
REVIEWS

Mary P. Nichols. *Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998. 255p.

DOUGLAS W. REITINGER
UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Mary P. Nichols' *Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen* is a text full of valuable insights, especially in the way it examines the philosophical nature of a number of Woody Allen's films. Nichols' text offers the reader a strong foundation on which to build an understanding of Allen and his work.

Reconstructing Woody is structured so that each of fourteen chapters is devoted to a different film in much of the Allen corpus. (Unfortunately, however, one of my personal favorites, an early Woody Allen comedy, *Love and Death*, is left out of Nichols' study.) Most of the chapters in Nichols' text adopt a New Critical approach: a strong close reading of the film is offered, often followed with a discussion of Allen's use of analogues and homages that can be found firmly fixed within the traditions of literature and philosophy. Chapters analyzing Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* in its relationship to *Mighty Aphrodite* and insights into how Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" is played out in *Stardust Memories* are examples of Nichols' greatest strength. Nichols is able, with obvious ease, to articulate and explain the nuances of Allen's work in its allusive relationship not only with the classical texts mentioned above, but she is also able to find connections to modern thinkers. In her illuminating discussion of Allen's films, Nichols also employs such twentieth-century minds as Sigmund Freud (specifically, *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*), as well as a number of exchanges on Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism.

That being said, though, Nichols' text is definitely a work of auteurism, as the title fittingly suggests. A minimal amount of film theory of any other type is found here, nor is an in-depth discussion of cinematic techniques offered, although clearly neither is the text's rhetorical goal. In the course of using this method of film criticism, Nichols often confines her approach to what reviewers and critics in the popular press have to say about Allen and his work (for instance, Roger Ebert is a staple). Allen Bloom also weighs in with *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), as does Susan Sontag with *Against Interpretation* (1961), but these are as close to what academic poststructuralist film study critics may expect. An-

other element that may jar many contemporary film critics is Nichols' extensive use of what Allen says about his own work. The artist's words about his or her work are one valid avenue to gain an understanding of that work, yet some critics may find this text to contain an overabundance of Allen's interpretation of his art.

Reading Nichols' *Reconstructing Woody* sparked me to make the highly unlikely mental association between Woody Allen and Ernest Hemingway, two artists who have little in common in terms of their thematic approaches to their art, or, for that matter, to their approaches to their lives. Yet both Allen and Hemingway are either loved or hated by their critics and the public. Both of these groups also tend to spend a great deal of time and energy obsessing over the seemingly biographical nature of these artists' works. While I don't know how Nichols personally feels about or would criticize Hemingway, it was gratifying to see that she wastes no time in the sort of biographical criticism that would sensationalize or commodify Allen's private (or not so private) life. What was less gratifying was the very deferential stance Nichols has toward Allen as an artist. Many chapters in Nichols' text end on an apologetic note. Nichols will have offered the words of a detractor, or many detractors, and then will proceed to refute all in the support of Allen. In these firmly stated refutations, there is often the sense of what many might call acriticism, an intonation that the author is personally biased. Nichols' lightly camouflaged exuberance about Allen and his art is refreshing in this cold, and allegedly neutral, world of academic criticism, although many film critics might not find it so. ❀