Woody Allen

An Essay on the Nature of the Comical

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Preface to the English Book Version

This little book was published first in English in the journal *Film and Philosophy*, which in 2000 dedicated a special issue, edited by Sander Lee, to Woody Allen, who turned sixty-five in that year. It owes much to discussions with my wife, Jieon Kim, and my friend Mark Roche, who was kind enough to go through this text and suggest linguistic and substantive improvements. I then translated it into German, and it was published in hardcover in 2001 by C. H. Beck and in paperback by Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag in 2005 on the occasion of Allen’s seventieth birthday. The Spanish edition with Tusquets came out in 2002.

The numerous reviews of the book that appeared in German, Austrian, Swiss, Swedish, Icelandic, Mexican, Argentine, and Chilean newspapers and journals have encouraged me to present it also to an English-speaking public as a little monograph, even if I am aware of two of its shortcomings. First, it is written by a European, whose view of Allen will be necessarily different from that of an American. Second, it is written by a philosopher, not a film studies professor. These two limitations, however, may also have some benefits attached to them. First, it is not accidental that Allen’s films have been a greater success in Europe than in the United States; there is a specific intellectuality in his humor that particularly the American Midwest does not
Preface to the English Book Version

seem to enjoy as much as European countries—a point made by Allen himself at the end of *Hollywood Ending* when Val Waxman, the character played by him, leaves for Europe, where his new film, which he has directed in a state of psychologically caused blindness, has become a great success. Second, the whole point of my book is that Allen is a profoundly philosophical comedian. I do not deny that he is influenced by authors like Bob Hope or the Marx Brothers; he obviously is. But it is not these influences that interest me, because my focus is on the philosophical dimension of his jokes and comical situations; and it is this dimension that raises his work so much over the comedies of his American predecessors and allows us to see in him a comedian of the same intellectual rank as Aristophanes or Molière. My essay aims at being both a new reflection on the nature of the comical and an analysis of unique features of Allen’s comical universe; the development of general categories is the basis of, and is enriched by, concrete interpretations. The philosophically sophisticated reader will recognize the main sources of my approach to the comical to be Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Bergson—Hegel’s intellectualism is in fact the driving force in my revision of Bergson’s peerless book on laughter.

My 2000 essay was copyedited, and some passages were added that relate to some of Allen’s newer films. (I thank an anonymous reviewer of Notre Dame Press for excellent suggestions.) But the core of my book is formed by Allen’s movies up to the late 1990s, since the basic patterns and motives of his humor can be found there, probably in an aesthetically more compelling way than in the later works.
Woody Allen
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An Essay on the Nature of the Comical

Earnestness sees through the comic, and the deeper down from which it fetches itself up, the better, but it does not mediate. What earnestness wills in earnest it does not regard as comic insofar as it itself wills it, but for that reason it can readily see the comic therein. In this way the comic purifies the pathos-filled emotions, and conversely the pathos-filled emotions give substance to the comic. For example, the most devastating comic perception would be the one in which indignation is latent—yet no one detects it because of the laughter. Vis comica [Comic power] is the most responsible weapon and thus is essentially present only in the hands of someone who has a fully equivalent pathos. Hence, anyone who could in truth make a hypocrite a butt of laughter will also be able to crush him with indignation. But anyone who wants to use indignation and does not have the corresponding vis comica will readily degenerate into rhetoric and will himself become comic.

