

Woody Allen and the spirit of Greek Tragedy: from *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) to *Match Point* (2005)

Pau Gilabert Barberà
Universitat de Barcelona
pgilabert@ub.edu

Many studies have already paid attention to what are called Woody Allen's 'serious films'. The aim of this article is to analyse the fluctuating sight of the American director with regard to Greek tragedy. Indeed, Gilabert is convinced that, only in this way, is it possible to reveal Allen's true sympathy with the tragic spirit of the Greeks, as well as to understand his urge to present that ancient literary genre as a paradigm with the help of which one can evaluate the greatness and misery of our contemporary world.

Keywords: classical tradition; Woody Allen; *Crimes and Misdemeanors*; *Mighty Aphrodite*; *Melinda & Melinda*; *Match Point*; Greek tragedy; Greek thought.

Numerosos son ya los estudios que se han centrado en el llamado 'cine serio' de Woody Allen. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la trayectoria fluctuante del director americano en relación con la tragedia griega desde la convicción de que, sólo así, es posible revelar su empatía con el espíritu trágico de los griegos y comprender su necesidad de presentar aquel género literario como un paradigma desde el cual entender las grandezas y miserias del mundo contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: tradición clásica; Woody Allen; *Crimes and Misdemeanors*; *Mighty Aphrodite*; *Melinda & Melinda*; *Match Point*; tragedia griega; pensamiento griego.

I

Chris, the main character in *Match Point* (2005), on facing the terrifying accusations of Nola's dead neighbour, Mrs Eastby, responds to her spectre as follows: "Sophocles said: 'To never have been born may be the greatest boon of all'".¹ When Chris quotes from the famous Greek tragedy, the two women have already become earthbound spirits, mere *eídola*, since Chris has assassinated both of them. Moreover, Nola was expecting Chris's child, which makes his act more hideous still. The plot ends to reveal that this murderer's good luck never runs out, he is not punished and the police attribute his crimes to an innocent bystander. It is obvious, then, that Sophocles, probably the most tragic of the Greek tragic poets, is not quoted here –like in other Allen's films such as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989)—as part of an ethical paradigm that may save our

¹ Compare it with Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* 1224-27: "Μὴ φῦναι ἅπαντα νι / καὶ λόγον. τὸ δ', ἐπει φανῇ, / βῆναι κείσ' ὅποθεν περ ἦ / κει πολὺ δεύτερον ὥς τάχιστα". ("Not to be born at all / Is best, far best that can be fall, / Next best, when born, with least delay / To trace the backward way").

contemporary Western world from values which have run aground. Instead Chris quotes Sophocles as if to say that having no scruples and no ethics is not only condoned by ancient wisdom but often rewarded by success. Therefore, must we think of a truly depressed Woody Allen?² Is this the only lesson that he can derive from Greek tragedy? Is it Woody Allen's invention or does it emerge quite naturally from the violent world in which he lives—in which we all live—and Allen merely portrays it with effective and stirring images? Traditionally considered one of the undeniable masters of contemporary cinematographic comedy,³ his paradoxical incursions into tragedy represent in my view the search for a centuries-old ethic and a clear counter-argument against ethical indifference.⁴ What follows is the analysis of the four most remarkable instances of the connection between the American director and the tragic soul of the Greeks, although my aim is above all to pose questions rather than answer them.⁵

II

In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, another criminal—or, to rephrase the term, the instigator of another crime—Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), dares to turn his successful criminal experience into a good screenplay. After a brief moment of remorse which almost makes him surrender to the police, he, like Chris in *Match Point*, is not punished. While attending a wedding to which he has been invited and in the course of a private conversation, he offers the script to Clifford Stern (Woody Allen), who, as a director of TV documentaries is constantly in financial difficulty. Judah assumes Clifford will be interested in accepting it. However, Clifford still remembers and believes in that Greek paradigm which is tragic and ethical at one and the same time:

JUDAH: I have a great murder story. Let's say there's this man who's very successful ... And after the awful deed is done, he finds that he's plagued by deep-rooted guilt. Little sparks of his religious background are suddenly stirred up. He hears his father's voice. He imagines that God is watching his every move. Suddenly it's not an empty universe at all, but a just and moral one. He's violated it. He's on the verge of a mental collapse, an inch

² For a general introduction and also the influence of his personal biography in his creativity, see e. g.: Hösle 2007; Lax 2007; Blake 2005; Luque 2005; Allen 2002; Fonte 2002; Bailey 2000; Schwartz 2000; Baxter 1998; Allen 1995; Girlanda 1995; Girgus 1993; Lax 1992; Spignesi 1992; Brode 1991; Flashner 1988; Bendazzi 1987; Sinyard 1987.

³ See e. g.: Wernblad 1992; Green 1991; Yacowar 1991; Bermel 1982; Allen 1977.

⁴ Regarding the so called 'serious films' of W. Allen, see e. g.: Allen 2005; Conard and Skoblie 2004; Downing 1997; Easterling 1997; Lee 1997; Blake 1995; Roche 1995 and Vipond 1991.

⁵ When I finished this article, in February 2008, the première of *Cassandra's Dream* had already taken place. In his film, Allen shows human life as a tragic journey. The screenplay alludes once more to the Greek Tragedy and presents an ethical dilemma which is similar to the one in *Match Point* or *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, although, on this occasion, one of the protagonists, who is aware that he has gone beyond the limits from which there is no return, opts for accepting the inevitable atonement of his crime, that is, his suicide, after causing unintentionally the death of his brother. However, the true instigator of the crime will go unpunished once again, so that, bearing in mind the above-mentioned two films, one should speak, in my opinion, of a recurring theme. On the other hand, although this is not a contribution on Greek tragedy but on its tradition in a very general sense, see e. g. as an introduction: Easterling 1997; Wiles 1997; Csapo and Slater 1995; Longo 1990; Baldry 1973.

away from confessing the whole thing to the police. And then, one morning, he awakens and the sun is shining and his family is around him and mysteriously the crisis has lifted. He takes his family on a vacation to Europe and as the months pass he finds he's not punished. In fact, he prospers. The killing gets attributed to a drifter who has several other murders to his credit. His life is completely back to normal.

