

# Fantasy Asks: Where the Reality Ends?

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## Abstract

*This study will examine Woody Allen's The Purple Rose Of Cairo (1985) in the context of the placement of its main character, Cecilia, between the worlds of 'reality' and 'fantasy'. Employing the prominent method in the field of film studies, namely that of discourse analysis, this study first will emphasize the distinction between the 'real' and the 'reality'. Second, it will elaborate the historical, cultural, economical and social circumstances that structure the 'reality' of Cecilia's life. Then, it will question the effects of Hollywood Industry on the spectatorship of women. Lastly, it will describe how Cecilia constructs her own 'reality' through the fantasies her mind produces; and in conclusion this study will answer the title question as "reality ends in film theaters since films take the spectators to the worlds of fantasy, at the same time a new reality begins in film theaters since the spectators carry that fantasy into each moment of life as Cecilia does".*

**keywords:** *The Purple Rose of Cairo, reality, fantasy, alienation, female spectatorship*

## Résumé

### Fantasie Demande: Où Finit la Réalité?

Ce travail examine le film de Woody Allen "la Rose pourpre du Caire du (1985)" dans le contexte de placement de la caractere principale, Cecilia, entre le monde réel et le monde de fantasie. Lors de cet étude faite en utilisant la methode discursive, nous distinguons d'abord la la notion de 'réel' et celle de 'réalité'. Deuxièmement nous mettons l'accent sur les circonstances culturelles, historiques, économiques et sociales qui structurent 'la réalité' de la vie de Cecilia. Ensuite, nous interregons les effets de l'industrie de film Hollywood sur les spectatrices . Enfin, nous décrions comment Cecilia construit sa propre 'réalité' par les fantasies de ses pensées. En conclusion ce travail répond a la question posée dans le titre de cet article : "la réalité finit, quand on regarde un film dans le cinéma, ou ce film nous eammène dans son univers de fantasie et en ce moment, une autre réalité apparait quand les spectateurs portent ces fantasies à chaque moment de leurs vies comme Cecilia le fait".

**mots-clés :** La Rose pourpre du Caire, réalité, fantasie, aliénation, spectatrices

## Özet

### Fantezi Soruyor: Gerçeklik Nerede Sona Erer?

Bu çalışma, Woody Allen'in The Purple Rose Of Cairo (Kahire'nin Mor Gülü, 1985) adlı filmi, ana karakter Cecilia'nın, 'gerçek' dünya ile 'fantezi' dünyası arasındaki konumlandırılışı bağlamında inceleyecektir. Söylemsel analiz metodunu kullanarak yaptığı inceleme sırasında, bu çalışma, ilk önce 'gerçek' ve 'gerçeklik' kavramları arasındaki ayrıma vurgu yapacak; ikinci olarak, ana karakter Cecilia'nın hayatının 'gerçeklik'ini yapılandıran tarihsel, kültürel, ekonomik ve sosyal koşulları detaylandırarak; daha sonra Hollywood film endüstrisinin kadınların sinema izleyiciliği üzerindeki etkilerini sorgulayacak; son olarak da, Cecilia'nın, kendi aklının ürettiği fanteziler aracılığıyla nasıl bir yaşam 'gerçeklik'i kurduğunu tarif edecek ve şu sonuca ulaşacaktır: "gerçeklik sinema salonunda film izlerken sona erer, fantezi dünyasına sığınılır fakat sığınılan fanteziler Cecilia'nın yaptığı gibi yaşamın her anına taşındığında da o salondan başka bir gerçeklik doğuyor demektir".

