



UNIVERSITAT DE  
BARCELONA

## Writers On Screen: Embodying The "Life-Text" In The Literary Biopic

Sonia Amalia Haiduc

**ADVERTIMENT.** La consulta d'aquesta tesi queda condicionada a l'acceptació de les següents condicions d'ús: La difusió d'aquesta tesi per mitjà del servei TDX ([www.tdx.cat](http://www.tdx.cat)) i a través del Dipòsit Digital de la UB ([diposit.ub.edu](http://diposit.ub.edu)) ha estat autoritzada pels titulars dels drets de propietat intel·lectual únicament per a usos privats emmarcats en activitats d'investigació i docència. No s'autoritza la seva reproducció amb finalitats de lucre ni la seva difusió i posada a disposició des d'un lloc aliè al servei TDX ni al Dipòsit Digital de la UB. No s'autoritza la presentació del seu contingut en una finestra o marc aliè a TDX o al Dipòsit Digital de la UB (framing). Aquesta reserva de drets afecta tant al resum de presentació de la tesi com als seus continguts. En la utilització o cita de parts de la tesi és obligat indicar el nom de la persona autora.

**ADVERTENCIA.** La consulta de esta tesis queda condicionada a la aceptación de las siguientes condiciones de uso: La difusión de esta tesis por medio del servicio TDR ([www.tdx.cat](http://www.tdx.cat)) y a través del Repositorio Digital de la UB ([diposit.ub.edu](http://diposit.ub.edu)) ha sido autorizada por los titulares de los derechos de propiedad intelectual únicamente para usos privados enmarcados en actividades de investigación y docencia. No se autoriza su reproducción con finalidades de lucro ni su difusión y puesta a disposición desde un sitio ajeno al servicio TDR o al Repositorio Digital de la UB. No se autoriza la presentación de su contenido en una ventana o marco ajeno a TDR o al Repositorio Digital de la UB (framing). Esta reserva de derechos afecta tanto al resumen de presentación de la tesis como a sus contenidos. En la utilización o cita de partes de la tesis es obligado indicar el nombre de la persona autora.

**WARNING.** On having consulted this thesis you're accepting the following use conditions: Spreading this thesis by the TDX ([www.tdx.cat](http://www.tdx.cat)) service and by the UB Digital Repository ([diposit.ub.edu](http://diposit.ub.edu)) has been authorized by the titular of the intellectual property rights only for private uses placed in investigation and teaching activities. Reproduction with lucrative aims is not authorized nor its spreading and availability from a site foreign to the TDX service or to the UB Digital Repository. Introducing its content in a window or frame foreign to the TDX service or to the UB Digital Repository is not authorized (framing). Those rights affect to the presentation summary of the thesis as well as to its contents. In the using or citation of parts of the thesis it's obliged to indicate the name of the author.



UNIVERSITAT DE  
BARCELONA

Departament de Llengües i Literatures Modernes i d'Estudis Anglesos

**WRITERS ON SCREEN: EMBODYING THE 'LIFE-TEXT' IN  
THE LITERARY BIOPIC**

Sonia Amalia Haiduc

Tesi doctoral en el Programa de Doctorat  
Estudis lingüístics, literaris i culturals

Directora de la tesi:  
Dra. Mireia Aragay Sastre

Tutora de la tesi:  
Dra. Mireia Aragay Sastre

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Mireia Aragay Sastre for her generous guidance and supervision. Her insights and support have made this thesis possible. I would also like to thank Professor Deborah Cartmell and Professor Judith Buchanan for their kindness and for providing me the opportunity to publish, and Dr Brian Mott for answering my queries on English grammar. Finally, I thank my family and friends for their love and unfaltering support over the years.

## **RESUMEN**

La presente tesis examina el subgénero de la biografía literaria cinematográfica y su intersección con la literatura y con otros géneros cinematográficos, visto desde la perspectiva del modo melodramático. Se investiga la dramatización del 'life-text', definido como el proceso mediante el cual los acontecimientos del espacio-tiempo no discursivo llegan a ser elementos discursivos en la biografía literaria y cinematográfica, por medio de una inspección de la figura del autor en una selección de biografías literarias cinematográficas aparecidas entre la época clásica de Hollywood y el año 2018. Puesto que la figura y la misma presencia del autor son no solo la piedra angular del género biográfico en el cine, sino también el escenario de la implicación del espectador en la narrativa, la figura del autor que se halla plasmada en esta clase de biografía viene a ser un punto de autenticación emocional que nos permite identificar y descodificar las fuerzas que son parte integrante del campo semántico tanto de la biografía cinematográfica como del melodrama, además de capacitarnos para participar en la experiencia metamodernista, que oscila entre la ironía y la seriedad, la convicción y la incredulidad, a medida que la figura del autor en pantalla representa, a la par que pone en duda, las teorías existentes sobre la autoría. Dado el enfoque interdisciplinario de este análisis crítico, se han tenido en cuenta la importancia de elementos de tipo literario, cinematográfico y cultural, como pueden ser el material biográfico, las adaptaciones anteriores o contemporáneas de las películas, el trabajo ya realizado por el director o guionista, y cuestiones relativas al estrellato. Asimismo, se contemplan las intersecciones de la biografía cinematográfica literaria y otros géneros cinematográficos, además de las funciones de los discursos comerciales y culturales relacionados con cuestiones de autenticidad, que es una de las preocupaciones centrales de la biografía cinematográfica. Resumidamente, la tesis pretende presentar la biografía cinematográfica literaria como una categoría que se ha involucrado de maneras complejas con la figura del escritor y con nuestro mundo cultural en general.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the sub-genre of the literary biopic and its intersections with literary texts and other film genres through the lens of the melodramatic mode. It explores the dramatization of the 'life-text', defined as the process by which events in the non-discursive space-time become discursive elements in written and film biography, by looking at the figure of the author in a selection of literary biopics from the classical Hollywood era to 2018. The number of studies on the biopic is reduced, but those that have been published so far have not examined the strategies of the melodramatic mode in biographically-inflected films. Since the body and presence of the actor is the cornerstone of the biopic genre, as well as the site for the spectator's investment in the narrative, the embodied authorial figure in biopics becomes a locus of emotional authentication that allows us to identify and decode the forces that are part and parcel of the biopic's and melodrama's semantic force fields, and participate in the metamodernist oscillatory experience between irony and earnestness, belief and disbelief, as the body of the writer on screen both enacts and challenges prevailing theories of authorship. The thesis argues, in short, that film biography must be 'melodramatic' in order to be 'true' – 'truth' being a certain readable, coherently constructed sense of interiority that speaks to what we perceive as reality of the human condition, and which is encoded in the presence and the gestural performances of the actors' bodies on screen, expressed through (melo)dramatic form. The protagonists of melodrama, and, by extension of biographical films, embody and enact socioethical values, showing the work of emotion and personality in social and political processes. The majority of the productions under scrutiny are English-speaking productions, but there are also a small number of international films that have been chosen on account of their relevance to particular sections of this study, for in a globalized cultural economy, individual films tend to build meaningful connections across national and cultural borders and address a variety of audiences. Given its interdisciplinary approach, the critical analysis of the case studies has taken into consideration a varying number of literary, filmic and cultural elements, such as biographical material, earlier or contemporary film adaptations, the director's/scriptwriter's previous work, intermedial elements around the question of stardom. It also examines the intersections of the literary biopic with other film genres, such as heritage or costume drama, as well as the functions of commercial and cultural discourses related to questions of authenticity,

which is a central concern in biopics. The thesis is structured into five parts, which explore varying representations of the author. It begins with a series of theoretical and critical considerations of genre and literary biography, followed by a survey of the critical discourses surrounding the literary biopic. The body of the thesis consists of a series of case studies beginning in the 1930s; it continues with an examination of a number of feminist productions from the 1970s, to finally focus on the contemporary period, which has seen the release of an ever-growing number of literary biopics. The study argues for the literary biopic as an increasingly sophisticated category that has engaged in complex ways with both the figure of the writer and our culture at large.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. Screenshot from <i>Factotum</i> (dir. Bent Hamer, 2005).....	2
Fig. 2. Posters for <i>Wilde</i> (dir. Brian Gilbert, 1997); <i>Sylvia</i> (dir. Christine Jeffs, 2003); <i>The Libertine</i> (dir. Laurence Dunmore, 2004).....	62
Fig. 3. Poster for <i>Sylvia</i> (dir. Christine Jeffs, 2003) .....	64
Fig. 4. Poster for <i>Sylvia</i> (dir. Christine Jeffs, 2003) .....	64
Fig. 5. Poster for <i>Bright Star</i> (dir. Jane Campion, 2009).....	64
Fig. 6. Poster for <i>Bright Star</i> (dir. Jane Campion, 2009).....	64
Fig. 7. Posters for <i>Priest of Love</i> (dir. Christopher Miles, 1981); <i>Quills</i> (dir. Philip Kaufman, 2000); <i>Miss Potter</i> (dir. Chris Noonan, 2006) .....	66
Fig. 8. Poster for <i>Shadowlands</i> (dir. Richard Attenborough, 1993) .....	68
Fig. 9. Screenshot from <i>Becoming Jane</i> (dir. Julian Jarrold) .....	75
Fig. 10. Screenshot from <i>Angel</i> (François Ozon, 2007) .....	77
Fig. 11. Screenshot from <i>Angel</i> (François Ozon, 2007) .....	77
Fig. 12. Screenshot from <i>Edgar Allen Poe</i> (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1909) .....	81
Fig. 13. Screenshots from <i>The Barretts of Wimpole Street</i> (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1934) .....	89
Fig. 14. Screenshot from <i>The Barretts of Wimpole Street</i> (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1934) .....	91
Fig. 15. Screenshots from <i>The Barretts of Wimpole Street</i> (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1934) .....	92
Fig. 16. Screenshot from <i>Devotion</i> (dir. Curtis Bernhardt, 1946) .....	103
Fig. 17. Screenshots from <i>Devotion</i> (dir. Curtis Bernhardt, 1946) .....	104
Fig. 18. Screenshots from <i>Devotion</i> (dir. Curtis Bernhardt, 1946) .....	106
Fig. 19. Screenshot from <i>Devotion</i> (dir. Curtis Bernhardt, 1946) .....	108
Fig. 20. Screenshot from <i>Julia</i> (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1977) .....	117
Fig. 21. Screenshots from <i>Julia</i> (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1977) .....	118

Fig. 22. Screenshot from <i>Julia</i> (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1977) .....	119
Fig. 23. Screenshot from <i>Julia</i> (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1977) .....	124
Fig. 24. Photo of Miles Frankling; Screenshot from <i>My Brilliant Career</i> (dir. Gillian Armstrong, 1979) .....	129
Fig. 25. Screenshots from <i>My Brilliant Career</i> (dir. Gillian Armstrong, 1979) .....	130
Fig. 26. Screenshot from <i>All is True</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2018) .....	148
Fig. 27. Screenshot from <i>All is True</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2018) .....	149
Fig. 28. Screenshots from <i>Becoming Jane</i> (dir. Julian Jarrold) .....	155
Fig. 29. Screenshot from <i>Becoming Jane</i> (dir. Julian Jarrold) .....	157
Fig. 30. Screenshot from <i>Becoming Jane</i> (dir. Julian Jarrold) .....	159
Fig. 31. Screenshot from <i>Becoming Jane</i> (dir. Julian Jarrold) .....	160
Fig. 32. Screenshot from <i>Miss Austen Regrets</i> (Jeremy Lovering, 2007); Screenshot from <i>The Piano</i> (dir. Jane Campion, 1993) .....	165
Fig. 33. Screenshot from <i>Miss Austen Regrets</i> (Jeremy Lovering, 2007) .....	167
Fig. 34. Screenshot from <i>Les Soeurs Brontë</i> (dir. André Téchiné, 1979) .....	177
Fig. 35. Screenshot from <i>Les Soeurs Brontë</i> (dir. André Téchiné, 1979) .....	179
Fig. 36. Screenshot from <i>Angel</i> (François Ozon, 2007) .....	208
Fig. 37. Screenshot from <i>The Happy Prince</i> (dir. Rupert Everett, 2018) .....	224
Fig. 38. Screenshot from <i>The Happy Prince</i> (dir. Rupert Everett, 2018) .....	228
Fig. 39. Poster for <i>Howl</i> (dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 2010) .....	232
Fig. 40. Screenshots from <i>Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle</i> (dir. Alan Rudolph, 1994) .....	241
Fig. 41. Screenshot from <i>Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle</i> (dir. Alan Rudolph, 1994) .....	247



Fig. 42. Screenshot from <i>The Hours</i> (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2002) .....	252
Fig. 43. Screenshot from <i>Sylvia</i> (dir. Christine Jeffs, 2002) .....	255
Fig. 44. Screenshot from <i>Tom and Viv</i> (dir. Brian Gilbert, 1994) .....	256
Fig. 45. Screenshot from <i>The End of the Tour</i> (dir. James Ponsoldt, 2015) .....	269

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Acknowledgements

### Abstracts

### List of Figures

<b>I. Introduction: Rationale, Aims and Methodology</b> .....	1
<b>II. Critical and Theoretical Framework</b> .....	17
1. The author and literary biography.....	17
2. Matters of genre hybridity.....	34
2.1. A look at melodrama .....	41
2.2. The biopic: a review of criticism.....	46
3. On ‘authenticity’: selling biopics.....	60
3.1. Stars as textual bodies.....	71
<b>III. Predecessors: From the Golden Age of Hollywood to Second Wave Feminism</b> .....	78
1. The literary biopic in the Classic Hollywood era (1930s-1940s) .....	78
1.1. <i>The Barretts of Wimpole Street</i> (1934): “When poets love, Heaven and Earth fall back to watch!” .....	84
1.2. <i>Devotion</i> (1946): Stormy nights in the Brontë household.....	96
2. Feminism and the literary biopic (the 1970s).....	110
2.1. <i>Julia</i> (1977): Of war and friendship.....	113
2.2. <i>My Brilliant Career</i> (1979): “Here is the story of my career” .....	126
<b>IV. Contemporary Biopics (1990s to 2018)</b> .....	135
1. Shakespeare and Austen at the movies .....	135

1.1. Shakespeare in love and death: <i>Shakespeare in Love</i> (1998) and <i>All is True</i> (2018).....	138
1.2. Austen in love and death: <i>Becoming Jane</i> (2007) and <i>Miss Austen Regrets</i> (2008).....	153
2. Auteurist connections .....	168
2.1. The Romantics on screen: French auteurism and the Brontës in <i>Les Soeurs Brontë</i> (1979).....	168
2.2. “Fear no more”: <i>An Angel at My Table</i> (1990).....	180
2.3. The myth of Amherst in two takes: <i>A Quiet Passion</i> (2016) and <i>Wild Nights with Emily</i> (2018).....	194
2.4. Character in search of an author: <i>Angel</i> (2007).....	207
3. Rebel with a cause.....	212
3.1. ‘We are all in the gutter’: <i>Wilde</i> (1997) and <i>The Happy Prince</i> (2018) .....	212
3.2. “Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!”: The trial of <i>Howl</i> (2010).....	230
4. Vicious circles.....	237
4.1. “What fresh hell is this”: <i>Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle</i> (1994).....	237
4.2. “Dying is an art”: <i>The Hours</i> (2002) and the death of the author.....	249
5. Decentering the author.....	258
5.1. Pulp fictions: <i>The Whole Wide World</i> (1996).....	258
5.2. “Emptiness at the center”: <i>The End of the Tour</i> (2015).....	266
<b>V. Conclusion</b> .....	276
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	284
I. Bibliography.....	284
II. Filmography .....	305

## **I. Introduction: Rationale, Aims and Methodology**

I would like to begin with two scenes from two biographically-inflected films, the smart comedy/romance *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Factotum* (2005), a Charles Bukowski adaptation-cum-biopic. At one point in *Shakespeare in Love*, the character of Hugh Fennyman (played by Tom Wilkinson), the moneylender who is persuaded to invest in Shakespeare's new play *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*, asks Philip Henslowe, the struggling owner of The Rose theatre (played by Geoffrey Rush), who is the exuberant young man giving a pep talk to the players on the stage about embarking on a great voyage. Henslowe's dismissive reply comically encapsulates a variety of cultural references potentially available to the film's spectators, such as the position of the author in Elizabethan England (for the knowledgeable literary crowd), the cultural iconicity of canonical authorship, the poststructuralist 'death' of the author, and, for the theatrically-inclined, the puffed-up attitudes of certain star theatre/film directors: "Nobody, he's the author. It is customary to make a little speech on the first day. It does no harm. Authors like it." The exchange relies on the audience's familiarity with an array of cultural discourses, but its knowing irony points to precisely the opposite of what is being uttered – the author 'Shakespeare' (played by Joseph Fiennes) is in fact the most important presence in the scene, both diegetically – the film title contains the name of the main character – and upon the larger stage of contemporary culture.

Early on in the film *Factotum*, Hank Chinaski, the lead character, is doing an interview for a job with a pickle factory owner, described in the end credits as Bald Man. Chinaski is an aspiring writer in constant search for 'fuel' for his literary work amongst the low-lifers and bar-dwellers of a dilapidated urban America. He goes from menial job to menial job in order to pay the rent and sustain his alcohol addiction.

During the awkward interview, the pickle factory owner finds out that Chinaski is a writer. The exchange that follows is both dead serious and deeply, absurdly comical:

BALD MAN: Writer, huh, are you sure?

CHINASKI: No, I'm not.

[...]

BALD MAN: What do you write?

CHINASKI: Mostly short stories, and, I'm halfway through a novel.

BALD MAN: What's it about?

CHINASKI: Everything.

BALD MAN: You mean for instance, it's about cancer?

CHINASKI: Yes.

BALD MAN: How about my wife?

CHINASKI: She's in there too. (*Factotum*, my transcription)

Like in the case of *Shakespeare in Love*, the scene's comical exchange goes beyond the meaning of spoken words to encompass the larger question of 'the author' and his cultural function and status. Far from being a mere aspiring pickle bottler, Chinaski (standing for Bukowski) places his creative calling and work within the tradition of the Romantics' and the neo-Romantics Beat writers' outsized ambition to express the totality of human experience. On the other hand, like Shakespeare, he is designated diegetically as 'nobody'. Indeed, the first shot of the writer is of a figure waiting behind a mesh barrier, over the distant sound of a flushing toilet (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The writer as 'nobody'

These two examples illustrate not only the plurality of meanings that are attached to the body of the author on screen, but also the sense of mischievous play mixed with lingering cultural reverence that infuse the representation of the author in the ever-expanding category of contemporary biopics. Far from being a contradiction, I read this alloy of the reverent and the irreverent as a manifestation of a new sensibility and cultural logic tentatively named ‘metamodernism’, associated with a Romantic turn in the arts around the start of the twenty-first century. Still very much subject to ongoing conceptualisation, metamodernism has been tentatively connected to “some crucial new formal and thematic developments in early twenty-first-century literature, namely empathy, presence, and connection via poststructural language” (Holland 199):

The story [...] goes something like this: poststructural theories about language in the mid-to late twentieth century resulted in literary uses of and attitudes about language that often veered towards futility; from the 1990s forward, and especially in the early twenty-first century, writers and theorists have been rethinking these ideas about language and trying new ways of enlisting poststructural narrative techniques towards humanist ends of meaning-making, communication, and empathy in and between characters, readers, writers, and texts. (Holland 200)

The new metamodern paradigm is characterised by “a radical movement that identifies with and negates – and, hence, overcomes and undermines – conflicting positions, while being never congruent with these positions” (van den Akker and Vermeulen ch. 1). Its sensibility oscillates between the “postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections: between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction and so forth” (ch. 1). It is within this new sensibility and expressive oscillation that I would like to position the figure and body of the author in contemporary biopics – a metamodern figuration – infused with the remains of the Enlightenment and the Romantic ethos of creativity and signifying, to a postsacred culture, the access to “a realm where large moral forces are operative, where large choices of ways of being must be made” (Brooks 21). On the

other hand, the authorial metamodern figuration, while infused with the ethos of ‘sincerity’<sup>1</sup> and ‘authenticity’, remains a self-aware, self-referential projection of poststructuralist and postmodernist absence. The author figure returns, paradoxically both as a presence – which has never really ‘died’ a textual death – and an absence (Andrew 85). Indeed, as Seán Burke points out in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, “postmodern emphases on ‘islands of discourse’, on little narratives, language games, the locality of discourse, should acknowledge the situated author as principle of locality *par excellence*” (xxix), as it has become increasingly evident that “the great crises of postmodernism are crises of authorship even if they still disdain to announce themselves as such” (Burke xxix). In sum, the last few decades have seen a shift from the perceived artistic dead ends and cultural failures of the postmodern period towards new ‘structures of feeling’<sup>2</sup> constructed around the new language and emergent forms of sincerity and depth encoded in a range of cultural and aesthetic manifestations that have been increasingly associated with the term ‘metamodernism’.

Peter Brooks’s 1976 seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination* defines the melodramatic mode as “an intensified, primary, and exemplary version of what the most ambitious art, since the beginnings of Romanticism, has been about” (21-22). Bearing mind that “melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures [...] that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action” (Williams 42), the literary authors in the biopic – a multigeneric, hybrid cinematic form that can trace its roots to the advent of cinema – have been made

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Sincerity’ is a key term within the new cultural paradigm of metamodernism. Associated with the fiction of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers or Zadie Smith, it signals a marked distancing from the perceived cynicism and tired self-conscious irony of postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘structures of feeling’ was developed by Marxist critic Raymond Williams across several decades and texts. He uses it to rethink culture as an everyday “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time” (qtd. in Simpson 37). This concept is not synonymous with ideology; rather, as he seems to suggest across several texts, it is a mode of historical and social relations, a tension between residual, dominant and emergent structures. According to Williams, a structure of feeling “cannot be merely extracted and summarised; it is perhaps only in art – and this is the importance of art – that it can be realised, and communicated, as a whole experience” (Williams 40).

to embody precisely this intensified version. If Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen place the emergence of this metamodern sensibility around the 1990s, critic Juliet John in “Metamodern Melodrama and Contemporary Mass Culture” identifies its operation through double consciousness with the inception of melodrama and its relationship with Romanticism in the late eighteenth century. According to John, the omission of melodrama from theoretical narratives has rendered “intellectually invisible the importance of melodrama to structures of feeling in a mass media age” (290-91). In part II, chapter 2.1 I analyse in more detail the overarching mode of melodrama and attempt to make the case for the literary biopic’s indebtedness to its aesthetic sensibility.

This study explores the figure of the author in literary biopics from the early twentieth century to 2018, with a focus on the numerous instantiations of the sub-genre in the contemporary period starting around the 1990s, situating it in an intertextual and intermedial network of biographies, literary texts, as well as film and other media adaptations. I approach the authors and their filmic embodiments as polysemous figurations at the intersection of the biopic genre with melodrama, as well as within the residual and emergent cultural paradigms of postmodernism and metamodernism. Throughout this study, melodrama is not conceived of as a singular genre, but, following Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams’s reconceptualization in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (2018), I employ the term to mean “an expressive mode of aesthetic articulation that shapes the operation of generic worlds” (Gledhill and Williams 5). One of the obvious problems of bringing a writer’s life to the screen is that the act of writing itself can be dishearteningly unexciting to watch; however, it is precisely the work this act produces that legitimises the cultural importance of the writer-subject and so generates a substantial part of the audience’s interest in the screened life. A ‘successful’ adaptation of an authorial life will, therefore,



need to address a series of different expectations on the part of its audience: the pleasure of letting the potentially familiar source texts “oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing” (Hutcheon 121) and identifying the connections between the two experiences, the deciphering and integration of cultural signs and symbols within the intertextual and intermedial tangle of the film, the appreciation of the directorial signature, as well as the choice of cast and location. The author on screen carries a powerful element of appeal as the pleasures of the viewing experience are heightened by the memory of past readings and previous adaptations of the author’s work. As Julie Sanders points out in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, the appeal of adaptations lies in the “sense of play produced by our informed sense of the similarity and difference between the texts, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise” (25). It is potentially this sense of play that keeps popular interest in literary adaptations and biopics very much alive. To exploit this pleasure, publishing houses make sure a new batch of re-editions reaches their prospective readership after each cinematographic release, demonstrating thus the relevance of André Bazin’s claim that adaptation “reinforces rather than eliminates the relevancy of drama and the novel” (qtd. in Boozer 23-4). Future readings, in their turn, will be altered by the film adaptation of the author’s ‘life-text’, creating spirals of intertextual referencing. The term ‘life-text’ was coined and elaborated on by William Epstein in *Recognizing Biography* (1987), where it is defined as the result of discursive encoding through biographical recognition: “the ‘life-text’ [...] like ‘facts’, occupies that generic space in which the non-discursive can be transformed into the discursive, in which ‘life’ can be made into or construed as Text” (39). In *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity*, Epstein further defines the ‘life-text’ as “the complex and slippery

process by which so-called events in extra-discursive space-time become facts associated with an individualized life in a biographical narrative” (“Introduction” 7).

One of the on-going difficulties of this project has been to find an approach that would allow me to make sense of the mechanisms at play in the literary biopic beyond predictable recourses to fact-checking and ideological scrutiny. I had noticed that, when examining biopics, film critics and academics alike have tended to view the ‘melodramatic’ elements in biopics as clichés that, by interfering with the biographical ‘truth’ presumed to exist somewhere outside the filmic world, depreciate the cinematic and cultural value of these films. For example, critic Andre Barker’s verdict in his review of Haifaa Al-Mansour’s *Mary Shelley* (2017) is that, while the film is “impressively shot and suffused with righteous feminist fire”, it ends up turning the writer’s story into “didactic and disjointed melodrama” (Barker). On the academic side of the isle, an essay in a relatively recent collection on the British celebrity biopic decries the apparent failure of Julien Temples’s *Pandaemonium* (2000) to subvert “the mystical concept of innate genius” (Jones 133) and to question “the basic hegemonic assumptions of British culture as essentially white, male, English and patrician” (137), while it describes the film as “all classic biopic melodrama” (132). What such labels suggest is an expectation on the part of both media reviewers and academics that, alongside providing intellectually-sophisticated entertainment, literary biopics should conform to particular ideological angles prevalent in university-educated circles. What they fail to acknowledge, however, is that although literary biopics –as well as all literary and historically-inflected films – are produced within particular industrial and cultural environments, as global products they are aimed at diverse global audiences – diverse in tastes and levels of education – that may care little whether the narrative on screen conforms to or subverts hegemonic assumptions around Western authorship. A

member of this implied global audience might simply enjoy the spectacle of literary creation or the character dynamics, or potential recognition of literary texts from related film adaptations. If one has enjoyed the sheer spectacle of Kenneth Branagh's Gothic melodrama *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), one might wish to see the spectacle of Mary Shelley the author.

As Dennis Bingham points out in his seminal *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010), "the appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character. [...] The function of the biopic subject is to live [sic] the spectator a story" (10). Bingham subtitles his introduction to the volume "A Respectable Genre of Very Low Repute", and in it he sets out to defend the reputation of the biopic against accusations of fraudulence and tedium. Indeed, the whiff of disrepute Bingham alludes to is one that has been attached to the term 'melodrama' in film studies as well, insofar as "it was partly its association with melodrama that inhibited the acceptance of cinema as a serious object of study" (Gledhill, "Home Is Where The Heart Is" 5). Fortunately, since the 1970s the stereotypes about melodrama's stylistic excesses and facile moralism have given way to a radical reassessment of its potential in film studies. After the publication of Peter Brooks's study in 1976, modern literary and film criticism has reevaluated melodrama as an aesthetic of emotionality that recalibrates morality around feeling and empathy, "endowing ordinary lives with significance" (Gledhill and Williams 2). Melodrama's focus on personalisation and the individual's co-dependency with the social make it an ideal expressive mode of aesthetic articulation to crosspollinate the biopic genre.

Two texts cemented my choice in approaching the literary biopic through the lens of the melodramatic mode. Firstly, film historian Robert Rosenstone, in his *Visions*

*of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (1995), contends that history – and, by extension, biography – must be fictional in order to be true (70). Appropriating Rosenstone’s provocative idea, the thesis argues that, on screen, biography must be ‘melodramatic’ in order to be ‘true’ – ‘truth’ being a certain readable, recognisable, coherently constructed sense of interiority that speaks, across time and culture, to what we perceive as the reality of the human condition, and is encoded in the presence and the gestural performances of the actors’ bodies on screen. Second, the recent publication of Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams’s collection *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (2018) supported the viability of the approach, by framing melodrama as a cross-generic affective modality, as well as a democratising sensibility that grounds empathy as a site of social cohesion in a modern context based on individualism. The protagonists of melodrama embody and enact socioethical values, showing the work of emotion and personality in social and political processes. Since the body and presence of the actor is the cornerstone of the biopic genre, as well as the site for the spectator’s investment in the narrative, the embodied authorial figure in biopics becomes a locus of emotional authentication that allows us to identify and decode the effects that are part and parcel of melodrama’s semantic force field, and participate in the metamodern oscillatory experience between belief and disbelief, irony and sincerity.

The number of studies on the biopic has been growing in recent years, but none of them has, to my knowledge, examined the uses of the strategies of melodrama in biographical films, nor positioned the genre of the biopic within the emergent structure of feeling tentatively named metamodernism. Earlier studies on the biopic genre have tended to focus on whether the filmic narrative is ‘true’ to historical or biographical ‘fact’. However, the question of historical and factual accuracy in biographical films,

while not entirely irrelevant, has a limited usefulness – similar to the ‘fidelity’ question in adaptation studies.<sup>3</sup> Examining the films in terms of generic strategies and intertextual/intermedial dialogism is, I think, a more fruitful course of action in order to give insight into what the films convey. As for the particular sub-genre of the literary biopic, the few studies and essays scattered in various collections published so far have focused on the iconography of authorship, the construction of national identities, as well as on the cultural and ideological meanings of the author figure. While my study shares certain concerns with these earlier ones, it also approaches the authors and their filmic embodiments as polysemous figurations at the intersection of genres, articulatory modes, as well as the residual and emergent cultural paradigms of postmodernism and metamodernism.

The thesis draws upon on over fifty film adaptations based on the lives of literary figures.<sup>4</sup> The majority of them are English-speaking productions, but there are also a small number of international productions that have been chosen on account of their relevance to particular sections of this study – in a globalised cultural economy, individual films tend to build meaningful connections across national and cultural borders and address a variety of audiences. Depending on the objective of each section, the close critical analyses of the case studies take into consideration a varying number

---

<sup>3</sup> ‘Fidelity’ is a contested term in adaptation studies, and the object of on-going debate. David T. Johnson defines fidelity as “the extent to which a given aesthetic object – traditionally, in adaptation studies, a film – reflects a *faithful* understanding of its source – traditionally, a literary text, especially a novel, play or short story” (87). Johnson notes that rejecting fidelity became a standard theoretical positioning for adaptation scholars, almost “an act of camaraderie whereby lesser known voices could join those who were more well established” (95), but that even those who more recently are advocating for a return to the question of a certain ‘truth to the spirit’, are in fact practicing a far more sophisticated approach to the question than the anti-fidelity discourse would assume.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘film adaptation’ was initially used in adaptation studies to define interactions between literary and cinematic texts. However, recent definitions of ‘adaptation’ have opened up the field considerably beyond textualities towards other fields and practices such as history, technology, politics and economics; ‘adaptation’ thus includes “industrial, commercial, and technological imperatives, economic and sociological pressures, and the psychological and physical construction of subjectivities and identities” (Corrigan, “Defining Adaptation” 31). Since biopics subject a particular historical figure’s ‘life-text’ to a process of adaptation, they are, by definition, film adaptations of a ‘life-text’. I use these two terms somewhat interchangeably to avoid repetition when needed, and when it is clear that ‘film adaptation’ means biopic, not cinematic adaptation of the writer’s work.

of literary, filmic and cultural elements, such as biographical material, earlier or contemporary film adaptations, the director's/scriptwriter's previous work, intermedial elements around the question of stardom, as well as issues of marketing and commercialisation. Given its interdisciplinary approach, the study also takes into account cultural and political movements, discourses of authenticity, as well as intersections with other film genres or types besides melodrama, namely heritage cinema, costume drama or documentary.

The case studies are organised in a theme-based manner in order to explore the connections between the films under scrutiny. However, I also take lateral and forward temporal lunges where the need arises. This does not imply that I make any attempts to present a history of the genre; such an endeavour is well beyond the remit of this thesis. The organisation of the case studies also takes into account other criteria, such as the category of writers – e.g. poets, canonical authors, marginalised subjects – and broader generic considerations – e.g. heritage or romance. While I have not purposefully split the corpus across gender lines, it does seem to fall into broadly distinct categories based on the sex of the protagonist, leading me to draw the conclusion that biopics of men and women writers pull towards different genres on account of their different social histories, as Bingham's study notes (213). However, I would hesitate to place all female biopics, as Bingham does, under the 'victimhood' umbrella (213-22). I should acknowledge at this point that the potential case studies I could have chosen are numerous, and any choices would have yielded equally stimulating analyses. Time and word count limitations mean that choices must be made out of such a large reservoir of films, and those choices might feel, up to a point, arbitrary. However, I think that the films I have selected provide a reasonably clear picture of both the sheer variety and

common elements that operate at the highly flexible generic boundaries of the literary biopic.

The thesis is organised in three major blocks. After this introduction, Part II explores various areas of critical inquiry which are relevant to the objectives of this thesis. Chapter 1 examines the question of the author and offers an overview of the debates around literary biography which bear a predictable resemblance to debates around historical and biographical films. Chapter 2 delves into matters of genre hybridity, as well as the critical history of the biopic and melodrama. Chapter 3 tackles questions of ‘authenticity’ and stardom, attempting to establish their importance for the commercial aspects of the literary biopic. The next two blocks offer a series of case studies that seek to chart the structures of articulation in a variety of biopics. The critical analysis starts in chapter 1 of Part II with the predecessors of the sub-genre of the literary biopic in the classic Hollywood era, focusing on two studio productions from the Golden Age, namely *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934) and *Devotion* (1946), as representative of the industry’s approach to the biographical subject. The studio system was based on the exploitation of commercially-successful film narratives that became templates and were easily transferred into a variety of types of movies, sustained by a powerful star system that traded on the celebrity appeal of famous actors. According to George F. Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), what is operating in the biographical films of the studio era is “the star system speaking of itself through its own contained, controlled means, animating its own values through the figures of a parallel world of stars” (18).

There is then a temporal jump from the 1940s to the late 1970s, as the 1950s and 1960s saw little interest in the cinematic representation of literary figures on the big screen; as a matter of fact, the genre of the biopic as a whole “went into eclipse as a

consistently produced popular genre” (Bingham 19). In 1957 MGM remade *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* in luscious colour, using the new Metrocolor processing technology. Around the same period, in the more experimental circles of filmmaking, the new controversial stars of the literary avant-garde Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg starred in their only film, a 30-minute short titled *Pull My Daisy* (1959) based on an incident in the life of Neal Cassady and filmed in an improvisational style. Apart from these two samples, the dearth of literary biopics in these two decades invites a variety of potential explanations, from radical changes in industrial patterns to more overarching cultural displacements in structures of feeling. As Custen notes, in the 1950s the studio system disintegrated as television began to seize the culture-defining terrain formerly occupied by film (214). Since television placed value on the ordinary, the general trend was to move away from powerful cultural figures towards the ‘common’ person to whom something newsworthy has happened, as tabloids start to provide the subject matter and tone for television biographies – “notoriety [...] replaced noteworthiness as the proper frame for biography” (Custen 216). In the wider cultural arena, with the rise of structuralism and poststructuralism, respectively, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the gradual erosion of the authorial figure and *his* agency in the world to be substituted by the impersonal structures of language; at the end of the 1960s, we see the outright replacement of the limit-imposing Author, now deemed ‘dead’ or a mere function courtesy of French theory, by the endless expanses of Text and the power dynamics of discourse. The authorial voice and intention thus lose their former cultural cachet as the emergent structures of feeling favour multiplicity over singularity, the formerly marginalised over the authoritative figure. The reaction to the demise of the Author is reflected in chapter 2 of Part III, which examines the different strategies employed by filmmakers to construct the figure of the woman writer as an agent of political and



social change in biopics at the end of the 1970s. The chapter focuses on two films, Fred Zinnemann's *Julia* (1977), a biopic-cum-war film, and *My Brilliant Career* (1979), a light-hearted feminist romp with an attitude, released in the heyday of the second wave of feminism.

The lengthiest and most substantial block is the fourth, where I tackle the numerous iterations of the contemporary biopic. It has been noted that the final years of the 1980s saw a revival of the genre attributable to a variety of reasons, such as the return of the auteur and the rise of the film school generation of New Hollywood. The consequence of this was the "transformation of the biopic from mass entertainment to auteurist testing ground" (Bingham 71). If, as Custen demonstrates throughout his *Bio/Pics*, the studio biopic was a producer's medium, the contemporary biopic becomes a director's film, according to Bingham's *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*. To this I would add that, in the case of the literary biopic, the contributions of the screenwriters are not to be ignored. To give but two examples, the screenplays for *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) were written by playwrights with authorial aspirations – Alan Bennett and Tom Stoppard, respectively. This is consequently reflected in the films' artistic ambitions beyond the typical mainstream fare, as well as in the irreverent take on the author figure. In Part IV, chapter 1 deals with the figure of the canonical authors William Shakespeare and Jane Austen in four productions which, in a rather pleasingly symmetrical manner, adapt the early years and decline of these two figures – *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and the very recent release *All is True* (2018) for Shakespeare, and *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008) for Austen. *Miss Austen Regrets* is a television production, unlike the other three, and while this thesis examines mainly feature films, the inclusion of this particular example is

necessary as it was clearly made as a kind of ‘sequel’ to the commercially successful romcom/biopic *Becoming Jane*.

Chapter 2 of Part IV analyses a variety of ‘auteurist’ biopics in which affective connections are created between the auteur director and the represented author explicitly – in the film’s press and marketing campaigns and, implicitly, through the director’s filmic choices. This is followed by chapter 3 where I examine the figure of the author constructed as a witness of injustice through the articulations of the melodramatic mode in a series of biopics that narrate the trials of literary figures/texts, such as *Wilde* (1997) or *Howl* (2010), or show them as self-destructive (male) rebels challenging the deficiencies of the social order, as in *Quills* (2000) or *Factotum* (2005). Chapter 4 examines the figure of the self-destructive (mostly) female author in *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994) and *The Hours* (2002), with incursions into a number of similarly-themed and visually-similar biopics to demonstrate the sub-genre’s screen language. The last chapter in Part IV deals with the fairly numerous literary biopics which decentre the author narratively and visually in favour of formerly marginalised figures such as lovers, editors or journalists, in keeping with the contemporary ethos towards restorative justice. The ‘life-text’ of the author is thus mediated through the perspective of a historically and biographically ‘secondary’ character, as is the case in the two main case studies in this section, *The Whole Wide World* (1996) and *The End of the Tour* (2015).

Each chapter is introduced through a section that draws in a variety of references to other literary biopics which, while not subject to full analysis, might contribute to providing a more complete and consistent picture of the overall argument. To conclude, this thesis aims to offer an analysis of a broad spectrum of cinematic engagements with the figure of the author through the lens of the melodramatic mode, examining an array

of possible interpretations of the presence and persistence of the aesthetic articulations of melodrama in the generic world of the literary biopic, situated at the crossroads of interfacing cultural paradigms.

## II. Critical and Theoretical Framework

### 1. The author and literary biography

Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough? Flaubert wanted them to be: few writers believed more in the objectivity of the written text and the insignificance of the writer's personality; yet still we disobediently pursue. (Barnes 12)

As André Bazin noted in his 1948 essay "Adaptation or the Cinema as Digest", in relation to myth-making, the public impact of films is greater than that of novels. Agreeing with Bazin's claim, Jack Boozer stresses the potential of narrative film writing and production "to reach millions worldwide, and thus to make a difference in ways and at levels that literature has been unable to achieve" (23). Cinematic images fuel our collective fantasies of divine creativity, and one of the most enduring myths is that of the author. Haunted, intermittently drunk and plagued by writer's block if he is male, or torn between the demands of romance, domesticity and a higher calling in the case of women, writers have been often constructed as figures with special access to mysterious areas of human experience.

Paradoxically, when examining the figure of the author in contemporary culture, one needs to consider, first and foremost, the issue of his/her death, and subsequent cinematic resurrection. Part of literary lore at this point, the idea of the 'death of the author' in literary criticism, connected to the broader social and political movements that contested authority in all its forms at the end of the 1960s, is attributable to two essays, namely, Roland Barthes's short piece "The Death of the Author" first published in 1967 and then continuously reprinted in anthologies, and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?", published in 1969. Allied to the iconoclastic project of poststructuralism and its "radical scepticism towards the integrity of a subject's thoughts, meanings and intentions" (Bennett 10), Barthes's provocatively titled text challenges the privileged

status of authorship in interpretations of literary works, as well as the notions of human agency and subjectivity in the tradition of literary criticism, and constitutes a rallying cry in favour of radical textuality, whereby texts are read independently of their authors. In this essay, Barthes contends that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (“The Death” 142). He suggests thus that authorial identity as a unifying principle is neither present in the text, nor desirable as a critical pursuit, for “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text [...] to close the writing” (147). For Barthes, writing is, therefore, a process fundamentally without origin(ator), “an anti-theological activity” (147) that is revolutionary in its refusal to fix meaning, which, by extension, entails a refusal of God, reason, science and law – what he sees as the tyrannical project of humanistic Enlightenment. Instead of chasing the ghostly presence of a non-entity in writing, what should instead be done is examine the system of language and locate the text’s unity in its destination, namely, the reader, who becomes “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without being lost” (148). Barthes ends his obituary of authorship and authority with the contentious declaration that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148). It is an interesting declaration insofar as it somewhat contradicts its initial premise of radical deconstruction of authorial unity. If the author, described as “no one, no ‘person’” (147) becomes a mere effect of the text, the reader, even “without history, biography, psychology” (148), is described as “someone” (148). By locating ‘unity’ within the reader, Barthes simply displaces the authority of a previously highly-regarded entity, the author, onto the reader as repository of meaning.

