

*The Self, the Ideal, and the Real.**The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman*

The relationship between the self, the ideal, and the real has been a topic of speculation for many writers, filmmakers, and thinkers in general. This is what Niccolò Machiavelli wrote on the subject in the sixteenth century:

A great many men have imagined states and principedoms such as nobody ever saw or knew in the real world, and there's such a difference between the way we really live and the way we ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation. (42)

With this brief passage the Florentine intellectual puts an emphasis on the importance that history, meaning plain facts, has on our understanding of the world around us. We should not forget that every culture has the tendency to distort, adjust, and embellish its heritage. This is also what the sixteenth-century Italian poet Ariosto meant when he commented in *Orlando Furioso* on the importance of a having a good poet as a friend for the legacy of men of power:

Nessun sapria se Neron fosse ingiusto / né sua fama saria forse men buona / avesse avuto e terra e ciel nemici / e se gli scrittor sapea tenersi amici [And no one would know whether Nero had been wicked — he might even, for all his enemies on earth and in heaven, have left a better name — had he known how to keep friendly with writers]. (425)

It should not be surprising that achieving historical accuracy has proven to be an extremely challenging task. It literally took centuries before people began to develop an appreciation of the importance of maintaining accurate historical records and of how these records can effect our perception of our own environment. Ariosto's comment reveals a frivolous attitude toward historical facts that was also addressed by Umberto Eco's novel, *Baudolino*, in which the author exposes the murky territory between reality and the self and confronts the reader with the notion that throughout the centuries the art of storytelling has been the product of fertile imaginations, like the one of Baudolino — a self-confessed liar — rather than a truthful recollection of facts. In the final chapter, *Baudolino Is No More*, the narrator, Niketas, admits to Paphnutius that the tale of the adventures of a peasant born in a far-off Piedmont swamp was told by a deceiving con artist. The reply of Paphnutius expresses concern about the hazards that such a tale could bring about if spread: "...And, further, would you like to put into the heads of your future readers the notion that the Grasal exists, up there amid the snow and ice, and the kingdom of Prester John in the remote lands? Who knows how many lunatics would start wandering endlessly, for centuries and centuries?" (Eco 521). The implications of this book are far reaching, since the name Baudolino, being the name of the Patron Saint of Eco's hometown of Alessandria, calls into question the truthfulness of the stories spread by the Catholic Church throughout the centuries.¹ The conflict between myth and history was also the subject of the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the spoof of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The objective of this film was to expose the danger of blind belief in narratives that have no basis in historical fact. The scene in which the historian has been killed and substituted by a fiction writer with a cartoonish sense of humor highlights the lunacy of a culture that imposed its values through the distortion of reality. The misrepresentation of myth as history is certainly not a novelty since — as many anthropologists have pointed out — the common denominator of all cultures is the need to come up with a story, a *mythos*, to explain the origin of man, his place in the universe, and his relationship to his peers. It is also true, however, that this process often turns out to be

a pragmatic and utilitarian practice through which a culture establishes a certain kind of order by imposing questionable values, such as birthrights, gender dominance, and race subordination. Traiano Boccalini in *Ragguagli di Parnaso* acknowledged the importance of Machiavelli's writings as a way for the reader to gain a real understanding of the status quo. *The Prince* was in fact the first realistic description of the ruthless logic found at work just beneath the surface in the world of power. It is this kind of understanding of the relationship between the real world and the fictitious culture we belong to that is the objective of any epistemological process, and it is through such processes we often become aware of belonging to a culture of denial. This was the overall message of *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen's film about relationships. The protagonist of the film, a New Yorker named Alvy Singer, much to the annoyance of his dates, would regularly go to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the documentary film on the French Resistance to the Nazi occupation during World War II. This was in complete contrast to Allen's portrayal of people living in Los Angeles, whose preference for Hollywood movies reveals a worrisome detachment from reality. The media in general is depicted as being partially responsible for the American *Grand Illusion*, as Allen subtly suggests by mentioning the title of Renoir's film. In fact, the dichotomy of the real and the ideal, addressed by Allen through the implied difference between documentary and fiction, was part of solving the problem of why human relationships can be so difficult. Woody Allen identified the acknowledgement of painful realities like Nazism, for example, as a way to help us to face our own nature as human beings and, to some extent, our own inner demons. This was the meaning of Alvy Singer's opening joke on his own personal relationships: "I would not want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." Allen linked this famous joke of Groucho Marx to Freud's writings on the subconscious, meaning that the journey toward consciousness often involves coming to terms with painful realities, such as powerful mechanisms of self-deception and denial. *Annie Hall* is in some sense a testimony on the tendency of an entire culture to deny and deceive itself. And when all self-serving illusions *à la* Hollywood are not enough to trick the minds of people, fake laughter and drugs are the next step to keep at bay uncomfortable and unwanted realities, such as an awareness of our own mortality, the sadomasochistic tendencies within ourselves and, on a lesser scale, bad jokes. The tendency of fiction to idealize and edulcorate reality throughout the centuries has enraged some writers so much as to push them to point their finger at such abuses. This is what Virginia Woolf stated in *A Room of One's Own*: "Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction — so we are told" (16). The English writer was appalled by the ideal portrayal of women presented in fiction, especially when confronted with the harsh reality with which the same women had to struggle. Here is the controversial dichotomy of the ideal and the real as addressed by Woolf:

Imaginatively she [woman in fiction] is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring on her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell and was the property of her husband. (44)

Myths, although useful in creating a shared worldview through conformity to accepted norms and values, are dangerous because they contribute to the process of falsification of the perceptual filter through which one experiences the self and the world at large. The discussion in *A Room of One's Own* of women's lack of selfhood, and the system of denial, has helped unmask the perverse cultural mechanism that lies at the core of patriarchal societies, or, as a matter of fact, of any other authoritative system. Adapting to myths endorsed by one's own culture often results in the dangerous creation of a

false self. The anger of artists like Woolf against the creation and promotion of false perceptions of ourselves as individuals and of society as a whole is well justified by psychological theory, as the health of both are closely tied to knowing who we really are. As Erich Fromm explained in *The Fear of Freedom*:

As a child, every human being passes through a state of powerlessness, and truth is one of the strongest weapons of those who have no power. But the truth is in the individual's interest not only with regard to his orientation in the outer world; his own strength depends to a great extent on his knowing the truth about himself. Illusions about oneself can become crutches useful to those who are not able to walk alone; but they increase a person's weakness. The individual's greatest strength is based on the maximum of integration of his personality, and that means also on the maximum of transparence to himself. "Know thyself" is one of the fundamental commands that aim at human strength and happiness. (215)

It is also true, however, that the label "fiction" does not necessarily imply escapism, idealism, distortion, or denial. In fact, it can mean any kind of imaginary story that has some link to reality and, contrary to the examples that were described previously, fiction can also be a powerful tool through which any artist can examine aspects of the self that are not easily confronted otherwise. This was certainly the message of Philip Roth's autobiography called *The Facts*, in which the American writer has his fictitious *alter ego*, Zuckerman, write him a letter with the following remark:

"I am not saying that this is a conventional, self-congratulatory celebrity autobiography... But nonetheless this is still, by and large, what you get if you get Roth without Zuckerman — this is what you get in practically *any* artist without his imagination. Your medium for the really merciless self-evisceration, your medium for genuine self-confrontation, is me." (Roth 185)

A similar conclusion is reached by Harry Block at the end of the film *Deconstructing Harry*, Woody Allen's ingenious portrayal of a creative mind that comes to terms with the power of his own imagination. Artists, Allen seems to say, do not — as Plato accused them of in *The Republic* — simply copy life. On the contrary, the altered mirror of reality created by the mind of the artist possesses the revelatory power of dreams. Good art often has the ability to tap into the subconscious, bringing to light unpleasant truths. Art can therefore be an important instrument for self-analysis. Indeed, fiction can enable the discovery of selfhood, as Virginia Woolf's own work demonstrated. However, such a process of self discovery should not be taken lightly. After all, the very notion of self, as suggested by cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett, is our prerogative as *Homo sapiens*:

... the strangest and most wonderful constructions in the whole world are the amazing, intricate constructions made by the primate, *Homo sapiens*. Each normal individual of this species makes a *self*. Out of his brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and, like the other creatures, it doesn't have to know what it's doing: it just does it. This web protects it, just like the snail's shell, and provides it a livelihood, just like the spider's web, and advances its prospects for sex, just like the bowerbird's bower. Unlike a spider, an individual human doesn't just exude its web; more like a beaver, it works hard to gather the materials out of which it builds its protective fortress. (Dennett 416)

The artist is probably the best explorer of what Dennett refers to as the "protective fortress," since his² whole creative endeavor is linked to the interaction between his own imagination, an existing web of consciousness, and reality. This is why it is fun-

damental for any creative mind to come to terms with the concept of art, the dichotomy between the real and the ideal, the notion of imagination, and the relevance that their artistic choices have in relation to their cultural background and to their own sense of self. For the artist to achieve this goal, it is essential that he comes to terms with the narratives endorsed by the culture he happens to live in, as well as his own identity as a storyteller. One of the most impressive examples of such a process belongs to the tradition of metanarration found in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Indeed, Stephen Dedalus' own struggle to decide whether he should be loyal to his family, his church, and his nation, or simply face his own nature devoid of any culturally induced values, initiated the tradition of self-examination and helped define the vocation of the contemporary artist. For this reason, Joyce's semi-autobiographical work has become an exemplary archetype found not only in novels, but also in some of the most interesting films ever made, such as Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963), Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980), and Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002). These three filmmakers (Charlie Kaufman is the only non-directing screenwriter) addressed similar issues that pertain to the creative struggle of the artist. This is a struggle on many different fronts that can be summarized by saying that the above-mentioned films create a depiction of the individual, the creative self, which is at odds with the ideological expectations of their own culture. The outward struggle with their respective cultures sparks an inner struggle, which is the beginning of a journey that unites them all. "The journey of adaptation" — or the lack thereof — to the expectations of a cultural system will be the main focus of this paper. I will therefore attempt to single out the elements that contribute to the making of three similar, yet unique, cinematographic portrayals of the artist as a middle-aged man at odds with the ideological expectations of his own culture.

