The Films of Woody Allen

Second Edition

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Contents

Introduction to the Second Edition

The Prisoner of Aura: The Lost World of Woody Allen

For years, Woody Allen, the eccentric and nervous, obsessive and compulsive, Jewish New Yorker was also the man who seemed to have it all together – life, art, work, love. This appeared to be especially true during his 11- to 12-year relationship with Mia Farrow. By most accounts, the success of his unusual domestic arrangement with Mia Farrow and their brood matched the success of his life and work in film; and in film, Allen's brilliance as director, writer, and star with final authority over production made him a historic figure of accomplishment, a judgment about his overall work that still holds true today. By the time of his relationship with Farrow, Allen had triumphed not only in film but in many books, articles, and performances as well. At that point in his life, Allen's record of achievement signified a degree of international success and recognition that made his career in comedy and film comparable even with Charlie Chaplin's.

However, in contrast to Chaplin, who usually performed as The Tramp, Allen invariably plays himself, thinly disguising himself as various film characters who are themselves fictionalized versions of Allen's own manufactured identity as Woody Allen.[1] In the case of Chaplin, the mask of The Tramp established some protection for his career in the midst of scandals involving young women.[2] For Allen, no such cover exists. In Allen's case, the fusion of the public and private selves helped him achieve success, but as it turned out, the same merger of the public and private in life and work increased his vulnerability to painful exposure concerning his private life. He has not been able to inoculate his public image against an association with his private behavior.

About ten years after the public first learned about Allen's sexual relationship with Soon-Yi Previn, the adopted daughter of Mia Farrow, repercussions remain for his reputation and career. The relationship between Allen

and Soon-Yi became widely known in August of 1992. At the time, he was 56 years old, and she was 21. The publicity over the scandal seemed exceptional but steadily worsened as the situation worsened. Farrow, 47, and Allen battled bitterly and publically over the custody of their three children. Most shocking, Allen was accused of molesting his adopted seven-year-old daughter, Dylan O'Sullivan Farrow.[3] Eventually, Allen lost the custody fight, the Connecticut state's attorney dropped charges of sexual abuse to spare the child "the trauma of a court appearance," and Allen married Soon-Yi.[4]

Among the general public and critics, many joined Mia Farrow and her famous mother, Maureen O'Sullivan, the film star of an earlier Hollywood era, in professing to be shocked. The headline for an article by Caryn James, a film critic for the *New York Times*, summarized a new skepticism toward Allen expressed by many of his fans. It proclaimed, "And Here We Thought We Knew Him."[5] For James and others, the scandal made Allen look like the very thing his image consistently contradicted. He suddenly seemed no better than the Hollywood he often still ridicules. Yet his unprecedented surprise appearance in a New York tribute at the 2002 Academy Award ceremony suggests a new appeasement of Hollywood, perhaps to help revivify his ongoing strategy to recuperate his public image. As James notes:

> Though he denies this ("People always confuse my movies and my life" is one of his disingenuous recent comments), the surprising truth is that the urbane, intellectual Woody Allen has turned out to be an old-fashioned movie star after all.[6]

The economic impact of the scandal upon Allen's filmmaking at times also has been considered serious. The *New York Times* reported, "Mr. Allen's publicized court battle with Mia Farrow over custody of their children left the filmmaker vulnerable at the box office, many studio executives say."[7] Although the article also noted that "reports of Woody Allen's professional demise have proven to be exaggerated," other events suggest the worsening of economic difficulties for Allen. Bernard Weinraub in 1998 described organizational and financial problems for Allen. He writes:

> Quietly, within the atmosphere of secrecy and control that marks Mr. Allen's creative decision making, the team that helped fashion movies like *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters* has largely broken up amid an intense effort to cut costs and overhaul the management of his operation. Mr. Allen said the changes were entirely the result of cost-cutting measures taken because his highly praised films have not earned money in the United States.[8]

A lawsuit initiated by Allen and his disputes with people who once were his most intimate associates demonstrated new economic and professional difficulties for him. Again Weinraub reports recent problems and setbacks for Allen:

> Jean Doumanian, who was Woody Allen's closest friend for 30 years and who produced some of his films, responded today to a lawsuit that he filed against her, denying the allegations and accusing Mr. Allen of being "self-indulgent" and "fiscally irresponsible" in his filmmaking. Ms. Doumanian also said that she and her companion, Jacqui Safra, and their privately held production company "took significant financial risks" on Mr. Allen's behalf. She said they had supported him "at a time when Allen stood accused of betraying others who trusted him," an apparent reference to Mr. Allen's bitter custody battle in the early 1990s with his former companion Mia Farrow.[9]

While the Woody–Mia–Soon-Yi imbroglio became a classic public relations nightmare, the subsequent crisis of Allen's public image also provides insight into the nature, structure, and operations of the cinematic image. As in the case of other stars, Allen's image achieved a special form of aura unique to the structure and nature of film. This aura emanates from the complex interactions between documentary image and fiction in film performance. Aura in this context relates directly to the qualities that distinguish film from other art forms.

