# *REPRESENTATIONS OF SELF, OTHER AND THE WORLD IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION AND FILMS*

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***Abstract*:** *Identity is the representation we have of ourselves, and it can be submitted to pressure by traditional mentalities, consumerist society, peers. It is easy to begin doubting oneself and go through an identity crisis, as can be seen in the films made based on the true lifestories of Elizabeth Gilbert and Julie Powell.*

***Keywords:*** *Self, the Other, image, identity, crisis.*

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you (…) the stable core of your identity. But it is also about your relationships, your complex involvement with others and in the modern world these have become even more complex and confusing. Each of us live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance. (Weedon, 2004:1)

Identity, the representation a person holds of himself/herself, is associated with the notion of well-being, of happiness or satisfaction with one's life. In today's consumerist society, traditionally stable forms of identity construction, such as community, class, religion, family or nationality, have become eroded, particularly in urban environments (see Dittmar, 2008:12), so identity is not ascribed but achieved by the individual. An important element of such achieved identity is the acquisition and consumption of material goods and wealth. However, this is not always the key of a happy, fulfilled life.

The reason for Elizabeth Gilbert's book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, published in 2006, is a deep personal crisis she was going through at 31. In spite of, apparently, having anything she wanted, she found herself unhappy and unable to enjoy what for others would seem the "perfect life":

> "Wasn't I proud of all we'd accumulated – the prestigious home in the Hudson Valley, the apartment in Manhattan, the eight phone lines, the friends and the picnics and the parties, the weekends spent roaming the aisles of some box-shaped superstore of our choice, buying ever more appliances on credit? I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life – so why did I feel like none of it resembled me?" (Gilbert, 2006:14)

The pressure of society manifests itself not only in making people keep up with the Joneses, but also with regard to family life. Women are supposed to get married and have children, especially at a certain age (less than in the past, it is true, but there is still a pressure, especially from parents and close relatives), to "follow the tradition"[2], and

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[2] First you are a child, then you are a teenager, then you are a young married person, then you are a parent, then you are retired, then you are a grandparent—at every stage you know who you are, you know what your duty is and you know where to sit at the reunion. You sit with the other



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failure to do so may lead to feelings of entrapment and insecurity. That is why Liz Gilbert cries herself to sleep on her bathroom floor every night, and feels that she needs to get out of her marriage:

> I don't want to be married anymore. I don't want to live in this big house. I don't want to have a baby. But I was supposed to want to have a baby. I was thirty-one years old. My husband and I—who had been together for eight years, married for six—had built our entire life around the common expectation that, after passing the doddering old age of thirty, I would want to settle down and have children. […] But I didn't—as I was appalled to be finding out—want any of these things. (Gilbert, 2006:13)

In these circumstances, having an affair with another guy, a younger actor, is a kind of a life buoy for her. The interesting thing is that, in her case, her identity and even her appearance seems to be defined by the men she goes out with, as shown in the remark somebody makes to her:

> Some time after I'd left my husband, I was at a party and a guy I barely knew said to me, "You know, you seem like a completely different person, now that you're with this new boyfriend. You used to look like your husband, but now you look like David. You even dress like him and talk like him. You know how some people look like their dogs? I think maybe you always look like your men." (Gilbert, 2006:66-67)

As she fails to find balance and happiness even in this affair, Elizabeth devises a plan to travel for a whole year, in search of her true self. In her case, adventure (whether it is an adventure with another man or a travel adventure) serves to 'hold the I together', to preserve the solidity of selfhood, by finding new ways of reinventing itself. Travel may serve to annihilate, or negate, the dimension of "real" life altogether.

Early psychoanalitic thinkers tended to view travel as the expression of a longing to gain freedom from the constraints of the social world. Freud himself introduced the idea that travel gives expression to a latent protest. In his 1936 essay *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis*, he wrote that he "had long seen clearly that a great part of the pleasure is rooted (…) in dissatisfaction with home and family" (see Levin, 2008:16)

Turning from fiction to film, the "cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings, values, and ideology in both sociality and subjectivity, and therefore should be better understood as a signifying practice, a work of semiosis: a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, makers and viewers". (Teresa de Lauretis, in Bower, 2004:3)

Food scenes in films not only signify social class, identity and nationality, but also provide insight into the complex ways in which food and eating are entangled with other aspects of social/cultural development. (Ferry, 2003:1) "It is possible to 'say' things with food—resentment, love, compensation, anger, rebellion, withdrawal. This

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children, or teenagers, or young parents, or retirees. Until at last you are sitting with the ninetyyear-olds in the shade, watching over your progeny with satisfaction. Who are you? No problem—you're the person who created all this. (Gilbert, 2006:93)



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makes it a perfect conveyor of subtext; messages which are often implicit rather than explicit, but surprisingly varied, strong, and sometimes violent or subversive.

> "I used to have this appetite for food, for my life, and it is just gone. […] Since I was 15, I've either been with a guy or breaking up with a guy. I have not given myself two weeks of a breather to just deal with, you know, myself." (film lines, *Eat, Pray, Love*)

Liz learns Italian with her tutor, while having dinner on a terrace, surrounded by people doing the same thing, talking and enjoying their meals and life the way Italians do. During Giovanni and Liz's conversation, the camera focuses on their dishes, on the way they appreciate the food and the wine. Liz also has something to teach Giovanni. Jokingly, she presents him the wine jug which is, in fact, a "therapist", i.e. a comforter, a healer.