Entrapment and Antagonism

The first scene of Fellini's *8 1/2* depicts film director Guido Anselmi's disturbing dream of himself being trapped inside a car that is stuck in traffic. The car fills up with smoke and it is surrounded by other cars with rather odd-looking occupants. This is similar to the opening scene of Allen's *Stardust Memories* in which another film director, Sandy Bates, is stuck on a train with aging, sad looking, and generally unhappy people. The primary difference between the two introductory scenes, besides the means of transportation, car and train, is the fact that while Guido's images refer to a dream, Sandy's are the actual images of a film he is working on. This implies a struggle on two different fronts, one inward and the other outward. From the very beginning of the film we witness Guido struggling with his own subconscious while Sandy, on the other hand, is about to struggle with the Hollywood producers who are not too happy with his choice of material for his next feature film. Regardless of whether it is an internal struggle or an external one, there exists a common denominator for both: the directors are at war with the cultural system they belong to. Fellini is at odds with the Catholic world, whose narratives of good and evil, repentance from sin, and the overall notion of transcendence have inflicted on him a sense of general unhappiness with who he is as a person. The sense of inadequacy felt by the Italian director is made worse by the critic Daumier, whose petulance and lofty standards are used to ridicule the attempt of Guido to embark on a journey of purification. In *Stardust Memories*, the source of Sandy's unhappiness comes not from the Catholic Church, but from the "Church" of Hollywood and its narratives of good and evil, happy endings, and the general notions of escapism and shallow entertainment. The show business mentality expressed with the line, "human suffering doesn't sell tickets in Kansas City," has a rather crippling effect on the artist, who would like to confront the bigger picture of life and existential issues such as "why do I age and die? What meaning can my life possibly have?"

Charlie Kaufman asks similar questions, although his struggle is actually closer to Guido's than to Sandy's. Charlie also suffers from psychological inadequacies that are the direct result of culturally conditioned fictions. Right from the outset of the film we

witness the mind-set of a screenwriter who does not accept himself for who he is and who would like to be someone different. The film starts with a black screen and a voice-over narration with Kaufman deprecating almost every aspect of himself; desperate to rewrite his own life, he complains about his poor appearance, lack of physical fitness, and his overall need for self-improvement. He seems to be trapped in the world of fiction and, if able, he would certainly rewrite himself as being slimmer, with a full head of hair, and with a love interest. "I could be the screenwriter who speaks Chinese and plays the oboe," Kaufman says, realizing that the world of fiction he is comparing himself to has resulted in his own self-hatred. "Just be real, confident.... Why should I be made to feel I have to apologize for my existence?," Kaufman adds toward the end of the scene. All of these films suggest that the portrayal of the ideal world in fiction has gone beyond killing the real world; it has disconnected the self from its environment. Despite the obvious differences between the three artists, Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman, they all suffer from a similar malady: a sense of entrapment, an antagonistic relationship towards the culture they belong to, and the urge for a re-negotiation of the terms of that relationship.

The Three: The Relationship Between the Ideal, the Real, and the Self

The following scene of Fellini's *8 1/2* shows Guido Anselmi as he is being wakened from his dream by a couple of doctors in white coats, who then begin to perform a general checkup on Guido's health in the cluttered hotel room where he is staying. Guido coughs profusely; he is sick, or so he believes. His illness is not physical, however; rather it is psychological as suggested by his dream. He feels blocked, confused, and most of all unable to create. In the next few scenes, shot at the thermal resort of Chianciano, it will be clear that the Italian director is there to find a cleansing cure to his malady. The middle-aged man — a sinner in search of redemption — is trying to come to terms with his Catholic upbringing, and it is this journey toward redemption, similar to the one described by Dante, that seems to be the inspiring principle that drives Guido's quest for a cure. The visions of the girl carrying a glass of water at the spring are reminiscent of the scenes described in the *Divine Comedy*, where Dante purged himself by drinking water from the river Lethe in a symbolic ritual of purification. The confrontation with Catholicism is constantly addressed throughout the film with the portrayal of the meetings, both real and fictional, between Guido and a high-ranking dignitary of the Catholic Church. In the first meeting, presumably the real one, the mind of Guido drifts back to his childhood memories. These memories include the time when he was first introduced to the wonders of womanhood, the sea-monster Saraghina, and the sense of shame and sin imposed by the Church. Guido's recollection of being caught by two priests from his boarding school on the beach while watching the dance of the aging voluptuous Saraghina is part of the sense of alienation he is feeling. To be shamed³ for his sense of wonder at human creation, here represented by a grotesque birth of Venus/ Saraghina, is rather puzzling to him. For punishment Guido was forced to wear a dunce cap in front of the entire class while carrying a sign on his back that says "*vergogna*," meaning "shame." The pressure to comply with values of piety and abstinence, reinforced by the Church through psychological as well as corporal punishment, is exemplified by the scene in which the young Guido is forced to kneel down on corn kernels while one of the religious authorities indoctrinates the rest of his classmates, who are having dinner. Furthermore, the imposition of an exemplary life, such as the ones of saints, whose images are depicted on the walls of the austere monastic school Guido attended as a child, has clearly contributed to the inner struggle he is suffering from. In other words, he is struggling between his own nature as a man and the values of self-denial imposed by Catholicism. Guido's state of mind is revealed by his attempt to cleanse his soul, depicted in the fictional scene at the sauna where he is called upon to meet the cardinal. The quotes in Latin spoken by the fictitious cardinal express the innermost fears of the director, who feels very much like an alienated outcast. "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*" [no salvation outside

the Church] thunders the voice of the pious authority, adding “*extra Ecclesiam nullus sal- vatur*” [no one will find salvation outside the Church], and “*salus extra Ecclesiam non est*” [there is no salvation outside the church]. No less than Guido’s sense of belonging is at stake here. Should he try to adapt to the expectations of his cultural background? And what would this adaptation consist of for an artist like himself? After all, a society that endorses the ideal to replace the real condemns the true self to die. The complete denial of the true self and the promotion of a false self has been described by psychologists and psychotherapists as a first step toward mental illness. The false self, according to psychoanalyst Nancy Napier, is “all the protective parts and maladaptive strategies you developed as you survived impossible childhood situations. You can think of the false self as the totality of your dysfunctional responses, which arose by *necessity* when you were young” (133). Erich Fromm has discussed in detail the dangers inherent in such processes of denial, not just for individuals, but for society as a whole. As Fromm explained, “the inability to act spontaneously, to express what one genuinely feels and thinks, and the resulting necessity to present a pseudo self to others and oneself, are the root of the feeling of inferiority and weakness” (215). As we will see later, the journey illustrated by Fellini is in many ways a journey of self-discovery, and most of all of self-acceptance. His final epiphany, in fact, comprises what Fromm described as “the spontaneous realization of the self [through which] man unites himself anew with the world — with man, nature, and himself” (215).