For Allen, the linkage of public and private selves helped establish his unique aura. Allen's systematic cultivation of this unity of his personal and public identities now compounds the crisis of his public image. The foundation of aura in the very documentary nature of the cinematic image exacerbates his difficulties in altering his own film image and identity to suit new circumstances. The character of aura as a product of documentary image and fiction suggests that Allen's dilemma with the public involves more than simply redecorating or changing the window dressing of his public image. The reliance of Allen's particular aura upon the fusion of his public and private identities clearly contravenes any public relations efforts since the scandal to sever or moderate that connection. In a sense, Allen has become a prisoner of his own image and public relations genius. The narcissistic marriage of public and private selves that served him so well now encircles him.

Until the scandal, images of Allen, the man, the star, and the screen character, maintained a remarkable consistency.[10] In film after film, a distraught, self-absorbed, anxious, skinny man charms us with jokes about the

depression and insecurity that form much of his identity. He appears on romanticized New York City streets that make the city an imaginary projection of an urban oasis imbued with enough stimulation to be exciting but never with so much as to become frightening. Interior spaces, whether in apartments or public areas, exude charm, taste, sophistication. The poor, the homeless, the insane and criminal, the deformed and disabled tend to live on other streets and occupy other spaces of New York. Similarly, at least until recently, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians usually remain off camera, thereby preventing the potential intrusion of dissonant social and political issues into Allen's narrative thrust and mental peregrinations. Dialogue as well as interior and spoken monologues articulate Allen's woes, worries, and wants. The soundtrack invariably establishes a distinctive Allen ambiance that suggests a love for classical music, jazz, and traditional popular music to match his sensitivity to art, ideas, and people.

We have seen Allen this way in films ranging from *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) to *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), and *Husbands and Wives* (1992). No matter the name, the main character in these films generally embodies a variation of the Allen persona and figure. Allen, of course, makes other kinds of movies that sometimes are of a darker, existential, and experimental nature. These films present a somewhat different image of Allen as both director and actor. *Interiors* (1978), *Stardust Memories* (1980), *Zelig* (1983), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *September* (1987), *Another Woman* (1988), and *Shadows and Fog* (1992) represent this aspect of his overall work. Some of his movies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994), and *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001) seem designed primarily as comic entertainment to attract wider audiences. Even over this range of characters and films, Allen and his screen character generally cohere. As a recent example, a reviewer of *Jade Scorpion* could not resist teasing about the apparent connection between Allen and the screen character, a "gumshoe" named Briggs. The reviewer, A. O. Scott, quips that actresses in the film "seem to be on hand to pay tribute to Mr. Allen's – I mean Briggs's – sexual potency."[11]

Accordingly, over the years, the invented identity of Woody Allen, auteur director, actor, and urban neurotic worked as a self-fulfilling system to help make Allen successful. The name and picture of Allen conjured up images and ideas, notion and values that provided a basis for developing his fictional screen characters. The composite Allen public image functioned as a ghostly alter ego to identify and situate the fictional Allen character portrayed in the

film's story. For Woody Allen, the actor, director, and writer, the identification with his fictional characters on the screen was money in the bank, not only an artistic and creative resource, but also a reservoir of collateral in the form of proven popularity with movie audiences that could secure investment in him for film projects.

Moreover, the process of educating movie audiences into identifying Woody Allen so thoroughly with his fictional film characters involves more than the repetition of external, physical, and dramatic representations of these characters. In these films, the steady unraveling on the screen of the man's inner being verifies the external representation and dynamic. The humor of self-deprecation, the confessional mode of discourse, the revelations of emotional and psychological weakness and impotence, the jokes about masturbation, and the expressions of personal venality and misdeeds all insinuate an intensity of authenticity and sincerity that create a veneer of impregnable credibility about his character. The deeper we get into him the more we believe him. Personal imperfection makes him more human and real. In classic Allen films, his weaknesses become familiar as admirable traits that constitute his unique individuality and genius.