However, Barthes himself did not completely disavow his own desire for ‘the author’. In a subsequent book titled *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), he confesses his ‘sin’: “As institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical persona has disappeared, dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; but in the text, in a way, I *desire* the author, I need his figure, as he needs mine” (27, italics in the original) And so this circulation of desire between author, reader and critic, an irresistible erotics of authorship, would later materialise in an autobiographical, confessional text called *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) which recounts with thinly veiled nostalgia his intense boredom as a child and tedium on the verge of distress during panel discussions and lectures, his belligerent suspicious of bourgeois discourse and also his despair at his encroaching plumpness. Roland Barthes is *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* engaged in circular desire.

Even more deliciously ironic and playfully postmodern, around twelve years after “The Death of the Author”, Barthes agreed to take part in a film dedicated not to one, but to three authors, the Brontës, all dead in body but resurrected in cinema. Having befriended the film director André Téchiné at Cannes, he agreed to play the role of the nineteenth-century author William Thackeray in Téchiné’s French-speaking literary biopic *Les Soeurs Brontë* (1979). In an ironic act of homage to his earlier arch-enemy, he thus inhabits the earlier author’s ghost on screen, embodying the dead figure he had theoretically erased. Barthes’s desire for the biographical figure, however, need not be blamed on theoretical inconsistencies but on human nature. After all, cognitive science tells us that human beings are essentialists. We are obsessed with origin and history; we take pleasure in an art work based on assumptions about the human

performance underlying its creation, we look for the artist behind the painting – for a story, we interpret it differently if we know it to be a ‘true’ story than if we know it is fiction. A part of this biologically-rooted, hard-wired essentialism is our need for ‘authenticity’ and origins. Therefore, the reason why the author has not gone away might have also a psychological dimension. Cognitive scientist Paul Bloom suggests as much in his 2010 book *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*, in which he tries to provide an evolutionary basis for the pleasure human beings take in, among others, food, performance and the imagination, “the intense interest people have in the mental states of the author, and [...] the rich and complex intuitions that underlie our enjoyment of stories” (xiv). According to Bloom, such pleasures are deep, rooted as they are in the human psyche:

What matters most is not the world as it appears to our senses. Rather, the enjoyment we get from something derives from what we think that thing is. This is true for intellectual pleasures, such as appreciation of paintings and stories, and also for pleasures that seem simpler, such as the satisfaction of hunger and lust. For a painting, it matters who the artist was; for a story, it matters whether it is truth or fiction; for a steak, we care about what sort of animal it came from; for sex, we are strongly affected by who we think our sexual partner really is. This theory of pleasure is an extension of one of the most interesting ideas in the cognitive sciences, which is that people naturally assume that things in the world – including other people – have invisible essences that make them what they are. Experimental psychologists have argued that this essentialist perspective underlies our understanding of the physical and social worlds, and developmental and cross-cultural psychologists have proposed that it is instinctive and universal. We are natural-born essentialists. (xii)

Moreover, Bloom argues that what we perceive to be the ‘essences’ of a person or a human-made tool or an artwork – associated with what he calls “category essentialism and life-force essentialism” (22) – is transferable, and it can be added and subtracted.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A few illustrations of this idea: one would be reluctant to wear the jumper of a serial killer, but would pay a lot of money to possess Jane Austen’s bonnet. However, if said bonnet were to be washed, it would be perceived as being less valuable, as if Austen’s ‘essence’ were still present ‘inside’ the bonnet. Another example might be an object with sentimental value. Were this object to be replaced by an exact copy, the copy, even though identical in every respect, would not be perceived to possess the same ‘essence’ as the original.

Hence, perhaps, the visual insistence in biopics on writerly objects – fetish objects – and the writer’s hand in close-up, which might point to the essentialist drive to gaze at and visually possess objects associated with authors, even indirectly, through the screen.

As noted earlier, the second text worth considering for this discussion of the author is Foucault’s 1969 essay “What is an Author?”, in which Foucault responds to Barthes’s introductory question “Who is speaking thus?” (“The Death” 142) with the similar-sounding, yet radically different one “What matter who’s speaking?” (245), a question he wants answered with a “murmur of indifference” (245). Foucault’s essay seems to agree with Barthes’s contention that the figure and name of the author functions as an exclusionary principle we should strive to be rid of, and posits the function of the author as a means to “characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society“ (235). Unlike Barthes, Foucault attempts to set in motion a social history of authorship whereby empty slogans about the disappearance of the author, God and man are to be replaced with an historical examination of “the empty space left by the author’s disappearance [...] its gaps and fault lines” (233) and a critical inquiry into the “paradoxical singularity of the name of the author” (234). The author becomes thus a function of discourse – an “author-function” upon which he performs various operations. He connects it with the juridical and institutional system that articulates the universe of the discourse (that is, ownership of texts), situates it historically, economically and culturally, and places the author within a multiplicity of signifying forces and positions: “the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse” (245). His essays envisions a culture in which discourse circulates freely, “in a pervasive anonymity” (245), without any bothersome attachments to the subject of the author or his – the masculine pronoun is crucial here – signification-limiting name.



Foucault's concluding assertion that the author should remain a matter of indifference has not remained uncontested. The theoretical indifference concerning the author advocated by poststructuralists and the Western critical preoccupations with the erasure of the individual and subjectivity have been problematised by feminist and postcolonial criticism, which have disputed their overarching validity. Indeed, the politically-inflected concerns of feminist and postcolonial critics have led to "a restoration of situated agency [...] which may not indefinitely bypass authorship if only because resistance and agency so often proclaim themselves in the form of written texts" (Burke xxviii). The restoration of a serviceable concept of authorship is necessary then in order to access historical, cultural and colonial discourses and contexts and the critique of universal subjectivity "must imply a reassertion of the subject in his/her particularity" (xxviii)

As poststructuralism became the dominant paradigm in criticism and academia, feminist critics experienced an acute conflict between their passionate project of reclaiming a female literary tradition and these arguments advocating the erasure of the writing subject. Moreover, Barthes's and Foucault's theories seemed to imply an oversimplistic identification between the God-like author and 'man' which left sexual difference and its implications unexamined. Dissatisfied with some of the interpretive limitations imposed by the inhibition of an authorial agency in favour of anonymous textuality, feminist critic Nancy Miller observed in 1985:

The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not, I will argue, necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the questions of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by *too much* self, ego, cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, hence decentred, 'disoriginated', deinstitutionalised, etc, her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from that universal position. (106)

Indeed, throughout the 1980s feminist critics argued for and against the erasure of the authorial voice from the text from clashing political and literary theoretical positions. Not all feminist critics saw it necessary to discuss the 'feminine' aspects of a text, arguing that by emphasizing the word 'woman' feminist criticism was imposing undesirable limits:

If the inaugural gesture of this feminist criticism is the reduction of the literary work to its signature and to the tautological assumption that a feminine 'identity' is one which signs itself with a feminine name, then it will be able to produce only tautological statements of dubious value: women's writing is writing signed by women. (Kamuf 285)

The beginning of the 1990s saw the publication of Judith Butler's watershed text *Gender Trouble* (1990) in which the words 'man' and 'woman', seen as reflective of the old patriarchal heteronormative structures, were decisively replaced by 'gender' as a performative social construct. This, combined with the dominant poststructuralist discourse, has resulted in the difficulty for literary criticism "to speak of 'women' except in inverted commas" (Moi 263). Furthermore, Moi notes that "theory and practice appear to be just as out of synch as they were by the end of the 1980s. The result is a kind of intellectual schizophrenia, in which one half of the brain continues to read women writers while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word 'woman' is theoretically dodgy" (263).

This splitting between certain strands of critical theory and the subject's political positioning is one of the main difficulties in the critical assessments of women's writing. Addressing the theory/practice dilemma after the decade which saw poststructuralist/feminist theories clashing with feminist practices, Cheryl Walker argued for a middle ground in 1990:

What we need, instead of a theory of the death of the author, is a new concept of authorship that does not naively assert that the writer is an originating genius, creating aesthetic objects outside of history, but does not diminish the importance

of difference and agency in the responses of women writers to historical formations. The loss of the writer runs us the risk of losing many stories important to our history (560).

The critical turmoil over the author points to the cultural importance of this figure which has proven to be remarkably resilient. In the case of feminist writing, the concept of the author is especially charged, for “the struggles of feminism have been primarily a struggle for authorship – understood in the widest sense as the arena in which culture attempts to define itself. Feminist ideas on authorship will be inevitably political since authorship involves the appropriation of cultural space” (Burke “Feminism and the Authorial Subject” 145).

From Virginia Woolf’s famous entreaty to women writers to embrace the androgynous mind in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to the controversies surrounding the justification for the Orange Prize, dismissed by novelist A.S. Byatt as ‘sexist’,<sup>2</sup> the convenience and usefulness of appending the word ‘woman’ before ‘writer’ when considering the question of female authorship and female writers’ place in the canon is still under dispute. On the other hand, celebrated author Margaret Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), a book she tentatively describes as being “about the position the writer finds himself in; or herself, which is always a little different” (xvii), provides a series of poignant insights into the grand subject of “Writing, or Being a Writer” (xvi) by recalling her own first forays into the field in the 1950s:

A man playing the role of Great Artist was expected to Live Life – this chore was part of his consecration to his art – and Living Life meant, among other things wine, women, and song. But if a female writer tried the wine and the men, she was likely to be considered a slut and a drunk, so she was stuck with the song; and better still if it was a swan song. (90)

---

<sup>2</sup> The complete quote from *The Guardian* reads: “The Orange Prize is a sexist prize. You couldn’t found a prize for male writers. The Orange prize assumes there is a feminine subject matter – which I don’t believe in. It’s honourable to believe that – there are fine critics and writers who do – but I don’t” (Higgins and Davies).

She goes on to caution the blithe against taking for granted the freedoms of our contemporary age: “the mythology still has power, because such mythologies about women still have power” (90).

The titles of literary biopics show an interesting penchant for familiarity in connection with women writers, seemingly in an attempt to convey the intimate, personal relationship readers – who are statistically mostly female – develop with their work, and, indirectly, with their persona. The Jane Austen cult is a case in point, reflected in the title *Becoming Jane*. Would *Becoming Jane Austen* have sounded too discouragingly literary for the average film spectator? It is an effective marketing strategy since women represent the majority of the target audience of literary biopics, and it is far more often pursued in biopics of women writers than in male biopics. To name just a few, one finds *Julia* (1977), *Stevie* (1978), *Nora* (2000), *Iris* (2001), *Sylvia* (2002), *Miss Potter* (2006), the aforementioned *Becoming Jane* (2007), *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008) and *Enid* (2009). On the other side of the gender divide there is *Wilde* (1997), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Byron* (2003), *Capote* (2007), *Infamous* (2006), *Shadowlands* (1993), *Quills* (2000), *Pandaemonium* (2000), *Finding Neverland* (2004), *The Libertine* (2004) and *Bright Star* (2009). In choosing familiarity over distance the films may reflect the tension between the private and the public realms, with the female experience more firmly tied to the private and intimate. Be that as it may, after the problematic theoretical ‘death of the author’ as legislator of meaning, the relentless string of big-screen and TV biopics of literary figures within the last four decades seems to indicate the return of the author in the guise of screen star.

On the other side of the camera, the film auteur seems to be equally back on his/her directorial chair, as Dudley Andrews writes in 1990, at the beginning of a decade filled with film adaptations of literary works and lives: “Breathe easily. Épuration has

ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again” (77). Auteurism as a movement had emerged in post-war France, and came to dominate film criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its credo is summed up by Bazin in his 1957 “Politique des auteurs” as “choosing in the artistic creation the personal factor as a criterion of reference, and then postulating its permanence and even its progress from one work to the next” (qtd. in Stam 1). In a change of paradigm similar to that taking place in literary studies, auteurism was displaced by the linguistically-oriented structuralism and poststructuralism of the early 1970s which critiqued the tendency of auteurist critics to evaluate and rank individual directors according to subjective criteria and ultimately arbitrary tastes. A sign of cinema’s quest for cultural and artistic legitimacy in its early decades, auteurism was also critiqued by feminist theorists, wary of the phallogentric undertones of the term “the camera pen”<sup>3</sup> and “the inevitable male-centredness of the *politique des auteurs*” (Angela Martin 129).

While accepting the poststructuralist primacy of textuality and the impossibility of a unified, totalising subjectivity, more recent reassessments have also argued that “we are still left with the presumption of some form of agency which is implicitly understood as having brought a work into existence” (Wexman “Introduction” 2). Uneasy with the poststructuralist attempts to abolish authorship, critics involved in filmmaking noted the practical side of ‘the author’, as “the most general concern of the cast and crew of a film, not to mention the producer, is that the director know what film he is making, that there be an author on the set” (MacCabe 30). Moreover, arguing for a reassessment of the figure of the writer – the scriptwriter, in particular – and against the

---

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘caméra-stylo’ was coined by French film critic and director Alexandre Astruc in his much anthologised article “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Pen”, first published in *L’Écran Française* in 1948.

erasure of the individual creative voice in literary and film criticism Boozer points out that

great cinema is not solely individual expression, but neither does it seem only a summary mirror of cultural forces. There is a reason why so many cultural studies look to issues of authorship for understanding. The closer one gets to a work, the more the particulars of story treatment, visual style, performance, tone, pacing, scoring, editing, and themes become recognisable as a series of decisions attributable to individuals. [. . .] Both macro and microperspectives for critical interpretation are useful, and there is no reason to disparage one for the other. (22-3)

Indeed, contemporary auteur studies have left behind the Romanticised figure of the individual genius in favour of considering the director's work as "the site of encounter of biography, an intertext, and institutional context, and a historical moment" (Stam "Introduction" 6) and as a "a commercial strategy for organising audience reception" (Corrigan *A Cinema without Walls* 103).

This reappraisal of the author figure in literature and filmmaking in recent decades seems to accompany the multiplication of adaptations of 'life-texts' of authorial figures on screen. Disputing the poststructuralist view of the author as an ideological function which limits and excludes, Kamilla Elliott in "Screened Writers" argues that the figure of the writer on screen is a proliferator and redistributor of meanings, going as far as to conclude that "the body of the screened writer proves problematic for mainstream theories of authorship in the humanities" (195). However, there is one field in the humanities where the author has survived and adapted to the changes in critical theory, namely literary biography. Biography sells. Such is its enduring popularity in terms of consistent commercial impact that writers and publishers have attached the noun to books that are not necessarily about any human 'bio' (which translates as 'life'), such as Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* (2000), Jon E. Lewis's *London: The Autobiography* (2008) and *England: An Autobiography* (2005), Phillip Ball's *H2O: A Biography of Water* (2000) and Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Biography* (2005). While

some hail its “extraordinary renaissance in recent years” (Hamilton 1), others claim that, while TV biography and the online content connected with life-writing have indeed become more ubiquitous, the popularity of published biography has neither waned nor increased but has statistically remained constant over the past century (Currie and Brien).

What critics agree on, however, is that biography as a genre has enjoyed little academic prestige, for a variety of reasons, one of them being that “the author of a scholarly biography typically encounters a certain embarrassment in the fact that biography is a popular rather than an academic form. [...] the biographer cannot but be conscious that he or she is writing partly for a lay audience” (Holderness 125). Nigel Hamilton pins the cause of this neglect on the initial, narrow definition of biography, which was coined in the seventeenth century as “a term for literary rather than graphic description” (2). This limitation of the biographical project to exclusively written records of human lives instead of a more inclusive field of real-life human depiction in various media sealed its fate as a domain of little substance and even less merit, as opposed to such prestigious fields such ‘literature’ or ‘history’. David Ellis’s *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding* finds that “when the academic body sweats publications at every pore and [...] the financial well-being of all institutions of higher education depends more and more on their charge sheets, the comparative dearth of analytic enquiry into biography is surprising” (3) He attributes this lack of interest partly to the dominance of poststructuralism in academia, more specifically to “the announcement, many years ago now, of the ‘death of the author’”, as “the notion that authors were mere intersection points for a number of psychological, linguistic or socio-economic systems was hardly an encouragement to study the details of their lives, especially in their more private aspects” (3).

Barbara Caine attributes the lack of prestige of biography to its “narrative form and its concern with individuals”, which has often relegated the genre “to the margins of historical study” (1). Fortunately, she sees a resurgence of interest in recent years, going so far as to claim there is a new ‘biographical turn’ taking place in the humanities and social sciences, a “new preoccupation with individual lives and stories as a way of understanding both contemporary societies and the whole process of social and historical change” (1) This recent appeal of biography can also be placed within a larger context of changes in contemporary critical and historical analysis, where there has been a move away from structuralist and Marxist theoretical approaches and their concerns with large-scale theories and class divisions towards other categories such as gender, ethnicity and sexual identity which are “contingent on particular situations and locations” – in this context, biography emerges as the archetypal ‘contingent narrative’ and “the one best able to show the great importance of particular locations and circumstances and the multiple layers of historical change and experience” (2). The same change has been noted by other scholars: “Over the last ten to fifteen years”, writes historian Ian Kershaw in 2008,

there does seem to have been a historiographical change [...] not confined to any one country. The decline of Marxist intellectual influence, which followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc, has been one substantial contributing factor. Linked to this in a way has been the replacement of social and economic history by cultural history – a fairly elastic category, at best lacking precise definition and often serving as a catch-all – as the dominant trend. “Modes of production” have been replaced by “modes of representation.” “Experience,” “feeling,” “image,” “myth,” and “consciousness” have taken over from social stratification and class analysis. Gender, not class, division has gained central ground. Behind these trends lies, of course, the rise of postmodernism, affecting history as well as other intellectual disciplines. [...] A fragmented history without pattern or meaning reasserts the focus upon the will, actions, and impact of an individual. At any rate, human agency is back in vogue. As the “grand narrative” underpinned by “grand theory” has gone into decline, narrative history, whether in microcosmic studies or in biography, has made something of a comeback. [...] This is possibly one reason why there is talk of a “biographical turn” in historical writing. (31-32)



Contemporary biography has thus become a place of engagement with a diversity of subjects and subjectivities beyond the narratives of ‘great lives’ common before the 1970s, branching out to include the life stories of those who had previously been relegated to the shadows of history such as women or racial and sexual minorities. This does not mean that interest in ‘great lives’ has altogether disappeared; quite to the contrary, the lives of political leaders and cultural luminaries have continued to attract biographers and readers alike. However, what has changed is the manner of engagement with the shape and meaning of the lives under scrutiny – the new approaches place less emphasis on the exceptionality of the biographical subject and more on the way the individual life relates to and is shaped by the historical context it inhabits. This is what, to give an interesting example, Barthes’ historical/biographical study of French historian Jules Michelet *Michelet par lui-même* (1954) did even as far back as the early 1950s. In fragmenting, re-structuring and connecting the biographical subject’s life to his writings on history, the life becomes an instrument of historical reading. Fascinatingly, Barthes, whose notorious “The Death of the Author” essay declared any interest in the biographical subject pointless for the understanding of a text, displayed a sustained, decade-long interest in the figure of Michelet. His study, apart from dealing with Michelet, also weaves Barthes the author as an intertextual element into his subject’s biographical network, thereby constructing a figure of the author as subject alongside the historical subject of the biography – Barthes’s analysis derives from a critical subjectivism in which the self “discovers itself at the same time as it explores and re-creates its object” (Petitier 124). In fact, Barthes goes so far as to declare a deep, personal, bodily connection with his *Michelet* which is absent from his relationships with his other more famous texts (in Petitier 111).

The same connection between biographer and subject is actively pursued by Richard Holmes in his innovative *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985), a book that is “part pure-bred biography, part travel, part autobiography, together with a bad dash of Baskerville Hound”, according to the Author’s Note (Holmes 277). Rather than being a straightforward biography of one subject, Holmes’s *Footsteps* consists of a series of biographical sketches dealing with particular significant moments in the lives of Robert Louis Stevenson, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley (alongside Byron and Mary Shelley), and Gérard de Nerval (alongside a series of other contemporary French figures). Infused with a great deal of personal observation and self-analysis the book nearly becomes an autobiographical portrait of the scholar in search of the artist. His method is one of scrupulous recreation of and empathic immersion in the subject’s environment through a variety of strategies. As the title suggests, he follows in the footsteps of the biographees tracing their movements in space in order to connect their experiences with his across time. In the case of Stevenson’s journey in the Cévennes, described in his 1879 *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*, for example, Holmes writes the following: “I set out to follow him as accurately as I could, without modern maps (until Florac) but going by the old tracks and roads between every village and hamlet he mentioned” (20). To aid the identificatory process with his subject, he emulates Stevenson by keeping a diary, wearing a gypsy ring and donning a hat which induces hilarity in the villagers. He stops short, however, of purchasing a donkey in spite of the locals’ insistence that “You see, Monsieur Steamson [sic], he had a donkey. It is in his book. It is *charming* for a writer to have a donkey” (17). The process by which Holmes enters Stevenson’s mind is reminiscent of a Method actor’s in its attempt to go beyond portraying in order to embody the character one pursues.

Woolf, daughter of the founding editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, was part of the movement to free modern literature, and by extension, biography, from the stifling confines of Victorianism, alongside Lytton Strachey's groundbreaking *Eminent Victorians* (1918). In *Orlando* (1928) she proposes to “revolutionise biography in a night” (Lee 13) through indulging in “that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests” (Woolf 4), as she writes to her lover Vita Sackville-West. *Orlando* challenges the rules of biography by exploding the notions of biographical time – it covers about three hundred years instead of a normal lifetime – as well as any sense of a unified personal identity of the biographee which the biographer is supposed to convey to the readers. Her subject sheds the outer skin of her/his gender and sexual identity mid-story, thus allowing Woolf to explore the idea of gender and sexual fluidity under the guise of fiction. Overwhelmed by the assault of life on his senses wafting in from the outside, an assault which leads to feelings and thoughts, those “thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore” (Woolf 4), Orlando settles down to write, enacting the scene which will come to signify visually a whole host of ideas connected to ‘literature’ and ‘authorship’ in countless biopics: he “dipped an old stained goose quill in the ink” (Woolf 4).



Fig. Shakespeare's ink-stained hand (Joseph Fiennes) tries out signatures in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), visually illustrating Woolf's idea.

Whether in literary theory, biography or cinema, the figure of the author has proved to be extraordinarily resilient to the twists and turns of changing paradigms. From 'genius' to 'function' to proliferator of meanings, the author and his/her body is still very much a site under construction whose interpretive and affective potential has been creatively exploited in biopics across the decades.

## 2. Matters of genre hybridity

“The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited”.  
(*Hamlet* 2.2)

“Genres are not born, they are made”.  
(Langford 5)

The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a flurry of publications which re-examined and re-oriented discourses around the concept of film genre. In “Rethinking Genre”, Christine Gledhill argues that, after the fragmentation of grand theory with its promise of incorporating films into a “totalising ‘social formation’ or ‘historical conjecture’”, the concept of genre might be able to fill the hermeneutic gap and provide a “conceptual space” in which “issues of texts and aesthetics [...] intersect with those of industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences – the central concerns of political economy, sociology, and cultural studies” (221). Rather than seeing context as an originating source for aesthetic and textual mutations, genre assigns equal importance to all of these terms and practices, illuminating their mutual relationships. Yet genre is a highly contested concept. In critical attempts to define this “first and foremost [...] boundary phenomenon” (Gledhill 221) with an existence rooted in industry mechanisms as well as in aesthetic and reception practices, exclusionary genre taxonomies have been fought over and generic categories have been continually reassessed. Indeed, as Andrew Tudor perceptively noted in his 1975 *Theories of Film*,

to take a genre such as the western, analyze it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the ‘principal characteristics’, which can only be discovered from the films once they have been isolated. (qtd. in Langford 15)

Whilst some genres such as westerns, war films, or romantic comedies might appear to be constructed around fairly cohesive textual or stylistic features which, aided by appropriately designed posters or DVD covers, render individual films easily recognizable to film consumers, theories of genre attempting to construct taxonomies have found the great majority of identificatory categories to be problematic due to the great variety of cinematic styles, iconographies, characters, plots, settings and other elements available: “theorists of genre have had to consider the difficulties entailed in attributing a common character or significance to large groups of films, the critical processes involved in defining genres, as well as the competing claims to authority over what these definitions should be” (Branigan and Buckland 232). Rather than fixed categories, genres are spaces whose productivity lies precisely in this constant challenging and redefinition of generic boundaries closely connected with the social and cultural context with which they interact in complex ways.

The turn of the twenty-first century also saw the publication of two book-length studies on genre theory, namely Rick Altman’s *Film/Genre* (1999) and Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), in which both film scholars attempt to apply rigour and consistency to what are, essentially, slippery abstract conceptualisations rather than easily distinguishable groupings. Altman’s dialogic approach based on questions and answers begins by disputing earlier assumptions about genre such as generic stability, transhistoricity and ideological function to reformulate the concept as a network of flexible, mutable and competing discourses. What he proposes film critics should do is not limit themselves to describing “a past genre formulation process” but rather become “current actors in an ongoing *genrification* process” (48). He defines *genrification* as the history of and discourses around the creation and establishment of genres seen as flexible structures, intimately connected among themselves, and interlocked in a mutual exchange of equally mutable terminologies. His methodology draws upon philosophy, linguistics and social theory not only to construct a

new theory of what genres are and how they work, but also to address ultimately wider issues concerning “a general theory of meaning” (215). The discussion in *Film/Genre* is meant to correct one of his earlier theoretical studies titled “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre” (1984) which, limited in its narrowly formalist assumptions, had failed to address the question of genre reception. His new conclusion, titled “A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Film Genre”, engages with the impact actual ‘users’ of genre, be they spectators, filmmakers, producers, distributors, and other cultural agents, have on generic categorisation. A semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach “treats genres as a site of struggle and co-operation among multiple users” (211). As Altman points out, after decades of useful, but ultimately incomplete questions about genre, a new approach is necessary – one that addresses the multiplicity of users and of readings, and “actively considers the effect of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labelling and display of films and genres alike” (Altman 214).

In certain respects, Neale’s objective in *Genre and Hollywood* is similar to Altman’s. He too wishes to leave behind conventional definitions and overgeneralising aesthetic and cultural theories which had thus far dominated theories of genre, for his contention is that these theories had been driven by “critical and theoretical agendas rather than by a commitment to detailed empirical analysis” (1). He too suggests his concepts might be applicable not only to film genre but also to broader areas of thought, given that genre is a “multi-dimensional phenomenon” that is “common to all instances of discourse” (2) and thus relevant to all types of text. More importantly, one of his main contentions is that the majority of films are multigeneric insofar as “they frequently hybridize and overlap, thus blurring the boundaries of the genres concerned” (3).

If Neale sees films as made up of a multiplicity of genres, Altman sees genres themselves as unstable and ephemeral, as nodal points in a process of genrification which creates overlapping generic maps, similar to genre-creating processes in literature and the

natural sciences – they are “part of the constant category-splitting and category-creating dialectic that constitutes the history of types and terminology” (Altman 18). Genrification involves certain linguistic patterns that can be observed, whereby broader categories of films defined adjectivally, such as ‘musical comedies’ undergo a ‘substantifying process’ and become ‘musicals’, thus creating new categories with their own independent status. Continuously subject to this sliding from adjective to noun, genre films are defined as those types of productions which, having undergone the process of substantification and consecration, display certain shared textual material and structures which disposes audiences to interpret films “according to generic expectations and against generic norms” (Altman 6).

While genre is a useful term for film critics and audiences, its value in Hollywood’s production and marketing processes is less than evident, with preference being given to signalling generic affiliation indirectly rather than directly. As Altman has found in reference to classical Hollywood, the film industry actively sidesteps committing to specific generic terminologies, preferring instead a “romantic combination of genres” (Altman 11) to maximise a product’s reach, and create new film cycles. This exploitation of cycles, however, has continued beyond the studio system into the present, where successful plot points and characters are being recycled not only across studios, but also across national boundaries. After the breakdown of the studio system, around the 1970s genre films mutated under the influence of emerging ‘auteurs directors’ familiar with the history and mythology of genres and became more self-aware. Due to a changing social context, certain genres entered a period of decline – such as the western – or had their conventions and iconography poached by other genres – such as the western surviving within science fiction as illustrated by George Lucas’s use of the motif of the ‘frontier’ and the final showdown in *Star Wars* (1977). Rather entertainingly, the combination of western and SF found a recent literal representation in the



transparently named *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011) whose tagline puts together two of the most easily recognisable themes: “First contact. Last stand”.

Regarding the biopic, Altman points out that its generic status was not established until the end of the 1930s, when following the box-office success of a series of Warner Bros productions, including *Disraeli* (1929) and *Voltaire* (1933) among many others, biographical films became recognised as a distinct genre. Up until that point, this type of film had been associated with other genres and labelled as ‘biographical drama’ or ‘musical biography’. This pattern of identifying a film with different categories before new genres became stabilised belonged to the studios’ strategies of marketing and was standard practice in classical Hollywood. Altman advances the hypothesis that studio personnel, based on their familiarity with previous films, performed acts of reading that were conceptually similar to film criticism: “film production constantly involves a process of criticism that actually precedes the act of production” (Altman 43). On the other hand, unlike film producers whose interest lies in keeping generic categories open, film critics continuously attempt “to fold the cyclical differences into the genre, thus authorizing continued use of a familiar, universalizing, sanctioned, and therefore powerful term” (Altman 25).

If earlier work on genre criticism imitated the generic divisions in literary criticism in its tendency to focus traditionally on the films’ narrative and stylistic features in order to tease out generic taxonomies, questions of industry practices, audience reception and generic expectation have taken centre stage in the last decade:

Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with a means of recognition and understanding. (Neale 158)

These expectations are shaped not only by previous cinematic experiences, but also by the practices of the film industry in terms of production and distribution. Using Gregory Lukov

and Steve Ricci's term *intertextual relay* to define institutional practices and discourses such as marketing, publicity, pressbooks, posters, journal reviews, and so forth, Neale sees them as performing additional generic functions that go beyond the definition and circulation of individual films – they “define and circulate, in combination with the films themselves, what one might call ‘generic images’, providing sets of labels, terms and expectations that will come to characterize the genre as a whole” (“Questions of Genre” 160). However, an over-reliance on the analysis and theorisation of intertextual relay presents a series of dangers, as Gledhill warns. The examination of purportedly locatable origins and authentic meanings to be found at the site of production “undercuts the much discussed hybridity of genre as not only an industrial but also a cultural process”, and “threatens to return us to the taxonomic trap” (Gledhill “Rethinking Genre” 225). Furthermore, as Barry Langford points out, the discipline of film studies itself constitutes its own ‘relay’ after decades-long legitimisation through analysis and theorising about individual genres or genre in general, and thus establishes “meaningful contexts in which genres and genre films are understood today” (6).

Closer to the definitional outlook on genre this study aims to build upon is Celestino Deleyto's “Film Genres at the Crossroads: What Genres and Films Do to Each Other”, where, drawing on Jacques Derrida's “The Law of Genre” (1980), chaos theory and George Lakoff's cognitive theory of categories, Deleyto argues that

genres are not groups of films but, rather, abstract systems formed by elements taken from many films. The generic bag contains conventions, structures, and narrative patterns, but no films. Generic analysis should, therefore, concern itself less with issues of belonging and generic purity (or impurity) and more with the actual workings of generic elements in films. (227-28)

Thus film texts are inevitably created through mixing genres and employing a variety of conventions and narrative patterns plucked out of the ‘generic bag’ according to the filmmaker's convenience. While film texts never belong to any one genre exclusively, they are also never produced independently of genre as “they are always generic: they always use

generic conventions and formulae” (Deleyto 227). Indeed, as Robert Burgoyne notes in *The Hollywood Historical Film* (2008), “poaching, repurposing and the creation of hybrid forms are the rule of genre, rather than the exception” (6). This is especially pertinent to the discussion around the biopic, which, as Karen Hollinger perceptively points out, is “a hybrid cinematic form that [...] combines melodrama, history, psychological drama, biography, and documentary” to tell the “partly factual, partly fictional story of a real person’s life or a significant portion of that life” (*Feminist Film Studies* 158). Although the biopic has been called a genre, it is actually a “multi-generic film form” (158), like the literary adaptation. Also like the literary adaptation, the biopic has been critically neglected until recently in spite of its long-lived success in the film industry.

In the case of melodrama, a genre that has been gaining critical clout, its earlier critical invisibility has been attributed to “the rise of realism as a touchstone of cultural worth and to its ghettoization as a women’s form” (Gledhill “Signs of Melodrama” 207). I would argue that biopics have faced the same critical disparagement for their inadequacy as conveyors of historically accurate and cinematically realistic portrayals of historical figures. While they are associated with cultural value and prestige, their narrative style has been deemed too conventional and their visual style too unadventurous to qualify for sustained critical attention. Together with historical films, period dramas or literary adaptations, biopics participate in what has been termed ‘the middlebrow’, a term and taste category attached to “audience, text or institution” (Faulkner 1) which has been ignored or “frequently dismissed as suspiciously conservative” (Faulkner 1) and, in class-conscious film studies, as a preference of the socially aspirational middle-class. It is interesting, however, that the generically-hybrid literary biopic should be associated both with the ‘middlebrow’ due to its literary subject matter and the ‘lowbrow’ in its assiduous employment of the strategies characteristic of the melodramatic mode.

## 2.1. A look at melodrama

My own greatest desire is for realism. Therefore I employ what is called melodrama — but which might as well be called ultra-realism — for all my thinking has led me to the conclusion that there is the only road to screen realism that will still be entertainment. Perhaps the strangest criticism I encounter is that I sometimes put wildly improbable things, grotesque unrealities, on the screen when actually the incident criticised is lifted bodily from real life. The reason is that the strange anomalies of real life, the inconsequences of human nature, appear unreal. (Hitchcock, “Why I Make Melodramas”, 1937)

The excessive style and rhetoric of melodrama is often perceived as antithetical to the sombre nature of realism – surely, real life is far removed from the strident theatricalities of the virgins and villains that peopled stage melodrama. Like Alfred Hitchcock numerous years later, in *Oliver Twist* Charles Dickens disagrees with this binary look:

It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; and, in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. We behold, with throbbing bosoms, the heroine in the grasp of a proud and ruthless baron, her virtue and her life alike in danger, drawing forth her dagger to preserve the one at the cost of the other; and, just as our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch, a whistle is heard, and we are straightway transported to the great hall of the castle, where a grey-headed seneschal sings a funny chorus with a funnier body of vassals, who are free of all sorts of places, from church vaults to palaces, and roam about in company, carolling perpetually.

Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight. The transitions in real life from well-spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning-weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling; only, there, we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference. (Dickens 106-107)

According to Dickens, everyday life contains the same sudden transitions from tragic to comic and the other way around, which we accept as natural because we are participants, actors upon the stage, instead of dispassionate lookers-on who can distance themselves from the action and pass ‘objective’ judgement. Clashing moods, like clashing modes, can be both

real and constructed, while the peaks and troughs of human emotion perceived as natural in everyday life might be perceived as artificial on stage or in fiction.

Melodrama is one of cinema's most contested and malleable terms, subject to continuous reevaluations and redefinitions since the term was first borrowed from Italian by Jean Jacques Rousseau to define his play *Pygmalion* in 1770. One of the problems of melodrama is that of generic specificity – the elements which identify a specific genre – versus a broader field whose elements are less easy to pin down as it intersects with other fields. Consequently, melodrama has been alternately seen within Film Studies as a distinct genre, a mode that cuts across generic spaces, and even a certain type of sensibility – films that are not necessarily categorised as melodramas can nonetheless be experienced 'melodramatically'. As Gledhill points out in the introduction to her seminal 1987 study *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, "[a] central problem is melodrama's status not just as a cinematic genre, but as a mode with formative roots in the nineteenth-century, rivalling realism in its claim to found the popular cinema" (1). As a cross-cultural, international form with a long history, the term *melodrama* has been applied to theatre, opera, fiction, a specific cinematic genre and, most importantly, to "a pervasive mode across popular culture" (Gledhill 1).

Writing about stage melodrama at the beginning of the twentieth century, the formalist theoretician Sergei Balukhatyi established its constructional principles and typical traits in his *Poetics of Melodrama* (1926), pointing out its overall aesthetic goal of generating maximally intense emotions. Alongside its emotional teleology, melodrama also "teaches, consoles, punishes, and rewards; it submits the phenomena of life and human conduct to the immutable laws of justice and offers reflections upon men's actions and feelings" (qtd. in Geroult 123), thus building a moral teleology which becomes legible through particular plot situations and speech acts. However, melodrama's principles can also be found concealed and

complicated by “realistic portrayal, psychological motivation, or ideological dialectics” in other types of drama, as “it is possible for a melodramatic skeleton to become covered with the solid flesh of realistic material and concealed beneath an elegant layer of psychology and ethical, social, or philosophical content” (Geroult 128) leading audiences to place the play or film in a ‘higher’ generic category.

Mirroring Dickens’s and Hitchcock’s perspectives, Jackie Byars points to this tension between realism and melodrama both as a set of cinematic techniques and an epistemology. According to Byars,

realism depends on the assumption that the social world can be adequately explained, through social-scientific methods, and that adequate representation is possible. Melodrama has no such confidence; irrational forces exist in the world, and our representational systems are incapable of adequately and directly representing them. Melodrama, like realism, roots itself in the everyday, but melodrama exploits excessive uses of representational conventions to express that which cannot (yet) be said, that which language alone is incapable of expressing. (13)

Since the aim of biopics’ aim is to convey the inner workings of ‘real’ historical figures, it is inevitable that they should naturally incorporate and interrogate cinematic techniques most readily associated with realist cinema and the rhetoric as well as the aesthetic of melodrama in their camerawork, soundtrack, and editing. This study will use the term ‘melodrama, then, to denote primarily a mode, rather than a genre – unless specified – in order to explore its influence on and intersections with the biopic’s claim to realism and authenticity.

Currently associated with a type of ‘women’s film’ focused on psychological exploration, the domestic sphere and strong pathos, melodrama was traditionally used by the industry and the trade press of the classic Hollywood period to describe mainly action-oriented, crime and retribution dramas, “extravagant adventures, full of blood and thunder, clashing swords and hair’s breadth escapes” (Neale *Genre and Hollywood* 180), that is, productions generally associated with male audiences. The later associations of the term with female-centred narratives of romantic and maternal self-sacrifice such as *Now, Voyager*

(1942) and the Sirkian family melodramas of the 1950s were generated by feminist critical debates in the 1970s and 1980s and resulted in the creation of a new, fertile critical framework laminated onto an existing industry category; in the process, this critical project also “successfully reoriented the gender politics of film theory itself” (Langford 29).

Peter Brooks’s seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (1976) helped reconceptualise melodrama as a mode by placing it in the tradition of the nineteenth-century novels of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Henry James, which themselves reworked a substratum of early nineteenth-century French popular theatre. For Brooks, melodrama represents the theatrical impulse itself, “the impulse towards dramatization, heightening, expression, acting out” (xv), whose forms are essential to the modern imagination. His interest lies, however, not in melodrama as a historical genre, but “as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force” (xvii). As a mode that operates with surfaces to signify depths and convey the experience of strong moral forces at work, “dramatizing an egalitarian ethos” (Gledhill “Prologue” xvii) and democratising thought and feeling, melodrama becomes “the expressionism of the moral imagination” (Brooks 55) and the central feature of the modern sensibility.

According to Gledhill, melodrama’s specificity “lies in its operation as modality: as a mode of aesthetic articulation distilled from and adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures [...] Thus, melodrama thrives on comic counterpoint, may site its fateful encounters in romance, and, to ensure the authenticity of its claims and the recognition of audiences, keeps pace with changing conventions of verisimilitude (what is taken as true) and the expanding boundaries of realism (enlarging representation)” (“Prologue” xiii-xiv). Recognisable by its effects, the melodramatic modality modulates its

structural devices and dramatic mechanisms according to the demands of evolving genres and subgenres, different historical circumstances and specific cultural environments, as well as the new media. Melodrama is locatable even at the heart of the poststructuralist project, as Foucault's major work, *History of Madness* (1961) has been read as "a melodramatic story about the persistence of unreason in Western society" (Huffer 637), a Manichean melodrama of unreason persecuted by authoritarian reason that forces readers to engage the "unsettling ethical ambiguities of a hyperrational, postsacred world (Huffer 637-38). Moreover, in his study of authorship titled simply *The Author*, Andrew Bennett describes Foucault's arguments for an author-function as "self-consciously melodramatic" (27).

As in the case of the biopic, melodrama's focus on the individual has been seen by neo-Marxist criticism as a displacement of social and class struggles into less important personal and family conflicts. However, as Deidre Pribram argues, "the pathos of a melodramatic situation calls on audiences (and, sometimes, characters) to respond to a wide range of socially induced or socially charged emotional states" (242). These states, generated by distressing social circumstances, are felt by individuals. Therefore, "such depictions do not displace social issues into privatized or personalized concerns"; on the contrary, they "foreground the individual as 'socioemotional'" (Pribram 243). Melodrama, like the biopic, sees the individual as both product and generator of social, economic and cultural forces – they meld together the individual's emotional and interpersonal dimensions with the socio-economic forces that power them. In a similar manner to the biopic, melodrama "fuses individual and social as codependent" where "action is generated by emotion as realized social force" (Gledhill "Prologue" xxi). Using the aesthetic articulations of melodrama, the biopic performs the same democratizing operations – by humanising the subjects of literary history, it foregrounds the socioemotional individual without whose mediation the social and economic forces would remain unfelt, unseen historical abstractions. One can hardly



empathise with a revolutionary crowd, but, as a spectator, one may resonate emotionally with Émile Zola's impassioned plea, having witnessed his struggles in *The Life of Émile Zola* (1937) "By all that I have won, by all that I have written to spread the spirit of France, I swear that he is innocent. May all that melt away; may my name perish if Dreyfus be not innocent. He is innocent". The scene of innocence revealed and defended, typical of melodrama, is also a scene of the author yielding his *auctoritas* to embody socioethical values and point to ethical forces felt as having "a real existence somewhere behind or beyond the façade of reality" (Brooks *The Melodramatic Imagination* 202).

