In a time when it is often argued that people—particularly men—seem incapable of taking their emotional lives seriously, Woody Allen would appear to be an exception. In his last three movies (Annie Hall, Interiors and Manhattan) Allen follows his exemplar, Bergman, in making personal relationships—particularly, unrequited love—the subject of his films. In many ways this is quite an achievement: to be able to make movies which modestly yet successfully compete with space spectaculars, exploitation pot-boilers, and flaccid sit-coms of the Neil Simon variety.

Notice that I said “to be able to make moves...” because what is even more remarkable than Allen’s establishing private life as a suitable case for treatment on the non-art movie house American screen is his confinement of the genre to his own private life. In film after film, we buy our tickets to peer once again into Woody Allen’s life, to see, basically, how he’s getting on with his girlfriend/s.

Now as I’ve indicated, this isn’t necessarily a bad thing, and one could describe Allen’s films much more charitably, along the lines of “honest and telling examinations of modern man’s deepest anxieties about love and death”. But the fact remains that unless we accept the Allen character as Everyman (which most of us who are not short, Jewish, male New Yorkers are unlikely to do), then Allen has scored a gigantic cultural coup: he has made himself, his predilections and preoccupations into a public commodity. We go to watch Woody Allen’s life, become privy to—even knowledgeable about—his hang-ups and obsessions, and because we know the plot beforehand (Woody finds girl-girl inexplicably chooses a different man/life—Woody loses girl but is resigned to his Fate), we sit back, relax, and wait for the very good laughs and dialogue which decorate the narrative.

How has this come to pass, that Woody Allen, comedian of the borscht circuit, parochially rooted in New York, can drag us into his fantasies about life, love, and urban living?

Well, of course, on the surface he’s a sympathetic character: the loser, the underdog, without much going for him except boundless hope and a sense of humor. He is disarmingly honest about his sexual obsessions, prepared to spill his Freudian guts about childhood repressions, neurotically fearful of the new and strange, and deeply attached to his home ground, the fascinating and complex New York. But notice that the New York that Woody Allen loves is only the physical New York for the people who live in Manhattan, are his favorite targets: that super-sophisticated Gadarene “push” of inauthentic pseudo-intellectuals, avairciously consuming “culture” and self-punishingly producing crap at a rate of knots.

So why not be interested in this opinionated but likeably honest man who loves the place he knows and lives in, who hates phonies, and who is prepared to suffer the blows dealt by cruel Fate—disappointment, rejection and failure—in good heart? Well, once maybe—Annie Hall. But we have had the working and reworking of the motifs through two more films. Is it because Allen is hitting his targets more squarely—Manhattan is far and away the best of these movies—that the audiences still come? Perhaps so. And perhaps we see a maturing of Woody Allen: at least in Manhattan he doesn’t get all the good lines, and as protagonist, is as badly flawed as the rest of the characters. But, most importantly, we see ourselves in the Age of Total Consumption.

For in Woody Allen’s world, the people don’t take their personal lives seriously, in the sense of attempting to integrate their public and private demands and needs by submitting them to rigorous scrutiny involving, at the very least, careful consideration of what might justify the demands they are conjuring with. Instead, they consume their lives, submitting the galaxy of demands and needs to an endless talkback show, effortfully repressing the question that is bugging them all—what the hell is the point of all this—in a dazzling display of tolerant dissection of their bloody and palpitating emotional guts. Seriousness this isn’t; narcissistic show business it is.

Manhattan is the emotional equivalent of disco dancing. Just as celebrities line up at Studio 54 to entertain themselves by being their own spectacle, the characters in Manhattan jockey for room in the self-revelation stakes. And everyone constantly talks: Woody talks to his 17 year-old schoolgirl lover about why she shouldn’t love him and how he doesn’t quite love her; Woody talks to his best friend about how he (Woody) handles his ex-wife’s preference for a lesbian relationship; the
ex-wife talks to Woody about his murderous designs on her lesbian lover; his best friend talks to Woody about his clandestine affair with Mary (the Diane Keaton character) and his relations with his wife; Mary talks to Woody about her affair with his best friend; Woody and Mary talk about how she feels about the best friend after they break up; Woody and the best friend talk (hastened) after the best friend breaks up with his wife and takes Mary away from Woody; Woody and the abandoned wife talk; and, finally, Woody and the rejected schoolgirl talk but she, thankfully, decides not to talk to him any more, and that’s the end of the picture.

