

# Undergraduate Dissertation

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

A Comic Journey Through Time: Tracing the  
Origins of Comedy in Woody Allen's *Whatever  
Works*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to explore the genre of comedy from its origins as ritual and/or religious celebration to its role as social critique, encompassing its influence on classical theatre. To achieve this objective, an analysis of the film comedy *Whatever Works* (Woody Allen, 2009) has been conducted, dissecting it into different acts to examine the various conventions presented in the theoretical framework. These include the use of the chorus and breaking the fourth wall within comedy, the origins of the genre itself, and ultimately, its social function. Through this analysis, the significant influence of the origins of classical comedy on contemporary film comedies is demonstrated.

**Key Words:** comedy – theatre – Woody Allen – cinema – chorus – fourth wall

## RESUMEN

El presente Trabajo Fin de Grado tiene como objetivo explorar el género de la comedia desde sus orígenes como ritual y/o celebración religiosa hasta su papel como crítica social, pasando por su influencia en el teatro clásico. Con este propósito, se ha realizado un análisis de la comedia cinematográfica *Whatever Works* (Woody Allen, 2009), desglosándola en diferentes actos para examinar las diversas convenciones expuestas en el marco teórico, como son el uso del coro y la cuarta pared dentro de la comedia, los orígenes del propio género y, en última instancia, su función social. A través de este análisis, se muestra la gran influencia de los orígenes de la comedia clásica en las comedias cinematográficas contemporáneas.

**Palabras clave:** comedia – teatro – Woody Allen – cine – coro – cuarta pared

## Acknowledgments

*This world is a comedy to those that think,  
a tragedy to those that feel.*

Horace Walpole

I am immensely grateful to my family for their unwavering support and belief in me, nurturing my love for language and literature from an early age.

Special thanks go to Jesús, my boyfriend, whose passion for cinema has fuelled my studies. His unwavering encouragement and presence have been a blessing, propelling me forward in moments of doubt.

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As Woody Allen famously said, “Eighty percent of success is showing up.”

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## Introduction

Comedy, as one of the oldest and most enduring forms of human expression, has entertained and delighted audiences for centuries. Its origins date back to ancient religious rituals, where the celebration of life and fertility took centre stage. As time progressed, comedy evolved from these rituals into more structured forms of theatre, with notable figures like Aristophanes and Menander, who stood out for their comedic use of social humour. With the arrival of cinema, comedy underwent further transformations and presented new dimensions.

In the modern era, comedy has assumed various forms, ranging from sitcoms to romantic comedies and more. Woody Allen, a filmmaker known for his ability to blend humour and social relevance, has created an impressive body of work. His film *Whatever Works* (2009), in particular, exemplifies this approach. The story revolves around Boris Yellnikoff (Larry David), an antisocial physicist, and Melody St. Ann Celestine (Evan Rachel Wood), a young woman from the South of the United States who has left home. Through their relationship, the film explores themes such as love, social stereotypes, and the search for meaning in life.

By closely analysing *Whatever Works*, this dissertation aims to focus on how Allen draws on classical conventions of comedy to craft a film that is both entertaining and socially significant. Furthermore, it explores the genre's evolution over time, tracing its roots from religious rituals to its current status as a broadly accepted form of entertainment. Ultimately, this dissertation offers valuable insights into the history and development of comedy, illuminating how this art form has endured through the ages and continues to captivate audiences today.

## **Breaking the Walls of Comedy**

*Theatre cannot disappear  
because it is the only art where humanity faces itself*

Arthur Miller

### **I. The Origins**

The origins of comedy, at least in the West, can be traced back to ancient Greek theatre, but comedy, as a social and cultural phenomenon, precedes it. The term “comedy” has its origins in ancient times, more specifically in the Greek word *komoidia*, which was a combination of “village” (*komai*) and “song” (*oide*). According to Lowe, the term first appeared in the 5th century BC and was originally linked to fertility, making it purely ritualistic in nature (6). The ancient Greeks believed that comedy, as a rite, played an important role in ensuring the perpetuation of life and the continuation of society. At a later stage, in ritual ceremonies, a chorus of around fifty people would sing a hymn in unison around the altar of Dionysus. In time, this became the starting point of what we define as modern theatre nowadays (Hartnoll 8).

Actor and playwright Thespis is generally credited with transforming the purpose of these ritualistic events into something performative, developing several innovations that are still relevant today. Thespis introduced the concept of a single actor, who would start to interact with the chorus, and used masks to differentiate between characters. He is also believed to have been the first to use dialogue, which was previously absent from the performances, making it a crucial component of drama (Hartnoll 10). Nevertheless, even keeping in mind later innovations, the theatre has its roots in those religious rites performed by the earliest communities which would, later, open the path of the spectacle.