## 2.2. The biopic: a review of criticism

The biographical film has been a fertile genre in the history of cinema, garnering both popular appreciation and industry awards for performers. However, in spite of its constant presence in the history of cinema, it has elicited surprisingly little sustained critical interest. This might be attributed to its industrial positioning as 'middlebrow' cinema, a term I have alluded to above, a cultural category that film critics have tended to avoid. As one critic points out, "critics who are truly cinephiles, I believe, often champion extremes. They go for the highest and the lowest [...] cinephile critics look for excess and intensity [...] What such critics usually do *not* like, on principle, is a certain middle-of-the-road, middlebrow cinema" (Martin; italics in the original). Indeed, both historical and biographical films have been consistently panned by film reviewers and academic critics for allegedly playing fast and loose with 'fact' and 'truth' – they have been found wanting in supposedly desirable characteristics such as accuracy, credibility, and authenticity, as well as lacking entertainment value owing to their perceived conformity to dull generic conventions.

It is revealing of the low status of the biopic that Robert Rosenstone should have titled his chapter in a collection about cinematic portrayals of the past “In Praise of the Biopic”. His analysis starts with the contention that “nobody has ever had much good to say about the biographical film” (11), including George Custen, the only scholar to have investigated the topic at length in his 1992 monograph *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, who joined the chorus of critics in describing the biopic in starkly negative terms: “Hollywood biography is to history what Caesar’s Palace is to architectural history: an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity” (Custen 7). Neale makes a similar observation in *Genre and Hollywood* when he notes the biopic’s surprising lack of critical success: “the target of historians and of film critics and theorists alike, it has been the butt of jokes rather more often than it has been the focus of serious analysis” (60).

As just noted, Custen’s 1992 *Bio/Pics* is the first sustained scrutiny of the genre. Before Custen’s volume, there had been sporadic engagements with the genre in the form of chapters and articles. For example, Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans’s 1985 *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical* devotes around twenty-five pages to the musical biopic of the 1940s. Thomas Elsaesser’s article “Film History as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-Pic”, published in the film studies journal *Wide Angle* in 1986 equally examines a series of classical-era biopics directed by William Dieterle for Warner Brothers, concluding that the biopic “can be understood as trying to inscribe the spectator as an individual (the classical subject-position of American cinema) and as a member of a collectivity, a civic audience [...] held together by the force of personality (in this case the authenticated historical individual represented by the performer as specialist of metamorphosis rather than the star who is always identical with himself)” (30). In Marcia

Landy's 1996 *Cinematic Uses of the Past* a chapter is devoted to a case study of *The Scarlet Empress* (1932) as both biopic and historical melodrama.

The earliest study focusing specifically on the biographical film as a genre is Carolyn Anderson's chapter "Biographical Film" in *Handbook of American Film Genres* (1988), in which she surveys over two hundred feature films chronologically from 1929 to 1986 in order to identify the characteristic patterns that make up the generic profile of the biopic. Among observations about recurrent motifs – such as 'success comes at a price' or 'the personally inadequate genius' – type of life stories that attract most attention – entertainers, composers and sports figures – and preference for a certain type of sex and race (mainly male and white), she also notes that their focus on the individual allows biopics to function as award-winning star vehicles, while their emphasis on the past makes them a conservative genre (Anderson 333). On the other hand, the tone, style and central content of the life story at the heart of the biopic blur any easily identifiable boundaries between this genre and other genres or subgenres such as the musical, the gangster movie or the western, according to Anderson.

Going back to Custen's seminal *Bio/Pics*, for the first time the volume examines in-depth the workings of the genre based on a large sample of almost three hundred biopics from 1927 to 1960. Echoing Anderson's observation about the biopic's tendency toward conservatism, Custen finds that the genre "routinely integrates disparate historical episodes of selected individual lives into a nearly monochromatic 'Hollywood view of history'" by means of constructing a "highly conventionalized view of fame" (3). What the studios did was control the shaping of public history to suit both the demands of production and a particular conservative ideology through a variety of means such as the standardisation of narrative, the recycling of actors in certain roles so that they became associated with a certain type of figure in the minds of the public, and the elision of events without regard for accuracy, in order to conform to the legal standards of the period (see Custen 22-23). Their

version of public history was ultimately a narcissistic one, heavily reliant on a self-reflexive world view in which

the lives and values of the men who created movie entertainment became a paradigm for all fame. Although the cinematic lives of the famous take place in locations the world over, and are set in time periods covering over two thousand years, they inevitably reflect the values of the world of the Hollywood studio and their personnel. (Custen 149)

This circumscribed view of history was invariably modelled on the cosmology of the movie industry in which “key historical figures become stars” and “the greatness of the individual figure becomes that set of qualities that made a producer great or powerful in Hollywood” (Custen 4). In terms of the preferred professions, he finds that entertainers, artists and outlaws make up the top three professions for men, while female biopics predominantly feature entertainers, paramours and royalty, with women artists making up but 7.8 percent of the total number. He does not specify how many of the ‘artist’ biopics are about writers, but a cursory glance at the tables he usefully provides shows that every decade between 1931 and 1960 yielded at least one writer story, such as *The Life of Émile Zola* (1937), *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* (1942) or the musical *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952). His analysis stops in the 1960s when the arrival of the truly consumer-based medium of television brought with it a shift in focus from the studio era’s great ‘idols of production’ to the more demographically fragmented, corporate-sponsored ‘idols of consumption’ and from feature films to docudramas and made-for-TV movies.

Discussions of biopics can be found in books from the 1980s and 1990s dealing with Hollywood’s relationship with history, such as Bruce Crowther’s tellingly entitled *Hollywood Faction: Reality and Myth in the Movies* (1984) and Robert Brent Toplin’s *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (1996), which tackle the issue of veracity. They also, more or less explicitly, warn against the distortion of history perpetrated by these ‘deceptive’ films. Furthermore, James Welsh’s article “Hollywood ‘Faction’ and the

New Biofantasy” sets out to illustrate the appropriate way to adapt biography to film: ‘the truth evolves from carefully researched primary sources and is consistent with and parallel to conclusions drawn by [...] historians. The life is neither falsified nor fabricated’ (61) – a stance on accuracy and medium translatability which biopic productions have tended to use in their marketing consistently in order to sell them as ‘true’. However, given the multiplicity of sources on which biopics are based, such as biographies, memoirs, letters, works of fiction, songs, paintings, interviews, and an endless variety of cultural appropriations, most attempts to pry fact and fiction apart are demonstrably pointless. In culture at large, the biographical film simply becomes another point in the complex intertextual and intermedial web of references surrounding the biographical subject.

At the turn of the twenty-first century research on biopics started to trickle into collections and scholarly journals such as *Biography* in 2000 and the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* in 2008, both of which devoted special issues to the genre, with contributions ranging from case studies of contemporary mainstream productions to analyses of subgenres like ‘self-biography’ and the documentary biopic. Robert Burgoyne’s *The Hollywood Historical Film* (2008) includes a chapter on the biographical film, which he calls “perhaps the most familiar form of cinematic historiography” and “by far the largest subgenre of historical filmmaking” (16). His choice of case study for the biopic is, of course, one that chimes with the overall thrust of his argument about the power of the historical film to “establish an emotional connection to the past” (1-2), namely Steven Spielberg’s sweeping epic *Schindler’s List* (1993).

Dennis Bingham’s *Whose Lives Are They Anyway: The Biopic As Contemporary Film Genre* (2010) continues Custen’s work in *Bio/Pics* and sets out to examine the evolution of the biopic since the classical Hollywood period to the turn of the twenty-first century, blending research into the biographical subject’s life, the history of the film’s making,

ideological and cultural analysis, as well as assessing what particular films mean in the context of the genre's development. While Custen's production-based approach conveys a sense of purposeful unity in Hollywood's myth-making machine, Bingham's extensive volume consists of a selection of forcefully argued case studies which combine aesthetic, sociological and historical perspectives to make the case for an evolutionary history of the genre that goes from the conventional to the postmodern, from the classic celebratory studio production, through the realistic stage, the parody, and the minority appropriation to, finally, the heterogeneous neoclassical biopic. His groundbreaking study demonstrates that the biopic has evolved from a producer's genre to a director's genre, as directors boasting 'auteurist' credentials such as Todd Haynes, Martin Scorsese and Roman Polanski formally deconstruct and revive the genre. Not only does Bingham persuasively argue for the cinematic and cultural value of the genre, he also gleefully sets out to rescue the term itself, 'biopic', from the derision of its critics: "I believe those of us who take the genre seriously should reappropriate that tangy word 'biopic' and unfurl it in the faces of all those who have treated the genre with the smugness they accuse the biopic of possessing in volumes" (13). In a potentially problematic move, Bingham divides the volume neatly into two parts along gender lines, claiming that biopics of women are inevitably weighed down by myths of victimisation, which makes them so structurally different from male biopics as to constitute their own genre. Interestingly, his only chapter on a literary biopic focuses on Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990), but he does not expand on the subject beyond an analysis of the ways this biographical film resists the tropes of victimisation associated with female biopics.

Whilst studies of the biopic in terms of genre and thematic variety are essential for such an under-researched field, the summer 2011 issue of the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* takes a different approach and sets out to examine the genre's close relationship with

the political-cultural formation called ‘American national identity’ on the basis of the idea that genre and nation are ‘both imagined constructions with material histories which are crucial to individual and communal processes of interpretation’ (Epstein 6). William H. Epstein’s introduction acknowledges Custer’s theory of the traditional alliance between the aesthetic practices of the biopic and the dominant structures of socio-economic authority, and puts forth one of the guiding premises of the collection, namely the idea that “the phrase ‘American national identity’ describes a well-travelled pathway through the generic history and poetics of the biographical film – *a generic plot*, if you will, by which the biopic traverses American lives” (7; italics in the original). In order to better define the contours of this particular structure across a variety of biopics, he proposes the term “generic gesture of *strategic patriotic memory*” (7; italics in the original) as a theoretical tool for tracking down the distribution of the generic plot among films, filmmakers, spectatorial positions and the reception and circulation of mainstream cinema. He aims to identify and analyse the most consistently used gestures of strategic patriotic memory in biopics, which turn out to be mainly visual and aural references to American symbols like the flag, well-known landmarks or the national anthem. Their repeated use in biographical films helps to articulate and establish the fictions around the ultimately unstable idea of American national identity. Yet again, the literary biopic is curiously absent from this special issue, although surely a glance at the ways American literature and writers have been represented on screen would have illuminated the concept of national identity further. This shortcoming is partly remedied in the volume *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopics and American National Identity* published in 2016, which collects almost all of the initial articles in the issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* while adding a few more on statesmen and artists. Among these is a Claire Perkins’s chapter on the biopic *Sylvia* (2003) which analyses the film’s narrative as a potential “bad misadaptation of the Plath legend, as a (melo)dramatic domestication of an

iconic cultural figure” (196-97) which, the author argues in agreement with Bingham’s diagnostic, aligns itself with the victimisation story that tends to define the classic female biopic. According to Perkins, *Sylvia* inevitably simplifies Sylvia Plath’s complicated legend and ‘digests’ it for mainstream audiences, while its only saving grace is its visual style and Gwyneth Paltrow’s excellent performance as the poet.

Wary of Bingham’s stark division between male and female biopics, Bronwyn Polaschek’s *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen* (2013) argues that, apart from the victimising or overtly feminist biopics examined in his volume, there is a third category, the postfeminist biopic. This particular kind has emerged out of broader social and cultural shifts which have influenced filmmaking and the structure of female audiences since the end of the twentieth century. The book focuses on four biopics that display varying degrees of formal and narrative experimentation: *Sylvia*, *Frida* (2002), *The Hours* (2002) and *Becoming Jane* (2007). The films are chosen, firstly, on the basis of the particular writer’s canonicity within second-wave feminism and, secondly, because of their relevance as meeting points between feminism, postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Polaschek’s aim is to demonstrate that contemporary female biopics need not conform to the victimisation paradigm, and she does this by teasing out the films’ postfeminist strategies and showing how they work towards complicating any simplistic feminist readings. Given that the four biopics she discusses rely on a variety of published biographical material, Polaschek’s analysis references relevant textual sources to support her arguments. For instance, while discussing the issue of romance in *Sylvia*, she quotes both the feminist biographies which downplay the importance of Plath’s romantic relationship with Ted Hughes for her poetry and the more recent assessments where the relationship is viewed as mutually productive. This intertextual strategy offers a complex view of the author’s reception and the influence of the critical debates on the biopic’s narrative. Thus the case



studies combine brief biographical notes, discussions of critical reception and compelling in-depth analyses of visual and narrative themes towards the overall conclusion that postfeminism represents an epistemological shift which serves to destabilise both patriarchal and feminist discourses. While Polascheck's approach comes close to my own in the present thesis, it diverges in its focus on a specific gender and limited number of case studies.

Up until Tom Brown and Belén Vidal's 2014 collection *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, most studies of biopics had been largely circumscribed to the Anglo-American context. Brown and Vidal's volume, whose contributors come predominantly from the field of film and media studies, aims to go beyond Hollywood into the international arena and map out the biopic's significance in contemporary film culture by examining the genre's appeal, hybridity and narratives in an industrial context. As with Bingham's volume, this collection attempts to identify key cycles in the development of the genre in the twenty-first century and single out challenging films and filmmakers that push the boundaries of generic conventions. The volume approaches its topic both in terms of historiographic development, as well as through close analysis of the aesthetic and narrative strategies deployed in the representation of historical lives. Unfortunately, as in the earlier cases, none of the chapters addresses literary biopics specifically.

Kamilla Elliott, on the other hand, has contributed two essays on the literary biopic, one in *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation* (2012), titled "Screened Writers", and a sequel titled "Postmodern Screened Writers" in *Screening Text: Critical Perspectives on Film Adaptation* (2013). In the former, she aims to examine theories of authorship as intertexts for authorial figures on screen, concluding that "screened writers not only destroy canonical literature's master narratives; they also destroy literary criticism's new master narratives – its philosophies and theories of authorship" (195). Her essay "Postmodern Screened Writers" continues her investigation into how "undead screened writers run up

against traditional and poststructuralist notions of dead authors” (22) by looking at the representation of two American writers in *Adaptation* (2002) and *American Splendor* (2003).

The first edited volume to engage more fully with the subject of literary biography on screen is *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, published in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Contributors to the collection set out to examine films about writers, real and fictional, and the ways in which filmmakers have configured literary lives and the material and commercial operations of literary processes (Buchanan “Introduction” 4). However, none of the chapters engages specifically with the intersection between the biopic and the melodramatic mode, as the present study aims to do. 2014 saw the publication of *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*, a collection of essays on a series of British royal figures and literary and artistic authors such as Princess Diana, Jane Austen, the Romantic poets or John Lennon through the lens of celebrity culture and British national identity discourses. Márta Minnier and Maddalena Pennacchia’s well-argued introduction builds on Custen and Bingham’s earlier theorisations of the genre, and combines genre analysis and internet comments to underline the biopic’s contemporary cultural relevance as well as find out “just to what extent and in what fashion contemporary cultural practices [...] shape this seemingly ‘harmless’ (that is, ideologically tepid) screen genre” (26).

The first book-length study to examine the literary biopic specifically is Hila Shachar’s *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic*, published in 2019. Shachar’s aim is to offer a detailed approach to the literary biopic “viewed through a wider ideological and cultural lens” (1). An interesting element in this study is the author’s attempt to define the literary biopic as its own genre, rather than a sub-genre of the larger category of the biopic or the costume drama. She argues that, instead of applying a taxonomy of hierarchies of genres and seeing the literary biopic as a secondary by-product, it is more fruitful to examine it as

---

<sup>1</sup> I have contributed a chapter to this collection, titled “‘Here is the story of my career...’: the woman writer on film” some of whose content is reflected in the present thesis.

“its own living organism, its own body” with its own unique language, expectations, and tropes, and place it horizontally to the general biopic mode. According to Shachar, the literary biopic’s uniqueness lies in its “minute, detailed screen language formed as a cultural exploration of interior subjectivity and authorial identity” (15). The authorial subjectivity that is central to the literary biopic becomes thus a quasi-religious “site of worship” (15) through which we – Western culture, that is – “seek our own selves” (169) and reflect on our contemporary culture and concerns. Intersectional politics, postmodern consciousness and analyses of the cultural formations of heritage cinema are combined in Shachar’s “magpie-like approach” (9) to the examination of the individual in Western culture. While this thesis touches upon a series of elements present in Shachar’s study, it is less preoccupied with ideological scrutiny, leaning towards a view of the literary biopic as essentially a hybrid generic form, not necessarily as a genre in itself. One finds it hard to see how, for example, the tropes used in painter or musician biopics differ in essential ways from those present in literary ones – they all indeed rely on the centrality of the individual commonly associated with Western culture, but they also draw upon a long and rich history of intersections and exchanges with a variety of filmic genres, especially, I would argue, melodrama, poaching and repurposing (to appropriate Burgoyne’s terms) images and strategies along the way in order to reach an increasingly global audience beyond the ‘West’.

Before moving on, a brief look at the above-mentioned term *heritage cinema* might be useful. The term has been applied to British and American ‘quality’ costume dramas, or period dramas, of the 1980s and 1990s that dramatised the romantic relationships of the upper and upper-middle class dressed in appealing and meticulously-reconstructed costumes, against a background of luxurious country houses and picturesque landscapes that form a

“pictorialist museum aesthetic” (Higson *English Heritage* 39).<sup>2</sup> Such heritage productions might include the tasteful literary adaptations of canonical texts by highly productive and successful producer/writer duo Merchant Ivory, uplifting historical films based on true stories like *Chariots of Fire* (1981) or biopics like *Gandhi* (1982), but also postmodern takes on the canon such as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981) or *Shakespeare in Love*, as they catered to the same type of literate audience. Highly multigeneric, heritage films intersect with comedy, musicals, romance, and horror. The heritage film label first emerged in the late 1980s, and became mostly associated with Andrew Higson’s studies of this cultural phenomenon published in the early- to mid-1990s, in which he sets out to discuss the range of characteristics of a series of films which “articulate a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes” (12). According to Higson, these conservative visions of the past construct and celebrate a desirable image of a long-gone England of the imagination for contemporary audiences. Heritage cinema has been connected to the consolidation of the heritage industry as a commodification of history and the past, to “the marketing and consumption of Britain’s cultural heritage as a tourist attraction” (Sargeant 301), and, politically, to Thatcherite Conservatism (Monk “The British heritage-film debate” 177).

On the other hand, several critics have voiced their disagreement with what they perceived to be unfairly limiting labels, and argued for a more complex analysis of these films that takes into consideration not only their cultural texture and significance, but also aspects of production and commercialisation as most of them are international productions aimed at an international audience, which complicates their supposed ‘national’ character. Claire Monk, for instance, argues that the term heritage cinema is most useful as a contingent

---

<sup>2</sup>Julianne Pidduck defines costume drama within the broader category of heritage cinema around the refusal of historical or literary authenticity, as the term ‘costume’ “suggests the pleasures and possibilities of masquerade – the construction, constraint and display of the body through clothes” (4).

critical construct rather than a description of concrete film genres or cycles (“The British heritage-film debate” 183). She notes that critiques of heritage cinema, while concentrating on the mise-en-scène to argue for these films’ nostalgic and conservative ethos, fail to take into account other potential sites of pleasure such as those of “narrative, character, performance, humour, sexuality” (188). Pointing to our diverse spectatorial experiences of specific heritage films, Monk observes:

How do we decide whether a particular screen fiction set in the past is ‘nostalgic’ or not – particularly when their relation to the past they depict is so often deeply ambiguous? [...] *Chariots of Fire* and *Maurice* undoubtedly make available the pleasures of eaves-dropping on an obsolete way of life and its aesthetic trappings – but do they really make us nostalgic for a past in which British Jews were expected to live with anti-semitic abuse and gay men could be sent to jail for kissing, or does our pleasure derive from cathartic indignation at the injustices of that past and the satisfaction of distancing ourselves from these prejudices in the present? (Monk “The British ‘heritage film’ and its critics” 122)

More recently, the debates around heritage have moved beyond the material into digital space, challenging the assumptions around heritage as an undifferentiated category inevitably tied to a particular national, cultural and ideological context. As Monk argues in a recent study of transnational audiences and fan perspectives, the transnational nature of ‘English’ heritage can be located across several sites, namely, “in the films’ institutional and production origins and commercial logics”, in the specifics of their circulation, re-framing and reception by non-homogenous global audiences, and also in the deterritorialised arena of internet-based, global fan culture whose agents engage in endless transtextual and transmedial creative play, appropriating and re-working heritage texts in plural ways (“From ‘English’ Heritage” 211). Consequently, I would like to position myself within Monk’s enlarged paradigm as a non-Western scholar of English-speaking literature and film, and argue that literary biopics, while potentially connected to the idea of heritage cinema through subject matter and style, can be productively interpreted from a transnational, deterritorialised

perspective through the lens of genre and modality which has allowed them to speak to audiences across the world.

The last scholarly study on the biopic I would like to mention is the long overdue *A Companion to the Biopic*, published at the start of 2020.<sup>3</sup> This collection contains chapters that use a variety of theoretical, historical, thematic and performance-based approaches, and provides an account of the genre from its beginnings to the present day. While my thesis can hardly replicate the ambitious sweep of such a heterogeneous collection, its methodology is somewhat similar in that it tries to approach the authorial figure in literary biopics from a variety of perspectives, all brought together by the overarching argument that the ‘melodramatic’ in the adaptation of a subject’s life-text is not a recourse to cheap sentimentality at the expense of historical fact, but a strategy convergent with a democratising ethos, and, more recently, with the emerging cultural paradigms of metamodernism and its new sensibilities.

---

<sup>3</sup> I have contributed a chapter to this recent collection, titled “Biopics and the Melodramatic Mode”. Some of it has been worked into this thesis.

### 3. On 'authenticity': selling biopics

To better understand the transmission mechanisms and cultural impact of biographical films, one needs to take into account not only the filmic narrative, but also the broader network of industrial and commercial structures out of which it emerges. In *Shakespeare on Film*, Judith Buchanan calls this the "textual penumbra":

Each movie release is typically accompanied by a bombardment of anecdote, location report, publicity stills, teaser trailers, celebrity appearances, interviews and production information strategically put into the public domain. Some of this will seep irresistibly into our reading of the film, compromising any hypothetical notion of textual autonomy. The sheer prevalence of such extra-textual information gives it a power of penetration that binds it in to what we might call the 'textual penumbra' of a film: that body of information that, although not literally part of what is seen on screen, attaches to the film so closely as to become inextricably associated with it. At its most intrusive, a film's potential inclusions in its 'penumbra', or textual identity in the broadest sense, might include, for example, what the director is on record as saying the film 'is about'. At its most innocuous, it might, more simply, include an awareness of an actor's previous roles, or a knowledge of the shooting locations used. (10)

The term is fairly close to Gerard Genette's literary *paratext* (1-2) and especially to what Steve Neale following Gregory Lukow and Steve Ricci calls *intertextual relay* ("Questions of Genre" 160). Neale defines intertextual relay as the various verbal and pictorial descriptions found in advertisements, reviews and posters, which "define and circulate narrative images for individual films, beginning the immediate narrative process of expectation and anticipation" (160). Additionally, this relay "helps to define and circulate [...] what one might call 'generic images', providing sets of labels, terms, and expectations that will come to characterize the genre as a whole" (160).

It would be impossible to examine the extent of the textual penumbra even in the case of one single biopic, so this section focuses on two paratextual elements – posters and trailers – in an attempt to demonstrate some of the ways in which they initiate

potential readings of films and build audience expectation in the case of a hybrid, multigeneric form like the biopic.

The life of a cinematic text begins well before its first screening, in the targeted “coherent clusters of meaning, expectation, and engagement” (Gray 47) that advertising campaigns inject into the market. Studios and film producers invest heavily in the production of promotional material, and although “we may in time resist the meanings proposed by promotional materials”, they nevertheless “tell us what to expect, direct our excitement and /or apprehension, and begin to tell us what a text is all about, calling for our identification with and interpretation of that text before we have even seemingly arrived at it” (Gray 48). Posters are but one type of print ad in a film’s marketing campaign, alongside billboards, newspaper adverts, and a multiplicity of online engagements. They occupy a liminal space somewhere between advertising and art, and have a respectable history as cult objects, collected by movie fans the world over. The sheer number of poster artwork collections on sale on the Amazon website is testimony to this interest in new and old posters for a variety of film genres, from Hollywood classics to Japanese or Hammer cult horror, to James Bond flicks.

Trailers, on the other hand, may offer tantalising glimpses into the world of the future film, initiating a whole host of generic, narrative and stylistic meanings. As Lisa Kernan points out, trailers are “a unique form of narrative film exhibition, wherein promotional discourse and narrative pleasure are conjoined (whether happily or not)” (1). While being ephemeral conduits of a larger text, trailers concentrate in a few minutes the potential attractions of the film, playing an essential role in creating an initial framework through which audiences frame and decode the future text generically and narratively. Indeed, trailers reflect the film in ways which are subject more to the constraints of a particular genre producers wish to channel, rather than reflect the



individual film itself which often is far more generically complex. Their “unique status as cinematic promotions of narrative – and narrativisation of promotion” in concentrated form, “enables a treatment that transcends mere marketing critique and has the potential to contribute to a social history of desire” (Kernan 2).

Though visually static and less dense in meanings than trailers, posters might be decisive in directing audiences’ expectations towards a particular film genre, in introducing the stars and selling the narrative world of the product. In general, they tend to be fairly standardised, depending on the period of production. In terms of visual style, even before reading the textual information containing the tagline and the actors’ names, a glance at a poster may tell whether the film pertains to the genre of action, horror or comedy. The information is conveyed through colour, disposition of the human subjects, use of objects, and strategically placed shadows and lights. Unsurprisingly, if the story is centred on a historical figure, as is the case with literary biopics, the leading actor(s) are at the centre, underlining thus both the generic and narrative focus of the film. They might also gaze directly at the viewer, to further show that what the poster is advertising is a ‘real’ story featuring ‘real’ historical people (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Promotional posters for *Wilde* (1997), *Sylvia* (2003) and *The Libertine* (2004)

Production companies oftentimes try to maximise the appeal of their product and target it at a larger audience by releasing a variety of posters that expand the film's generic reach. Thus it is not uncommon to see female biopics being marketed aggressively as romance, with the corresponding shift in the image.

More often than not, romance film posters show the leading couple either side by side or nuzzling each other (figs. 4 and 6) , and given that biographical films tend to deal with the protagonists' love lives predominantly, the choice to sell the story as romance is to be expected. The main selling points conveyed by posters also depend on the market, with the US being more receptive to romance films than, say, the UK market. An illustration of this national preference might be the alternative ending to *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), custom created for the US market, where Elizabeth and Darcy share a romantic conversation on their newly acquired marital status, sealed with a slow-motion kiss. In the examples of posters for the biopic *Sylvia* (2002) in fig. 2 (centre) and fig. 3, one can appreciate the different meanings contained in the choice of design. The English-language poster in fig. 2 features an extreme close-up of Gwyneth Paltrow looking straight at the viewer, with the names of the lead actors, title of the film and the tagline "Life was too small to contain her" positioned across her cheek. The head of the actress is heavily cropped to appear as if, indeed, she is too great to be contained by the small frame of the poster – thus the tagline of the film references both extratextual and intratextual elements. This directs out attention to the design of the poster itself, the star status of the A-list actress, the filmic narrative of Plath's suicide, and the actual historical figure of Sylvia Plath behind the image whose 'reality' cannot be contained by the film. While communicating the generic contours and extradiegetic intersections of the biographical film, posters also lure potential audiences with the

intertextual potential and public appeal of their lead star(s). The Spanish poster (fig. 3) is modelled on the same principle of star centrality, even though it inexplicably uses an image of a younger Paltrow with a 1990s hairstyle, a choice suggesting perhaps that the historical context of Plath and Hughes's story might be irrelevant for the film's potential audience. In this case, then, the promotional material assumes that an international (Spanish) mainstream audience might not know or care who 'Sylvia' is and will be attracted by the glossy beauty of the (youthful-looking) star and the tagline promising a heart-wrenching love story: "The heart of a woman. The mind of a genius. One love".<sup>1</sup>

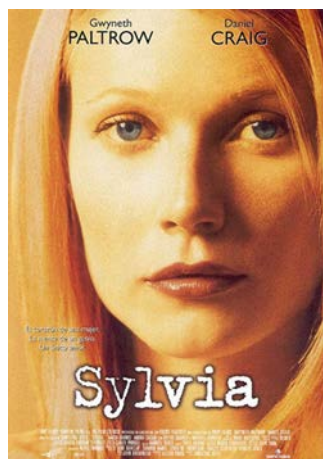


Fig. 3. *Sylvia* for the Spanish market



Fig. 4. *Sylvia* for the English market



Fig. 5. Marketing the auteur



Fig. 6. Marketing the romance

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish version reads: "El corazón de una mujer. La mente de un genio. Un único amor".

In the case of productions that might be associated with art cinema, posters trade on the perceived auteurist status of the director, exemplified in the case of the promotional poster for Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009) in fig. 5. As Timothy Corrigan notes in his analysis of the commercial dimension of contemporary auteurism, postmodern auteurs challenge the poststructuralist 'death of the author' through their status as stars:

In a twist on the tradition of certain movies being vehicles for certain stars, the auteur-star can potentially carry and redeem any sort of textual material, often to the extent of making us forget that material through the marvel of its agency. [...] in today's commerce we want to know what our authors and auteurs look like or how they act; it is the text that may now be dead (*A Cinema Without Walls* 105-106)

The poster in fig. 5 illustrates Corrigan's observation on the commercially-driven insertion of the auteur into the textual penumbra whereby "auteurist movies are often made before they get made" (*A Cinema Without Walls* 105). The design is contrastively colourful, yet minimalist, with the female lead facing away, engrossed in reading a letter or a poem – the ambiguity is deliberate in a film that deals with a Romantic poet's love and loss. The placing of the human figure suggests an intimacy to which we are denied access, unless mediated through Campion's art. The necessity of this mediation is further emphasised by the mention that Campion is the director of the highly acclaimed, award-winning *The Piano* (1993), thus encouraging the viewer to oscillate hermeneutically between the two films, while expecting the spectacle of another female's private world. The highlighted part at the top supports that promise, assuring discerning audiences that *Bright Star* is bound to be a masterly cinematic experience, worthy of five stars, in line with Campion's previous Oscar-winning film. The narrative itself is subordinate to the lure of being able to re-experience "an exquisite piece of film-making". Moreover, the tagline underneath the title in a font resembling handwriting seems to appropriate Keats's poetry for the purposes of auteurist

promotion, as “A thing of beauty is a joy forever” allows for multiple readings simultaneously – it positions the film as a literary adaptation, it references the visual pleasures of period film, and, read in conjunction with the superlative review at the top, it points to the cinematic ‘beauty’ a Campion film is certain to provide based on her previous work. The artistic leverages of Keats the poet and Campion the director are integrated to promote a product of a certain ‘quality’ built on the premises of creative integrity and artistic mastery.

On the other hand, the poster in fig. 6 seems slightly less invested in auteur promotion. The design is modelled on the conventional romantic film layout, with a close-up of the two protagonists on the verge of kissing. While the name of the director is still fairly prominent, it does not reference her other films, and asserts her auteurist credentials – “a Jane Campion film” – in a more subdued manner. The tagline “First love burns brightest” rearticulates the title, while the line from the critical review at the bottom, crowned by two award nominations, underscores the message that this is a ‘quality’ romantic film. Unlike in the ‘auteurist’ poster in fig. 5, the disposition of the various visual and textual elements in this one conveys a potentially more circumscribed generic categorisation as romance.



Fig. 7. Foregrounding the cultural status of the author

Another fairly common biopic poster is the one in which the cultural status of the protagonist is foregrounded and explicitly connected to the reality-based ‘authority’ of the filmic narrative, by identifying it as either biographical or as adapted after a ‘true story’. In fig. 7 on the left, the poster for *Priest of Love* (1981), a biopic based on D.H. Lawrence’s biography, trumpets the writer’s name at the top – “He was D.H. Lawrence. She was his Lady Chatterley. Their extraordinary romance was more tempestuous than any he wrote” – thus constructing the biopic around romance and melodrama, a reading reinforced by the image showing two embracing figures that form a heart shape. By comparing the ‘real’ romance in Lawrence’s life with the romances featured in his fiction, the film places its own narrative alongside Lawrence’s literary creations. Moreover, by singling out the protagonist of Lawrence’s most notorious novel, the biopic also signals its status as a literary adaptation of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) who, in this case, becomes Lawrence himself. In fig. 7 on the right, the tagline for *Miss Potter* (2006) – a romance biopic on the life, love and loss of children’s author Beatrix Potter – reads “The life of Beatrix Potter was the most enchanting tale of all” thus asserting the potential superiority of the life-text on screen over Potter’s fiction through the use of the superlative. Moreover, the adjective “enchanting” points both to the charms of Potter’s children’s stories, which the audience is expected to reconnect with as they watch the film, and the quaint pleasures of British heritage cinema. On the other hand, the poster for *Quills* (2000) in fig. 7 in the centre humorously trades on the Marquis de Sade’s cultural reputation as a libertine and a sadist – “Meet the Marquis de Sade. The pleasure is all his” – while the disposition of the two protagonists coupled with Winslet’s exposed bosom signal a playfully erotic period film.

In *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* Thomas Leitch discusses the label “based on a true story” and finds it to be “always strategic or generic rather than

historical or existential” (282), oftentimes deceptively used to ascribe a truth value to filmic texts which are entirely fictional. Films that use this label “define themselves by announcing their fidelity to a text to which they can never be compared, one which just happens to be congruent with the truth” (301-2). Their source is then a slippery notion of truth and reality already fully formed into a story, ready to be adapted, and, through this strategy, these films authenticate themselves by appealing to “precursor texts that are nonexistent” (302).

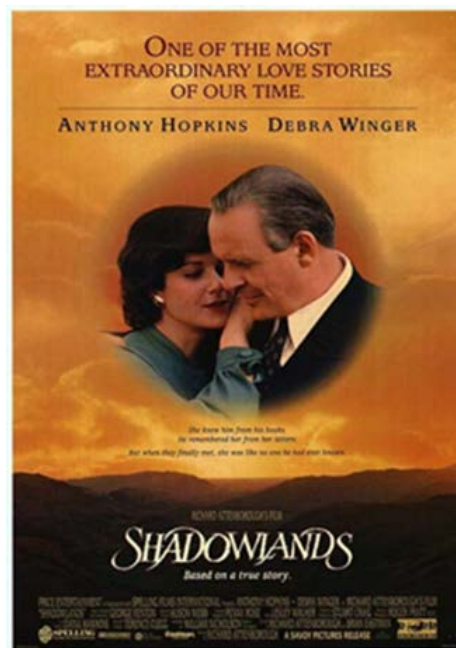


Fig. 8. The poster for *Shadowlands* combines ‘true story’ and romance

The tagline on the poster for *Shadowlands* (1993) in fig. 8 appeals to this kind of fidelity to real events in the life of C.S. Lewis that have been already structured into a ‘true story’. However, in this particular case, the message actually connects with the history of the film’s making, as the screenplay written by William Nicholson was based on an earlier adaptation for the BBC, also called *Shadowlands* (1985) which was later on adapted as a stage play in 1989. In light of this, while the ‘truth’ value of the narrative the tagline points to may be questionable, the fact of it being based on a precursor story is accurate. Consequently, rather than being “nonexistent”, as Leitch

suggests, there is in fact at least one text whose story has been adapted. Thus the label plays with the notion of ‘story’, attributable both to Lewis’s tragic love story and its various adaptations in the media. This type of paratext contributes thus in multiple ways to the construction and perception of a biographical film as a multigeneric adaptation, asserting the authority of a variety of agents and elements such as director, film star, author, and even earlier film or stage adaptations in its bid for textual ‘authenticity’. Next I am going to briefly examine a series of contemporary biopic trailers to show how these condensed promotions of narratives use multiple rhetorical instruments and textualising strategies to communicate genre and authorship.

Literary biopic trailers use multiple rhetorical instruments and textualising strategies to communicate genre and authorship. Trailers of literary adaptations in the classical Hollywood era often reference visually other art forms such as literature, theatre or painting in an attempt to appropriate some of their cultural and commercial cachet. For example, the trailers for both *Jane Eyre* (1934) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) open with images of books. This strategy is used in the trailer for the 1957 *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, which makes use of an ornate painting frame to deliver the introductory text and the characters, followed by a shot of a book as the text on screen informs viewers that the film is “based on the world-famous play”, thus incorporating multiple allusions to the literary origin of its characters, the art of portraiture and the popularity of the source text in order to mark the film as ‘quality’ literary biography on screen. The promotional trailer for *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994) includes shots of her portrait being painted, as well as of her typing and discarding papers as the voice-over informs us that “Everyone wanted to know what was on Mrs Parker’s mind, but no one ever guessed what was in her heart”. The trailer promises that the film’s



narrative will unveil the ‘true’ portrait of Parker by incorporating and outdoing previous visual and literary attempts to depict her.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary literary biopics consistently use shots of writing, paper, pens and typewriters – easily recognisable signifiers – to promote the idea of authorial ‘authenticity’ to the viewer. Writing is what writers do, they reiterate, and you will *see* it. Showing writing on screen also points to the instrumental purpose of the act, which serves to elevate the writer character into the cultural pantheon. The trailer for *Nora* (2000), a biopic on the relationship between James Joyce and Nora Barnacle, opens visually with a shot of crumpled-up paper followed by text that reads “The true story of a genius...and the woman who inspired him”. In between shots of written text, we are offered a close shot of Ewan McGregor identifying himself by name: “My name is James Joyce”. The trailer for *Iris* (2001) opens with Kate Winslet twirling gleefully as the voice-over informs us “Her name was Iris Murdoch”. Even if the above films tend to be marketed as romances, melodramas or comedies, they also consistently display genre markers that help audiences identify the product as filmed literary biography. These promotional, concentrated narratives initiate textuality before the filmic text has reached its audiences, drawing them into the process of meaning-making. Like posters, they employ a wealth of visual, textual, and, in the case of trailers, auditory cues to publicise and fixate the formula of the biopic genre in the mind of the audience.

To conclude, film posters and trailers carry a multiplicity of meanings in terms of genericity, pleasure potential, authorial involvement and cultural status, and function as formative filters through which the audiences access the cinematic experience. As such, they are essential to our understanding of cinematic texts not as discrete entities, but as nodal points in a dialogic network, each carrying their own penumbras.

### 3.1. Stars as textual bodies

Another important site of meanings in biopics is located in body of the star actor, since “the actor is the cornerstone to the biopic’s edifice of historical allusion” (Vidal “Introduction” 11). Hollywood, and the film industry in general, has been built upon the premise and promise of visual, physical beauty mobilised and manipulated through costume, makeup, and cinematography to generate desire and aspiration. As Vidal contends, “the biopic trades on a sense of authenticity that stems from the actor’s body itself” (11) whereby hair, makeup, voice and gesture are combined to meet a series of expectations of likeness. These expectations arise from a “collective social memory” (11) that encompasses both the audience’s (not necessarily accurate) image of what the biopic subject should look like, as well as previous representations that work towards constructing the iconography of the biographical subject. These images, however, can be quite flexible in nature, shaped as they are by sets of expectations stemming from the nature and mechanisms of the film industry. Audiences expect characters to be somewhat ‘beautified’, as likeness tends to take a back seat to the illusion of an aesthetically improved version of the real subject. Indeed, by casting attractive actors and actresses as historical figures who were perhaps less aesthetically pleasing to look at, and subjecting them to a process of ‘uglification’, as in the case of Ewan McGregor as James Joyce in *Nora* (2000), Johnny Depp as J.M. Barrie in *Finding Neverland* (2004) or Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (2002), the film industry seems to be asserting its own status as a producer of beauty rivalling the impersonated writers’ artistic creations. One can see this ‘beautification’ of reality even in unconventional biopics that play with generic expectations of performance, such as in *I’m Not There* (2007), Todd Haynes’s biopic about the different facets of Bob Dylan.

*I'm Not There* has been met with general critical approval for eschewing of the supposedly dull biopic formula to hurl “a Molotov cocktail through the facade of the Hollywood biopic factory, exploding the literal-minded, anti-intellectual assumptions that guide even the most admiring cinematic explorations of artists’ lives” (Scott). Instead of one actor playing Dylan, Haynes uses six different actors and actresses, the majority of whom are conventionally attractive Hollywood A-listers such as Christian Bale, Cate Blanchet, Richard Gere and Heath Ledger to construct an image of the modern troubadour as an elusive, unknowable subject, although certainly recognizable to connoisseurs through intertextual allusions.

Haynes’s choice to play with the public perceptions of Dylan, rather than more conventionally attempt to represent his person, has garnered accolades for its subversion of the form. One might argue, however, that Haynes’s refusal to pin down Dylan by embodying him through an individual performance is just another form of ‘great man’ worship, albeit a stylistically-sophisticated, postmodern one. By refusing to humanize ‘Dylan’ and, instead, deconstructing and distributing his persona among a multiplicity of bodies and selves – he is portrayed not just as a singer, but also as a movie star, and poet suitably named Arthur Rimbaud – Haynes’s film elevates Dylan above the human dimension – the artist becomes an almost divine entity whose genius gives him the ability to become a shape-shifting Zeus, taking on different forms to mingle with the mortals. Of course, the nature of Hollywood’s system of financing, production and distribution plays a crucial role in the choice of cast. Nevertheless, one may see Haynes’s film choices as replicating, in a certain way, Hollywood’s projection of stars as inaccessible objects of desire beyond the grasp of the common people.