Allen's success in gaining favorable treatment from the press achieved something approximating ultimate fulfillment in early 1991 in a piece in *The New York Times Magazine* by Eric Lax who had written before about Allen for the *Times*. The article's focus on Woody and Mia and their unusual domestic and work situation included all of the children involved in the relationship. It appeared about a year before the scandal. Presented as genuine magazine journalism about a famous couple whose special combination of authenticity and sophistication made conforming to conventional Hollywood hype unthinkable, the article in retrospect resembles classic publicity writing. It portrays Woody and Mia as having the best of all worlds, a bohemian and creative life-style with the security and love of marriage. It describes them as pursuing a companionate relationship of devotion and loyalty without the usual hangups and restrictions of conventional marriage. It makes them eccentric and ordinary at the same time. It also includes photos of Mia, Allen, and the children that suggest the pleasures of genuine family love and devotion. Consistent with such articles about stars, this piece parallels stories and photos about their personal lives with details about the progress of their careers in film. After comparing Woody and Mia to "a number of on-and-off-the screen legendary couples" such as Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Lax emphasizes how Allen and Mia are similar but different because as "younger counterparts of these famous twosomes they

seem intent on being untheatrical – in their disregard for fashionable attire, in their unusual living arrangement, in their combining busy film careers with a large family."[12] Firming up his portrait of a thoroughly happy partnership, Lax assures the reader, "Despite the vast differences in background and upbringing, each likes the family of the other. Her mother and sisters appear in his films."[13]

Lax, who has written a biography of Allen, confirms intimate aspects of the domestic life of this unusual family that had become part of the Woody–Mia legend. He lists all of the children, naming "one Korean" in parentheses. He says, "For the first few years after their friendly dates turned into serious ones, Allen would get up in the morning, give Farrow a call, and then work while she attended to the children, of whom there are now nine." Lax goes on to write one of the paragraphs that still must keep him awake at night:

> Few married couples seem more married. They are constantly in touch with each other, and not many fathers spend as much time with their children as Allen does. He is there before they wake up in the morning, he sees them during the day, and he helps put them to bed at night. As each has been married and divorced twice, experience has taught them that legalizing a relationship doesn't necessarily make it last, and Mia Farrow is fond of quoting a joke about the much-married Alan Jay Lerner: "Marriage is Alan's way of saying good-bye."

Lax summarizes their harmonious life together this way:

> They both also seem to have what they want. Farrow is a full-time mother and has a satisfying career. Allen – who, according to friends, spent considerable energy in his earlier marriages and relationships educating his partner and being needful of her attention – has, in Mia Farrow, found a balance with a wholly contained woman.[14]

Obviously, such a favorable portrait of Allen and his relationship with Mia Farrow constitutes an endorsement of Allen and his life-style, one that provides added justification for the faith many fans and critics at the time placed in the connection between the real Allen and his onscreen characters. Through the benefit of hindsight today, only the images of Woody and Mia on the cover of the magazine hint at hidden distress as they both vacantly stare up into the camera with looks that intimate the slightest possibility of being masks that dissimulate deeper anxieties, doubts, and fears. In contrast to such images, the magazine article itself provides assurance that the brilliance, personality, and behavior of the real Woody Allen attain fictional expression in the humor and eccentricity of classic onscreen Allen characters.

All that changed, of course, a year later when Soon-Yi Farrow Previn, the girl mentioned parenthetically in Lax's article, gained extraordinary notoriety as Allen's secret love. As discussed earlier, the public scandal changed forever the popular image of Allen and seems to have transformed how movie audiences understand the connection between the public and private Woody Allen.[15] As also noted earlier, in the article by film critic Caryn James of the *New York Times*, Allen's efforts at the time of the scandal to dissociate his private life from his characters on the screen seemed hollow and what she termed "disingenuous."

In fact, James and others emphasized how closely details of Allen's and Farrow's problems matched events in *Husbands and Wives*, the film Allen released at that very time. James writes:

> Woody and Mia look worn and beleaguered in *Husbands and Wives*, and now that we know what was going on behind the scenes when the film was being shot last winter, no wonder. Woody Allen and Mia Farrow showed up on the set to play a couple whose ten-year marriage is falling apart while he becomes infatuated with a 20-year-old student. At the same time, their 12-year offscreen liaison was falling apart while he was becoming involved with her 21-year old adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Farrow Previn.[16]

A story in the paper a few days earlier soldered Allen and the film character firmly together by documenting how closely the shooting schedule of the film compared with events in his personal life. William Grimes writes,

> Woody Allen has often said that his work is his life. *Husbands and Wives*, his new film, gives new meaning to the sentiment. The film deals with problems of fidelity, the psychological pressures of aging and the eternal war between the heart and the intellect. The film can be read as a script for Mr. Allen's own life, with parallels that range from intriguing to uncanny. Of particular interest is the shooting schedule for the film, on file at the New York City Mayor's Office for Film, Theater, and Broadcasting, which includes a scene-by-scene breakdown of *Husbands and Wives*, scheduled to be released in mid-September.[17]

