

Wieland Schwanebeck

Woody and 'Woody': The Making of a Persona

Do you know *this* one? Woody Allen always plays himself in his films. Yet what may have been a popular joke once has by now arguably turned stale. Sadly, the dubious conflation of man and work is not the exclusive domain of tabloid publications, though they have contributed a lot to it—especially in the early 1980s, following the release of the first batch of films which would later be recognized as the dawn of Allen's mature period. John Lahr (interviewing Allen for *The New Yorker*) took the director's choice of Felix Mendelssohn's Wedding March in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982) as confirmation that Allen was about to get married to Mia Farrow (65); other journalists employed the clichéd trope of the sad clown in order to reveal the 'real' Woody Allen (cf. Kelley). In spite of Allen's own frequent denial that his plots and his characters mirror his own life (cf. Lax 52-53; Matloff 142), it is not only journalists and fans who insist that he always "plays a version of himself" (Klein 88). It is the same logic that the fanatic mob applies in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979): "Only the true Messiah denies His divinity." Thus Allen—so the argument goes—may be opting to play coy, but in truth he is winking at us and spurring us on.

Similar propositions permeate *scholarly* assessments of Allen's work as a screenwriter and director. David Lanning constantly refers to the director as "Woody/Alvy" and reads the character of Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters* as a mere "mouthpiece for the director's views on death, sex, religion" (53); Christopher J. Knight not only views Allen's oeuvre solely through the prism of his alleged personal guilt-complex over the Farrow fallout (77-83), but also contemplates whether Allen's comedic output can help us answer the question of whether or not the director may have been "capable of the kind of sexually aberrant behavior to which he stood charged by Farrow" (82); Shaun Clarkson accuses Allen of "translating autobiography into fiction" (58).

It is easy to dismiss all those scholars who take for granted that the "private Woody Allen [...] is identical to the public or onscreen Woody Allen" (Glenn 40), for what they do is, after all, not very far removed from what tabloid journalists or biographers like Marion Meade (in her extremely vitriolic book, *The Unruly Life of Woody Allen*, [2000]) have been doing for the past decades: constructing tautological links between circumstantial biographical 'evidence' and the *dramatis personae* of the films, in order to make their case for

a certain monolithic version of Allen, be it ‘The Jewish *schlemiel*,’ or ‘The Pygmalionesque Tutor and Seducer of Young Women.’ On the other hand, close readings of Allen’s work which aim to strip the interpretation of the films of all connections with incidents and episodes that inevitably feed into the general discourse on the director always run the risk of deliberately obscuring context. Whether we like it or not, we cannot help but go into his films being aware of at least some of the paratextual frames that supplement them. Cecilia Sayad quite sensibly argues that Alvy Singer (in *Annie Hall*, 1977) and Harry Block (in *Deconstructing Harry*, 1997) are “obviously not identical to the real man;” in spite of that ontological difference, however, they “function as reminders of his biographical self and, consequently, of Allen as the author of films in which he appears” (“Fool” 24).¹

I will not attempt to reconcile the two camps: on the one hand those who remain oblivious to any kind of methodological qualms against reading Allen’s films as blatantly autobiographical self-portrayals; on the other hand those who refuse to engage with the context that Allen’s work must be placed in. Rather than indulging in the tautological rhetoric of half-digested truths about the ‘real’ Woody Allen, I will employ the concept of the ‘persona’ in order to contextualise the debate. The evolution of the ‘Woody’ persona since the 1990s suggests that Allen does not exclusively rely on one singular archetype of the bespectacled intellectual New Yorker. *Deconstructing Harry* was the first film to be read as a noteworthy exception from the rule in that it deconstructs not only the titular character but ‘Woody’ as well. Allen’s roles in his own films have not nearly been that consistent, though. What authors like Pinsker characterise as the prototypical Allen persona—“the ‘beautiful loser’ par excellence” (1) and the “sensitive New York Egghead” (4)—has not only been exorcised from Allen’s later films (as my subsequent analysis of *Anything Else* will demonstrate), it was, in reality, never the only incarnation of ‘Woody.’ Though Allen himself always insists that, given his limited range as an actor, he usually plays the same character,² he has frequently strayed from his comfort zone to play non-intellectual characters like the adaptable Leonard Zelig (*Zelig*, 1982), a struggling talent agent (*Broadway Danny Rose*, 1984), or a sports journalist (*Mighty Aphrodite*, 1995). On the other hand, the ‘Woody’ persona was itself adaptable enough to be taken on by other actors like John Cusack (*Bullets over Broadway*, 1994), Kenneth Branagh (*Celebrity*, 1998), or Larry David (*Whatever Works*, 2009), some of whom received critical floggings for mimicking Allen’s actorly mannerisms.³ Following an examination of how star images are constructed and of how Allen’s status as an *auteur* and as a former stand-up comedian influences his persona, this article will offer a case

