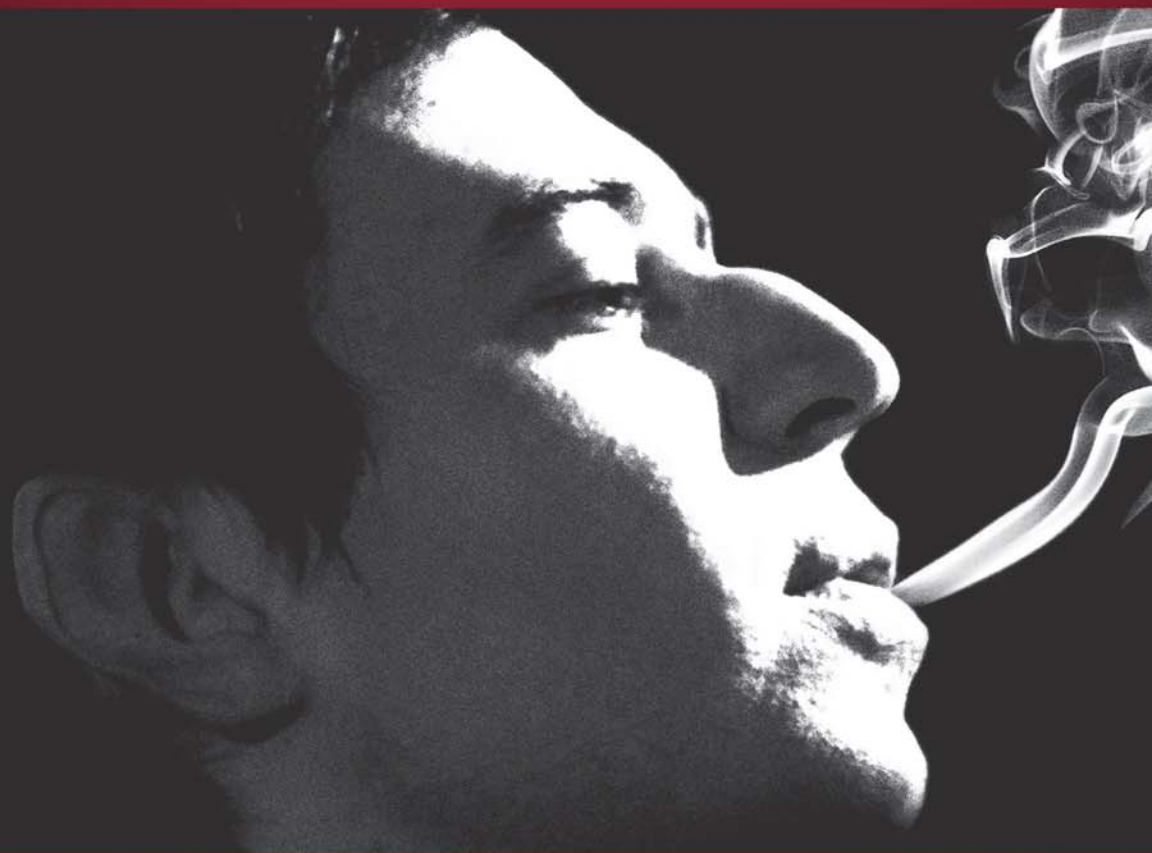


THE BIOPIC IN CONTEMPORARY FILM CULTURE



EDITED BY

TOM BROWN AND BELÉN VIDAL

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THE BIOPIC IN CONTEMPORARY FILM CULTURE

The biographical film or *biopic* is a staple of film production in all major film industries and yet, within film studies, its generic, aesthetic, and cultural significance has remained underexplored. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* fills this gap, conceptualizing the biopic with a particular eye toward the “life” of the genre internationally. New theoretical approaches combine with specially commissioned chapters on contemporary biographical film production in India, Italy, South Korea, France, Russia, Great Britain, and the US, in order to present a selective but well-rounded portrait of the biopic’s place in film culture.

From *Marie Antoinette* to *The Social Network*, the pieces in this volume critically examine the place of the biopic within ongoing debates about how cinema can and should represent history and “real lives.” Contributors discuss the biopic’s grounding in the conventions of the historical film, and explore the genre’s defining traits as well as its potential for innovation. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* expands the critical boundaries of this evolving, versatile genre.

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*This book
is dedicated to
Edith Marcella Brown
and
Jaime Vidal and Gemma Villasur
key characters in our life stories*

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Tom Brown and Belén Vidal

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introduction:
the biopic and its
critical contexts

b e l é n v i d a l

It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch. If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined.

—Lytton Strachey, Preface to *Eminent Victorians* (1918)

Amateur psychologists who think it clever to explain the character of the later man for a jumble of largely fictitious memories can ferret for their filth in other people's autobiographies!

—Graham Chapman, *A Liar's Autobiography: The Untrue Story of Monty Python's Graham Chapman* (2012)

Is it possible to capture the essence of a life? The biographical picture, or *biopic*, is a troublesome genre. Often cavalier in its handling of historical fact

and mired in its own sense of self-importance, the biopic commands as much critical derision as industrial visibility. In contemporary cinema the biopic is a ubiquitous vehicle for prestige projects, and in many ways it has become synonymous with award worthiness and its attendant market benefits, particularly when it comes to star-making performances. The film industry's most publicized accolades—the American Academy Awards—are a good indicator: 12 of the 20 Oscars awarded in the Best Actor and Best Actress categories between 2000 and 2009 went to actors playing real-life figures in high-profile films including *Ray* (Jamie Foxx), *Milk* (Sean Penn), *Walk the Line* (Reese Witherspoon), *Boys Don't Cry* (Hillary Swank), *Capote* (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and *La Môme/La Vie en Rose* (Marion Cotillard). Yet the biopic is often perceived as a throwback to old-fashioned modes of storytelling—a sort of heavy armor that constrains filmmakers' creative movements. Todd Haynes, for example, has expressed disdain for the genre, which he describes as “a formula, almost more nakedly so than other film genres because whatever the life is has to fit in this one package.”¹ When she presented *Bright Star* in the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009, Jane Campion emphatically declared that her film about poet John Keats and Fanny Brawne was a love story, not a biopic, which she calls a “fated area.”² On *Lincoln* (2012), Steven Spielberg notes: “I never saw it as a biopic. I sometimes refer to it as a Lincoln portrait, meaning that it was one painting out of many that could have been drawn over the years of the president's life.”³ As Dennis Bingham eloquently notes, “nobody wants to be caught making a biopic,”⁴ and yet, according to this scholar—one of the few to champion the genre unambiguously—the biopic is as maligned as it is prolific and durable.⁵ An ongoing history of profitable but often undistinguished movies suggests that the genre sits at the rearguard of aesthetic innovation. However, the perception of the biopic as tepid and heavy handed, perennially tied to the “cradle-to-grave” formula (a widespread misconception with little demonstrable evidence in the actual films), seems out of step with the incessant flow of productions about historical lives around the world and with the wide spectrum of variation found within the flexible limits of the “based-on-a-true-story” principle.

The time is ripe for a reconsideration of the biopic's significance in contemporary film culture. Our goal in this collection of new essays is to take the study of the genre beyond its associations with studio filmmaking and Hollywood myth-making, to look at the international life of the biopic through its hybrid forms, narratives, and politics. The volume examines an array of cultural areas and modes of filmmaking in order to evaluate the genre's state of play, with a particular (though not exclusive) focus on film production since 2000. At a time in which, as Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover note, cinema's transnational flows cannot be detached from the trajectories of film form,⁶ the biopic feeds fantasies of national identity to the international film scene (as seen, for example, in *Coco avant Chanel/Coco*

Before Chanel, 2009), but also blurs the contours of national cinemas through transnational encounters and appropriations (*Marie Antoinette*, 2006, for instance) and eludes traditional critical distinctions between popular and art cinema.

The interface between the national and the transnational in the contemporary biopic is but one in a series of interlocking frames of analysis to be found in this collection: [Part I](#) situates the contemporary biopic in relation to wider cultural factors that have shaped its evolution in specific industrial contexts; [Part II](#) identifies key cycles that have defined the contemporary biopic as a mainstream genre and examines them through issues of representation and performance; finally, [Part III](#) singles out distinctive films—and filmmakers—that imaginatively engage with the iconicity of their subjects in ways that challenge generic expectations. Together, the contributions in this volume illuminate what makes the biopic a modern film genre drawing on a rich tradition. This introduction, in turn, traces the main lines of critical thinking about the biopic in order to provide a context for the discussion that follows. The collection uncovers a series of aesthetic and narrative strategies in film biography across nations; such strategies run the gamut between the epic sweep and the narrow focus on a moment in time, between translatable myths and cultural specificities, and between classic stories of achievement (and failure) and closely observed portraits. By examining the most salient debates around the biopic, the following pages attempt to locate key points of continuity and changes in the genre's evolution, and claim its status as a distinctive form in contemporary film culture.

the biopic as a classical genre: critical foundations

The term “biopic” is used to refer to a fiction film that deals with a figure whose existence is documented in history, and whose claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story. Like other sub genres within the historical film, the biopic is underpinned by reenactment or, as Robert Burgoyne puts it, “the act of imaginative recreation that allows the spectator to imagine they are ‘witnessing again’ the events of the past.”⁷ Regardless of the audience's degree of prior knowledge about the subject portrayed, it is the fundamental link to historical fact that seals the generic contract⁸ between producers and audiences of biographical film fictions, with the attendant pleasures of recognition.

Unlike in other film genres placed at the intersection of fiction and history, such as the epic, the costume film, or the docudrama—all of which may feature historical characters and biographical tropes—in the biopic an individual's story comes to the fore. Personality and point of view become the conduit of history in stories that often boil down complex social processes to gestures of individual agency. Burgoyne sharply summarizes

widespread critical opinion when he notes that the biopic's "style of historiography is regarded as suspect, a dubious attempt to encapsulate or exemplify a major historical period in the life of an individual protagonist."⁹ Conversely, cinema-friendly historians have pondered over the ability of the historical film to function not just as a historical document, but as a form of historical writing. Hayden White coined the term *historiophoty* as counterpart to written historiography; this suggestive if little used term refers to "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse."¹⁰ The potential for a distinctive mode of biographical historiophoty also arises in Natalie Zemon Davis's¹¹ and Robert A. Rosenstone's concern with the genre. In an essay initially entitled "Telling Lives" (but tellingly renamed "In Praise of the Biopic" in a later reprint),¹² Rosenstone examines the different "lives" of John Reed in film. While showing a historian's concern for his subject, which he places at the center of his investigation, he strategically deploys the biopic as another form of historiography. Biopics (or "biofilms," Rosenstone's preferred term) arising from different industrial and national contexts refract, like the facets of a prism, different sides of their subject. In Rosentone's work, the biopic and written biography stand side by side in the public sphere, like communicating vessels that subtly join specialist knowledge, popular history, and mass entertainment.¹³

The biopic's potential to intervene in the discourses of history intersects with the historiography of film genres in complex ways. Forms of the biographical picture date back to the beginnings of cinema as commercial entertainment. Although early examples can be found in all major film producing countries,¹⁴ the Hollywood biopic of the studio era, with its emphasis on the celebration of the "Great Man" as motor of history, has gone down in film history as a blueprint for the genre as a popular film form. The classical Hollywood biopic is the focus of George F. Custen's book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, from 1992. The first and most widely referenced work on the subject, *Bio/Pics* charts the corpus of nearly 300 biographical films that were produced by the major studios between 1927 and 1960, a minor but continuous strand of production that established itself as a form of public history. The Hollywood biopic is a producer's genre,¹⁵ often promoted as a prestige film that exploits the popularity of a star under contract. In Custen's analysis, the retelling of the stories of the great men and (to a lesser extent) women conflates the studios' capitalist ethos with American founding myths.

Referring to Leo Lowenthal's research on biographies in popular magazines, Custen highlights the socializing function fulfilled by the biopic as well as by other forms of mass popular culture.¹⁶ In this respect, these Hollywood productions could be seen as the natural continuation of older modes of popular biography, merging the hagiographic (the biopic as a secular descendant of the life of saints)¹⁷ with edification. In particular,

Custen extrapolates the shift from the focus on so-called “idols of production” to “idols of consumption” observed by Lowenthal,¹⁸ to a similar evolution in the film biopic’s selection of figures from certain professions. Characters presented as role models, such as politicians, scientists, industrialists, and businessmen, in films like *Disraeli* (1929), *Voltaire* (1933), *The White Angel* (1936), and *Dr Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet* (1940), progressively gave way to sportsmen and entertainers as the preferred subjects of the biopic, especially as the USA entered World War II—*Gentleman Jim* (1942), *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1943), and *The Dolly Sisters* (1945) are some examples cited by Custen. There are, however, significant differences in approach. Lowenthal, a sociologist of the Frankfurt School, regarded with pessimism the progressive marginalization of social and political issues in favor of a falsely democratic leveling based on consumption.¹⁹ For Custen, the trajectory from obscurity to success found in the stories about show business and sports personalities not only furnish models of American myths of aspiration, but also function as an allegory for Hollywood itself. The genre ultimately reinforced the ideological and economic logic of the film industry, dovetailing myths and values that, embodied by their producers and stars, helped legitimize Hollywood as an institution. Studio production led to a standardization of the great-man narrative through the fit between stars’ roles, control of publicity, and very importantly, a strong self-regulation in content and approach to the famous figures portrayed. This was necessary to ensure market control without censorship restrictions and to avert the risk of legal action against the studios in relation to the films’ portrayal of famous living or dead persons.²⁰ Ironically, biopic production thus promoted individuality and uniqueness through a template that worked within “a mass-tailored contour for fame in which greatness is generic and difference has controllable boundaries,”²¹ a tension internalized by the contemporary popular biopic.

Custen’s critical model shows that the classical Hollywood biopic functioned as a vehicle for a pre-determined vision of history. In a later recapitulation of his theses, he points out that the classical studio biopic assured us “that the world was in fact largely stable” and change occurred “through the agency of individual intervention, through strong leaders.”²² This personalized mode of history-telling connects cinema to nineteenth-century literary models, relying on linearity and an accumulation of facts to provide a strong logical thread and sense of progress. Through a necessarily selective account of a life, often constructed at the end point through the framing structure of the flashback, linearity and factuality led to a “natural” collapse of the future into the past. This teleological model was designed to communicate the achievements of a public figure—her, or most often, his greatness.²³

This potent mode of popular history-telling has been taken to task by other critics and historians on ideological as well as historiographical

grounds. Most notably, John Ford's Abraham Lincoln biopic *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939) was singled out as the object of a detailed semiotic analysis collectively signed by the editors of the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in a landmark post-May 1968 essay.²⁴ An example of producer Darryl F. Zanuck's investment in the genre during his time as head of Twentieth Century Fox, *Young Mr Lincoln* was made on the back of the popularity of Carl Sandburg's extensive biography of the sixteenth President of the United States (*Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, 1926), and concentrates on an episode of Lincoln's (played by Henry Fonda) early years as an Illinois country lawyer. For the *Cahiers* critics, the film is constructed on an act of repression that strengthens the myth: Lincoln's fate—the fact that is known by the spectator—is the historical event left out of the actual narrative, which thus mobilizes the event's "universal and eternal meaning."²⁵ This analysis highlights the recursive structure of myth: "‘Told’, Lincoln's youth is in fact *rewritten* by what has to filter through the Lincolnian myth."²⁶ This mode of historical narration is therefore geared to causal determinism on both a *teleological* axis—the historical actor is presented as predestined to become one—and on a *theological* axis—the moral justification for the predestined historical actor's immortality is already embedded in the figure's myth.²⁷ In retelling the story of the young Lincoln, *before* he became "Lincoln," the historical basis for the myth legitimizes the story, and at the same time remains outside the self-enclosed "future perfect" tense of the biographical narration, a discursive structure that is described, via Jacques Lacan, as "what I will have been for what I am in the process of becoming."²⁸ For the *Cahiers* critics, history is reduced to a form of morality sanctioned by capitalist ideology; no more than a self-fulfilling prophecy of a "continuous and linear development of a pre-existing *seed*, of the future contained in the past."²⁹ This mode of address obscures its ideological basis, displacing (to the symbolic *hors champ* of the fictional space) the capitalist interests of Hollywood and the American Republican Party, the two-pronged force that underlies the elevation of the young Lincoln as a beacon of moral authority over his political affiliations.³⁰

This holistic reading of the classical biopic, reflective of the political positioning of *Cahiers* and of the journal's line of structuralist criticism at the time, nonetheless anticipates the poststructural turn of historians like White,³¹ and informs later revisions of the biopic as a form of historiography. In a direct response to the mode of analysis developed by the *Cahiers* critics, J.E. Smyth argues that Ford's film points at the gaps between the "real, 'historical' Lincoln and the myth in American consciousness."³² Comparing *Young Mr Lincoln* with other cinematic renderings of the historical figure produced in the same period (notably *Abraham Lincoln*, 1930, a rare instance of the chronological "cradle-to-grave" life chronicle; and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, 1940), Smyth notes *Young Mr Lincoln's* contrasted understanding of its subject, shown in details like Zanuck's editing decision to dissolve quickly

from a shot of Lincoln/Fonda walking out of frame into the bleak, stormy landscape, to a shot of the imposing Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. This moment of “visual disjuncture”³³ between the human figure and his monumental representation demonstrates that the “transition from history to myth is not seamless.”³⁴ Where the *Cahiers* critics dissect Hollywood’s mode of historiography as a myth-making leveling machine, Smyth reclaims the discerning vision of the Lincoln myth formulated by the filmmakers working within the system, thereby vindicating Zanuck, Ford, and scriptwriter Lamar Trotti as “three of Hollywood’s most dedicated American historians.”³⁵

This debate highlights the complex intertextuality that embeds the biopic in specific moments of film culture. And yet, as Martin Barnier notes, the biopic deals not with the stability, but rather with the *transformation* of an image.³⁶ The most famous statuary portrait of Lincoln, which seals the future perfect tense of the 1939 film, has become a travelling sign that informs further representations. It is difficult not to recall Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln* in Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, which starts via a reference to the famous monument (and, implicitly, to the ending of Ford’s biopic). Following an opening scene of grueling battle that situates the action in the Civil War, Spielberg’s film reveals an imposing Lincoln (Daniel Day-Lewis) who, seated on an elevated wooden structure, visually recalls the famous statue. However, this scene confronts the president with a young African-American soldier who recites back to him the final words from his famous Gettysburg Address. Whilst visually and aurally positioning the spectator as passive recipient of a new hagiographic take on Lincoln—posture and camera angle reinforcing the image of the “great leader” at its most familiar—this symbolic encounter reframes the great man’s vision of history within a specific political project. In the script by Tony Kushner,³⁷ Lincoln’s political maneuvering to achieve the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that brought slavery and the Civil War to an end is the central event that makes the Lincoln myth *readable* for the contemporary moment.

The classical biopic’s teleological mode of address arguably provides the unchallenged basis of the post-classical biopic. *Lincoln* continues to draw its resonance from the future perfect mode, which the ellipsis of the moment of the president’s assassination reinforces. However, the critical studies on the foundations of the genre also point at a flexible form continuously reinscribed in the shifting space between historical fact, previous representations, and contemporary pressures. As Custen reminds us, the biopic builds on mediated structures (secondary sources) and appropriations (such as the statuary iconography in the Lincoln narratives) brought together by an array of dramatizing strategies. In this respect, the biopic can be considered a fully fledged form of modern biography.

literary biography and film biography: parallel lives?

The biopic's bad reputation echoes the prejudices towards literary biography among historians. Biography and the biopic carry, in parallel ways, the stigma of backward modes of storytelling. Speaking in defense of the form, esteemed biographer and scholar Richard Holmes notes that

academia . . . has regularly assaulted the [biographical] form as trivial, revisionist, exploitative, fictive, a corrupter of pure texts and probably also of scholarly morals. Most fatal objection of all, biography has no serious poetics, no set of post-Aristotelian regulations, and is therefore irredeemably subjective.³⁸

Modern biographical studies have responded by reconstructing the rich history of biography and by seeking to redefine its function in what has often been called a post-literary age. The collapse of the realist novel in the postmodern age has left a gap in the market, which has come to be filled by biography's safe offerings of authoritatively told tales featuring well-drawn characters, with the guarantee of a satisfying closure,³⁹ something that could equally be argued about the durability of the genre in contemporary cinema and television. Biography has thrived on the promise of instant accessibility fostered by digital media, and on the erosion of the boundaries between the private and the public, furthered by celebrity culture. In its many forms biography is, in the words of Hermione Lee, "a quest for lives which speak to us."⁴⁰

The renewed interest in biography in the early twentieth century runs in tandem with its crossover to the emerging film medium. An instrument of propaganda in major national film industries such as Russia, Germany, Britain, France, and the US in the first two decades, the early biopic classics of the transition from silent to sound cinema—from Abel Gance's bio-epic *Napoléon/Napoleon* (1927) to the first portrait of an artist in Alexander Korda's *Rembrandt* (1936)—are also indexes of biography's parallel transition into modernity. This transition is perhaps best encapsulated in the overhaul of the encyclopedic and eulogizing biographical form inherited from the Victorian era in the works of *New Biography*.⁴¹ Represented, among others, by Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and Virginia Woolf's biographical fiction *Orlando* (1928) as well as her numerous essays on the subject, the *New Biography* redefined the contours of biographical practice though its attention to personality rather than chronology, its fragmentary quality, and its use of satire and irony. As encapsulated by Strachey's words that open this introduction, the *New Biography*, in sum, distanced itself from the reverential treatment of the great man. While the nascent medium of cinema has often been signaled as a formative influence in modernist fiction, a two-way exchange took place affecting the evolution

of the modern biographical form. Laura Marcus remarks that “the new biography is inflected by the cinematic devices of detail, gesture and close-up and by cinematic subversions of linear time and chronology,” while “film borrowed from biography the trajectory of a life as an appropriate cinematic theme and structuring principle.”⁴²

If cinema and biography helped mold each other as modern narrative forms, Freudian psychoanalysis was a no less formative influence on this relationship. Sigmund Freud’s own ground-breaking study *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910) may have been derided for its dearth of data and errors in interpretation; however, Freud produces one of the most enduring tropes of biography by presenting Leonardo “as the archetypal ‘great man’ whose creative gift began to be intelligible only when brought into alignment with a disturbing childhood memory.”⁴³ It is through such familiar narrative moments, filtered through popular cinema’s appropriation of (diluted) Freudian ideas (a move parodied in the spoof biopic *A Liar’s Autobiography: The Untrue Story of Monty Python’s Graham Chapman*, 2012) that that legacy of psychoanalysis to film biography can be identified and, conversely, that the biopic emerges as the ideal genre for psychoanalytical examination. Childhood as site of character-shaping trauma has become a recurring trope that the contemporary biopic finds hard to escape, to the extent that one critic notes that “the modern biopic aims less at the story of a life than the portrait of a pathology,”⁴⁴ a claim that films like *The Aviator* (2004), *Walk the Line*, *Ray*, *La Vie en Rose*, or *Cloclo* (2012) easily illustrate. The pathologization of genius (explored by Julie F. Codell in this volume) underpins films that fetishize self-destructive acts as symptoms of the condition of the creative artist. Feminist critics in particular have challenged what they see as the tendency of the woman artist’s biopic to sexualize her art and subject her creativity to the influence of a powerful male figure, as is evident in films such as *Camille Claudel* (1988), *Frida* (2002), *Sylvia* (2003), and in the much-debated portrayal of Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi in *Artemisia* (1997).⁴⁵

The biopic participates in a paradox that, according to Malcolm Bowie, confronts the modern biographer and is dramatized by the psychoanalytic method: “you need a simplifying model, a schematic life-pattern, in order to give your work an arresting plot and prevent it from becoming a mere chronicle of particulars.”⁴⁶ This simplified model becomes apparent in the biopic’s dense mediation. Often reliant on abbreviated or fragmented information gleaned from multiple sources (biographies, journalistic accounts, letters, or short stories), the biopic is tasked with producing a full explanation of a life that is congruent with other narratives in a culture.⁴⁷ Its controlling storytelling devices, described by Custen—beginning in medias res, embedded flashbacks to “primal scenes,” montage sequences that condense the rise (or fall) of the subject, or trial-like scenes where, under pressure, the historical character verbalizes his or her goals⁴⁸—also

connote the mediating function of psychoanalysis as a pervasive template for the modes of biographical retrospection inherited from the twentieth century.

Holmes writes that, in contemporary biographical practice, “the ‘monolithic’ single Life is giving way to biographies of groups, of friendships, of love affairs, of ‘spots of time’ (microbiographies), or of collective moments in art, literature or science,” many concerning “those held together for an historic moment by a common endeavor, place or ideal.”⁴⁹ This trend is reflected in many of the case studies featured in this volume; for example, the encounter between King Yeonsan and the itinerant clowns that centers the South Korean heritage biopic *Wang-ui Namja/King and the Clown* (2005); the friendship and rivalry between Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Saverin in *The Social Network* (2010); the typical dual structures of the docudramas scripted by Peter Morgan, such as *The Queen* (2006); or the historical meeting between General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito that structures *Solntse/The Sun* (2005). In all these cases the dominant narrative focus on a single life narrated in retrospect opens up to biographical events that necessarily juxtapose several points of view. The collection thus pushes for a rethinking of the biopic’s generic limits, by proposing a remapping of the genre as a hybrid form that changes in contact with other genres, such as the docudrama (a topic examined in my own contribution to this volume). The rich hybridity of the contemporary biopic arises from its different trajectories according to cultural areas and industrial factors, and depending on available source materials.

The different narrative models that form the basis of film biography provide “critical indexes of the kind of historical vision film attempts to construct.”⁵⁰ The existence of the Biografilm Festival, an annual event exclusively dedicated to biography on film, which will reach its tenth edition in 2014,⁵¹ speaks not only of the sustained popularity of the format as a production/genre category, but also of its diversification: fictional, semi-fictional, and documentary films, which are all encompassed by the diverse sections of the festival, suggest that the circulation and critical consumption of the contemporary biopic has taken a turn similar to that towards “life writing” in biographical studies. Life writing emerged in the 1970s as a concerted move to acknowledge and connect biography, autobiography, memoirs, and other forms of life stories that could contribute towards the discovery and valuing of individual lives.⁵² This move follows a shift towards democratization in biographical writing (potentially any lives are worth writing and reading about), as well as cultural studies’ turn towards the study of neglected experiences and subjectivities.

The shift from biography to life writing acknowledges the heterogeneous sources and investments that form the basis of biographical practices—something that cinema, as a collective endeavor and a multi-layered text only serves to amplify. Woolf’s characterization of biography

as the “perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow,”⁵³ that is, as a combination of hard fact and the work of the imagination, takes on new shades of meaning in the biopic. In particular, the role of the actor focuses the tension between the factual basis of the reenactment, the pro-filmic body, and the image as conduit of the biopic’s mimetic imagination.

the mise-en-scène of the historical character: image and performance

The actor is the cornerstone to the biopic’s edifice of historical allusion. His/her performance is the emotional hook for the spectator’s investment in the biographical narrative. However, the actor’s very presence can equally obstruct the suspension of disbelief demanded by film representation, especially when he or she plays a contemporary figure who belongs to the collective memory of the film’s intended audience. As Derek Paget points out, any historical reenactment is predicated on a second-hand experiential connection; this places an extra burden on the actor, who can be seen as “‘bearing witness’ on behalf of a real-world subject.”⁵⁴ The biopic trades on a sense of authenticity that stems from the actor’s body itself. Make-up and hair, costume, and especially voice and gesture need to meet a set of expectations shaped not only by an audience’s knowledge and emotional response to the person portrayed but also, more often than not, by a history of previous representations—what could be called a collective social memory or even “icon” memory.⁵⁵

Embedded in the mise-en-scène, acting conventions have evolved alongside changes in style and technology. The work of the actor is integral to the mode of address of the biopic in different historical contexts. For example, the “monumentalization” in the above-mentioned Lincoln representations has a counterpart in the visual treatment of the great men of history in classical French cinema. As Raphaëlle Moine notes, in *Pasteur* (1935), the theatrical mise-en-scène tends to detach the main character—played by actor-director Sacha Guitry—from his environment and elevate him literally and metaphorically through the use of static medium and close-up shots.⁵⁶ The historical importance of the famous scientist is less articulated at a dramatic level than celebrated through moments of introspection and oratory. Supported by the Ministry of National Education, in keeping with the nationalist interests of the government of the French Third Republic,⁵⁷ the film’s pedagogic intention resonates with what Friedrich Nietzsche called “monumental history”: a monologic discourse that seeks to forge continuities between the present and the past, bringing history closer to fiction through the tools of narration. Monumental history dissolves into “mythical romance,” but also functions as an ideological mirror for the present.⁵⁸ This false analogy is actualized

through the actor's embodiment of the character; performance revives a figure from the past as an icon for its time.

Performance in the classic biopic has been deemed a tool to engineer social consensus. In relation to a cycle of biopics made by Warner Brothers in the 1930s, directed by émigré William Dieterle and starring Paul Muni, Thomas Elsaesser notes that the star image mediates between society and the text, displacing the ideological incoherencies of the film's discourse into spectacle.⁵⁹ The (masculine) historical figure is represented as simultaneously bound by history and able to transcend his time through the "unifying and uniting force of the 'riveting' performance."⁶⁰ This mode of address is realized via specific performative gestures, in particular what Tom Brown defines as "the historical gaze."⁶¹ Brown sees this as a recurring feature in Muni's performances, notably in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and *Juarez* (1939): making a stand in a public forum, the actor punctuates his speech with moments in which "his head tilts back, his eyes seem to gaze into an imagined distance, and the words delivered by Louis Pasteur/Emile Zola/Benito Juarez seem to address posterity."⁶² Posture and gesture actualize the great man's struggle to overcome the reactionary forces that bar progress, in a rhetorical flourish that literalizes the claim of the great man's being "ahead of his time."⁶³ Here performance functions as the lynchpin of the future perfect tense of the classical biopic, in which the meaning of the story lies in the great man's narrative of achievement, which secures its place in the audience's present. Although this mode of performance is associated with classical cinema, equivalent moments can be found in mainstream contemporary films that appeal to a similar sense of consensus. Brown claims that moments of oratory are integral to a middlebrow aesthetic that stresses the transhistorical relevance of its subject (see his analysis of heritage biopic *Amazing Grace*, 2006, in this collection; also in this volume, Rachel Dwyer identifies similar moments in *Guru* (2007), a Hindi biopic that elevates the figure of the business tycoon to that of hero for the new middle classes). While subject to changing acting conventions, the consensus-building function of performance persists in otherwise stylistically diverse films about political topics. In *Milk* (2008) a biopic of the eponymous leader of 1970s gay rights activism, and in *Made in Dagenham* (2010), a fact-based drama that chronicles the 1968 political campaigning for equal pay by a group of female factory workers at the Dagenham Ford plant, similar performance tropes channel breakthrough moments in which minority politics enters the arena of national debate.

While the actor brings forth the presentness of the past, performance also shows gaps that call for critical reflection on the mechanisms and goals of historical reenactment. Jean-Louis Comolli famously defined the encounter between the actor and the character in historical fiction as the problem of the "body too much." He states that a filmed historical character has two bodies: that of the actor who plays the character, and

the sum of previous representations evoked by the character (“the imagery”).⁶⁴ The actor’s body thus stands as the body too much, always already in excess of the historical meanings associated with the character’s image. Writing for *Cahiers du Cinéma* during the journal’s most overtly political phase, Comolli directs the concerns of post-structuralist theory at the specific problem of the actor’s performance. As De Cordova notes, for Comolli, performance structures the spectator’s belief.⁶⁵ Comolli’s priority in his article is to demystify the ideological nature of realism, which he regards as an “effect”⁶⁶ constantly threatened by a sense of the pro-filmic real conveyed by the actor’s body. Comolli’s retrospective appraisal of the performances in Jean Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* (1938) speaks of this generation of *Cahiers* critics’ shared interest in the politics of historical representation.⁶⁷ He points to aspects that strain the seamlessness of the relationship between body and image. A wig that fails to stay in place is both a sign of the unruly, declining body of King Louis XVI, unable to carry on with the performance of his royal role, and of actor Pierre Renoir’s body, whose gestures draw the spectator’s attention to the cracks in the illusion of representation.⁶⁸ Comolli’s analysis isolates the work of the actor from other aspects of Renoir’s mise-en-scène and reads it against the grain of the conventional dictates of psychological introspection; he focuses on the material aspects of the performance, and their relation to the inevitability of revolutionary change. His closing remark,

We have never seen anything but Pierre Renoir’s body, but this body has made us see the body too much of Louis XVI with, dare I say, the eyes of his contemporaries, and made us condemn it as they did: may it disappear!⁶⁹

aligns his critical stance with the film’s left wing politics; performance can create a rift in the historical spectacle and its ideological articulation of consensus, which can in turn be mobilized for the purpose of oppositional politics.

This retrospective evaluation of performance needs to be understood in the context of the modernist turn in historical cinematic fictions. In the late 1960s and 1970s the biopic became the site of experimentation in films that distanced themselves from the commemorative function of monumental visions of history. Much admired by the *Cahiers* critics, *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV/The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966) was the first of Roberto Rossellini’s biographies for television and a groundbreaking example of humanist objectivism in the staging of historical spectacle. Rossellini knowingly undermines the idea of the individual as catalyst of historical change, presenting instead a series of tableaux in which rituals and practices in the court of Louis XIV are brought into relief as political acts.⁷⁰ Experimental biopics made since this period have contributed to redefining the role of the actor in historical reenactments: *Chronik der Anna Magdalena*

Bach/The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach (1968) uses a voiceover that reads from the diaries of Johann Sebastian Bach's wife and relinquishes drama in favor of sequences that record the performance of Bach's compositions in their entirety; *Walker* (1987) parodies the great man's vision of history in a relentless attack on US militarism; *Caravaggio* (1986) (discussed by Codell in this volume) explores the artist's relations with his models and patrons through the prism of queer politics; whereas Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991) presents the eponymous painter during his final days in Auvers-sur-Oise as an aimless figure nearly absorbed by the landscape of nature and community. Performance in these films flouts the unifying mode of transhistorical address, either rooting the subject into the wider social world or deploying anachronistic modes of verbal and bodily expression. Universalizing notions of historical agency are questioned and subverted by the material gestures of performance. In various ways, the focus on the unique individual becomes a pretext that gives way to the experimental biopic's demand on the spectator to engage with the strangeness of the historical Other.

The study of performance in the contemporary biopic both draws on and departs from the above debates. In line with developments in star studies,⁷¹ Bingham outlines three possible categories of biopic performance in mainstream cinema: embodied impersonation, stylized suggestion, and the star performance.⁷² These categories can be related to the actor's different techniques in the construction of the historical character as well as to the different critical ways of approaching the question of the body too much vis-à-vis the demands of spectatorial identification. With regard to *Surviving Picasso* (1996), with Anthony Hopkins as Pablo Picasso, and *Frida* (2002), with Salma Hayek in the titular role, Bingham makes the fair judgment that:

the strength of the performance lies in its ability to make us believe that this could be Picasso or Kahlo, while never letting us forget, either, that these are Hopkins and Hayek creating their art, interpreting, and, if we feel they succeed, becoming the person-as-character.⁷³

And yet, performance can rarely be analyzed in isolation. The tensions and contradictions resolved by the star image, and the visual reflexivity of the modern biopic, affect our response to the performance. Hayek brings to the film her Hollywood Latina star image; star casting thus irons out the "unauthentic" choice of English in a story largely focused on Mexican characters, and her *tour de force* embodiment of Kahlo at different stages of the artist's life, from school girl to world-famous artist, unifies the nonchronological collage of animation, filmic, and painterly references that provides the landscape to her turbulent life story. In *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (2004), by reenacting some of Sellers's most famous screen

creations, Geoffrey Rush draws attention to his virtuoso impersonation of the British comedian, but plays Sellers as a parade of masks that leaves the spectator with a portrait of the late actor's dysfunctional personality as an unfathomable core—an “empty shell of a man.” *American Splendor* (2003) takes this de-centering of the biographical subject even further. In this film, the subject (cartoonist Harvey Pekar) and the actor (Paul Giamatti) exist not in excess of each other, but visually side by side.⁷⁴ Without fully abandoning historicism and illusion as a mode of address, these films sidestep the pitfalls of the body too much, confronting the spectator with an emphatic duplication of bodies/subjects—a “beside-the-body-ness,” so to speak—in line with the deconstruction of the centered self, common in much postmodern art. Jason Sperb's conclusion with regard to *American Splendor* could be extended to the status of performance in contemporary biopics that reject otherwise pervasive classical templates: the film “challenges any assumption about ‘knowing’ Harvey Pekar . . . suggesting that his life and the cinematic mapping of that life can never quite be aligned.”⁷⁵ This thought is also applicable to Toni Servillo's grotesque recreation of Giulio Andreotti in *Il divo: La spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti/Il Divo* (2008), the multiple avatars of Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There* (2007), and the stylized performance of Doug Jones in a puppet mask as Serge Gainsbourg's demonic double in *Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)/Gainsbourg* (2010), all films explored in this volume.

It seems inevitable to conclude that, past the postmodernist moment, the biopic has become a metagenre: that is, a genre that intently reflects on its own forms of life writing. The above-mentioned films suggest that the expectations generated by performance in the biopic have substantially evolved with the genre itself. Biography has been called the necrophiliac art,⁷⁶ a “‘haunted’ form of writing, imparting a textual afterlife to the dead,”⁷⁷ an aspect repressed by the biopic's dependence on the actor as a literal agent in the narrative, and a metaphorical agent in history. However, the contemporary biopic also questions the alternative ways in which the actor can, as Michael Meneghetti has put it, become a *medium* for historical meaning.⁷⁸ Meneghetti's choice of term is felicitous, as it suggests two different realms of interpretation: on the one hand, the actor *is* the medium insofar as his/her body, as discussed with regards to the classical biopic, connects the historical figure with the audience, making the spectator experience history vicariously. On the other, “medium” suggests a practice with an altogether more troubling outcome—a form of communication with the dead, the *frisson* of bringing the dead back to life in an illusion that we know to be always temporary. The biopic is, as Burgoyne claims in this volume, a deeply uncanny form, a form of thanatography or *death* writing (see Jesse Schlotterbeck's chapter) as opposed to life writing.

The latter aspect comes to the fore in the encroaching closeness of the contemporary biopic to other formats located on the same fact-based

spectrum, namely the docudrama and the documentary.⁷⁹ In contrast with the body too much implied by the fictional reenactment of famous lives, the biographical documentary often faces the opposite predicament, what Bill Nichols calls the “body too few,” in the absence of both the historical person (if he/she is deceased or otherwise absent) and an actor representing him/her.⁸⁰ Recent documentaries like *Senna* (2010) and *Bobby Fischer against the World* (2011) show how the absence of its central subject can be bypassed, but also amplified for narrative effect by resorting to archival footage, sound recordings, and interviews. Not only is the absent biographical subject eerily present, but these documentaries transform pieces of a life and partial accounts into a seamless chronicle of death foretold: stories underwritten by tragic death at a young age (the Formula 1 driver Ayrton Senna) or spectacular mental free fall (in the case of Bobby Fischer, recalled as the most charismatic chess player in the history of the game). Other recent documentaries deploy performance to signal the porosity of fictional and documentary regimes of representation. In *The Arbor* (2010), actors lip-synch and act to a soundtrack of recorded interviews with relatives and neighbors of short-lived playwright Andrea Dunbar in an extended act of ventriloquism that signals the uncanny mismatch between present and absent bodies. *Howl* (2010) dramatizes the life of Beat poet Allen Ginsberg through focus on his most famous work. Animation sequences interspersed with the reconstruction of interviews with Ginsberg (played by James Franco), of his first public reading of *Howl* in San Francisco, and of the court trial for obscenity that followed the publication of the poem, make for a nonlinear series of performative acts that shift the emphasis from the life of the artist to the life of the work. *The Arbor* and *Howl* draw attention, in different ways, to the transient quality of the life experiences they reconstruct through the ephemerality of performance.

Lastly, it is not just genre boundaries, but the notion of performance itself that is problematized in a set of films that could be called “autobiopics.” The subject, normally a film or music performer, plays him/herself in fiction films that exploit the illusion of access to the private as well as to the public side of the celebrity’s life. The barely fictionalized movie star played by Brigitte Bardot in *Vie Privée/A Very Private Affair* (1962)⁸¹ could be considered a precedent to the “insider” mockumentary *I’m Still Here* (2010), written by and starring Joaquin Phoenix, or to *A Liar’s Autobiography: The Untrue Story of Monty Python’s Graham Chapman*. The latter, a patchwork of comic sequences in different animation styles, unified by voice recordings (of his memoirs) made by Chapman before his death, cheekily flies in the face of assumptions about the knowability of its subject, or, indeed, about the intrinsic worth of the act of telling a life. These films go—with a vengeance—against the grain of the expected rewards of insight, growth, achievement, and human uniqueness promised by performance in the biopic. While the genre may not be prepared to let go of the assurance given

by biographical certainties and the lucrative fascination with the lives of the famous, it also gives proof of a formal flexibility that can serve radically different aims.

new critical frameworks: genre and hybridity

The hybrid status of the contemporary biopic raises the question of whether the focus on a historical life amounts to a genre of its own or needs to be considered a biographical variation within other, more established film genres.⁸² A clear generic line joins gangster fiction film *The Public Enemy* (1931) to crime biopic *Public Enemies* (2009), in parallel to stories about notorious law-breakers in various other national contexts that show the influence of the American crime genre: for example, the British film *The Krays* (1990), the Irish production *The General* (1998), and the French-Canadian diptych *Mesrine: L'Instinct de mort*/*Mesrine: Killer Instinct* and *Mesrine: L'Ennemi public n° 1*/*Mesrine: Public Enemy #1* (both from 2008) suggest syntactic variations on the semantic elements of the gangster film. American biopics of musicians (*The Buddy Holly Story*, 1978; *Great Balls of Fire*, 1989; *Beyond the Sea*, 2004) stem in some respects from the Hollywood musical genre.⁸³ Portraits of writers, painters, and other artists across national cinemas, such as *My Brilliant Career* (Australia, 1979), *Wilde* (UK/Germany/Japan, 1997), *Chihwaseon/Painted Fire* (South Korea, 2002), and *Molière* (France, 2007) have been received critically as a sub-set of the heritage film.⁸⁴ Moine gives precedence to the extra-textual framework of reference when she notes in her contribution to this volume that, “it is only in an interpretive context predisposed to recognize it that we can classify a fiction-film-telling-the-story-of-a-real-person’s-life (or a significant portion of his or her life) as a biopic.” In this vein, Dwyer (also in this volume) identifies a trend of semi-fictionalized biopics in Indian cinema implicitly based on current or past celebrities who are, however, pictured under different names in a bid to circumvent legal and cultural pressures. The semi-fictional biopic also allows for retrospective critical moves, such as Bingham’s consideration of *Citizen Kane* (1941) as a blueprint for the modern experimental biopic.⁸⁵

Scholarly work after Custen has shifted its attention to thematic groupings and issues of representation. In an issue devoted to the biopic by the French book series *CinémaAction* in 2011,⁸⁶ international case studies are organized around, among others, sections on artists (including musicians), writers and journalists, justice and politics in the twentieth century, and adventurers and sportsmen.⁸⁷ Carolyn Anderson and Jonathan Lupo’s dossier on the state of the genre (published in 2008) brings together essays on contemporary English-language films that highlight comparative approaches to biopics about specific figures (Truman Capote, Albert Einstein, King George III, and musicians on film). The attention received by the biopic from non-film journals such as *Biography*⁸⁸ has also enriched

its taxonomy by bringing uses of biography into the critical conversation across different media practices—including documentary and experimental video—beyond the fiction film. The proliferation of biographical themes and modes is, in sum, reflected in a sprawling, fragmented field, which has opened the genre up to the study of less consensual objects as a result.

The expansion of the field has also been critically considered in terms of the changing sociological make-up and political investments of producers and audiences. Discussing the state of the US biopic at the turn of the twenty-first century, Anderson and Lupo note how the increase in low-budget and independently produced projects (particularly in the 1990s) led to a diversification of biographical subjects, including an influx of stories by and about women and people of color.⁸⁹ This diversification runs parallel to the redefinition of the genre (in the US context) as director- rather than producer-driven.⁹⁰ Critically esteemed films by Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol*, 1996); Julian Schnabel (*Basquiat*, 1996; *Before Night Falls*, 2000); Oliver Stone (*JFK*, 1991; *The Doors*, 1991); Martin Scorsese (*Raging Bull*, 1980; *The Aviator*); Tim Burton (*Ed Wood*, 1994); Milos Forman (*The People vs Larry Flynt*, 1996; *Man on the Moon*, 1999); Gus Van Sant (*Milk*); and Sofia Coppola (*Marie Antoinette*, discussed by Pam Cook in this volume) circulate as auteur films; these films negotiate the conventional expectations generated by the “based-on-a-true-story” tag with different levels of film language experimentation. Equally important, the biopic’s industrial respectability has, paradoxically, allowed for the appropriation of the genre as a vehicle for confrontational politics. To some extent, this suggests a repositioning of what was once considered as an overwhelmingly conservative genre, into a vehicle for counter-hegemonic interventions.⁹¹

Bingham’s wide-ranging *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* from 2010 constitutes the most salient exploration of the widening choice of subjects and styles in the modern biopic. In this book, Bingham moves on from the production-based approach to the genre in Custen’s *Bio/Pics* to its investigation as a critical mode. Taking off where Custen left off (post-1960 American biopics), with selected detours into classical examples (*Rembrandt*) and non-US biopics (*Lumumba*, 2000), Bingham’s monograph is divided into eighteen chapters, each devoted to a specific film. Case studies are split into two parts, male and female biopics. This binary approach allows Bingham to examine the affirmation and the deconstruction of the ideological patriarchal myths that deep-structure the genre across films from different eras: on the one hand there is history as the expression of the agency of great (white) men, on the other is women’s public history as dominated by failure and victimization.

Modulations in tone are key to Bingham’s distinction between the “celebratory” biopic (which he associates with the classical producer-led cycles and melodramatic form of the Hollywood biopic), the “warts-and-

all” (between melodrama and realism), the experimental or “auteurist,” and the parodic biopic—what he calls “the biopic of someone who does not deserve one.” The latter category includes the ironic turn to the cult of celebrity in films that mock the notions of heroics, destiny and fame⁹²—the genre’s logical next step within its progressive but resolute shift towards the “idols of consumption,” already noted by Custen. Bingham favors post-studio-era biopics that demand to be discussed within the language of postmodernism, embracing films sometimes considered too experimental to fit the biopic category, such as the atypical *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993), a portrait of the Canadian pianist in thirty-two short episodes or takes, which has been called an “antibiopic” on the grounds of its “discursive reversal and undermining of the traditional eulogizing, hagiographic, and totalizing impulses in biography forms.”⁹³ *Citizen Kane* and *I’m Not There* bookend the discussion; the former anticipating the radical, deconstructive qualities of the latter.

By resolutely reclaiming the modernist and the experimental as part and parcel of his genre study, Bingham demonstrates the biopic’s history of aesthetic innovation and historiographical sophistication. However, the desire to balance an account of what the biopic typically is with what, Bingham argues, it is capable of being leads to some awkward steps in his argument. For example, he draws attention to the distribution of Academy Awards in order to demonstrate the genre’s increasing prestige since 1980⁹⁴ and suggests that “as the industry and its audience became more fragmented . . . biographies were often received as attempts to communicate with an adult audience, to do something risky and out of the ordinary.”⁹⁵ The conflation of prestige with “risky and out of the ordinary” reads, in the context of the study as a whole, as a maneuver to square the focus on the genuinely risky biopic (for example, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1998) with an argument about the importance of the biopic to Hollywood discourses of “quality.” In reality, Hollywood has surely privileged the *faux-risky*? Indeed, the information about Oscars that Bingham draws attention to underlines the genre’s dominant reputation for middlebrow entertainment rather than its potential as a counter-hegemonic practice. Bingham’s attribution of a near-evolutionary logic to the genre⁹⁶ ends up underscoring the co-existence, rather than the succession, of different phases in the biopic. He notes that the biopic’s (contemporary) parodic and self-reflexive phases have been “held up and interrupted, and re-started more than once”⁹⁷ by a return to what he calls the neoclassical wave—films from the 2000s such as *Kinsey* (2004), *Ray*, and *The Aviator* among others, which “synthetize the classical celebratory form with elements of warts-and-all,”⁹⁸ while other contemporary films such as *American Splendor* and *I’m Not There* shake up the genre.⁹⁹ Thus, Bingham concludes:

The neoclassical wave has predominated in the 2000s . . . and *I'm Not There* is about as out of place within it as *Citizen Kane* was amid early forties biopics such as *Sergeant York* and *The Pride of the Yankees*. Like *Kane*, *I'm Not There* illustrates all the possibilities if not of cinema (what single film including *Citizen Kane*, can carry out that mandate?) then of the biopic.¹⁰⁰

By reclaiming the biopic mostly through highly distinctive films, very often made by prominent auteurs (Orson Welles, David Lean, Oliver Stone, Tim Burton, Spike Lee, Todd Haynes), Bingham's classification skirts perhaps the central problem attached to the genre: the biopic's middlebrow-ness or, as Brown concludes in his chapter in this volume, its delivery of consensual pleasures related to formal conservatism and a simplified understanding of historical agency and identity. Taking its cue from Custen's and Bingham's milestones in the critical discussion of the genre, but moving beyond the focus on English-language cinema, the present collection aims to probe further the relationship between the consensual and the experimental; between the celebratory aspects and the potential for critique in the contemporary biopic. In order to fulfill this remit, contributors (especially those in [Part I](#)) highlight the relationship between films and their cultural and institutional contexts of production, which I examine briefly in the next section.

the international life of the biopic: memory and media convergence

The reenactment of historical lives speaks of the ways we remember the past across cultures and nations. In this respect, the constructions of memory that mediate the telling of lives on the screen have become embedded in the biopic's mode of address. This section discusses the pervasive presence of the genre across media, and its engagement with the processes and textures of cultural memory, which feeds into a rich transnational historical imaginary.

The modern cinematic biopic calls for the discussion of another medium: television. The demise of the studio system in the 1960s brought about important changes to the biopic as television took over the shaping of public history.¹⁰¹ Television biography opts for human-scale narratives at a time when Hollywood was reconfiguring itself through the spectacular economy of the super-production and, since the end of the 1970s, the blockbuster.¹⁰² Television alters our relationship with history in fundamental ways: it changes the scale of both subject and narrative frames, refocusing the genre into a more direct relationship with the everyday. Not only does the frame literally "shrink," as Custen puts it,¹⁰³ in allusion to the conditions of home viewing, but the time window between event,

fictionalization, and transmission does too: television biography ceases to look back at the past and turns to the now in search of watershed events and iconic—if not exemplary—figures.¹⁰⁴

The era of the television biopic also posits questions of value. For Custen, it is the rise of this “truly consumer-based medium” in the 1950s that cements the change of emphasis from idols of production to idols of consumption diagnosed by Lowenthal.¹⁰⁵ The docudrama and the movie-of-the-week format of the 1980s and 1990s¹⁰⁶ thrived on a staple diet of biographical stories extracted from the headlines: television movies like *The Royal Romance of Charles and Diana* (1982) and *Charles and Diana: Unhappily Ever After* (1992) speak of the ability of the medium to capitalize on current news. These forms of television biopic join a celebrity culture that aligns itself with aspirational values, but which does not command the same cultural capital as previous forms of screen biography. However, in our era of 24/7, multi-channel, multi-platform access to television content and ever-bigger home screens, the made-for-TV biopic has become an asset to quality programming. Biographical content plays an important role in the provision of quality mini-series and drama for global export that is part of the strategy of UK channel BBC or American HBO (and its film division HBO Films). In 2013, three HBO-produced biopics—*Game Change*, *The Girl*, and *Hemingway and Gellhorn*—all aired the previous year, earned ten out of a total of seventeen nominations for that year’s Golden Globes, as the channel advertised on its website.¹⁰⁷ These films sport high production values and stars (Julianne Moore appears as Sarah Palin in *Game Change*; Clive Owen and Nicole Kidman play Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn) and circulate as both television and festival cinema releases. HBO’s *Behind the Candelabra*, directed by Steven Soderbergh, was part of the official selection in competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013, where it secured theatrical distribution in several European territories. The televisual biopic’s frame seems to be “expanding” again in the era of medium convergence.

The advent of digital media has arguably reshaped the temporality of the biopic and its mode of address. The new biopic has shifted from the historical past to an appetite for historicizing the present by focusing on living subjects, or figures and events embedded in the recent collective memory. *The Social Network* (2010) and *W.* (2008) turn to figures who are ever so close to the present of the audience and zoom in on the gestation of watershed events that are presented as unfinished business (the invention of Facebook, the American invasion of Iraq). As Rebecca A. Sheehan argues in this volume, the downfall of the subject structures narratives riddled with unheeded warnings, which play on timing and anticipation. In these films, the inexorable temporality of tragedy takes the place of the future perfect mode in the self-fulfilling historical narrative, this time tuned in to the instantaneity of communications in the era of digital media.

The international biopic has taken a notable turn to the visual and sonic archive of the twentieth century. At a time of veritable visual-media saturation, available archival materials (and their digital reconstructions) often crowd the screen, standing side by side or blending with dramatic reenactment. Archival images and sounds form the textures of memory, whether individual or collective. The focus on the unique individual can thus open up to a mode of address that appeals to the spectator's sense of remembrance and participation in a shared popular culture, a device richly exploited by music- and film-themed biopics such as *Control* (2007) and *My Week with Marilyn* (2011). The memory aesthetics of these biopics promote a sense of community through a shared past (e.g., the lead-up to World War II in *The King's Speech*, 2010), or can directly challenge the consensual sense of history—and, even present a “counter-history,” as Marcia Landy claims in relation to *Il Divo* in her chapter in this collection. Like other forms of the heritage film, the modern biopic has become a site of competing memories, in which the emphasis falls on identity rather than action. Occasionally obtrusive framing devices inscribe memory as a reflexive activity, blurring the contours of the future perfect mode: *The Iron Lady* (2011) simultaneously presents Margaret Thatcher (in a striking performance by Meryl Streep) as a figure defined by her “destiny” as a powerful, if divisive force in British politics, and as a disoriented Alzheimer sufferer who experiences memory loss and temporal confusion. In *Gainsbourg* the child's gaze, a common allegorical device in European art cinema, enables fantasy self-projections that filter the traumatic memories of the Nazi Occupation of France, in a portrait of the young artist who humorously rebukes the specter of his own Jewish identity.

Memory tropes are conducive to the biopic's revision of national histories in the popular imagination. The genre combines stories of individual achievement with a form of historical writing in which the focus on personality serves a subjective point of view on a major, and often traumatic, historical event. For example, in *Schindler's List* (1993)¹⁰⁸, Oskar Schindler is entirely defined by his actions vis-à-vis the Jewish genocide, the Holocaust being the “modernist event”¹⁰⁹ that proves the making of Schindler as a historical figure. The stories of Holocaust survivors, members of the anti-Nazi resistance, and perpetrators constitute one of the most consistent strands in the European biopic around World War II, with films such as *The Pianist* (2002), *Der Untergang/Downfall* (2004), or *Sophie Scholl—Die letzten Tage/Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005). I would contend that, in line with Rosenstone's suggestion, these films show that “less than full-blown portraits, [biopics] should be seen and understood as slices of lives, interventions into particular discourses, extended metaphors meant to suggest more than their limited timeframes can convey.”¹¹⁰

Memory and history have become central questions in the study of the biopic as an international genre. The genre's specific national and cultural

inflections mean, as shown in the case of the classic American biopic, that life-writing cannot be separated from nation-writing, an aspect especially foregrounded by chapters in this volume on French (Moine), South Korean (Hwang), Indian (Dwyer), British (Vidal), and Italian (Landy) biopics. The study of the genre in most of the major national film industries is still in its infancy, and there is much work to be done on comparative approaches to the biopic across non-Anglophone contexts, a venture that faces the problem of fragmented knowledge and the nonsynchronic development of generic forms and traditions. While acknowledging the heavy Euro-American slant of biopic studies (perhaps a reflection of the prominent place of biography in the imaginary of capitalist Western societies), the present collection aspires to revisit fundamental genre questions in underexplored national film cultures which, in turn, are shaping themselves to become new international foci of biographical production.

summary of chapter contents

This collection brings together fourteen new contributions about the biopic. Chapters focus mainly on films made between 2000 and 2010 as well as bringing older examples of the genre into the conversation. The volume wants to make a critical intervention in the historiography of the genre, while examining the distinctive visual and narrative strategies deployed in the representation of historical lives. In keeping with this two-pronged approach, all chapters, including the ones that survey a cycle or iconography across a number of films, draw on the analysis of specific case studies in order to tease out questions of narrative, tone, and mode of address. Likewise, the discussion of particular contexts of production and reception aims to provide models of analysis that may be brought to bear on further past and future examples of the genre.

Part I, “Cultural Shifts,” explores cultural, industrial, and institutional configurations that have given rise to new frameworks for the study of the contemporary biopic. Rebecca A. Sheehan looks at time and narrative in the age of new media in relation to a cycle of Anglo-American biopics focused on still-living figures. In particular, Sheehan examines the conflation of the temporal structure of classic tragedy in *The Queen* and *The Social Network* with the acceleration of information in the era of the postmodern simulacrum. She examines how, in these biopics, pathos arises from the subject’s failure to control and thus to retain his or her agency over processes of communication defined by the instantaneity of the televisual and the digital transmission of information. Sheehan’s analysis illuminates the reconfiguration of agency and historical time in the new biopic. Raphaëlle Moine queries the historical invisibility of the term biopic in French film studies in light of the explosion in biographical film production in France since 2000. She examines the gaps in the

historiography of the genre, which she links to the twin critical debates about the heritage film and the memorial functions of the biopic in France. Noting the irreverent treatment of great men and the elevation of popular artists and (notorious) celebrities from the post-World War II period, Moine demonstrates how this cycle exploits a collective visual memory with nostalgic appeal for contemporary national audiences, and exports a gallery of “idols of consumption” to international audiences, validated by the success of *La Vie en Rose*. Rachel Dwyer examines the biopic in the cultural context of Hindi cinema. Dwyer argues that the contemporary Hindi biopic needs to be understood as a reflection of the desires and aspirations of the new middle classes, whose tastes the biopics about entrepreneurs, sportspeople, and performers cater to. She identifies the thriving online celebrity culture and the potential of legal liability as factors that shape these semi-fictionalized stories, alongside Bollywood formal traditions. Valorizing upward mobility along gender lines, the Hindi biopic powerfully reflects the changes in values of the new India. The section closes with Yun Mi Hwang’s examination of the culture content industry in relation to biopic production in South Korea. She looks at the genre’s development under the logic of the OSMU (“One Source Multi Use”) operating principle that guides the national creative industry. Drawing on adaptation and heritage film frameworks, Hwang’s analysis of three case studies makes apparent the key role of the biopic in the transmission of ideas about cultural heritage, and demonstrates the convergence of institutional and industrial forces that shapes the new wave of South Korean *sageuk*, or historical dramas.

Part II, “Cycles and Performance,” reads *with* the grain of the genre, examining characteristic cycles and recurrent tropes. By looking at what the contemporary biopic does best, the essays in this section reconstruct a mode of address that treads the line between expressivity and self-conscious performativity, teleological determinism, and excess. Chapters examine the formal strategies and ideological meanings arising from films that revisit well-known public figures and/or familiar genre narratives, and further the debate through frameworks of gender, sexuality, and nation. Lucy Fife Donaldson looks at films about stage and musical performers. Her analysis draws on the material details of performance, such as posture and gesture, in connection with generic expectations and individual agency. The specificity of film performance contributes to the mode of address of the popular biopic, rendering visible the construction of self through specific forms of embodiment. Donaldson argues that, rather than biographical fact, popular biopics about performers foreground the famous person’s creations at the basis for the dramatization of self, thereby making meaning in intertextual and transcultural ways. Further addressing issues of agency and performance, Tom Brown examines the middlebrow aesthetics of the heritage biopic. His chapter reassesses the tension between “showing” versus “telling” that forms the basis of the modernist critique of the middlebrow.

Through the close analysis of oratory in *Amazing Grace*, a biopic about abolitionist William Wilberforce, Brown examines how such moments of performance, which inform the film's consensual pleasures, also point at the limitations of the great man's approach to history. In particular, he examines the failure of this model to deal with the issues of erased subjectivity and agency that focus the film's didactic narrative about the abolition of slavery. My own chapter looks at the collaboration between screenwriter Peter Morgan and actor Michael Sheen in three docudramas focusing on former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. I argue that these films represent the "compressed" frame of the post-classical biopic, blending the factual basis of docudrama with the fiction about a famous individual. Focusing on writing, mise-en-scène, and performance in relation to the robust tradition of the British docudrama, I relocate the biopic as a hybrid format between cinema and television, characteristic of a moment of industrial, generic, and aesthetic convergence. Julie F. Codell conducts an examination of the notion of abjection in the contemporary artist biopic. Revising a long tradition of painter biopics in which artists are exoticized, marginalized, and finally redeemed by death and the value of their artwork, Codell focuses on abjection as a mode of resistance to assimilation to the heteronormative circuits of production and exchange. Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Codell examines abjection through the critical move to queer the aesthetic and ideologies of art production and the artist's creativity in the experimental *Caravaggio* and *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (1998). In the chapter that closes this section, Ginette Vincendeau focuses on the female biopic through a cycle of films on the life and times of Coco Chanel. Examining biographical accounts of the fashion designer's life in parallel to the biopics' portraits, Vincendeau critically examines the films' contribution to the construction of the Chanel myth through a narrative of love and loss that glosses over the politics behind the historical figure and subordinates Chanel's professional success to heterosexual romance. Vincendeau concludes that the biopics need to be seen in relation to other Chanel-related products and visual texts that contribute to the reinforcement of the Chanel myth as the basis for its continuing commercial exploitation as a French global brand.

Part III, "Icons and Auteurs," explores theoretical and philosophical ideas about identity, historiography, and life writing that emerge from the formal uniqueness of the contemporary biopic. Each chapter in this section focuses on one "exceptional" film, conducting an in-depth analysis of the rhetorical and visual mechanisms by which the chosen case studies break the (generic) mold. The iconicity (both visual and cultural) of the historical figure comes to the fore in biopics that exploit, deconstruct and interrogate received knowledge about their subject in ways that highlight the auteurist subversion of film biography. Alastair Phillips focuses on Aleksandr Sokurov's *The Sun* and, in particular, on the strategic power relations at work

in the iconic meeting between Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur that marked Japan's surrender and the end of World War II. Phillips's detailed textual and intertextual analysis scrutinizes the duality—divine and human—of the Emperor's figure, as portrayed by the film through a blurred sonic and visual language that sheds the dramatic conventions associated with the genre. Phillips's analysis finally illustrates the ways in which film may participate in the construction of knowledge about biographical identity. Pam Cook turns her attention to a very different object: Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* as a work of new auteurism. Considering the film's use of anachronism and stylization in the *mise-en-scène*, Cook positions *Marie Antoinette* within a web of texts, including literary biographies, fashion magazines, and other commercial ancillaries, leading to an overall design concept where Coppola's auteur profile emerges as the key unifying factor. For Cook, in *Marie Antoinette* a postmodern vision of history and the commerce of auteurism go hand in hand to produce a unique model of learning about the past which, while driven by market demands, also contests dominant hierarchies regulating the access to historical knowledge. Jesse Schlotterbeck looks at Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* through what he calls "transcendent thanatography": not an example of life writing, but of *death* writing. Schlotterbeck argues that *I'm Not There* deconstructs the iconic myth of the self-destructive artist's untimely death as the basis of multiple music star biopics. Working through concepts from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Schlotterbeck opens up *I'm Not There* as an artifact that explores the creative possibilities behind the figuration of Bob Dylan's multiple deaths and rebirths. By turning the idea of death as motor of the musical biopic on its head, the resulting portrait of Bob Dylan trumps the conventional retelling of life narratives on film. Thanatography, as an alternative to biography, provides an explanatory model of resistance to the cycle of consumption that marks the musical biopic. Marcia Landy examines *Il Divo*, a biopic of former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, as a model for counter-history. Placing this film in contradistinction to modernist and postmodernist traditions in Italian political filmmaking, Landy identifies a hybrid aesthetic that, by way of grotesque, theatrical, and spectacular elements (as well as borrowings from other genres) refuses to elevate its central character. Instead, the historical figure remains an impenetrable enigma that invites the spectator to question the cultural and political role of image-making. Drawing on the work of Carlo Ginzburg, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, Landy scrutinizes *Il Divo* as a radical experiment with a familiar form. Finally, Robert Burgoyne closes the volume with a bold exploration of the biopic as an uncanny form, focusing on the use of puppets and puppet-like doubles as avatars of the creative artist in *Gainsbourg*. Burgoyne discusses the non-realist narrative spaces that dramatize music star Serge Gainsbourg's conflicted love life and sense of non-belonging as a French Jew. Highlighting Joann Sfar's retrospective

reading of Gainsbourg through the filter of ethnic identity, Burgoyne argues that the film positions the artist as a fictional character who does not follow a conventional narrative arc. The impasse between nation and ethnicity lies at the basis of the portrait of the “heroic” artist refracted by his uncanny doubles.

This collection aims to produce a multi-faceted approach to the biopic as an endlessly mutating form in cinema’s second century. The different variations and contexts in which the genre keeps developing illuminate a myriad of cultural aspects: the renewed currency of national heritages in international markets, the constant rearticulation of the boundaries between the public and the private in an era of sprawling celebrity cultures and media saturation, as well as textual and theoretical questions arising from the interweaving of history, memory, and identity in fiction films.

It is our hope that this collection contributes to the reevaluation of the biopic as a thriving genre in world cinema, as a fascinating problem for historians and film historians alike, and as the object of a rich critical conversation that we hope will be further pursued in the years to come.

acknowledgments

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notes

1. Sean Axmaker, “Todd Haynes and a Whole Slew of Dylans” (includes an interview with Todd Haynes), *Green Cine*, May 6, 2008, accessed August 1, 2012, <https://www.greencine.com/central/toddhaynes>. Quoted by Jesse Schlotterbeck in [Chapter 12](#) in this volume.
2. Quoted in Michael Phillips, “Director Campion Dials Down Style for Biopic,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 2009, accessed April 1, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-09-20/news/0909170523_1_fanny-brawne-director-campion-film. See also, in the Cannes Film Festival’s online multimedia archives, “Press Conference: *Bright Star*,” filmed May 15, 2009, video, 34: 35, accessed April 1, 2013, www.festival-cannes.fr/en/mediaPlayer/9776.html.
3. Mike Fleming Jr., “Q&A with Steven Spielberg: Why It Took 12 Years To Find ‘Lincoln’,” *Deadline Hollywood*, December 6, 2012, accessed April 1, 2013, www.deadline.com/2012/12/steven-spielberg-lincoln-making-of-interview-exclusive/.
4. Dennis Bingham, “The Lives and Times of the Biopic,” in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 237.
5. *Ibid.*, 235.
6. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema,” in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

7. Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 7.
8. As discussed by Rick Altman when he defines the genre's "viewing position" or mode of address. See Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 14.
9. Burgoyne, *Hollywood Historical*, 40.
10. Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1193.
11. Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Any resemblance to persons living or dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *The Yale Review* 76, no. 4 (1987): 457–482.
12. See Robert A. Rosenstone, "Telling Lives" included in his book *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, UK: Pearson/Longman, 2006), reprinted as "In Praise of the Biopic," in *Lights, Camera, History. Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (Arlington, TX: Texas University Press, 2007), 11–29.
13. In this respect, Rosenstone acknowledges his own standpoint as biographer of John Reed and historical consultant to Warren Beatty's biopic *Reds* (1981). This double role is yet another index of the inseparability of specialist and popular forms of historiography. See Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 97–98.
14. See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 5–6; and Ian Christie, "A Life on Film," in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 292.
15. This is Custen's stance in *Bio/Pics*, and also Altman's in *Film/Genre*, 38–48.
16. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 33.
17. Burgoyne highlights this connection in his study of *Schindler's List* (1993), with reference to Leo Lowenthal and Custen. See Burgoyne, *Hollywood Historical*, 116–117.
18. Leo Lowenthal's extensive sample covers popular biographies published between 1901 and 1941. See Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines" (1944), in *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919–1968*, ed. John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 189–191.
19. Lowenthal, "Biographies," 203, 205.
20. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 22–23.
21. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
22. Custen, "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961–1980," in "The Biopic," ed. Glenn Man, special issue, *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 132.
23. See Martin Barnier, "Biographie filmée et historiographie," in *Les biopics du pouvoir politique de l'antiquité au XIXe siècle. Hommes et femmes de pouvoir à l'écran*, ed. Martin Barnier and Rémi Fontanel (Lyon, France: Aléas, 2010), 17–18.
24. "John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*. A collective text by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*," trans. Helen Lackner and Diana Matias, *Screen* 13, no. 3 (1972): 5–44. Originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 223 (1970).
25. *Ibid.*, 19.
26. *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original).
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 15.
29. *Ibid.*, 19 (emphasis in the original).
30. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
31. See Christie, "A Life on Film," 298.

32. J.E. Smyth, "Young Mr Lincoln: Between Myth and History in 1939," *Rethinking History* 7, no. 2 (2003): 200. For an extended discussion of the classic representations of Lincoln, see Smyth, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).
33. Smyth, "Young Mr Lincoln," 209. Smyth points out that Zanuck acted as the uncredited editor of all John Ford's productions at Twentieth Century Fox, and highlights the producer's direct intervention in the editing of this sequence.
34. Ibid., 208. See also Tom Brown's nuanced analysis of *Young Mr Lincoln*, which tests the future perfect narrative construction against moments of performance that negotiate the historical character's foresight—the representation of historical agency—with intimations of human vulnerability. Brown, "Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*," *Screen* 49, no. 2 (2008): 165–167.
35. Smyth, "Young Mr Lincoln," 200.
36. Barnier, "Biographie filmée," 23–24.
37. At Spielberg's request, Tony Kushner reduced his original 550-page script to a slim 65-page section covering the last four months in the president's life. See Fleming, "Q&A With Steven Spielberg."
38. Richard Holmes, "The Proper Study?," in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7–8.
39. Martin Stannard, "The Necrophiliac Art?" in *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions*, ed. Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1996), 33.
40. "Biography—A 'peculiarly British vice?' Interview with Hermione Lee," by Deborah Holmes, Caitríona Ní Dhúill, Hannes Schweiger, April 21, 2006, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography, Vienna, accessed August 1, 2012, <http://gtb.lbg.ac.at/docs/leeinterview.pdf>.
41. On the links between the New Biography and biopic production, see Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 31–40; and Christie, "A Life on Film," 285–286.
42. Marcus, "The Newness of the 'New Biography': Biographical Theory and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 215.
43. Malcolm Bowie, "Freud and the Art of Biography," in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 191.
44. Jean-Marc Lalanne, "Billet: Cloclo, La dame de fer, J. Edgar . . . biopics ou biopsies?" *les inRocks*, March 17, 2012, accessed August 1, 2012, www.lesinrocks.com/2012/03/17/cinema/billet-cloclo-la-dame-de-fer-j-edgar-biopics-ou-biopsies-111028/ (my translation).
45. For details of these debates, see Griselda Pollock, "Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem," in *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Susan Felleman, *Art in the Cinematic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 140–157; and Belén Vidal, "Feminist Historiographies and the Woman Artist's Biopic: The Case of *Artemisia*," *Screen* 48, no. 1 (2007): 69–90.
46. Malcolm Bowie, "Freud and the Art of Biography," 191–192.

47. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 179.
48. *Ibid.*, 178–192.
49. Richard Holmes, “How to Write a Biography—Notes from a Published Author,” *Authonomy*, no date, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://authonomy.com/writing-tips/how-to-write-a-biography-by-author-richard-holmes/>.
50. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 178.
51. Biografilm takes place annually in the Italian city of Bologna. See www.biografilm.it.
52. Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 66–71.
53. Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography” (1927), in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), 155.
54. Derek Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It: Docudrama on Film and Television*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 52.
55. To borrow the phrase used by actor Henry Goodman. See Mary Luckhurst, “Henry Goodman. Playing Sigmund Freud and Roy Cohn. Interview with Henry Goodman,” in *Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People*, ed. Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2010), 77.
56. Raphaëlle Moine, “Le biopic à la française: de l’ombre à la lumière,” *Studies in French Cinema* 10, no. 3 (2010): 273.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 16.
59. Thomas Elsaesser, “Film History and Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-Pic,” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 2 (1986), 26.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Brown, “Spectacle/Gender/History,” 157.
62. *Ibid.*, 164.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Jean-Louis Comolli, “Historical Fiction. A Body Too Much,” trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 19, no. 2 (1978): 44.
65. See Richard de Cordova, “Genre and Performance: An Overview,” in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 132.
66. Along the lines of Roland Barthes. See Barthes, “The Reality Effect” (1968), in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 141–148.
67. Comolli’s piece originally appeared within a series of articles on film and history published in *Cahiers* throughout the 1970s, variously inspired by Bertolt Brecht’s theories of the social gestus, and by Michel Foucault’s intervention in the debates about memory and history. See Bérénice Reynaud, “Introduction. *Cahiers du Cinéma* 1973–1978,” in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Vol. 4, 1973–1978: *History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle*, ed. David Wilson (London: Routledge, 2000), 14–30.
68. Comolli, “A Body Too Much,” 51–52.
69. *Ibid.*, 53.
70. See Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 123–163.
71. See, for example, Christine Geraghty, “Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 221–243.

72. Dennis Bingham, "Living Stories: Performance in the Contemporary Biopic," in *Genre and Performance: Film and Television*, ed. Christine Cornea (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 79.
73. Bingham, "The Lives and Times of the Biopic," 240.
74. Bingham, "Living stories," 85.
75. Jason Sperb, "Removing the Experience: Simulacrum as an Autobiographical Act in *American Splendor*," *Biography* 29, no. 1 (2006): 130.
76. Stannard, "The Necrophiliac Art?," 32.
77. Marcus, "The Newness of the 'New Biography'," 206.
78. Michael Meneghetti, "Feeling Yourself Disintegrate: *The Aviator* as History," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 3.
79. Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It*, 161.
80. Bill Nichols, "'Getting to Know You . . .': Knowledge, Power, and the Body," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 177.
81. Thanks to Ginette Vincendeau for drawing my attention to this film and its implications for the study of the genre.
82. While using different examples, I am following the line of enquiry posed by Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 60; and Moine, "Le genre biopic," in *Biopic: de la réalité à la fiction*, CinémAction 139, ed. Rémi Fontanel (Condé-sur-Noireau, France: Éditions Charles Corlet, 2011), 25.
83. For a full analysis of this trend, see Jesse Schlotterbeck, "'Trying to Find a Heartbeat': Narrative Music in the Pop Performer Biopic," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (2008): 82–90.
84. See Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 91–97; and my, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press/Wallflower Press, 2012), 110–120.
85. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 50–71.
86. Rémi Fontanel, ed., *Biopic: de la réalité à la fiction*, CinémAction 139.
87. Previous journalistic and academic publications in France, where the genre has received considerable critical attention since 2005, tend to follow a similar thematic organization: see the dossier of articles entitled "La biographie filmée," *Positif: Revue Mensuelle de Cinéma* 540 (2006): 82–110; and the already cited collection *Les biopics du pouvoir politique de l'antiquité au XIXe siècle* from 2010.
88. See "The Biopic," ed. Glenn Man, special issue, *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000).
89. Carolyn Anderson and Jonathan Lupo, "Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 92.
90. See *Ibid.*, 95–98; and Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 20.
91. On the counter-hegemonic effect of the historical film genres, see Rosenstone and Parvulescu, "Introduction," in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 7.
92. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 17–18.
93. David Scott Diffrient, "Filming a Life in Fragments: *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* as 'Biorhythmic-Pic'," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (2008): 95. For an earnest critique of the value distinctions implied in the use of the term "antibiopic," see Bingham, "The Lives and Times of the Biopic," 233–237.

94. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 21–22.
95. *Ibid.*, 22.
96. *Ibid.*, 18.
97. *Ibid.*, 19.
98. *Ibid.*, 20.
99. *Ibid.*
100. *Ibid.*, 381.
101. Custen, “The Mechanical Life,” 133.
102. *Ibid.*, 150.
103. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 214–232.
104. *Ibid.*, 216–217.
105. *Ibid.*, 212.
106. On the movie-of-the-week television format, see Steven N. Lipkin, *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice*, 3rd ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 55–98.
107. HBO Corporation, “*Game Change*, *The Girl*, *Hemingway & Gellhorn* Nab Golden Globe Nominations; 17 in All for HBO,” *HBO Movies*, December 13, 2012, accessed January 30, 2013, www.hbo.com/movies#/movies/talk/news/hbo-receives-17-golden-globe-nominations.html/eNrjcmBOYM5nLtQsy0xjzXfMS8ypLMlMds7PK0mtKFHPz0mBCQUkppqf6jeamcjlysknlpbkF+QkVtqWfJWmsjGyMQIAWCcXOA==.
108. See Burgoyne’s analysis of Spielberg’s film as an instance of the contemporary biopic in Burgoyne, *Hollywood Historical*, 100–124.
109. This is Hayden White’s formulation. See White, “The Modernist Event,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 17–38.
110. Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 109.

cultural shifts

part one

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facebooking the present

o n e

the biopic and

cultural instantaneity

r e b e c c a . s h e e h a n

I just wished that nobody made a movie of me while I was still
alive.

—Mark Zuckerberg, interview, June 2010

A recent surge of biographical pictures have cast living figures into a genre heretofore reserved for dead ones, displacing the present from itself through a historicizing representation that remembers the still-living. From roughly 2005 to the present, biographical pictures have emerged internationally that focus either on a controversial living person, or persons from the past whose lives speak to hot-button issues of the cultural and political present. These pictures fall, more or less, into two categories that maintain a similar relationship to history, politics, and cultures of media and mediation. While films like *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), and *Milk* (2008) use a public figure or incident from the past to comment upon and even to intervene in contemporary cultural issues, films like *The Queen* (2006), *W.* (2008), *The Social Network* (2010), *Invictus* (2009), *Fair Game* (2010), and the recent HBO movie *Game Change* (2012) comment upon

the present not by reviving a past personality or era but by portraying a living political figure, taking the broadly known events of this person's life and, through them, remarking upon an ongoing political or cultural event.

In their different ways, both of these trends within the genre of the biographical picture present us with historicized pictures of our immediate political and cultural present. This paper focuses on three recent biopics that depict living figures: Oliver Stone's *W.*, in which Josh Brolin is assigned the awkward task of portraying George W. Bush in a film that premiered at a politically awkward time in the latter's presidency; Stephen Frears's *The Queen*, in which Helen Mirren enacts the stoic characteristics of Queen Elizabeth II and Michael Sheen plays a Tony Blair whose popularity was soaring during the story time of his portrayal, but plummeting at the time of the film's release; and David Fincher's *The Social Network*, in which Jesse Eisenberg mimics the ironic anti-social behavior of Mark Zuckerberg, the wunderkind founder of Facebook. It will be my ongoing claim that it is no coincidence that this kind of biopic emerges during a period with a paradoxical relationship to televisual and Internet media. The particular cultures of information and the out-of-sync temporality these films represent, and from which they emerge, help chart a departure from the well-observed tendency for historical films (and biographical pictures can generally be described as such) to respond to and emerge from anxieties particular to the moment in which they are produced.¹ These "instant" biopics, by being about a historical moment not yet past and by meditating within their narratives upon media that put a premium on instant information, push the trend of historical films to an unprecedented point of paradox in which the present is figured as both historical and ongoing. The coincidence of the present as both past and enduring within these films, elaborates the collapsed distance between the actual and information that attains its own reality: a collapse that ultimately accounts for the fatalism in each narrative.

All three films partake of the tragic narrative device responsible for generating a sense of belatedness, of "time out of joint," reminiscent of Hamlet's famous lines.² This "joint" constitutes a divide between knowledge and action, established through repeated warnings containing information about a character's future or fate that are ignored in the face of brash confidence.³ Rita Felski's recent work traces contemporary reevaluations of tragedy that are helpful for this essay. In *Rethinking Tragedy*, Felski argues that Greek tragedy is an "exemplary source of insight [which] . . . in its very remoteness from the present . . . throws light on the dilemmas and contradictions of modernity."⁴ She later describes the tragic protagonist as characterized by "miscalculated confidence and its consequences. . . . Rather than breaking free from the past, . . . [he] finds himself entangled in its meshes; the weight of what has come before bears down ineluctably on what is yet to come."⁵ All three of the films that this essay engages with

borrow narrative cues and fatal character flaws from some of the most widely known Greek tragedies, while the very repetition of this ancient past, a past whose narrative is so familiar to Western audiences, lends its role in these contemporary films a similarly fatalistic air. In what could be an echo of Aeschylus's Cassandra to Agamemnon or Sophocles's Sphinx to Oedipus, *The Social Network* opens with a scene in which Erica Albright, Zuckerberg's soon-to-be ex-girlfriend warns him, "you don't care if the side effect [of trying to get into a final club] is blindness," and, later, she utters words that return in the final scene of the film: "You'll go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd but that won't be true—it'll be because you're an asshole." These are the first of a number of unheeded warnings about the dissonance between Zuckerberg's intentions and actions that come true. Similarly, *W.* is riddled with unheeded warnings. After announcing his plans to run for President, George W. Bush's mother warns her son that he's too much like her in that he "acts before he thinks," while Colin Powell, the Cassandra to the invasion of Iraq, pleads caution from the initial scene in the Oval Office to a war-mongering administration unwilling to throw the brakes on a half-hashed plan to take down Saddam Hussein. *The Queen* gives its spectator a similar feeling of the unavoidable as the Queen ignores Blair's suggestions about how to acknowledge the nation's grief for an ex-Royal.

As stories built upon classical rhetorical structures of tragedy, the characters of these narratives are subject to and guilty of realizing information too late to act on it. This dissonance between information and access to it is reflected in each of the three narratives as they deal with the complexities of a culture whose demand for instant information threatens to overwhelm our agency over history. In these stories, the virtual via the representation of the real, or what Jean Baudrillard may have at an earlier moment in televisual history referred to as a simulacrum of the real, gains a life and agency of its own.⁶ A contradiction at the heart of instant televisual media—whereby we desire both proximity to and distance from the reality to which it gives us access—resonates with the temporal coincidence between the release of these biographical pictures and the still-living people and ongoing events they depict. This contradiction can also be articulated as a desire for "truth" that the very premise of televisual media deems impossible. The instant imaging of a distant and private world—be they of our troops on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan or of the parties of the friends of friends—brings us no closer to what we seek from those worlds when we watch them, no matter the speed with which they reach our screens. The premium placed on instantaneity in contemporary media is clear in ways that directly influence these stories: Facebook promotes a streaming feed of "status" updates that promise to disclose what "friends" are doing or thinking at any given moment, its invitation to upload photos from parties that are not yet over but can be broadcast to entire cyber

communities around the world expanding upon a “democratization” of the same recording media that promises instant coverage of war through the speed and ease with which mobile and inexpensive devices give us fast access to images of battle on the ground, digitally recorded by reporters and soldiers and then streamed over YouTube, Skype, and instant messaging networks.

In their representations of on-going political or cultural events, these biopics depict and exemplify a culture that places such a premium on instant information that it invites representation to trump reality. For the Bush presidency, this culture of the instant was evident in the war that promised to be over instantly and was largely screened in real time. Zuckerberg’s network illuminates the paradoxes of instant representation as it instantly broadcasts social relationships and encourages friendship to be experienced at the same paradoxical distance and proximity television and the Internet have afforded war. In *The Queen*, immediacy and the instant are embodied by the speed with which the media broadcasts the private lives of the Royals as well as their actions following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, before they have time to think about their response. Instantaneity is also evident in the timing of the film’s release as it coincided with the plummet in Blair’s popularity; this moment is remarked upon and heralded at the end of the film as the Queen teases Blair about his willingness to assist her in handling the media’s portrayal of her and the Royal Family’s response to the death of Diana. She tells him, “You saw those headlines and you thought, ‘One day that might happen to me.’ And it will, Mr. Blair, quite suddenly and without any warning.” Indeed, in the moment of the film’s UK release in September 2006, Blair had recently been handed a fatal blow to his premiership—losing 18 councils in the local elections of 4 May, 2006, a failure largely chalked up to the public’s dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister’s decision to join America in going to war with Iraq.

simulacra of the present

The contradictions embodied by instant information are also reflected in how the narrative of each film represents opposing desires to make an image or idea real and to make the actual into a distanced image of history. This translates into the ambivalent nature of each film’s representation of and emergence from a cultural present. Each of these films engages in a mode of retelling events that are part of an ongoing present as history. This trend may be critically understood as redefining the “nostalgia for the present,” which Fredric Jameson identifies in the way films and novels of the 1950s through the 1980s treated their present as past, telling a story that takes place in the future or avoiding it altogether by indulging in “lavish images of specific generational pasts.”⁷ In *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late*

Capitalism, Jameson argues that novels and stories like these invite us to return to the past, noting earlier that:

Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms *use* such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective.⁸

For Jameson, the historicist novel and film distance us from the immediacy of the present but they also tempt us to try and grasp the present as “a kind of thing.”⁹ Historicity creates an oppositional attitude toward the present in which we at once want nothing to do with it and we want to grasp it, making it our subject rather than seeing ourselves as its object. Jameson reads two films from 1986, *Blue Velvet* and *Something Wild*, as showing a “collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that they illuminate the failure of this attempt, which seems to reduce itself to a recombination of various stereotypes of the past.”¹⁰ It is unavoidable to acknowledge the contemporary biopic as taking part in and expanding each of the trends Jameson identifies as endemic to the late twentieth century’s representation of itself and of history. However, films like *W.*, *The Queen*, and *The Social Network* are historicist in an even less intermediary way than the works Jameson speaks of. That is, they perceive the present as history but they do this more directly than any of the works cited by Jameson.

Jameson’s critique of the nostalgia film, as producing “not a list of facts or historical realities . . . but rather a list of stereotypes, of ideas of facts and historical realities,”¹¹ is also of value for a discussion of these three biopics riddled as they are with mythic details that substitute the real with the idea of the real. These details give us a sense of greater proximity to the characters and events they depict while merely rehearsing their actual distance from our comprehension and the distance of their culturally consequential actions from our agency. Details that parallel Jameson’s argument about how the representation of the 1950s in the nostalgia film is limited to stereotypical signs like “Main Street, U.S.A., Marilyn Monroe . . . short hair cuts, early rock and roll, longer skirts”¹² emerge to a similar effect in these contemporary biopics. *W.* brims with well-broadcast moments of his time in office, which a number of tell-all books and articles from insiders and presidential historians, television comedians and newscasters had made almost common knowledge by the end of George W. Bush’s presidency, when *W.* was released. Stone does not shy away from representing those moments: the scene in which *W.* almost chokes on a pretzel,¹³ when his brother, Jeb, loses the gubernatorial race in Florida,

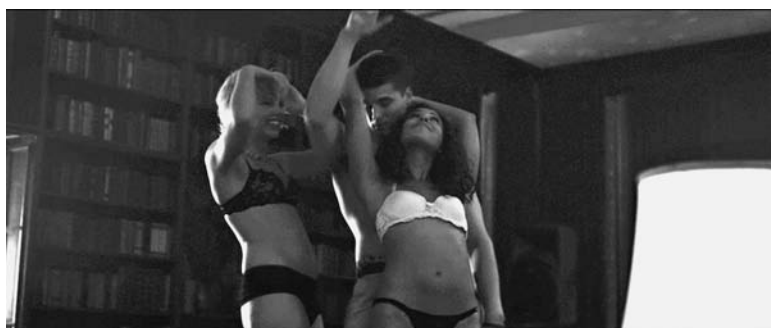
eclipsing his parents' joy at W.'s own win in Texas; the details of his evangelical rebirth and his reputation as an alcoholic party boy; or his insistence on holding high-level cabinet meetings at his ranch in Crawford, Texas—all details which had been painted in the American imaginary long before Stone's film. Similarly, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin and director David Fincher repeat details about the founding of Facebook that had become lore: from Zuckerberg's breakup with his girlfriend to his business cards that read "CEO, bitch": or Sean Parker's sexual promiscuity in Silicon Valley, a reputation that many viewers, especially in the US, would likely be familiar with.

Frears's film fulfills the stereotyped demeanors of the individuals within the Royal Family but also details the events of Princess Diana's death by using archives of televised material that, because of the televised image's global reach, had attained the status of common memory. In this way, Frears articulates collective memory in the form of televised images. These images not only work in the past tense, but also function in their present in a way that is similar to the stereotypical signs that operate as "ideas of facts" about a period rather than facts, as noted by Jameson. These "ideas of facts" also emerge in the form of television and tabloid gossip and rumor, fragments or ideas that parade to the point of becoming facts about the Royal Family for the public but also for the Royal Family itself, as Frears suggests in the scene that finds the Queen watching a rerun of the Panorama interview with Martin Bashir in which Diana discusses the Royals' rejection of her.¹⁴ Television footage functions in *The Queen* not so much to give us the "facts" of its own moment in history but to give us an idea of this moment. In order to fulfill the promise of bringing us closer to cultural events, people, and phenomena from our present or recent history by satisfying our curiosity about them, these films merely rehearse anecdotal material that has come to stand for these events, even constituting them in our memory. At the same time, like the 1986 films Jameson singles out as distinctive from the legacy of the nostalgia film, which look at the present as past indirectly (by inhabiting the past or the future), these contemporary biographical pictures clearly emerge from a "collective unconscious" trying to "identify" its own present.

The tension these contemporary biopics generate between possessing the present as a kind of "thing," and distancing their contemporary audience from it by turning it into history, is embedded in the processes of simulacra and simulation at work in these films as they cast actors to play living persons. Presenting doubles to contemporary figures, these characters draw attention to the hyperreality of media communication that Jean Baudrillard observed in the 1980s. Indeed, at the heart of these representations of living individuals are stories of how simulacra, in the form of mediated images of the real, get mistaken for reality to the point that, as Baudrillard suggests, it becomes "useless to ask which is the first term."¹⁵

Nonexistent weapons of mass destruction that present themselves as actual through rumor, unconfirmed reports, and ultimately through the media's representation of them, lead to the reality of war in *W*. In *The Queen*, the media's representations of Diana create her popularity, and the pursuit of her image leads to her death, just as the media's representation of the public's reaction to the Royal Family's response determines its final capitulation to Blair's theretofore unheeded suggestions. *The Social Network*'s interaction with the hyperreal is perhaps best summed up by the sequence that finds Zuckerberg, on a path of vengeance after his girlfriend has broken up with him, at his computer coming up with the code that will eventually lead to Facebook, in a scene intercut with images of a raucous final-club party soaked in semi-nude girls and alcohol (Figure 1.1).

It is not clear, as Sorkin pointed out in the film's debut at Harvard University in September of 2010, whether these scenes from the club of which Zuckerberg so desperately wants to be a member are real, occurring simultaneously to his coding, or whether they are occurring entirely in his head. But their reality doesn't matter; they are functional either way. The interchange between reality and fantasy depicted through this intercutting is similar to the relationship with reality established by Facebook: the power of the mediated representation (particularly as it gains quick circulation)



Figures 1.1–1.2 *The Social Network* (2010): Mark Zuckerberg hacking into Harvard's network is intercut with scenes from a final-club party that could be taking place in Zuckerberg's head or in reality.

becomes such that it degrades the real. The televisual can produce “true symptoms,”¹⁶ indicators of a reality that may or may not exist, but functions or acts as the real so effectively that it becomes reality. Zuckerberg’s revenge on a social reality that rejects him is realized through his taking advantage of the hyperreality of communication. In their own ways, Zuckerberg, W., and Blair, each determine that to gain control of the present they must create its effective simulation, a mediated image that performs like the real until it is indistinguishable from reality. These films show us in form and substance that the phenomenon of hyperreality intensifies, attaining an even greater capacity for degrading the real in an age when ever more instantaneous communication shortens the material time and distance between reality and image.

Defining the act of simulation against pretending in its relationship to the real and the true, Baudrillard explains:

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has.
To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have.
One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: “whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms” (Litré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.”¹⁷

In W.’s narrative, the opposition between solidifying and eviscerating the present is embodied by the figure of evasive weapons of mass destruction. The administration needs to make WMDs tangible (and, by extension, make tangible a stateless organization of terrorists) in order to advance a war program to eliminate them. In *The Social Network*, this opposition between approximation and distance is created by Facebook’s emergence from Zuckerberg’s desire to avenge Albright’s rejection of him in the first scene, as the last scene recasts his invention of social networking as an attempt to get her back. *The Queen* places this paradox at the heart of the modern monarchy and its anachronistic belief that royals should be distant, private, and stoical in an age that desires the same proximity to the Queen and her family as it does to celebrities—for their private lives to be placed on display. Each film represents attempts to bring solidity to events or facts whose actuality is riddled with the doubt of mediation—WMDs, Zuckerberg’s acceptance into Harvard society and the role of final clubs, the monarchy’s actions determined by royal codes of behavior—while also representing the extent to which these characters, rather than wanting to grasp the present,

wish to abscond from it, primarily through the virtual worlds afforded by that very same mediation that enfeebls the actual with an image divorced from the actual. W. escapes into a world of televised football while being unable to admit wrongdoing; Zuckerberg retreats through creating a world of mediated acceptance; the Queen effectively hides behind royal protocol and tradition, rituals of communication that protect her from the same people for whom the image of royalty drives the desire for more than the mere knowledge of her existence.

One of Stone's choices for the incorporation of live footage in *W.* was the by-then-iconic "Mission Accomplished" speech George W. Bush gave from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003, as he stood in front of a banner with the words "Mission Accomplished" written in white over an image of a waving American flag. This image, which the Bush administration must have believed would create a reality that did not exist, or at least function as that reality for the American people watching it on television, becomes a metaphor in Stone's film (as much as it did in American culture retrospectively) for an administration whose perceptions of reality proved constantly false (or, given a more sinister reading, to be lies). In this moment, the powerful agency of the televisual image, the media event, to create and give credence to the message sets off a duplicitous representation of the real. Representing the buffoonery of the Bush administration and thereby assuming a comedic existence, this image not only signals an undermining of the entire premise for the war—a previous scene in which Dick Cheney giddily maps the Middle East's oil reserves suggests the administration's more clandestine motivations—but also transforms the image Bush used to manipulate reality into the very icon of this deception. The mechanisms of tragedy are threatened by the comedic tone Stone cultivates for this moment. Wavering between a tragic and comic tone, in this instance and others, the untimely nature of tragedy gives way to a utopic exit from the bleak final days of the Bush presidency. This exit might also be figured through reading the doubling that tragedy produces—the character who has access to knowledge but who acts in ignorance, embodied by Brolin's literal simulacra of George W. Bush—as an alternative to history.

Frears opens *The Queen* with television footage of people going to the polls and of Blair with his family. The next shot reveals a figure watching the same images on a television, a figure the following shot reveals to be the Queen. As the newscaster speculates that Blair will become "the youngest Prime Minister in history," the Queen asks someone off screen whether they have voted. The next shot reveals this to be a person painting her portrait for which we now realize she has been sitting. After their conversation about her not being allowed to vote and a flashback to televised images of New Labour supporters, the camera moves from her feet to her head, as her eyes gaze offscreen to her right. She turns her head to look at us and her

“portrait” becomes the film’s title card. The first glimpse Frears gives us of his main character situates her, and the incoming Prime Minister, between image and reality. We are introduced to Blair through the Queen watching him on television, and we are introduced to her as she sits for a traditional portrait (Figures 1.3–1.5).

Later, Prince Charles complains that it seems like there are “two Dianas,” the one he knew and the one the media has created. Frears emphasizes that these are characters produced and determined by their mediated image, whether this is the image projected in real time to a viewing public or the image projected into posterity and onto history through the painted portrait. *W.* and *The Queen* draw attention to the function and persuasion of the mediated image, with the effect of suggesting reality’s emergence from the virtual. Fincher and Sorkin open *The Social Network* with a scene in which, after she breaks up with him, Zuckerberg asks his now ex-girlfriend, “is this real?” Frears challenges us to ask the same question as we learn in the first shots that the image of Queen Elizabeth we get at first is one posed and constructed for her portrait. Within the admission of the reality of the virtual, the effectiveness and independence of the image, is the realization that the attempt to gain control of the present, to grasp it, is undermined by the present’s mediation through images that can and do generate a life of their own, exclusive of our will or our desire as spectators or subjects to intervene in the course of events.

The hermetic courses of action in these stories, which account for their tragic nature, occur as the image gains momentum and neither the films’ characters nor their spectators can intervene. This independent course for the image creates numerous moments of realization for the spectator and the character, akin to Aristotle’s *anagnorisis*. Northrop Frye’s description of *anagnorisis* suggests how it might function within the repetitive structures set in place by the simulacra:

The discovery or *anagnorisis* that comes at the end of the tragic plot is not simply the knowledge by the hero of what has happened to him . . . but the recognition of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken.¹⁸

In *The Social Network*, Facebook emerges from Zuckerberg’s vengeance at a society that rejects him to assume a life of its own. Facebook’s first investor and CFO, Zuckerberg’s roommate Eduardo Saverin, nags Zuckerberg in the early stages of work on the website to start using Facebook to advertise, to which Zuckerberg responds, “We still don’t know what this is.” Sean Parker later echoes this response to Eduardo before having him eliminated from the company. This line engenders the mechanisms set in motion by Zuckerberg’s invention over which he invariably has insufficient control,



Figures 1.3–1.5 *The Queen* (2006): We are introduced to the Queen with a shot over her shoulder as she first encounters Tony Blair through his televisual image. The second shot presents her sitting up straight talking to a person off-screen. The next shot reveals that the person she is speaking to is painting her portrait. The image of the Queen we took to be a “natural” one is revealed to be a construction.

in this case the firing of his best friend. In *W.*, speculation about WMDs sets in motion a war for which no one in Bush's cabinet (including himself) wishes to assume responsibility and that, once started, no one can stop (making good on Powell's repeated concern in cabinet meetings about the lack of an exit strategy). The WMD claim (and the urgency to take down Saddam Hussein) gains its own fatalistic structure that ultimately evades Bush's control. In *The Queen*, the monarchy's decision, driven by outdated tradition and codes, that because "the Princess was no longer a member of the royal family" her funeral would not be a public ceremony, sets in motion the public's virulent backlash and its conviction that the monarchy is partly to blame for Diana's death, a belief driven largely by media representations of the Royal Family—including the aforementioned interview with the Princess that Frears includes in its original state. As Blair says at one point, "Someone save these people from themselves," auguring the unavoidability of the downfall set into motion by the Queen's allegiance to royal tradition and, ultimately, her inability to understand contemporary Britain. The actions set in place by her initial response become irreversible, tied more to the monarchy as an institution than to anything they can change or do as individuals. Mediated by royal protocol, they gain a virtual life of their own, as does the media's representation of the life of Princess Diana and the Royals' response to her death. As each of these films engages and comments upon contemporary media, they suggest that aspects of our living present exclude our ability to act—even as we sit and watch them in real time, with more temporal and spatial proximity than ever before.

the timing of tragedy: mediation, information and the out-of-sync

In a 2008 interview about *W.* with Oliver Stone, Nick James asked, "Why did you make the film now, when he's still in power and not in some years' time?" to which Stone replied:

Because it's the greatest story of our time; it's greater than fiction. This guy is amazing, he's a John Wayne figure. You may loathe his politics but look at the size of his stride, look at what he's done in a negative way: brought our country to the edge of ruin. It really is a story of Shakespearean size—it's *Julius Caesar*. How can you avoid it? How can you not be excited by it?¹⁹

Stone's description of *W.* as an unavoidable story lends the very telling of this tale, the creation of the film, the same air of inevitability as the fatalistic outcomes that characterize tragedy. Indeed, he is not alone in comparing his subject to a tragic figure; in the aforementioned question-and-answer

session at the Harvard Film Archive, Sorkin claimed that the story of Mark Zuckerberg bore every resemblance to classical tragedy, and that it could have been “written by Aeschylus.” Stone’s comparison of *W.* to *Julius Caesar* is compelling not just for understanding the timing of his film (released during the 2008 Presidential election season), but also for understanding what Stone, Sorkin, and Frears imagine as what I call the hermetic present: cultural and world historical events which move independently of the will and the ability of a people or person to intervene, events that exclude our agency just as the agency of these characters is muted by their fate. The timing of William Shakespeare’s 1599 representation of the Roman Emperor, *Julius Caesar*, is believed to have been reflective of the general anxiety about Queen Elizabeth I’s successor to the throne at the time it was performed. Elizabeth, who had by then reached an advanced age, had refused to name a successor, a refusal that prompted concern that a civil war on the order of Rome might follow her death.²⁰ As Shakespeare’s representation of Caesar articulated a larger national anxiety, so Stone’s representation of an outgoing president implies the endurance of his legacy; as Stone notes “this guy isn’t going away in January.”²¹ Stone’s representation of *W.* in a biographical picture casts him as a figure of the past who, when the film was released, was still a sitting President. The status *W.* achieves to be both past and present through Stone’s film lends his presence an endurance that makes his story inescapable, especially in the context of the moment of its release. This was a moment in which, despite the prospect of a new President, the nation was still left fighting two unending wars, facing an impending global recession, and seemingly no less vulnerable to terrorism than it was before the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Tragic narrative devices have become so typical within filmic representations of the present that it is probably not coincidental that in 2011 George Clooney directed and starred in a film about the American Presidency entitled *The Ides of March*. The ignored warning, “beware the ides of March,” given to Caesar in the Shakespearean play by a soothsayer in the crowd, finds rearticulation as unheeded warnings are uttered by chorus-like characters in these films—often from the sidelines of the main character’s life. Like *W.*, *The Queen* gives its audience a similar feeling of the unavoidable: we know what is going to happen because these events are in such recent memory, and all we can do is shake our heads at the Queen’s continued resistance to Blair’s suggestions about how to acknowledge the nation’s grief for an ex-Royal. In this sense, it is fair to say that these films ask us to participate *as* tragic characters. As Geoffrey Brereton has suggested, “it is clear that an event appears ‘more tragic’ when the participants realize they are doomed. . . . It is more tragic still when they understand the nature of their doom and its causes.”²²

While *The Social Network* has less shared memory of recent political and cultural events at its disposal than *W.* and *The Queen*, its structure is perhaps

the most inflected by the repetitions that characterize classical tragedy and the confluences between past, present, and future that they create. While inflections of the past help chart an unavoidable course for the future that hangs over the political landscapes of *W.* and *The Queen*, *The Social Network's* narrative structure more explicitly mixes past (the narrative of Facebook's invention) and present (one hearing in which Zuckerberg is being sued by Saverin, and one in which he is being sued by the Winklevoss twins and Divya Narendra). The scenes from the hearings could themselves be rearranged and have no effect on the perceived chronology of events. *The Social Network's* script uses repetition, sometimes to give the audience knowledge that some of the characters do not have, and at other times to emphasize the tragedy of information available but perceived too late for action. Going back to the first scene, when Zuckerberg tells Albright, "I want to be straightforward with you and tell you I think you might want to be a little more supportive. If I get in [to a final club] I would be taking you to all the events, and the gatherings, and you would be meeting people you don't normally get to meet"; she replies, "You would do that for me?," a line which is immediately deemed sarcastic when Zuckerberg shrugs and says, "We're dating," and she responds, "I want to be straightforward with you and let you know that we're not anymore." The structure of repetition within Zuckerberg and Albright's spat (in which he also repeatedly refers to her telling him she "likes guys who row crew") predicts the larger structure of the film's revenge narrative as Facebook grows out of Zuckerberg's response to rejection; at first from Albright and the final clubs, and then from Harvard's moneyed elite and athleticism embodied by the Winklevoss twins (who are also the rowers Albright "likes" and Zuckerberg compares himself to). Eventually Parker even helps him get his revenge over Saverin, after the latter chooses a summer internship in New York over following Zuckerberg to Palo Alto.

The repetitious basis for the revenge narrative is also carried out in echoed phrases. Albright's "you would do that for me?," which at the moment she utters it registers to us as sarcastic and to Mark as genuine, signaling the latter's inability to abide by or comprehend codes of social interaction, is repeated by Zuckerberg in response to the Winklevosses' and Narendra's suggestion that they will help clean up his reputation after the "hot-or-not" scandal, in which Zuckerberg faces social retaliation against his prototype of Facebook. The lawyer sitting in on Zuckerberg's hearing echoes, in the final scene, the warning Albright gives to Mark that he will go through life thinking girls don't like him because he's a nerd but it will be because he's an "asshole." The lawyer says, "you're not an asshole you're just trying so hard to be." This last scene engages the repetition of tragedy while referring to Zuckerberg's dependence upon image, returning us to the life of the virtual that underscores the film's narrative—from Zuckerberg's initial uncertainty about the reality of Albright's break-up with

him, to the viral nature of his “hot-or-not” game, a drunken misadventure that takes on a life of its own. This last bit of dialogue distinguishes Zuckerberg’s fatal flaw from evilness, engineering pathos from a quality he cannot control while aligning the virtual with the mechanisms of tragedy.

Both *W.* and *The Queen* insert within their representation of a historical moment the many anecdotes and details that act more as images or ideas of the period they represent than as truthful representations of it. This is one of the ways in which what Jameson calls “ideas about facts” functions for the spectator; they orient us within the diegesis of the story with knowledge of what will come but do not furnish us with the means to stop it. These mechanisms and their emergence from the mediating image are represented not only as the fate of the characters the films portray, but also the fate of the audience watching the film. Anachronistic characters, mentally detached from the political times they physically inhabit, are also figurative of the ambit of ideas taken for truths (or simulacra) and in this way contribute to the fatalism of their narratives. *W.* portrays Bush’s cabinet preparing for a twenty-first century war with a Cold War mindset, as characters like Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleeza Rice utter lines that refer to the previous administrations they served.²³ These characters bestow on the course of events about to unfold that sense of doom associated with not being in touch with the world of the present, and of the past as an inescapable future. Frears’s portrayal of Elizabeth II hints at the same anachronisms which function as simulacra; the Queen upholds the stoicism that was applauded during the post-World War II moment in which she came to power, but is frowned upon in her political present, as Princess Diana had by then trained Britain to expect a friendlier and more accessible monarchy. On a number of occasions the Queen remarks in a dazed tone that she “doesn’t know her own people” to Phillip, himself a harbinger of the old, who advises her to do what her ancestors would do “in this situation.” Characters like the Queen function as doubles that become as fatal to the future as the “ideas about facts” that gain a life of their own; these characters automatically respond to the events of the present through mechanisms of the past, against whose determination they appear powerless.

These films enact the dislocation of the present moment from itself in the very tone of historicity they assume, while testifying to this dislocation in the tragic temporalities of the stories they depict. Through such a relationship to the present, they suggest the desire of a culture to reflect upon itself, but which is impeded from doing so by the distancing nature of the same televisual and digital images that promise an immediate and transparent window onto the world. The most glaring characteristic these portrayals hold in common is the collision courses set in motion by acting before thinking. As characters denied the agency to stop what has already been set in motion, their hermetic fate suggests their audience’s own

struggle with wanting to change what seems unstoppable or unending—from the American and British decision to enter into a seemingly perpetual war in the Middle East, to the ethos of current networking technologies whose inventors often create products with uncertain uses and futures and who seem impervious to the old saying, “just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should.” The dislocation of thinking from action is implied as inevitable to an age that puts a premium on instant communication, permitting the representation of the real to make reality beyond individual or collective agency.

notes

1. See Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. Naomi Greene (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1988); as well as Tom Brown’s illuminating descriptions of the “historical gaze” in films that are “ironically, perhaps, often particularly concerned with the contemporary moment in which they are made,” in “Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*,” *Screen*, 49, no. 2 (2008): 163.
2. “The time is out of joint; Oh cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 5, lines 211–212.
3. “Introduction,” in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1–2.
4. *Ibid.*, 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6. Baudrillard explains how the simulacrum loses its relationship with the real, exchanged for itself in an “uninterrupted circuit.”
7. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 296.
8. *Ibid.*, 284 (emphasis in the original).
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 296.
11. *Ibid.*, 279.
12. *Ibid.*
13. This incident was widely publicized by the US and UK media. For example, in a January 14, 2002, article entitled “Bush on Fainting Episode: ‘Chew your Food’,” CNN’s White House correspondent John King reports that “Bush lost consciousness for a brief time in the White House on Sunday evening while eating a pretzel and watching a professional football game on television.” *CNN Politics*, accessed March 29, 2012, http://articles.cnn.com/2002-01-14/politics/bush.fainting_1_pretzel-vital-signs-white-house?_s=PM:ALLPOLITICS.
14. Diana, Princess of Wales, interviewed by Martin Bashir, *Panorama*, BBC 1, November 20, 1995.
15. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 81.
16. *Ibid.*, 3.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 212.

19. Nick James, "The Greatest Story of our Time," *Sight and Sound* 18, no. 12 (2008): 20.
20. Maria Wyke, *Julius Ceasar in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2006), 5.
21. James, "The Greatest Story of our Time," 20.
22. Geoffrey Brereton, *Principles of Tragedy: A Rational Examination of the Tragic Concept in Life and Literature* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1968), 37.
23. The very first scene of *W.* features Paul Wolfowitz suggesting that Bush model his speech to the American people about going to war with Iraq on Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech.

the contemporary french biopic in national and international contexts

r a p h a ë l l e m o i n e

Was *La Môme/La Vie en Rose* (2007) the first ever French biopic? One might think so, given the recent introduction of this generic label in the French language and the unprecedented number of biopics currently being released, going into production, or being announced in the media since 2007: *Jean de la Fontaine, le défi/Jean de la Fontaine, the Challenge* (2007); *Molière* (2007); *Sagan* (2008); *Sans arme, ni haine, ni violence/The Easy Way* (2008), about the famous gangster Albert Spaggiari; *Séraphine* (2008); *Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec/Coluche, the Story of a Guy* (2008); *Mesrine* (2009); *Sœur Sourire/Sister Smile* (2009), about Belgian singer and nun Jeanine Deckers; *Coco avant Chanel/Coco Before Chanel* (2009); *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* (2009); *Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)/Gainsbourg* (2010); *Carlos* (2010); *La Conquête/The Conquest* (2011), which tells the story of how Nicolas Sarkozy rose to power; *Jeanne captive/The Silence of Joan* (2011), a new account of the life of Joan of Arc; and *Cloclo/My Way* (2012), a biography of Claude François, the undisputed star of French “middle-of-the-road” music (*variété*) in the 1970s. Some of these films enjoyed considerable box office success: *La Vie en Rose* drew in 5.2 million viewers; *Mesrine Part I* (*L'Instinct de mort/Killer Instinct*), 2.3 million; *Mesrine Part II* (*L'Ennemi public n° 1/Public Enemy*

#1), 1.5 million; and *Séraphine*, 821,000, an exceptional achievement for an art-house film made on a relatively small budget.¹ At the time of writing, a number of films have gone into production: a new film about sculptor Camille Claudel directed by Bruno Dumont, focusing on her years spent in a psychiatric hospital; a biopic about Jérôme Kerviel, the Société Générale trader and fraudster; another on Yves Montand; another on Romy Schneider; and yet another on Grace Kelly, to name only a few. The scale of French biopic production has attracted considerable attention in the media and in critical debates: the genre, perceived as a new trend imported from Hollywood, has often been stigmatized for “swamping” French theatres.²

The newness of the French biopic is also apparent in the introduction of the word itself into French: the Anglo-American term “biopic,” which until recently was almost unknown to French audiences, started to become part of the French vocabulary in 2007. The term not only competes with the label “biographical film” (*film biographique*), sometimes even replacing it, but is also listed among the 150 new words that appeared in the 2010 edition of the *Petit Larousse*, the most common reference dictionary, which is updated every year. In a country where language has long been treated as a state matter, regulated by official institutions and laws, the “biopic” label has unsurprisingly attracted official comment and the *Journal Officiel* of November 27, 2008, calls for the use of “*film biographique*” and “*biofilm*” in preference to the English term “biopic.”³

Contemporary perspectives on the biopic in France are thus governed by two assumptions: first, that the genre is new in the French context, and, second, that it is a foreign (or more specifically *Hollywood*) form. This chapter will challenge this inaccurate historical account of the genre, by first placing French biopics in a broader national context, and then repositioning this contemporary cycle in the context of French heritage cinema. This will make it possible to appraise the supposed cultural and cinematic hybridity of the genre: to ask, to what extent contemporary French biopics mix French topics and cultural values with international and Hollywood conventions?

the historical invisibility of the french biopic

Although the biographical film is not among the most prevalent genres in French cinema—as it is in Hollywood—since the 1930s there have been four cycles when the genre has flourished, each one distinct in terms of aesthetic, ideological, and cultural factors.⁴

During the first cycle, the genre encompassed a celebration of the romantic artist, particularly through biographies of musicians such as *Un grand amour de Beethoven/The Life and Loves of Beethoven* (1937), and nationalistic celebrations of the “Great Men” of the French Republic, such as *Pasteur*

(1935). This type of film, with its highly theatrical aesthetic, elevates the protagonist to the status of a monument that cannot possibly be emulated, whereas Hollywood biopics of the same period, albeit celebratory, humanize the protagonist, turning him or her into a role model.⁵ As far as one can judge in the absence of comprehensive data on ticket sales, these films were relatively successful. For example, *L'Appel du silence/The Call* (1936), about Charles de Foucauld, an explorer and soldier who became a priest and hermit in colonial North Africa, topped the box office during the 1935–1936 Paris season.⁶

The second cycle developed in the post-war period. Once again it is characterized by hagiographic stories that glorify the French Great Men—such as *Monsieur Vincent* (1947) and *Il est minuit docteur Schweitzer/Dr. Schweitzer* (1952)—in order to offer positive, heroic national male role models during the post-war restoration of patriarchal authority.⁷ They were followed in the mid-1950s by a wave of sentimental and often “steamy” films that revolved around female characters like *Lucrèce Borgia* (1953) and *La Belle Otero/The Beautiful Otero* (1954). This second cycle—the classical French biographical film—is thus split in its treatment of gender. While many of these films have been relegated to the dustier shelves of cinema history, their success at the time was real, and sometimes even considerable. Attracting slightly more than seven million spectators, *Monsieur Vincent* was the third most popular film at the French box office in 1947 and the scandalous *Lucrèce Borgia*, played by female star of the early 1950s Martine Carol, attracted more than 3.6 million spectators.⁸

A third cycle appeared in the mid-1970s, at a time when the biographical film, much like the costume drama, had become outmoded. It developed outside the context of popular cinema and abandoned the celebratory and nationalistic perspective. During this time, biographical stories were chosen by a certain number of auteur-directors, such as François Truffaut with *L'Histoire d'Adèle H./The Story of Adele H.* (1975), André Téchiné with *Les Sœurs Brontë/The Bronte Sisters* (1979), and Alain Resnais with *Stavisky* (1974). René Alio's *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma sœur et mon frère . . . /I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered my Mother, my Sister and my Brother . . .* (1976), based on the book by Michel Foucault (1973), experimented with a new form of historical discourse. Although less radical in their attempts, this was an ambition that was shared by almost all the biopics of the 1970s.

The fourth cycle, which comprises the contemporary biopic, did not begin with *La Vie en Rose*, rather it started to develop from the end of the 1980s. Its emergence is linked to the boom of *fiction patrimoniales*, the French equivalent of the British heritage film. *Camille Claudel* (1988) set the ball rolling with 2.7 million spectators, earning sixth place at the French box office that year. Despite some resounding flops such as *Vercingétorix/Druids* (2001), the 50 or so biographical films made since then have enjoyed great success, often proportionate to their budgets, which has ensured the

profitability of the genre. *Tous les matins du monde*/*All the Mornings of the World* (1991), *Beaumarchais l'insolent*/*Beaumarchais* (1996), and *Jeanne d'Arc*/*The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) performed extremely well, respectively achieving 1.7, 1.9, and 2.9 million spectators in their theatrical releases.⁹ While the popularity of such films certainly peaked with Olivier Dahan's *La Vie en Rose*, which attracted 5.2 million spectators in France and was an international success, neither Dahan's film nor 2007 can be described as the starting point of the genre.

How, then, may we account for the invisibility of the biographical genre in the discourse on French cinema? First, one could cite the avoidance of genres in French cinema, reflected as much in the practices of filmmakers as those of critics: the former, especially when they are auteurs, are reluctant to promote their work as genre films, while the latter are prone to favoring aesthetic or auteurist frames at the expense of ideological and generic interpretations.¹⁰ Second, the unstable nature of the biographical film, which is only partially defined by its chosen subject matter ("the life of . . ."), and its particularly marked hybridity, complicate the classification of the films. In fact, the interpretive designations "biopic" and "*film biographique*" are in competition with other labels that refer to broader, more common categories, such as the *film historique* (historical film) or the *film en costume* (costume drama). The nature of the protagonist's fate and the tone of the life story can also lead to the biopic being variously described as a musical, a drama, a melodrama, a comedy, or a thriller, and so on. It is only in an interpretive context predisposed to recognizing it that we can classify a fiction-film-telling-the-story-of-a-real-person's-life (or a significant portion of his or her life) as a biopic. The naming of genres may seem ultimately arbitrary, but generic labels are also interpretive categories, revealing what we think films are about and, in the case of imported foreign labels, where we consider their formula to come from. As I have argued elsewhere, "different labels simultaneously reveal and propose interpretive perspectives through which films are both received and understood."¹¹ For example, it is telling that, in reviews of *Camille Claudel* that appeared in the French press when the film was released, the notion of "biography" is hardly present at all. And when it is present, it is for the sake of referring to the literary biographies of the artist published in early 1980s, or to draw comparisons between Claudel's real life and her life as represented in the film. The French reviewers tended to speak of "drama," "the drama of passion," "a portrait" (of Isabelle Adjani), and the only critic (out of 39 reviews from the national press) who invoked the notion of biographical film did so in order to dismiss it:

Three astounding hours: before the camera of Bruno Nuytten, Adjani (Camille) and Depardieu (Rodin) enact the joys and the dramas of the creative process. *Camille Claudel*—the film—is not so much a swaggering biography

with brilliant and empty episodes, as it is an inspired metaphor for two facets of the one and same affirmation: creation and loving passion.¹²

Finally, at least until the end of the 1990s, the contemporary cycle of French biopics was totally subsumed within the heritage film. This frequently nostalgic celebration of the past is characterized by luxurious settings and a museum aesthetic, incorporating fictional characters often drawn from canonical literary works as well as actual historical figures. It can even be difficult to distinguish between these two types of character: *La Reine Margot/Queen Margot* (1994) is more a cinematic adaptation of the novel by Alexandre Dumas and a perpetuation of the myth of the lecherous woman born to a cursed family than it is a portrait of the historical figure Marguerite de Valois. Furthermore, the recurrent use of the same actors in heritage films has blurred the line between fiction and reality: Adjani played Camille Claudel and Queen Margot one after the other, while Gérard Depardieu's larger-than-life persona encompasses a vast range of characters, both imaginary and real. He has embodied a succession of French cultural heroes including Cyrano de Bergerac, the musician Marin Marais (*All the Mornings of the World*), the Balzacian Colonel Jacinthe Chabert (*Le Colonel Chabert/Colonel Chabert*, 1994), François Vatel, the seventeenth-century royal chef (*Vatel*, 2000), and Alexandre Dumas (*L'Autre Dumas/The Other Dumas*, 2010). Depardieu's recurring appearances in heritage films and his place at the center of the French star system situates all these characters in a mythical space, and it seems to matter little whether the films are biographical or not.

the remnants of french heritage cinema? memorial functions of the biopic

Looking at contemporary biopics in relation to heritage cinema allows us to keep the novelty of the vogue for biopics in perspective. Heritage fiction and biopics share a common commemorative function by revitalizing sites of memory in the course of revisiting them. Both serve to evoke and put forward a collective past, construing it as a common good in which spectators recognize themselves. However, while the heritage biopic of the 1980s and 1990s set out to build a community of moviegoers who were united through the celebration of great or tragic moments, famous works, or eminent characters, contemporary biopics explore a noticeably different repertoire of characters. This phenomenon is particularly evident in films about artists. High, classical, and scholarly culture were privileged in the 1990s, in films such as *Van Gogh* (1991), *All the Mornings of the World*, *Farinelli* (1994), *Beaumarchais*, and *Lautrec* (1998). Even when films shared in the rediscovery and elevation of women artists who had been forgotten, underappreciated, or were invisible beyond a limited circle of specialists, they

were associated with noble major art forms—seventeenth-century painting in *Artemisia* (1997) and sculpture in *Camille Claudel*—or highly respected figures of classical culture: in *Marquise* (1997), Mademoiselle Du Parc is an actress in Molière’s company and the muse of Racine, who writes *Andromaque* for her. In contrast, the most recent biopics primarily tend to honor icons of popular culture: singers in *La Vie en Rose* and *Gainsbourg*, or the irreverent humorist in *Coluche, the Story of a Guy*.

Nevertheless, rather than a clear break between the two centuries, what we see is the culmination of a gradual move away from the maxim *historia magistra vitae est* (history as lessons for the present), which affects both the types of person chosen and the way in which they are depicted. Nowadays, biopics about writers are frequently used as a way of toppling great literary figures from their pedestals. Essentially, the emphasis is more on scandal (an unbridled sex life, alcohol, or drug abuse) rather than on the writers’ works, although it is undeniable that the act of literary creation, which is far less cinematically attractive than the visual or performing arts, has always posed a problem for screenwriters and directors. By focusing on the unromantic aspects of their day-to-day lives, by depicting their financial setbacks, and by making scenes of excessive drinking a cliché of the genre, the later films in the cycle give a parodic portrayal aimed at demystifying great figures who were formerly celebrated with respect. The epic spirit of Ariane Mnouchkine’s *Molière* (1978), for example, is simply absent from the 2007 film by Laurent Tirard, who turns Molière into a character from his own comedies. We find the same strategy at work in *Jean de la Fontaine, the Challenge*, in which Perrette from the fable “The Milkmaid and Her Pail” is presented simply as the writer’s mistress. However, in these examples the irreverent treatment bestowed on the “great French writers” is not designed to lessen their existing status as customarily portrayed. Rather, these two films’ strategy is simultaneously to evoke, for example through the use of citations, a scholarly memory of the writers as major figures in French cultural heritage while also presenting them as contemporary cultural icons. *Jean de la Fontaine, the Challenge* thus provides an anthology of his best-known fables (“The Ant and the Grasshopper,” “The Milkmaid and Her Pail,” “The Fox and the Crow”), learned by generations of French school children, while rejuvenating the canonical image of La Fontaine. In contrast to the official portraits of him as an elderly Academician, the film presents us with a La Fontaine who frequently rebels against the existing order. The entire film relies upon the clash between this ceaselessly active, lively writer of the fables (played by Lorànt Deutsch) and a Machiavellian Colbert (Philippe Torreton) dressed in black. The juvenile appearance and diction of Deutsch, with a hint of a Parisian working-class accent, contrast with Torreton’s maturity and “Comédie Française” acting method, allowing La Fontaine to be transformed into a modern-day hero. Likewise, Romain Duris, the eternal teenager, quintessential young dandy, and cult actor in

French cinema since the late 1990s plays a Molière still in the process of “finding himself.” Here Molière experiences the events of his future plays in advance of writing them, which secures the playwright’s place in the short and long-term collective cultural consciousness. *Le Libertin/The Libertine* (2000) provides another example of this double anchoring. While Gabriel Aghion’s film is a biopic about Diderot that retraces the editing of the *Encyclopédie* and conjures up the memory of the French Enlightenment, while its music (with its moments of synthesizer enhancement) and its vivid aesthetic equally recall the atmosphere of the successful comedy *Pédale douce* (1996), a kind of *The Birdcage* for the 1990s, also directed by Aghion.¹³

The irreverent treatment of Great Men and the progressive rise of popular figures in biopics have been accompanied by a predilection for heroes from the very recent past. In this case, it is not the transmission of a learned or scholarly memory that is solicited. The face, the voice, and the expressions of the character, as well as the costumes and re-creation of the period trigger a range of memories in older members of the audience and establish a degree of closeness with the figure whose story is being told. When watching *Mesrine*, for example, recollections of Jacques Mesrine resurfaced in my memory—the blood-spattered face of France’s public enemy number one sitting dead in the driver’s seat of his BMW, and the chin strap beard of police commissioner Broussard, as seen in the televised news reports of 1979. More personal memories also surfaced—the place where I saw these images, the circumstances in which I saw them, the cars of the 1970s, among which I recognized the make owned by my father, and so on. These biopics play on an experience-based memory, at least for some members of the audience, and recall memories of media reports in all spectators. Françoise Sagan, Coluche, Serge Gainsbourg, and Mesrine not only attracted intense media attention during the 1960s and 1970s in magazines and on television, but have also continued to have their image popularized to this day by the same media, which often recycles the most caricatured aspects of their personalities. The Mesrine affair (Was he a criminal psychopath or a rebellious Robin Hood figure? Was he assassinated without warning or killed in a legitimate act of self-defense by the police?) has been pursued for thirty years in publications, debates, television programs, songs, law suits, and even movies. In 1980, *Inspecteur la bavure/Inspector Blunder* parodied the Mesrine affair, and in 1984 André Génovès’s fiction film *Mesrine* and Hervé Palud’s documentary *Jacques Mesrine: profession ennemi public/Jacques Mesrine* offered two radically opposed versions of the gangster. More broadly, the idiosyncratic diction of Françoise Sagan, Coluche, and Gainsbourg is still a staple of imitators and, moreover, since the mid-1990s, television nostalgia programs such as *Les Enfants de la télé/The Children of TV*, in production since 1994 (TF1 until 1996 and France 2 since then), have been dedicated to the recollection of great moments of earlier French television. Performances by a barely audible

Françoise Sagan in literary programs, by a drunken Serge Gainsbourg, or by Coluche when he was candidate to the Presidency of the French Republic are among the set pieces constantly revisited in *The Children of TV* and discussed collectively by the guests. The confusion between these images perpetually circulated in the media and biopics is often extreme. Not only does actor Éric Elmosnino, who portrays the French singer in *Gainsbourg*, bear a remarkable physical resemblance to the vocalist, but while the film was being promoted he went as far as to reenact in the studio (during a Canal+ program) a stunt performed by Gainsbourg. The singer had infamously burned three quarters of a 500 franc note in protest against the “tax racket” of which he had become a victim on the set of *7 sur 7*/*Twentyfour Seven* (TF1, 1981–1997), the most watched talk show of the time. This illegal and, for many, sacrilegious act caused a lot of ink to be spilt in 1984. It was shown repeatedly on television and is now available in several versions on the Internet.

It is not the heritage function of contemporary biopics that has shifted so much as the nature of this heritage. While the biopics of the 1990s were undeniably one of the expressions of the “official heritage,” “normally a combination of a high-profile actor and a cultural icon,”¹⁴ more recent films tend to involve a “media heritage” that is more easily activated, in so far as the heroes and heroines belong to the recent past, to a rich world of available images. As a consequence, the use of “A-list” film stars or renowned actors—such as Adjani, Depardieu, Isabelle Huppert as Madame de Maintenon in *Saint-Cyr/The King’s Daughters* (2000) and Carole Bouquet as a great figure of the French Resistance in *Lucie Aubrac* (1997)—has ceased to be the norm. Recent biopics make greater use of chameleonic actors who were not stars at the time of filming, like Marion Cotillard in *La Vie en Rose*; actors who strive to stimulate a mimetic resemblance to the subject, rather than bringing a pre-existing image to the screen.

Finally, the tendency of contemporary biopics to choose subjects from the 1960s and 1970s may be linked to the current political and economic context. Certainly, a flight from the present and a nostalgic withdrawal into a glorious past (whether idealized, fantasized, or actual) during a period of crisis is a phenomenon frequently noted in critical writing about costume and historical films.¹⁵ Nevertheless, one must take note of the abundance of biopics set during the *Trente Glorieuses* (“The Glorious Thirty,” the years between 1945 and 1975) or before the election of François Mitterrand as President of the French Republic in 1981, namely a period in which France had not yet lost confidence in “grand narratives,” nor relinquished hopes for a “better tomorrow” should the Left rise to power. In this context, *Coluche, the Story of a Guy*, which focuses on several months during which the humorist was a candidate in the presidential election of 1981, is an interesting case, in so far as it describes both the hope of change and its frustration. Coluche’s candidacy begins as a joke: he is the candidate of the

“*parti d'en rire*” (“the party for a laugh”). The humorist then becomes the candidate for all those who are marginalized, which the film underlines by allowing his entire official declaration of candidacy to be heard and by showing him being welcomed as a savior in a factory by workers threatened with redundancy. The end of the film depicts the failure of his candidacy, as much the result of personal excesses as of political pressure, but it also alludes to the failure of the hopes invested in the French Left after it came into power. The final insert reminds us that Coluche founded the *Restos du cœur* (“Restaurants of the Heart”), a charitable association that provides free meals and foodstuffs to the poor, and ends with the words: “Unfortunately, since then, the *Restos* have gone from strength to strength.”¹⁶

There emerges another way of accounting for the rise of biopics at the expense of other forms of popular historical narratives. In the 1980s and 1990s, French heritage films, often supported and partially subsidized by public bodies, have functioned as “the cement for a nation rocked by the first failures of the Left” and this cement consisted of celebrations of “the great works and figures of the nation or, on occasion, of Europe.”¹⁷ In addition to asserting cultural standards in the struggle against American cultural imperialism (including the matter of box office sales), this investment in the past was intended to produce nationwide benefits. In a period when the great ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were questioned, when the present no longer derived its meaning from the way it was preparing for the future, these films were a vehicle of a collective sense of identity based on the recollection, whether nostalgic or critical, of a shared past. Contemporary biopics share these ambitions in part: they invite their French spectators to partake in a collective experience of remembrance and some take a gamble on internationally recognized French icons who are capable of drawing in American audiences. Examples include Edith Piaf, Sagan, and Coco Chanel, with the latter being the subject of two biopics released almost simultaneously. What distinguishes biopics from heritage films is not their memorial function but the way they question how a community is represented. In the absence of French films that deconstruct the subject of the biography, such as Todd Haynes’s *I’m Not There* (2007), the French biopic is a somewhat centripetal genre, which folds memory into the protagonist, reducing the social and historical context to a mere backdrop. In this respect, the success of the genre can be viewed as the symptom of a new stage in the questioning of “grand narratives.”

french biographical films or biopics “in the american manner”?

The contemporary flood of French biopics, therefore, is not a mere importation of models from Hollywood to the cinema of France.

Furthermore, one can observe that the vast majority of the heroes and heroines of French biopics are national figures, some of whom are readily exportable, while others, such as Coluche and Albert Spaggiari are scarcely known outside their country. Despite some pan-European figures (such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Farinelli, and Roberto Succo), the biopic continues to draw upon what might be regarded as local resources, and for this reason remains a national genre, tied to a local imaginary and cultural context. Thomas Langmann, the producer of *Mesrine*, was all too aware of this when he stated with respect to the American marketing of the film, "I'm not worried about France, since it's a hot subject here, but abroad we can't sell it as a movie about Mesrine; we have to promote it as a thriller."¹⁸

While the American influence needs to be kept in perspective, it should also be questioned in a deeper, more historical, and more indirect manner. I mentioned above the swing away from traditional elite figures towards icons of popular culture and the mass media. This shift is comparable to what happened with the Hollywood biopic in the 1950s,¹⁹ but for the French biopic it took place at the turn of the twenty-first century. In commencing this shift in their turn, French films did not copy Hollywood models so much as take note of a culture of celebrity that had developed only recently in France. This new phenomenon was perceived as a symptom of an Americanization of French society and its imaginary to the point that the French neologism "*peopolisation*" (from the English word "people," mistranslated as "public figure") was coined and popularized during the 2000s. While France has always had tabloids, new titles suddenly started to appear in newsstands, such as the launch of the French version of the British magazine *Closer* in 2005 and the weekly tabloid *Public*, launched in 2003 by the French media conglomerate Lagardère. Tabloid culture has penetrated into the French readership, at the same time as at the other end of the spectrum "serious" media blurs the line between public and private life by creating columns on the private lives of public figures.²⁰

France's entry into the era of the individual and the celebrity, under the influence of the Anglo-American model, is not strictly speaking the reason for the success of the biopic. However, the contemporary biopic, which, unlike classical French biopics about men, exposes both public and private life, is completely in keeping with this tendency of turning intimacy into a spectacle. Certain films even go as far as to place celebrity culture in a *mise en abyme*. The French poster for *The Easy Way* proclaims, "On 19 July 1976, Albert Spaggiari became a star," suggesting that it is stardom that justifies the making of this biopic and that the move from anonymity to fame can suddenly happen to anyone. The sequence in *La Vie en Rose* in which Piaf learns of Marcel Cerdan's death is a striking metaphor for the porosity of the boundary between public and private life. At the end of this long set piece, the sobbing heroine staggers down the hallway of her apartment while "L'Hymne à l'amour" ("Hymn to Love") begins to play. As soon as she is

flush with a curtain, the camera pivots 180 degrees, and we see Piaf, from behind, as she goes through the curtain, which now separates the wings from the stage. Without any perceptible transition, she finds herself standing before an audience in a theatre, where she sings “L’Hymne.” The second part of *Mesrine* focuses not so much on the criminal’s progressively violent behavior as it does on his (historically attested) aspirations to stardom. Although certain of Mesrine’s actions are omitted, Jean-François Richet’s film dwells in an almost reflexive manner on the way the gangster plays with the media and on his desire to become a celebrity. We see him writing his autobiography, *L’Instinct de mort*/*Killer Instinct*, of which the first part of *Mesrine* is an adaptation. The first time that he is spoken of on television, he cries, “High time!” He tells the court, “the audience likes stuff to happen. Action, you know,”²¹ before declaring that he is a “star.” In a lengthy scene depicting the secret interview that he gave to a *Paris Match* journalist while on the run in 1979, he poses with an air of self-satisfaction for the photographer and asks the young journalist whether she has “read his book.”

It is difficult to know whether the adoption of the melodramatic warts-and-all narrative formula of the biopic (which associates great achievements with great sufferings and flaws) originates in the repeated circulation on French screens of Hollywood biopics, or whether it reflects the end of an “age of heroic biographies”²² shared by all Western societies and their cinemas. Either way, this formula, alien to the first three cycles of French biopics, provides a favored vehicle for the many contemporary French biopics about women and even explains why such films are so plentiful. The melodramatic Hollywood formula is a good vehicle for depicting more modern figures who aspire to independence, while enclosing their ambition within a circle of sufferings: exceptional women, to a greater extent than men,²³ pay a high price for their talent and ambition in the form of spectacular sufferings, whether of mind or body. The painter Séraphine ends up in a mental asylum. The image of an Edith Piaf suffering from premature ageing and drug and alcohol addiction is a leitmotiv in *La Vie en Rose*. The film alternates between her triumphant performances on stage and an impressive series of personal tragedies: being abandoned by her parents, her temporary blindness during childhood, the loss of a child, the murder of her first protector, the death of Cerdan in a plane crash, and numerous health problems and illnesses. In Anne Fontaine’s film *Coco Before Chanel*, Coco becomes Chanel, but it is only after the accidental death of Boy, her lover, that she frenetically throws herself into activities relating to haute couture. It is personal tragedy, then, that leads us towards the parade of the different Chanel-created collections that ends the film. The “new melodramatic formula” allows the traditional European stereotype of the “tragic heroine,” first popularized by opera,²⁴ to be reclaimed along the way and reproduces the double standard of our culture concerning creativity—

men create as a result of personal genius, but women come to do so through passionate love and loss.

Finally, the extent to which recent biopics adopt an American style very much depends on the film's target audience. Popular biopics intended for the domestic market (like *Coluche*), just like auteur biopics (such as *Séraphine*) intended mainly for an art-house audience, borrow little from their Hollywood cousins. However, spectacular super-productions such as *La Vie en Rose* and *Mesrine*, designed to conquer large French and international audiences, display a cultural and cinematic hybridity.

Legend has it that producer Alain Goldman signed off on the film about Edith Piaf on the basis of a text message sent by Dahan: "A great love story played out on the big screen for the people, with music, tragedy and romance. A French subject, an international film, a great film about Piaf."²⁵ In fact, the narrative focuses on a little girl from the working-class neighborhood of Belleville, who in the post-war period becomes one of France's greatest singers, and the last representative of a specifically French musical genre, the *chanson réaliste* ("realist song"). Nevertheless, the film begins in a manner that could potentially be disconcerting for French spectators—a concert given by Piaf in *English* at Carnegie Hall, where she sings "Heaven Have Mercy"—and it also presents a series of comings and goings between Paris and the United States. The film thus places considerable importance on the international career, reduced here to the American tours, of the French cultural icon. At a more textual level, the fragmented structure of the film—a song evokes a specific moment in the life of Piaf which, in turn, calls up another song and so on—allows for a synthesis between the French musical tradition of the *chanson réaliste* and the Hollywood tradition of the musical.²⁶ In *chanson réaliste* performances, the female singer dramatizes her own existence, more often involving suffering than moments of happiness,²⁷ whereas in the musical, the spectacular sung episodes and the "lived episodes" mirror one another. This procedure, which is also prominent in contemporary American musical biopics,²⁸ brings *La Vie en Rose* closer to the Hollywood biopic and makes it a cultural hybrid.

Intended to be an American-style gangster film, *Mesrine* makes repeated fetishistic allusions to Hollywood cinema—a split-screen recalls Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987), there is a *Bonnie and Clyde*-style escape, and reminders of Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Goodfellas* (1990). Richet and his screenwriter, Abdel Raouf Dafri, take care, however, to anchor the original trauma by explaining Mesrine's "killer instinct" in a narrative that is truly "French." Mesrine's epic story begins with a scene of torture in Algeria, in which the conscript Mesrine is required to participate; then, on his return to France, during an argument, the young man hurls at his father that he has never accepted being "the son of a collaborator." Furthermore, the mannerist references to American cinema and the action scenes

contrast sharply with the dialogue, which emphasizes a style of speech that seems to come straight out of the 1950s French *série noire* films—such as *Touchez pas au grisbi/Honour amongst Thieves* (1954) and *Du rififi chez les hommes/Rififi* (1955). Mesrine repeatedly refers to the gangster code of honor. Appearing in the court, he says, “Once I choose a guy, he never gives me up.” To justify a get-away he accomplished by taking the chief justice of the court hostage, he quips, “I took refuge behind the law.” His arrest by police commissioner Broussard is a testosterone-fuelled verbal sparring match. Broussard tells the gangster, “A cop doesn’t think: he acts.” To which Mesrine replies, “Next time, there won’t be any women, no champagne, only you and me.” In keeping with the histrionic excess for which the historical Mesrine was known, the dialogue situates him in the nation’s aural memory. Visually, Mesrine is a hero from the world of Scorsese, but linguistically he is a child of Michel Audiard.²⁹

conclusion

Just as heritage cinema is a transnational genre that assumed different forms specific to the countries of an old Europe in the grips of a crisis at the end of the twentieth century, the biopic is a transnational form, inextricably linked to a Western cult of the individual, which one should not be surprised to find in the different national cinemas. This is not to deny that images circulate, merge, and engage with one another, nor that those images produced by a dominant Hollywood cinema have influenced the European national cinemas. Rather, this chapter has emphasized that the flourishing of biopics in various cinemas does not imply that there are “Hollywood models” on one side and “French avatars” that imitate them on the other side, nor that the two national forms of biopic are linked by a direct, mechanistic relationship.

As I have demonstrated, the boom of contemporary French biopics parallels the decline of the “official” French heritage cinema in the early twenty-first century. Biopics also extend heritage films, expressing changes in representations of the past and in their relation to memory and community. The success of French biopics derives from sociocultural transformations occurring in French society (the so-called *peopolisation*, and nostalgia for the 1970s), while the “American-ness” of contemporary French biopics is a more complex matter than a simple game of borrowing from Hollywood cinema. Accordingly, *La Vie en Rose*, because of its success and its winning synthesis of American and national genres, did not facilitate the importation of an American narrative formula, but rather brought a pre-existing American generic category into the critical lexicon. Critical responses to Dahan’s film, whether positive or negative, generally link the film to the “biopic” genre, the exotic nature of which is accentuated by the use of quotation marks.³⁰

It [*La Vie en Rose*] sings, it screams, it lives, it stirs your guts, it makes you cry, reopening the valves of good old melodrama, it stirs up collective memory, it has nothing to do with hagiography, it explodes the old saying that only the Americans are capable of succeeding with a real “biopic.”³¹

This American label has come to be applied somewhat automatically to *all* French biographical films, regardless of their “national,” cultural, or cinematic roots. Finally, even “American-style” French biopics need to be considered in relation to the other group of films that perpetuate French heritage cinema, exemplified by big-budget productions such as *Le Pacte des Loups*/*Brotherhood of the Wolves* (2001) and *Vidocq*/*Dark Portals: The Chronicles of Vidocq* (2001). This kind of film is intended as:

a mirror-image of Hollywood, from which it borrows both its commercial and aesthetic approaches, and a rival to it, insofar as it always affirms a specifically French identity, whether through references to a national cinematic heritage, or, in a wider sense, by recycling elements of popular culture.³²

Just like “American-style” post-heritage super productions, “American-style” French biopics illustrate the paradoxes of identity inherent in a spectacular French historical cinema “caught between a desire for continuity and rupture, imitation and specificity.”³³

notes

1. See the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée) website www.cnc.fr. The French “box office” is calculated in terms of spectators.
2. See the film reviews that mention the recent boom of the genre as each new biopic is released, and the debates on TV magazine programs, such as *Ce soir, ou jamais*/*This Evening or Never* (France 3, June 9, 2008). Similarly press articles, even in the most popular newspapers, have claimed that “French Cinema is surfing on the fashion of biopics” and that “the American recipe has crossed the Atlantic,” *20 minutes*, June 21, 2008, accessed November 5, 2011, www.20minutes.fr/article/238446/Culture-Le-cinema-francais-surfer-sur-la-mode-des-biopics.php. All quotations from French-language sources are my translation, unless otherwise specified.
3. See the “film biographique” entry, *FranceTerme*, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://franceterme.culture.fr/>.
4. For a more detailed description of the cycles, see Raphaëlle Moine, “Le Biopic à la française: de l'ombre à la lumière,” *Studies in French Cinema* 10, no. 3 (2010): 269–287.
5. Tom Brown, “From Intimate Pleasures to Spectacular Vistas: Musicality and Historicity in French and American ‘Classical’ Cinemas in the 1930s.” (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2007), 237–261.

6. Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth and Convention in the French Cinema 1929–1939* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 319.
7. Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français (1930–1956)* (Paris: Nathan, 1996), 245–277.
8. Simon Simsi, *Ciné-Passions. 7ème art et industrie de 1945 à 2000* (Paris: Dixit, 2000), 6 and 18.
9. See the website cnc.fr.
10. Raphaëlle Moine, “L’Évitement des genres: un fait critique?” in *La Fiction éclatée*, vol. 1: *Études socioculturelles*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit and Geneviève Sellier (Paris: INA/L’Harmattan, 2007), 105–119.
11. Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre*, trans. Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner (New York and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 115.
12. Michel Boujut, “Isabelle-Camille: le corps à corps,” *L’Événement du jeudi*, December 8, 1988, 122.
13. Évelyne Jardonnet, “La Naissance d’un type: l’écrivain,” in *Biopic: de la réalité à la fiction*, CinémAction 139, ed. Rémi Fontanel (Condé-sur-Noireau, France: Éditions Charles Corlet, 2011), 92.
14. Phil Powrie, “Heritage, History and ‘New Realism’,” in *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference*, ed. Phil Powrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.
15. See the critical debate about British Heritage cinema, summarized in Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46–85. For the debate in relation to French cinema see Susan Hayward, *French Costume Drama of the 1950s: Fashioning Politics in Film* (Bristol, UK, and Chicago, IL: Intellect, 2010).
16. *Coluche, l’histoire d’un mec*, DVD, directed by Antoine de Caunes (Nantes, France: Capricci éd.; Paris: Studio 37, 2009).
17. Raphaëlle Moine and Pierre Beylot, “Introduction: les fictions patrimoniales, une nouvelle catégorie interprétative?” in *Fictions patrimoniales sur grand et petit écran. Contours et enjeux d’un genre intermédiaire*, ed. Pierre Beylot and Raphaëlle Moine (Bordeaux, France: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009), 23.
18. Joan Dupont, “Thomas Langmann, a Hot Young Producer, with 3 New Films,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2008, accessed November 5, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2008/01/24/arts/24iht-fmdupont.1.9466567.html.
19. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 214–232.
20. Jamil Dakhli, *Mythologie de la peopolisation* (Paris: le Cavalier bleu editions, 2010), 7–8.
21. *Mesrine. 1ère partie, L’instinct de mort*, DVD, directed by Jean-François Richet (Boulogne Billancourt: Universal Pictures Video, 2009) and *Mesrine. 2ème partie, L’Ennemi public n° 1*, DVD, directed by Jean-François Richet (Boulogne Billancourt: Universal Pictures Video, 2009).
22. François Dosse, *Le pari biographique: écrire une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 133–211.
23. In *Gainsbourg*, the singer is successful commercially and with women. Even if the film pays some attention to the setbacks that he experienced in his love life and career, and to his spectacular personal decline, it ends with a series of positive images: Gainsbourg with his young wife Bambou and son; Gainsbourg as a child; and a frozen image presenting Gainsbourg as an icon, surrounded by curls of smoke.

