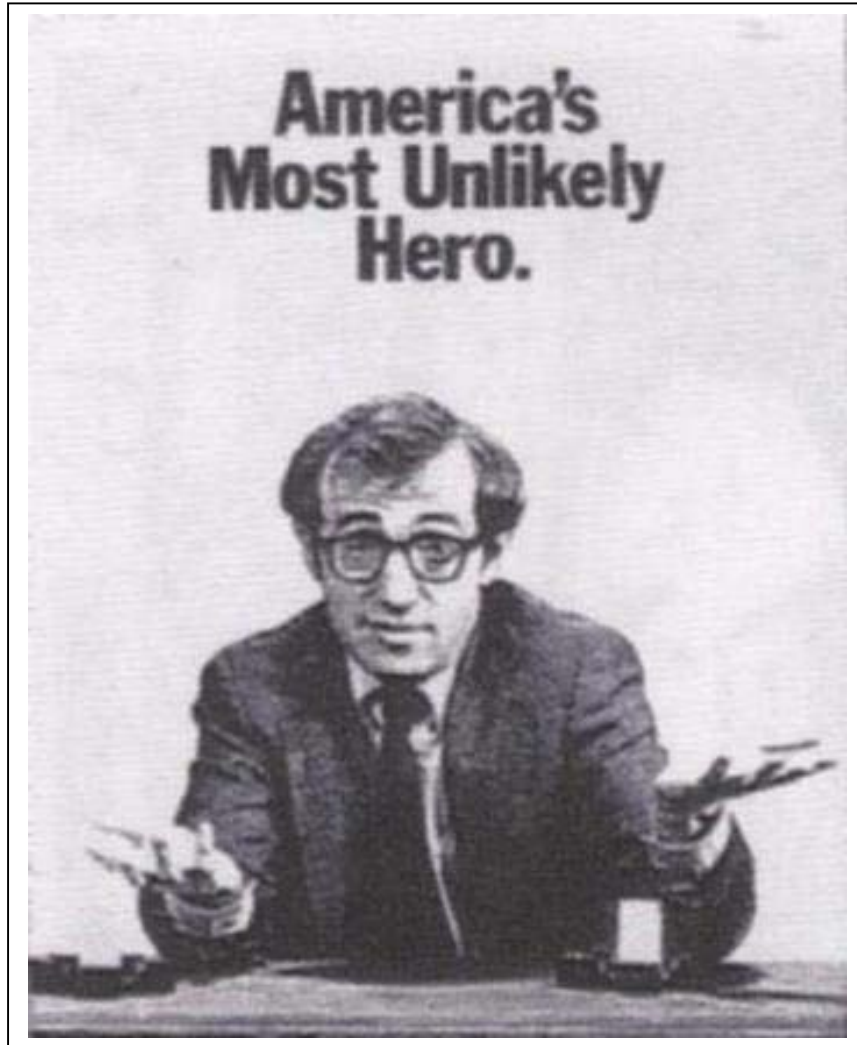


Deconstructing Woody
Woody Allen's Life and Work



By Lydia Tonoyan
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“Unchastity’s first-born daughter is blindness of the spirit”
-Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*

“Many wrongdoers have even turned evidence against themselves”
-Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*

“The law is written in the hearts of men, which iniquity itself effaces not”
-St. Augustine, *Confessions*

“Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
More needs she the divine than the physician.”
- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

“Knowledge contains its own morality, it begins not in a neutrality
but in a place of passion within the human soul.”
- Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We are Known*

As a great deal of scholarly research has been done on the influence of one’s moral life on one’s intellectual output, whether it be in their writings, music, poetry, scientific pursuit, paintings, or cinematography, E. Michael Jones’ book *Degenerate Moderns* has yet again proved the instrumental role character flaws and moral dissoluteness of modern intellectuals, such as Picasso, Sigmund Freud, Sir Anthony Bunt, Margaret Mead, and many more others, played in their intellectual projection on humanity. The thesis of Jones’ book can be resumed in one of his simple assertions that “*modernity is rationalized sexual misbehavior*”¹. In other words all of the intellectual and cultural enterprise of modernity is in some way or other rooted in the sexual lusts (a matter itself open to many disagreements yet plausible) their forefathers knew to be wrong but by which they chose to be dictated nonetheless. Jones in his book decries

¹ E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, p.17

the largely accepted modern notion that one's intellectual (and thus more open to the public eye) output is by and large distinct from one's life behind the scene, i.e. one's private life, as "if they could be separated into neat compartments that did not influence each other".² Jones' observation of the rather insidious nature of sexual sin is that it eventually brings about the decadence of the mind, as the "vices are transmuted into theories". If this is to be true, there are ultimately only two alternatives for the modern individual, intellectuals included: *either one conforms desire to the truth or one conforms truth to desire.*³

The argument of this nature is not limited to Jones' book only, nor is it foreign to many other thinkers concerned with the intricacies of belief and practice. The purpose of the present inquiry is consequently to find and elaborate Jones' thesis from other significant works, either written on this particular topic or those that directly support it, as well as endorse it by considering the life and the work of one of America's "beloved" wonder-boys that of Woody Allen, one of the many modern intellectuals and artists we allow to suggest the way we ought to approach the world, the family, and life in general.