Although all the words are apparently directed toward self-revelation and honest attempts at explanation of motive and intent, the most that they do is to describe rather than explain these characters and their particular dilemmas. At one point, when Allen berates his friend for stealing Mary away from him the friend explodes. “Oh, for God’s sake, don’t moralise!” And the charge is just, for no one in Allen’s world is ever asked to justify his or her actions. The unspoken “explanation” is that serious, sophisticated people are — and should be — free of repressive social rules and restraints, and that their search for experience and awareness justifies what in another era would be regarded as careless, callous, even contemptible, behavior.

But no one in Manhattan is contemptible. We have abundant sympathy for the characters: the desperately striving Mary, clutching at the straw of “love”, hurting Woody “cleanly”; the desperately loving best friend, punitively pleasuring himself in tortured emotional apocalypses; the desperately tolerant abandoned wife who, like Woody, accepts and goes on; the desperately searching Woody, remorsefully letting his schoolgirl lover go and then manipulatively wanting her back again. The poverty of Allen’s vision can most easily be seen in his treatment of the schoolgirl as the only “authentic” person in the film. She is the only one who doesn’t talk, whose life and relationship to Woody is a constant conundrum in the movie, a relationship that continually demands explanation justification but, of course, doesn’t and can’t receive it.

Everyone else in Manhattan purports to explain why they feel and act as they do toward someone else, but in fact they merely explain that they feel in a particular way, and the matter can be taken no further. Anything else is moralising, nagging, being a nuisance... after all, how can you help how you feel? Clearly, emotions and principles don’t mix.

In Manhattan, instead, the public world (glimpsed all too fleetingly) is the place of principles: Woody resigns his well-paid job as a TV comedy writer because his coked-up colleagues are satisfied with junk programs and canned laughter; he criticises Mary for churning out the “novelisation” of a film; he even criticises their first time in bed as too much conscientious performance from her, not enough feeling.

Now it would be nice to say that Manhattan is a film about a society in decline, where massive failure of principle in the public sphere (Watergate, Nixon, Viet Nam, countless political scandals) is reflected in the private sphere. But Manhattan argues a different line: that principle should operate in public life but that feelings — unmediated by consensually validated values — should hold sway in private life. So the self-evident truths of Manhattan are those of a New Order. Gone is our endowment of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness; present instead is therapeutic permission to engage in Experience, Awareness and the Pursuit of Gratification. On and on the Manhattan characters talk anxious to tell all, teenagers in a constant telephone conversation: anxious to feel all, teenagers in a constant flush of narcissistic expectation.

And we, the audience, partake of the spectacle, not only recognising our own complicity and participation in such “modern” goings-on, but also applauding the primacy of the private over the public, heart over head, emotions over intellect. The portrayal of intellectuals as mouthy pseuds, emitting half-digested, unassimilated claptrap on demand, caters to our deepest anti-intellectual feelings. How much more satisfying to identify with Woody the Comedian who, like royal Fools of old, pricks the balloon of pomposity and arcane erudition, and stylistically gesticulates at humorless, retributive authority.

Watching the opposition set up by Allen in Manhattan between the “authentic” comic and inauthentic intellectual poseurs, it is difficult to recall a somewhat different — and perhaps more persuasive — reality: the opposition between those truly serious intellectuals who attempt to confront and analyse contemporary crises of authority, repression and meaning and those cartoonics who, through illusion, fancy footwork and juggling, are content to slide by problems of bureaucracy, consumption and narcissism.

What we like about Woody Allen is that he shows us the easy way out. Why should we beat our heads to a pulp trying to nut out Iran, Afghanistan, how to understand liberation as a social goal rather than a personal predilection, etc.? That would turn you into a boring, up-yours, depressed critic. How much easier to privatiastically take yourself so “seriously” in the privacy of your own homes and bedrooms, that you need never consider the social implications of the self and emotions as consumable commodities at all. Come on, now, doesn’t everybody have a right to feel good?

— Kathe Boehringer.