Whether or not to adapt to the expectations of one’s own cultural background is a dilemma also faced by another director on the other side of the Atlantic. The problematic relationship between the real, the ideal, and the self is very much an issue in Allen’s *Stardust Memories*, even though the cultural context is somewhat different than that of *8 1/2*. The main character, Sandy Bates, is an American icon, a successful director who has made his name by creating funny movies. His success, although financially rewarding, has reduced him to being a cog of the Hollywood system and has limited his choices as an artist. The star-system Sandy Bates is a part of is not unlike the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, attacked by Guido Anselmi. The implications are made clear in the scene where Sandy, sitting in his Rolls Royce that is stuck in traffic, inquires with his secretary by telephone whether the Pope or any other show business figure might be in town. The American film director, like his Italian counterpart, is unhappy. His troubled state of mind is emphasized by the famous Eddie Adams photograph, enlarged to fill the wall of his Manhattan penthouse, showing the horrific street execution of a suspected Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon during the Vietnam War. The suffering of people out there is very much on the American director’s mind, as confirmed by his reply when asked what he is thinking about while looking out his window at the city below: “You know ... all those people,” says Sandy, “...how most of them are unhappy. The terrible things they do to each other. Everything is over so quickly. You don’t have any idea, was it worth it or not?” Human suffering and mortality are the kind of realities Hollywood is trying to avoid with upbeat portrayals of life. Hollywood tends to appease and shelter the spectators’ minds very much like the tranquilizer Valium handed to Sandy by his doctor, to whom Sandy says: “Oh great! Another show business tranquilizer.” The obvious implication is that movies are just a means through which society keeps at bay unwanted realities, such as the one quoted by Sandy from the article he was reading on the front page of *The Times* about the decay of matter in the universe. The real versus the ideal is the dichotomy Sandy Bates is struggling with, much like his counterpart, Guido Anselmi. Should Bates adapt to the Hollywood system and conform to the expectations of his fans by blocking out unsettling realities, such as the one depicted in the final scene of his latest film that has both winners and losers alike ending up in the same garbage dump? Or should he deny his audience the Hollywood narcotic of a happy ending, which the producers of the film have insisted upon by switching the final destination of the film from a garbage dump to the more upbeat “Jazz Heaven”? This is a dilemma whose compromise resolution,

as we will see later, results in the death of the true self.

The dilemma of whether to conform to the expectations of the Hollywood establishment is also part of the Charlie Kaufman's artistic choice. "Adaptation is a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world," is one of the lines from Kaufman's film that deals with the creative struggle of a Hollywood screenwriter, a struggle that will lead him to redefine his personal relationship with nature and culture. A Hollywood executive producer has given Kaufman the assignment of adapting *The Orchid Thief* to a screenplay. *The Orchid Thief* is a book about orchid hunter John Laroche, whose botanical adventures in the Florida swamps are part of what seems to be a book about the relationship between man and his environment. "Nothing much happens" in Susan Orlean's book, people don't have epiphanies, or grow to like one another, and certainly they don't learn profound life lessons. This had at first captivated Charlie's imagination, since he liked the idea of writing a script that would not be, as he had put it: "artificially plot driven." Contrary to the experience of Sandy Bates, the Hollywood producers do not try to impede Kaufman's creativity. Charlie has been given artistic freedom, but during the process of adapting the book for the screen he will learn a profound lesson. Kaufman will realize how difficult it is to "dramatize a flower" and, most of all, he will understand what the purpose of movies really is. The mistake on Charlie's part was to want to recreate Laroche's fascination with the ghost orchid without any fictional augmentation. His failed attempt to write a script showing "how amazing flowers are," without any Hollywood glamour, is due to Charlie mistaking art for life. The dichotomy between art and life is also mirrored by Kaufman's split self, Charlie and Donald, who are in fact the same person. Kaufman suffers from a psychological disorder known as schizophrenia, a disorder that, as Steven Pinker wrote, afflicts the minds of people who cannot distinguish between what's real and what's imagined. Here is what Pinker wrote on the subject:

But all of us are capable of distinguishing fictitious worlds from real ones... Cognitive scientists believe that the ability to entertain propositions without necessarily believing them — to distinguish "John believes there is a Santa Claus" from "There is a Santa Claus" — is a fundamental ability of human cognition. Many believe that a breakdown of this ability underlies the thought disorder in the syndrome called schizophrenia. (215)

In Kaufman's case he cannot distinguish between the phrase "Orlean said that Laroche didn't find a ghost orchid" and "Laroche didn't find a ghost orchid." The notion of *uroboros*, the image of the snake eating its own tail, will be the first insight into the idea that Susan Orlean's book is not a precise factual account of the real world, but a mediation and therefore a work of fiction. A story, as realistic as it might be, will always be a tale, as Roland Barthes pointed out in *S/Z* when he said: "In short... what we call 'real' (in the theory of realistic text) is never more than a code of representation (of signification)..." (80). Key to the film is Kaufman's realization that Orlean herself is an *uroboros*, viewing life from her own perspective, and that her book is after all a personal account of the facts. Charlie, unlike Donald, has lost touch with the notion that writing is in itself a mediation, that is, an interjection of culturally induced artifices. In fact, the relationship between the self and reality is altered by all sorts of subjective mediations, as subtly implied in the cinematographic text through the recurrent scenes in which Orlean wears lightly shaded eyeglasses while conducting her investigation in Florida. The eyeglasses⁴ serve as a reminder of the cultural spectacles through which we filter and interpret reality. This kind of mediation was also made clear in the scene where Orlean, interviewing Laroche in his van, writes down her own opinion, "delusions of grandeur," instead of Laroche's actual answer. A similar situation was portrayed in the scene of the dinner party hosted by Orlean in New York, where the biased opinion toward this peculiar character from Florida, Laroche, is

voiced by both the host and guests alike. Kaufman's recognition of this kind of mediation will be his first step toward the distinction between reality and fiction, the reintegration of the self, the adaptation to the Hollywood system, and more.

Nature vs. Culture. Claudia and the Ghost Orchid vs. the Catholic Church and Hollywood

Italian director Guido Anselmi dealt with his middle-aged crisis through his own cultural background. That this is a rather common occurrence is supported by the following passage by Carl Jung:

This is what happens very frequently about the midday of life, and in this wise our miraculous human nature enforces the transition that leads from the first half of life to the second. It is a metamorphosis from a state in which man is only a tool of instinctive nature, to another in which he is no longer a tool, but himself: a transformation of nature into culture, of instinct into spirit. (49)

Dante is another famous middle-aged Italian who wrote about his personal crisis in allegorical terms. The Florentine poet used the *Commedia* to transcend his own physical nature and embark upon an imaginary journey toward spiritual salvation. The inspiring principle of this journey — as foreshadowed by *Vita nuova* — was the love for a woman. Beatrice, although loosely based on the Florentine Bice de' Bardi, was no ordinary woman; She was first and foremost a creation of the poet's mind. It should also be clear that Dante was himself a second order, if not a third order, *uroboros*. In other words, he fed not on the real world but on the Catholic hagiographic tradition, which itself fed on the vast biblical tradition of writings like *The Song of Songs*. Dante's exquisite literary elaboration turned Beatrice from a woman of flesh and blood into a vision, an angel, a divine messenger, and most of all a means of salvation. The culture Dante fed upon had the intent of rescuing mankind from its animal urges, as clearly implied by the metaphor at the beginning of the poem of the middle-aged man who is lost in the dark forest and is being threaten by three beasts. The transformation of nature into culture, as stated by Carl Jung, is the ultimate objective of this literary journey. Dante was not referring to just any culture, however, since Christianity represented to him the true path toward salvation. In fact, the initial and partial rescue of the medieval Italian poet by Virgil, a poet of ancient Rome, puts an emphasis on the importance of Christian values. Dante's journey toward salvation cannot be completed without Beatrice who, in the fictional superstructure of the *Commedia*, holds an allegorical status, representing theology, and therefore the importance of Christian values. This means that — according to Dante — even the most refined of cultures, such as the one belonging to the classical world, are not beholders of the truth. Dante bought into the Christian values and even built upon them. Fellini's character, Guido, would like to do something similar to what the Florentine poet did in the fourteenth century, but the acceptance of a value system — whose truth has been challenged — has left the Italian director struggling. The following exchange with one of the Church's dignitaries highlights this dilemma:

Monsignor: — The film is of a religious nature?

Guido: — I was just saying that the hero [of my film] had a Catholic upbringing, like all of us for that matter. That has left him with a complex, a need he can't go on repressing. A cardinal appears to him as a holder of a truth he can no longer accept. So he turns to him for help, for enlightenment perhaps.

