

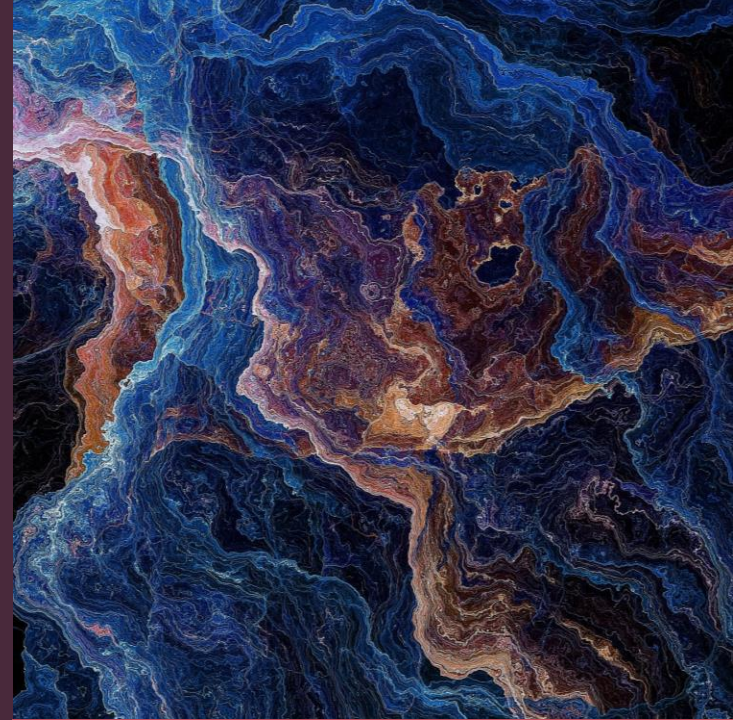
# The Bind in Film Comedy

## SRN 2023

Dr Deborah Klika

Associate Professor Film and Television

University of Greenwich





# Overview

This paper explores the nature of the bind in the film comedy as a narrative form rather than genre.



*A Fish Called Wanda*

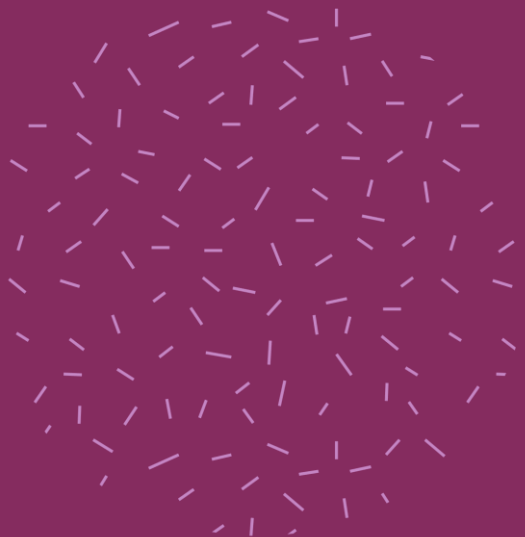
wrs. John Cleese and Charles Crichton, 1988

*The Devil Wears Prada*

wr. Aline Brosh McKenna, 2006

*Muriel's Wedding*

wr. P.J. Hogan, 1995



# The characters and their narrative in Drama vs Tragedy vs Comedy

The first being when the character begins to face their need or flaw after the midpoint (MP), the MPR and the second when the character never faces their need or flaw - the result is tragic.



# Comic character

Keith Giglio writes:

... at the midpoint of the story something will happen to them that is going to get them on the path to becoming whole, and repairing whatever is really wrong with them emotionally, inside.

*(Writing the Comedy Blockbuster, 2012, pp. 157-8)*

Or do they simply deny it until the last possible moment?

# Denial at the MP

I argue that the protagonist in a comedy becomes caught in a form of cognisant dissonance, enabled by the persistent denial of their need or flaw, coupled with a clear (and sometimes new) want which is increasingly out of the reach of the comic character.

# The MIDPOINT and COMIC TENSION

I offer that the MP initiate a 'bind' for the main character/s between a 'want' (often a tangible goal) and their 'need' (flaws they must face).

Further, I posit, that the comic character will only confront their need or flaw when they could lose something that has now become important to them.

# The Bind

Thus the **narrative structure of film comedy** is shaped by a **bind** born conscious goal/s at odds with unconscious flaws, even when becoming conscious are maintained by some form of lie, deception, misunderstanding, secret, or extreme denial.