Similarly, Terrence Rafferty in *The New Yorker* describes "Woody Allen's uncomfortably personal new movie," *Husbands and Wives*, as a "kind of confessional piece." He notes that Allen "couldn't have foreseen" that the timing of the film's release would cause audiences to scan it "for inside dope about the messy breakup of his relationship with Mia Farrow." Rafferty

concludes, "It's sad to have to say this, but Woody Allen's take on life and love has become unbearably familiar."[18]

This commentary and documentation about *Husbands and Wives* confirm the history of Allen's close association of his personal life with his screen life but with the crucial difference that in this case the fusing of the private and the public created a negative image for Allen. Such articles and reviews anticipated the difficulties Allen would face in trying to deal with the problematic relationship between his public and private image. Spin could not make his personal story palatable or even morally comprehensible to many of his fans. Nor could spin separate what had been so carefully linked, the common identification of the private Allen with the public figure on the screen.

The war of mutual annihilation in the press and media between the contending sides in the Allen–Farrow–Previn affair provides a case study of the connection between public relations and the making of celebrity and stardom. The public relations contest in this case includes Farrow's memoir of her life, marriages, and career, *What Falls Away: A Memoir*, which covers the Allen years in detail; a lengthy *Vanity Fair* article favoring Mia; and a documentary about Allen by acclaimed documentary filmmaker Barbara Kopple, *Wild Man Blues* (1998), a film finally more notable for projecting a positive image of Allen's relationship with Soon-Yi than for its pronounced original purpose of documenting his love of jazz by filming his world tour with his jazz band.[19] Allen granted Kopple remarkable access and cooperation for the project. Not surprisingly, a self-serving pseudo-documentary that barely disguises its failed attempt at image reconstruction only aggravates Allen's isolation.

However, the use of the documentary form to strengthen Allen's image at this point in Allen's life occurs with some irony. From the beginning of his career to his most recent films, Allen has evinced a fascination with the documentary form. Allen has used documentary style, documentary technique, and the mock documentary form in films from *Take the Money and Run* (1969) to *Zelig* (1983), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), and *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999). In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), Allen even seems to play himself yet again as an unhappy, intellectual, idealistic, flawed, and unsuccessful documentary filmmaker. One of his most interesting efforts with the mock documentary form reappeared in 1997 after it had been neglected and forgotten since it was made in 1971 at WNET, the public television station in New York. The film, *Men of Crisis: The Harvey Wallinger Story*, sustains a mock form of a documentary throughout its 25-minute portrayal of a fictitious aide to President Richard M. Nixon, Harvey Wallinger, who clearly resembles Henry Kissinger.[20]

Allen's development of the documentary style over so many years in such a variety of forms to dramatize a diversity of stories, subjects, characters, and themes indicates not only a natural proclivity toward this form in his work but also an instinctive appreciation for the centrality of documentary to film in general. His repeated use of the documentary form to structure works of fiction suggests his interest in the documentary nature of all film as well as his insight into the intrinsic relationship in film between documentary and fiction.

What remains less clear concerns Allen's awareness of documentary as a kind of Frankenstein for him. His own insight into documentary as a foundation of film probably prepared him for being caught in a double bind. As described earlier, much of his career involves playing himself. Film by its nature involves documenting the construction of that career. Trying to change his characterizations and portrayals, on the one hand, or changing the nature of his filming and documentation, on the other, have proven difficult to achieve. The documentary nature of film as a crucial element of aura partly accounts for that difficulty. Therefore, understanding the structural elements that constitute the documentary image of film performance and aura should help explain Allen's dilemma of documenting his inability to escape or change himself in film.

In his seminal work, *Acting in the Cinema*, James Naremore helped initiate a fresh interest in film studies in relating film, especially film performance, to documentary. Early in his study of the rhetoric and semiotics of film performance, Naremore emphasizes how the documentary record of performance entails one of the three ways of analyzing actors in film. The others involve considering actors as theatrical figures in dramatic performance and also as public figures.[21] More recently, Gilberto Perez, in *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium*, articulates a theory about the nature and structure of film that suggests that the relationship between documentary and fiction in film provides a fundamental way of understanding how film works. Perez's theory proposes key terms, elements, and relationships that help to explain the situation of Woody Allen as actor, auteur, and public figure.