CLIFFORD: Yes, but can he ever really go back?

JUDAH: Well... People carry sins around with them. Maybe once in a while he has a bad moment, but it passes. And, with time, it all fades.

CLIFFORD:It'd be tough for somebody to live with that. Very few guys could actually live with that on their conscience.

JUDAH: People carry awful deeds around them. What do you expect him to do? Turn himself in? This is reality. In reality, we rationalise, we deny, or we couldn't go on living.

CLIFFORD:I would have him turn himself in. Because then... your story assumes tragic proportions. In the absence of God, he is forced to assume that responsibility himself. Then you have tragedy.

JUDAH: But that's fiction. That's movies. You see too many movies. I'm talkin' about reality. If you want a happy ending, you should go see a Hollywood movie.⁶

The coincidences with *Match Point* are evident, but it is also quite clear that this time the reference to tragedy, far removed from nihilism, reveals Allen's confidence or faith, when the latter—which is far more canonical—in “the eyes of God [which] see all”—has vanished because of the irrefutable proof of so many crimes without punishment, so many criminals succeeding in ousting remorse from their consciences, or even innocent men / women being accused of other people's crimes.⁷ Clifford's faith is certainly deep and his view is that no-one would be able to bear the weight of such terrible sins. In any case, in his screenplay there is only room for philosophers like Professor Levy (Martin S. Bergmann), the one he has been interviewing for months. Tragic faults demand cathartic expiations, that is, the criminal of Judah's story must surrender to the police, since even the vulgarity of a selfish man can then assume tragic proportions.⁸ Needless to say, Judah jeers at Clifford's naïve beliefs and, like a man who shows considerable adroitness for detecting paradoxes, he maintains that he could admit that tragedy or the tragic proportions of a story may be regarded as a ‘happy ending’ but, if true, it follows that Hollywood is undoubtedly the relevant reference.

In fact, Clifford's naïve faith in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* contrasts with Lester's (Alan Alda) intellectual boldness and lack of moral scrupulousness. He is a TV producer whose success and wealth reveals that he is not interested in attaining tragic proportions for the stories he shoots. On the contrary, he deliberately turns tragedies into comedies. He justifies himself by saying that he works in such a bold way because the audiences ask him to do it to forget their

⁶ All the quotations will correspond to Allen 1989.

⁷ Sol, Judah's father: “....The eyes of God see all. Listen to me, Judah. There is absolutely nothing that escapes his sight. He sees the righteous and he sees the wicked. And the righteous will be rewarded, but the wicked will be punished for eternity”.

⁸ See e. g.: Aristotle's *Poetics* VI: VI, 2-3: “Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude ... It represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions”.

daily trials and tribulations. Let us see him, then, boasting about his revolutionary theories:

I love New York. And what makes New York such a funny place is that there's so much tension and pain and misery and craziness here. And that's the first part of the comedy. But you have to get some distance from it. The thing to remember about comedy is: if it bends, it's funny; if it breaks, it's not funny. So you gotta get back from the pain. They asked me at Harvard: 'What's comedy?'. I said: 'Comedy is tragedy plus time'. The night Lincoln was shot, you couldn't make a joke about it. You just couldn't. Now, time has gone by, and now it's fair game. See what I mean? It's tragedy plus time. It's very simple. Think of Oedipus. Oedipus is funny. That's the structure of funny, right there. 'Who did this terrible thing?'. 'Oh, God, it was me'. That's funny. Look at those people out there! These people are lookin' for something funny in their lives!

But the views expressed above are very questionable. Surely a more powerful intellectual weapon than paradox is needed to associate tension, pain and misery with what is funny. From an ethical point of view neither distance nor intellectual games can turn tragedy into comedy. For instance, would it ever be possible for Oedipus, emblem of all tragic expiation, to become a sort of a comic who laughs at himself? In the context of the 9/11 New York tragedy, the possibility of making a joke like the one about Lincoln's assassination, as Allen does in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, becomes increasingly far-fetched. In fact, it is difficult to calculate how many years will be needed for a New Yorker to dare make a joke about this event, if indeed anyone were ever to do so.

I am not going to present a hypothesis now—since I already did on another occasion—about the likelihood of a Sophistic (or Greek) rather than Jewish legacy,⁹ which Allen draws on when he decides that Judah Rosenthal and his brother (Jerry Orbach) dare to laugh at the eyes of God which see nothing at all, at the *timor Dei* of naïve men and also at Justice, whose bandaged eyes do not seem to indicate her impartiality but a scandalous indifference towards so many crimes without punishment.¹⁰

Nevertheless, I should like to point out that, in spite of those three months between Judah's remorse and his happy return to his family and professional life; in spite of being convinced—probably thinking of Protagoras's thesis—that God is a luxury he cannot afford; in spite of overcoming the fear of any divine punishment—with also the probable intellectual help of Critias; in spite of confirming—as maintained many centuries earlier by Antiphon—that Justice lies in not transgressing the law before witnesses; in spite of the mocking words with which he addresses Clifford when he advises him to search in Hollywood for the happy ending he seeks almost religiously, and, finally, in spite of the death of Dolores (Anjelica Huston), which is clearly necessary to save the personal welfare of both his lover and tragic anti-hero, in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and as a result of an executive decision by Woody Allen, there

⁹ See Gilabert 2006. The English version, "New York versus Tragedy and Oedipus: The Legacy of Sophocles and the Sophists in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*" is available at www.paugilabertbarbera.com

¹⁰ However, regarding the Jewish legacy, see e. g.: Kinne 1996 and Stora-Sandor 1984. And regarding Justice: Colwell 1991.

is still room for tragedy, for Sophocles and the ethical and literary paradigm *Oedipus Rex*, i.e., for personal responsibility. Clifford proclaims it by not taking into account the presumptuous lesson of Judah and also by deciding that he does not want to prostitute himself in order to finally forget his financial difficulties. Needless to say, it is Lester who finally conquers the woman whom Clifford also loves (Mia Farrow), so that Woody Allen might be suggesting that, although his screenplay respects the right of fair people to behave ethically, one should never forget that many times the final triumph does not accompany them and Fortune often ill-treats them.