The theatre evolved, and so too did the genre of comedy. As the ceremonial function diminished in its importance, its entertainment value and its capacity for social commentary developed. One of the earliest forms of comedy was the “Old Comedy,” which was characterized by its use of satire and parody. Aristophanes, among others, used his plays as a form of political commentary, often ridiculing politicians, and public figures without mentioning their names. Over time, comedy became more refined, and the “New Comedy” emerged, which was more focused on relationships between young men and women, portraying everyday life (Leggatt 8, 9). This transition brought about a new sense of individualism and a focus on personal relationships. Playwrights such as Menander were well known for their contributions to this genre (Leggatt 6).

Indeed, the influence of ancient theatre and comedy on contemporary art forms, including cinema and theatre, cannot be overstated. The roots of comedy in Greek theatre, with its use of satire, irony, and social commentary, created a theatrical tradition that has had a great impact on Western theatre and narrative for centuries. This influence is still present in contemporary drama, where many productions employ comedic elements to bring levity and entertainment to their audiences while, at the same time, offering critical views of social mores and customs. Similarly, cinema has adopted many of these same techniques, utilizing various comedic devices to engage viewers and create a sense of humour and amusement.

## **II. Comedy and Laughter**

Laughter has always been an integral part of comedy, and it serves multiple functions within the genre, including social commentary, entertainment, and the articulation of a comic vision of the world. As Langer argues, comedy is not merely a sequence of jokes, but a structured art form with a specific rhythm that differs from that of tragedy (67, 68). It is a form of communication that seeks to engage with the audience and create a shared

experience. As Horton and Rapf note, “Comedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself” (4). Therefore, it may be seen as a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, making it a powerful tool for social commentary and change.

As we have seen, one of the primary functions of comedy is its social role: laughter can serve as a form of social critique, allowing the viewer to laugh at social conventions and norms. As has been discussed in the previous section, ancient playwrights such as Aristophanes used comedy in order to make a political critique of those that were in power. In this sense, it is important to define comedy as a mirror of society or “a game that imitates life” (Sypher 20), which highlights its flaws and injustices. As Corrigan argues, the genre has historically been a tool for rebellion and a mechanism for public defence (51).

Simultaneously and inextricably linked with social comment, comedy also serves an entertainment function. The use of humour and laughter in comedy seeks to entertain the audience, providing a break from the serious aspects of everyday life. As Sypher claims, comedy provides an escape from the mundane and grim realities of political life, offering a form of relief and release (50, 51). This function has always been present, and it continues to be paramount in contemporary society. Comedy provides a space for audiences to let their guard down, relax, and enjoy themselves.

Finally, laughter in comedy also serves a function as part of a comic vision of the world. According to Corrigan, “[c]omedy operates in that middle zone between the serious and the absurd which is called the ludicrous”. Through comedy, in this sense, an individual is able to see the absurdity and irrationality of human behaviour and existence, and through laughter, they are able to accept and celebrate it (7).



In sum, laughter is an essential component of comedy, serving multiple functions within the genre. It serves as a means of entertainment, a means of social commentary, and, finally, a means of creating a comic vision of the world. Through laughter, an individual is able to celebrate the human experience, and through comedy, one is able to see the world in a new and comic light, a perspective that focuses on the joys of being alive, of being part of a community, of being human, and the belief in the cyclical dimension of nature and human existence.

### **III. The Chorus and the Fourth Wall**

Comedy, then, is historically connected to the theatre. In the course of history, certain theatrical devices and strategies have remained in place and are still used in many contemporary comedies such as the chorus and the fourth wall, that have had a significant impact on the evolution of comedy – first in the theatre and, more recently, in cinema. Even though these two devices are closely connected, I will evaluate them separately in order to offer a more descriptive analysis of their origin and their importance in comedy nowadays.

The chorus of ancient Greek theatre, once the actors and the dramatic action had evolved from the original ceremonial event, continued to play a significant role in commenting on the action of the play and guiding the audience's interpretation of the story. The chorus allowed for a shared emotional experience between the performers and the audience and served as a means of commentary and reflection on the events of the play. This use of the chorus as embodying the main vantage point of the story was not only used in classical theatre but also appears in cinema where the presence of a chorus evolved, giving rise to different manifestations such as the narrator.

For Leggatt, following Robortello's arguments about "disturbances" in comedy, the chorus may be related to the genre's episodic nature (12). It may be at the origin of the

structure of plays in several acts, initially separated by the intervention of the chorus. Even though Menander suppressed the use of the chorus, he still created what is called today “interludes” and, therefore, the division of acts was still present (Beare 45). Acts and scenes and other divisions may function to give a narrative structure to the play, but it also has the potential for fragmentation, which has been particularly relevant in comedy. Lowe describes the history of comedy as “a series of far-fetching experiments in how to assemble a series of comic moments into a larger performance whose armature is essentially narrative” (7). In the cinema, this episodic nature is apparent in certain types of comedy – comedian comedy, such as that of the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, Jerry Lewis, or, indeed, the early films of Woody Allen – which tend to use narrative structure as little more than an excuse for a succession of jokes, gags, songs, and other bits of comic business (Deleyto 176).