study of the refashioning (and deconstruction) of 'Woody' in the later films, especially *Anything Else* (2003).

The Star and the Persona

In antiquity, the persona designated "the mask worn by actors" in the theatre, their exaggerated features conveying emotions to audience members who could not identify regular facial expressions from where they were sitting (Fierz 48). The persona is thus an auxiliary tool that helps the audience towards the cathartic experience, and which grants the performer some degree of protection (Shechner 238). The concept was later adapted into Jungian psychoanalysis, for it neatly ties in with Jung's concept of the deep structure of the psyche and the *animus* and *anima*. Whilst the latter are part of our unconscious and not even directly accessible to ourselves, it is the persona which allows us to conduct civil relationships in an appropriate manner (cf. Fierz 48), as our naked, raw self can never be "show[n] [to] the world, for it remains hidden behind the persona, the actor's mask" (Jung 93, my translation). This mask which we present to the public can merge with the actor to such a degree that his own face remains hidden from the public forever, allowing for "a theatrical relationship to life" (Shechner 238). Moreover, it is the persona which "prevents the actor's complete fusion with his characters" (Sayad, "Fool" 22). Since it stresses the divide between performer and performance, the concept resembles Richard Dyer's seminal work on the notion of the star (*Heavenly Bodies*, 1986). In his insightful case studies of 'Old Hollywood' stars like Marilyn Monroe, Dyer not only shows to what extent the public images of stars shape the reception of their works. He also argues that the construction of the prevalent star image depends on the various paratexts and fan discourses which surround the films. Ultimately, star images are "always extensive, multimedia, intertextual" (Dyer 3), and they can help us come to terms with the tension between stability on the one hand and the necessity to accommodate image changes on the other. Dyer makes a convincing case for how the star image provides the audience with the illusion of "an irreducible core," as "one flesh and blood person is embodying [all the roles]" (9).

Woody Allen's persona seems to be outside the jurisdiction of Dyer's work, for Allen rose to fame just as the old studio system was breaking down and as the corporations lost the exclusive 'ownership' of stars: The old paradigm was no longer operable. Moreover, Woody Allen's star persona arguably rests on a different basis than that of the few male Hollywood stars discussed by Dyer. While the persona of actors like John Wayne depended a lot on

sporting activities, on heroic close-up shots, as well as on appearing in action-based genres (Dyer 6-11), none of this directly applies to the making of ‘Woody.’ In spite of these differences, we can still use Dyer’s model of the star persona, for although the stars emancipated themselves from some of the old mechanisms, we are still under the spell of the classic paradigm. What remains very much intact, for instance, is the unspoken assumption that the audience, by partaking in star discourse, can catch a glimpse behind the scenes, i.e. at the ‘real person’ behind the role (cf. Dyer 10). This works most effectively in the category of the *professional*, one of three star types outlined by Christine Geraghty. In the professional, the ‘real self’ and the persona appear virtually indistinguishable from one another. This notion of the ‘real self’ is, of course, highly problematic, not least because modern sociology and identity theory reveal us all to be performers in every aspect of life, driven by unconscious fears and desires. In addition, even the persona comes with its own history, as the example of Woody Allen illustrates.

