

The Cinema as Therapy: Psychoanalysis in the Work of Woody Allen

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Summary

There is undoubtedly no other film producer who has devoted such attention to psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts as Woody Allen. The work of this New York film maker is based on a series of formal, narrative, and thematic constants in which issues such as emotional instability and its psychotherapeutic treatment –normally addressed in comic tone- are featured strongly. Additionally, owing to their peculiar structures some of the most representative movies of Allen's universe can in the long run be understood as exercises in psychological release. In Allen's films the figure of the psychiatrist is usually represented with criticism in mind, although the need for such professionals in this contemporary urban world of ours, in which confusion and meaninglessness are rampant, is not demeaned. For all of the above, then, Woody Allen is considered to be one of the pivotal references in the cinematographic treatment of the obsessions of our times.

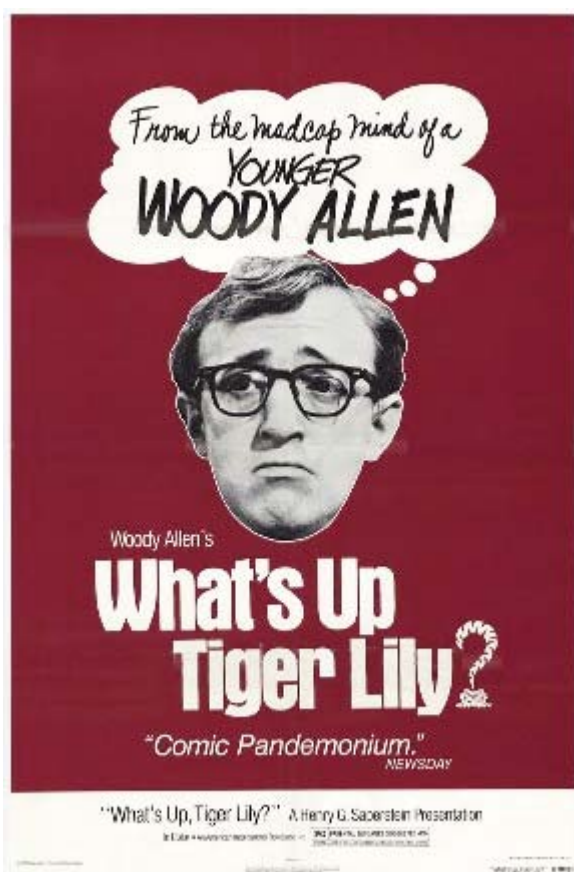
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Introduction

Allan Stewart Konigsberg, better known as Woody Allen, first attended a psychiatrist's consultancy in 1959. He was barely more than 24 years old and his febrile –and precocious- creative activity seemed to have awakened in him inner conflicts that he was unable to deal with on his own. His young age, however, was no obstacle to his selling jokes to several important columnists of the local press, his early steps in the field of radio, his work as a professional scriptwriter for TV programs and variety performances. And as if this were not enough, by that age he was already married to Harlene Rosen, a philosophy student who improved the cultural level of her husband, who was in fact self-taught. The young Woody Allen undoubtedly lived a decisive stage of his personal journey towards maturity at a very fast pace. However, for no specific reason he began to feel unhappy: he was feeling a sensation that was terrible and terrifying; one that he was unable to get over¹. According to

his biographers, his visits to the psychiatrist were regular occurrences as of 1963 and became a habit that he would never abandon; this was so that, among other aims, he could converse with people completely unrelated to show business.

It is therefore not surprising that in a cinema production with a marked autobiographical element such as that of our New York director continuous allusions to psychiatric issues in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, should appear as from the very start of his artistic production. The extravagant *What's up Tiger Lily* (1966) - a delirious modification and remake of a Japanese film about martial arts with a shoe-string budget - is peppered with scenes in which he can be seen talking to a therapist. Shortly afterwards, in what is considered to be his opera prima, *Take the Money and Run* 1969, in the final cut –in the guise of a false documentary- he includes the declarations of the psychiatrist treating Virgil Starkwell, the kleptomaniac main character played by Woody Allen, in the prison.



