

# MAKING ONTOLOGICAL LEMONADE FROM LIFE'S LARGER LEMONS: WOODY ALLEN'S 1994 FILMS

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*Alice* (1990), *Shadows and Fog* (1992), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), and *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993) are all legitimate comedies—dark comedies (*Husbands and Wives* being the pinnacle of that darkness) often mirroring the travails of Woody Allen's personal difficulties of those years. In 1994, however, Allen made *Bullets Over Broadway* and *Don't Drink the Water*, two near-“early Allen” comedies that are lighter and more comedy-for-comedy's-sake than their predecessors. *Manhattan Murder Mystery* acts somewhat as a segue for the 1994 work, and *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995) and *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) carry residual elements before *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) resumes the dark comedy motif that dominated the decade. (And, realizing the cultural construction of “decades,” *Alice* was preceded in the late 1980s by *September* [1987], *Another Woman* [1988], and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* [1989].) Allen's very public breakup with Mia Farrow occurred in 1992, followed by a long custody battle and public recriminations that consumed 1993. The following year, his movies were brighter than at any other time in the decade. Presenting the change as some sort of escapism for the filmmaker or as a push to improve a tarnished public image would be conjecture, an application of psychology. But a careful evaluation of the arguments of the two 1994 films, combined with a consideration of the historical reality of the writer-director's personal situation,

can reinforce that conjecture. The messages were the exemplar of the argument presented in *Deconstructing Harry* three years later: Personal difficulty creates the need for creative escape, and creative escape is necessary for personal progress. “Get on with it,” he seems to be telling himself. Or perhaps, “Use what you have, because it's all you have.”

Regardless, the message changed in 1994, and Allen explained the change most eloquently in the closing moments of his 1997 film. Harry Block returns to his home exhausted, finally away from the dark private and public light that had drenched him through most of *Deconstructing Harry*. His characters led him to a ballroom full of more of his appreciative creations:

I love all of you. Really. You, you've given me some of the happiest moments of my life. And, and, and you've even saved my life at times, you know. And now, now you, you've actually taught me things, you know. And I'm completely grateful for this, really. It's amazing. To me, it's a, it's a really interesting character, a guy who, who can't function well in life, but, but can only function in art, you know. It's, it's sort of sad, in a way, and also funny.

An English professor behind him interprets for the group: “I think the author's message is to know yourself, stop kidding

yourself, accept your limitations and get on with your life.”

One of the most prolific auteurs in American film history, Woody Allen has long been labeled an autobiographical filmmaker, a charge he has repeatedly denied. Nonetheless, his work unmistakably parallels certain events in his life. *Annie Hall* (1977), for instance, although written in collaboration with Marshall Brickman, was colored by Allen's personal relationship with Diane Keaton. Indeed, the actress's middle-American, free spirit clearly proved attractive to Allen in reality as much as it did to Alvy Singer. Charlotte Rampling's disturbed character in *Stardust Memories* (1980) echoed Allen's experiences with Louise Lasser, whose psychological problems precipitated the break-up of her marriage with Allen in the late 1960s. So it was no surprise that with the release of *Husbands and Wives*, the public attempted to mine the film for insights into the personal turmoil that was engulfing Allen in 1992. The studio anticipated this, increasing the number of screens to over 800, an unusually high number for a director whose recent films had, throughout the 1980s, each earned less than its predecessor. In light of the growing scandal, Allen had reason to fear that he was becoming increasingly marginalized in American cinema, a fact that critics reinforced as his private life spilled into the public (Kilgannon A1). Worse still, the media, led by the New York press, published every salacious tidbit of the bitter custody fight for his children Dylan and Satchel; and of course the disputed details of his relationship with Soon-Yi Previn were spilled across the front pages, as well. Allen rightfully feared that he was becoming another Fatty Arbuckle—another famous figure ruined by sexual scandal and innuendo (Marks A16). To some degree his fears were proven correct, as his name has indelibly become linked with his public battles of the early 1990s. These events unfolded just as Allen released *Husbands and Wives*, one of his best films of the period.