“A Lot of Significant Things Have Occurred in My Private Life”: The Birth of ‘Woody’

Before the filmmaker, there was the comedian, who could already look back upon an impressive career before his first appearance in a feature film. Having started out as a gag writer for comedians like Sid Caesar and Ed Sullivan, Allen appeared on a number of TV shows in the 1960s, guest-hosting programs like *The Tonight Show* and acquiring the status of “a recognizable public figure” in his twenties (Pogel 30). Not all of these appearances foreshadow the kind of persona Allen would eventually build for himself in his sophisticated urban comedies: In some cases, we witness Allen pull off outrageous stunts that we would rather associate with C-list celebrities these days. In a 1966 episode of the *Hippodrome Show*, Allen steps into a boxing ring with a kangaroo (footage of the fight is included in Robert Weide’s *Woody Allen: A Documentary* [2012]). In other cases, established showbiz personalities invited Allen onto their shows to add an element of countercultural *chic*, for the young comedian had already proven his street credibility with students and young urbanites. In a TV special dedicated to Hollywood legend Gene Kelly (*New York, New York*, 1966), Allen plays his usual *shtick* (cracking jokes about analysts and women), eventually joining Kelly and the other guests in a dance number. The proximity to the legends of the studio era allows Allen to partake in the old-fashioned idea of the star persona; it certainly indicates that the earliest manifestation of a ‘Woody’ persona was well-established as early as 1966, three years before Allen directed his first feature film, *Take the Money and Run*. The gesture he

performs in Gene Kelly's show—inviting the host (and the audience) into his home in a short sketch—is arguably symptomatic of the endeavor that he and other stand-up comedians of the 1960s partook in: This, after all, was the dawn of a new age in comedy, “the age of the stand-up comic as autobiographical artist” (Brode 26). Allen's stand-up comedy is often grounded in a version of reality which the audience can recognize as the one they are familiar with. His jokes about Europe (documented on the CD *Standup Comic* [1999], from which the following quotes are taken) relate back to his experience shooting the Clive Donner-directed sex farce *What's New Pussycat* (1965), and he repeatedly references fellow celebrities and cast members throughout his monologue. Similarly, he exploits the fact that his first marriage and divorce were covered extensively in the tabloids, particularly after his ex-wife had sued him for cracking jokes about her. He also welcomes the audience with the line quoted above, and delivers on his promise to reveal his private life by delivering a string of anecdotes and stories which involve relatives, girlfriends, or (ex-)wives. The fact that these stories merge straight into outright surreal tales (such as his bizarre encounter with a moose) should be read as a clear sign that the comedian is in no way interested in honoring his part in the autobiographical pact, yet not everyone saw the sign, as it were. After all, the 1960s were also the era of stand-up comedy turning political, offering ‘truth’ where other institutions had failed: Lenny Bruce read out his own court protocols in his night-club act, and even Allen (though not overtly political in his routine) quipped in 1968 that he was “working on a non-fiction version of the Warren Report.” In a short guest-piece written for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Joan Rivers talks about this watershed moment in 1960s American comedy, as a new generation of comedians took over from the old joke-tellers like Bob Hope, “[t]he white men [who] were doing ‘mother-in-law’ and ‘my wife's so fat ...’ jokes.” When Rivers—another memorable case of a persona taking over the general public perception—talks about Allen or George Carlin discussing ‘their lives’ in front of an audience, and when Allen informs his interviewers that, as a stand-up comedian, he “usually just went up and talked as *myself*” (qtd. in Björkman 31, my emphasis), we should not take this as an indication that Allen bears his soul and reveals the human being behind the act. What it *does* signal is that Allen, right from his first encounters with the public, was performing ‘Woody Allen,’ on stage, in interviews, and on the screen. Stand-up comics like Allen,⁴ as Cecilia Sayad explains,

tend to be less concerned about constructing an altogether fictional world than telling anecdotes as if they had happened in real life [...] However fictive their tales, they are narrated by the artist's public (and highly performative) persona. Any traditional sense of a psychologically complex and consistent character is blurred with the artist's autobiography. ("Stand-Up" 23)