It is not my job in this article to propose a hopeful or upbeat interpretation of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. However, despite the fact that Clifford acknowledges both the tragic and painful expiation of any crime; despite the personal tragedy of his failed marriage; despite the tragic search of his sister Barbara (Caroline Aaron) for a good man; despite the tragic lack of any scruples on Lester's part; despite Ben's (Sam Waterston) tragic blindness; despite the tragic disrespect for the human life which Dolores's violent death signifies; to sum up, despite our tragic nature, there are, as Professor Levy says, surprisingly energetic and hopeful men and women:

We are all faced throughout our lives with agonising decisions, moral choices. Some are on a grand scale, most of these choices are on lesser points. But we define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are, in fact, the sum total of our choices. Events unfold so unpredictably, so unfairly. Human happiness does not seem to have been included in the design of creation. It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to the indifferent universe. And yet, most human beings seem to have the ability to keep trying and even to find joy from simple things like their family, their work, and from the hope that future generations might understand more.¹¹

This is a thoughtful voice in the midst of more frivolous views. We all live in an unpredictable, indifferent and unfair world, but we have to make our choices to the extent of defining ourselves by them. Philosophy—or simply Reason—makes us understand that in this universe there is no room for happiness or, at least, it does not seem to have been included in the design of the Creation.¹² This terrible feeling must have been precisely the cause of the

¹¹ A bit earlier, during another flashback of one of his lectures, he had said: "But we must always remember that we, when we are born, we need a great deal of love in order to persuade us to stay in life. Once we get that love, it usually lasts us. But the universe is a pretty cold place; it's we who invest it with our feelings. And, under certain conditions, we feel that it isn't worth it any more". He is very probably the image of the real Primo Levi, an Italian writer and chemist who was a survivor of the concentration camps in World War II. He told of his experiences in *Survival in Auschwitz*. Although he survived, even torture, he fell into a deep depression whose tragic result was his suicide on 11 April 1987. In this sense, Clifford's words about Levy's unexpected suicide are relevant: "[His family] were all killed in the war. That's what's so strange about this. He's seen the worst side of life. He always was affirmative. Always said 'yes' to life, 'yes', 'yes', now today he said 'no'".

¹² A theme on which Judah and the rabbi Ben reflect. "BEN: It's a fundamental difference in the way we view the world. You see it as harsh and empty of values and pitiless, and I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel it with all my heart a moral structure, with real meaning and forgiveness, and some kind of higher power. Otherwise there's no basis to know how to live". See e. g.: Nichols 1998.

suicide of Professor Levy who, moreover, leaves a simple note reporting that he has jumped from the window.¹³ What is left, then? Surprisingly, there are still men and women in a tragic world searching for a minimum of personal stability in their capacity for love, their families and work, and above all in the hope of discovering meaning in their lives, which for the time being seems to be reserved for future generations because of a tragic and inexorable universal Destiny.

III

Everything that has been addressed so far shows that Woody Allen, in spite of his own personal and substantial hope, must often struggle with an existential doubt that does not ever completely relent. Nevertheless, sometimes Light rescues us from Darkness and *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995) leads us, in the fluctuating course of Allen's production, to the summit which, for the time being, has not been conquered a second time. Once more he takes advantage of tragedy, because the tale of Lenny Weinrib (Woody Allen), which he has decided to write, is "[a] tale as Greek and timeless as fate itself".¹⁴ In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* Lester turned tragedies into comedies in both a frivolous and a scandalous way. By way of contrast, the American director will make his characters live joyful experiences whilst respecting the laws of Greek tragedy or, at least, some of their essential features.

Indeed, this Greek tale with a *happy ending*, in which ancient tragedy and contemporary life become confused, lacks nothing at all. The Chorus mentions great protagonists of tragic horror: "Woe unto man! Brave Achilles slain in trial by blood. For price, the bride of Menelaus and father of Antigone, ruler of Thebes, self-rendered sightless by lust for expiation. Lost victim of bewildered desire. Nor has Jason's wife fared better: Giving life only to reclaim it in vengeful fury". Something terrible, then, is going to happen, and this time it might be avoided if the warnings of the oracle, that is, the tragic intuitions of Lenny himself and the reference to the tragic tales of Laius, Iocaste and Oedipus are taken into account:

LENNY: We adopt some little boy and when he turns 13 at night he kills us with an ax.

CHORUS: Laius, proud father, speak.

LAIUS: I, with joy, did have a son. So fair, so clear-headed and brave that I a thousand pleasures did derive from his presence. So what happens? One day he kills me. And don't you think, he runs off and marries my wife?

CHORUS: Poor Oedipus, King of Thebes.

IOCASTE: My son did slay unwittingly my noble husband. And without realizing, hasten with me, his loving mother, to lustful bed.

CHOREUTES: And a whole profession was born by charging sometimes \$200 an hour and a 50 minute hour, at that.

¹³ Paradoxically, Professor Levy was himself from his non-religious view of human life the image of coherence. From this perspective, his suicide seems as absurd as the fact that Clifford's sister had a brief love affair with a handsome man and, when he had already seduced her and she believed that they were going to make love, he confined himself to defecating on her.

¹⁴ All the quotations will correspond to Allen 1995.