Kierkegaard, Stages on Life’s Way, “Guilty?”/ “Not Guilty?” June 7, Midnight
Woody Allen is a challenge for philosophy. Why? Laughter is of course not one of the most fundamental but is nevertheless one of the most controversial and intriguing topics in philosophy, in whose analysis various philosophical disciplines have to work together—philosophical anthropology, philosophical sociology, and aesthetics proper. This bestows on comedians a certain philosophical interest—the more so since, “while comedy may be the most widely appreciated art, it is also the most undervalued,” an injustice that calls for redress by philosophy. Philosophers have to operate with abstract concepts; but it is reality, or at least a certain interpretation of reality, that has to show whether the concepts developed are fruitful. Therefore, every philosopher interested in elaborating a general theory of laughter is well advised to study those works that make people laugh, and Woody Allen can claim to make a certain type of people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (mainly Western, particularly European intellectuals) laugh as nobody else can. It may well be that a careful analysis of his work will contribute to an improvement of the main theories of the comic developed till now. What are the causes of Allen’s success?

First, Woody Allen has succeeded in impersonating a certain type of comic hero, and it well befits philosophy to try to find the general features common to Victor Shaka-popolis in What’s New, Pussycat?, Jimmy Bond in Casino Royale, Virgil Starkwell in Take the Money and Run, Fielding Mellish in Bananas, Allan Felix in Play It Again, Sam, the jester Felix, Fabrizio, Victor Shakapopolis again, and the loquacious and fearful sperm in Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask), Miles
Monroe in *Sleeper*, Boris Grushenko in *Love and Death*, Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*, Isaac Davis in *Manhattan*, Sandy Bates in *Stardust Memories*, Andrew Hobbes in *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, Leonard Zelig in *Zelig*, Danny Rose in *Broadway Danny Rose*, Mickey Sachs in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Sheldon Mills in *Oedipus Wrecks*, Cliff Stern in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Nick Fifer in *Scenes from a Mall*, Max Kleinman in *Shadows and Fog*, Gabe Roth in *Husbands and Wives*, Larry Lipton in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, Lenny Winerib in *Mighty Aphrodite*, Joe Berlin in the musical-like *Everyone Says I Love You*, Harry Block in *Deconstructing Harry*, Ray Winkler in *Small Time Crooks*, CW Briggs in *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, Val Waxman in *Hollywood Ending*, David Dobel in *Anything Else*, Sid Waterman in *Scoop*—and even to those persons in some of the films directed by Allen whom he did not play himself but who nevertheless share some of the aura of the comic hero usually represented by him: Kenneth Branagh in *Celebrity*, for example, plays Lee Simon in a Woody Allen-like manner (to name only one feature, he stammers). Obviously, there are huge differences between, to name only two, Victor Shakapopolis and Harry Block; however, that they have something in common is due not only to the fact that Allen’s repertoire as an actor is quite restricted (therefore Block seems less mean than probably was originally intended) but even more to the desire of his public to recognize in the roles he plays something of what they associate with the Woody Allen persona—who, owing to Stuart Hample, for some years even became a cartoon character. Even if Allen were able to play a figure like Judah Rosenthal in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* or Chris Wilton in *Match Point* convincingly, his
audience would be frustrated—whereas the public was perhaps surprised, but not frustrated, when Henry Fonda played the villain in Sergio Leone’s *Once upon a Time in the West*. In the following I call the comic hero played by Woody Allen the Woody persona—to distinguish him from the real human being (who managed to become quite successful by representing the failures of the Woody persona).