On the basis of his own films and work, Allen certainly should appreciate Perez's claim that fiction films and documentary films exist on "that uncertain frontier where documentary and fiction meet."[22] Allen has been there repeatedly. For his time and generation of filmmakers, he was a pioneer on that frontier. For Perez, the dependence of fiction in film upon documentary images helps define film as an art form. Working in tension with each other but dependent upon each other, documentary and fiction remain inseparable. Perez writes, "Every film is in some way poised between the

documentary and the fictional aspects of its medium, between the documentary image that the camera captures and the fiction projected on the screen" (p. 49).

The importance of the photographic image to film goes to the heart of film's connection to documentary. For Perez, documentary means not just "factual content, the actual existence of the things represented" but also "the form of the photographic image" (p. 345). Using classic semiological terms, he says the elements of the photographic form involve "an icon because it gives an image, a likeness, of the subject it represents" and "an index because it has a direct connection with the subject, as a footprint has with a foot or seismograph with movements of the ground" (p. 32). Icon and index work together to explain how the photographic image operates and communicates. Icon and index exchange credibility and possibility. A photograph must look real, like a living part of the material reality photographed, but such reality in a photograph also requires indexical associations that make the icon credible. As Perez says, "It is not the index rather than the icon, the imprint rather than the image, but the marriage of index and icon, imprint and image, that makes the photograph distinctively what it is" (p. 33).

This "marriage of icon and index" enables the photographic image to achieve an aura that departs from the conventional understanding of aura. The idea of aura originated, of course, in Walter Benjamin's argument for aura as emanating from a thoroughly unique object in contrast to works that machines mass reproduce, including photographic images.[23] However, Perez suggests a notion of aura in photography. Perez asserts:

> In photography there is no original image, only copies, and thus, according to Benjamin, no aura. Yet a photographic image has its own kind of aura – the aura of a remnant, of a relic – stemming from the uniqueness, the original particularity, not of the picture but the referent whose emanation it captures. (p. 33)

Thus, it can be argued, a photographic image achieves a form of aura by capturing the "emanation" of a "remnant" and structuring it through a unique synthesis of icon and index.

The relationship of icon, index, and symbol to the photographic and documentary image indicates how the creation and revision of aura for a figure such as Allen involves more than image building or publicity. Secured on what Slavoj Žižek terms a semiotic "triad of indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs," Perez's theory describes the play of structural elements that creates an aura in film for a performer such as Allen.[24] Allen's aura grows out of the partnership of icon and index in the photographic and documentary image.

The union of icon and index in the photographic image authenticates the dynamic between fiction and documentary in film. The fusion of icon and index becomes the agent and basis for the relationship between documentary and fiction in film. The interaction of all these elements especially enters into the representation of film performance by documentary. For Perez, a statement by Jean-Luc Godard, the French director and leader of the New Wave movement in French film of the 1950s and 1960s, summarizes the argument about documentary and film performance. Perez quotes Godard, the director of *Breathless* (1959): "'Every film,' Godard has said, 'is a documentary of its actors'" (p. 343). Perez continues:

> A fiction movie constructs the fiction of characters from the documentary of actors. It is the documentary of a fiction enacted before the camera; and it is the fiction of a documentary of characters merged in our minds with their incarnation in the actors. (p. 343)

It would seem, then, according to this theory of documentary, fiction, and film performance, that icon and index comingle in cinematic representations of Allen to engender his aura. At the same time, the dependence of Allen's aura on the fusion of his public and private selves now complicates his work and career.

Like other great directors, Allen has defied convention and tradition in his films by foregrounding the system of filmmaking itself. For example, in *Annie Hall*, Allen's use of narrative voice, split screens, subtitles, startling visualizations, narrative breaks and discontinuities, and complex character constructions all make his film consistent with the contemporary interest in self-reflexively focusing on the means, method, and signifiers of cinematic representation. This emphasis on the processes of representation promotes aesthetic distance and critical interaction with the film as opposed to merely stimulating consumption and providing entertainment.

In contrast to such innovation, however, it seems that Allen remains rather conventional in retaining the coherence that is discussed throughout this essay between himself as actor and the Allen character portrayed in his films. Allen's divided and fragmented screen characters seem quite consistent with his own public personality. This impulse toward coherence between Allen himself and his screen characters distinguishes Allen from other innovative directors. Thus, Perez notes how "Godard sets up a marked separation between the actor and character," especially in the classic *Breathless* (p. 341). For Perez, Godard induces a break between the character in a film and the actor in order to acknowledge and emphasize the difference between "the reality the camera reproduces" and the process of constructing fictional

characters (p. 344). Godard, as Perez interprets him, "splits the documentary of the actor, the person, from the characterization of the fictional being he or she impersonates" (p. 345).