*Husbands and Wives* was, as John Baxter points out in his critical biography of the

director, the first Allen picture in years that was comprised of entirely new material, and not a re-shaping of some previous, unfinished work. (Baxter 392) Indeed, it marked an innovative new direction for Allen. Carlo DiPalma's hand-held cinematography created an almost voyeuristic intimacy that meshed well with the theme of disintegrating marriages. Susan Morse's quick-cut editing consciously evoked Godard's similar technique, resulting in a streamlined film that lacked superfluous shots. Moreover, Allen's use of an unseen documentary filmmaker, to whom the characters reveal details of their lives, was an extension of his longstanding interest in the genre (typified by his earlier films, *Take the Money and Run* [1969] and, particularly, *Zelig* [1983]). At first glance, the characters appear to be speaking to a therapist, but a closer look reveals that they are miked, as Allen seems to break down the barrier between director and audience: this is a film about relationships, not a film masquerading as reality.

Nevertheless, there were elements of Allen's real life embedded within *Husbands and Wives*, most noticeably in the character of Rain, played by Juliette Lewis (in essentially the same manner she has played every role of her career). Rain represents the young vivacious force who breathes new life into the disillusioned Gabe (Allen's character). Yet, at the same time, Gabe recognizes her as a threat to his psychological stability. At the end of the film he wistfully concedes that he has always been attracted to “kamikaze” types, self-destructive women whose most appealing traits are also the most dangerous ones. Though he disputed suggestions that this was an autobiographical work, Allen must have noticed the similarity between Gabe's attraction to Rain and his own attraction to the younger woman who had so notoriously entered his own life.

*Husbands and Wives* also initiated a new coarseness to Allen's work. Critics blanched at the violent scene in which Sydney Pollack's character drags his embarrassing, New Age girlfriend out of a party, to the shock of onlookers. *New Yorker* critic



Pauline Kael, who had always considered Allen an essentially brilliant failure rife with self-loathing, found much to deride in *Husbands and Wives*, but also noted that its most abrasive scenes were "quite stunning" (qtd. in Davis11). For the rest of the 1990s Allen would explore provocative and lurid new themes, such as profanity, prostitution, and domestic violence.

Allen's early 1990s projects were written during a personal and professional nadir: his films of the late 1980s had largely alienated mainstream audiences, and the artist's audience grew largely unconcerned with art. In the midst of the media swirl and public disapproval, he made another film, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*. Diane Keaton replaced Mia Farrow in the lead of this effort, and the result was a charming, if slight work. Critics offered lukewarm praise, though most managed to find something likable about the picture. On one hand, *Manhattan Murder Mystery* was, as Allen put it, "a trivial picture," but seen in the context of his personal struggles, the critical viewer can find significant insight into Allen's craft (Allen and Bjorkman 255). One of the more revealing moments of the film occurs when Keaton's character announces, "I take back everything I ever said about life imitating art." This reinforces a similar statement made by Rain, in which she claims that "life doesn't imitate art, it imitates cheap television" (Baxter 393). While *Husbands and Wives* delved into the issues of marital infidelity, stagnation, and inertia, *Manhattan Murder Mystery* was simply a lark: a small, safe project that provided Allen a distraction from the tumultuous events swirling around him.

In 2003, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky described Allen's work during this span as a "search for a new artistic direction." He places *Bullets Over Broadway* in a selective interpretation of *Husbands and Wives* and *Deconstructing Harry*, accurately locating Allen's fixation on "the autonomy of the artist and the salvation of art," but ultimately finding a "vision of the artist/writer as a carnivorous creator of beauty and form." By choosing "the best of

Allen's work in the nineties" (6), however, he falls victim to his own selection. While many of Rubin-Dorsky's interpretations are valuable, the context is misplaced. Allen's two 1994 films, produced in the tumult of his overly-public personal life, are the most whimsical of the decade. They act as testament to the artist who "can only function in art." They are the physical embodiment of Harry Block's explanation three years later.