However, it is after *Annie Hall* (1977) that references to psychiatry and psychoanalysis become more regular and above all more encrusted within a production style that has since then matured to the point of Allen now being seen as a key figure in the world movie panorama of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Allen's production is also prolific almost to the point of obsession, as though directing movies were an alternative to therapy itself. Thus, Allen often places himself behind, and in many instances in front of, the camera in order to reduce his visits to the psychiatrist, among other goals. And this attitude affects his creative sphere in two ways germane to our enquiry here. On one hand, the stories acquire a deep personal imprint, a sincerity that exposes highly personal traumas that materialise with aesthetic operations that are both complex and revealing of a troubled psyche. On the other, the films are replete with professionals and patients, relating to a key aspect within the array of issues that recurrently interest the artist.

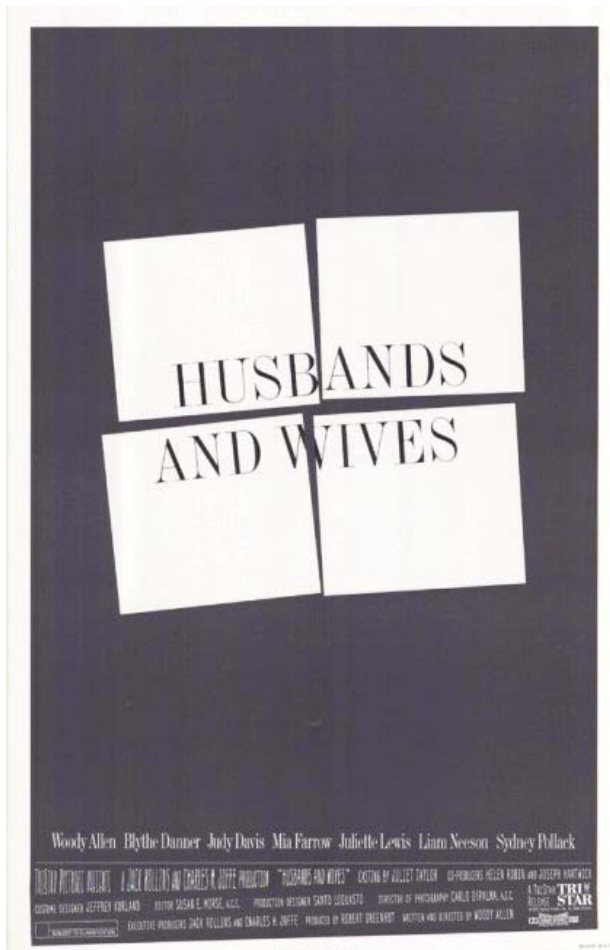
Suffering as recreation and relief; cinematographic devices for representing the unconscious

In *Husbands and Wives* (1992), the young Rain (Juliette Lewis) gives her teacher Gabe Roth

(Woody Allen) the following impression about the manuscript of a novel that he has just finished - she says he makes suffering sound like fun. Her comment could well be extended to Allen's movies, outstanding representatives of American comedy based on Jewish tradition (Lubitsch, Wilder, Groucho Marx, etc). The importance of our author is well known in the comic genre, so popularly accepted as escapist or pleasurable, but also linked, in its more enduring manifestations, to suffering and perhaps a pessimistic view of human existence². This consideration is explained by Lester (Alan Alda), the successful TV producer in *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989): "The thing to remember about comedy is if it bends, it's funny; if it breaks, it's not funny."

In general, Allen's films have an existentialist tinge that emerges through a manipulation of the deepest of human preoccupations as the subjects of humour. The meaning of life, the lack of consistency in moral and/or theological referents, the unforeseen nature and intervention of chance -sometimes randomness- in interpersonal relationships are just some of the pillars upon which his films are seamlessly built. These issues affect all his characters, especially those played by himself, who are all prisoners of their own obsessions and draw forth from us a laughter that in the end inevitably stings, because it is born of suffering. Laughter, as has happened so often in the history of communication, acts as a sort of releasing catharsis, with benefits for both individual and social balance. However, its basis rests on pain, a paradox on which the director bases himself- through exploration of the specific tools of film language- to represent turbulent psychological states.

This is undoubtedly one of the most important qualities of Allen as a creator, since he tends to portray himself as an explorer of the mind based on what is, in essence, characteristic of the aesthetic and narrative nature of film. As a result, and as we learn from Girgus, in most of his films psychoanalytic awareness functions as a kind of narrative-generating force that provides a tentative means to organising the chaos of modern life³. In this sense, what the director does is simply to use the formal rudiments of the seventh art to represent the confused and unstable states of the human mind. This is so to such a point that Allen himself has on occasion admitted his desire to make films about the unconscious in which this, the unconscious, would be the main scenario for the development of the action⁴.