Consequently, it is quite clear that, without an adoption, there will not be a tragedy, or a comedy, or what this film or 'cinematographic destiny' may offer, so that Amanda (Helena Bonham Carter) and Lenny, *mutatis mutandis*, will also have their personal Oedipus, Max, in this case a lovely child who lacks any incestuous or parricidal instinct. Everything, then, could have continued perfectly well, but the Sophoclean paradigm followed by Allen makes Lenny imitate Oedipus and, therefore, not heed the serious warnings of his three personal Teiresias: Teiresias himself (Jack Warden), the Chorus and Cassandra (Danielle Ferland) (needless to say, when I mentioned Allen's 'respect' for the laws of Greek tragedy, I meant *Allenico modo*, since, besides the above cited changes—for instance, the appearance of Cassandra, a character who corresponds to the *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus—we will also detect that superior law proclaimed by Antigone, the well-known *deus ex machina* of the tragedies by Euripides, and the Roman and not Greek theatre of Taormina):

CHORUS: Don't go any further.

CHOREUTES: I know what you're thinking and forget it.

LENNY: The thought's been put in my head.

CHORUS: Cursed fate. Certain thoughts are better left unthunk.

LENNY: I bet this kid has a dynamite mother.

CHOREUTES: Maybe he got everything from his father.

LENNY: Everything? That's unlikely, but I'm going to find out.

CHORUS: Let sleeping dogs lie!

CHOREUTES: Curiosity kills us... What are you doing Weinrib? You're breaking the law.

LENNY: There's a higher law. I can find out who the mother is.

CASSANDRA: You never should've looked for her. Now I see big trouble.

LENNY: You're such a Cassandra! I gotta check this out.

CASSANDRA: You'll be very sorry. Quit now.

CHORUS: Poor Weinrib! Turn back. Don't meddle any further. Accept the truth.

CASSANDRA: I see disaster. I see catastrophe.

The *katastrophé* or overturning of the great expectations conceived by Lenny takes place when he meets Linda (Mira Sorvino), who is known as *Judy Cum*—certainly a disgusting *anagnórisis*. However, in spite of being a prostitute and an actress in pornographic films, she is also an adorable and motherly woman:

LINDA: I had a kid, Lenny. I gave him up for adoption. It's the sorriest thing I ever did in my life. There's not a day that doesn't go by that I don't wake up thinking about him. Now some lucky family has him, I hope they're taking care of him.

LENNY: Why did you give him up?

LINDA: I don't know. I was all confused. I had no dough. I didn't know what to do... the father could have been one of a hundred guys. Welcome to planet Earth, thanks to a broken condom.

Mighty Aphrodite offers a great deal of joy and hope but, as has been seen, the price imposed by tragedy—and thus in this Greek tale of Allen's, too—must be paid. Besides the most terrible choice made by Linda, there are still more sad episodes such as the separation of Amanda and Lenny, and, above all, Linda will be ill-treated by the man to whom she was introduced by Lenny who did so in the interests of her future welfare and happiness. Lenny and Linda, then, share their tragic experiences, console each other and the Chorus in its turn will implore Zeus for help:

CHORUS: Oh, Zeus, most potent of gods, we implore thee: We need your help! Zeus, great Zeus, hear us! Hear us! We call out to thee.

ZEUS'S VOICE: This is Zeus. I'm not home right now, but you can leave me a message and I'll get back to you. Please, start speaking at the tone.

CHORUS: Call us when you get in. We need help.

Maybe we laugh at this ultramodern Zeus who uses an answering machine but one also detects true human helplessness, and it would be certainly difficult to find a man or a woman who has never had such a terrible feeling. Lenny will experience it even after making love to Linda and finding out that he misses Amanda, his wife. Linda will, too, when she feels alone once more after her disastrous relationship with a violent man. And the fact that they both acknowledge their respective tragedies magnifies the joyful end of the conflict, which in the case of a little Greek drama could only be a *deus ex machina*, at least as far as Linda's destiny is concerned:

CHOREUTES: And as for Linda... On the way home, she was distraught and felt life held no hope when talk about a *Deus ex machina* ... So Linda married to a wonderful man who accepted her ... And so our little Greek drama comes to...

TEIRESIAS: Wait. There's more. On that night Lenny Weinrib and Linda did make love. Linda became pregnant with Lenny's child. She never told him. She went off with her new husband ... she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Lenny never saw Linda again. Then, one fall day in New York...

LINDA:I'm married. I knew you would be back with Amanda.

LENNY: Is this yours? She's adorable.

LINDA: Is that Max? What a handsome boy ... I'm really good. Thank you for everything.

CHOREUTES: But they have each other's child and they don't know.

CHORUS: Yes. Isn't life ironic?

CHOREUTES: Life is unbelievable. Miraculous. Sad. Wonderful.

Woody Allen believes once again in men and women and their need for love. It is precisely love with all its mystery that can undo the tragic knot and make them happy. On the other hand, we have just witnessed a peculiar adaptation of the double sense of tragic irony familiar to the Greeks. Indeed, Greek audiences saw with irony how tragic heroes and heroines made their choices, since they certainly knew that precisely those choices would lead them towards an unbearable catastrophe. *Mutatis mutandis*, and in this case in a positive sense, Lenny knows to what extent it is absolutely ironic that Linda believes that Max is his son, while Linda, in her turn, sees how Lenny believes ironically that the

father of her daughter is her husband. And it is also ironic that everything has come to a happy end while just the opposite might have been the case. This overturning of the conflict or *katastrophé*, which among the Greeks could only indicate that everything went downwards (*katá*) in a negative sense, follows the opposite direction, thus giving way to the exaltation (*aná*) of joy and not to the fall into depression. Indeed, might we not be mistaken and have naïvely believed that Tragedy was a mask attached to our faces—an essential part of our natures—while now we can see that, given the example of the actors on the screen, it was only necessary to turn it upside down in order for it to be transformed into joy? And, after seeing the chorus both singing and dancing, should we not believe that this is Hollywood rather than Taormina, thus confirming that “that’s entertainment”? Why do we not accept that life is sad but also unbelievable and marvellous? Why must everything be so tragic if a smile, as the song says, can transform everything and remove for evermore both the rain and all sorts of human storms?