As has been previously mentioned, Thespis is credited with being the first actor to step out of the chorus and take on a speaking role, creating the first individual character in theatre (Hartnoll 10). This was a significant departure from the previous stage of development, in which the function of the chorus was to tell the story and convey the emotions of the characters. This shift allowed for a greater exploration of individual psychology and personal relationships and created the real spectacle within classical theatre. By engaging in dialogue with other characters, Thespis separated himself from the chorus and thus facilitated the appearance of the theatre understood as a dramatic conflict and not only as a religious celebration.

According to Hartnoll (14), the size of the chorus gradually became reduced from thirty to only twelve members. Over time, additional individual actors were added, helping to the creation of plots as interactions between multiple characters. In this way, with the change in the chorus, the audience was also transformed, and they started to be

considered spectators, instead of a congregation. Many centuries later, this innovation would pave the way for the development of cinema, where audiences could enjoy the performance of multiple actors considering it just a spectacle.

The notion of the audience also acquired a special role with the introduction of some comic devices in theatre and films. As Horton and Rapf note, successful comedies require a special relationship and intimacy with the audience, achieved through the creation of a sympathetic connection with the characters and, sometimes, with the breaking of the fourth wall (3). This concept, which is partly linked to the evolution of the chorus, has had a significant impact on the evolution of theatre and comedy. It refers to the imaginary barrier between the performers and the audience, which may allow for a more realistic portrayal of human behaviour and emotions. It may be said that in ancient theatre, with the chorus directly addressing and interacting with the congregation, the fourth wall was non-existent. Later, as a continuation of the role of the chorus, individual characters would also address the audience directly. Thus, the viewer gained access to privileged information and developed a closer connection to the characters. The breaking of the fourth wall has been a popular tool for eliciting sympathy and empathy from audiences throughout history, as well as for comic purposes. This strategy of making spectators aware of the fourth wall as a convention also calls attention to the artificiality and constructedness of the comic work. It is used in many contemporary comedies, including those of Woody Allen, who is known for involving the audience in the action. According to Horton and Rapf, the use of the fourth wall has allowed for a greater range of comedic situations, granting “the sense of a play” (4).

In brief, the origins of theatre and comedy have significantly impacted contemporary cinema. The use of the chorus, individual characters, the fourth wall, and the use of the comic rhythm remain vital elements of modern comedic performance.

These devices have allowed for a greater range of comedic styles and have made comedy a universal form of entertainment. While these devices have evolved over time, they continue to be essential.

#### **IV. Theatrical Conventions in Woody Allen's Films**

As has been discussed in this chapter, the genre of comedy as it exists nowadays has a close connection with its origins in classical theatre. For this reason, it is possible to spot several theatrical conventions in many recent films belonging to the genre. This is the case with Woody Allen's films. Although my main objective in this essay is to analyse in detail the use of these theatrical devices in *Whatever Works* (2009), it is also worth noting that these conventions appear, in different forms, in much of his filmography.

One of the conventions that are used in his films is the breaking of the fourth wall. This device can be seen in films such as *Annie Hall* (1977), where Alvy (Woody Allen) begins the story by talking to the camera and, therefore, addressing the audience directly. With this tool, the spectators unconsciously position themselves on Alvy's side and start a process of sympathy toward the character, apart from the comic potential of the device and, as signalled above, its metacinematic dimension. This can also be seen in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). Nevertheless, in this film, the device is employed differently as, instead of breaking the fourth wall with the real audience, the layered structure of the movie creates a new dimension for this device where Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels) breaks the fourth wall of his own film to address his audience – a diegetic audience – and literally step across the cinema screen within the film's fiction.

The fourth wall, however, evolved from the detachment or dissolution of the chorus, as has been previously mentioned. This use of the chorus, which is a clear influence of the Greek theatre, can also be seen in movies such as *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), where a

literal Greek chorus is introduced in the story to warn Lenny (Woody Allen), in a comic register, about the possible consequences of his acts. In this sense, the chorus functions the same way it functioned in classical theatre, as the conscience of the main character. However, in this movie, Lenny breaks another cinematic wall and appears at the same narrative level as the chorus, addressing them directly, like the original actors did in Greek theatre. This scene can be considered an emulation in reverse of the dissolution of the chorus and the formation of the characters in reverse. The comic potential is obvious but so is the desire to insert the film within a long tradition.

Finally, the episodic nature of comedy in theatre is also depicted in many of Allen's films such as *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), which is divided into different sections, which could be considered acts. These sections are marked by a title or a quotation that evokes the actions that are going to happen in each act. In this film, however, it is also noticeable that the spectators can hear Elliot's (Michael Cane) thoughts as if he was a narrator or even breaking the fourth wall to share his more intimate feelings with the audience. This is also significant because, as has been previously mentioned, to accomplish success in comedy it is important to provide a special intimacy between the audience and the character. This existence of a narrator is also present in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), among many other Allen films, where a character is literally the narrator of a real story.