Without going so far, what is true is that some of his works are conceived and organised as though they were in fact therapy sessions. Thus, in Allen's films the characters usually appear wishing to exteriorise their innermost fears, ghosts and worries; often circumscribed within a sentimental context and on not a few occasions with a heavy dose of philosophy mixed in. We therefore see a kind of confession that emerges through the typical direct looks the characters give the camera, appealing to the audience, who then feel invited into the text of the film. This device -so distant from the conventions of the classic narrative that defines the meta-linguistic aesthetics of the modern cinema- involves a break from the transparency of the plot and invites those on the other side of the screen to adopt the guise of a confessor before whom the character bares him or herself emotionally and psychologically. Examples -to cite two cases distant in time- are Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) at the beginning of *Annie Hall* and Jerry Falk (Jason Biggs) in several parts of *Anything Else* (2003). Allen's invitations to the members of the audience lead them to become the receivers of messages very similar to those given out by the characters in the offices of their

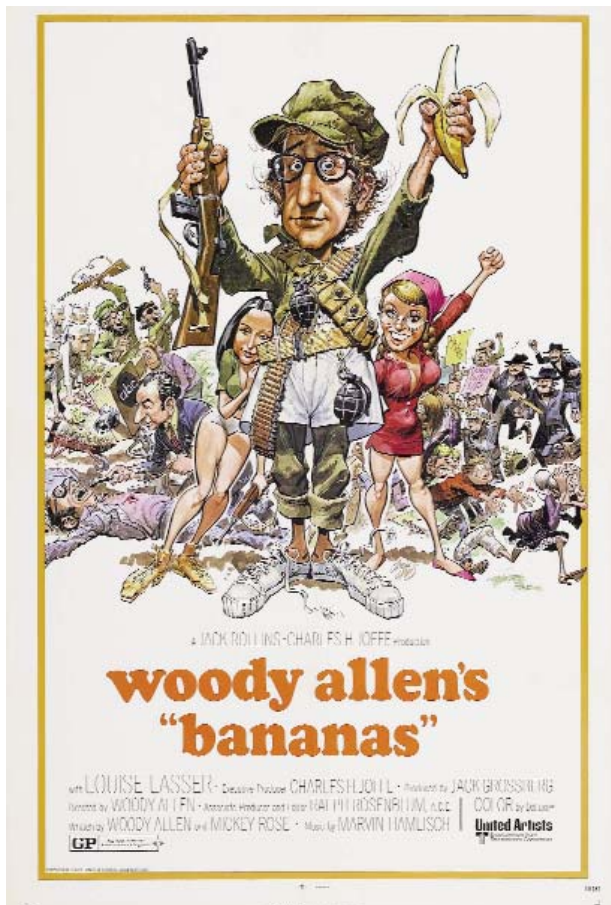
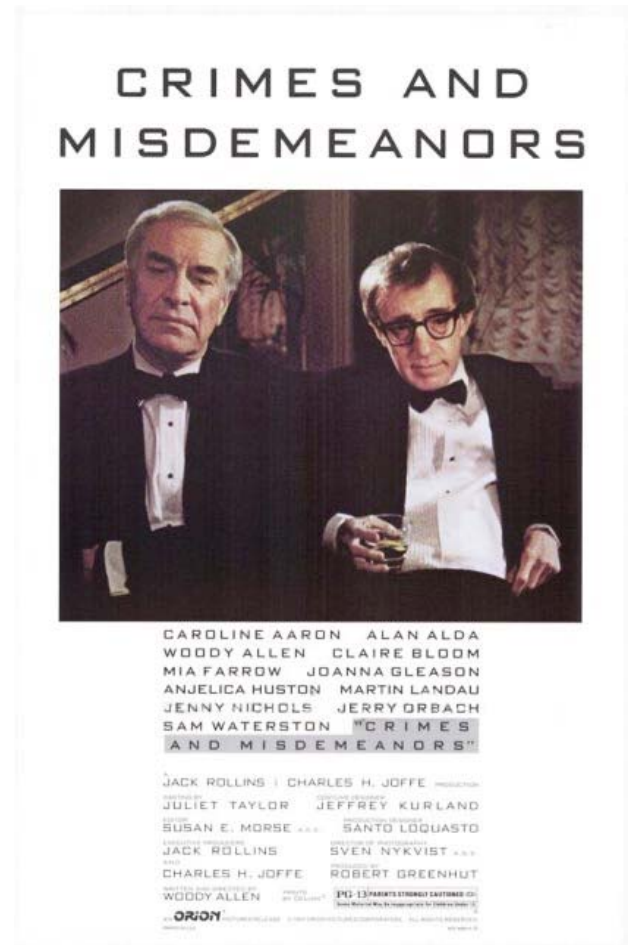
psychiatrists, and hence they become an extradiegetic reflection of those same analysts.