After arriving in Rome, Liz walks on its streets, enjoys the atmosphere and, seated on a bench, she eats an icecream. Next to her, two nuns are doing exactly the same thing. Liz turns her head, looks at them and smiles. The camera has performes a movement from the top of the church behind to Liz, and then enlarges the view, following her gaze, to show us the two nuns, nonchalantly enjoying their icecream. It's a city where everyone enjoys the small pleasures of life.

Liz encourages a friend, who is reluctant to eat pizza for fear of gaining weight:

> I'm tired of saying no and going to bed remembering everything I've eaten the day before. […] I'm going for it. I'm going to finish this pizza and tomorrow we'll go on a date and buy bigger jeans.

Proving that she has now reached a balance, the phase of accepting herself even with a "muffin top" (an extra layer of body fat around her waist) and simply enjoying life. Her newly gained self-confidence is due to her visit to Italy, to her contact with the Italian tastes and practices of daily life, to appropriating that Italian lifestyle of "dolce far niente".

Another case in which personal crisis is linked to identity crisis can be seen in the film *Julie and Julia*, based on the true stories of Julia Child and Julie Powell (the author of the book). In 1949, Julia Child, the wife of a diplomat, was in Paris, wondering how to spend her days while her husband was busy at work. After hat-making lessons, she learns how to cook (because she loves eating) and writes a book teaching Americans how to cook French recipes, step by step.

In 2002, an unhappy Julie Powell – who hates her job as a secretary for a government agency dealing with the aftermaths of 9/11, who has moves to Queens, to a really small apartment over a pizzeria, and who is snubbed at by her so-called "successful" friends/ex-classmates – decides to cook Julia Child's recipes and blog about her "adventure", thus regaining her self-esteem and balance, just like Julia Child did when she found the joys of cooking.

Although having big dreams in college ("once the editor of the Amherst literary magazine "the one we all knew would be 'The One', who "temped for eight years before giving up on her novel"), Julie Powell works for the government, in a position in which she has no authority, in a cubicle (which is somewhat depersonalizing, depriving people of their sense of identity, of the feeling of work community),



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answering the phones from the families of the victims involved in the 9/11 attack, in other words dealing with a lot of frustration, complaints, unhappiness and feelings of helplessness. On top of that, she and her husband have had to move in a shabby and small apartment. It is easy to see how this could lead to a deadlock:

> Earlier that evening […] when I was standing in the Korean deli staring at produce, I'd been thinking, "I'm twenty-nine, I'm never going to have kids or a real job, my husband will leave me and I'll die alone in an outer-borough hovel with twenty cats and it'll take two weeks for the stench to reach the hall." (Powell, 2005:19)

For Helga Dittmar (2008:2-3), within this economic landscape, selfishness and materialism are no longer being seen as moral problems, but as cardinal goals of life. We have adopted a world view in which the worth and success of others is judged not by their apparent wisdom, kindness, or community contributions, but in terms of whether they possess the right clothes, the right car, and more generally, the right "stuff".

According to Symbolic interactionism theory, developing a sense of identity stems from the human ability for self-reflexivity, or viewing oneself from the *perspective of the other*. (…) Material objects, or the symbolic meanings associated with them, can serve as imaginary points of view from which to see the self, too (eg. a Rolex watch is a symbol of wealth and success). (Dittmar, 2008:18)

Every month, Julie has "Cobb salad" lunch with a group of friends, former college mates, as we gather. It is a dreaded event, as Julie feels inferior. They are all successful, career women, flashing their expensive clothes and phones, always busy and careful at what they eat: each of them wants something left out of their Cobb salad (no bleu cheese, no beets, no bacon, no eggs).

While Sandra Lee Bartky talks about internalized oppression through obsessive dieting and exercising, elaborate makeup and skin-care routines, and alluring ornaments and clothing, women "discipline" their bodies (see Tietjen Meyers, 2002:21), Helga Dittmar sees the "body perfect" as only one ideal identity, while the other refers to the "good life", where an affluent lifestyle, studded with expensive consumer goods, possessions, and activities, is heralded as a material ideal (Dittmar, 2008:14) The perfect body and material success are associated with control, autonomy, an interesting personal life, happiness.

As people judge others on dimensions that are personally relevant, Julie feels she has achieved nothing in her life, she is a mid-level bureaucrat, with nothing to show for it, like her friends. Her decision to blog her way through Julia Child's cookbook proves to be a life-saving (or rather mind-saving/identity-saving) idea, and helps her regain her self-esteem.

Conclusions:

In the two books and their films, travelling, cooking, writing about it all serve as a way of overcoming the crisis which affected or threatened to affect the protagonists' self-esteem and even identity. While we see how they went on and solved their issues, we also see how the world around influences them, how society can put pressure on personal identities through traditional beliefs, consumerist practices and social ties, and how easy it is to have an identity crisis.

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