Despite all his doubts, Guido's urge for a spiritual force to cleanse his soul still remains. Claudia is Fellini's equivalent of Beatrice, a product of the director's imagination loosely based on actress Claudia Cardinale, whose transformation into an ethereal being retains the uplifting qualities of the spiritual Beatrice. Inspired by Claudia, Guido built

a tower for his film that was intended to be a platform from which to leave earth on a rocket, leaving behind all human wants and desires. Notwithstanding all his efforts to find a way out of the *civitas diaboli* (as the Cardinal described life outside the strictly defined spiritual path), the Italian director seems unable to disentangle himself from the maze of his own consciousness. In fact, Guido's confused experience of life does not fit in with the literary or the religious mediation he is desperately trying to relate to. Furthermore, the authorities of both worlds — the intellectual and the spiritual — display a hostile indifference towards Guido's creative quest. The thought of facing moral judgment and the fear of excommunication are very much on the director's mind. Guido's desperate attempt to comply with the expectations of his own culture, whose inner structure is symbolized by the scaffolding of the platform, is a threat to his own creative self. The scene at the press conference captures the frustration and confusion felt by the Italian director, who can hardly speak at this point. The sense of sheer panic and general unhappiness experienced by Guido is due to his inability to conform to the expectations of his own culture; the mere attempt to conform has resulted in his own creative suicide. With the scene that depicts Guido blowing his brains out with a gun, Fellini seems to assert that an artist is most of all a creator, and not an intellectual. The artist's aim is neither to transcend reality nor to criticize its imperfections. His function is closer that of the magician, Maurice, who out of nothing has created something beautiful, complex, and unique, like nature itself — something that is impossible to cage within a rational structure. The next to last scene of the movie is particularly telling. Guido Anselmi finally decides to cancel the making of his film and the scaffolding is being pulled down. It is right at this moment, as Guido walks back to his car while being lectured by Daumier, that he has an epiphany. He finally realizes that the judgmental attitude of the intellectual, with his lofty standards, is at the root of his creative crisis. Guido's initial dream of being inside a car that is stuck in traffic has finally found its cause in Daumier's constant belittling. The internalized criticism based upon the imposition of a culturally induced ideal proves to be dangerous and stifling for the artist. Although the general tendency of any culture is to inspire some kind of ideal order, in reality the nature of life is essentially chaotic, as pointed out by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*: "Human existence, if it were thrown back on its orgasmic resources by themselves, would be the existence in some sort of chaos. ... Social order exists only as a product of human activity" (69–70). This is also the epiphany of Guido Anselmi when he finally breaks through his creative crisis and says: "Everything is confused again, but that confusion is me. How I am, not how I'd like to be..." The artist decides to leave the stifling culture of the ideal and join the real creation with all its imperfections. After all, the phrase in the film "Asa NIsi MAsa," whose initial letters form the word *anima*⁵ a word that according to Carl Jung is the projection of the ideal woman by the male psyche — is used here by Fellini to identify a real woman. In fact, the Italian director has linked the word *anima* to the warmth of the maternal womb. This is implied by the scene that depicts Guido as a child under the tender care of female figures, such as his grandmother, mother, and other women whose love is all embracing and non-judgmental. By the end of the film the Italian director's artistic choice will be clear. He will abandon the worship of the Jungian *anima* in order to embrace the creative, although imperfect, love of real women. Unlike Dante, Guido renounces the angel-like girl at the spring and opts for the real Claudia, whose name, after all, means "the lame one." And so — fulfilling Daumier's prophecy — Guido Anselmi becomes the artist who "...like the lame man leaves his deformed prints." In the final scene, the magician Maurice opens the curtains to reveal a variety of odd looking people belonging to all walks of life, who descend from the tower and join hands to form a circle. This is a clear message: Guido's replacement of the tower, a clear phallic symbol, with the circle, is an indication of his desire to leave behind the hierarchical and judgmental male dominated structure — which is culture — to join the randomly linked chain of the female creation — which is nature.

American director Sandy Bates is struggling with a different kind of establishment, one whose portrayal of life tends to be highly censored. The Hollywood producers, who have condemned Sandy's film as being too morbid and pretentious, are depicted as black shadows on a white screen. Allen clearly draws an analogy between the shadows we see on the screen and Plato's allegory of the shadows on the wall of a cave, which Plato used in *The Republic* to explain our limited perception. As Plato argued, we are all very much like the people in the cave — unable to perceive what is really out there. The allegory of the cave can be easily applied to describe the relationship between the self, culture, and nature. In other words, the projection of the shadows is equivalent to the symbols produced by a culture in which the self is confined. Ideally, culture would serve as a bridge between the self and nature, but to enable the self to gain a realistic and truthful understanding of nature, a culture would have to enable its artists to leave the cave. This is not the case for Sandy Bates, whose choices are very much limited by the authorities — the Hollywood producers in charge of such decisions. With *Stardust Memories*, Woody Allen seems to address the important issue of a culture that, instead of helping people to gain a realistic understanding of the world, chooses denial and escapism. "Too much reality is not what the people want" is the phrase that both the Hollywood producer and the psychologist used to describe the tastes and desires of the general public. Sandy Bates has been condemned to filter reality according to the public's expectations, as illustrated by the close up of him wearing sunglasses upon his arrival at the New Jersey film festival. The sunglasses are used here as a metaphor for the blocking out of unwanted realities, such as the freakish oddity of the fan-base that gathers at the star's arrival. In fact, the fans look much like the cast of a Fellini movie, as many critics have pointed out. The implications for this choice are many, and some are rather obvious. First of all, it is a statement that Hollywood does not want to show anything that differs from accepted norms, i.e., the beautiful, rich, happy people of tinsel town. Allen also wants the viewers to be aware that his film is essentially a postmodern cinematographic work: a visual text whose message is often conveyed through well-known quotations from other films. *8 1/2* is clearly the inspiration at the heart of *Stardust Memories* and the similarities are so many that it is impossible to miss them.⁶ Thematic analogies are used by both directors to express similar concepts, such as the middle-aged director's creative struggle and existential issues like the impermanence of life. Examples of these analogies, common to both films, include the use of metaphorical images such as the car stuck in traffic to express the creative struggle and the hotel as a clear reminder of our own mortality. Of course, the similarities with Fellini's film just served as a point of departure for Woody Allen, who took his film in a very different direction than the one in *8 1/2*. Sandy's religious upbringing, for example, although not as openly discussed as Guido's, is very much part of the inner struggle faced by the American director. Sandy Bates is Jewish and his attitude toward a jealous and vengeful god, like the one described in the Old Testament, is rather resentful. This antagonistic relationship was revealed by Sandy's remarks to his sister while she was showing their family pictures to his French girlfriend, Isobel. The conversation takes place as we see images appear on screen of a play at Sandy's Hebrew school when he was a child. The sacrifice of Isaac turns into a riot: "Sandy: I always resented Abraham for being so willing to kill his son. / Sandy's sister: I think it was jealousy. You wanted the part of God." In fact, being a movie director, as envisioned by the Hollywood establishment, is the closest thing to being God. In the absence of a god who can fix life's problems, Hollywood has created a surrogate one: a creator of a fictitious world where people wished they lived. This is a world where problems are solved, life has meaning, and one can hope for a happy ending. At first Sandy gladly complied with these expectations, as he himself confessed to the adoring public gathered at the film festival held in his honor. The American director declared in the press conference scene, contrary to his well-known narcissism, "if I did identify with a Greek mythological character it would not be Narcissus...[it would be] Zeus." It already appears as

though his fans perceive him in this role, as they are depicted as flocking to him and making the oddest requests, as if they are looking for some sort of magic healing power from this celebrity/divinity. Unfortunately, there is nothing magical about director Sandy Bates. His are just the silly tricks of a conjurer, similar to the ones he used to perform when he was a young child. In his real life Sandy is just as helpless as anyone else, and it is this kind of helplessness the American director would like to portray in his new film. He would like to give a face to issues such as unhappiness, aging, death, and other realities that are often suppressed by the Hollywood establishment. Overall, this is the reproach directed towards American culture, as clearly indicated by the scene where Sandy and Daisy are discussing the meaning of *Bicycle Thieves*. This famous film is evidence of how Italian culture, unlike the American counterpart, has used films not as a means to deny reality, but as a bridge to a better understanding of the world we live in. The resentment toward a culture that won't allow the development of the equivalent of Italian neorealism is strongly felt throughout Allen's film. The apparent impossibility of elaborating a cinematic tradition that, like neorealism, would enable people to get in touch with social problems as well as with existential issues is rather puzzling to him. With *Stardust Memories*, Woody Allen seems to address a key question: what kind of consciousness can the public develop if denied the opportunity to ponder life's problems in any depth?

Human nature is very much on Sandy Bates' mind as he thinks back to a girlfriend in his past. Dorrie is a dark and complex woman, or as the extraterrestrial in the film described her: "two days a month she was the most exciting woman in the world, but for the rest of the time she was a basket case." Dorrie's unpredictable mood swings, although being part of her charm, are an example of the kind of life that Hollywood is trying to censure. This is implied in the scene that depicts the first meeting between Dorrie and Sandy during the shooting of one of his films. Dorrie, who is shown sitting on the other side of a scaffold while reading Schopenhauer, is not an ideal projection of Sandy's mind. Unlike Dante's Beatrice, Dorrie is a self-contradictory human being whose complex character cannot be easily pinpointed, and it is precisely this kind of complex character that scares Hollywood. The medium shot of the two talking on the other side of the scaffold is clearly symbolic. The scaffold, reminiscent of the platform in Fellini's *8 1/2*, is used here to describe the Hollywood structure that — not unlike the Catholic Church — is trying to confine, organize, control, and edulcorate life's complexities. Dorrie's own confession of being unable to conform to society's expectations is exemplified by the scene in which she complains of not being able to play a certain part in a film. Her unhappiness and inability to adapt to a cultural system, such as the one imposed by the Hollywood producers, mirrors Sandy's own difficulties. His alienation is so strongly felt that his car, a metaphor for his creative struggle, breaks down in the middle of the forest. The following scene shows Sandy immersed in nature as he walks with Daisy, a woman whose personality is very similar to Dorrie's. Sandy and Daisy find themselves in the middle of nowhere when they spot a country fair-ground full of odd-looking people. We see Liza Minelli look alike, fat people, old people, all of whom serve as a representation of the oddity of human creation when not subjected to any cultural filtration. It is right here, in this weird environment, that Sandy will come to terms with the notion that his quest for meaning will not be fulfilled. "Outside the Church there is no salvation," were the words of the Italian cardinal to Guido in Fellini's *8 1/2*, a slight variation of which could be used to describe Woody Allen's new paradigm: "outside Hollywood there is no meaning." Sandy's search for meaning outside the fictitious cultural order will be ended by a fan, whose expectations of uplifting movies will terminate the director's quest. Following the scene where Sandy has been shot by a fan, or believes that he has been shot, we witness the return of the American director to playing the role of God. After changing his film and his life to meet Hollywood expectations, Sandy Bates ends up on the same train where the film began. But this time he is sitting next to Isobel, a nice mature