The aforementioned gesture performed by Allen (the comedian) thus had to come back to haunt him once he made the transition from stage to screen, with the audience failing to recognise that the young *schlemiel* who had shown them around 'his' apartment, who had shared 'his' relationship troubles with them, and who was now inviting them to see 'his' life in contemporary New York was not to be confused with the man writing and directing the films. Allen chose to remain blissfully unaware of any such confusions, sometimes feigning a complete lack of awareness, sometimes wearily (and correctly) predicting that the main character in his next film "is not me, but [...] will be perceived as me" (qtd. in Lax 53). In fact, when we talk about Woody Allen we *always* mean 'Woody,' not just when we discuss the roles played by Allen in his own films and the few occasions where he appears in other directors' works. He also performs 'Woody' in what would usually be classified as paratexts, like interviews or the two comprehensive documentaries by Barbara Kopple (*Wild Man Blues*, 1998) and Robert Weide, both of which draw considerable value from playing on 'Woody's' nervous tics and witticisms. Look him up in the *Internet Movie Database*, and it will offer you different lists of his credits which carefully distinguish between the 'Actor' (more than 40 credits since 1965) and the 'Self' (more than 160 appearances in interviews, documentaries, or TV shows since 1960), though they could actually all be summed up as performances. Whether there is a 'real' Woody Allen behind the persona is beside the point: What we can conclude from his omnipresence in the media throughout the 1960s is that the 'Woody' persona was already powerful when Allen crossed into feature film-making, where his act would be lapped up by the followers of the *auteur* concept.

Auteurism and the Evolution of 'Woody'

Allen's rise to fame as a comedian coincided with one of the major publication events in the history of film criticism: the launch of François Truffaut's *Hitchcock* (1968), which would guarantee that the *auteur* (an idea coined by the French *Cahiers* journalists and developed into a proper theory by American film critics) gained momentum as a heuristic tool in academic

film studies. Strangely enough, Roland Barthes' proclamation of the 'death of the author' (1967) could not harm the idea of the *auteur*, in spite of the obvious problems that comes with adapting the notion of (literary) authorship to the even more collaborative field of film. *Auteur*-centred readings often have a strong inclination towards the biographical component: viewed through the prism of fully-fledged *auteurism*, with its unbridled enthusiasm for what Andrew Sarris describes as "[t]he tension between a director's personality and his material" (105), every Hitchcock film must become an interrogation of Catholic guilt, and—by implication—Woody Allen cannot help but make films that reflect life as a contemporary Jewish New Yorker. Subsequent *auteur* theorists followed Peter Wollen's structuralist intervention and began to talk about 'Hitchcock' and 'Hawks' rather than Hitchcock and Hawks, i.e. "the structures named after them" (Wollen 578).

Both Hitchcock's and Allen's case illustrate that the persona which carries the *auteur*'s name is usually not produced by the films alone. Like 'Hitchcock' or 'Orson Welles' before him, 'Woody' is omnipresent in his films, yet they are but one puzzle piece. Hitchcock had his TV show and other merchandise, Welles was an established radio and stage personality and regularly appeared in advertisements. Audiences which were initially drawn to Woody Allen's comedies must have viewed them as the continuation of a well-known and beloved property they had been exposed to on comedy albums, in newspapers, in his highly successful stage play *Play It Again, Sam* (1969), TV programs like *The Dick Cavett Show* or *What's My Line?*,⁵ and his own TV special (1969). Even after his cinematic breakthrough, 'Woody' remained a multimedia property, as Allen authored a number of books and plays, and granted the cartoonist Stuart E. Hample permission to develop a comic strip (*Inside Woody Allen*, 1976-84) that was to feed back into the films.⁶ If we consider all of these manifestations of the persona, it certainly does not appear any less ill-advised to judge the various 'Woody' characters as authentic and autobiographical, but the media environment surrounding these performances allows us to understand why audiences have felt compelled to draw their conclusions about the 'real' Woody Allen. Ultimately, there is, of course, only 'Woody,' just as there is "no such thing as Hitchcock without quotation marks," for Hitchcock always remains "a construction" (Leitch 12).

