

Woody Allen on the American Character

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Woody Allen had dreamed of higher things. Having been encouraged by more adulation from the country's cultural elite than any comic artist since Charlie Chaplin, he aspired to outgrow comedy—in his chosen medium to become Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini. These ventures resulted in an almost uninterrupted string of commercial disasters, and now he has returned to us, but still trailing aspirations to “significance,” with *Zelig*—an unquestioned comedy, comparatively innocuous, and funnier, at least to his devotees, than any film he has made for some time. After missing the press screening, I stood in a huge line the opening week in New York, and a young man behind me, standing on his tiptoes, blurted out to his friends, “Say, do you realize almost everybody in this line is Jewish?” On my second viewing, a woman in front of me in line volunteered her view, “Oh, Woody Allen's big in New York. How he does in the rest of the country, I don't know.” New York, headquarters of the national press, news magazines, television networks, and publishing houses, is of course the cultural capital of America, so—whether he plays to a Jewish audience or not—Woody Allen is a far more prestigious figure than if he were the king of comedy of, let's say, St. Louis.

Zelig is constructed around a special plot device—lifted whole, in fact, from Warren Beatty's *Reds*. One of the most striking features of the Beatty film is the collection of interviews of elderly people who reminisce either about John Reed's period or about the man himself, the film's hero. These artfully edited snippets (a few seconds of screen time out of four hours of interviewing per person) give a strong, if specious, feeling of authenticity to a heavily fictionalized account of what Beatty has called, with indulgence if not overt sympathy, “the beginnings of American Communism and American Socialism.” Woody Allen has now used the same device to give plausibility to an invented folk hero of the 1920's, a Brooklyn Jew named Leonard Zelig. The movie *Zelig* parades before our eyes such lofty present-day luminaries as (in order of appearance) Susan Sontag, Irving Howe, Saul Bellow, and Bruno Bettelheim, all commenting solemnly, without a detectable speck of waggishness, on a comic invention by Woody Allen, as though Zelig were a real historical personage. In the language of the trade, they have consented to appear as “straight men,” mirthless, scholarly, slightly naive figures who collectively create an atmosphere of sober historicity, throwing into relief the hijinks of the star comic. Unless, of course, they have convinced themselves that this fictional Leonard Zelig—laugh though the audience may—represents some deep truth about our society, a truth the explanation of which is an enterprise perfectly consonant with their dignity.

But Sontag, Howe, Bellow, and Bettelheim are not the only people who, for the purposes of the film, “remember” Leonard Zelig. About a dozen other present-day people, some real, mostly fictional, reminisce about this legendary character, once a genuine folk hero, now strangely forgotten. These “reminiscences,” combined with a steady voice-over commentary written by Woody Allen, constitute the basis of the film, giving us, in effect, Woody Allen as a writer (where he began his career) far more than Woody Allen as a performer. Allen has used this technique in a movie before. In *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966), a spoof of Japanese adventure films consisting of

real footage from a Japanese original, he hardly appears at all. We merely hear his comic off-camera commentary explaining, for example, that the reason a stream of assassins and murderers are after one of the film's protagonists is that he has invented the world's best egg salad. "He who makes the best egg salad controls the world!"

In *Zelig*, however, we do see Woody Allen. He appears most conspicuously in quite wonderfully done shots made to look like early newsreels or home movies. We see him with Calvin Coolidge, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, William Randolph Hearst, Marion Davies, Charlie Chaplin, Jimmy Walker. Some of these fragments are from genuine archive footage (such as Hearst at San Simeon), some either cleverly spliced or simply fresh footage of Woody Allen, but shot so as fastidiously to reproduce the primitive techniques (and hackneyed commentaries) of the period. Allen, I must say, is not only done up in impeccable period dress but manages to put on period *faces*. In these snippets he really looks like someone we might see in a group shot with Calvin Coolidge. He does extremely little real acting, however, largely confined to some sessions with his woman psychiatrist (Mia Farrow).