IV

In *Melinda & Melinda* (2004) Woody Allen matches tragedy with comedy, misery with joy.¹⁵ First, it might appear that both Melindas (Radha Mitchell) are treated even-handedly in the film, since the unfortunate Melinda and the fortunate one appear in it from start to finish without apparently being favoured. However, one sees very soon that the positive valuation of the second Melinda is, in fact, an altruistic intellectual concession to the vain hope for a better world. The relative confidence of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and the undeniable joy of *Mighty Aphrodite* are left behind, and one begins to perceive that, whatever the personal reasons may be, Woody Allen seems almost to be ashamed of earlier upsurges of enthusiasm, while the most reasonable thing would be to judge joys and pains, comedy and tragedy, by being truly impartial.

Here are the images which make us see and hear different speakers in lively discussions about comedy and tragedy or, more specifically, about which of the two is deeper. We suspect from the outset that the former is more superficial, since speaker A, who writes comedies, seems convinced of what he is saying: “The essence of life isn’t comic. It’s tragic. I mean, there’s nothing intrinsically funny about the terrible facts of human existence”. It is quite obvious that, with the help of such a serious statement, one could ‘neutralize’ all the Lesters of our world and, in any case, the appearance of Aristotle and the ‘essence or substance’ means that a serious obstacle has been put in the way of the defenders of comedy.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Allen creates a speaker B, a writer of tragedies, who expresses the opposite view with as much conviction as the writer of comedies: “No, I disagree. Philosophers call it absurd because, in the end, all you can do is laugh. Human aspirations are so ludicrous and irrational. I mean, if the underlying reality of our being was tragic, my plays would make more than yours because my stories would resonate more profoundly with the

¹⁵ All the quotations will correspond to Allen 2004.

¹⁶ See e. g.: Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 1017b 32-37: “Thus it follows that ‘substance’ has two senses: the ultimate subject, which cannot be further predicated of something else; and whatever has an individual and separate existence. The shape and form of each particular thing is of this nature”.

human soul". What does 'tragic essence' mean, then, if it does not refer to the underlying essence of human beings? Nothing at all. Therefore, we had better forget Aristotle and begin to speak about 'absurdity', 'irrationality' and 'laughter', although, as we shall see immediately, speaker A does not surrender: "I mean, it's exactly because tragedy hits on the truly painful essence of life that people run to my comedies for escape... I mean, tragedy confronts. Comedy escapes". Speaker C decides to be impartial, and speaker D thinks that the best thing would be to tell a story in order to elucidate whether it is a comedy or a tragedy. Nevertheless, consciously or not, he transforms his story into a romantic comedy and is accused by speaker C of not taking into account its tragic implications, so that here are definitively two Melindas, the unfortunate one and the fortunate one, depending on our tragic or comic vision of everything.

For the time being, impartiality seems to be guaranteed, but Aristotle and his 'essence or substance' is a brick-wall rather than a mere obstacle, and that tragic essence of human life under a surface which sometimes may be comic cannot easily be defeated. In my opinion, the best proof would be that, if one wants to join the beginning and the end of the film, it is not necessary to review the joyful life of the fortunate Melinda. Indeed, if one listens to the final conclusions of the speakers, C maintains that now her first thesis has been confirmed:

So, you see, it's all in the eye of the beholder. We hear a little story, a few hearsay details. Right? You mould them into a tragic tale: a woman's weakness for romance is her undoing. And that's how you see life. Whereas you, you take those details, you put them into an amusing romance. Great. That's your take on life. But, obviously, there is no one definitive essence that can be pinned down.

As seen, one prefers now this simple adaptation of Protagoras's *homo mensura* to a 'monster' such as Aristotle,¹⁷ but the truth is that Woody Allen makes speaker A utter the last words in a lively discussion and, then, tragedy becomes the undeniable protagonist and will remain so till the end. We understand now why the unfortunate Melinda, in the course of a party which was meant to cheer her up and while she is talking to Ellis (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a pianist with whom she will fall in love, needs to rub her hands against the surface of a lamp, which she imagines to be magic, hoping that her fortune will finally change. Needless to say, if with regard to comedy and tragedy a true impartiality were guaranteed, magic would not play any role in this story. But the pianist also believes in magic:

¹⁷ See e. g.: Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1, 216-219: "Protagoras also holds that 'Man is the measure of all things', of existing things that they exist, and of non-existing things that they exist not; and by 'measure' he means the criterion, and by 'things' the objects, so that he is virtually asserting that 'Man is the criterion of all objects', of those which exist that they exist, and of those which exist not that they exist not. And consequently he posits only what appears to each individual, and thus introduces relativity". See also Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 11, 6, 1062 b 13: "Protagoras said that man is the measure of all things, by which he meant simply that each individual's impressions are positively true. But if this is so, it follows that the same thing is and is not, and is bad and good, and that all the other implications of opposite statements are true; because often a given thing seems beautiful to one set of people and ugly to another, and that which seems to each individual is the measure".

I think it's the only thing that can save us. Why do things that start off so promisingly always have a way of ending up in a dump? You know, life is manageable enough if you keep your hopes modest. The minute you allow yourself sweet dreams you run the risk of them crashing down. Believe me. There's plenty of old songs that I cry over.

He is not Greek and, therefore, he neither mentions the envy of the gods nor remembers that human beings can be considered happy only after their death, when the final computation of their happiness can be proved, but, consciously or not, Woody Allen endows him with the tragic soul of the Greeks.¹⁸ And for the same reason we also understand that the unfortunate Melinda prefers not to hear the good news his defender has for her regarding custody of her children: "I don't dare say this, but it looks hopeful. God. I almost wish this opportunity hadn't come up, you know. I just don't know if I can handle the tension. I mean, just say it doesn't work out". Ellis, the pianist, wants her to be confident: "I do know that we were not put on this Earth to be dragged all the time", but neither her defender's prediction comes true nor does she succeed in retaining Ellis, who falls in love with her best friend, Laurel (Chloë Sevigny), and intends to justify himself: "I don't have a satisfying explanation. You know. These things happen. Living is messy".