In his book E. Michael Jones mentions a book written by Paul Johnson called *Intellectuals* the subject matter of which is similar to that of Jones': the relationship between intellectual product and private life. In this book Paul Johnson is going from one example to another providing an intellectual framework for his argument against the liberal, disjunctive view of the relation between life and work. Intellectuals, he tells, are

free spirits, adventurers of the mind. With the decline of the clerical power in the 18th century a new kind of mentor emerged to fill the vacuum and to capture the ear of

² EMJ, p.14

³ EMJ, p.11

society. The secular intellectual might be a deist, skeptic or atheist. But he was just ready as any pontiff or presbyter to tell mankind how to conduct its affairs.⁴

Unlike their religious predecessors modern intellectuals are not “servants or interpreters of the gods but their substitutes”, who took upon themselves a task to identify and heal the problems of the world with the help of their own “unaided minds.”⁵ In the conclusion Johnson offers a statement - “beware intellectuals.” Johnson concludes by advising to keep the intellectuals away from taking up roles of power, and that they should be treated rather suspiciously when they seek to offer collective advice.

Another work that E. M. J. ’s thesis echoes well with is the Parker J. Palmer’s book entitled *To Know As We are Known*. In this book Palmer comes to the conclusion (much like the authors discussed above albeit his purposes are different in doing so) that person’s intellectual endeavors are not at all independent from the condition of one’s heart but rather are its immediate by-product. Knowledge (or intellectual virtue in our case), he says,

contains its own morality, it begins not in neutrality but in a place of *passion* within the human soul. Depending on the nature of that *passion*, our knowledge will follow certain courses and head toward certain ends...If we are worried about the path on which our knowledge flies and about its ultimate destination, we had better go back to its launching pad and deal with the *passions* that fuel and guide its course.⁶

Thus, argues Palmer, the self projects itself into the world around it and creates the world in its “image and likeness.” Much of the world’s violence, hatred, deception, and betrayal are only acting-outs of the feelings we find in ourselves. Only by connecting oneself to the source of transcendence and by rightfully ordering one’s passions, reasons Palmer, can one enter into spontaneous and authentic relationship with the

⁴ Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*, p.1

⁵ Ibid, p.2

self, and produce a beautiful fruit into the world. For, as the Scripture says, “a spring does not send forth fresh water and bitter water from the same opening”⁷, but rather a sweet spring sends forth sweet water and a bitter spring a bitter one.

What Jones and Johnson call *inner life*, Palmer describes as *passions*, Jonathan Edwards would refer as *holy* or *unholy affections*. In his work *Religious Affections* Jonathan Edwards shows how true Christian life depends upon the cultivation of the right proclivity of the soul and of the affections for the godly way of living. “Our inclination,” he writes, “governs our action”.⁸ Likewise St. Augustine visions person’s external life as a function of his *ordered* or *disordered loves (ordo amores)*. For Augustine reason utilizes the whole person and is influenced by the direction of our hearts, wills, character, loves, desires and faith. Reason cannot function independently from the rest of who the person is. This is how Augustine underlines that the course of person’s *loves* determines whether he is good or bad:

For when there is a question as to whether a man is good, one does not ask what he believes, or what he hopes, but what he loves. For the mad who loves aright no doubt believes and hopes aright (thinks aright? acts aright?); whereas the man who has not love believes in vain, even though his beliefs are true; and hopes in vain, even though the objects of his hope are a real part of true happiness; unless, indeed, he believes and hopes for this, that he may obtain by prayer the blessing of love.⁹

How then does a person obtain Augustine’s ordered loves, Edwards’ holy affections, Palmer’s passions, Jones’ rightly formed moral life? Martin Luther in his *Freedom of The Christian* suggests that only by attaining peace with God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and justification by faith through grace can any man have all these things inwardly so that he can live them outwardly.

⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We are Known*, p.7

⁷ The Epistle of James, 3: 11

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p.7

⁹ St. Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, p.135

Using the intellectual framework positioned by E. Michael Jones in *Degenerate Moderns*, it would be appropriate now to illustrate it by inquiring into the life and work of the prominent moviemaker and a modern thinker of sorts, Woody Allen, whose biography was chosen for this particular reason.

Allan Stewart Konigsberg was born in the Bronx on December 1, 1935. Konigsberg family- father, mother, and son, Allan- were mashed into the little apartment with Nettie Konigsberg's (Allan's mother) sister and her husband. Too many people in too few rooms made daily living somewhat volatile. Later, as an adult, detesting family turmoil and the forced intimacy of overcrowded households, Woody would be obsessive about solitude. His mother was born in New York City in 1908 into the family of Jewish-Austrian emigrants. In his vignette "Oedipus Wrecks" in 1989, Woody would come to describe his mother as a shallow, narrow-minded woman whose interests tended to be commonplace: "My mother is an orthodox paranoid and, while she does not believe in an afterlife, she does not believe in a present one either."¹⁰ Nettie was a hot-tempered woman who would start with howling and yelling and then would take a good swipe at Allan. In 1986, when Nettie was a woman of seventy-eight, while making a documentary about her life Woody told her in front of the camera: "I remember you would hit me every day when I was a child...you were always slapping me."¹¹

Marty Konigsberg, Allan's father, was a first generation Jewish emigrant from Russia who tried to provide for his family by strolling from one job to another. Daily warfare had become practically a way of life in Konigsberg's marriage that proved to be dysfunctional not long after the wedding. While his two parents had to work, Allan was

¹⁰ Marion Meade, *The Unruly Life Of Woody Allen*, p.24

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.27

trusted into a succession of caretakers, usually non-educated young women who desperately needed the money and were not particularly interested in the fine points of early childhood development. An agency sent them over and often what Woody recalls as their “seedy boyfriends” came and hung around.¹² When Allan entered P.S. 99 in the fall of 1940, short and undeveloped, he felt insecure about his looks, and he usually wore a sad sack expression on his pale face. Biographers tell us that the young Allan showed no aptitude for learning whatsoever, demonstrated multiple behavioral problems and never developed a passion for books besides comics. Despite the comics, he found himself able to write “real prose compositions. There was never a week when the composition he wrote was not the one that was read in class.”¹³ No until his teens did he accept the theoretical importance of reading, but it was too late by then- he found it boring. The great books that taught him about life- how to talk, to look, to eat, to make yourself attractive- were the movies.

Although Allan’s father never paid the slightest attention to either religion or Jewish dietary rules, his mother kept kosher and sent her boy to a Hebrew school. At home she tried to impress on him value of work and success. “Don’t waste time” she yelled again and again, a life lesson that would be ingrained in him and later give him a fame as a person who possess “Prussian kind of a discipline”.¹⁴ All mother’s effort to engraft into her son the love toward education seemed fruitless. Everything he thought about reaching the age of thirteen was sex and becoming famous. But more frequently he thought about dying suffocated by multiple fears he developed at early age. He unburdened himself years later to the famed movie critic Roger Ebert that “not a day

¹² Eric Lax, *Woody Allen, A Biography*, p. 15

¹³ Meade, p.31

goes past when I do not seriously consider the possibility of suicide”.¹⁵ At the time of this statement, he was a fifty-one-year-old titan of the movie industry, who had been in psychoanalysis for twenty-eight years.

At the age of sixteen Allan started his career as a writer and that is how Allan Konigsberg became Woody Allen, a name Allan picked for his new identity as a gag-writer. His mother never considered show business a sensible job and insisted that he would enroll at New York University to learn pharmacy. At a compromise, he enrolled there as a film major, not because of any desire to make films but because it was an easy course. Half the time he never got to class, spending his mornings in the coffee shop with the newspaper and catching an early feature at the Paramount; to make matters worse, he seldom cracked a book. At the end of the first semester, he flunked Spanish and English, and barely passed motion picture production. N.Y.U. dropped him. That winter of 1954, to please his mother, he enrolled in a night course in motion picture production class at the City College of New York, where he lasted an even shorter time than at N.Y.U.

