates him for his lies and infidelities. He has one mistress (Sandra Milo), a jolly vulgarian, the opposite of his wife. These women are to him all the same person. At one point his mother kisses him, and turns into his wife. In the film's most famous sequence he dreams that they all live happily together with him in a fantasy haram: this is balanced by the next sequence, in which, as screen-tests are run, and an actress testing for a role obviously based on his wife suddenly puts on a pair of Nana Mouskouri spectacles, and speaks lines which Anouk Aimée has already said, Aimée tells him to go to hell, and walks out on him.

Allen / Allen spends the entire movie at a retrospective weekend of his own films. He has no muse, but instead an *embarras de richesse* of mortal women, and his inability to commit to any of them proves his undoing. There's an actress-girlfriend (Charlotte Rampling), who's a wonderful cook, but who appears constantly on the verge of a nervous breakdown – not because of him, but because of insecurity about her acting ability. In one Felliniesque shot, he, dressed as a Catholic priest, tries to prevent her from panicking, while in the distance a chorus-line of nuns rehearse a honky-tonk dance routine. He also pursues another woman (Jessica Harper), a violinist with whom he discusses movies on a theoretical and political level. Then there's a mature, well-balanced girlfriend (Marie-Christine Barrault), an ex-*gauchiste* from 1968 who has left her husband for him. She has two children, one of whom shouts at him, "Tu es imbécile!" across the restaurant table. The women in *Stardust* never turn into one another, except in a comic sequence from one of his films, where he performs a Frankenstein swap between two women of contrasting qualities, and then falls in love with the wrong one.

It's never clear what the film of Mastroianni / Fellini is going to be about (this was Fellini's own problem during the shoot). It looks in part to be about a spaceship which will save earth's population from disaster – we see the huge launch-pad set being built. But it will also involve flashbacks to his childhood, his Catholic upbringing, and his minor sin (major, according to the fathers who run his school), in ogling an enormous, terrifying beach-prostitute called La Saraghina. Can these disparate ever cohere? We never know – all we know is that the film will get made, even though Mastroianni / Fellini admits that he has nothing to say, and even though he appears in one scene to crawl under a table and shoot himself. In the end, on the "spaceship" set, the entire cast parade to circus music, and it even looks as if his wife has returned. When in doubt, bring some clowns in, play music, and have everyone dance. It's an easy way out of the impossible narrative dilemma Fellini has set himself. Theoreticians will love it.

Allen parades his entire cast before Harry at the end of *Deconstructing Harry*, not before Allen / Allen at the end of *Stardust Memories*. We have no idea even that Allen / Allen is making a film until two-thirds of the way through, when we hear that some new producers have taken over, and changed his ending – or is it his opening? The "grimy looking" people trapped with him in the train (see above), will now end up, say the new producers, not on a garbage dump, but in a "jazz heaven". We don't see how, but he thwarts the new producers, and has himself – and Jessica Harper – meet, not the "grimy looking" people on his own train, but the people on the other, happy train: they were off, not to a "jazz heaven", but to a summer camp for hot-air balloonists and U.F.O. freaks! There, to prove it, is Sharon Stone, in her very first movie, blowing him a kiss through the window of a truck! (Stig Björkman

doesn't seem to have noticed this clue when he interviewed Allen, and Allen didn't give it away).

There's a sudden cut, and we get an extraordinary series of jumpily-edited close-ups of Charlotte Rampling cracking up in a mental home. It's not funny at all, and is the emotional core of the picture, much more disturbing than anything in *8½*, which looks flashy and shallow by comparison. This is the human suffering which Fellini / Mastroianni and Allen / Allen both cause and exploit.



Fellini / Mastroianni's film was to have a space-ship save some of the inhabitants of earth. Allen / Allen's – for by now that's what we're starting to suspect is what we've been watching all the time – has aliens come down to earth, as visitors to the U.F.O.-and-hot-air-balloon summer camp. They have IQs of 1,600, and tell Allen / Allen that all his deep questions about God, human suffering, and life's meaning are the wrong ones – he should just keep on making funny movies, of the kind they, the aliens, enjoy: "You want to do mankind a real service? Tell funnier jokes!"