Ironically, when Allen, during the Mia Farrow–Soon-Yi Previn crisis, so passionately maintained the prominence of such a split between himself and his own films, many, as noted earlier, came close to accusing him of perpetrating a fraud with such a claim. The same issue reemerged with a more recent film, *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), a movie about a writer, Harry Block, who happens to be a despicable human being with all sorts of terrible character traits. Allen told Bernard Weinraub of the *New York Times*, "People confuse the details of Harry's life with my life, when I'm nothing like Harry." Weinraub, however, reports that Allen "acknowledged that his films often blurred the line between art and life." Weinraub also notes that in the film Allen plays, "a blocked writer with, like any character in a Woody Allen film, an avalanche of creative, neurotic and erotic obsessions."[25]

Allen, of course, has powerful, responsible, and respected defenders in film, the media, and entertainment who insist on the validity of his claim to be totally different in real life from his public and film identity. John Lahr in *The New Yorker* argues pungently for separating the Allen he interviewed over several days from the Allen the public imagines.

In Lahr's article, Allen seems quite aware of the power of the system of signs that defines him for many. Sounding semiotic himself, Allen conveys his frustration with a situation that may have placed permanent limits on his ability to create conditions for himself of great freedom. Lahr writes, "in a sense, Allen's fiction has succeeded too well: The public won't divorce him from his film persona. 'I'm not that iconic figure at all,' he says. 'I'm very different from that.'"[26]

More than five years after Lax's article, Lahr proclaims an Allen in real life that differs dramatically from the public image. He says, "The real Allen holds himself in reserve. He is, like all great funny men, inconsolable." Lahr emphasizes that "Onscreen, Allen is a loser who makes much of his inadequacy; offscreen, he has created over the years the most wide-ranging oeuvre in American entertainment."[27] Lahr details differences between the common conception of Allen and reality. Describing Allen's "book-lined and flower-filled Fifth Avenue duplex penthouse" as a "rustic cocoon" that qualifies his urban image, Lahr writes:

> Allen does not stammer. He is not uncertain of what he thinks. He is not full of jokes or bon mots, and when he is amused he is more likely to say "That's funny" than to smile. He is courteous but not biddable.

> He is a serious, somewhat morose person who rarely raises his voice, who listens carefully, and who, far from being a sad sack, runs his career and his business with admirable, single-minded efficiency.[28]

Perhaps it is both obvious and unfair to note that part of Allen's "admirable, single-minded efficiency" involves media and public relations.

In any case, rather quickly into the piece, both Lahr and Allen engage in explaining and analyzing what Allen himself described as the problem of his "iconic" public image. Lahr writes that "Allen had hit on a persona, much in the way that Chaplin had found Charlie when he put on the bowler and picked up the cane." Lahr quotes Allen, "'Keaton and Chaplin reflected an era where the anxieties and underlying vocabulary of people's longings were physical. It was a physical era. It was trains and machines.'"[29] Lahr then interprets the symbolic differences between Chaplin's image and Allen's. He writes, "At the beginning of the century, Chaplin's kinetic tramp made a legend of dynamism; by its end, Allen's paralyzed Woody made a legend of defeat."[30]

Thus, while Lahr provides a persuasive portrait of Allen as a consummate professional and a creative genius with a more subdued and detached personality than his public image usually conveys, both he and Allen inevitably must confront the issue of the profound resemblance between Woody Allen's public persona and his screen characters. The need remains to interpret the meaning and symbolism of the marriage of icon and index. The public sense of Allen as "iconic figure," in spite of his disavowal of its significance, continues to impose itself on Allen and his defenders.

Amazingly, the Allen that Lahr introduces to readers has been part of the Allen public persona all along. Much of the genius of the Allen image has involved its incorporation of contradictions and complexities that broaden its significance over a wide range of issues. In his major movies, the Allen figure does not find himself limited by just one group of images as the "loser" or "sad sack" that Lahr mentions. In fact, in such classic Allen films as *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the Allen characters stand out as artistically, intellectually, and even morally superior to the other characters. They also invariably demonstrate success, and although they often lose at love, such losses involve liaisons with women such as Diane Keaton, Mariel Hemingway, and Meryl Streep, to say nothing of Mia Farrow. Even in morally compromising situations, his characters often demonstrate qualities of honesty, sensitivity, and complexity. Judgmental with others to the point of arrogance, the Allen characters convey a sense of unique charm through their humor, honesty, critical thinking, and discursive

dexterity. In other words, the strength of the Allen image as loser in the foreground of the screen derives to a large extent from its foundation in a figure of substance. Such complexity helps to explain the broad appeal of the Allen image to a variety of different audiences. In none of the classic Allen films does the sympathetic Allen figure become pathetic or maudlin; instead he connotes a complexity of meanings that demands thoughtful interpretation. Accordingly, for Allen it becomes painfully difficult to break from only part of the complex whole of his public and cinematic identity.