But what, in that mad age known as the 20's, made Leonard Zelig of Brooklyn a folk hero? He was, we are told, a case unique in medical history, a "human chameleon." In the memoirs of Scott Fitzgerald, says the commentary, we read of the appearance, at one of the great Long Island parties, of a perfect aristocrat named Leonard Zelig, with the clothing, behavior, and accent appropriate to his station in life. But guests at the party are "stunned," we hear, when they see this same Zelig stroll into the mansion's kitchens and talk with the kitchen help, adopting their behavior and accent as if he were one of them. Still photographs and snips from home movies later show Zelig among gangsters, in dress, manners, and appearance every bit a gangster. Next among black jazz musicians. Here something more extraordinary occurs. His skin color changes. He becomes, if not black, at least somewhat darker-skinned. Among Chinese, he becomes Chinese. Among fat people, fat. Most of this earns great guffaws of laughter from the audience, mostly at the absurdity of seeing their own nebbish Woody Allen appear—with some verisimilitude—as a gangster, an aristocrat, a black, a Chinese, or whatever.

Zelig is immediately a subject of fascination to the psychiatric profession. Under the care of Dr. Eudora Fletcher (Miss Farrow), the human chameleon takes himself to be, like Dr. Fletcher, a psychiatrist—which gives Allen the opportunity for some psychiatric jokes. "I broke with Freud over penis envy," he says. "Freud thought it was limited to women." And later: "I'm treating two sets of Siamese twins. I'm being paid by eight people!" And then: "I have to go now. I'm giving a course in masturbation. And if I'm not there they'll start without me!" Later, under hypnosis by the same Dr. Fletcher, he says drowsily: "I had a dream when I was twelve years old in which I asked a rabbi the meaning of life. He told me the meaning of life in Hebrew. But

I don't understand Hebrew. Then he asked me for \$600 for Hebrew lessons." Again under hypnosis, he reveals to Dr. Fletcher while under treatment at a sanatorium in the country: "I hate the country. I hate the grass. Your cooking is terrible. I dump your pancakes in the garbage when you're not looking. I love you. You're a terrible cook. I love you. Please, no more pancakes." This is a fair sampling of the movie's humor, although, to be fair, what with Allen's timing and good delivery, the lines are somewhat funnier in the film than in print.

For reasons that are not exactly clear, Leonard Zelig—who is after all only some kind of natural freak—becomes a giant national hero, as famous, Miss Sontag tells us, as Charles Augustus Lindbergh. But the film, of course, has a second act. In it Leonard Zelig, after marrying Dr. Fletcher, is revealed as having married several other ladies, including a black woman he told he was the brother of Duke Ellington. Zelig is driven from the country by the equivalent of what Allen clearly intends to be the counterpart of the present Moral Majority and is discovered in Nazi Germany as (what else?) a Nazi. Brought to his senses by Dr. Fletcher (Act 3), he escapes from Germany by plane, "setting a record for flying non-stop across the Atlantic upside down." Given a hero's welcome in New York, Zelig declares before the period microphones: "It just shows what you can do if you're a total psychotic!"

After his breathtaking escape from the Nazis, we are told in the film's final frames that Zelig's "malady gradually disappears" and that he dies, at last, regretting only that he would now never finish *Moby-Dick*, which at the onset of his malady he pretended he had read.

If the choice of a "human chameleon" as a popular hero seems psychologically wrong, even for a comedy (who admires chameleons?), the choice seems even more perverse when compared with the career of another Jew from Brooklyn whose real-life story is revealed at a dozen points to have originally suggested the Woody Allen fiction. Stephen Jacob Weinberg, otherwise known as S. Clifford Weinberg, Ethan Allen Weinberg, Rodney S. Wyman, Sterling C. Wyman, Stanley Clifford Weyman, Allen Stanley Weyman, C. Sterling Weinberg, and Royal St. Cyr, was the greatest impostor of the age. His feats seem breathtaking even today, and he became a true popular hero, the darling of the multitudes. Anyone who questions the extent of his fame can only reflect that a new feat of Weinberg's got more space in the New York press of the day than the funeral ceremonies of Rudolf Valentino.