Then it looks as if Allen is shot by one of his own fans. Marie-Christine Barrault, his French girlfriend, who's just walked out on him, accompanies him to hospital – finds he's only fainted – and walks out on him again.

The film ends: and we're in the audience, leaving the auditorium. The retrospective weekend involved a premiere, and we've just seen it. There are Daniel Stern, Charlotte Rampling, and others, all playing themselves. Jessica Harper complains to Marie-Christine Barrault that, in the kissing scenes, Allen / Allen did the unprofessional thing, stuck his tongue in your mouth, and wriggled it around. They all leave, and the last shot shows Allen / Allen wandering lost in the auditorium, before the blank screen.

Other borrowings

There may be small borrowings: the idea of a relationship with its roots in a hypnotic trance, with which Allen plays games in *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, comes from *Notti di Cabiria*; and the guy who sincerely doesn't object to the girl's past as a hooker – see the end of *Mighty Aphrodite* – is developed from François Perrier's pretence that he doesn't mind about Masina's past in the same film.

But consider how Allen's *Radio Days* (1987) improves on Fellini's *Amacord* (1973). Both films reminisce about their auteurs' childhoods. Allen's way of stringing it together by references to songs of the period need not fool us – *Amacord* is his primary inspiration. Fellini's film is set in Rimini on the Adriatic coast. Fellini really was born there. Allen's is set in Rockaway, Long Island. Allen was born in Brooklyn, but there's no seafront in Brooklyn, as in *Amacord*, so Allen stretches a point in order to compete more neatly. Both films recreate the period in loving detail. Both show comic family squabbles, both show how ordinary people escaped (in their minds), from the dull world of the 30s and 40s into movie- and radio-fantasies. Both feature a woman desperate to find a man before she's over the hill. In sentimental Fellini, she finds him; in Allen ... she remains hopeful.

It's true that Fellini's characters have to deal with fascism – his father is forced by thugs to drink castor oil, and is roughed up by them – and with the death of his mother, which occurs towards the end. This gives *Amacord* an occasional political and social gravity which *Radio Days* lacks, even though Pearl Harbour occurs in the middle of its action. What unites the USA in *Radio Days* is not so much World War Two (“Who is Pearl Harbour?” asks Mia Farrow), but the drama of the girl trapped in the underground hole – the one serious section of the movie.

Allen's films are only political by remote implication. “I believe in total, honest democracy,” he says in *Stardust Memories*; “and I also believe the American system could work.”

Allen works so much faster and more tightly than Fellini. He gets more jokes and grotesque situations into his first five minutes than Fellini gets into his first fifty. Fellini tells his stories at leisure: Allen is manic. For example, each had – or leads us to believe he had – a crazy uncle. Fellini's episode about this character lasts over ten minutes and has two jokes. Allen's also has two jokes, but they're told in thirty seconds.

One of Fellini's most famous early films is *I Vitelloni* (1953), a study of sad provincial failures who can't outgrow adolescence. I think Allen may have combined two of its characters. One is Fausto (Franco Fabrizi), who marries early on in the film, but whose eye for women will not let him rest. Another is Leopoldo (Leopoldo Trieste), who longs for his drama script to be accepted, so that he can escape. Now who do we know in a Woody Allen film who is a promiscuous rover in need of help, but who is also a would-be script writer to the great, tangling with, among others, Leonardo di Caprio himself? Why, it's the leading man in *Celebrity*, played by Kenneth Branagh. What if, (so Allen might have thought), Fausto was both an obsessive womaniser, *and* an aspiring writer like Leopoldo? And what if his long-suffering wife, fed up with his philandering, took her revenge by destroying his play-script? Put these two and two together and you get the scene in which Branagh moves in with his girlfriend Famke Jansen, then, infatuated with Winona Rider, moves out the day after, upon which Jansen goes for a ferry-boat ride, and in revenge scatters the leaves of his script in the East River, leaving him emotionally, culturally, and morally bankrupt, in need of the “HELP!” sky-written over Manhattan. The *vitelloni* can't escape the Italian provinces: but Branagh is equally lost in the imagined Mecca that is New York. Leopoldo despairs of having his play put on when the old, overweight thesp who claims he's interested in it turns out to be more interested in Leopoldo; Branagh, faced with a different moral cesspit to climb into – joining Leonardo di Caprio in hotel-room sex orgies – yields to the temptation: but still nothing comes of it.