Harry was, for the most part, an unfeeling antihero. His final destructive and insensitive act in the film is an affair with his wife's psychiatric patient, an inviolable moral boundary that Harry was able to justify to himself because he was closed off from the outside world, and because his resentment of his wife fed his narcissism. The scenario seems eerily familiar. (Her: "You sick, sick, sick, sick, fucking bastard." [Something he was hearing often in the lean years prior to the 1994 films.] Him: "We've been living like brother and sister...What do you want? Who else do I meet? I'm here, I'm working in the room, we have the baby, you're always out there practicing. We never socialize.") The scene isn't a defense. Harry is clearly in the wrong, and the humor comes from his attempt to justify himself. When alone with his creations, however, Harry is not attempting to justify anything. He is describing his own actions. He is, essentially, explaining those films of 1994.

In both *Bullets Over Broadway* and *Don't Drink the Water*, the comedy precedes the message. The former describes the faltering production of "God of Our Fathers," a pretentious play staged by pretentious actors, eventually saved with the help of a mobster named Cheech. *Don't Drink the Water* is a television remake of Allen's 1966 play about an American family trapped in a US embassy behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. The earlier 1994 release, *Bullets Over Broadway*, uses common tropes. The starving artist, the starlet, the mobster, and the mobster's promiscuous girlfriend are all stereotypical characters. Infidelity, murder, and eating disorders are each treated as farce. Furthermore, even the "serious" mo-

ments are cartoonish and unthreatening. Potentially menacing moments are quickly alleviated (unlike, say, *Husbands and Wives*, produced just two years prior). One mob killing is followed by comic small talk, another by Cheech practicing lines with his boss's aforementioned slutty actress girlfriend, Olive. Cole Porter's "Let's Misbehave," plays over the closing credits as it did over the opening credits in Allen's earlier *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex... But Were Afraid to Ask* (1972). *Don't Drink the Water* is a love story full of quick-paced action and one-liners. It is *Bananas*-like in its use of foreign diplomacy, and, like that film, uses a news narrator to set the action and develop the plot. The principal stories all play out in the spaces between the hyperbolic and comic dialogue between Allen and his screen-wife Julie Kavner. ("The plot," wrote Rick Marin, "is just a wafer-thin excuse for Allen and Kavner to kvetch" [Marin 76].) More importantly, however, both films argue for their own embodiment and anticipation of Harry Block's closing soliloquy.

*Bullets over Broadway* and *Don't Drink the Water* represent a conscious effort to move away from the Upper West Side milieu. In *Bullets*, Allen submerges himself in the dilemmas of the creative process, addressing issues of artistic purity, and the question of whether some people are innately artists. Co-written with Douglas McGrath at the height of his public squabble with Mia Farrow, *Bullets* arguably became Allen's most critically successful film of the 1990s. The character of David Shayne, played by John Cusack, is undoubtedly Allen in disguise, though it is to Cusack's credit that the portrayal does not devolve into an outright Woody Allen impression (as Kenneth Branagh would painfully offer in Allen's 1998 *Celebrity*). Shayne represents the artist who compromises himself in the pursuit of material success. Rob Reiner's character, the Greenwich Village playwright Sheldon Flender, proudly remains unpublished, unknown, and thus ever-pure.

Flender voices an oft-repeated notion in the film, that an "artist creates his own moral universe." Shayne, to his ultimate relief, finds



Greenwich Village playwright Sheldon Flender, played by Rob Reiner, explains that "the artist creates his own moral universe."

that he cannot effectively apply this idea, and moreover, that he is not an artist after all.

Shayne also voices one of the principal concerns that Allen would again explore in *Deconstructing Harry*: the problem of reconciling a successful, prolific creative life with a messy, often unfulfilling personal life. He initially finds himself enamored with Helen Sinclair, the lead in his play, only to wonder if she is only courting him as a calculating career move. Moreover, Shayne finds, to his chagrin, that instead of devastating his girlfriend when he reveals his infidelity, she is non-plussed, having been engaged in a deeply rewarding affair with Flender, who has managed to turn lovemaking into an art form. The off-type casting of Reiner as the libidinous Flender elevates the scene to great comic effect.