At the same time, the director uses voice-over -which allows us to hear the inner thoughts of the characters or their memories of the past expressed out loud - as a highly singular element of his style. This is yet another resource aimed at offering the character relief, since through this cinematic device we see what is in the end a relationship in which the receiver is understood as a confidante.



However, the most radical and striking use of what is typical of the language of movies for the representation of mental states is seen in the visualisation of dreams, the choice of disordered narrative structures, temporal superposition and the interaction between «real» and «fictitious» people. In Allen's movies, the narrative becomes progressively more complex, especially as from *Annie Hall*, which is an actual declaration of principles about the different levels and spatio-temporal fractures on which many of his stories rest. Thus, the narrative scaffolding becomes more complex and richer, apparently chaotic and very free.

His work is full of examples. In *Bananas* (1971) the clumsy Fielding Mellish (Woody Allen) tells his psychoanalyst about a recurrent dream in which some religious men bear a cross onto which he has been nailed in a procession along a central avenue in New York. However, the presentation of dream-like situations becomes more interesting in *Annie Hall*. Here we are offered a deconstruction of the main character in which even his materialisation in the past is possible, such that he sees himself as a child in the company of his parents or his school friends. This operation reached greater heights in some films in which, as in *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), Allen plays a movie director (the former) and a writer (the latter) – both of whom enter into contact with the people they themselves created, thereby mixing the assumed reality with the fiction in the discourse. This mechanism is further complicated by the constant jumps in the order of the stories, thus producing temporal fractures that are in general much appreciated by the author of *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989) to mention two of the several cases in which Allen makes it clear that the *flashback* is one of his favourite rhetorical operations.



Thanks to the peculiarities of the language of the cinema, it is easier to understand the complex pattern that the film maker weaves into his most significant works, in which different levels of reality tend to be combined. Moreover, in such works we usually perceive a wish to X-ray the dilemmas and psychological traumas of the characters, where memories and a non-realistic interaction between individuals belonging to different, although complementary, spheres of the narrative are of special importance. A good example can be found in *Annie Hall*, in which the main character recalls his experiences at school. The *voiceover* sets us in the classroom, where Alvy the child is reprimanded by the teacher who receives complaints from a schoolgirl who he has unexpectedly kissed. Suddenly we see Alvy the adult seated in the chair, airily complaining that it was only an innocent curiosity about sex. The teacher warns Alvy that children of six-years old do not think about girls and the child who has been kissed erupts with “For God’s sakes, Alvy, even Freud speaks of a latency period”. And Alvy the forty-year old, in an exchange reminiscent of the surreal, replies “Well I never had a latency period, I can’t help it”.

Evidently, scenes like this are impossible to understand in a realistic sense, which means that we must realise that they only occur in the mind of the character, who is emotionally laid bare in the text of the film through the presence of memory in the present moment. This is also a usual type of narrative logic, since as the author himself reminds us in *Stardust Memories*, all that occurs after the domestic help of Sandy Bates (Woody Allen) places a dead rabbit in front of him is no more than a projection of his own psyche: “so everything that occurs later on in the film is happening in his mind”⁵. Thus, adapted to a certain extent to Freudian theory – for which dreams are characterised by temporal dislocation and an order that is catalysed from the unconscious– the formal and narrative efforts of Allen adopt a chaotic and fractured guise, as if the content of his discourses were no more than expressions of the inner ghosts of an artist prepared to explore his mind from the insides of film sequences through free association between “real” happenings and evocations that derive from the seeds of his traumas and worries. These obsessions can be attributed to the persons inhabiting the stories but also to an author who impregnates his creations with a noteworthy autobiographical element.

The psychoanalyst: a recurrent figure in Allen’s gallery

Take the Money and Run, which should be considered the opera prima of Woody Allen, includes a complete declaration of principles about the film maker’s view of the figure of the psychoanalyst, one of the commonest categories among those populating his work. The film is a false documentary about the story of Virgil, a thief who is definitely not up to speed in his profession. At one particular moment of the film we see Dr Epstein (Don Frazier), a psychiatrist who treated Virgil during his time in prison, making declarations about the patient and his relationship with his beloved Louise (Janet Margolin): “Louise meant a great deal to Virgil from a psychiatric point of view. His love for her was the healthiest thing in his life. It was genuine and clean. Not like some patients I know”. At that moment, the doctor directs an inquisitorial look at a prisoner lying on a couch with a look of guilt on his face.