In order to guarantee the above mentioned impartiality with regard to the two Melindas, the final conclusions of the speakers—or at least the conclusions of speaker A, who is not refuted anymore—should not be based to such an extent upon the endless tragedy of the unfortunate Melinda but also upon the joyful experiences of the fortunate one. However, if we pay attention to the last words of the discussion, it is quite obvious that the reverse is the case:

A: Well, moments of humour do exist. I exploit them. But, you know, they exist within a tragic overall framework.

D: Is everybody going to Phil Dorman's funeral next week? He just had his cardiogram, which was perfect.

C: I hate funerals.

B: Me too. Always at the wrong time, I laugh.

A: We laugh because it masks our real terror about mortality.

D: I didn't mean to bring up the subject of funerals.

A: Well, how can it be a romantic, funny world if you can't trust your own cardiogram?

D: I wanna be cremated.

A: Now? Or after your death?

B: Let's change the subject. We came out to have a fun and relaxing evening. Jesus!

A: Let's drink to good times. Comic or tragic the most important thing is to enjoy life while you can, because we only go round once, and when it's over, it's over. And, perfect cardiogram or not, when you least expect it, it could end like that.

With regard to this quote I should like to emphasize an important element of Greek tragedy, i.e. masks. If in *Mighty Aphrodite* Allen had almost convinced us that masks are in fact an absurd adherence to our faces that should be

¹⁸ See e. g.: Herodotus I, 26-32.

turned around, he seems now to regret that earlier boldness by maintaining that human laughter masks an underlying tragedy which is inherent to our condition. We know it, but we would rather enjoy life while we can, above all when we see on the screen that the Director and Editor of our personal films, whoever s/he may be, might decide to put an unexpected end to our lives.

V

The premiere of *Match Point* (2005) took place only one year after *Melinda & Melinda* but this film shows, in my opinion, a hopelessness both true and 'tragic'.¹⁹ We shall have to continue to speak about tragedy because of the explicit reference to Sophocles and those verses from *Oedipus at Colonus* which were already quoted at the beginning of this paper. However, for all those who regard Allen's films as in many ways part of the Greek legacy that we have been studying for years, it would be in fact impossible not to think of that Hellenistic *Týche*, which has become both the image and the emblem of a historical period, immediately associated with the loss of the traditional reference to the *pólis* and, as a consequence, with a real feeling of insecurity, uncertainty and fear—*stricto et lato sensu* in all cases.²⁰ And, given that this article deals with cinema and the undeniable power of its images, it is worth taking advantage of those belonging to *Alexander* (2004), by Oliver Stone, directing our attention to the generals and soldiers who were swept up in the conquering madness of that visionary young man. Indeed, they saw how Fortune often abandons even the most powerful men—that is to say, Darius far earlier than Alexander himself—and day after day they also felt undoubtedly both fear and a true longing for Greece, which was by then so far away. Needless to say, it is difficult to resist the temptation of comparing that historical period with our contemporary world and, if this were the case, everyone would choose the most suitable instances to illustrate the loss of a wide range of references, which had been perceived as secure—or reasonably secure—before their disappearance. At any rate, we would all very probably come to an agreement, i.e., this world of ours is confident about its powers, conquests and triumphs and yet at the same time it is fearful of the outbreak—or simply of the confirmation—of a global tragedy: be it one related to ecology, war, culture, loss of values, or the health of the human race with the current increase in cancer, depression and mental illness.

The reason why I have begun by making such a general case is that Allen makes Chris (Jonathan Rhys Meyers)—the unscrupulous criminal of *Match Point*—the mouthpiece for the most terrible thesis of his screenplay. Indeed, his future wife, Chloe (Emily Mortimer), who mentions the luck that his brother Tom (Matthew Goode) wants for Nola, says that she confides more in hard work than unreliable luck, but Chris does not agree with her: "Oh, hard work is mandatory but I think everybody's afraid to admit what a big part luck plays. I mean, it seems scientists are confirming more and more that all existence is here by blind chance. No purpose, no design".²¹ Consequently, given that we are now deprived of that cosmos, order or global sense we had

¹⁹ All the quotations will correspond to Allen 2005.

²⁰ See e. g.: Polybius I, 1-4, 5.

²¹ Think, for instance, of the studies by the famous palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould.

been taught to trust in by the Greeks, deprived of any *télos*, too, how could we resist the temptation to embrace the tragic ethical indifference of a Chris who has been seduced by a Fortune which lacks, by definition, any criterion or sense of distributive justice—or at least this is what Allen seems to maintain?

Certainly, there will be those who, with the help of well-established ethical codes, react in despair or with faith, but if they must argue with those who worship Fortune, they will find themselves in serious trouble, since very probably they will be accused of having lost contact with the real world or, in other words, of forgetting about those who mock Justice and are never punished. According to the adorers of Fortune, if one opts for resistance, one has to take the path not of the least but of the most resistance—though, in the case of Chris, this will mean the sacrifice of three innocent human beings: “TOM: What was it the vicar used to say? ‘Despair is the path of least resistance’. It was something odd, wasn’t it? It was. / CHRIS: I think that faith is the path of least resistance”.

This attitude implies to lay aside any ethical code or deep understanding of life. It is necessary to be brave, to cope with fear and to notice that, although there are many things which are beyond our control, this is not always negative. As far as *Match Point* is concerned, the main contribution of Woody Allen to the world of images—to the world of cinema, then—is, in my opinion, the one which explains everything with the least effort and the greatest effectiveness: a tennis-ball hitting the top of the net and leaving the onlooker wondering whether it will fall forward or back. Bearing in mind the title of Allen’s film, it is quite obvious that it deals with the most significant ball, that is, the one which will decide either the triumph or the defeat, although in the hands of the American director it becomes the allegorical image of the *match point* which, sooner or later, not only the main character, Chris, but also all human beings must play:

The man who said ‘I’d rather be lucky than good’ saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It’s scary to think so much is out of one’s control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck it goes forward and you win. Or maybe it doesn’t and you lose.