Second, Allen is not only a great comedian, he is, being also a good author, even more an excellent screenwriter and movie director. He acquired his capacities as a director slowly, since he began his career as a gag writer and later worked as a stand-up comedian, mainly with words and facial expressions; but, having been interested in films from his childhood on, he was able, in due time, first, to overcome in most of his later screenplays the episodic nature of his early works and achieve that unity and wholeness that is an indispensable prerequisite of great artworks, and, second, to integrate the visual and musical aspects that a good film needs into the stories he conceived. Allen became so good as a director that he needed less of himself as an actor—something that none of the other great film comedians, such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, or the Marx Brothers, could have afforded (*Chaplin’s A Woman of Paris*, where Chaplin plays only a minor role, was a failure). Not only in those movies that are not at all comic, such as *Interiors* and *September* (which one can regard as Allen’s most ambitious and most problematic works, serving mainly to persuade Allen himself that his repertoire as a director was not limited by his innate capacities as an actor), but even in two of his best films, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Bullets over Broadway*, Allen the actor is absent (even if the role of David Shayne probably could have been
played by him, were it not for the issue of age); in others, such as *Hannah and Her Sisters*, he no longer plays the central role. There is little doubt that the movies directed by Allen (who is usually, but not always, the only one responsible for the screenplay) and in which he does not act are better and more complex than those in which he only plays and does not serve as director (with the exception of *Play It Again, Sam*, whose screenplay, however, originated with Allen and was based on a play he wrote for the theater). The artistic autonomy the director Allen gained relatively early on vis-à-vis his producers (e.g., regarding the final cut) is, particularly in the United States, uncommon and impressive, and even if the success of his movies also obviously depends on the actors he selects (his reputation allowing him to hire even the most famous stars for compensations they would otherwise not accept), his excellent cinematographers (later ones being Gordon Willis, Carlo Di Palma, Sven Nykvist, and Zhao Fei), the production designer Santo Loquasto, the costume designer Jeffrey Kurland, the editors Susan E. Morse and Alisa Lepselter, and the carefully chosen, evocative music, in the specific case of Woody Allen’s films “auteurism”—that is, the approach that regards the director’s artistic conception as the center around which film criticism has to gravitate—is widely justified. And in this conception philosophical concerns play a major role. Philosophical issues are important in Allen’s movies on two different levels: there are frequent allusions to philosophical problems in the puns and jokes (in the most pronounced form in *Love and Death*), and some of his stories focus in their structure on classical philosophical issues, such as the identity problem in *Play It Again, Sam*, and *Zelig*, the shortcomings of the positivist
concept of reality in *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, the relation between reality and art in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Deconstructing Harry*, the objective validity of morality in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point*, the power of evil in *Shadows and Fog*, and the relation between art and morality in *Bullets over Broadway*. It goes without saying that the problems of death and love are omnipresent in Allen’s films. One can safely claim that no other living film director addresses the great philosophical issues as openly as Woody Allen does (certainly at the price of his ignoring other important issues, such as social ones, and being quite repetitive), and one can even state that Allen’s philosophical vision corresponds exactly to a certain moment in the history of philosophy, namely that moment in the late twentieth century when French existentialism’s concept of freedom and its ethically motivated atheism had become profoundly problematic because they seemed to undermine any belief in an objective ethics. If the process of modernity has been also a process of disenchantment of the world, our century at its end came to deep disenchantment with regard to the intrinsic validity and the consequences of a disenchanted moral world for humankind. Atheism might still be regarded by many as true, but the triumphant and optimistic tone in which its message had spread from the late nineteenth century onward gave way to a more somber, if not tormented mode. Allen’s films capture this mode without, however, being willing or able to offer a positive solution.\(^6\)

We have approached the third reason why Woody Allen’s comedies are philosophically interesting: they have a peculiar position in the history of art. They differ radi-
Woody Allen: An Essay on the Nature of the Comical

cally from the type of comedy that has been not the only but clearly the dominant strain in the Western tradition since the demise of the Old Comedy and the rise of the Middle and particularly the New Comedy in Greece. I name only one feature: many of his films are not at all realistic. Allen’s imagina-tiveness in developing formal innovations, his virtuosity in reinterpreting and parodying older forms of expression (as in his revival of the chorus in *Mighty Aphrodite*), his integration into the comic universe of giant breasts and anxious sperms, extraterrestrials, ghosts, persons in the film within the film, magicians with exorbitant powers, human beings with the capacity to become like their environment or to provoke their environment to fall in love with them, and passengers on the barge of death remind one of Aristophanes. One can even defend the thesis that Allen recovers a fullness of the comic that had been lost by high art—of course with exceptions such as Rabelais and, in some of his plays, Shakespeare—for more than two millennia. An interesting question belonging to that intersection of the philosophy of history and aesthetics, namely the philosophy of the history of art, is why, at the end of the twentieth century, this form of the comic could be successfully revived.