woman, as if to say, despite all, life can be an enjoyable ride. The end of the film has been changed, not to involve Jazz Heaven as the Hollywood producers had insisted upon, but to a commercial upbeat note nevertheless. With this ending to his film, Woody Allen acknowledges his artistic decision to comply with the American cultural system that wants its artists to continue blocking out unwanted realities. This message was emphasized by Sandy going back to collect his sunglasses after the viewing of his film, a clear statement of self-censorship. In the end, it seems that the entrapment within culture of the creative self in search of meaning is as unavoidable as seeing nothing but shadows was for the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave.

The entrapment in the world of fiction is also central to another Hollywood produced film. *Adaptation* portrays a screenwriter whose problem consists of his inability to distinguish between reality and fiction. Kaufman is in between jobs; He has just finished writing the script of his first film, *Being John Malkovich*, and now is working on the adaptation of Susan Orlean's book, *The Orchid Thief*.⁷ *Being John Malkovich* was very much a work of his own imagination, a reflection on the self at odds with its environment. Central to the film is the frustration and alienation felt by a misunderstood puppeteer, Craig Schwartz, who was forced to redirect his talent and become a filing clerk. The following comments made by Schwartz to his pet chimpanzee emphasizes the sense of despair felt by this artist: "You don't know how lucky you are being a monkey, because consciousness is a terrible curse. I think, I feel, I suffer. And all I ask in return is the opportunity to do my work. And they won't allow it, because I raise issues." The discovery of a portal into the mind of actor John Malkovich will enable Craig Schwartz, along with many others, to overcome their sense of despair and fulfill their life long dreams. The surreal story of being someone else — a celebrity — is a metaphor that encapsulates the sense of general unhappiness that people often have with their own identity. This, Kaufman seems to say, is very much at the root of the success of the world of fiction, as it provides the closest thing to being someone else. To be able to escape one's own frustration, for even a brief moment, as depicted by another famous Woody Allen film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, is very much part of the success of the Hollywood establishment. The making of the film *Being John Malkovich* serves as the starting point of *Adaptation*, where the relationship between the self, the ideal, and the real will find an interesting new twist. The introduction of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, standing in the studio where *Being John Malkovich* is being filmed, is key to understanding the creative endeavor of the artist. The introductory scenes were in fact used to explain the mission of the artist, which consists of providing meaning to something as random and confusing as the real world we live in. The first images we see are of a rather discouraged Kaufman, a balding middle-aged man, overweight, poorly dressed, and pondering the meaning of life. Charlie's thoughts are on a grand scale: "I have been on this planet for forty years," says the voice-over narration with a close-up of Kaufman's balding head, "and I am not closer to understanding any single thing. Why am I here? How did I get here?" The scenes that follow appear to be the scientific explanation of what Hollywood California must have been like four billion and forty years earlier. We see explosions, the first single cell organism, the crawling creatures that left water to move onto dry land, dinosaurs, the explosion of an asteroid, the ice-age, apes, man, civilization and finally the birth of Charlie Kaufman. Not much of a story, certainly not the explanation most human beings crave for. This narration should satisfy the analytic minds of the *Homo Sapiens* out there, but it really doesn't. *Adaptation* will indirectly provide an answer to the question posed by the pompous philosophy professor described in Woody Allen's *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*: "Why do people require more [a mystical explanation] for their existence than the wonderful world about them?" The truth of the matter is — as Charlie himself will find out — the majority of people need more. This is also the reason for the existence of religion and of storytelling in general. The equivalence of storytelling to religion is exemplified by the scene involving the Hollywood screenwriters' workshop of

Robert McKee, whose authority resembles very much the authority of the biblical god who gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Kaufman shows us here the general need of people for meaning and structure in their lives. In fact, meaning is very much linked to the notion of rules, as asserted by anthropologist Lévi-Strauss: “To speak of rules and to speak of meaning is to speak of the same thing” (12). The need of mankind for a structure has been revealed by a variety of anthropological studies and is first and foremost demonstrated by our natural tendency to create stories. The pattern that lies beneath every story, as pointed out by scholars such as Lévi-Strauss, Propp, Jung, and Joseph Campbell, is very much at the core of our quest for meaning. This distinguishes mankind from the rest of the creation. Finding a structure that might help man gain some understanding of our own existence, providing society at large with a sense of direction and purpose, is a task that every culture sets out to fulfill. Somehow science, with the portrayal of a random evolution on a planet in the middle of a cold and hostile universe, has shattered man’s psychological sense of meaning. This was hinted at in the scene mentioned previously in which Kaufman ponders the harsh reality of creation. The notion that we humans are the product of random processes, whose lives have no meaning, is unsatisfying for most people and this calls for some sort of intervention. In the absence of a god or a prophet, it will be the writer that provides the structure to which one can hold on to. In particular, the fiction writer seems to be that precious link between chaos and order, as beautifully expressed in Philip Roth’s autobiography where his own fictional creation confronts his creator on the objective of his craft as a writer by saying:

Nothing is random. Nothing that happens to him [the writer] has no point. Nothing that he says happens to him in his life does not get turned into something that is useful to him. Things that appear to have been pointlessly destructive and poisoning, things that look at the time to have been wasteful and appalling and spoiling, are the things that turn out to be, say, the writing of *Portnoy’s Complaint*. As each person comes into his life, you begin to think, “So what is this person’s usefulness going to be? What is this person going to provide him in the way of the book?” Well, maybe this is the difference between the writer’s life and an ordinary life. (189)

This kind of insight into the mind of the fiction writer described in Philip Roth’s autobiography, as well as in Kaufman’s film, and Orlean’s book, reveals a very important process of transformation that can, for example, turn a little white flower that grows in the swamp into a glamorous and highly desirable flower called the ghost orchid. This is exemplified in *Adaptation* with the scene in which we hear Susan Orlean read lines from her book in a voice-over narration: “Orchids,” says the voice, “are the sexiest flowers on earth. The name orchid comes from the Latin, *orchis*, which means testicle.” Despite the fact that every mind works as a filter — since each person is trapped in a subjective experience of the world — there is something special about the mind of the artist/writer. This was also the epiphany of the protagonist in Woody Allen’s *Deconstructing Harry* when the artist, after having met his own creations, affirmed: “All people know the same truth. Our lives consist of how we choose to distort it. Only his [the artist’s] writing was calm. His writing, which had in more ways than one, saved his life.” The process of transforming random facts into a story, however, and turning reality into fiction, is a process that carries with it some side effects, since it comprises all sorts of augmentation and often it results in the complete falsification of the self. This point was emphasized in the last scene of the film by the thoughts of screenwriter and storyteller, Charlie Kaufman: “I wonder who’s going to play me. Someone not too fat. I like that Gérard Depardieu, but can he not do the accent?” which was in complete contrast to the expectations of the orchid hunter and man of action, John Laroche, who said, “Who’s gonna play me... Hey, I think I should play me!” when he learned from