**BIND = WANT+NEED**



# The comic antihero

Wes Gehring cites certain films as having antiheroes: *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *A Fish Called Wanda*. He writes -

“While Cleese is the most tightly wound of the three male principals addressed here, the other two (befuddled Hugh Grant of *Four Weddings*, and the ever-so-rigid Colin Firth of *Bridget*) are both in need of screwball revitalization.”

(2002, p. 146)



In this context the antihero is portrayed as not being the 'hero' in that they do not rescue an 'other', rather it is *they* that need rescuing - ultimately by themselves.

Looking at the MP of *A Fish Called Wanda*, Jamie Lee Curtis (Wanda) has come to Barrister Archie Leach's house to seduce him and get information about her co-conspirator, George.

# *A Fish Called Wanda* 1988— MP (4.10)



Archie is trapped in the female gaze x 2.

Archie is an antihero as defined by Gehring in that he is affected by the actions of others namely

**Wanda. But Archie is also caught in a bind between his want to be an ethical barrister and his need to have sex with Wanda but which he needs to deny – at all comic costs.**

At the MP both Archie and Wanda find themselves in a bind – he with his wife and she having lost the pendant that Wendy now discovers.

Wanda is very conscious of what she wants and needs, so her bind is not about facing a need rather about how to get to her goal of dumping George, Otto and getting the loot.

# *The Devil Wears Prada* 2006

Miranda Priestley is an antihero but in a different way – she knows what she wants and while she treats her staff with disdain, she awakens in Andie, the protagonist, the realisation that she does not want to be like Miranda or Miranda's assistant, Emily.

Andie is also an antihero in that another character has affected change in her.

While the antihero may (or may not) have moral misgiving, they can force change for other characters.

# The Female Gaze (1:19)



This is how Andie responds - her bind is evident. (1:40)



And the tension is in play... (1:17)



# Gap between WANT and NEED

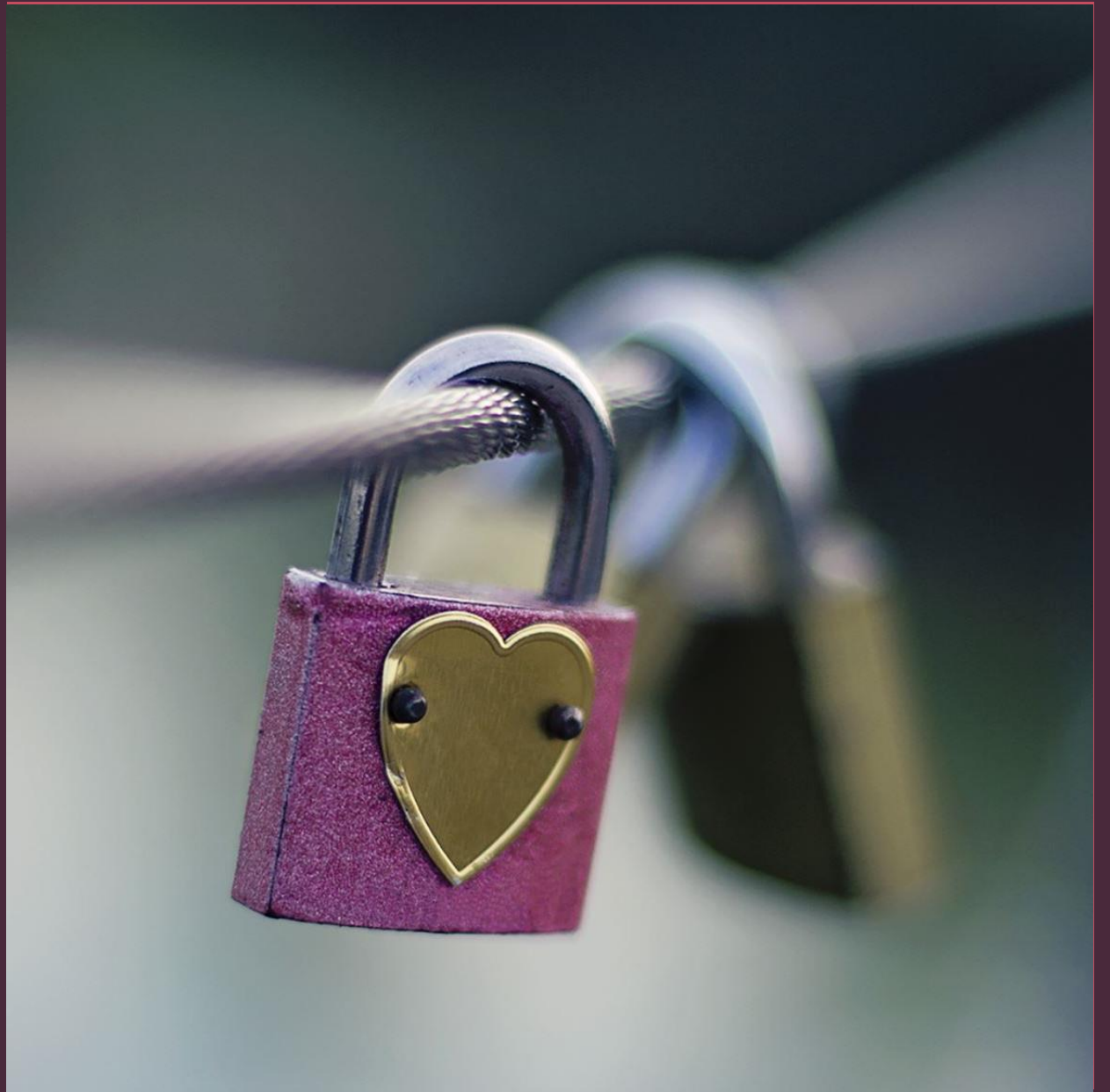
For the character to become aware of the reality, they must face their need, defined by a flaw that traps them in behaviour that undermines their goal - and to do something about it. This moment occurs at the MP.