The artist undoubtedly has a kind of love-hate relationship with psychoanalysts. In general terms, his films portray a fairly critical view since his therapists tend to be pretty incompetent at actually “curing” their patients. From this point of view, it seems that Allen –who has paradoxically received

treatment uninterruptedly ever since he was a young man– is attempting to tell us that seeing a therapist is simply a waste of time and money. However, at the same time, it seems that the presence of these specialists is a part of the urban architecture that the author is unable to elude, implicitly accepting a relevant and natural role for them in a world in which the more profound issues cannot be addressed in black and white. Faced with the loss of meaning and the lack of certainty of modern life, Allen chooses the consolation of science over any theological balsam, regardless of the fact that neither works. In this way, he actually adopts the words of Harry Block, the man of letters in *Deconstructing Harry*, when he says that if he had to choose between the Pope and air conditioning he would choose the latter.



Also, with a few exceptions psychiatrists have a tangential, although quite influential, presence in the development of the narratives. The characters playing these figures do so in a secondary fashion, and in fact sometimes they are only referred to in *off*, such as when in the futuristic *The Sleeper* (1973) Miles eventually recognises that he had not seen his therapist in

200 years “And I haven’t seen my analyst in 200 years. And he was a strict Freudian. And if I’d been going all this time, I’d probably almost be cured by now”. Moreover, where therapists do appear on screen they are dressed in grey; they lie in an armchair in apparent listening mode while their patients engage in unfettered wordiness. Notwithstanding, what reproaches can we deduce from the acid vision of the director?



First, a dysfunctionality that reflects the very human weaknesses of analysts that makes them equal to their patients. In some of his films, Allen plays comically with the paradox that psychiatrists are not even able to put their *own* lives in order. Thus, in *Manhattan* Mary Wilkie (Diane Keaton) complains that her therapist can no longer counsel her about her love problems: “Donny is in coma. He had a very bad acid experience”. However, it is in *Deconstructing Harry* where Allen expresses himself so trenchantly in this sense. In one of the most memorable scenes – and here we refer to both the film and the whole treatment given to psychiatrists by Allen – we see Joan (Kirstie Alley) arguing with her husband Harry because he has slept with one of her twenty-year old patients who has subsequently spilt the beans in a therapy session. The affronted wife is trying to strangle him, screaming that she is going to kill him, when a patient arrives for a

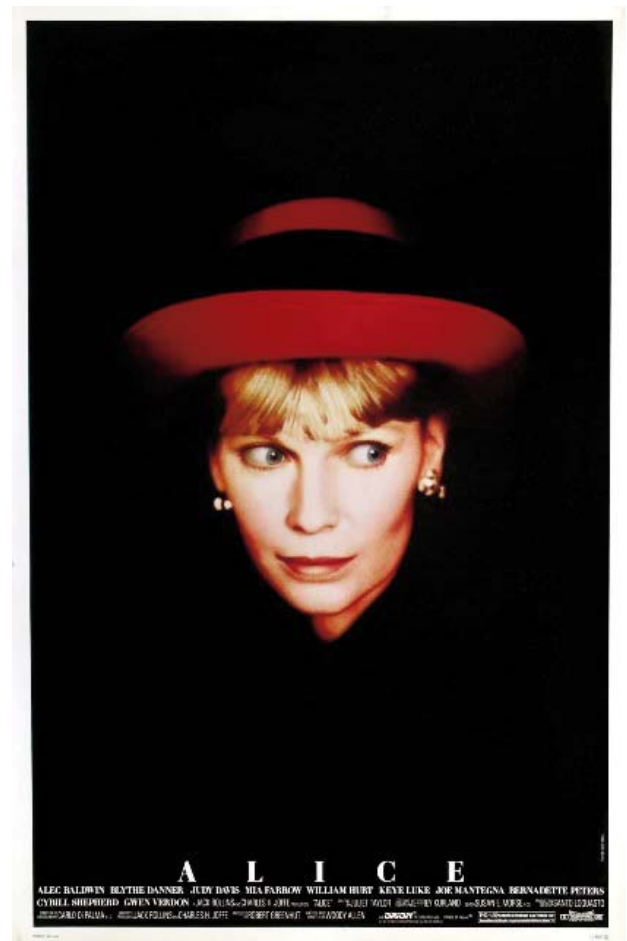
consultation. Suddenly, she says she is sorry and gets up. The camera remains on the patient who, horrified, hears voices from off the set. “You fucked-up fuck! I can’t believe you did this! Fucking asshole! You fucked my patient- You don’t fuck somebody’s patient! Fuck you!” Then she returns to the office, sits down and begins to write in her notebook. She asks poor Mr. Farber to pick up where they had left off but while he is trying to do this she struggles to open a bottle of pills. She jumps up again and carries on with the argument at full volume “And with my patient! That is a sacred trust! My patient!” Harry attempts to defend himself: “But who else do I meet?” Joan sits down again and asks Mr. Farber to continue, but before he can she screams to the other end of the house “Get your shit and your goddam clothes and get the fuck out of here!....And I mean tonight, motherfucker”. This is when Mr Farber bursts into tears like a child.

