

WOODY ALLEN LAUDATIO

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Magnífic Rector
Excelentíssims i Ilustríssims Senyors
Benvolguts Col·legues i Alumnes de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Senyores i Senyors

I have been honored with the task of pronouncing the *Laudatio*, the commendation of the merits of Mr. Woody Allen, born Allan Stewart Konigsberg, on the occasion of conferring upon him the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, following the resolution of the Council of Government of the University.

A university is like a big family, a community tied together by intellectual bonds. We are thus happy to welcome Mr. Allen as a new member of our family because of his many outstanding achievements in the arts. However, we are all aware that a family ruled only by the intellect would indeed be a dysfunctional one, so I would like to start by saying that we also welcome him with affection, as if we were receiving a distant cousin, someone we have heard a lot about and feel as if we knew him, as if we were close to him, although we have never met him in person.

This feeling comes from the fact that Mr. Allen is the only one among contemporary filmmakers who has repeated a model that was prevalent among the comic artists of the silent era and early talkies, such as Chaplin and Keaton, who were at the same time actors and directors and played a similar character over and over in most of their films, a strategy we find later when Jacques Tati looks back on silent film. With a different approach and the help of language, Mr. Allen has constructed through his films such a coherent fictional persona that people have identified, and often even confused, the characters he writes and plays with his real self. The confusion can be read as an artistic device, which gives continuity and depth to the view of life he represents in his films.

In spite of the insights provided by the documentary *Wild Man Blues*, which follows his 1996 tour of eighteen European cities, among them Barcelona, with the New Orleans Jazz Band, we cannot truly know how much of the characters he plays corresponds to his life experience or his personality. But it does not really matter because the important thing is we have been persuaded by the illusion of reality. It can be argued that his films illustrate the Aristotelian rule that art should imitate life, if we understand imitation not as a plain mirror but as an artifice that is convincing enough to produce recognition. We do not have Aristotle's recommendations for comedy, but we realize that comedy and humor are the distorted mirror through which we become aware of unexpected meanings: we laugh at the joke and enjoy Mr. Allen's humor because we sense something truthful behind it, particularly when he calls our attention to the absurdity of the way things are.

Mr. Allen's production is extremely diverse, as he is such a prolific director. It would thus be inaccurate to suggest one can find the same kind of reflections on life in his wilder early works, such as *Bananas* or *Sleeper*, as in the intense psychological explorations of *Interiors* or *Another Woman*, but none of his films is devoid of his special brand of satirical observations about the world around us. We honor him today not just because he has made us laugh, which in itself is no inconsequential gift, but because he has also made us think.

Sooner or later human beings become aware that each of us is alone, but we feel less alone when we identify with somebody else's viewpoint, share a common perception or laugh together at the complications and miseries of life. Humor is the most powerful weapon for coping with the challenges of living, and Mr. Allen has provided us with ample ammunition. That is why for many people Mr. Allen has become a sort of popular philosopher, a source of everyday wisdom, and the audiences of his films all over the world find in them ironic clues about the complexity of human relationships, the delusions of contemporary society and the uncertainties of existence.

He has contributed to our times an original way of looking at reality, a slightly skeptical, amused look, always alert to the nonsensical dimension of events, that comes from the rich tradition of Jewish comedians, which he has reformulated into a personal style. Humor is supposed to be conditioned by cultural specificity, but film history provides so many exceptions to that rule that it no longer seems to hold. In Mr. Allen's case, what is personal, local and culturally specific has achieved universal appeal. He has managed to make his idiosyncrasies into an acquired taste shared by many. And he has succeeded in doing so not by trying to guess and follow the taste of the audience, the way Hollywood often does, but by focusing on what he cares about, the way artists do: he offers us his intellectual and emotional concerns, the kind of cinema he enjoys, the music he likes, the reasons that make life worth living. And the basic themes he cares about are not so different from what most people care about everywhere in the world: love, death, sex, not necessarily in this order.

Everybody has a favorite Woody Allen film, and some of us have a different favorite Woody Allen film for each mood. The menu is extensive, one can choose between degrees of melancholic introspection or outrageous and hilarious displays of irrationality. We can find parodies of science fiction movies in *Sleeper*, of nineteenth-century Russian novels in *Love and Death* and of German expressionist cinema in *Shadows and Fog*; revisions of genres like the gangster film in *Bullets Over Broadway*, the musical in *Everyone Says I Love You*, film-noir in *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*; homages to Bergman in *Interiors* and Fellini in *Stardust Memories*; evocations of Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* and of Greek tragedy in *Mighty Aphrodite*. We also find among this corpus of works a wide range of carefully constructed female characters that provide not only beautiful roles for actresses but the basis for a lucid analysis of gender relations. As for the roles he has played himself, they have become the standard for the contemporary anti-hero.

In the same way that he has developed characters that are identified with him, his own city has turned into another central character and in the process assumed an ideal dimension. He has built a filmic image of his city that is now familiar to people all over the world and that has become the model of what a

city means as a space of human interaction and of the circulation of desire and illusions. New York is a unique place, and has achieved symbolic status as an American city, while at the same time it is different from the rest of the country and has many things in common with European cities. New York's position in our collective imaginary owes a lot to Mr. Allen's portrait, to which he has added the appropriate background music. The citizens of Barcelona are probably as much in love with their city as New Yorkers are with theirs, but by watching films such as *Manhattan* we have made his city into the archetype of what a city aspires to be, not in terms of urbanism but as a protagonist of the life stories of its inhabitants.