Orlean that *The Orchid Thief* was going to be made into a film. Hence, fiction, with the power of the imagination, has a multi-functional purpose. It can alter aspects of the true self and reality that we are not too pleased with. It can provide a fulfilling explanation to life's enigmas, supplying a sense of meaning and purpose. It can give the so much needed structure of how to relate to one another. It can also block out unwanted realities with the portrayal of an ideal society, or it can simply serve as a substitute for the actual experience — a safe fantasy without consequences — very much like the masturbation scenes that portray Charlie Kaufman having virtual sex with almost every woman he meets. Sandy Bates also gave this explanation when he said: "You can't control life. It doesn't wind up perfectly. Only art you can control, art and masturbation. Two areas in which I am an absolute expert." The relationship with the real world is often confusing, frustrating, and down right scary; in fact, people like Laroche are rare: people whose minds are naturally fascinated by the world as it really is. Laroche's mind has the ability to get lost in the world of turtles, fossils, or tropical plants, and most of all, it is willing to chase each pursuit with passion, despite all obstacles. It is this kind of relationship with the world that captured the imagination of writer Susan Orlean, as we hear her confess with lines read from her book in another voice-over narration: "Most people yearn for something exceptional, something so inspiring that they would risk everything for that passion. But few would act on it. It is very powerful, and it is intoxicating being around somebody so alive." Orlean's book is a fulfilling literary mediation for those people that, like her, are unwilling to engage with a world of action. The people that lead secure yet passionless lives, in which they have let part of themselves die, will find in her book a risk free surrogate, a substitute for the actual experience. Orlean's book, however, although a literary mediation on nature, still lacks a coherent story, leaving its readers unsatisfied. This was pointed out in the scene where Charlie confronts his own agent and reads to him the review of Orlean's book in *The New York Times Book Review*: "Orlean digresses in long passages ...no narrative really unites these passages," says Kaufman, adding, "there is no story!" This prompts the suggestion from Charlie's agent that, in the absence of a story, he should make one up, revealing the true identity of the Hollywood establishment. The shot of the agent's office with a few pictures of himself skiing and surfing, together with a couple of artifacts from the far East, emphasizes the Hollywood recipe at its best. Action and contemplation are the two ingredients that provide a meaningful experience of life, something all humans crave. The industry of fiction, which provides a meaningful structure to a pulsating yet otherwise meaningless universe, will find in McKee and Donald (whose names together, coincidentally, sounds like *McDonald*) the solution to Charlie's creative struggle. Charlie's reunion with his twin brother Donald — whose death in the Florida swamp is just part of the reintegration of Kaufman's creative self⁸ — will provide a Hollywood ending to Orlean's book. Charlie Kaufman's attempt to adapt a book on nature to a Hollywood screenplay will result in his own adaptation as a screenwriter to the Hollywood system, and will lead him to write precisely the kind of ending to his screenplay that he originally set out to avoid, a point that was emphasized at the beginning of the film with his anxious declaration to the Hollywood producer: "I don't want to cram in sex, or guns, or car chases, or characters learning profound life's lessons, or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end. The book isn't like that, and life isn't like that. It just isn't." Nevertheless, the ending of the film will have sex, guns, car chases, characters coming to like each other, and much more. Kaufman makes the statement that his movie, after all, is a Hollywood product, a work of fiction, and that it should not be mistaken for real life. The final scene, depicting Kaufman driving his car out of the parking lot after having met and kissed Amelia, emphasizes that his creative struggle is over. His days as a frustrated puppeteer — a metaphor for a fiction writer that was desperately trying to gain control over his life — are over. Life and art have been separated in his mind and Kaufman has finally con-

nected, once again, his own self to the real environment. Nature and culture, as implied with the close up of the pot of daisies in the middle of traffic, are now two different things that — despite all expectations — do not necessarily mirror one another.

Imagination, Perception, Deception, and Reality

In order to better understand the significance of these three films — which are nothing less than the manifestos of Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman on their role as artists in relationship to their environment — it is necessary to broaden the spectrum of analysis to include some relevant issues in the field of cultural studies. These three filmmakers are members of a much larger community of artists and creative minds that have been confronting the cultural dichotomy between ideology and epistemology, and the related issue of the perception and deception of reality. Many writers, playwrights, film directors, and intellectuals have been pondering the same question raised by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, where she plainly asked: “What is meant by ‘reality?’” (110). This is no trivial question since gaining a realistic picture of the world can often mean the difference between survival and death, as explained by Primo Levi in his book about his experience at Auschwitz:

I was captured by the Fascist Militia on 13 December 1943. I was twenty-four, with little wisdom, no experience, and a decided tendency — encouraged by the life of segregation forced on me for the previous four years by the racial laws — to live in an unrealistic world of my own, a world inhabited by civilized Cartesian phantoms, by sincere male and bloodless female friendships. (13)

The entrapment of the self within a culture of denial and delusion is often the result of a forced segregation. An excellent example of this is provided by the following lines from Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Shosha*, a book about the stifling life in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II:

I was brought up on three dead languages — Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish (some consider the last not a language at all) — and in a culture that developed in Babylon: the Talmud. The cheder where I studied was a room in which the teacher ate and slept, and his wife cooked. There I studied not arithmetic, geography, physics, chemistry, or history, but the laws governing an egg laid on a holiday and sacrifices in a temple destroyed two thousand years ago. Although my ancestors had settled in Poland some six or seven hundred years before I was born, I knew only a few words of the Polish language... I was an anachronism in every way, but I didn’t know it. (3)

This passage awakens us to the notion that the world we perceive is not necessarily the real one, but rather the cultural structure that we were born in. Culture is most of all an organizing principle that carries a worldview through which we relate to one another, and through which we express judgement. The issue raised by both Levi and Singer concerns the notion of how to gain awareness once the self is entrapped within the cultural mazes of false consciousness. This was also the message of Virginia Woolf’s essay on the lack of selfhood in a patriarchal society, in which she calls upon women to stop believing in the system that expressed such poor judgement of their gender. “As people mature they cease to believe in sides,” writes Woolf, “or in Headmasters or in highly ornamental pots,” then adding later on, “... we [women should] escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever may be in themselves” (106–14). Indeed, the relationship between the self and reality — as subjective and culturally induced — still remains the major objective of any journey toward consciousness. The relationship between the self and reality and the distortion

of that relationship was at the core of the creative struggle depicted in the three films we just analyzed. The distortion of reality through cultural spectacles was symbolized by the sunglasses — a clear metaphor for censorship and cultural relativism — worn by Guido Anselmi, Sandy Bates, and John Laroche, representing how each person relates to the world through a preconceived cultural structure, whether the structure is provided by the Catholic Church, Hollywood, or even through the belief in the Florida legal system. The first two cultural systems, the Catholic Church and Hollywood, work on a level of censorship whose danger consists of disabling the self to grow, keeping it either indefinitely in a state of denial of one's own true nature or in a perpetual state of infancy.⁹ A culture that alters, denies, and screens reality puts its people's well-being in jeopardy, since their perception of what's out there will irrevocably result in them being deceived. The outcome of a culture that lies is daunting, and should not be taken lightly, as addressed by Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*, a book in which the author denounces the systems of cultural manipulation that people are continuously subjected to. A humorous condemnation of the media was also a part of Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry*. This was illustrated by the rather hilarious scene that shows the writer descending into hell on an elevator while being told by a public announcer (describing each floor in a fashion reminiscent of an American department store) that the floor reserved for the media was filled to capacity. The ontological implications that emanate from any cultural mediation are worrisome, since we often live in a cultural paradigm in which we see what we believe, rather than believe what we see. The danger inherent of such a process has been made apparent by cultures like the one of Nazi Germany, which conceptualized and projected a subjective and xenophobic hatred onto part of its own population through the creation of vast narratives whose stories did not describe reality, but instead provided camouflage for gratuitous anti-Semitic sentiments. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the fake document that allegedly proved the existence of a Jewish conspiracy, is perhaps the best example of a *casus belli*. In fact, if there is a lesson to be learned from the Holocaust it is the horrific consequences that biased opinions and the projection of negative stereotypes can bring about. Therefore, the subjective and ideological structures that, as Terry Eagleton pointed out, "persuade men and women to mistake one another from time to time for gods or vermin" (xiii), ought to be confronted. This is why an awareness of the difference between subjective and objective knowledge — referred to in Kantian terms as phenomenon and noumenon — is key to any epistemological quest. Such awareness should include Nelson Goodman's idea of cultures as different ways of worldmaking in relationship to an objective reality. After all, the entrapment of the self within a web of lies is key to upholding any abusive power structure in which ideology consistently cripples any epistemological endeavor. This was perhaps best described in the Shakespearean tragedy, *Hamlet*, whose portrayal of a corrupt kingdom uncovered the dangers that blind conformism can bring about, conformism exemplified by the exchange between Hamlet and the king's advisor, Polonius:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius: By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Me thinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is back'd like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Polonius: Very like a whale.