This scene exacerbates the vitriolic tone usually accorded to issues of psychoanalytical treatments by the author. In this scene, we see a psychiatrist who shows her weakness of character in managing an emotionally and psychologically extreme situation. The comic thrust of the situation is also enhanced by the portrayal of the point of view of the unfortunate Mr. Farber, who is terrified upon learning that his problems are unsolvable because even his therapist is condemned to uncontrolled suffering in the sphere of human relationships. The humoristic treatment of despair and suffering thus acquires a pessimistic underpinning that on other occasions suggests the restrictive and repressive attitude of the therapist. There are many other instances of this, such as when in *Manhattan* Isaac (Woody Allen) is surprised that Mary should call her therapist Donny: “I call mine Dr. Chomsky, you know. He hits me with a ruler”. In *Stardust Memories*, we see a cadaverous looking doctor, his face illuminated by contrast lighting that further highlights his sinister aspect, speaking in a severe voice to the camera about his patient: “He failed to get over the terrible truths of existence, and at the end his inability to push away the horrible facts typical of existence in this world took all meaning from his life”. And in *Hannah and her Sisters*, the wife of a friend who Mickey Sachs (Woody Allen) has asked to impregnate his own wife brakes his initial enthusiasm: “It’s something to be talked about by your psychoanalyst and mine”.

The excess severity and control is not the only reproach that the characters and/or the author

formulate against specialists who dispense treatment based on psychoanalysis. The perception that putting oneself into their hands serves little use may also be due to the lack of answers to the dilemmas that have arisen. Again in a caustic tone, Allen often places Jerry Falk –the character in *Anything Else*, - in a consultancy from which no clear benefit at all emerges. Obsessed with his inability to leave his girlfriend for an attractive woman he has just met, the young man consults his psychiatrist. However, the therapist simply asks him about a recurrent dream his patient has in which the Cleveland Indians –a baseball team- are buying toys in a Toys'R Us store. Desperate, Jerry looks at the camera and we hear “The guy will not talk. I've been with him for three years and he wants me to free-associate about the Cleveland Indians”.

It is clear then, that although the men and women portrayed in the films need to know that they can always count on their therapists, these latter do not represent a definitive answer to their problems. The humour becomes more patent in that even though they know that the treatment is inefficient in the utilitarian sense they return to their sessions time and again. Thus, the spectator knows that when Alvy confesses to Annie Hall that after 15 years of treatment he's going to give his analyst “one more year and then I'm going to Lourdes”, he is only recognising implicitly that he will continue to be cannon fodder for the profession. Even were this not so, he would need to relate himself to some kind of figure able to offer hope, relief or a mechanism of defence in a world characterised by the absence of meaning, which is why in *Stardust Memories* Sandy Bates admits that “I think I need something more than a book on zen. I need a rabbi, a psychoanalyst or an interplanetary genius” and why in *Deconstructing Harry* Harry Block says “I have squandered all I have on shrinks, lawyers and whores... fatigue syndrome”. In this sense, it is not surprising that what the psychiatrist represents within the fiction is sometimes taken over by characters such as the genial Doctor Yang (Keye Luke), a Chinese doctor who treats an anodyne wife in *Alice* (1990) with some wonderful herbs that, among other effects, allow her to be invisible so that she can confront the truth of the world surrounding her. On other occasions, the role is portrayed by someone more prosaic, such as David Dobel (Woody Allen), who in *Anything Else* is able to offer the doubtful Jerry the answers not provided by his analyst, against whom he hurls tirades at every possible opportunity “You know, since the beginning of time, people have been frightened and unhappy and scared to death and scared of getting old



and there have always been priests and shamans and now shrinks to tell them ‘I know you're frightened, but I can help you. Of course, it'll cost you a few bucks”.