**anahtar kelimeler:** Kahire'nin Mor Gülü, gerçeklik, fantezi, yabancılaşma, kadın sinema seyirciliği

This study will examine Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) regarding its main character Cecilia's relationship with the worlds of 'reality' and 'fantasy'. Since reality and fantasy are interwaver so much in Cecilia's life; even her mind brings a film character out of a screen into the life she lives in and makes that film character one of the components of her 'reality', this study first will emphasize the distinction between the 'real' and the 'reality'. In order to clarify this distinction, it will try to put an explanation of the concept of 'fantasy' instead of 'fiction' since this study will examine the construction of the main character of the foregoing film rather than the medium itself. Second, it will elaborate the historical, cultural, economical and social circumstances that structure the 'reality' of Cecilia's life. Then, it will question the effects of Hollywood Industry on the spectatorship of women; and lastly this study will describe how Cecilia constructs her own 'reality' through the fantasies her mind produces.

Cecilia the main character of *The Purple Rose Of Cairo* is a woman who looks for a bit of romanticism in her life while the heavy conditions of the Depression years of thirties are surrounding her and her husband, Monk, in New Jersey. The source of the romanticism she wishes to have is not Monk but exactly the Hollywood movies to which she is addicted. In those years of crisis, the cinema serves as the main entertainment realm which reaches to the masses because of its cheapness. It has a great influence on public to make people forget their economic, social and familial problems. Most importantly, it is one of the building structures of popular/consumer culture. In the context of cultural, social and ideological functions of cinema, this study will embrace the character Cecilia as split in two: the Cecilia in the "reality" of her life, and the Cecilia living in a "fantasy" world that the movie she watches – the film within film named also as *The Purple Rose Of Cairo* – leads her into.

The distinction between reality and fantasy is the main theme in Allen's *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*. It emerges around the idea of how it would be interesting if a character of a film steps out of a screen at a movie theatre. At this point Cecilia as a 'keen cinema-goer' occurs to be the reason (responsible) for the action of the romantic-archaeologist character Tom Baxter to step out of the screen. To be more clear, the answer of how the reality that she lives in makes her responsible for the fantastic action of Tom? should be elaborated in the following parts as well. However, firstly the distinction between the 'real' and the 'reality' is needed to be emphasized.

'Reality' emerges in a way depending on the cultural, economical and social circumstances. It is relative. Catherine Belsey points that "reality is what we do know, because culture defines it for us" (Belsey 2005: 5) How 'reality' differs from the 'real'? As Jacques Lacan affirms "The 'real' is what does not depend on our idea of it" (Belsey 2005: 4) "The 'real' is what is there, but undefined, unaccountable, perhaps within the frameworks of our knowledge. It is there as such, but not there-for-a-subject." (Belsey 2005: 5) In contrast

to the real, something is reality when it is there-for-a-subject. That is to say, Cecilia is the subject and in the following the 'reality' of her life will be elaborated according to the cultural, economical and social circumstances that she lives in.

However, before stepping inside the 'reality' of Cecilia's life, an explanation on how this study handles the concept of 'fantasy' should be made following the path of Rosemary Jackson's book titled *Fantasy* (1995). In her book, Jackson defines the birth of 'fantasy' as a "protest" to some particular constraints and at the same time, as an "attempt to compensate for a lack<sup>1</sup>" resulting from those constraints. (Jackson 1995: 3) This is the point why this study will focus on the constraints of Cecilia's life in the following to explain her escape or refuge to the fantasies her mind produce and to the ones Hollywood movies present and function as a shelter for her.

Cecilia lives in New Jersey in 1930s. After the First World War, the economical crisis dominates USA, factories are closed, in Cecilia's words "the whole country is out of work", most of the men are unemployed, women work at daily jobs as a waitress, laundrywoman, housemaids, babysitter or as a prostitute. People queue in the streets for some soup to drink, they light fires in barrels and stand in front of them all day with nothing to do. Most of the men pitch pennies, shoot craps, play cards, drink and make passes at the girls who walk by.