It was also the paradigm of the highly productive intellectual *auteur* that provided stability when the 'Woody' performances began to grow more complex. As Allen evolved as a filmmaker—developing from a *metteur-en-scène* of loosely structured sketch revues like *Bananas* (1971) towards a serious *auteur* who confidently alternated between different

genres⁷—, so did the ‘Woody’ persona. Allen ceased to employ it solely in order to disperse witty one-liners. ‘Woody’ began to voice existential dilemmas, to experience heartbreak, and, subsequently, anger and psychosis. Consequently, it would be wrong to assume that the persona has remained stable over the years. Memory tends to harmonize and synchronize, allowing us to smooth over fissures and complications. Many comedians never altered their physical appearance, yet Groucho Marx was more mean-spirited on stage and in his early films before the Marx Brothers were turned into a family-friendly franchise by MGM; Steve Martin underwent a development from quirky oddball to a more family-friendly Hollywood version of his persona. Similarly, any claims that Woody Allen has only performed various iterations of one and the same character over the years are downright wrong.⁸ Allen’s appearance may have changed only slightly, but even this is merely a surface impression. Evidently, the props which have become associated with and simultaneously been drawn in by the powerful vortex of the ‘Woody’ persona have undergone an evolution: His glasses initially served as a vehicle for running gags (in the early films, they get trampled on, they characterize ‘Woody’ as a pacifist weakling who is unlikely to ‘get the girl,’ and they offer slapstick opportunities like when he mock-seductively plays with them), but later they evolved into the primary signifier of the well-read intellectual, even if that impression is misleading—as the rather simple-minded robber Denny (Michael Rapaport) remarks about his similarly dim-witted boss Ray (Woody Allen) in *Small Time Crooks* (2000): “I mean, we’re all smart, but *he* wears glasses!” By the same token, Allen has put his clarinet-playing to different uses over the years. His musical instrument contributes to the lightweight comic atmosphere of his early films (part of whose scores Allen performed with his band, a habit he dropped after *Sleeper* [1973]), and he clowns with his instrument on a 1960s appearance on *Dick Cavett*; later, the clarinet-playing turns into the primary signifier of Woody Allen’s resistance to Hollywood and lends him artistic credibility, for he makes a point of always keeping his regular Monday-night gigs in New York, even when the Academy Awards are hosted in Los Angeles.

Additionally, Allen—unlike Chaplin, who could “distance himself from his alter ego by removing his costume, mustache, bowler hat, or by opening his mouth” (Glenn 44)—does not emphasize differences between his film performances and other appearances in public, like interviews or red-carpet events. When there is not a lot of make-up involved, the audience are inclined to assume that the difference between role and performer is negligible, though in reality, ‘Woody’ has a lot in common with the “Great Roe,” the creature Allen invents in his

hilarious short story, “Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts” (1975): “a mythological beast with the head of a lion and the body of a lion, though not the same lion” (Allen, *Prose* 95).

Though critics frequently attempt to bully him into admitting to the autobiographical agenda of his films, Allen has arguably remained one step ahead in that respect and constantly sets traps for them.⁹ Not only has he frequently engaged with autobiography as a genre (*Annie Hall* and *Radio Days* [1987] are structured around the memories of his autodiegetic narrator-protagonists), tempting his viewers into reading the films as his own autobiographical confessions (cf. Shumway 195), but he also constantly addresses the theme of identity as something which remains in flux (nowhere more so than in *Zelig* [1982]). In addition, his films frequently deconstruct those binary oppositions on which his fame and reputation are based (such as the one between originality and adaptation, cf. Schwanebeck), and they show no sign of mellowing. Even when they turn self-referential (as in recent years), the persona keeps evolving, often with rather astounding results.

“Stop Reliving the Past!”: Angry ‘Woody’

Just as there was a development in Allen’s performances from the trickster wimp of his early films towards the urban *schlemiel*, there has now been a movement towards angry, borderline sociopathic characters in a changed urban environment. It is worth stressing once more how the ‘Woody’ persona emerged in the 1960s and how it came with the promise of close proximity and a degree of intimacy, a promise seemingly cherished by the archetypal ‘Woody’ character, Alvy Singer (*Annie Hall*): After all, Alvy, with his habitual breaking of the fourth wall and his frequent asides to the audience, bears testimony of Allen’s stand-up comedic persona of the past (cf. Sayad, “Stand-Up” 24-26). Allen’s cinematic output from *Deconstructing Harry* onwards arguably offers a satirical and highly self-referential attempt to sabotage this persona and to respond to those who feel his range too narrow and his films as mere variations of the same old joke. However, it becomes clear that Allen’s American films are now located within different geopolitical coordinates: Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the gentle version of the ‘Woody’ persona has been relegated to his nostalgic excursions to Europe (see Allen’s own performances in *Scoop* [2006] and *To Rome with Love* [2012], or Owen Wilson’s performance in *Midnight in Paris* [2011]), whereas in his American films, the ‘Woody’ persona has grown increasingly bitter, angry, and edgy since the 1990s. Like Harry Block (in *Deconstructing Harry*), who has more in common with the prostitute-loving, hard-drinking, and foul-mouthed angry Jews from Philip Roth’s novels than