Lo Sceicco bianco



The Purple Rose of Cairo

The *Purple Rose of Cairo* borrows from Fellini's *Lo Sceicco Bianco* (1952), but in a bold, original way, doing it not by parody or travesty, but by imitation and inversion. In *Cairo*, the heroine's dull, married reality is invaded by the mildly fatuous fantasy world she prefers, when the screen actor steps down into the auditorium. In *Lo Sceicco* the newly-married

heroine (it's too early to say her marriage is dull, and she's so dim she probably wouldn't know), steps "up" into the completely fatuous world of photo-realistic comic strips. *Lo Sceicco* in turn rips off Vigo's *L'Atalante*, where the newly-married heroine ... you get the idea.



Masina



Morton



La Strada



Sweet and Lowdown

In *La Strada*, the innocent Giulietta Masina is lumbered with Anthony Quinn, who's not only boorish and indifferent, but talentless too. However, as directed by Fellini, she's so sexless that you don't really blame him. In *Sweet and Lowdown*, on the other hand, the innocent Samantha Morton (see stills above for why Allen cast her), is very sexy, and Sean Penn, though boorish and indifferent, is immensely talented. It's an interesting series of inversions – though Quinn and Penn, both brilliant at being boorish and indifferent, both lose out in the end, talented or not.

The difference is that, despite the moving quality of Quinn's acting in *La Strada's* last scene, when he collapses in tears on the beach thinking of the girl he's rejected and lost, it's sentimental and stupid, because – what has he rejected? a clown's mask. Compare the excellent bit at the end of *Sweet and Lowdown* where Penn meets Morton again, and, though the camera's on him, and she's a deaf mute so you can only infer what she's communicating from his expressions, you know at once that she's married and has had a baby. It's by contrast genuinely sad, so you really understand why he goes to his favourite rubbish tip and smashes his guitar. Allen gets right what Fellini, because of his obsession with Masina's circus-face, gets wrong.

Masina's face is part of the problem with *Giulietta degli Spiriti* (1965), remade by Allen (he might deny it), with much greater success, as *Alice* (1990: there's a bit of Lewis Carroll in it too). As directed by her husband, Masina is, compared with Mia Farrow for Allen, two-dimensional and bland, even when she's being jealous: Fellini doesn't care about her. Masina, who's about twenty-five percent more expressive than Queen Elizabeth II (and about fifty

percent less expressive than she had been in *Notti di Cabiria*), is giving the performance he wants, directed down to the last wan smile: Farrow, for Allen, is giving the performance they both want. Great directors enable, they don't dictate.

Fellini isn't interested in the social background his disaffected heroine inhabits, either: his domestic interiors are as fanciful and unreal as his set pieces of dream and nostalgia – the circus, the séance, the session with the guru, the junior-school passion play, the house of orgy. They're all illusory. There's nothing to contrast them with. You believe in none of them, and so you don't give two hoots about Masina's problem: even her catholic conscience is a design from a junior school play. We see the wisdom of Allen's non-stop use of Manhattan: Manhattan contains everything, all kinds of lifestyle, and a rich woman, surrounded by expensive fakery like Alice, can always find an alternative. Masina fancies a matador who seems as magical (that is, as phoney), as everything else in the film, including especially the toy-boys. Farrow (a good Catholic, like Masina), fancies a jazz musician who, as played by Joe Mantegna, is real. The gurus and mediums conjured up by Fellini are fake in the way that Fellini is himself. Doctor Yang, whom Farrow visits, inhabits a real shop, with old guys on the floor smoking dope, and we believe in him. Thus we suspend our disbelief when he causes magical things to happen to her, like flying over the city with Alec Baldwin, or becoming invisible. Because we believe in Alice's environment, we go on believing when its probability-rules are defied.

It's weird that Fellini could have made *Giulietta degli Spiriti* just five years after he'd made a film with its feet planted as firmly on the ground as *La Dolce Vita*.