On the surface, *Bullets* is a minor work, a diversion from the seriousness of *Husbands and Wives*, *Hannah and her Sisters*, and others. But as Alan A. Stone notes, it is a film in which Allen succeeds, perhaps for the first time, in creating a fully-realized female character, Diane Wiest's Helen Sinclair (an obvious homage to Tallulah Bankhead), whose grandiosity rivals that of any of the characters played by Allen in his past films (3). *Bullets* also grapples with the issue of reconciling artistic vision with the demands of being a successful commercial artist. Shayne gives in to tempta-



tion immediately, hiring Olive, a hysterically awful would-be actress and mobster's moll (skillfully played by the underrated Jennifer Tilly) in order to finance his play. As a plot device, this works to perfection, subverting expectations as it is revealed that the mafia bodyguard Cheech (Chazz Palmentieri) is a genuine, uncompromising artist—one who is actually willing to create his own moral universe, both as a mobster and as an artist. However, Allen has extensively explored this well-trod intersection of art and commerce: in Alvy Singer's harangues against Tony Roberts's shallow Max in *Annie Hall*, the character of Yale in *Manhattan* (1979, who trades in is literary ambitions for a brand-new Porsche), and virtually all of *Stardust Memories*. Thus while *Bullets* approaches the subject with considerable comedic skill, this is ground Allen has covered before, and with far greater depth.

"I'm an artist," says playwright David Shayne as the action of *Bullets Over Broadway* opens, "I won't pander to some commercial Broadway audience." From the film's inception the protagonist views the world as unnecessarily obtrusive into the artistic (read escapist) world. Doug Stenberg has noted *Bullets Over Broadway*'s resemblance to Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (204-212). Interestingly, Constantine Treplev, *The Seagull*'s protagonist, desires to escape from art, as eventually Shayne would do. Indeed, escape is a theme rampant throughout. Even the characters are escaping into a play—their passion for the theater and art is their refuge, too. At the same time, however, the writer's best ideas come from the real world. Or, from a world other than his own, represented here by the mobster Cheech. While Rubin-Dorsky sees Cheech as the artist and Shayne as the poseur, Richard Blake more accurately places both as elements of Allen himself (Blake 22). Both comprise the artistic circuit that facilitates the production of "God of Our Fathers." The real world (Cheech) made the play possible, helped repair it, and actually allowed Shayne's play to continue—his escape to

continue—but at an unreasonable price.

Cheech murders Olive, whose stunted acting is ruining the play, thus helping Shayne to better function in his artistic world. But, in so doing, he breaks the rules Shayne has created for that universe. ("An artist creates his own moral universe," repeats Flender—a line often interpreted as Allen's justification of his real life actions.) Shayne acknowledges that Cheech is an artist, but defends himself as a "decent, moral human being." "Then what are you doing with Helen Sinclair?" Cheech responds. He knows the playwright is having an affair with the play's leading lady, and, in effect, defends himself by arguing that his version of morality is different but present



David Shayne, played by John Cusack, is overawed by Helen Sinclair, the grandiose star of his fledgling Broadway production.

nonetheless.

So the real world rubs off on the artist, and vice versa. But the victories here are largely pyrrhic, the damage to both far more permanent. Cheech is killed in a retributive mafia hit, and Shayne quits the theater. The collaboration might have created something meaningful, but we never find out enough about "God of Our Fathers" to be certain. But it is not important. What is important is that the inviolable artistic world is somehow violated, breached by the real world, and the consequences are disastrous for both. After the confrontation on morality between playwright and mobster, Shayne's girlfriend has an affair with Flender. They have made "intercourse an art form"—another example

of the disastrous consequences when the two worlds collide. The experience ruins his ability to escape. When he does get the girl in the dramatic conclusion, his intent is to go back to Pittsburgh, teach, have children, and leave the artistic lifestyle behind.

It would not be difficult to assume that Allen was making actual statements about his personal life here. Woody's two worlds collided every time he cast Mia Farrow in his films. The mafia boss in *Bullets Over Broadway*, in fact, puts his girlfriend in the play, effectively ruining it (until Cheech murders her). The girlfriend, too, is only dating the crime lord for his ability to make her a star. If a similar propaganda element exists in *Don't Drink the Water*, it lies in Woody's portrayal of a family man who sides with the United States against the rest of the world. The movie acts as a vehicle for him to be a funny father and husband (on primetime national network television, no less). In response to a commotion out of his window, Michael J. Fox deadpans, "They're probably just shooting one of their poets." This reading of the films is cynical, possibly, but also beside the point. These elements do not constitute developed authorial arguments, and thus remain possible coincidences—inconclusive



Walter Hollander and his wife, played by Woody Allen and Julie Kavner, make a harried appeal to the U.S. embassy after they find themselves Cold War targets while vacationing in a communist country.

conclusions.