with the usual *dramatis personae* of Allen's own back catalogue, these characters contradict Lanning's flat-out ridiculous thesis that Allen has been trying to whitewash himself of all the accusations levelled at him in public by performing lovable "teddy bear[s]" (54) throughout the 1990s. Like Harry Block, these 'angry Woodys' attracted a lot of fervent criticism, particularly from all those who based their reviews "entirely on the assumption that Harry equals Allen" (Clarkson 65),¹⁰ and thus felt compelled to view Allen's characters "a kind of extreme (bad) version of himself" (Glenn 46). Given the history of the persona, it becomes a little clearer why some of the patrons of Allen's films felt insulted: An old friend with whom they had built a relationship suddenly showed a different face.

If Allen's own appearance during the 74th Annual Academy Awards in 2002 marked an exception from his personal rule never to break the Monday Jazz appointment (Allen appeared as 'Woody' in order to appeal to fellow filmmakers to continue filming in post-9/11 New York, cracking the odd joke about foot fetishism and having sold his Oscars to a pawnshop) and could be viewed as a gesture of reconciliation between him and the Hollywood establishment, his subsequent films showed that he had no intention of being mellow, and was exploring new territory (ironically, by ceasing to work exclusively in New York City). Like his other New York-set comedies in the aftermath of *Deconstructing Harry* (which stands as one of the most insightful and aesthetically rewarding films that Allen has ever produced), *Anything Else* (2003) is usually not viewed as one of the highlights of Allen's career: It was neither embraced by the critics (Leonard Maltin went so far as to call it "the filmmaker's all-time worst movie," 53) nor did it manage to receive a commercial boost from casting newcomers like Jimmy Fallon or Jason Biggs. The result was a commercial failure, even by Allen's standards. Interestingly, the marketing campaign for *Anything Else* (his fourth project distributed by DreamWorks, a period frequently cited as Allen's artistic low before his alleged European renaissance) betrays a visible discomfort on behalf of the distributor to accommodate Allen's persona. 'Woody' is completely absent both in the trailer and on the movie poster (as is his signature typeface), the ads choose to convey the misleading impression of a cheerful romantic comedy for the *American Pie* clientele, and not that of a darkly satirical, post-9/11 tale of urbanite paranoia. Though even Woody Allen's core audience stayed away (presumably scared off by the ads), the film has some unlikely admirers such as Quentin Tarantino, who included *Anything Else* in his list of the twenty most important films of the 1990s and early 2000s (cf. Buchanan). It is through Tarantino's own sensibility as a meta-conscious master of the post-modern mashup that it becomes possible to

assess the merits of *Anything Else*, Allen's first New York-set comedy following 9/11. *Anything Else* is the closest Woody Allen has ever come to remaking his own back catalogue. He has frequently voiced his bewilderment at people asking him about a possible sequel to *Annie Hall* (cf. Lax 172), and his unwillingness to accommodate their wish is not surprising, given how harshly the idea of reliving a unique moment is dealt with in *Annie Hall*.¹¹ Though *Anything Else*, released 26 years after his most popular film, is not a straightforward sequel, it toys with the former film's structure, engages with some of its ideas and, by revisiting some of its locations and scenes, also appears to remake it. There are countless parallels to the 1977 film: Like *Annie Hall*, the film opens with Allen's character sharing wisdom in the form of old jokes; like Alvy Singer, *Anything Else*'s protagonist (Jerry Falk, played by Jason Biggs) is an aspiring comedian who married too young, who idolizes New York, and who is torn between commercial ventures and his attempts to fulfill his own artistic ambitions as a novelist.¹² The first scene showing him with his girlfriend is a faithful recreation of the first Alvy/Annie scene: a date ruined by her tardiness. From here on, both films avoid linear chronological order and skip back and forth between different stages of the central relationship, with characters and scenes mirroring *Annie Hall* on several levels: Like Annie, Amanda (Christina Ricci) is a neurotic young woman who has a spellbinding effect on men, who is characterized as promiscuous, and who tries to fulfill her artistic ambitions. Like in *Annie Hall*, key scenes revolve around the couple exchanging existential literature as gifts, the protagonist spying on his girlfriend to find her flirting with one of her professors, trouble over a parking-space, the ill-advised use of cocaine, the couple splitting up and moving back in together, and a crucial trip to California. Similar parallels permeate the discourse level of *Anything Else*: The film is not told in chronological fashion, the protagonist frequently breaks the fourth wall, and there are techniques which had effectively vanished from Allen's films during the 1980s, such as the use of split-screen technique, close-ups, and frequent off-camera conversations.¹³