I have indicated the three questions I shall try to answer—the last one only very briefly—in this essay. Why is Allen as a comic actor so funny? What makes some of his films philosophically so profound? What are the causes of this outburst of *vis comica* in a particular historical and cultural setting? First, however, a discussion of the different theories of laughter is indispensable in an essay that is authored not by a film critic but by a philosopher and that hopes to shed light, through its reflections on Woody Allen, on the phenomenon of the comic in general.
In his *Argument of Laughter*, D. H. Monro classifies theories of laughter in four groups: superiority, incongruity, release from restraint, and ambivalence. His own theory on the inappropriate as the common denominator of laughter claims to be a synthesis, but he is well aware that it is quite close to one of the incongruity theories, namely Schopenhauer’s. It is easy to see that the incongruity theory is privileged with regard to the others if we focus on humorous laughter (disregarding the nonhumorous forms of laughter, such as laughter from tickling, which most likely are phylogenetically prior but philosophically less interesting, even if the theory is worth mentioning according to which laughter from tickling protected from unwelcome sexual advances; for laughter destroys sexual excitement). For it is the only one to address a feature in the funny or ridiculous object or situation itself, while the other theories deal with features of the recipient. This implies, first, that the incongruity theory is compatible with the other theories, since they deal with different sides of the issue (Bergson’s theory, e.g., combines aspects of the superiority and the incongruity theory); and, second, that only the incongruity theory can be the basis of a normative theory of the comic. It is undeniable that different persons, or even the same persons in different moods, laugh at different things; it may well be that when we laugh we feel—either exclusively or simultaneously—superiority, release from restraint, ambivalent emotions; but if we want to answer the question of whether our laughter is intelligent, our feeling of superiority justified, we must analyze the object of laughter. The point I am making exemplifies the more
general one that artwork aesthetics must take priority over production or reception aesthetics—even if all three of them are important—because the properties of the artwork provide the criterion of whether a production or reception is appropriate and not vice versa. It may well be that the public of the unnamed comic played by Johnny Haymer in *Annie Hall* really enjoys his stupid jokes and that he himself chuckles for pleasure at the thought of his own superiority—but the point of both the director Allen and the Woody persona Alvy Singer is that what ought to be laughed at is the comic himself, with his grotesque sense of humor and his unjustified feeling of superiority, and certainly not his jokes. It is this fundamental difference between the normative and the descriptive dimension to which the first modern and also crudest form of the superiority theory, the Hobbesian, does not render justice, although it is quite obvious that one important criterion in evaluating other persons is the object of their laughter: a fundamental disharmony of character becomes manifest when a person laughs at things we do not find funny at all and vice versa. Laughter, being fundamentally a reflex mechanism and very hard to simulate in a convincing way (artificial laughter being easily detected), says quite a bit about the persons we are.

Again, these reflections do not entail that at the origin of humankind laughter was elicited by the perception of incongruities—it is very plausible that laughter was simply an expression of joy, well-being, playfulness. Charles Darwin, who has reflected as few other persons have on the expression of our emotions (though he is unfortunately ignored by Monro), writes: "We may confidently believe that laughter, as a sign of pleasure or enjoyment, was practiced by our progenitors long before they deserved to be called
human; for very many kinds of monkeys, when pleased, utter a reiterated sound, clearly analogous to our laughter.”