One of Allen's most inventive and startling efforts to effectuate the recently desired separation of his public persona from his character in a film occurs in *Celebrity* (1998). In the film, Kenneth Branagh, most celebrated himself for starring in and directing stylish film productions of Shakespeare, becomes Allen's surrogate. As though trying to convince audiences and/or himself of the difference between the real Woody Allen and his fictional characters, Allen has Branagh play the Allen character in *Celebrity*. In an amazing acting tour de force, Branagh steps in and intercedes between Allen – the auteur director, writer, and star – and Allen – the character – on the screen. Branagh serves as a kind of shield to protect Allen from himself and perhaps the audience from witnessing another Allen performance of a character who looks, speaks, and acts like Allen but somehow, according to Allen, is not Allen. Describing this effort, Janet Maslin notes that

> [i]n an exceptional feat of mimickry, Kenneth Branagh assumes the corduroy mantle of Mr. Allen and takes on the full panoply of self-effacing nervous mannerisms ("Really? Great, great, 'cause I don't wanna be, uh . . . ") as assiduously as if he were tackling *Richard III*.[31]

Ironically, Branagh's performance proves the power of the documentary history of Allen's work as well as the potency of Allen's aura. Branagh's utter mastery of every detail and nuance of Allen's film characterizations seems so unnatural coming from the Shakespearean as to emphasize Allen's aura and insinuate his presence through his absence. The longevity of the documentary power of the Allen image overwhelms the effort to create a substitute for him. In his own absence, Allen becomes an invisible presence, haunting the screen and epitomizing Perez's "material ghost."

It would be interesting to imagine a reversal of this relationship between Branagh and Allen as a way of considering some of the implications of the ingenious idea of using Branagh as a surrogate in *Celebrity*. Imagine the following scenario. Branagh suddenly finds himself in a situation that makes it impossible for him to play King Henry again in a scheduled remake of his popular film version of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1989). Desperately needing

to find a replacement for himself, he appeals to Allen to play the role, arguing passionately that the challenge involved in acting as the king could mark the beginning of a whole new film career for Allen, while the publicity would ensure the film's commercial success. He prevails upon Allen by reminding him about *Celebrity*. Thus, it would be Allen, not Branagh, in medieval costume and armor in a low-angle shot before his assembled soldiers as they prepare to face the French at Agincourt. It would be Allen, not Branagh, who reminds his troops that they go into battle on the day marking the Feast of Crispian, telling them,

> From this day to the ending of the world
> But we in it shall be remembered,
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
> For he today that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother. (4.3.58–62)

Similarly, Allen would proclaim:

> I was not angry since I came to France
> Until this instant. Take a trumpet, herald;
> Ride thou unto the horseman on yon hill.
> If they will fight with us, bid them come down,
> Or void the field: they do offend our sight. (4.7.50–55)

And it would be Allen who would woo and win over the beautiful Catherine of France:

> No, it is not possible you should love the enemy of France, Kate. But in loving me, you should love the friend of France, for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it, I will have it all mine; and Kate, when France is mine, and I am yours, then yours is France, and you are mine. (5.2.168–172)

No doubt, any audience watching Allen in such a performance would anticipate the very next line spoken by Catherine: "I cannot tell vat is dat" (5.2.173).

Of course, after years of film performance, Allen's aura resonates through this bit of pretend. In reality, it seems inconceivable that Allen would try to reproduce Branagh's performance in *Henry V*. Instead, in such an unlikely cinematic event, Allen would highlight the humor of the unbridgeable chasm between himself as performer–public figure and Shakespeare's heroic king, Henry V. In his own way, Branagh seems to me just as foolish trying to be Allen as Allen would be if he tried to be Branagh. Branagh seems out of place

in his effort to displace Allen. The documentary records of years of performances by Allen and of acclaimed performances by Branagh himself smother Branagh's and Allen's efforts to create the kind of break between Allen the actor and character that directors such as Godard achieve. In *Celebrity*, Allen and Branagh enact what Perez might call a failed "fiction of a documentary" (p. 343) as well as a failed "fiction of authenticity" (p. 344). Thus, Allen's dilemma of escaping his aura continues in a world that now questions his innocence and authenticity.