The concept of stardom is built around the contrast between “the performing presence and what happens ‘off-stage’” (Geraghty “Re-examining Stardom” 184).

Therefore, the meanings conveyed by stars are highly unstable and dependent upon the rapidly fluctuating cultural and commercial discourses around the star persona. The term *star text*, introduced by Richard Dyer's seminal study *Stars* in 1979, conceptualises film stars as "sites of contradiction and resistance" thereby connecting the fields of film and cultural studies (Geraghty 184). Stars are intertextual constructs involved in the "cultural economy of the human body as sign" (B. King 167), emerging out of a vast range of media products and cultural practices that have the potential to influence the production and reception of films and, as such, they demand analysis as texts alongside the filmic text, as part of the textual penumbra.

Originally published in 1978, Jean-Louis Comolli's "Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much" problematises the question of multiple corporealities in historical films. For Comolli the film character reaches the viewer as a "bodily effect" – what we perceive first in a filmic narration is the body of the actor, the body as an "empty mask" while the character will emerge "later and bit by bit as effects of this mask, effects in the plural, changing, unstable, never quite achieved, thwarted, incomplete" (66). Comolli's evaluation of performing bodies in Jean Renoir's historical film *La Marseillaise* (1938) compares the difference involved in embodying a character based on a historical figure, which has a referential model in reality, to one that is entirely fictional, concluding that "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" (Comolli 67). The "imagery" he speaks of is a construction of all the previous visual representations of the 'real' historical body that has disappeared into the past, yet persists through traces in images which demand acknowledgement. The body too much, the body in excess, is that of the actor, for its presence strains the interplay of necessary irrational belief in the reality of the body on screen with the discourses of

reason based on our knowledge of historical reality far more than it would if it were the body of an imaginary character. The disturbing bodily supplement asks audiences to believe in the flawed illusion of historical representation and, consequently, to deny knowledge and realism, to devote themselves to the discourses of irrationality. An important nuance in Comolli's analysis is introduced by the words "at least", for one may argue indeed that there are a multiplicity of bodies involved in every performance, not just two. The body of the actor in a literary biopic, for example, carries with it not only the imagery associated with the literary author, but also the traces left by past cinematic adaptations of the author's texts and fictional characters, since these types of biopics routinely conflate the writer with the work. In *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) Joseph Fiennes's body carries the meanings associated with the historical figure called William Shakespeare and his cultural imagery, but he becomes simultaneously Romeo and connects with a host of other Shakespearian characters referenced in the film's narrative. The same applies to Ewan McGregor in *Nora* (2000), who is simultaneously James Joyce, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, all at the same time. Thus Comolli's article stresses the importance of embodied performance in historical reenactments which, alongside other aspects of filmic mise-en-scène, carries with it a multiplicity of meanings. However, as we have seen, this multiplicity is present well before the text has reached us – in the case of the star, "the actor as a member of the host culture – with a given hair colour, body shape, repertoire of gestures, registers of speech, accent, dialect and so on – always pre-signifies meaning" (B. King 173).

A recurrent strategy to link the star body to the filmic narrative in literary biopics is the superposition of handwritten or printed text over the actor's image. In historical films, the use of textual prologues and epilogues has become a recognisable trope of the genre. They provide factual information to contextualise the drama, or to

provide closure, stitching “the events depicted in the main body of the film to written accounts of history. In the process, they perhaps indicate some of the ways in which written histories are valued as more trustworthy and authentic than visual representations of history” (Stubbs 21). In historical films, then, these textual markers which emphasise words over images tend to stand outside the main narrative. However, in literary biopics, owing to the written word’s elevated cultural status within the diegesis, images of text can be said to stand both outside and inside the narrative, connecting the film to the larger context but also, symbolically, connecting the text on screen, the text on paper and the body of the star actor. This connection is made literal, for example, in *Becoming Jane* (2007), where the handwritten beginning of the novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is superimposed over the images of Jane Austen (Anne Hathaway) and her potential marriage candidate Mr. Wisley (Laurence Fox) (fig. 9) – the star’s body – the body too much – becomes a mediator of meaning for both the film, and, retroactively, for any potential readings of the book, as well as for the historical figure ‘Jane Austen’.



Fig. 9. Visually connecting literary text, filmic text and the star body in *Becoming Jane*

In *Angel* (2007), French director François Ozon includes a scene where the awe and lovestruck secretary and sister-in-law of Angel, the female writer protagonist, massages

her naked body (fig. 1.9). The image of handwritten text is superimposed over the scene, underlining the transfer of eroticism from body to text and back – a potential reference to Barthes’s ‘desire for the author’. The image works in conjunction with an earlier scene in which the text is superimposed on Angel’s day-dreaming face, as she expresses her desire to become an author (fig. 1.10). The director’s use of these visual tropes seems to function as a comment on the inextricable, potentially sensual relationship between writing body and written text, as well as the desire for the authorial presence behind the text, mediated through the desirable bodies of the star actors. For Barthes, “the text is a fetish, and this fetish desires me. The text chooses me [...] and, lost in the midst of a text (not behind it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 27). Barthes seems to argue that if the author is present within the fetishised text, the author himself/herself may be a fetish, a desiring and desired body resurrected through the body of the performer. Barthes’s desire thus reembodies the author within the substance of the text. Consequently, when biopics conflate authors with their works and place their embodiments – the actors’ bodies – as object of desire in the midst of written text, they use this multiplicity of bodies – textual and visual – to trigger organic, emotional connections with the potential audience that go beyond mere recognition of literary references and are the source of the visceral dimension of melodrama.

As Marnie Hughes-Warrington notes, viewers do not respond only to a film’s narrative and style, but also “to print and online reviews and information about ‘stars’, the physical environment in which they see the film, merchandise, and the friends they share their film-watching experiences with. [...] Thus film alone does not tell us how others – past and present – view it and make use of it” (189). Indeed, far from being limited to the narrative on screen, a film’s meanings emerge equally forcefully out of

the fertile visual and rhetorical strategies of the paratextual proliferations surrounding it, such as promotional materials or the stars' bodies on screen.

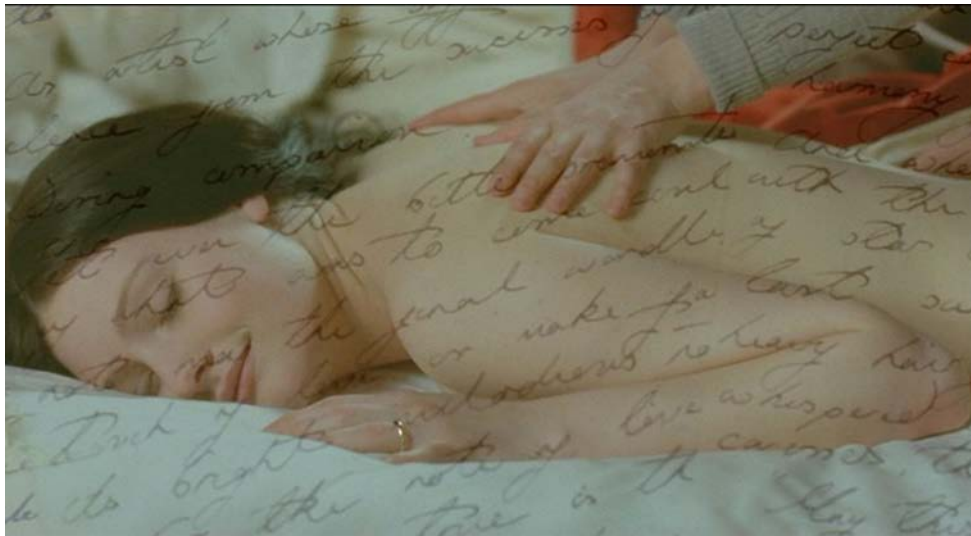


Fig. 10. Desiring the author



Fig. 11. Desiring author



### III. Predecessors – From the Golden Age of Hollywood to Second Wave Feminism

#### 1. The literary biopic in the Classic Hollywood era (1930s-1940s)

André Bazin's 1948 essay "Adaptation, or Cinema as Digest" compares the mythmaking qualities of literature and cinema, concluding that cinema's impact on our collective imagination is greater than that of novels (26). That same year the oligopoly of the Hollywood studio system which had dominated American filmmaking for more than three decades was officially ended on grounds of unfair practices by the decision of the Supreme Court. The studio system's monopoly within the film industry had been possible due to the studios being vertically integrated, that is, having strict control of "the modes of production, distribution and exhibition" (Hayward 363), which effectively closed the market to competition from national or foreign companies. Of the eight companies which dominated the industry, Paramount, MGM, Twentieth-Century Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO were vertically integrated, while the smaller Universal, Columbia and United Artists were given access to the majors' theatres.

Since the 1920s these companies had been steadily producing cinematic 'myths', each specialising in and being known for its own genres that were being produced and marketed multigenetically with a view to maximum profits. Paramount produced big-budget historical films, but also vaudeville and sophisticated European-style productions starring Marlene Dietrich or Maurice Chevalier. Twentieth Century-Fox's production of musicals featuring pin-up girl Betty Grable brought in big profits during the war. RKO's profits depended on an array of Fred Astaire musicals, productions of Broadway plays and low-budget films. Universal made its name with, among others, horror films based on British classics such as *Dracula* (1931) or *Frankenstein* (1931), as well as with the Sherlock Holmes series in the 1940s. While Warner Bros's low-budget projects were based around recycled plots that exploited popular genres such as the

gangster film, the social problem film, or the biopics of 'Great Men', MGM released lavish star-studded prestige films with an emphasis on 'quality', many of them adaptations of literary classics or successful plays, such as *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934) adapted after Rudolf Besier's eponymous play first performed on stage in 1931. For its combination of "costly production values and cultural status", the company was being referred to as the "'Tiffany' of the Hollywood studios" (Glancy 69), with budgets that "averaged \$500,000" and employing "more stars than there are in Heaven", as MGM's marketing slogan boasted (Thompson and Bordwell 235). Indeed, during the studio Golden Age both major and independent companies produced biopics.<sup>1</sup> Two-hundred ninety-one biopics were released between 1927 and 1960, the majority about the lives of statesmen, entertainers and artists. Seven biopics of women artists were made out of a total of around forty-three artist biopics, a more reduced number compared to the number of biopics of female 'paramours' and entertainers, of which there were sixteen and twenty-six, respectively. The biopic was an extremely popular genre that combined the high-brow appeal of historical or literary figures played by reputable British actors or glamorous stars (for example, George Arliss's *Disraeli* (1929) and *Voltaire* (1933), or Greta Garbo's *Queen Christina* (1933), to name some of the earliest) with the popular appeal of melodramatic plots. The biopics of the studio age tended to glorify statesmen (*Disraeli* (1929), *Abraham Lincoln* (1930)), scientists and inventors (*The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) or *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939), and artists and writers like *Rembrandt* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), or *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* (1942) making them into mythicised creators of "the progressive, capitalist, liberal-humanist modern world that the spectator was

---

<sup>1</sup> The Golden Age of Hollywood began around the end of the 1920s with the advent of sound films and lasted to the late 1950s, when television gradually took over mass entertainment. Its principles of filmmaking were centred around character motivation driving the plot, cause and effect-driven narrative, unobtrusive cinematography, spatial and editing continuity, clear beginning and closure (Hayward 2000: 64-8).

having the good fortune to inhabit” (Bingham 32). They were represented as following their high calling in the service of humankind, vanquishing human flaws and bravely defying societal conventions while drawing courage and inspiration from their female companions or romantic interests. The style of classical filmmaking lent itself easily to this particular strategy, with the films’ plots driven exclusively through individual psychological motivation, a strong focus on the actor’s body and face to convey the all-conquering will of the character, and the inevitably clear resolution in which the hero is vindicated and order is restored. There are scenes of rallying speeches to a rapt public, generally during a trial scene, which function melodramatically as emotional high points in the narrative by allowing the camera to focus in close-up on the tormented yet determined face of the protagonist defending his ‘vision’ and setting himself up as a hero against an unjust system.<sup>2</sup> For example, Emile Zola’s courtroom speech in *The Life of Emile Zola* depicts the protagonist as a reluctant rebel compelled to take a stand, indignant at what he perceives as intolerable political circumstances: “My profession is writing, not talking. But from my struggling youth until today, my principal aim has been to strive for truth. That is why I entered this fight.” His rousing speech is designed to demonstrate the power of an individual to uphold justice in the face of destructive state institutions: “What does it matter if an individual is shattered - if only justice is resurrected?”, an idea in keeping with the dominant American ethos of individualism.

From the earliest days of cinema, the strong emotions of melodrama were used in biographical films to humanise the protagonist and attract audiences who might not have been familiar with the historical figure’s life or work. For example, as early as 1909, the silent film *Edgar Allen Poe* [sic], directed by D. W. Griffith, distils some of the elements that have consequently been preserved in literary biopics. The destitute

---

<sup>2</sup> Parts of these speeches are overwhelmingly featured in the trailers, underscoring their emotional and cathartic narrative importance.

poet, played by Herbert Yost, is distressed by his wife's suffering. Inspired by the sudden materialisation of a raven, he writes the iconic poem only for it to be rejected by various unfeeling editors (fig. 12). Finally, he is offered some money, but when he returns home triumphantly with food and a blanket, his wife is dead. The film focuses on a deeply affecting event in the life of the protagonist which is connected to the creation of a particular masterpiece. Life and art are thus connected; indeed, writing itself becomes vitally significant, elevated to a matter of life or death. Moreover, audiences are afforded the pleasure of recognition, as they witness the troubled private life of an unjustly persecuted and (as yet) unrecognised genius whose achievements are, nonetheless, being implicitly celebrated.



Fig. 12. Poe writes "The Raven" to save his dying wife

Given the fraught position of women in the public arena, biopics of female figures focused on the themes of heterosexual love and self-sacrifice at the expense of other considerations, be they films about the life of an allegedly lesbian queen such as

*Queen Christina*, the story of a saintly Florence Nightingale in *The White Angel* (1936), or the imagined love lives of the Brontë sisters in *Devotion* (1946). While the acts of self-sacrifice of male public figures tended to be illustrative of their personal principles and pursuit of political goals, the equivalent in biopics of female figures was mostly centred on heterosexual romance and domestic matters. To be fair, *Queen Christina*, shot in the pre-Production Code period,<sup>3</sup> does contain scenes which imply an alternative sexuality, such as the main character proudly strutting around in male clothes, or kissing a maid servant on the mouth, but the hints are as ambiguous as Greta Garbo's myth – she had various relationship with men and women (including one of the scriptwriters of *Queen Christina*), yet her iconic on-screen persona at the height of her career was constructed around glamorous roles in romantic melodramas such as *Anna Karenina* (1935) or *Camille* (1936) or romantic comedies like *Ninotschka* (1939). The evolving images of women and the meanings of femininity in the early days of the film industry reflect the changes at work in the wider social context, for “what was considered appropriate feminine behaviour was often different in one era from that in another: what it meant to be a woman varied from decade to decade (as it still does)” (Benshoff and Griffin 217).

In an industry which depended on the sharp division of labour, the top of the business was dominated by men, with women relegated to inferior positions; yet these roles were slightly permeable, as a few women did manage to become successful producers and scriptwriters or run independent film companies, especially in the first two decades of the century. Scriptwriting during the studio years was very much a collaborative activity, with many of the agents involved working under contract and on

---

<sup>3</sup> The Motion Picture Production Code were a series of guidelines imposed in 1934 to prevent films from attempting on the public's decency; it concerned mainly the use of sexual language and violence. The organ in charge of making sure films conformed to the public's moral standards was actually a corporation owned by the film companies themselves, and its censoring task, though repressive, was “to block potentially more extreme national censorship” (Thompson and Bordwell 240).

several projects at one time as the studios sought to maximise profits; as such, the question of authorship was diluted, allowing a fair number of female writers from the margins to enter the business. Directing films was, however, still very much a male activity, with only two female directors managing to infiltrate the mainstream – Dorothy Arzner (1897-1979), who often dressed and behaved in a masculine way, and who had initially worked as a script girl, and Ida Lupino (1918-1995), an actress who moved on to directing low-budget social problem films towards the end of the classical period. In one of her many roles as an actress, she played Emily Brontë in the fictionalised biopic *Devotion*. The following two sub-chapters will examine the authorial figure in two biopics produced at the height of the studio era, namely MGM’s *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and Warner Bros.’s *Devotion*. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* dramatises the romantic relationship between nineteenth-century poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, as he rescues her from the clutches of her tyrannical father. *Devotion*, on the other hand, tells the story of the Brontë sisters’ rise to fame and their romantic troubles involving a heavily fictionalised Reverend Arthur Nicholls. These biopics based on British literary figures contain many of the elements that have contributed to the bad reputation of the biopic genre, such as “the elevation of romance over historical fact or the valorisation of true love over artistic achievement” (Cartmell “The Golden Age” 147-48), but also to its popular appeal and commercial success as a star vehicle, contributing to “the establishment of the genre as we know it today” (148).

1.1. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934): “When poets love, Heaven and Earth fall back to watch!”

Historically-inflected dramas and comedies featuring European cultural figures had been produced since the early days of cinema, creating a series of “national stereotypes” (Custen 96) such as the German of superior talent such as Johann Strauss Jr. in *The Great Waltz* (1938), or the intensely romantic or intensely nationalistic Frenchman, such as François Villon in *The Beloved Rogue* (1927) in which the French poet is both a lover and an ardent patriot. According to Custen, the focus of Hollywood studios on foreign figures was “an attempt to broaden the demographic base of fame, appeal to ethnic minorities in the mass audience, and satisfy lucrative foreign markets” (102)

On the other hand, adapting the lives of literary figures corresponded not only to purely commercial interest, but also to democratising and educational impulses, as shown by MGM studio chief Louis B. Mayer’s declaration “I want to bring culture and taste, in the form of enlightenment, to the masses” (qtd in Tibbetts 4). MGM’s *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was the first studio-era biopic to feature a female writer as its lead character. It was released in the middle of a decade in which the subjects of female biopics were generally queens, highlighting “the star status of the actresses who played them (Great Garbo as Christina of Sweden, Marlene Dietrich as Catherine the Great, Bette Davis as Elizabeth I, Norma Shearer as Marie Antoinette)” (Bingham 217). *The Barretts’* producer Irving Thalberg cast his wife Norma Shearer as the leading lady in this adaptation of a homonymous play written by Dutch-British dramatist Rudolph Besier in 1930 that had become a critical and audience success in the United States. As it was common practice in the studio era, the screenplay was adapted by three writers who had already collaborated several times; moreover, they had also worked with both

the director Sidney Franklin and the leading actors Norma Shearer and Fredrich March in an earlier Oscar-nominated supernatural romance *Smilin' Through* (1931).

The resulting adaptation, “with an all-star cast enacting a story much more concerned with forbidden love than poetry [...] was made palatable for mainstream audiences” and became “one of the most successful films of the 1934-35 season” (Glancy 77-78). It fit in perfectly with the company’s policy of high-profile big-budget productions, and also with a growing trend of making ‘British’ films: “between 1930 and 1945, over 150 ‘British’ films were made in Hollywood, whether based on British history or literature, or set geographically in the far outposts of the British empire or in Britain itself, or located in time as period dramas or contemporary war films” (Glancy 1). These ‘British’ films produced in the United States were some of the most expensive productions of the period, and featured either a British director, British cast, British source material, or quite often all of these elements, imparting “some measure of authenticity” to the story on screen (Glancy 2). This particular attraction might be explained by the anglophilia of the American studios, where a great number of British producers, directors and actors were working, and also, perhaps most importantly, by the fact that the British market was the most profitable of all foreign markets. Not only were the British keen movie-goers, but the tastes of the altogether sizable British Commonwealth market tended to coincide with those of the mother country, multiplying considerably the profits Hollywood made from exports. Sure to appeal to English-speaking audiences worldwide, *David Copperfield* was produced the same year 1934 by George Cukor and David O. Selznick after an adapted script by Hugh Walpole, a Commonwealth writer. Even though the film was shot almost entirely in California, the desire to provide a certain degree of British authenticity to an already ‘prestige’ text made them cast British actors in the main roles, offering a thoroughly idealised view of



Britain and Victorian society and thus catering to the expectations of the film's international mass audience in terms of 'cultural value'.

It is perhaps an interesting coincidence that the first biopic of a woman writer should be Barrett Browning, since the poet saw herself as something of a pioneer in the realm of literature, writing to a friend in 1845:

England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned language, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards, – women of deeper acquirements that are common now in the greater diffusion of letters: and yet where are the poetesses? The divine breath which seemed to come and go, & ere it went filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists..why did it never pass even in the lyrical form over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it is so? I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you – witness my reverent love of the grandfathers! (qtd. in Avery and Stott 3)

In spite of her disabled condition which prevented her from engaging in the public arena (or, perhaps, because of it), Barrett Browning was celebrated during her lifetime for her poetry, which engaged overtly and courageously with politics, social oppression and the ills of slavery, and, in "Aurora Leigh" (1896), a nine-book epic poem, with female professional ambition to become a successful poet. Her reputation as a poet suffered a sharp decline at the beginning of the twentieth century, overshadowed by the Modernist's rejection of the Victorians and, possibly, also by the rise to poetic greatness of her husband Robert Browning, as well as the interest in her life following the publication of her letters and Besier's melodramatic play. Indeed, the woman poet seems to have been replaced by the romantic heroine in the cultural imagination, especially after the correspondence between the couple was finally released in 1899 to a Victorian readership hungry for details about the romantic elopement of two brilliant poets. Moreover, in Besier's play the indomitable Barrett Browning was reconstructed as a saintly invalid at the mercy of her tyrannical and incestuous father, with Robert Browning in the role of life-restorer. In time, her poetry fell into disregard and she

disappeared from anthologies and critical reviews, becoming almost a footnote to her husband. As Virginia Woolf notes in an essay on “Aurora Leigh”,

Fate has not been kind to Mrs Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place [...] In short, the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned to her is downstairs in the servants’ quarter where [...] she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife. (qtd. in Avery and Stott 11)

She remained virtually obscure until feminist criticism in the 1970s reassessed her importance and restored her back ‘in her place’ alongside the most celebrated Victorian poets.

The treatment of the two poets’ story in Besier’s play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (A Comedy in Five Acts) contributes to the image of the saintly Victorian heroine galvanised into passion by the impetuous poet-hero played by matinée idol Fredrich March. However, their status as poets is of little importance to the story, as the plot centres around the tribulations of the Barrett women under the yoke of their oppressive father, Edward Moulton-Barrett. The play is a markedly Freudian interpretation of Elizabeth’s relationship with her strict father, as the reason for her eventual hasty elopement with Robert Browning is attributed to her father’s incestuous desire for her. In the last of the five acts, her father confesses, to her horror, that all his children except herself were born not out of love but fear as he had crushed her mother’s spirit with his oppressive and unforgiving behaviour. Even though they stopped loving each other, he still exercised his ‘rights’ – a reference to marital rape – under the ‘tyranny of his senses’ (the Barretts had twelve children). Craving his wife’s lost love he focuses his sublimated passions upon Elizabeth as he plans to separate her from her friends and her life in London and, in an unsettling scene, allows his daughter a terrifying glimpse into his dark secret:

In our new home we shall draw close to each other again. There will be little to distract you in the country—nothing and no one to come between us. (*He draws*

*her stiffening form into his arms.*) My child, my darling, you want me to be happy. The only happiness I shall ever know is all yours to give or take. You must look up to me, and depend on me, and lean on me. You must share your thoughts with me, your hopes, your fears, your prayers. I want all your heart and all your soul. . . . (*He holds her passionately close; she leans away from him, her face drawn with fear and pain.*) (Besier 129)

The 1934 biopic keeps close to the play, both textually and in its mise-en-scène. It leaves out but a few details from the text of the play, some of them for the sake of conciseness, others for their strong sexual overtones which might have been too much to pass censorship. For example, in spite of the film being supposedly a biopic of poets, a discussion about the poet Tennyson which is in the play is left out, presumably to keep the focus on the love story. However, it might have been an interesting intertextual allusion, for had it not been for Tennyson, she might have become Poet Laureate in 1850. The script also eliminates all allusions to the family's source of wealth, which, in the play, is disclosed by Henrietta: "You know he [the father] once owned slaves in Jamaica. And as slavery has been abolished here, he carries it on in England" (Besier 53-54). It is suggested then, that Elizabeth's father's psychological (and, eventually, physical) brutality might be at the root of his wealth – a brutality that finds its outlet in the family. Criticism of her father's heartless oppression is extended thus to the wider social and historical context, a criticism which the studio filmmakers might have wished to avoid in the racially-segregated America of the 1930s. Equally, the filmmakers might have considered cousin Bella's sexual teasing and reference to 'the English vice' too much for the American audiences' and the censors' sensibilities, especially coming from a woman, as she tells her uncle playfully: "Did he whip you when you were naughty? How fwightfully [sic] exciting to be whipped by uncle Edward!" (Besier 77). On the other hand, the film preserves the Freudian undercurrents in the play. The possessive patriarch of the family, played by Charles Laughton, looms darkly over the

lives of his adult offspring, betraying an unhealthy obsession with controlling their lives and becoming physically violent when disobeyed (fig. 13). Numerous scenes in the film focus on his pathological obsession with the eldest Barrett sister, as he insists that she is a terminally ill invalid, and, as such, in need of his protection and care.



Fig. 13. The pater familias exercising his authority in MGM's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*

*The Barretts of Wimpole Street* begins with a shot of a female hand which opens a photo album containing the photographic images of the protagonists, with the last one, the photograph of Wimpole street dissolving into a moving image of the place itself. It connects the fixed pictorial qualities of the album with the fluid life-like qualities of the film, thus laying claim to the real-life authenticity of the biopic's characters and setting. An interesting choice in the film is the introduction of the first character on the screen, the dog Flush, with a backdrop of a jolly musical score – not only does it infuse the literary melodrama with a light-hearted tone, but it also provides the more culturally sophisticated audience members with a highbrow intertextual allusion to Virginia Woolf's book about the Barretts's spaniel *Flush*, which had been first published a year before, in 1933.

The film has a neatly circular structure; at the beginning, the camera follows Flush as he enters the house and the audience catches a glimpse of some of the characters from his perspective. We hear the voice of the father praying, then it fades

into silence as Flush goes upstairs to join Elizabeth. At the end of the film we hear once more the voice praying as Elizabeth, Flush and the faithful maid Wilson creep downstairs towards freedom. The last scene also features Flush guarding the church door where the couple are getting married, ending with the bride gazing adoringly at her husband and the requisite kiss to swelling violin music. All but one scene are shot in the studio, conveying the sense of confinement of the Barretts's world. The characters are generally framed in close-ups and developed through shot/reverse-shot editing, the commonest type of editing in classical Hollywood, which allows for easy understanding of character motivation and emotional state and gives smoothness to the narrative flow. Adding to the theatrical feel of the film are the repetitive long shots of characters leaving the room, with the camera lingering on the opening and closing of doors, allowing thus for a pause in the narrative in order for the spectators to be able to mentally readjust for the coming scene. The overall feel of the biopic is theatrical, but the medium of film makes it possible to represent visually the emotions of the characters. Although not particularly experimental in its cinematography, the film's sparse visual symbolism supports the text quite competently. In the scene where Elizabeth, after having ventured downstairs to meet Robert, is sent back by her disapproving father, her despair and frustrated helplessness are made evident as the camera frames her from above, emphasising the stark colour contrast between the light downstairs and the darkness of her confinement upstairs (fig. 2.3). As she makes her way up the stairs, her father's disembodied, contemptuous voice telling her "you can't do it" is visibly sapping her energy until she gives up and her father rushes to carry her in his arms, shoving Robert out of the way triumphantly. He also makes sure to further crush Elizabeth's hopes for freedom: "it's unlikely that you'll ever be a normal woman" he tells her as he closes the curtains punctuating his sentence with a gestural flourish.



Fig. 14. Stark contrast and camera angle illustrating visually Elizabeth's predicament

The film's tagline announcing the film's literary credentials "When Poets Love, Heaven and Earth Fall Back to Watch" prepared the audiences for a highbrow romance between literary 'greats'. Viewers are indeed informed that Elizabeth is an accomplished poet, as she lets the doctor know that the only activity she wants to do is write poetry and that Mr Browning has sent her letters of professional admiration. In the period in which the plot is set, Elizabeth Barrett's poetry was much more renowned and critically acclaimed than Robert Browning's, so that, quite accurately, the doctor does not seem to be familiar with the gentleman's name. As a matter of fact, in a democratising gesture that mocks the highbrow elitism of literature, the film uses Browning's verse for comic effect when Elizabeth reads out a passage from his famously obscure "Sordello" (1840) to Wilson, who instantly dozes off. Ironically, when they discuss admiringly each other's poetry, Browning himself is caught off-guard by the ambiguity of his own poetry (fig. 4):

BROWNING: You don't find me difficult, obscure?

[...]

ELIZABETH: Sometimes there are passages that... I've marked one or two in your "Sordello" which rather puzzled me.

BROWNING: Ah, “Sordello”! Somebody once called it a horror of great gothic! I’ve done my best to forget it.

[...]

BROWNING: But then, a passage torn from its context...All petals, no prickles. No prickles like trickles...

ELIZABETH: Well?

BROWNING: Well, Miss Barrett...When that passage was written only God and Robert Browning understood it. Now only God understands it. (my transcription)



Fig. 15. Robert and Elizabeth exchange views on poetic abstruseness for comic relief

Besier’s play follows closely the correspondence between Elizabeth and Robert, which had become wildly popular after its publication at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He includes the now famous “I do, as I say, love these Books with all my heart – and I love you too” (qtd. in Leighton 91) from Browning’s first letter in 1845. Naturally for a film centred on romance, the screenplay adapts it as “I love your books with all my heart—and I love you too”, a declaration which, together with Browning’s impetuous grabbing of Elizabeth’s hands – to send “new life tingling and prickling up your fingers and arms into your heart and brain” – proves too much of a strain for her frail body and she nearly collapses, leading Browning to conclude that, in being afraid of him, she is actually afraid of life. His lines echo her father’s entreaty “if you love me you can’t be afraid of me...” as both men seem to assume that her frailty of body reflects frailty of mind, a reading that is consistent with the cultural image of the Victorian woman as an excessively delicate creature in need of male protection. Both play and film adaptation

eschew her political poetry and commitment to “the idea of the poet as a public figure” (Avery and Stott 20) in favour of an image of the author as a helpless invalid and victim of her villainous father, as “the figure of the woman still takes precedence over the figure of the poet, and the story of her love for Robert over the other story of her lifelong commitment to writing” (Leighton 7). Supported by the promise of romance and marital fulfilment, Elizabeth eventually finds the strength to escape her father and join Robert – the biopic narrates thus the story of “one of the leading poets of the nineteenth century [...] not becoming a writer but becoming a wife” (Cartmell “The Golden Age” 150).

In terms of casting, the choice of having an American or British actor play a role in films based on ‘British’ culture and history“ added supplementary layers of cinematic meanings to the narrative, insofar as these types of films “often focus on the rigidity of the class system, social snobbery, and Anglo-American differences” (Glancy 5). It is thus noteworthy that the rebellious freedom-loving protagonists are played by American and Canadian actors, while Charles Laughton, a British actor, is cast as the tyrannical Victorian father who insists on absolute obedience to his selfish wishes, a performance reminiscent of his role as the Tudor monarch Henry VIII which he played with exuberant gusto a year before in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933).<sup>4</sup> The intermedial layers afforded by the actors’ past roles add complexity to the network of associations and references. Fredrich March had been awarded an Oscar for his performance in a 1931 adaptation of a Victorian story, R.L. Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in which he takes on the dual role of the respectable gentleman Jekyll and ape-like Mr Hyde in a cinematic story of sexual repression. In the same year he starred in *The Barretts*, March also took on the role of Benvenuto Cellini in a completely fictional biographical romp

---

<sup>4</sup> An international box-office success, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was the first British film to be nominated for an Oscar, and the first to be awarded one for Laughton’s performance as Henry VIII.



about the artist's romantic adventures fittingly titled *The Affairs of Cellini* (1934), in which Cellini becomes a swashbuckling wooer of various women, capitalising on the success of a series of swashbuckling films released the same year of 1934, such as *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Over twenty years later, in 1957 director Sidney Franklin used the exact same script almost word for word for a new take on *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, also produced by MGM, but with the added attraction of being filmed entirely on location in England in MGM's fairly new system Metrocolor, and with a cast that boasted such names as the British Shakespearean actor John Gielgud and Jennifer Jones. Like Shearer, Jones was also married to a powerful Hollywood producer, David O. Selznick, who had produced the award-winning adaptation *Gone with the Wind* in 1939, and launched Alfred Hitchcock's career in Hollywood with the literary adaptation of *Rebecca* (1940) and who supported Jones's career. Unlike the 1934 production, on the other hand, the remake failed to succeed commercially, overshadowed by its award-winning predecessor. In light of this, it is quite possible to read the adaptations of Barrett Browning's 'life-text' as articulated by two types of fame, one literary, the other derived from the star system, as "movie biographies offered the public the possibility of connecting concretely with a glamorous image of a famous historical person in the guise of a contemporary movies star" (Custen 34). Indeed, as Cartmell notes in connection with these films casting the wives of powerful producers in the lead roles, "the choice of actresses with such powerful husbands makes the transformation of Barrett from demure and plain (close to Barrett herself) to fashionable and glamorous parallel the lives of the women portraying her" ("The Golden Age" 152).

The studio biopic shares thus the mythmaking drive of the Victorian biography (Bingham 33), as well as its 'hero-worship' propensities, most obvious in the case of the

Great Men of the studio era. 'Great Women' biopics, apart from being considerably fewer than their male counterparts, were also made into the mould of cultural expectations around gender, turning female authors into victimised saints or lovers, as illustrated in the next chapter on *Devotion*. The purpose of the biopics was in many ways identical to that of Victorian biographies, which was to "encourage idealization of achievement through the contemplation of noble biographical example" (Hamilton 115). A literary life depicted on screen creates signifiers beyond those of entertaining storytelling, contributing to the construction of cultural iconographies that emerge out of a particular period and circumstance but whose cultural influence percolates well beyond their spatial and temporal confines.

## 1.2. *Devotion* (1946): stormy nights in the Brontë household

The myth of Romantic genius has given birth to one of the most enduring concepts of authorship that has been both perpetuated and subverted in the history of biopics. Mostly associated with male writers, the image it projects is that of a solitary figure, cut off from trivial reality, an inhabitant and originator of higher realms of divine inspiration. Joining these few elect, the Brontë sisters, and, especially Emily Brontë, the author of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) have become icons of female creative genius – tragic figures against the dark background of the Yorkshire moors. Authors of some of literary history's most famous love stories, the sisters have become inevitably associated with their characters and speculations as to parallels between their life and work have been feeding biographies and fictional adaptations alike. Their life stories, starting in the moors and ending in global fame, have consequently attained an almost mythical dimension, while their novels and main characters are read with an eye on their biographies, especially in the case of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, seemingly as "poor, obscure, plain and little" (Brontë *Jane Eyre* 215) as the writer. The novel's subtitle is, after all, *An Autobiography*, which makes it irresistible for wild conjectures.

Not unusual for their times, their novels' publishing history bear witness to the self-effacing strategies women novelists used in order to avert public and critical opprobrium. The Brontë sisters published their poems and novels using male pseudonyms, at first mainly because of Emily's reluctance to enter the public sphere. The success of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and subsequent publication of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* (1847) prompted a frenzy of speculations as to the identity of the authors – while some critics thought them to be one person, Emily and Anne's publisher actively sought to imprint upon the public mind the impression that their publications were

authored by the celebrated Mr. Bell of *Jane Eyre* celebrity. If the first reviews of *Jane Eyre* were almost universally laudatory, *Wuthering Heights* and especially *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) were deemed “too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them” (Allott 39) and “revolting” (Miller 21-22), respectively, for their depictions of shocking violence and unsanctioned passions. The American *Paterson’s Magazine* recommended to its readers: “We rise from the perusal of *Wuthering Heights* as if we had come fresh from a pest-house. Read *Jane Eyre* is our advice, but burn *Wuthering Heights*...” (Allott 48). However, in the wake of the scandalous reputation of these two texts, *Jane Eyre* also began to be reviewed negatively. Driven by her own authorial ambitions and the desire to be accepted in literary circles, yet wary of the notoriety associated with female writers in the public eye, Charlotte decided to reveal the truth about the sisters’ gender and attempted to clear their names of suspicions of immorality. After her sisters’ death, in “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” attached to the 1850 second edition of their selected works, she gave an account of their initial writerly pursuits:

We had very early cherished the dream of one day becoming authors. This dream, never relinquished even when distance divided and absorbing tasks occupied us, now suddenly acquired strength and consistency: it took the character of a resolve. (C. Brontë 302)

On the other hand, she stressed the unassuming nature of her sisters’ characters: “in externals, they were two unobtrusive women; a perfectly secluded life gave them retiring manners and habits” (306) and the fact that neither of them was learned, but they “wrote from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition, and from such stores of observation as their limited experience had enabled them to amass” (306). The ‘coarseness’ of subject they had been accused of was, therefore, as Charlotte demurely notes, but a consequence of the place and environment they had inhabited and not of

their own conscious choice as novelists. Anne's choice of subject for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Charlotte declared "an entire mistake" (304); her sister's motives in choosing it, if "slightly morbid" (304), were pure and a consequence of her witnessing "the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused" (304) – a reference to her brother's alcoholism. Her purpose in writing such a shocking novel, according to Charlotte, was entirely didactic and guided by duty. Emily's unusual work, on the other hand, was the result of her lack of adaptation to the "practical business of life" (306) – a Romantic image of the writer as a receptacle of divine inspiration. Hoping to further sway public opinion, Charlotte described their untimely deaths in terms that reflect their characters – Emily's fortitude and Anne's Christian patience – and declared it has been her sacred duty to "wipe the dust off their gravestones, and leave their dear names free from soil" (306). She became thus her sisters' first biographer, setting the tone for the dominant public reception of their lives as retiring virgins unaware of the strangeness of their novels. However, the discrepancy between their private lives and their 'passionate' writing has become the focal point of public curiosity. How could they have written so persuasively about passions they had not experienced?

Charlotte drew the first traits of her sisters' future cultural iconography. However, critical agreement tends to identify Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) as the text that marked the beginning of the Brontës' lives as cultural icons (Miller 88). The public and critical imagination seized upon Gaskell's highly symbolic reconstruction of Charlotte as a nearly saintly figure, an "icon of exemplary womanhood" guided by "spiritual heroism" (Miller 89). Tellingly, her relationship and correspondence with Mr. Héger are glossed over, while her domestic role as dutiful sister and daughter becomes the main focus. The effect of Gaskell's biography on the public was nothing short of revolutionary. Novelist Charles Kingsley, for example, in a

letter to Gaskell, regretted his earlier critical attitude towards what he perceived as Charlotte Brontë's "coarseness": "I confess that the book has made me ashamed of myself... How I misjudged her!...Well have you done your work, and given us the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by sufferings" (qtd. in Miller 30).

Soon other biographies were published, and admirers flocked to Howarth to pay homage to their heroine – 'Charlotte' the cultural myth became a blend of Victorian high morality and literary competence. It created a market for Brontë memorabilia which has been highly lucrative ever since. Before long, business-minded villagers began selling photographs of the Brontës, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Haworth had become a well-established literary shrine, and the remnants of the Brontës' lives prized relics (Stoneman 216). In 2011 a French museum bought one of Charlotte Brontë's miniature booklets made when she was fourteen for over 690,000 pounds, outbidding the Brontë Parsonage Museum. Apparently, the price may have been driven up by the two film adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, respectively, which had been released that same year (Needham) – an interesting effect of film adaptations on the auction market.

After the Victorian cult of Charlotte, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence Emily Brontë's myth as a quintessentially free spirit. The first film production of the Brontës' literary works was an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* in 1920. Following the 1939 Hollywood adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* starring Lawrence Olivier, interest in Emily's biography gained momentum. However, in contrast with the wealth of information about Charlotte, Emily has remained an elusive figure, which has only added to her mythical dimension – the biographical data about her life is scarce and speculative, and could be summed up mainly as her "running away at the sight of strangers" (Miller 185). In fact, it was through Emily that the Brontë

family has become more generally identified as forces of nature toiling at their literary masterpieces against the windswept backdrop of the moors. The scarcity of information about her sources of literary inspiration has contributed to her image as “the sphinx of English literature” (Miller xii) shrouded in mystery. Influenced by her reading of *Wuthering Heights* as a violent book, Gaskell’s portrayal of Emily in *Life* is a melodramatic blend of cruelty and heroism, reflecting the indomitable nature of her creation, Heathcliff. The biography narrates an episode in which Emily punishes her dog in the same way Heathcliff beats up and then takes care of Hindley in her controversial novel. When Keeper, the family dog, dares to disobey her orders and lie on the bed, she drags him downstairs:

...no one dared when Emily's eyes glowed in that manner out of the paleness of her face, and when her lips were so compressed into stone. [...] She let him go, planted in a dark corner at the bottom of the stairs; no time was there to fetch stick or rod, for fear of the strangling clutch at her throat - her bare clenched fist struck against his red fierce eyes, before he had time to make his spring, and, in the language of the turf, she “punished him” till his eyes were swelled up, and the half-blind, stupefied beast was led to his accustomed lair, to have his swelled head fomented and cared for by the very Emily herself. (Gaskell 269)

Following Gaskell’s *Life*, the Brontës’ story has been retold countless times and in such varied forms that through sheer force of repetition it shifted from the level of history to that of myth. By the 1920s, cinema took an interest in the family saga and the mythical possibilities of the wuthering landscape which had become the heart of the Bronte narrative. The first screen adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (1920), a silent film directed by A.V. Bramble, was shot on location in Haworth, as the landscape of the author’s hometown was felt to be an essential feature of the story.<sup>1</sup> The Brontës became a fashionable subject in the theatre of the early 1930s, with a series of plays based on the

---

<sup>1</sup> A.V. Bramble went on to direct a silent screen adaptation of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* in 1922.

sisters' lives being performed in London: *Wild Decembers*, *The Brontës* and *The Brontës of Haworth Parsonage* – all in the same year of 1933 (Gale 151).