Darwin recognizes, however, that in humans laughter has a more complex cause: “Something incongruous or unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laughers, who must be in a happy frame of mind, seems to be the commonest cause. The circumstances must not be of a momentous nature: no poor man would laugh or smile on suddenly hearing that a large fortune had been bequeathed to him.” It is plausible to assume that mediating between laughter caused by the mere feeling of well-being and humorous laughter is that form of laughter triggered by a feeling of superiority. Not only is it not surprising that, in an organism that has to compare itself continuously with other members of the same species, the realization of its own superiority, contrasted with a mishap or a fault of another, may cause a particularly strong feeling of pleasure; the existence of this peculiar form of laughter can be accounted for also by the fact that it may be developed in such a way as to have a positive social function. Indeed, laughter is a painful negative sanction of socially unacceptable behavior (such as vanity), even if it lacks the brutality of physical violence and the risks connected to it. It is therefore a powerful tool to show disapproval without high costs for the user, and this probably explains its evolutionary success—particularly in groups that had to compensate for their inferior power by the strength of their wit, such as the Jews. If the humorous remarks are not directed immediately against the person to be criticized but make a detour, possibly to oneself, and leave the concrete application to the recipients, laughter can even avoid being offensive, and jesters could thus play an
important role in political systems in which open criticism of the rulers was not allowed. It is, by the way, too one-sided an interpretation if, along with Mikhail Bakhtin’s admirers, one sees in laughter mainly the power to challenge established authorities. Without doubt laughter can fulfill this function, and therefore it is again and again, as, for example, in Rabelais, a means of social change: the inversion of social roles in carnival and the opposition of eating, drinking, and sexual activities, which are in themselves joyful, to loftier ideals are simple and powerful forms of ideology criticism.11 But laughter’s function of criticism or intimidation can also be turned against those who try to change society: Aristophanes was politically a conservative, as were many other satirical and humorous writers. Henri Bergson’s essay on laughter develops a more general theory on the social function of laughter: “Laughter is, first, of all, a correction. Created in order to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person who is its object. Through it, society revenges itself on the liberties that had been taken with it.”12 Of course, a social subgroup can also laugh at those aspects of the established society that threaten its proper function, but it is plausible to assume that originally it was society at large that defended itself against persons with behavior it regarded as inferior—the larger the audience in a theater, the greater its willingness to laugh.13 This also explains why, in the traditional theory of genres, only people of the lower classes were regarded as the proper subjects of comedy. One must, however, concede that the public usually was invited to identify with the persons belonging to the lowest class, namely the slaves and later the servants, and with their success in manipulating the vices and stupidity of their aging
masters, often to render possible a marriage of the younger generation that the parents wanted to prevent—interclass conflict being combined with intergenerational strife.

With the development of a finer moral sense and a finer intellect, laughter must have become problematic. Sometime in human history it must have begun to be regarded as vulgar to laugh at, for example, a poorer or uglier person (as it occurs in the development of most individuals, who are taught to check their schadenfreude and the often cruel or dirty forms of laughter they engaged in as children). The malice, as Bergson rightly notices, inherent in laughter is subjected to moral and aesthetic criticism. This can happen in two ways. On the one hand, there is the merely negative approach, to be found in those moralists who lack any sense of humor and who would like to have laughter banned entirely. On the other hand, there is a wiser, more constructive way to tame that malice, one that still allows for the satisfaction of the ineradicable and fundamentally reasonable human impulse to laugh: namely the cultivation of the sense of the comic by those comic actors and writers who are subtler than others and who resent the vulgarity of their colleagues who have achieved easy successes, for example, by simply mimicking hunchbacked or obese persons. One has only to read the parabaseis of some of Aristophanes’ comedies or the prologue to Ben Jonson’s Volpone to see how disgust at cheap humor is an essential characteristic of the great comedians. To those we owe much more than one usually thinks, namely the humanization of our feelings.