Reviewing Mr. Allen's production as a whole, one is stricken by the wealth of cultural references and by how many of his films are not just comedies or psychological explorations but self-reflexive exercises on the nature of film language and the legacy of film history. Mr. Allen has defied cinematic conventions since his very first film, *What's Up, Tiger Lily*, where he took a preexisting Japanese spy thriller, an imitation of the James Bond model, and substituted new dialogues for the original soundtrack. In his films, expectations are betrayed and moral codes are transgressed: romance fails leaving us without a happy ending, and crimes go unpunished. The confusion of fiction and reality which is at the core of the illusion generated by film is the subject of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, but Mr. Allen has addressed the same issue by simulating the documentary format in *Take the Money and Run* and in *Zelig*, and by imitating, in *Stardust Memories*, Fellini's use of pseudo-autobiographical discourse. In this sense, Mr. Allen's work constitutes a lesson in cinema, a careful recreation of the echoes of film history at the hands of a lover of this art, a director who is also an attentive spectator.

The influence of his films has transcended borders, because no matter how particular and personal his sources and viewpoint may be, he draws on a variety of filmic and cultural repertoires and takes advantage of the capacity of cinema as a international medium of communication. It is specially pertinent to underscore here today that Mr. Allen's films represent a bridge between two cinematographic traditions and two cultures: American and European. In many ways, this has been possible because he embodies some of the best traits of both traditions: he belongs both to the exceptional line of American filmmakers who have managed to maintain their independence while working alongside the mainstream industry, and to the select group of international directors who are recognized for their original contribution to the history of cinema as an art, while never renouncing its dimension as entertainment. The company he keeps in this group includes Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder, as well as Luis Buñuel and Akira Kurosawa.

We must not forget Mr. Allen is not just a filmmaker, but a writer first and foremost. He has published four books and is also the author of ten dramatic works: *Play It Again, Sam* was a successful play in Broadway before it was adapted for the screen. The artistic impulse is often depicted in his films through characters that are writers. He has written all of his films, and in most of them since the eighties his is the only writing credit. This gives him an amount of creative responsibility that allows us to identify him as author of a body of work,

as an *auteur*, in the way we use the term when applied to his admired Bergman or Fellini.

One could say that this honorary doctorate conferred on Mr. Allen is also a homage to the role the cinema has played in shaping our collective and individual psyche, creating fantasies that help us go on living. We have accompanied his characters to the movie theatre quite often, even repeatedly to watch the same film, as happens with *The Sorrow and the Pity* in *Annie Hall*, because he has made the experience of movie watching a recurrent topic in his films which stands for the way culture is not just an object of consumption or aesthetic enjoyment, but something that makes us who we are. We could say people make movies, but movies also make us.

We are acknowledging as a university that Mr. Allen has left a mark not just in the domain of film, but also on contemporary culture as a whole. He has become, whether he likes it or not, a cultural icon. Aside from the revealing fact that there was even a comic strip drawn after him, people recall scenes from his films the way the protagonist of *Play It Again, Sam* recalls *Casablanca*. His words are anthologized and his jokes repeated as a source of enlightenment, reminding us to what extent it is writer in him whom we are honoring.

I have talked this far without quoting Mr. Allen's words, which is not an easy task, as he has provided us with an ample lore of eminently quotable remarks. But I would like to quote his mother instead. At the end of *Wild Man Blues*, Mrs. Konigsberg dismisses the idea that her son's films may be about his own life and says: "I like it because he tells you a story, even though it may not be true. The stories maybe far fetched, but it is a story. That's what I like." And that is serious praise for a writer and filmmaker. It is all about telling stories, telling them well and persuasively. We know, since the time of the Greeks and Aristotle's lessons, that the pleasure of telling and hearing stories drives human culture, and that in stories we find models of behavior, values and strategies for interacting with our environment.

Mr. Allen is probably a bad example for our students, because he proves that one can achieve success, have a rewarding career and make a difference in people's lives without what we provide here, without getting a college degree. With many like him we would be out of business. But we forgive this subversive example because universities are not only in the business of providing education and degrees but also institutions devoted to knowledge, and Mr. Allen has expanded our knowledge of the world around us.

In Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, Professor Isak Borg travels to the ceremony of his honorary award. In a parallel odyssey, the protagonist of *Deconstructing Harry* drives to the school that expelled him and that now intends to honor him. Harry never gets to attend the ceremony in his honor, which is cancelled, but at the end of the film, he imagines a gathering of all the characters in his stories, evoking the ending of Fellini's *Otto e Mezzo*. We cannot offer Mr. Allen a ritual like the one dedicated to Professor Borg. We lack the patina of age, do not wear gowns or speak Latin. But this ceremony is for real; we are not figments of anybody's imagination (or at least that's what we believe); we are not characters but grateful spectators. On the other hand, we claim the right to take the position of the characters in *Deconstructing Harry*

because we feel that we have become part of Mr. Allen's films inasmuch as they have become part of our lives.

For all the above reasons, distinguished authorities and members of the university community, I respectfully ask and earnestly request that the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra be awarded to and conferred upon Mr. Woody Allen. And I will say it in Latin to recall the ancient protocol and bring us closer to the spirit of *Wild Strawberries*: *his de causis, peto gradum doctoris honoris causa domino* Woody Allen.

Barcelona, June 14, 2007