The Brontë vogue reached Hollywood in the 1940s, with the Brontë sisters making their first appearance in *Three Sisters of the Moors*, a short produced by Twentieth Century-Fox to promote their release of *Jane Eyre* (1943) which focuses on the period of the publication of their first novels and celebrates their literary achievements. The Hollywood melodrama *Devotion*, finished in 1943 and released in 1946, screams its doomed love story angle in its various taglines: “ALL about those Bronte sisters! ...They didn't dare call it love, they tried to call it devotion!” and “Acclaimed...THE GREATEST LOVE STORY OF THE YEAR! Tender! Endearing!”. Produced by Warner Bros, the company most involved in biopic production in the studio era, and starring Olivia de Havilland and Ida Lupino as Charlotte and Emily Brontë, respectively, *Devotion* takes great liberties with the sisters' lives. To enliven the story of the siblings, the film features a love triangle between the two sisters and Arthur Nicholls, played by Paul Henreid of *Casablanca* (1942) fame.

The film has a lot in common with other Hollywood costume dramas of the period: Charlotte and Nicholls's bickering might remind audiences of the hate/love dynamic between Elizabeth and Darcy in the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice*, and the passionate kiss following one of Charlotte's tantrums has a hint of Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), including the threat of amorous slapping to calm the woman down: “There are two ways of dealing with young women of your perverse temperament. It is fortunate for you that I am not a woman-beater” says Nicholls exasperated by Charlotte's strong-headedness. The allusion is obvious, given that Olivia de Havilland had starred in the Oscar-winning epic as the saintly wife Melanie, a contrasting female figure to Scarlett's memorable femme fatale. There is a



considerable amount of screen time devoted to quaint shops and rural houses and studio-constructed Englishness reminiscent of *Mrs Miniver* (1942) which replaces the unappealing reality of the industrial town of Haworth. The prettification of 'England' was in fact a concerted effort on the part of the studios during war time "to make Americans feel good about entering the Second World War" (Miller 157). The film's opening credits appear against a static background of a generic 'English'-looking landscape, with a written paragraph announcing the film's context:

A century ago there lived, upon the Yorkshire moors of England, three sisters and a brother, all of great talent – and two with genius. Their name was Brontë, their novels are classics which will endure forever – but they themselves lived a story as rare and remarkable as any they dreamed.

The film conveniently omits Anne's literary talents narrowing the focus on the conflict between Charlotte and Emily vying for Mr Nicholls's attentions. The film's triangle of lovers seems to reflect thus the famous literary conflicts in *Jane Eyre* (Jane, Mr Rochester and Bertha) and *Wuthering Heights* (Cathy, Heathcliff and Edgar). Anne, on the other hand, is presented as a self-effacing bland creature unable to keep up with her literarily superior sisters. Her only purpose appears to consist in quietly keeping her sisters company in various scenes. She poses for Branwell's famous painting on the sunny moors, dons a lavish gown in the requisite ball scene and plays chess with a dying Emily while Charlotte is living it up in London. Indeed, this being a film about three writers, there is hardly any writing being done. Emily becomes the film's token writer, as she is shown to take her literary pursuits seriously (fig. 16). The only scene of writing shows Emily scribbling away at night while her sisters are in bed, signalling thus her special dedication and genius. At one point, Branwell tells Charlotte that Emily and himself have much more talent than her – a position the film endorses in its choice of characterisation. While Anne and Charlotte declare that their wish to become

governesses is connected with their “wish to see life” so that they may write of what they see, Emily rejects the world and prefers the secluded life on the moors: “this is my world”.



Fig. 16. Emily Brontë (Ida Lupino) engaged in writerly pursuits

Interestingly, Emily’s declared source of inspiration – her world-shy imagination – does not coincide with what the film actually implies her passionate writing stems from, namely, her unfortunate love for the rather fickle Nicholls. In a parallel to Cathy and Heathcliff’s relationship in *Wuthering Heights*, Emily takes Nicholls for a walk on the windswept moors, and, pointing to a dark house perched on top of a hill, she tells him, (mis)quoting Shakespeare: “not quite what dreams are made of, is it, but it’s been in mine ever since I can remember” (fig. 17). Her recurrent dream of a dark horseman riding through thick fog towards her – perhaps an allusion to the American classic *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) – seems to signal her untimely death. As she tells Nicholls of it, a dark horse is heard, but it turns out to be but a moor horse – her love for Mr Nicholls then, seems to keep her nightmare and, by extension, her death at bay. The classic Hollywood approach to female creativity in the cases of both Charlotte and Emily is to find the origins of literary inspiration in romantic relationships.



Fig. 17. Love and death on the windswept moors - Emily and Nicholls

Charlotte, on the other hand, is portrayed as a shallow flirt, becoming interested in Nicholls only when she sees Emily dancing with him. To signal her flirtatious nature, she is shown entering a dark tunnel in an amusement park with Monsieur Héger only to come out slightly dishevelled – she describes herself as a rather “disillusioned woman of the world”. Caught up with her love affairs, she declares she does not want to write as she is too busy living, to which Emily answers pensively: “or is it dreaming?”. The implication here is that Emily’s source of creativity are her dreams, yet the film’s overall message locates it firmly in the arms of a solicitous Nicholls. On her deathbed, Emily lets Charlotte know that love is the only thing that matters, and that she will find the meaning (of life, one presumes), “when he comes back...and he will.” Pursuing the promised ‘meaning’, after Emily’s death Charlotte exclaims in tears on her sister’s beloved rock on dark moors: “I have found the meaning, dear Emily” before she descends to join Mr Nicholls who is indeed waiting for her at the foot of the hill.

The mythical moors themselves are alternatively put to use for sibling frolicking, romantic picnics with Nicholls, and, most importantly, for Emily’s wandering about in a dark cloak – a symbol of her dark, tragic imagination. The dark horseman in Emily’s dream appears shrouded in fog as she stands gazing at the house she calls Wuthering Heights – therefore, he seems to originate from the house itself – the place onto which

she projects her imagination is thus associated with her death. The woman writer who severs her ties to romantic aspirations, this suggests, is necessarily doomed. Nicholls has managed to connect Emily to reality and life; however, once he redirects his attentions towards her sister, she starts to wither and the deadly horseman of her nightmares has a hold on her once again. The film does hint at the real cause of her death, consumption, by making her repeatedly go out into the rain to look for Branwell, who is bent on ruining his artistic potential by excessive drinking. Having failed to become an artist in London, he blames his sisters for wanting to get rid of him, yet wishes he had written Emily's story. After Branwell's death, Nicholls, the object of the sisters' affection and literary talents, feels unable to "live side by side with greatness" and leaves – interestingly, the film seems to change focus at this point and, instead of Emily, the plot concentrates on Charlotte's rise to literary stardom.

Aside from being portrayed as more interested in men than in writing, Charlotte seems to be a celebrity-hungry, career-driven woman – somewhat in keeping with Olivia de Havilland much-publicised litigious public persona (Carman and Drake 214-16).<sup>2</sup> Upon hearing that her brother is ill, she is unwilling to "sacrifice my career for any hysterical whim of yours [Emily's]", and treats Nicholls with indifference when he informs her that Mr Thackeray has praised the poems Emily and herself published in a magazine, betraying thus her self-centred fickleness. This Charlotte Brontë is indeed more Scarlett O'Hara – without the pluck – than the saintly Charlotte of Victorian biographies. Charlotte becomes thus a type of melodramatic villain to Emily's victim role, but her ultimate redemption story is undoubtedly used generically, reminding audiences of the female dynamic in the commercially-successful *Gone with the Wind*.

Mr Nicholl's departure prompts a clumsy outburst of tearful information from her: "I

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1943, Olivia de Havilland was involved in a lawsuit with Warner Bros. over the terms of her contract which kept her tied to the studio illegally and against her wishes. The studio lost the case, and the ensuing state law came to be known informally as The De Havilland Law.

know nothing. I understand nothing. And yet I have dared to write two hundred thousand words about life!”, she says, tossing her book aside, even though the film omits to show scenes in which she is actually doing any writing. The script seems to be rather fond of the word “dare”, standing presumably for female non-conformity, as it appears in the poster tagline as well: “She didn’t dare admit her love...She dared everything”. This non-conformist attitude, however, is firmly connected with romantic affairs rather than literary pursuits. The film fails to show why the sisters published under male pseudonyms – for the uninformed viewer, the shot of an unbound copy of *Jane Eyre* bearing the name Currer Bell might turn out a little confusing.



Fig. 18. The published *Jane Eyre* affords moments of pleasure to female readers

*Devotion* devotes a fair amount of screen time to Charlotte and Mr Thackeray’s comings and goings in London. The publication of *Jane Eyre* provides the occasion for an attempt at literary criticism which, amusingly, is in keeping with where the film’s sympathies lie in relation to the Brontë sisters. After a succession of shots of a printing press and a hand stacking up copies of the now printed book (fig. 18 left), the next scene places us in the company of the critics, who discuss the two novels’ qualities – although there was no prior mention of *Wuthering Heights*’s publication. The film’s approach to literary value betrays the medium’s uncomfortable relation to literature. One critic declares *Jane Eyre* to be a better book than *Wuthering Heights*, based on its sales

success, while another one points out contemptuously: “yes, but look at the people who are buying”, as the image shows the face of a spinsterish-looking old lady sighing with pleasure as she is reading the book (fig. 18 right). The next shots do show fleetingly young girls and old gentlemen with pipes reading it too – a more diverse readership – but the implication remains that *Jane Eyre* is a romantic novel of conventional appeal and thus questionable worth compared with the mysterious *Wuthering Height*. A second snub at her novel is delivered by Thackeray, who driving past a lavish display of *Jane Eyre* copies, observes drily that his own *Vanity Fair* did not need the publicity apparently used to sell *Jane Eyre* and proclaims *Wuthering Heights* to be the greatest of the three novels. Commercial success and literary ‘greatness’ are thus dissociated, as the films seems to ironically allude to the cultural privileging of literature over the visual arts.

The film offers the pleasure of ticking famous names audiences might have been familiar with, when Charlotte and Thackeray briefly cross paths with Charles Dickens at the publishing house (fig. 19). In spite of his disparaging remarks regarding *Jane Eyre*, Thackeray becomes Charlotte’s avuncular mentor and shopping companion, while wryly observing that “*Jane Eyre* seems to have stepped into the pages of *Vanity Fair*”. The film is keen to draw stark contrasts between Charlotte’s shallow celebrity-seeking behaviour and Emily’s home-bound, retiring manners. The suggestion seems to be that genius – as several characters call Emily repeatedly – does not need public recognition. This is yet another ironic stance of a medium which, at the height of the studio era, relied heavily on the star power of its leading actors.



Fig. 19. Left to right: Dickens, Brontë and Thackeray meet at the publishing house

*Devotion*, in sum, offers an image of authorship that is constructed around oppositions between public (Charlotte) and private (Emily), with creative authenticity and literary value associated firmly with the private realm. Emily Brontë becomes a Heathcliff-esque figure, losing her lover to her femme-fatale sister, ultimately leading to the sublimation of her passion in writing, and, inevitably, to her demise. A caricatured Charlotte is used to criticise female vanity, while exposure to public scrutiny becomes thus suspect. In this, even if it does not overly state its approach, the film's treatment of its female writers subtly reflects Robert Southey's view that "literature cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation" (qtd. in Gordon 125). Southey's remarks are part of his answer to a letter he had received from a young and hopeful Charlotte Brontë, in which she asked for his opinion on her poetry and expresses her wish "to be for ever known" (qtd. in Miller 3) in spite of her awareness of the prejudiced treatment of women in the public sphere. Over three

decades later, in the French speaking adaptation of the Brontë's 'life-text' titles *Les Soeurs Brontë* (1979), co-written and directed by André Téchiné, Southey's letter is used to further explore the emotional contradictions connected to female authorship in the public sphere. Téchiné's biopic is the subject of analysis in Part IV, chapter 2.1 of this thesis.

In its depictions of female writers as torn between romance and their literary calling, and their privileging of the personal over the historical, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and *Devotion* conform to this period's pattern of female 'greatness' in historical films and biopics, delineated by Deborah Cartmell as follows:

1. Film begins with frustrated, lonely woman in a sterile environment
2. A charismatic man appears, threatening to disturb the equilibrium
3. Inner struggle between family, loyalty and love interest, resulting in one of these being sacrificed ("The Golden Age Hollywood Biopic" 150)

They both employ the villain / victim dichotomy, *The Barretts* more explicitly than *Devotion*, as well as narrative and visual strategies that privilege heightened emotional and psychic states to explore melodramatically the power and familial dynamics involved in the female authors' negotiation of the private and public realms, in accordance with the culturally predominant and commercially-successful templates of female agency in the productions of the studio era. Custen notes in reference to the MGM biopic *Madame Curie* (1943), directed by Sidney Franklin like the two *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* biopics, that while its effect is "to tell viewers the story of the great scientist who discovered radium, it also posited a vision of what a scientist should be, how the experimental method is applied to scientific discovery, and how a scientist should behave if the scientist was also a woman. (17).



## 2. Feminism and the literary biopic (the 1970s)

Attuned to the cultural myths surrounding the author, adaptations of women writers' lives to film from the 1970s day constructed their characters in keeping with evolving cultural images of female authorship during the revolutionary period of second-wave feminism. An examination of the competing forces at play in a two 1970s literary biopics ranging from art-house to Hollywood fare, yields interesting results, most notably in the encounters between the filmmakers' attempts to convey in cinematic terms the process of artistic creation and the conventions of the genre further complicated by the commercial demands of the industry.

As Custen's *Bio/Pics* observes, the 1950s brought the disintegration of the Hollywood studio system and the gradual introduction of television into an ever-growing number of homes. Television started to intrude upon the terrain of cinema and to shape public culture in new ways. If Hollywood biopics in the previous decades celebrated the achievements of extraordinary men, in the US, "made-for-TV biopics – first broadcast in 1971 – shifted attention away from the elite famous and focused instead on the lives of everyday people to whom unusual things happened" (Custen 215). The period after the Second World War brought with it the social and cultural pressure on middle-class women to return to domesticity and the traditional roles of wife and mother, a pressure that was being exerted through the combined efforts of the media and consumerist advertisement. The majority of television shows were family-oriented, supporting the ideal of the nuclear family and offering clearly defined gender roles. Overall, film historians like Custen and Bingham notice a tendency to present women as victims or to focus the narrative on the family rather than the individual, reinforcing "an image of women as less powerful than men while valorizing a living

arrangement – the nuclear family – that more often than not places women in the role of homemaker, monarch of the domestic scene but victim of the world outside this sphere” (Custen 227).

According to Bingham, in contrast to the Great Man biopics of with their origin in classic-Hollywood era, “female biopics overall found conflict and tragedy in a woman’s success” (217). The reasons for what he sees as a “tendency toward the downward trajectory in female subjects” (Bingham 218) might have been the decline of the importance of female audiences and female stars after the disintegration of the studio system, the rise of misogyny in post-war popular culture, as well as the growing influence of domestic melodrama and the ‘woman’s film’ on the biopic genre, which meant the focus in the plot shifted from the heroine’s balancing power with love to one in which the victimised heroine struggles with the downward spiral that overtakes her (Bingham 218). If, as Bingham suggests, female biopics are to sidestep “the easy melodramatic victimization of the form” (219), they must make deliberate efforts to rethink the patterns that lead to female protagonists’ loss of agency through “parody and deconstruction, by combining them with other forms to create an ironic or critical perspective” (222). Bingham’s overwhelmingly negative assessment of the female biopic is countered by Karen Hollinger, who contends that “the female biopic has much more complexity than Bingham grants it” (*Feminist Film Studies* 161). A closer look at the films Bingham examines reveals a different picture, as none of the examples fits the victimology formula unequivocally. As Hollinger notes, while “it is undeniable that female biopics in contrast to those about men focus more on their protagonists’ suffering, this suffering [...] does not degrade the female protagonist but rather shows her ultimate triumph over her misery, or at the very least her success in being able to survive through it” (161-62). While female biopics reflect the socioeconomic limitations

imposed on women, as well as a tendency to highlight romance, it is also true that they tend to be less hagiographic and more complex in their portrayal, especially from the 1970s onwards, pointing to the need for women “to enter the public sphere and establish a sense of autonomy and control over their lives” (162).

If the studio-era biopic was inspired by plays, portraits or print biographies, coinciding with great shifts in “the redefined contours of fame” (Custen 216) towards notoriety, rather than noteworthiness, the TV biopic of the mid-to-late twentieth century reflected the audiences’ interest in the lives of celebrities of short-lived fame. The 1950s, however, still continued the tradition of the artist biopic on the big screen, with, amongst others, the 1952 musical comedy *Hans Christian Andersen*, the 1957 adventure romp *The Life, Loves and Adventures of Omar Khayyam*, the Oscar-nominated Van Gogh biopic *Lust for Life* (1956), or *Beloved Infidel* (1959) based on Scott Fitzgerald’s affair with a movie columnist in the Hollywood of the 1930s; similarly to the previous decade, a considerable number of musical biopics were produced. On the other hand, the only biopic featuring a female writer on the big screen in the 1950s was an MGM remake of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1957) directed again by Sidney Frankling using the same screenplay he had used for his 1934 studio production. The new take had the added attraction of being filmed entirely on location in England and in MGM’s fairly new system Metrocolor, with a cast that boasted such names as John Gielgud and Jennifer Jones. The trailer dropped the word ‘poet’ from its tagline altogether, advertising the romance as “Never a Love Story Like it!”

If the first two postwar decades “represent the dark ages of the woman’s film” (Hollinger “From Female Friends” 79), the 1970s saw a revival of two categories of films which emerged as a consequence of the cultural shifts gaining ground in the period of second-wave feminism, namely, “the independent woman film and the female

friendship film” (79). The two films that follow, *Julia* (1977) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979) are representative of these two sub-categories within the larger category of the hybrid biopic form.

### 2.1. *Julia* (1977): Of war and friendship

The Twentieth-Century Fox production *Julia* was adapted by scriptwriter Alvin Sargent from a chapter in *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits*, a controversial collection of memoirs by playwright Lillian Hellman published in 1973 to critical acclaim. The film is directed by director Fred Zinnemann, whose previous work includes a variety of genres, from documentaries to westerns to biopics such as the Academy Award-winning biographical adaptation *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). In fact, several of his films had already dealt with the history of anti-fascist resistance, as well as with events around the Second World War. Before directing *Julia*, he had already been awarded two Oscars for Best Director and had directed a series of films dealing with the ravages of war on the fate of individuals.<sup>1</sup>

Constructed as a “complete and timely redefinition of the content and form of women’s history on screen” (Smyth 166), *Julia* tells the story of Lillian and Julia’s lifelong friendship over a period of decades from their childhood spent together in a socially privileged environment to Julia’s violent death in Nazi Germany. In the course of their relationship, Julia asks for Lillian’s help to smuggle money across the border in order to save partisan lives, a request which Lillian fulfils risking her own life in the process. After Julia’s death, Lillian searches for her friend’s missing child in vain; moreover, her efforts to enlist Julia’s upper-class family in the search are thwarted by their refusal to have anything to do with their rebellious offspring. The narrative of their

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the war dramas *From Here to Eternity* (1953) or *Beyond a Pale Horse* (1964)

friendship is set against Lillian's struggles to become a successful playwright under the mentorship of Dashiell Hammett, her on-and-off companion for thirty years.

The story of Julia resonated with Zinnemann's career as an Austrian-born Hollywood success story whose professional projects had led him to journey across several European countries – his European background lent a certain “authority and authenticity of feeling to the film's pre-war atmosphere”, showing the “America of the 30s having to learn the fearful language of Nazi Europe” (Sinyard 141). His personal emotional involvement with the anti-Fascist movement came from the fact that his parents had died in the Holocaust. If Julia's story chimed with Zinneman's personal story, he thought Hellman a “phony character” in spite of acknowledging her writerly talents and he described their relationship as “very guarded and [ending] in pure hatred” (G. Miller 154). Some disagreement during the adaptation process was concerned with Hellman's request that there be more of Julia and less of herself in the film (Fred Zinnemann: *Cinema of Resistance*). In fact, following the release of the movie, there was some controversy regarding Hellman's veracity and Julia's identity, with evidence suggesting that Julia was a composite character patterned after the lives of several women. Aware of the expectations placed upon historical films, and of the fact that “many of Hollywood's historical films about women had been undermined by a false romanticism and soft focus on historical truths” (Smyth 167), Zinnemann was anxious to avoid making Julia seem too artificially heroic and polished, as “it was based on one woman's shifting memories of another woman” (qtd. in Smyth 167).

The stellar cast of the film included Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave and Jason Robards (the two latter actors won Oscars for their roles) as well as a not-yet-famous Meryl Streep in her earliest film role. Befitting this political film about female friendship released during the turmoil of second-wave feminism, the two lead actresses

were at the time openly engaged in political activities, with Fonda an outspoken defender of feminist ideas and Redgrave on the side of the socialist movement. Redgrave's previous roles also cast an interesting light on the film's choices. Before becoming Julia, she had received another Oscar nomination for her role in a 1968 biopic based on the life and loves of bisexual dancer Isadora Duncan – a role partly recapitulated in *Julia*'s ambiguous treatment of female friendship. The illuminating network of associations generated by the highly charged political or professional profiles of Fonda and Redgrave seems to confirm the confrontational edge of the film's aspirations. Moreover, it “offers an original variation on the ‘buddy movie’ formula which was one of the principal features of Hollywood filmmaking in the 70s” (Sinyard 141).

Indeed, the figure of the woman writer in the 1970s was constructed in keeping with the outspoken feminism of the 1970s. Through subtle arrangements of plot and visual imagery, *Julia* is made into the story of an ambitious, self-absorbed, conflicted young woman who longs for professional success and who, through her strong relationship with her childhood friend Julia, becomes aware of her social responsibilities. Their friendship unfolds in flashbacks, aided by the frequent intrusions of Lillian's voice-over. The non-chronological format of the script and the use of the disembodied and rather monotonous voice of the filmic narrator point to the textual voice of the memoirist's account of past events and feelings, thus highlighting the literary source of the adaptation. The character of Julia is “both solid yet spectral” – she is more an ideal rather than a ‘real’ person – as there is a distinct emphasis in the film on the subjective nature, idealising projections and nostalgic ambiguity of memory.

The film opens with the voice-over of the narrator explaining the meaning of “pentimento”, a pictorial term which is also the title of the memoir.<sup>2</sup> The film itself possesses a highly pictorial quality, with its skilful use of contrasting colours and the effective variation of bright and dark lighting. The opening shot makes use of blurry grey and blue colours to show Lillian sitting motionless in a boat on a lake fishing at dawn or dusk – a symbolic image of the narrator trying to retrieve memories from a past that has become dim with the passing of time – as the voice-over muses: “I am old now and I want to remember what was there for me once and what is there for me now” (fig. 20). The alternating temporal planes hint at the brushstrokes of the artist layering paint across the canvas to create the multiple spatial dimensions of the scene. Indeed, there are several temporal layers, encompassing the two friends’ lives from childhood to adolescence, maturity and, finally, to the narrator’s old age, all of them skilfully balanced with the help of visual connections and plot elements. The pictorial impression is enhanced even further by the circular structure of the film – the first and last shots are identical, framing the narrative visually and pointing to the artificial unity of events recollected in retrospect. Moreover, these shots are connected narratively to the main plot of the film, in which Lillian, completely alone, and linguistically and culturally isolated, has to brave the Nazis to fulfil her mission.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Pentimento” or “pentimenti” is a pictorial term that denotes the traces of earlier painting beneath another layer of paint which show that the painter has changed his/her mind in the course of composition.



Fig. 20. Fig. The opening and closing shots in Julia: retrieving memories

The intensity of the relationship between the two female characters at the centre of the story is represented through sophisticated cinematography. Bright, vivid colours and soft-focus images are used to construct an intimacy based on admiration and longing. The first time the audience sees Julia, she appears as if lit from within, with sparkling eyes and a mysterious smile, looking directly at the camera in extreme close-up – a dream-like projection rather than a person anchored in the solidity of reality (fig. 21). By having the character break down the cinematic fourth wall, the filmmakers might have wished to indicate her dual position as both inside and outside the film narrative, intimately connected not only with her friend, but also with the forces of history which are bound to victimise her. The close-up is a cinematic technique which Gilles Deleuze, referencing film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, equates with the concept of “affection-image”: “Eisenstein suggested that the close-up was not merely one type of image among others, but gave an affective reading of the whole film” (89) Indeed, throughout the film, the camera, standing for her adoring friend’s eyes, lingers on Julia’s face at length or remains motionless as she walks towards it until she fills the frame with her body. The scenes from their childhood and adolescence in which the two friends share



moments of intense intimacy are all shot in a warm light projected by a lamp or a fire, reflecting an idealised relationship under the warm glow of nostalgic remembrance, and constructing a visual rhetoric of affectivity which is part and parcel of the melodramatic mode (fig. 21). However, Julia's person remains an enigma throughout the narrative. Vanessa Redgrave plays her as a slightly otherworldly character, her light-blue eyes staring almost unblinkingly through or past her friend even when speaking to her.



Fig. 21. Fig. Young Julia (Lisa Pelikan) and adult Julia (Vanessa Redgrave) as idealised projections

Julia is constructed narratively and visually as a muse to Lillian, encouraging her to “Work hard. Take chances. Be very bold”, but also as her social conscience awakening after having been silenced by a prosperous lifestyle. Later on, stricken with writer's block, Lillian goes to Paris in search of inspiration and searches for her elusive friend only to find her in hospital, badly beaten by Nazi sympathisers. However, they are unable to communicate, and she disappears as mysteriously as she had appeared. Her enigmatic person is swept up by the forces of history as she constantly seems to operate just outside her friend's reach. Lillian's frantic attempts to understand and pin her down are futile – while Lillian *writes* about society, Julia *embodies* the society whose actions and intentions on the brink of the Second World War remain elusive. This reading seems to be supported visually by a shot in which Lillian walks through a dark corridor towards the camera, framed inside an open door, while behind her a clearly visible painting of Moby Dick crushing a boat between its jaws – a powerful symbol –

dominates the background. As she reaches the threshold, she turns off the light, and the painting disappears in darkness – Julia and the impersonal, primitive forces of history symbolised by the whale provide a menacing background to Lillian’s life. She will ultimately become caught and be forced to make a choice between being a helpless, passive spectator or an active participant – a “quintessentially Zinnemann dilemma, the bravery of people to whom physical courage does not come easily but who recognize that to act otherwise would be to undermine the values by which they have lived” (Sinyard 145). Her brief encounter with Julia and the forces of history in Europe the not only galvanise her into action on a political level, but also, subtly, on the literary level, by releasing her creative forces. Back to her sheltered life in America, Lillian sets about writing furiously and produces, after an initial hesitant start, her first great play. Thus the film suggests that it is the combined forces of the personal and the social which feed the writer’s imagination. Her encounter with her own personal ‘white whale’ liberates her creative energies.



Fig. 22. Lillian in front of the picture of Moby Dick crushing a boat between its jaws

Critic Karen Hollinger criticises what she perceives as the overly sentimental aspects of the women's relationships which, by emphasising "the importance of the emotional bond between the two friends, interfere with the force of the film's political message" (*In Company of Women* 45). Admittedly, compared with the more restrained display of emotionality in Hellman's text, the film tends to err on the side of effusiveness. It might indeed be argued that there is a certain amount of tension between the film's energetic endorsement of female writerly and political activities, which was exceptional at the time the film was released, and the somewhat excessive visual emphasis on female emotionality. As stated earlier, Hellman objected to the film's heavy focus on the character of Lillian at the expense of that of Julia, whose political activities are often mentioned in the narrative but seldom shown on screen – "whereas the viewer is only told of Julia's brilliant, courageous and self-sacrificing political activism, her physical mutilation and eventual murder are visually presented. What the spectator is allowed to see are not Julia's accomplishments, but her severe punishment for her entrance into public life" (*In Company of Women* 46). While this is a valid argument, one might argue that the lack of insistence on Julia's anti-Fascist activities is simply a consequence of the film's form as an adaption of a memoir, which is by definition a one-sided subjective account of events and people remembered. It is also debatable whether Julia's death is a form of punishment for her feminist intrusion into the public sphere. The scene of her death is consistent, I would argue, with the symbolic representation of her overall character. While Lillian is gradually falling asleep during a performance of *Hamlet* in Russian (Hamlet's monologue, to be precise), we are witnessing the stealthy intrusion of men armed with knives into Julia's room at night. As they bear down on her, the brief stabbing scene is shown against the light and in slow motion, accompanied by the soft wailing of a chorus and of violins which stops sharply as she falls to the

ground and, superimposed, we hear the applause for the actors' performance. Julia's death is thus elevated to the level of universal tragedy and her sacrifice acquires a symbolic significance which is in tune with her characterisation. She is indeed less of a person and more of a symbol, but her stature is not diminished herewith.

Bearing in mind that the character at the centre of the film's narrative is a writer, the filmmakers strive to convey a sense of artistic creation as both an individual and a collaborative process. Lillian Hellman's relationship with Dashiell Hammett was a tortuous one, but also a productive and mutually beneficial one. When they met Hammett's creative powers were already in decline, while Hellman's explosive energies needed direction. In a 1974 interview Hellman talks about this. To the question whether Hammett had helped her with her writing, she responds: "Oh yes, enormously, enormously. I can't ever pay him enough gratitude for what he did beyond the obvious things that writers can help with. He was so enormously patient. And more than patient, he was honest, sometimes rather sharply and brutally honest". Although his words sometimes pained her, she accepted his criticism because "you can always take what people say if you know there's no malice in it or no self-seeking in it. Then whether they're right or wrong, they've shown that amount of love to take the chance on your hating them which has always impressed me in people" (Bryer 152).

The mentoring relationship between Lillian and Dash is an element which the filmmakers developed far more extensively in the film than it is in Hellman's text, where he is only mentioned briefly a few times. What was adapted here were aspects from Hellman's biography, the details of which were probably gleaned and interpreted from contemporary interviews such as the one quoted above in which she spoke about their relationship. The negotiations between scriptwriter and director around the amount of romantic dependency the female character was to display are visible in the elements

that were not filmed, according to the (published) script. For example, in an early scene where Lillian vents her anger at Dash for her lack of inspiration, he walks away and leaves her on the dark beach. She simply stands there as the lights go off in the house and we hear her voice-over beginning to tell her story about Julia. The script, on the other hand, reads:

*Silence. Finally, after a few moments:*  
LILLIAN'S VOICE (O.S.). Hammett?  
*Hold for a long time. Waiting for some sign of her. There is none.*  
LILLIAN'S VOICE (O.S.). Hammett, I'm lost!  
*Hold. She still doesn't appear. (Thomas 454)*

Also, their telephone conversation after the success of her first play is shortened and a few lines eliminated, possibly again because they might have made her character less independent: "Hammet, are you listening to me? No, I don't want to talk in the morning, I might not be famous in the morning, I'll be alone in the morning, Hammett, and I don't want to be alone in the morning, I don't care how famous I am tonight" (Thomas 469).

Hammett's presence in the film is not overbearing – he is rather like a catalyst, an enabler that makes an appearance when needed, acting as a literary critic rather than a typical love interest. Some feminist critics have objected to various aspects in the configuration of the Lillian-Dash relationship on screen: his disillusioned personality, his lack of sexual interest seemingly pointing at a mutually exclusive relation between intellectual achievement and sexuality, or the fact this heterosexual interest in the story diminishes the importance of the two female characters' friendship (Hollinger *In Company of Women* 47). Again, I would argue that the presence and actions of this male figure do not function as disempowering elements in the construction of a heterosexual couple subjected to conventional gender roles. He exerts pressure, but is not obtrusive,

nor does he take over her authorial voice, but provides critical pressure when needed. Reading her first attempt at a play, he lets her know bluntly: “You wanted to be a serious writer. That’s what I liked. That’s what we worked for. I don’t know what happened but you’d better tear that up. Not that it’s bad, it’s just not good enough. Not for you”.

Indeed, in a 1973 conversation with Nora Ephron, Lillian Hellman expressed her irritation at being called a “woman playwright and a woman writer”:

Of course I believe in women’s liberation, but it seems to make very little sense in the way it’s going. Until women can earn their own living, there’s no point in talking about brassieres and lesbianism. While I agree with women’s liberation and ecology and all the other good liberal causes, I think at this minute they’re diversionary – they keep your eye off the problems implicit in our capitalist society. As a matter of fact, they’re implicit in socialist society too, I guess. It’s very hard for women, hard to get along, to support themselves, to live with some self-respect. (qtd. in Bryer 136)

Her pragmatic view of women’s liberation was that it was a matter of financial independence and that bringing up children should carry a salary with it so that women can manage their lives on the same footing as men.

A considerable amount of screen time is devoted to Lillian’s activities as a writer – the film is studded with instances in which we witness the writing process and what it means to be a writer is given a visual expression. As she writes by the window, she smokes and drinks furiously and tears pages out of her typewriter, displaying a muscular sort of behaviour in her battles with inspiration. While she does turn to Julia and Hammett for emotional support, her struggle for words and ideas in front of the typewriter is an individual process she faces at her own risk. At one point, after Hammett’s negative assessment of her first play, the camera follows her around trying to reflect what is going on in the writer’s head. Interior processes are translated into exterior manifestations to render visible mental processes: she is seen murmuring to

herself and gesticulating as she walks and cooks in apparent dialogue with the characters in her head, or looking wistfully out the window (fig. 23). Inevitable stock objects associated with writing such as the typewriter or scribbled pages are shown in close-up to suggest the intimacy of the creative process, as well as the affective relationship between the writer and the instruments of her craft. Interestingly, her strong physical reactions in dealing with frustration (throwing the typewriter out the window) seem to echo the confrontational spirit of 1970s feminism.



Fig. 23. Exteriorising the invisible process of writing

Throughout the film, the idea of lesbianism is suggested through the frequent display of physical affection and the exchange of longing looks between Lillian and Julia. The eroticism is never explicit, yet the homosexual dimension of their relationship seems to be much clearer than the heterosexual erotic connection between Lillian and Hammett, which is all but non-existent. In her memoir, Hellman acknowledges that her strong love for Julia was certain to have contained a sexual element which she did not explore, and which the film is ambivalent about.

In her interview with Ephron in 1973, Hellman expresses her wish to “leave as little as possible” (qtd. in Bryer 137) behind in order to avoid the misinterpretations of biography writing. She had managed to stop biographies of Hammett and was hoping to prevent any being written about herself on the grounds that “any life can be made to

look a mess. Mine certainly can” (qtd. in Bryer 137). Given her own propensity for blending fact and fiction, these scruples might sound slightly disingenuous; yet given that some of her writing is concerned with the distortion of truth and the consequences of ruined reputations, it would make sense to be suspicious of the biographer’s claims for accuracy in interpreting lives. Zinneman’s film most certainly met with some opposition on Hellman’s part, as those implicated in the process testified, but this partial cinematic biography of a woman writer’s relationship with history, memory and the process of artistic production manages to strike a delicate balance between the personal and the political, merging the two into a complex filmic commentary on the importance of human connection and social responsibility.



## 2.2. *My Brilliant Career* (1979): “Here is the story of my career”

“Is it possible to label films biopics that take a novel and turn it into an ‘I film’, a concealed biography of the author? This can be seen in the adaptations of *Little Women* in which Jo March is modelled on the author Louisa May Alcott [...] The genre is often hybrid and dominated in publicity and in critical discussion by its other genres” (Cartmell “The Hollywood Biopic” 94). This is indeed a question worth asking, since it is often not clear what characteristics should a film have to qualify as a biopic. Cartmell’s example of a liminal biopic is *Little Women*, adapted by Gillian Armstrong in 1994. Another example might be one of Armstrong’s earlier films, the Australian production *My Brilliant Career*.

Released at the end of a decade that witnessed major shifts in cultural consciousness, *My Brilliant Career* is based on the homonymous debut novel – and possibly veiled autobiography – by Australian writer Miles Franklin first published in Scotland in 1901. The film had a strong female input at the level of production, which partly accounts for it being having been described as “the first Australian feminist film” (Robson and Zalcock 10). The initial idea came from producer Margaret Fink, who, after reading the novel in 1965 and identifying strongly with the character, bought the rights. She recognised the strength of the novel’s main message at a time when the international women’s movement was in full swing. Tellingly, most of the main credits belong to women – the director Gillian Armstrong, the screenwriter Eleanor Witcombe and the production designer Luciana Arrighi.

Fortunately, the period of production was quite favourable in terms of funding. In the late 1970s, apart from setting up film funds to support the national film industry, both the Australian and New Zealand governments offered tax concessions designed to

encourage private investment in films. This allowed independent film-makers to access the sums necessary for more risky projects and also to move more easily into mainstream film production. Many films by women produced at the antipodes from the 1970s onwards share “a commonality of interest and approach” (Robson and Zalcock 6) that manifests itself in their focus on the family, the landscape and ethnicity, reflecting and supporting the civil rights and feminist movements under way there as well as and internationally.

*My Brilliant Career*, as its title suggests, turns around the question of female independence against the background of conservative cultural values at the end of the nineteenth century. Her family and the landscape of Australia become essential narrative and visual elements in the main character’s journey of self-discovery. Sybylla (Judy Davis), the plain daughter of a financially-challenged family living in the harsh conditions of the Australian bush, dreams of becoming an artist, against all odds. She is sent to her well-to-do grandmother’s estate to be groomed into an eligible, proper young lady ready for the marriage market. But Sybylla’s restless spirit does not succumb to the genteel taming techniques of her aunts or to the grim perspectives she is threatened with should she stubbornly refuse to conform to societal expectations with regard to female roles. However, not even falling in love and being proposed to by her dashing suitor Harry (Sam Neill) persuade her to conform. As untamed as the landscape around her, the heroine remains single-minded in her pursuit of a ‘career’. Armstrong points out the radical nature of the film’s ending in that period, as contrary to all expectations, *My Brilliant Career* is a “love story where a heroine turned the guy down” (“Interview with director Gillian Armstrong”; my transcription). Indeed, the surprising ending made an investor so nervous in terms of audience expectations that he initially refused to make the money available unless Sybylla should marry Harry.

Miles Franklin wrote the book when she was 16, and, like her heroine, she left her life in the bush to pursue her artistic and political interests. The end of the nineteenth century was a period of political and cultural ferment in Australia, as the country was trying to sever its ties with England. Writers were engaged in supporting a strongly nationalistic agenda – the cultural myth of the proud bushmen connected together in a fellowship of the working man was set against the classism of the old world. However, this belief in socialism and equality did not extend to women or the native population, and Miles Franklin was acutely aware of the limitations imposed upon women. Indeed, according to her biography, marriage as a social imperative was a matter of relative inconsequence to her (Roe 100) as she found her interests engaged elsewhere – she despised the “dullness and tame hennishness” of women’s lives (Franklin n.p.) and accepted the loneliness her choice would entail. But in spite of her rebellious and outspoken character, once the book *My Brilliant Career* had made her famous, she recoiled from the attention of the public, denying any connection between the text and her own life and turning her back on her native Australia to work in America and join the war efforts in England. The sequel to her novel, entitled *My Career Goes Bung*, which she started writing in the 1900s, was rejected by publishers for its outspokenness and would finally be printed in 1946. Upon her return to Australia she continued her political and social work and supported young Australian writers (Callil n.p.). On her death, she left enough money to provide for an annual prize – the Miles Franklin award for fiction remains one of the most prestigious literary awards in Australia.

From the beginning, the film draws parallels between Miles Franklin’s and Sybylla’s characters. The film’s title pays homage to its author insofar as it appears gradually, in hand-written font, against the black screen, signalling the literary source of

the adaptation. Several of the visual and plot choices are made with the author in mind. At one point, for example, the camera follows the heroine at length as she walks along a sheep enclosure and her appearance is made to resemble Franklin's in one of her photographs as a young woman (fig. 24).



Fig. 24. Miles Franklin and Sybilla

The novel opens with an unequivocal, ironic address by the young writer to her prospective readers: “My dear fellow Australians, Just a few lines to tell you that this story is all about myself – for no other purpose do I write it. I make no apologies for being egotistical. In this particular I attempt an improvement on other autobiographies” (Franklin n.p.). She goes on to decry the drabness of bush life and sternly warn the reader against misinterpreting the heroine's romantic troubles: “This is not a romance – I have too often faced the music of life to the tune of hardship to waste time in snivelling and gushing over fancies and dreams [...]” (Franklin n.p.).

The film's opening scene shows Sybilla's solitary home in the middle of the Australian outback as the young protagonist's voice announces the place and time of the story: “Possum Gully, Australia, 1897”. The next shot centres on the open door of the house, through which we see Sybilla pacing as she reads out the beginning of her future novel – and the film's source:

Dear fellow countrymen, just a few words to let you know that this story is going to be all about me. So, in answer to many requests, here is the story of my career. Here is the story of my career. My...brilliant... career.”

The camera shows her first from the outside, standing framed in the window and she rehearses the words about her ‘career’. Struck by inspiration, she then proceeds to sit down and adds the word “brilliant” as the camera focuses on her hand and her childish handwriting – an image which the biopic genre uses to signify a literary ‘life-text’. She is now framed next to a closed window pane which reflects the dry Australian landscape (fig. 25). Thus her words point to the future insofar as they mark her initial enthusiastic scribbles as the fictional autobiography of an already established writer. On the other hand, the added words “my brilliant career” (not present in the book’s opening) also function retrospectively in the context of the film adaptation, positioning the narrative as a cinematic celebration of a canonical woman writer.