*Don't Drink the Water*, however, epitomizes the argument for hiding away in art, if for no other reason than its re-production for television twenty-eight years after its original film debut. Again, as in Harry's argument to his psychiatrist wife in *Deconstructing Harry*, Allen causes havoc because he's cloistered away (this time in a foreign embassy). His feeling of enclosure leads him to dream of running naked down the street, but even in the dream he was placed in an asylum. Likewise, imposition into the real world destroys that real world, as it did in Cheech's *Bullets* relationship with "God of Our Fathers." Crisis after crisis befalls the foreign embassy upon Allen's *Don't Drink the Water* entrance.

The film marked a curious new turn for the director. Originally a successful stage play, *Don't Drink the Water* had been made into a disastrous 1969 Hollywood film, directed by Howard Morris. In that production, Jackie Gleason railroaded the project with a dreadful performance that obliterated the nuances of the script. Thus, the 1994 remake attempted to reconstitute the film into the ensemble piece it was originally intended to be. Moreover, by casting himself in the lead, as American tourist Walter Hollander, Allen appeared to be trying to offer audiences a more benign image of himself. His public persona had become so linked with educated, angst-ridden Manhattanites, that the timing of this remake should not be ignored. Along with *Don't Drink the Water*, Allen also agreed to produce an ABC television courtroom drama. While this project never came to fruition, it can nonetheless be seen as an effort to refashion his image.

*Don't Drink the Water* ultimately fails because its original script was rooted in the Cold War of the 1960s, and as such had little relevance in a political environment that, as Francis Fukuyama dubiously asserted, had reached "the end of history" (3). Though set in a fictional communist country, and given minor



adjustments to update the story, the film has no cogent political import. This is not surprising since Allen's liberalism, once trenchant and biting, had been steadily eroding as his work became more insular. Allen's performance, however, has several bright moments, and indicates yet again that he is an underrated (and under-employed) character actor. To be sure, he still represents the nebbish neurotic, but his interplay with Michael J. Fox (who plays Axel McGee, an American diplomatic attaché to the communist country in which the Hollanders find themselves comically trapped) proves more successful than one might suspect. But the film's ultimate downfall is its casting. The dismal romantic paring of Mayim Bialik, who plays Hollander's daughter Susan, and Fox, fails to ignite a spark. This is somewhat anomalous considering that casting, usually conducted by longtime Allen collaborator Juliet Taylor, has typically been one of the stronger points in Allen's work.

The slightness of the film is further confirmed by the newsreel placed at the beginning, reportedly done so at the request of the network in order to pad out the running time. It begs the question: what was it about earlier versions of *Don't Drink the Water* that Allen felt it had to be re-made? In one sense he was simply reaching back into the past, rehashing a failed project. This was nothing new; *Manhattan Murder Mystery* lifted its plot from early drafts of *Annie Hall*, which was originally intended as a story of murder and comedic intrigue. Yet *Don't Drink the Water* provides insight into Allen's sensibility at the time. Of all of his previous projects that could have been resurrected (and there are many), Allen chose a script that dealt with the trapped artist, caught in a foreign country. Walter Hollander finds himself cut off from his work, which in turn appears to be collapsing without him. Stuck in a world he hardly understands, Hollander can only hope to get back to his work, the

one aspect of his life over which he has control. In perhaps the most direct expression of this theme yet, Allen reinforces the disconnect between his professional life and public persona.