24. Catherine Clément, *L'Opéra ou la défaite des femmes* (Paris: Grasset, 1979).
25. Didier Peron, "L'Olympiaf," *Libération*, February 14, 2011, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://next.libération.fr/cinema/010193967-l-olympiaf>.
26. Ginette Vincendeau, "Spectacular Misery: *La Môme*" (paper presented at the Performing Lives Conference, Kingston upon Thames, UK, Kingston University, July 6–8, 2009).
27. About the *chanteuse réaliste*, see Kelley Conway, *Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).
28. Jesse Schlotterbeck, "'Trying to Find a Heartbeat': Narrative Music in the Pop Performer Biopic," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (2008): 86–88.
29. From the end of the 1940s to the end of the 1970s, Michel Audiard (1920–1985) was one of the most popular screenwriters and dialogue writers in France. Notably, his brilliant use of slang contributes to the success of the *série noire* films: *Mission à Tanger*/*Mission in Tanqier* (1949), *L'Ennemi public n° 1*/*The Most Wanted Man* (1953), *Gas-oil*/*Hi-Jack Highway* (1955), *Série noire* (1955), *Mélodie en sous-sol*/*Any Number Can Win* (1962), *Les Tontons flingueurs*/*Monsieur Gangster* (1963).
30. About the importance of quotation marks in the process of genrification, see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 72–77.
31. Danièle Heymann, "Une même spectaculaire et populaire," *Marianne*, February 2007, 3.
32. François-Xavier Molia, "Peut-on être à la fois hollywoodien et français? French Superproductions and the American Model," in *France at the Flicks: Trends in Contemporary French Popular Cinema*, ed. Darren Waldron and Isabelle Vanderschelden (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 52.
33. Molia, "Peut-on être à la fois hollywoodien et français?" 61.

t h r e e

the biopic of the
new middle classes
in contemporary
hindi cinema

r a c h e l d w y e r

The realist strand of Hindi cinema has produced a number of biopics, notably about the nationalist leaders of the freedom struggle, including the Indo-British co-production *Gandhi* (1982).¹ However, there were few biopics in mainstream Hindi cinema (“Bollywood”) until the early 2000s. The first cycle of biopics during this period was part of the revival of the historical genre.² These films were mostly about national leaders including Ashoka, the emperor who united much of India in the third century BC (*Asoka/Ashoka the Great*, 2001); Bhagat Singh, an anti-colonial revolutionary, whose story featured in the 2006 hit *Rang de Basanti/Paint it saffron*; Mangal Pandey, a semi-legendary hero of the 1857 uprisings, featured in *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (2005); and the Great Mughal, Akbar, who was the subject of *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008).³

This paper looks at what may be called a second cycle of biopics in mainstream Hindi cinema. This group of semi-fictionalized biopics, made during the early 2000s, depicts figures who are part of living memory; not rulers or leaders, nor those committed to public service, but figures whose success was achieved mostly in business or entertainment, and who have

become the heroes and heroines of an emergent social group—India’s new middle classes. The latter has emerged while India has been undergoing the most rapid social change in its history after economic liberalization in 1991. Developing as a potential global power, there has been an ongoing reconsideration of history in the context of a growing ideology of Hindu nationalism and the rise to dominance of the new middle classes, who form the main audience for producing and consuming films and film culture.⁴ These semi-fictionalized biopics show this group’s understanding of their history and culture in what Charles Taylor has called the “social imaginary.”⁵

the hindi film form, bollywood and the biopic

Hindi film genres are notoriously fuzzy and are often regarded as *masala*, that is, a spicy mix of ingredients, rather than a single flavor, although there are generic groups that are recognized by the industry as well as by audiences. As is the case with Hollywood biopics,⁶ Indian biopics are also part of other genres; in Indian cinema there is much overlap with those that have a quasi-historical or historical nature,⁷ as well as with the nationalist film. However, the term “biopic” is little known and rarely used in India, and these films are usually classed as “historicals.”

According to George F. Custen, the basic plot structure of the classical Hollywood studio biopic gives lives cinematic shape through the use of three basic configurations, “resistance, the struggle between innovation and tradition, and the importance of the big break.”⁸ This structure is similar to other Hindi film stories where the hero struggles to find his place in the family, the community and the nation, without giving up on his family values in the melodramatic conflict between good and evil, where moral order must be restored.⁹ In the Hindi melodrama, narrative is often subsumed by a series of attractions,¹⁰ which works well for the requirements of the biopic in creating a cultural mythology.¹¹ These attractions include the famous Bollywood song-and-dance numbers, which often divert or arrest the narrative. This may be incorporated diegetically for biopics of creative persons, such as filmmakers, singers, and movie stars.

The genre needs a particular flexibility to work within the format of the Hindi film. Hindi films are often star vehicles and while the star’s charisma may often be a match for the character’s own, the star must have an image that is appropriate to the character, and must resemble or impersonate the character convincingly. It is often felt that a new actor with star potential is best for a role where there is no star persona that needs to be fitted to that of the character, as was the case of Ben Kingsley in *Gandhi*.¹² Tigmanshu Dhulia, who directed the biopic on the runner turned bandit *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), points out that audiences would think that a biopic without stars would be classed as a “documentary.”¹³

The Hindi film uses grandiloquent speech, delivered in memorable “dialogues,” which are learned and delivered outside the cinema as part of the wider consumption of films. The biopic, with its mix of invented dialogue, often featuring famous quotations, and imaginary private scenes taking us into the lives of the characters, is thus particularly well suited to the form of the Hindi film.

The shift through the first cycle to the second cycle of biopics follows major changes in Hindi cinema, as mainstream Hindi film, now called Bollywood, is most closely associated with the values of the new India and its rising new middle classes.¹⁴ The new biopics are closely associated with the ideology of this new group, who are seen as neo-traditionalist, business-minded, and highly aspirational. This shift from figures of public and nationalist history to idols of the new middle classes may be seen as as radical as the shift that Custen identifies in Hollywood (drawing on Leo Lowenthal’s work on magazine biographies) from “idols of production,” that is, members of the elite such as businessmen, military men, and so on, to “idols of consumption,” that is, figures from the new media, notably radio and film.¹⁵ This change in the Indian biopic signifies a shift in values and morality, from the concerns of a postcolonial nationalism and politics to those of a new consumerism. India’s middle classes need new heroes to suit their values, as their heroes are not political leaders who are interested in public duty and responsibility, but rather, ambitious individuals who, rather than seeking political or social change, operate within what they regard to be unnecessary legal and other constraints. The characters have to struggle against the old India and there is little interest in the morality or legality of their acts as long as they follow their ambition and business is done. These heroes are the people who have shaped the new India, creating this new class, generating more wealth for it, and who believe it is not in their interest to discuss financial crime, treatment of minorities, and the increasing number of the poor. In fact, such discussions are regarded as “Western” and part of “poverty porn.”¹⁶

The new middle classes like the stories of their heroes to be hagiographical rather than warts-and-all portrayals. This is also the way that the leads are shown in most Hindi films, where they are heroic, self-sacrificing, and otherwise virtuous, rather than well-rounded characters. Respect for the character’s family is often cited, along with fear of potential legal action or the censors, as either of these factors could delay a film indefinitely as well as being extremely costly. Producers are already wary of biopics, as, although digital effects make historical reconstructions easier, the budgets required to make them are still huge. This goes hand in hand with a belief in India that one should never speak ill of the dead. While the media themselves are interested in biopics, as is evident from the coverage that they give to them, it is unclear whether cinema audiences are interested in the close examination of someone’s life. Salacious stories about famous

people now circulate widely in the media, in particular in the digital realm, as a form of gossip but not in more regulated media such as film.

However, the new middle classes are deeply interested in the private morality of their heroes. In particular, they must uphold traditional values of family and religion, and these are often shown as closely linked to their public success, whether through a supportive wife or the blessings of God. The private domain is both separate from and more highly valued than the public domain. The heroes are likely also to enjoy romance and to be seen to be happy and rewarded in love, a mirror for their public standing where they are successful and respected, if not revered.¹⁷ Films about nationalist leaders have usually ended in failure, while books and cartoons that depict them are often banned.¹⁸ Even gossip magazines refrain from discussing stars' family relations, and paparazzi are almost unknown, as are unauthorized shots of stars.

A second cycle of semi-fictional biopics made since the late 2000s dealt with the recent lives of less revered figures, often using fictitious names, although the stories were closely based on the lives of the heroes of India's emerging new middle classes: businessmen in *Guru* (2007); sportspeople in *Chak De! India/Go India!* (2007) and *Paan Singh Tomar*; film stars in *Woh Lamhe/Those Moments* (2006), *Khoya Khoya Chand/The Moon Disappeared* (2007), and *The Dirty Picture* (2011); and underworld dons in *Sarkar/The Boss* (2005) and *Sarkar Raj* (2008), which drew heavily on the story from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010) showed many links with Haji Mastan—already seen in *Deewaar/The Wall* (1975)—and Daud Ibrahim; while politicians in *Raajneeti/Politics* (2010) were composites of characters from the *Mahabharata* and *The Godfather*.

All these semi-fictionalized biopics would be excluded by Custen, for whom the biopic is “minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose name is used.”¹⁹ However, following Dennis Bingham, who argues for the centrality of the semi-biographical *Citizen Kane* (1941) to the history of the biopic,²⁰ this chapter classes as biopics those films in which the lead character is easily identified with a real person. The lives are semi-fictionalized, out of respect for the dead and for the families of the actual persons on which the characters are based. This only adds another layer of transformation to the biopic which, like the historical film, has to change other narratives into the requirements of the fiction film using alteration, compression, invention, and metaphor,²¹ without which there would be no film at all.

The rapid social changes in India today would seem to require new imaginaries of people, their lives and times. These lives can also be read as a guide to morality and values in these changing times, when India is finding a new role in the world and traditional values are under scrutiny. Hindi cinema's *Guru* and *The Dirty Picture* are two of the most successful and engaging works in this cycle.²²

guru

One of the most popular biopics is Mani Ratnam's 2007 Hindi film, *Guru*, following his two quasi-biopics in Tamil: *Nayagan/The Leader* (1987), heavily influenced by *The Godfather* but whose central character is strikingly similar to the Bombay mafia don, Varadarajan Mudaliar, and *Iruvar/The Duo* (1997), said to be the story of the two male Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu state.

Guru, the life story of a character called Gurubhai Desai, was to be another quasi-biopic, loosely, though clearly, based on the life of one of the world's richest men, India's "Polyester Prince," Dhirubhai Ambani (1932–2002).²³ The character's name Gurubhai ("Guru") differs by just one syllable, or character in the Gujarati language, from "Dhirubhai" (*-bhai* is an honorific suffix, meaning "brother"), and holds the gravitas of the name, meaning "teacher" or "elder." Ambani, a Gujarati Modh Bania by caste, was the son of a schoolteacher. He went to Aden (now Yemen) to work for Burmah-Shell, returning to India to work in the Bombay Cloth Exchange. He built a polyester mill for his own brand "Vimal," later expanding into petrochemicals and refineries as part of his renamed "Reliance" empire. When he died, he had built up a fortune of around \$9 billion and the taxes his company paid accounted for around 5 percent of the Indian Government's tax revenue. Ambani raised capital by encouraging the common person to become a shareholder and was famous for his annual general meetings held in sports grounds to accommodate the crowds. A harbinger of the new dawn of Indian economic liberalization in the 1990s, he changed Indian business practices, and his challenge to the old authorities and his encouragement to set the new India dreaming (as presented in the film) are key to his legacy. The film has a "showpiece" ending set in a sports stadium as he encourages shareholders to dream of being the biggest company not just in India but in the whole world, which seemed impossible at the time.



Figure 3.1 *Guru* (2007): Encouraging the New India to dream.

Source: Courtesy of Madras Talkies.

Framed by the present, the film tells Gurubhai's story in chronological order using flashbacks, a common narrative device in the biopic genre. *Guru* takes us into the very private life of the family, and like any Hindi film, gives ample space to the hero's love story. The couple has twin daughters in the film rather than two sons. Ambani's sons, Mukesh and Anil, are ever present in the media and remain among the world's richest men, even though their father's company was split after his death. The elder is famed for building Antilla, the world's most expensive house, costing £630 million.

Although Ratnam says his film is not about Ambani, no one, including the Ambani family, has any doubts.²⁴ The significant differences are not due to the need to avoid legal difficulties, as Indian Law follows English Law, so there is no libel of the dead. Hamish McDonald's book *The Polyester Prince* (1998) was not published in India, however in 2010 New Delhi-based Lotus Roli Books published a revised edition, *Ambani & Sons*, and there has been no libel action from the family. In fact, Anil Ambani's Reliance Entertainment was involved in the production of Ratnam's next film, *Raavan* (2010). *Guru* allows the melodramatic form of the Hindi film to pick up the almost mythological resonances of Ambani's role as one of the heroes of the new India.

Ambani's appeal with the Indian public is his "rags-to-riches" story. He lived life on his own terms, and rose to become one of the world's richest men through intelligence, cunning, manipulation, and charm. He represents the dream for India's new middle classes, who hope that in one generation they too can follow his trajectory. Ratnam developed Ambani's life into a biopic in which the characters tell us about life at a time of massive social change. The protagonists represent the old and the new, and, even though the old is valued and shown in an aesthetically pleasing manner, the new is presented as inevitable.

The story of Ambani is well known in India and the beginning of the film assumes this much, so its narrative interest is about the conflict of a changing India, embodied in Guru and his antagonists. The character Arzaan Contractor represents an older India of merchant princes, clearly modeled on Muhammad Ali Jinnah's grandson, Nusli Wadia, with whom Ambani had a long-running dispute. The demise of his class is indicated at the beginning of the film when Guru follows him on the golf course, breaking the old rules by dropping the ball in the hole.

Guru has a more complex relationship with the other representatives of the old India of Gandhi and Nehru in the Gandhian Manik Dasgupta. Dasgupta seems to represent Ramnath Goenka, the founder of the national newspaper, *The Indian Express*. Dasgupta is played by Mithun Chakrabarty, who is best known in India as the Disco Dancer.²⁵ In the film, the sepia-tinged Bombay associated with Dasgupta is that of the art deco, low-rise, Marine Drive, the last major building projects of colonial times for the old

Anglicized middle classes. He is dressed in the clothes of the freedom struggle, the Indian *dhoti* and handloom cloth (*khadi*), albeit with Western shoes and socks, in contrast to Guru's polyester shirt-pant and later his safari suit, favored by the modern lower-class businessman. Everything about Dasgupta points to the past, even the campaigns in his paper, which has the nationalistic name *Swatantra Samachar* (*Independence News*). He represents a kind of paternalism that appeals to Guru on a personal level. He calls Dasgupta "Nana" ("grandfather"), and even when Dasgupta is campaigning against Guru's corruption, he visits him in hospital when the younger man has a stroke.

Although the film ultimately supports Guru's modernizing viewpoint, it evokes nostalgia with the black and white of the earliest sequences, then sepia-tinted color, followed by bright colors—in the manner of Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* (2004). Bombay is pictured as an almost car-free city filled with handcarts and trams. Clothes are appropriate to the times, as are the lavishly re-created interiors complete with period décor and furnishings. The soundtrack uses old film songs and rock-and-roll music, emphasizing Guru's new rebellion. The beauty of this section of the film, both visually and aurally, creates nostalgia for a world whose end is imminent.

Guru's adherence to the old, despite his efforts to bring in the new, is seen in the courtroom drama set piece towards the end of the film, where he is found guilty of corruption but wins over the crowd. He begins by saying he is a Bania and he knows the price of everything; this causes laughter because, although many castes have become newly important in the Indian business world,²⁶ the Bania's values lie at the core of many new middle-class values. In his speech, Guru is adamant that he is proud to be a villager and that he will always be part of the public rather than the elite. As such, he is quick to see ways around rules imposed by the rich and by a remote government, just as Gandhi himself was. He is willing to engage in everyday corruption as the only way to get round the rules imposed by the economic restrictions of the Permit or Licence Raj. He never loses his self-respect or bends to the will of others, and he is happy to make fun of himself and others with clever dialogue as well as charm and charisma, so his peers admire rather than fear him. Guru suggests the speed of his mobility is the reason why some fear him, while he is making money for his shareholders as part of his plan to change the country, which he claims is all with him. The "new" here is not a Westernized modernity but a new Indian wealth. He shows a clear link to the common people—an understanding of what the aspiring classes would like to be, how they would live if they were rich. In other words, he becomes a role model for India's new middle classes.

Guru says he wants to establish his business because he does not want to work for the *Gore Sahib* ("the white man") and wear a tie, but the anti-colonial rhetoric is only skin deep in the film and the real struggle is with anyone who obstructs the operation of business. Dhirubhai learnt his business skills,

like many Banias of his generation, as a clerk in a British company, and he used them to his benefit in British-ruled Aden, just as he was able to manipulate the Permit Raj in India. His flexibility and pragmatism meant he was always willing to adapt if it was good for business, so while he gave his polyester company, “Vimal,” an Indian name, his later company, “Reliance,” had an English name, to make it sound reliable, modern, and global, as opposed to the name used in the film, “Shakti (female) power.”

In the set piece at the end of the film—the courtroom speech, a typical Hindi film device through which the justice of the state is put on trial—Guru says that he wants to make an Indian company one of the world’s biggest corporations. However, the film shows that Guru’s life may pay lip service to the rhetoric of nationalist sentiment, but it is not about nation building or creating a new India. His interest is in modernizing business and challenging the old order that wants to prevent him from doing this. He battles initially with his own kind, the merchant classes, but he later wins them over with his charm and his wit, as well as his home-cooked philosophy of a pragmatic decency (sometimes with the emphasis more on the former). Guru’s motto is that he does not take no for an answer.

Dasgupta believes that morality is public and private, and that both are intertwined in a universal ethics, largely imported from the West. His work in the nexus of media–politics–business as a relatively clean area seems very remote today. Guru, however, has a strong ethic about private life and his relationships with family, friends, and employees, but he is willing to bend every rule, even blackmailing and bribing people, to get his work done. Pragmatism overrides everything except family, where his loyalties are absolute. These fairly dubious principles allow Guru to get things done in a manner that is familiar to all Indians during the four decades (ending in 1991) of the Permit Raj, when extensive bureaucratic restrictions were imposed on businesses.

Guru draws on many of the features that have made the historical film such a popular genre. Guru himself represents the new India, the other characters embodying different viewpoints but fleshed out into figures with whom audiences have emotional relationships. The hero of the biopic brings about the end of much of the old India as his focus is only on the present and the future, but the film justifies the decisions and actions he takes to build the new India. The biopic’s focus on one character inserts the viewer into a much closer relationship with him and *Guru* does this well, drawing on the many forms of the Hindi film, including music and the rhetorically polished dialogue, to win the audience over to the character of Gurubhai Desai. The required melodrama means that the love story remains at center of the film. Abhishek Bachchan is cast alongside his future wife, Aishwarya Rai, who plays Sujata Desai. The iconicity of the Bachchan family, who have been Bollywood royalty since the 1970s, is used to great effect as they play the first business family of India.

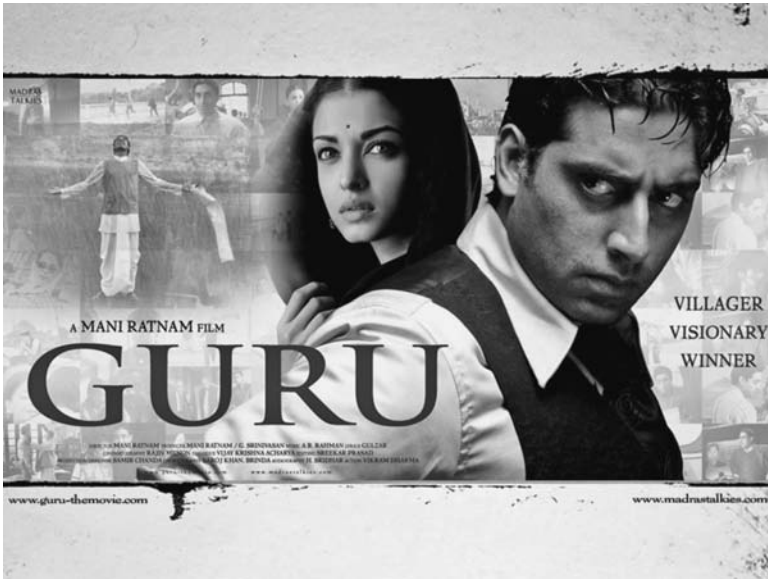


Figure 3.2 Bollywood royalty: Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai. Poster for *Guru* (2007).

Source: Courtesy of Madras Talkies.

Guru was a box office success,²⁷ and was critically acclaimed.²⁸ However, some reviewers thought it was a documentary,²⁹ leading many to criticize it on the grounds that it condoned all of Ambani's activities.³⁰ It is here that an unbridgeable divide in morality between these two groups arises, as the pragmatism of the new middle classes and its businessmen, who see that one has to cross boundaries to get things done, is seen as corruption by others. Businessmen argue that paying someone various amounts to move something along is no different from the Rs.100 bribes allegedly given to the police to avoid fines for jumping lights. This morality based on pragmatism extends this attitude to the view of Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi, whom many have held responsible for the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat post-2002, but who has kept the support of much of the business community because of his understanding of them and the benefits he has given them.

the dirty picture

It is surprising that the success of *Guru* did not create a space for more big-budget biopics. The next major biopic was made by Milan Luthria, a director who had made the dark comedy *Taxi 9211* (2006), followed by *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010), a semi-fictionalized biopic about two major figures of the Bombay underworld, Haji Mastan and Daud Ibrahim. Luthria's

semi-fictionalized biopic, *The Dirty Picture* (2011), is unusual not because it is about the tragic rise and fall of a film actress but because its heroine, Silk, is a female South Indian star, said to be Silk Smitha, the star of semi-porn films. Smitha died aged 35, in a suspected suicide. Although the film is said to draw on the lives of other similar South Indian film stars, Nylon Nalini and Disco Shanti, it has already attracted criticism from Smitha's family who believe that it should not have been made without their consent.³¹ The film was declared a "superhit."³²

Silk Smitha was not much written about, at least not in English or Hindi by film journalists, and there is relatively little about her on the Internet. Yet, she was the subject of much gossip, and the makers of the film said they had to interview people and collect anecdotes that, 16 years after her death, a time that saw great social change, must have made them even more unreliable than usual.³³ Silk Smitha was often referred to as an "erotic actress"; she was known for her famous performances ranging from cabaret to semi-nude scenes, and particularly for donning a bikini to beat up criminals. She was said to have acted in soft-porn films but she was not part of the much-discussed, but little-studied, real porn industry in South India. She was known more among the Hindi-film-viewing public by reputation, and for her appearance as a would-be seducer in *Sadma* (1983), a remake of a Tamil film.

Ekta and Shobha Kapoor of Balaji Films, the producers of *The Dirty Picture*, had earlier made *Ragini MMS* (2011), a sex-horror film which picks up the theme of the circulation of Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) messages of consensual sex filmed without one party (invariably the woman) knowing about it. This is a topic raised in other films outside the mainstream Bollywood circuit such as *Dev. D* (2009) and *LSD: Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010). Ekta Kapoor claimed that the film was meant to be like *Boogie Nights* (1997),³⁴ but the difference of gender pushes *The Dirty Picture* into the more usual arc of the female biopic described by Bingham,³⁵ where a woman lives on her own terms and challenges the male order, but succumbs to the extraordinary pressures which drive her to self-destructive behavior leading ultimately to her death. This story is familiar from the stories of the lives of female stars, whether Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland in Hollywood, or Meena Kumari in the Hindi film industry. Their stories suggest that any woman who is too ambitious for success and fame will end up killing herself and therefore offer a salutary warning for others who might emulate them. These themes are confirmed in Madhur Bhandarkar's films, such as *Page 3* (2005) and *Fashion* (2008), where women who try to pursue careers in the glamorous worlds of media and fashion find the going too tough so they retreat into their expected roles.

In voiceover, filmmaker Abraham (Emran Hashmi) explains how Silk is rejected by her mother after running away the day before her wedding and has to deal with life on her own in the conservative Madras of the 1970s

and 1980s. Initially rejected for being not attractive enough, she gets a role as a film extra, where she seizes the chance to give an erotic performance. Abraham cuts this from the release, stating that he hates her, but she seduces a leading male star, Suryakant (Naseeruddin Shah), in order to get more film roles. Building up a male fan following, she thinks she can manage on her own, stating, "There are three things a film needs: entertainment, entertainment, entertainment—and I am entertainment." However, it is only her erotic displays for which she gains an audience and Surya insults her at an awards ceremony, referring to her as our "dirty secret." Silk uses the function to give a powerful speech in which she says that although the audience calls her "vulgar," "dirty," and "sexy," they are the ones who have made her who she is, and she will carry on making her "dirty pictures." A journalist tells her that what is seen as rebellion today will be seen as freedom tomorrow, to which Silk says that she is not a film that changes after the interval. Given that this speech forms the pre-intermission climax, it sets the scene for the second half of the film, which is concerned with her downfall.

For Silk, mastery of the male domain proves impossible as she is bankrupted after attempting to finance her own film. She is ditched by Surya's younger brother (Tusshar), but Abraham falls in love with her as he himself begins to act in films. However, as she tries to make it on her own, she is tricked into making a porn film, whose sets are raided. Degraded and despairing, she kills herself, dressed as a bride, with Abraham arriving too late to save her.

The main selling point of the film was Vidya Balan who, after appearing in *Parineeta* (2005) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), became one of Hindi cinema's major stars. She also played Guru's wheelchair-bound friend in *Guru*, Amitabh Bachchan's mother in *Paa* (2009), and revealed only her edgier, more sexualized persona in *Ishqiya* (2010). Much was made of her somewhat frumpy image so she seemed an unlikely choice to play Silk. Stories about her gaining 12 kilos and wearing hotpants and low-cut blouses generated further interest in the film in advance.³⁶ Balan's success in carrying off a role that seems incompatible with her star image has led to several major national awards for her performance in the film, while the film itself has mostly been a critical and definitely a commercial success.³⁷

The Dirty Picture was released in three language versions simultaneously: Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu. The film is ostensibly about the South Indian film industry but it draws on references to Hindi films of the 1970s and 1980s rather than re-creating the very different South Indian industry. It shows the sleazy industry in the 1980s at the last moment before liberalization, and the change in the industry when it attempted to move to a more corporate footing. Some of the most memorable scenes, apart from the sex scenes, show how Silk shocked the industry of that time by giving an interview in the bathtub and creating a scene by dancing on a car outside

a party to which she had not been invited. The film contains more sexual explicitness than most Hindi movies but avoids censure, as the emphasis on Silk's tragic ending shows that she is punished for her transgressions. However, the verbosity of the film, with its grandstanding speeches that often verbalize what could have been shown, cools any titillation, and the scenes that should develop her character are often held together only by Balan's performance.

It is easy for a film about the industry to incorporate songs as part of the diegesis. Music director (composer) Bappi Lahiri's cheeky "Ooh La La Tu Hai Meri Fantasy" is in part a parody of big staged songs, yet it is also catchy with appropriately cheesy lyrics and it establishes the character of Suryakant and his films well. Abraham's (Hashmi's) big song "Ishq Sufiyana," which evokes the Sufi love of the soul for the divine, sets his love apart from the others and the Islamicate reference is a link to the courtesan genre where the beautiful, but ever virginal, courtesan seeks love.³⁸ These elements are part of the film's self-reflexive look at the Hindi film industry, as the recycling of elements from the Hindi film is given a greater priority than attempts to show the South Indian industries.

concluding remarks

The current ferment of interest in the biopic in Hindi cinema is clear from the many biographical projects that are announced but then withdrawn or cancelled.³⁹ Perhaps partly as a result of *Guru*'s success, talk began in the late 2000s about making a number of biopics based on heroes of the new middle classes, predominantly from the areas of entertainment and sports. The circulation of life stories in the media—including books, Internet sites, urban legends, gossip, and historical documents—clearly provides a rich source of potential stories. These successful films show that such stories can find an appreciative audience in the cinema marketplace. However, certain characters, such as political leaders, remain too contested—whether they are revered or controversial—to be shown on screen though they are discussed in academic books and circulate in other media. Life stories are more malleable if semi-fictionalized, so they can be told in ways that fit the Hindi film form of mixed genre traits, spectacle, stars, memorable dialogues, and songs. While *Guru* is more realist than many Hindi films, its songs are disruptive, and their music and visual style allow the Hindi film form to triumph over the narrative. A striking example is the beautiful love song, "Tere bin/Without you," whose Islamicate references are totally out of character for *Guru* and Sujata. Silk's story has been changed to emphasize its melodrama of failure and the quest for love, which bring it squarely into the demands of the Hindi film.

The heroes of the new middle classes are public figures even though they have their roots in the private milieu, like Dhirubhai Ambani, whose

creation of a share-owning public for a new liberalized India was most dramatic. However much *Guru* changes values, he remains rooted in traditional values of home and family, with his wife taking a public role only by his side. *Guru* treats its central character with great respect, and indeed Ambani was never associated with any scandal, while Silk's life was always a source of great prurience. Silk's attempt to step into a male domain may be seen to threaten the family values of these classes, but she suffers and fails in her attempt to step into the public arena. Yet, her sari-clad death reminds us of the nightclub singer in *Deewaar*, who keeps a wedding sari in the hope of marriage, a dream shared by the courtesan in *Pakeezah/The Pure* (1971). In other words, the films uphold the values of the new middle classes. They likewise acknowledge an interest in sexuality—within marriage—and the importance of traditional family bonds and structures over a public life of service and morality.

The two films discussed above concern two major preoccupations: money and sex. The Indian press remains fascinated by the Ambani family's wealth and *Guru* emphasizes the role Ambani's shrewdness, charm, and private morality played in the founding of this empire, which can also be read as the story of the emergence of the new globally powerful India from its socialist postcolonial roots. *The Dirty Picture* similarly safely channels current interest about women's ambition and sexuality as Silk's death can be interpreted as her "punishment." Both films draw on conventions of the Hindi film, such as the courtroom speech, and the tragic end of the woman who pursues her driving ambition. However, the latter undermines this regressive argument as the film let the actress Vidya Balan emerge as the first female star for over a decade to have a major box office opening. These two films have undoubtedly led to producers reconsidering the risks of the genre, though it is too early to say whether the form will flourish.

The biopic, or the quasi-biopic, which tells the life stories of figures who are important to the "new India" may be the best guide available to help us understand how Indians see themselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century as they shape and are shaped by the values of the new middle classes. This dominant social group continues to expand its control of cultural capital, thereby reinforcing its position as the key player in shaping the nation's self-image. The role of the biopic in mainstream Hindi cinema forms is key to our understanding of this group.

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notes

1. See Rachel Dwyer, "The Case of the Missing Mahatma: Gandhi and the Hindi Cinema," *Public Culture* 23, no. 2 (2011).
2. See Dwyer, "Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Modern India," *Asian Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2011); and Dwyer, "The Case of the Missing Mahatma."
3. See Dwyer, "The Biopic in Hindi Cinema," in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, eds. Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
4. See Dwyer, "Zara Hatke!: The New Middle Classes and the Segmentation of Hindi Cinema," in *A Way of Life: Being Middle-Class in Contemporary India*, ed. Henrike Donner (London: Routledge, 2011).
5. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
6. See Glenn Man, "Editor's Introduction," in "The Biopic," ed. Glenn Man, special issue, *Biography* 23, no.1 (2000).
7. See Dwyer, "Bollywood's India."
8. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 178.
9. See Rosie Thomas, "Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality in Mainstream Hindi Film," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis and London, UK: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Ravi Vasudevan, "The Meanings of Bollywood," in *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood: The Many Forms of Hindi Cinema*, eds. Rachel Dwyer and Jerry Pinto (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).
10. See Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books and Others, 2002).
11. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 10–11; Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 172–213.
12. See Dwyer, "The Case of the Missing Mahatma."
13. The term "documentary" is used in everyday speech to mean a film without entertainment, which could include the documentary genre itself, but also films that belong to realist cinema, which Das Gupta has accurately called "India's unpopular cinema." Chidananda Das Gupta, *Seeing is Believing: Selected Writings on Cinema* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 73–97.
14. See Dwyer, "Hindi Films and their Audiences," in "Being Here, Now: Some Insights into Indian Cinema," ed. Shanay Jhaveri, special issue, *Marg, A Magazine of the Arts* 61, no. 3 (2010); Dwyer, "Zara Hatke!"; Dwyer, "The Biopic in Hindi Cinema;" and Vasudevan, "The Meanings of Bollywood."
15. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 33.
16. Shakuntala Banaji, "Seduced 'Outsiders' versus Sceptical 'Insiders': *Slumdog Millionaire* through its Re/Viewers," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 7, no. 1 (2010), accessed August 28, 2011, www.participations.org/Volume%207/Issue%201/banaji.htm.

17. This section is based on discussions with the persons cited in the Acknowledgments.
18. The problems experienced when Richard Attenborough made *Gandhi* and the issues relating to the political biopic are discussed in Dwyer, "The Case of the Missing Mahatma." For protests about the first cycle of biopics, see Dwyer "The Biopic in Hindi Cinema."
19. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 6.
20. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 51.
21. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 72–76.
22. It is interesting that both films have a strong connection with the South Indian film industry. *Guru* was made by a leading Tamil film director and much of the film was shot in South India rather than Bombay and Gujarat, while *The Dirty Picture* is about the South Indian industry but seems to refer more to the Bombay industry. Most of the films in the second cycle do not have a Southern connection.
23. See Hamish McDonald, *The Polyester Prince: The Rise of Dhirubhai Ambani* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Hamish McDonald, *Ambani & Sons* (New Delhi: Lotus Roli Books, 2010); and Gita Piramal, *Business Maharajas* (New Delhi, Penguin, 1996).
24. Personal communication. See also Krittivas Mukherjee, "Rags-to-Riches Story," *The Star Online*, January 17, 2007, accessed August 21, 2011, <http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/1/17/movies/16534800&sec=movies>
25. Mithun began as an actor in realist cinema but became a dancing star in the Indian disco genre, which was hugely popular in India and overseas, before entering the C-circuit with lucrative almost home-productions (the term C-circuit is widely used in India to refer to a lower grade of audience below the A and B circuits). See Sudha Rajagopalan, *Leave Disco Dancer Alone! Indian Cinema and Soviet Movie-Going after Stalin* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008).
26. See Harish Damodaran, *India's New Capitalists: Caste, Business and Industry in a Modern Nation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
27. One report notes that for the majority of the year the box office "was dominated by one film only: Mani Ratnam's *Guru* . . . perhaps the first biopic to click big at the box office in recent times." Anonymous, "Box Office: **The 2007 Box Office Report and Classifications**," *IBOS—The Complete Channel on Indian Film Industry Box Office, Popular Culture and Media*, January 7, 2008, accessed May 20, 2011, www.ibosnetwork.com/newsmanager/templates/template1.aspx?articleid=21086&zoneid=4
28. For example, by Rajeev Masand, "Masand's Verdict: *Guru*," *IBN Live*, June 17, 2007, accessed August 20, 2011, <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/masands-verdict-thumbs-up-for-guru/top/31056-8.html>.
29. Taran Adarsh, "Guru," *Bollywood Hungama*, January 12, 2007, accessed May 21, 2011, www.bollywoodhungama.com/moviemicro/criticreview/id/539430. For the meaning of "documentary," see note 13.
30. Khalid Mohamed, "Review: *Guru*: Good Value for Mani," *Hindustan Times*, January 12, 2007, accessed August 20, 2011, www.hindustantimes.com/REVIEW-Guru-Good-value-for-Mani/Article1-199345.aspx.
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33. Gayatri Jayaraman, "Silk route," *Livemint*, September 30, 2011, accessed March 4, 2012, www.livemint.com/2011/09/30210746/Silk-Route.html?h=A3.
34. Agencies, "Ekta calls 'Dirty Picture' India's Version of 'Boogie Nights'," *Jagran Post*, May 16, 2011, accessed March 4, 2012, <http://post.jagran.com/Ekta-calls-Dirty-Picture-Indias-version-of-Boogie-Nights-1305535016>.
35. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 10.
36. ANI, "I gained 12 kilograms for *The Dirty Picture*: Vidya Balan," *Hindustan Times*, November 30, 2011, accessed March 5, 2012, www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Bollywood/I-gained-12-kilograms-for-The-Dirty-Picture-Vidya-Balan/Article1-776180.aspx.
37. Anonymous, "*The Dirty Picture* Opening: Top 5 of 2011, Top 10 of All Times," *The Times of India*, December 6, 2011, accessed March 5, 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-12-06/box-office/30481515_1_yash-raj-films-vikram-bhatt-dirty-picture.
38. Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London, New York, and Delhi: Routledge, 2006), 116–122.
39. This includes films that are not biopics, yet they use the actual names of their characters, such as the story of a model murdered at a celebrity party, *No One Killed Jessica* (2011). A biopic of a soldier and runner turned bandit, Paan Singh Tomar, directed by Tigmanshu Dhulia, was released in March 2012. At the time of writing, *Rang Rasiya/Colours of Passion*, a biopic about the father of Indian art made by Ketan Mehta (the director of *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey*) that screened at the London Film Festival in 2008, is still waiting for a general release. Two biopics of Guru Dutt, one of India's leading directors of the 1950s were planned, but both have been shelved.

recycling historical lives

f o u r

south korean period biopics
and the culture content
industry

y u n m i h w a n g

The biopic or biographical film dramatizes, whether in part or whole, the life of historical personalities on screen. What Robert Burgoyne calls “perhaps the most familiar form of cinematic historiography and . . . by far the largest subgenre of historical filmmaking” in Hollywood,¹ the biopic has a substantial presence in Korean cinema. By presenting small layers of national history through the life of recognizable figures from the past, the genre first rose to prominence in the Golden Age of Korean cinema of the 1960s. In the 1970s, the public’s interest in biographical stories fell dramatically when heroic biopics subservient to the dominant ideology flooded local screens. Since the beginning of the 2000s, biopics have started to make a comeback, as the phenomenal growth of the national film industry made space for nearly forgotten and dismissed film cycles to reemerge. This time, shedding its propagandistic mantle and appealing to popular taste, the genre has been riding the tides of the rising “culture content industry” that promotes ancillary products and synergy effects.

In this chapter, I look at three revivals of famous figures from Korean history—a notorious tyrant in *Wang-ui Namja/King and the Clown* (2005), a master

of erotic painting in *Mi-indo/Portrait of a Beauty* (2008), and a famous courtesan in *Hwang Jin Yi* (2007).² Using these films as primary examples, I focus on how historical lives are rendered as “content” to be circulated in a number of cultural domains under the logic of “One Source-Multi Use” (OSMU) that guides the national creative industry. In particular, I demonstrate how the films themselves can be positioned within the matrix of other commodities based on historical figures, and, thereby, produce further intertexts. Commercial imperatives shift the emphasis away from the issue of authenticity and fidelity in the biopic genre and suggest a new model for understanding the liberal construction of historicity in popular culture. Through my analysis, I address the dynamic interplay of history-making in the biopic genre and heritage-making in the culture content industry.

Expensive, visually striking, and commercial historical dramas, known as *sageuk* in Korean, have been performing strongly at the Korean box office since the early 2000s. Period biopics, in particular, occupy an important space in this *sageuk* trend in both film and television. The popularity of biographical narratives in cinema started in the late 1950s in Korea, at a time when the historical genre became the driving force in resuscitating the national film industry in the post-Liberation and post-war period.³ Particularly fashionable were those biopics that dramatized the struggle for political power and survival inside the royal court such as *Danjong Aesa/Tragedy of Prince Danjong* (1956), *Janghuibin/Lady Jang* (1961), and *Inmok Daebi/Queen Dowager Immok* (1962).⁴ With the arrival of extremely nationalistic films in the mid-1970s, biopics arguably started to serve a rather different function that was more politicized than economic.⁵

The continued regulatory revisions of the Motion Pictures Law and the proclamation of the authoritarian *Yushin* (“Revitalizing”) System in 1973 by president Park Chung Hee, together with the popularity of foreign imports and the exponential growth of television, marginalized the film industry.⁶ At this time, heroic biopics showcasing the achievements of male leaders who deliver the nation from foreign invasions or great famines came to prominence; a sense of contamination can be detected in a once populist genre, indicating that it had “sold out” to political maneuvers.⁷

Great King Sejong, whose life is dramatized in *Sejong Daewang/King Sejong the Great* (1978), and admiral Yi Sun-sin, who appears in both *Seongwoong Yi Sun-sin/Yi Sun-sin, the Great Admiral* (1971) and *Nanjung Ilgi/A War Diary* (1977), became the two iconic figures of this public indoctrination. It was not the potential for lucrative success that made these films viable; indeed, many historical biopics were designated as state-policy films and generously given film awards, grants, and other incentives. A telling example is the aforementioned *King Sejong the Great*. It was one of the most expensive films of its time, but was never shown in theaters.⁸ In Korean film history, as a result, the biopic genre attests to historical trauma, invariably reviving memories of the dictatorship.

Even so, the biopic was given new life in the 2000s as Korean cinema strengthened its impact on the domestic market, while increasingly enjoying international recognition. The number of films made is not as high as when the genre was at its initial peak in the 1960s, or when it was pursued for political ends in the decade that followed. With regard to content, there are detectable new features in the present biopic cycle, notably the popularity of the “faction” mode that explicitly blends historical fact and fiction. This goes hand in hand with one of the most crucial *industrial* factors behind the Korean period biopic renaissance—the evolving national culture content industry and its aim to create synergy effects.

historical biopics and the one source-multi use drive

Since the mid-1990s, the South Korean government has endeavored to revolutionize the nation’s approach to media industries and reap the economic benefits of its cultural sectors. If the previous authoritarian regimes tightly controlled and regulated the film industry business through censorship and entry barriers, the strategy now is to nurture competitiveness through legal and financial resources in the present neo-liberal global economy.⁹ The inauguration of the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2001, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT), is indicative of its ambition to galvanize the media and cultural industries. KOCCA, whose national budget was \$220 million in 2012, is tasked with overseeing the planning, production, and utilization of culture content.

KOCCA’s mission is to “establish a comprehensive support system to nurture the content industry, and aim to develop Korea as one of the world’s top 5 content powerhouses.”¹⁰ What is noteworthy here is the adoption of the word “content,” as opposed to “product,” which underscores the importance of a digitally based raw material, ready to be applied and disseminated through a number of devices or media platforms. This emphasis on content ties in with KOCCA’s OSMU operating principle, a uniquely Korean approach that supports content management. Conceptually, OSMU is similar to horizontal integration, tie-ins, and the branding and franchising of cultural products, where the success of a piece of content is measured by its wide-ranging impact.¹¹ In other words, KOCCA stipulates that the initial idea (content) should not be exhausted by one product but must be reformatted and sent to different markets to generate additional profit. The phrase was enthusiastically embraced as the neologism *par excellence* in popular discourse, as maximization of profit seemed like a suitable goal towards which both KOCCA and the industries can work. Since the general framework was laid down, industry practitioners have been encouraged, but not forced, to make use of the many schemes and initiatives set up by KOCCA.¹² It is too soon to conclude

exactly how KOCCA is influencing the shape of Korea's creative industries; however, it is clear that the business-oriented philosophy of cultural content management is deemed attractive to both policy makers and industrial agents.

With regards to the film industry, costume/period dramas featuring historical personalities have proven to be particularly suited to the OSMU paradigm. First, the *recognizable* iconography of the historical figures engrained in the collective memory is a merit unique to the biopic genre, which works advantageously in OSMU adaptations. For instance, the scandalous story of the late fifteenth-century tyrant, Yeonsan, and the *femme fatale*, Nok-su, has been told time and again in different media. *King and the Clown*, a film that features both historical figures, heavily relies on the characters' fame to connect with the audience. In addition, the fact that almost all period biopics use market-proven fiction pieces as a source material makes the genre extremely OSMU friendly.¹³ Popular fiction novels place real historical figures in fictional situations, and are easily adapted for biographical television programs and films. All the films discussed in this chapter are based on either a stage play (*King and the Clown*) or a historical novel (*Portrait of a Beauty* and *Hwang Jin Yi*).

If a particular aspect of the biopic proves successful other products that follow can embellish that tested element. For example, in *King and the Clown* the representation of feminine masculinity through the character Gong-gil, a point to which I will return later, was deemed to be one of the main reasons why the film gathered such phenomenal publicity. Therefore, the two musicals that followed the film, first *Yi* and then *The Story of Gong-gil*, accentuated the androgynous image of Gong-gil in order to sustain the public's interest in this character. In this case, Gong-gil's femininity was clearly the prime content that was recycled in future adaptations.

At the same time, dependent on careful market research and a needs analysis, a product in the OSMU chain must be able to stamp a mark of distinction upon its release. This is where product differentiation becomes key to accelerating the commercial chain. The television drama *Hwang Jin-yi* (KBS, 2006) and the film *Hwang Jin Yi* (2007) are example of this.¹⁴ Released only a year apart, both are biographical costume dramas about the eponymous sixteenth-century courtesan. Both are also based on novels written by contemporary writers; Kim Tak-hwan in the case of the former, and Hong Seok-jung in the case of the latter. After the success of the television drama *Hwang Jin-yi*, the makers of the film strategically chose to present a different, fresh, and appealing vision of this famous person. This is most clearly suggested in the contrasting color schemes. While the television drama is composed with a striking red and other primary colors, the film uses a muted palette, dressing the heroine in a luxurious black *hanbok* (traditional Korean costume) on the film poster.¹⁵ Such choices underline the fact that OSMU biographical content is commonly determined by

product differentiation, rather than by the hierarchy of adaptation that demands fidelity to an original and historical truth.

The case of Hwang Jin-yi also allows us to consider the competitive market aspect of the OSMU drive. The director of the film *Hwang Jin Yi*, Chang Yoon-hyun, expressed his feelings about the “rival” television drama *Hwang Jin-yi* by saying:

I realized how quickly a television drama can be made. I first heard the news that a broadcasting station was making a Hwang Jin-yi drama when our team was already working on the script and casting the leads. By the time we got ready for production, the drama had already aired, completing the series even before we had finished shooting.¹⁶

Rather than being controlled by a horizontally integrated content distribution system—the preferred way in which multi-national media conglomerates, such as TimeWarner and Sony, run business—Korean popular media is relatively decentralized in nature, run locally by smaller players and *jaebeol* groups.¹⁷ Even the biggest media company in Korea, CJ Entertainment, predominantly operates within the film industry and rarely branches out into other fields like publishing, television, or merchandising. This means that the biopic trend is realized through the participation of different production companies and industry agencies, creating a situation where products within a content chain can be set against each other. To go back to my previous point, the Hwang Jin-yi film and television biopics were released too close to each other and could potentially have threatened each other’s impact on the market. While underpinning the consumption of a historical life on screen, such an industrial praxis limits a sustained content boom and is evidence of conflicting interests and diverging industrial motivations.

With this institutional and industrial context in mind, I will now examine the way in which historical lives have become “content” to be circulated through various media. As noted above, the following case studies can be positioned within the matrix of other commodities connected to the historical subject, with the relationship between them dictating and illuminating the internal logic of each text.

king and the clown

The tenth king of the Joseon Dynasty, Yeonsan (1476–1506), is one of the most infamous tyrants in Korean history. Historical records disapprove of this psychologically unbalanced and ruthless ruler, who is thought to have been traumatized by the tragic death of his mother, Queen Yun. Yeonsan tried to compensate for the loss by seeking corrupt pleasures and indulging in an extravagant lifestyle with his favorite concubine Jang Nok-su, a *femme*

fatale figure who expedited his fall. The dramatic story of King Yeonsan and Nok-su continues to captivate the general public, and the number of radio dramas, popular fictions, and films produced over the years is evidence of this fascination.

Just when one might assume that the Yeonsan and Nok-su narrative had been exhausted, the couple returned at the turn of the millennium, in the play *Yi* (2000) and its screen adaptation *King and the Clown*. Playwright Kim Tae-woong's hit stage play radically reinvents the life of Yeonsan. Taking his cue from a brief mention of a defiant court jester in the official historical record, Kim developed the full-blown story of Gong-gil and his fellow clowns from an itinerant entertainment group, or *namsadang*. Using *sohakjihui*, a traditional Korean mode of performance centered on banter, *Yi* imagines Yeonsan's encounter with the world of the clowns.

Closely following the plot of *Yi*, the film adopts the less obscure title *Wang-ui Namja*, or "King's man" in English, instead of "Yi." This decision foregrounds the role of Gong-gil as well as the homosexual subtext. Breaking away from earlier screen portrayals of a terrible, sex-crazed, and self-destructive tyrant, Yeonsan is treated rather sympathetically in the film as a man with oedipal longings for his mother. The film tones down the romantic liaison between the King and Gong-gil, which is more pronounced in the play. It also strives to appeal to a broader audience, especially through the supporting clown trio, who provide slapstick humor while easing the homoerotic overtones.

A film with a modest (US)\$6 million budget,¹⁸ *King and the Clown* became the highest grossing film in South Korea after selling 12.3 million admission tickets nationwide in early 2006. As the whole nation immediately fell under the spell of the film, the media heralded the news of multiple viewings, the emergence of hardcore fans of the actor Lee Jun-ki (Gong-gil), and the film's popularity among 40 to 60 year olds, the demographic least likely to go to the cinema.¹⁹ *King and the Clown* inscribed its heritage "event" status through a massive viewing phenomenon; the media even highlighted that the President and the First Lady visited the cinema to see the film.²⁰ The outstanding success of this costume drama without a bankable star bewildered both film critics and industry insiders alike. There was speculation that the reason behind the film's success was the *subdued* representation of homosexuality and the *overt* capitalization of soft masculinity, which struck a chord with the sexual politics and public discourse of the Korean social imaginary.²¹ In the end, the controversy surrounding these two aspects played a great part in registering *King and the Clown* in the social discourse and boosting its admissions.

According to a report by the Korea Culture and Tourism Policy Institute the total revenue of *King and the Clown*, including tickets and confectionery sales, reached (US)\$110 million, nearly 20 times its original budget.²² A model example of the OSMU logic, the film then generated a wide range



Figure 4.1 Gong-gil, the star attraction in *King and the Clown* (2005).

of licensed merchandise and tie-ins. Coinciding with the release of the film, the play *Yi* returned to the stage in December 2005. A joint promotional offer was established giving 30 percent discounts on play tickets to those who presented a cinema ticket. After 44 successful shows in Seoul with 30,000 tickets sold, *Yi* then toured the rest of the country in January 2006.²³ In October 2006, exploiting the popularity of the “movie-to-musical” or *movical* trend, the musical version of *Yi* was staged.²⁴ Then in 2007, the Seoul Performing Arts Company launched *The Story of Gong-gil*, a new musical based on *King and the Clown*, which made Gong-gil the most important character in the show. As is clear from the show’s tagline that read “the cross-dressing clown Gong-gil and his most beautiful love story in the world,” the musical fully capitalized on the “Gong-gil factor.”

In October 2007 permission was granted for *The Story of Gong-gil* to be performed in the grounds of Gyeonghui Palace, once an official residence of the Joseon kings. This attracted both locals and foreign tourists, who came to watch a musical with traditional cultural motifs in a historic royal palace.²⁵ The musical was subsequently shown in Shanghai and Beijing.²⁶ In this way, *King and the Clown* and its ancillaries functioned as ambassadors for Korean culture and history abroad, riding the tide of the cultural export drive and the Korean Wave, or *hallyu* phenomenon.²⁷

The publishing and music industries also took notice of the *King and the Clown* trend; a string of historical novels have been published recovering and examining the life of Yeonsan. Scriptwriter Kim Hyun-jeong also published a novelization of the film—*King and the Clown: The Movie Story Book*—complete with full-color pages of stills. In addition, Art Service, a subsidiary of Cinema Service, the main distributor of the film, released a number of different DVD packages ranging from a single feature DVD to a box set containing the theatrical release, extended version, original soundtrack, and the published

version of the play *Yi*. Lastly, Lee Byung-woo's original soundtrack became one of the highest selling records of 2006.

The film also succeeded in launching a wide variety of merchandising. In January 2006, online store "GMarket" opened a charity auction for the hand-puppet set featured in the film, which quickly sold for US \$1,800.²⁸ Other items, including the sword, bow and arrow, and different clown masks, were also auctioned off. Ardent fans who did not win any items in the auction were not to be disappointed as Art Service launched themed merchandise in April that year, including the hand-puppet set, a miniature five mask frame set, four original posters signed by the actors, and a set of six *King and the Clown* bookmarks.²⁹ On top of this, Anseong, a small satellite city near Seoul, and home to *namsadang* performance, has experienced a surge of tourists since the film's release. There are now guided-tours around the Anseong area and people flock to the *namsadang* instruction center to learn the dying art of tightrope walking. These are all examples of how cultural tourism and the promotion of national culture were made possible through the popularity of the biopic.³⁰

King and the Clown marks the high point of the period-biopic trend in contemporary Korean cinema in terms of financial returns and socio-cultural impact. The success of the film's value-adding and lucrative merchandising model was such that later mainstream commercial features have undeniably been influenced by it. By grafting the clown world into the familiar Yeonsan narrative, the film revived the economic fortunes of the Yeonsan biopic and effectively suggested a recommendable OSMU model. By avoiding negative controversy while boosting its crossover consumption through gender and sexuality the film carefully negotiated the full potential of the material. Industry and consumer interests struck a chord and, reinforced by the government's agenda to expand the culture content industry, the profitable so-called "*King and the Clown* phenomenon" came about. The film's successful convergence across media also demonstrates the cultural and commercial ramifications of the OSMU drive. If *King and the Clown* represents the prime example of an all-round content distribution in the biopic genre, the next case study, *Portrait of a Beauty*, draws our attention to how different media can successfully compete to take full advantage of a biographical content boom.

portrait of a beauty

Portrait of a Beauty is part of another successful biographical OSMU cycle. The second feature of Jeon Yun-su, the director of the debut hit *Sikgaek/Le Grand Chef* (2007), the film was listed as the seventh highest grossing Korean film of 2008, no mean feat for an 18-rated costume drama. *Portrait of a Beauty* revolves around the fictionalized history of an eighteenth-century painter, Shin Yun-bok, who must disguise herself as a man to be accepted into the

Royal Academy of Painting. In this section, I examine the economic motivations involved in filming the life of (female) artist Shin Yun-bok by comparing the film with the television drama *Baram-ui Hwawon/Painter in the Wind* (SBS, 2008). Broadening the discussion, I chart the contours of the Shin Yun-bok phenomenon within the Korean cultural scene and consider how it is implicated in the reinvention of the Korean aesthetic heritage.

Although his paintings have enjoyed continued popularity, little is known about the life of Shin Yun-bok (1758–1813?). He specialized in genre painting, capturing the customs and lifestyles of people from all classes. With detailed brushstrokes he depicted upper-class libertines, lovers in secret *rendezvous*, and *gisaeng* (professional female entertainers) in their quarters, never failing to capture the sensuous ambiance.³¹ His collected works, *Transmission of the Spirit of Hyewon*, are listed as National Treasure No. 135; “Portrait of a Beauty” and “Scenery on *Dano* Day” are two of the best-known paintings in this collection. Together with his contemporary Kim Hong-do, he is one of the most celebrated painters in Korea.

Shin Yun-bok was revived in the 2000s, on both the small and big screens, where the OSMU logic validated and even accelerated the economic interest in his life. Riding the crest of a booming culture content industry and its ambition to animate the desire for the past, the discovery of Shin translated into the rediscovery of the period in which he lived and worked. His audacious works were used as evidence that Confucian Korea was not merely a “stifling, straight-laced society” and that the “ancestors were gentle, open people with a romantic and humorous streak.”³² Aided by the fact that very few historical records about his life are available, this seems to have spurred on the publishing, television, and film industries’ efforts to *invent* Shin Yun-bok.

The first example is a three-volume historical novel *Painter in the Wind* (Yi Jeong-myeong, 2007). This is also the first cultural text to posit that Shin may have been a cross-dressing female artist. In this novel, Shin is rendered as a talented student at the Royal Academy. Alongside her teacher Kim Hong-do, she investigates a number of mysterious cases concerning the royal paintings in order to aid the King. When the book became sensationally popular in 2008, many critics became concerned about the limits of artistic license. An Hwi-jun, the then head of the Cultural Heritage Committee, called it “the worst case of historical distortion,” stating that, “changing the gender of a historical figure pushes the boundaries of historical fiction.”³³ The concern was that younger readers would take the novel at face value and confuse the real Shin Yun-bok with the fictional female version.

Soon after the book’s publication, SBS (Seoul Broadcasting Station) acquired the rights and produced a sixteen-episode television drama with the same title. Closely following the book, this teleplay combined comedy, action, and suspense with a star-crossed love story. Gender nonrecognition

and homoerotic tension arise when her (male) teacher Kim and (female) *gisaeng* Jeong-hyang both fall in love with Shin. Jeong-hyang even pledges an oath of everlasting devotion to Shin, while Shin's feelings towards Jeong-hyang remain ambiguous. The ensuing quasi-lesbian love affair, despite containing no physical interaction, was considered controversial for prime-time television.³⁴

Although independent of them, the script for the film *Portrait of a Beauty* was being developed around the same time as the novel and its television adaptation were released. In the movie Shin Yun-bok again appears as a woman in men's clothes. However, unlike *Painter in the Wind*, *Portrait of a Beauty* works mainly as a melodrama (with no murder mysteries to solve) and thus distances itself from the television production in terms of genre and target audience. Due to the strict censorship of sexual material on public television, *Painter in the Wind* shied away from showing naked female torsos in the paintings, not to mention actual naked bodies. The 18-rated feature film, in contrast, was able to engage more fully with the explicit nature of the celebrated paintings. What is more, the risqué paintings function as a narrative nodal point in *Portrait of a Beauty*: pieces of a puzzle to be used to reconstruct the life of the artist. Each painting is given autobiographical weight in the film, in a manner similar to other fictional biopics like *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Becoming Jane* (2007), where works by the artists provide clues to help imagine the lives of their creators.

For this reason, *Portrait of a Beauty* was deemed to be original and thus marketable, despite being released as soon after the television series had ended. In fact, the film was designed to target a more mature adult audience, who were already familiar with the tame *Painter of the Wind* but wanted something more sensual. Accordingly, the film's poster campaign was one of the most erotically charged teaser promotions of that year (Figure 4.2).

Poised like a blue flower in full bloom, leading actress Kim Min-seon wearing only a skirt that billows out around her exposes her bare back, while her hair is fashioned like a man in traditional times. The image is accompanied by a subtitle that reads "A Sensational Joseon-period Melo-(drama)." The popular media promised titillating sex scenes, and Kim's determination to "show everything without holding anything back" was reported in pre-release interviews and publicity materials.³⁵ Borrowing the tropes of the erotic genre, which was extremely popular in Korea in the 1980s, the film imagines Shin as a female artist and heroine of a tragic romance.³⁶ At the same time, the stylized eroticism endows the film with an up-market facade and artistic merit for wider appeal, a strategy proven to be profitable at the box office by other costume dramas, *Seukaendeul/Untold Scandal* (2003) and *Eumran Seosaeng/Forbidden Quest* (2006).

By cleverly distinguishing itself from the television series, *Portrait of a Beauty* played a part in propelling the OSMU Shin Yun-bok boom. As the film



Figure 4.2 An erotic mixing of male and female imagery. Poster for *Portrait of a Beauty* (2008).

Source: Courtesy of Yedang Entertainment.

entered into the OSMU chain relatively late, following on from the successful novel and television drama, it did not generate the same kind of impressive profit or ancillary products as *King and the Clown*. Even so, *Portrait of a Beauty*, together with products from other media, maintained focus on the artist. For example, after the publication of the book *Painter in the Wind*, a string of other fictionalized biographies of Shin Yun-bok appeared on the market. The popularity of these fiction products has resulted in the proliferation of academic works written by art historians trying to rectify

the many myths surrounding the painter. In effect, the publishing industry has become an arena where historians and other interest groups have fought to reclaim the painter.

What is perhaps most interesting is that the public's fascination with the painter's (fictionalized) life translated into increased interest in his art. The original painting, "Portrait of a Beauty," and his other major works are housed in the Gansong Art Gallery, a small private gallery in Seoul. In October 2008, when the television drama was aired, the gallery held its bi-annual exhibition for two weeks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the exhibition attracted an exceptionally large number of visitors and people had to wait for hours just to enter the gallery.³⁷ No doubt many went to see the paintings after having consumed the fictional biographies in the popular media. In this sense, one can see how the Shin Yun-bok boom expanded into the middle-class leisure activity of gallery-going, thereby diversifying the types of cultural consumption manifest within the national heritage industry. Yet, as with other OSMU-driven projects, after the appeal of the "content" reached its peak, related products quickly disappeared from the market. The OSMU Shin Yun-bok boom led to a passionate but ultimately short-lived national obsession with this artist, whose life remains as mysterious as ever. All in all, *Portrait of a Beauty* fully exploited the success of *Painter in the Wind* on the small screen, and it was positioned as an intriguing and salacious update on the artist.

conclusion: the case of *hwang jin yi*

This chapter has explored the contexts of production and circulation for biopics in contemporary Korean cinema. Mixing fact and fiction to revive a historical life, *King and the Clown* and *Portrait of a Beauty* made a positive impact on the media market, and demonstrated the type of industrial operation required to make an OSMU chain successful. Indicating the economic possibilities of period biopics, both films worked harmoniously with other related products, thereby aiding and sustaining the history boom. One should note, however, that due to the unpredictable relationship between production trends and consumption patterns not all OSMU biopics have been a hit. *Hwang Jin Yi*, a film I mentioned briefly in the introduction to this chapter is a particularly good illustration of the mixed fortunes of this genre and the impact external forces can have on this industrial configuration.

A much anticipated big-budget costume biopic, *Hwang Jin Yi* is based on a novel by the aforementioned North Korean writer Hong Seok-jung and was conceived with the hope of setting a precedent for joint North-South Korean filmmaking. Such cultural border-crossing was possible due to the reconciliatory and cooperative mood between the two states in the mid-2000s. A legendary courtesan known for her wit and charm, Hwang lived

in Songdo, a city now called Gae-seong that is located in North Korea. When it was introduced to South Korea in 2003, the novel was received with enthusiasm as it contains authentic regional dialect and rich geographical descriptions of locations that are unreachable to readers in the South. Through the life of Hwang Jin-yi, therefore, the novel carved a space in which to articulate commonality, affirming a shared cultural heritage between North and South. The filmic adaptation made in South Korea, however, suppressed almost all of the North Korean flavor, especially the authentic language. While it is possible to assume that the makers of the film were simply trying to make the material more accessible to the South Korean viewers, one must also remember the political misfortunes that interfered with the film's production. In October 2006, North Korea conducted a surprise nuclear test, immediately straining international relations and stalling all cultural and economic exchanges between the two states. The ambitious plan to shoot the film in the actual places Hwang lived in North Korea became little more than a faint hope.

As a result, instead of highlighting the cultural prestige and the authenticity present in the source novel, the film used modernized production, costume designs, and the star appeal of Song Hye-kyo to fashion the image of the heroine. A relative newcomer to film acting, Song is a popular model, television actress, and *hallyu* star who has a significant following in the greater Asian market. *Hwang Jin Yi* relied heavily on her star persona, with the mise-en-scène and cinematography, as well as the narrative and marketing strategies serving to maintain and accentuate her mainstream image. The "revolutionary" and "class-conscious" Hwang Jin-yi character originally conceived by Hong Seok-jung was eclipsed by the powerful "star-as-star"³⁸ image of Song Hye-kyo.

The star-centered marketing strategy culminated in the Korean *Vogue* cover that coincided with the general release of the film (June 2007). The cover image strikingly resembles that of Kirsten Dunst posing on the cover of American *Vogue* (September 2006) as the titular character in Sofia Coppola's period biopic *Marie Antoinette*. This direct reference to the *Marie Antoinette-Vogue* connection branded the film *Hwang Jin Yi* as a luxurious fashion movie and a teen romance. Any connection between the adaptation and the North Korean novel was effectively diluted in the process. This repositioning came at a cost—the loss of the unique association with the North, the cultural other. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly why the film fared so disastrously at the box office, it is certain that it failed to negotiate the different interests involved—the desire to forge a unified North–South cultural heritage, and the need to make a fashionable biopic heavily reliant on its star's image. Unlike *Portrait of a Beauty*, which sensibly exploited the television series *Painter in the Wind* and other Shin Yun-bok contents to promote itself, *Hwang Jin Yi* sadly missed the mark.³⁹ The story

of this film therefore exemplifies the perils balancing ideological, political, and commercial interests when trying to reconstruct a famous figure's life.

To conclude, recent South Korean period biopics bear the mark of the rapidly evolving culture content industry, stipulated by the logic of capital-generating ancillary products. The films are configured within a fully functioning industrial paradigm, where the governmental body KOCCA has established OSMU as a motto that guides cultural production, where the industry is competing and collaborating to find more tantalizing ways of manipulating history, and where the audience welcomes and consumes the wide choice of historical personality-themed products available. The three films discussed in this chapter evince different ways in which period biopics can position themselves in the market. *King and the Clown* and *Portrait of a Beauty* are excellent examples of how the cross-promotion of biographical narratives in different media can lead to financial gains, whereas *Hwang Jin Yi* reminds us of the high stakes involved in the national mobilization of history and memory on the big screen.

notes

1. Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 16.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of titles are my own.
3. Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910 until the end of World War II. Not long after the Liberation in August 1945, the Korean peninsula was divided and administered by a US–USSR Joint Commission. The bloody civil war between the communist North and the capitalist US-backed South broke out in 1950 and ended in 1953.
4. Gil-seong Yi, "The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception," in *The Scenery of Modernity: Korean Film History and Production Design*, ed. Sun-ha Cha (Seoul: Sodo, 2001), 280–282. In Korean.
5. Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Cinema: History, Resistance, Democratic Imagination* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 49–52.
6. For more on the political situation of the period, see C.I. Eugene Kim, "Korea at the Crossroads: The Birth of the Fourth Republic," *Pacific Affairs* 46 (1973): 218–231.
7. Hye Seung Chung, "Reinventing the Historical Drama, De-Westernizing a French Classic: Genre, Gender and the Transnational Imaginary in *Untold Scandal*," *Post Script* 27, no. 3 (2008): 105.
8. Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 279 (n. 27).
9. Dal Yong Jin, "Cultural Politics in Korea's Contemporary Films under Neoliberal Globalization," *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2006): 5–23.
10. KOCCA, "Introduction," accessed March 30, 2012 www.kocca.kr/eng/about/about/index.html.
11. Jean Noh reports that "South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism is planning to . . . develop 'one-source, multi-use (OSMU) killer content' by 2013." See Jean Noh, "Korea Invests \$271m in Manga, Animation, Character-Merchandising," *Screendaily*, November 24, 2010,

accessed March 30, 2012, www.screendaily.com/koreainvests-271m-in-manga-animation-character-merchandising/4042110.article.

12. KOCCA is involved in a variety of fields, supporting broadcasting, music, animation, and even games. While the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) is the main government body that oversees film production, KOCCA also has a number of projects that are relevant to filmmakers and producers. For example, KOCCA's projects Digital Culture Heritage Content and HanStyle are designed to facilitate access to historical knowledge and heritage culture, which can be useful for those who work on the costume genre.
13. For instance, Kim Tak-hwan is currently one of the most sought-after writers of historical fiction in Korea and many of his novels have been adapted for television and cinema. The most recent was *Russian Coffee*, published in 2009 and then made into a film in 2012. Its narrative imagines the story of Korea's first barista Tanya and the attempted assassination of Emperor Gojong.
14. The English spelling of the television drama (*Hwang Jin-yi*) and film (*Hwang Jin Yi*) are intentionally differentiated to eliminate any confusion.
15. See the official *Hwang Jin-yi* website on the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) website, accessed March 30, 2012, www.kbs.co.kr/drama/hwangjinyi/. Posters for the film *Hwang Jin Yi* can be viewed on the Korean Movie Database, accessed March 30, 2012, http://kmdb.or.kr/eng/mdimage_list.asp?nation=K&p_dataid=08517.
16. Gi-ju Sin, "Director's Cut: Chang Yoon-hyun," *Premier Korea* 6 (2007): 91 (my translation).
17. Sometimes spelled *chaebol*, *jaebol* is "a family-owned and managed group of companies that exercises monopolistic or oligopolistic control in product lines and industries." Octopus-like conglomerates such as Hyundai and Samsung are globally known Korean *jaebol* groups. See Jung-en Woo, *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in the Industrialization of Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 149.
18. From the total budget of USD6 million, USD4 million was used for production and USD2 million for marketing. USD 1 = KRW 1,100 (South Korean currency WON) at the time of writing.
19. Seok Mun, "The Success of *King and the Clown* I," *The Hankyoreh*, January 25, 2006, accessed December 1, 2010, http://hanimovie.cine21.com/Articles/article_view.php?mm=009007000&article_id=3155.
20. Jeong-rok Sin, "The President Watches *King and the Clown*," *Chosun Daily*, January 22, 2006, accessed March 30, 2012, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2006/01/22/2006012270353.html.
21. Si-hwan An, "Reasons behind the Success of Clowns and Tightrope Acts: *King and the Clown*," *Cine21*, January 19, 2006, accessed March 30, 2012, www.cine21.com/do/article/article/typeDispatcher?mag_id=36077&page=1&menu=&keyword=&sdate=&edate=&reporter=.
22. Korea Culture and Tourism Policy Institute, "Creative Industry Trends Analysis: The 4th Quarter of 2005," March 17, 2006, accessed March 30, 2012, https://www.kcti.re.kr/04_2.dmw?method=view&publishId=05&publishSeq=18. The film continued to sell another 500,000 tickets after KCTI's count, indicating that the final revenue was bigger than the Institute's report.