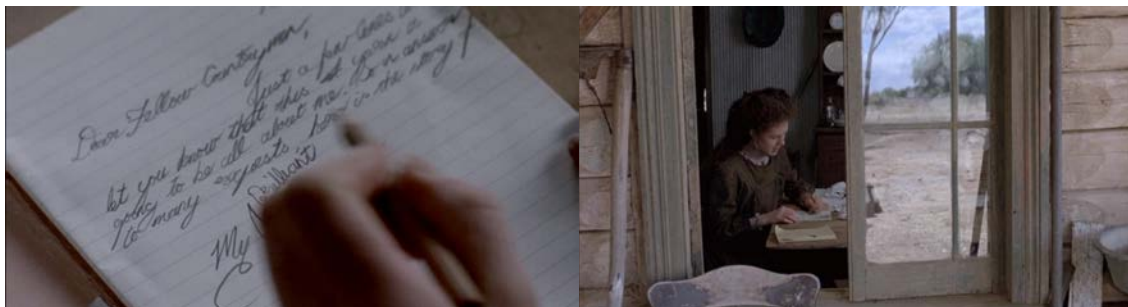


Fig. 25. Sybilla plotting her literary career

Armstrong’s adaptation augments the feminist tone of the story by casting newcomer Judy Davis, an unconventional beauty, as the boisterous, opinionated heroine struggling to leave behind her rural background in pursuit of a more elevated life. Her unruly hair signals her unruly spirit and her unwillingness to bow to the fate to which her family’s lack of means seems to condemn her. When told that her family can no longer “afford to keep” her, she stubbornly refuses to become a servant, sharing her hopes of a life beyond work and sleep with her sister: “I want to do great things,

Gertie". Her artistic aspirations receive renewed blows when she takes up with her wealthy grandmother and aunt, who wish to tame her wildness of spirit and make her eligible on the marriage market. Faced with the prospect of eligibility and romantic relationships, she feels acutely the importance of woman's beauty for her future and despairs at her own plainness: "I am so ugly, nobody loves me".

In an interview, Armstrong pointed out the importance of having a woman director deal with the heroine's lack of self-esteem in a sensitive manner – she felt that physical insecurity was something all young women would be able to identify with and was a subject that needed to be treated sympathetically ("Interview with director Gillian Armstrong"). Her looks improve after her aunts have her wild hair tamed and coarse skin scrubbed and softened – but she still revels in thwarting their efforts by driving fast, singing pub songs, making inappropriate jokes in front of distinguished company and generally declaring her future plans: "I won't marry anyone. I'm gonna have a career" much to the displeasure of her genteel grandmother. The comedic tone of the film is obvious in the scenes where her mischievous temperament emerges from under the veneer of gentility.

This being a period romance, the director trades upon the aesthetic appeal of the clothes and comfortable homes of the middle classes at the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the beauty and vivid colours of these interiors and their surrounding lush greenery are made to contrast even more sharply with the harshness of the drought-stricken outback, shown in dusty washed-out colours or caked in dried mud. Her refusal to marry the suitor chosen by her wealthy relatives leads to her being expelled from this place of leisure and comfort back into the poverty she tries to flee. When she tells her aunt Helen that she does not wish to marry, and least of all without love, she is given the example of her own mother, who has fallen down the social ladder

precisely for indulging her romantic desires. Later on, another more sympathetic aunt warns Sybylla about the consequences of her choice: “Loneliness is a terrible price to pay for independence.” However, neither the spectre of poverty nor the prospect of loneliness manages to curb her independent spirit. Indeed, the price for security is presented as equally undesirable, as an overhead shot of the heroine and her aunt inside a closed bird sanctuary and Sybylla’s framing between the cage bars makes visible the symbolic entrapment of genteel women.

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) bears a certain similarity to *My Brilliant Career*. Both heroines see themselves as plain but spirited and clever, and are made to face economic and social hardships in the unjust Victorian society that denies them personal fulfilment. If Jane Eyre, on the one hand, goes on to find her equal and settle into comfortable domesticity (admittedly, she is not given the choice of a ‘career’), Sybylla finds her mate but is nonetheless unwilling to give up on her dreams of artistic success. She asks for time to find out “what’s wrong with the world” and promises to marry him once she has completed her journey of self-discovery. As it turns out her career prospects take a turn for the worse when, like Jane Eyre, she is forced to work as a governess for a family to whom her father is indebted. Interestingly, the scene where she writes her name in chalk on the blackboard mirrors the handwritten design of the film’s title in a self-referential gesture. Harry is presented as a worthy companion but his affection and patience are still not rewarded eventually. In spite of his pleas: “I thought you loved me. Don’t you love me even a little?” the film’s narrative has thus far lead to the protagonist knowing her own mind. To appease the film’s corporate producers who were worried about the unexpected ending, the filmmakers compromised by having Sybilla tell Harry “I’m so near loving you”. However, her choice is presented

as a realistic comment on the consequences of marrying and the power of her own desires for self-fulfilment:

...the last thing I want is to be a wife out in the bush...having a baby every year... maybe I'm ambitious, selfish, but I can't lose myself in somebody else's life when I haven't lived my own yet. I want to be a writer. At least I'm going to try. But I want to do it now. And I want to do it alone.

These lines, sealed with a tender kiss against the background of the blue sky, ultimately subvert the conventions of the period romance the biopic had broadly followed up to this point.

According to the director, the ending of the book was too negative and had to be changed to let the audience know the aspiring writer did indeed fulfil her dream. In the last chapter of the novel, Franklin writes in a tone of lamentation: "my heart is weary. Oh, how it aches tonight – not with the ache of a young heart passionately crying out for battle, but with the slow ache of an old heart returning vanquished and defeated!" (Franklin 231) Fusing Sybylla's and Miles's stories, the filmmakers have chosen to preserve the "young heart crying out for battle" and add a more upbeat tone to the last scene, catering to their target audiences' expectations. Referring to her fellow countrymen, the Franklin's Sybylla muses with slight bitterness about her prospects: "My ineffective life will be trod out in the same round of toil, - I am only one of yourselves, I am only an unnecessary, little, bush commoner, I am only a – woman!" However, in the film, the word "will" is changed into "may" to leave the future open and condense Franklin's love for Australia that is manifest in her writings:

My ineffectual life may be trod out in the same round of toil. But I want to tell everyone about my own people, how I love them and pity them. Pity all of us. The sun is shining, another day, and hope is whispering in my ear. With much love and good wishes to all – good night, good bye. Amen



Indeed the film ends as it began, with an image of the sun rising over the Australian landscape, but now the heroine's body becomes part of it. Carrying her manuscript, she kisses it lovingly, as she had kissed Harry and places it inside the post box. Then she remains next it, smiling at the sun, as her outstretched arms seem to be embracing both the landscape and the 'brilliant' future represented by this new day – the film's ending as the moment when the 'real' story of the writer's 'brilliant career' truly begins. She is thus made to represent the spirit of the Australian pioneers, toiling for a better future in harsh conditions, as well as the spirit of feminism trying to break free from the past.

In 1979 *My Brilliant Career*'s message and stylistic sophistication was not lost on audiences. It was nominated for an Oscar for Best Costume and for a Palme d'Or at Cannes, and garnered a series of awards in the UK and Australia. The audience at the Cannes' premiere cheered the film's makers, calling the 27-year-old director an 'auteur'. Indeed the started the careers of many of the participants, amongst them Armstrong and Davis. History, autobiography and film industry come together in this film, iconising a tradition of feminist heroines who have managed to make their voices heard: the writer Miles Franklin, the women filmmakers collaborating on a successful cinematic product that celebrated female creativity and agency, and the female audiences at the height of second-wave feminism.

#### IV. Contemporary biopics (1990s to 2018)

##### 1. Shakespeare and Austen at the movies

The history of Shakespeare film adaptations goes back to the nineteenth century with the first Shakespeare-inspired film produced in 1899. Sir Herbert Beerbohm, a British actor and theatre manager with a long career in Shakespearean theatre productions, filmed a series of scenes from *King John* with the help of one of Thomas Edison's early collaborators (Rothwell 1). Shakespeare himself made his first appearance in 1907, in the now lost film *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* by French cinema pioneer Georges Méliès, in which Méliès played the bard himself. As the surviving stills and the catalogue entries suggest, Méliès's Shakespeare is seated at his desk suffering from writer's block – a recurrent theme in literary biopics – while trying to conjure up the assassination scene from *Julius Caesar*. With the help of the magic of stop-motion characteristic of early cinema, Shakespeare is suddenly “transplanted into the scene of Caesar's assassination, converted [...] from frustrated writer to rapt spectator” (Buchanan “Introduction” 7). In the first decades of the twentieth century, cinema used Shakespeare's dramas to “raise the contemporary estimation of film as a low-culture medium” (Cartmell “The Shakespeare on Screen Industry” 30), as movies were perceived to be entertainment for the working-class masses. In time, Shakespeare adaptations would acquire an aura of prestige, making the gradual transition from ‘low’ to ‘high’ culture and from stage to screen with the aid of celebrated actors such as the classically-trained Shakespearean actor Laurence Olivier in *Henry V* (1944), *Hamlet* (1948) and *Richard III* (1955), or iconic actors/directors like Orson Welles in *Macbeth* (1948) and *Othello* (1951), to mention but a few.

On the other hand, the history of Austen on screen starts comparatively late, and has a less smooth transition. One of the earliest recorded adaptations of her novels is a BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* (1938) which has not survived. After the commercially successful MGM adaptation released in 1940, starring Laurence Olivier as Darcy and Greer Garson as Elizabeth Bennett, surprisingly, all Austen adaptations moved onto the small screen, with the BBC making a great number of these. It is in the 1990s that the Austen boom picked up pace, with six adaptations appearing only in the years 1995 and 1996 (Parrill 5). In 2007, Austen the writer was awarded her first biopic, namely *Becoming Jane*, starring Anne Hathaway, although earlier adaptations of her work betrayed a marked tendency to interpret her novels as autobiographical. Patricia Rozema's adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (1999) explicitly turns Fanny Price into Austen while the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* opens with a deliciously self-referential scene of Elizabeth Bennett reading Austen's novel, "a witty declaration of the film's source and status as an adaptation" (Cartmell "Becoming Jane in screen adaptations" 152). In fact, *Mansfield Park* may arguably be described as the first biographical picture of Austen, coming at the end of a decade awash with film adaptations of Austen's novels. Rozema transforms the self-effacing Fanny Price into an outspoken author by grafting Austen onto the fictional character through a variety of strategies such as having Fanny/Austen read from Austen's literary work while gazing directly at the camera, acknowledging thus the artificial boundary between fiction, biography and history. Unfortunately, Rozema's challenging adaptation was lost on postfeminist audiences at the end of the twentieth century. The film was a relative flop because "it fell between audiences" (Higson "English Heritage, English Literature" 48) due to its radical revisionist interpretation of the novel.

Like in the case of Shakespeare more expensive history on screen, critical appraisals of film adaptations of Austen's texts aimed at the mass market have tended to use the language of betrayal and desecration – the moving image has been deemed unfit to contain and communicate the 'spirit' of the written word. The same suspicion of 'dumbing down' has accompanied literary biopics, as Andrew Higson's analysis of *Becoming Jane* evinces the film's slightly questionable appeal to both the knowledgeable and the multiplex viewer: 'while it was carefully addresses to the niche market of so-called 'quality films', it was also addressed to mainstream audiences seeking a romantic comedy-drama' ("Brit-lit biopics" 118). The next two chapters discuss four literary biopics based on these two canonical figures' life-texts, exploring the generic narrative and visual strategies they employ in the service of conveying biographical and emotional 'truths' about their subjects.

### 1.1. Shakespeare in love and death: *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *All Is True* (2018)

Young man: "I just wanted to ask how you knew."

Shakespeare: "Knew what?"

Young man: "*Everything*. There is no corner of this world you have not explored, no geography of the soul which you cannot navigate. How? *How do you know?*" (*All is True*; my italics)

You need to be conversant with Shakespeare. You need it. At one point, when I was about eleven I guess, I was convinced that Shakespeare was a black girl. In the South. Who had been molested. *Else how could he know what I knew?* 'When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, / I all alone beweep my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, / And look upon myself and curse my fate,[...] From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings/ That then I scorn to change my state with kings.' I knew that that was my grandmother he was talking about, that sweet love remembered. And that's how I felt about her. (video "Maya Angelou talks Shakespeare at the University of Texas in 2008"; my transcription, my italics)

While the history of adaptation of Shakespeare's plays is rich and varied, it is rather surprising that his life has not been brought to the screen very often. The two largest productions, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *All is True* (2018) were released twenty years apart. Other, less known biographical films are the obscure *The Immortal Gentleman* (1935), the 1978 ITV mini-series *Will Shakespeare* starring Tim Curry of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) fame, the British television production *Waste of Shame* (2005), the *Blackadder*-inspired family comedy *Bill* (2015), based on Shakespeare's 'lost years' as a young man seeking his fortune in London, the BBC television sitcom *Upstart Crow* (2016) released during the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and the American teen series *Will* (2017). I hesitate to include the blockbuster directed by Roland Emmerich slyly named *Anonymous* (2011) since it is not really about Shakespeare, but rather about the fictionalised Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, who, it is suggested, was the 'real' writer of Shakespeare's plays.

Described as a “vulgar prank on the English literary tradition” in the *New York Times*, Emmerich’s *Anonymous* is not content to challenge the idea of literary authorship through ritual cinematic re-enactment of the ‘death of the author’, he denies his authority as the quintessential authorial figure by denying his very existence. A certain Shakespeare pictured as an illiterate buffoon does make an appearance, but that would hardly qualify the film as a biopic. Evidently, both *Shakespeare in Love* and *Anonymous* are films about ‘authorship’ more than anything, but at least the former is a “playful, postmodern biographical fantasy” (Lanier 221), whereas the latter is presented in an earnestly historical manner, bolstering its claims to historical authenticity through “cinematic alusion and magnificent computer graphics” (Lanier 224) to re-instate an elitist image of Shakespeare as aristocratic, rather than ruffian.

Critic Stephen Orgel suggests that our desire for authenticity in relation to Shakespeare is for something else beside the text:

What is authentic here is something that is not in the text; it is something behind it and beyond it that the text is presumed to represent: the real life of the characters, the actual history of which the action is a part, the playwright’s imagination, or the hand of the master, the authentic witness of Shakespeare’s own history. The assumption is that texts are representations or embodiments of something else, and that it is that something else which the performer or editor undertakes to reveal. What we want is not the authentic play, with its unstable, infinitely revisable script, but an authentic Shakespeare, to whom every generation’s version of a classic drama may be ascribed. (24)

This undefinable “something else” is Orgel’s statement is similar – in its ambiguous nature – to what Courtney Lehmann calls (via Slavoj Žižek) something “in the text more than the text” (2), an elusive “potency of life”, as John Milton called it (qtd. in Lehmann 2), that books radiate. Lehmann contends that this ‘something’ is not simply that which eludes interpretation, but “something that exceeds the narrative frame itself: superfluous, vital, it contains the residue of cultural desires, anxieties, and repressions, exerting an affective pull on the reader only to lead to a signifying void” (2).

Paradoxically, by eliminating the fiction of the Author, poststructuralist critiques have endowed the anthropomorphic Text with a personality, whereby it seems that “any body *but* the authorial body is allowed to participate in [the] primal scene of textual pleasure” (Lehmann 9; italics in the original) A potential solution to the problem of how to retain a viable concept of agency without resorting to the oppressive ideology of the Author, is performance, for, as Lehmann argues, on stage (and on screen, I would add) “the body is textualized and the text is embodied” (Lehmann 15). ‘Shakespeare’ becomes then “a montage of historically charged collisions between bodies and texts” (19) that cannot be reduced to either an individual Author or an impersonal textual apparatus. Thus in cinema we might potentially locate that undefinable ‘something’ one might call ‘Shakespeare’, for it is indeed theatre and cinema that “give[s] us back our bodies, and particularly our faces, which have been rendered illegible, soulless, unexpressive by the centuries-old ascendancy of print” (Sontag qtd. in Lehmann).

The Oscar-winning romantic comedy *Shakespeare in Love* playfully constructs ‘Shakespeare’ the author as not quite ‘dead’ yet, but suffering from writer’s block. Master Bill complains to an anachronistic Freudian psychologist in Elizabethan London: “It’s as if my quill is broken, as if the organ of my imagination has dried up, as if the proud tower of my genius has collapsed”. The film eroticises the act of writing implying that the male author’s ‘female’ work is impregnated via the organ of the imagination stimulated by the muse who has so far failed to make an appearance and help Shakespeare pour out *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate’s Daughter* onto the page. Shakespeare’s failure as a writer is exploited for laughs from the opening scenes, as his ink-stained fingers are shown in close-up, a conventionalised biopic trope, scribbling versions of his signature instead of immortal lines. But if Shakespeare the playwright fails to deliver the work, ‘Shakespeare’ the brand is shown to have already delivered the

goods materialised in a souvenir mug from Stratford upon Avon that sits on a shelf. The film humorously and self-consciously blurs the lines between past and present, between the market-driven literature Shakespeare is expected to produce in an early capitalist society, and the crowd-pleasing money-making mainstream fare the film itself is expected to be at the end of the 1990s.

Samuel Crowl's *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* identifies five periods in the history of Shakespeare on film: the silent era in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the first attempts to merge Shakespeare with popular film in the 1930s, the post WWII international phase that saw productions from Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, or Franco Zeffirelli, the "barren wasteland" from Polanski's *Macbeth* in 1971 to Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989, and, lastly, the revival of the Shakespeare film genre in the last decade of the century, "the most concentrated release of sound films based on Shakespeare's works" ranging from Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* in 1991, through John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) to Tim Blake Nelson's *O* (2001) (Crowl 1-2). Beginning in the 1970s the American film market saw the development of the cineplex, "a large, sprawling, suburban, one-story, cement-block structure, surrounded by acres of parking lot" (Crowl 2-3) with multiple screens which demanded more product and created a market for smaller, less expensive independent films by the 1990s. The company that best catered to this new market was Miramax, whose triumph came in 1998 when John Madden and Tom Stoppard's irreverent collaboration to bring Shakespeare the author to life on screen won the Oscar for Best Picture. Miramax productions were relatively low budget and were characterised by their "attention to theme, character relationships and social relevance", targeting a market between the art-house and the mainstream (Jackson 6).



As several critics have noted, Miramax's *Shakespeare in Love* is not really about William Shakespeare the historical writer, but about authorship and performance (Corrigan "Which Shakespeare" 155; Bennett 2). I mentioned above the scene where Shakespeare scribbles his signature instead of creating art. As he gets frustrated with his creative blockage, he crumples up the pages and throws them at various objects, one of them being the Stratford mug, the other a Hamletian skull. The image of the skull functions both as a tongue-in-cheek reminder that we are in the presence of the author of the revered play *Hamlet*, but also as a sign of the absence of the 'real' author, now long dead, like "poor Yorick". Paradoxically, *Shakespeare in Love* contains both the presence and the absence of the writer, "the ghost of Shakespeare materializes here as, quite literally, a contemporary body, resurrected by and for contemporary film culture" (Corrigan "Which Shakespeare" 156).

This being a partial adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, it plays with the romantic story of the star-crossed lovers, locating the origin of the play in Shakespeare's own romantic life. Having finally found the muse that unblocks him in the fictional Viola de Lesseps, he communes with her in body and spirit and brings forth the play and a successful end to his creative tribulations. However, art demands sacrifices, it is implied, and he must give up his lover in body so that he may create art, imbued by her spirit, rendering her immortal. "You will never age for me, nor fade, nor die" he tells his lover in distress, referencing the last line in the famous sonnet 18 "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee". "Write me well" she demands as consolation. The purpose of Shakespeare's play and of *Shakespeare in Love* is fulfilled: "to show the very truth and nature of love", that is, to make audiences experience 'real' emotions through the embodied medium of the writer as performer and author. The embodied author as performer adds the dimension of 'the real' to fictional events unfolding on the stage.

*Shakespeare in Love* adds a further layer of intertextual irony to the love story by casting heartthrob-of-the-moment Colin Firth as the villainous aristocrat Lord Wessex, who thwarts the lovers' plans. Three years before, in 1995, he himself had starred as the romantic lead Mr Darcy in the hugely successful BBC television adaptation of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

*Shakespeare in Love* conflates life and work, and reconceives "the little we know about Shakespeare's life to reflect an author who writes from the heart, his most powerful expressions inspired by the personal experience of love" (Cartmell 154). However, the idea that we do not know very much about Shakespeare's life is a myth, claim Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith in *30 Great Myths about Shakespeare* (2013). We may not know all the "precise details of the bits that most interest us, but it is not true to say that the records are scant. [...] Part of the reason that we know so much, relatively speaking, about Shakespeare is that he maintained links with his home town" (106). It is to his home town that Kenneth Branagh sends the bard twenty years later in *All Is True*.

The fascination with the figure of Shakespeare has a long history in literary biography. "I began with the desire to speak with the dead. [...] If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them" (Greenblatt, *Shakespeare Negotiations* 1). Stephen Greenblatt's end goal in *Shakespeare Negotiations*, however, is to examine "the textual traces in which we take interest and pleasure" not as a source of "numinous authority", but as "the signs of contingent social practices" (5). And yet this desire to speak with the dead would not be assuaged. Sixteen years after his examination of textual traces and collective making of cultural practices, Greenblatt resurrects Shakespeare the man to write *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became*

*Shakespeare* (2004) praised for being a love letter to Shakespeare, and criticised for being so highly speculative and imaginative as to be on the verge of historical fiction, a literary biography deemed by a critic uncomfortable with its perceived traditional impetus and conservative politics as “the most notoriously unnecessary biography of recent years” (De Ornellas 328). *Will in the World* starts not with textual traces, but with the “young man from a small provincial town – a man without independent wealth, without powerful family connections, and without a university education” who “in a remarkably short time, becomes the greatest playwright not of his age alone, but of all time” (Greenblatt 11). The book endeavours “to discover the actual person who wrote [...] or rather, since the actual person is a matter of well-documented public record, it aims to tread the shadowy paths that lead from the life he lived into the literature he created” (Greenblatt 12) From the Preface, Greenblatt’s biography wears its method on its sleeve: “to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform his life into his art, it is important to use our own imagination” (14). It has been noted that much of the vivid drama in this literary biography does not come from Shakespeare, but from the biographer himself, who reached into “his own life to supply the emotional raw materials that energise this book. [...] Greenblatt understands Shakespeare so well because he understands himself” (Taylor).

A similar connection between biographer and biographee seems to be at the heart of *All is True*, a slow-paced, meditative biopic that dramatises Shakespeare’s three final years. The film seems to be constructed as an aging fan’s intensely intimate and irreverent ode to his idol depicted as a rueful, guilt-racked old man re-examining his life and choices. Scripted by author and actor Ben Elton and directed by Branagh, it centres on the playwright’s domestic troubles as he moves back to Stratford after an exciting life devoted to theatre in London, to find his long-suffering wife and emotionally-

troubled daughters are hostile and resentful, and that his success on the London stage means little to the family he has left behind.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic drive of the film evolves around his efforts to atone for his absence and reconnect with his remaining family while clearing out the skeletons in the cupboard. The story also offers a dash of whodunit mystery as he tries to find out how his son Hamnet died. Ironic and straight-faced bardolatry blends with feminist politics, social and religious critique, heartfelt deliveries of Shakespeare verses seamlessly alternate with postmodern pastiche, and melodrama is fused with comedy.

Branagh has a long history of theatre productions and a sizeable filmography of Shakespeare adaptations both as an actor and a director, starting with *Henry V* in 1989. His Oscar-nominated *Hamlet* (1996) which he wrote, directed and starred in has had an enduring impact on the Shakespeare canon, not least owing to his visually arresting bleached hair and severe black uniform, a striking look befitting the sheer spectacular size of the production. In fact, Branagh's work has been consistently described as a blend of high art and popular culture, a *bricolage* that "attempts to resituate the high modernist notion of artistic *production* within a low postmodern mode of mass cultural *reception*" (Lehmann 164, italics in the original). Before poststructuralism took hold in academia, film adaptations of Shakespeare's work were met with accusations of 'infidelity' and disrespect towards a body of work that was being treated reverentially. In the last three decades, on the other hand, the critical position has shifted, and mainstream filmmakers have stood accused of putting out conservative productions that invariably fail to subvert hegemonic ideologies and the neo-liberal paradigm. Consequently, much of Branagh's work, given his unabashedly "whole-hearted

---

<sup>1</sup> Before *All is True*, Ben Elton had written and directed the BBC2 comedy series about Shakespeare "Upstart Crow".

participation in the marketplace” (Russell 9) has tended to be discussed in terms of its cultural politics rather than any aesthetic measure.

According to Crowl, “Branagh is a product of the postmodern moment dominated by a sense of belatedness – a sense that originality is exhausted and that only parody and pastiche and intertextual echo remain. [...] an artist who creates out of the bits and shards of the postmodern moment” (“Shakespeare” 28). He uses a vast array of intertextual and intermedial references to add comedic or emotional layers of his work. To give but one example, in *All is True* we see Shakespeare playing with a dog several times, carrying him in a wheelbarrow for the amusement of his niece – the scene brilliantly referencing the dog scenes and Philip Henslowe’s quip in *Shakespeare in Love* about the questionable taste of audiences: “You see? Comedy. Love, and a bit with a dog. That’s what they want”.

The emotional emphasis is on Shakespeare’s family’s bitter discontent and his need for atonement, as well as his belated grief for the death of his son, externalised in his obsessive tending to his garden. The garden is an hermeneutically multi-layered locus in the film: a retreat from the world after the thrills of city life; a retreat from the disappointments of life, following Voltaire’s injunction to cultivate one’s garden at the end of *Candide* (1759); a place of communion with the natural world at the end of life; a space of dreams and fantastical creatures referencing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Predictably, critics have pointed out the ‘inadequacy’ of such an approach in transposing a biography on screen – “the result is more country soap than biopic, a slow and soothing tale of family secrets and festering resentments” (Catsoulis) – ignoring the interplay of strong melodramatic pathos and comical, tongue-in-cheek self-awareness, as well as the knowing nods to contemporary culture and to the Shakespeare fandom.

Shakespeare mourns not only his son, but also himself, the end of his work and life as his wife points out reproachfully. That he is in his twilight is also visually represented in a scene where he is shown walking through cascading falling leaves blown by the autumn wind, a clear reference to his sonnet 73 on the ravages of time: “That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/ Upon those boughs which shake against the cold...”. He is a man in search of redemption for his son’s death and of emotional truth grounded in the real: “I’ve lived so long in imaginary worlds, I think I’ve lost sight of what is real, of what is true”, he tells one of the maids at one point. To which the maid, in a rather postmodern, self-referential manner, replies: “Nothing is ever true”, a sentence echoed later on by his daughter. The women in Shakespeare’s life are given voices and back stories, adding to the human dimension of the cultural icon on screen. At one point, the newly domesticated Shakespeare explains to his servant maid, in an instance of egalitarian fraternising, that plays, gardens and loaves of bread,

all of them begin with an idea, from a compulsion to create something of beauty or of need. [...] Bushes, brambles, yeast, flour, verses, players, and they all need a dream which will not be denied, and which must weather all kinds of adversity, because the weather will turn, the bugs will infest, the oven will cool, the yeast will sour, and in my case, your fellow workers, like the brilliant lunatic actor called Dick Burbage, will interfere, and they will demand a bigger show for a smaller budget, and a shorter play with a much longer part for him, and all of these trials must be overcome without ever losing sight of the dream itself.

This deftly scripted scene manages to bring together politically resonant ideas around women’s labour, the playwright’s labour of writing, as well as the filmmakers’ labour of putting together the cinematic production we are witnessing.

The film opens with an extreme close-up shot of the ‘Chandos portrait’ – the only portrait of the playwright that has any claim to have been painted from life – gradually emerging from the darkness of the past to fill the entire frame. The shot signals from the beginning the film’s connection to the ‘real’ author. The next shot replaces the pictorial Shakespeare with the cinematic ‘Shakespeare’ played by Branagh, standing heroically in front of a wall of fire that is (we are informed by the start credits) consuming The Globe Theatre after a prop cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII* (advertised as *All Is True*) (fig. 26). Mournful violin music accompanies the text on screen informing us that “William Shakespeare never wrote another play”, the implication being that the film is offering the lovers of Shakespeare’s literature a chance to witness the playwright’s last drama.



Fig. 26. Shakespeare in heroic pose standing in front of the burning Globe

In the introductory scenes, the camera is placed at a ground-level angle, the upward-pointing shots rendering the characters larger than life. In particular, Shakespeare is made to appear powerful and impressive – like a tragic hero on an urgent mission, he bursts onto the screen riding a horse and is then shown silhouetted against the setting sun. Using these unusual camera angles to introduce the character, the filmmakers imply that the bard is a star in decline, a meaning supported by the close up

on Branagh's (prosthetically-enhanced) face from the level of a boy who, with a voice filled with wonder, introduces the hero: "You're Shakespeare, the poet. You tell stories". "I used to", retorts Shakespeare in a tired voice. "I had a story, but it was never finished. Will you finish it for me, please?", "I'm done with stories, lad. I wouldn't know how to finish yours.", "Yes, you would". As Shakespeare turns to look at the boy, he has disappeared, suggesting it is his dead son Hamnet who has welcomed him back to Stratford.



Fig. 27. A star is setting – Shakespeare as declining genius

The camera work in these few establishing scenes manipulates our point of view and emotions in astute ways. As Shakespeare turns around, adopting a god-like posture crowned by the setting sun, the effect is highly melodramatic (fig. 27). The emotionally-charged, pathos-filled plea of the dead boy asking his father – and the greatest writer of all times – to tell his 'true' story in close-up shots is contrasted with the lingering, awe-inducing heroic stance of the silhouetted figure against the darkening sky that produces an artificial, distancing effect of visual spectacle. From the marketing to the introductory shots, *All is True* signals its intentional blend of the heroic and the melodramatic in telling the story of "the final act of the world's greatest playwright",



according to its poster tagline. The film also indulges in the pleasures of the ‘heritage aesthetic’ and literary allusion, with wide shots of verdant countryside, tolling bells hinting at the first lines in Sonnet 71’s “No longer mourn for me when I am dead / Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell/ Give warning to the world that I am fled...” , gardens in bloom and gliding swans on gently-flowing rivers.

The film, as is to be expected of literary biopics, intertwaves the work and the life-text in order to bring the former to life. When Shakespeare plots an ingeniously comical story about a “Moorish villain named Aaron” from *Titus Andronicus*, and the magnificent African who played him, to save his daughter from a disgraceful trial for adultery, the justification in the guise of a playfully modern catchphrase is applicable to both the film’s narrative and the biopic genre in general: “I’ve never let the truth get in the way of a good story.” The narrative oscillates between seriousness and irony, emotion and detachment, belief and disbelief. When Shakespeare advises a young man presumably aspiring to become like Shakespeare to consider the contents of his own soul, “and if you’re honest with yourself, then whatever you write, all is true”, the heartfelt tone of the scene is undermined by its suspicious similarity to Polonius’s advice to his son Laertes in *Hamlet* “This above all, to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man”. Were Polonius not a cynical, flattering fool his words might be taken at face value, so can one trust the words of the playwright who imitates his own character? *Shakespeare in Love* contains many allusions to a range of Elizabethan cultural references whose function is to engage and entertain different categories of spectators, from those who have little knowledge of the period, to those who might recognise John Webster’s name and are in on the jokes. Likewise, *All Is True* capitalises on a range of allusions to Shakespeare’s

work and context to enrich the spectator's experience of the life-text on screen through moments of pleasurable recognition.

The Earl of Southampton, played by gay actor Ian McKellen, and identified as the fair youth of the sonnets, acts as an admiring fan and a lucid critic of class hierarchies. He flatters Shakespeare, calling him the son of Apollo, "god of poetry, god of truth" and urges him to ignore the sneers of his social superiors, and spurn the trappings of respectable status, as he has merit and talent on his side: "The man who wrote *Hamlet*, and *Henry V*, and *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, paid twenty pounds for the name of 'gentleman'. Will, why do you care?" "I care because it matters, well, in England it matters. I have what I have upon my own merit, and for that I'm suspect." This emotionally-charged exchange further deepens Branagh's identificatory strategy with Shakespeare, as it speaks to Branagh's personal history. As an Anglo-Irish actor, born in Belfast to working-class parents, he shares with Shakespeare a history of being an outsider coming in from the margins. After his parents moved to England to escape The Troubles in the 1970s, young Branagh became 'suspect' on account of his origins, learning to suppress his Northern Irish identity "to become English at school and remain Irish at home" (Branagh qtd. in Crowl "The Films" 2) in order to blend in. In order to gain the approval of the Royal Shakespeare Company as a young aspiring actor he altered his accent and acquired what he describes as a "quintessentially English identity" (Branagh qtd. in Lehmann 171). His power as an actor and director has been recognised as stemming from "his unique stance as an outsider to mainstream English theatrical culture" (Crowl "Flamboyant" 222). Branagh's biography reveals that these complex identities have contributed to his postmodern style of artistic *bricolage* combining low and high cultural forms. For Branagh, then, Shakespeare would become a means of self-translation and legitimation, while his rivalling legacies of Protestant

and Catholic, English and Irish would nourish his dual career as a Shakespearean and Hollywood actor – he is indeed, like Shakespeare, an “upstart crow”.

The scene of the ‘death of the author’ allows Branagh to close the film by further connecting the personal and the cultural dimensions of Shakespeare’s life-text and literary text by having the formerly illiterate wife, who is now able to read, and his two daughters recite “Fear no More” from the play *Cymbeline* in an uplifting moment, where the lines “The scepter, learning, physic, must / All follow this, and come to dust” speak to the educational and democratising spirit of Shakespeare’s text, and, by extension, of Branagh’s film. In an attempt to dispel any prescribed notions of objectivity in writing literary biography, Graham Holderness suggests that “biography should be emotionally involved, not dispassionate; self-reflexive, not neutral; experimental and innovative, not realist and documentary (“Author! Author!” 131), wearing the personal signature of the biographer. This description applies equally to Branagh’s autobiographically-inflected portrayal of Shakespeare’s life-text. *All is True* constructs an emotionally-involved story of success, guilt, love and reconnection against the background of complex family dynamics infused with the rhetoric of affectivity of the melodramatic mode that bears Branagh’s personal postmodern signature of generic *bricolage*, intertextual allusion and intellectually-stimulating blend of high culture and popular entertainment.

## 1.2. Austen in love and death: *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008)

At the turn of the millennium, Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999) managed to leave behind the "the myths of suffering, victimization and failure" (Bingham 10) of women's biopics through formal experimentation and the deliberate application of a feminist point of view to the vexed issue of female authorship, in line with the development in male biopics, which have moved from the hagiographic and celebratory to the postmodern and parodic. A fresh path for the Austen genre seemed to have been cleared by this particular innovative interpretation. However, adopting a feminist point of view in the case of Austen adaptations has proved to be manifestly problematic in a twenty-first century very much steeped in postfeminism.

Through both the associations of casting and the film's specific narrative treatment of its central character, the plucky heroine (Anne Hathaway) of Miramax's *Becoming Jane* is, in effect, transformed into the mother of chick lit, albeit with the enhanced polish of cultural respectability bestowed by Austen's canonical status. The film also positions itself as a romance through the casting of Anne Hathaway as Jane. Hathaway had attained Hollywood fame through her roles in the teen romantic comedies such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001) and its sequel *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (2004) and *Ella Enchanted* (2004), and had only just begun to be associated with more serious roles after starring in the 2005 drama *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Based on Jon Spence's literary biography *Becoming Jane Austen: A Life* (2003) and the plotline of *Pride and Prejudice*, the purpose of this biopic-cum-literary adaptation is to solve the mystery of how a woman who never married and lived a quiet life was nevertheless able to write so convincingly about love and marriage. The drive

to find the love story (or stories) that Austen's lost letters, burned by her sister Cassandra, might have contained, rests on the "well-established fact that the writer fosters in her readers a peculiarly intense and personal devotedness" (Wiltshire 16) and is sustained by the teasing references to various men one finds in her remaining letters, as well as in the memoirs of members of her family.

The two biopics *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets* propose two possible suitors – Mr Lefroy (James Lefroy) in the feature film and Mr Bridges (Hugh Bonneville) in the TV production, respectively. The romantic plot seems inevitable in any biographical endeavour, for it seems "if we are to believe that love is 'real' and thus trust the romantic unions Austen builds, if we are to surrender to her rendering of that most effable of feelings, then there must be narrative assurance, if no historical evidence, that Jane herself both loved and was loved" (Weber 187). Indeed, if the biographical remnants of Jane's life prove teasingly insufficient, her novels constitute a valuable resource any scriptwriter can turn to with confidence, established as they are in the popular imagination. In her *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Tania Modleski notes the decisive contribution made by *Pride and Prejudice* to the formula of the romance novel, a formula which has been equally applied to the genre of the romantic comedy: initial disdain turning into love is indeed an extensively used and immediately recognisable plotline (1x).

As regards the adaptations of Austen's novels, where some see feminism others see retrograde postfeminist posturing. Not only are Austen adaptations accused of betraying the novels, they seem to also be guilty of not challenging the patriarchy with enough conviction. For example, in an essay on Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility*, the author points out that "Thompson registers protest through the speeches of her female characters and then quiets it by means of a courtship plot that obviates the

conditions protested against” (Samuelian 148). The suspicion is not entirely unfounded. In one of the early scenes of *Becoming Jane*, the outspoken Jane ignores her rich admirer’s imposing house. “His small fortune will not buy me”, she asserts in response to her mother (Julie Walters) swooning over the stately home (fig. 28).



Fig. 28. The question of who will buy Jane’s affections is settled

The answer to her cousin’s subsequent inquiry as to what would buy her is made visually clear as the next shot opens on Tom Lefroy’s (James McAvoy) naked torso engaged in a boxing match in disreputable company, thus obviating the need for any explicit answer from Jane (fig. 28). Future material comfort is shown in direct conflict with love and sex, the first linked with a heritage image of upper-middle class privilege that is nonetheless cold and stifling, while the latter is associated with lower class vitality. The film constructs an image of Austen as a sex-starved young rebel in conflict with a mother who, while seemingly enjoying a varied sex life with her husband, is nonetheless deeply distressed by having to dig her own potatoes, and presses Jane’s wealthy suitor on her as a means of sparing her daughter such future indignities.

*Becoming Jane* positions itself as a prequel to the modernised Austen adaptations of the 1990s and especially to the 2005 Oscar-winning *Pride and Prejudice*, on whose box-office success it capitalises. *Pride and Prejudice* is a muddy-hem take on Austen’s novel complete with romantic images of the heroine on a windswept peak, or gazing soulfully at an almost bare-chested Darcy striding across misty fields to declare

his bewitchment to the sound of swelling violins. The film adaptation starring Keira Knightley includes a series of subtle allusions to Austen the writer, thus playfully attempting to capitalise on the cultural status of the source novel and its author. For instance, Elizabeth enters the story reading the last pages of the film's source novel – a new take on “one of the enduring clichés of adaptations that seek to trumpet their literary associations” which is the “running of the opening credits over a shot of the book under adaptation” (Leitch 158).<sup>1</sup>

The budding author at the centre of *Becoming Jane* is portrayed as a young wit, plucky and self-confident, yet helplessly piqued in the presence of sexually experienced ‘bad boy’ Tom Lefroy. In one of the early scenes, Tom’s disparaging criticism of her speech at her sister’s engagement party – he calls it “extended juvenile self-regard” – sends Jane to her room in a huff where she throws her writing into the fire and despairs at her naïve scribblings. She may be a witty young author, the script suggests, but she is in sore need of an education in matters sexual, as Tom tells her: “If you wish to practise the art of fiction, to be the equal of a masculine author, experience is vital” and promptly offers her Fielding’s ‘dirty’ novel *Tom Jones* to “widen her horizons”, a task to which she applies herself studiously. The script makes it clear that if she is to write about “matters of the heart”, as she confesses to fellow author Ann Radcliffe (Helen McCrory), she needs to experience life, not only write about it using her imagination.

There is very little information about Ann Radcliffe’s life, as she was extremely protective of her privacy. A meeting with Austen was never recorded, but the inclusion of the two women novelists’ meeting adds poignancy to Jane’s romantic dilemma and offers the filmmakers the occasion to critique the past’s supposedly indiscriminate oppression of the female imagination. Radcliffe may have been the most successful

---

<sup>1</sup> Leitch gives a few examples of literary adaptations that use this strategy: *The Thin Man* (1943), *Jane Eyre* (1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951) and *Daisy Miller* (1974), among others.

novelist of the 1790s, but her supposedly scandalous literary reputation as a woman in the public arena, surely took a toll on her marriage, as her love of drink seems to imply, issuing thus a warning to young Jane (fig. 29).



Fig. 29. Aspiring writer Jane meets a world-weary Ann Radcliffe

In the film commentary included in the special features of the *Becoming Jane* DVD, director Julian Jarrold and scriptwriter Kevin Hood insist that their cinematic story has been based on “factually true” elements. They also acknowledge the overwhelmingly important part that audience expectations played in the making of the film, especially concerning the weight given to Tom’s part, which had to be substantial enough to make Jane’s interest in him believable. Moreover, they to market their film as markedly different from earlier “conservative” productions (conveniently ignoring Rozema’s *Manfield Park*) through their “risqué” (a word they employ repeatedly) choices – the implied sex life of Mr and Mrs Austen or Tom reading about bird sex to Jane, as well as their supposedly extensive use of irony which, they claim, some journalists seemed to have overlooked in their reviews. Indeed, one of these journalists, contradicting the filmmakers’ claim for innovation, notes “a persistent undertow of



tweeness that never entirely goes away: it is a picture whose mannerisms have been learned from other Austen adaptations – but learned assiduously and effectively” (Bradshaw 2007).