*Hannah and her Sisters* uses the equivalent of theatrical acts to structure the narrative but in many of Allen's early films, like *Bananas* (1971), *Sleeper* (1973) and *Love and Death* (1975), the episodic narrative conveys fragmentation and, biographically, the fact that, after all, his films developed from his stand-up comedy and his first job as a writer of jokes for other comedians. In a sense, Allen the stand-up comedian and the creator of jokes remained visible when his films became narratively

more sophisticated. As a comedian (both actor and director), Allen's art can be traced directly back to the origins of the genre in the theatre. The comic devices that I will analyse in the rest of this essay have a long history and remind us of the comic view of life that was already present in the invocations to the god Dionysus. *Whatever Works*, a later film than those mentioned in this section, once again flaunts such theatrical devices and, together with the casting of Larry David, a prestigious comedian and comedy writer, in the protagonist part, openly seeks to deal with contemporary life through a strong acknowledgement of the comic and theatrical traditions.

## Analysis: From Stage to Screen

*All the world is a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players*

William Shakespeare

*Whatever Works* (2009) makes ample use of the strategies mentioned in the previous chapter and, therefore, inserts itself within what we might describe as the classical tradition of comedy. In this section, I will offer a close reading of several scenes from the film in order to develop the impact of the tradition of the genre in its meanings and connotations.

The analysis is divided into three parts called “acts”, as a reference to its theatrical models. These parts deal with the three aspects that have been analysed in the theoretical framework and that take part in comedy’s theatrical tradition. Part one focuses on the breaking of the fourth wall and the use of the chorus, part two tackles the origins of comedy as a ritual and, finally, part three focuses on the social function of comedy itself. Through this thematic analysis, my aim is to consider this film as a tribute to the origins of comedy, not only in the theatre but in its first manifestations within the social order and its main functions.

### Act I: “Tell *them* your story”

The film opens with a tilt down where the voice of Boris Yellnikoff (Larry David), our protagonist, shifts from off-screen to on-screen, focusing the viewer's attention on him and his constant complaints about civilisation and religion. The intervention of the rest of the characters in the scene is scarce but extremely important since it is not until one of Boris' friends utters the phrase “They don't know your story. Boris, tell *them* your story” that the story itself begins. At that moment, no one bothers to explain who is behind this “them”, but Boris's reaction is curious since his response, apart from mentioning the title of the film and the main motto of the story and the character (“My story is *whatever works*”), is accompanied by a small glance directly into the camera (Fig. 1), implying that the people to whom he is supposed to tell his story are none other than the “real” spectators.



Figure 1. Boris' first interaction with the audience.

However, when Boris refers to the audience, his friends look at him incredulously and ask if he feels he is being watched. To which Boris replies, with an air of superiority and surreal naturalness, that he is talking about the spectators who have bought tickets to



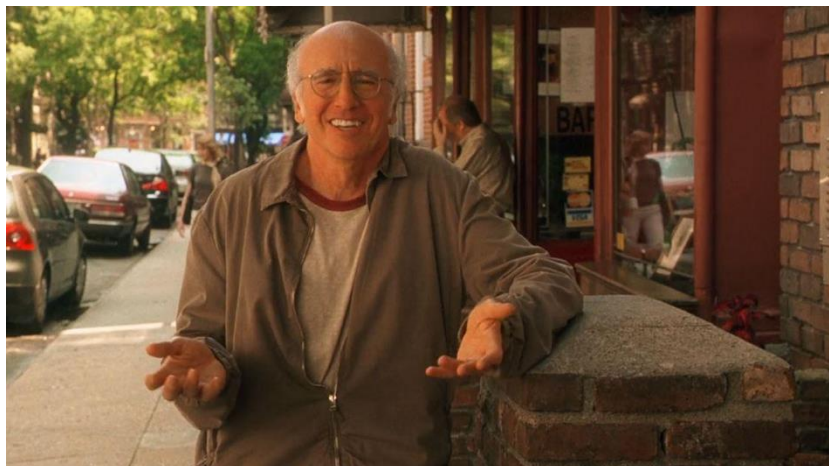
see them. At this point, the film enters into a metafictional conversation, but the rest of the characters still do not understand what he is talking about (Fig. 2). The fact that Boris is the only one who seems to be aware of the existence of “life” outside the diegesis suggests the importance of the need for a special relationship between comedian and spectator in comedy and the creation of “a state of conspiratorial irony” (Horton 9). Boris seems to request this special relationship. In this sense, the film transports us back to ancient Greece where there was no camera in between the spectator and the actor, when the latter addressed the audience directly. This is what happens in *Whatever Works*, where the recording device goes unnoticed, and “the camera is not the character's *confidant*; the spectator is” (Shannie 102).



