The *Insider* demonstrates quiet, personal satisfaction as the reward for existential authenticity and the avoidance of desolation through social conscience. In *Ali*, a similarly authentic character, Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali (Will Smith), is also able to escape isolation, by embodying the hopes and desires of many people, and in overcoming adversity shares that triumph with the people who believe in him. This shared triumph makes Ali’s victory socially conscientious as well as existential. The wide resonance Ali has with thousands of people is almost unique amongst the Mann Men, making Ali Mann’s most successful protagonist at harmonising his existential guiding ethic with social engagement.

The prominence of social conscience gives *Ali* a sprawling narrative, and the biopic lacks the tight focus of Mann’s other films. The wide scope of the film includes some of the social and political upheavals that took place between 1964 and 1974. This timeframe allows Ali’s personal quest for the world heavyweight championship to be juxtaposed with his involvement with the Nation of Islam, protests against the Vietnam War and changing political situations in Africa; Ali is placed within ‘an era of uncertainty, strife and discord’ (Marcus, 2004: 123). Therefore, Ali is in-the-world, but the world includes more social and political conflicts than Mann’s other films, and the relation between Ali and others is more significant than it is for any other Mann protagonist. Ali is presented as ‘a complex and contradictory figure [in] the social and historical context’ (McCriskken and Pepper, 2005: 176) of the film’s period. More than any other Mann film, *Ali* explicitly dramatises ‘the tension ... between drives that emphasize individualism [and] drives that encourage community’ (Custen, 1992: 79) through the film’s emphasis upon context as much as character. This tension between individualism...
(the existential guiding ethic) and community (social engagement) is explored through Ali’s role as the ‘People’s Champion’.

‘The People’s Champion’ is Ali’s fundamental self, while his vital programme is the pursuit of the heavyweight championship of the world. For him to be what he purposes, he both manifests the personal beliefs that he speaks of, and acknowledges the investment others have in him. Ali’s adherence to his social conscience maintains his fundamental self, but he must also suspend his vital programme and then return to it without ceasing to be what he purposes. At times the film seems to obscure Ali’s personal journey with the wider conflicts around him, but this apparent deviation is necessary to dramatise the world which Ali perceives.

Steven Rybin notes that *Ali* is part of a cycle of biopics released in the 1990s and 2000s, including *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992), *What’s Love Got To Do With It* (Brian Gibson, 1993) and *Men Of Honor* (George Tillman, Jr., 2000) (Rybin, 2007: 151), the cycle continuing with *The Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 1999) and *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001). *Ali* has thematic elements that George Custen (1992) identifies as typical of the biopic, such as ‘romance, the role played by family and friends, and ... the idea of fame’ (149–54) as well as common stylistic features including ‘flashbacks and montage’ (149). Most obviously, *Ali* includes the protagonist’s ‘self-invention, that most characteristic American form of personality construction’ (Custen: 149), a generic feature similar to existential freedom and responsibility. Although Ali must negotiate a range of political and sociological influences, his personality remains self-defined – he declares and maintains his fundamental self. Rybin notes that biopics ‘elide various details from the depiction of each subject’s life’ (2007: 151), and in the case of *Ali*, Mann’s omissions result in the film’s focus on the period 1964–74, which places the film’s protagonist in an existential framework.

Ali’s fundamental self first appears in an interchange between him and a journalist. Following his victory over Sonny Liston (Michael Bentt), Ali is walking through Harlem, surrounded by the inhabitants and accompanied by Malcolm X (Mario Van Peebles) and various journalists. When asked what sort of champion he will be, the champion responds:

Ali: I’m definitely gonna be the People’s Champion, but I just ain’t gonna be the Champ the way you want me to be the Champ, I’m gonna be the Champ the way I wanna be.