To consider laughter morally acceptable, a civilized human being will ask that two conditions be fulfilled. First, the feeling of superiority, which cannot be explained away in the analysis of laughter, will have to be mitigated somehow.
The intelligent laugher has to recognize that the subject he
laughs at is not fundamentally different from himself. He
may himself share the traits caricatured, but even if this is
not directly the case he will know that they are human traits
and that he as a human being could well develop them or at
least analogous ones, or that he might have been afflicted
with them. In cultivated laughter there is, in whatever
degree, a certain melancholic identification with the object
of laughter—where that is completely lacking, the laugher
becomes repulsive or even an object of scorn himself.
Perhaps this is the reason why in humans there is a certain
continuum between smiles and laughter, although in our
apelike ancestors they must have had almost opposed func-
tions—with laughter expressing a feeling of happiness and
superiority, smiling a feeling of submission, often to ward off
an attack. This latter function of smiles is well known also in
humans, and it is the more surprising that nevertheless a
smile can sometimes announce laughter, that an expression
belonging to the behavior of appeasement may prepare the
expression of a behavior originally linked to the enjoyment
of one’s own superiority. Perhaps the reason behind it is the
following: the laugher who first smiles asks in a certain sense
for forgiveness for what he is going to do, partly to avoid
retaliation on another occasion, but partly, perhaps, also
because even if such retaliation is not to be feared he has
an unconscious insight into his affinity with the comic ob-
ject. This explains why often, although not always, the pecu-
liar emotional quality of laughter is an ambivalent feeling,
sometimes of simultaneous attraction and repulsion with re-
gard to its object (where this is a person), who is pitied
(i.e., identified with) and scorned (i.e., distanced) at the
same time.

Woody Allen: An Essay on the Nature of the Comical
The degree of identification with the object of laughter depends on various factors. One is the inner consistency of the ridiculous person. The way Don Quixote reacts to Sancho Panza’s objections against his interpretations of reality causes more laughter not only because it shows the extent of his madness but also because it elicits a certain admiration with regard to his capacity to make sense of his theory—a capacity in itself positive, without which also scientific creativity would be impossible. Another factor is whether the ridiculous person succeeds in making us laugh at an even more ridiculous one, as is usually the case with the parasites in ancient comedies, such as Gnatho in Terence’s *Eunuch*, who is morally reprehensible but clearly superior to his master, Thraso. The decisive quality is, however, the comic person’s capacity to laugh at herself: because in doing so she joins the spectators or readers, they, having this trait in common, are much more prone to identify with her and thus laugh with her, not at her. Probably the important difference between the satiric and the comic mood, which are both related to laughter, has to do with this capacity—Jonson’s *Volpone* being a satiric and Aristophanes’ *Peace* a comic example: one laughs at Volpone (and even more at his victims, who are not less greedy but more stupid), but one laughs with Trygaios. The figure of Falstaff in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and, even more, in Boito’s libretto for Verdi’s opera (one of the few librettos that can claim to be a great artwork) shows that a transition exists between the two moods: we laugh sometimes at, sometimes with Falstaff, the latter particularly when he joins the persons laughing at him. In this aspect the Woody persona is, as we will see, closely related to Falstaff. Because of his increased self-awareness, the comic hero is more in-
individualized than the subject of a satire: satiric comedies may have titles indicating an abstract quality (as in Molière’s *The Miser*), or the names of the persons may be animal names (as in *Volpone*, where a Doctor Lupus is mentioned, the same name given to the beauty surgeon in *Celebrity*), but if we want to laugh with a person individualization is indispensable.