Figure 2. Boris' friends look incredulously.

It is not until a few seconds later, though, that the fourth wall is completely broken, and this theatrical tool becomes most spectacular and comic. Thus, the monologue, or, as Shannie calls it, “the theatrical soliloquy” (1), begins. At this point, the interaction between the character and the audience begins to develop naturally and Boris begins to tell his story, making the spectator his confidant. In addition to using one of the most

important tools in the history of comedy, Allen also arguably imitates one of the most important innovations of theatre, namely the dissolution of the chorus and the creation of characters (Hartnoll 10). Thus, for a while, the group of friends, that are not performing a ritual ceremony but commenting on what is happening around them inside a fictional story, disappear and the film starts focusing solely on the “interaction” between the protagonist and the audience. The individual character appears and, through a medium shot, begins to tell his own story to become the protagonist (Fig. 3). In this way, Boris arguably becomes not only the protagonist but the modern and fictional embodiment of Thespis who, according to Hartnoll, was the first to step forward and separate himself from the chorus to shape the conflict and the story itself – the first actor (10).



*Figure 3. Boris becomes an individual character.*

However, while it is true that this device for creating empathy within comedy serves as a story developer, as it sets the stage for all the events related to it, this is not the only scene in which the fourth wall becomes a recurring tool. Throughout the film, one can see how the filmmaker makes use of it every time something relevant happens in the story – something relevant enough for the protagonist to explain further to the audience or comment on the situation critically, like the chorus did in classical theatre – thus pausing

the story and segmenting it into different parts and/or events, and emphasising the fragmentation that is often typical of comedy (Lowe 7).

Another example of this tool, among the many that can be found in the film, occurs when Melody (Evan Rachel Wood) confesses her feelings for Boris. In this case, the protagonist feels the need to detach himself from the scene, as in the previous example, and discuss this topic – in a monologic way – with the audience (Fig. 4). The framing is very similar to the one before, a medium shot of Boris speaking directly to the camera and discussing what has just happened, which will turn out to be an important moment in the development of his story. In this case, we can see how Boris hides from Melody in order to carry out this “conversation”, which again makes us think that he seems to be the only one capable of understanding the metafiction within the film.



*Figure 4. Boris hides from Melody.*

## Act II: The Rebirth

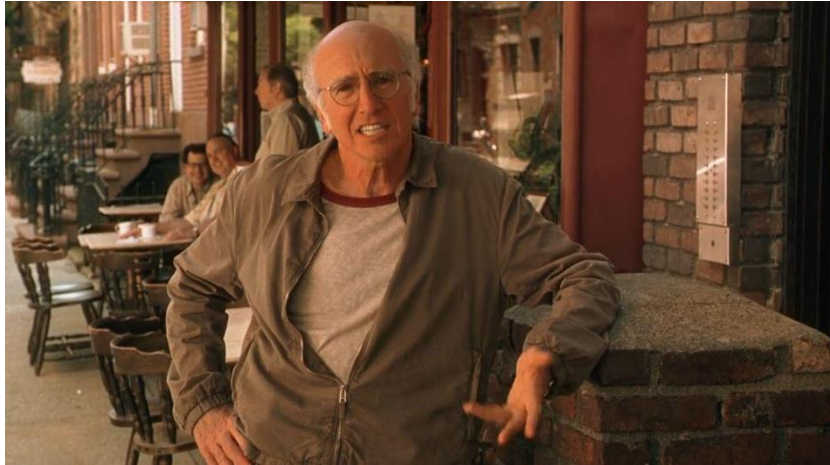
If there is one epithet that can define Boris Yellnikoff's character, it is pessimistic. Throughout the film, the character wallows in a critique of every aspect of society, creating a vision far removed from the comic one that the viewer of *Whatever Works* might have expected. The next scene to analyse begins with Boris's desperate cry "I'm dying". Since the audience can recognise the absurdity and irrationality of the situation and find humour in it, his pessimistic outlook on life serves as both a social critique and a comedic device (Corrigan 7). In this sense, it might be said that, in spite of his apparent omniscience and extraordinary intelligence (according to himself), he lacks a specific type of wisdom, and, from a comic perspective, he is on a lower level of awareness than the audience – we immediately recognise his limitations.

When Boris's wife Jessica (Carolyn McCormick) enters the scene, the couple begins to argue about their relationship, going into absurd details. Irony, as well as metafiction, returns when Boris says, "I'm the only one to see the whole picture". In this way, he not only mentions the human futility of which he is well aware but also the fact that he is the only one capable of breaking the fourth wall and creating a special relationship with the audience. Something similar happens when he pronounces "Life isn't on paper" in such an ironic way that, if we do not consider the metafictional irony embedded in the story, the spectator may miss the fact that his life is indeed written on paper. Thus, the real and the fictional becomes flexible and interconnected (Shannie 102). However, the connection between the serious and the absurd to form the ludicrous (Corrigan 6) become the turning point of the story. The scene ends with a close-up of Jessica that serves to narrate the events off-screen and let the spectator know that Boris has attempted suicide (Fig. 5).