Although we live an age of postmodernism and cultural relativism — whose structures are believed to be subjective, ideological, and therefore never the beholders of truth — people like biologist Richard Dawkins have come to the rescue of the notion of objectivity and epistemology. In *A Devil's Chaplain*, Dawkins declares that — contrary to all subjective culturalism — science has achieved a sense of objective accura-

cy, giving as an example the achievement of shooting a rocket in space with great precision. The notion that there is a reality out there and that the goal of any culture should be to create a bridge to that reality has been addressed by Dava Sobel (*Longitude*) and Umberto Eco (*The Island of the Day Before*); these two books deal with the problems of ocean navigation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Longitude* — a successful cognitive structure — was used by both writers to show the drive of European culture toward the creation of a relationship between the self and reality. Of course, a journey toward consciousness is something that mankind started long before the seventeenth century. Early evidence of how man created a sense of self in relationship to his environment¹⁰ can be found in the first cave drawings — caves at Lescaux and Altamira being two great examples. In fact, icons, as pointed out by art historian E.H. Gombrich, are the first tangible evidence of the complex cultural and artistic process of identification. Until recently, this identification process was simplistically viewed as an objective description by Paleolithic man of the natural world through the depiction of what were believed to be the earliest images of hunting scenes. Instead, strong evidence recently provided by scholars like Lewis Williams and Nigel Spivey tends to suggest otherwise. According to Williams, the presence of a multiplicity of dots on the cave paintings, as well as the fact that the animals depicted did not constitute the chosen prey of Paleolithic man, seems to confirm the theory that the drawings found in Altamira and Lescaux do not represent a description of the natural world found outside the caves, but are a reproduction of visions induced by spiritual ecstasies, such as the ones experienced during a trance. As Spivey explains it: “They [Paleolithic man] weren’t copying nature, but were reproducing visions created inside their heads.”¹¹ This new interpretation of the earliest drawings ever found in Europe serves as an important reminder of something we should never forget when dealing with the human mind: the existence of imagination, a precious human attribute, can cause quite a few problems if not grounded to inferential observations. The fact is that any act of human cognition is deeply embedded in the imaginative powers of the mind and, as demonstrated by most cultures with mythology and religion, even genuine attempts to reach an objective description of one’s own environment can result in subjective projections, since cognitive activity itself lies between what is real and what is imaginary. This dichotomy, which carries with it the seeds of perception and deception, is linked to the ontological process people have always been struggling with. The breakdown in the perception of what is real and what is imaginary has often resulted in an entire culture taking a path toward ontologically unsound imaginary projections, such as unicorns, dragons, and other creatures of myths and legends. These creatures are only imaginary, as opposed to others, such as the dinosaurs, whose existence has been confirmed by abundant fossil evidence. It is fair to say that man’s imagination has proved to be a double edge sword, since it can either be a powerful asset for unlocking nature’s mysteries, or it can lead to self-deception if not properly grounded in reality. This is also part of scientist Francis Crick’s comments on the importance of man’s imagination being built on what he views as sound foundations, that is, scientific facts. Here is what Crick wrote on the subject: “To construct a New System of the World we need both inspiration and imagination, but imagination building on flawed foundations will, in the long run, fail to satisfy” (261). Having said that, it is important to distinguish between two extreme directions artists can take. On the one side there are artists whose epistemological quest constantly searches outside cultural boundaries, while on the other hand there are artists who feed only from their own cultural background, without ever questioning its truthfulness. Such a dichotomy is probably best illustrated by two well-known sixteenth century Florentine artists, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti. The first, being an avid student of nature, stepped outside the realm of the all-pervading Catholic culture and found inspiration from the real world. Leonardo is famous for his realistic depictions of the human body, birds, and novel machines. Michelangelo instead thrived on the depiction of stories from the bible, with the Sistine

Chapel being the most famous example of his work. Leonardo and Michelangelo are excellent representatives of the dichotomy between epistemology and ideology. According to the role played by these two artists we are left either with the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa, Leonardo's allegory of the mystery of life, or with the fictitious pretense of a man-made cultural environment found in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, where life has a well-defined meaning and purpose.¹² Something similar exists in the aftermath of the films of Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman who, not unlike Leonardo and Michelangelo, addressed their role as artists within their own cultural background and have come out with different perspectives of art and its relevance to society at large. Naturally, they did it following the tradition of twentieth century writers such as Joyce and Woolf. The three filmmakers have tackled epistemology and ideology from a personal and intimate perspective, which resulted in the successful translation of the literary "stream of consciousness" onto the big screen. A fascinating depiction of self-discovery was at the core of these three similar yet unique artistic manifestos.

Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Man in Search of Meaning

James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, about the making of the artist Stephen Dedalus, has become the archetypal portrait of the birth of the creative self. In fact, the journey toward aesthetic consciousness has since been linked to Dedalus' breakthrough as he distanced himself from his own cultural environment and preconceived notions of country, nation, and religious allegiance. Dedalus' artistic freedom lies in his choice to become an exile and an outcast, which — contrary to being a cultural cog — enabled him to develop a direct experience of life. In this way the artist, whose perception and imagination may be connected to the revelatory power of dreams, becomes an important link to the world and can be instrumental in the creation of a wider and deeper state of consciousness. Unlike culture, whose structure gives shape and significance to the world about us, art enables us to transcend our own life experience and merge with the "other." By transcending the boundaries and regulations that culture imposes on our perception through sterile and stifling labels, the artist can lead us beyond the sense of entrapment commonly felt by the self within the cultural web. Guido Anselmi's journey was the affirmation of the creative self in terms similar to the ones used to describe Stephen Dedalus' journey of self-discovery. Fellini's portrait of the artist, however, is differentiated from Joyce's description of the young Dedalus in one aspect: he portrays the creative journey of a middle-aged man. I believe this difference is dictated by the urgency for meaning that an artist like Guido faces as life itself seems to be slipping away. Joyce did not address the issue because the young Dedalus is far from being at an age that he might feel such a sense of urgency. Guido, on the other hand, is a man lost in his own inner labyrinth, facing his own mortality and, most of all, he is in search of some meaning in his life. His search takes him back in time to confront his childhood memories, his failed religious upbringing, as well as his shaky relationship with his wife. In this tangled state of mind, Guido is looking within his own cultural tradition for a cure to his malady with the hope of being rescued from the spiritual void that has engulfed him. Guido, like Dante, sees the cure in a relationship with an ideal woman whose inner spiritual power will give purpose and meaning to his life. This journey from the real to the ideal — exemplified by his disappointing relationships with real women and his desire for an ideal woman — ultimately fails, and Guido is overwhelmed by a sense of self-acceptance and a new appreciation of what is real, instead of an unattainable ideal. Guido's final epiphany consists of him realizing that it is impossible for him to comply with an ideal cultural system whose judgmental attitude has a crippling effect on his creativity. This epiphany has finally freed the artist within him who can then go back to his creations with a renewed love. Fellini, like Joyce, gave a portrait of the artist as being the only kind of person capable of breaking through the cultural web and embracing nature with all its imperfections, complexities, contradictions, and most of all, with its lack of meaning. On the other

hand, there is a different kind of artist, closer to the tradition of the intellectual, whose quest consists of the successful transition from nature into culture. This was very much at the core of Dante's expiatory journey described in *The Divine Comedy*, where, at the beginning of the poem, the Florentine poet found himself lost in the middle of a forest from which he was first rescued by Virgil, then ultimately by Beatrice. These two historical figures, Virgil and Beatrice, gain the allegorical status of Reason and Theology in the fictional superstructure of the poem. Dante's accomplishment consists of showing that man's search for meaning cannot be fulfilled by nature alone; culture is the meaningful structure that gives significance and purpose to life as such. This was also the aftermath of Woody Allen's creative journey as he reached outside the restrictive cultural boundaries, an exciting experience in of itself, although it ultimately proved to be rather unfulfilling as it did not provide the middle-aged Sandy Bates with the sense of meaning that he so much craved. Unlike *The Divine Comedy*, in *Stardust Memories* there is no ideal imaginary woman. The film's message is conveyed through Sandy's relationship with two, both real, but very different, women. Dorrie, to whom Sandy is fatally attracted, is a complex and self-contradictory woman, while Isobel, whose maturity and wisdom make her a highly desirable partner, is viewed as the ideal woman by commonly accepted moral standards. Sandy's final choice to be with Isobel is in fact a statement about the power of the artist/intellectual to transform nature into culture. By *culture*, we mean a process of filtration and selection through which an ideal, that is, a model to imitate, is imposed. The choice of Isobel over Dorrie is ultimately culturally induced, based on a value-system, and it is in its own right a demonstration of how fiction and reality interact with one another. Woody Allen's happy ending, where life becomes fiction, or vice versa, may be one of the strongest statements about the impact that art can have on life. Overall, I would say that Fellini and Allen have given a portrayal of the artist according to a dichotomy that exists in the relationship between what is real and what is ideal. Within this dichotomy we have on one side the artist that breaks out of the cultural web and becomes the principal mediator of nature, and on the other side we have the artist who instead chooses to remain within the cultural web on which he continues to feed. Man's journey toward consciousness lies within these two polarities, and the artist's imagination can go in either direction.