In *Giulietta*, you don't believe in anything – there is no environment, there are no rules, and thus no contrast. He's just playing with you, but without success: that plus the sixties colour, the sixties make-up, Nino Rota's idiotically cheerful sixties score, all conspire to make you lose interest. Fellini would never include either Mother Teresa, or an act of adultery, in *Giulietta degli Spiriti*: Allen puts both into *Alice* – and juxtaposes them, as if they share one motive. For a Jew, he makes an excellent catholic.



Alice



Giulietta

All the points made above about Allen's pacing, invention and economy apply equally to *Alice*. Alice's problems may be as trivial as those of Giulietta, but because you credit them, understand them and are dragged in to share them, you feel afterwards that you've had your money's worth.

“I'm going out the window”

The most upsetting moment in a Fellini film comes at the climax of his most serious work, *La Dolce Vita*, when Marcello arrives at the house of his old friend and mentor Steiner (Alain Cuny), to find that Steiner has killed his young children and shot himself. Steiner loved his children: his son was brilliant at observing things and laughing happily; his daughter had a wonderful way with words. Steiner was the only one who took Marcello seriously, the only one who thought he might be a writer and encouraged him in that ambition. Through Steiner's eyes we feel that Marcello might make more of his life than just being a publicity agent and

irresponsible fornicator. When he's with Steiner he feels he could change. With Steiner dead, neither we nor he feel that life has meaning any more. With Steiner around, there was a quality to life that made it worth living. Without him, all there is left to life is orgying, and being facetious. Steiner's death makes his corpse, the dead bodies of his children, and his widow, the property of the *paparazzi* whose vulpine activities are famously the target of the film's satire.

In *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, Woody Allen discovers a brilliant lecturer called Professor Levy, who, while admitting that life is unpredictable and unfair, says that most people are able to find happiness in simple things like work and family. Allen is a documentary film maker, and he wants to make a film about Levy, whose message, he feels, deserves spreading. Instead he's committed to make a film about a flashy, selfish TV producer (Alan Alda), whom he despises. Like Marcello in *La Dolce Vita*, he makes money by creating public profiles for worthless people. Both he and Alda fancy Mia Farrow, and he and Farrow are close. But it all falls apart when Levy – who had seemed so optimistic in the face of life – kills himself. All he leaves is a note saying, "I'm going out the window". It's when he showed Farrow some footage of Professor Levy that he and she became closest, and just after they discuss Levy's death that it becomes clear they have no future. She ends up married to Alan Alda.



While working away from the crowd one day in *La Dolce Vita*, Marcello meets a charming teenage waitress from Perugia (Valeria Ciangottini). She seems intelligent, innocent, amusing ... everything the Roman women and international film actresses with whom he's normally surrounded are not. At the end of the film he meets her again. He sees her standing opposite him across a small tidal creek, just after he and his partying friends have discovered, on the beach, the corpse of a giant sting-ray which seems metaphorical for the bloated moral inertia of their lives.

It looks, in the final scene, as though the girl likes him, and she beckons playfully to him to wade through the waters and join her. But he shakes his head and gestures, implying without words that he's all washed up and has nothing good, nothing healthy, to offer someone like her, from the depths of his triviality and corruption. The film ends with a close-up of her simultaneous amusement, sadness and compassion as he turns to face his friends, and the dead sting-ray.



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In *Manhattan*, Allen has his protagonist go to bed with a teenage acting student (Mariel Hemingway), and carry on an affair with her. She's intelligent, innocent (or was until she met him), amusing – and is even keener than he is to try out as many positions as possible. Allen has taken the potential relationship between Marcello and the waitress from Perugia, and asked, “What if Marcello had waded across and joined her?” The answer is – he screws it up, tells her he doesn't love her, leaves her for a woman closer to his age, changes his mind when the woman in turn rejects him and just as the young student is planning to go abroad – he confuses and bewilders her. His motives are in small part guilt, in small part coldness (he fakes concern at the age gap), but in great part incomprehensible, especially to himself. Faced with a paradisaal relationship, he can't cope with it, and has to spit on his luck.

Allen takes Fellini's prelapsarian vision, and brings it down into the world of neuroses, cop-out, and failure, which is his version of human life.