23. Jeong-ae Yi, "After *King and the Clown*, Yi Does Encore Performance," *The Hankyoreh*, January 19, 2006, accessed March 30, 2012, www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/96484.html.
24. Darcy Paquet, "Korea Sings for 'King'," *Variety*, November 19, 2006, accessed March 30, 2012, www.variety.com/article/VR1117954167.html?cs=1&query=king+and+the+clown.
25. Bo-bae Yi, "Musical *Gong-gil* in Old Palace," *Sisa Focus*, October 15, 2007, accessed March 30, 2012, www.sisafocus.co.kr/news/view.php?n=26283&p=1&s=4.
26. For more information, see the Seoul Performing Arts Company website, www.spac.or.kr/.
27. The Korean Wave refers to the immense popularity of Korean pop culture, including film, music, television, and even fashion styles, across many Asian countries and other parts of the world since the early 2000s. For more on the Korean Wave, see Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein, and Alison Tokita, eds., *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2010); and Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).
28. Mi-yeong Mun, "Lee Jun-ki's Hand Puppet sold for \$1,800," *Joong Ang Daily*, January 18, 2006, accessed March 30, 2012, http://article.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.asp?total_id=2123210.
29. The merchandise sets were simultaneously unveiled to consumers at multiple venues across South Korea: the Internet shopping mall "Interpark," department store chain "Shinsegae," and large bookstore "Kyobobook."
30. On the "*Baudeogi Pungmuldan*" section of the namsadangnori.org website one can find more information on how to sign up for the tightrope walking experience program, supported by the Anseong Municipality, accessed March 30, 2012, [www.namsadangnori.org/index.htm](http://namsadangnori.org/index.htm).
31. For more on the life of Shin in English, see Ah-young Chung, "Mysterious Artist Resurfaces on Modern Culture Scene," *The Korea Times*, October 9, 2008, accessed March 30, 2012, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2009/10/203_32393.html.
32. Won-bok Lee, "Shin Yun-bok and Korean Wave," *The Hankyoreh*, October 25, 2008, accessed March 30, 2012, www.koreafocus.or.kr/design2/layout/content_print.asp?group_id=102228.
33. Cheong-hwan Kim, "Special: Let's Talk about Shin Yun-bok," *Weekly Hankook*, November 5, 2008, accessed March 30, 2012 (my translation). http://weekly.hankooki.com/lpage/08_life/200811/wk20081105112127100510.htm.
34. Hye-myeong Bak, "Let's Talk about Yaoi Code," *Cine21*, November 20, 2008, accessed September 20, 2012, www.cine21.com/news/view/mag_id/53929.
35. An example of this not-so-subtle marketing is the article titled "20 Minutes of All-Nude Sex Scenes in *Portrait of a Beauty*," *NewsN*, November 5, 2008, accessed March 30, 2012, http://article.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.asp?Total_ID=3366654.
36. In the 1980s, contemporary and historical dramas with soft-core pornographic elements flooded local screens. In particular, *tosok ero*, which I translate as "folk erotica," blended local flavor and eroticism with humor in costume. *Tosok ero* films were, at best, derided as cheap entertainment and are perceived as an embarrassing chapter in Korean film history.

37. Semi Bak, "Shin Yun-bok Virus," *Chosun Daily*, October 27, 2008, accessed March 30, 2012, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2008/10/26/2008102600892.html.
38. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 182–184.
39. One of the many criticisms directed at *Hwang Jin Yi* was the lack of a form of sensuality appropriate for the eponymous heroine. For instance, Kim Eun-hyeong writing for *Cine21* complained that even though Hwang is a *gisaeng*, known for her seductive charisma, Song misjudged the character, portraying someone who is obsessed with the outdated "chastity ideology." See Eun-hyeong Kim, "When the Actress Has to Disrobe," *Cine21*, June 22, 2007, accessed March 30, 2012, www.cine21.com/do/article/article/typeDispatcher?mag_id=47009&page=1&menu=&keyword=&sdate=&edate=&reporter=.

**cycles and
performance**

part two

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performing performers

f i v e

embodiment and

intertextuality in the

contemporary biopic

l u c y f i f e d o n a l d s o n

A few minutes into *Molière* (2007), Jean-Baptiste Poquelin/Molière (Romain Duris) sits down to write a play for his theatre troupe, who have recently arrived in Paris to perform for the King's brother after several years touring the provinces. A long shot presents Duris centrally framed behind a large wooden desk, the foreground cluttered with various objects; open books, a fur rug, leather-covered furniture. Molière dips his quill into a pot of ink and clears his throat, at which point the film cuts to a medium shot from Duris's right side. The camera begins to slowly circle him, during which time (via a cut masked by the back of his chair) day becomes night. The scene ends with him throwing away the quill. For the duration of the camera movement Duris remains in the same position, looking forward while holding the quill poised above a blank piece of paper. This is one of three writing scenes that punctuate the film. Only one of these features Molière actually writing, which, considering his primary reputation is as a playwright, directly confounds an expectation of witnessing the business of writing.¹ As a solution to the difficulty of dramatizing an activity that lacks visual interest—as Catherine Wheatley observes in her review,

“writing isn’t a cinematic activity”²—the act of writing is substituted with an extended flashback to an episode in Molière’s life 13 years earlier, prompted by a reunion with a woman who became his lover and encouraged his comedic talents during that time. These past events become the material of the play he writes, which is performed at the end of the film. Not only does the film exchange writing for a dramatized narrative, but it foregrounds the constructedness of the biographical story by making the drama of his becoming a writer revolve around performance and pretense, borrowing motifs and characters from Molière’s plays. Molière the playwright becomes Molière the (bad) actor, hired as an acting tutor by rich merchant Monsieur Jourdain (Fabrice Luchini), while pretending to be a religious tutor and hiding his affair with Madame Jourdain (Laura Morante). Intertextual reference to Molière’s work, to theatrical conventions, as well as to the business of performance and disguise constitute much of the film and inform its style. In this scene the framing of Duris is consistent with proscenium theatre space, the arrangement of furniture and décor echoes that frontal position and the mise-en-scène is cluttered with what could be theatrical props, objects, and furniture positioned to foreground the scene’s activity.

Performances that operate intertextually are central to *Molière*’s structure, an approach that is mirrored in recent Anglo-American biopics.³ This chapter will explore examples in which life stories relating to stage/musical performance transform the process of creation into a physicalized drama, whereby creators become action-driven figures via an emphasis on staged performance. As in *Molière*, *Beyond the Sea* (2004), a biopic of singer/songwriter Bobby Darin (Kevin Spacey), and *De-Lovely* (2004), a biopic of composer Cole Porter (Kevin Kline), the central historical figures perform as characters in—and comment on—the plays/films/stage musicals they are known for, thus intertextually appealing to an (inferred) knowledge and enjoyment of their work. Not only are all three films about male artists/entertainers, with prominence given to their significant



Figure 5.1 *Molière* (2007): The mise-en-scène of writing.

romantic relationships, but they also share little concern for strict physical resemblance, complete accuracy,⁴ or the chronological approach that we might associate with biography—although these traits may not entirely set them apart, as “biopics typically rearrange chronologies.”⁵ Although discussion of the films’ intertextuality could cover references to a range of texts, including the subjects’ own work, American and French theatrical or musical traditions, the wider circulation of the work of Molière/Darin/Porter in popular culture, or even issues of stardom, this chapter will focus on the “text of performance.”

In addition to focusing on intertextual cues that arise from impersonation and narrative development through performance, *Beyond the Sea* and *De-Lovely*, like *Molière*, display a self-conscious awareness of their subjects and the biopic as a form, thus offering the spectator a privileged insight into how the life story is being told. In *Beyond the Sea* events are framed as reminiscences to Darin’s younger self/the actor playing Little Bobby (William Ulrich) during the filming of his life story. The film-within-a-film diegesis moves between action on set and flashbacks, interspersed with musical numbers. *De-Lovely* moves between staged productions, filmed scenes, and conversations commenting on both. Here the biographical narrative is framed as a theatrical production organized by the Angel Gabriel (Jonathan Pryce) for Porter before his death. Although Dennis Bingham observes that “the biopic’s parodic and self-reflexive phases have been held up and interrupted, and restarted more than once,”⁶ the impulse to directly acknowledge the process of constructing actuality is a distinctly contemporary trend.⁷

Through these examples, I aim to explore performance and intertextuality as central and transnational tendencies of the contemporary biopic. The genre is uniquely placed to address the role of performance, including the extent to which lives are performed, as biopics allow access to private/public moments, revealing the ways the self can be subject to disguise or displayed through performance. To approach embodiment in films that foreground the construction and constructedness of life through performance and spectacle, I will focus on the material details of performance (posture, gesture) and the ways these connect to questions of expectation and agency.

biopic bodies

The actor’s body is of critical importance to the biopic’s representation of “real” lives, to issues of physical and gestural resemblance, and in its role as the dramatic vehicle (acting out significant moments, embodying transformations resultant from the attainment of stardom, age, or illness). These elements speak to certain expectations relating to performance—resemblance, type of action—and to the nature of that performance. We

might say that achievement in biopic performance is defined in the overlap of our prior knowledge of the subject, colored by a range of cultural texts as well as the subject's accomplishments, and a variety of issues around their embodiment. Perceptions of the subject's physicality, including what features/gestures are recognizable as *theirs*, and the actor's corporeal suitability as related to their star persona or casting history, tangibly key into the junction between expectation and execution. More so than in other genres the biopic exists within a space occupied by both fiction and history, balancing entertainment and actuality, or increasingly accessible documentary media and interpretation. In this sense, the genre is by its nature intertextual. As Phyllis Frus observes, interpretation of the biopic is rooted in the subject's achievements/other biographical material regardless of whether or not the film references these.⁸ Expectations about overall accuracy seem to be directly related to physical resemblance, and as such, material decisions about the embodiment of a life signal an immediate indication of any given biopic's relationship to actuality and fiction. The performer's body becomes the film's statement of how it will address biography, and this body thus defines our relationship to events as they are depicted.

Nonetheless, the issue of how "truthful" a biopic might be attempting to be is not merely tied to physical similarities or accurate impersonation. The embodiment of a real person negotiates shades of mimesis. In *Molière*, *Beyond the Sea*, and *De-Lovely*, production and costume design place the characters historically, while Duris, Spacey, and Kline have neither been cast for their likeness nor undergone physical transformations.⁹ The attainment of physical resemblance through special diets, makeovers and prosthetics, physical and vocal training, and intensive research has become the stock-in-trade of the contemporary biopic performer and central to popular coverage and appreciation of biopic performance.¹⁰ Such discourse underlines the biopic body as a specific type of cinematic spectacle, as well as the cultural value placed on the labor of performance more generally, suggesting rich avenues for further study outside the scope of this chapter. Transformation is one side of the spectacle involved in biopic embodiment, but I would like to focus on the other side how the body tells the story. The emphasis on physical work involved in biopic performance suggests an awareness of performativity, and underlines, therefore, that ostensive modes of performance dominate the genre.

When watching any biopic, expectations of embodiment emerge from the type of person and life depicted. Biopics about actors or musicians would be expected to dramatize the physical processes and achievement of acting/singing (in practice and rehearsal) and thus call attention to the constructedness of a star's image. The opening of *Beyond the Sea* emphatically introduces us to a performer, with a steadicam shot of Darin walking down a corridor and through a kitchen as he makes his way to the stage of the

Coconut Grove nightclub. By including his continuous movement between these spaces, the sequence is concerned with activity and involves us in the action. We see Spacey as Darin backstage—where he talks to his team and stops to sign autographs—and then onstage, where the camera follows him to the curtain as he is introduced by a diegetic voice off-screen. Onstage he is shown holding a microphone, singing, addressing the audience, and moving energetically around the stage.

performance modes

The inclusion of the offstage, when *Beyond the Sea* could have begun onstage, calls attention to the process of becoming, the star's preparation, and a literal movement towards their onstage/onscreen persona, and in doing so matches similar treatment of popular singers in recent biopics.¹¹ The change in Darin isn't dramatic, but the film allows us to observe the subtle shifts that occur during progression to the stage. Prior to this he has been smoking, his voice soft and somewhat flat; his response to a passing "have a great evening" is a downturned "thank you," accompanied by a briskly casual wave of his hand. His transition to performer is crystallized in the brief pause before he goes onstage. He steadily walks up the stairs to be given a once-over by his valet Charlie (Bob Hoskins), and in turning towards him gives a brief flap of his arms, which stiffen. Following this, his carriage begins to adjust to a more energized movement. When he emerges through the curtains and onto the stage, his previously steady gait alters, fluidly synchronizing with the music (a diegetic introduction to his number one hit "Mack the Knife" which had also accompanied most of his walk backstage) and he starts to click his fingers. The film's relationship to Spacey further indicates this change, as in this moment he becomes centralized in the frame, the sole focus of the camera. Previously he was frequently obscured by other bodies, now onstage he engages in the movements and gestures expected of a singer within the accepted space and framing for such activity.

The work of the biopic body, meaning its physical qualities and its role in telling the story, is likely to be different according to the type of person depicted, how central the body is to telling the story of a person's life, through transformation and effort. It is fairly straightforward to note that there might be basic postural differences in the embodiment of entertainers and royalty, for example: flexibility vs. rigidity, smoothness vs. stiffness, improvisation vs. authority. Recognition of these differences joins together the "what" of performance—material and kinetic details of movement, gesture, voice, and so on—with the "how," in terms of physical effort. The shift between offstage and onstage in *Beyond the Sea* is communicated by localized physical qualities and our access to them, specifically in the degree of energy, rhythm, and control that we witness. In the corridor Darin is

swept along by others—we even see a hand placed on his back propelling him through the space—but on stage he moves easily, his body in control of its movements, as emphasized by his sudden changes in direction and pace. Along with the expected actions of a singer is the dynamic physicality associated with successful performance, signaling ability to command the attention of an audience; the film reveals the degree to which this is the product of physical control (construction and work) and/or a spontaneous inner talent (“natural” performance revealing self).

The film provides access to details of performance, allowing us to observe the way Spacey makes room for intertextual inflections that are recognizably Darin’s:¹² the slightly rigid movement of his free hand forwards and up as he clicks his fingers; abrupt slicing hand gestures that accompany equally sudden and rapid vocal interruptions to the song;¹³ briefly sliding his flattened hand under the front of his tuxedo jacket. However, the editing decisions and those concerning camera placement and movement become less about presenting the detail of Spacey’s performance and more about placing Darin within the context of the space of the club and his audience. In a wider sense, introducing Darin in this way centers singing as the activity that defines his fame; his body commands the space and it is this dynamism, the energy, and control that is at stake.

Beyond the Sea does not limit itself to straightforward progressions of offstage to onstage or to the business of being a singer however; it abruptly interrupts this formulaic, but no less graceful, introduction to Darin. Just over a minute into the song, Darin looks behind his band, a cut to his point of view revealing a young boy standing by the curtain. The boy meets Darin’s gaze, and when the film returns to Darin he stops the performance. The boy leaves with no explanation and when Darin turns to face the audience again, he looks round the room. He announces that he wants to start again from the beginning, his voice and body lacking the energy of before. After interjections from his manager, Steve “Boom Boom” Blauner (John Goodman), who appears from behind a curtain at the back of the audience, and band members, an amplified off-screen voice announces the break, and the club is revealed to be a film set.

While we are made aware of Darin as performer by his movement from offstage to onstage, now we cannot escape understanding his performance as re-created for the screen, that is, the product of many previous rehearsals. The retrospective nature of this awareness alludes to the work previously involved, so that the labor of the process is underscored even as it is bypassed. By revealing its constructedness from the outset, the film announces its intentions to play with biopic conventions, complicating the flashback to further confound the rigidity of time and space, dissolving the potential demarcations of public/private and performance/reality as they all bleed into one.

De-Lovely exerts a similar fluidity of time and space, as the movement between Porter in the theatre and the dramatization of his life on stage and within the diegesis frequently takes place within the same camera movement. So why are these spaces intertwined? In all three films performance on the stage becomes performance of self. Biopics, more nakedly than any other film genre, reveal the way that:

In daily activity we constitute ourselves rather like dramatic characters, making use of our voices, our bodies, our gestures and costumes, oscillating between deeply ingrained, habitual acts (our “true mask”) and acts we more or less consciously adopt to obtain jobs, mates, or power.¹⁴

Biopics allow us access to this oscillation, and thereby to understand the construction of character/self/star/gender as subject to similar processes—this is recognized by theorists like Erving Goffman and Judith Butler.¹⁵ In approaching films where these connections are foregrounded, where performances become the arena through which people onscreen define themselves, their relationships, and their art, I am struck by Judith Butler’s call to “consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning,”¹⁶ as a fitting allegory to the self-definition that is explicitly enacted by Molière, Darin, and Porter.

modes of address

In order to begin to unravel the place of performance in biopic compositions of self-definition, I will first address performances which, to a lesser or greater degree, are recognized as such. Molière’s exertions as a playwright are dramatized through physicalized action: access to his work is filtered through performances by him and others throughout the film and then addressed directly in the performance on stage at the end. As in the opening of *Beyond the Sea*, the possible division between performer/self is blurred. We access Molière through the prism of various performances, both public and private, onstage and off. He acts the part of tragedian (onstage, public), Monsieur Tartuffe (offstage, public), comedian (onstage, public and offstage, private), playwright (offstage, private), the famous Molière (offstage, public—at court and when drunk), and gentleman (offstage, public). As such, we could understand the eventual creation of “Molière” as consciously driven by his embodiment of these roles.

In order to address the slipperiness of what constitutes a performance in all three films, it is useful to look to Goffman’s description of theatrical performance as “an arrangement which transforms an individual into . . . an object that can be looked at in the round and without offense, and looked

to for engaging behavior by persons in an audience role,”¹⁷ which appropriately highlights the existence of an arrangement between performer and audience. This relationship between performer and audience is critical, as the self-reflexive structures of all three films work as acknowledgment of their construction, and thus knowingness is absorbed into the watching experience. Knowingness is most directly communicated through the spectator’s position of superior epistemic authority, whether this exceeds or is shared with characters (e.g., comments made on the action by old Porter and the young Darin). In *Molière*, our privileged point of view is such that we are made aware of all the characters’ various disguises/performances, while characters are only made aware of each other’s to varying degrees. James Naremore’s suggestion that “at its simplest level, the activity of any performer can be described in terms of a mode of address and a degree of ostensiveness”¹⁸ complements Goffman’s sense of an “arrangement” enacting transformation, the degree of a performance’s visibility directly relating to how the audience receives it. In a film where the main character engages in various performances, recognizing each mode of address and degree of ostensiveness gives us the ability to place their behavior. Moreover, Goffman’s notion of performance being a process of transformation makes this a suggestive position from which to consider performances that explicitly transform the self, such as those that allow *Molière* to pass in a range of social roles.

Established at the beginning of the flashback, *Molière* has two modes of address that he inhabits onstage: tragedian and comedian. As tragedian his performance is controlled but overtly stiff and strained. He holds his arm directly out from his body, the elbow slightly bent, his hand poised, and his head held looking towards his hand. His lips purse as his mouth makes an O shape, squashing the words to a monotone and projecting outwards. The tragedian is based on a small series of poses—looking up to his right hand, pointing out towards the audience, gesturing outwards with his left hand—which are shapes made for the audience (diegetic and nondiegetic) as made evident by cuts between long and close shots. That his return to this performance later in the film is almost identical in posture and inflection indicates the extent of the mode’s rigidity.

In comedic mode, *Molière*’s body and voice become more flexible. He is capable of quick changes and improvisation. When his performance of tragedy is interrupted by bailiffs, he demonstrates sudden physical dexterity to the great delight of the audience who had regarded his previous performance in silence. As one bailiff states the amount of money he owes, *Molière* snatches the bailiff’s scroll and echoes the total in mock horror, before dramatically breathing in and simultaneously sinking to a submissive bowing position on the floor, then rising slightly to go through the bailiff’s pockets, while wailing noisily. When the bailiff pauses to bat him away, *Molière* gets up and paces steadily behind the men and stops between them.

A beat later he bursts through them as the first bailiff says his name, and stands towards the front of the stage, his chest puffed out. As the second bailiff turns and points, commanding him to pay, Molière leaps across the stage and lands neatly in his arms. Even during this short extract from their tussle, the contrast between tragic and comedic performance is striking, as now Molière moves through space on vertical and horizontal planes with ease and spontaneity, control and release. More significantly, it is only in his comedic mode of address that he acknowledges the audience's reactions, his pranks responding to their laughter.

The physical qualities of these modes, thus defined for us early in the film, inform the subsequent offstage performances and operate as rhetorical styles that feed into the tone of these encounters. In his secret meeting with Madame Jourdain, during which he assumes the role of an anonymous young playwright, he holds his head tipped down, and walks firmly towards her with his left shoulder tipped forwards, arm held forwards and hand poised. When he speaks, his voice is a low monotone, words articulated with little variation in rhythm or timbre. For his deception of Célimène (Ludivine Sagnier) on Monsieur Jourdain's behalf, he utilizes similar gestures—an angled standing position (left foot pointed forwards) with elbows bent and arms held open from his waist and hands directed upwards—but presents them in the other mode of address, adopting a greater freedom of movement through deep bows and a wide smile. As he introduces himself to Célimène's salon he holds his arms wide, gracefully bent at the elbow and hands poised, and bows again. He gestures expansively, to her and to the rest of the room and his voice has a light and flexible tenor. As these sequences demonstrate, the modes of comedy and tragedy are determined by physical qualities, by posture and movement. These are moments of disguise, figures created to deceive women; the tones of address and their success are tempered by the physicality Molière adopts. The taking on of "a corporeal style," to borrow Butler's term, becomes a way of disguising the self by flaunting the body.

In *Molière*, the body is very directly the medium through which the narrative takes place. These performances and the physical style of comedy set up our understanding of the play he produces at the end of the film as a piece of art that captures the essence of Molière. The range of figures he embodies thus efficiently substitutes the act of writing. The postures involved in his performances are repeated within the physicality of his rhetorical range, grounding them as emphatically and recognizably "of Molière." Traces of the physicality of the previous performances are evident in his movements in other roles we see him play—the expansive gestures of the gentleman, the groveling position adopted at the bailiff's leg—but once onstage, his physicality is more demonstrative, these actions are bigger, more exaggerated. Instead of walking towards the ladies he leaps gracefully, his body held in the same basic position, left leg first, arm

movements now emphatically outwards and upwards, still with hands artfully posed. The doubled nature of performance as a physical mode made wholly evident by the film speaks to a level of ostensiveness, of bodies spectacularized, that is mirrored in *Beyond the Sea* and *De-Lovely*. The desire to reveal the construction of life is achieved through revealing the devices of its presentation.

dramatizing life

Alongside dramatizing the process of creation, central life experiences, and specifically those related to central romantic relationships, are also transformed into performance, exceeding the narrative as moments of spectacle. In *Molière*, the process of falling in love is defined through performance/disguise, whether it is successful or not. In *Beyond the Sea*, Darin's intent to marry Dee is communicated through an elaborate performance of "Beyond the Sea" that unfolds while they are shooting a film in Italy. In *De-Lovely*, courtship, love, and growing apart are defined through performances of Porter's songs, both onstage and off, allowing us to reflect on relationships in ways that characters cannot or will not articulate.

Initial establishment of the Porters' relationship is presented through Porter's performance of "(You'd be) so easy to love" for Linda.¹⁹ The scene is introduced by a discussion between Porter and the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel asks, "So what are we talking here? A love affair, a business proposition or a social arrangement?" To which Porter replies, "There was nothing arranged or negotiated about our relationship. It was . . . our own." As he says "nothing arranged" an accordion starts to softly play, bridging a cut to the couple walking in a Parisian park. At the end of the avenue is a small café, where Porter sits at the piano to play and sing to Linda—this action preceded by his exclamation, "An unmanned piano. Come on." Initially this is presented as a simple and spontaneous serenade. His singing is sincere and unpolished—Kline's vocal performance acknowledges the weakness of Porter's voice quite evidently here—and Linda's slight awkwardness at being sung to is made apparent by the way she looks away. The piano is then given diegetic/nondiegetic accompaniment (an accordionist is visible in the background, but there is no sign of a bassist), while the elderly Porter's voice interjects off-screen. "It's too early for another song," he complains, as the film cuts back to him and Gabriel in the theatre. Up until this point, the moment appeared to be less a musical number than a declaration of love, albeit expressed through song, and is treated as such by the performers and the film itself. When the film cuts back to the couple, however, the nature of the performance and its treatment changes, as though Porter's announcement formally signals its place as a musical number. After continuing at the piano for a moment, Porter rises (though

the music continues) and leads Linda to the open space in front of the instrument, the film keeping them in a medium shot as he carries on singing while they dance sedately. Shortly after, there is a cut to a long shot and Porter stops singing, spins Linda, bends her backwards and then breaks away to dance over a chair. People sitting nearby clap and he bows slightly before taking Linda in his arms again.

The shift between the medium shot, which offers an intimately enclosed view of Porter singing to Linda, and the long shot, which foregrounds his dancing in the context of their audience, sets up tensions between the intensity of his romantic expression and the extent to which this is performed, thus contradicting Porter's description of their relationship that introduced the scene. While Linda might be the main audience, Porter's actions far from exclude those around them. However, no matter how subject to ostensive performance strategies the moment between them might be, to stage it thus is to place it more firmly as a life event, a biographical experience worthy of the spectacle of a choreographed production number and of showcasing one of Porter's songs (unlike the scene that follows of Porter meeting his male lover). While the film's emphasis engages more fully with the heterosexual couple, it later allows for Porter's homosexual relationships to be included through similar strategies in an onstage rehearsal of "Night and Day," during which Porter "teaches" the leading man to sing his part. *De-Lovely* allows the characters' physical agency to emphasize the start of a romance through their bodies, communicating togetherness through movement and making the exchanges of sentiment more emphatic.

modes of presentation

The performance of "(You'd be) so easy to love" situates the romantic narrative as the life story, the spectacle appropriately centralizing its importance and in doing so becoming the filter through which this biopic looks at its subject. Cinematic spectacle condenses the formation of the Porters' relationship, substituting an emotional process with action. The physical agency granted by expression of emotion through song and dance speaks to Richard Dyer's writing on the utopian sensibilities of Hollywood musicals. He offers categories—specifically: energy, intensity, and transparency—which relate to and transform inadequacies in society (i.e. "real" life), such as scarcity, dreariness, and manipulation.²⁰ Biographical accuracy is transformed by the energy of the dynamic bodies onscreen and the intensity of Cole's expression, and the moment is transferred through another generic mode: the integrated musical.

Jesse Schlotterbeck has observed a move towards the traditions of musical integration associated with classical Hollywood in the development of contemporary biopics, and suggests that:

More recent films [musical biopics] present songs as immediate expressions of the lead character's emotions. In this way, the structure of new musical biopics is more closely related to the musical (where music is commonly deployed narratively as the instantaneous expression of a character's desires).²¹

The intertextual qualities of the reference to these generic and expressive traditions are furthered through the visual presentation of the performance. After Porter has danced over the chair, he moves back to Linda, the music continues and as they dance they talk, the film keeping their heads in a close-up. Porter starts singing again, and they stop dancing. He holds her hand with his arm outstretched, completing the song as the camera cranes out to an increasingly distant and high-angled long shot. Porter kneels and kisses Linda's hand, and the people around them clap once more.

In its strategies of filming performance, *De-Lovely* makes it clear that this scene draws on film musicals—as opposed to stage musicals, which, as illustrated at the start of the film in a production of “Anything Goes” by the rest of the cast for Porter and Gabriel, feature a different mode of performance. The relationship between performer and camera is attuned to the mode of performance here, with shifts between close-ups for singing and medium and long shots that acknowledge the work of the dancing body, before finishing with a high-angled crane shot that frames the final romantic pose while also capturing the moment's emotional exhilaration through its rising movement. Porter and Linda's actions are staged for, and given space by, the camera, and in this way the inclusion of stylistic musical conventions formally codes the “arrangement” between performer and audience (Figure 5.2).

All three films I have been discussing adopt generic and medium-specific forms in the relationship between camera and body, and in doing so expand the intertextualized nature of performance. They not only draw



Figure 5.2 *De-Lovely* (2004): Intertextual references to film musicals.

on intertextual references to the featured artists' work, in the form of songs, performances, and so on, but also to modes of performance and staging/framing widespread within film and stage. In both *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea*, this is most clear in the musical sequences, whether onstage or off. In *Molière*, the theatrical conventions of blocking, so that scenes are framed as though for a proscenium arch and bodies placed centrally within them, are integrated with offstage spaces, so that public and private are self-consciously blurred. In these ways, the intertextuality of these films transcends the opportunity to measure expectation/interpretation with achievement, particularly in relation to performance. Rather than performers being contained by biographical accuracy or an emphasis on the laborious "reality" of creation, intertextual references—in this case, to the product of that creation—grant biopic embodiment a freer and more energetic dramatization. To some degree this echoes Dyer's argument that popular entertainment offers utopian sensibilities as solutions for the everyday: abundance in place of scarcity, energy instead of toil, and so on. The relationship between interpretation and accuracy is framed by Dennis Bingham thus; "at the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth."²² For the examples cited in this chapter, intertextual cues arising from performance and its presentation combine with self-reflexivity to offer a contemporary emphasis on play, artifice, and energy, which act as solutions for the limits of accuracy and become the films' interpretation of "truth."

De-Lovely, *Beyond the Sea*, and *Molière* illustrate the extent to which biopic performance can be seen as operating in an ostensive mode. These films also underline ways in which this might be a tendency of the genre as a whole, not merely the extra-textual evaluative appreciation of performances. Perhaps more important, however, is their acknowledgment of the performances involved in the creation of self through the depiction of both private and public life. In light of this I hope that discussion of embodiment and performance in this chapter might point to the potential argument for these tropes to be acknowledged as increasingly transnational. While choice of subject matter might differ and relate to nationalized understandings of value—biopics concerning artists and entertainers have monopolized Hollywood's output,²³ but have only come to dominate French biopics since the 1980s²⁴—the role of the body as an intertextual and dynamic element in the cinematic dramatization of actuality deserves wider examination.

acknowledgments

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1. Monsieur Jourdain asks him to appraise the play he has written to impress Célimène. On being told that it is worthless, he challenges Molière to write something better. When the film returns (after the flashback) to Molière in his study he has completed the play.
2. Catherine Wheatley, "Molière," *Sight and Sound* 17, no. 7 (2007): 64.
3. For example, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Becoming Jane* (2007).
4. Molière is a largely fictionalized account of an allegedly unknown period; *Beyond the Sea* omits Darin and Dee's divorce, and Darin's involvement in Bobby Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, including his presence at the Hotel where Kennedy was assassinated (an event included in the film); *De-Lovely* reverses the age difference between Cole and Linda (she was eight years his senior).
5. See Jonathan Lupo and Carolyn Anderson, "Off-Hollywood Lives: Irony and its Discontents in the Contemporary Biopic," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (2008): 102–111.
6. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 19.
7. For discussion of the role of parody and irony in recent American and French biopics see: Lupo and Anderson, "Off-Hollywood," 102–111; and Raphaëlle Moine, "Le Biopic à la française: de l'ombre à la lumière," *Studies in French Cinema* 10, no. 3 (2010): 279. Moine points to the demystifying treatment reserved for celebrated subjects in recent French biopics, including Molière.
8. Phyllis Frus, "The Figure in the Landscape: Capote and Infamous," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (2008): 52–60.
9. It's worth noting that both Spacey and Kline sing their own musical numbers as Darin and Porter, a decision that requires a degree of transformation/impersonation from each. While my emphasis is on embodiment in the physical/gestural sense, voice could also be considered a part of this topic.
10. Recent examples include Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003) and Marion Cotillard in *La Môme/La Vie en Rose* (2007), both of whom received Academy Awards. As one industry indicator of appreciation, the Academy Awards has consistently honored biopic performances. Between 2000 and 2011 they accounted for 6 best actors, 8 best actresses, 2 best supporting actors, and 4 best supporting actresses, as well as 32 nominations within those categories.
11. *Walk the Line* (2005) and *Ray* (2004) are the most notable recent examples. The trope is also spoofed in parody biopic *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007).
12. This can be observed in the various performances available via the video streaming websites youtube.com and dailymotion.com.
13. In the "The Making of *Beyond the Sea*," featurette on the *Beyond the Sea* DVD (London: Entertainment, 2004), director Kevin Spacey notes that Darin's personal arrangements of the songs were used.
14. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 21–22.
15. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper, 1974) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

16. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 177.
17. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 124.
18. Naremore, *Acting*, 34.
19. The choice of song highlights the film's nonchronological approach, as it was written for *Born to Dance* (1936).
20. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie* 24 (1977): 6.
21. Jesse Schlotterbeck, "'Trying to Find a Heartbeat': Narrative Music in the Pop Performer Biopic," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (2008): 82.
22. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 10.
23. See Lupo and Anderson, "Off-Hollywood" and George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 248–50.
24. Moine, "Le biopic," 279.

consensual pleasures

amazing grace, oratory, and

the middlebrow biopic

t o m b r o w n

Movies SHOW . . . and then TELL. A true movie is likely to be 60% to 80% comprehensible if the dialogue is in a foreign language.

—Alexander Mackendrick, *On Film-Making*

In accounts of popular genres, it is understandable and fitting that scholars might focus on case studies that are innovative or experimental, or on films that marshal wider generic conventions to offer a progressive message or meanings; the limit cases of a genre or the most aesthetically successful exemplars bring to light the potentialities of a popular form. As discussed in the Introduction to the present volume, this is close to the approach taken by Dennis Bingham in his account of the biopic.¹ My emphasis in this chapter is approximately the opposite of Bingham's. I will discuss a film that is neither experimental nor innovative, a film that might rather be judged as representative of the biopic at its most "middlebrow."² This chapter participates in an ongoing reevaluation of the middlebrow within film studies. However, rather than focus, as is often the case, on the middlebrow

in relation to the constitution of the audience, my analysis of the aesthetics of oration finds middlebrowness to be a textual operation, locatable *within* the biopic.

Amazing Grace (2006), a British biopic of late-eighteenth century abolitionist William Wilberforce, is a “talky” film both in its emphasis on parliamentary oratory and in its decision to tell us about rather than show us the horrors of the slave trade. This chapter will examine this as a concrete aspect of *Amazing Grace*’s style, but also consider journalistic critiques of the film as a *mise en abyme* of wider attitudes towards talky films and the notions of medium specificity they veil. The quotation that opens this chapter, for example, taken from a well-known book on filmmaking, underlines the idea that the “cinematic” is defined by its relative independence from verbal discourse. A critical reevaluation of the “talky” and its place within broader middlebrow aesthetics does not, however, negate important aesthetic–political problems with *Amazing Grace*. I shall also consider the historiographical issues attendant upon dramatizing a discourse against the slave trade via the oration of Great White Men. This ideological “failure” goes hand in hand with what can be judged as a more aesthetic one: the film being out of step with modern cinema and museum spaces in terms of the phenomenological rendering of the experience of slavery.

the middlebrow biopic

The discourses of cinephilia and the academic study of film have both often been characterized by a rejection of the middlebrow. As Adrian Martin has written, “Critics who are truly cinephiles . . . often champion extremes. They go for the highest and the lowest. . . . What such critics usually do not like, on principle, is a certain middle-of-the road, middlebrow cinema.”³ Similarly, academic film scholarship first validated its object of study through attention to the formally experimental highbrow and then by attention to the mass lowbrow commercial cinema (Hollywood genre movies primarily). The latter became a respectable object of study when the subtleties of expressive *mise-en-scène* were uncovered or when scholars began to focus upon the complex ideological operations the films revealed unconsciously (the search for which was a major function of psychoanalysis within 1970s–1980s film writing) or through disguise. The middlebrow, comprising many genres of historical films, social problem pictures and, certainly, biopics, has been less fashionable, due partly to a conventionality of technique and seriousness of subject matter that is conscious and overt.

The middlebrow falls through the cracks in the aesthetic biases of film scholarship, yet the category has also often posed problems for locating texts historically. This is in some ways paradoxical as many contemporary commentators on the middlebrow seem to agree that it more appropriately

describes a given culture of reception (which needs to be located within specific national and historical parameters) rather than any particular aesthetic of production.⁴ Yet, as the term “middlebrow” has generally been employed in journalistic discourses in an amorphous way (and may often be employed as a synonym for “average” or “middle-of-the-road,” as appears to be the case in the Adrian Martin quotation above), the category becomes too large to deal with in precise terms. More complex layers of historical relations and developments potentially become folded in on each other. This is a present danger in this chapter. However, the more pressing problem here is the question of to what extent “middlebrow” is an appropriate prism through which to conduct a *stylistic* analysis. The recognition of middlebrow as a designation of relative cultural capital⁵ (relative to high- and lowbrow) makes it hard to locate it with the text. Both in order to narrow the range of apposite historical reference points and to consider the middlebrow stylistically, this chapter will focus primarily on the aesthetics of oration in *Amazing Grace*. Oration, in its association in the modern period with the privileged sphere of parliamentary politics, carries middlebrow cultural capital. Yet it is also something that is analyzable stylistically.

Mark Eaton’s intervention into debates on the middlebrow in the cinema suggests that it is a category term “less and less applicable to the current [as of 2006] film industry,”⁶ offering “nobrow” as a more apt term for the American context of film reception and marketing. Citing the work of Lawrence Napper, he does concede, however, that “middlebrow may have more heuristic value when applied to Great Britain.”⁷ Indeed, Napper’s work, by locating the middlebrow within precise historical and national parameters (primarily interwar Britain), succeeds in offering a definition that is more susceptible to a style-based analysis and, ironically perhaps, one then more identifiable and applicable outside of this timeframe:

Unlike Modernism with its interest in formal purity and experimentation, middlebrow culture was engaged in blurring the boundaries of its media. Traditional modes of representation—realism, pictorialism, theatricality and literary narration—were transferred to new media, and deemed to carry their meanings (and also their cultural status) intact across the adaptation process.⁸

Napper’s notion of the middlebrow seeks to rescue the category from the disparagement that is inevitable when adopting highbrow evaluative criteria. Napper finds in British middlebrow productions (he considers theatre and literature, especially, alongside the cinema) a cultural dynamism lacking in the purist discourses of the highbrow. British middlebrow culture was linked to the rapidly evolving middle classes who adapted with ease to “living in new spaces, doing new jobs, consuming new

forms of culture”⁹ in the interwar years. Highbrow vitriol directed at middlebrow culture “reveal[s] a concern and an anxiety over issues of purity, authenticity and origin that do not appear to have bothered [the] middlebrow residents [of the ‘Tudorbethan’ style of suburban housing that emerged in the interwar period].”¹⁰ The styles of middle-class homes can be read as middlebrow texts characterized by heterogeneity and the blurring of boundaries; “Tudorbethan” housing combined the architectural features of the Tudor and Elizabethan periods in contexts in which it did not “belong” (i.e. 1930s suburbia). Such architecture can be discussed through the language of “adaptation,” a term of central importance to middlebrow cinema—importantly, Napper’s core case studies had their origins outside of the cinema.

Napper’s definition of the middlebrow enables us to consider the, I hesitate to say, “natural” pull of the biopic genre towards the middlebrow. The biopic is innately a form of adaptation; its heterogeneity is guaranteed by its attempts to translate imagery (of a famous person, of famous events in which that person was involved) from other media (classical portraiture or statuary, photographs or newsreels, for example) into film. Similarly, a famous speech or a musical recording might be re-created on screen: in the role of the king, Colin Firth performs George VI’s address to the nation in *The King’s Speech* (2010); we see what me might imagine to hear in Johnny Cash’s 1968 album *At Folsom Prison* in *Walk the Line* (2005). The more “conventional” biopics (“conventional” being a term which rather problematically seems often to stand in for “middlebrow”) might seek to try to carry the meanings of this biographical, real/historical material “and also their cultural status intact across the adaptation process.”¹¹ Napper also points towards more specific aesthetic traditions (“realism, pictorialism, theatricality and literary narration”¹²) that a middlebrow film might participate in. *Amazing Grace*, intersecting as it does with another predominantly middlebrow film tradition, the heritage film,¹³ certainly relies a great deal on pictorialism and on theatricality. To the latter broader category, we might add the more specific aesthetic of the Great British Actor’s oratory—a rousing speech performed by veteran stage and film actor Michael Gambon will feature in my analysis below.

One can find the conflict between high- and middlebrow evaluative criteria operating quite clearly in some journalistic responses to *Amazing Grace*. A particularly sharp critique of the film came from Ryan Gilbey:

There is no doubt that *Amazing Grace*, which depicts William Wilberforce’s 18-year battle to outlaw slavery in the British Empire, has its heart in the right place. The picture also boasts an unusual structure that flits back and forth between Wilberforce’s first stirrings of dissent and the final passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. Yet,

despite this, *Amazing Grace* is the sort of film best watched on the radio.¹⁴

After rather damning the film with faint praise (“its heart is in the right place”), Gilbey offers a positive comment on its “unusual structure that flits back and forth,” finding here a quality reminiscent of highbrow literary works to praise in *Amazing Grace* (i.e. a complex and “unconventional” structure). However, the critic’s most withering assessment is that the film is “best watched on the radio.” In almost identical terms, another British critic suggests “*Amazing Grace* might as well have been a radio play.”¹⁵ These assessments of the film explicitly concern medium specificity in a way that echoes the highbrow critique of middlebrow art: *Amazing Grace* is judged not sufficiently “cinematic.” The “cinematic” in journalistic discourses is regularly opposed to the “talky” and *Amazing Grace* is a talky film. The allusion to radio underlines this and so too does Gilbey’s later response to the film’s choice to focus on political debate centered on the historical hero and enacted in drawing rooms, around the dinner table, and in the House of Commons:

Amazing Grace follows Wilberforce’s repeated efforts to change the law, but the film’s focus on him is so narrow that the desire to win becomes disconnected from the subject of slavery, which remains frustratingly abstract. While it is interesting that the film-makers have chosen to convey the slaves’ ordeal through words and intimation rather than images, the disadvantage of this approach is that it’s like listening to the minutes of an obscure meeting.¹⁶

I will return to the ideological/historiographical appropriateness (or otherwise) of the film’s “talky” approach to representing the slave trade. The charge against the talky film of primary concern for the moment is that it narrows the expressive range available to it. The talky film does not make sufficient use of stylistic qualities more “unique” to its medium, such as expressively framed *mise-en-scène*. The scholarly neglect of the classical Hollywood biopic prior to George F. Custen,¹⁷ must have much to do with these same presumptions of what is “cinematic” and, in the genre’s history, one finds precedents for the style of *Amazing Grace*. For example, *Juarez* (1939), the biopic of the great Mexican president, is a particularly oratorical film, especially in the context of 1930s Hollywood: key dramatic passages turn on relatively extended discussions of distinctions between different forms of government and on, for example, the precise meaning of the word “democracy.” Moreover, within the same famous cycle of biopics, renowned writers (*The Life of Emile Zola*, 1937) or chemists (*The Story of Louis Pasteur*, 1936) become orators whose verbal skills are preeminent (as far as what is on screen is concerned) in their ability to transform the outmoded and reactionary attitudes of those around them.

In its emphasis on oration, *Amazing Grace* does, in fact, bear a strong resemblance to the courtroom drama (an inherently “talky” genre that has been even more neglected than the biopic). This too links *Amazing Grace* to the genre’s classical and middlebrow history. In his canonical account of the classical Hollywood biopic, Custen underlines the prevalence¹⁸ and aesthetic significance of the trial or trial-like scene, which “suggests the purpose of the biopic is to offer up a lesson or judgment in the form of a movie.”¹⁹ As Custen underlines, the message or historical lesson is the central “point” of the classical biopic, and trial-like settings, such as parliamentary debates, make the declamation of this message narratively credible. In such settings, the historical hero derives his force from an eloquence that reveals the outdated attitudes of his antagonists, if not their lack of righteousness: “The biopic figure is able to alter opinion through rhetoric, or by the rhetoric of performance.”²⁰ Not only, then, the conduit for the message, oratory lends the biopic a respectability associated more with legitimate theater or broader institutional discourses. For example, a wartime British biopic of another figure *Amazing Grace* represents, *The Young Mr Pitt* (1942), opens with a text foreword: “The speeches by the Earl of Chatham and William Pitt in the Houses of Parliament are authentic.” Accuracy and authenticity can, in this context, be considered innately middlebrow. Those things that can be rendered “accurately” (speeches, costumes, props) necessitate the adaptation of pre-existing material; “accuracy” is in itself concerned with the “intact” transfer of meanings “across [an] adaptation process.”²¹ Nevertheless, the “talky” style that a courtroom-like emphasis on oration engenders further underlines why highbrow criticism (to include academic film studies) has generally neglected the biopic while the genre has frequently been rewarded with the middlebrow kudos of the Oscars.

Schindler’s List (1993) was a film lauded by the Academy (of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) but heavily criticized by highbrow critics and many film scholars. Miriam Bratu Hansen has compared the critical reception of Spielberg’s film to that of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985).²² The comparison is pertinent to the present chapter because these films are about what is, for some, an “unrepresentable” traumatic history, and because the middlebrow status of *Schindler’s List* is contrasted to what might be called the highbrow, modernist aesthetic represented by *Shoah*. Hansen outlines four key intellectual critiques leveled at Spielberg’s film, though only two are of pressing relevance here: first, that the narrative focalization around Oscar Schindler (Liam Neeson) and the use of point-of-view structures for his character and, more troublingly, the SS Commandant Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), are inadequate to capturing the reality of the historical situation and are, in many respects, distasteful;²³ second, she notes that “the . . . most difficult, objection to *Schindler’s List* is that it violates the

taboo on representation (*Bilderverbot*), that it tries to give an ‘image of the unimaginable.’”²⁴

The issues of narrative focalization and point of view are at the heart of Ryan Gilbey’s earlier-cited comment that “the film’s focus on [Wilberforce] is so narrow that the desire to win [abolition] becomes disconnected from the subject of slavery, which remains frustratingly abstract.” As Gilbey also notes, “the film-makers have chosen to convey the slaves’ ordeal through words and intimation rather than images.”²⁵ Indeed, in visual terms, the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade are represented only very indirectly and strictly through Wilberforce’s point of view. Early in the film, Wilberforce hallucinates in his mirror a manacled slave reaching out to him. And later, we see on-screen what Wilberforce supposedly dreams, as he falls asleep reading an account of plantation conditions. Significantly, these moments, two of the only three instances where actual slaves are represented, are clearly demarcated as “subjectively saturated:”²⁶ the slave viewed in the mirror vanishes as soon as the feverish Wilberforce turns to look for her and the dream sequence (one of two in the film) is highly stylized.

Director Michael Apted, referencing the criticism the film faced in its general elision of slavery, suggested that his choice for visualizing the horrors of the plantation in Wilberforce’s dream was in order to suggest that the reformer’s “knowledge of slavery was sort of at arm’s length. It was second-hand.”²⁷ One might find this rather unconvincing and counter that Apted here utterly fails to recognize the question of the ethical *appropriateness* of this degree of focalization on Wilberforce. However, the director is defensive against criticisms that imply that a “black point of view” or a point of view from the position of slaves themselves was the only appropriate perspective on the trade,²⁸ and argues with more assurance:



Figure 6.1 *Amazing Grace* (2006): Slaves are represented through Wilberforce’s consciousness.

There's no argument about the slave trade. The slave trade is a *bad thing*. Had you chosen another subject, say in the modern times . . . abortion or stuff like that, the audience would be divided going in about the subject itself. At least with this subject there was no division, I don't think, about people saying, "Well, why did they want to finish slavery off?" So you really could concentrate on the other aspects: of how politics can work, how it can get done.²⁹

Elsewhere in the DVD audio commentary, both Apted and the film's star Ioan Gruffudd express wariness at the considerable historical baggage associated with the slave trade. Here and in the section quoted above, there seems to be a tacit respect for a *Bilderverbot* akin to that cited by Hansen in relation to *Schindler's List*. Given the hegemony of a White perspective in Anglo-American historiography and film, one might suggest that representing the slave trade is not *verboten* in Western culture, in the way the Holocaust has been, so much as marked by a history of failure.³⁰ However, within the culture at large, there remains the sense, I would contend, that the horrors of the slave trade are ultimately unrepresentable—this can be illustrated with reference to an “immersive” museum display I shall discuss later in the chapter. Apted and his collaborators' decisions in *Amazing Grace* can thus be considered to have at least some ethical grounding. What must be stressed, however, is that the decision to not represent slavery directly is not a modernist gesture; we are far from the “nonrepresentational, singular, and hermetic *écriture* . . . found in works of high modernism”³¹ that *Shoah* represents. It is, rather, a decision simply not to show us slavery directly, taken in the language of “good taste.”

the pleasures of oration

I shall now turn to the final scene of *Amazing Grace* in order to demonstrate the sincere pleasures of a middlebrow style emerging from the “cinematizing” (to mean, fairly neutrally, the deployment of a range of technical strategies) of oratory. Such an argument is not a negation of the ethics of historiography, however, and I shall also underline the enormous complexities and quite clear problems in the film's strategies of telling rather than showing.

Describing the experience of *Amazing Grace* as akin “to the minutes of some obscure meeting”³² is a response to the cumulative impact of the film's focus on debate and oration. The final scene does have something of “minutes” about it, though the meeting is not an obscure one: the film's climax sees Michael Gambon, as the famous British politician Lord Charles Fox, deliver a speech that, at times, is an almost word-for-word re-creation of a real speech that congratulated William Wilberforce when the slave trade was

finally and totally abolished in the British Empire.³³ Ryan Gilbey's description is of course designed primarily to evoke a lack of cinematic imagination in the film's handling of its topic. However, at the very minimum, one can say that the final scene does deploy a range of views and aural layers that are far beyond the range familiar to UK audiences of real parliamentary debates, since they were first televised in 1989. For example, during the one minute and eleven seconds that Fox stands alone in the House to deliver the film's final speech, we have sixteen shots, ranging from long shots to close-ups, high angles of the chamber and lower angles of the viewing galleries. This and other such data (for example, an average shot length of four and a half seconds) are somewhat crude measurements of an aesthetic that succeeds in its clear intention to be "rousing"—music, performance, and framing combine with editing to sweep the audience along in enjoyment of Wilberforce's eventual and hard-won victory. I shall return to the moment the speaker confirms the successful passage of the bill, but it is worth lingering on Fox/Gambon's speech, which immediately follows the first rapturous response to Wilberforce's (and morality's) victory.

The scene makes heavy use of a lush, "stirring" orchestral score and the music is carefully shaped to maximize the affect of Fox/Gambon's oration: in a build-up phase the music is first just audible above the hubbub of the chamber before it gradually falls silent as the vote is read; the music reaches its first crescendo (via a brief bass drum *incalzando*) as the vote is passed; the music then goes silent for the duration of Fox's speech before reaching its climax after he finishes speaking. Other aspects of the staging invest the speech with an emotional and historical weight. For example, as the standing ovation for Wilberforce dies down and the MPs (Members of Parliament) return to their seats, Fox remains standing. A high angle wide shot and then a slightly closer, more head-on view frame Fox in an overtly "theatrical" manner—he is taking the stage. Audience response is embedded in the speech's representation as, in the wider shots, and in cutaway reaction shots (of which there are many), all eyes are directed at Fox. Gambon's vocal performance (and his distinctive voice) is skillfully deployed: as he contrasts Wilberforce with Napoleon, his polar opposite as a "great man," the actor puts particular emphasis on the first letters of "violence," "pomp," and "power," words that he enunciates almost violently (Gambon delivers them very quickly). The final part of his speech, now viewed in closer shots, is intoned more deeply, spoken more slowly, and becomes gradually quieter (to a final point when its audibility is barely credible if one imagines oneself in the space): "and yet his [Napoleon's] dreams will be haunted by the oppressions of war. William Wilberforce, however, will return to his family, lay his head on his pillow and remember: the slave trade is no more." The House erupts into applause once more.

Audience response is encouraged also via “affective mimicry” (the science of cognition explains why when we see, for example, someone cry on screen we to some extent share that emotional reaction) and the less quantifiable impact of physical details in the surrounding performances: one reaction shot of Gruffudd/Wilberforce, with eyes red from tears, is followed by a close up of Albert Finney (the film’s other most eminent thespian) whose John Newton (writer of the hymn “Amazing Grace”), now blind, listens intently to Fox’s words. The view of Finney coincides with “lay his head on his pillow” and the performer, whose eyes are initially closed, scrunches up particularly the left side of his face into a half smile (Figure 6.2).

The intimacy of the words (their content and the volume of their delivery) is vivified by an intimate view of a personal response. Finney’s expressions, on one level, simply communicate the fact of a blind man listening intently to a speaker on his left. However, through Finney’s physicality, we almost imagine one’s head touching a pillow, the closed eyes remind us of sleep, and we feel, physically, the touch of something to Newton’s left (they are Fox’s words but they could be, metaphorically at least, the pillow the words describe). Like many classical biopics,³⁴ the home life of the hero, the world of his family where he lays his head, is of central importance to *Amazing Grace*’s “personalization” of history, and the ending of the film, after celebrating the magnitude of his achievements (in ironic counterpoint to Napoleon), makes sure to return us to an intimate register. It is an intimacy into which we are directly invited: the film ends with a cut from Wilberforce’s adoring wife (Romola Garai) looking down at him, to a high-angled view from her perspective of Gruffudd/Wilberforce looking upwards. By looking directly into the camera in the film’s (almost) final shot,³⁵ Wilberforce also looks as if at us, across the chasm of history.³⁶



Figure 6.2 John Newton feels the touch of Lord Fox’s words.

If the evocation above successfully captures its object, it will conjure a scene that would be familiar to many viewers: a highly conventional example of a “rousing speech” on film. However, conventional pleasures are too easily dismissed when their conventions are laid bare. The film has required that we follow up to this point Wilberforce’s very personal struggle for a transparently just cause “against all the odds,” and the ending (especially through the use of music, eloquent speakers, and shots of tearful onlookers) likely encourages a level of emotional response even in the most cynical viewer. Another small detail of the final scene further underlines its pleasures but may be used to point towards the ideological problems they mask. After the tally of votes is declared, the Speaker of the House of Commons (Richard Ridings) quietens the cheering, applauding MPs, and, accompanied by the rousing score, he booms: “I declare the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade to be passed.” Crucially, between “Abolition of the Slave Trade” and “to be passed,” Ridings/the Speaker takes a pause for dramatic emphasis. He looks away to his left and back to his right in time with the pause, a half-smile showing.

There is a readable pleasure taken by the Speaker in, one assumes, the passage of the bill, and certainly in the theatrical reading of its passage. We, the audience, are similarly swept into the consensual pleasure of the smile and the deep, rich British baritone of the Speaker/Riding’s intonation; the pleasure is consensual because the institution has acted upon natural right. However, it is worth underlining that the plenitude of the final triumph for Wilberforce and for justice in the chamber is utterly incongruous with, but still likely to erase the memory of, the moral bankruptcy that has characterized the House for most of the film’s run time. Before this point we witness, in Parliament, an indifference to the problems of slaves as individuals that we can make out as systematic. It is ironic that the moment with the splendidly bewigged Speaker is preceded, at the start of the sequence, by the “Old Parliamentary Official” (Neville Phillips) having to be awoken to take the votes for the bill. He is reluctant and grumpy when roused and must drip perfume over his wig before he can leave to collect the results and then read the tally. The irony is clear in the film’s structure: this is the moment the film and Wilberforce’s quest have been leading up to, and this functionary of the state is first asleep and then more concerned with anachronistic pageantry.³⁷ However, the irony is entirely isolated and thus shorn of any deeper significance, as the film never follows through a repeated threat to critique the system; instead it ultimately locates Parliament’s problems solely with individuals. The above scene’s ultimate plenitude as political spectacle is pleasurable; yet, this plenitude is politically suspect because it makes the scene *the* site where the ignominy of slavery is ended, and ended by the oration of just, White men.

agency, hindsight, and immersion

The issue of agency is an immensely complex one in the field of history and particularly in histories of slavery. For example, Walter Johnson questions the way in which the “New Social History” attempted to “give the slaves back their agency.”³⁸ Though supportive of the ethics of this attempt, Johnson is skeptical about this project precisely because the polysemous term “agency” is too often conflated with humanness itself and consequently “the humanity/agency circuit formulates enslaved people’s actions in much too abstract a manner.”³⁹ To consider the issue in simpler terms, the question of to what extent a figure such as William Wilberforce was the actual agent of historical change (in this case, the abolition of the British slave trade) preoccupies historians. William Hague counters the notion that Wilberforce merely rode a wave that led irrevocably to abolition: “He was no mere agent of something that had always been inevitable. Abolition was not bound to happen in 1807: it required a conjunction of forces of which Wilberforce and his band of ‘saints’ were a truly indispensable component.”⁴⁰ Clearly it would be an unusual biography that did not subscribe to such a view: Wilberforce’s preeminent agency is presupposed by the very existence of a paperback biography written by a prominent British politician⁴¹ that, like *Amazing Grace*, appeared close to the Abolition bicentenary. Wilberforce’s agency is indeed *Amazing Grace*’s *raison d’être* and this is encompassed in the poster campaign that marketed the film as being about “One voice that changed the lives of millions.”⁴²

The truth of the extent to which Wilberforce made Abolition happen is not the concern of this chapter. Moreover, in *Amazing Grace*, “agency” is, in my opinion, ultimately illusory, for the term implies a willed choice. Wilberforce’s determination to end slavery is presented as innate, as “natural,” as a given facet of his humanity; seen from the modern vantage point, abolition is so transparently the right thing to do and so utterly inevitable that individual agency is rather moot. George Custen illuminates the operation of this kind of discourse in the classical Hollywood biopic, noting that opponents of the biographical hero in his quest for necessary reform are “depicted as desperate[ly] clinging to outmoded ‘conventional’ ways of thinking. As such, opposition is a kind of straw figure, painted in Gramsci-like strokes of false alternatives.”⁴³ It is through the medium of verbal rhetoric or oration that such conflicts are played out and, ultimately, resolved (though the resolution is never in doubt):

By making the biopic hero or heroine triumph by virtue of “common sense,” a particular set of circumstances can be rendered universal. . . . By personalizing evil—often as a corrupt or venal establishment figure . . . —the triumph of history is rendered individualistic and the outcome, even after struggle, seems both obvious and predetermined.⁴⁴

Amazing Grace is perfectly in tune with the earlier phase of biopic production Custen analyses. The evils of the interests vested in eighteenth-century slavery are almost entirely channeled through Lord Tarleton (Ciarán Hinds) and the Duke of Clarence (Toby Jones). Our first view of the House of Commons sees Wilberforce's far superior oratorical skills bamboozle Tarleton and the Duke, as the latter attempts to defend the ongoing war against the revolting American colonies—crucially a conflict the contemporary spectator *knows* Britain will lose, again aligning Wilberforce with an outcome that is “obvious and predetermined.”⁴⁵ Tarleton is the proverbial straw figure in a later exchange, as he virtually spits back “the people?” in response to the righteous (and farsighted) declaration by Wilberforce, “You will not drown out the voice of the people!” And, if Wilberforce is the film's great man ahead of his time, the Duke of Clarence is always already anachronistic. An aristocrat, the Duke represents reactionary forces in contrast to Wilberforce's radically democratic attitudes: Wilberforce introduces a petition to Parliament during the above-cited exchange with Tarleton, and his sympathy towards the Americans underlines his democracy; the Duke, in contrast, offers to give Wilberforce his “nigger.” As Ryan Gilbey notes, in this moment:

The benefit of hindsight is imposed incongruously on the action, as in when the Duke of Clarence's racist language meets with outraged music on the soundtrack. Such disapproval is understandable enough, but it would be easier to take if *Amazing Grace* didn't add to the current glut of white films about black suffering.⁴⁶

With characteristic acuity, Gilbey once more identifies a “weakness” of *Amazing Grace*. Importantly, however, the incongruous imposition of hindsight is common to the Anglo-American biopic as a popular, predominantly middlebrow genre. Custen's aforementioned emphasis on the creation of a discourse of “common sense” and the use of “straw men” antagonists to create a sense of history that is “obvious and predetermined” underlines that hindsight operates at a fundamental level of biopic narration/historiography: “what I will have been for what I am in the process of becoming,” as the *Cahiers* editors characterized the narration of *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939),⁴⁷ brings hindsight into the present tense.⁴⁸ This discourse of hindsight persists into the modern period to the point that it is available to parody: in the spoof biopic, *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007), the first childhood flashback sees the hero's brother Nate (Chip Horness) declaim, “ain't nothing horrible gonna happen today,” and, a little later, “there's nothing I won't do in this *long, long* life of mine,” before we see a montage of the small boys playing with rattlesnakes, blow torches in a barn, and finally (and fatally) machetes. The heavy-handedness of the joke works because of the heavy-handedness of the rhetoric it spoofs; in *Ray* (2004), the

embedding of hindsight heavily signposts the tragic death of the musician's brother during childhood.

The incongruity of hindsight underlines, at a formal level, a broader truism of the form: the historical film tells us more about the moment of production than the historical moment it represents. However, Gilbey's second point above (that *Amazing Grace* is part of "a glut of white films about black suffering") indicates what seems to be the film's most serious failure, which is implicit in the most vociferous critiques of it: rather than a failure of historiography, in terms of the accurate rendering of the facts of the past (biopics must always fail on these terms), it is the failure of the film to live up to decades of post-colonial discourse⁴⁹ and contemporary approaches to historiography. Its lack of historiographical modernness is felt most keenly in its distance from current trends relating to New Social History (a distance that is particularly charged in the context of a "white film about black suffering") and in its style, which owes little to forms particularly attuned to "phenomenological" readings (as are much valued in contemporary film studies and, it seems to me, much present in contemporary film form and wider representations of history). The historiographical approaches encompassed by New Social History are approximately the opposite of the approach taken by *Amazing Grace*. The former proposes to offer a "bottom up" (as opposed to "top down") examination of historical development (focusing on the details of everyday life and of ordinary individuals). Clearly this is anathema to the very premise of the biopic—that is, that exceptional individuals, at a minimum, help us understand history, and quite possibly forge it. And by "phenomenological," I refer to styles of filmmaking that demand to be read first in terms of bodily affective response.⁵⁰ Both trends are in evidence at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool.

The museum is concerned with slavery up to the present day but is primarily focused on the Atlantic Slave Trade. An underlying concern is clearly (to follow Walter Johnson's formulation) to "give the slaves back their agency"⁵¹ via a detailed engagement with the lives of slaves and the African communities from whence they were ripped, a stress on the survival of African customs as resistance,⁵² and a number of accounts of and broader emphasis on slave revolts.⁵³ It is notable that, despite the predominantly British focus of the museum (that is, the trade as pursued by Britain and, particularly, the city of Liverpool's role), the domestic abolition movement, including images of some of its key figures (including Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson) feature only discretely. The overwhelming emphasis on the minutiae of the day-to-day lives of slaves and their manifold means of resistance participates in a mode of historiography consonant with the New Social History and its attempts to find slave agency in a system that was all about its denial.

The Middle Passage audio–visual exhibit, which is placed centrally in the main section of the exhibition, offers a very different sense of “agency” and phenomenological experience to the display cases. Comprising a darkened, partly circular room, the exhibit seeks to offer an immersive re-creation of what it would be like in the hold of a slave ship. The visitor is surrounded on at least two sides by video projections and enveloped in a loud soundtrack (the groans of the “slaves,” the creaking of the boat’s timbers, the clanking of chains, etc.). While the website forewarns the visitor, “Please be warned that [the exhibit] includes graphic scenes of life on board a slave ship,”⁵⁴ to my eyes there was little that was “graphic” in the sense that that term is commonly used. The emotional and affective impact of the presentation emerges from a sense of proximity: not only do the projected images fill the walls, they comprise almost exclusively close-ups and extreme close-ups of the body parts of various “slaves.” The visitor sees quite rapidly intercut images of hands, feet (often in shackles), eyes, and mouths in constant motion, tension, and/or strain—combining with the soundtrack, this represents living, human bodies bound in pain in the bowels of a constantly moving ship. No purposeful, willed action is visible—the close-ups are so tight that the function of each viewed movement (whether it would be to steady oneself, shield a painful injury, or to pull against a chain) is impossible to discern. The exhibit therefore does not attempt to try to “give the slaves back their agency” in any simple way. However, it tries through audio–visual immersion and proximity (sound close-ups as well as filmed ones) to offer a sense of what the Middle Passage would *feel* like. Agency is thus, to some extent, bypassed and instead the project seems more to be to humanize the slaves in the narrow sense of a focus on sensorial experience—i.e., the pain and misery of the Middle Passage.⁵⁵

Amazing Grace makes no attempt to offer an immersive experience such as this, nor in any way to attempt to *show* what it would have been like to be a slave. It is out of step with the audio–visual experiences offered by many modern museums and many modern films. The alternative that *Amazing Grace* pursues can be usefully considered again through the prism of Hansen’s reading of the reception of *Schindler’s List*:

The critique of *Schindler’s List* in high-modernist terms . . . reduces the dialectics of the problem of representing the unrepresentable to a binary opposition of showing or not showing—rather than casting it, as one might, as an issue of competing representations and competing modes of representation. This binary argument also reinscribes, paradoxically, a modernist fixation on vision and the visual, whether simply assumed as the epistemological master sense or critically negated as illusory and affirmative.⁵⁶

Hansen very helpfully suggests how one might reject the modernist/highbrow fixation on vision and the binary opposition of showing or not showing. In the contemporary period, one would have to add to the more open array of “competing representations and competing modes of representation”⁵⁷ Hansen imagines, the distinction between “feeling” (in the somewhat narrower sense I have been emphasizing of physical affect favored by contemporary phenomenological film studies) and “not feeling” (i.e., in this sense, we are never made to “feel” what it is like to be a slave in *Amazing Grace*). In Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997), for example, an obvious point of comparison to Apted’s film, the opening throws us into the immediate sensorial experience of the hero, Cinque (Djimon Hounsou), as extreme close-ups conjure for us the physical struggle of working a nail free from a piece of timber.⁵⁸ Spielberg’s film may, moreover, be rescued for highbrow interpretations because of its self-consciousness/reflexivity.⁵⁹ However, so too might *Amazing Grace*’s emphasis on telling over showing (and feeling) if one were to home in on various elements of the script, for example, in the scene where Wilberforce is visited by the group of prominent anti-slavery campaigners in order that they might convince him to be their voice in parliament. Wilberforce has a telling exchange with two important historical figures in the abolition movement, Olaudah Equiano (Yousou N’Dour) and Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell):

WILBERFORCE. You wish to discuss something with me?
EQUIANO. No. We do not want to talk. Because we hear
you are a man who doesn’t believe what he hears until he
sees it with his own eyes.

Clarkson then removes from his bag slave manacles, somewhat laconically and only very basically narrating their function (“these are for the legs,” etc.) before demonstrating where on his body they would be fixed. Equiano then takes over the discourse again, describing the condition of being enslaved, gradually unwinding his necktie and revealing a brand upon his chest. The exchange, somewhat ironically (in the context of my discussion of the talkyness of the film), reinscribes vision as the master sense (“see it with your own eyes”). However, it does this predominantly *through the spoken word*: close-ups of the manacles and the branding scar on Equiano’s chest are merely functional; the visual emphasis is primarily people talking.

Elsewhere, the film does pursue an implicit argument about the inability to visually represent slavery not only in its choices of what not to film (the absence, earlier mentioned, of direct visual representations of either the Middle Passage or life on the plantations) but also in what it chooses to show. Wilberforce raises money from wealthy donors by steering their ship alongside an empty slave ship. As, one by one, the donors move their handkerchiefs to their noses in response to the stench, Wilberforce demands they remove them and “breath it in . . . breath it deeply,” adding,

“that smell is the smell of death.” He asks that they “remember that smell.” Smell is the sense perhaps most remote in film spectatorship but the encounter with the ship asks that we imagine what these people respond to in disgust. The film here displays an evident self-consciousness about its aesthetic/ethical choices in the representation of the trade. The olfactory scene described above follows on from Wilberforce’s first visit to a slave ship with Equiano, who narrates the function of various spaces and manacles in the now empty vessel. In some ways, then, the slave ship functions something like the concentration camp in modernist texts on the Holocaust, such as *Nuit et brouillard*/*Night and Fog* (1955) and *Shoah*. A voice accompanying a now abandoned space can conjure unseen horrors. My intention in noting this correspondence, however, is not to “rescue” or recuperate *Amazing Grace* for a highbrow reading. To do so would be to seek to render *Amazing Grace* more palatable for an audience at which it is clearly not targeted; we might more aptly compare Equiano’s role in the above scene to a guide in the more middlebrow milieu of a museum or a tour of a historical site. Nevertheless, we see again evidence of an ethical consciousness of a kind of *Bilderverbot* of the horrors of slavery.

Throughout this essay, I have tried to be careful to demarcate value criteria and evaluate the project of *Amazing Grace* in terms more consistent with the middlebrow biopic. It must, however, be admitted that the isolation of the above scenes is critically disingenuous if one does not also admit the absence of an “imaginative” or “innovative” rendering of them and, in these moments, a failure of effective synthesis between the “how” and the “what.” The latter critical language is associated primarily with V.F. Perkins who values the achievement of a synthesis in which the relationship between form and content is harmonious.⁶⁰ Unlike critical terms such as “imaginative” and “innovative,” the valuing of synthesis is not a highbrow criteria (Perkins’s primary case studies are Hollywood genre movies), nor should it a priori disadvantage the middlebrow. In the scenes cited above, the vividness of the words or, rather, what the words conjure, finds little echo in the audio–visual style. We can certainly imagine an alternative way of filming the slave manacles Clarkson unfurls that would more effectively convey their materiality. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in my reference to the scene with the Old Parliamentary Official, the film never follows through its threat to explore the problems of the system at a structural level—the clear irony of this moment is shorn of a wider framework that would give it weight. This would have been more available to the more distanced, talky style Apted has adopted, a style which Ryan Gilbey understandably describes as akin to listening to “minutes.” It is important, however, not to lose sight of the value of the “consensual pleasures” a text such as *Amazing Grace* offers: the oration of Great British Actors emerges as the conduit for the celebration of Western democracy’s capacity for reform; oration is here the performance of the passage of “natural right.”

Nonetheless, fundamental ethical–historiographical issues remain when one goes beyond the film’s failure of synthesis and its lack of investment in vivifying the physical, material condition of slavery at the level of narration to consider the real historical issue itself. Consensual pleasures might illuminate the durability and persistence of a key strand of the popular “middle ground” of biopic production, but, here, the Great White Man-centric view this involves compounds the voicelessness and lack of agency that is slavery.

notes

1. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).
2. Another marker of worth might be commercial success. However, my case study was not particularly successful at the box office, see “Amazing Grace,” Boxoffice Mojo, accessed August 2, 2012, <http://boxoffice.mojo.com/movies/?id=amazinggrace.htm>.
3. Adrian Martin, “Light my Fire: The Geology and Geography of Film Canons,” Australian Film Critics Association, February 2008, accessed September 20, 2012, <http://s168.n228.n6.n64.static.myhostcenter.com/LightFire.php>.
4. The final round table discussion at the Middlebrow Cinema symposium (University of Exeter, UK, July 25, 2012) came to a mostly shared conclusion that there is no middlebrow form but a number of forms that are *recognized* as middlebrow within specific national cinema contexts at specific times.
5. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the *moyen* (the average) has been the major touchstone in contemporary definitions of the middlebrow. See *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010).
6. Mark A. Eaton, “Miramax, Merchant-Ivory, and the New Nobrow Culture: Niche Marketing, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2006): 259.
7. *Ibid.*, 263.
8. Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 9.
9. *Ibid.*, 10.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 9.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press/Wallflower Press, 2012), 25–28.
14. Ryan Gilbey, “Plenty of Passion, but Where’s the Humanity?” *New Statesman*, March 26, 2007, accessed January 7, 2013, www.newstatesman.com/theatre/2007/03/amazing-grace-film-wilberforce.
15. Nicholas Barber, “Amazing Grace,” *The Independent on Sunday*, July 22, 2007, accessed March 6, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/336989726?accountid=13460>.
16. Gilbey, “Plenty of Passion.”
17. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

18. Trials or trial-like scenes feature in 32 percent of his “purposive sample” while more metaphoric “trial structures” contribute a further 15 percent; see Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 187.
19. Ibid. 186.
20. Ibid. 187.
21. Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture*, 9. It is worth noting that in the DVD commentary for *Amazing Grace*, Michael Apted claims that the text of Wilberforce’s speeches as performed in the film was drawn from the historical record; Michael Apted and Ioan Gruffudd, “Commentary,” *Amazing Grace* DVD (London: Momentum Pictures, 2007).
22. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “*Schindler’s List* is not *Shoah*: the second commandment, popular modernism and public memory,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 292–312.
23. Ibid., 299–300.
24. Ibid., 300.
25. Gilbey, “Plenty of Passion.”
26. This terminology comes from George M. Wilson, *Seeing Fictions in Film: The Epistemology of Movies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150.
27. Apted and Gruffudd, “Commentary.”
28. This view is implicit in the angry response to the film by some among the “panel of experts” brought together in one newspaper article on the film’s release; see Derek Malcolm, “Amazing grace or disgrace?” *Evening Standard*, March 22, 2007, 32.
29. Apted and Gruffudd, “Commentary.”
30. Celeste-Marie Bernier has talked of the need for an “ongoing war against intellectual failures” in academic/historical discourses on the slave trade—“Imaging Slavery: The Body, Memory and Representation in the Transatlantic Imaginary” (research seminar at King’s College London, October 17, 2012). Bernier’s paper was concerned especially with the problematic question of agency (a focus of later sections of my chapter) and uncovering the “imaginative inner life” of faceless, unrecorded slaves.
31. Hansen, “*Schindler’s List* is not *Shoah*,” 302.
32. Gilbey, “Plenty of Passion.”
33. Though, as is typical in many historical films, a speech that was, in reality, delivered by the Attorney General, Sir Samuel Romilly, is given to one of the film’s major characters and famous actors. William Hague quotes extensively from the speech in the opening to his Wilberforce biography; see *William Wilberforce. The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), xviii.
34. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 68–69.
35. There is not the space to fully discuss the literally monumental final shot of the film (which comes after we’ve seen the faces of the gallery of actors) except to note its entirely inadvertent irony: the camera cranes back through a symmetrically staged band of military pipers playing the film’s titular song, before offering us a view of Westminster Abbey, where Wilberforce is buried. With the full bombast of classical, monumental film spectacle as I have defined it elsewhere (see Tom Brown, “Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*,” *Screen* 49, no. 2 (2008): 157–178), the shot vivifies the militaristic pomp and ceremony (and, digging further, the colonial violence that upheld it) to which Wilberforce should logically be contrasted.