In fact, as it turned out, Weinberg was directing the funeral ceremonies of Rudolf Valentino. It all happened in what was for Weinberg a perfectly natural way. He read in his modest home on Metropolitan Avenue in Brooklyn that Valentino had died and that Pola Negri, his paramour, chief mourner, and a giant star in her own right, had arrived at the Hotel Ambassador for the services. Weinberg simply took the subway from Brooklyn, sailed into Pola Negri's suite with that combination of aplomb, charm,

and confidence that all who saw him in action reported was truly astounding, and said, “Rudy would have wanted me to take care of you, my dear.” He next offered his services to Valentino’s manager as public-relations director (identifying himself now as “Miss Negri’s personal physician”), and the constant briefings to the press throughout the entire Valentino funeral services, demonstrations, and riots were conducted by Stephen Weinberg. Until, that is, one of the newsmen recognized him. It was Weinberg! The Great Impostor! The Great Impostor has struck again! At which point, Weinberg became a bigger story than Valentino. Pola Negri, informed that “Dr. Weyman” was not the genuine article, declared defiantly that she didn’t care, and that he was the best doctor she’d ever had.

One of Weinberg’s most celebrated stunts was his introduction into the White House of Princess Fatima of Afghanistan. Sitting in Brooklyn, he read of the diplomatic difficulties. The British empire did not at the time recognize Afghanistan as a sovereign state and had persuaded Washington not to receive even Kabul’s officially designated chief of mission. Meanwhile, Princess Fatima was languishing at the old Waldorf-Astoria in New York and Weinberg (for the moment Captain Wyman) presented himself to her as the “State Department Navy Liaison Officer.” Stephen Weinberg—it was clear to everyone who ever had contact with him—was a man of remarkable gifts. He took on the State Department (who thought he was from the Navy). He took on the Navy (who thought he was from the State Department). He took on the White House. He took on the British empire. And before long he and his protégée, Princess Fatima, were received at the White House by President Warren G. Harding. The *Washington Post* gave the event full coverage, with respectful notice for Captain Wyman, who “interpreted” for Princess Fatima (from *Afghan?*), not failing to note Princess Fatima’s exotic royal costume “bearing a close resemblance to the present harem boudoir gowns.”

Weinberg’s escapades seem endless. When the flagship of the Atlantic fleet was moored in the Hudson, he hired a motor launch and, dressed in a uniform of his own devising, presented himself to the U.S. fleet commander as the Consul General of Rumania. The admiral enjoyed his company so much that he had a 21-gun salute fired in his honor. When a world-famous Austrian surgeon arrived in New York, “Dr. Weyman” went down to the ship to greet him, saying he had been sent by the New York Health Commissioner to assist him with arrangements during his stay. Weyman was so charming and efficient that, when he was exposed as an impostor, Dr. Adolf Lorenz, also, refused to give him up. So what if Weyman wasn’t a doctor? He was the best special assistant Lorenz had ever had.

Presenting himself as a U.S. Navy doctor, Weinberg got himself engaged at one time as Director of Sanitation of Lima, Peru, and became a great hit in Peruvian society. He served for a year and a half, and if Lima’s sanitation suffered, no one ever found

him out. Doing a stretch in the state penitentiary in Atlanta, Weinberg, with time on his hands, studied law, passed the bar examination, and was admitted to the bar in the State of Georgia. His knowledge of the law increased his earning power and, back in New York, he was soon driving about in his Pierce Arrow, Mercedes, and Daimler automobiles equipped with plates marked “Special Deputy Attorney General” (an authentic post he obtained for himself) and, later, official license plates of the New York City Police Department (equally authentic). He sometimes traveled accompanied by a genuine police motorcade. Then he would be at it again, passing himself off as someone he was not, such as the Consul General from Algiers. His favorite roles tended to be diplomatic, medical, and military (navy, army, or air).

At the time of the famous first crossing of the Atlantic by air from east to west (the hard way), an event the press of the day was covering with almost the same hysteria as Lindbergh’s crossing in the opposite direction eleven months earlier, Weinberg had another of his shining hours. The “Bremen Fliers,” as they were called (Baron Günther von Huenfelt, Major James Fitzmaurice, and Captain Hermann Koehl), were being welcomed in New York by the city’s official “greeter,” Grover Whalen—when Whalen suddenly found himself shouldered aside in the middle of his welcome speech by a Captain Stanley Wyman of the “United States Volunteer Air Service,” who announced he had been sent by Mayor Jimmy Walker personally to welcome the Bremen Fliers to New York. Wyman made an eloquent speech himself, then with the help of police expelled all “unauthorized” people from the room, and the afternoon papers were filled with pictures of the Bremen Fliers and their host, Captain Wyman. In the evening, in the city rooms of New York’s morning papers, editors noticed that Captain Stanley Wyman of the U.S. Volunteer Air Service and Dr. Sterling C. Wyman, Pola Negri’s personal physician, bore more than a passing resemblance. It was Weinberg. The devil had done it again. Dr. Phyllis Greenacre, a leading contemporary authority on the relationship of the impostor and the artist, wrote solemnly of the impostor’s “ego hunger” and “need for completion.” Psychiatrists have given deep thought to the case of Stephen Weinberg.