*Figure 5. Jessica's close-up narrates Boris' attempted suicide.*

From that moment on, we are again presented with a medium shot of Boris breaking the fourth wall and explaining to the audience how that suicide was unsuccessful and all it did was cause him to limp for life (Fig. 6). This fact, instead of being treated as tragic, is comic from the spectator's perspective. The same example is used by Corrigan to discuss a failed suicide that he read about in the newspaper. He claims that because suicide failed and the reader did not take the situation seriously, it became "ludicrous" (6). The same thing occurs in slapstick comedy, where physical reality does not exist and, therefore, the acts of violence, cruelty, or suffering do not evoke sadness but laughter. All of this is caused because the audience is certain that the character involved in the action has not actually been in danger (7). However, Boris is not yet aware of the ironic significance of this seemingly tragic circumstance which makes the film what Knight calls a "dark comedy", due to the staging of a disparaging protagonist who begins not only by talking about his father's suicide but attempts to replicate the same act later on (91). In fact, learning that and coming to understand the comic view of life will be the focus of his character's narrative arc.



*Figure 6. Boris explains his suicide attempt.*

Beyond the ludicrous, it is important to mention how this suicide attempt marks the beginning of Boris's story in the film. As mentioned in the previous chapter, "the spirit of comedy is the spirit of resurrection" (Corrigan 8) and this is portrayed in the film. As Langer also points out, the Comus was a fertility rite recognised as a symbol of perpetual rebirth and eternal life (70). From this perspective, the character's attempted suicide may be seen as his rebirth, where he must "die" in order to be born again. It may be argued that the character is renewed by the unsuccessful suicide. It gives rise to a new life perceived from a comedic angle. As a further consequence, the character's rebirth not only signifies the beginning of a new life for Boris but also the introduction of new characters, such as Melody, who will be a part of his life. In other words, it is at that point that the diegesis begins.

Towards the end of the film, Boris attempts suicide again when Melody leaves him. This time, he is seen jumping out of the window. However, although this appears to be a tragic moment in his story, we soon see, through an overhead shot, that Boris has actually fallen on top of a woman and says that he has "blown it twice" (Fig. 7). However, this suicide attempt is again understood, within the film, as a new opportunity or, due to its



ritualistic origins, as a renewal of the character and the appearance of a new romantic interest. Therefore, this scene leads to the first hint at the possibility of closure and, in the same way, to the end of the character's path to finding his place and discovering the comic view of life. Additionally, it is interesting to add how the scene in which Boris and Helen (Jessica Hecht) meet in such an unconventional way also has sexual connotations that foreshadow not only their future as a couple but also the origins of comedy as a celebration of life and, therefore, of sex (Horton and Rapf 4).



*Figure 7. An overhead shot of Boris' second suicide attempt.*

### Act III: Laughing Matters

Comedy is a powerful tool that has long been used to reflect society's values and norms, offering an insightful commentary on the world around us. According to Sypher, comedy in the scenic arts has always served as a mirror of society while providing a comedic perspective on life, making people laugh, and helping them see things from a different angle (20). Woody Allen is well known for using comedy to criticise and comment on various aspects of American society. *Whatever Works* contains numerous instances of such social commentary. It may be disguised as sarcastic remarks by the protagonist or articulated through the characters and their various conflicts. Two conversations between Boris and Melody are representative of this critique. The two characters represent distinct cultural subgroups within American society. Their dialogues highlight their contrasting viewpoints. By investigating the social role of humour in these scenes, we will gain a deeper understanding of how comedy can serve as a vehicle for social commentary.

The first scene to be analysed in relation to the social function of comedy is the first conversation between Boris and Melody, which relies especially on stereotypes. The scene begins with the young woman innocently introducing herself to the man, telling him about her hometown, to which he replies with his usual sarcasm: "Not even the people who live there have heard of it". Although these comments are apparently there only to produce a comic response from the viewers, the social function is implicitly here, and this is linked to what has happened seconds before. When the girl asks about food, mentioning only typical dishes from the south of the United States, Boris replies that he is not a "Creole restaurant". The scene is presented mainly through a shot/reverse shot (Figs. 8-9) to emphasize the dichotomy of their personalities – coupled with their age difference – and, at the same time, the different worlds they belong to. The fact that the young woman is from the south of the United States, more specifically, from the state of