Thus in the film comedy, the bind must be in play before the MP and the tension realised for the audience at least if not the comic character. Jill Chamberlain proposes in *The Nutshell Technique* that there must be a catch in play at the beginning of Act Two. And therefore I argue that the Catch enables the Bind.



# Want+Need = (Comic) Bind

I now posit that the greater the gap between a character's 'want' and 'need' the greater the comic tension.



# Muriel's Wedding 1995

The MP centre on the sudden paralysis of Muriel's friend Rhonda, after suffering a bad fall.

When Rhonda tries to release Muriel from any responsibility in caring for her, Muriel will not hear of it and confesses that since moving to Sydney and living with Rhonda she no longer listens to ABBA songs because her life is as good as *Dancing Queen*.

We may think Muriel has changed and faced her need to depend on fantasies. However, the following sequence sees Muriel in her continued addiction to wedding attire, intercut with the discovery by Rhonda of Muriel's photo album splattered with images of her in various bridal outfits. Rhonda confronts Muriel in the current bridal shop. (2:22)



MOVIECLIPS.COM

# Muriel becomes Marial becomes Muriel

Despite her addiction being exposed, Muriel agrees to marry a South African swimmer who needs Australian citizenship to compete in the next Olympics.

Here the character articulates the need, yet does not internalise it, thus denying it and going on to get married, losing the friendship with Rhonda who is forced back to the little life in Porpoise Spit due to her permanent paralysis.

It is the suicide of her mother and at her funeral, Muriel realises who she has become; she leaves the sham marriage and rescues Rhonda.

# To change or not to change....

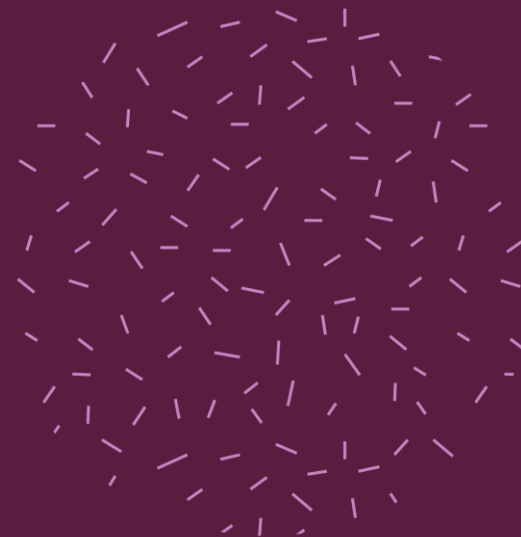
The protagonist may be faced with the reality of the world yet they respond to maintain 'their world', rather than face their need and therefore change.

Thus, the nature of the comic protagonist is not only an accidental hero but also unheroic – they did not set out on a journey of transformation, they avoided it until confronted with some truth or reality that they can no longer deny, resulting in some change – but not completely – they are as Steve Kaplan offers, 'still flawed.' (PAGE)

**And in order to explore the tension that the character faces between their flaw and goal, the point of change must occur later than the MP - at the turning point into Act Three.**

This paper has proposed that the comic character is in denial of the reality around them, creating a BIND resulting in some degree of cognitive dissonance – the source of comic tension in the second half of Act Two and confronted at the second turning point into Act Three.

THE END.



# Thank you – Dr Deborah Klika

## REFERENCES

Chamberlain

Field

Giglio

Kaplan

Wilkes

Yorke