Yet if *Anything Else*, with its deliberate sense of *déjà-vu*, at times feels like a 'greatest hits' sampler of Allen's oeuvre and like an assembly of the most clichéd tropes associated with his fictional universe,¹⁴ it is not quite a carbon copy of *Annie Hall*. As a generic throwback, it is almost too good to be true, almost too intent on doing the same. As anyone who has seen *Midnight in Paris* can testify, Allen's films are highly suspicious towards the feeling of nostalgia, and the treatment of 'Woody' in *Anything Else* confirms this. The classic 'Woody' persona is split between two characters here, young comic Jerry and his aging

mentor, David Dobel (played by Allen himself). Whilst the former is the younger, more innocent and naïf double of Alvy Singer, the latter is his perverted, psychotic alter ego. Disillusioned polymath Dobel, though a hilarious caricature of the gun-toting survivalists usually associated with the political right, is one of Allen's most complex creations, and his mad doctrine ("Never trust a naked bus driver!") remains the film's moral compass when compared with the endless bickering and tiring neuroses that mark the other characters, whose self-obsessed behavior merely reveals egotism and lustfulness (note that the deterioration of Amanda's and Jerry's relationship is illustrated entirely through their problematic sex-life). Though Dobel's presence exorcises the misty-eyed depiction of the urban romantic associated with Allen's former New York-set films and allows Allen to cover new thematic ground (an issue particularly relevant in the context of the post-9/11 Bush administration), there are countless intertexts woven into Dobel's DNA, many of which have self-referential overtones. When Dobel tries to teach Jerry (who is his primary addressee on the intradiegetic level and, by proxy, also the implied viewer's surrogate) to put together a rifle blindfolded, the scene evokes the sight-gags of the mercenary training in *Bananas* (where 'Woody' joins a band of guerrilla warriors), Dobel's advice to Jerry to sack his useless agent (Danny DeVito) leads to a recreation of the moment Lou Canova fires Danny in *Broadway Danny Rose*, and *Anything Else* frequently hints at the possibility of Dobel being the aged Alvy Singer. We learn that he is a native New Yorker, active in the stand-up scene, and was institutionalized following a bad break-up that he never got over (a possibility which the ending of *Annie Hall* hinted to, with Alvy reworking his relationship with Annie into a stage-play, unable to move on). What was a strong degree of general distrust and fear of Anti-Semitism in Alvy (cf. the famous "Did you/Jew eat?" scene in *Annie Hall*) has grown into full-blown psychosis in Dobel, who not only suspects, but who is *sure* of the presence of Jew-haters everywhere. He overhears their conversations ("Jews start all wars!' Did you hear that?") and prepares for the end of civilization ("Burglars, rapists, the Gestapo!"), arming himself with guns, fishhooks, and water-purifying tablets: "We live in perilous times! [...] You don't want your life to wind up as black-and-white newsreel footage scored by a cello in a minor key." In one of the film's numerous meta-jokes, Allen introduces a gun to proceedings at the beginning, and as a dedicated Chekhovian, he is sure to make the weapon go off during the final act, when Dobel admits to killing a police-man for implying "that Auschwitz was basically a theme-park." With *Anything Else*'s bleak ending, Allen offers a rare head-on political commentary (Dobel's violent outbreak illustrates that, in an age of paranoia, the real danger may be lurking within),

and moreover, he buries the well-known persona and honors Dobel's insistent appeal to Falk to stop reliving the past. Having seduced his audience with a film that has the nostalgic promise of 'Manhattan Revisited' written all over its surface structure, Allen actually negates these pretexts, and he was to continue in that direction with the ranting, misanthropic character of Boris Yelnikoff (Larry David) in *Whatever Works*, a spiritual cousin to *Anything Else* in spite of its outrageously over-the-top happy ending.