Not only the emotional quality of laughter but also its objects have to be of a certain nature if laughter is to be acceptable. The persons laughed at must deserve our scorn because their mishap is a just consequence of their behavior and their behavior contradicts some intellectual or moral norm one cannot help acknowledging. This contradiction between a certain behavior and the relevant norm explains why only some form of incongruity theory can claim to capture the reason why an intelligent person is allowed or even invited to laugh at a given piece of behavior. We are justified in laughing when we are right in feeling superior, and we are right in feeling superior when the derided behavior is indeed something that ought to be avoided and when by laughing we acknowledge certain standards also for ourselves and oblige ourselves not to infringe on certain rules—if we should do so, we know that we, too, will be ridiculed. However, the main problem of the incongruity theory is the precise determination of the class of incongruities that make us laugh, and I must immediately concede that I neither know of a theory giving the necessary and the sufficient conditions of that class nor have one to offer myself. I will thus limit myself to discussing the plausibility and the limits both of the first modern and of the relatively richest theories of incongruity, namely those of Schopenhauer and Bergson.
The first important incongruity theory stems, as already mentioned, from Schopenhauer, who expands in a fascinating way Kant’s enigmatic allusions. Laughter, according to Schopenhauer, originates from the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the objects we perceive by way of that concept. The incongruity can occur by beginning either with concrete objects, which are unified under an encompassing concept, or with the concept, under which very different objects are subsumed. The first case constitutes witticism (Witz), the second foolishness (Narrheit). Witticism is always intentional—we laugh with the joke teller at someone or something else, not at him—and it is conceptual or verbal. Puns can be subsumed under it, though here it is no longer different objects unified under the same concept but different concepts unified under the same word. Foolishness causes laughter in an unintentional way and manifests itself mostly in actions; it encompasses pedanticism, the desire to subject reality to abstract concepts. The art of the jester consists in masking his witticism as foolishness: we laugh at him even if his intent, like that of the witty joke teller, is to make us laugh. While irony is fun hidden behind seriousness, humor is seriousness hidden behind fun. Schopenhauer develops his theory in the context of his empiricist epistemology, which insists on the priority of perceptions over concepts. For him, laughter is the revenge we take against reason when we see that its concepts do not really fit the subtle differences of reality. The immediate advantage of Schopenhauer’s formula is that it takes into account epistemological inadequacies and puns, which are neglected by other theories. But his siding with perception overlooks that the failure may be on both sides—when Hippias answers the Socratic question of what beauty is
with “a beautiful girl,” it is he who is made fun of, not the generality of concepts. In some of the jokes Schopenhauer offers yet fails to analyze properly, the humorous effect is based on their self-reference, particularly on the contradiction between what is said and what is done. Also a simple contradiction between two concepts, and not concepts and objects, can sometimes be funny. It is furthermore certainly possible to expand Schopenhauer's theory by insisting that the general concept often traces connections between two realms that evoke very different emotional responses, thereby contributing to a reversal of values that not only may be funny but may hint at a profound truth. “Our mental exploration may uncover a real connection between our mental compartments.” Monro continues this remark by stating that the addition of other elements such as codes of values, satirical intent, and emotional attitudes transcends what Schopenhauer is explicitly stating even if it is compatible with it. Indeed, an assimilation toward the worse or toward the better, to name the concepts used in the most important ancient treatise on comedy, even if it is not necessary, certainly increases the humorous effect. To give two examples, in Scoop Sid Waterman explains, “I was born in the Hebrew persuasion, but I converted to narcissism.” The concept of conversion entails the transformation of a person by his opening himself to a higher dimension; narcissism, however, is the opposite of transcending one’s self, even if it is true that it has features of a religion, for it renders the self absolute and has become a widespread ideology. In Manhattan Ike says to his seventeen-year-old girlfriend Tracy: “I don’t believe in extramarital relationships. I think people should mate for life, like pigeons or Catholics.” This remark is witty in a Schopenhauerian way because it brings...
two very different things, pigeons and Catholics, under one general concept, monogamous behavior. But it is easy to see that other factors add to its comic effect. By introducing “pigeons” between “people” and “Catholics,” the remark surreptitiously diminishes the value of the behavior praised; for one can hardly regard animals as models, and to compare pigeons with Catholics is clearly disparaging to the latter. So there is an implicit criticism of the monogamous ideal that Ike nevertheless tries to defend and Tracy questions. But not only is there a contradiction between different parts of the statement (the criticism of extramarital relationships and the praise of pigeons); there is also a contradiction between the statement and its speaker. Ike has gone through two divorces, and his remarks are triggered by the encounter with Mary, the mistress of his married friend Yale. Even before the later development of the story, his behavior during this encounter betrays the main reason for his disapproval of Yale’s relationship—namely that he himself is getting interested in Mary and wants to get rid of Tracy, who, despite her doubts about monogamy, exhibits till the end a touching fidelity. One can therefore say that Ike is the reverse of Schopenhauer’s jester—Ike’s intentional witticism, which playfully undermines what he says, is foolish because it reveals to the intelligent spectator of the film (although not to Tracy, who is too much in love and too candid for that) the real desires that he himself is not yet prepared to acknowledge.