It is worth noting that Weinberg was never found out or thought un-genuine in any way by the object of his impostures, from Warren G. Harding to Pola Negri to the participants in a national conference of medical and psychological professionals—before whom, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, presenting himself as a member of the New York State Lunacy Commission, he gave a lecture on reform of psychiatric treatment in prisons which was extremely well received. Weinberg would be undone, usually well after the fact, by some detail from his past cropping up. Toward the end of his brilliant career as an impostor he had become such a celebrity in his own right that he was often spotted by some newsman. *It’s Weinberg! He’s done it again!* Interestingly, although he would put on a uniform with gold braid at the drop of a hat, Weinberg never made any attempt to disguise his appearance. He was good-looking, wearing the hairline mustache considered “distinguished” at the time, charming, intelligent. With his quite extraordinary ability to get people to like and trust him, not to mention his wiliness

and audacity, everyone who has studied Weinberg's case agrees that if he had been sane enough to settle on a single, legitimate career and stay with it (politics? diplomacy? real-estate promoter?) he was likely to have been a great success.

It is fairly obvious why Weinberg, in his time, became such a popular hero. He was appealing, cunning, intrepid beyond belief. He "cocked a snoot" at authority, yet shared—one might say to a pathological degree—a desire held by millions of his countrymen: to "rise," to be eminent. For Weinberg, unlike Woody Allen's Zelig, had no desire at all to be taken for a member of the kitchen staff. His goals, in strict accordance with the behavior of the classic mythomane, were entirely self-aggrandizing. The roles he chose for himself were always persons of conspicuously high status. Which was the fun of it all. Who, in the 20's, would have thrilled at the idea of a clever Brooklyn Jew managing to pass himself off as a Negro or a Chinese?

Another part of Weinberg's popularity was also due, no doubt, to the fact that he never did anyone real harm. For another profession for which Weinberg's gifts might seem to have destined him was that of swindler. But, barring a little financial squabbling at the end of his relationship with Princess Fatima, Weinberg never used his specious eminence and wondrous skill at the old flimflam to enrich himself. When he came into money (through real-estate transactions, interestingly enough), he would spend it like water, all on display.

Stephen Weinberg was, in fact, characteristic enough of his age—but certainly not for being a human chameleon. He wanted fame, glory, august position. His only problem was that, although an honor student at Brooklyn's Eastern District High School with a gold medal in his pocket for debating, he was psychotic and could never quite grasp that he would have to accomplish all this "on the legit," more or less, and instead would attempt the shortest of all possible short-cuts. Then again, there were those who felt that Stephen Jacob Weinberg was not, after all, a failure, but that his impostures were among the most sublime and entertaining art works of the age.

Much written about in the 20's, and even the 30's, Weinberg was eventually forgotten—the fate of many another popular artist thrown up by the *Zeitgeist* (where are you now, Theda Bara? Clara Bow?). And I owe to St. Clair McKelway's book, *The Big Little Man From Brooklyn* (Houghton Mifflin, 1969), awareness that Stephen Weinberg's life, like Woody Allen's movie, had a second, and even a third, act. In the early 50's another impostor, Mike Romanoff, was running a hugely successful restaurant in Hollywood, and in New York, Dinty Moore's, at the time another great celebrity hang-out, hired as its greeter—without having the faintest idea who he was—a certain Stanley Clifford Weyman. As charming as ever, Weinberg, over

sixty now, was an instant success with the customers. After only a few weeks, Dinty Moore's daughter, then in active charge of the restaurant, offered to raise his salary, at which point Weinberg, whom the years had mellowed, confessed that he had been in prison many times and was, in fact, the notorious impostor from Brooklyn. Miss Moore was astonished, and afraid of alarming Dinty Moore's customers. But Weinberg's ability to get people to like him worked once again. She implored him to stay, merely keeping his identity secret. In this period, during which Weinberg seemed to view life, and himself, with a wry humor, he impressed great numbers of customers with his intelligence, knowledgeability, and tact. The editor-in-chief of a well-known national magazine found him a highly intelligent luncheon companion, and had long conversations with him on any number of subjects.