Again, Allen again plays an artist, a "creative caterer," and the imposition of real life gets in the way. (His replacement back home in New Jersey inadvertently poisons eight people before the first act is complete.) The first thing he wants to do upon his arrival home is return immediately to work—to move straight from captivity to art. Artistic ability itself plays a principal role in the film, as it acts as the only element to bring Hollander and Magee, his daughter's suitor, together. But art here is still in conflict with the real world. Fox's Axel Magee wanted to attend art school as an adolescent, but attended Harvard instead because of his father's desire that he become a diplomat. He subsequently ruined every embassy he visited, through incompetence rather than avarice. Eventually, his courtship with Allen's daughter leads him to his escape back to art as an employee of Hollander's Creative Catering business. The film opens with his ineptitude and closes with his



Talented and passionate about art, Axel Magee (Michael J. Fox) became a diplomat at his father's request. His incompetence ruined several American embassies before a relationship with the daughter of Walter Hollander (Woody Allen) allowed him to work for Hollander's "creative catering" business.

release—his move to happiness when moved back to the artistic realm.

Art and escape are present in subtler ways, as well. A fortuneteller (read artist) told Susan Hollander that she would meet the man of her dreams under mysterious circumstances, allowing her to sever her relationship with a dermatologist fiancé, a stark real world tie back in New Jersey. A fortuneteller told Axel that he would be the next Michelangelo, an event that really couldn't occur until he acted to impose that separation from the diplomatic real world he found so destructive. "A lot of famous men had rough starts," Susan assures him. "Hitler flunked out of art school." One of Axel's most hardened coworkers, Mr. Kilroy (played by Edward Herrmann), received a concussion from a protester's brick, making him believe he was the Wright brothers (read creators). For Kilroy, ultimate pain caused ultimate escape.

That escape could obviously take different forms. The embassy's cook (another artist) needed the isolation his kitchen provided within the larger embassy to create the meals about which he felt so passionately. A priest also lived in the embassy, a refugee from six years prior who had escaped from his own harsh real world into the environment Axel, Hollander, and others found so stifling. That escape, and that subsequent new form of isolation, led the priest to magic, and much of the film's comedy derives from his fumbling attempt to perform his tricks.

The plot itself, in fact, revolves around the necessity of escape. Magee's goal in the film is to get the Hollanders, wanted for espionage by the communist nation that surrounds them, from the embassy to the United States. The effort is eventually successful, but after many frustrated attempts. The priest tries to reassure the diplomat at one point by encouraging him that, "Houdini escaped." "This is not Houdini," Magee responds. "This is a man who carves bridegrooms out of potato salad." But that carving was the one thing to which Allen wanted to return. It proved to be the salvation of Axel, and the appreciation of both for their craft was a direct result of the tumult presented to them by real life, just as the success of "God of Our Fathers" was

a direct result of the tumultuous realities of mafia life. And just as Allen's 1994 work was a direct result of the tumult of his personal life and its public face. Escape is the endgame of both *Bullets Over Broadway* and *Don't Drink the Water*. It is *what the artist should desire*. And escape can only occur when there is something to leave behind. Allen's philosophical vision here is ultimately positive, a variation of, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." His message is most clearly stated in an ancient form, evoking the Greek chorus of *Mighty Aphrodite*:

Things are better in a created world.  
Creation is facilitated by the necessity of  
escaping the actual world.  
Therefore, having something to escape  
from can be beneficial.

In 1992 and 1993, in the actual world, Woody Allen was involved in a very public affair, separation, and custody battle that shocked many and kept a dark public light on the writer/director. In 1994, in a created world, David Shayne and Axel Magee stormed the frames of *Bullets Over Broadway* and *Don't Drink the Water*, arguing against the exclusivity of both. After the amateur psychology and critical insight that followed *Husbands and Wives*, Allen created films that allowed him "to know himself, stop kidding himself, accept his limitations and get on with his life."

In a 1997 interview Allen remarked that he had originally intended to title *Deconstructing Harry*, "The Worst Man in the World," and he appeared acutely aware of how much the public's perception of him had changed during the 1990s: "It's about a nasty, shallow, superficial, sexually obsessed guy. I'm sure everyone will think—I know this going in—they'll think it's me" (Lahr 22). In fact, Roger Ebert suspected Allen might be making a subtle jab at Philip Roth, but Harry's inability to forge meaningful, successful relationships was also a critique of Allen himself (Ebert 1).