There are several plot and visual elements that connect *Becoming Jane* to the 1995 award-winning *Sense and Sensibility*, as well as to the 1995 miniseries and the 2005 feature film *Pride and Prejudice*. The most obvious reference to the miniseries is the displaying of the naked male body (slightly more fully in *Becoming Jane*) for the voyeuristic thrill of the female audiences. While in the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* it serves the purpose of reversing the classic object of the scopophilic gaze – instead of the female body as object of the gaze, the film offers a shot of Darcy taking a bath, although the gaze is returned to the male character in the following shots – in *Becoming Jane* male nakedness becomes part of the social commentary on the gendered behaviour limitations in Austen’s time. While the young men enjoy a refreshing dip after the game of cricket, Jane and her cousin, glancing coyly from behind the shrubbery, are made to turn around with their clothes firmly in place. While the more roguish male characters engage in activities such as boxing, whoring and skinny-dipping to show their rebellious side, Jane’s non-conformist nature is made manifest in her engagement with writing, the considerable amount of screen time given to her relationship with her feisty, sexually-liberated cousin the countess de Feuillide and, more importantly, in her unauthorised romance and subsequent elopement. However, her freedom after the elopement is shown to be fatally curtailed, as she would become wholly dependent on her future disgraced husband. The prospect of dependence and the burden of motherhood, however, are not as strong deterrents as her moral sense of duty towards Tom’s poor family, which, as she finds out from a letter she reads surreptitiously, is relying on him for financial support. Sense wins over sensibility and she goes back to her family,

equipped with the necessary experience; she is now quite determined to “live by her pen”.

As a literary biopic, the film engages in the exploration of authorship and literary inspiration. The filmmakers construct a variety of the life-work connection not only narratively, but also through editing and montage, such as the use of numerous overlapping images that illustrate the point that Austen’s emotional life was the direct inspiration for her fiction. The inclusion of the written words over images of the author is in keeping with earlier literary biopics produced in the studio era, in which there is a marked inclination for the “apparatus of literature: printed words and books, authors and their collected works” (Leitch 173), signalling the films’ textual origins and respectable cultural capital. However, in *Becoming Jane*, the text superimposed on the image is used at specific points to indicate that the words on the page come as directly inspired by actual events.



Fig. 30. Visual life-work connections

In fig. 30, the words written over the images –“my feelings”, “Pemberley”, “Darcy”, “marriage” – connect Jane’s own life experience with her Elizabeth Bennett’s, and, since she writes them during the troubled time she spends in Tom’s company at his uncle’s house, they provide a hard-to-miss reference to the fact that she is the heroine of her own future fiction. In fact, almost each time Jane engages in fiction writing, or indeed letter writing, the words are shown to be reactions to her previous dealings with Tom Lefroy. When Cassandra receives her indignant letter about Tom’s impertinences at the dance, her sister’s rhetorical question, “What is she trying to say?”, acquires a double meaning, for the audience has witnessed her outpour of adjectives relating to Tom’s character and is beginning to suspect that the lady ‘doth protest too much’.

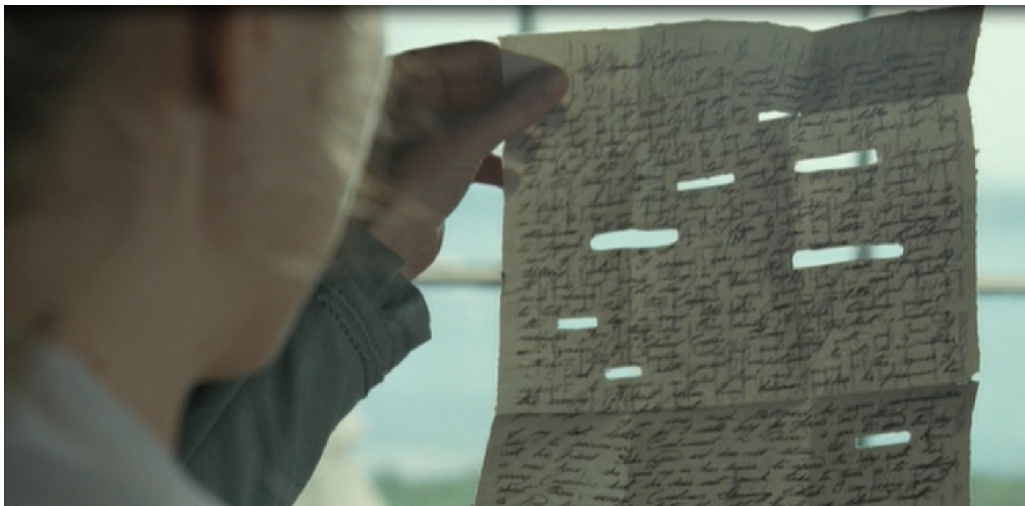


Fig. 31. Jane’s letter detailing Tom’s character to her sister Cassandra

The iconic first line of her future novel *Pride and Prejudice* –“It is a truth universally acknowledged...” – is provided by her admirer Mr Wisley, a potential Mr Darcy of awkward social skills and reserved kindness. Her love story thwarted by her suitor’s lack of money, in *Becoming Jane*, Jane Austen distils her disappointed hopes into her fiction and gives herself a happy ending, in an attempt to possess in fiction the “incandescent marriage” her life sorely lacked, according to the filmmakers.

*Becoming Jane* is thus *Pride and Prejudice* without the happy ending. One of the opening shots of *Becoming Jane* features an object so central to the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* that it is unlikely it will be missed by the observant viewer who has seen the previous production – the swing on which Elizabeth Bennett daydreams after Darcy’s proposal. This visual element associated exclusively with the female heroine connects the literary adaptation and the biopic. Other equally subtle visual and auditive elements encourage audiences to make the connection between the 2005 adaptation and the biopic. In both productions the establishing shots offer picturesque images of landscapes bathed either in the light of the setting sun or the haze of early morning, accompanied by birdsong, offering spectators an introductory idyllic surface of Austen’s world, a picture-perfect backdrop for the decorous mating rituals and the tribulations of domestic life.

A classic trope of literary biopics, one of the film’s central symbols is Jane’s hands displayed at the centre of the opening and closing shots. The film’s establishing shots include a series of close-ups of the writer’s hand holding the pen, hovering above the page, dipping the pen, tracing the letters – all visual signs that render visible the intellectual engagement of the character with the art of fiction, thus drawing a parallel to the scenes of writing in the comedy *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Both in *Shakespeare in Love* and in *Becoming Jane* these first shots visualise ‘authorship’ and the process of ‘becoming’ the writer. In the case of Shakespeare, his splotchy signatures mock the iconography of the author; in that of Jane, the lines on the page – “the boundaries of propriety were vigorously assaulted” – announce the love story which, the film suggests, is the true source of her art.

The final image of the biopic is, again, of Jane’s hands resting demurely on top of her published book, *Pride and Prejudice*, as the image fades to black – a gesture of

possession pointing to her literary and historical authority over the text. If in the opening shots the close-ups of her disembodied hand foreshadow the cinematic embodiment of her life-text – the title emerges eventually from her whole body in capital letters and grows across it as she sits with her back turned to the audience – the closing shot of her hands disembodies her once more. This last scene, introduced by diegetic opera music infuses emotional depth into the narrative – the melo of melodrama accompanies the separation of Jane the character from Jane Austen the cultural icon. However, before she is frozen in her pose as literary icon, the scene in which she reads an excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice* provides an interesting closure to the love story with Tom Lefroy:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance (Austen 239).

The chosen fragment, speaking of Elizabeth Bennett's reassessment of her feelings for Mr Darcy, is received by the listeners with approving nods and hearty applause, as the camera gives us a close-up of Tom Lefroy's aged face showing signs of emotional turmoil. He then proceeds to applaud her performance – Jane's talents have been reappraised, his initial contempt for her juvenile piece has turned into admiration for her mature works. The characters' emotions that infuse the scene seem to clash with the fragment being read, which speaks in a sarcastic tone about Elizabeth's loss of suitor, ending with "But no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was." (Austen 239). It is a matter of debate what the "admiring multitude" might represent in Austen's novel – Elizabeth's circle, society at large, or the novel's readership. The author seems to mock her own heroine's romantic assumptions

directed towards impressing a “multitude”. As such, the fragment read out at this point in the biopic also works as a critique of the expectations of the romantic comedy audience for a conventional happy ending, which, together with the complexity of the visual imagery, eventually saves *Becoming Jane* from death by romcom.

One year after *Becoming Jane*, the 2008 BBC and WGBH Boston coproduction *Miss Austen Regrets* examines Jane Austen’s (Olivia Williams) life choices in a self-reflexive manner, incorporating an ironic awareness of its readership/audience into the narrative. Instead of a ‘secret love story’ the biopic “introduces the possibility that Jane could well have been informed in the ways of love through the intense sorophilia she experienced with her sister” (Weber 193). The plot relies on biographical information gleaned from her letters, family memoirs and critical works to offer a glimpse of the writer’s last years. The romantic intrigue at the centre of the plot is in fact Jane’s niece’s quest for a husband; to this end, Fanny summons her forty-year-old aunt to counsel her in matters of the heart and the suitability of a prospective husband. Her niece’s pursuit of a husband affords Jane the opportunity for soul-searching and ambiguous confessions that let explicitness hover on the margins of her emotional life.

In a rather detectivesque manner, the title constitutes an invitation to audiences to find out what Miss Austen regrets, and indeed, the first scene seems to offer a clue to the mystery. In it, Jane is being proposed to by Mr Harris Bigg-Wither of the stately Manydown House, who offers her the possibility to be “mistress of Manydown”, which she rejects soon after. In the carriage taking her back home, she prays to God that she may never regret her decision to reject financial security afforded by a union without affection, in favour of an uncertain future. The script implies that her sister Cassandra plays a key role in her change of heart, questioning Jane’s choice. Whether she does this out of disinterested love or a misplaced feeling of sisterly possession remains unclear,

as film refuses to provide definite answers to any of the dilemmas and mysteries to which it makes reference.

A possible ironic allusion to *Becoming Jane*'s idea of romance is Jane's mock-melancholy answer to her niece's inquiries about her past: "The truth is, Fanny, I am she that loved and lost. I loved and lost and pined and yearned. And then swore myself to solitude and the consolations of writing about it instead", she tells her niece. Yet romantic expectations are shattered when she brings down the young woman's romantic illusions with a teasing "you have read too many novels", a script line potentially addressed not only to her niece, but also to the romantically-inclined Jane Austen fans at large. Indeed, Fanny is given the role of Janeite investigator into her aunt's love life, constantly fishing for information on her past admirers and her true feelings on marital matters. Her desperate pleading to Cassandra not to burn Jane's letters reflects the frustration of every biographer and scriptwriter forced to make do with the meagre leftovers. Cassandra's question at the end "You still believe there's a secret love story to uncover?" is as much addressed to Fanny as to Janeites past and present. Tom Lefroy is mentioned in passing, as not being "the one", while Mr Bridges, a long-term admirer, presses Jane to admit her regret at not having married him and invites her to imagine the alternative: "I wouldn't have prevented you from writing if that was your fear." Her arguments underline the deterrents, the loss of her writerly self in a financially insecure marriage: "How could I have written if we'd been married? All the effort of mothering...We'd have been poor. Jane's choice to remain single marks her as a potential feminist figure, determined to preserve her independence against societal and family pressures.

The feminist credentials of *Miss Austen Regrets* are further strengthened through intertextual allusion to the award-winning film *The Piano* (1993) written and directed

by Jane Campion. In this particular shot, the main female character's point of view becomes both the camera's eye / 'I' as she peeps through her fingers at the outside world and, when showed from the outside, her hands seem almost like prison bars impeding her vision (fig. 32).



Fig. 32. Female vision in *Miss Austen Regrets* (left) and *The Piano* (right)

Geared at a more mature audience than *Becoming Jane*, the film never fully makes explicit the answer to the question implicit in the title: what does Miss Austen regret? From sexual longing, suggested by Jane's repeated assessments of her body in the mirror, to nostalgia for her lost youth, to authorial limitations – “My work is so small”, she wistfully observes – a host of possibilities are suggested but none of them is given more screen time than the others. At one point, the film tentatively suggests an answer to the enduring appeal of her works, which lies in their focus on that moment in a woman's life when she can still make a choice conducive to happiness, when the future possibilities are still open before her. After the disappointing experience with a young doctor, where it is made painfully obvious to Jane that beauty and youth are valued above intelligence, the character of Madame Bigeon reminds her of her accomplishments in an emotionally-charged speech: “Every woman, spinster, wife, widow, every woman has regrets; so we read about your heroines and feel young again and in love and full of hope as if we can make that choice again”. The appeal of Austen's stories, therefore, is attributed to their almost fairytale-like quality. The



repetitiveness of the main romance plot (hero and heroine meet, overcome obstacles and finally marry) is projected as a reassuring rather than a dull quality. Novelist Martin Amis sees it in terms of the inevitability of romantic fulfilment, especially in the case of

*Pride and Prejudice:*

When I was introduced to the novel, at the age of fourteen, I read twenty pages and then besieged my stepmother's study until she told me what I needed to know. I needed to know that Darcy married Elizabeth. (I needed to know that Bingley married Jane.) I needed this information as badly as I had ever needed anything. "Pride and Prejudice" suckers you. Amazingly—and, I believe, uniquely—it *goes on* suckering you. Even now, as I open the book, I feel the same panic of unsatisfied expectation, despite five or six rereadings. How can this be, when the genre itself guarantees consummation? The simple answer is that the lovers really are made for each other—by their creator. They are *constructed* for each other: interlocked for wedlock. (Amis; italics in the original).

The film's closing scenes stage the burning of her letters by a grief-stricken Cassandra, against the backdrop of Fanny's wedding party and Jane's voice speaking in Fanny Price's words from *Mansfield Park* about the sublime effects of "solemn, and soothing, and lovely" nature upon the human heart (Austen 115). The fragment from the novel, voiced as it is against an image of Fanny looking towards her wedding party becomes in the biopic a celebratory declaration of the joy of life. As in the case of *Becoming Jane*, the last shots in the film turn back to the novels, reading Austen's life-text through her fiction. Her last visual authorial trace is signalled in the a corner of one of her letters about to be engulfed by the flames that reads "infinities of love, J. Austen", a last emotional message about sisterly and literary connection, addressed to both her sister and to the audience (fig. 3).

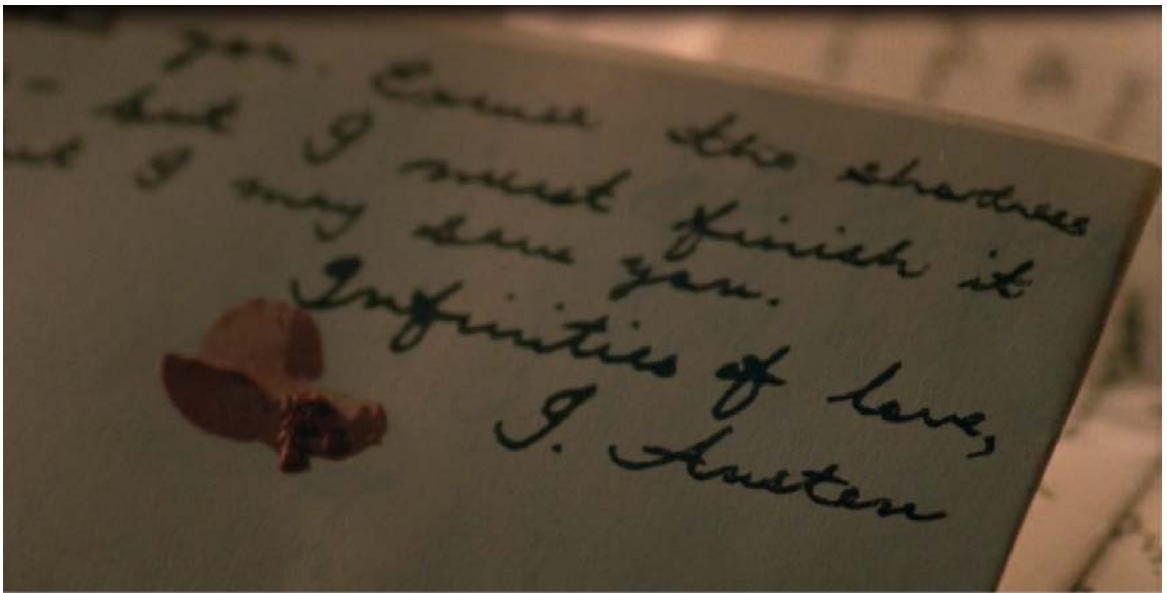


Fig. 33. Autorial traces / emotional connections

## 2. Auteurist connections

The following chapter maps the category of literary biopics where the signature of the auteur director is discernable narratively and stylistically. As discussed in Part II, chapter 1, the author/auteur has never really left back on the critical agenda, in spite of Dudley Andrews's sigh of relief "Breathe easily. Épuration has ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again" (77). The literary biopic has attracted the attention of a variety of directors with a certain auteur status, from Todd Haynes, to Steven Spielberg, to Terence Davies, to Jane Campion, to François Ozon. In subchapter 2.1. I focus on a French-speaking adaptation of the Brontë sisters' life-text, directed by André Téchine in 1979, as an example of cross-cultural transmission and reception of culture, and the connections established not only across cultural, but also across gender lines. Subchapter 2.2 is devoted to Jane Campion's adaptation of the life of New Zealand writer Janet Frame, and the empathetic treatment of a tragic story with a happy ending. Subchapter 2.3 examines two biopics based on Emily Dickinson, one by British director Terence Davies, and the other by a newcomer director with a subversive political agenda. Subchapter 2.4 tackled the topic of melodrama on steroids in literary biography on screen, in a liminal biopic directed by French director François Ozon in English.

### 2.1. The Romantics on screen: French auteurism and the Brontës in *Les Soeurs Brontë* (1979)

As noted in Part III, chapter 1.2, the Brontë sisters have become icons of creative genius, whose life stories have attained global fame. The image of the Brontë family proved highly attractive to aspiring French filmmaker and ex-*Cahiers du Cinema* critic André Téchiné, who went on to direct *Les Soeurs Brontë* in 1979. He had wanted to

make a film based on the Brontës at the start of the 1970s but had been unable to find sufficient funding and had to wait until the end of the decade to go ahead with his project (“Les Fantômes de Haworth”). Before Téchiné’s cross-cultural incursion into the biography of the mythical family, the only feature film to have attempted to do the same was the Hollywood production *Devotion*, and discussed in Part III chapter 1.2. As noted there, the adaptation “submerged the sisters in a bath of romantic and wildly inaccurate slush” (Miller 156) by inventing a love triangle between Charlotte, Emily and Charlotte’s future husband Arthur Nicholls against a background of idyllic Englishness that was typical of 1930s and 1940s Hollywood adaptations.

The figure of the auteur has a great deal in common with that of the Romantic author: both are perceived as gifted individuals driven by personal visions, their self-expressive works often in conflict with the demands of philistine commercialism. Wishing to place cinematic creation on equal terms with literature, French director Jean Luc Godard claimed: “The cinema is not a craft. It is an art. It does not mean teamwork. One is always alone; on the set as before the blank page” (qtd. in Grant 3). The realities of the industry, however, have persistently undermined the myth of the individualist (French) auteur, surrounded by an aura of continental sophistication. Téchiné is associated with the post-New Wave generation in the history of French cinema. The French New Wave occupies a heavily mythologised space in the history of world cinema – the period between the end of the 1950s and mid-1960s witnessed an exciting turn in filmmaking, as well as film criticism, centred around a group of young directors who also worked as film critics and theorists. Rebellious against what they perceived to be the stifling, tired mainstream tradition of quality that dominated French cinema post-WWII, “bogged down [...] in generic historical reconstructions and uninspired literary adaptations” (Neupert *A History of the French New Wave* xvii), these young *révoltés*,

steeped in the culture of *ciné-clubs*, art cinemas and film journals such as the iconic *Cahiers du Cinéma*, began shooting films on a tight budget, populating the screen with young, spontaneous middle-class youths that moved in a recognisable, contemporary, urban France. Against the “aesthetic sclerosis” (Marie 19) of the period, the new generation brought stylistic innovation and a desire to transgress boundaries. However, the drive for innovative styles, stories and practices was combined with a “detailed knowledge of film history as well as film technique and storytelling” (Neupert “The French New Wave” 42) – indeed, the group of passionate “cinephiles” around film critic André Bazin were characterised by a voracious interest in a wide variety of cultural and cinematic productions, from art classics to Hollywood genre films that eventually informed their own filmic practices. Supported by forward-looking government institutions and audiences receptive to experimentation, the new filmmakers perceived their creative status as being equivalent to that of literary authors whose work they often adapted, arguing that the auteur’s uniquely personal *mise-en-scène* gives a film its artistic value through a process reminiscent of the mechanisms of literary authorship.

Timothy Corrigan points out that ironically, “the most celebrated auteurs in film history have regularly relied on adaptations as a way to appropriate the aura of literary signatures and to creatively interpret both the letter and spirit of literary texts” (“Friction, Failure, and Fire” 317). For example, a good number of François Truffaut’s celebrated films such as *Jules et Jim* (1962), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Les Deux Anglaises et le Continent* (1971) and *La Chambre Verte* (1978) are adaptations of literary works by Henri-Pierre Roché, Ray Bradbury or Henry James, while *L’Histoire d’Adèle H.* (1975) is based on the diaries of Victor Hugo’s tormented daughter: “Truffaut would become a filmmaker gravitating to adaptation as a vaguely illicit cycle of desire for literature and the literal as refuge and hideaway” (Corrigan “Friction,

Failure, and Fire” 322). Interestingly, while working on the script for *Les Deux Anglaises et le Continent*, a romantic drama with elements of sublimated melodrama that tells the story of two English sisters’ protracted love affairs with an aspiring French writer, Truffaut and his screenplay-writing collaborator Jean Gruault were reading the biographies of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, “who were also English, puritanical, novelistic and impassioned” (Truffaut qtd. in de Baecque 284), one would assume in an attempt to anchor their adaptation in a cultural and emotional authenticity gleaned from biography. The same preoccupation with the idea of historical authenticity can be seen in the opening of his later adaptation *L’Histoire d’Adèle H.* Shot on location in Halifax, where Adèle Hugo obsessively pursued her unfaithful lover, the film opens with the statement: “The Story of Adèle H. is true (*authentique*). It depicts events that took place and characters that existed” (my translation), followed by a zoom shot of an ancient-looking map.<sup>1</sup> The tension around the questions of “truth” and “authenticity” are apparent from these first shots. Indeed, the film that follows has little to do with history – it is a study of unrequited passion and monomaniacal obsession starring Isabelle Adjani in the role of Adèle. The word “*authentique*” in the credits seems to apply not so much to the story of the real Adèle, but to Truffaut’s film – his cinematic representation of Adèle’s interiority revealed through Adjani’s tortured performance.

In spite of the perceived individualism of the French auteur-director, many films were collaborations at the level of screenplay writing. A great number of Truffaut’s screenplays based on literary sources were written in collaboration with Jean Gruault. In fact, Gruault collaborated with many other “New Wavers” like Jean Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette or Alain Resnais. Having worked with Truffaut on *Les Deux Anglaises* and *L’Histoire d’Adèle H.* over a period of seven years, he may have been a natural

---

<sup>1</sup> The text in French reads: “L’Histoire d’Adèle H. est authentique. Elle met en scène des événements qui ont eu lieu et des personnages qui ont existé.”

choice for André Téchiné's project on *Les Soeurs Brontë*. Like Truffaut, Téchiné had also been associated with *Cahiers du cinéma* as a critic in the mid-1960s, and subsequently moved on to making film. The screenplay for the biopic was a collaboration between Téchiné, Gruault, and Pascal Bonitzer, a film critic and screenwriter who, like Téchiné, was also associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma*.<sup>2</sup> The main source of inspiration for the film seems to have been Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, which, after its first publication in French in 1877 as *La Vie de Charlotte Brontë*, had been re-translated and published in a new edition in 1972.

Raphaëlle Moine identifies four cycles in the history of the French biopic: a first cycle that elevates 'Great Men' to the status of inaccessible monuments; a post-war cycle characterised by the glorification of national male models and a fascination with sentimental, 'steamy' female characters, a third cycle in which a number of auteurs engage with new historical discourses in a spirit of narrative and formal experimentation, and a fourth, and final, cycle of contemporary biopics is linked to the rise of "fictions patrimoniales" – the approximate equivalent of heritage cinema in Britain – around the end of the 1980s (*Vies Héroïques* 109-116). According to Moine, Téchiné's film belongs to the third cycle which emphasised formal experimentation and the representation of marginalised figures and which, as Moine argues in an earlier study, did not incorporate the "melodramatic warts-and-all narrative formula of the biopic (which associates great achievements with great sufferings and flaws)" ("The Contemporary French Biopic" 62) Agreeing with Dennis Bingham's claim of a double standard in male versus female biopics, Moine contends that "the 'new melodramatic formula' allows the traditional European stereotype of the 'tragic heroine,' first popularized by opera, to be reclaimed along the way and reproduces the double standard

---

<sup>2</sup> Pascal Bonitzer would go on to collaborate on the writing of the screenplay for Jacques Rivette's 1985 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* titled *Hurlevent*.

of our culture concerning creativity – men create as a result of personal genius, but women come to do so through passionate love and loss” (“The Contemporary French Biopic” 62-63). Such starkly oppositional qualities in male versus female biopics may be discernible if one looks at biopics as an essentially rigid genre, reproducing the same narratives and ideologies of the studio era that Custen examined in *Bio/Pics*. Yet a closer, less partisan look at individual biopics that takes into account the question of their generic hybridity, shows a far more complex picture. As Hollinger points out, suffering “does not degrade the female protagonist, but rather shows her ultimate triumph over her misery, or at the very least her success in being able to survive through it all” (*Feminist Film Studies* 162). Moreover, associating melodrama exclusively with female victimhood ignores the extent of its reach into a wide variety of genres. The melodramatic mode does not percolate into cinematic life-stories cleanly along gender lines.

In France, the 1970s was a decade in which literary costume dramas had fallen out of favour and historical films had become increasingly political after the events of 1968, while the new structuralist concepts taking root in academic circles which questioned the grip of bourgeois culture on history were slowly being adopted by the cinema industry. In the light of this, it can be said that Téchiné’s film was going against the current, with its historical-biographical subject. Moreover, it was also unusual in the context of French cinema insofar as it was a French production that adapted a British story, with exteriors shot in Yorkshire in an attempt to convey an ‘authentic’ feel of the place. For the roles of the sisters, Téchiné cast a trio of some of the biggest female stars, with whom he had already worked before: Marie France Pisier as Charlotte, Isabelle Adjani as Emily, and Isabelle Hupert as Anne Brontë. For the role of Branwell (Pascal Gregory) he deliberately chose a newcomer, reflecting thus Branwell’s lack of fame



within the family. In an interview taken during the Cannes Festival where the film premiered, Téchiné talked of his intention to explore definitions of creativity by reading the Brontës as different types of artists: the acknowledged writer (Charlotte), the mythical genius (Emily), the withdrawn craftsman (Anne) and the cursed artist (Branwell).

Téchiné's wish had been to invent as little as possible, even at the expense of narrative interest – he calls the script a kind of documentary based on accounts from that period and also on the Brontës' work. However, what propelled him to undertake this project was not so much a love for their fiction, but rather his devotion to their lives, which he calls arid and barren (“Les Fantômes de Haworth”), paired with his ongoing interest in the idea of fictionality, which is one of the major preoccupations of his filmography. The minimalist, dark aesthetics of the film manages to convey the aridity and seclusion of the Brontës' lives in a manner which is both intensely claustrophobic and emotionally fertile. The story seeks to explore the sisters' relationship with their surroundings – especially in the case of Emily, who roams the moors in men's clothes, to the disapproval of the housekeeper – as well as with their own imagination which is connected with the idea of passion in the original sense of suffering rather than romantic attachment.

The film's initial credits appear against an image of the moors accompanied by a soundtrack of opera music, followed by an interior scene in a smoke-filled pub where the monotonous voice of a visible narrator speaks about the ravages of the Industrial Revolution as an introductory background to the Brontës' story “But the Brontës, during that time, wrote and blackened pages with their fine, illegible handwriting.” From its opening scenes, the film makes no attempt to mask its mythmaking approach – the peasant-narrator seems to function as an introductory artifice that signals the story's

fictionality and melancholy tone of loss. At the end of the film, however, we hear the voices of the now dead Brontë sisters accompanying a lingering shot of empty opera seats. The sound of voices is used to convey a certain symmetry by framing the film's plot in a manner similar to the repeated framed shots of Anne and Charlotte.

Even though Téchiné consciously sought to avoid turning the film into an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, he did use the 'wuthering' landscape to construct a mythical 'non-place' of the imagination through the close relationship he creates between images of the empty moors accompanied by the sound of howling wind and close-ups of the protagonists' faces. The focus on landscape and its relationship to emotion is central to Téchiné's work: "Landscape take precedence over characters, at times. Located between naturalism and theatricality, his work makes nature an essential component of his compositions" (Costeix 20). The film feels oppressive and airless. The colours are muted; its construction made up of almost static tableaux with very little movement, with obvious cuts between scenes which give it a fragmented quality, undermine any attempts at anchoring its world in reality. The fragmented quality might be a consequence of the fact that the original production was around three hours long, and it had to be heavily edited for its release. As it is, however, the film's amputated final version seems to reflect the sisters' truncated lives, the constant seeking for relief outside their circumscribed universe, only to inevitably come back unable to escape its grasp on their spirits. The separation of the Brontë home and its inhabitants from the outside world is emphasised by repetitive shots of a carriage going and returning on the empty road. The theme of the journey is at the heart of the cinematic narrative, yet, more than a journey towards an outside, it feels rather like a constant return journey towards the home which pulls them back inexorably.

The watchful solitude and longing of its inhabitants are suggested through repeated shots of Anne's enigmatic face looking out windows. The woman at the window is a recurrent image in period drama, generally signalling the protagonist's yearning for freedom, as it "marks the threshold of inside and outside" (Pidduck *Contemporary Costume Film* 26). On Anne's sullen face, drained of colour, the longing for the outside seems painfully hopeless, giving the character a sphinx-like look. Téchiné forced his actresses to be very restrained, minimalist in their face movements, conferring an abstract, timeless quality to the figures whose lives unfold before us – they become a unit, made up of distinct personalities connected by the same stillness of expression built around a certain Brechtian distancing effect through which "emotional identification with protagonists is refused in favour of a foregrounded portrait of social and psychic structures" (Marshall 26). In contrast with the subdued facial expressions, the film is interspersed with scenes where physical pain pierces through, a reminder of the 'real' physical nature of the bodies in motion on screen but also of their psychic interconnectedness.

Initially, the film constructs a family dynamic that is built around the pairing of siblings, to throw into relief the varied emotional ties between them. The couplings were based on biographical fact, but only in terms of writing. Their first childhood literary endeavours which resulted in the creation of the imaginary kingdoms of Angria and Gondal were undertaken in pairs: Charlotte and Branwell chronicled the history of the former while Emily and Anne wrote about the latter. However, Téchiné cuts Branwell off from his literary sisters by visually obscuring his involvement in the writerly proceedings of the Brontë household. His on-screen dedication is exclusively to painting, even though it is mentioned that he writes poems. Téchiné moves Branwell from the margins of the Brontë story to the centre – he becomes "an almost autonomous

fiction within the macro-fiction of the film” (Philippon 78). Given to drink, drugs, illicit sex and bouts of self-destructiveness, paired with pictorial talent, Branwell incarnates the figure of the Romantic genius and his indulgence in manic-depressive states of mind is set in contrast with the emotional stability of the sisters. Crippled by his weakness of spirit, Branwell eventually erases his face from the family painting, committing thus artistic suicide, his self-erasure made visible both in the painting and in a burnt smear on the wall of his room (fig. 34).



Fig. 34. Brawell erases himself as an artist

The story becomes thus almost a vampire story, in which the sisters gradually take the brother’s place and accomplish an artistic destiny his hesitations deny him – his laudanum-fuelled descent into degradation is marked by the rise of the sister’s literary reputations. The hungriest among these virgin vampires seems to be Emily – denied the full range of life experiences by her position in society, she feeds on her brother’s experiences: in one scene, as she pushes him into the pub, she kisses him almost incestuously on the lips to make herself drunk on the wine that he is going to drink and which she will never be able to taste. It is thus suggested that her unusual imagination is

drawn from transgressive experiences that she is forced to receive in mediated form through her male brother. Téchiné uses the image of the vampire in conjunction with that of the female writer to critique the social forces that impel female artists to seek creative sustenance in a male figure. In an ambiguous scene after Branwell's death, Emily puts his coat on and is seized by unbearable pain, as if his tormented spirit inhabiting his clothes had entered her – a melodramatic scene that seems to re-enact Brooks's "body seized by meaning" ("Melodrama, Body, Revolution" 18). Truffaut's *Adèle H.* is also shown as possessed by the spirit of her dead sister whose death by drowning haunts Adèle's dreams. Whilst Branwell's death is associated with fire, Emily's demise is marked by water dripping from clothes around her spectral face – the association with these primordial elements enhancing the siblings' mythical dimensions as artists. Anne's death is also connected with the sea – as she lies lifeless on the bed, we hear the cry of the seagulls outside the window as the camera gives us a close-up of a miniature ship inside a frame resembling a house – a symbol of domestic confinement contrasted with the vastness and freedom of the sea. *Les Soeurs Brontë* contributes to the mythologizing of the Brontës, yet it is a process of mythmaking that is contingent, strongly connected to a specific landscape and sense of place.

Indeed, Téchiné's film contains a multitude of connections to François Truffaut's *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.*, in its "disconsolate mood" (Watts 79), importance of landscape as a reflection of psychic dimensions, and, in more practical terms, the use of the same actress, as the suggestions of emotional depths in Isabelle Adjani's performance as Emily are strongly reminiscent of her earlier portrayal of Adèle H. The ending of Téchiné's film offers a fascinating commentary on the connections between literature and cinema, namely the exquisitely self-conscious choice to cast the literary theoretician Roland Barthes, the slayer of the 'Author', as the writer Thackeray.

Celebrated as the writer of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë is shown socialising at the opera in the last scenes, where she meets Barthes/Thackeray. In a symbolic gesture, the critic/author offers Charlotte a pair of binoculars through which she peers uncomfortably at the operatic scene, as the sound of her dead sisters' voices drown out the diegetic music (fig. 35). The scene seems to suggest that while the critic offers instruments of examination and appraisal, it is the polyglossic voice of literature that becomes part of emotional memory and is carried across time into posterity. Self-reflexively, Téchiné's film examines the mechanisms of artistic creation in terms of collaboration, individual voice, and the vampiric relationship between literature and auteur cinema.



Fig. 35. Roland Barthes as the author Thackeray

## 2.2. “Fear no More”: *An Angel at My Table* (1990)

In *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* Bingham notes that while films about men “have gone from celebratory to warts-and-all to investigatory to postmodern and parodic”, biopics of women’s lives

are weighed down by the myths of suffering, victimization, and failure perpetuated by a culture whose films reveal an acute fear of women in the public realm. Female biopics can be made empowering only by a conscious and deliberate application of a feminist point of view. (10)

The victimisation of the female protagonist in films seems to be reflective of a retrograde cultural framework that has been challenged with increasing vehemence in the last decades. The dominance of reductive plotlines that focus on romance and marriage to the detriment of other considerations can be challenged through either parody and deconstruction, or through empathy, all of which alter the narrative to allow space for a woman’s voice in the telling of a woman’s story. By foregrounding the female perspective, “the old story of woman’s destiny, the old marriage plot, would give way to another story for women, a quest plot” (Heilbrun 121).

The quest narrative seems to be central to Jane Campion’s *An Angel at My Table*, a biopic of New Zealand writer Janet Frame based on her three-volume autobiography and, partly, on her fiction. The production was initially conceived as a three-part television series financed by the New Zealand Film Commission, which was looking to attract local talent for projects with a national resonance. Moreover, the commission had a special interest in collaborating with Campion, an expatriate who had acquired a certain status as an up-and-coming filmmaker with an international appeal – one of her film projects, *Peel* (1982) had won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and her work for Australian television was also highly acclaimed. It was through the initiative of the commission that *An Angel* was subsequently converted from

miniseries to a single feature film which went on to receive standing ovations and a host of awards at various international film festivals.

Campion felt attracted to Frame's literary world from an early age – she had read her first novel *Owls Do Cry*, first published in 1957, at the age of thirteen and identified with her moving description of childhood in New Zealand. Shortly after Frame had published the first volume of her autobiography, *To the Is-land*, in 1982, Campion and Bridget Ikin (the producer) approached the author seeking television rights for a series based on her book, but had to wait until all three volumes were out before they could start on the project.<sup>1</sup> The writer seems to have been delighted with the sense of adventure and serious intentions of the young filmmakers and agreed to collaborate. An agreement was signed for the making of up to six films from Frame's books, and the adaptors promised to create a "quality television series, designed to create a wider market for the autobiographies (and by implication the other works of Janet Frame) and to appeal to those already familiar with the books" (King 473).

As her autobiography recounts, Frame was born in New Zealand in 1924 into a large working-class family and showed a love of words from a young age. Whilst she was known to be a relatively happy child, her family was struck repeatedly by tragedy in the form of illness and death – her brother suffered from epilepsy and two of her sisters drowned. Janet grew up to become a shy, socially awkward young woman struggling to find her place and identity as a writer in a highly conservative society. Her misunderstood 'difference' marked her as mentally ill – she was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and spent about eight years in psychiatric institutions where, on one occasion being scheduled for a lobotomy. She narrowly escaped the operation only when one of the doctors found out she had won a literary award for a collection of short

---

<sup>1</sup> The three volumes are *To the Is-Land* (1982), *An Angel at My Table* (1984) and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985).



stories. The official diagnostic was eventually overturned by a British doctor, but the myth of the ‘mad’ genius stuck long afterwards and heavily permeated her biographical legend and early criticism of her work.

The autobiographical trilogy was a critical and commercial success. In writing about herself in a genre which is associated with “truth” and authorial “veracity and sincerity” (Marcus *Autobiographical Discourses* 3), her avowed intention was to convey her side of the story and regain control of the narrative surrounding her life and work. Faced with what she rightfully considered as incorrect biographical information concerning both her mental health and her childhood, Frame went so far as to send to several critics a copy of a letter from her doctor which refuted that she had ever suffered from mental disorders and cautioned them that to refer to this alleged illness in their reviews would expose them to litigation. Her exasperation with the predominant public image of herself as mentally unstable, as a writer defined by her supposed pathological deviance from normality, is apparent: “All these myths [...] I suppose it is too late to do anything about them. [...] I think the way I am writing the story of my life might at least show that I am not – well, that I *am* a human being (Frame qtd. in Harold and Gordon 2011, italics in the original).

In undertaking to write her autobiography, Frame recognises the contradictions inherent to such a project that is necessarily retrospective and thus subject to the vagaries of memory and the ambiguities of fictional re-construction. Her opening paragraph points to the unstable nature of auto/biographical truth: “From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth” (Frame *An Autobiography* 7).

The way she sets out to write her autobiography points to the creation of myths of origin: as a story which recreates the circumstances and forces that created the heroine/narrator. She connects the past, present and future through the concept of existence in “place”, from the “liquid darkness” of the womb to the present “place of air and light” and into the future, the “Third Place” of the imagination. Autobiography thus becomes a universal story and the writing of it an act of mythmaking connecting times, places and selves, all under the control of the storyteller: “autobiography in Frame’s sense constitutes a gesture of authority, a reclaiming of the past in the name of the author” (Baisnée 97). Frame counteracts myth with myth, pointing thus to the constructedness of the self and its history through language. However, she wishes to take control of the constructing process which had hitherto been under the destructive power of institutions and reinstate herself as an ‘I’:

certain people have actually written – in book form! – more or less what purports to be the story of my life, without even consulting me. It is the desire really to make myself a first person. For many years I was a third person – as children are, ‘they’, ‘she’, and as probably oppressed minorities become, ‘they’. (Frame qtd. in Harold and Gordon 2011)

However, the story of ‘I’ at the end of her autobiography lays no claims to finality and closure, but becomes a “journey rather than a destination; the reader discovers not an inert essential self, but an identity or a myth both constituted by and interior to narrative and language” (Dean 2011: 51). Also, whilst wrenching power away from biased critics and asserting control over the narrative of her-self, she is wary of conflating the autobiographical self with the ‘real’ Janet Frame:

I am always in fictional mode, and autobiography is found fiction. I look at everything from the point of view of fiction, and so it wasn’t a change to be writing autobiography except the autobiography was more restrictive because it was based in fact, and I wanted to make an honest record of my life. (Frame qtd. in Harold and Gordon 2011)

The idea of ‘honesty’ here is connected with the question of authorial motive governing the production of autobiographical texts and becomes part of the structure of reception, that is, the ways in which readers position themselves in relation to the text. Frame’s story claims a closer relation to factual truth by virtue of her first-hand witnessing of events; however, as a writer, she is aware that the relation is distorted by the indeterminacy of words and the conscious manipulation of narrative forms.

The cultural impact of Frame’s autobiography was considerable – it won awards and became a bestseller. More importantly, however, it opened her fiction to a new readership which had previously been discouraged from engaging with it by its reputed difficulty. The autobiography provided a key to her texts, becoming thus a hermeneutical tool. As one critic recounts: “I was introduced to the name ‘Janet Frame’ by the three volumes of her autobiography, and through them I came to read her fiction” (Finney 193). But the published autobiography did not completely shift the myths surrounding her person. When she eventually agreed to let a biographer pore over her life, offering her collaboration with a few reservations, the results left her dissatisfied.