Later on, Chris, favoured by the good luck of meeting Tom and, through him, his sister Chloe, becomes intimate with her, taking advantage of the extremely wealthy position of his future father-in-law, Alec Hewett (Brian Cox), enjoying a very good professional life and having still better future expectations. One day he meets an old fellow, Henry (Rupert Penry-Jones), and repeats what his voice-over had already said when the ball-image was on the screen. When repeating it, he still shows a certain modesty, probably the one which is particular to a man who knows that he does not deserve his good luck, but we see him very well prepared for the above mentioned most resistance: “CHRIS:I got involved with a woman, very nice. Family’s got nothing but money. Big estate, servants, polo ponies. All quite lovely. Isn’t it amazing how much of life turns on whether the ball goes over the net or comes right back at you”.

Nevertheless, Fortune is unstable by definition or, in other words, we can also have bad luck and, amid such good fortune and abundance, the darker side will intrude when Chris gets Nola (Scarlett Johansson) pregnant and not

his wife Chloe. This is the first time we shall hear him mention the name of Christ, not to proclaim any conversion or *metánoia* but to show both his annoyance and fury. In short, having been so favoured by Fortune, he even considers himself a 'fortunate' man. His fury turns finally into an accurate planning of the murder whose victims will be Nola and the child she is expecting. In accordance with the traditional restraint of the Greek tragedy in this respect, we shall not contemplate any blood-scene, although we shall see him shooting first Nola's neighbour and, afterwards, Nola herself. Now both women are dead, Chris is being tortured by serious remorse, and the spectres of Nola and Mrs Eastby (Margaret Tyzack) make their appearance. Time has arrived, then, for the most resistance:

CHRIS: Nola! It wasn't easy. But when the time came I could pull the trigger. You never know who your neighbours are till there's a crisis. You can learn to push the guilt under the rug and go on. You have to. Otherwise it overwhelms you.

MRS EASTBY: And what about me? What about the next-door neighbour? I had no involvement in this awful affair. Is there no problem about me having to die as an innocent bystander?

CHRIS: The innocent are sometimes slain to make way for a grander scheme. You were collateral damage.

MRS EASTBY: So was your own child.

CHRIS: Sophocles said: 'To never have been born may be the greatest boon of all'.

NOLA: Prepare to pay the price, Chris. Your actions were clumsy. Full of holes. Almost like someone begging to be found out.

CHRIS: It would be fitting if I were apprehended and punished. At least there would be some small sign of justice. Some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning.

Nola's spectre is still confident that Justice will finally triumph and Chris will be punished as he deserves, but the scriptwriter is going to play a dirty trick on her. In fact, Nola is behaving like a policeman rather than a victim. It is not her job to judge whether the criminal's actions have been "clumsy" or not, or even "[f]ull of holes", "[a]lmost like someone begging to be found out". Furthermore, her naïve confidence and Chris's desire to be arrested and punished in order to save Justice and the sense of everything certainly magnifies the irony, which is a tragic one with regard to all fair people—that is, opposed to what they deserve and expect—when we see this clumsy murderer getting his own way in the end. Indeed, the previous image of the tennis-ball is now retaken and adapted to the new situation, and we contemplate how the 'ball-ring' hits the top of the 'net-balustrade' next to the Thames and doubt if it will fall into the river or on the ground, which is finally the case. And there it remains until a junkie with a long string of convictions picks it up and, later on, is accused of a murder he has not committed.

As just seen, *Match Point* shows no mercy at all towards the audience. Indeed, what can human beings do in this world of ours if "all existence is here by blind chance, no purpose, no design"? Who will stop them if, leaving aside any *timor Dei* or any sort of laws and punishments, they finally find the courage "to pull the trigger", to kill and, overcoming any remorse, "to learn to push the

guilt under the rug and go on”? Woody Allen’s answer seems to be that “to never have been born may be the greatest boon of all”. This is not a suitable time, then, for Euripides and his *dei ex machina* but for Sophocles and the total tragedies. We can think that Allen has been excessive by presenting hopeless men and women but, from my point of view, he gives us enough hints to pass from the limited realm of the screenplay to the far wider one of our real world. Indeed, should we believe that Nola’s child and Nola and Mrs Eastby refer only to themselves and, as a consequence, they bear no relation to the tragedies enacted throughout the world and about which we are informed day after day? Is it not true that we often ask ourselves why those who are responsible are not arrested and punished, so that there is still “some small sign of justice, some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning”? And finally, if the present and centuries-old deaths of innocent people does not even mean “to make way for a grander scheme”, must we admit then that Allen is right?

Chris gets his own way, resists the temptation which faith means and worships his own interest. Everything has worked out well—*ironico et tragico sensu*—and remorse has failed to defeat him. The policemen who had suspected him of the crime have concluded now that “He’s another poor schmuck who cheated on his wife, which is perfectly understandable when you see those pictures of Nola Rice”. Chloe has become pregnant and they are apparently a happy couple. He is held in high esteem as a professional and has finally had a child, Terence. His grandfather, who is fortunately anchored in past times, expects his grandson will excel in everything. On the contrary, his uncle Tom, a true symbol of the new, does not care if he will be great and only wishes that “he’s lucky and all that sail on him”. Is it a tragic end? Maybe ironic? Both ironic and tragic? The audience, *comme il faut*, has the last word.

VI

In an interview conducted on 29 October 2006 on the occasion of the premiere of *Scoop* (2006), which was shot in London, like *Match Point*, and also on the shooting of his next film, *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona* (2008), Allen maintains that he has always had the feeling that only magic can save the human race, that any solutions proposed by philosophers, religious leaders, politicians or sociologists have failed in the end. In his opinion, without some sort of magic we are doomed. Unless there is a marvellous trick which can save us, we are a condemned species, a damned one. The very notion of a universe, of a cosmos, of existence as a whole is magic.