Cecilia works as a waitress at a restaurant. She takes in extra laundry after work to pay the rent of her house. Her husband Monk spends the money she earns in gambling and drinking. He does not look for a job. He behaves Cecilia as if he is the boss and she is a slave. He does not spend his time with her. He just see her to get money and to eat something at home. He also comes home with another girls when Cecilia is out. He pays no attention to Cecilia, but he maintains his patriarchy, giving orders to her, beating and shouting at her. He believes that she achieves nothing without him, she can not produce any idea without him. On the other hand, Cecilia wants him to spend time at home with her, have a job, think of her, love her, go to cinema with her, take her dancing, be kind, be romantic and pay attention to her. Unfortunately, Monk is not her type and the life is not the one she wants to live. She says Monk "I don't know how much longer I can go on like this". She is tired of everything. She does not concentrate on her job because of thinking of the movies and the movie stars all the time and talking to her sister about them while working. This causes her to pay less attention to what she is doing. Instead of thinking about the unhappy life of her own, she prefers to think about the romantic movies she watches again and again. She knows too much about the movie stars' private lives. She memorizes all the lines of the stars. "She is an addict, using Hollywood as a substitute for her miserable life." (Girgus 2002: 78) In other words she is alienated to the world

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1 In Cecilia's case, she attempts to compensate the lack of 'romance' in her life.

(reality) she lives in. Movies, stars, film musics, film locations and film lines becomes vital for her instead of the real world.

At this point, 'alienation'<sup>2</sup> – which is referring to “the perceived states of loneliness and rootlessness” in the sense of isolating the ‘self’ socially and culturally – is the appropriate concept to understand Cecilia’s plight. (Kanungo 1982: 27) When it comes to elaborate the reasons of her alienation depending on the social, cultural, economical, historical and ideological constraints of her life, the relation between all the constraints and Cecilia’s unconscious (where her fantasies originate) should also be taken into account. Since this study believes that those constraints make Cecilia’s mind protest the harsh realities of her daily life and attempt to compensate for the lack of romance by the fantasies, following explanation of Sigmund Freud as: “*In the psychic life, there is nothing arbitrary, nothing undetermined.*” would be pointed. (Jackson 1995: 8) Taking her departure from this idea of everything in human mind is already determined by the components of existing order of the life (including natural origins), Jackson defines the concept as: “*[f]antasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different.*” (Jackson 1995: 8) In this sense, it might be good to remind how Cecilia’s “alienation” from existing order of human-world results in a fantasy which comes out as “*apparently ‘new’*” and “*absolutely ‘other’ and different*” will be explained in the last part of this study regarding the reasons of the fantastic action of the interior Purple Rose of Cairo’s male character, Tom Baxter.

Evidently, regarding Cecilia’s plight, the oppression of the Depression years and her husband do not let her express herself as a woman. She has no chance for self-realization. She feels herself alone, and she really has to confront all the difficulties of her life alone. In this situation, she naturally requires some care, support, appreciation, confidence, fine understanding and a bit of romance from her husband. Actually, Hollywood movies present the ‘romance’ that she is looking for. Cecilia refuges to the movies and consoles with the fantasy world that she could never live.

There is a common tendency to evaluate such kind of attitude illustrated by women on the basis of the concepts of popular and consumer culture. Jackie Stacey mentions Hollywood movies as “popular culture and its female spectators”

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2 This concept exactly has a link with what Jackson explains by referring to Dostoyevski’s opinions about fantastic literature. As she points out “Dostoyevski frequently writes of a fantastic literature as being the only appropriate medium for suggesting a sense of estrangement, of alienation from ‘natural’ origins.” (Jackson 1995: 17) Not in the context of literature, but similarly concerning the characterisations of minds which recognize the real world through fantasies likewise its main character Cecilia, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* tells us a story of alienation from the natural origins of life.