Another addition to Schopenhauer’s theory is possible, and it is particularly fruitful with regard to film theory—there may be in a film a contrast between images, words, and music. Virgil’s line in Take the Money and Run regarding his first walk with Louise, whom he originally wanted to rob—“Within fifteen minutes I wanted to marry her . . . after half
an hour, I gave up all thoughts of stealing her purse”—is funny in itself, for one would think that the first intent entailed the second immediately, not after fifteen minutes. But the contrast is heightened by the romantic, almost kitschy images of the couple wandering about together. Allen has devised various techniques to increase our perception of comic contrasts; thus in *Annie Hall* the splitting of the screen contrasts the mutual expectations or interpretations that different persons have of the same situation, and the appearance on the screen of subtitles reveals the thoughts persons have while speaking. The juxtaposition of Alvy’s remark to Annie that “photography’s interesting, ’cause, you know, it’s—it’s a new art form, and a, uh, a set of aesthetic criteria have not emerged yet” and his thought “I wonder what she looks like naked?” is comic not only because of the contrast between the intellectual discussion and the more worldly afterthoughts but also because there is a Schopenhauerian close connection between the lofty concept of aesthetics and the basic experience of the beauty of a naked body. In its crudest form the contrast between image and words is the point of Allen’s remake of *Kagi no Kagi* as *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?*, in which he kept the images but radically changed the words.

It is Bergson’s merit to have somehow generalized Schopenhauer’s theory. The breadth and depth of his analysis of the comic features of forms, movements, situations, words, and characters, the splendor of his style, and the skillful combination of the superiority and incongruity theories into a unity make his book extremely persuasive. For Bergson laughter is society’s sanction against those who try to impose something mechanical on the flux of life. Fundamentally the perceived (not necessarily the real) rigidity of
movements and characters makes them comic because they contradict one of the main demands of life, elasticity. The comic is therefore opposed not so much to beauty as to grace. Grimaces, mechanical movements, masquerading, the overwhelming of the mind by the body, the reification of persons, repetition, inversion, the interference of different series (being opposed to the organic traits of continuous change, irreversibility, and an individuality closed in itself), the insertion of an absurdity into a sacred formula, the literal understanding of metaphors, transposition into a different tone (degradation and exaggeration), unsociability, obstinacy, distraction, automatisms of character—all these phenomena, most of which play an important role in Allen, are paraded in review by Bergson and connected by the common idea that they all violate the essence of life. One certainly has to agree with Bergson that many cases can be subsumed under this idea. The reason why we laugh at the mechanical steps of Prussian soldiers, their Stechschritt, is that they are in contrast with normal and healthy movement: it is not reasonable to refuse to bend the knees, since they are integral for walking. The overwhelming comic power of Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, to name the most Bergsonian of all comedies—and of its imitations at the beginning of *Bananas* when Fielding tests the “Execusizor” or in many scenes in *Sleeper*, such as when Miles simulates being a robot (with movements reminiscent of Fernand Leger’s *Mechanical Ballet*) or Luna enters the “Orgasmatron”—stems from the subjection of a living human being to the mechanisms of engines and industrial society in general, from the reification of a person.

But is this always the case? Think of repetition, which Bergson rightly regards as a fundamental strategy of the