36. I have written elsewhere about “direct address” and note its prevalence in the endings of films; see Tom Brown, “Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema,” May 31, 2012, accessed January 8, 2013, <http://fttreading.wordpress.com/2012/05/31/breaking-the-fourth-wall-direct-address-in-the-cinema-4/>.
37. It is significant that in our first view of them in parliament near the start of the film, Wilberforce and his friend William Pitt (Benedict Cumberbatch) are marked out for their modernity as the only two clearly visible MPs not wearing white wigs.
38. Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–124.
39. *Ibid.*, 114.
40. Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 353.
41. Hague was Shadow Foreign Secretary (Conservative Party) at the time of the biography’s publication and Leader of the Opposition between 1997 and 2001.
42. Interestingly, the DVD menu changes this to “one movement that changed the lives of millions.” This is perhaps a response to the negativity that met this proclamation of Wilberforce’s agency in some quarters on the film’s theatrical release. See again, Malcolm, “Amazing grace or disgrace?”
43. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 188.
44. *Ibid.*, 190.
45. This sequence clearly orientates the film towards the US market. Though *Amazing Grace* was reported in one industry periodical to be a “wholly-UK production” (see *Screen Finance* 18, no. 23 (2005): 4), the financing came predominantly from the US (Walden media, which is owned by prominent US evangelical Christian Philip Anschutz). Moreover, the film did 66 percent of its box office business in the United States, see Boxofficemojo.com, “Amazing Grace.” It is clear from the film’s US website that promotional strategies were there targeted at church groups; see “Resources,” accessed January 8, 2013, www.amazinggracemovie.com.au/resources.php. (Note, this is the Australian website for the film but this section largely replicates the now unavailable US site.) Since the massive success of *The Passion of the Christ* (2006) this market has become more important in the eyes of publicists and financiers. A different essay could delve further into the literally pedagogical function of *Amazing Grace* as a text and, for example, compare the different pedagogical address (and more politically correct emphases) of its online UK marketing, where Olaudah Equiano has a level of prominence he does not have in the film; see “Amazing Grace,” accessed January 8, 2013, www.amazinggracemovie.co.uk/. See also the Times Educational Supplement’s online materials for using *Amazing Grace* in the classroom, “Teaching Resources,” accessed January 8, 2013, www.tes.co.uk/mypublicprofile.aspx?uc=168559.
46. Gilbey, “Plenty of passion.”
47. See “John Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln*: A collective text by the Editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*,” trans. Helen Lackner and Diana Matias, *Screen* 13, no. 3 (1972): 15.
48. See also my analysis of the “historical gaze,” a form of foresight expressed by historical characters that is dependent upon hindsight—i.e., without the hindsight available to the contemporary viewer, the foresight of the character could not be recognized as such. Brown, “Spectacle/Gender/History.”

49. Though beyond the scope of the present chapter, issues pertaining to the relative voicelessness of slaves in *Amazing Grace* could be further enriched with reference to this literature and especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), 66–111.
50. Lisa Purse's analysis of *United 93* (2006) offers an excellent model for a phenomenological reading of a film whose style is particularly attuned to this approach—moreover, as Purse demonstrates, *United 93* shows there is no contradiction between a vitally affective, "embodied" style of filming and deeper levels of political meaning, see "Working Through the Body: Textual–Corporeal Strategies in *United 93*," in *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory*, eds. Tom Brown and James Walters (London: British Film Institute, 2010), 157–161.
51. Johnson, "On Agency," 114.
52. For example, text accompanying the display of "Necklace of Nine Charm Pendants" reads, "Another form of resistance was the retention of African culture, especially religion. African belief systems survived the Middle Passage and helped enslaved Africans endure their ordeal."
53. This features repeatedly and prominently in the "Plantation Life" display, particularly revealingly in this text (talking first of actual revolts): "This sort of resistance is recorded; it is not so easy to see individual acts of resistance, like deliberately spoiling a job, breaking machinery, or committing arson but you can see them if you read between the lines of European observers of the time." This emphasis is more widespread—Alison Landsberg quotes a caption to one of the central displays in Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American history: "we, as a community, are remembering [the contribution] of our ancestors who were enslaved, remembering the crimes that enslaved them, and remembering their *countless acts of resistance*" (my emphasis). Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 81.
54. "Enslavement and the Middle Passage," accessed December 12, 2012, www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/middle_passage/index.aspx.
55. The success of this aim is clearly open to debate because, as my description hopefully conjures, the images are highly abstracted, such is the tightness of the focus on individual parts of the slaves' bodies; no slave is individualized in the exhibit. However, at a minimum one can say that this proposes a different level of imaginative involvement for the spectator than a more narrative form.
56. Hansen, "*Schindler's List* is not *Shoah*," 302.
57. Ibid.
58. Spielberg's representational choices in *Amistad* are bold and complex. In ways very similar to the Middle Passage exhibit at the International Slavery Museum (perhaps the latter was influenced by *Amistad*), the first few shots of the film make us "feel" the physical toil of Cinque's escape. However, as the opening scene develops, the mutiny/slave revolt comes to be represented something like a horror movie, with Cinque, especially, being made to appear quite monstrous. This is clearly a deliberate and self-conscious strategy, as the film is invested in first othering the slaves (not sub-titling their dialogue for approximately the first 20 minutes while

sub-titling that of the Portuguese slavers, for example) then increasingly aligning the spectator with them and justifying the violence on the boat. Significantly, the film later *shows* us (visualizing Cinque's testimony) the horrors of the Middle Passage in graphic detail.

59. See for example, Armond White's enthusiastic reading of the film, "Against the Hollywood Grain," *Film Comment* 34, no. 2 (1998): 34–42. In *Amistad* voicelessness is made a topic of the drama: the film concerns itself with the way in which language (specifically a lack of English) denies the slaves agency as their fate is decided in the oratorical theatres of nineteenth century US courtrooms; a major climax comes near the end when Cinque has learnt enough English to call out to a judge, "Give us free!" Language is a marker of humanity, but oratorical skill is the key conduit of narrative agency in middlebrow historical films of this type (as in courtroom dramas, a genre to which *Amistad* is closely related)—Cinque's limited English convinces many of his humanity, but it is up to John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins) to talk about (as in, make happen) the Africans' freedom.
60. V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), particularly [Chapter 6](#), 116–133.

morgan/sheen

the compressed frame

of impersonation

b e l é n v i d a l

In a scene early in *Frost/Nixon* (2008), a glib David Frost tries to impress Caroline Cushing, an attractive young woman he has met on a luxury flight on his way to California. Although clearly flattered by his advances, she teases him by quoting from a radio show, in which, she claims:

they said you were a person who defined the age we live in
... you and Vidal Sassoon ... but what made you
exceptional, they said, was that you were a person who had
achieved great fame without possessing any discernible
quality.

Momentarily caught off guard, Frost deflects the tenor of the conversation, resorting to his trademark grin and a mellifluous “let’s talk about you for a little bit.” *Frost/Nixon* presents Frost as a celebrity talk show host destined to make history through the series of interviews with disgraced former US president Richard Nixon, which culminated in his unwitting admission of responsibility for the Watergate scandal. The momentous interviews provide the docudrama backbone to a narrative that follows the familiar

trajectory of an unlikely hero's spectacular triumph against the odds. But this biographical center is constantly thrown into question by the multiple perspectives that render Frost's motivations *suspicious*. Michael Sheen's performance elicits strong associations with the "real"—Frost's telegenic presence—through voice and gesture. However, the arch irony of the interview-like scenario in which Frost loses the upper hand and the tight close-ups on his twinkling eye and flashing smile, tap into the elusiveness of the central character as an inveterate performer, defined by and through his relationship with the medium of television.

Cushing's ironic line about Frost's presumed fame without substance could equally be extended to performers with a special gift for impersonation. Playing real-life figures who are part of our collective visual memory confronts the screen actor with the added challenge of familiarity. Sheen is adept at this task, but it is no wonder that in interviews he resists the word *impersonation* in relation to his work.¹ Impersonation suggests a superficial (and often parodic) act of mimicry, which is rarely accorded the praise bestowed on performances that not only convey the physicality of a character but also seem to reveal some kind of essence. In contrast, impersonation can often be perceived as the vehicle of cliché and caricature, but not of memory or soul.

"Impersonation" however raises intriguing questions in relation to my object of analysis in this chapter: the five films for cinema and television born of the collaboration between playwright and screenwriter Peter Morgan and actor Michael Sheen, in which the latter plays historical figures fixed in recent memory. Sheen played television host David Frost in both the original stage production and filmed adaptation of *Frost/Nixon*, football manager Brian Clough in *The Damned United* (2009), and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair on no less than three occasions: as a contender for the leadership of the Labour party in television drama *The Deal* (Granada for Channel 4, broadcast on September 28, 2003);² as a freshly installed Prime Minister in the feature film *The Queen* (2006), and as political ally to former US president Bill Clinton in *The Special Relationship* (HBO/BBC, September 18, 2010). I will focus on this "Blair cycle," as these three films best illustrate the emergence of a hybrid—and versatile—space developing between the docudrama's reenactment of real events, and the biopic's focus on fictions about famous individuals. In these films the encounter between documentary and dramatic forms evokes a British tradition of factual television genres responsive to sociopolitical events. However, in this chapter I want to argue that, if considered as a cycle, these films alternatively constitute an original development in a long devalued genre—the biopic—in relation to a devalued medium—television—which relies on a similarly devalued form of acting—impersonation. The collaboration between actor and writer raises tantalizing questions about the creative constraints and possibilities opened up by what could be called the *compressed* frame of the

biopic, a working framework for the rethinking of this genre at a time of industrial, generic, and aesthetic convergence.

Television is a key platform for the international visibility of a body of drama written by Morgan that is specifically British in its themes and approach to figures in recent cultural and political history. 2006 saw the release not only of *The Queen*, but also of the Channel 4/HBO docudrama *Longford* and the Film Four-backed *The Last King of Scotland*. *The Damned United* was developed for the BBC and then given an international theatrical release by Sony Pictures,³ while Universal saw an opportunity in Morgan adapting his own Anglo-American-themed play *Frost/Nixon* into a script directed by Ron Howard (also at the helm of Morgan's Formula 1 biopic *Rush*, 2013) after *The Queen* became a global success. *The Queen* was initially developed for television (as a continuation of *The Deal*) but "converted" to the big screen with the injection of international production funds.⁴ Finally, *The Special Relationship* aimed to capitalize on Morgan's successful formula of political drama in a lavish BBC/HBO production designed with transatlantic audiences in mind. This work has cemented Morgan's reputation as one of a selected group of star writers, which also includes Abi Morgan, Richard Curtis, and Stephen Poliakoff, whose crossover appeal in cinema rests primarily on their television work.⁵ My point of departure to examine Morgan's films for cinema and television as a cycle is not so much the production process as the textual *effects* of collaboration. If we look at the former, the input of directors and, in particular, the mediating role of Stephen Frears would need to be taken into consideration.⁶ However, I argue that the distinctive traits of the cycle can best be read through the continuities of Morgan's work with Sheen.⁷ Their five films (to date) suggest a decentered model for authorship in contemporary British cinema, located in the mutually complementary spaces of writing and performance, biopic and docudrama, as well as the big and the small screens. This approach is particularly appropriate for the study of a body of screen work that addresses the theme of the balance of power and its continuous shifts between two players.⁸ Thematic cohesiveness, however, is compounded by the hybrid format of a cycle that shifts the line of "history" ever closer to the present in a self-conscious move that, I contend, has reshaped the contemporary biopic.

television as compressed frame

Morgan's distinct brand of political drama maintains self-reflexive links with the evolution of the modern biopic as a genre associated with television. George F. Custen, whose work on the classical Hollywood biopic has become an obligatory point of reference, points out that, after the demise of the classical studio system in the 1960s, television has taken over the role of shaping public history.⁹ Custen describes this shift as a literal

and metaphorical “shrinking of the frame.”¹⁰ There is a change in approach and preferred subjects: the television biopic ceases to look back at the past and turns to the now in search of source materials; everyday-ness (what Custen calls the “tabloid famous”) is preferred to greatness.¹¹ Operating on smaller budgets than cinema, television delivers biographical drama on a more intimate scale¹² and enshrines the lives of the already famous—“lives already marked as worthy by their appearance in other media.”¹³

The explosion of biographical content found a new home in an established television genre, the docudrama. An early definition characterizes docudrama as “accurate recreations of events in the lives of actual persons.”¹⁴ However, the docudrama’s documentary roots belie the generic shaping and complex fluidity of biographical and historical content in fact-based fictions. For Steven N. Lipkin, docudrama, as an underlying rhetorical practice informing popular television formats (such as the “movie-of-the-week”) “creates a framework for relatability by converting the character/conflict/closure structure of the classic Hollywood narrative film into melodramatic configurations of victim, trial and articulation.”¹⁵ As a rhetorical template that aims to show the “universal” moral values at stake in the triumph of the common person against the odds, the docudrama also gained prominence in the film scene of the 1990s. Films such as *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *Schindler’s List* (1993) tackle traumatic historical events through personal perspectives and the melodramatic trajectories of their central characters.

While Custen’s choice of critical language upholds dated barriers of value separating film from devalued forms of television biography,¹⁶ approaches to the docudrama arising from television studies have emphasized the format’s flexible blending of biographical content with factual events to create new synthetic forms of drama.¹⁷ Lipkin’s analysis of the shared rhetorical strategies of the historical film and the television docudrama, or what Tobias Ebbrecht—in his work on historical programming in German television—has called “biographical docudrama” and “historical event television” geared to an affective perception of historical authenticity,¹⁸ provides a context to look at Morgan’s versatile writing across media. Nevertheless I would like to retain Custen’s stress on the “shrinking” of the biopic’s frame. This phrase signals that history on television is based on a presumption of closeness, “making the viewer feel personally connected to history in an intimate but startlingly casual way: ‘You are there.’”¹⁹ Custen’s thoughts about television raise intriguing questions about the biopic’s changing mode of address: the shrinking frame should not be understood purely in the negative sense of loss, but as a *compression* manifested in spatial, temporal, and affective terms.

Morgan’s films are part of a strand of political biopics that emerge out of the remainders of the expansive ideological narratives about historical progress and agency. This group of films often refers to a compressed

temporal frame—what Rebecca A. Sheehan calls, elsewhere in this volume, the cultural instantaneity of the biopic in the digital era. The topicality of docudramas permeates films about figures who are close to the present of the audience. Morgan's trilogy of films about Tony Blair, made between 2003 and 2010 and dealing with different stages of Blair's political career between 1994 and 1999, sets a precedent for other instances of contemporary political cinema. *W.*, completed by Oliver Stone while George W. Bush was still in office, was released three weeks before the presidential election in November 2008; *La Conquête/The Conquest* (2011), set during the 2007 electoral campaign, presents a less than flattering portrait of the (at the time of its release) incumbent President of the French Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, inviting comparisons between his electoral promises and the outcomes of his first term in office.²⁰ These films focus on specific events that are presented as retrospectively meaningful but also as unfinished business. They highlight the over-mediatized nature of the contemporary political process (more on this later), unfolding as cautionary tales about the pressures and perils of power told through a focus on the leader and his individual life story. Made with a sense of urgency that other biographical cycles lack, this trend is affirmed by its use value in current political discourse. Yet, it is the tension between timeliness and timelessness²¹ that can be said to define the rhetoric of contemporary political biopics.

Morgan's films typically illustrate this tension in the ways that they explicitly address the spectator as a historically situated subject: Custen's phrase "you are there" is literalized by mechanisms that draw attention to the mediated nature of the remembered event. The classical biopic's emphasis on duration and scope is replaced by the narrative reenactment's zoom in on a (retrospectively signaled) watershed moment: the meeting between Blair and Gordon Brown that sealed the alleged New Labour leadership pact in *The Deal*, Princess Diana's death in *The Queen*, or Frost's three televised interview sessions with Nixon in *Frost/Nixon*. More specifically, the characters played by Sheen exist in the compressed frame of the televisual event: in *The Queen*, Blair is introduced diegetically through television news footage (see [Figure 1.3](#), p. 45); Frost in *Frost/Nixon* and Clough in *The Damned United* come into full view for the first time as they stand in front of television cameras. This has important bearings on the primacy effect—the all-important first impressions that are to guide our response to the character further through the narrative.²² The film shot raises an intertextual connection that may trigger a concrete (televisual) memory of the famous figure in the mind of the spectator. However, as Sheen's characters emerge scrutinized by the double-framing of the small screen within the film's outer frame, the mimetic effect of the reenactment is momentarily suspended by the foregrounding of the *performance*. We may wonder, as the scene in *Frost/Nixon* cited at the beginning of this chapter

invites us to do: how should we read a character who exists, first and foremost, through television?

A possible answer to this question lies in the way the media image encodes “presentness” historically. The final act of *Frost/Nixon* stages what Custen identifies as one of the deep structures of television biography, the talk show.²³ In a gesture typical of the biopic, this reenactment collapses different moments of interpretation. *Frost/Nixon* progresses to an eleventh-hour denouement that sees Frost and his team claim victory from the jaws of defeat in the last interview session with Nixon, which culminates in the former president’s public admission of his role in the Watergate affair in front of the television cameras. Structured through a series of shot/reverse-shots, this sequence replicates the classic trope of the public trial, which “lays bare the specific messages of the biopic, encasing one narrative within another on a parallel level of commentary.”²⁴ The trial exposes the motivation of the main character and “seals the verdict of history,”²⁵ reinforcing the future perfect tense of the classical biopic—the teleological narrative that structures the character’s arc, destined to become the historical figure we know.²⁶ However, this time the truth of the message lies in the very channel of mediation—television—which shifts the emphasis from the resolution—Frost’s personal triumph and Nixon’s defeat—to the layers of retrospect embedded in the future perfect tense of the narration. These layers are spelt out in the talking-head interviews (conducted five years after the event and re-created with the cast members) and, in particular, through the last intervention by James Reston (Sam Rockwell), the archetypal investigative journalist and liberal American intellectual who assists Frost with his laborious research on the Watergate scandal. Reston’s voice, heard over a close-up of a forlorn, distraught Nixon seen through a television monitor at the end of the final interview, states: “The first and greatest sin of deception of television is that it simplifies, it diminishes great complex ideas, tranches of time, whole careers become reduced to a single snapshot.” While *Frost/Nixon* reenacts a historical event through a deeply personal, almost intimate confrontation between two individuals, it also explicitly acknowledges the construction of the nation as an imagined community by and through television. This affirms the potential of biopics as, in the words of Robert A. Rosenstone, “extended metaphors that suggest more than their limited timeframes can convey.”²⁷ In the remaining sections I examine further how the retrospective mise-en-scène of the political in the age of television conveys this metaphoric potential in Morgan’s fictionalization of a single figure—Tony Blair—across three films.

british docudrama and the mise-en-scène of the political

Martin Barnier, quoting Marc Ferro, has pointed out that biography responds to a social demand: “common sense expects from history that it

makes intelligible the social and political system in which we live.”²⁸ The biopic’s personalization of recent history offers one possible response to this demand, by throwing light on the agency of individuals in the political process. Morgan’s Blair triptych participates fully in this personalization of history, while steeped in the rhetorical practices of British docudrama. In *The Deal*, the extensive use of television news footage of the Labour and Conservative parties during the 1980s and early 1990s works as visual shorthand, providing a detailed background to Blair’s rise through the ranks of a Labour Party in disarray after the 1992 general election defeat. In contrast, the central event around which the whole narrative gravitates—the meeting between Blair and Gordon Brown at the Islington restaurant Granita, where a pact for the leadership was allegedly reached—constitutes the fully dramatized core of a scene that bookends the story of Blair’s well-documented rise. This speculative premise radically alters the documentary value of *The Deal* and the indexical meanings attached to its factual elements—a state of affairs that the film boldly highlights in its opening frames. Ushered in by a disclaimer (“although some scenes and dialogue have been invented, this film is based on actual events and parliamentary record”), the next statement—“much of what follows is true,” ascribed to the Western caper *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969)—playfully reverses the spectator’s expectations. The suggestion is that a mythical framework may be superimposed as the more appropriate prism through which to render intelligible the facts that form the basis of this film. This twist on the docudrama’s generic contract is only strengthened by the subsequent credit “written by Peter Morgan,” which graces the left-hand side of a close-up of a pensive Brown (David Morrissey). As Dave Rolinson points out, captured through the glass window of the restaurant, his face double-exposed through multiple glass refractions, the credit “creates . . . a sense of different Browns: the documented, the impersonated, the private, the authored.”²⁹

In this respect, *The Deal* needs to be inscribed within a wider “post-documentary” culture context, where the aspects and strategies associated with documentary as a discourse of truth have become “a diversion,” that is, increasingly dispersed and integrated into entertainment formats.³⁰ This, however, does not cancel out the progressive potential of the docudrama which in its current phase (post-2000s) flourishes in a rich televisual ecosystem characterized by “intergeneric hybridisation”³¹ and the “porous . . . opening up of both documentary and drama spaces.”³² Derek Paget notes that the encounter at Granita is a key moment during which Morgan brings into play an *uncertain* knowledge of what took place between Blair and Brown for the benefit of a *justifiable* fiction arising from the wider suspicion “that most if not all important political questions of the day were being stitched up in private meetings designed to bypass due democratic process.”³³ As Paget puts it, the ironic tale of the beginnings of the leader-

to-be articulates a desire to “make mischief,” or to offer a kind of “alternative truth”³⁴ through the speculative focus on the individual and the contingent, which renders the recent political past accountable.

Morgan’s Blair triptych appeared in a period of growing dissent and distrust towards the ruling New Labour government. *The Deal* and *The Queen* were released in 2003 and 2006 respectively, in the context of diminishing electoral support for New Labour³⁵ and criticism of the concentration of executive power at Number 10, to a degree unmatched in previous British history, during Blair’s third term in office.³⁶ During these years television drama turned to real-life political figures and hybrid formats in ways that were as prescient as they were confrontational. The widespread culture of spin at Westminster was targeted by political satire *The Trial of Tony Blair* (More 4, January 15, 2007). *The Project* (BBC/Arte France, November 10–11, 2002), a fictional account that charts the progressive disenchantment experienced by four young supporters of the New Labour project, from opposition into power, was based on interviews with persons associated with the party. The controversial *The Government Inspector* (Channel 4, March 17, 2005) tackles head on the death of weapons expert David Kelly through the speculative strategies of the docudrama.

These programs redirect the formal radicalism and social content of earlier models of British television drama towards a reflective response to the media culture of the New Labour era. This period has been characterized by an intense media focus on personality politics, as well as by the casting of the electorate into the passive role of spectators rather than participants in the electoral process.³⁷ Ana Inés Langer has called this the “Blair effect,” in reference to the selective yet constant exposure of the PM’s personal life to the public. The blurring of boundaries between the private and political personas helped Blair gain soft media coverage and appeal emotionally to “ordinary” citizens uninterested in or resistant to formal politics.³⁸ In *The Queen*, the Blair effect is dramatized, primarily, as a *televisual* effect, as reflected in a scene in which various female members of the staff at Balmoral quietly sob while watching Blair’s tribute to Princess Diana live on television. Blair’s emotive speech and, in particular, his celebrated dubbing of Diana as the “People’s Princess” are re-created here as part of a shared collective memory. The evocative power of the scene is amplified by the relatively long time (over 25 seconds) in which Sheen appears on the television screen as he performs the speech, and by the inclusion of real footage of ITV newsreader Martyn Lewis. Lewis is caught in a moment of spontaneous emotional response to Blair’s speech that matches that of the diegetic women spectators. While Sheen’s crisp and mournful delivery of the speech gives sonic unity to the sequence, the inclusion of reaction shots of the Queen’s staff—pointedly including the Queen’s private secretary’s skeptical “a bit over the top, don’t you think?”—

highlights the ambivalence of this moment etched in televisual memory (Figures 7.1 and 7.2).

Blair's impeccable performance is partly presented as an opportunistic move by Alastair Campbell (Mark Bazeley), then head of the Strategic Communications Unit at Number 10, to advance the PM's influence. In *The Queen* the appeal to a collective memory freezes the televisual image in the past tense, temporarily casting it in the warm glow of nostalgia. However, moments like this also illustrate the rhetorical effectiveness of writing and performance, producing insights into the political process through a personalized mode of address. In a text that situates the evolution of forms of documentary dramatization in British television, John Corner notes that "perhaps the most important aspect of dramadocumentary as a controversial form . . . is the linking together of a 'viewpoint' discourse with discourses of strong referentiality and of high imaginative potency."³⁹ The strong referentiality of Morgan's ironic writing and Sheen's self-effacing performance style tends to eclipse the most important aspect of their



Figures 7.1–7.2 *The Queen* (2006): The “Blair effect.” Emotional politics and televisual memory.

collaboration: the “imaginative potency” of the textual strategies set in motion in a space in between writing and performance. This is what connects their work to the fictional foundations of the biopic genre. Morgan has declared his lack of interest in providing a journalistic response to current events:

Never write about what’s happening; write about what happened. . . . Up close, too near to the actual event, and you lose the possibility of metaphor, you’re bound to be too literal. You’re limited (in terms of possibilities) to reconstruction.⁴⁰

Such potential for metaphor is enhanced by the 10-year gap between the events reconstructed in *The Deal*, *The Queen*, and *The Special Relationship*, and the respective production and reception contexts of these films. The period between 2003 and 2010 saw the consolidation of a 24/7 timeframe for television news response, accelerated by the advent of the broadband era in digital communications. Temporal compression shapes public commentary on history in the making and gives a factual quality to a cycle of films that persuasively incorporate found footage of the moments they reconstruct as part of their own fictional discourse. However, the imaginative potency of this cycle equally depends on the meanings accrued by performance. Thus, in the final section, I want to look at acting and, more specifically, at impersonation as key to the films’ successful circulation as biopics.

impersonation and interpretation

Performance is one of the attractions and stumbling blocks in fact-based fiction genres. In trying to replicate the traits of a figure who is only too familiar to the audience, the actor’s body risks standing in the way—“a body too much,” to use Jean-Louis Comolli famous formulation: that is, a body in direct competition with the visual imprint of the real figure.⁴¹ The body’s excess brings the biopic ever closer to docudrama and historical drama. As Paget notes, rather than separate manifestations, they should be seen as genres located in a continuum of fact-based representations across different media.⁴²

The body too much is not just a free-floating side effect of performance, but an ideological (and legal) bone of contention. Actors often speak about the sense of responsibility that comes from playing public figures; for instance, commenting on playing Gordon Brown in *The Deal* while Brown was still in government, David Morrissey states that he felt like he was being disloyal to someone he admired, and refers to the need to be attentive to the flow of information and the ever-changing context.⁴³ Journalist Mark Lawson has noted the change in attitudes towards impersonating members

of the Royal Family. Such acts have progressed from being the target of censorship or sanctions, to being encouraged in a celebrity-obsessed culture where the boundaries of privacy are continuously redrawn by famous cases, most notably the high-profile divorce of Charles, Prince of Wales, and Diana in 1996.⁴⁴ Testing the degree of success with which an actor embodies a historical figure close to our memory is one of the central pleasures of the genre itself. This leads me to the related question of the implications arising from a successful performance, in which the necessary empathy that the actor must develop for the figure they impersonate may compete with other affective meanings that the said figure may have for the audience. Patricia Hodge (*The Falklands Play*, BBC April 10, 2002), Lindsay Duncan (*Margaret*, BBC February 26, 2009), Andrea Riseborough (*Margaret Thatcher: The Long Walk to Finchley*, BBC June 12, 2008), and Meryl Streep (*The Iron Lady*, 2011) have all played Margaret Thatcher in television and film productions. However, these are also politically sensitive acts, as a successful performance opens up a margin for political revisionism, a critique that ran parallel to the praise garnered by Streep's award-winning turn as Thatcher in the contentious *The Iron Lady*.⁴⁵

Michael Sheen's versatility in the biopic genre has, paradoxically, become close to a form of typecasting. In addition to his roles in Morgan's films he has also starred as the titular characters in the dramas *Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa!* (BBC, March 13, 2006) and *H.G. Wells: War with the World* (BBC, September 30, 2006); he has posed as Charles Chaplin in the documentary *Shooting the Hollywood Stars* (BBC, 2/12/2012) and has played a Christ-like figure in the experimental Passion play-meets-social-drama *The Passion of Port Talbot* (2011) and its film version *The Gospel of Us* (2012). However, approaching Sheen's "Blair" creation as a *narrative act* across three aesthetically different films is key to the consistency, as well as the sense of evolution, of Morgan's project as both a reenactment of and a meditation on recent political history.

The Deal was aired on Channel 4 on September 28, 2003 after ITV had commissioned it, and then dropped it.⁴⁶ Its sensitive content made it presumably too hot to handle at a moment in which Blair's popularity had hit an all-time low after Britain joined the war in Iraq in March 2003 and the scandal surrounding the weapons of mass destruction dossier. Concentrating on a typical narrative motif of the biopic—the formative years in the life of an influential historical figure—*The Deal* flashbacks to Blair in 1983. As the newest MP to arrive in Westminster, he is introduced to Brown by a veteran Labour figure, John Smith (Frank Kelly). Smith would become leader of the opposition for a brief period. However, his sudden death in 1994 made it possible for Blair to maneuver into the leadership of the Labour party to the detriment of Brown, who was until then regarded as the "natural" candidate. The scene of Blair and Brown's first meeting in the cramped space of the latter's office already contains the seeds of the

conflict at the center of the drama. The scene economically signals two different ways of understanding power: the hard-working attitude, intellectual clout, and defensive demeanor of Brown are externalized in Morrissey's body language: shoulders crouched over his deskwork, he writes furiously as he gives curt answers to Blair's queries, looking up to the intruder, arms crossed, with a hint of suspicion but growing curiosity. In contrast, Sheen's casual, open gestures around the office and his "trying on" of the available space (such as the couch) suggest someone primarily attentive to adapting to his new environment. Morrissey and Sheen embody the dramatic contrast between a politician rooted in his time and place and the "blow-in," the man who comes from nowhere and thrives in a new milieu.⁴⁷ In the broader context of the story, this early scene suggests that Brown's tragic flaw lies precisely in his agreeing to the sharing of a space, which will eventually lead to the more painful sharing of power in what James Naughtie, author of the book that inspired the film, called an uncomfortable "political marriage" (Figure 7.3).⁴⁸

Sheen's performance begs the question, to borrow John Caughie's words, "what do actors do when they act?"⁴⁹ Sheen tends to avoid noticeable bodily transformation or additions such as heavy prosthetics that are most often worn as the visible marks of the "star-as-performer,"⁵⁰ and are routinely expected from the biopic actor. Sheen has characterized his work as one of gathering data such as gestures, mannerisms, and idiosyncrasies as a way of opening the door to the spectator's engagement with the character's emotional narrative.⁵¹ His Blair is only very tenuously an impersonation. The visible coat of make-up in *The Deal* was later toned down to a fresher, more natural look in *The Queen*, but in his first stab at Blair, his pale countenance, red lips, and dark-lined blue eyes give a plastic mask-like



Figure 7.3 *The Deal* (2003): Two ways of understanding power. Tony Blair (Michael Sheen) and Gordon Brown (David Morrissey).

quality to his face, whereas the side-glances and wide grin, which he flashes almost as an automatic defense mechanism at the end of the first meeting with Brown/Morrissey, enhance the inscrutability of both character and actor. As befits the two-hander structure in all of Morgan's scripts, Sheen's play is extremely alert to context and interaction, foregrounding the nuances of reaction whether face-to-face with his opponents, or in his multiple scenes built around telephone calls and television screens in both *The Deal* and *The Queen*. Faced with the psychologically "fuller" performances of Morrissey as Brown, or Helen Mirren in *The Queen*, watching Sheen is more about the production of a layered space which, to quote Caughie again, "is both reflective and affective . . . it begs neither identification nor distanciation, but both."⁵²

Sheen's performance in *The Deal* does not stress Blair's mannerisms as a fully fledged impersonation would do, nor tantalize the spectator with the illusion of full access to the (historical) character's virtues and foibles. Instead, its integration into the *mise-en-scène* allows audiences to imagine the process of *becoming* a public performer, and to witness the construction of a public persona that draws the personal into the political—a key critical focus for analysis of the Blair era, as noted earlier.⁵³ In this respect, even the most purely documentary-like moments in *The Deal* are driven by the mythical substratum of the biopic narrative. This is particularly clear in a sequence in which archival news footage relating to the notorious James Bulger murder case in 1993 precedes a montage of moments showing Blair in front of and through the television cameras, talking to the press and to Parliament about the need to be "tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime"—one of the key slogans of his mandate. Placed immediately after another, very different set of archival images that give a taste of the cacophony of scandals and disagreements that threw the Conservative Party into disarray in the early 1990s, Blair's delivery of an anti-crime policy sound bite is forceful and confident, as Sheen's voice carries the message seamlessly and unflinching through the flow of televisual images. This transitional sequence functions not unlike the classic montage of the rise of the great man, a typical narrative trope in the classical biopic. However, the extremely fragmented *mise-en-scène*, complex double-framing effects, and marked video textures that distort the close-ups of Blair, place the emerging leader under scrutiny, drawing attention to the mediated nature of his political address and, if not cancelling, then at least questioning the rhetorical power of Blair's intervention. Rather than the familiar performative gestures that encode the great man's sense of historical vision,⁵⁴ this montage gives a Kuleshovian impersonality to Sheen's performance as Blair: an ambiguity that draws our attention back to the *mise en abyme* of television itself, not as immersion into history in the making, but as a text that is circular and self-referential, expressive of the patterns of memory but also of television itself.⁵⁵ This self-referentiality gives

The Deal its edginess, making it, in the tradition of political docudrama, a text of suspicion. The double-framing of the televisual moment in 1993 for spectators in 2003 is a compressed time capsule that stands in for a longer political process, redirecting our attention to performance as key to the negotiation of power.

the compressed frame expands: biopic and media convergence

The continuities between Morgan's scripts and Sheen's incarnations of Blair across cinema and television make for an unprecedented example of a biopic-in-progress, where the character does not remain stable. As Barnier has noted, "the hermeneutics of the political biopic lead us to consider 'the future of the past,'"⁵⁶ or, better, in the plural: the *future(s)* of the past. The biopic carries the plurality of meanings embodied by its subject up to our time, intervening at any given point in the evolution of a myth. It deals, in fact, not with the stability, but with the transformation of an image.⁵⁷

Sheen's Blair, as the anti-hero in Morgan's scripts, refracts mistrust towards the alliance between television and the political. The cycle thus links back to the progressive stance of British docudrama, but also to the anti-television bias that we find in Custen's key study of the classic cinematic biopic. In the context of British cinema today, the biopic has nevertheless become a particularly supple format in the "logic of convergence"⁵⁸ driving forward the relationship between cinema and television by blending the strategies of dramatic film and TV drama. *The Queen*, in particular, has a marked reversibility; as one in an "increasing number of projects blurring the lines" (between cinema and television),⁵⁹ it is difficult to distinguish where the political docudrama ends and the monarchy biopic begins. However, as a film that emerged at an advanced phase in the convergence process that started in the 1980s, *The Queen* is markedly reflexive about this process, incorporating the relationship between both media into its mise-en-scène and mode of address, and inviting a reflection on the location of the televisual spectator through cinematic styles of narration.

The logic of convergence has continued to reshape the contours of the contemporary biopic. With *The Special Relationship*, British political docudrama inserts itself into the context of American quality television. This latest installment in the cycle was put together by HBO Films and BBC Films joining forces. A USA/UK co-production, it premiered on HBO on May 29 in 2010 and was aired on BBC2 on September 18 in 2010, a mere three months after the May 6 general election that signed off the New Labour era in Britain.

This time the biopic zooms in on selected episodes of Blair's unfolding relationship with Bill Clinton (Dennis Quaid), between 1992 and 2001. During this period, Blair becomes Clinton's close ally throughout the

Monica Lewinsky affair and conducts high-profile interventions in Northern Ireland and Kosovo (1999). In *The Special Relationship*, the televisual frame visibly expands to widescreen dimensions and the image takes on an edgy gloss, with international locations, high production values, and more emphatic performance styles. Blair is relocated to the landscape of the American political drama, reminiscent of both the classic—the opening scene with Blair arriving at the White House has echoes of *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939)—and the contemporary, most notably of Stone’s presidential biopics *JFK* (1991), *Nixon* (1995), and *W.* (2008), as well as the television show *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006). However, the connection with previous “moments” in the cycle is carefully woven into the script. Visiting the White House in 1992, an impressionable Blair attends a presentation by Clinton’s chief of political strategy, where he is instructed in the art of the political sound bite: “be tough on the causes of crime . . . but be tough on criminals too.” By pondering the weight that “the special relationship” had on the formation of Blair’s liberal discourse and New Labour’s identity (as seen in *The Deal*), the cycle relocates the strictly national concerns of the political docudrama to an international space of communication that is also increasingly generic. What may, on the one hand, seem the logical next installment in the ongoing chronicle of the New Labour era of British politics, marks, on the other hand, a less than subtle shift from the priorities of British docudrama to the interests of American commercial television. This includes the refocusing on Clinton, a clearer hook for the American audience to whom this television film is primarily addressed. In the international scope of this drama, Sheen’s impersonation takes on an added layer, closer to what Thomas Elsaesser calls “ImpersoNation”: an idea of “self-ethnography” practiced for the eyes of the other, mostly in an economy of representation that is largely conditioned by the implicit look of the big Other as posited by Hollywood as a de-centered, yet omniscient entity.⁶⁰ This idea, which relates to *The Queen*’s international visibility as a British heritage film, is dramatically built into *The Special Relationship*.

Morgan and Sheen’s films center on characters (Blair, Frost, Clough) who are consistently mediated by a form of memory that is, first and foremost, televisual. These are films that encapsulate, industrially and aesthetically, the logic of convergence. “Impersonation” becomes an act of performing collective memory at a point where historical narratives are still open and under revision, in a space that encompasses writing and acting, cinema and television. The sense of “unfinished business” left by the end of *The Deal* at the time of its original 2003 broadcast has subtly shifted over the years, turning into ambivalent nostalgia for the time of New Labour “landslide victories” (as one reviewer put it)⁶¹ after the release of *The Queen* in 2006, and changing into the stuff of political history after the end of the New Labour era in 2010.

In the cycle of films written by Peter Morgan and starring Michael Sheen the compressed frame of television functions as a tool for political scrutiny. Characters who are still alive are consistently mediated by a textual memory that primarily derives from the small screen, providing a vivid sense of “presentness” already transformed into myth. This raises all manner of questions concerning the biopic, including the role of televisual rather than cinephilic pleasures in the popularity of the genre in Britain. The strategies of the docudrama find an ideal conduit in Sheen’s performances: the actorly body too much of historical fiction manifests itself here as a self-effacing embodiment of figures who excel at reacting and adapting. His performance of Blair makes this most media-friendly of politicians hard to read—and that is the whole point. The creative *performance* of impersonation thrives in the auteurist gaps of interpretation opened up by the compressed frame of the contemporary biopic.

acknowledgments

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notes

1. See, for example, extended interviews with Michael Sheen in *The Culture Show*, BBC, December 2, 2008, and *The South Bank Show*, ITV, June 17, 2007.
2. All broadcast dates for films made for television refer to the date of first airing in the UK, unless otherwise specified.
3. Adam Dawtrey, “‘Queen’ Scribe Treated like a King,” *Variety* 404, no. 6 (2006): 7.
4. Originally conceived as a Granada Screen production, the project gained access to theatrical distribution in the UK and abroad when Pathé came in as co-financer; Miramax picked up distribution rights in the USA. Ben Dowell, “Think Big, Start Small,” *Screendaily*, April 5, 2011, accessed September 1, 2012, www.screendaily.com/reports/features/think-big-start-small/5025551.article.
5. Historically, television studies has been much more ready than film studies to concede the symbolic weight of authorship to screenwriters. On the television screenwriter as author, see Sarah Cardwell, *Andrew Davies* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 15–16.
6. Stephen Frears (who signed up to direct *The Deal* and *The Queen* on the basis of Morgan’s scripts) has been, in Morgan’s own words, a crucial figure in his development as a screenwriter, giving him “a degree of self-belief.” Quoted in Simon Hattenstone, “Inside the Minds of the Mighty,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2008, accessed June 16, 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/dec/13/peter-morgan-scriptwriter-frost-nixon/print. Equally, it must be noted that Frears is a notoriously eclectic director known to place the (normally pre-existing) script at the center of his creative investment

- in a project. See Derek Paget, "Making Mischief: Peter Kosminsky, Stephen Frears, and British Television Docudrama," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 10, no. 1 (2013): 175.
7. Trade papers have enhanced Morgan's reputation as a British *auteur*. By the time *Frost/Nixon* was released, Morgan's relationship with Sheen was being likened to famous creative partnerships between directors and stars. See Ali Jaafar, "Actor and Screenwriter Elect to Connect," *Variety* 413, no. 2 (2008): A10.
 8. Philip Kemp, "Royal Blues," *Sight and Sound* 16, no. 10 (2006): 29.
 9. George F. Custen, "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961–1980," in "The Biopic," ed. Glenn Man, special issue, *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 133.
 10. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 214–232.
 11. *Ibid.*, 216–217.
 12. *Ibid.*, 221.
 13. *Ibid.*, 219.
 14. Proposed by Tomas W. Hoffer and Richard Alan Nelson in 1980 and quoted in Robert B. Musburger, "Setting the Stage for the Television Docudrama," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13, no. 2 (1985): 93.
 15. Steven N. Lipkin, *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice*. 3rd ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 100.
 16. On the critical prejudice towards TV see Charlotte Brunson, "Is Television Studies History?," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2008): 127–137.
 17. Jonathan Bignell, among others, regards television as the natural home of the docudrama on the basis of its historical commitment to both factual (documentary) and fictional genres, and the medium's characteristic interest in the present. See Jonathan Bignell, "Docudrama Performance: Realism, Recognition and Representation," in *Genre and Performance: Film and Television*, ed. Christine Cornea (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 60. On the hybridization between British and American traditions, as well as between cinematic forms and television genres, see Derek Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It: Docudrama on Film and Television*. 2nd ed. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011).
 18. Tobias Ebbrecht, "(Re)constructing Biographies. German Television Docudrama and the Historical Biography," in *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, eds. Erin Bell and Ann Gray (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 210–211.
 19. Custen, "The Mechanical Life," 134.
 20. Serge Kaganski and Jean-Marc Lalanne, "Pour ou contre: 'La Conquête', film crédible ou oeuvre affligeante?," *les inRocks*, May 18, 2011, accessed August 10, 2012, www.lesinrocks.com/2011/05/18/cinema/pour-ou-contre-la-conquete-film-credible-ou-oeuvre-affligeante-1115134/.
 21. On the use value and timeliness of film cycles, see Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 5 and 9.
 22. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 37.
 23. Custen, "The Mechanical Life," 133.
 24. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 186.

25. Ibid., 186–7.
26. See “John Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln*. A collective text by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*,” trans. Helen Lackner and Diana Matias, *Screen* 13, no. 3 (1972): 19. For a full discussion of the biopic’s future perfect tense, see the Introduction to this volume.
27. Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, UK: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 109.
28. Marc Ferro, “La biographie, cette handicapée de l’histoire,” *Le Magazine littéraire* 264 (April 1989), 86, quoted in Martin Barnier, “Biographie filmée et historiographie,” in *Les biopics du pouvoir politique de l’antiquité au XIXe siècle. Hommes et femmes de pouvoir à l’écran*, eds. Martin Barnier and Rémi Fontanel (Lyon, France: Aléas, 2010), 18–19 (my translation).
29. Dave Rolinson, “Gesture Politics and Control Freak Actors: New Labour as Performance in *The Deal* and *The Queen*” (paper presented at the Acting with Facts symposium, University of Reading, UK, May 8, 2009), (my emphasis). I am grateful to the author for giving me access to this paper.
30. John Corner, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 260.
31. Corner, “Television in Theory,” *Media Culture and Society* 19, no 2 (1997): 247–262, quoted in Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It*, 3.
32. Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It*, 273 (emphasis in the original).
33. Paget, “Making Mischief,” 177.
34. Ibid., 182.
35. Under Blair’s leadership the Labour Party triumphed at the 1997 general election winning 418 seats, which gave them a majority of 179 in the House of Commons. This majority was reduced to 167 in 2001 and to 66 in 2005. In 2010, Labour lost its majority, winning only 258 seats, and it became the second largest party in the House of Commons and the official opposition to the Conservative–LibDem coalition, in government at the time of writing.
36. This concentration of executive power came about predominantly through three means: a centralization of power, the cutback on Cabinet decision making, and the personalization of party politics. See Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes, “Prime Ministers, Presidentialism and Westminster Smokescreens,” *Political Studies* 54, no. 4 (2006): 672.
37. See Mike Wayne and Craig Murray, “UK Television News: Monopoly Politics and Cynical Populism,” *Television and New Media* 10, no. 5 (2009): 416–433.
38. Ana Inés Langer, “The Politization of Private Persona: Exceptional Leaders or the New Rule? The Case of the UK and the Blair Effect,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 60–76.
39. John Corner, “British TV Dramadocumentary: Origins and Developments,” in *Why Docudrama? Fact-fiction on Film and TV*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 45. Paget has noted that although docudrama and dramadocumentary are, historically, different practices, there is a growing tendency to use them interchangeably, although docudrama is preferred in the production context, see *No Other Way To Tell It*, 135–137. My understanding of Morgan’s films as entrenched in docudrama does not invalidate the applicability of Corner’s point about the related practice of dramadocumentary.
40. Peter Morgan, “The Accidental Political Writer,” *Written by* 12, no. 7 (2008): 25–26.

41. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Historical Fiction. A Body Too Much," *Screen* 19, no. 2 (1978): 41–54.
42. Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It*, 161.
43. Mary Luckhurst, "David Morrissey. Playing Gordon Brown. Interview with David Morrissey," in *Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People*, eds. Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2010), 113.
44. Mark Lawson, "One is ready for one's close-up," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2006, accessed August 10, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/sep/08/3.
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gender, genius,
and abjection in
artist biopics

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Since Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (77–79 CE), art has been mythologized in cultural histories. Dealer Leo Castelli described his job as “myth-making of myth material.”¹ In *Lives of the Artists* (1550), Giorgio Vasari, inspired by Pliny, found artists' eccentricities humorous, endearing, and constitutive of their myths. Modern biopics find them pathological, however. While idealizing beloved art works, these films nonetheless represent artists as abject figures—poverty-stricken, sexually unrestrained, alcoholic, drug addicted, money-squandering, paint-splattered, and abusive. In *Vincent and Theo* (1990), Vincent Van Gogh (Tim Roth) licks paint from his fingers, drinks turpentine, and bares decaying teeth; his brother Theo suffers syphilitic agony; and their sweaty lovers devour food ungraciously. Jackson Pollock (Ed Harris, *Pollock*, 2000) and Francis Bacon (Derek Jacobi, *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon*, 1998) appear on the toilet; Amedeo Modigliani (Andy Garcia, *Modigliani*, 2004) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (José Ferrer, *Moulin Rouge*, 1952) die in their thirties; alcoholism and syphilis overtake them and several other artists. In these films such abjection must be accounted for and ultimately erased to validate the production by such

artists of “great” works that represent the high culture proudly claimed by their respective societies and nations.

The emergence of nineteenth-century avant-gardism in response to the open market provoked a cultural disparity between abject artists defying the bourgeoisie and “heroic” art acclaimed by that same bourgeoisie. Since then, abjection has become naturalized as fundamental to a modern cultural economy, as often mythologized as the notion of genius. In biopics, art-making is coded as obsessive, excremental, mysterious in its origins, and subconscious (that is, without the need for training) in the *mise-en-scène* of the studio, in which sexual encounters, dreams, and hallucinations occur. Focusing on the discourse of artists’ abjection in *Caravaggio* (1986), *Camille Claude* (1988), and *Love is the Devil*, I argue here that artist biopics made around 1990 radically revised the notion of abjection from a mark of denigration into a creative force, and that through this change such films critiqued earlier biopic representations of abject masculinity.

Since Alexander Korda’s *Rembrandt* (1936) biopics have erased, exaggerated, or invented biographical content to naturalize abjection as the essence of the artist’s character and define the artist’s function as cultural scapegoat. Artists’ deaths are a necessary stage in a cleansing process that makes art transcendent and “timeless” by freeing it from bodies and histories. Such transformations are film conventions fixed by repeated uses of melodrama, spectacle, invented characters or incidents, *tableaux vivants* that animate paintings, artists dreaming masterpieces, and magical, strangely lit studios. For example, in *Moulin Rouge* director John Huston invented a prostitute, Marie, who repeatedly calls Toulouse-Lautrec an ogre no woman could love, although the painter’s syphilis and candid representation of prostitutes belie the film’s overwrought themes of loneliness and lovelessness.

The studio is a refuge for forlorn Toulouse-Lautrec, or filled with white-hot intensity for hysterical Van Gogh (Kirk Douglas, *Lust for Life*, 1956). If the artists are well known to the public and their works are valued in the marketplace and available in museums and reproductions, this prior knowledge bonds the artist subject and the films’ spectators. Eminent artists creating famous works permit spectators to partake of this “magic” moment that obscures contradictions between the posthumous idealizations of artists in cultural memory and their seemingly innate marginalized, dirty, immoral, and self-destructive abject selves.² Biopics mask these contradictions by condemning society’s conformism, treating creativity as a violent act, and often depicting the artist’s death at the beginning of a long flashback. Death represents the moment of transformation from abject individual into national myth in a narrative economy that exchanges artist for masterpiece.³ The artist’s abject body must be sacrificed to the body of art in a struggle over phallic power.

naturally abject

As Deborah Covino notes, “the recognition that the aesthetic imaginary is a real cultural force should prompt us to view perceptions of the unacceptable body as founded not on private psychological bases, but on complex social structures and cultural repressions.”⁴ Idealized posthumous geniuses form a cultural mirror presumed to reflect an entire society, while living artists appear as outcasts until their deaths. The posthumous great artist is the “fantasized image of oneself as free from the visible signs of temporality, discontinuity, and variance,”⁵ while the living artist is fragmented by compromises with a philistine public, demanding patrons, and the marketplace. This notion of the posthumous genius as “whole” draws on Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage as constructing an imaginary subjectivity in a libidinal relationship to the body image.⁶ It is dramatized in biopics by the spectacularized and eroticized moment of the artist’s first appearance. We hear about Camille Claudel’s disappearance before seeing her, see only Modigliani’s shoes for the first few minutes, wait suspended for Toulouse-Lautrec to turn around, or listen to nondiegetic prologues before seeing Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1965) or Van Gogh (*Vincent and Theo*). In many films the artist protagonists’ first appearances initiate “a dynamic character evolution as the audience’s provisional meanings give way to subsequent information.”⁷ However, artists’ identities are fixed from the start; they do *not* evolve but remain stereotyped to fit spectators’ expectations about genius and the genre’s conventions.

For Julia Kristeva the abject is associated with phobia, hallucination, narcissism, and disgusting natural phenomena (e.g., blood, pus, bad smells) that are inexpressible in language. The abject is associated with a pre-language state, “the archaism” of a paradigmatic violence through which an infant becomes separated from its mother.⁸ Even if the abject is expelled, what is rejected is still part of the self: “The abject is both repellent and seductive . . . borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained”⁹ in the process of our “rejecting what is other to oneself—and thereby creating borders of an always tenuous ‘I.’”¹⁰ Abjection’s permeable borders between “what we are and what we reject, between what we expel and what we contain”¹¹ make abjection an unstable state of being and “a process of jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself,” that is, always challenging “tenuous borders of selfhood.”¹² Repressed but never eliminated, the abject is “the place where meaning collapses.”¹³

In biopics, artists cross borders between abject mortal and eternal genius. The sacrifice to art makes the artist a scapegoat, which, for René Girard, is “both a threat to the community . . . and the ‘sacred’ source of (originary) unity for the community.”¹⁴ Rituals, including film genres, disguise and contain an originary violence “to keep it at bay,” to keep society from spiraling into chaotic indifferentiation: violence toward the scapegoat

becomes then “the origin of unity and order . . . the principal of difference, the foundation of community and society.”¹⁵ In biopics, violence constitutes not only society’s rejection of artists but also artists’ creativity, making them accomplices in their victimization. The connection between violence and creativity has its roots in psychoanalysis. For Sigmund Freud, the artist, whom he considered a borderline neurotic, violently reconfigures suppressed material into new forms that constitute transgression.¹⁶ Drawing on repressed libidinal sources, artists release violent impulses, providing the means to challenge orthodoxy.

Violence dominates artist biopics: betrayal and murder in *Caravaggio*; verbal abuse and sadism in *Love is the Devil*; betrayal and imprisonment in *Camille Claudel*; sexual betrayal (*Frida*, 2002), violent rage (*Pollock*), suicide (*Carrington*, 1995; *Pollock, Love is the Devil*), and alcoholism/overdosing (*Moulin Rouge*, *Pollock*, *Modigliani*, *Basquiat*, 1996). In *Caravaggio*, two boxers tied to each other, both of whom sleep with Caravaggio (Nigel Terry), fight viciously, their violence a turn-on for the painter. Later, fighter Ranuccio (Sean Bean) acts as the model for St. Matthew’s sadomasochistic executioner in Caravaggio’s painting. With the words, “In the wound the question is answered,” the artist protagonist acknowledges the role of violence in creativity. Ranuccio, feigning friendliness, approaches Caravaggio and stabs him. Caravaggio rubs his blood on Ranuccio, saying, “We are brothers.” Later, Caravaggio slits Ranuccio’s throat and the dying Ranuccio puts blood on Caravaggio’s face. In *Love Is the Devil*, Bacon calls boxing “a marvelous preparative for sex . . . [that] unlocks the valves of feeling.” At a match, blood splatters Bacon’s face, producing an orgasmic moment for him and an image that evokes one of his paintings.¹⁷

For Kristeva, in abjection the semiotic consists of the emotive, individual discharge of energy and desire which is the “imaginary realm [that] seems to threaten to disrupt the orderly symbolic realm,” the socially accepted, rational(ized) order.¹⁸ The semiotic is in a negative or surplus relationship to the symbolic and is “heterogeneous to meaning,” intended to be highly personal and expressive, even emotional.¹⁹ I would argue that the artist is semiotic, while the art is symbolic—*not* when produced but only after the artist’s death, when art enters canons and markets. In the studio the semiotic emotional expression joins the symbolic, as art shapes violent creative impulses into public communication and a shared language.

abject romance

Susan Felleman argues that for artistic couples—male mentor, female student—“passionate commitment to art is seen not only as inherent and originally sexual in its underlying energies but also as explicitly bound up in sexual forces;” thus, the sexual and muse functions of subordinate females naturalize “the achievement of those already ‘known’ to be great

or potentially great.”²⁰ Myths of artists’ obsessive work and rampant sexuality are antithetical to femininity in biopics that blur the boundaries between art cinema, feminism, and romantic melodrama.²¹ Since the 1990s some biopics have revised images of female artists made abject by romance, while others have interrogated masculinity through the same blurred boundaries.²²

Films about women artists began in the 1980s with *Camille Claudel*, followed since 1990 by *Carrington*, Françoise Gilot in *Surviving Picasso* (1996), *Artemisia* (1997), Lee Krasner in *Pollock*, and *Frida*. Melodramatic romance plots appear in male artists’ biopics to underscore their abject natures: Van Gogh’s abnormal sociality, or Toulouse-Lautrec’s deformity. Women, however, are not abject by character or genius, but by virtue of being both female and artists. Belén Vidal views these biopics as moments when feminist historiography engages with “formative narratives of feminism—the struggle for women’s self-expression; the identification between women artists now and then—while filtering them through the politics of romance.”²³ Given “the double consciousness of the biopic: its layering of the present over the past, . . . the past also *deconstructs the present*, showing that the implications of the romance narrative are part and parcel of the pleasures of an active female gaze,” while past history “determines the textual limits” of the revisionist fantasy.²⁴ To adhere to the romance plot, women artists are domesticated (*Carrington*, Krasner, Gilot), punished (*Claudel*), or infantilized (*Artemisia*). To fulfill stereotypes of women artists, *Carrington*’s (Emma Thompson) bisexuality is erased, making her bond to homosexual Lytton Strachey (Jonathan Pryce) all the more abject—she hopelessly loves a gay man more than the four men with whom she has affairs in the film, while her lesbian affairs are ignored.

Women in films about male artists have agency to reject these artists, but female agency in melodramatic romance is often absent. In *Artemisia*, to learn to draw the body, Artemisia Gentileschi (Valentina Cervi) asks her tutor, Agostino Tassi, to pose for her, and so carnivalizes the artist–model relationship—hers is the scopophilic gaze. In the film her father Orazio accuses Tassi of rape, and Artemisia is tortured to test this accusation. Chivalrous Tassi admits to rape to stop her torture. According to the documents of the actual trial, he never confessed and it was Artemisia who accused him of rape. Felleman notes that the film works “to imbue its heroine with (an entirely anachronistic) sexual license and visual subjectivity and at the same time to offer her up as an object of desire.”²⁵ In *Camille Claudel* and *Artemisia*, the workshop, necessary for professional training, becomes a humiliating site where women are treated as servants and targets of male apprentices’ sexual jokes, diegetically replicating this dual gazing.

In *Camille Claudel*, Claudel’s (Isabelle Adjani) ambition becomes erotic, melodramatic, and abject, a “mud lust . . . a sculptural perversion . . . for

touching, feeling and making that is tactile and dirty, virtually scatological, and highly eroticized.”²⁶ At night she digs up mud, and later is “passionately engaged with a huge mound of clay, pulling and tearing at it, embracing it and smearing herself with it, breathing heavily, indeed panting, and ending up covered in brown streaks of clay,” as “the allure of a dangerously passionate woman threatens to give way to the horror of madness.”²⁷ The camera’s visual eroticization of finished works seen from all angles is distinguished from Claudel’s obsessive coprophilia, which eroticizes excremental raw materials.

Claudel proclaims her independence and right to work and exhibit but is, as Jennifer Borda notes, “subdued not only within the fictional narrative . . . but also within the film’s . . . narrative and visual structure.”²⁸ In one scene she takes a model’s place, becoming “a passive object of erotic desire,” which transforms her narrative “into a rumination on the dangers of feminist ambition” by offering “contradictory feminist ideologies.”²⁹ The film’s melodrama requires that she be marginalized and bohemian—Auguste Rodin’s mistress, estranged from her bourgeois family and always hysterical. But Claudel is also conditioned by her family’s bourgeois respectability in her desire to marry Rodin (G  rard Depardieu). Both the bourgeois Rodin and Claudel’s dealer Eug  ne Blot want her art but not her alcoholic, volatile behavior. The art world being as hostile toward abject artists as the wider social world is a theme reiterated in *Pollock* and *Basquiat*.

Claudel’s insanity, appearing as a consequence of both her failed affair with Rodin and her overweening ambition, results in her imprisonment in an asylum. The film resorts to the convention that love and ambition construct a hysterical female by implying that her affair drove her mad. Yet, for fifteen years after the affair, she continued to be a productive sculptor and was most likely institutionalized to prevent her from inheriting property.³⁰ Her doctors insisted for decades that she was fine; her mother ignored them, as does the film. In biopics women artists’ dilemmas are the result of romance.

In addition to the female gaze and narrative pleasure, I suggest that romance is also foregrounded because women’s works have no cultural status. Male artists’ works possess values affixed by a priori cultural judgments distinct from artists’ lives, and these judgments justify their biopics; given the uncertainties about women’s “greatness,” it is their scandalous lives that justify their biopics and are shaped into conventionally melodramatic story lines. But slovenly, drunk, and impoverished Claudel is unlike women artists in post-1990 biopics. In *Frida*, Kahlo never succumbs to abjection or romance and refuses victimization despite physical debilitation as devastating as Toulouse-Lautrec’s. The film depicts her as unrestrainedly bisexual and provides opportunities in the narrative to reinforce her agency and willpower, for example, when she chooses to go to her exhibition in her bed. Kahlo, Krasner, Gilot, and Gentileschi enjoy

successful careers and sexual freedom, and relinquish love when it becomes overwrought. Often initiating troublesome relationships, they leave them of their own accord with their faculties intact in order to continue to make art.

Griselda Pollock describes biopics' differencing: for male artists, film provides "access to the generic mystery of (masculine) genius," while female artists' biopics confirm "the pathology of the feminine, saturated by her sex. . . . made to hinge about a powerfully sexual, male figure."³¹ But cinema's power to produce pleasure "in excess of the meaning of images and their deferral to established sexualities" can undermine conventional narratives like romance.³² Patricia MacCormack deploys Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of becoming minoritarian, a perverse withdrawal from dominant culture, to explore an unfixed, unstable subjectivity that I think complicates Pollock's assessment.³³ Gentileschi, Claudel, and Kahlo are close to their fathers, who empower their ambitions. However, these relationships become unsustainable in adulthood. These women then aggressively pursue male mentors/lovers; training and sex are interdependent for women becoming artists, since they must overcome social as well as artistic limits. Male mentors free them from social conventions so they can be artists for whom desire is "positive . . . fundamental, full and creative."³⁴ However, following their liberation, women must *be* artists, entering a discourse that denies them master status because, unlike becoming, being exists within a regulated gendered order that rejects women artists. In some biopics artists embrace true perversion if they maintain a state of being unstable, deterritorialized, and undefined, what MacCormack calls "becoming-monsters." In the film Claudel says, "I've become a stranger to myself. . . . Nothing that's monstrous is foreign to me," and admits her minoritarian, unstable identity: "I am that old woman with nothing on her bones; the aging young girl, that's also me, and the man is me."³⁵ Successful women artists must remain monsters, refusing restrictive, normalizing desire that "threatens to define and other [them]."³⁶ Claudel fails, but Gentileschi, Krasner, Gilot, and Kahlo succeed in becoming-artist/becoming-monster/becoming-woman by not capitulating to regulated desire.

abject masculinity

Women artists embrace becoming minoritarian in defiance of gender restrictions. I argue that *Caravaggio* and *Love is the Devil*, too, embrace becoming in defiance of social restrictions, but in a queering of the ideologies of art production and values. Artist biopics have methods for representing and rejecting abject masculinity. Voiceovers and prologues, in their godlike invisibility, rationality, and omniscience, are used to maintain a distance between abject artists and their art. In *Moulin Rouge* the

written prologue inserts the symbolic order of artistic greatness to explain and contain the film's melodramatic abjection: "His palette [*sic*] is caked and brushes dry," but "the genius of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is as fresh and alive as the day he laid them down." The film claims to restore his paintings "to his hands, and he and his beloved city and his time shall live again." A similar prologue assures spectators that Rembrandt is a great genius to balance the film's portrayal of him as abject. Prologue-like openings of dying artists (in *Caravaggio*, *Goya en Burdeos*/*Goya in Bordeaux*, 1999; *Klimt*, 2006) promise that death will save art from artists' abject lives.

In *Love is the Devil* and *Caravaggio*, however, artists' poetic voiceovers counterbalance and interrogate abjection. Despite presumptions that voiceovers "naturalize the strangeness of cinematic narration" to create "a special relationship with the viewer,"³⁷ these seemingly explanatory voiceovers are highly poetic streams of consciousness that combine with narrative representation to deconstruct the dominant view of artists' abjection as prior to and outside the work of art. Rather, abjection becomes constitutive of creativity as it also challenges the presumption that art is timeless or can escape history.

The Bacon biopic, *Love is the Devil*, is a long flashback from his 1971 exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris to his affair with George Dyer (Daniel Craig) in the 1960s. We first see Bacon's art through Dyer's shock at a montage of paintings and pornography in the studio he enters to rob. Despite becoming lovers, well-to-do Bacon is contemptuous of working-class Dyer. Their sexual activity is imaged in mirrors, a common device in Bacon's paintings. Submitting to Dyer, Bacon describes masochistic pleasure as cathartic in a voiceover: "all responsibility is relinquished . . . you exist solely for the pleasure of another man." His burns from Dyer's cigarettes are "just the trophy."

Refused permission by Bacon's estate to use any paintings, John Maybury and cinematographer John Mathieson used filters and lenses to distort faces and reflections shot in mugs and ashtrays. Elongated images and faces suggest Bacon's paintings, and Dyer's hallucinations mesh with images from the paintings. In one scene, Dyer awakens and urinates into a painting of a toilet—art and life intertwined in an abject act. At the Colony Club, Bacon and friends recite their mantra: "We are all in our own private personal prison. And you never see the light until your throat is cut." Bacon adds: "Feelings? I prefer to show two men fucking." He repeatedly muses on ties between beauty and death in voiceovers: "sometimes a man's shadow is more in the room than he is, the void . . . across his face as he daydreams is the void of death."

Bacon's narrative is a dialectic between his success (which the film ignores and he appears to disdain in his sharp retorts to praise) and the fall of Dyer, his doppelgänger. Bacon and Dyer represent a schizoid split of abject masculinity. Dyer, with his conventionally manly hard body and rugged

face, is hysterical, self-destructive, poorly educated, criminal, depressed, and weepy. The more flamboyant Bacon is rational, cool, witty, well-educated, rich, successful, indulgent but not self-destructive, and always in control even as the masochist in their sadomasochistic rituals.

Bacon muses on his perpetual loneliness, “Who if I cried out, would hear me?” and failed relationships,

This painful inability to sustain relationships, the selfishness
my work demands leaves no room for an emotional self.
Can tenderness ultimately only manifest itself in emotion
of a brush? Even this remains invisible. . . . Trying to create
some distance between myself and some dead lover.

Bacon acknowledges his agency in this loneliness: “Loneliness, my only true companion will always rival any lover. . . . Do I possess some inner destructive demon?”

Most significant, however, is that Bacon’s voiceover acknowledges the ties between abjection and creativity that he embraces (see [Figure 8.1](#)):

When I went into the house of pleasure. . . . I went into the
rooms that are kept secret . . . shameful even to name. But
there is no such shame for me because then what sort of
poet, what sort of artist would I be?

Dyer, on the other hand, is destroyed by abjection and commits suicide on the eve of Bacon’s Grand Palais exhibition. Before dying, Dyer, like a figure in a painting by Bacon, stands semi-naked before a mirror, vomits, drops pills, sits on the toilet, cries, and lies on the floor. Later Bacon, while on the toilet, remembers a similar circumstance: “Peter Lacey died in Tangiers [in 1962]. . . and they told me this the opening night of my Tate retrospective.”



Figure 8.1 *Love is the Devil* (1998): Bacon and Dyer in the studio.

Death and success are linked here and again in Bacon's diegetic comments to a friend about the doubling of beauty and pain, creativity, and violence: "There is no beauty without the wound . . . I'd just like to make one picture that would annihilate all the rest, the violent fusion all the past and all the present concentrated into a single raw slice of a nerve." Fittingly, a double exposure effect is used to turn a photo of Dyer into a skull, as Bacon muses on love and entropy in a final voiceover: "Everything is running down. The sun is burning out, the stars are burning out, it's the only thing in life that's certain, that it's all running down."

Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* also focuses on "the wound," death, and entropy. As Steven Dillon notes, Jarman purposely used no actual paintings, but re-created their making, drawing on Pier Paolo Pasolini's notion of poetic cinema as "irrational, oneiric, elementary, and barbaric" by using "free indirect discourse" to combine the subjective/lyrical and the objective/political in a character's internal monologue.³⁸ The film opens with a highly poetic voiceover from the dying artist:

1610, four years on the run, so many labels on the luggage
 . . . running into the poisonous blue sea, running under the
 July sun, adrift, salt water drips from my fingers leaving a
 trail of tiny tears in the burning sand . . . I'm dying in time
 to the splash of the oars.

This soliloquy "represents a conscious artifice . . . deriving from alienation and homelessness" that "emerges in a liminal space of death,"³⁹ as Steven Dillon notes, so that every scene expresses "subjective memory as much as objective history," as scenes move back and forth in time linked by soliloquies on sex and death.⁴⁰

Darkness and light re-create drama in Caravaggio's paintings, but another equally important light source is gold: Cardinal Del Monte examines a gold tiara; Caravaggio's coins buy Jerusaleme from his family and pay his model Ranuccio; Caravaggio mixes paint beside a pile of gold coins. Paint and money are both excremental, yet both produce beauty. Dillon notes that Jarman "allegorize[s] the power of creativity,"⁴¹ a common strategy in biopics. But, in the cases of Caravaggio and Bacon art-making is not idealized, but rather messy and without magic. Caravaggio's Virgin is modeled on a drowned prostitute's bloated body, and Bacon's paintings record Dyer's mental collapse. Art is both "imaginative and destructive."⁴²

In Caravaggio's studio Jerusaleme grinds, primes, and mixes blood red paint, which is also the dominant color for Bacon. Painting is not inspired but tedious: models hold difficult postures or fall asleep, Jerusaleme yawns, and uninspired Caravaggio stares at models unable to paint them. His studio is associated with drunkenness and satires about religion in which Caravaggio impersonates Girolamo Savonarola, the zealous fifteenth-century religious reformer. In his studio social identities are fluid and ludic,

so that lower-class models with dirty feet turn into saints. Caravaggio's art is not divorced from history or biography but is, in James Tweedie's view, "the moment at which a welter of social and economic forces, identities and desires were inscribed on canvas . . . a microcosm of Rome's sexual, economic and power relations."⁴³ Sweaty models perform tableaux for money, and Renaissance violence, emotion, politics, and sexual relations (like Kristeva's semiotic forces) enter Caravaggio's paintings to resist art's symbolic forces of institutionalization and commodification, expressed in the Pope's instructions: "paint quickly, the quicker the better. . . . Revolutionary gestures in art are a great help for us. . . . Keeps the quo in the status . . . a revolution made with brushes . . . the paintings are very popular, very useful." But Caravaggio's embrace of abjection resists the Pope's recipe. His gritty lovers incorporate his life into his art, and permit grubbiness to inspire and enter masterpieces to inject the timely and historical life into the timeless art. Caravaggio's voiceover mediates between philosophical depth (time) and life's grit, poverty, and death: "Time stops not even for the sun. My shadow passes, the flies come back."

In both films time is measured not by triumph or art's escape from time but by decay, entropy, death, and aging. Narratives run down, instead of resolving into fame as in earlier biopics. Bacon's and Caravaggio's works display abject subjects—dirty feet, balding heads, grubby bodies, screaming faces, and the body in pain.⁴⁴ Such content thwarts institutionalization, as do Jarman's other devices: inventing Caravaggio's mute assistant Jerusaleme (who inscribes the studio as a work site) and a relationship between Caravaggio and Lena,⁴⁵ and showing poor imitations of Caravaggio's art that make the film's tableaux more "authentic" than paintings in reflecting Caravaggio's desire to put real life into art.

Tweedie believes the tableau destroys "the organic, mimetic diegesis" through an aesthetic alternation between "distanciation and intimacy,"⁴⁶ also served by Jarman's anachronisms: a calculator, suits and ties, a typewriter, a magazine with photos of Caravaggio's paintings, jazz, smoking, cars, trains, and motorcycles. Miguel Mota argues that the film "calls attention to its own rhetorical invention, complicating the categories of both history and fiction" because Jarman believed Caravaggio's life "could be accessed not through the usual history books but rather only through an imaginative reading and recreation of the paintings."⁴⁷ Rejecting the historical mystifications that wrench art from its history and sensationalize artists' biographies, Jarman has Caravaggio reject cathartic certainties: "Uncertainty and doubt, long live doubt, through doubt comes insight." Maybury, likewise, has Bacon state "I'm optimistic about nothing."