in her article *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. She emphasizes that some women take Hollywood cinema seriously and give much status to it – Cecilia is a good instance – and some express shame in their pleasure because they were aware of its low status. (Stacey 2003: 156) At the end, there is the ‘pleasure’ that cinema provides for women regardless of its status. In the book *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, Allen answers one of the questions of Stig Björkman trying to explain what kind of ‘pleasure’ it can be. Björkman asks: “*The Swedish writer and [...] Harry Martinson designated the movie houses as ‘temples for the cowards of life’. What would you say to such a description?*”. Allen answers: “[...] *Certainly, I agree with him completely that one of the ‘pleasures’ of going into a movie house is to avoid the harsh ‘realities’ of life*”. (Allen and Björkman 2005: 149) This is valid for Cecilia’s plight, for sure. In addition to this, from the perspective of Marxist approach, “She has attached herself with real desperation to the cultural goods on offer. [...] None of the passion, knowledge and focus she is able to bring to bear is given to struggling with her conditions and life; all is expended on a fantasy world.” (Witkin 2003: 164)

Accordingly, Theodor Adorno, inspired by Marx’s theory of alienation, would suggest that Cecilia’s refuge to the movies is not the right strategy in the face of an alienated world. Works of art should not restrain or isolate human beings in their conduct with the outer world. Rather, they should provide a source of inspiration for their struggle with the conditions of real life by invoking the possibility of alternative non-alienating worlds. In this vein, the work of art should support one to confront the harsh realities. However, the Hollywood industry presents itself as a shelter to refuge. It creates a fantasy world and offers nothing to its audiences to cope and struggle with their lives. As Harold Garfunkel emphasizes, this industry creates its own “cultural dopes” who act in compliance and get what is given by the common culture (Miller and Stam 2000: 338). Jean Baudrillard asks a good question to reveal how human beings are culturally constructed: “Can we be sure where Disneyland ends and the real America begins?” (Belsey 2005: 3). This study puts that, in the case of the Hollywood cinema, the following verdict is fair: the real never comes to the scene.

In fact, Hollywood industry as one of the most effective medium in the popular culture in USA and in all over the world, does not serve for only women. However, from its beginning, cinema has become the common entertainment realm and the common public space that women easily participate in. In addition to this, “cinema”, as the medium of the beginning of twentieth century and the “seventh art” also caused redefinitions of “public sphere”. In its classical perception, “public sphere” defines a space where the problems, needs and responsibilities of the public is discussed, planned, decided, solved and at the end formed as a “public opinion”. Because of the patriarchy that is established at the very beginning of the human life basically in the family then in all the institutions

of public life, “public sphere” is always dominated by men. Although Habermas defines the classical “bourgeois public sphere” as “gender-neutral”, decision mechanism has always operated with masculin bias, that is, dominated by men who is well-educated, mostly at similar ages (elder) and have an appreciated status in the public. (Hansen 1991: 10) In the beginning of twentieth century, the “public sphere” has transformed. In line with this, Miriam Hansen argues in the following as,

[T]he logic of consumption already invaded the classical forms of public life [which has been characterized with the masculin bias of which is mentioned above]. And with women, increasingly being perceived as the subject of consumption, the repressed gender subtext of the bourgeois public sphere returns— with the emergence of qualitatively different types of publicity such as the ‘cinema’, with relations of representation and reception no longer predicated on the exclusionary hierarchies of literary culture. (Hansen 1991: 11)

In somehow similarly, Alexander Kluge defines non-industrial and non-commercial cinema as an alternative “public sphere”. He thinks that “a film either exploits the viewer’s needs, perceptions, and wishes or it encourages their autonomous movement, fine-tuning, and self-reliance” – the latter is what Adorno expects from the work of art. (Hansen 1991: 13) In this case, Cecilia is a viewer whose needs, perceptions and wishes are exploited. That is to say, she is the one who is manipulated by the cultural industry of Hollywood. In the context of *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, manipulation starts with the ‘romance’ which is promised by the interior film within it and as it is mentioned at the beginning of this study, ‘romance’ is the strongest component of Hollywood movies for Cecilia to refuge the ‘fantasies’ her mind produces through them.