In general, it is difficult to find more generous examples of the figure of the psychiatrist. The most outstanding is undoubtedly Dr. Eudora Nesbitt Fletcher (Mia Farrow), the physician who risks her whole professional career to solve the problems of Leonard Zelig (Woody Allen), known to the press as *the human chameleon* owing to his propensity to change his personality according to whom he is with at any given moment. The doctor applies psychoanalytical techniques against the counsel of her colleagues, who defend the organic origin of his condition up to the point of attributing it to a bout of “indigestion brought on by Mexican food or to a brain tumour”. Despite this, she uses hypnosis in sessions that were to become famous under the denomination of “the white room”, which according to the false documentary which is *Zelig* (1983) would become of huge importance in the history of psychotherapy. Nevertheless, according to the voice in *off* that tells the story the success of the treatment will be due to a

double-edged attack, according to which, with the patient (Zelig) in a trance, the therapist will explore his personality and then reconstruct it and, while conscious, will show him kindness, care and unconditional attention.

In this way, for once Allen humanises therapists in a dual way: on one hand, they appear as intelligent, audacious and intuitive, while, on the other, they are resolved to becoming emotionally involved in solving the problems affecting their patients. This is an exceptional case in a filmography that tends to portray corrosive comedy, although it also gives us a hint about the natural way in which the film maker places psychiatrist in his own world, to which they inexorably belong as though they were a necessary lesser evil within the cloud of urban neuroses inhabiting his stories.



The patients: the psychological disorders of the contemporary urbanite

In the long run, the character of Leonard Zelig is no more than an extreme exaggeration made

by Allen of what is commonly considered to be a multiple personality complex. Again, the altered condition of the subject is used to obtain humoristic dividends from what is usually a motive of suffering and pain. The film maker is insistent on this topic, and his work is full of people who consider themselves to be neurotic – even though the concept of “neurosis”, as such, has now been all but abandoned by scientific psychology and psychiatry- and who, in all reality, subject themselves to psychotherapy in order to combat very diverse types of disturbances: depressive, somatoform, of a sexual nature, dissociative, anxiety, impulse control, etc.

Thus, the author has popularised a stereotype characterised by disquiet and fragility, which he has usually portrayed himself in order to strengthen the autobiographical facet of his creations⁶. Actually, the device revolves around the dilemmas affecting the main character such that the figure of the therapist can be considered as a reflection that bounces that character’s most important inner conflicts outwards. Accordingly, to a certain extent Allen’s portrayal of the psychiatrist also helps to his own personality, with which it tends to be coherent. A good example can be found in *Annie Hall*, where the screen is split in two while Annie and Alvy converse with their respective doctors. She does this in a consultancy with a fairly modern style thanks to some sophisticated decoration. He, on the other hand, does so in a more classic and solemn environment, with a prevalence of ochre. The questions they are asked are very similar, although their replies reinforce the contrast between their two personalities, which at that point implies a threat of breakdown of the relationship between them. In particular, when asked about the frequency of their sexual encounters their replies are respectively “Hardly ever, maybe three times a week” (him) and “Constantly, I’d say three times a week” (her).

However, beyond the game set up with their doctors, the films offer a broad but consistent series of features that help us to forge an “identikit” of the Allen anti-hero: an urban male, timid, nearly always unsatisfied, prone to making a lot of gestures, stressed and obsessive, often a hypochondriac, with a propensity to fall in love, intelligent and voluble. His philosophy -fairly bipolar in that he expresses pessimistic convictions about his own existence offset by an epicurean flair that acts as antidote, is expressed in the legendary scene in *Manhattan* in which Isaac improvises a list of the things that make live worth living, although