Then, having been the Great Impostor of the 20's, largely forgotten by the 40's, and resurrected with a curious kind of respectability as an attractive greeter at a world-famous restaurant in the 50's, Stephen Weinberg lived into still another age—and a very different one—the 60's. One day, with no forewarning, he told Miss Moore that he wanted to resign to become the night manager of a modern motel on Yonkers Avenue in Yonkers. She implored him to stay, offered to raise his salary. But no. He wanted more time “to think,” he said. He worked for about a year at the Dunwoodie Motel on Yonkers Avenue, when, in the middle of the night of August 27, 1960, two gunmen walked in and shot him dead. Reconstructing the crime afterward, and noting the position of the cash-box and the body, detectives could reach only one conclusion. Weinberg had thrown the cashbox to the floor as a distraction and then, at the age of seventy, vaulted over the counter to attack the two gunmen barehanded. “He did a lot of things in the course of his life,” said a detective, “but what he did this time was brave.” So Stephen Weinberg, the Great Impostor, he who had shaken the hand of Warren G. Harding and embraced Pola Negri, gave up his life at seventy defending a motel cashbox in Yonkers.

Walking out of a public screening of *Zelig*, I heard a young woman in front of me say to her male companion, “You know, Irving Howe is right. The 20's was really an age of conformity.”

Now this is not what Irving Howe said. But it is, in a sense, the “message” of the film. It was in order to convey this message that Woody Allen transformed the dashing if psychotic Stephen Weinberg into the wormlike chameleon Leonard Zelig—who, in my view, under no possible circumstances could have become the hero of multitudes but only a side-show freak, above all in the 20's. But the notion of the 20's as a *conformist* period is also somewhat staggering. The Jazz Age? Speakeasies? Flappers? Stock-market manipulations and real-estate swindles probably never matched before or since? The Saint Valentine's Day massacre in Chicago? The decade which brought about a revolution in daily dress, utterly demolished the genteel tradition, and established the popular arts in the position of utter dominance they still enjoy? Of course,

it was a decade in which, despite enormous social change and the best efforts of Big Bill Haywood, European ideologies like Marxism did not take hold and the country remained firmly capitalist—and it is perhaps this that Woody Allen would understand as “conformist.” Or quite possibly, by analogy with the Eisenhower years in the 50’s, Allen simply thinks that any period under Republican administrations must be conformist. I have pointed out before that Woody Allen hasn’t taken in many new ideas since the 50’s, and the ancestor work for his *Zelig* might after all really be David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), with its emphasis on the “other-directed” personality type.

But perhaps it is a mistake to overanalyze *Zelig*, which is, after all, “only a comedy.” On the other hand, there is a puzzle. In addition to the other eminent figures I have already mentioned, we also have SS Obergruppenfuehrer Oswald Pohl, commenting on Leonard Zelig during his Nazi phase. Now Oswald Pohl (and very few viewers can be expected to know this) was one of Heinrich Himmler’s deputies, director of economic administration of the entire *Schutzstaffel* (SS). Artistic license also comes into play here since Pohl was condemned to death at Nuremberg on November 3, 1947, and executed on June 8, 1951, so his role is played by an actor. Still, Jews like Irving Howe, Susan Sontag, Bruno Bettelheim, and Saul Bellow offering their wise interpretations of a Woody Allen fiction in tandem with a convicted Nazi war criminal dedicated to the extermination of just such Jews—surely there is some exquisitely refined joke here. But it is one which Woody Allen will have to explain to me, since, try as I may, I cannot get myself to laugh at SS Obergruppenfuehrer Pohl, who, literally, supervised the melting down of gold teeth taken from the bodies of victims of Hitler’s gas chambers. In Woody Allen’s view, Pohl might well be a hilarious figure but, explain it as you will, he simply does not tickle my funny bone.

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