In this world "sexuality is the self-lacerating passage from life to death."⁴⁸ This is epitomized by Caravaggio's naked embrace of the dead Lena (Figure 8.2): "I love you more than my eyes. Pure spirit, in matter. I'm trapped. . . . horribly perverted. . . . my Magdalene drowned in the waters



Figure 8.2 *Caravaggio* (1986): Caravaggio and the dead Lena.

of forgetfulness.” Later a monk tries to place a crucifix in his hands but the dying Caravaggio throws it away and addresses Jerusalem: “Dolphins are not caught with smiles but cruelly with hooks. One day you will learn to be cruel.” It is abjection that marks life’s progress. The camera then focuses on Caravaggio’s stigmata and dirty fingernails in a tableau in which he appears as Christ deposed in his own painting of the Deposition.

I would argue that Jarman also queers biopics by deploying and parodying the paradigmatic dying artist cliché and its melodramatic function in earlier biopics, just as he parodies the masterpiece, the critic, and the “magic” of creativity in scenes in which Caravaggio lacks inspiration in the studio. Jarman further queers the art world’s ideology of masterpieces when critic Giovanni Baglioni, seen anachronistically typing his review in the bathtub, poses like Marat in Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793). Such parodies and anachronisms deny the elevation of art that simultaneously commodifies it. Although Caravaggio dies, his flashbacks remain undidactic episodes of resistance against hegemonic powers. Alluding to the conventions of artist biopics, Jarman’s queering destabilizes artistic identity from its melodramatic abject representation in earlier films with which he dialogues. Caravaggio’s creativity requires a fluid identity, while maintaining integrity in his resistance to his patrons’ attempts to control his art even as he accepts their commissions. His indeterminate sexual identity is a metaphor for an unpredictable, commanding, and unvictimized artistic identity.

Bacon’s sexuality is not ambiguous, but he too resists the social conformity that Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec desired. He rejects Dyer in public and rejects others’ praise, so unlike the neglect experienced by artists in earlier biopics. His two greatest achievements are each marked with the suicide of his lover, his pain making his honors visceral and emptied of glory, so he can continue to paint and not succumb to success.

Both films challenge stereotypes of homosexual identities. Emphatic about the physicality of art, the young Caravaggio uses his art as a lure for gay tourists. But the triangulation of Ranuccio, Lena, and Caravaggio shows “that sexual identity cannot be delineated simply by sexual object choice, gender performativity or by sex.”⁴⁹ Their main contribution to the genre is their queering of abjection, refusing to accept it as a negative force or a justification for marginalization and victimization. In order to interrogate dominant powers that commodify art (the Church for Caravaggio, the public for Bacon) and impose aesthetic identities on artists, these films queer the norms of art-world politics—patronage, valuation, public image, and assimilation to religious or national purposes. They queer the genre’s presumption that art can be severed from history and biography and that the labor of art-making must be erased for a work or oeuvre to achieve “masterpiece” status. To a lesser degree, *Basquiat*, which reiterates the abject victimization convention, also projects a hostile representation of art-world dealers and patrons. In this way, these films resist the victimized, abject artist constructed by decades of biopic reiterations. Both films, absorbing Judith Butler’s assertion that gender is not fixed but is saturated with class, ethnicity, and history, among other factors,⁵⁰ intervene to disrupt filmic representations of the abject artist and refuse the reiterations of abjection that had come to naturalize the artist.

Most studies of abject masculinity in films make the masculine ridiculous through comedy or emphasize the absolute masculinity of “hardness” in noir films.⁵¹ Artist biopics are melodramas, and male artists are figures of lack—without social acceptance or normative sexualities, even if heterosexual. Jarman and Maybury reject the genre’s melodramatic conventions, its ideologies of art’s timeless purity against artists’ messy lives, and its treatment of creativity as hysterical victimization. Conflicts between poetic soliloquies and abject lives are resolved in the studio where Caravaggio and Bacon gain control—Caravaggio by tableaux vivants that fix and redefine his relationships with lovers and patrons, and Bacon by returning to an atavistic state (painting himself green and screaming before he paints) that erases the social order he otherwise handily manipulates in the Colony Club. In Bacon’s teeming mess of cans, papers, brushes, everything is spilled from shelves to the floor including a drunken sleeping Dyer, who is unwelcome, thrown out by Bacon several times. Similarly, Caravaggio’s studio is a space in which he controls even his patrons, who pose for him. Bacon succeeds despite his abjection and Caravaggio is not victimized but triumphant in killing Ranuccio and fleeing.

Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Toulouse-Lautrec try painfully to shake off their abjection; they cannot, and so must be salvaged by art, which survives to redeem their victimization. But Bacon and Caravaggio are not victims, and they embrace abjection as a source of inspiration. Bacon’s biting wit

rejects tender words from friends or strangers, and Caravaggio commits violence without remorse.

conclusion

For both artists abjection becomes a source of creativity, not the hindrance it is in earlier biopics. The devastating consequences of abjection for Van Gogh or Toulouse-Lautrec become the fortunes of Dyer, Lena, and Ranuccio, who bear its brunt. Caravaggio and Bacon persist without sentimentality, hysteria, melodrama, tears, or the social ostracism of the filmic Rembrandt, Toulouse-Lautrec or Van Gogh. Caravaggio and Bacon reject the social assimilation that would dominate them. They maintain art-making as inviolate, but without the panic and hysteria of earlier biopics in which it becomes the very sign of the artist's inability to live in the real world or possess an adequate masculinity. Art is a necessity in Caravaggio's Renaissance and in Bacon's nationalistic post-World War II Britain, and these artists take advantage of their historical moment to control the processes by which their art represents their age or nation. These films deploy abjection to rethink the nature of art (and film) rather than to disguise fissures between artists and their art. Voiceovers moving across past, present, and future (Caravaggio's death, Bacon's entropy) treat abjection not as repulsive, but as liberating, explanatory, and poetic. Caravaggio and Bacon speak a counter-narrative that exposes their complex consciousness with its own illumination, as Tina Chanter recognizes:

By paying attention to abject moments, and to the moments that produce and follow them, moments in which identity appears to coagulate and cover over the fissures and cracks that help to produce it, we can contest the forces that tend to gain hegemonic power over us. . . . in the fractures of the stories we tell, and are told about others and about ourselves.⁵²

Death in artist biopics often frames the narrative, appearing at the beginning and the end to foretell the cleansing of abjection as art's first step on its trajectory toward timelessness. Only in death does the artist attain symbolization, or rather his art does. In life he is emasculated.

Before *Caravaggio*, in the artist biopics of the classical Hollywood period, artists' masculinity was ambiguous, deviant, and questionable—they were rejected and victimized by women, the art world, and their families. But Caravaggio and Bacon succeed while they are alive to obtain commissions, prizes, lovers, and friends, unlike the deformed Toulouse-Lautrec, the socially inept Van Gogh, foolish Rembrandt in his dotage, and the ever-celibate Michelangelo, who prefers the company of stonemasons to rich patrons. These artists suffer an impaired masculinity, lacking the phallus

sexually and economically: the servants of patrons, they are poor and unable to support families or themselves. Furthermore, like most women artists, they come from bourgeois families and are conflicted about their failures to fulfill conventional masculine roles of breadwinner, father, and lover. But with powerful patrons, public acclaim, money, and fame, Caravaggio and Bacon spectacularize their sexual prowess and integrate it into the very process of art, whose making is an end in itself. They do not have to die that their art might live.

As Butler notes, abjection includes the notion of being outcast.⁵³ But Bacon and Caravaggio are not outcasts. This form of abjection disappears after 1990, as artist biopics come to be filled with promiscuous sexuality, hostile competition among artists (uncommon in earlier films), and an abjection without melodrama or victimization (as in the early deaths of Klimt and Modigliani portrayed in their respective biopics from the 2000s). Artists in post-1990 biopics aggressively resist the social demands of the art world or domestic life, and are unwilling to appease social protocol, unlike artists in earlier films who desperately seek public approbation and family acceptance.

The films by Jarman and Maybury not only grasp how artists, art, and viewers are shaped by myths of genius and abjection, but also how abjection, disdained in earlier biopics as the trait of weak emasculated artists, can instead free art from the hegemonies of timelessness and mystification that feed sentimentality and nationalism by obfuscating art's historicity and creativity's labor. In these films, abjection has a philosophical, cultural role in making art as material and historical as artists and, in turn, in making masterpieces as capricious and ephemeral as their artists' lives, with no certainty or teleology about what is remembered and what is lost.

notes

1. See Annie Cohen-Solal, *Leo and his Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 427. In the prolific genre of biopics, artist biopics have a special status as a popular subgenre among famed directors and actors. Among the most well-known directors are Vincente Minnelli, John Huston, Carol Reed, Milos Forman, Julie Taymor, James Ivory, Julian Schnabel, Alexander Korda, Carlos Saura, Derek Jarman, Robert Altman, and Ken Russell. I mention actors throughout this essay.
2. On *Pollock* and *Basquiat*, see Julie F. Codell, "Nationalizing Abject American Artists: Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and Jean-Michel Basquiat," *A/b: Auto/biography* 26, no. 1 (2011): 118–137.
3. Saints, explorers, and adventurers are also normalized after biopic deaths. See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 171, and Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 41.

4. Deborah Caslav Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 4–5.
5. Ibid., 2.
6. Jacques Lacan, “Some Reflections on the Ego,” in *Influential Papers from the 1950s*, eds. Andrew C. Furman and Steven T. Levy (London: Karnac, 2003), 293–306.
7. Janet Thumim, *Celluloid Sisters: Women and Popular Cinema* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 5.
8. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.
9. Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 49–50.
10. Ibid., 45.
11. Covino, *Amending the Abject Body*, 4.
12. McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 46.
13. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.
14. René Girard, quoted in John Bergin and Robert I. Westwood, “The Necessities of Violence,” *Culture and Organization* 9, no. 4 (2003): 215.
15. Ibid.
16. Sigmund Freud, quoted in Bergin and Westwood, “The Necessities of Violence,” 217.
17. Bacon’s *Study after Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) replicates Sergei Eisenstein’s image of the woman with broken glasses in *Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin* (1925).
18. McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 15–17.
19. Ibid.
20. Susan Felleman, “Dirty Pictures, Mud Lust, and Abject Desire,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no.1 (2001): 39.
21. Belén Vidal, “Feminist Historiographies and the Woman Artist’s Biopic: The Case of *Artemisia*,” *Screen* 48, no. 1 (2007): 77.
22. An exception is Vermeer in Peter Webber’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003).
23. Vidal, “Feminist Historiographies,” 77.
24. Ibid., 87.
25. Felleman, “Mud Lust,” 32. Jennifer Borda similarly notes that female artists are “both subject of the narrative and the object of the filmic gaze,” in her article “Portrait of A Woman Artist,” *Feminist Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2009): 228.
26. Felleman, “Mud Lust,” 35.
27. Ibid.
28. Borda, “Portrait of A Woman Artist,” 234.
29. Ibid., 240–241.
30. John Walker, *Art and Artists on Screen* (Surrey, UK: Institute of Artology, 2010), 125.
31. Griselda Pollock, “Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem,” in *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and other Thinking People*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 193, 169–206.
32. Patricia MacCormack, “A Cinema of Desire: Cinesexuality and Guattari’s A-signifying Cinema,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 16, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 341.
33. Patricia MacCormack, “Perversion: Transgressive Sexuality and Becoming-Monster,” *thirdspace* 3, no. 2 (2004): 27–40.
34. Elizabeth Grosz quoted in Patricia MacCormack, “Perversion,” 32.

35. The English translation from the original dialogue in French has been transcribed from *Camille Claudel*, VHS, directed by Bruno Nuytten, Los Angeles, CA: Orion/MGM, 2000.
36. MacCormack, "Perversion," 35–36.
37. Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 128–129.
38. Steven Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 135–36.
39. *Ibid.*, 139–41; for a similar view, see Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 78.
40. Dillon, *Derek Jarman*, 140.
41. *Ibid.*, 178.
42. *Ibid.*, 149.
43. James Tweedie, "The Suspended Spectacle of History: The Tableau Vivant in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*," *Screen* 44, no. 4 (2003): 381.
44. Jarman describes the "masochistic soul" of Caravaggio's art, quoted in Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 115.
45. Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 259.
46. Tweedie, "The Suspended Spectacle," 380–381.
47. Miguel Mota, "Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*: The Screenplay as Book," *Criticism* 47, no. 2 (2005): 224.
48. Dillon, *Derek Jarman*, 141.
49. Niall Richardson, *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman: Critical and Cultural Readings* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 93.
50. This is the central thesis of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
51. See Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Peter Lehman, ed., *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Phil Powrie, Ann Davies, and Bruce Babington, eds., *The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005).
52. Tina Chanter, *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6.
53. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 243.

chanel on screen

female biopics in the

age of global branding

g i n e t t e v i n c e n d e a u

Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel (1883–1971) without a doubt is a gift to biographers. A legend in the world of couture and Parisian elegance, her trajectory took her from provincial obscurity and abject poverty to immense wealth and lasting global fame. She transformed women’s fashion in the 1910s and 1920s, replacing corsets, ornate frocks, and ostrich feathers with sportswear-inspired comfortable designs and the iconic “Little Black Dress.” Thanks to the success of her No. 5 perfume (created in 1921), and financial backing from the Wertheimer brothers, the Maison Chanel became a thriving fashion empire in the interwar period. Meanwhile Coco’s social circle encompassed wealthy playboys (Etienne Balsan, Arthur “Boy” Capel), avant-garde artists (Jean Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky), and British aristocracy (the Duke of Westminster, who was one of her lovers; Winston Churchill). In 1954, at a time she could have been expected to retire, she made a spectacular come back, aged 71, with her legendary tailored suits. Henceforth the emblem of elegant bourgeois femininity, they were worn by, among others, Jeanne Moreau in *Les Amants* (1959), Romy Schneider in Luchino Visconti’s episode for *Boccaccio '70* (1962) and Jackie Kennedy on

the day of her husband's assassination in November 1963. A slim, dark-haired, and dark-eyed beauty for much of her life, Chanel herself was always impeccably stylish in her understated chic creations.

Coco Chanel was, too, a controversial figure. A harsh employer, she dismissed demands from staff, especially at the time of the 1936 Popular Front strikes. During World War II she closed the business down, moved in collaborationist circles, and dabbled in espionage activities for Nazi Germany; she also tried (unsuccessfully) to repossess the business from the Wertheimer brothers who had moved to America to escape anti-Semitism. At the Liberation of France she went into temporary exile in Switzerland to avoid reprisals. Throughout her life she remained an outspoken exponent of right-wing politics, anti-Semitism, and homophobia—withstanding the fact that many of her friends, customers, and colleagues were Jews and homosexuals.

Her flamboyant rags-to-riches life indeed inspired numerous biographies (57 by 2011, according to the Maison Chanel¹). After her death in 1971 came seminal books by distinguished French writers Edmonde Charles-Roux and Paul Morand. British and American biographies followed, by Axel Madsen, Pierre Galante, and Justine Picardie among others, and Hal Vaughan's well-documented account of her spying activities, *Sleeping with the Enemy* (2011). There are also plenty of lavishly illustrated books about her clothes, jewelry, and perfume bottle designs.² In contrast to this abundant bibliography and the global ubiquity of the Chanel name and logo (two intertwined "Cs"³) disseminated through retail and advertising, screen representations have been surprisingly scant, until, that is, the late 2000s. In 2008 came Christian Duguay's Canadian double feature made for television, *Coco Chanel*, starring Shirley MacLaine as the older Chanel. There followed two French biopics that enjoyed an international career: Anne Fontaine's *Coco avant Chanel*/*Coco Before Chanel* (2009) with Audrey Tautou in the title role, and Jan Kounen's *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* (2009) with Anna Mouglalis, a Chanel model, as Coco. Speculation about other films ran high in the fashion press, with two more biopics announced in July 2008. There was also news of a film with Anouk Aimée in the role of the mature Chanel. None of these projects has so far materialized.⁴

The sudden boom in Chanel biopics is understandable as part of the renewed popularity of the genre in French cinema, as discussed by Raphaëlle Moine.⁵ The dual trend Moine identifies, which "feminizes" the biopic and seeks subjects among twentieth-century figures, has produced, among others, films about writers Colette, Françoise Sagan, and Simone de Beauvoir, and singer Edith Piaf.⁶ In this chapter I will concentrate on the three 2008–2009 biopics—*Coco Chanel*, *Coco Before Chanel*, and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*. Given the small size of the corpus, I will also make a few references to an earlier film, *Coco Chanel, Chanel Solitaire* (1981), directed by George Kaczender and starring Marie-France Pisier (I will refer to the latter

as *Chanel Solitaire* to avoid confusion with the 2008 *Coco Chanel*). My analysis of the decisions made in the retelling of Chanel's life on screen—the recurrent iconographic and narrative motifs as well as the gaps and absences—aims to relate these films to both the gender bias of the female biopic and the context of Chanel as a global brand in the early twenty-first century, when a constant recycling of the Chanel “heritage” goes hand-in-hand with the marketing of her fashions, perfumes, and accessories: it is alleged that in the late 2000s, a bottle of Chanel No. 5 was sold “every thirty seconds” worldwide.⁷

coco always before chanel: love, not work

Biopic specialists George F. Custen and Dennis Bingham have pointed out the problems inherent in the female biopic, and in particular the difficulties Western culture has in conceptualizing and representing career women. For Custen, “the difference between male and female careers . . . is striking: men are defined by their gift, women by their gender, or their gendered use of their gift.”⁸ Bingham also points out “the contradictions between the public positions—positive and negative—women have achieved and the ‘unladylike’ activities that have landed them there.”⁹ Career here is understood as public occupation, be that of royalty, courtesan, or entertainer—the professions that traditionally dominate the female biopic. Chanel's “modern” career (even though couture derives from the traditional female occupation of seamstress) makes her part of contemporary celebrity culture, with its emphasis on scandal and spectacle and erosion of the division between private and public life that suits the biopic so well.

playing with chronology

Even though *Coco Before Chanel* singles itself out, from its very title, as dealing with Chanel before she was famous, in actual fact *all* the Chanel biopics¹⁰ concentrate on the early period of her life, up to the early 1920s—told in flashback through a framing story (*Coco Chanel*, *Chanel Solitaire*) or with a leap to the older Chanel at the end (*Coco Before Chanel*, *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*). Left out, significantly, are the years from the mid-1920s to 1954, which encompass both her period of greatest social power and her problematic behavior during the war years.

The biopics vary in terms of the weight given to her childhood on the one hand and her years of youthful searching on the other. *Coco Chanel* paints a particularly *misérabiliste* childhood in rural France, compounded by the early death of the mother. But in common with *Chanel Solitaire* and *Coco Before Chanel*, it dwells on the father's abandonment of Chanel and her sister to the care of nuns in a convent (in real-life Aubazine, in central France). This episode may be called the first *mytheme*¹¹ of Chanel biopics, placing the psychological

trauma of abandonment at the root of her success. The early convent years have long been relatively obscure insofar as Chanel did her best to obliterate them. In Morand's *The Allure of Chanel*, she elides them completely: "At the age of six, I am already alone. My mother has just died. My father deposits me, like a millstone, at the house of my aunts, and leaves immediately for an America from where he will never return."¹² This episode also shows Chanel perpetuating the fable of her father going to America—in fact he stayed in France, but the fantasy of American glamour made the rejection more palatable. Following Charles-Roux's pioneering research, biographers now see the Aubazine years as a key episode, both in terms of sewing apprenticeship and of aesthetic influence, determining Chanel's taste for understated designs. But while the apprenticeship is historically plausible and confirmed by research, this professional aspect is ignored by the biopics, while the aesthetic influence, a moot point, is made much of. In *Coco Before Chanel*, the brief convent sequence is built around the gaze of the child, intently looking at details of visual patterns that the spectator knows will later constitute key Chanel stylistic motifs—in particular the nuns' black and white clothes and headdress, and the décor of the dormitory—an example of the biopic's tendency towards "retrospective determinism."¹³

If one compares the chronology of Chanel's early years, as told by reliable biographers such as Charles-Roux, Madsen, and Picardie, with that put forward by the biopics, another interesting discrepancy is the erasure of the formative years from 1900 to 1905 that Chanel spent with aunts and briefly in another convent school in the garrison town of Moulins, also in central France. There she learnt to modify and decorate hats from one of her aunts, a skill that would eventually lead to her career as a clothes designer. Adrienne, her youngest aunt, was close to her in age but whether she is presented as such or, as is often the case, as her sister (for example in *Coco Before Chanel*), the films use her more as romantic counterpoint than as a professional companion. In any event, the aunts episode is either blanked out or quickly disposed of to make way for Chanel's more picturesque failed career as a cabaret singer. For this, *Chanel Solitaire*, *Coco Chanel*, and *Coco Before Chanel* all mobilize a well-established Belle Époque iconography: smoke-filled rooms, champagne-drinking officers and loose women surround Chanel the chanteuse, lamely belting out "Qui qu'a vu Coco,"¹⁴ the song that provided her nickname. But this is a mere prelude to the next landmark, her entry into the Parisian *demi-monde* and affair with Boy Capel. The latter constitutes the second *mytheme* of Chanel's fictionalized life, and is typical of the elevation of romantic love over professional considerations in the female biopic.

tragic love as female destiny

Chanel met Capel, a wealthy English businessman, through cavalry officer Étienne Balsan, whom she had followed to his chateau at Royallieu near

Compiègne, north of Paris. Balsan and his disreputably glamorous entourage, which included courtesan Emilienne d'Alençon, enabled her to escape her peasant origins. D'Alençon, in life and in the films in which she features is the incarnation of social climbing through sex, conveniently minimizing the fact that this was the path Chanel also followed, indeed one of the few open then to a woman without personal fortune or formal education. *Chanel Solitaire* and *Coco Chanel* gloss swiftly over this episode and significantly idealize it: in *Chanel Solitaire*, she is literally swept off her feet by Balsan (Rutger Hauer) when taken to his chateau. *Coco Before Chanel* deals at length and more explicitly with the Balsan/Capel episode, but adroitly turns her initial marginality within the louche milieu into a badge of innocence. Her awkwardness and shyness are contrasted to d'Alençon's blasé cynicism. And while other relationships are presented as expedient or casual, Chanel's affair with Capel (Alessandro Nivola) is depicted as real love. Charles-Roux, Madsen, Picardie, and others all confirm that Chanel *was* in love with Capel, but also that she was initially dependent on his money and aware of his other women. The films play down the business aspect and recast her pragmatic accommodation of his womanizing as a whirlwind romance shattered by his "betrayal" when he marries an aristocratic English woman. Echoing the contrast between Chanel and d'Alençon, Capel is depicted as more romantic and more artistic than Balsan. In all the films, sex with Balsan is portrayed as a jolly romp (or not at all), but sex with Capel is "the real thing." *Chanel Solitaire* makes her weep the first time she sleeps with Capel (Timothy Dalton). In *Coco Before Chanel*, their first sex scene merges with a bucolic fancy-dress party in which Capel is dressed as a pirate. In *Coco Chanel*, it is the result of a fanciful, long-drawn-out, romantic courtship.

The high point of the films' romanticizing of Capel is his early death in a car crash in 1919, depicted variously as taking place while he is rushing to meet Chanel, or rushing to see his wife in order to divorce her and, it is implied, marry Chanel, or rushing to see a house in the South of France that they might inhabit together. Thus, as with Marcel Cerdan's death in a plane crash on his way to being reunited with Edith Piaf in *La Môme/La Vie en Rose* (2007), Capel's accidental death is presented as implicitly determined by Chanel's desire for him. The melodramatic trope—lovers cruelly separated by death just as they were about to be reunited—plays a pivotal role in all the biopics. Capel's death functions as climactic resolution for *Chanel Solitaire*, *Coco Chanel*, and *Coco Before Chanel*, all of which first present the dramatic revelation (by friend, family, or the telephone) of the fatal crash and then a somber Chanel insisting on being driven out to see the site of the accident. In each case a brief coda evokes the subsequent mourning—to which the invention of the Little Black Dress is attributed—and intimates Chanel's soaring success to come, invariably condensed into

one image: the mature Chanel sitting or standing on the glass-paneled spiral staircase of her shop, watching models parade her designs.

Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky also cashes in on this episode despite the fact that its main action is situated post-Capel. His presence is fleetingly evoked twice at the beginning of the film and once at the end. We see him and Chanel during the opening credits as she is getting ready to attend the first performance of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*/*The Rite of Spring* at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées in Paris in 1913. After the riotous performance and a black-and-white montage of World War I images, the action jumps to 1920. Chanel attends an elegant party, dressed in black, prompting an onlooker to remark on Capel's death. Immediately after, she is introduced to Stravinsky, and this triggers the main part of the narrative about their relationship. The very last sequence of the film alternates views of Stravinsky as an old man in New York and of Chanel as an old woman at the Ritz hotel in Paris. She lies on what looks like her deathbed (Chanel did die at the Ritz), remembering the second, triumphant, performance of *The Rite of Spring* that she had financed. After a fade-out to white the end credits start to roll. However, in an unexpected brief sequence after the lengthy credits (and thus probably missed by most spectators), a flashback shows Chanel and Capel together. Thus his death hovers over the whole story: explicitly, by determining Chanel's love of black, which dominates the visual design of the film, and implicitly, by creating the romantic vacuum that Stravinsky will fill. The very last image of the post-end credit sequence indeed shows a silver frame containing a photograph of Stravinsky, whereas the same frame had contained Capel's photograph in the opening scene.

why capel?: failure, not success

At first sight it is curious that the biopics should concentrate on the obscure Capel and ignore the much more famous and colorful men and women who came later in Chanel's love life: bohemian artistic figures like model Misia Sert, poet Pierre Reverdy, and designer Paul Iribé; and cosmopolitan aristocrats, including the Russian Grand Duke Dmitri, the Duke of Westminster, and the German spy "Spatz" von Dincklage. In this respect Bee Wilson's remark about *Coco Before Chanel* serves for all the films: "[It] is essentially based on a single chapter [of Charles-Roux's biography], 'The Keepers and the Kept, 1906–14', about her complicated relationships with Balsan and Boy Capel. It isn't the most interesting."¹⁵ Perversely, the only film that does bypass Capel, *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*,¹⁶ chooses to focus on an affair that is speculative at best, having so far eluded biographers' research, rather than any of those above, amply documented through letters, photographs, and testimonies.

There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, Chanel turned 40 in 1923. Thus in the 1920s and 1930s, the years of her greatest professional and social success, she was already a mature woman. Though photographs attest to her being dashing well into her sixties, cinema's obsession with youth marginalizes the representation of middle-aged affairs. The critic Anthony Lane unwittingly confirms this when, discussing Audrey Tautou in *Coco Before Chanel*, he muses, "The ideal would have been Kristin Scott Thomas, twenty years ago."¹⁷ Fear of legal problems may also have prevented projects featuring members of Chanel's entourage. The designer was not the only one who "slept with the enemy;" some of her famous lovers, such as the Duke of Westminster, and friends, like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, were notorious Hitler sympathizers. Biographers agree that Chanel escaping trial at the Liberation of France was due in part to commercial interests (continuing to sell No. 5 in the USA), and in part to Churchill's intervention, protecting members of the British Royal family and aristocracy from awkward exposure. Vaughan's book provoked strong reactions from the Maison Chanel, which, among other things, officially "denies Coco's anti-Semitism."¹⁸ Despite eschewing those thorny areas of Chanel's biography, the existing films have all had to deal with legal action, threats, or criticism from the firm. The latter took the producer of *Chanel Solitaire* to court (though lost the case).¹⁹ There were also reports of Karl Lagerfeld, the Maison Chanel artistic director, querying the choice of Tautou for *Coco Before Chanel*²⁰ and criticizing *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*; this last move was more surprising given his financial involvement in the film and his supplying costumes for Mougallis.²¹

Be that as it may, more diffuse yet equally fundamental issues shaping the narratives of the Chanel biopics relate to the representation of professional women. The decision to give Capel's fatal crash so much importance suggests his death as final for her too. Yet, as Picardie puts it, "Chanel was not wiped out; she was not consumed in the wreckage of the end of her affair with Boy Capel. She moved onwards . . . wearing black as a symbol of strength and freedom."²² Indeed, the post-Capel years would see her reign over Parisian couture and society, design and sell highly coveted fashion and perfume to an international clientele, and surpass earlier star couturiers such as Paul Poiret. She also made her mark on the arts, designing clothes for the theater (Cocteau), the ballet (Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*), and the cinema. She had a brief spell in Hollywood, working on a film starring Gloria Swanson (*Tonight or Never*, 1931) and on the Joan Blondell comedy *The Greeks Had a Word for Them* (1932). In France she designed Michèle Morgan's iconic trench coat and beret for Marcel Carné's *Le Quai des brumes/Port of Shadows* (1938) and one of Simone Simon's outfits for Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1938).²³ Her most extensive work was for Renoir's *La Règle du jeu/The Rules of the Game* (1939), for which she provided no fewer than 37 costumes.²⁴

By eliding such achievements, the Chanel films chime with biopics of other prominent French female professionals. *Sagan* (2008) moves swiftly from the young writer shooting to overnight fame with her novel *Bonjour tristesse* (1954) to her unraveling through drink, drugs, and financial ruin. *La Vie en Rose*, similarly, dwells on Piaf's poverty-laden childhood followed by the scandals surrounding the death of her first Pygmalion, cabaret owner Louis Leplée, in 1936. Then, skipping over more than a decade, the film concentrates on the affair with boxer Marcel Cerdan and his tragic death, followed by Piaf's descent into alcoholism and drugs, physical decrepitude, and early death. To the spectacle of female competence and control, the films clearly prefer tragic romance, decadence, and ruin. Unable to find the latter in Chanel's life, they over-emphasize her grief at Capel's death. Even *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, whose action is situated later, makes her work marginal to the central romance. In that film, the dominant black-and-white color scheme in both costumes and décor functions as a visual embodiment of Chanel's cold-heartedness, especially by contrast with the emotional warmth of Stravinsky's wife, Katarina (Elena Morozova), whom we see trying to cheer up her bedroom by hanging a piece of red cloth. In real life, while she did have all the woodwork in her house painted black, she asked for it to be repainted pink after only one day.²⁵ This confirms the ideological function underlying Chanel's association with black in this film.

In the end, the "problem," as suggested by Custen and Bingham, is the representation of a woman's ambition, and more simply of women's work. The films do show Chanel tracing on fabric, cutting it, and fitting clothes on mannequins or models, but these are always fleeting images, edited with wipes and mostly silent. Unlike a film like *Brodeuses/A Common Thread* (2004), the camera does not linger on the process of designing and making clothes. The films display her work through sumptuous costumes and occasionally show her expressing severe judgment, but what we hardly see is Chanel *at work*. As suggested by Bingham, Chanel's career-woman identity has to be represented as "unladylike" or simply as "unfeminine." In *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, she is chastised for daring to compare her fashion to his music, and the film implicitly contrasts Stravinsky's warm and motherly wife with the childless Chanel. The end of *Coco Before Chanel* makes the equation of "unnatural" femininity and professional success explicit. Over a melancholy Chanel, wanly smiling as she watches her models (and after a flashback to her dancing with Capel), the following text rolls up before the end credits:

Coco Chanel never married.

She worked until her death one Sunday in January 1971.

Over a career spanning 60 years, from Paris to the world, her designs came to define style and elegance for generations of women, famous and unknown.

Ahead of her time, she broke into a man's world, founding an empire that still bears her name.

Social and professional triumphs to come are minimized, or at least qualified, by a negative statement foregrounding her single status.

chanel on screen: stardom, iconography, and global branding

The discussion so far has focused on the discrepancies between Chanel's biography and its representation on screen, showing how this is revealing of ideological processes underlying the screen representation of professional women. Shifting the perspective, we also need to look at the biopics in relation to the expectations and knowledge of the contemporary audiences for whom they were made. Here, the issue is no longer the factual accuracy of the films in relation to Chanel's life—significant, though, as this is—but rather the perception of Chanel through the reiteration of her image in contemporary media, itself closely linked to the sale of her products. In other words, here we are no longer talking of Chanel the woman, but of Chanel the global brand.

playing chanel: iconic images and star personas

Biopics have a special relationship to stardom. They might occasionally propel a relatively unknown actress to fame (for example, Marion Cotillard in *La Vie en Rose*), but more often the exceptional nature of the persons depicted demands, and attracts, established stars who must then plausibly embody famous characters while preserving the distinctiveness of their own persona—for example, Bette Davies as Queen Elizabeth I in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) and *The Virgin Queen* (1955). Writing about Pierre Renoir's incarnation of Louis XVI in Jean Renoir's 1937 film *La Marseillaise*, Jean-Louis Comolli theorized the difficulties inherent in well-known actors embodying historical figures as a clash between two bodies, given that the historical figure has already been available to the audience through a range of images; as he says, "the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much."²⁶ Without going that far, there is an intrinsic tension between actors and characters in the biopics, evident in the recurrent critical speculation about their suitability for the role. The Chanel films are no exception.

Marie-France Pisier brought to *Chanel Solitaire* the aura of a former New Wave actress rather than box office clout; the film did not prove to be a landmark in her filmography. Nor did the Slovakian Barbora Bobulová, who plays the young heroine of *Coco Chanel*, achieve an international

breakthrough thanks to it.²⁷ In this film stardom belongs to Shirley MacLaine, who dominates the film's poster and publicity and makes up for in charisma what she lacks in screen time. MacLaine brings the excess of the older diva to bear on a highly entertaining characterization of the older Chanel that borders on camp. But *Coco Chanel* remains, in contemporary media culture, a relatively modest television production. *Coco Before Chanel* and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* are of a different order, as large budget²⁸ European heritage films with high production values—the latter especially visible, unsurprisingly, in the care taken over costumes. Both films received several award nominations for costume design, with *Coco Before Chanel* winning a César in this category.

Audrey Tautou and Anna Mouglalis represent different case studies in terms of the relationship between their star persona and Chanel as character and “brand.” By the time she made *Coco Before Chanel*, Tautou was already a major European film star, with 18 feature films to her credit ranging from social dramas to romantic comedies and a lead female role in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). But despite such variety and the steely determination that characterizes many of her parts, Tautou's star persona²⁹ has been irrevocably linked to the whimsical sweet girl she plays in the film that brought her fame, *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*/*Amélie* (2001). As Lane put it, “The problem for Audrey Tautou is that she is doomed to trail clouds of ‘Amélie’ wherever she goes.”³⁰ Tautou is aware of this, at times even referring to herself as “Amélie.” Expressing her gratitude to Stephen Frears for casting her as a shy Turkish immigrant in *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), she said, “It took his intelligence and vision to realize that Amélie Poulain could do this.”³¹ Many have expressed the view that Tautou's Amélie-style sweetness was unsuitable to play the tough, hard-bitten Chanel; for instance Clara Dupont-Monod in *Marianne* observed, “Audrey Tautou gives us an adorable Chanel. That is the problem. Gabrielle Chanel was a genius, but not adorable.”³² Yet director Anne Fontaine is on record as saying “as soon as I had Audrey in front of me I knew that she was Chanel. . . . Had she declined my offer, I would have given the film up.”³³ This was clearly a good move in box office terms, as we will see. But the choice of Tautou also made total sense in terms of looks. A delicate, petite brunette with large black eyes, she was ideal material to play the young Chanel. The film naturally exploits this visual resemblance, but has to remedy a lack of “fit”³⁴ between the two “star images” of Chanel and Tautou. This it does in three ways. First, as discussed above, it romanticizes Chanel's affair with Capel. Second, Tautou modulates her oral performance style, hardening her voice to match Chanel's peremptory tone. Third, the film makes the star adopt clothes, expressions, and postures that reference iconic photographs of the real Chanel. Although the other biopics do this too, the physical fit makes these matches particularly potent in *Coco Before Chanel*.

As a celebrity, Chanel was abundantly photographed, including by star photographers such as Man Ray, Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst, and Robert Doisneau. Out of the plethora of pictures, two iconic images emerge as focal points in all the biopics—even though these pictures were taken outside the periods covered by the films. The first is a Man Ray portrait taken in 1935, at the height of Chanel’s first period of fame. Dressed in a long-sleeved black dress and black hat, she is sitting, arms akimbo, head turned towards the left of the frame. Her chin is jutting out, a cigarette firmly planted in her mouth. The strong black and white composition is arresting, Chanel’s black outfit set off by the white background, white seat and her “signature” strings of pearls (Figure 9.1).

The strong lines and simplicity of the photo evoke the modernity of her designs while brilliantly capturing Chanel’s defiance, as well as her androgynous style: the masculine hat, cockily perched on her forehead, and her mannish way of smoking are balanced by the abundant jewelry and fancy seat. All these elements, together or separately, recur in the films. All include images of Chanel with pearls and heavy jewelry, and a cigarette planted in her mouth, especially in the rare moments when she is seen working—adjusting a dress or cutting some fabric (Figures 9.2–9.5).

The other, and perhaps most iconic image of Chanel is of her sitting or standing on the glass-paneled spiral staircase of her shop on the rue Cambon in Paris, watching models display her collections. There are many photographic versions of this moment, taken among others by Doisneau in 1953 and Beaton in 1965. These pictures show the older Chanel, dressed in one of her “come back” suits. She is alone, isolated from the models and customers, seemingly contemplating not just her latest work, but her past life. The mood is melancholy rather than triumphant.

All the films feature a version of this image, perforce resorting to anachronism in order to embed this popular item of Chanel iconography. For instance in *Coco Before Chanel* a still young Tautou is thus portrayed, wearing a white version of the 1954 suit, the models clad in a jumble of different styles ranging over decades (Figure 9.6). This forlorn image also chimes with the end credit text quoted earlier (“Coco Chanel never married . . .”) that somehow undercuts her professional triumph.

Anna Mouglalis had appeared in almost as many films as Tautou by the time she made *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, including successful art films such as Claude Chabrol’s *Merci pour le chocolat* (2000) and a television biopic, *Les Amants du Flore* (2006), in which she plays Simone de Beauvoir. Yet her fame as a film star remained modest by comparison with Tautou. A very tall and strikingly beautiful woman, she is noted for her unusually low, “masculine” voice which instills in her performance a harshness and androgyny that fit the part of Chanel. Unlike Tautou, she does not resemble Chanel physically, but her suitability for the part resided in the off-screen synergy with her modeling career for Maison Chanel since



Figure 9.1 Chanel portrait.

Source: © Man Ray Trust/ADAGP-DACS/Telimage—2013.

2002—spreading her association with the brand to fashion magazines and the Internet. Reviews of the film never fail to mention her status as a “Chanel muse” rather than her film career.

The importance of such synergies is demonstrated also by the closeness between Tautou’s part in *Coco Before Chanel* and her featuring in a film commercial for Chanel No. 5. Both ran in parallel: the film was released in France on April 22, 2009, and the commercial on the Internet on May 5, 2009—implausibly, Chanel executives insisted that “the timing [was] just a coincidence.”³⁵ The commercial, shot by *Amelie* director Jean-Pierre Jeunet



Figures 9.2–9.5 *Coco Before Chanel* (2009) and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* (2009):
Recurring motifs.



Figure 9.6 *Coco Before Chanel* (2009): Tautou on the staircase.

with a reported budget of \$4.3 million,³⁶ takes a woman (Tautou) from Paris to Istanbul on the Orient-Express, where she spots a handsome young man. It deliberately merges Tautou's projection of the Chanel brand with key *Amelie* motifs—Tautou running in a Parisian railway station and the role of a bottle of perfume—while the distanced sensuous play with the young man recalls the romance with Nino (Mathieu Kassovitz) in *Amelie*. Above all, Jeunet's stylized compositions, use of overhead shots, and saturated color palette directly refer to the earlier film. At the same time, the commercial's sensual narrative updates Tautou's image, in line with her 2006 romantic comedy *Hors de prix/Priceless*, arguably contributing, as much as *Coco Before Chanel*, to steering her star persona towards a more mature sensuality, in evidence in her 2012 film *Thérèse Desqueyroux*.

The fact that a commercial with a screen time that is only a fraction of that of *Coco Before Chanel* (2'25" and 105' respectively) was made on almost a quarter of the feature film's budget, and arguably had as much influence on the star's image, is a testimony to the relative importance of the luxury-goods industry in today's culture, a crucial context for the Chanel biopics.

"coco fever": boom years for french luxury

A British journalist reporting on five new books on Chanel coming out in Autumn 2011 observed, "Coco fever shows no sign of abating."³⁷ Indeed, 2012 saw, among other things, the publication of a new version of Picardie's biography lavishly illustrated with drawings by Karl Lagerfeld, an exhibition of Chanel jewelry in Paris (itself celebrating the eightieth anniversary of the original 1932 exhibition), and an exhibition and book produced by Lagerfeld about "The Little Black Jacket,"³⁸ a concept that conflates the suit with the Little Black Dress. These are only a few examples among a number of events, books and documentaries produced by Lagerfeld and others that recycle the Chanel myth through declensions, reinventions, and tributes.

It is no coincidence that the escalation of “Coco fever,” which includes the biopics released in 2008 and 2009, takes place at the time of an extraordinary expansion of the luxury industries, a market whose turnover trebled over the last 20 years³⁹ and in which France is a key player. At the time of writing, half of the 10 largest fortunes in the country belong to family firms specializing in luxury goods and cosmetics that all have global exposure: the ranking places Bernard Arnault (LVMH, including Louis Vuitton) at no. 1; Liliane Bettancourt (L’Oréal) at no. 3; the Puech family (Hermès) at no. 4; François-Henri Pinault (PPR, including Yves Saint-Laurent) at no. 5; and Alain and Gérard Wertheimer, grandsons of Pierre Wertheimer the founder of the Maison Chanel, at no. 8.⁴⁰ Despite the slump caused by the 2008 financial crisis, the sector thrives globally thanks to the spending power of a still expanding class of “super-rich” who are “returning to spending at pre-recession levels,”⁴¹ and the industry’s “key ability to increase its prices, whatever the environment.”⁴² The bankable conflation between French luxury goods and French femininity that surrounds the cult of Chanel is visible in a number of ways, including the reification of fashion figures such as Carine Roitfeld (former editor of French *Vogue*) and Inès de la Fressange (former Chanel model), and a spate of popular journalistic books mythologizing French women as eternally elegant and seductive (including titles such as *French Women Don’t Get Fat* and *French Women Don’t Sleep Alone*⁴³). Concurrently, at the other end of the social scale, the circulation of global luxury brands has found an echo in “Chav” appropriations through cheap copies of, in the case of Chanel, quilted bags, scarves, and sweatshirts adorned with the intertwined “Cs” logo.⁴⁴ The Chanel biopics, with the branding activities that surround them—such as Audrey Tautou’s No. 5 commercial—expand this commercial and cultural synergy to the film industry. Some have viewed this negatively, as little more than product placement. *Le Nouvel Observateur* quoted the press release of *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* that “shamelessly” equates “No. 5: the revolutionary perfume” with “The Rite of Spring: the revolutionary work” to ask sarcastically, “Will this be ‘The Rite of product-placement’ or ‘Prelude to the afternoon of a fragrance’?”⁴⁵ On the other hand, applauding *Coco Before Chanel*, a reviewer noted “This is better than a film about Chanel: it is a Chanel film.”⁴⁶

For good or evil the Chanel biopics thus function, importantly, as conveyors of global perceptions of French national identity. In the context of the luxury industry’s fight against the “exponential” growth of fakes,⁴⁷ but also of the continuous attempts by French cinema to assert itself outside its own borders, harnessing films to French-identified global brands is clearly one way for French cinema to ensure its international reach. Despite a lukewarm and divided critical reception in France, *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* and *Coco Before Chanel* are among the French films of the early twenty-first century that have done best at the international box office. A

quick comparison of figures reveals that while these two films did either modestly well at the French box office (*Coco Before Chanel* sold a little over one million tickets, a disappointing score given its budget), or very badly (a poor 136,361 tickets for *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*), they did significantly better abroad. In the USA, *Coco Before Chanel* grossed \$6.1 million and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* \$1.7 million. By comparison, around the same time, the critically acclaimed *White Material* (2009), made on a budget of €5.8 million (barely more than that of the No. 5 commercial) grossed \$302,819 in the USA, while the French action film *Transporter 3* (2008), shot in English with British star Jason Statham, grossed \$31.3 million in the USA.⁴⁸ Between the niche auteur film on the one hand, and the Americanized action movie on the other, in which Frenchness on screen is reduced to a few bit players and fragments of locations, the Chanel biopics accumulate signifiers of Frenchness in a way that is readable, and bankable, on the global stage.

Chanel's life followed an exemplary trajectory from abject poverty to global fame. She was a woman with a unique, epoch-changing talent that resulted in a thriving career. As if this wasn't enough, she also had a particularly lively love life involving many celebrities of the age. Yet, from this astonishing raw material, the biopics, as we saw, chose to tell a very partial and conventional romantic story. The choices the films made in what they represent, and more importantly *do not* represent, make them a fascinating case study for the female biopic, revealing our culture's institutional misogyny, which still makes a woman's professional achievement subservient to her love life, regardless of the gender of the director. They also betray the weight of the generic formula, which generates similar biases, whatever the means deployed by the film. Fabienne Pascaud's severe judgment that *Chanel Solitaire* "reduces this mysterious artist to the infantile heroine of a sentimental trifle"⁴⁹ applies to all the films examined here. What the Chanel biopics unarguably achieved, though, was to consolidate the global reach of a famous *French* brand. As Serge Kaganski summed up, "Coco=Coca [Cola], the suit or N° 5 are products as famous as the Big Mac or Levi's. . . . Elegance, luxury, good taste, a way of life, and all so *French*."⁵⁰

notes

1. Agence France-Presse, "La maison Chanel nie l'antisémitisme de Coco," *La Presse*, August 16, 2011, accessed May 31, 2013, www.lapresse.ca/international/europe/201108/16/01-4426346-la-maison-chanel-nie-lantisemitisme-de-coco.php.
2. For example, among relatively recent publications: François Baudot, *Chanel Jewelry (Universe of Design)* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2000); Françoise Aveline, *Chanel Perfume (Memoirs)* (Paris: Assouline, 2004); Jérôme Gautier, *Chanel: The Vocabulary of Style* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011); Karl Lagerfeld and Carine Roitfeld, *The Little Black Jacket: Chanel's Classic Revisited*

(Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2012); Amy de la Haye, *Chanel: Couture and Industry* (London: V&A Publishing, 2013).

3. There is much speculation about the invention of the logo, some attribute it to the Aubazine stained-glass windows or to the “Cs” of Capel and Chanel, see Justine Picardie, *Coco Chanel, The Legend and the Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), 34–35 and 92, but it now seems established that Chanel took it from the coat of arms of the Château de Crémat, near Nice, whose American owner in the 1920s was a friend of hers. Laurence Guidicelli, “Le château de vin,” *Le Point*, August 16, 2012: 95–97.
4. Popsugar Fashion, “Chanel Movie Madness: Four Projects in the Works,” July 14, 2008, accessed May 31, 2013, www.fashionologie.com/Chanel-Movie-Madness-Four-Projects-Works-1780053.
5. See Chapter 2 in this volume, and Raphaëlle Moine, “Le biopic à la française: de l’ombre à la lumière,” *Studies in French Cinema* 10, no. 3 (2010): 269–287.
6. Respectively: *Colette, une femme libre* (France 2, 2004), a two-episode mini-series for television directed by Nadine Trintignant; *Sagan*, directed by Diane Kurys in 2008; *Les Amants du Flore* (2006), a television film directed by Ilan Duran Cohen; and Olivier Dahan’s *La Môme/La Vie en Rose* (2007).
7. Hal Vaughan, *Sleeping with the Enemy: Coco Chanel, Nazi Agent* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), 209.
8. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 106.
9. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 213.
10. The corpus of films studied here constitutes virtually the complete list of biopics about Chanel at the time of writing; the only additional material is an episode devoted to Chanel in the French television series *Une femme, une époque* (TF1, 1978–1981) which was not available for viewing.
11. ‘Mytheme’ is a concept developed originally by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the structural study of myth, and adapted to the analysis of narrative. It refers to an irreducible, basic unit of myth around which various permutations are possible. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 208.
12. Paul Morand, *The Allure of Chanel*, trans. Euan Cameron (London: Pushkin Press, 2008), 15.
13. Serge Kaganski, “Coco avant Chanel d’Anne Fontaine,” *les inRocks*, April 17, 2009, accessed May 31, 2013, www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/films-a-l-affiche/coco-avant-chanel. All quotations from French-language sources are my translation, unless otherwise specified.
14. “Qui qu’a vu Coco,” 1878, lyrics by Félix Baumaine and Charles Blondelet and music by Édouard Deransart.
15. Bee Wilson, “Why Are You So Fat?,” *London Review of Books* 32, no. 1 (January 2010): 33.
16. This film is based on a novel by Chris Greenhalgh, originally published as *Coco and Igor* (London: Review, 2002) and reprinted in 2009 under the same title as the film.
17. Anthony Lane, “Dressing Up. ‘Coco Before Chanel’ and ‘Walt & El Grupo,’” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 2009, accessed June 20, 2012. www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/09/28/090928crici_cinema_lane.
18. Agence France-Presse, “La maison Chanel nie l’antisémitisme de Coco.”
19. Anonymous, “Malgré Chanel,” *Le Matin*, October 12, 1983. References are as complete as possible. Note that daily and weekly press references

- obtained from the database at BIFI (Bibliothèque du Film) in Paris do not indicate page numbers.
20. Olivier Wicker, "'Coco' rikiki," *Libération*, April 22, 2009.
 21. "Je me sens une vraie héritière de Chanel: Interview with Anna Mouglalis," by Lisa Gougué, *France-Soir*, December 30, 2009; Anne-Laure Quilleriet, "Anna Mouglalis," *L'Express*, December 17, 2009.
 22. Picardie, *Coco Chanel*, 93.
 23. On Chanel's (uncredited) work on *Le Quai des brumes* and *La Bête humaine*, see Denise Tual, *Le Temps dévoré* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1980), 137–139.
 24. Olivier Curchod, "Chronologie : *La Règle du jeu* au jour le jour (1938–1998)," in *La Règle du jeu, Scénario original de Jean Renoir*, eds. Olivier Curchod and Christopher Faulkner (Paris: Nathan, 1999), 11.
 25. Picardie, *Coco Chanel*, 91.
 26. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Historical Fiction. A Body Too Much," trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 19, no. 2 (1978): 44.
 27. Despite having previously garnered several European awards, in particular for her role in the 2005 Italian film *Cuore sacro/Sacred Heart*, directed by Ferzan Ozpetek.
 28. Both films benefited from high budgets with the European/French context: €19.4 million for *Coco avant Chanel* and €12.9 million for *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, putting both films in the higher bracket (over €10 million) in French cinema, where the bulk of productions were between €2.5 and €7 million. See figures in "Les coûts de production des films en 2009"; "Les coûts de production des films en 2010," available on the website of the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée), www.cnc.fr.
 29. For a discussion of Audrey Tautou's star persona, see Ginette Vincendeau, "Miss France," *Sight and Sound* 15, no. 2 (2005): 12–15.
 30. Lane, "Dressing Up. 'Coco Before Chanel' and 'Walt & El Grupo'."
 31. Michel Rebichon and Thierry Cheze, "Audrey Tautou, La belle année," *Studio Hors-série* (2006): 44.
 32. Clara Dupont-Monod, "Coco Chanel, une taille au-dessous," *Marianne*, April 18, 2009.
 33. Anne Fontaine, quoted in Lucie Calet, "Tailleur pour dames," *Le Nouvel Observateur (TéléParisObs)*, April, 23, 2009.
 34. The concept of the "fit" between star and character originates from Richard Dyer's book *Stars*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 129–130.
 35. Popsugar Fashion, "First Look: Audrey Tautou for Chanel No. 5," March 20, 2009, accessed May 31, 2013, www.fashionologie.com/First-Look-Audrey-Tautou-Chanel-5-2953263.
 36. The shooting took 3 weeks, and 250 people worked on it. "Making of Chanel No. 5—Audrey Tatou," YouTube video, 1: 02, posted by "Stéphane Galienni," April 21, 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEi2Zw6KwPA.
 37. Rosamund Urwin, "Coco's One Big Passion," *Evening Standard*, October 13, 2011, 50.
 38. "The Little Black Jacket" is an exhibition of photographs by Karl Lagerfeld, curated by Lagerfeld and Carine Roitfeld, which toured several cities between April 2012 and December 2012 (Tokyo, New York, Taipei, Hong Kong, London, Moscow, Sydney, Paris, Berlin, and Seoul). This has been published as a book—Lagerfeld and Roitfeld, *The Little Black Jacket: Chanel's Classic Revisited*.

39. Christian Potier, "Opportunités sur le luxe," *Le Point*, November 1, 2012, 112.
40. See "Les 500 plus grandes fortunes de France," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no date, accessed June 20, 2012, www.challenges.fr/classements/fortune/fiche/alain-wertheimer-et-sa-famille;603.html. See also the entry devoted to Alain Wertheimer and his family on the eighth position in this ranking.
41. Anakin, "Luxury market rebounding," Luxuo. Luxury blog, May 31, 2010, www.luxuo.com/luxury-trends/luxury-market-emerges-from-global-recession.html.
42. Potier, "Opportunités sur le luxe," 112.
43. Mireille Guiliano, *French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure* (London: Vintage Books, 2006); Jamie Cat Callan, *French Women Don't Sleep Alone: Pleasurable Secrets to Finding Love* (New York: Citadel Press Books, 2009).
44. Among the abundant literature on the "Chav" phenomenon and fashion, see Tony Hine and Margaret Bruce, *Fashion Marketing, Contemporary Issues* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007).
45. Anonymous, "Jan Kounen Le sacre du N° 5," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, May, 21, 2009.
46. Guillemette Odicino, "Le tournage de 'Coco avant Chanel'—Témoignages," *Télérama*, April 22, 2009.
47. Scheherazade Daneshkhlu, "Luxury French brands hit back at fakes," *The Financial Times*, May 30, 2012, accessed September 7, 2012, www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4617eef8-aa5f-11e1-8b9d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2acvRx2rCwww.
48. The source for the French box office information is the website AlloCiné, www.allocine.fr. The French box office is calculated in terms of spectators. The source for the international box office is the Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com.
49. Fabienne Pascaud, "Chanel Solitaire," *Télérama*, October, 26 1983.
50. Kaganski, "Coco avant Chanel" (my translation, except the last two words, in English in the original).

icons and auteurs

part three

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cinematic boundaries

t e n

aleksandr sokurov's

the sun as liminal biopic

a l a s t a i r p h i l l i p s

What happens when a living deity renounces his divinity and acknowledges his true identity as a human being? *Solntse/The Sun* (2005), Aleksandr Sokurov's mesmerizing portrait of the life of the Emperor Hirohito during the last days of World War II, focuses on the key turning point in international history when the Japanese monarch did precisely this. Hirohito's decision taken, according to the film, not long after his first meeting with General Douglas MacArthur, set the terms of the American Occupation of its former enemy and in so doing posed explicit, and perhaps unanswered questions, about the exact relationship between myth and political necessity. In this chapter, I want to argue that although Sokurov's film is firstly a truncated investigation into the reshaping of strategic power relations shot through the prism of one person's life, it also draws our attention to the way that film may participate in the construction of knowledge about biographical identity, especially in relation to the porous boundaries between public and private, the past and the present, and, in this case particularly, between the national and the global. Importantly, too, the film seems only too aware of the intrinsic aesthetic boundaries between

invented story and documentary history. There are at least two Hirohitos in *The Sun* and two ways of engaging with his historical presence. Sokurov's blurred sonic and visual language helps shape our growing perception of the biographical subject's dual, transnational dimensions. We hear, for instance, American and Japanese voices on the radio and rumblings of traditional Japanese music and Wagnerian motifs in the background audioscape. On the screen, we see an elderly and fragile man turning the pages of the Japanese Imperial Family album before gazing on a treasured collection of Hollywood studio portraits. Odd ellipses and strange perspectival shifts help to sustain the logic of a buried dream about to dissolve into a new postwar order. This is a film in which hardly anything, but then also everything, happens; when time itself seems to take on new dimensions. In short, *The Sun* thus provides a series of unique insights into the nature of the biopic as an especially liminal form of historical narrative.

I will explore this notion of liminality in a number of ways, beginning with the question of what Inuhiko Yomota has previously termed "the foreign gaze"¹ and the place of *The Sun* within Sokurov's filmography as a whole. I will then turn to the representation of historical time and space and the various political and ideological boundaries that are explored within the film's staging of the Emperor's first meeting with MacArthur. This meeting marked the end of the war and the beginning of the postwar, but it also confronted both protagonists with the realization that the nature of their public and private selves was itself in flux. To this extent, what was yet to come was going to depend as much on what could be agreed about the two men's shared pasts, as on the nature of the present they both temporarily found themselves within. I then want to move to the fundamental question of the fictionalization of history and the aesthetic tropes the film specifically deploys in order to question the boundaries between documentary evidence and the dramatization of the real. Here, I will examine two inter related modes of viewing—the transition between sites of public and of private interaction, and the dialectic between the role of the observer and the nature of what is observed within these spaces. In the final section, I will return to Sokurov's conception of the biopic and to what extent, given the nature of the film's revelations, it may be said to resist the conventional vectors of the genre in favor of something more elusive. In other words, what can *The Sun* also tell us about the limits of the form it explores to recount the story of one man's personal recognition of his own moral, ideological, and emotional boundaries?

Sokurov's film on Hirohito brings together two longstanding elements in the director's career: an interest in Japan, embodied by documentary films such as *Vostochnaya elegiya*/*Oriental Elegy* (1996), *Smirennaya zhizn'*/*A Humble Life* (1997) and *Dolce . . .* (1999); and his series of film portraits of twentieth-century figures of power that includes *Molokh*/*Moloch* (1999), about Adolf Hitler, and *Telets*/*Taurus* (2000), about Vladimir Lenin. Sokurov's "power

tetralogy,” to which *Faust* (2011), a reinterpretation of the original legend and its literary adaptations, serves as the conclusion, all explore, self-consciously, the nature of historical time and its effects on the individual agent of authority. For Eva Binder, Sokurov’s earlier film portraits, such as *A Humble Life* (about a rural Japanese kimono maker), clearly evoke a predilection for the elegiac form; something reiterated elsewhere in his filmography by the number of titles including the word “elegy.” These films, she argues, “are meditations on the themes of transience and death”² in which two temporal worlds are contemplated: the “(remembered) past and [the] (lived-in) present.”³ There are certainly echoes of this in *The Sun*, but in the case of Sokurov’s representation of Hirohito’s unique place in the flow of world history, he chooses to focus on a more condensed timeframe and explore three defining events that transformed the perception of the Japanese Emperor as a public figure: the aftermath of his radio address announcing unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945; his first meeting with General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), on September 27, 1945; and his New Year’s Day speech on January 1, 1946, in which he formally renounced his divinity to a stunned nation. What makes the film so distinctive is that this chronological structure is collapsed to the extent that it is impossible to distinguish exactly when these events occur. Sokurov remains uninterested in the conventionally linear duration of a public life, perhaps the defining feature of the conventional biopic, and prefers instead a more fragmentary approach replete with temporal elisions and failed spatial leads. In this sense, it thus becomes impossible to formulate a coherent cinematic perspective on the identity of the film’s protagonist and his true role in the events that have led to his renunciation of power.

The Sun is less “a story of a life” than a film about the consequences of the story that has been told up to now, and the implications of the story that will have to be told from now on. How then to tell a retrospective story about how these narratives were recounted at the time? In interview, Sokurov has called attention to his fascination with the “symbiotic and hybrid”⁴ nature of the film medium that draws upon the influence of music and painting. For him, *The Sun* has both a “symphonic” and a “pictorial” dimension.⁵ As we shall see, this interest in the aesthetics of the image has numerous repercussions, but the one that is most immediately striking is that Sokurov’s pictorial register explicitly draws attention to the problematic status of the recorded image in the telling of one story about one person’s life. For Stephen Hutchings, Sokurov’s dense and blurred, even “morose,” *mise-en-scène* specifically addresses the inevitability that a “true, embodied communion between present and past, observing self and observed other . . . will [necessarily] forever elude the grasp of those who would seek to capture it.”⁶ The gaze between Sokurov’s camera and the subject of its attention is constructed in knowing terms, to the extent that

“the cinematic form within which he works must inevitably distance itself from the history that it aims to represent.”⁷ This is achieved by, among other tropes, the sepia tones of the surface of the image and the frequent recourse to foregrounding frames within frames. In other words, we are encouraged to actively reflect on a mediated interpretation of an event that once occurred through the construction of an explicitly photographic sensibility.

This is important for it alludes to the ways in which Hirohito himself was gazed upon before and after the events, which form the film’s main plot. On one level, it points to the way that the Emperor was especially instated as a man out of the picture within the Japanese cultural imaginary. He was rarely ever seen in public, and of course this had enormous implications for the ways in which his wartime responsibilities were subsequently evaded. As Inuhiko Yomota has pointed out, Sokurov’s concern with registration also places him in a line of foreign image-makers—that goes directly back to the Italian artist Edoardo Chiossone—who have sought to “demystify the Emperor by demystifying the Emperor’s divine image.”⁸ Chiossone painted the famous official state portrait of the Emperor Meiji in 1888 and, interestingly, also played a key role in teaching the Japanese about the design of paper currency and postage stamps, both of which subsequently carried key icons of Japanese Imperial culture.

This question of the “foreign gaze” and the notion of being seen and being absent takes us to the film’s core concern with the meeting of Hirohito and MacArthur, when the latter’s own first gaze upon his former enemy signaled the full renunciation of Imperial power and the initiation of one of the most famous photographs in Japanese history: that taken of the two men together in the main reception room of the Ambassador’s residence within the US Embassy. The significance of this meeting and the image that recorded it cannot be overestimated. They marked the end of the catastrophe of Japan’s wartime conflict, the beginning of the American Occupation that lasted until 1952, and the permanent reshaping of cross-cultural relations that secured both the regeneration of the Japanese economy and the development of significant regional cooperation during the Cold War era. They also appeared to end 2,000 years of Imperial history, during which the Japanese throne had uniquely represented a direct line of descent from the founding deities of the nation. The photograph, taken on the instigation of the Americans by a US Signals photographer, records this shift with telling precision.

MacArthur’s relaxed but solemn demeanor is revealed by his open stance, his hands placed commandingly on his hips, and the wearing of an open-necked military shirt. In contrast, the shorter, diminished figure of Hirohito looks stiff and uncertain. He is wearing a black morning coat with a cravat, and his arms are placed uncertainly at his sides. The official boundaries of culture and authority have apparently been transposed.

According to MacArthur's memoirs, and indeed to some extent Sokurov's own film, the question of the line of guilt and responsibility dominated the encounter between the two men. MacArthur records that Hirohito nervously complied and offered responsibility for "every political and military decision made and action taken by my people in the conduct of the war."⁹ Yet was this true? Could it ever have been true? Subsequent accounts of the meeting, which was never properly publicized, suggest a more opaque picture that continues to resonate within the formal ambiguities of Sokurov's own *mise-en-scène*. According to John Dower's compelling account of Japan's immediate postwar history, any "serious engagement with the issue of war responsibility was deflected" in order to allow the emperor to remain "the incarnation of a putative racial purity as well as cultural homogeneity."¹⁰ By leaving Hirohito as "the embodiment of an imagined timeless essence that set the Japanese apart from—and [made them] superior to—other peoples and cultures,"¹¹ the Americans thus colluded in the task of constructing "the most usable Emperor possible."¹² How this was managed sheds light on one plausible interpretation of Sokurov's film, for what ensued at this point reveals a picture of complicity, since, in one sense, the boundaries of the existing social order were retained, yet also, at the same time, diminished. On the one hand, the postwar image of Hirohito was certainly democratized even though, as Edward Behr points out, the new public image of the Emperor with his scuffed shoes and gauche demeanor was also part of "an elaborate defense mechanism."¹³ On the other hand, as the historian Carol Gluck has keenly argued, the term "Shōwa" remained both the name of the Emperor and the name of an era for the Japanese. The decision to continue with the Japanese calendar and refer to 1946 as "Shōwa 20" presented significant ideological consequences.¹⁴ In other words, the first fictionalized biography (or "biopic" as it were) of Hirohito's enduring place in postwar world history was actually constructed at the time, and thus *The Sun* perhaps becomes more a reflection on this process, rather than an effort to reproduce a plausibly neutral, first-hand account of what actually happened.

The meeting between the two men is staged by Sokurov as a performative encounter with each protagonist acutely aware of the role they have been assigned. To underscore the dramatic potential of this, the director relies as much on his collaborator Sergey Moshkov's sound design as the conventional orchestration of the actors within the *mise-en-scène*. As Anna Nisnevich has suggestively argued in her analysis of the role of musicality in Sokurov's account of historical time, the director repeatedly shuns the "familiar routes of historical signification, with their emphases on causality and intention." Instead, "the director foregrounds duration, transience, and tone."¹⁵ In this case, the long journey from the Palace to MacArthur's Tokyo residence is managed with little dialogue or exposition. The sounds

of the American soldiers' voices and birds and insects in the garden are accentuated as the stooping figure emerges into daylight; his spatial, sensory, and political disorientation reiterated by the competing, overlapping elements on the soundtrack. After a journey through the ruins of the capital, he enters the confines of the temporary headquarters of the Occupation in the American Embassy. The ominous threads of Andrey Sigle's orchestral score return in the background, but the dominant sonic element is the harsh clatter of the soldiers' shoes on the marble steps and corridors of the darkened chambers. At one stage, Sokurov's mobile camera cuts away to the gaze of some young American soldiers, then we cut back to a view of a semi circular balustrade which is reiterated in an inverse pattern by the curvature of an arched window behind. Hirohito (Issei Ogata) steps into this space from the left and pauses in the exact center of the frame within a frame to converse—it appears soundlessly—with his Prime Minister (Hiroya Morita), who comes up from behind. The camera tracks slowly in on the silhouetted figures, as if to eavesdrop, but the meaning of the image is elusive (Figure 10.1).

This intensification of space and time is typical of Sokurov's aversion to montage and yields the suggestion that we are witnessing a progression of elements that are in the radical process of reorientation. This is the last point in the extended sequence when Hirohito's authority is recognized.

Perhaps the most significant element of Sokurov's dramatization of Hirohito's meeting with MacArthur (Robert Dawson) rests in what happens next as we are quite explicitly encouraged to assume that the progression into the General's quarters is akin to that of an actor about to enter from the wings onto the stage. It is no accident that this question of role-playing is foregrounded, for it cuts to the chase of the politics of responsibility: to what extent might Hirohito be deemed, within the film's



Figure 10.1 *The Sun* (2005): Hirohito and his Prime Minister.

account of this man's life, to be agent or puppet? In his influential distinction between conventional historiography and what he terms "historiophoty," Hayden White argues that just as written history "is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification," so the same applies when it comes to "the production of a filmed [historical] representation."¹⁶ White's argument here depends, in part, on the assertion that created images are "better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of certain kinds of historical phenomena [such as] landscape . . . atmosphere, [and] complex events such as wars, battles, crowds, and emotions."¹⁷ He goes on to suggest that "when considering the utility or adequacy of filmed accounts of historical events . . . it would be well to reflect upon the ways in which a distinctively imagistic discourse can or cannot transform information about the past into facts of a specific kind."¹⁸ What we have here then is less a picturing of the "complex events" that have led up to this historical meeting (the war is never shown), and more an audiovisual meditation on the way in which the consequences of those events were then mediated between the two parties as an appropriate public narrative for the future that was being formulated.

Sokurov's conjunction of sound and image recognizes this distinction. As Hirohito pauses outside MacArthur's office—we have still to see inside—a soldier commands the Emperor to open the door, then realizes that the Emperor is expecting to have it opened for him. As he speaks, Sokurov cuts abruptly to a medium shot of the Prime Minister turning his head away in regret down the corridor. There is then a further sudden cut to inside the room with the door still closed. We see two marble pillars on each side of the frame and a set of theatrical curtains framing, in turn, the door itself. This delay in time, and the reiteration of the symbolic potential of the moment in both spatial and temporal terms, eloquently expresses the nature of Hirohito's view of his role and the implied perspective of the Americans. Although we have not seen him yet, this image, we subsequently learn, is as close to a point of view shot from MacArthur's field of vision as could be. The spectator is, in other words, directly implicated in the physically tangible nature of the shift in viewing relations as power literally drains away and a new life begins.

When the door finally opens, it is done so by the soldier; the image of managed cooperation thus suggesting the careful complicity of the Americans in the private construction of Hirohito's public postwar biography (Figure 10.2).

The negotiation between the two parties continues on a verbal level. The Emperor walks stiffly and self-consciously through the portal and as he does so, a commanding male voice is heard off-screen requesting "Your Majesty, please come in." Hirohito is about to reply but is interrupted in English by an unidentified male Japanese speaker, again located outside the frame.



Figure 10.2 Hirohito enters MacArthur's office.

Still unseen, MacArthur (Robert Dawson) tells him to “shut up and interpret.” The interpreter then comes into the frame and continues speaking, but this time in Japanese to the Emperor. At this point, there is a line established between the two Japanese men in which the conventional hierarchy between monarch and subject is pictured, but as the interpreter bows his head, the camera already begins to surreptitiously pull back and minutely track away in a diagonal relationship from the line towards the right-hand side of the image. Hirohito is asked in Japanese if he agrees to “submit to the will of the Allied Command” to which he replies, opaquely, that he accepts “whatever your decision may be.”¹⁹ The interpreter translates this differently: “His Majesty does not ask for mercy.” Sokurov then cuts to a medium shot of Hirohito whose manner of moving his lips voicelessly in the form of an oppressive nervous tic is overlaid with the sound of MacArthur continuing to speak off-screen. To the spectator, it is as if one voice has been replaced by another in a carefully articulated game of aural and linguistic power relations. The interpreter refuses to translate MacArthur’s admonishment that he can’t understand how “such people can control the world and send millions of others to their death,” and we then cut to the first full view of the General at the far right-hand end of an axis of action, the construction of which started a few shots earlier (Figure 10.3).

This line is at the heart of their ensuing conversation and, indeed, at the heart of the film. It is a perfect example of how White’s notion of “historiophoty” has been reconceptualized to take into account how the representation of biographical space can say as much about the workings of global history as the visual depiction of the great events that helped shape and inform this conversational encounter. Tellingly, the line does not remain static and as if to emphasize the import of this moment, and the



Figure 10.3 The first full view of MacArthur.

new power dynamics at hand, Sokurov's camera begins to track forward, in the same shot, thus bringing the Emperor closer to the American's sphere of action in preparation for the decisions that will now unfold.

In his theorization of the biopic's appeal, Dennis Bingham makes the point that the genre stems, in part, "from the desire to see biographical and historical figures [actually] living before us"; that filmmakers can serve the spectator's need "to 'complete' history, to fill in what didn't happen with what a viewer might wish to see happen."²⁰ In other words, as Bingham argues, the fascination with "the biopic lies in seeing an actual person . . . transformed into a character."²¹ The exploration of this crafted modulation between biographical realism and dramatized actuality lies at the heart of Sokurov's restaging of history, not least because his subject already resisted the public eye to the extent that his entire known existence was a potential work of fiction in the first place. In this sense, *The Sun* works with the boundaries between the private and the public self in quite a nuanced way. Instead of simply visualizing a more durable and consolidated subjectivity, the film makes the choice to prioritize the moment when the protagonist's old role expired and a new, more uncertain, dramatized self emerged instead. Sokurov achieves this, in part, through his staging of space in order to create an almost endless sense of claustrophobic rooms within rooms, each codified with its own unique set of social practices and rituals. Hirohito's sequestered domestic quarters lead through a set of corridors to the theater-like chambers where he receives his military cabinet. He leaves these to rise above onto ground level and enter the laboratory in which he conducts his biological experiments. At each turn, he is endlessly received with an obsequious reverence that ignores the absurd and precarious tomb-like nature of the characters' surroundings. The sense here is not that history is necessarily being "completed," but rather that it is being

consciously evaded as any motor of change, or revelation of interiority and thus active thought, is being consciously deferred.