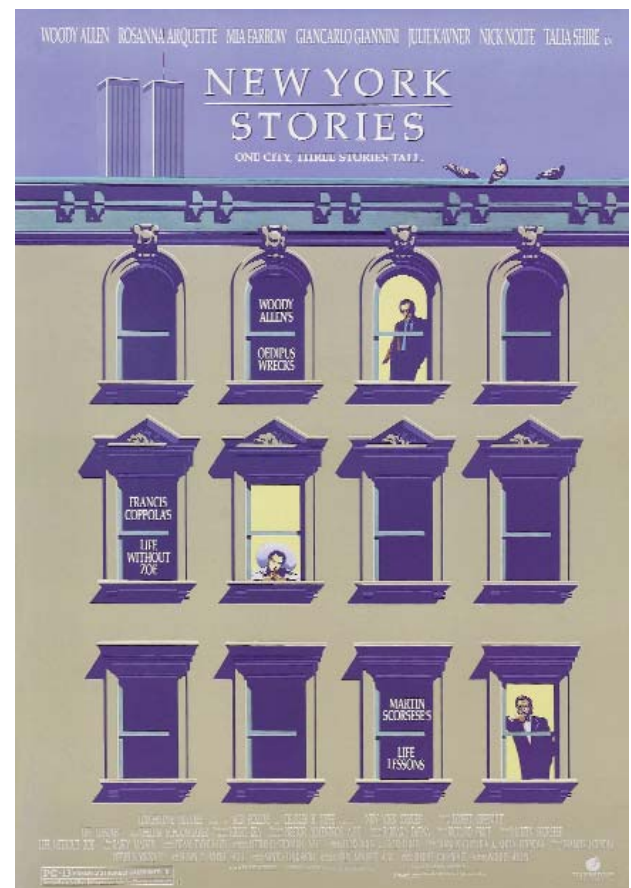
he only does so to palliate the blackness of the idea he has just had for a story about "...people in Manhattan who are constantly creating these real, unnecessary, neurotic problems for themselves 'cause it keeps them from dealing with more unsolvable, terrifying problems about... the universe".

The predisposition of the character to take any event as a symptom of the meaninglessness of life or as an excuse to feel anxious is a gold mine for the exercise of comedy. The spectator knows that part of their charm lies in the deficiencies and weaknesses of the fictional creatures. And it could be said that to a certain extent even the characters feel comfortable with their own instability and problems, which they assume with as little fuss as they would accept the colour of their hair. This combination has generated some very funny scenes, such as the finding of a lifeless body in the lift in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), which draws a cry –actually a rather *engaging* sort of cry- from Larry Lipton (Woody Allen) "Oh, Jesus. Claustrophobia and a dead body. This is a neurotic's jackpot". Thus, in a completely natural way Allen brings to the screen certain psychological disorders, and -thanks to the scope of deformation allowed by the comic genre- encapsulates the humanisation of the kleptomaniac, the schizophrenic or the addict of prostitution, to name but three.

So, the influence of psychoanalytical theory filters into the construction of the type character that appears so frequently in Allen's work. In particular, childhood and the education received at home through parents are often blamed as the traumatic origin of the emotional instability suffered in adulthood. In *Take the Money and Run*, Virgil's parents cover their faces with plastic glasses and a false moustache because for many years they have been ashamed of their child. In *Bananas*, Fielding recalls his childhood and confesses to his analyst "And I... I guess I had a good relationship with my parents.... They very rarely hit me... I think they hit me once, actually, in my whole childhood. They started beating me on the 23rd December of 1942 and stopped beating me in the late spring of 1944". But it is above all in *Oedipus Wrecks* –the chapter directed by Woody Allen for the collective film *New York Stories* (1989)- where the director extends his application of the "Oedipus complex" further than in any of his stories through the exacerbated control to which Sheldon (Woody Allen) is subjected by his mother (Mae Questel), to the ultimate extent that she ends up looking down on him from the sky over New

York and only comes down when he teams up with a girl very much like her.

It is well known that although subject to the constraint of fiction Woody Allen has done no more than expose and "undress" himself for forty years through his creations, so influenced by psychoanalysis that they almost function as a substitute. In this sense, it is not surprising that in the documentary *Wild Man Blues* (1997) –which the director Barbara Kopple dedicated to the musical tour that the artist made with his Jazz band- he portrays himself, when confessing to his wife that he is special. When he is in Europe, he misses New York and when there he misses Europe. He doesn't want to be where he is and always wants to be somewhere else. He sees no way of solving the problem. Wherever he is it gives him chronic dissatisfaction. But it is this terrible dissatisfaction that he has been able to transform into humoristic energy as a balsam for himself and for his public, adopting as his own the words uttered by one of the creators who in *Melinda and Melinda* (2004) discuss the comic or tragic nature of existence: "We laugh because it masks our real terror about mortality".



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