For years, audiences and critics of Woody Allen's films saw in them an apparent unity of Allen's public and private selves that helped inform their response to him and his work. This bond of self, identity, and art has been in a situation of crisis for years now. For many, Allen's personal life has overshadowed the ongoing documentary of his cinematic achievements. The unique aura that emanated from Allen's cinematic image of a self-embodied blend of character, oddity, integrity, and genius became confused and somber while remaining ambiguous. For at least some of these fans and critics, uncertainty about Allen persists even in the face of what seems to be a concerted public relations and media effort to reconstruct his image and the public perception of his career.[32] This strategy for renewal includes perhaps Allen's longest filmed interview for *Time*'s Richard Schickel in *Woody Allen: A Life in Film* (2002). Made for Turner Classic Movies (TCM) in conjunction with that cable channel's subsequent presentation of 18 of Allen's most-celebrated movies, the title of the documentary seems to address the controversial issue of the relationship between Allen's public and private identities. In addition to promoting the release during the same week of Allen's latest film, *Hollywood Ending* (2002), the self-serving 90-minute documentary avoids most of the difficult questions about Allen's work and career as he describes his feelings about filmmaking and many of his classic films.

A line in a Godard film that Perez likes to quote helps enlighten the unsettling turn of events in Allen's life and work. Once again, Godard proffers special insight into the importance of the dynamic in film between documentary and fiction. Godard indicates that the documentary nature of the film image works as an interplay between photographic realism and fiction in a medium and world of constant change. For Godard, "'To photograph a face is to photograph the soul behind it. Photography is truth. And the cinema is truth, twenty-four times a second'" (p. 345). Of course, Godard does not say that the photograph makes the soul actually visible or immediately accessible; he only suggests that the photograph helps us to think, focus, examine, and imagine. As indicated by his work and ideas about film, few directors would seem to understand this idea better than Woody Allen. Few

also could provide better examples than Allen from his recent past of the volatility and mutability of the truth and the self the camera searches for in its own unique way.

Notes

1. For a discussion of Woody Allen's background, career, and image, see the next chapter in this book.

2. For a discussion of this aspect of Chaplin's career and the relationship involving his public image, private life, and screen performance, see Sam B. Girgus, "Documenting the Body in *Modern Times*: Love, Play, and Repression in Chaplin's Silent Classic," in *America on Film: Modernism, Documentary, and a Changing America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

3. Press coverage over the events was intimate, personal, detailed, and exhaustive. For example, "Scenes From a Breakup," *Time*, August 31, 1992, pp. 54–61, included details, narrative, and comparisons with earlier Hollywood scandals involving figures such as Chaplin, Errol Flynn, Fatty Arbuckle, and Roman Polanski, as well as interviews and comments from Allen and Soon-Yi. "Unhappily Ever After," *Newsweek*, August 31, 1992, pp. 52–9, covered it in a similar fashion. In addition, coverage by the tabloid press, *New York Times*, and the entertainment media continued unabated for months.

4. Peter Marks, "Allen Loses to Farrow in Bitter Custody Battle," *New York Times*, June 8, 1993, pp. A1, A16, writes: "Describing Woody Allen as a 'self-absorbed, untrustworthy and insensitive' father, a judge in Manhattan today rejected his attempt to win custody of his three children and awarded custody to their mother, Mia Farrow. In a scathing 33-page decision, Acting Justice Elliott Wilk of State Supreme Court denounced Mr. Allen for carrying on an affair with one of Ms. Farrow's daughters, trying to pit family members against one another and lacking knowledge of the most basic aspects of his children's lives." See also, Melinda Henneberger, "Prosecutor Won't File Charges Against Woody Allen," *New York Times*, September 25, 1993, p. 9.

5. Caryn James, "And Here We Thought We Knew Him," *New York Times*, Sunday, September 6, 1992, Arts & Leisure, p. 7.

6. Ibid.

7. "Apparent Lift for Allen," *New York Times*, November 3, 1993, p. B2.

8. Bernard Weinraub, "Deconstructing His Film Crew: Woody Allen's Longtime Staff Is Hit by Cost-Cutting Efforts," *New York Times*, June 1, 1998, p. B1.

9. Bernard Weinraub, "Producer Responds to Woody Allen Lawsuit," *New York Times*, June 26, 2001, p. C8. For an update on Allen's lawsuit against Doumanian, the decline in ticket sales for Allen's films, including *Hollywood Ending*, and the apparent growing disaffection of the public with Allen and his work, see Andy Newman and Corey Kilgannon, "Curse of the Jaded Audience: Woody Allen, in Art and Life," *New York Times*, June 5, 2002, pp. A1, A22.

10. Early in the 1990s, I was quite impressed when I saw for myself the extent of Allen's popularity and fame in various places throughout the world. For example, in areas as seemingly different as South Korea and Bogota, Colombia, people for various reasons identified with Allen the man and the character. In Seoul, many expressed an affinity for the element of urban alienation in Allen's work and character. In Bogota,