The final outcome of all this sublimation is revealed when Hirohito is eventually propelled outside the performative nature of his natural arena into the public realm that lies immediately outside the imperial residence. Here, Sokurov's *mise-en-scène* begins to take on a more obviously detached aspect. Using the fixed vantage point of a distant corner, the camera, for example, observes the Emperor in a dinner suit as he mounts the metallic stairs of his subterranean vault. His black clothing practically disappears into the monochrome surroundings. Sokurov then cuts to one of the most important shots of the film: the moment when the Emperor takes leave of his servants in the hallway of his home and prepares to greet the new authorities gathered outside. The orderly but muted nature of the transition is observed from the remote vantage point of a high angle wide-shot looking down at the ceremonial proceedings below. This is not the viewpoint of any fellow human within the drama; instead the camera's perspective privileges a sense of history as unguarded flow rather than circumscribed artifice. Yet the observational intensity of this moment doesn't last. Before moving outside, we cut instead to a prolonged close-up of Hirohito's gaze from outside the window of the doorway. He is now pinned down; momentarily adjusting to the new role that he will now be required to play. The tension between the public and the private is thus again being renegotiated, but this time, all power has now been drained away. This is almost comically underscored in the subsequent shot when we see the Emperor gingerly descend the steps—as if almost at the imagined premiere of a film. The camera stays with him as he turns, expecting conversation, but the attention of the soldiers in the garden is taken up with their efforts to capture one of his pet cranes—a metaphorical action underscoring both the fragility of the film's protagonist and the inept cultural insensitivity of the foreign occupiers.

These remarks suggest that Sokurov may be acutely aware that an intrinsic aspect of the biopic might lie within the way its viewing relations are both established and managed within the progression of the drama. This is certainly important to the way the film stages the relationship between Hirohito as observer and Hirohito as figure observed, not least because this distinction between agent and witness cuts to the very politics of the subject's subsequent rehabilitation on the global stage. In its opening stages, *The Sun* portrays the minute ritualistic adjustments to attire and body language that the Emperor is forced to make in his daily progression from private individual to military figurehead and apparent living deity. Sokurov facilitates this by incorporating two other characters: the controlling and tradition-bound Chamberlain (Shirô Sano), and the more wry, but devoted, figure of the male manservant (Shinmei Tsuji) who dresses Hirohito, provides his nourishment, and has unique access to the

most intimate chambers of the imperial quarters. In his discussion of Sokurov's representation of historical power in his film tetralogy, Fredric Jameson suggests convincingly that the director refutes the two governing tendencies of biographical narrative fiction proposed by Georg Lukács: the grandiose portrait of a larger-than-life personality, and "the mediation of an average character who is given the opportunity to glimpse the great personages from afar."²² Instead, with the collaboration of his scriptwriter Yuri Arabov, Sokurov scrupulously emphasizes an aesthetic of intimately framed detachment that nonetheless still manages to preserve "historical drama's secret fascination with the primal scene of history."²³ For Jameson, this leads to a conception of private life on screen that is comprised of "a kind of schizophrenic dissociation."²⁴ What better phrase to describe the way in which the film portrays the moment we see the Emperor being attentively dressed by his manservant—almost like a mannequin—and then also being reminded about the nature of his ancient divinity by the Chamberlain? In one obvious sense, it's a sequence providing crucial narrative access to the machinations behind what is now an obviously catastrophic facade, but in another sense, it's also a carefully structured examination of the moment its central protagonist starts to examine the cost of this facade to his own internal sense of being.

Stephen Hutchings has commented perceptively on this duality by arguing that Hirohito is not only "disjoined from his fellow humans, but also from the shell of his own body over which he cannot exert full control."²⁵ Hence, we may also argue, the recourse to multiple nervous tics in Issei Ogata's performance, including the involuntary fish-like lip movements, suggest that Hirohito's diminished persona has become conflated with one of the aquatic specimens the Emperor examines in his spare time. For Hutchings, "the leading character's struggle to come to terms with his estrangement from his body . . . [is] played out on the level of viewer-screen interactions in the pauses, contradictions and peripetiae [*sic*] in the camera's engagement with its subject."²⁶ But this is also true in terms of how we look at other characters within the frame that gaze upon the film's central subject. In this sense, we should notice how Sokurov helps moderate the competing range of views that the film as biopic takes of its own subject. For some, this may be what makes the film's overall approach to the genre seem so opaque, but if one looks carefully at certain shots, there's evidence, too, of the film's suggestive recognition of the ongoing indeterminacy of history in terms of its appropriation of the biographical form. At one point, for example, Hirohito literally disappears behind a screen while listening to the Chamberlain bark out the order of the day's events. We then cut to an elusive multiple mirror shot of the more sympathetic manservant listening in on the interaction—as if he's surreptitiously empathizing with the fragmented persona of his master—before we cut back to another shot of the Emperor adjusting himself out

of full view of the person advising him about his role that is unfolding as they speak. Not one character is really looking at the other, but each in their own way is alluding in their glances and in their body language to a sense of historical unity breaking down.

There are other ways too that Sokurov conveys the protean nature of his biographical subject. In his discussion of *The Sun*, Inuhiko Yomota refers to Ôshima Nagisa's speculative discussion about the likely effect on the Japanese population if the Emperor Hirohito's Declaration of Humanity (*ningen sengen*) had been televised. Ôshima records that "that fateful day was so decisive because it was delivered to us as a mere sound bereft of supporting images. Our history of images, rather than being a catalog of the kinds of images we have possessed, is a catalog of the images we *haven't* possessed."²⁷ Is Sokurov's film a retrospective solution to this problem? It is certainly the case that the inclusion of so many sounds of radio distortion on the soundtrack alludes to the now fractured symbiotic relationship between the Emperor and his subjects on an auditory level, as if Hirohito is no longer "tuned in" to the people he ostensibly commands. But the film also refutes any direct visualization of this monumental broadcast. Indeed, there is nothing remotely "televisual" about its aesthetic at all; the film is resolutely uninterested in restaging public history of the kind associated with the more conventional tropes of the biopic, such as the picturing of the nation witnessing the live mediation of their own history through a mass media event. Instead, we need to return to Sokurov's concern with a kind of variegated form of historical representation that in the words of Anna Nisnevich, "foregrounds duration, transience, and tone."²⁸ Nisnevich may originally have been making an argument about the director's control of sound and musicality, but the same is true for the construction of the image itself. And here, Sokurov chooses to emphasize the boundary between public duty and private imagination.

In one astonishing sequence, for example, the film departs from its stately, hushed, and measured sense of progression to enter the mental field of vision of its subject by means of a hallucination he appears to have while alone in his bedchamber. For a number of minutes we enter another spatio-temporal realm governed by sweeping fast-paced camera movement, rapid dissolves, and multiple views of flying fish and bombings over the city of Tokyo. The entire fabric of the image seems to be burning too, or on the cusp of eruption, as fissures appear in the picture density because of the apparent intensity of heat being generated by the destruction below. This is the only section of *The Sun* where we actually gain any spectatorial access to the events that have led to the time frame the film is principally concerned with, and it is significant that it occurs to someone who was not directly there in the first place. In other words, as well as recording the devastation of war, the image track also records the absence of the biopic's

main protagonist from the site of history. What he seems to imagine is a film of the event, not the event itself.

This play between cinematic documentation and artifice resurfaces when the Emperor is later pictured at his desk ruminating about the reasons for Japan's wartime defeat. We see him turning the pages of his family photo album. It's a moment of intense introspection, but also an opportunity for Sokurov to insert a more extended temporal scale and rhythm into the hitherto condensed nature of the diegesis. The sequence cuts between full-frame images of a single page and darkly lit one-shots of the Emperor examining the album. What's remarkable is that these are not re-created photographs using contemporary film actors, but genuine photographic images of the Japanese Royal Family that would then have been in public circulation. Sokurov is thus delving into a means, common to the biopic form, of achieving truthful factual resonance within the necessary limitations of fictional reconstruction. What makes these moments so telling is the conjugation of touch—when the actor's hand and lips reach out to the image—and blurred subjectivity. Which line is being crossed? Is it that between the fiction of the biopic and the real of the photograph, or that between the fictional sensibility of the staged portrait and the more apparent real of the immediate pro-filmic event? Sokurov seems to be calling these issues into doubt in order to both draw attention to the liminal work of the biopic, and question the distorted relations between truth and artifice under which the closing stages of Japan's experience of World War II were conducted.

The exploration of these boundaries is even taken one stage further when Hirohito/Issei Ogata puts the family album down and picks up a much-handled album of Hollywood studio portraits containing photographs of, among others, Humphrey Bogart, Charlie Chaplin, and Loretta Young—the only Americans the Emperor would indeed have ever “met.” The multiple layers of mediation that we have here not only suggest an analogy between Hollywood stardom and royal status, and thus an ensuing gap between the nature of the recorded image and the reality to which it refers, but also the ways in which the form of the biopic may privilege the difficult balance between private recollection and public display. Through the form of fictional re-creation—Sokurov's film itself—we thus have a view of different competing realities and perhaps, for that matter, the inability of the film's central protagonist to distinguish the difference between the two.

In her analysis of Sokurov's “power tetralogy,” Denise Youngblood makes a compelling case for a consideration of films like *The Sun* as “quint-essential postmodern historical films.”²⁹ Drawing upon the influential categories devised by Robert Rosenstone, she emphasizes, for example, the way that Sokurov “eschew[s] traditional narrative . . . refuse[s] to focus on or sum up the meaning of past events . . . [and] utilize[s] fragmentary and/or

poetic knowledge.”³⁰ In this case, it’s certainly true that Sokurov is engaging quite self-consciously “with a full awareness that history is a process of cultural construction, not the retrieval of ‘reality.’”³¹ In this sense, then, it could be said that *The Sun* is really an “anti-biopic” in that it tells us so little about the events leading towards an explanation of how this peacock-loving, garden-tending man could send millions of his countrymen to their deaths. But as I have also tried to argue in this chapter, cinema can’t give up on the idea of isolating a single life from the endless flow of history. Through its means and also because of the specific nature of its historical subject, Sokurov’s film is actually an investigation into the very limits of biographical representation. It addresses, head-on, the issues at stake in conceptualizing the biopic as a liminal form of cinematic narrative. Hayden White has suggested that “modernism resolves the problems posed by traditional realism . . . by simply abandoning the ground on which realism is construed as an opposition between fact and fiction.”³² In conclusion, this is certainly the case here. Sokurov is hardly interested in claiming “this is how it was” or in creating an unfolding sense of witnessing “history now in front of your eyes.” Instead, he has found a unique and multi-layered means of meditating on the very potential of the biopic as a narrative form. *The Sun* thus becomes a powerful evocation of a moment that was a turning point in both Hirohito’s own and his nation’s biography: the moment when the fictional became real and a god became a man.

notes

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4. Jeremi Szaniawski, “Interview with Aleksandr Sokurov,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2006): 23.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Stephen Hutchings, “History, Alienation and the (Failed) Cinema of Embodiment: Sokurov’s Tetralogy,” in *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, eds. Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 151.
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8. Yomota, “A Portrait,” 78.
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13. Edward Behr, *Hirohito: Behind the Myth* (London: Penguin, 1990), 430.

14. Carol Gluck, "Introduction," in *Showa: The Japan of Hirohito*, eds. Carol Gluck and Stephen R. Graubard (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), xx.
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18. Ibid., 1196.
19. *The Sun*, DVD (London: Artificial Eye, 2005).
20. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2010), 8.
21. Ibid., 10.
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23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Hutchings, "Cinema of Embodiment," 148.
26. Ibid., 149.
27. Nagisa Ôshima quoted in Yomota, "A Portrait," 78.
28. Nisnevich, "Temporary Floods," 44.
29. Denise J. Youngblood, "A Day in the Life: Historical Representation in Sokurov's 'Power' Tetralogy," in *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, eds. Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 123.
30. Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Future of the Past: Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 206.
31. Youngblood, "A Day in the Life," 123.
32. Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 18.

history in the making

e l e v e n

sofia coppola's *marie antoinette*

and the new auteurism

p a m c o o k

Sofia Coppola's 2006 biopic of Marie Antoinette caused a stir among critics, some of whom objected to its decidedly sketchy rendition of a major historical event such as the French Revolution. Coppola's close-up approach disturbed those more comfortable with cinematic and televisual period drama that portrays the past as distant, disguising the processes of historical reconstruction. Others considered that she failed to do justice to one of history's most complex and intriguing figures, condemning the film as a self-indulgent travesty that superimposed the director's worldview and reduced its subject's story to a mere fashion accessory.¹ In the years following its initial release, *Marie Antoinette*, like its ill-fated protagonist, has undergone a process of scholarly reassessment that has placed it with a recent revival of the biopic in which the director's personal style is uppermost.² The controversy surrounding Coppola's audacious reinvention of the genre threw up familiar issues about cinematic versions of history, connecting the film to wider discussions about the cultural value of postmodernism's undoing of many of the hallowed dictums of traditional historiography. The contemporary biopic's elliptical life stories,

elusive protagonists, and stylized narration have become central to rethinking historical representation.

Writing about what he terms “the modernist event,” historian Hayden White identifies a break with the realist narrative conventions typical of nineteenth-century historical novels and historiography brought about by twentieth-century modernism’s dissolution of the links between character, plot, and event.³ White argues that, with the abandonment of the event as the referent of history, the distinction between real and imaginary is undermined, as postmodernist literary and visual representations mix factual and fictional modes in the retelling of historical material. The illusion of impartiality has given way to versions of the past in which “anything goes” on the levels of form and content—a development decried by those for whom the capacity to distinguish between conjecture and what really happened is essential to understanding history.⁴ White uses Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), where the search for the truth about the assassination of John F. Kennedy is relayed via a combination of archive footage, historical reconstruction, documentary techniques, and fictional storytelling, as an example of “history as you like it” in which the veracity of actual events, if it can be attained at all, is a matter of individual speculation.⁵ Stone’s distinctive style of filmmaking underscores the subjective nature of the project to transmit history as an arena for equally valid, contesting representations rather than authoritative or definitive accounts. Linking Stone’s take on historiography to literary modernism, White demonstrates how modes of writing used by Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein fused form and content to produce history as a play between interior and exterior perception.⁶ With this shift, the past is filtered and reordered through the present-day experience of protagonists who struggle to make sense of the relationship between now and then.

White is relatively unusual in paying attention to the role of authorial style in historical reconstruction; as he indicates, stylistic flourishes are often seen as obscuring the understanding of history, which is viewed as pre-existing factual content. Although recent scholarship has acknowledged the mix of documented evidence and invention in historical films and the related biopic genre, and has argued for an understanding of their particular conventions, detailed consideration of the operations of personal modes of expression in cinematic versions of history is generally elided in favor of narrative and theme. In his illuminating discussion of the role of biography and authorial style in historical fiction, Robert Rosenstone outlines the fictional characteristics of biography and the strategies used by writers to translate historical lives for modern audiences without paying significant attention to personal style. When it comes to biopics, despite emphasizing the specifics of cinematic language, his examples focus more on narrative structure and editing than on aesthetic qualities of image and sound, and mention authorial intervention only briefly.⁷ In his in-depth

account of contemporary biopics, Dennis Bingham delineates a transition in the post-studio period from producer to director as auteur,⁸ and devotes space to considering individual directors' techniques of creative reinterpretation. Because of his focus on genre, the significance of authorial style is assessed primarily in terms of its impact on the biopic form and in relation to ideological concerns rather than addressing wider issues of historical reconstruction. George F. Custen's study of studio-era biopics claims that their generic conventions and the lives they created reflected the interests of the powerful men in charge, yet he sidesteps the impact of studio house styles fashioned by teams of artisans on the processes of representation.⁹

Each of these scholars acknowledges the significance of personal style in historical representation. They all seek to rescue the biopic from its status as an underrated form and succeed in establishing its importance to debates about cinematic renditions of history. In this chapter I attempt to build on their insights by looking in detail at the operations of authorial style in and around Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*. However, I depart from their methodologies in key respects. I maintain that the conditions of production, distribution, and reception from which the film emerges demand new ways of conceptualizing the biopic. My argument is that the understanding of history produced by the film is an effect of its style, just as Coppola's brand of authorship is a product of the filmmaker's position in the contemporary media industries. Authorship in cinema is generally assumed to emanate from the director's intentions and to be entirely within their control, despite the fact that their role, though it may be perceived as primary, is mediated via the input of many different creative, technical, and business agencies. I explore how Coppola's authorial identity is produced via the interaction of multiple factors and how this process intersects with and affects the film's reconstruction of its historical subject.

Although history is authored and is creatively reinvented from the perspective of those who relay it, authorship remains problematic for traditional historians. Realist historiography presents itself as authentic and authoritative by effacing the presence of individual narrators and offering access to a pre-formed content with minimal manipulation. The consumer may be aware that poetic license is taken, but the difference between fact and fiction remains one of the primary ways in which the past, viewed from a respectful distance, is understood. Once authorial discourse enters the fray, the distinctions between past and present, real and imaginary, interior and exterior, objective and subjective become blurred as a defining sensibility appropriates the past for its own interests. This situation evokes the tension between history and discourse identified by Christian Metz as at work in classical narrative cinema.¹⁰ For Metz, although mainstream cinema is both *histoire* (story) and *discours* (discourse), it masquerades as story, presenting itself in the past tense as complete, coherent, and conclusive, a narrative without a narrator. In this kind of cinema, the viewer/receiver secretly watches

what takes place on screen rather than participates in making meaning. On the other hand, when discourse predominates, the narrator is visible and the viewer is actively solicited in the process of reconstruction in the present.

Metz's much-debated thesis could be taken as an argument for auteur cinema, in so far as it posits the presence of a first-person discourse in the here and now as disruptive of the false certainty offered by *histoire*.¹¹ In spite of the problems with this argument (not least the difficulty of identifying first-person discourse in a collaborative form such as cinema), it is useful in defining cinematic style as a conflict between opposing kinds of address to viewers—one impersonal and neutral, presenting itself as transparent, the other personal, imparting the process of making meaning as open-ended, subjective, and potentially critical. *Discours* is defined not in essentialist terms as already-known content, which is how auteurism is often perceived, but as emerging from an engagement with language. This resonates with White's description of Stone's directorial style in *JFK* as posing a challenge to traditional historiography through its emphasis on conflicting aesthetic modes and assertive authorial gestures.

In the context of the resurgence of auteurism in current cinema and its convergence with new forms of the biopic, Metz's polemic takes on renewed relevance. In the case of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*, it helps to illuminate how the filmmaker unsettles accepted versions of the queen's life story by taking an idiosyncratic approach. However, since Metz wrote his 1975 piece, changes in the organization of the global media industries have transformed institutional and representational practices. Factors such as the realignment of the relationship between independent and mainstream production during the 1980s, the renewed commercial value of art cinema, and intensified emphasis on promotion and branding, have created a culture in which auteurs are now more central to commodity production and, like stars, often perform a vital role in selling their films. While this does not necessarily divest authorial discourse of its disruptive potential, the fact that critical or subversive elements of personal style are motivated by business interests in response to consumer demands inevitably inflects the counter-cultural status of the new auteurism. The "commerce of auteurism," as Timothy Corrigan calls it, is particularly relevant to Sofia Coppola's construction of an authorial identity.¹²

the sofia coppola brand

Sofia Coppola is a prime example of the contemporary commodity auteur. Her celebrity, like that of today's film stars, extends across interrelated arenas: film, print media, fashion and lifestyle magazines, television, live appearances, and the Internet. At the time of writing, she does not have an official website or active Facebook page, but she and her work are the

subject of numerous fan sites.¹³ Although coverage of her life in the tabloid press is restrained in comparison to that endured by many stars and celebrities, she has become the topic of online discussion boards, where debate is often heated, personal, and malicious.¹⁴ She works in several fields: as a film director, screenwriter, producer, costume and fashion designer, actress, model, photographer, and director of commercials for luxury brands such as Dior. She is no stranger to the business of commodity production; she has her own fashion line in Japan (MILKFED, directed predominantly at teenage girls),¹⁵ and has appeared in advertising campaigns and commercials for high-end labels Louis Vuitton and Marc Jacobs, as well as for a range of wines named after her by her father Francis Ford Coppola, who owns a winery. As with the star persona, her biography plays a large part in her fame. Her relationship with her father, who acts as mentor, producer, and executive producer through his independent company American Zoetrope, features strongly in the construction of her auteur identity.

To some extent, the high visibility of Sofia Coppola's public persona is a consequence of the renewed emphasis in the contemporary media industries on marketing and branding since the 1990s. Alisa Perren has described how independent distribution companies successfully emulated major studio exploitation tactics to enable lower-budget art movies to perform well at the theatrical box office, resulting in the setting up by media conglomerates of specialty divisions and subsidiaries dedicated to niche art-house productions.¹⁶ These studio-based operations focused on smaller-scale quality pictures, which redefined the identity of independent cinema and led to the proliferation of production set-ups that occupied the territory of "Indiewood." Indiewood films are located somewhere between mainstream and low-budget production, they depend on mixed funding arrangements, and the filmmakers retain varying degrees of creative autonomy.¹⁷ This shifting terrain provides the operating conditions for Sofia Coppola's feature films, which have all, to date, been produced by American Zoetrope with the involvement of other independent outfits, specialty subsidiaries, and, since *Lost in Translation* (2003), Japanese production and distribution company Tohokushinsha.

Indiewood has enabled Sofia Coppola to make highly personal movies distinguished by inventive style and subject matter. It has also brought her power and prestige in the industry: in 2004, following critical acclaim and a plethora of awards for *Lost in Translation*, including the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, she made history by becoming the first American woman to be nominated for the Best Director Oscar.¹⁸ Her extraordinary achievement on the back of a relatively small-scale, offbeat art-house comedy indicates the impact that Indiewood production and distribution techniques have had on the mainstream.¹⁹ It also demonstrates her success in establishing a distinctive authorial identity after making just two feature films. Although this has been attributed to her privileged background as a

member of the Coppola filmmaking dynasty, it has as much to do with her position in contemporary cinema, where “Hollywood” as a center has given way to a conglomerate culture comprising diverse interconnected operations that feed one another, enabling multiple commercial tie-ins. In this context, auteur discourse circulates across a wide range of media outlets as authorial brands interact with other marketing and cultural operations. As I have argued elsewhere, Sofia Coppola’s work and persona have emerged from this de-centered context and can be seen to embody it.²⁰

One of the distinctive aspects of the Sofia Coppola auteur persona is its emphasis on European art cinema as a source of inspiration. Coppola’s personal links to Europe are strongly marked via her Italian-American family connections and her marriage to French rock musician Thomas Mars, while in interviews she highlights the influence of the Nouvelle Vague on her style.²¹ She is clearly aware of the significance in global media production of the European-style auteur in branding a filmmaker’s *oeuvre* as art, giving it a recognizable niche identity that can be used in promotion. Her insistence on creative autonomy and the personal nature of her films adds to her auteur credentials, while her aesthetic, although incorporating elements of classic cinema, draws heavily on art cinema tropes by foregrounding ambiguity, elliptical narration, and ambivalent characters, and denying the viewer a secure position from which to understand the film.²² This dilatory mode is supported by Coppola’s life story, which portrays her as having drifted aimlessly before finding her creative direction, and by her laid-back directorial manner, which is perceived as low-key in comparison with that of her ebullient father.²³ She encourages the idea that life events have an impact on her work, which is often interpreted as autobiographical. As an experienced actress, she is skilled in self-presentation and aware of its importance in creating her brand. Her persona combines the construction of herself as a character with the performance of identity: for example, the inconclusive, open-ended structure of her films is mirrored in her habit of leaving sentences unfinished in interviews, which has become a trademark.²⁴

This persona is closely associated with the youthful female protagonists of her films, who find themselves at odds with the traditional social roles they are expected to occupy. It is configured as gendered and, crucially, generational. In light of her paternal lineage, it can be no accident that Sofia Coppola cites the influence of the Nouvelle Vague with its drive to break with the French “*cinéma de papa*.” She is identified with a creative elite of younger filmmakers whose work spans areas of popular culture such as fashion, music, art, and film, and who, despite retaining links with old and new Hollywood, differentiate themselves from the past. In ironic resonance with the “movie brat” generation to which Francis Ford Coppola belonged this set has been characterized as a “play group.”²⁵ It is defined by postmodern cool and the adoption of whimsical perspectives on

dysfunctional characters and institutions. Jeffrey Sconce has labeled the new sensibility that emerged in North American cinema in the 1990s as “smart cinema,” describing its diverse manifestations in terms of irony, black humor, and fatalism. For Sconce, the ironic detachment characteristic of smart films is a strategic attempt to address niche audiences and demarcate the works from popular mainstream cinema. He connects the cinematic trend with the emergence of post-60s “Generation-X” youngsters in the USA, who mobilized irony and cynicism as a means of expressing their disaffection.²⁶

Sofia Coppola does not appear in Sconce’s exclusively male pantheon of smart filmmakers, though many of her “play group” peers do. Nevertheless, her work shares the predilection for irony, preoccupation with surface style, engagement with consumer culture, and addresses the sophisticated audiences of this smart clique. Her films dramatize generational relationships and conflict, and target affluent younger cinemagoers. They differ from smart films by projecting a “feminine” aesthetic that chimes with her own ultra-feminine sartorial style and identity, evident in the girlish look and persona she cultivates despite being in her 40s and having two children. This hyper-femininity has been linked to postfeminism and to third-wave feminism’s celebration of youth, fashion, celebrity, and commodity culture—a further indication of the way Coppola projects an identity that distances itself from the past.²⁷ Others have positioned her work more in the tradition of second-wave feminism’s analytical response to consumerism and popular culture and its critique of patriarchy.²⁸

Coppola’s auteur persona spans a number of contradictions: the appeal to a hip younger generation is matched by nostalgia for the likes of Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut or indie classics such as her father’s *Rumble Fish* (1983), whose diffused cinematography she emulated in *Somewhere* (2011).²⁹ Her feminine image encompasses conflicting tendencies: between passive and active; fragility and toughness; effortlessness and drive; and naturalness and artifice. Her filmmaking technique oscillates between the observational distance of *cinéma vérité*, the intimacy of home movies, and highly stylized collages of images and music. These tensions emanate from her position within Indiewood and her negotiation of the branding imperatives of global film culture; they traverse her work, inflecting her creative choices and execution of projects. In the case of *Marie Antoinette*, they impact on the film’s engagement with the biopic and historical representation.

history as she likes it: *marie antoinette*

Coppola credits Antonia Fraser’s 2001 biography, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, as the basis for her script—although she had initially optioned French historian Evelyne Lever’s volume, *Marie Antoinette: The Last Queen of France*,

which appeared in English translation in 2000.³⁰ Lever's book and Fraser's sympathetic account of the young queen's life were part of a spate of revisionist works that attempted to humanize Marie Antoinette and reassess her role as villain of the French Revolution. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young point to the sudden explosion of interest in Marie Antoinette in Anglo-American popular media at the time, which they put down to the "chick culture" that emerged in the mid-1990s.³¹ However, this phenomenon was only a small part of the coverage devoted to one of history's most extensively documented figures. Discourses about Marie Antoinette abound across the centuries and round the world in different media, from memoirs and biographies, journals and diaries, letters, pamphlets, scandal sheets, newspapers, and songs, while images of her proliferate in portraits, sculptures, fashion magazines and books, lampoons, pornography, fancy dress costumes, fashion design, popular music performances, films, television, websites, and online discussion boards. Much of this material is imbued with gossip, innuendo, and prevarication, so that the historian's task becomes one of decoding forms of representation that demand different, often specialist analytical skills.

Fraser's meticulously researched biography offers detailed analysis of myriad source materials, claiming to dispel the myths surrounding its subject, who is repositioned as the tragic victim of a situation she did not control. The book is lavishly illustrated with paintings and portraits, indicating the significance of visual imagery in representing the queen's journey through life. The project is to uncover the truth about Marie Antoinette, but Fraser indulges in some speculation, and her personal perspective as researcher/narrator is clearly marked. She signals her sympathy from the outset by stating that she has tried to tell Marie Antoinette's story without anticipating its terrible conclusion too early.³² Coppola's script remains true to this trajectory in choosing to end the film with the king and queen's flight from Versailles, while including harbingers of doom such as low-key lighting and the slice of the guillotine on the soundtrack in the final scenes.³³ However, she does not deliver a faithful adaptation. The relationship between the biography and the film is one of negotiation and transformation, in line with the notion that each version of history relates its story from the perspective of the storyteller. Although she aligns her project with Fraser's revisionist work, Coppola distances her film from literary biography by insisting on her intention to present an impressionistic portrayal of Marie Antoinette's life by using cinematic language to visualize her youthful outlook.³⁴

Rosenstone observes that by definition the biopic is not a self-contained form; it necessarily relates to literary biographies, which usually provide the basis for cinematic versions of famous historical lives. He maintains that the biopic cannot be understood without reference to the wider issues of representation that have preoccupied biographers.³⁵ Sofia Coppola's *Marie*

Antoinette pushes the boundaries of historical representation through its playful use of anachronism, by highlighting visual and aural techniques of storytelling, and in the prominence given to the director/narration's contemporary viewpoint. Anachronism—evident in such ironic touches as the modern-day sneakers glimpsed as the camera pans over an array of exotic, colorful eighteenth-century women's shoes designed by Manolo Blahnik (Figure 11.1), the jarring mix of classical and post-punk pop music on the soundtrack, and the decision to have the cast members speak in their own accents—defies the rules of chronological narrative, in which the past is represented as pre-existing its telling in the here and now.

The film remains within a chronological timeline but its episodic structure and freehand approach give the sense of fleeting moments strung together in the present. Mechanisms of digression and delay, such as the ecstatic montages of images of clothes, shoes, and comestibles, and slow-paced, languorous sequences in which little happens, give a sense of timelessness that holds chronological inevitability at bay. The visual and sound design avoid holding historical material at a respectful distance by giving precedence to symbolic and affective elements that privilege Marie Antoinette's emotional experience over external events. This interior focus deliberately relegates the reality of the French Revolution to the sidelines, emphasizing the illusory nature of the queen's privileged world.

Visual design plays a crucial role in transmitting the auteur's distinctive take on the biopic. In promotional campaigns, elements such as costume, color, sets, cinematography, and lighting are attributed to the director's overall concept, despite being the work of eminent designers and skilled craftspeople.³⁶ Columbia Pictures' production notes emphasize the film's modern approach to history, quoting Coppola to the effect that she wanted



Figure 11.1 *Marie Antoinette* (2006): Modern-day sneakers glimpsed in the period mise-en-scène.

to avoid making a dry period movie à la Masterpiece Theatre.³⁷ Her assertion that she wanted audiences to experience what it was like to be at Versailles with Marie Antoinette differentiates her film from pedagogic versions of past events, targeting younger viewers who are said to be uninterested in history. The design of *Marie Antoinette*, its vibrant color palette, high-key lighting, and decorative sets and costumes, are projected as the realization of the director's innovative approach. Ironically, in claiming modernity for itself, Coppola's brand of auteurism depends on a literary model in which the film is perceived as entirely the result of the director's intentions.

In the production notes costume designer Milena Canonero, cinematographer Lance Acord, and production designer K.K. Barrett describe the way the film's design draws on, dramatizes, and deviates from paintings of the time to create an emphatically different look from the sepia-tinted pictorial conventions of traditional period drama. Their remarks are in part market-led, since the irreverent approach is intended to appeal to the film's target audience of 16 to 25 year olds.³⁸ But they can also be seen as confronting ideas about education, in particular the view that young people are resistant to learning about proper history. The film's affirmation of surface style over content has been perceived by some as pandering to this trend, but its "history with attitude" approach also functions as an intervention in debates. It presents pleasurable consumption of delectable images and cool music to fashion-conscious young viewers accustomed to decoding signs and meaning in commodity culture. By offering an engaging experience through which the past is made relevant to the present, it includes consumers as participants in the process of reconstruction. The project to overturn accepted versions of Marie Antoinette's life puts the biopic at the heart of a conception of history as in the making, rather than already made.

Part of *Marie Antoinette*'s transgression is to blur the boundaries between personal taste and "serious" historical enquiry by making Coppola's identity a central feature, to the extent that it eclipses that of Kirsten Dunst as Marie Antoinette. This identity pervades the script, which takes liberties with documented evidence and omits significant incidents; it infuses the impressionistic shooting style and understated performances, which have a spontaneous, unpolished air; and it is emblazoned across the flamboyant display of costumes and fashion. Coppola's persona intersects with that of Marie Antoinette in several respects. Like today's media personalities, Marie Antoinette was, and continues to be, the focus of intense public scrutiny and controversy. The commercial industry surrounding her has created her as icon and brand. The presentation of the young queen as the target of malicious gossip, and her status as misunderstood victim of circumstances, chimes with perceptions of Coppola's position as a celebrity member of the Hollywood élite. Her naivety and difficulties with age-old traditions and adult expectations echo the generational predicaments of the

heroines of *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Lost in Translation*, while her search for creative direction invokes Coppola's own life story. The intimate identification of the director with her subject serves to highlight the personal nature of the project, mark the discursive voice of the auteur, convey a feminine perspective on history, and mobilize the Sofia Coppola brand as a marketing tool for *Marie Antoinette* and related ancillary products.

selling history

As many have noted, in the contemporary media industries the success of a film, particularly in the art-house sector, does not entirely depend on its box office performance. Theatrical exhibition is only one element in a network of interrelated operations that provide opportunities for promotion and commercial spin-offs. After the critical and financial success of *Lost in Translation*, *Marie Antoinette*'s mixed reception and modest box office results were disappointing, despite a high-profile promotional drive in which Sofia Coppola featured prominently.³⁹ In addition to a youth-oriented online marketing campaign using interactive technologies and offering consumers prizes such as a trip to Paris and a Sony Walkman,⁴⁰ the film received extensive coverage in fashion and lifestyle magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. The latter's September 2006 special issue had a rococo cover displaying a portrait-style image of Kirsten Dunst in pink period dress with the banner "Kirsten Dunst as the Teen Queen who Rocked Versailles." Inside, a feature by fashion writer and biographer Kennedy Fraser offered an overview of Marie Antoinette accompanied by a photo spread, shot at Versailles by celebrated photographer Annie Leibovitz, showing Kirsten Dunst and other members of the cast wearing costumes from the film, or displaying gowns by haute couture designers produced specially for *Vogue*.⁴¹ In the same issue, an extract from Caroline Weber's recent Marie Antoinette biography analyzed the importance of fashion and style in the queen's life.⁴²

Devoted to music, art, fashion, and cultural matters the trendy magazine *Dazed & Confused*, directed at a design-conscious readership, produced a special tie-in issue packaged in an envelope containing the Sofia Coppola Special with a cover image of the director and a free book showcasing "cool" brands. A feature on Coppola, with graphics in the mode of *Marie Antoinette*'s title design, had intimate, seemingly impromptu photographs of her accompanied by a short interview and twelve pages of notes, comments, illustrations, and images from the director and her collaborators, who included her brother Roman, her father, music producer Brian Reitzell, and French rock band Phoenix, interleaved with inspirational figures such as novelist A.M. Homes and trash glam artist Richard Prince.⁴³ The feature epitomized the Sofia Coppola brand. It emphasized the director's personal style and artistic credentials, and

addressed readers immersed in and accustomed to assuming an ironic distance in relation to commodity culture. Like *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, the issue was advertisement-heavy to a degree that threatened to overwhelm editorial content. While these magazines' *Marie Antoinette* features included historical background and analysis about the queen's life and the making of the film, they were difficult to find.

The *Dazed & Confused* special issue devoted space to Coppola's interest in and approach to music, which was a key element in the film's collagist treatment of history. This aspect anticipated Sony's release of a two-disc soundtrack CD that included a glossy booklet of images from the film and an album cover that copied its design. Other spin-offs, such as the DVD and the reissue of Fraser's biography, were also produced using the movie's trademark colors. An elegant and lavishly mounted book published by Rizzoli contained extracts from the script illustrated with production photographs, design sketches, and film stills. The shiny, pale blue jacket, which was shocking pink on the reverse, carried a title that imitated the film's graphics.⁴⁴ *Marie Antoinette*, its ancillary products, and commercial tie-ins had a unified design concept that relied on and strengthened Coppola's profile. In some instances, the branding process appears tangential to the concept of the original product. In others, it works to complement the movie. For example, Sony's upscale official website features an arty, decorative collage of images, music, and text that offers multiple interactive options. By clicking on icons under the "Life of a Legend" heading, the consumer can access details about Marie Antoinette's historical background. Other pages allow them to download wallpapers and screen savers, watch clips, or purchase e-cards (Figure 11.2). Like the film, the website



Figure 11.2 The film's website primarily targets female consumers.

presents history to young, predominantly female consumers as an interactive, open-ended experience of pleasure and fantasy. The acquisition of commodities is entwined with gaining an understanding of the relationship between past and present.

The operations of authorship that traverse *Marie Antoinette*, its promotional tactics, and related events privilege *discours* over *histoire*, foregrounding the making of history in the here and now as a dynamic process of exchange between auteur and consumers. This conception recalls Metz's ideas about the potential challenge to the false certainties of *histoire* offered by *discours*, and White's description of postmodernism's critical engagement with traditional historiography. However, *Marie Antoinette*'s projection of history emerges directly from its production, distribution, and exhibition practices, and arguably cannot fully be understood without reference to this context. The fact that Sofia Coppola and the film are embedded in the "commerce of auteurism" complies with business imperatives while also overturning established precedents. *Marie Antoinette*'s postmodernist techniques extend beyond textual and aesthetic strategies, raising questions for scholarly approaches to literary and audiovisual historiography that focus on the text as analytical object. It promotes a model of learning influenced by consumerism and interactive new technologies that, while driven by market demands, also contests prevailing ideas about the means by which knowledge of history is accessed. The film reconfigures the biopic as a mobile, mutable form that transports *Marie Antoinette* itself into different, interconnected commercial and cultural locations. As biography, the movie envisages its subject's life in terms of a convergence between the director's identity and that of its protagonist, dividing the unified character at the center of conventional life stories. Its brazenly girly look and tone modernize the costume romance's address to female audiences and affirm its celebration of a feminine principle in history.⁴⁵ At the same time, the ornamental beauty of its *mise-en-scène* masks the proximity of dark, destructive social forces. While it appears to revel in luxury and excess, it suggests that the decadence of Marie Antoinette's self-indulgent lifestyle led straight to the scaffold. The tension between these contradictory impulses creates an interpretation of historical reconstruction that overturns genre and audience expectations, belying the film's characterization by some as a superficial, trivial work. The deceptive surface conceals a deeper purpose, to confront accepted ways of seeing, hearing, and understanding.

notes

1. See Agnès Poirier, "An Empty Hall of Mirrors," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2006, accessed October 5, 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/may/27/comment.filmnews.

2. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 361–376.
3. Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 66–86.
4. *Ibid.*, 68–69.
5. *Ibid.*, 68.
6. *Ibid.*, 76–79, 82–85.
7. Robert A. Rosenstone, “In Praise of the Biopic,” in *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (Arlington, TX: Texas University Press, 2007), 11–29.
8. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 19–21.
9. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
10. Christian Metz, “Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism),” trans. Celia Britton et al., in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 89–98.
11. See Gilberto Perez, “The Narrative Sequence,” in *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 54–55, who contests Metz’s application of *histoire/discours* to film.
12. Timothy Corrigan, “The Commerce of Auteurism: A Voice without Authority,” *New German Critique* 49 (1990): 43–57.
13. For example, *lifewithsofia*, and the livejournal community profile *i_heart_sofia*, accessed September 22, 2011, www.jadoresofia.com; <http://i-heart-sofia.livejournal.com/profile>.
14. See discussion in the Film Forum on *Mubi.com*, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://mubi.com/topics/sofia-coppolas-somewhere/>.
15. *MILKFED*, website, accessed September 26, 2011, www.milkfed.jp/#/index/.
16. Alisa Perren, “Sex, Lies and Marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2001): 30–39.
17. Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 1–46.
18. Pam Cook, “Sofia Coppola,” in *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2011), 131.
19. *Lost in Translation* was made on an estimated budget of \$4 million and grossed more than ten times that amount, according to the Internet Movie Database, accessed September 26, 2011, www.imdb.com/title/tt0335266/business.
20. Cook, “Sofia Coppola,” 130.
21. Sean O’Hagan, “Sofia Coppola,” *Observer*, October 8, 2006, accessed September 27, 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/oct/08/features.review1.
22. Cook, “Sofia Coppola,” 130.
23. Evgenia Peretz, “Something About Sofia,” *Vanity Fair* 553, September 2006, 237.
24. Peretz refers to this mannerism in “Something about Sofia,” 184.
25. Peretz, “Something About Sofia,” 184. Coppola’s contemporaries Alexander Payne and Wes Anderson are part of this group.
26. Jeffrey Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 355–358.
27. See Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, “Marie Antoinette: Fashion, Third-Wave Feminism, and Chick Culture,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2010): 98–112; Caitlin Yunuen Lewis, “Cool Postfeminism: The Stardom of Sofia Coppola,” in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female*

- Celebrity*, eds. Su Holmes and Diane Negra (New York and London: Continuum, 2011); Samiha Matin, "Private Femininity, Public Femininity: Tactical Aesthetics in the Costume Film," in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012).
28. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 371, 376; Todd Kennedy, "Off With Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur," *Film Criticism* 35, no. 1 (2010), accessed October 9, 2011, www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-241514974.html.
 29. Isabel Stevens, "A Kind of Softer Feeling," *Sight and Sound* 21, no. 1 (2011): 20.
 30. Evelyne Lever is one of two French historical consultants credited on the film.
 31. Ferriss and Young, "Marie Antoinette," 98.
 32. Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (London: Orion, 2006), xvii.
 33. Sofia Coppola, *Marie Antoinette* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), n.p.
 34. This is a direction endorsed by Fraser, see Antonia Fraser, "Sofia's Choice," *Vanity Fair* 555, November 2006, accessed October 4, 2011, www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2006/11/fraser200611#gotopage1.
 35. Rosenstone, "In Praise of the Biopic," 12.
 36. Renowned costume designer Milena Canonero and production designer K.K. Barrett were nominated for numerous awards for *Marie Antoinette*, and Canonero won the Oscar for best costume design. Cinematographer Lance Acord was nominated for awards for his work on *Lost in Translation*.
 37. *Marie Antoinette* production notes available online, *Columbia Pictures*, accessed September 30, 2011, www.visualhollywood.com/movies/marie-antoinette/notes.pdf. Masterpiece Theatre (now Masterpiece) is a television drama series that airs on PBS. A high proportion of its programming is quality period drama.
 38. Danielle Long, "Sony Targets Social Networking Sites for *Marie Antoinette*," *Brandrepublic.com*, October 20, 2006, accessed September 30, 2011, www.brandrepublic.com/news/599673/sony-targets-social-networking-sites-marie-antoinette/. In the "Cribbs with Louis XVI" featurette, which is shot by Roman Coppola, on the *Marie Antoinette* DVD (London: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment UK, 2007), Jason Schwartzman as Louis conducts an introduction to Versailles in MTV-style vernacular. *Marie Antoinette* received a PG-13 rating in the USA as potentially unsuitable for children under thirteen.
 39. "Marie Antoinette," *Boxoffice Mojo.com*, accessed October 5, 2011, <http://boxoffice Mojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=marieantoinette.htm>.
 40. Long, "Sony Targets."
 41. Kennedy Fraser, "Teen Queen," *Vogue*, September 2006, 640–646, 747.
 42. Caroline Weber, "The Height of Fashion," *Vogue*, September 2006, 648–649, 747–748.
 43. Jefferson Hack, "Keep Your Dreams," *Dazed & Confused*, November 2006, 82–101.
 44. Coppola, *Marie Antoinette*.
 45. For discussion of the period romance's feminization of history see Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 77–79.

i'm not there

transcendent thanatography

t w e l v e

j e s s e s c h l o t t e r b e c k

Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* (2007) is an unusually inventive and imaginative biographical film. It is, in the words of the opening credits, "Inspired by the music and many lives of Bob Dylan." Fitting the metaphorical announcement that it will cover "many lives," the film presents a living star subject who is absent, multiple, elusive and in the most daring portrayal, dead. *I'm Not There* reimagines Bob Dylan with six different actors. Each of the actors symbolically represent a different Dylan career-phase or interest: Marcus Carl Franklin plays Woody, an African American boy, who represents Dylan's little-known childhood, his interest in social politics, and the work of Woody Guthrie; Ben Whishaw is Arthur Rimbaud, a poet admired by Dylan, who shared his commitment to the ideal of individual artistic creation; Christian Bale appears as both Jack Rollins, an aspiring folk singer similar to the Dylan of the early 1960s, and later as Pastor John, evoking the born-again Dylan of the late 1970s and early 1980s; Heath Ledger plays Robbie, who divorces his wife in the late 1970s, much like Dylan, and voices his ambivalent relationship to stardom; Richard Gere is Billy the Kid, approximating a time of reclusion in the 1970s; and finally, Cate Blanchett

appears as Jude Quinn, the embodiment of Dylan I will focus on in this chapter. Quinn resembles the Dylan of the mid-1960s, when he produced his most legendary albums and appeared in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary, *Don't Look Back* (1967). Nearly as surprising as the appearance of Dylan in these remarkably different bodies, and just as central to Haynes's critical take on the genre, is the presentation of Dylan as a corpse at the beginning of the film.

Popular music stars have frequently lived self-destructively and died young, making their stories ideal subjects for biopics. The following feature or made-for-television films all depict musicians who suffered untimely deaths: *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978), *Elvis* (1979), *Sweet Dreams* (1985), *John and Yoko: A Love Story* (1985), *Sid and Nancy* (1986), *La Bamba* (1987), *The Karen Carpenter Story* (1989), *The Doors* (1991), *Selena* (1997), *Hendrix* (2000), and *Control* (2007). *I'm Not There* stands out as an exception in this genre. Because its subject is a musical star who was living at the time of the film's release, its treatment of Dylan's fictional death brazenly varies from the biopic's "putative connection to accuracy and truth."¹ Caroline Merz writes, "the contract of the biography is the promise to deliver up a life; a biographer's success or failure is judged on whether it creates a coherent personality."² *I'm Not There*, by contrast, portrays the star as fragmented and multiple instead of coherent. From the start, *I'm Not There* does away with the possibility of being "true" or coherent in any conventional sense. Instead, it is critical and imaginative. Haynes's film defamiliarizes the pop-star story and implicates the audience as part of a "devouring public" that wishes to consume another's identity. It makes a familiar story—in which a musical star seems to perform not only their work, but their life and death for an audience—strange.

Todd Haynes has done more to legitimate the musical biopic than any other director. All three of his musical films work with this genre as a vital and innovative form while also referencing and revising its more staid characteristics. Before the Dylan film, Haynes made the cult classic *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a thesis film made with Barbie Dolls, and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a film that borrows its structure from *Citizen Kane* (1941) to reconstruct the rock biographies of characters resembling Marc Bolan, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie.

Interviewed on the occasion of *I'm Not There*'s release, Haynes demonstrates his sensitivity to the biopic's typical "formula" and the way that this knowledge of the genre informs his work. While Haynes does not mention particular titles, his outline of the musical biopic capably describes the tendencies of the most popular films in the genre, such as *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005):

I do see that there is a kind of form that has become common to film [*sic*] that we now call the bio-pic, but I don't

know that it has any relationship to reality or anything literal or historical. It seems to be a construct of the narrative form that has to find beats in a person's life to dramatize events of the life that correspond to those moments of high and low and that have a relationship to their work. They are usually required to expose a certain amount of private history or conflict with drugs or philandering or something, and then show how that gets recovered or resolved. So to me, it's a formula, almost more nakedly so than other film genres because whatever the life is has to fit in this one package.³

Haynes consciously varies from the biopic "formula" that earned *Ray* over \$75 million at the box office and *Walk the Line* over \$119 million. *I'm Not There*, by contrast, would earn only \$4 million, but it is clear that Haynes's aim had less to do with profits and more to do with exploring the possibilities of the biopic.⁴ As demonstrated in the above-cited interview, Haynes consciously wished to redress the tendency of musical biopics to render lives legible and easily explained. *I'm Not There* is consciously crafted as an answer to biopics that present a simplified compilation of a life's highlights and lowlights.

Haynes's film portrays the process of representing a life as elusive and provisional. Its bewildering representation of biography veers precipitously close to Freud's take on the genre:

Whoever becomes a biographer takes on the obligation to lie, to cover up, to be hypocritical, to whitewash, and even to conceal his lack of understanding; for biographical truth cannot be had, and if one did have it, one could not use it."⁵

While it is tempting to read *I'm Not There* as pure postmodern playfulness or in the pessimistic terms of classical psychoanalysis (which often reduces human behavior to the fulfillment of similar drives and patterns of perception), I will argue, drawing on the psychoanalysis developed by Carl Jung, that the film celebrates a rare popular artist who confronts and accepts the impermanence of life. As such, *I'm Not There*, is not only interested in biography (writing life) but also in thanatography (writing death). Yet, the film is not somber or sentimental about death. Instead, it celebrates a heroic encounter with death and a popular artist's insistence on play and creativity because of it. Death as a creative catalyst is present in two ways, one literal (a nearly fatal motorcycle accident) and the other figurative (Dylan's willingness to explore and abandon artistic personas).

Haynes's film celebrates Dylan for his elusiveness, taking the viewer through the songwriter's major phases—from his interest in left-leaning politics, to romanticism, to evangelical Christianity. *I'm Not There* makes an

implicit argument that Dylan's continuous movement through various personas allowed him to transcend the conventional cycle of consumption. It suggests that the kind of popular star who is able to keep both body and artistic spirit alive eludes conventional understanding. The film suggests that the kind of subjectivity necessary to undergo such frequent transformations of character is so unusual that it is best represented as a series of deaths and rebirths.

I will draw on the insights of psychoanalysis to better understand both the phenomenon of self-destructive star consumption and the exceptionality of Dylan. Because Dylan follows a creative and fluid process of development, the work of Carl Jung is especially relevant. In contrast to the model of psychoanalysis we have inherited from Sigmund Freud, which positions the field as a practice for diagnosis and correction, for getting subjects to accept an ordinary life, Jung's is not only interested in returning subjects to health but in having them reach their full potential. He considers "personality" not just as something that we have by default, but also as something to be struggled for and won: "Personality is the supreme realization of the innate idiosyncrasy of a living being. It is an act of high courage flung into the face of life."⁶ This description is befitting of the achievements of a popular artist such as Dylan, who was as much devoted to the 1960s project of sorting out vital ways to think and live as he was to mastering music genres such as folk and rock.

As such, even though Jung's ideas are not used frequently in academic film studies, they are vitally relevant to the study of films that portray talented popular artists. Although Jung's development of a practice of psychoanalysis that differed from Freud's led to a falling out between the two men, their different models can, in fact, be read as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis is helpful in elucidating the psychology of fandom, while Jungian psychoanalysis is more helpful in understanding a unique and enigmatic performer, as Haynes imagines Dylan. Before closely analyzing two scenes of *I'm Not There*, I will review a number of psychoanalytic concepts relevant to this study.

In his critical account of surrealist Michael Leiris, Sean Hand devises the term "thanatography," to account for Leiris's experimental approach to the biography genre. Hand argues that Leiris's biography demonstrates "the pleasure and the power . . . of [autobiographical] presence; but simultaneously . . . [its] enthusiastic proliferations and effacements [indicate] how autobiography depends on a drive to the death."⁷ *I'm Not There* also consciously elaborates on the film biography as thanatography: the presentation of how stars die in addition to how they live. We are accustomed to this spectacular immolation because it delivers on the contradictory things we ask of our stars: simultaneously, we want them to live too much and to die for having done so.

Thanatography is an extension of Freud's concept of *thanatos* (or the death drive). In Freud's theory this potentially dangerous instinct can be positively harnessed for worldly achievements. He writes, "libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfills the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards . . . [to] the instinct for mastery, or the will to power."⁸ The celebrity's work with *thanatos* is particularly unusual. The public performer creates a "self" known by many at the expense of an immediate kind of death—as the wholeness of the private being is sacrificed in service of public works and appearances—but is still mindful of eventual death, beyond which reputation and public works will live.

In psychoanalysis, a group of interrelated terms (the Real, *jouissance*, and the death drive) are associated with the most threatening aspects of being—things that the subject is so driven to avoid that they, like the head of Medusa, cannot be directly seen. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the "Real" constitutes an unknown aspect of consciousness that can never be directly accessed yet structures the "Imaginary" and "Symbolic." The "Real" exists "outside language and is inassimilable to symbolization."⁹ The "Real" is not a sought-after territory that we wish to encounter, but the opposite, something that is scrupulously avoided by fantasy, returning us to the more comfortable realms of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Slavoj Žižek explains, "fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real."¹⁰ The affect that accompanies encounters approaching the Real is *jouissance*. *Jouissance* means both enjoyment and a surplus of enjoyment that the subject experiences as a threat.¹¹ It is the pursuit of *jouissance* that motivates the death drive.

In Jung's work, we encounter a concept very close to Lacan's "Real," the "nigredo."¹² For Jung, this terrifying darkness is not equally experienced by all subjects. Whereas the "Real," for Lacan, remains universally inaccessible and terrifying for all subjects as something that exists outside language, for Jung the "nigredo" is the first stage of a potentially intense and creative psychological transformation. For those interested in and capable of such a journey—whether artistic, mystical, or psychological—the terrifying darkness is not to be feared, but seen, accepted, and worked through. While the structuring force of the "Real" is the deepest ontological truth for many psychoanalysts, for Jung the equivalent, "nigredo," is simply a default state of incoherence that, once experienced openly and accepted, the subject can move beyond for higher stages of development. Jung borrows these phases of psychological development from the seventeenth-century science of alchemy. In the alchemical ideal, the individual moves from the *nigredo*, a perception of outer-truth defined by chaos and arbitrariness, to realizations of inner-truth. Dylan, as portrayed by Haynes, represents such a figure; he is able to see the entirely social self as impersonal and best treated as a stepping stone. This potentially

dark recognition becomes, for Dylan, a catalyst for creation and self-realization.

Yet, the bare fact of the death drive or the “nigredo” is too much for most of us to face directly. The cultural valuation of “love-and-death pop idolatry” fulfills the social function of making the death drive, *jouissance*, and the Real partially visible and accessible.¹³ While characterizations of *jouissance* and the death drive bear a remarkable resemblance to the pursuit of fame, these phenomena have rarely been considered together.

Joan Copjec’s definition of the death drive’s motivation—“making oneself heard or making oneself seen”—resembles the pursuit of fame.¹⁴ In the celebrity condition, following the death drive can dangerously conflate public and personal understandings of the self: “the intimate core of our being, no longer sheltered by sense, ceases to be supposed and suddenly becomes exposed.”¹⁵ *I’m Not There* portrays celebrity as a contradictory and chaotic state, which resembles the dilemmas of selfhood outlined by psychoanalysis. This is what Dylan, as portrayed by Haynes, accepts and artfully plays with. This biopic thematically complements Copjec’s redefinition of the filmic gaze, not as “an unrealizable ideal but . . . an impossible real.”¹⁶ Because the Dylan of *I’m Not There* also recognizes the singular ego-identity as “unrealizable” and “impossible,” he is able to create freely under numerous personas and transcend the constitutive limits proposed by the pessimistic psychoanalysis of Lacan.

As an artist connected to beatnick poets, popular protest movements, and the hippie subculture, Dylan was well aware of alternate theories of selfhood espoused by these communities. Timothy Leary and Ram Drass, defectors from the Harvard Psychology Department, proposed different models of selfhood by drawing on psychedelic drug use and Eastern philosophy. Ralph Metzner, a colleague of Timothy Leary’s, summarizes the “transformational work” that attracted seekers of the 1960s:

when the ego personality “dies”, everything changes. The old self-image, the one we acquired from our parents and from society . . . all these have to be “killed”, that is, rendered completely lifeless within us . . . The new personality, the new sense of identity that results from the transformational work, is symbolized by the reborn child.¹⁷

It is this unfixed subjectivity that is imaginatively presented in *I’m Not There*. The decision to have six different actors play Dylan should be read figuratively, to suggest the stark differences between his artistic phases. The film suggests that this fluidity allows Dylan to flourish in what might otherwise be an overwhelming lifestyle.

Dylan represents the rare triumph of the star-artist over the public ideal of the easily evaluated, short-lived (in fame if not life) celebrity. Instead of submitting to the judgment of popular media or fans, Dylan productively

destroys his personas again and again. Musical styles (folk, country, rock, blues) and social values (activism, autobiographical expression, artistic integrity, religious rebirth) are freely channeled, then abandoned as the chameleonic artist explores the energy of these genres and values but never insists on their one-to-one correspondence with a stable, personal identity. By so freely moving through different artistic personas, Dylan makes himself immune to the conventional life-cycle of media coverage and popular reception.

In *The Exile of Britney Spears*, Christopher R. Smit studies a cycle of popular consumption that is the negative image of Dylan's story. Smit positions the consumption of this more typical pop star as emblematic of the exchanges ritually enacted by twenty-first century celebrities and fans. Smit pushes us to recognize that the trajectory of Spears's popular image from "innocent" teen star to derided tabloid fodder should not "be seen as a simple cultural inevitability."¹⁸ He writes that, "it was our energy [as eager and unselfconscious consumers] that initiated [her eventual] exile."¹⁹ Yet, the very institutions—the popular media, in particular—that facilitate the mass ritual of consumption and abandonment naively disavowed any active role in her demise. Smit continues, "like all things consumed, Britney was digested and eliminated. . . . Left to be what *Rolling Stone* called an American Tragedy, forgetting that they started the whole thing."²⁰ Dylan is such a powerful and enduring star because he effectively turns this kind of consumption cycle on its head. He slips out of conventional understanding, moving effortlessly from protest songs ("The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll") to insistence on individual growth as the ultimate goal ("My Back Pages"); from indictments of contemporary Christianity ("With God on Our Side") to his own evangelical rebirth ("Every Grain of Sand"). Dylan's shape-shifting, defiant individuality eludes understanding. He cannot simply be comprehended, judged, and rejected (like Spears) because his astonishingly diverse repertoire, full of opposing expressions, seems to anticipate and respond to potential critiques. His canon is its own universe—diverse, enigmatic, and irreducible. It is this ego-transcending multiplicity that Haynes captures in *I'm Not There*.

The film opens with a first-person point of view shot. This long take, in grainy black and white, aligns us with the perspective of an unseen music star. Roadies direct the implied subject behind the first-person point of view shot through backstage corridors as we hear crowd noise and musicians tuning their instruments. The glare of the stage spotlights blinds our view, and the film suddenly cuts to another time and place. A motorcyclist starts his bike in two extreme close-ups before riding across the frame in a long shot long take. Dylan fans will recognize this three-shot scene as an allusion to the singer's motorcycle accident in 1966. Had Dylan died in this wreck, his cult status would have been solidified with a James Dean-like ending. Instead, exactly the opposite happened: few details of the accident or the

extent of his injuries were ever known, and the singer recovered and withdrew from public life for a few years. Dylan did not tour for eight years, and his musical output from 1967 to 2012—with occasional exceptions such as the albums *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), *Time Out of Mind* (1997), and *Tempest* (2012)—was less acclaimed. *I'm Not There* asks us to consider an alternative to this more mundane outcome: what if Dylan tragically died just after producing three of his strongest records, *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)? The following scene stages an anachronistic autopsy.

The film cuts to Dylan (Cate Blanchett) being examined by morticians then placed in a casket. In this scene, a medical lamp flashes on, filling the screen and suggesting a connection between this deathly white light and the glare of the stage lights or the flashbulbs of press photographers. A philosophic voiceover muses, “There he lies, a devouring public can now share the remains of his sickness.” Next, the narrator (Kris Kristofferson) introduces us to *I'm Not There*'s primary conceit—that six actors (none of whom bear a strong resemblance to Dylan or to the other five actors who play him) will appear as the singer. Each character is introduced with a terse past tense description and a full-frame close-up that emphasizes their stark differences: “There he lay, poet, prophet, outlaw, fake, star of electricity.” Voiceovers by Kristofferson, Blanchett (Jude), and Ben Whishaw (Arthur) point to the elusive quality of Dylan's personas and work. Blanchett says, “A poem is like a naked person,” and Kristofferson's voiceover adds, “Even the ghost was more than one person.” We return to all six characters in an additional set of close-ups: cuts between them are abruptly paired with a gun shot. Whishaw adds, “But a song is something that walks by itself.” This series of comments is dynamic and bewildering in equal measure, producing a strange effect of presence and nonpresence.²¹

Each part of the opening sequence works in this manner to portray the star as both multiply constituted and unstable. The opening shot, which



Figure 12.1 *I'm Not There*'s (2007) opening sequence: Cate Blanchett appears as Dylan in an anachronistic autopsy.

aligns us with a star taking the stage, suggests presence (this character is the center of the scene, fussed over by his numerous handlers and cheered on by the crowd) and absence (we never see the character's face or hear his music). Here, the star is an empty signifier that can be filled in by an infinite variety of personas and performance styles. The motorcycle scene taunts the spectator with the possibility that Dylan's legend would be greater and more cinematic if he had died at that moment. Instead, he "dies" a much slower and more complicated "death" through six different guises. What are we to make of such a bizarre representational strategy? This is not mere postmodern experimentation or nonsense. Instead, it is a celebration of Dylan's triumph over the star-making-and-destroying apparatus. He achieves this by passing through a series of persona phases, portrayed in *I'm Not There* as a series of bodily incarnations.

Haynes's sensitive engagement with the biopic genre is also matched by Dylan's management of his celebrity status. Celebrityhood is a negotiated state that Dylan understands and controls. A close reading of "Ballad of a Thin Man" from the 1967 album *Highway 61 Revisited* offers a good illustration of Dylan's management of his star image. I will attend to the relationship of this song to Dylan's work and persona in the late 1960s, before analyzing how Haynes uses "Ballad of a Thin Man" in *I'm Not There*. In this song, Dylan taunts a critic's effort to understand his craft, ("You walk into the room / with a pencil in your hand . . . You try so hard but you don't understand"). These opening lines subvert the usual power dynamic between the critic and the popular musician. Typically, the entertainer must (as an implicit part of the show-business contract) offer himself up for public judgment—with newspaper and magazine critics figuring as the default arbiters of popular taste. However, in actual exchanges with the press, Dylan famously attempted to redefine this relationship, positioning himself in opposition to the popular critic's discourse.

Dylan's stance was clearly established in two charged interactions with the press in the 1960s. In 1963, a *Newsweek* exposé revealed that much of Dylan's past was either mythical or a lie. This piece could have done significant damage to Dylan if his star image had been defined by fact and authenticity. Instead, following the *Newsweek* piece, he openly argued for his intensely individual relationship to his music. Understanding himself as a romantic artist, Dylan refused to engage in middlebrow conversations about musical genres, influences, and his popular reception. Loren Glass situates Dylan's response to this magazine piece as a turning point in his balanced construction of his status as celebrity and artist. He writes, "After Dylan's lies about his past were exposed . . . he began to build a wall of semi-private and allusive language around himself, implying that his persona required not factual reportage, but literary interpretation."²² A literary equivalent to "Ballad of a Thin Man" can be found in the "11 Outlined Epitaphs" of the album liner notes of *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. There,

in a note addressed to “Mr. Magazine,” Dylan’s self-presentation is markedly different from the journalistic model. He writes that:

[T]he town I was born in holds no memories . . . mine is of another story for I do not care to be made an oddball bouncing past reporter’s pens co-operating with questions aimed at eyes that want to see . . . I don’t like to be stuck in print staring out at cavity minds who gobble chocolate candy bars.²³

Here, Dylan positions himself outside the default relationship with the press. Rather than offer himself fully for consumption and judgment, Dylan rejects the validity of journalistic assessments and the neutrality of the consumer economy.

Dylan confronted the mainstream media again in the cinema vérité documentary *Don’t Look Back* (1967). In one of the film’s most famous scenes, he antagonizes an interviewer from *Time* magazine. Instead of earnestly responding, Dylan questions the validity of *Time* as an objective source, and turns the focus to the interviewer. He argues that, in short, the reporter is merely a functionary in a ritualistic exchange. *Don’t Look Back* is a broad-ranging film, in which Dylan’s clash with this reporter figures as the most concise and coherent dramatic conflict. *I’m Not There*, as I will outline shortly, could be described in a similar way.

Dylan also positions the singer and his song above the critic in his performance of “Ballad of a Thin Man.” Beyond the clarity of his intentions expressed in the lyrics cited above, his performance of the song on the album *Highway 61 Revisited* supports its rhetorical project. Dylan does this by skillfully performing crucial lines of the song: he laughs slightly while singing, “you *try* so hard but you don’t understand.” He slows to a condescending crawl for last four words of every chorus—“Something is happening here but you don’t know what it is, *do you, Mister Jones?*” Here, Dylan taunts Mister Jones with a slowness that does not make the critic’s job any easier or clearer. Musically, “Ballad of a Thin Man” strikes a balance between ponderous and playful. Played in a minor key, the piano, the dominant instrument in the song, is severe, mimicking the critic’s seriousness. Dylan effectively says, “Even when I put something *on your level*, you still can’t get it at all.” In contrast to the somber piano, the organ riff in a higher key that accompanies the end of each line of the song is light, and sounds almost improvisational. Dylan’s vocal delivery, which is both commanding and casual, indicates his ability to masterfully hold both of these modes in dual focus. He fully understands and can play around with the idea that a star-persona or a song can be deliberate and self-evidently meaningful, but ultimately rejects this possibility, favoring instead a mode of expression and self-understanding that remains elusive and ungraspable. Given such a similar thematic interest, “Ballad of a Thin Man” is, logically,

featured in *I'm Not There*. It is the only song to receive a sequence akin to a music video.

Bruce Greenwood plays a character who combines characteristics of both “Mister Jones” and the *Time* magazine reporter Dylan clashed with in *Don't Look Back*. In an elaborate two-part sequence, Dylan (played by Blanchett in this portion) clashes with “Mister Jones” during an attempted interview, then performs “Ballad of a Thin Man” at a concert that this critic attends. In the first half of this sequence, Jones attempts to conduct a conventional journalistic interview with Dylan, but finds him to be an unusually frustrating and slippery subject. Dylan persistently refuses to enact a conventional interview. Instead, he repeatedly denies any personal investment in his own work or the social world. When the interviewer asks Dylan to take a coherent stance of contemporary political movements, he refuses, saying, “I’m just a storyteller man, that’s all I am.” Dylan poses the heretical possibility that his folk-music phase could be nothing more than “jumping into a scene” and “[doing] it better than anyone else.” Dylan presents a version of himself and his work that is obviously false. Such insouciant responses refute journalistic discourses that would reduce Dylan’s work to a musical genre or a social cause.

Dylan effectively gains control over this exchange, limiting Mister Jones by providing quotes that cannot be assimilated into a reductive reading of his art. To underscore this point, Haynes inserts Dylan song lyrics for Jones’s attempted retorts. When Jones protests Dylan’s supposed lack of social concern, his response is drawn from the lyrics of a song from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*: “I don’t believe you, you act as though—” Jones tries to hold to the conventions of journalistic discourse. He claims that Dylan’s refusal to give him a straight answer reflects a lack of sincerity. Dylan retorts that he is, “No more sincere than you are. You just want me to say what you want me to say,” and effectively turns the questions to the interviewer. He asks Jones, “What do you care, if I care or don’t care, what’s it to you?” Dylan has broken down Jones’s confidence. In a revealing edit, a reverse-shot of the interviewer is held for a relatively long period of time. Jones’s penetrating gaze is interrupted and he casts his glance askew—feeling the grip of the typical interviewer’s position slipping.

The “Ballad of a Thin Man” video, which follows this tense and failed interview, illustrates the overturning of the usual critic–celebrity dynamic. A cover of the song by Pavement’s Stephen Malkmus forgoes the teasing and subtle qualities of the original for a more raucous version, and accompanies a surreal sequence. The critic, Mister Jones, walks into a restroom and is startled to encounter multiple versions of himself—the stability of his subject-position apparently unsettled by Dylan’s rebuke. He then walks into a performance space and is confronted with a nightmarish sequence of events that undermine his smug sense of authority. Dylan is replaced on stage by a caged circus performer, “Eeka the Geek,” before the

critic has a chance to digest this replacement; he, himself, is in the cage and Dylan extends a microphone towards him (Figure 12.2).

Visually, Haynes conveys the frustration that Dylan expresses in the relationship between popular artists and critics—their interest in speaking for and explaining artists (“Here is your throat back, thanks for the loan”) and their deadline-bound rush to demand clear meaning from popular artists: “You’re a cow, give me some milk or else go home!” The ability of art to thrive in such an exchange is so curtailed that Dylan fantasizes about the banishment of critics from mediating the relationship between fans and performers: “There oughta be a law against you coming around. You should be made to wear earphones.”

What is at stake in the antagonistic relationship between Dylan and the press? “Ballad of a Thin Man” and the passage it inspired in *I’m Not There* present arguments through negation. A series of negatively stated positions emerge from this sequence of the film: Dylan does not want to be reduced to a commercial product. He does not want the media to set a limit in determining the meaning of his life or songs. He does not want to be bound by discourse that strictly associates facts with truth—but what is suggested in its place? *I’m Not There* portrays the very difficulty of imagining ways of being and meaning outside the norm. Subjectivity in *I’m Not There* is flexible and fluid. To understand oneself in terms that significantly vary from the dominant modes is difficult and shattering. It is a kind of death, but also liberating.

In Jungian psychoanalysis, in which the unconsciousness is also the source of positive and sustaining ideas, the subject is encouraged to enter this realm in order to conceive of himself beyond the categories available to him by default, based on context. Jung writes, “if we can successfully develop that function which I have called transcendent, the disharmony ceases and we can then enjoy the favorable side of the unconscious. The unconscious then gives us all the encouragement and help.”²⁴ In *I’m Not*



Figure 12.2 In a surrealistic sequence accompanying “Ballad of a Thin Man,” Dylan (Blanchett) extends a microphone to a caged critic.

There, we have the example of a figure profoundly in touch with a multi-dimensional, creative personality. It is to Haynes's credit that such an accomplished popular artist's life should not simply be dramatized or analyzed, but also artistically reimagined and celebrated. As represented in *I'm Not There*, by moving through different personas, Dylan is able to transcend the usual cycle of consumption and exist for himself as much as for an audience.

Understood in the context of the death drive, the popularity of the doomed rock star narrative and its opposite—Dylan's fluidity and survival—makes considerably more sense. Atkinson concisely describes the pop biopic in terms that are readily adaptable to a psychoanalytic interpretation:

All modern pop biopics are by nature hagiographic, but, haunted by the ghost of Elvis, they are also inevitably tempted by the forces of darkness. The bitter destiny balances the music's natural élan. And without the buoyancy of youthful privilege, the crashes, the ODs and asphyxiations would have no resonance.²⁵

Atkinson clarifies, however, that the fan's imagination of Elvis is contrary to the sobering facts of his demise:

Even if it took more than twenty years for the crush of iconolatry, wealth, and drug abuse to boomerang back at him, the classic trajectory of Elvis' life is still clung to popularly as modern tragedy—as if he was *meant* to die sometime before getting fat, middle-aged and campy, didn't, and we'll just pretend he did.²⁶

By this, Atkinson is emphasizing not just the wish of the popular audience to destroy young idols, but for their death to be a kind of apotheosis. How much more satisfying is the forever-young image of James Dean versus the aged image of Elvis that Atkinson invokes? So much more that we vaguely imagine Elvis as triumphant and transcendent, forever youthful.