Mississippi, is part of the stereotyped presentation of the character. Together with her comments, her accent, and her “brainless attitude” in Boris’s words, this amounts to a recurrent stereotype in the media: the rural family. According to Lee, this popular stereotype of rural families is usually determined by country living and illiteracy, which clashes with that of people from an urban area, who show arrogance and superiority towards those of the other group (1986, 253). This is why Boris sarcastically laughs at the girl’s innocence and answers Melody’s petition of staying with him with a “[you] won’t last three days in New York”. Although the film presents the scene as a mockery of these stereotypes by portraying them through the characters, as the film progresses, we see how these stereotypes are radically challenged, not only by Melody, who grows and learns how to live on her own, but also by her family, who will appear later in the movie and who will radically challenge the stereotype of closed-minded southerners by staging a homosexual relationship and a ménage-à-trois. While, in this scene, the film appears to be supporting the stereotype by making us laugh at Boris’s remarks, as the story progresses it is revealed that the text was not so much caricaturing Melody as caricaturing the arrogance and intolerance embodied in the stereotype, as we see the comedian evolve and Melody, the butt of the joke, reveal her personality and intelligence, both gradually channelling the critique of the stereotype.

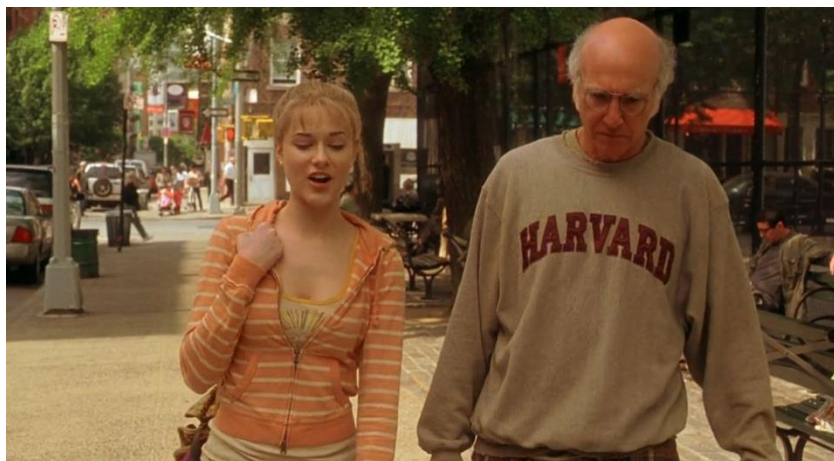


*Figure 8. Shot/reverse-shot.*



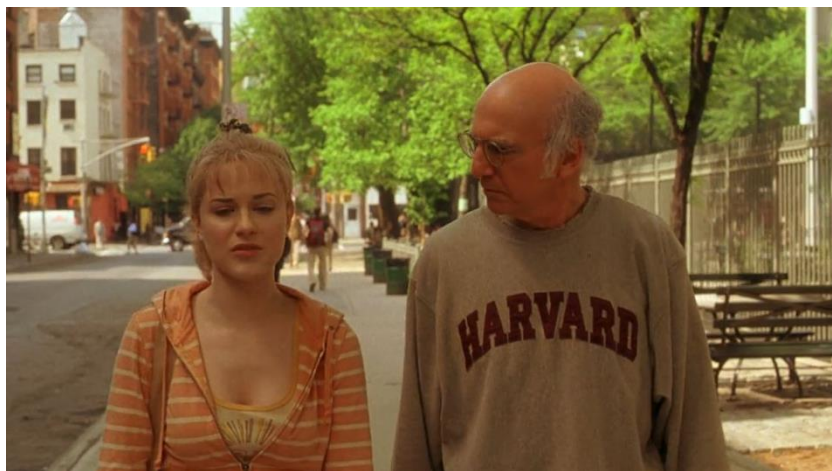
*Figure 9. Shot/reverse shot.*

The next scene to be analysed is also a conversation between Boris and Melody, which works as a satirical commentary on the type of relationship they represent. Melody has just confessed her feelings to Boris. The young woman asks him if he wants to walk home and, seeing that the man does not stop talking and complaining about absurd things, she decides to tell him that a boy has proposed going on a date to her. The scene unfolds through a medium shot of the two characters that suggests the familiarity that already exists between them in comparison with the shot/reverse shot mentioned above. However, their shoulder-to-shoulder position and the lack of eye contact also hint at the internal conflict of both characters due to their desire for each other but Boris's denial, which prevents him from looking at her directly (Fig. 10).



*Figure 10. Medium shot of Melody and Boris walking*

It is when Melody delivers this news that Boris stops looking at the floor and starts looking at her, revealing a jealous attitude. This situation may be comical to the viewer because of the man's change of attitude, since he had until recently criticised her by calling her an "inchworm", but it also represents the beginning of their growing intimacy. Boris's response by warning the girl about serial killers only furthers the viewer's comic vision, as the man's implied jealousy is intermingled with his critical and conspiratorial attitude throughout the film. However, Melody's response is much more curious and comical as well as demonstrative of the couple's dynamics, as she admits to having been talking to the boy about Boris's views on capital punishment, to which Boris fixes his gaze on her and stares at her in disbelief (Fig. 11).