Clearly, it is easy to dismiss scholarly attempts of tracing 'Woody' in Allen's cinematic output as ontological confusion, or as a throwback to the kind of ideologically questionable, heavily romanticized notion of the powerful creator-figure which has come so much under attack since Barthes' oft-quoted proclamation that the author is dead. Yet it would be wrong to completely ignore the context of the discussion, its links with other media, and the history of the persona. All of these can help us acquire an in-depth understanding of how the persona developed, which intertextual layers it evokes with each new appearance, and what impact it still has on the audience. At the same time, we should refrain from crude conflation between the distinction of the 'Woody' persona and the allegedly 'real' Woody Allen. What is more productive is to expand our idea of the persona. 'Woody' not only appears in Woody Allen's films when he is played by Woody Allen—he is in comic books, in Jazz clubs, on records, in interviews, in TV appearances and documentaries (some of which employ narrative techniques similar to those employed by Allen himself, cf. Glenn 45-46), and he is in the performances given by other actors in Allen's films. As Dyer says of the various mirror images which permeate star discourse, no single reflection "is more real than another" (2), and we would be ill-advised to believe the persona to be any less 'real' than the person behind the mask—not least because this binary view of identity invokes a questionable, monolithic notion of the 'self' which Woody Allen keeps deconstructing in an intelligent and highly amusing fashion in his brilliant films.

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¹ In her 2013 assessment of "The Stand-Up Auteur," Sayad goes on to interrogate the theme of artists exploiting their private life for their work as a leitmotif in Allen's films.

² "[My range] certainly doesn't expand. I can play some versions of what I am, a New York character. And there is a little variation within that" (Allen qtd. in Lax 149).

³ "[W]e regularly refer to the 'Woody Allen character' in his films, even when he doesn't appear in the picture" (Glenn 35). See the different reactions to Kenneth Branagh's 'Woody' performance in Glenn 48-49, Lanning 54, and Lax 182-83, and to David's performance in Errigo and Hessey.

⁴ One could also cite Larry David or Louis C.K., both of whom have appeared in Allen's films and who have assembled complex fictional universes around their respective personas.

⁵ The *Internet Movie Database* lists 63 TV appearances of Allen between 1962 and 1970.

⁶ The animated version of Alvy Singer that appears in the brief cartoon interlude of *Annie Hall* is based on Hample's drawings (cf. Hample).

⁷ The blunt distinction between the early, flat comedies and the later, 'serious' films is problematic in itself, not least because the allegedly happy endings of Allen's early comedies are all somewhat poisoned and subverted.

⁸ For two symptomatic readings of this kind see Laberge 23 and Glenn 42.

⁹ See also James M. Wallace's reading of Woody Allen's short stories as satires which poke fun at intellectuals who conflate authors with their oeuvres.

¹⁰ Allen himself has stressed in numerous interviews that *Deconstructing Harry* would have been much better received had he not played the main character himself (cf. Matloff 142 and Björkman 324).

¹¹ In the film, Alvy attempts to recreate his and Annie's magic lobster meal with another date, but—needless to say—he fails.

¹² Ironically, *Anything Else* is itself based on a novel project Allen gave up years before (cf. Lax 104-05)

¹³ Allen had pioneered this technique together with cinematographer Gordon Willis on *Annie Hall* (cf. Lax 212-13).

¹⁴ The film features several montages of the characters walking through New York City, and amongst its intertextual references are nods to Humphrey Bogart films, Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (the idea for which Owen Wilson's character pitches to Buñuel in *Midnight in Paris*), and a gendered spin on Allen's characteristic Pygmalion motif: This time, the elderly tutor instructs a young *man*.