Maybe we find him naïve, earlier we found him tragic and hopeless. Magic has saved and still saves him from the tragic destiny of the human race as well as from the tragedy of the whole of Existence. And the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy—certainly approached in a very personal way—endows him in its turn with everything necessary to speak to his faithful audiences about the joys, pains and little and great miseries of contemporary men and women.²²

²² This article is dedicated to M. Oliva, S. Hampshire, P. L. Cano, F. J. Tovar, J. M. Lucas, X. Riu and M. Osset

Works Cited

- Allen, W. 1995: *Woody por Allen*. By S. Björkman. Madrid: Plot.
- 2002: *Conversaciones con Woody Allen*. By J.M. Frodon. Barcelona, Buenos Aires, México: Paidós.
- 2005: “Entretien avec Woody Allen: certains sujets méritent de ne pas être pris à la légère”. By G. Valens. *Mensuelle de cinema* 527(Jan): 17-20.
- 2006 : “Woody Allen: El cel-luloide al barret”. By I. Noain. *El Periódico. Dominical* 29 October. 215: 26-33.
- 2007: *Conversations with Woody Allen*. By E. Lax. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Aristotle 1965: *Poetics*. Ed. and trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- 1969: *Metaphysics*. Ed. and trans. H. Tredennick. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Bailey, P.J. 2000: *The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky.
- Baldry, H. C. 1973: *The Greek Tragic Theatre*. London: W. W. Norton.
- Baxter, J. W. 1998: *Allen: A Biography*. London: Harper & Collins.
- Bendazzi, G. 1987: *The Films of Woody Allen*. London: Ravette.
- Bermel, Alfred 1982: *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP.
- Blake, R.A. 1995: *Woody Allen: Profane and Sacred*. Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow P.
- 2005: *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese and Lee*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky.
- Brode, D. 1991: *The films of Woody Allen*. New York: Carol.
- Colwell, G. 1991: “Plato, Woody Allen, and Justice”. *Teaching Philosophy* 14 (December).4: 339-407.
- Conard, M.T. and Skoblie, A.J. eds. 2004: *Woody Allen and Philosophy: You Mean My Whole Fallacy is Wrong?* Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Csapo, E. and W.J. Slater 1995: *The Context of Ancient Drama*. Ann Arbor, MI: The U of Michigan P.
- Downing, C. 1997: “Woody Allen’s Blindness and Insight: The Palimpsests of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*”. *Religion and the Arts* 1.2 (Spring): 73-92.
- Easterling, P.E. 1997: *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Flashner, G. 1988: *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Woody Allen*. London: Robson.
- Fonte, J. 2002: *Woody Allen*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Gilabert, P. 2006: “New York versus la tragedia y Edipo: El legado de Sófocles y los sofistas en *Crimes and Misdemeanors* de Woody Allen”. *Actas del Congreso Sófocles Hoy: Veinticinco siglos de tragedia*. Córdoba: El Almendro. 183-98.
- Girgus, S. B. 1993: *The films of Woody Allen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Girlanda, E. 1995: *Woody Allen*. Milano: Castoro.
- Green D. 1991: “The Comedian’s Dilemma: Woody Allen’s ‘Serious’ Comedy”. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 19.2: 70-76.
- Herodotus 1988: *Herodoti Historiae*. Ed. and trans. C. Hude. Oxford: Clarendon P.

- Hösle, Vittorio 2007: *Woody Allen: An Essay on the Nature of the Comical*. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P.
- Kinne, Thomas. L. 1996: *Elemente Jüdischer Tradition im Werk Woody Allens*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Lax, E. 1977 (1975): *On Being Funny: Woody Allen and Comedy*. New York: Charterhouse.
- 1992: *Woody Allen: A Biography*. New York: Vintage.
- Lee, Sander H. 1997: *Woody Allen's Angst: Philosophical Commentaries on His Serious Films*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland.
- Levi, Primo 1996: *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Longo, O. 1990: "The Theatre of the Polis". *Nothing to do with Dionysos?* Eds. J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin. Princeton: Princeton UP. 12-19.
- Luque, R. 2005: *En busca de Woody Allen: Sexo, muerte y cultura en su cine*. Madrid: Ocho y medio.
- Nichols, M.P. 1998: *Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love and Life in the Films of Woody Allen*. New York, Oxford, etc.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Polybius 1905: *Polybii Historiae*. Ed. and trans. T. Büttner-Wobst. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Roche, M. 1995: "Justice and the Withdrawal of God in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*". *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 29.4: 547-63.
- Schwartz, R.A. 2000: *Woody, from Ant to Zelig: A Reference Guide to Woody Allen's Creative Work, 1964-1998*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood P.
- Sextus Empiricus 1967: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Ed. and trans. R.G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Sinyard, N. 1987: *The Films of Woody Allen*. Twickenham: Hamlyn.
- Sophocles 1968: *Oedipus at Colonus*. Ed. and trans. F. Storr. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Spignesi, S.J. 1992: *The Woody Allen Companion*. London: Plexus.
- Stora-Sandor, J. 1984 : *L'humour juif dans la littérature de Job a Woody Allen*. Paris: PUF.
- Vipond, D.L. 1991: "*Crimes and Misdemeanors*: A Re-Take on the Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg". *Literature Film Quarterly* 19.2: 99-103.
- Wernblad, A. 1992: *Brooklyn is Not Expanding: Woody Allen's Comic Universe*. Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson UP.
- Wiles, D. 1997: *Tragedy in Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Yacowar, M. 1991: *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*. New York: Frederick Ungar.

Films Cited

- Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004)
- Cassandra's Dream* (Woody Allen, 2007)
- Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Woody Allen, 1989)
- Match Point* (Woody Allen, 2005)
- Melinda & Melinda* (Woody Allen, 2004)
- Mighty Aphrodite* (Woody Allen, 1995)

Scoop (Woody Allen, 2006)

Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona (Woody Allen, 2008)