*The Purple Rose Of Cairo*’s first shot is a close-up of a poster of the interior *The Purple Rose of Cairo* movie. On the poster, Egypt, Pyramids and the archaeologist Tom Baxter is located on the left, on the right there are men in suits holding champagne glasses and a luxurious car near them and in the middle there is a woman in a stylish cocktail dress. In the second shot, there is a close-up of Cecilia looking at the affiche with admiration and wonder. Then the theater manager informs her the impending arrival of a new movie – the interior *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. “You’re gonna like this one. It’s better than last week’s, more ‘romantic’.” This is where the interior film starts its promises, by an expression of the manager before its screening. When it comes to the screening, ‘romantic’ as a word is emphasized many times in the lines of the characters. First we hear it from a blonde female character, she is in a flamboyant dress, ready for a party. She enters a room where a man in suits, sitting in front of a piano and saying that he is bored with cocktail parties and opening nights. Another man brings a glass of martini to him and offers to go to Paris for a couple of days. The man who is bored says “I am talking about some place completely different. Like Morocco or Egypt.” There, the female character says “Ooh, a boat trip down the Nile. Sounds so ‘romantic’.” In the first scene of

the interior film, we and Cecilia see a section of Manhattan high-life and start to imagine how romantic it can be to go to Egypt and have a boat trip down the river. Then, the bored man adds to travel to Casablanca and Tangiers. The man who brings martini toasts and says "to Cairo, Morocco and Tangiers, to all the exotic and 'romantic' places in the world." In this way he strengthens the curiosity about all the mentioned places and the romantic atmosphere of them. In another scene, we see these three characters of the high-life of Manhattan visiting Pyramids in Egypt. There, they meet the archaeologist Tom Baxter and he tells the legend of The Purple Rose: "a pharaoh had a rose painted purple for his queen, and now the story says purple roses grow wild at her tomb." The expected reaction comes immediately from the blonde woman: "How romantic!" After a short conversation, three from Manhattan invite Tom Baxter to New York to meet Countess. He accepts and goes to New York and at his first night, they all together go to club Copacabana. A singer character Kitty Haynes who was already in the middle of the affiche that is shown in the first shot, sings a 'romantic' song. While listening to her Tom Baxter seems attracted by her.

We see Cecilia watching the above-mentioned scenes at the first screening of the movie. A day after the first screening, she daydreams about the movie while working and the boss warns her to concentrate on the job. Just a few seconds after the warning, she tells about the film to her sister while both going on working. Sister asks what she is thinking about and Cecilia answers: "A penthouse [bored man's home], the dessert, kissing on a dance floor [Copacabana club where probably Tom and the singer have a kiss]... The people were so beautiful. They spoke so cleverly and do so much 'romantic' things...The man playing Tom was so cute." Cecilia talks about the film in a mood as if she is charmed by it and she convinces her sister to go and watch it again that night. A day after that night, she insists daydreaming at the restaurant regardless of her boss's warnings and at last Cecilia is dismissed from the job. Nonetheless, immediately after the dismissal, she finds herself in the movie theater again. She cries and watches the interior *The Purple Rose of Cairo* for at least five continuous showings in a bad mood. In fact, Cecilia's desperate hours of sitting, crying and just looking at the screen, while the movie starts and ends several times, are the indication of the big action<sup>3</sup>. Cecilia makes Tom Baxter, the romantic character in the interior movie, to step out of the screen<sup>4</sup>. She

3 Although this study handles the concept of 'fantasy' in the context of its examination of the placement of *The Purple Rose of Cairo's* main character between the worlds of 'reality' and 'fantasy', a point also needs to be made here concerning the fantastic narrative of the movie. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* places the spectators between the worlds of reality and fantasy through its narrative as well. It definitely corresponds to Rosemary Jackson's following explanation of 'fantastic narratives'. As Jackson states: "They assert that what they are telling is real – relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so – and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what – within those terms – is manifestly unreal. They pull the reader [spectator] from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and everyday world into something more strange, [...]" (Jackson 1995: 34)