Naturally there are certain consequences that result from the artist's choice, as portrayed in Charlie Kaufman's film. *Adaptation*, with its notion of schizophrenia as a culturally induced phenomenon, has awakened us to the dangers of a culture that feeds on itself. The image of the artist as an *uroboros* [the snake that eats its own tail] is revelatory of how tricky cultural mediations can be, exposing the lack of relevance that epistemology has within the Hollywood industry. From the outset of the film we are introduced to a chain of people whose relationships define a different stage of removal from reality. John Laroche, an orchid hunter from Florida, whose actions were the inspiration of Orlean's book, is the true link to the real world. His relationship with the world of nature and culture, although at times altered by personal beliefs, is based on a constant process of checks and balances, as depicted by the scene in which he explains the implications of an unusual looking orchid. "You see that nectary all the way down there?," Laroche said as he pointed out the flower to Orlean, "Darwin hypothesized a moth with a nose twelve inches long to pollinate it. Everyone thought he was a loon. Then, sure enough, they found this moth with a twelve-inch proboscis." This scene clearly illustrates the reliance of Laroche on epistemology, that is, the reliance on inferential descriptions of the world (meaning direct observations that are supported by evidence). Susan Orlean, a writer for *The New Yorker* magazine who turned Laroche's life into a book, is the investigator whose tale represents the first stage of removal from reality, and therefore the first step toward fiction. This was clearly addressed throughout the film with scenes that portrayed Orlean mixing facts with her subjective beliefs and bias personal opinions about Laroche, the state of Florida, and nature in general. Finally, there is Charlie Kaufman, a screenwriter who has no first-

hand experience of the events he has been asked to turn into a story for the big screen by a Hollywood executive producer. In other words, Kaufman represents the missing link between Hollywood and reality, whose stories are usually the product of the screenwriter's imagination. Kaufman's adaptation will turn out to be his personal and imaginary interpretation of the disjointed events lived by Laroche and narrated by Orlean. The portrayal of Charlie Kaufman, stuck in his room and incapable of any social interaction, is itself a statement that the Hollywood storyteller is essentially an artist that lives off his own imagination and, at best, off other works of fiction. Kaufman's advice is therefore not to rely on fiction to gather any notions of reality. This message was also conveyed by Kaufman's Hollywood-ending, which has Laroche and Orlean chasing the screenwriter through the Florida swamp in a symbolic struggle between fiction and reality. In fact, the swamp is a metaphor for the 'artist's subconscious in which the creative conflict of adapting Orlean's story has turned into the killing of Laroche. The death of the orchid hunter represents the admission by fiction writer Charlie Kaufman that Hollywood is not the least interested in a realistic portrayal of life, since it is more than willing to erase any trace of such a relationship.

Finally, it can be stated that the films by Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman analyzed here are instrumental in understanding the difficulties faced by the artist in his journey toward self-awareness within an overall cultural framework. The three filmmakers have succeeded in the depiction of their own mental state as creators while challenging and antagonizing the existing cultural bridge between the self and reality. Their work, which made abundant use of the techniques of estrangement and defamiliarization, has enabled the viewer to gain an insight into cultural mediation and confront the ideas that make up ethical systems — both religious and non-religious — of one's own culture. Confronting the bondage of the self to a cultural structure is a major step toward awareness of one's own self, of others, and of the world as separate entities. At the core of these three self-portrayals — which are united by the depiction of a common journey of self-discovery as storytellers — was the realization of the power that stories have on people's lives. Each one of the artists analyzed here has rejected the collective belief that understanding the narratives endorsed by a particular culture can help us gain a more accurate understanding of nature, the cosmos, or a clearer perception of oneself and one's own nature. Despite the different conclusions arrived by these filmmakers, there is a common denominator to each one of the three films, and it is that the epic story of man's place in the universe is just a fictional construct. The paradigm shift of consciousness described by Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman resembles the one already addressed in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the epic journey of the Greek hero was rewritten in all its meaningfulness as one day in the life of childless Leopold Bloom and his journey through the streets of Dublin. This is what modern man is left to ponder upon. In spite of Bloom's relatively pedestrian adventures, his life does nevertheless echo the one of Odysseus as he too was faced with many different challenges.¹³ Joyce's portrayal of life's complexities awakens us to the importance that *mythos*, that is, a story, has in providing our lives with meaning and structure. Despite all the confusion with the complexity of our own existence we still search for some sort of meaningful structure to hold on to, and as T.S. Eliot stated, Joyce's *Ulysses* seemingly mythical pattern was done "simply as a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Grant 70). The question faced by any reader of *Ulysses* is whether our perception and interpretation of the analogies to the Homeric structure are objective or subjective. This dilemma is closely related to the dichotomy between nature and culture itself, which is very much a juxtaposition of chaos and order, where the artist can take either path by choosing to select and filtrate his own experience accordingly. That is the negotiation every artist has to come to terms with, in other words, the relationship between the creative self, the ideal, and the real. Fellini's *8 1/2* is in some ways an artistic manifesto in which the director renounces the epic story and storytelling as such, to devote himself to the exploration

of man's inner world, his urges, and his sense of loss outside the commonly accepted fictitious cultural boundaries. Allen's *Stardust Memories* and Kaufman's *Adaptation* are instead an oath of allegiance to the world of fiction and therefore to storytelling. In absence of a god, the *Cinecittà* artist chooses to face the enigma of life, while the Hollywood artist seems willing to assume God's role, creating story after story, like a modern-day Scheherazade, where, in the best tradition of the *Arabian Nights*, the story itself becomes a means of survival.

ANTONELLA D'AQUINO

NOTES

¹As the author of this paper I would like to clarify that the comments on the Catholic Church are not my personal opinions. What I tried to do here was simply to provide a suitable explanation on a subject as difficult as the affirmation of an ideal through a belief system.

²In this paper, the generic masculine pronouns *he* and *his* refer to the artist in general, male or female.

³This is what psycho-therapist Nancy J. Napier wrote about the effects of being shamed at a young age can have later in life: "To have a shamed child inside creates the potential for feeling alienated from yourself. It promotes the experience of disliking yourself, of feeling that you are a bad person, or of having a part of you you don't want anyone else to discover" (166).

⁴Actually, there is a distinction to be made between the symbolic use of eyeglasses, lightly shaded eyeglasses, and sunglasses. While the eyeglasses worn by the three protagonists are often used to signify culturally induced biases, the lightly shaded eyeglasses, on the other hand, tend to signify a mixture of culturally induced biases and personal biases based upon feelings and emotions. Sunglasses are instead used as a reminder of self imposed censorship.

⁵This is what Carl Jung wrote on the subject: "Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of the man, an imprint or "archetype" of all the ancestral experiences of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions ever made by woman — in short, an inherited system of psychic adaptation... I have called this image 'anima,' ... a man can create for himself a *femme inspiratrice* by his anima projection" (50–51).

⁶Many people have made the link between Fellini's *8 1/2* and Allen's *Stardust Memories*, one good example is Mary P. Nichols' and her book *Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen*.

⁷The title of Orlean's book, *The Orchid's Thief*, echoes the English translation of the title of De Sica's film *The Bicycle Thief*. The implication here is that, just as the bicycle was a symbol for culture, the orchid is a symbol for nature. Furthermore, the stolen bicycle, whose Latin name *fides* implies the loss of faith (trust) in humankind, mirrors the stolen orchid in Kaufman's film. In fact, the name *ghost orchid* can easily be interpreted as the loss of mystery once nature's secret is deciphered.

⁸As clearly implied by the song sang by Charlie to his dying twin brother. Here are the lyrics: "Imagine you and me. I do. I think of you day and night. It's only right to think about the one you love and hold you tight. So happy together."

⁹Something similar to what Disney did to the adaptation of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* — a book that ironically deals with the notion of moral growth of an individual through trial and error — as pointed out by the hilarious review of William Grimes: "First the bad news: in chapter four Pinocchio smashes Jimmy the Cricket against the wall with a wooden mallet. Old Geppetto doesn't have a cat named Figaro. Monstro the Whale is in fact an anonymous shark suffering from asthma and heart palpitations. In other words Disney took certain liberties with Collodi's text, so first time readers are in for a few surprises. The good news is that the real *Pinocchio* offers pleasures never hinted at by Disney ... a masterful blend of realism and fantasy."

¹⁰Sobel's book used the notion of longitude as a metaphor to indicate how a male dominated culture could enable women to strive for an objective self-knowledge as wished by Virginia Woolf. This was clearly stated at the beginning of Sobel's book where the author recalls her own childhood memories of being carried by her father while holding a wire ball that resembled the lines of longitude. She remembers stopping in front of the statue of Atlas, the male god, who carried heaven and earth on his shoulders.

¹¹See Spivey, *How Art Made the World*.

¹²Although the accuracy of such a statement might be challenged, since Michelangelo and Leonardo both worked under commissions from wealthy patrons that severely restricted their expression to certain subject matter, the dichotomy between ideal and real still remains. In fact, unlike Michelangelo, Leonardo's famous portrayals of biblical scenes were meticulously grounded to real aspects of nature. One of the best examples is the *Annunciation*, commissioned by the monks of Monte Uliveto outside Florence, where the angel Gabriel kneels on a carpet of grass and flowers, which were rendered with an accuracy indicative of Leonardo's considerable botanical knowledge.

¹³For example, Bloom's contemplation of mortality at Paddy Dignam's funeral can be viewed as the equivalent of Odysseus' descent into Hades; or the confrontation with an intimidating anti-Semite at the pub is reminiscent of the episode with Poliphemus; and the temptations offered by the brothel can be viewed as the equivalent of Circe's den.

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