The 1990s proved to be a difficult period for Woody Allen, both personally and professionally. He split with longtime collaborator and confidant Jean Doumanian (whose ex-husband John made a cameo as



one of Alvy Singer's cocaine-savvy friends in *Annie Hall*). Declining box-office receipts forced Doumanian to make drastic cutbacks at Sweetland Films; by 1999 much of Allen's long-serving crew had been dismissed. As Sam Girgus has noted, the unity of Allen's public and private selves had been integral to his creative success. Indeed, despite his protestations to the contrary, his work has been an ongoing documentary exercise in cinematic confession. Once the illusion of the mensch—suffering from anhedonia, of course—was shattered, Allen entered new territory as a filmmaker after 1992. This might have been, as, for example, the later films of both Akira Kurosawa or Robert Altman have demonstrated, a liberating experience, the impetus that would push his work in daring new directions (as evidenced by *Ran* [1985] and *Short Cuts* [1993], respectively).

After the critical disappointment of *Stardust Memories* Allen responded with concise, confidant films like *Zelig* and *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984). The focused moments of *Husbands and Wives* signaled that he might cope with his personal troubles in a meaningful, creative manner. Instead Allen stumbled into the wilderness, returning to weaker past projects such as *Don't Drink the Water*, and the lighter fare of his early work with *Bullets Over Broadway*. By 1997, and the release of the important but flawed *Deconstructing Harry*, his work still functioned at a high technical level, but these films were increasingly stuffed with A-list celebrities as if to compensate for the paucity of the material. Moreover, his later films revealed a greater bitterness toward human relationships, which in turn further alienated his audience. Death and pessimism had always pervaded his work, but by the late 1990s Allen had injected a deeper sense of entropy and self-loathing, suggesting that he had perhaps finally given up trying to find answers.

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## THE LOST TRANSCENDENCE OF WOODY ALLEN: FROM "DIVINE COMEDY" TO CELEBRITY

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For more than a decade, Woody Allen achieved a special realm of comedic genius and greatness in film that the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes as "Divine Comedy." At least in American literature, humor, and film, few have gained such status over an extended period of time. Mark Twain's writings and Charlie Chaplin's great American film comedies immediately come to mind for comparison to Allen's work in our own time. So perhaps it should be enough for Allen's ultimate critical reputation in cinematic and comedic history that several of his films over a dozen years from *Annie Hall* (1977) to *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) qualify for this special category of achievement and success. However, in Allen's case, a comparison in terms of Levinas's idea of "Divine Comedy" of his classic films to his films made after 1990 offers important insight not only into his work in particular but film comedy in general, especially the comedy that either aspires to or disclaims a form of transcendence.

Levinas's notion of divine comedy appears in one of his most widely published essays, "God and Philosophy." The term constitutes another elucidation of his "first philosophy" of ethical metaphysics that established him as a key player in an expanding circle of thinkers that began in his youth as a student with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, went on to Jean-Paul Sartre during the post-war years of his development in Paris, and continued through the maturity of his discourse with

Jacques Derrida. In his engagement with all of these thinkers, Levinas diverged from dominant intellectual trends and movements to carve out his own understanding of the relationship of ethical experience to modernism. He proposed to place a priority upon ethics over ontology, pluralism over totality, transcendence over empirical conceptualization. While Sartre expounded a philosophy of freedom based on the idea that existence precedes essence, Levinas proclaimed responsibility to the other takes precedence over one's self.

The divine comedy constitutes another articulation of this ethical philosophy. For Levinas, divine comedy suggests the paradox of the impossibility of the inescapable moral demand that responsibility and the other places upon the individual. This understanding dramatizes the incomprehensible gap between the finitude of human understanding and emotion and infinite moral demand and responsibility. Levinas maintains that "divine comedy—hollows out a desire which cannot be filled, nourishes itself with its very augmentation, and is exalted as a desire, withdraws from its satisfaction in the measure that it approaches the desirable" (139). For Levinas, the desire of divine comedy inherently connects to the infinitude of his ethical metaphysics. He asserts this relationship when he argues for the need for the return of the word "transcendence" which "has to be put back into the significance of the whole plot of the ethical or back into the divine comedy without which