In the winter of 1956, Woody’s life took an unexpected turn when he got a chance to go to Hollywood as a comedy writer on the *Colgate Variety Hour*, NBC’s answer to the top-rated *Ed Sullivan Show* on CBS. Regardless of his success, enthusiasm, and bright looking future, Woody was lonely, miserable and dissatisfied. He admitted to his friend Jimmy Moore that he experienced “a continual awareness of seemingly unmotivated depression” and that he had recently begun to see a therapist.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, p.34

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 35

¹⁶ Ibid, p.46

In 1959 Allen had begun Freudian psychoanalysis, which he would continue until the nineties, and which he was to urge on his friends, lovers, and mere mortals like the regular moviegoer who appreciated his talent. It became the motif of his relationships and a source of material for his films and comic pieces. When, during the scandal of his relationship with his adopted daughter Soon-Yi Previn, puzzled writers asked how someone who'd spend more than thirty years on the psychiatrist's couch, sometimes as often as three times a week, could behave with so little insight into his own motives or the effect of his behavior on others, psychiatrists were quick to explain that Allen wasn't in therapy, which aimed to correct a problem, but analysis, which merely helped one to live with it.¹⁷ When people asked Elliot Mills, one of Woody's friends, about Woody and his new girlfriend, i.e. his adopted daughter Soon-Yi, he said: "That's the result of a successful analysis. If you've been in analysis for forty years you can justify anything."¹⁸ Or how Woody would express it in his *Stardust Memories*: "You can make an exception in my case. I'm a celebrity."

At the root of Allen's entry into analysis was the failure of his first marriage with Harlene Rosen. Alienation to Harlene had developed into outright hostility, exacerbated by his newfound freedom and prosperity. Unsuccessful marriage led to the hurtful divorce and shorter after Woody was remarried to Louis Lasser, a Hollywood actress. According to Louis Allen never had a kind word to say about his former wife in private as well as in public. Soon Harlene became a center piece of his comic shows where he referred to her as Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame, described her as a "weird woman" who had half a dozen of sex-change operations "but couldn't find anything she

¹⁷ John Baxter, *Woody Allen, A Biography*, p.74

¹⁸ Meade, p.258

liked.”¹⁹ Marrying her was a stupid mistake because the first she cooked him a dinner he almost choked to death on a chicken bone in her chocolate pudding; the American museum of Natural History used one of her shoes to reconstruct a dinosaur, and many other hostile unkind jokes. Woody, too, was cruel to his mother, but there was no one he treated so scornfully as the spurned Harlene.

At this time he continued writing plays for Broadway and featured in his new role as a comedian. At the age of thirty-two, Woody stood at cross roads. Overflowing with unbounded energy, he had bounced from television writer and nightclub comic to movie actor, screenwriter, essayist, Broadway playwright, even fashion model because he posed for a series of magazines ads for Smirnoff vodka and Foster Grant sunglasses. It was at this time that Woody discovered for himself movie-making business. His first movie *What's New, Pussycat?* 1965, is the story about hypersexual guy living in Paris and afraid to get married. Somewhere in the character of Victor Shakapopolis who works at a striptease club, helping the girls dress and undress, there is a “Woody Allen” buried with his insecurities and sexual obsession. Sex will become a leading theme in all of the Woody’s movies.

In a great succession of Woody Allen’s wives and mistresses, Mia Farrow is standing out as one of his greatest loves as well as the reason of his greatest scandals. The fame or the infamy of the story is that Woody ended up seducing one of Mia’s adopted daughters, Soon-Yi, who he eventually married and had common kids. He also faced charges of child molestation as Mia testified he molested her other little girls. Just as the passage of forty years never deterred Woody from continuing to insult Harlene in his films, his need to even the score with Mia still burns white-hot. At every opportunity,

¹⁹ Ibid, p.58

among the other horrible things, he brands her unfit to raise children. His charges immediately created an almost 'Pavlovian' response from Mia, "I have a son whose sister is married to his father." Some of Mia's children, she said, were in therapy and "some are on antidepressants." The person she faulted for all of these fractured lives is "an old pedophile" Woody.²⁰

David Thomson in *The New Biographical Dictionary Of Film* is making a critical remark that Woody has always insisted on making movies about "his own angst as a cunning diversion from true self-examination." Thompson maintains that despite fantastic humor and lots of fun, Allen has never made a film free from his own panic. Allen in his words is so overwhelmed by certain death, elusive sex, the farfetched theory of romance, the immorality of pleasure, and the fracturing of cultural and personal, that he could never release these chains even in his movies.²¹ *Annie Hall*, a movie that garnered Allen three Oscars, *Interiors*, sculptured in Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman's style, a love-song to New York *Manhattan*, yet darker pictures *Stardust Memories* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, are all seemed to evolve around Woody's insecurities and his complex distorted misbehavior. His outrageous mania for younger child-like women finds reflection in almost all of his movies where he is either surrounded or is having an affair with them. For example In *Husbands and Wives* his character, a college professor who Woody is playing himself, in the middle of ruins of the broken marriage is dating a freshmen who he meets in his literature class.