*Figure 11. Boris looks at Melody in disbelief.*

This is where the couple's curious, yet clichéd relationship based on a mentor-apprentice dynamic comes into its own. However, as Boris says in the previous scene, "sometimes a cliché is finally the best to make one's point". Such Pygmalion-Galatea relationships, which originate as the relationship between a mentor and an apprentice, usually an older man and a younger woman, are quite recurrent in cinema (Lee 2013, 510). This can be seen in films such as *Pygmalion* (Leslie Howard and Anthony Asquith,

1938) and *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1965), both film adaptations of G.B. Shaw's play. Their type of relationship, however, is not only characterised by their age difference but also by their focus on the transmission of knowledge, as can be seen here in Melody's absorption of Boris' ideas. This couple's representation also takes us back to classical comedy.

This phenomenon, nevertheless, is not only implicit in the film, but it is Boris himself, scenes earlier, who says "I wish I could do a Pygmalion on her". Eventually, this happens, and as mentioned by Rapf (272), Melody ends up absorbing all the knowledge provided by Boris, as can be seen in her comment about capital punishment but also in the growing evidence of her intellectual sharpness. Soon she has turned into an independent woman with her own ideas. For this very reason, although it is Melody who is first interested in having a romantic relationship with Boris, once she has grown and learned from him, she is the one who, as in the Pygmalion story but also in Allen's earlier and much more famous film *Annie Hall* (1977), leaves him, this time, for a younger man, Randy Lee James (Henry Cavill), mocking the old man marrying a young woman trope often seen in the classical, especially theatrical, representations of the genre. To contribute to this critique, it is worth noting Boris's reaction when Melody leaves him as he tries to commit suicide again. In this way, the girl who needed the man becomes the independent woman who no longer needs his help, while he has become the one who needs her – the brilliant intellectual now turned into a needy old man. Thus, the filmmaker shows the absurdity of a relationship based on the age difference between both members, since, although during the process their relationship has remained stable, at the end both protagonists end up with a person of a similar age to their own and, therefore, with fewer differences than Boris and Melody.

Throughout the film, we can encounter several scenes that portray this dynamic mentor-apprentice, taking the spectator back to classical comedy and providing a satirical commentary on traditional patriarchy, going back many centuries, within which men, often taking advantage of their social or economic advantage, assume that women that are much younger than them are going to be romantically interested in them because of their personality or sexual attractiveness, a patriarchal culture that has also convinced some women that such a romantic attachment is viable. The film uses stereotypes that reinforce the admittedly very old and hardly original, social critique, but it fleshes them out through very convincing, “knowing” and self-conscious performances by Evan Rachel Wood, Larry David, and the rest of the cast.

## **Conclusion: The Curtain Goes Down**

*Plaudite, amici, comedia finita est*

(Applaud, my friends, the comedy is over)

Ludwig Van Beethoven

The long tradition of comedy has led to countless innovations within the genre. This trend continues today, not only in modern theatrical productions but also in films. Even though these innovations have played a significant role in the ongoing evolution of comedy, the genre still shows strong links to its theatrical and religious origins. This connection is clear in some contemporary comedies. This essay has explored such a connection through the analysis of *Whatever Works* (Woody Allen, 2009), a film that, through the use of different resources, shows us a clear homage to the classical conventions of comedy.

I have analysed different scenes which, through the construction of the character of Boris, show the use of different comic elements that consciously take us back to the origins of the genre. The first is the use of the convention of the chorus and the notion of the fourth wall, both traditionally used to invoke the special relationship between the comedian and the audience. In *Whatever Works*, they both place Boris in the metafictional layer of the film and, therefore, create empathy towards him, which, in turn, contributes to the comic perspective of the movie. Likewise, through Boris' various suicide attempts, the filmmaker alludes to the origins of comedy not as a theatrical tradition but as a ritual, where his possible death functions as his own rebirth, giving way to a new life seen from a comic lens. The same goes for the social function of comedy, which is also clearly portrayed in the film through the depiction of Melody and Boris as a couple, and which goes back to classical theatre. Through the portrayal of the couple, Allen specifically criticises different social stereotypes within American society as well as patriarchal

relationships based on age difference and inequality between the old man and the young woman.

The scenes that I have analysed in order to describe this view of the movie as an homage to classical comedy were selected taking into account my theoretical framework. Therefore, other aspects of comedy that might have been equally relevant for an analysis of *Whatever Works* have not been considered. For this reason, the analysis of the film from a comic perspective may encompass other factors, such as the connection between comedy and tragedy and their differences.

In conclusion, the analysis of *Whatever Works* and the study of the origins of comedy that has been conducted highlight the influence of classical theatre and its past as a religious ritual within contemporary film comedy. The film presents a clearly comic vision whose objective is not far from the traditional one due to its interest in entertainment and the production of a comic reaction in the audience, as well as in the social critique of current issues. The past of the genre continues to be very present in the 21st-century in the films of certain directors like Woody Allen.

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