4 This fantastic action can be read as resulting from Cecilia's attempt to compensate the lack of



causes to a new fantasy that brings some meaning to her empty life. He wants to stay with her, not to go back to the screen. He says many times that he loves Cecilia. He behaves her nicely, something that Monk never does. He takes her to a romantic dinner, to dancing and he gives her flowers. He ensures 'romance' for her that she sees only on movies. However when Gil Shepherd, the actor who plays the character named Tom Baxter, comes to New Jersey to find and convince Tom to return to the screen, he meets Cecilia and pretends as if he likes her. He wants her to leave Tom. He promises to bring her to Hollywood. At this moment, Cecilia prefers the biggest 'fantasy' – going to Hollywood – to the small one that Tom Baxter provided her with a couple of romantic moments. Although Tom Baxter steps out of the screen for her, at her most desperate moments and makes the 'romance' real in her life, Cecilia choses to leave the 'reality' behind. She achieves it exactly, not by going to Hollywood with Gil – she can not go because Gil Shepherd deceives her in order to make her let Tom Baxter go back to the screen – but by going to the movie theater again as she always does<sup>5</sup> and watching a brand new 'romance': Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in *Top Hat* (Dir. Mark Sandrich, 1935) dancing and Fred Astaire is singing "I'm in heaven".

In conclusion, this study examined Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) in relation to the concepts of 'reality' and 'fantasy', through its main character Cecilia and the circumstances surrounding her. Within its examination, this study explained how 'reality' is differing from the 'real' and what are the components of Cecilia's 'reality'. Thus, it revealed how the world of 'fantasy' Hollywood film industry is selling affected Cecilia's life as a woman i.e. made her alienated to her daily life ; and at the end became the most critical component

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'romance' in her life. In other words, this is the way how Cecilia expresses her desire for the romantic moments with Tom Baxter. As Jackson puts out "[i]n expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (...): it can *tell of*, manifest or show desire (...), or it can *expel*, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (...)." (Jackson 1995: 3) In light with the foregoing categorization, it can obviously be said that Cecilia's fantasy of making a romantic film character step out of a movie screen to have a love relation with her can be interpreted as: she expresses her desire by *telling off*/manifesting or showing it in an unusual/different/strange way which threatens the cultural or Caillois's "acknowledged" order and continuity in her life. (Jackson 1995: 21) Even though she is not happy with her life that she is experiencing lots of constraints and lack of romance, she knows somewhere in her unconscious that in this way of expressing her desire, there is something wrong, she is still married and it is impossible to go on with a lover that came from a fantasy world. Thus, later on, her fantasy turns to operate in the latter category.

- 5 At this time, Cecilia's fantasy operates in the way of *expelling* the 'desire' which made Tom Baxter once step out of the screen, has romantic moments with Cecilia but then go back to the screen again just because of Cecilia's mind did not let this fantasy go on like that; and so, made Gil Shepherd come to town, convince Tom to return to the screen, promise Cecilia to take her to Hollywood and at the end turn her adrift. Since the existence of a romantic film character out of a film-world, and having a new place near by Cecilia as a lover in her fantasy world, threatens her unconsciously and she prefers not to break the acknowledged order in which she was enduring all the harsh constraints of her life by means of just watching romances on the screen of a film theater in a passive act - with no film character stepping out of or with no Cecilia stepping into the screen.

of her own 'reality'. In sum, if it comes to answer the question been asked at the very beginning, the 'reality' that is experienced in Cecilia's daily life might be seen as ended in the 'heaven' which was being presented via the 'fantasy' worlds of Hollywood movies, in film theaters; but might also be seen as just starting in the film theater each time she watches a new romantic film (or the same film again and again) and carries the fantasy world of those movies into each moment of her real life.

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