The fluid and multiple iterations of Dylan presented in *I'm Not There* dramatize the fulfillment of the promise of Elvis—the transcendent popular artist. Though Dylan was alive and well when *I'm Not There* was made, this biopic remains “haunted by the ghost of Elvis” because the kind of subjectivity that the transcendent artist embodies is incredibly difficult for the fan to imagine. An artist like Dylan willfully invites a process of deaths and rebirths, in the forms of performing personas. The willful invitation of lack and the refusal to identify with a persona consistently coherent to others is not only difficult for music or film fans to imagine, it also challenges the classical model of semiotic psychoanalysis often used

in film studies. Contemporary psychologists still working in the tradition of psychoanalysis, such as Mari Ruti, see a link between lack and creativity. Ruti posits:

A direct link between lack and creativity, between our alienation on the one hand and our capacity to engender imaginative ways of coping with this alienation on the other. This suggests that our ability to dwell within our lack without seeking to close it—our ability to tarry with the negative . . . is indispensable for our psychic aliveness.²⁷

Psychoanalytic critics, cited with greater frequency by academic film studies, are more pessimistic about our creative capacity to transcend the confines of default psychological and cultural limits. Žižek, following Lacan, would have us believe that we are limited universally by lack and the limitations of language. Ruti, like Jung, would say that the exceptionally actualized or creative individual can consciously value self-understanding over social identity. For someone like Dylan, the recognition of our finitude, or lack, is not confining at all; rather it is a necessary point on the path toward authentic self-knowledge and expression. The exciting and bewildering range of personas that appear in *I'm Not There* suggest a very different kind of subjectivity than that typically sought in everyday life, star representations, and the popular media. Eschewing externally defined ideals of coherence and stability that exist outside of time, Haynes's Dylan is able to survive the vicissitudes of the celebrity lifestyle because he accepts the temporal and ephemeral quality of life, which leads inevitably to death. Emboldened by this recognition, Dylan's fluid and playful artistic personas are defiantly individual, always a step ahead of the fan, popular critic, and academic account: "There's something happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mister Jones?"

notes

1. George F. Custen, "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961–1980," in "The Biopic," ed. Glenn Man, special issue, *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 139.
2. Caroline Merz, "An Examination of Biography in Film and Television," (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 1981), as cited in Mary Joannou and Steve McIntyre, "Lust for Lives: Report from a Conference on the Biopic," *Screen* 24, no. 4–5 (1983): 146.
3. Sean Axmaker, "Todd Haynes and a Whole Slew of Dylans" (includes an interview with Todd Haynes), *Green Cine*, May 6, 2008, accessed August 1, 2012, <https://www.greencine.com/central/toddhaynes>.
4. "Biopic—Music Movies at the Box Office," *Boxofficemojo.com*, accessed April 23, 2012, www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=musicbio.htm.
5. Freud quoted in Walter Kaufman, *Freud, Adler, and Jung: Discovering the Mind*. Volume 3 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 178.

6. Carl Jung, *The Development of Personality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 171.
7. Sean Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 186.
8. Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 418.
9. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 159.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 57.
11. Žižek describes *jouissance* as "a violent intrusion that brings more pain than pleasure"; *How to Read Lacan*, 79. Stephen Heath defines *jouissance* as "a radically violent pleasure which shatters—dissipates, looses—that cultural identity, that ego." Heath contrasts *jouissance* with Roland Barthes's related concept of *plaisir* in *Image, Music, Text*, defined as "linked to cultural enjoyment and identity, to the cultural enjoyment of identity, to a homogenizing movement of the ego," in other words, the lighter, less threatening side of *jouissance*. Stephen Heath, "Translator's Note" in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 9.
12. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 271–275.
13. Michael Atkinson, "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics," in *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and Movies Since the 1950s*, eds. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 21.
14. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 190.
15. *Ibid.*, 190.
16. *Ibid.*, 34.
17. Ralph Metzner, *Opening to Inner Light: The Transformation of Human Nature and Consciousness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 155.
18. Christopher R. Smit, *The Exile of Britney Spears: A Tale of 21st Century Consumption* (Chicago, IL: Intellect, 2011), 21.
19. *Ibid.*, 20.
20. *Ibid.*, 21.
21. Greil Marcus noted a similar effect at work in his analysis of the first bars of the 1965 Dylan song "Like a Rolling Stone":

There is that stick coming down hard on the drum and the foot hitting the kick drum at the same time, this particular rifle going off not in the third act, but as the curtain goes up. . . . Then for an expanding instant there is nothing. The first sound is so stark and surprising, every time you hear it, that the empty split-second that follows calls up the image of a house tumbling over a cliff; it calls up a void.

- Greil Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2006), 94–95.
22. Loren Glass, "Buying In, Selling Out: From Literary to Musical Celebrity in the United States," *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 1 (2005): 32.
 23. Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, Columbia CS 8905, 1964, LP, "Liner Notes" as cited in Glass, "Buying In, Selling Out," 32.

24. Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 116.
25. Atkinson, "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics," 27.
26. Ibid., 24.
27. Mari Ruti, *A World of Fragile Things: Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 49.

il divo

thirteen

the biopic, counter-history,

and cine/politics in the

twenty-first century

marcia landy

reflections on the biopic in the twenty-first century: history and the image of time

Romantic conceptions of history shared by many nineteenth-century historians were instrumental in advancing forms of history that were dependent on the figure of the great man as a primary force of historical process. Johann Gottfried Herder espoused a view of historical process characteristic of nineteenth-century history-making that identified with an organicist conception of life, in which individuals and groups were united by nature *and* spirit, and viewed history as a theater where antagonistic forces engaged in combat toward moral and political enlightenment as a drama of spiritual progress.¹ While Thomas Carlyle shared Herder's view of history as a struggle to overcome chaos, he placed emphasis on super heroes and how they were distinct from the common run of humanity.² Though the Enlightenment expressed a greater skepticism about the achievements of individuals, Carlyle held that the actions of exceptional individuals (e.g., Frederick the Great) were the prime instruments in "history as a process

[that] represents an endless struggle of the mob against the exceptional man, the hero.”³ He held that the actions of these exceptional individuals were instrumental in imposing order through purposive action to “give to history the mark of man’s own aspiration to be something more than *mere* chaos.”⁴ This nineteenth-century view of historicism was to be prominent in much biographical writing and was later expressed through cinema.

The biopic was one of the earliest genres in the history of cinema in which historical figures and events played a prominent role.⁵ By the 1930s, the biopic had taken on new histrionic dimensions often wedded to other genres (e.g. historical films, epics, gangster films, westerns, and war films) as a popular source of historical knowledge. Through the movement-image and its reliance on sensory-motor responses to produce affect and action, this cinema generated a monumental form of history that belongs to “the man of deeds and power . . . who fights a great fight. . . . His goal, however, is happiness; perhaps not his own, but often that of a nation or of mankind as a whole.”⁶

Fascism, World War II, anti-colonial struggles, and corresponding changes in cinematic form, identified by Gilles Deleuze as a “crisis of the movement-image,”⁷ contributed to altering attitudes toward history as biography. This crisis involved situations that were once considered universal, purposive, and unifying, calling into question the clichés and collective assumptions about action and belief through what Deleuze calls the “time-image.” The time-image becomes “an analytic of the image, implying a new conception of cutting, a whole ‘pedagogy’ which will operate in different ways.”⁸ The image in this context is both actual and virtual. Time in its smallest circuits brings past and present into coexistence, the present being actual, the past virtual—a (historical) process in which the spectator is situated in a position of indeterminacy in relation to Truth.

The time-image thus has a different relation to historical representation. Unlike earlier historical actors and agents who could create only on the condition that they identified themselves with recognizable figures from the past, in the time-image history is a form of theater in which the viewer is diverted from time-honored heroics. This theater deprives the spectator of transcendental reassurances derived from repetition of past tragic forms and calls forth the unthought as prologue to rethinking relations between the world and life.⁹

This description is connected to Michel Foucault’s claim for what he terms an “effective history,” which invokes traditional conceptions of the past to regard them “not from superior heights [but from] a shortening of vision to those things near it”¹⁰—a strategy that bears on the visible rather than on abstract universals. This form of historicizing leads to a tragic-comic vision: first, through parody, disguises, and masquerades; second, through a dissolution of identity; and, third, through a “rejection of traditional attitudes of reverence.”¹¹ Reminiscent of Carlo Ginzburg’s

micro-historical method, the historical sense is closer to medicine (or crime detection) in its task to become “a curative science.”¹² By focusing on symptoms and clues based on the senses, intuition, or conjectural knowledge, this method differs from conventional diagnostics to generate alternative modes for thinking about power, knowledge, and politics.

Paolo Sorrentino's biopic about Giulio Andreotti destabilizes expectations of a narrative that is seamless, continuous, and unchangeable. *Il divo: la spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti/Il Divo* (2008) is a distinctive form of history-making through cinema's expressive uses of the body, of faces, and of spaces. Through his portrait of a “spectacular life” that relies on fiction and actual events, Sorrentino transforms monumental history into a darkly humorous parody. Similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of satire as a serio-comic treatment of the “absolute past . . . brought low” and represented “in the low language of contemporaneity,”¹³ Sorrentino's biopic presents his subject in this “low language of contemporaneity” as an enigma. By posing the question of whether Andreotti was the most persecuted man or the cleverest criminal in history, who “knew how to turn accusations against him against his accusers,”¹⁴ the film recruits the spectator into its experimental and investigative treatment of the ethical issues that it raises.

il divo as counter-history

Il Divo is illustrative of cinematic transformations in the aesthetic and political examination of historical figures and events not easily contained within either the rubric of realism or postmodernism. By unsettling conventional forms of biography, the film rejects reductive treatments of history reliant on melodrama and aspires to be open-ended in its refusal of heroes or tyrants, passive victims, sentimental portraits of sacrifice, and attribution of a final reductive meaning to the events. Sorrentino's biopic addresses Andreotti's political career, but it is not a hagiography, tragedy, melodrama, or comedy. In contradistinction to the truth claims of conventional biographical treatments, the “conjectural” treatment of Andreotti is reminiscent of a crime film. By drawing on an investigative paradigm, *Il Divo* relies on what Ginzburg calls, with regard to the historical method, “symptoms and clues to diagnose a man and society that are in crisis,”¹⁵ and hence it provides an altered access to past, present, and future.

The film adopts stylistic and conceptual strategies related to surrealism to produce symptoms and clues deriving from Andreotti's figure so as to provoke a rethinking of historical agency, violence, and politics. By evoking the grotesque through spectacle, which becomes posited as more real than what passes for commonplace reality, *Il Divo* creates what I will term a “counter-history.” Counter-history is not anti-history, but rather a transformation of storytelling identified with traditional historicism. By

placing emphasis on seemingly minor or commonplace details, which might normally escape attention, they become clues and symptoms for investigation. Through forms of narration borrowed from both popular and avant-garde forms—especially invoking different experiences of affective engagement in relation to uses of montage, color, close-ups, and the comedic—*Il Divo* provokes the viewer to contemplate and rethink familiar modes of historical narration as developed through the biopic genre and its elevation of the protagonist. Thus, the mysterious albeit destructive basis of Andreotti's power is explored by mixing fact with invention, art-house filmmaking with spectacular popular genres—gangster films, horror, film noir, and comedy—to complicate past and present, actual and virtual perception. Spectatorial participation is solicited on behalf of an investigation of the cultural and political role of image-making. As counter-history, this eclectic and opaque style of biographizing maintains a focus on its historical protagonist through a form of tragicomic theatricality.

Giulio Andreotti, the subject of *Il Divo*, was a powerful political figure in Italy for over 40 years (1946–1992), having served as prime minister seven times. The film covers the last two decades of his long career in a nonchronological and elliptical fashion, thereby dramatizing how Andreotti is a subject worthy of being filmed due to his mysteriousness, ambiguity, and contradictions. Not just any man, he was responsible for the destiny of a nation.¹⁶ Andreotti's persona is connected to other Italian and international figures in their grandiose flouting of laws, manipulation of public trust, and appreciation for the power of media. By contrast to Silvio Berlusconi, a media persona who has been identified with a penchant for a transgressive, rhetorical, and dramatic flair, Andreotti's *divo* qualities derive from his relations to the Christian Democratic party, the Catholic hierarchy, and, especially and more problematically, to his connections with the Mafia. These constituent parts make up the riddle of the film.

Il Divo undoes clichés identified with heroic sacrifice for the common good of the nation and undermines the expectation of a “truthful” history in which Andreotti is the fulcrum of progress. The film runs counter to the realism of the biopic, but not to historical fact. The viewer is not presented with a representation of a “real” Andreotti, played by Toni Servillo, but an “impression of a powerful man.”¹⁷ The character is not a likeness but a “resemblance,” which is meant to focus attention on the mechanisms of power that he appears to express in the historical theater of the biopic. If anything, Andreotti's “spectacular life” raises the issue of connections between the state and media expressions of forms of terrorism and criminality. Servillo's performance is the hinge on which the historical spectacle turns. He embodies “il divo,” evoking Andreotti's appellations as the “divine Julius,” “Giulio Cesare,” and also the cinematic conception of *divismo*, a form of theatricality associated with opera and melodrama.

Il Divo as a political biopic has precedents in post-World War II Italian cinematic culture, in particular the films of Francesco Rosi, whose biopics *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961) and *Lucky Luciano/Re: Lucky Luciano* (1973) altered the style of the genre. Rosi rejects the binary contrasts of melodrama, or the linearity and organicity of film biographies, and by adopting oblique forms of narration and camera movement undermines the pathos usually identified with the trials of the central character. Rosi depicts these historical figures not as exceptional but as creations of the Mafia, the police, the courts, the state, and even the media. In investigating their actions, Rosi does not glamorize his actors, but rather subjects them to “the form of a ‘film inquest.’”¹⁸ Furthermore, in these films “the specificity of character is replaced by the *position* the character occupies,”¹⁹ so as to expose the interconnected social forces that find their expression *through* historical figures.²⁰ Subsequent biopics from the 1980s to the present have appropriated the genre as melodrama rather than as inquest. Giuseppe Ferrara’s *Il caso Moro* (1986) reconstructs the 1978 kidnapping of former prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*), the refusal to negotiate his freedom, and his death. Marco Bellocchio’s *Sogni infranti/Broken Dreams* (1995) is a documentary about the events and implications of Moro’s captivity and assassination, while *Buongiorno, notte/Good Morning, Night* (2003) dramatizes Moro’s 55 days of captivity through the conflicted perspective of a young woman, a Red Brigade member, to shift attention towards an investigation of the political character of terrorism. Bellocchio’s penchant for biographizing also includes *Vincere* (2009), a melodramatic exploration of the rise of Mussolini through the victimization of a woman (Ida Dalser) and her son at the hands of her former lover. Silvio Berlusconi has also generated biographical treatment in Nanni Moretti’s *Il caimano/The Caiman* (2006) and Erik Gandini’s *Videocracy* (2009).

None of these films is comparable to Sorrentino’s biopic, though *Il Divo* comes closest to Rosi’s films conceptually. Like Rosi’s biopics, rather than offering the spectator a figure with whom to identify, *Il Divo* adopts stylistic strategies to endow its biographical subject with behavior not normally attributed to the subject of the biopic. *Il Divo* presents a figure whose appearance and actions are puppet-like, if not cartoonish, based on Andreotti’s inscrutable physical demeanor, his immobile facial expression, his highly choreographed and repetitive hand gestures to express resignation, boredom, or negation, and his enigmatic aphorisms on politics, power, and human “frailty.” Sorrentino’s biopic eschews such conventions as life stages, reliance on a domestic milieu, social class, family, or supportive friends to convey the formation of the “real person” following linear chronology. The film does not justify the striving for fame in support of the common good and refuses a conversion narrative that dramatizes a transformation from ordinariness to exceptionality. *Il Divo* plunders

popular visual forms to produce a biopic critical of a figure of exceptional power by visualizing the horrific potential of ordinariness.

the spectacle of *il divo*

The film opens with a glossary that lists the political parties, scandals, and key figures in Italian politics from the 1970s to 1990s, including the Red Brigades, Aldo Moro, and the P2 Lodge (*Propaganda due*, a secret anti-communist group), thus bringing its political agenda into focus. Captured in the *dramatis personae* of the glossary, the biopic moves between the conflict-laden, bloody politics of Italy from the late 1970s to the 1990s.

The inner life that Sorrentino invents for Andreotti further reinforces, through image and sound, the latter's theatricality. One of the most visually arresting sequences at the beginning of the film is of Andreotti framed in darkness with acupuncture needles inserted around his lit-up face, lending him the appearance of a legendary saint, while in a voiceover he reflects on death and his own survival (Figure 13.1). His cryptic (private) image burdened with suffering from a perennial headache solicits but does not resolve clichés about the burdens of power.

After the titles and the decorous sound of Gabriel Fauré's *Pavane* (Opus 50), a startling montage of a brutal massacre abruptly interrupts the static character of the introduction, creating an ambiguous space between the protagonist and the events that surround him. The viewer is plunged into night scenes with images of chaotic movement, disorienting spaces (reminiscent of Bernardo Bertolucci's modernist filming of space in *Il conformista*/*The Conformist*, 1970), and rapid shots of cars and motorcycles in an orgy of killing. The dizzying montage of victims on the street, at home, and in prison, is superimposed with titles in red identifying names of victims, and the image of Aldo Moro's body wrapped in a blanket as it is machine-gunned (an allusion to the mutilated body of the slain Giuliano



Figure 13.1 *Il Divo* (2008): Bad conscience as a headache.

in *Salvatore Giuliano*). The sequence culminates in the image of a car (Judge Giovanni Falcone's) as it is hurled through the air into an open ditch where it explodes, and functions as a coda to which the film returns several times to visualize the spectacular character of the violent times and the mysterious character of the perpetrator.

An abrupt cut to a seemingly disjunctive close-up reveals two water glasses containing effervescent aspirin tablets, captured in an overhead shot reminiscent of the Alka-Seltzer glass in *Taxi Driver* (1976). Like crystals of endlessly dividing time,²¹ this reiterated image is a visual correlative to Andreotti's inscrutable figure. The random movement of particles is a clue to the film's investigative method and its treatment of time, repetition, and uncertainty about its biographical/historical subject. Further investigation of this "divo" involves another shot of him, his head blocked by a lamp, which reinforces this estranging portrait. After a close-up of his face as he drinks, the camera slowly follows him through a corridor as he turns out lights on his way to a room where he rides an Exercycle. Alternating long and close-up shots convey not only his separateness but also his affinity with darkness. His indecipherable facial expression, mechanical gestures, and ordinariness serve as provocative clues to the scenes of horror previously portrayed.

As in film noir and horror, darkness is central to the film's evocation of Andreotti's obscure persona. In a darkly lit early morning scene on a street, he appears as the Hunchback, or Prince of Darkness (as he is often called), as he takes his constitutional walk to church accompanied by guards. His step is slow, his body movements stilted. Even when he stops to read graffiti on the wall stating "massacres and conspiracies are the work of Craxi and Andreotti," his facial expression remains obscure. Inside the church, a close-up of his hands is a prelude to a conversation with Don Mario, his confessor, who emerges from darkness. In a dialogue that pertains more to politics than religion, Don Mario makes a comparison between Alcide De Gasperi (founding figure of the Christian Democratic Party and Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953) and Andreotti. According to Don Mario, De Gasperi "talked to God," while Andreotti "talks to the priests," to which Andreotti counters "priests vote," a retort that exemplifies the politician's cryptic use of maxims and proverbs to forestall or divert questions concerning his public and private thoughts through disconcerting directness.²² The viewer is thus afforded the opportunity to reflect on Andreotti's relations to the Roman Catholic Church.

A more surreal image of his character is revealed on the occasion of the inception of the seventh Andreotti government at the presidential palace. The camera tracks after him through a vast hall to an upper floor. Greeted by a group of women, he pauses, then, accompanied by the sounds of baroque music, slowly ascends stairs to another hall, where he is confronted by a white cat, shot in close-up, with one blue and another green eye. The

cat sits defiantly before him. Andreotti's crouching form differs from his usual rigid posture, suggesting another facet to his usually restrained behavior and secretiveness by humorously pitting him against the animal. Andreotti claps his hands three times before the cat slowly moves away. This surreal scene produces a comic, if incongruous, portrait of Andreotti with silent guards as his audience (Figure 13.2), and foreshadows problems that he would face in his last term as prime minister. The episode challenges narrativized modes of explaining character. It functions as a dream image that disrupts the flow of the film and its temporal progression. The likening of his character to that of a feline is another instance of the film's adoption of spectacle to convey his enigmatic persona, suggesting that, like a cat, Andreotti plays with opponents.

At a reception, surrounded by a bevy of photographers, the camera pans over guests and journalists. Once again, a split between the event and Andreotti's perception of it is introduced. His voiceover recounts how he has been "blamed for everything that happens in Italy" and how he has been "honored" with several nicknames: "Divine Julius, First Letter of the Alphabet, The Hunchback, the Fox, Moloch, The Black Pope, The Salamander, Beelzebub," but he has never pressed charges because he has "a sense of humor." His reference to humor is critical to the film's style, which relies on a seeming absence of affect to valorize the bizarre comedic aspects of his wit.

Affect, if evident, is transferred to the spectator struggling to decipher the enigma of Andreotti. He refers to his vast archive of information that "takes the place of imagination" (later there will be a shot of him in this archive), and adds that this archive keeps others silent "as if by magic." His spectacular life is built on a screen of secrecy linked to his impenetrable persona and its contribution to his form of *divismo*. His persona runs contrary to biopic protagonists whose exceptional actions are interpreted through popular psychological clichés relating to childhood traumas,



Figure 13.2 A comic perspective matters.

confused loyalties, or personal resentments, as is the case, for example, in *Good Morning, Night* and *Vincere*. Andreotti's persona resides elsewhere, covered by a facade that does not conceal but rather confirms the surface he presents, which is anything but innocuous.

An instance of his indifference to others and impenetrability is evident at an evening party that appears to be an updated scene from *La dolce vita*/*La Dolce Vita* (1960) with Paolo Cirino Pomicino as host. While dancers twirl in abandon to Brazilian music heavy with drums, Andreotti and his wife Livia sit rigidly on a sofa. The moment reinforces Sorrentino's penchant for the comedic and the spectacular. This scene demarcates Andreotti's behavior from the wild gyrations of the dancers, "distinguishing the New Age freedom so exuberantly announced by these uninhibited revelers [that] is effectively annulled by this ceremony of allegiance to the man who incarnates and underwrites the status quo."²³ The enigmatic quality of this contrast is reinforced when Livia reminds him that he must rise early, and he willingly agrees to leave, yet the scene buttresses his own observations about his lack of imagination, conveyed by his inelasticity and his apparent distance from the very forces over which he seems to have power. This scene reiterates the film's refusal to rationalize its central character. Through its uses of mise-en-scène and sound, it undermines the expectations of justification raised by conventional biopics as well as by the crime film.

Andreotti's visit to the Kremlin (with no public ceremony) offers two telling scenes that through sound and image shed light, if cryptically, on the complex question of his rise to power. The first is a banal telephone conversation with his wife about her wearing a coat, a gift from Saddam Hussein, at a reception, and his response to her question about Mikhail Gorbachev's "unsightly" birthmark. The scene humorously portrays Andreotti swallowed up in a large bed, flanked by a portrait of Vladimir Lenin hanging to his left and a larger portrait of Karl Marx to his right, a reminder of his anti-communist activities but possibly connected to his ambiguous involvement in the murder of Moro. The hum of a tape recorder reinforces the dreamlike sequence, as the disembodied voice of a man asks, "What will they say about you? What will they remember about you, a cold organizer, inscrutable, without doubts or thrills?" The second scene cuts to Andreotti in the snow (at night) dressed in a Russian-style coat and fur hat, as the voiceover continues to refer to him as being "incapable of pity." The camera zooms in to a frontal close-up of Moro, in front of the familiar Red Brigades banner titled "Aldo Moro 1978." This invented episode, reminiscent of Macbeth's guilt over the murder of Banquo, suggests Andreotti's responsibility for Moro's death, but also prefigures later scenes in which he claims that he cannot recognize his role in that slaying. Moreover, these scenes shift the biopic from a sentimental and judgmental form to one of "contradictory and indecipherable complexity"²⁴ that relies on a provocative connection between actual (the

present) and virtual (recollection). The film invites reflections on Andreotti as performer, image, and *divo* as instrumental to his political survival.

repetition or difference?

The downward trajectory of Andreotti's political career is explicitly introduced when Pomicino informs him that his government is about to fall; Andreotti portrays no emotion, but responds by referring to his headaches and with the witticism "it is better to bluff than snuff it out." The Lima affair further develops Andreotti's contempt for his cohorts, and comes closest to spelling out his indifference in his responses to others. Salvo Lima, a now dissatisfied member of the Andreotti faction, comes to see him but is ignored by Andreotti. Lima runs hastily from the room, but the implication becomes clear—Lima's career and his life are imperiled. In a lengthy and spectacular montage sequence, where Andreotti, his wife, and his cohorts are at a horse race, two races are intercut, evoking *The Godfather* (1972). In one race Andreotti observes the event through long and middle shots of the horses' progress. Increasingly, quick intercuts to another, parallel, race reveal cyclists chasing a human quarry, namely Lima, who attempts to escape his killers. Andreotti rises from his seat and in close-up stares vacantly at the jockeys as both "races" end.

Despite the innuendo suggested by the montage, there is no "evidence" of Andreotti's role in yet another killing. Andreotti's strategies of deflection, disavowal, or feigned unresponsiveness are further exaggerated when Vincenzo Scotti, Minister of the Interior, comes to inform him of Lima's death. The phone rings and Andreotti (as he had done with Lima) ignores Scotti and carries on a banal telephone conversation with his cousin, Teresa. Ignoring Scotti's news, Andreotti puts down the phone and informs Scotti that the woman is a hypochondriac. Astounded by this misplaced response, Scotti comments, "I'll never understand you." In response, Andreotti digresses by referring, not to Lima's, but to Moro's death, commenting that when he learned of it he "had retching spasms." And, in a predictable, sententious vein, he adds, "Uncontrollable actions embarrass us, but underneath they are helpful because they tell us we are alive and human." Nonplused, Scotti merely responds that they have to go to Palermo for the funeral. Andreotti finally alludes to Lima's death in political terms by suggesting that the killers tried to get at him for running for the presidency.

Both of these events move further in a direction contrary to conventional modes of biography. Instead of an alignment between Andreotti's personal reflections and external events, the film is invested in exploring reactions to incidents in the vein of a mysterious, detached, and aloof, if not horrific, portrait of Andreotti as parody of a fatal *divo*. In every way imaginable, *Il Divo* persists in offering his biopic as a provocative examination of historical high moral seriousness, to foreclose melodrama

and undermine commonplace theatricalizations of power. Thus, Andreotti is not filmed at Lima's funeral, though his return ride to Rome after the funeral is intercut with an extreme close-up of the Archbishop who rails against the killers and those who mandated the killing.

Andreotti's response to this apparent "recollection," again an invention of the filmmaker, is to take a pill, exit from the car, and take a walk in his familiar territory. The sound of birds can be heard, and the scene cuts abruptly to the confessional with Don Mario. This lengthy exchange reveals the priest's anxiety about Andreotti's Mafia associations with Lima and others of Andreotti's faction; he asks why Andreotti has surrounded himself with "such people." Andreotti answers with a maxim, "Trees need manure to grow." The priest retorts, "Such irony is atrocious." Undeterred, Andreotti counters with his customary nebulous profundity, "Irony is the best cure against death." Even with the priest, Andreotti keeps up his spectacular wit, his defense against exposure, and his conspicuous aloofness.

What appears to be irony is a prelude to his avowed suffering over Moro's death that he describes as being like "a second migraine only more agonizing." He claims that the Red Brigades should have taken him, who is strong and privy to many secrets, rather than Moro, who was weak. Nonetheless, it remains ambiguous as to whether his remorse is real or feigned. These ruminations do not stop him from thinking about the upcoming presidential election. According to an interview with Sorrentino, this episode is "not necessarily the truth, because we don't really know if Andreotti suffered for Moro, but I believe that it's possible."²⁵ Andreotti's "ambiguous" and "inscrutable" figure situates him differently as subject of biography and as a political text. Rather than a predictable indictment or apologia for the "sins" of its historical subject, the film focuses on his conduct acting as an inquiry into the mechanisms of power in Italy within which Andreotti played a prominent role.

By presenting Andreotti in terms of his contradictions and indecipherability, his persona moves further away from habitual representations of the exceptional individual hero or villain and comes closer to posing questions about how to reflect differently not only on his actions, but also on those of his followers in relation to power. In Sorrentino's terms "he's not as smart as the Italian people believe him to be. They confuse his wisecracks for cleverness, for intelligence."²⁶ Thus, the film's style seems designed to use the biopic to unmask and expose the fascination with celebrity. However, another strategy is at work, involving the film's rejection of Andreotti as a suitable case for indictment by treating his figure as one that requires a different cinematic form—not one addicted to litigious judgment or reductive explanation, but one that puts forward his crafted image and its effects as matter for reflection.

While Mafiosi are committing suicide or getting arrested, the Andreotti faction is scheming about the future. The political "dance" goes on in a

ballroom scene, in a milieu that is more subdued than the one celebrating his seventh term. Once again Andreotti is not a participant but an observer, this time in anticipation of his campaign for president. As if aware of sobering events to come, in response to the question whether he dances, Andreotti retorts: "All my life." At a meal with his cronies, in which the circling shots of the camera simulate the circular flight of a vulture, Evangelisti toasts Andreotti as ruler of a theocratic regime, and his cohorts agree that Andreotti must run for president. Neither humble nor aggrandizing, he accedes to the position of power offered to him by noting, "I know I'm of average height but I don't see any giants around." This statement reveals not only his practical assessment of his impressive effect on others but his contempt for them as well.

The last movement of the film involves three passages in a downward trajectory—the unsuccessful machination of his faction to secure the vote, the arrests of Mafia figures and a montage of extracts from their plentiful declarations, and finally Andreotti's trial and acquittal. Prior to the election of President of the Republic in the Senate chamber, a repeat of the image of Falcone's car hurtling to earth and exploding is a visual reminder of the violent background to the negative vote about to take place. When the results of the election are announced and he has lost, the film cuts to a close-up of Andreotti's face, which registers no emotion whatsoever. However, in a night scene that follows, in voiceover he reflects—using a bizarre comparison—that, "though Judas kissed many, he wasn't sentimental." He claims that he has only cried three times in his life: when his mother died, on the death of De Gasperi, and the first time he was elected vice-minister. Characteristic of his brand of grim humor, he adds that, after Moro's kidnapping, he vowed to give up ice cream if he was released. His meditation *sans* sentiment ends on his observation that he could have won if Italy had direct elections. Skillfully, what emerges in this counter-history is an analysis of the machinations and mechanisms of power that plumbs the differing relations between public and private life, subjectivity and objectivity, to dramatize Andreotti's secretive stance and identify it with his peculiar form of *divismo*.

A montage of images of arrests and suicides associated with *Tangentopoli* ("Bribesville") in the 1990s precedes a revealing conversation between *La Repubblica's* editor Eugenio Scalfari and Andreotti on the theme of chance. This sequence reinforces the film's philosophical and political project of endowing the biopic with the potential for reflection rather than affective identification. Andreotti declares that he does not believe in chance but in the will of God, and Scalfari asks him how he accounts for the hatred felt for him by the wives of Moro and Calvi, and Della Chiesa's son, his associations with P2, his Mafia links, and his association with "nearly every scandal that has afflicted Italy." This "philosophical" interview ends with a question attributed by Scalfari to Indiro Montanelli: "Are you the most

cunning criminal or the most persecuted man in the history of Italy?”²⁷ Andreotti defensively retorts, “is it by chance that I kept your newspaper from falling into the hands of Berlusconi?” Edited with a gliding camera movement between the two men that ends in checkmate, what comes across in this scene is Andreotti’s skill in verbally disabling his opponents by revealing the banality of their approaches.

The film moves to closure with the arrest of a number of Mafiosi, as a result of which many scandals come to light. Names are named that reveal the Andreotti government’s connections to the killings in the late 1970s and 1980s. A scene in which Andreotti is shown kissing Mafia boss Totò Riina in traditional Mafia fashion visually reinforces Andreotti’s complicity but in an indecisive manner, linking with other spectacular images of “evidence” as questionable. In a pre-trial hearing Andreotti rejects any guilt in relation to the deaths of Moro or others, despite his involvement being “corroborated” by informers who testify that these victims were privy to secrets that threatened Andreotti’s position.

Later, in a familiar pose, alone and seated, and directly addressing the camera, he reminisces about his marriage proposal to Livia in the Verano Cemetery, and Sorrentino provides a flashback to the two, much younger, walking together. He refers to her innocence, claiming she will never know the deeds he committed to gain power (Figure 13.3).

In this monologue (another invention by the filmmaker), Andreotti’s voice rises above its usual flatness as he expresses remorse for the carnage he claims he created to strengthen the political center in Italy from 1969 to 1984. In Machiavellian terms, he justifies creating evil in order to ensure good as a “tension strategy,” or rather a “survival strategy,” that cost many lives (as the camera tracks alongside rows of graves), thus offering an apologia of sorts for the divisive and destructive politics that undermined the well-being of Italian society. The scene then fades to the familiar aspirin concoction and close-ups of his hand as he drinks. The soundtrack



Figure 13.3 An apologia of sorts.

introduces the voice of Moro accusing Andreotti of lacking “human fervor,” predicting that ultimately he will “vanish without a trace, a mere news item.” Moro’s prophecy renders enigmatic the much-vaunted image of Andreotti as a “prince of darkness.” By contrast, Andreotti’s wife offers a different insight on his being good at wisecracks—he is depicted by others as cultured and intelligent, but in actuality “that’s all he is.” When asked why she is suddenly critical, she responds by asserting “the need to establish the truth occasionally.”

These two descriptions of Andreotti’s persona foreground a familiar dilemma of the biopic posing as myth or history, that of the despotic figure as a-historical and unchanging, or as subject to the vicissitudes of time and memorializing. However, *Il Divo* suggests another conception of time, invoked by the dissolving crystals of Alka-Seltzer in the glass reminiscent of Deleuze’s crystalline image, in which emphasis is placed on the indiscernibility between the real and imaginary, the actual and the virtual, where both are “true.” The film addresses an open dimension of time that allows for an investigative relation to its biographical subject to generate different, less molar, thinking about events and personages inherent to the crystals of time on which Andreotti’s past and future memory depends.

Later, as Andreotti washes his face before a mirror, the image of Moro reappears and says, “my blood will spill upon you,” and in a subsequent conversation with Andreotti, Francesco Cossiga rationalizes,

People know that we did not get rich from politics, but they think that power is what interested us for forty years. . . . They pretend to forget that we actually saved their lives, that the Soviet threat was real and close by. We let Moro die . . . and I was aware of it.

Predictably, Andreotti does not respond to Cossiga about Moro. In typical fashion, Andreotti rejects any expression of sympathy, saying that only little things, not serious accusations, dishearten him, such as his disappointment at losing the presidency of the Music Society. In another of his characteristic retorts to aggressively mystify others, and under the guise of sharing a secret, he “reveals” that what really “discouraged” him was his unfulfilled crush on Vittorio Gassman’s sister, Mary. These scenes tantalize the viewer, making them wonder how to assess the different perspectives on Andreotti’s actions, and thus complicate questions of responsibility.

The film closes with news reports of the trial of the century and differing opinions on Andreotti’s persona, including a telephone conversation from Scalfari citing his report on the trial in which he compares Andreotti to Talleyrand, and attributes Andreotti’s greatness to being an enigma. The trial begins with the requisite formalities and the camera moves slowly to Andreotti. A voiceover (Moro’s) intones that Andreotti remained cocooned

in his dark dream of glory to advance his reactionary plan, and ends with the question, “what was the meaning in the face of all this and his other evil plans?” Andreotti’s responsibility for events in which he played a dominant role is posed in interrogative terms not to exonerate him but to transfer the investigation onto the “‘force field’ around which swerve the social antagonisms”²⁸ of 40 years of Italian politics. By rendering Andreotti as a comic and grotesque figure, the film repeatedly questions and draws on the cinematic as a means of analyzing power.

Il Divo creates a cinematic world that has lost faith in redemption, though perhaps not in the capacity of the spectator to discern and contemplate difference for thinking historically. The flamboyant and hybrid style of the film destabilizes inherited certainties not only about biography as history but also about history as biography. Given the film’s intertextual allusions to other cinematic forms (gangster film, horror, and film noir), one might assume that its focus is primarily on unmasking a “corrupt politician” and not on “political exposé.”²⁹ However, *Il Divo*’s multi-faceted, multi-directional, and nonjudgmental treatment of its protagonist appropriates and contaminates the biopic through unsettling, familiar rationalizations of historical events and their actors. By destabilizing the boundary between fiction and fact, the film becomes an investigation of brutal actions in the name of the state, and especially of the tendency to regard these actions as customary and hence dismiss them as inevitable.

Il Divo situates the spectator in the position of detective, as described by Ginzburg in his work on the historical method.³⁰ The film invites the spectator to rethink numerous visible and audible clues involving the spectacle of the body, its connections to violence and secrecy, and the disjunctions between the private and the public, in order to proffer a portrait of a biographical subject that undermines repetitive and habitual responses to the operations of power identified with historical actors. Considered from Foucault’s conception of effective history as irreverent laughter, and Deleuze’s observations on distinguishing repetition and difference, this biopic becomes an instance of experimenting with knowledge about historical events in the interest of thinking differently. Andreotti’s “spectacular” life is a radical experiment with a familiar form of repetition characteristic of biographic narration concerning the figure of power. However, experimentation is not history any more than earlier biopics’ claim for historicity is. If, for Deleuze and Guattari, history is “only the set of almost negative conditions that make possible the experimentation of something that escapes history,”³¹ the film’s experimental form creates a counter-history that produces conditions for rethinking historical practices.

notes

1. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 72–3.
2. Ibid., 148.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. (emphasis in the original).
5. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 5.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 67–68.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 207.
8. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 22.
9. Ibid., 170.
10. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. and ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 161.
11. Ibid., 162–163.
12. Ibid., 156.
13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 21.
14. Guido Bonsaver, “Dall’uomo al divo: Un’intervista con Paolo Sorrentino,” *The Italianist* 29, no. 2 (2009): 331 (my translation).
15. Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 124.
16. Bonsaver, “Dall’uomo al divo,” 330.
17. Gary Crowdus, “Exposing the Dark Secrets of Italian Political History: An Interview with Paolo Sorrentino,” *Cineaste* 34 (Summer 2009): 36.
18. Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Durham, UK: Durham University Press, 2002), 51.
19. Ibid., 52 (emphasis in the original).
20. Ibid.
21. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 90–91.
22. The translation of the Italian dialogue into English is taken from the film’s subtitles. *Il divo: la spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti* DVD, directed by Paolo Sorrentino (Rome: Lucky Red Video, 2008).
23. Millicent Marcus, “The Ironist and the Auteur: Post-Realism in Paolo Sorrentino’s *Il Divo*,” *The Italianist* 30, no. 2 (2010): 247.
24. Bonsaver, “Dall’uomo al divo,” 331 (my translation).
25. Paolo Sorrentino quoted in Crowdus, “Exposing the Dark Secrets of Italian Political History,” 35.
26. Ibid.
27. Bonsaver, “Dall’uomo al divo,” 331 (my translation).
28. Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles*, 51.
29. Bonsaver, “Dall’uomo al divo,” 331 (my translation).
30. Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*.
31. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 111.

gainsbourg

fourteen
puppetry in the
musical biopic

robert burgoyne

Among the most ancient theatrical devices, puppets and mannequins have emerged as a powerful resource in contemporary theater, highlighting both the tensions and continuities between “live” physical performance and the long alternative tradition of puppetry and marionettes. In many contemporary works, puppets share the stage with human actors, a development that has provoked discussions concerning “liveness” and performativity in theater—debates that have received pointed expression in Julie Taymor’s work for stage, which is generally credited with sparking a renewed interest in puppetry in Western culture.¹ Developing along a parallel pathway, a major scholarly field has now opened concerning the metaphysics of the puppet theater, a wide-ranging inquiry that includes related forms such as replicants and cyborgs, understood as an underground expression of animism and religious fear.²

Until recently, however, the use of puppets and mannequins in mainstream film has mainly been limited to animatronics in fantasy and science fiction genres, exemplified by the work of Terry Gilliam, Tim Burton, and Guillermo del Toro. The use of animatronic puppet figures in

the musical biopic *Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)*/*Gainsbourg* (2010) is thus a departure and an innovation, a radical break from the genre's basis in reenactment and verisimilitude, and one that illuminates the biopic's underground connections to performativity, masquerade, and metamorphosis. Joann Sfar, the film's director, has said that puppetry was a primary interest and point of departure for him, and has described how he wanted to make a monster "that was disturbing," but also did something more than simply frighten people, that could depict a range of emotions, "that could dance with a woman, that would feel pain and longing, and desire."³ By contrast, the human character, Serge Gainsbourg, "is unable to learn anything," Sfar says, "He doesn't change, he doesn't have a character arc. There is no resolution. It's as if he is simply walking through life until he is old."⁴ The film thus casts a new light on the idea of the heroic or monumental life, rendering many of the breakthrough moments and defining episodes of Gainsbourg's life as performances prompted by his puppet avatar. Here, the puppet and the human character, the avatar and the biographical figure, carry equal dramatic weight. The tension between masquerade and authenticity, between ventriloquism and the inner voice of the character, is placed in relief in the film, with the biographical character portrayed almost as a kind of somnambulist who must be activated with the borrowed energies of an external being. The "heroic life" that forms the subtitle of the French release can thus be seen as an ironic challenge to the genre itself, with the emphasis on apotheosis and fulfillment that is a key part of the form contradicted by the film's powerful assertion of the dualism and "otherness" of the artistic life.

In this chapter, I argue that *Gainsbourg* employs puppet figures to literalize the notion of a double life, dramatizing the idea of artistic vision as a form of possession and recalling older traditions of visionary and fantastic art in which hallucination and excess were seen as a source of imaginative power. As Jean-François Chevrier writes, "the imagination feeds on examples, it doesn't emerge from the void. It is renewed through the life of forms, but also comes from the mechanisms of delirium nourished by artists' biographies."⁵ The delirium and excess cultivated by Gainsbourg as part of his persona, his performative mask, are expressed here in the form of full-body puppets, avatars of otherness and creative vision that are directly figured as the source of artistic imagination. The puppet avatar who dominates much of the dramatic life of the film, however, is not the sort of handsome double such as that imagined by artist William Blake in his work *The Man Who Taught Blake Painting in his Dreams* (1819–1820). Rather, Gainsbourg hallucinates his creative double as an extreme ethnic burlesque, a caricature of anti-Semitic propaganda. The extraordinary puppet figure, who Gainsbourg names "La Gueule," is nicely described by Peter Bradshaw: "this bizarre, long-nosed caricature expresses [Gainsbourg's] self-doubt, but also his exuberance and flamboyant flair, his bohemian sang-froid, his



Figure 14.1 *Gainsbourg* (2010): La Gueule, Gainsbourg's puppet avatar.

confrontational quality, which is bound up with his Jewishness and differentness.”⁶ Perhaps the most threadbare cliché of the artist biopic—the shaping influence of social prejudice on artistic imagination—thus takes a striking and original turn in the film, as the anti-Semitic and graphic propaganda images of Gainsbourg’s childhood in Vichy France are channeled into a grotesque avatar of artistic creativity. The extreme ethnic stereotypes of wartime France here become a kind of embodied alter ego, an ethnic mask that dances, plays piano, flies through the night, and goads and challenges the character Gainsbourg at the critical moments of his artistic development.

The history of artistic hallucination as an imaginative resource—what Arthur Rimbaud famously called the “systematic derangement of the senses”⁷—is strongly associated with artistic periods such as Symbolism, Surrealism, and psychedelia that are far distant in tone and imagery from the verisimilitude that characterizes the classic artist biography in film. *Gainsbourg* thus marks a striking departure from genre convention, reworking the biographical details of Gainsbourg’s life and milieu into a loosely Symbolist visual and narrative design. Drawing specifically on the work of Charles Baudelaire, Henri Fuseli, and Marc Chagall, the film creates a biographical film that foregrounds the “psycho-sensory technique” of artistic hallucination, employing puppet avatars as vehicles, devices that express an “other” reality within the perceptual world.⁸

At the hinge points of Gainsbourg’s “vie héroïque,” the realist frame of the film suddenly opens out to encompass hallucinatory forms. The theme of the demon double as artistic goad and agent of sovereign inspiration is visualized here in a series of encounters with two different puppet figures—an enormous balloon-like form, rotund and mute, who materializes from a propaganda billboard depicting “The Jew and France,” and a grotesque Nosferatu-like figure, who is alternately playful and taunting. The “heroic life” depicted in *Gainsbourg* is thus visualized as a kind of possession—a theme that brings together the motifs of artistic inspiration, racial and

ethnic stereotypes, and the notion of self as masquerade. The surrealistic fusion of interior and exterior life that animates the film is perhaps best captured in a quote by Antonin Artaud, who writes in *The Theatre and its Double* of his dream of a “theater of intensified, embodied and magical gestures;” of the “appearance of an imaginary Creature made of wood and cloth, wholly fabricated, corresponding to nothing, and yet intrinsically disturbing, capable of bringing back to the stage some faint breath of that great metaphysical fear that underlies all ancient theater.”⁹

A racist billboard depicting “The Jew and France” triggers the first hallucination scene in the film. The young Lucien Ginsburg¹⁰ imagines himself pursued by an enormous potato-head version of the billboard come to life, a gargantuan form that bounds after him and then blocks his way. As the sound of a distorted version of “La Marseillaise” combined with the Gainsbourg song “Nazi Rock” plays on the soundtrack, the two figures begin to mimic each other’s movements, moving like figures in a marionette theatre, arms and legs lifted by invisible strings. The scene ends with a disturbing shift as Lucien points his toy pistol at the potato-head figure, as if he were about to execute his avatar. Directly following this scene, Lucien arrives at a neighborhood police station, insisting that he be the first to receive his Jewish identification star. And it is here that he announces his vocation as an artist, telling the police that he is not in school because he attends the Montmartre Art Academy, and offering to introduce the chief to a high ranking German officer who is also studying painting at the school.

The odd, underground connection the film establishes between Lucien’s sudden awakening as an artist and his confrontation with ethnic stereotype has some precedence in the work of other painters. Marc Chagall, for example, who Sfar has identified as a primary influence, is perhaps the most direct model; his use of Jewish themes and stereotypes as subjects, although more benign and folkloric than Sfar’s, is clearly a source of inspiration. Some of Chagall’s famous motifs—the flying lovers and the Jewish violinists—are directly referenced in *Gainsbourg*. Somewhat further afield, the work of Chris Ofili provides another example of an artist whose creative expression is closely linked to unlikely and challenging racial imagery, visible in his large series of paintings of black prostitutes in overtly provocative and exploitative poses, or the notorious—and beautiful—works combining African elephant dung and religious or spiritual figures. Where *Gainsbourg* brings something new to this idea of ethnic stereotypes as a form of artistic currency is in its use of puppet figures modeled as ethnic grotesques, who appear in the film as hallucinations, driving the character forward (Figure 14.2).

Sfar has discussed at length his “negotiation with Jewishness” and his use of full-body puppetry as a form of racial caricature. In relation to this he notes:



Figure 14.2 The puppet figure as ethnic grotesque.

The whole attitude of the film was based on the idea of throwing all the anti-Semitic clichés in your face rather than hiding them. Gainsbourg came from a Russian family with no religious practice. In fact, he may have only learned that he was a Jew when the French police gave him the yellow star during the war. This idea of a religion that was given to him by the police is very interesting in order to understand Gainsbourg's complex relationship to France and to Judaism.¹¹

The director's response suggests that the extraordinary features of the puppets, whose physiognomies index the most extreme ethnic stereotypes, may be obliquely related to the long history of puppet theater as an iconoclastic form, where politically taboo subjects could be acted out in broadly satiric ways. In *Gainsbourg*, the puppet figures serve to satirize the extremes of anti-Jewish propaganda while at the same time suggesting the lingering psychological effects of anti-Semitism.

Sfar describes the animatronics and the puppets in the film as "disturbing,"¹² and isolates the scene when La Gueule, Gainsbourg's demon mentor, emerges from alongside the bed and places his skeletal fingers on the nude figure of Elisabeth, Gainsbourg's first wife. This scene unfolds as Gainsbourg, now a young man struggling to achieve something as a painter, lies next to his naked wife and laments the fact that he cannot sleep: "I can't sleep, I hear voices night and day. . . . If I don't write or paint they get louder." Elisabeth responds, "You're possessed . . . the devil is your double. It's someone you can talk to. All great writers have one." Gainsbourg then asks a question, "then how do I get to sleep?" Suddenly, a multi-octave voice comes in: "You obey me!"¹³ The shot is now dominated by a huge, elongated hand, which reaches up from beneath the bed and comes to rest on the naked back of Elisabeth.

Here the film recycles the gothic imagery of Henri Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781), with its grotesque demon squatting on the body of a sleeping

woman, to create a striking image of artistic imagination as a form of possession. The character of La Gueule, with his yellow eyes, enormous nose, and outsized ears is an extraordinary figure. Plotting Gainsbourg's career moves, tempting him with carnal and artistic success, La Gueule is a new kind of demon, a brilliant performer, a dancer and pianist who embodies charismatic power, and emotional and physical intensity. Played by Doug Jones, the faun in *El laberinto del fauno*/*Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), the demon double seems to eclipse the biographical figure here; to steal the show. Master of theatrical moves, La Gueule encapsulates a kind of emotional truth, already suggested in Gainsbourg's own construction of a flamboyant alter ego in his songs, a persona he called "Gainsbarre."

Oscar Wilde wrote that puppets "themselves have passions. They will bring a new plot into what they are presenting," and twist the tale to their own devices.¹⁴ As Gainsbourg vacillates in his commitment to music, continuing to fill his studio with paintings while playing piano in clubs at night, he also half-heartedly attempts to learn guitar. His gypsy jazz guitar instructor, after playing a beautiful riff, asks Gainsbourg to at least "look at his guitar," to tell himself a story. After the instructor leaves, Gainsbourg picks up a canvas and violently smashes it, and seems about to destroy his studio. La Gueule, the demon of the crossroads, appears from the wings and asks Gainsbourg a question: what will he do, he asks, "to play like Django Reinhardt?" He then lights a match to make his point. Django, he says, "uses only two fingers; the rest, he doesn't need. The rest can be sacrificed." La Gueule then sets himself on fire.

Kenneth Gross writes that "the life of puppets does not just survive destruction, it feeds on it. . . . The puppet always exists in the shadow of its own destruction . . . 'a sum of destructions' (as Picasso said of his paintings)."¹⁵ Made of partial bits and pieces, broken remnants and relics that are put together to create a sense of a parallel world that is larger than the ordinary world, the poetry of the puppet, as Gross argues, is a "poetry of inadequacy"¹⁶ which feeds on "gestures of substitution, revision and replacement." These ideas are crystallized in the form of the emotional La Gueule, put together from bits and pieces of Gainsbourg's past and the possible worlds of his future, who dances with Gainsbourg, flies with him through the night, weeps bitter tears while sitting on Gainsbourg's roof, sets himself on fire, and floods the screen with blood.

And it is here, in the idea of the puppet as an emotional, vexed figure, a piece of memory, an incomplete or interrupted story, that the film reveals the puppet's deep links to the childhood of the character, and further, to his complicated performance of self, nation, and ethnicity. The self-immolation of La Gueule, potent with historical resonance, condenses the ideas of sacrifice and Promethean rebellion in a scene that dramatizes the symbolic power of fire as a medium of creation and destruction. Reorienting the narrative around music, the fire obliterates the character's



Figure 14.3 The self-immolation of La Gueule.

past, consuming his paintings—flattering self-portraits and paintings of young girls alike—in an act of auto-destruction. The burning of the archive, with the demonic La Gueule dancing and strumming guitar while covered in flames, comprises a turning point in the narrative. Here, the theme of artistic possession, familiar from so many folklore and film examples—the ring of fire in F.W. Murnau’s *Faust* (1926), the crossroads exchange where Robert Johnson buys his supernatural talent, the radio channel that creates poems for Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus* (*Orphée*, 1950)—is translated through La Gueule’s excessive gesture into something new, a powerfully surreal condensation of loss and artistic rebirth.

In the scenes that follow, his bargain made, Gainsbourg enacts a kind of dream script of carnal fulfillment and artistic success, almost beyond reckoning. Consistently linked to the erotic, the musical triumphs the character achieves with “Bonnie and Clyde” and “Comic Strip,” for example, are staged not as hard-won creative breakthroughs but as playful and erotic duets with Brigitte Bardot clothed in a bed sheet. In an airy studio, with natural light flooding the scene and widescreen views of Paris through the windows, Gainsbourg presides over a world of sensual delight—dazzling eroticism and artistic inspiration folded into one. Similarly, his love affair with Jane Birkin achieves its peak expression with the indelible sensuality of “Je t’aime . . . moi non plus,” a song written for Bardot and recorded with her, but made anew with Birkin and rendered in a scene in which Jane, Serge, and their dog seem to embody the most beautiful possibilities in life. The lighting and close-up photography depict both characters as golden children, physically perfect, complete (Figures 14.4 and 14.5). In these scenes, the music and Gainsbourg’s love life are fused. And as the character moves from one artistic and personal triumph to another, La Gueule seems to have disappeared.

Gross quotes one of Goethe’s epigrams, “I fell in love as a boy with a puppet show. It attracted me for a long time until I destroyed it.”¹⁷ The adult Gainsbourg, accomplished, successful, seemingly fulfilled, ignores his



Figures 14.4–14.5 Golden children, physically perfect, complete.

alter ego, shuts him out, and in the film's own way, tries to destroy him. The destruction of the puppet is a recurrent theme in puppet theater, Gross points out, citing Punch and Judy and the Opera dei Pupi. It is a theme that articulates not only the life and death rebirth cycle of puppet theater, but also the puppet's intimate link with destruction, its identity as a thing that is incomplete, "partial, fragmented, and broken."¹⁸ Gainsbourg ignores and shuts out La Gueule—who confronts him on the street and mocks him about the new "style" that he has cultivated, his clothing, his hair. Gainsbourg tells La Gueule that he doesn't need him anymore, that he may be a poodle, but he's a poodle who has chosen his master, and he never wants to see him again.

I have argued in this essay that the puppet avatar La Gueule is such a strange and original invention, such a wild innovation, that his presence changes the generic identity of the film. Twisting the realist coordinates of the biopic into a strange contemporary variant of Gothic and Symbolist art, complete with doppelgangers and scenes of artistic possession, the film seems more akin to the shape-shifting genres of the fantastic and science fiction than it does to the verisimilitude of the biographical film, with its necessary grounding in a recognizable historical world. My argument until now, however, has hinged on a fixed and rather conservative understanding of genre, one that assumes a quite limited repertoire of textual moves. By

treating *Gainsbourg* as an exotic specimen, a mutant form at the margins of the genre, I have perhaps obscured a more potent and revealing idea—that the film is in many ways the very exemplar of the biopic, its paradigmatic expression.

As a kind of thought experiment, I would like to suggest the following: that the biopic is in fact not a realist genre at all, but is rather a deeply uncanny form, a project dedicated to ventriloquizing the life of another, inhabiting the skin of another, reenacting a life to find its essence, “its soul.” Baudelaire writes in “The Philosophy of Toys” about the child who broke apart his toy and hurled it across the room in an effort to get a response to the question “where is its soul?”¹⁹ The biopic, I suggest, works on a similar level, probing for the core, demanding some truth, and using the skin—the gestures, the look, the verbal tics—of the double as the conduit to a larger meaning. The body of the actor, the double, conveys the life of the biographical figure in an uncanny reenactment that is in many ways a kind of possession, a haunted reanimation.

In one scene in the film, the young Ginsburg is shown painting erotic watercolors for his friends. We see the sketches as they are being made—the quick, confident brushstrokes, the open line and the nuanced shading, the deft and graceful technique—as if an invisible hand were guiding the young artist. And in fact, the hands of Joann Sfar, the fluent and accomplished artist and director, are the hands making the pictures. The multiple levels of impersonation that are manifest here create a powerful *mise en abyme*—the filmmaker impersonates the young actor, who impersonates the historical figure, who is himself depicted as playacting a role.

Substituting his own brushwork and his own drawings in lieu of young Ginsburg’s—Sfar has said how difficult it was to pretend to paint with the hands of a child²⁰—the filmmaker opens up a chain of associations that lead us to the central conceit at the core of the biopic, the ventriloquizing of a life. In the biopic, flesh and blood actors are charged with forging a vocabulary of mimetic gestures and to speak in a voice and in cadences that are not their own (a theme emblemized in *The King’s Speech*, 2010). With its doublings and its uncanny reenactments, the biopic can be seen as a genre in which the fusion of self and other, and of the visible and invisible world, are foregrounded.

Gainsbourg literalizes the doubleness at the heart of the genre, juxtaposing and finally fusing the descriptive data of biographical realism and the drama of hallucinatory vision in a series of increasingly surreal scenes. As the love affair of Gainsbourg and Birkin unfolds, their romance is distilled in a tender sequence set in a candlelit bath where Jane talks of having a child. With the song “Je t’aime . . . moi non plus” playing on the soundtrack, the scene communicates an emotional plenitude, a sense of existential fulfillment. Then the camera cuts to La Gueule, perched on Gainsbourg’s rooftop. Sobbing audibly over the strains of the love song still playing in

the background, La Gueule is a striking figure, a weeping gargoyle, cast out of the interior of the artist's life, an outsider looking in. As the light changes to dawn, however, he seems to be revived. He peers through the skylight of Gainsbourg's apartment and sees a newborn baby being placed in a crib by Jane—the scene on the roof has condensed a year's time. "What is your name?" he asks the baby. "Melody. Melody Nelson," she replies, spoken in a young girl's voice. La Gueule, looking in through the skylight, responds by flooding the screen with blood. As the camera zooms in on La Gueule, "L'Hôtel particulier," a song from the album *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (1971) is heard. The film then cuts to a shot of Gainsbourg in his room, suffering a heart attack.

La Gueule seems to orchestrate the heart attack, and to regain command of the fictional world. Presented from the surreal perspective of the puppet, the biographical event, creative hallucination, and physical trauma are condensed into one frame. And in these few shots La Gueule also reasserts his claim over the life of the musician. The baby's name is not Charlotte, his daughter with Birkin, but "Melody Nelson," referencing the title of the breakthrough rock opera he has just released (*Histoire de Melody Nelson*), as if his true progeny were his songs. The puppet here seems to twist the plot to its own devices, and to move the story back onto his own terrain.

Bringing together the biographical event and the visionary apparition, the artist biopic here seems to occupy the "elsewhere" of realism. Recuperating in the hospital, Gainsbourg is visited by La Gueule, who enters the room carrying cartons of Gitanes. Gainsbourg tries to reject him, but the puppet responds, "It's time to smoke the pipe of peace!" Seeming to emanate smoke, fire, and destruction, La Gueule perches on Gainsbourg's bed as they both smoke. La Gueule's fingers move rhythmically to the sound of "L'Hôtel particulier" playing in the background, and he invites Gainsbourg "to split." Gainsbourg refuses, photographers are coming tomorrow. At this, La Gueule stands, extending his arms, triumphant—smoke now enveloping the room—"I want to be here too!" he says. "It's the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian," Gainsbourg responds, "with flashguns rather than arrows."

Under La Gueule's reanimating influence, the narrative now pivots in another direction. Always the provocateur, Gainsbourg's music takes on an explicitly political and contemporary set of themes. Several vignettes depict the new level of success that Gainsbourg begins to achieve with the album *Rock Around the Bunker* (1975), its theme song "Nazi Rock" moving several sonic registers away from Gainsbourg's typical style into hard rock. Embraced by a new generation of young fans, the newly fashionable Gainsbourg switches freely between musical genres and styles and succeeds with everything he touches.

His career ascent, however, is matched by an inverse movement of personal decline. The film moves rapidly through the death of his father,

with La Gueule urging him to “do his blubbering on stage,” and the death of his dog. Increasingly dissolute, he is pictured passing out in the street and being ferried to a concert in a police van where he performs “Nazi Rock” to wild crowds, filled with young girls. With La Gueule his now constant companion, Gainsbourg undergoes a complete metamorphosis, shape-shifting from one grotesque incarnation to another. In one sequence Gainsbourg is transformed into a cabbage head—a scene that literalizes the iconography of the album *L'Homme à tête de chou* (1976). Stumbling into a hairdressers, “half man and half vegetable,” Gainsbourg is seated while a beautiful attendant trims the leaves of his head with Edward Scissorhands-like speed and dexterity. When the hairdresser finishes the job she turns him to the mirror; he has metamorphosed into La Gueule, complete with elongated nose and elephantine ears. With his new face displayed in multiple mirrors, reflections within reflections, Gainsbourg seems neither surprised nor frightened; he admires his new appearance.

The fusion of Gainsbourg and La Gueule, the merging of self and alter ego, is based on the biographical detail of Gainsbourg's creation of a dark double, “Gainsbarre,” who became increasingly prominent in the songwriter's public persona. Gainsbarre was comfortable with people, an extrovert, not shy like Gainsbourg. Birkin describes this figure: “When I left, he started calling himself Gainsbarre—a made-up name, which could mean a complete nihilist. Gainsbarre used to laugh about Gainsbourg and mock Gainsbourg, but they were always there inside him like a Russian doll.”²¹ As the Gainsbourg biographer Sylvie Simmons writes,

Gainsbarre was Gainsbourg's badly behaved alter-ego, the *Docteur Jekyll* to his *Monsieur Hyde* [sic]. He was the battered, booze-soaked body-double he could send out to do his interviews and TV appearances . . . Serge appeared to have become more addicted than was healthy to his dissolute twin.²²

Willful, insolent, self-pitying, and opportunistic, La Gueule, like Gainsbarre, serves as a flamboyant exoskeleton for the inhibited, self-doubting character. However, as the film progresses, the histrionic characteristics so manifest in the puppet begin to be displayed in Gainsbourg's own behavior, a theme that is depicted in the surreal metamorphosis staged in the hairdresser's. Gainsbourg and the puppet fuse, ultimately forming one composite being, one performing mechanism.

The breakup with Jane is also staged through the intermediary of a double, the anatomy dummy that Gainsbourg nicknames “Professor Flipus.” Bringing the dummy into the space where the children are playing, Gainsbourg lays it before his daughters, Charlotte and Kate, and tries to diagnose the problem with the patient; a figure who he says reminds him of his brother who passed away before Serge was born. Serge sets up an

elaborate mise-en-scène, comprising a toy train, a projector whirring in the background, and long strands of film and audio tape to represent the innards of the character. As the game continues, Jane walks in. Charlotte says Professor Flipus is in a bad way, he's dead. Serge offers to put him out of his misery, takes out a real pistol and fires a shot into the head of the dummy—an echo of the opening hallucination scene in which the young Gainsbourg takes out a toy pistol as if to shoot the avatar of “The Jew and France” propaganda poster. A very fast reaction shot to Serge shows his head slumping forward. Jane's response is instantaneous. Gathering up the children, she forbids Gainsbourg to ever speak to her again, and leaves.

The film provides one final performative role for Gainsbourg, a role in which he simultaneously confronts the specter of a nationalism that marked him as a child and asserts his place at the center of French cultural life. Cutting directly from the breakup with Jane to a beach in Jamaica, Gainsbourg is depicted recording a reggae version of “La Marseillaise.” The Jamaican musicians are distant and uninterested, but are won over when Gainsbourg tells them that “La Marseillaise” is a French war song, a statement that serves to translate the official nationalism of the French anthem into an idiom that is both specific and universal. Richard Dyer suggests that this scene is tinged with racism, evidenced in the almost instantaneous transformation of the Jamaican musicians into singing, dancing, and performing figures, animated by music and rhythm, suffused with the “life” that the white Gainsbourg must borrow in order to energize his song and his career.²³ I read this scene in a different way. The distinctive sonic textures and cultural style of Jamaican music in the late 1970s can be seen as a kind of protest music that carries across languages and cultures. Race might well be central to this scene, but in a different way than might be imagined. Rather than reanimating popular stereotypes, the scene might be read as more in the style of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, a triangular movement whereby the French national anthem is reshaped by its encounter with Black culture, and returned to France where the new variant on the old anthem triggers a new kind of cultural identification.²⁴ Gainsbourg, almost despite himself, here creates a vernacular expression of protest and identity from a relic of the past.

One writer has called this song, “Aux Armes et caetera,” the equivalent of The Sex Pistol's “God Save the Queen” and Jimi Hendrix's “Star Spangled Banner” rolled into one.²⁵ Its impact was immediate and profound, with protests and counter-protests that were covered on the front pages of French newspapers. Detailing the first performance of the song, staged in front of a crowd of hostile ex-paratroopers mixed together with the young rock fans Gainsbourg has continued to attract, the film depicts a frightening scene of fights, denunciations, and near-riot conditions. Gainsbourg insists on performing, despite the numerous bomb threats received by all the hotels in town that have forced the musicians to relocate several times a night.

Confronting the ex-soldiers, calling them out for the cowardice of anonymous bomb threats, he steps onto a stage with only Jane and his bodyguard nearby for support. Saying “I’m a rebel. ‘La Marseillaise’ is a rebel song. Sing with me!” he begins to sing a traditional version of the song. Watching the performance from a kind of peephole is the young Lucien Ginsburg, tears on his face. The soldiers, impressed by Gainsbourg’s performance, begin singing the words, as the rest of the audience joins in. He finishes by flipping his arm in an obscene gesture, and stalks from the stage.

Homi Bhabha has famously written of national identity as performative, a continuous rehearsal of belonging that is achieved by animating the “scraps, patches and rags of daily life” into a temporal performance. Incorporating the odd bit of song, the familiar slogan, a style of clothing, or certain idioms of speech, the performance of national identity converts the bits and pieces of daily life into “the signs of a national culture.”²⁶ These themes are both iterated and complicated here. After the release of “Aux Armes et caetera,” Gainsbourg is pictured alone in his flat, now transformed into young Lucien Ginsburg. His cabbage head begins to grow back as he listens to a radio review of his work denouncing him for provoking anti-Semitism in pursuit of royalties.²⁷ As the reviewer continues to denounce the stain and divisiveness that Gainsbourg has created, the young Ginsburg seems to metamorphose, as his features are rapidly covered with thick cabbage leaves. When the diatribe is complete, Gainsbourg peels the leaves away to reveal his adult face, battered, wasted, and tearful.

The circularity of this moment, in which the adult Gainsbourg joins up with the young Lucien Ginsburg, both pushing back against the prejudice and the conservatism of France and both suffering the consequences, suggests a direction the film could have taken, a way of rendering the life of Gainsbourg as an exemplary “heroic” life. Instead, Sfar stages Gainsbourg’s encounter with anti-Semitism as a complicated encounter with the self, consonant with the dualism that structures the text. Here the anti-Semitism that had marked him as a boy comes back as a mirror reversal, with Gainsbourg now accused of being the agent of anti-Semitic feeling. Nation and ethnicity are once again staged as a tense and unresolved contradiction.²⁸

Sfar has described Gainsbourg’s love affairs with the French female icons of the day as love affairs with France:

The way he told that story [of his Jewish star] it turned all of his relationships with French women into a love story with France. I cannot forget that when he met Brigitte Bardot it was a *symbol*. When he wrote to his father, “I am dating Brigitte Bardot,” he was in a sense saying, “We belong to this country now.”²⁹

The connection Sfar draws between the Jewish star and “belonging” to France, however, is never made explicit in the film. Rather, the work stages these two identities as pointedly not reconciled, continuously in tension. Sfar’s comment quoted earlier in this text, that the character never grows, never learns, that there is no character arc, may perhaps be mapped onto the larger impasse suggested throughout the film between nation, ethnicity, and race.

Gainsbourg constructs the performance of self and nation as a split form of consciousness, haunting the character with an ethnic alter ego, a shadow self, a double that he cannot leave behind. The child Ginsburg constructs an overtly ethnic performance of Jewishness, overarched by the signifiers of France, out of bits of ethnic stereotypes—the Jewish star that he claims for himself and the propaganda images that line the streets—and adopts this stereotype as his hallucinatory double. The adult Gainsbourg, attended by the ethnic puppet *La Gueule*, enacts a signature style of provocative performance as a form of belonging, redefining French pop music, taking the great iconic French women of the day as his lovers, and recording a “freggae” version of “*La Marseillaise*.” Gainsbourg’s complex performance of self, with its ethnic and national underlayers intact, is finally fully realized at his death, with François Mitterrand declaring in his eulogy that Gainsbourg was a national icon, “our Apollinaire, our Baudelaire. He elevated the song to art.”³⁰

notes

1. Taymor’s work for theater makes explicit the tension between “live” physical performance and puppetry, as the puppets she has designed for the stage expose the facial expressions and gestures of the puppet handler as well as the puppet itself. Always visible, the face of the puppeteer, combined with the face and gestures of the puppet character, create what Taymor calls “the double event,” in which the audience sees both the puppet’s and the puppeteer’s performance. Her influential work includes stage productions such as *The Lion King* (1997), *The Green Bird* (2000), and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2010), which she originated. Her film work includes *Titus* (1999), *Across The Universe* (2007), and the biopic *Frida* (2002), which incorporates an animated puppet sequence by the Brothers Quay. See Eileen Blumenthal, “Julie Taymor” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, accessed September 9, 2012, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/taymor-julie>.
2. See in particular, Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
3. “*Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)*: Interview with Joann Sfar,” by Michael Guillén, Twitchfilm.com, August 23, 2011, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://twitchfilm.com/interviews/2011/08/gainsbourg-vie-heroique-interview-with-joann-sfar.php>. See also “Behind the Scenes—Interview with director Joann Sfar,” *Gainsbourg* DVD, directed by Joann Sfar (UK: Optimum Releasing, 2011).

4. Sfar, "Gainsbourg (*Vie héroïque*): Interview with Joann Sfar."
5. Jean-François Chevrier, "Between Terror and Ecstasy: Artistic Hallucination," trans. Shaun Whiteside, *Tate Etc.* 24 (January 2012): 67–71.
6. Peter Bradshaw, "Gainsbourg," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2010, quoted in "Gainsbourg (*Vie héroïque*)," by Guillén.
7. See Arthur Rimbaud to Paul Demeny, Charleville, 15 May 1871, *Arthur Rimbaud. le poète*, accessed June 26, 2012, http://abardel.free.fr/tout_rimbaud/lettres_1871.htm#lettre_demeny_15_mai_1871.
8. Chevrier, "Between Terror and Ecstasy," 69.
9. Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 236, quoted in Gross, *Puppet*, 30.
10. "Ginsburg"—Gainsbourg's birth name.
11. "Chatting with Joann Sfar, Director of *Gainsbourg: A Heroic Life*," by Danny Miller, MSN Entertainment: The Hit List, August 19, 2011, accessed June 27, 2012, <http://.social.entertainment.msn.com/movies/blogs/the-hitlist-blogpost.aspx?post=a4822618-afad-42a3-a6ef-80822f5587a6>.
12. Sfar, "Behind the Scenes," *Gainsbourg* DVD.
13. *Gainsbourg* DVD, directed by Joann Sfar (UK Optimum Releasing, 2011).
14. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Ian Small, vol. 2, *De Profundis*, "Epistola in carcere et vinculis" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 67.
15. Gross, *Puppet*, 95.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 96.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Charles Baudelaire, "The Philosophy of Toys," (1853) trans. Paul Keegan, accessed September 8, 2012, <http://gv.pl/index.php/main/szkola/lalki/pdf/ baudelaire.pdf>, 5.
20. Sfar, "Gainsbourg (*Vie héroïque*): Interview with Joann Sfar."
21. Sylvie Simmons, *Serge Gainsbourg: A Fistful of Gitanes: Requiem for a Twister* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 102.
22. Ibid., 102.
23. Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London: Routledge, 2012), 14.
24. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).
25. Simmons, *Serge Gainsbourg*, 88.
26. Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 297.
27. Accused of disrespect toward the national anthem, Gainsbourg would later purchase the original manuscript of the song, partly to prove that his version, which includes the words "aux armes, et caetera" in fact duplicated the words of the original, as if to stake his claim to French patrimony. See Simmons, *Serge Gainsbourg*, 90.
28. Ginette Vincendeau provides a particularly nuanced reading of the theme of Jewishness in *Gainsbourg* in her full-length review of the film in *Sight and Sound*. "Intoxicated Man," *Sight and Sound* 20, no. 8 (2010): 46–47.
29. Sfar, "Gainsbourg (*Vie héroïque*): Interview with Joann Sfar."
30. François Mitterrand reacting to Gainsbourg's death quoted by Philip French, "Gainsbourg," *The Observer*, July 31, 2010, accessed March 12, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/aug/01/serge-gainsbourg-lucy-gordon.

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