

Document Citation

Title	Films in focus : Woody Allen at the peak of parody
Author(s)	Andrew Sarris Andrew Sarris
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1983 Jul 19
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Zelig, Allen, Woody, 1983



Woody Allen's *Zelig*: a comedy for the cognoscenti

Woody Allen at the Peak of Parody

By Andrew Sarris

ZELIG. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. A Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe Production released through Orion Pictures/Warner Bros.

SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS. Directed by David Hand. Produced by Walt Disney. Released by Buena Vista.

Back in 1964 I described Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night* as "the *Citizen Kane* of jukebox movies." Almost 20 years later I feel compelled to describe Woody Allen's *Zelig* as "the *Citizen Kane* of screen spoofs." Indeed, *Zelig* is part homage to *Kane* itself, and part replica of that classic's send-up of *The March of Time*. *Zelig* is also a takeoff on *Reds* in that both films employ "witnesses" to buttress their historical accounts, though *Zelig* goes *Reds* one better in clearly labeling such tongue-in-cheek pundits as Irving Howe, Bruno Bettelheim, and Susan Sontag. Allen's "joke" about witnesses is of course double-edged in the sense that those of us who read page six of the *Post* slavishly are aware that both Woody Allen and Warren Beatty have been involved with Diane Keaton in the muse-is-a-jealous-mistress department. This kind of joke could keep a feature-length film going for about two minutes. Add another few minutes for Ken Murray's breathtaking home movies of William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies entertaining such luminaries as Charles Chaplin and Carole Lombard at San Simeon. Then sprinkle a few patented one-liners, and you would have another minor Woody Allen comedy. What distinguishes *Zelig* from all the Allen efforts except such masterpieces as *Manhattan* and *Annie Hall*,

and, admittedly arguable, such a tour de force as *What's Up, Tiger Lily?*, is the unifying thread that runs all through it. Feature-length movies since *Birth of a Nation*, and even before, have required some sort of unifying thread, be it a theme, an attitude, a feeling, or a style. What ties *Zelig* together is Allen's abiding affection for that very stylized past that masquerades as "reality" in period newsreels.

But to go back a little bit, I should confess that I approached a comparatively intimate screening of *Zelig* with a mixture of apprehension and exasperation. Allen's antics in promoting the secrecy of his projects had seemed to me to have reached the point of diminishing returns. Being the gossip column freak that I am, I cannot avoid all the planted items about all the hush-hush nonsense surrounding his "summer" movie and his "autumn," or is it "winter" movie. Allen has been seen here in a Nazi uniform—oh, yes, it pops up in *Zelig*—and there with a strange haircut and an oddly bespectacled Mia Farrow. Allen is summering in Southampton, Allen is not summering in Southampton. Allen is watching the Knicks. Allen is feasting at Elaine's. Allen hasn't been seen at Elaine's two nights running. If Bill Murray's media celebrity-watcher on the old *Saturday Night Live* show had chosen to comment on Allen's behavior, his judgment would have been harsh and implacable: WOODY: YOU'VE GONE HOLLYWOOD! Now, getoutahere, you little devil, you.

The point is that my unbridled enthusiasm for *Zelig* may be prompted by the fact that I had come to bury Allen once and for all, and I had stayed to praise him.

Also, some guilt may have crept into the critical equation inasmuch as *Zelig* happens to be the very kind of movie idea that depends upon the surprise achieved by secrecy. It is not often that this jaded reviewer steps into a screening room without the slightest idea of what is to befall him. *Zelig* turned out to be one of those rare occasions, and the sheer audacity and ingenuity of the execution filled me with a perpetually bubbling merriment. What was particularly surprising was that Allen had managed to submerge even himself in his conception. It is as if he wanted to prove once and for all that he could be an unobtrusive detail in a majestic mise-en-scene if he so desired.

I don't know how much I should tell you about *Zelig* himself. He is a fictional character played by Woody Allen. We are told that *Zelig's* father was an ineffective Oberon in an Orthodox Jewish production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and that his mother was the usual monster of the period. A childhood of beatings led to his adopting the personality and physiognomy of whatever person or group he happened to encounter. He could change shape, appearance, and color at will. Eventually, he became one of the medical-psychological sensations of the '20s and early '30s. His cures and relapses, his roller coaster adventures made him as well known in the period as such authentic titans as Chaplin, Ruth, Gehrig, Dempsey, Lindbergh, and even Hitler. He inspired such songs as "Leonard the Lizard," "Doin' the Chameleon," "Chameleon Days," "You May be Six People, But I Love You," "Reptile Eyes," and "The Changing Man Concerto."

Irving Howe barges in from time to time with intimations of the familiar Jew-

ish trauma of assimilation, and Susan Sontag with ironic paradoxes, or is it paradoxical ironies, about conformity as an existential absurdity. The "witnesses" are in color, whereas *Zelig* and his bygone world are in authentic black-and-white.

Zelig is, among other things, a marvelously witty media probe. Allen does not have to press the point home. The people we have been looking at in newsreels all these years are no more "real" than the people we have been looking at in the most fanciful Hollywood movies. And yet once we have seen them in their newsreel incarnations, we can never think of reality itself apart from them. This is what makes *Zelig* so moving. There is in Allen a love for this ridiculously hammy and heart-rendingly self-conscious past, and he expresses this love through a scrupulous respect for the form and gravity of the illusion. Let us say this: compilations of old newsreels can never look the same again after *Zelig*, and yet nothing in *Zelig* diminishes our loving regard for these fragments of dead time and space and matter.

If I have not given due regard to Mia Farrow as the loving, dedicated, and touchingly repressed analyst who rides the celebrity roller coaster with Leonard Zelig, nor to such other sterling cast members as Garrett Brown, Stephanie Farrow, Will Holt, Sol Lomita, John Rothman, Deborah Rush, Marianne Tatum, and Mary Louise Wilson, it is because *Zelig* is more a tapestry of illusionist nostalgia than a standard background-foreground vehicle for performers. Everyone behind and in front of the camera meshes magnificently in this very curiously vicarious masterpiece. Still, though I wouldn't want to jinx it commercially, I believe that *Zelig* will flourish primarily as a comedy for the cognoscenti. It is really too good and too imaginative for the pabulum-craving masses. Also, it is a movie more about art than about life.

The art of George Cukor shall be featured in the next ten weeks at the Metro Cinema, starting with *Holiday* and *Dinner at Eight* on Thursday, July 14, for one day only. These are perhaps Cukor's two most electrifying '30s works and are not to be missed. I shall discuss the programs on subsequent Thursdays as they come up, and I shall get around to the reconstructed version of *A Star Is Born*, and Cukor's career as a whole, very shortly.