Autobiography figures significantly in all Allen's scripts, a fact he has infrequently acknowledged. One such instance: "Maybe it's because I'm depressed too often that I'm

²⁰ Ibid, p.327

²¹ David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary Of Film*, p.10

drawn to writers like Kafka and Dostoevsky and a filmmaker like Bergman. I think I have all the symptoms and problems that their characters are occupied with: an obsession with death, and obsession with God or the lack of God, the questions of why are we here. Almost all of my work is autobiographical-exaggerated but true.”²² It is not a secret ready to be discovered that Woody’s art is not only a way to tell his life story but a step beyond, it is the medium of his choice in an attempt to communicate his ideas and beliefs. In the interview with Stig Bjorkman Woody expresses his irritation about American *puritanical view* of sex compared to European *progressive* approach to it. He notes that only in sophisticated circles there’s been some ‘progress’ made, but in general in this country people still have an old-fashioned attitude with its leaders being forced to reflect this kind of morality if they want to be elected. In his movies Allen has always tried to present sex in a ‘progressive’ European light (the best example of it is in the *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex and Were Afraid to Ask*), where he also portrays what is there so important to be know about sex which is for him is merely its “quantity and accessibility.”²³

Woody believes that life’s bleakness demands escapist consolation of art. His movies *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Shadows* constitute the markedly dubious necessity of art to the lives of men and women. Woody’s personal awkward childhood and unhappy reality found resolution in the almost twisted fantasy and different modes of illusion characterizing the most of his movies: “It has been said, that if I have one big theme in my movies, it’s got to do with the difference between reality and fantasy. It comes up very frequently in my films. I think what it boils down to, really, is that I hate

²² Peter J. Bailey, *The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen*, p.62

²³ *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, in Conversation with Sting Bjorkman, p.57, 62

reality. And, you know, unfortunately it's the only place where we can get a good steak dinner."²⁴ And Allen's world is truly full of realities to make his life miserable and despised. For now being in his late seventies Allen faces the internal as well as the social crisis because of his own mistakes. "We define ourselves by the choices we have made," Allen uttered through one of his characters in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.²⁵

In a lot of his works Allen admits and conforms to the notion that artworks replicate human corruption. In one of his best pictures *Deconstructing Harry* Allen portrays a writer who can't function in life and who uses art as compensation for the fact. The same idea can be traced in some of his latest movies *Another Woman* and *Celebrity*. Lee Simon, a protagonist in *Celebrity*, is writing a book "about values of society gone astray". Through the cognitive dissonances between art and life that Lee experiences in *Celebrity*, Allen is making an argument that art is too much the product of corrupt human beings to be anything other than corrupt. In *Husbands and Wives* Allen establishes the terms of the interpenetrability between art and life when its protagonist Gabe Roth explains the relationship between his art and erotic pursuits to his analyst: "Maybe because I'm a writer...some dramatic or aesthetic component becomes right, and I go after that person."²⁶ However it seems that Allen is underestimating the power of art and ideas presented in the form of art on the minds and souls of his addressees: "It astonishes me", he says, "what a lot of intellectualizing goes on over my films, they're just films."²⁷ Are they really?

²⁴ Ibid, p.260

²⁵ Meade, p.327

²⁶ Bailey, p.256

²⁷ Ibid, p.30

And the end of our inquiry let's look back at Jones' and Johnson's thesis one more time. We have looked at the individual case of Woody Allen, a prominent artist and thinker, who directly or inertly seeks to give definitions of good and bad, of right and wrong, moral and immoral through the art of cinematography. We have examined his life as well as his moral and ethical judgments for this role. In particular we examined his ability to evaluate truth and evidence in response not only to humanity but human beings around him; the way he treats his friends, his colleagues, and above all his family. Hopefully this examination is going to stir some skepticism and suspicion with which intellectuals and the sophisticated should be treated when they attempt to consult humanity about life affairs. True wisdom and intellectual virtue can be found only in the depth of "religious tradition" or "spiritual quest". Drawing a distinction between human and divine wisdom Apostle Paul writes to Romans: "Because although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools...for this reason God gave them up to vile passions."²⁸ And again to Corinthians: "has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"²⁹

As Johnson warns us, one of the principle lessons of our lamenting century, which has seen more suffering and deaths in the name of progress and improvement than any other century before, is—beware intellectuals (and by a simple extension, beware artists).

²⁸ Epistle to Romans, 1:20-26

²⁹ 1 Epistle to Corinthians, 1:19