Michael King’s *Wrestling with the Angel; A Life of Janet Frame*, published in 2000, relies rather heavily on Frame’s autobiographies and non-fictional writings, turning them into historical documents to be mined for hard facts, without distinguishing the degree to which they might be infused with fictionality. He opens with an author’s note stating the biographee’s wishes not to be quoted *verbatim*, and with a prologue in which he compares the Frames with the Brontës in terms of both their love of words and their tragic family life. Frame herself had drawn this comparison, in a slightly ironic tone, in one of her earliest autobiographical writings, “Beginnings”, published in *Landfall* magazine in 1965. However, reviewers and overzealous academics seized upon it and blew it out of proportion, thus adding to the

myth of the disturbed, mysterious ‘genius’.<sup>2</sup> While the bulk of King’s biography errs on the side of dry factuality, the ending offers us a rather surprising image of Frame sitting in front of her computer where “she rediscovers the world and engages with it, without the burden of social contact” (King 519). This imagined final seclusion of its subject demonstrates the strong influence of the Frame mythology, for whilst she did not welcome intrusions upon her privacy, she was by no means a hermit, as a cursory glance at her public activities proves. Interestingly, King himself admitted he had already settled upon this particular ending before starting to write, suggesting that his mind had been made as to what Janet Frame’s life represented before he even got a chance to explore it.

Ten years before King’s official biography tried to come to grips with its elusive biographee, Frame’s life-story had been adapted on screen by a highly personal and idiosyncratic director, Jane Campion. The biopic bears the title of the second volume of the autobiographical triptych, *An Angel at My Table*, but covers all three volumes. The three-part structure of the autobiography was preserved in the adapted script by Australian screenwriter Laura Jones, with whom Campion collaborated closely throughout the process of adaptation. Both Campion and Jones felt a deep personal connection with Frame’s story and wanted to do it justice. After her first encounter with Frame’s fiction as a teenager, Campion’s fascination with the writer “grew to have a mythic proportion [...] her life seemed to sum up the tragic/sad artist” (Wexman 59-60). The mythical dimension of the writer in Campion’s mind was scaled down to more realistic proportions when she finally read her autobiography when a film student in Australia: “I was shocked to find out how normal she was and how much my childhood felt like hers. I thought it was like the unravelling of a myth. I found it very moving, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Janet was assigned the role of Charlotte, as she was more “practical” and less outwardly “passionate” (Frame in Harold and Gordon 2011)

felt like I would really like to share that experience, and introduce people to Janet” (Campion qtd. in Wexman 60). On her part, in transforming a lengthy autobiography into an eighty-page script, Jones was guided by a sense of personal responsibility towards the author: “my responsibility was to Janet’s version of her life, to what she calls the ‘fiction’ of her life” (qtd. in Jones 80) Frame herself was actively implicated in the project, offering suggestions and material, and even visiting the film set on one occasion.

Campion made *An Angel at My Table* after three student films, the TV production *Two Friends* (1986) and her first feature *Sweetie* (1989), an experimental exploration of sisterly dynamics which had had a negative reception in Cannes. Faced with Frame’s story, she felt clearly that the subject would not lend itself to an experimental style and used a more conventional approach. Nevertheless, Campion’s distinctive touch and her particular mise-en-scene are apparent even in such a relatively modest project in cinematic and aesthetic terms. In fact, the biopic became a crucial stepping stone in her career as a leading female filmmaker with auteurist status. Three years after *An Angel at My Table*, Campion would go on to impress the film world with her award-winning evocation of feminine internal space, the melodrama *The Piano* (1993). A retrospective look at her female characters seems to reveal an interest in feminine ‘difference’ and women’s relationship to language offset against external physical locations with symbolic potential which mirror the inner life of her characters and their search for personal fulfilment. This is certainly the case in *An Angel at My Table*, an exploration of a female subjectivity and vulnerability at odds with a culture which shows little understanding for ‘difference’, especially in a woman.

The biopic is constructed as the perilous life journey of a highly sensitive being in search of her identity and place against the background of unfavourable

circumstances, whose moments of happiness are connected with reading and writing. It follows Janet from toddlerhood to maturity in her painful quest to find her literary voice and a safe place in which to develop her calling. The quest motif is illustrated in one of the opening shots, where Janet the child is seen walking towards the camera up a long road surrounded by the lush New Zealand landscape. The camera cranes down to her short height and offers a close-up of her face – she looks at the camera briefly, clutches her clothes with nervous chubby fingers and then suddenly turns and runs away from the prying eye of the implied audience. Throughout the scene, Kerry Fox’s (who plays the adult Janet) voice over introduces us to the main character “I was born Janet Paterson Frame...” before telling us about the twin brother who died shortly after birth. While visually the scene seems to highlight Janet’s loneliness, social inadequacy and fear, at the same time, it lets us know that she is also a survivor. The choice of cast also signals Janet’s difference, from the halo-like ginger hair to the chubbiness of the child Janet, making us empathise with the image of the outcast trying to win her classmates’ friendship through childish acts of transgression such as stealing money from her father to buy them chewing-gum.

In terms of visual style, the film relies heavily on empathic identification with the main character through the sustained use of framing and close-ups. Deleuze described the concept of the affection-image as being identical to the close-up, and, in its turn, with the face itself: “there is no close-up *of* the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face, and both are affect, affection-image” (88). Campion’s almost claustrophobic style of shooting, with numerous scenes taking place in cramped interiors showing as little background as possible, suits the subject of her film beautifully, for it constructs a close connection between the viewer and the character on screen and appeals to a universal sense of emotional vulnerability: “my goal was to

bring to the screen the emotions I had felt while reading the book” (Campion qtd. in Wexman 67). One of the most emotionally-charged scenes shows Janet, with a bruised face, facing the prospect of an impending lobotomy while locked up in a bare room in the mental hospital. In despair, trying to hold on to her sanity, she desperately scribbles lines from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* on the wall: “Fear no more the heat of the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages”. The camera, initially in a position above Janet, descends close to her face intense with concentration, and we hear her trembling voice reciting Shakespeare’s lines. The scene uses the strong pathos and rhetorical articulations of affectivity associated with the melodramatic mode to convey the oppressive menace of a social environment which resorts to bodily mutilation in order to uphold a limited view of intellectual and behavioural ‘normality’. This scene of potential mutilation connects forward to Champion’s period melodrama *The Piano* (1993), in which the mute protagonist Ada has one of her fingers cut off by her husband in an attempt to make her conform to his patriarchal expectations of marital submission.

This being the biopic of a writer, *An Angel at My Table* contains multiple references to Janet’s love of literature, as well as numerous scenes of writing. As a young child, she writes poems enthusiastically, and ignores her older sister who tries to persuade her to change a word in her poem because it should sound more conventionally poetic – a reference to Frame’s own highly personal style of writing rich with metaphors and unusual imagery. After she receives a free library pass as a prize for her school results, she peruses the packed shelves methodically, bringing back a book for each member of her family. As a teenager, she observes people with pensive attention – they will become characters in her future books. In each instance, the camera shot ‘frames’ her – she becomes the focal point of the image – as a literary ‘hunter’ and an active observer. Later on, the now grown-up Janet is frequently shown either reading,

writing or typing as a conventional signifier of her unfolding writerly identity. In several instances, the film makes explicit reference to her novels through close-ups of manuscript pages, as well as to reviews of her work in newspapers which she peruses in public toilets.

The literary theme is connected with another of Campion's recurrent themes, that of sisterly relationships. The child Janet is shown reading fairy tales in bed to her sisters or mouthing a poem her eldest sibling Myrtle is reciting on the radio. Interestingly, however, there is one major omission which speaks volumes about Campion's personal investment in the story: nowhere does she mention that Janet's love of words stems from her mother. As a matter of fact, Frame's mother was a great admirer of poetry, like Janet; she wrote poems and contributed to the household income by selling them door to door during the early 1930s economic depression. The biopic opens with a shot of a gigantic, shadowy mother figure silhouetted against the sky seen from the perspective of baby Janet, a flash-like vision simultaneously nurturing and menacing. With this, the film narrative seems to adapt the opening paragraph in Frame's first autobiographical volume which references the myth of origins as a "first place of liquid darkness" (Frame *An Autobiography* 7) from which her consciousness emerges and which it must transcend. Interestingly, in Campion's film the father is the encouraging figure; he buys little Janet a notebook for her poems, while the self-denying mother seems relegated to a purely domestic role, with no apparent interests outside the household. Frame's autobiography speaks several times of her mother, of the regret of a potentially better life wasted in domestic drudgery and the fear of loss of identity in the midst of a demanding family life:

[...] and there she was, writing poems in a small notebook and reading them to the other patients, who were impressed with her talent.

'Your mother writes lovely poems.'



What had we done to her, each of us, day after day, year after year, that we had washed away her evidence of self, all her own furniture from her room, and crowded it with our selves and our lives. (Frame *To the Is-Land* 105)

The erasure of the fictional mother is, interestingly, accompanied by a gesture of auteurist insertion into Frame's story, in which the director casts her own mother, Edith Campion, as the stern, black-gowned teacher Miss Lindsay, shown reciting theatrically Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* to a class of awestruck students. The Arthurian legend is shown to literally come to life in Janet's mind as we catch a quick glimpse of a sword being grabbed by the hilt – an instance of intrusion of the fantastic in an otherwise predominantly realistic narrative which might point to Jane Campion's own fascination with Frame. But the auteurist interventions do not stop here. In a short video accompanying the biopic, titled *An Audition*, and filmed by her sister Anna Campion, Jane and her mother become actors in a battle of personalities. The video shows a fragile Edith in her seventies auditioning for her role as Miss Lindsay in Campion's future film, arguing with her daughter, talking about her fear of not being artistically good enough. The psychological relationship between the two protagonists is a mixture of resentment and affection on both sides. In light of this, one could argue that Campion's involvement in filming Frame's story is a manner of trying to make sense of her own fraught relationship with her unstable mother. Edith suffered from depression for most of her life, a condition worsened by her husband's infidelities and the failure of her theatrical career, and she ended up in hospital several times; indeed, it was her mother who sent Campion a copy of Frame's first autobiographical volume and triggered her desire to bring the writer's life on screen: "14 years after first opening *Owls Do Cry*, I was once more sitting up in my bed, once more reading Janet Frame. And as I read, I sobbed. I was not only reading about Frame's life, I was also re-experiencing my own childhood, exploring emotional fault lines [...]" (Campion 2008).

Speaking of her helplessness when faced with her mother's illness Champion points to a deep emotional connection with Frame's story:

The issue of mental illness [...]even now is incredibly difficult in our society, and anybody who has a family member or anyone they're close to who suffers any mental problems – depression, schizophrenia – knows just how painful it is to have a family member with a problem like that [...]– (Champion qtd. in Fox 2011)

Perhaps due to the director's deeply felt relationship with the character and the seriousness of the subject, the tone of the film in regard to the question of mental illness is highly empathetic, bordering on tragic. On the other hand, Janet's autobiography treats the subject with a good dose of humour, which is missing from the biopic. For example, Frame's second volume adopts an ironic tone towards her young self eager to impress an attractive representative of the opposite sex with her diagnosis of schizophrenia, moulding her discourse to fit the myth of the mad genius. She attends psychoanalysis sessions with an attractive teacher "glistening with newly-applied Freud":

...suddenly I'd put a glazed look in my eye, as if I were in a dream, and begin to relate a fantasy as if I experienced it as a reality [...] Usually I incorporated in the fantasy details of my reading on schizophrenia. [...]

'When I think of you, he said, 'I think of Van Gogh, of Hugo Wolf...'

I, in my ignorance, knowing little of either Van Gogh or Hugo Wolf, and once again turning to books for my information, discovered that Hugo Wolf 'd. insane', and that Van Gogh 'shot himself in despair at his condition'. I read that Schumann, too, 'suffered serious deterioration in mental health.' All three were named as *schizophrenic* with their artistic ability apparently the pearl of their schizophrenia. Great artists, visionaries [...]

My place was set, then, at the terrible feast. I had no illusions about 'greatness' but at least I could endow my work and – when necessary – my life with the mark of schizophrenia. (Frame *To the Is-Land* 79, italics in the original)

However, the performance of madness as a way of emulating stereotyped genius leads to disastrous misunderstandings, as it is this teacher who recommends Jane be admitted into hospital after she swallows aspirins in a desperate suicidal gesture and, naïvely, writes about it in a class assignment.

In her pursuit of emotionally-charged material, Campion uses parts from the novel for the biopic scenes in which Janet is once again marked as ‘different’ against the background of madness – however, her ‘difference’ here is her sanity. The film chooses to blur the boundaries between fiction and biography, conflating life and work in a manner which is widely used in literary biopics in order to address the expectations of the writer’s readership and place the new filmic adaptation within the media landscape of the adapted text. In choosing to adapt parts of Frame’s novel about madness, Campion fails to take into account the writer’s repeated effort to dissociate her real person from the myth of madness which had plagued the reception of her work. Moreover, the film seems to connect Frame’s childhood in a disturbingly deterministic way with her later life in hospitals, throwing an aura of madness over the filmic life-story. In a scene at the beginning of the film, we see the Frame family sleeping snugly in the train; the next shot shows the train stopping at Seacliff station (the name of the mental hospital to which Frame was committed in 1945) and Janet the child stares curiously at a lunatic’s twitching face as her mother’s hands are trying to cover her eyes. What the shot show is in fact a literal framing of the vision of insanity, foreshadowing young Janet’s lived experience and the use she makes of it in her fiction. Also, her mother’s hands, instead of protecting her from the image of suffering, provide a perfect frame through which she stares at the painful future – a hint perhaps at the maternal inadequacy which Campion associated with her own mother.

The film contains two strong masculine figures: Janet’s own father and also Frank Sargesson, the writer who gives her shelter after her release from hospital, nurtures her writerly talent to fruition and sends her out into the world (England and Spain) to free her from the emotional bonds of the land and experience life and love as a free person. In keeping with the film’s overall quest theme, Janet returns home after her

father's death and, visiting the empty family's home, steps into his large abandoned boots, briefly imitating his authoritative walk and voice. The scene points to the new sense of self and authority acquired by the now mature Janet: "stepping into her father's shoes, she symbolically assumes the iconic shoes worn by male heroes in the kingdom of fairy tales, preferring the magical powers of the writerly imagination to the passive femininity of Cinderella's fragile slippers" (Rueschmann 43). The film's last scene shows Janet, secure now in her selfhood, framed in the window of a caravan as she types away smiling, alone but by no means lonely.

While Campion's film visually mythologises its human subjects at certain points, it nonetheless does not construct a fully unified view of family history found in mainstream Hollywood cinema, but favour a fragmented narrative. In this manner, the cinematic narrative imitates Frame's modernist preoccupations with the provisionality of memory. The past is constructed out of moments of consequential perceptions and meaningful episodes in the life-text, connected at times through the use of voice-over as a marker of agency. Speaking of the occasion when she visited Frame to discuss the adaptation of her books Jane Campion remembers:

I see now that she was not, as I sometimes thought, lonely, but lived in a rare state of freedom, removed from the demands and conventions of a husband, children and a narrow social world. Near the end of her life in 2003, when she was diagnosed with acute leukemia, she was reported to have said that her death was an adventure, "and I've always enjoyed adventures". (Campion 2008)

Frame's reference to Peter Pan seems to suggest her fearless, idiosyncratic character, ready to risk life and limb to follow her calling in spite of terrifying setbacks. Campion's film becomes thus a story of survival and triumphant achievement in spite of all odds, as well as a celebration of a unique individual's story, in keeping with the trajectory of the biopic genre.

### 2.3. The myth of Amherst in two takes: *A Quiet Passion* (2016) and *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018)

This sub-chapter sets out to analyse two adaptations of Emily Dickinson's biography: *A Quiet Passion*, a quiet auteurist take on the poet's relationship with her family written and directed by British director Terence Davies, and *Wild Nights with Emily*, an irreverent reading of Dickinson's letters and poems in the shape of a lesbian romantic comedy that seeks to dismantle the mythology around Dickinson's persona.

As noted before, biopics have an undeserved reputation of being conservative, cradle to grave stories, when, in fact, the great majority focus on a part of the biographee's life only, and through that partial lens, attempt to make sense of their subject. I say make sense, not tell the truth, as filmmakers rarely employ that word – they try to take apart the elements of a life and put them together in a smaller frame, while simultaneously acquiescing to the demands of the genre and their own personal agendas. What a good number of them also do tend to do, is reflect on the emotional connections between the subject of the film and either the director's or the scriptwriter's (or both). Naturally, in many cases of artist biopics the film is the result of a deeply personal interest in the work of the artist which then extends to his or her life. An example that crosses gender and national lines is Davies's *A Quiet Passion*, a stylised, sensitive adaptation of Dickinson's life and poetry. Resorting once again to the critical establishment's low opinion about biopics, *The New Yorker's* review begins with "there is little more solemn and sanctimonious than the great-person biopic, but Terence Davies's 'A Quiet Passion' breaks the mold" (Brody).

In a way, Davis can be said to be the ideal filmmaker to bring the American poet's figure to life on screen, as he has been described as "a filmmaker concerned with authenticity of feeling above all else" whose films are "defined by recognisable emotions",

expressing “insight and truth about human experience” (Di Mattia). Born in a working-class part of Liverpool, he became a voracious cinephile fed by the sensibilities and aesthetics of both art-house cinema and classical Hollywood filmmaking. He has been celebrated as one of the greatest British filmmakers alive, yet he has had to deal with scarcity of funding and the indifference of audiences. His relative critical and industrial invisibility can be attributed to the “unfashionably personal, contradictory, queer natures” of his films which render them “puzzling works that skirt the lines between autobiography and fantasy, reality and fiction, radicalism and conservatism – each of those, incidentally, categories in which critics and academics prefer to place films” (Koresky 8). Indeed, Davies’s films display a mosaic of “subjective chronology and lived-in experience that never forfeit technical precision for heart-stopping poignancy” (Eng).

Many of his later cinematic productions – all of them adaptations of novels or plays – focus on female protagonists, such as Lily (Gillian Anderson) in *House of Mirth* (2000), Hester (Rachel Weisz) in *The Deep Blue Sea* (2011), *Chris* (Agness Deyn) in *Sunset Song* (2015), or Emily Dickinson in *A Quiet Passion*. In describing his filmic influences and preference for female heroines, he has noted that “I grew up on what used to be called ‘The Woman’s Picture’” (qtd. in Koresky 55) and, has invoked the work of emblematic directors in the history of melodrama such as Max Ophuls, Douglas Sirk or Henry King. Moreover, this preference is shared with a number of other gay directors, as “such tragic heroines have been a source of identification for gay male directors, as in the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Todd Haynes, who, like Davies, have often recontextualised melodrama within an art-film aesthetic” (Koresky 55). As Michael Koresky notes, “impossibility and doom are traditional, if outmoded, key words for queer identity in much of the twentieth century, so it would follow that the narratives of much queer art would be fuelled by heartbreak” (58). This particular inclination towards the grand figures, passions

and gestures associated with the melodramatic tradition and a certain queer sensibility applies to François Ozon as well, as analysed in the chapter devoted to his partly-fictional biopic/camp melodrama *Angel* (2007).

Written and directed by Davies, *A Quiet Passion* is an adaptation of Dickinson's 'life-text' that foregrounds the writer's position as part of a family, delving deep into the domestic dynamics of a group of people with strong emotional connections and contradictory interests. In an interview following the release of the film, Davies confirms the profoundly personal nature of his filmic project and his identification with the poet, across time and space, based on shared lived experiences and deeply-felt emotions:

And her family was very close and I'm from a family of ten, seven surviving. Our family was very, very close too, so I know what that felt like. And when there were frictions within the family, I knew exactly what that felt like. So I felt, at that level, that I could bring something to it because I can feel that she didn't want the family to change forever. And I was the same. I wanted my family to stay exactly like [they were], forever and ever. It seemed so wonderful.

And I think the other thing is that she was an observer. And I think I am an observer. I'm not a participant in life. And so even when you're at your happiest, there's a part of you that know it's already decaying. There's nothing more depressing than getting on a bus and looking around and wondering, One day we'll all be dead.

[And] I didn't think [Dickinson's] was a dull life. [Life] doesn't have to be exciting because you go everywhere. She only went away to Mount Holyoke [Female Seminary], which is about ten or fifteen minutes by car [from Dickinson's home in Amherst]. But if you got to go there by [carriage], it seems an enormously long way away. And she was very, very homesick. She was ill with homesickness. And when I was a child, I had to be sent away to North Wales [from Liverpool] because I had a chest infection. And, to a child, that's [far]. And I used to ache and [beg] to go home. I really know what that feels like. (qtd. in Eng)

The film opens with a scene where a young Emily is narratively and visually singled out as an outsider. Placed in front of a cross hanging on the wall of an austere decorated room, and dressed in severe black, the headmistress of the female seminary Emily has been attending, asks the pupils to group themselves according to their wish to be saved. Emily is left standing alone to defend the authenticity and validity of her doubts regarding religious faith and rejection of imposed dogma – how can she truly repent and be

saved when she has no sense of her sins? The headmistress concludes: “You are alone in your rebellion, Miss Dickinson. I fear that you are a no hoper”. Smiling slightly, Emily agrees.

A recurring image in Davis’s films is that of a character staring out of a window, “looking onto a world that has confounded, betrayed, or oppressed” them (Koresky 1). Following the confrontational scene with the mistress, young Emily is shown with her back turned to the viewer, looking out a window through which shafts of light enter, illuminating her in a symbolic manner. Yet there is no salvation to be had, neither inside the grimly dogmatic school, nor outside in a world whose social burdens she chooses to keep at a distance. It is also a shot that points to the cultural iconography of the Amherst poet in voluntary seclusion in her family home. Confirming the symbolism of this image, we hear the voice of the older Emily, played by Cynthia Nixon, recite “For each ecstatic instant /We must in anguish pay...” suggesting the connection between the present scene overshadowed by the anguish of eternal damnation, and the future distillation of the memory of such moments into poetic creativity.

Two of the concerns at the heart of Davies’s work are his fascination with the nature of time and his passion for music, “itself a temporal art form of course, and the one which, in Davies’s opinion, most closely relates to the medium of film” (Everett 3). Both themes are present in *A Quiet Passion*. Music is shown to speak to Emily’s passionate, young self. We see her enthusiasm at the opera, and her humorous teasing of her disapproving father who is displeased with the sight of women upon the stage: “A gift is no excuse for a female to exhibit herself in that way.” “And what would you have her do? Perform an Act of Congress, aloud?”. But more importantly, Davies uses the sounds of Dickinson’s poems almost as a soundtrack: “It was important to make sure that the basic music was the poetry. That acts as the music” (qtd. in Eng). Throughout the film, then, it is



Dickinson's own lyrical voice, made audible through the actor's reading, that accompanies her on-screen life, like a running commentary across over twenty poems, lending those moments a certain dissociative quality, a paradoxical fusion of profound emotionality and dispassionate detachment. A peaceful, fire-lit domestic scene is accompanied by Nixon's voice-over reciting "The heart asks pleasure first, / And then excuse from pain..." followed by the chime of a clock marking the inexorable passing of time, as the camera pans slowly around the room, taking in the members of the family and household objects. However, by the time the camera is back to Emily's face, a look of pain has taken hold of it suggesting that "the little anodynes that deaden suffering" are ineffectual to deal with her acute awareness of the fragility of life and the uncertainty of the afterlife. The slow tracking shot is in fact a recurrent technique in Davies's films, skilfully used to construct a mindscape engulfed by either contemplative or ecstatic surges of emotional intensity. He uses the strategies of the melodramatic mode to convey meaning as "a felt affect", an "aesthetic-emotional experience that lifts audiences" (Gledhill "Prologue" xxii).

It is common practice in biopics to read the work of an author autobiographically to varying degrees – Elizabeth Bennett is Austen in *Becoming Jane*, Romeo is partly Shakespeare in *Shakespeare in Love*, Tolkien's friends and war experiences inspired his fantasy novels in the recent biopic *Tolkien* (2019). In *A Quiet Passion*, domestic events are connected emotionally with Dickinson's poems. Indeed, in certain stylistic aspects Davies's film departs from the more formulaic biopics; in others, he follows the formula because of its proven effectiveness. Apart from the use of the work in the narrative, he also offers audiences the pleasures of feminist vindication when, for example, we are offered a scene of Emily writing feverishly at her desk, accompanied by the voice-over of the journal editor of the Springfield Republican, who, having decided to publish one of her poems, pontificates that "the genuine classics of every language are the work of men, not

women. Women, I fear, cannot create the permanent treasures of literature”. Similarly, when at one point she looks at herself in the mirror and wonders “Oh you are a wretched creature! Will you never achieve anything?”, the emotional poignancy of the filmic moment is tempered by the knowledge that, in fact, she did achieve a great deal, even if posthumously. However, there is hardly any sentimentality attached to the scene, as later on the film’s Emily also wryly points out the problems with that consolation, to an admirer of her poems: “There is, I suppose, always, posterity. But posterity is as comfortless as God. [...] Besides, a posthumous reputation is only for those who, when living, weren’t worth remembering. Ah, to be racked by success... But I would like some approval before I die.”

Although not a militantly feminist film, Davies’s biopic is deeply sympathetic to the historical situation of women in nineteenth-century America. When her brother chastises her for associating war with gender, she replies “Any argument about gender is war, because that too is slavery [...] Live as a woman for a week, Austin, you will find it neither congenial nor trivial”. It is interesting, however, that a gay director should not have gestured at least in the direction of critical speculation regarding Dickinson’s lesbian desire for her sister-in-law, Susan.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, choosing Nixon, a well-known lesbian and advocate for LGBT rights who is also actively involved in politics, to portray Emily, is an interesting strategy. The film focuses instead on Emily’s friendship with a sharp-witted, wicked semi-fictional character, Vryling Buffam (Catherine Bailey), whose humorous banter with her lightens the film’s tone but does not contain sexual undertones. The (failed) romance in her life is embodied by reverend Charles Wadsworth (Eric Loren), who is a composite character like Vryling. Dickinson did correspond with Wadsworth, in whom she “found, above all, a fellow sufferer, the quality of whose suffering had in common with

---

<sup>1</sup> Dickinson’s alleged lesbian romance with Susan is the subject of *Wild Nights with Emily*, briefly discussed below.

hers that it was borne in silence (Sewall 459). The romance element is closely connected with the idea of literature; for instance, in the scene where Emily meets the reverend she has a romantic interest in, and his stern wife, the conversation revolves around poetry and truth.

*A Quiet Passion*'s style is only partly naturalistic – Davies's self-conscious, stylised aesthetic is evident not only in the pictorial quality of the imagery, but also in the use of photography as a means to represent the awareness of the film as a construct, as well as to visualise the transition between the past and the narrative 'present' of the Dickinson family. The subtle stylisation is evident in the sequence where the Dickinsons pose in front of a photographer – a metacinematic doubling of the eye of the camera. However, whereas photography freezes the past for posterity, Davies uses contemporary film technology, specifically CGI, to underscore the fluidity of temporal progression in a compressed manner. In order to 'age' the characters and visualise the transition from a younger Emily to a middle-aged one, the actors' still bodies are morphed in front of the 'double' camera. The effect is slightly uncanny, as the gradual metamorphosis turns a set of facial features into another – not only do they age, but in the case of Emily and her siblings, they also turn into completely different persons.

Although the film is an intimate portrayal of the artist in her domestic world, Davies points to the larger historical realities beyond the contracted frame of family relations. The Civil War does intrude upon the community, pitting son against father. To connect the film's domestic sphere to the events beyond the film narrative's world, Davies uses coloured photographs of fallen soldiers and historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Edward Everett alongside textual information on screen regarding the number of casualties on different battlefields. This documentary-like strategy functions as a marker of historical authenticity and creates a reality effect that comes across as strangely odd

insofar as the hard factuality of the number of casualties visible on screen stands in contrast with the emotional expansiveness of the surrounding narrative.

The painterly quality of Davies's cinematic style is also evident in many of his tableaux arrangements, where the actors stand still in a variety of poses reminiscent of portraiture, as well as in the visual framing of Emily at several points in the narrative. His filmography is testament to an enduring interest in painting and photography, and a "fascination with light and texture" (Everett 159). Films such as his adaptation of *The House of Mirth* (2000) use interiors that are opulently pictorial and display a keen eye for the interplay of light and shadow, colour and texture, stillness and movement that seems to be inspired by Vermeer's interiors, John Singer Sargent's society portraits, or Whistler's intimate domestic scenes. Apart from an interest in literature that is evident in his filmography, Davies also uses literary references to connect Keatsian 'truth' and 'beauty' to Dickinson's preoccupation with poetic truth and, by extension, to the emotional honesty portrayed by the characters on screen. When questioned about her preference for the Brontë's Yorkshire gloom, Emily asserts the superiority of "the beauty of truth" to be found in their work to the banality of Henry W. Longfellow's epic poem *Hiawatha*. The reference to the Brontës signals the kinship of Dickinson's domestic and poetic worlds to that of the Yorkshire sisters, pointing to a common cultural mythology of female genius and willed reclusiveness.

Although Davies's portrait of the artist employs the aesthetic sensibility of melodrama as a way to lend the story an intensity of affect and achieve an empathic response which 'realism' is unequipped for, the result is never vacuously sentimental. In the second part of the film, the losses in Emily's life occur in relatively quick succession, connected in a sudden manner that precludes any lingering sentimentality. For example, the scene of Vryling's wedding ceremony and separation from Emily is immediately

followed by an overhead shot of Emily's father lying in a coffin, filling the screen with the seemingly unmediated emotional shock of death. Moreover, Emily's longing for love and romance, stunted by her withdrawal from society, is portrayed as both desire and existential dread sublimated into poetic creation. In an affecting scene accompanied by Nixon's anguished recitation, as well as a heart-rending musical track, an imagined "no ordinary bridegroom", a looming man, mounts the stairs towards her darkened room. Gazing directly at the camera, Emily's face is made to suggest both agony and ecstasy, an erotically-suffused spiritual experience reminiscent of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. However, as the camera tracks back, her expression turns to horror and the door closes with the finality of a coffin lid. The next scene shows her convulsing on the floor in an epileptic fit and lying in bed having been diagnosed with an incurable kidney disease. As the voice-over of one of her poems reaches the word "crucifixion", the camera lingers on her drained face. The film thus foregrounds the connection between ecstasy and pain, insofar as Emily's human predicament is seen as a reflection of the Passion of Christ (in the original Latin meaning of 'suffering'). To support his reading of Dickinson through the prism of her family life, Davies crafts the images of her death as similar to those of her mother and father, her death bed filling the screen.

However, in keeping with the visual and hermeneutic ambiguity of the film, the ending seems to embrace both Emily's embodied humanity and her consecration as a literary icon. As her coffin is carried towards the grave, guided by Nixon's voice intoning Dickinson's famous "Because I could not stop for Death", the camera pans slowly towards the "House that seemed/ A Swelling of the Ground" and lingers above the rectangular gap in the earth, before it fades to black. The sheer, unsettling physicality of the grave in close-up, reflective of the poet's shared humanity – our inexorable final scene – is tempered somewhat by the last shot, a framed picture of Nixon as Emily, whose face morphs into

that of Emily Bell as young Emily, which eventually morphs into the real Emily Dickinson's portrait. This particular strategy, by asserting the truth status of the biopic, anchors the narrative in the larger historical context, and, through its visual progression into the past, memorialises the figure of the poet from the perspective of the present. *Quiet Passion* combines the cinematic and narrative strategies of the biopic and melodrama genres to deliver a complex portrait of Dickinson and a self-portrait of Davies, one of "cinema's great poets" (Brody).

Written and directed by Madeleine Olnek, a university-educated, New York-based playwright and filmmaker, and starring Molly Shannon as the writer, *Wild Nights with Emily* was released two years after Davies's 'quiet', meditative version the poet's life. Described as "fresh, funny and absurd" (O'Malley), this small independent film takes its title from one of Emily Dickinson's poems to Susan (Susan Ziegler), her sister-in-law, and reinterprets the lines literally, as a lesbian romantic comedy:

Wild nights - Wild nights!  
Were I with thee  
Wild nights should be  
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -  
To a Heart in port -  
Done with the Compass -  
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -  
Ah - the Sea!  
Might I but moor - tonight -  
In thee!

(Dickinson 120)

The film begins in a self-aware manner, with the character of Dickinson walking leisurely into the frame, joined by Susan, as the voice-over of Mabel Loomis Todd (Amy Seimetz, Dickinson's censorious legacy keeper and posthumous editor – she was also Emily's brother's mistress – with the pinched formal diction of a disapproving academic/critic,

informs us that “speaking of the life of Emily Dickinson, and her famous reclusivity, too much has been made of late of Emily Dickinson’s girlhood friendship with her brother’s wife, Susan, the daughter of a tavern keeper.” As the voice stops, the two women kiss passionately, falling behind a sofa in a flurry of crinolines. Indeed, besides the romantic tribulations of Emily and Susan, the film engages also with the long and fraught history of the publication of Dickinson’s poems. As one critic observes in 1999 looking back upon over a century of this publishing history, “the editing of Emily Dickinson’s poetry has been entangled with human passions, sex, and blindered partiality, as though the editors were (and sometimes they were) the despairing lovers tossing on their beds” (Benfey 35). This amusingly literate film implies that Mabel Loomis Todd functions as the principle of heterosexual censorship, erasing Susan’s name from the poem manuscripts in order to sanitise Emily’s ‘life-text’ and proclaiming several of Emily’s male acquaintances as potential love interests, similar to countless critical studies in the Dickinson industry that have sought to decipher the poets’s life based on her letters and poems spurred by and, in turn, contributing to her mythologised image as a recluse and poetic genius. Indeed, it is Todd who seems to have initiated the mythology around Dickinson, writing in her journal on September 15, 1882:

Emily is called in Amherst “the myth”. She has not been out of her house for fifteen years....She writes the strangest poems, & very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius. She wears always white, & has her hair arranged as was the fashion fifteen years ago when she went into retirement. She wanted me to come & sing to her, but she would not see me. She has frequently sent me flowers and poems, & we have a very pleasant friendship in that way. (qtd. in Longworth 3)

A cheerfully postmodern, unapologetically feminist romp, *Wild Nights with Emily* has a theatrical pacing and an artificial style that make no attempt to hide its designs of challenging the Dickinson cannon. Similar to Davies’s film, it also incorporates a great deal of her poetry, written on the screen in the manner of subtitles at particular points in the

narrative. Dickinson's words thus provide a running commentary to the actions of the characters and visibly connect the writer's texts with the filmmakers' adaptation.

Among the strategies used to produce comical effects throughout the film is the contrast between Mabel Todd's version of Emily and the events in the film that contradict her pompous declarations. Dressed in frilly pink to emphasise her oppressive conventionalism, Todd's character and assertions signify the claims of the traditional critical establishment across history, claims which the film caricatures and rebuts. For example, Todd argues that "Emily had many influences over her work. She was inspired by the great Ralph Waldo Emerson", yet Emily is shown coming to Susan's house in order to hear what Emerson, who is visiting, has to say, and instead of an uplifting scene of authors communing, we see Emerson mumbling unintelligibly to a bored-looking audience as Dickinson looks baffled, suggesting that the great man of letters had in fact little to say to her. The film sets itself as a light-hearted comical counterpoint to the academic tradition of biographical and critical writing about Dickinson the woman and the poet. Instead of the "spinster recluse poet", in Todd's words, who shunned publication, this comedic biopic offers an image of a privately 'wild' Emily as an LGBT icon and a misunderstood poet ahead of her time.

In one of the final scenes, Emily's young niece – standing for the film's fresh and 'truthful' perspective – urges the diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences to ignore the false image of the poet as a "frustrated spinster maid" that Todd has projected into the public imagination. Instead, they should "go to the letters and the poems, you will hear the story of my mother and my aunt as I understood it..." and discover an alternative, more authentic view of Dickinson that challenges Todd's heavily biased, expurgated perspective, and the power of heteronormativity and critical censorship. As the last shot of the movie makes it clear, this alternative view has been largely ignored. The film uses explicitly the



perpetrator/victim dichotomy characteristic of melodrama to illustrate the historical injustice done to the memory of the poet. The screen is split between a scene of Susan lovingly cleaning Emily's body after death in a darkened room, and Mabel Todd — the villainous editor of their love story — methodically erasing Susan's name from Emily's manuscripts. In a series of end titles appearing over the sound of rubber erasing words, the viewers are informed that a 1998 article in the *New York Times* “documented the use of computer-imaging software to restore the erasures of Susan's name in Emily's letters”. The present and its technological advancements thus rescue Emily Dickinson's ‘authentic’ words from the clutches of a censorious past, just as the film itself, by dramatising the letters and poems, saves the marginalised affair of the two women from oblivion and in so doing advances the cause of sexual minorities. As Brooks notes, polarisation in melodrama is not only a dramatic principle, but “the very means by which integral ethical conditions are identified and shaped, made clear and operative” (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 36). The film's comedic drive is thus accompanied by the affective and contrastive mechanisms of the melodramatic mode in order to raise awareness of historical issues of marginalisation.

Released two years apart, these two biopics engage in an interesting dialogue about Dickinson's cultural mythology. One is a reverential and self-referential portrayal of the artist, the other an exuberant, politically militant act of cultural re-appraisal and myth-busting. Both, however, employ the melodramatic mode to challenge the ideological shortcomings of the social order, past and present, and emotionally connect audiences with Dickinson's work and ‘life-text’. Both, indeed, are testimony to the fact that “more so than other writers, Dickinson appears to elicit a desire for greater and greater intimacy” (Erkkila 24).

#### 2.4. Character in search of an author: *Angel* (2007)

At the heart of François Ozon's camp semi-fictional biopic *Angel* lies the exploration of artistic creation. Ozon is described as an atypical auteur because his films do not show the strong stylistic unity usually associated with auteurism. According to Kate Ince, he is "France's first mainstream queer auteur" (113), whose body of work interrogates sexualities and desires in original ways. He is a bold experimenter with generic conventions and narrative forms in art and mainstream cinema. *Angel* is his visually flamboyant adaptation of a homonymous fictional biography written by English novelist Elizabeth Taylor in 1957, and inspired by bestselling-author Marie Corelli's life in Edwardian England. Ozon's film both nostalgically and ironically the melodramas of the Technicolor era. Indeed, from the hot pink opening credits to the obvious back-projections imitating Hollywood classics, this adaptation signals unequivocally its melodramatic aesthetic and campy approach. Ozon had become interested in adapting Taylor's *Angel* before making another melodrama-infused film about a female writer, *Swimming Pool* (2003), starring Charlotte Rampling. The two films share an interest in the psychology of writers of 'excessive' fiction and the boundaries between fiction and reality, but, with *Angel* "Ozon sets out to make melodrama through and through, a film that will be the very embodiment of that genre, as well as its implicit critique" (Asibong 137). I would argue that the exploration of these boundaries is also part of the biopic genre, and the easiness with which melodrama and biopic work together is indicative of a deep affinity.

The main character in the film – the delusional Angel Devereaux, a writer of high-flown romantic novels of questionable quality – lives inside her florid imagination with absurd tenacity, churning out rivers of bad prose while panting with irrepressible emotions. In fact, she barely acknowledges the outside world and the reality of the

people around her – the world of Angel is a firmly removed from the humdrum of everyday life. Neither war nor the loss of her husband and child manages to shatter her iron will to see herself as the living version of one of her preposterous characters, deeply disdainful of both grammatical rules and common sense. Set in England with an all-British cast and a multinational crew, *Angel* wears its melodramatic heart on its sleeve. However, it is precisely its melodramatic excessiveness that leaves it open to a variety of interpretations, including that of a success story over the limitations of the class system, as Angel is the lower middle-class daughter of a shopkeeper. Prompted by an outsized ambition and a florid imagination, Angel aspires to become the refined lady of an aristocratic mansion, and she achieves this by the only means open to her – becoming a successful writer (fig. 36), ultimately destroying the lives of her mother and her husband.



Fig. 36. Artistic creation as an obsessive and destructive pursuit

Ozon's melodrama adaptation challenges the perception of period film as a nostalgic genre with a conservative agenda to construct a study of obsessive single-mindedness in pursuit of dreams of literary glory, and also as a Technicolor meditation on the perishability of literary (and otherwise) reputations. *Angel* escapes from any geographical and generic limitations – baffling critics on the way – to explore the border realms of genre: its narrative arc and generic conventions are those of that a biopic, following the protagonist from childhood till death, but, instead of cultural immortality, it condemns its protagonist to implacable historical oblivion. It is a subversion of the biopic form insofar as it deals with the life of a failed, self-deluded artist who, the film seems to argue, still deserves the name by sheer force of her creative drive – she bends reality to conform to her imagination and adorns her environment as excessively as her writing style. Along the way the film asks the audience to question assumptions as to who deserves to be elevated and allowed entrance into “the pantheon of cultural mythology” (Bingham 10). Similar to Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994) in its parodic reversal, but without the saving grace of an amusing lead character, *Angel* pushes characterization to its limits, being all surface and no depth.

Karen Hollinger defines the biopic as “a hybrid cinematic form” that combines melodrama, history, psychological drama, biography and documentary” (*Feminist Film Studies* 158). Ozon's cinema in general draws on a multitude of genres, including the crime thriller, the musical, the comedy, and, indeed, the melodrama which he defamiliarises through his highly inventive filmmaking style and recurrent blurring of boundaries between “masculine and feminine, gay and straight, fantasy and reality, auteur and commercial cinema” (Schilt 5). With *Angel* he plays on the biopic genre's hybridity, using his original style of filmmaking to inject interest into the period drama, biopic and melodrama genre formulas. The highly artificial style including the use of

shaky rear-screen projections to show the protagonist travelling to exotic places and overly saturated colours is a reference to the character's emotional and mental reality – the employment of excessive clichés is meant to reveal her 'real' self. Ozon makes ironic use one of the most recognisable tropes in literary biopics, that of written text superimposed on the body of the author as a means of signalling the identification of the body of work with the body of the writer. However, here the symbolism is deflected and parodied by the realisation that *Angel*'s writing is but a string of auto-plagiarising vacuities. Consequently, the body of writing, which *Angel* desires and *Angel*'s body, desired by her secretary Nora, become a chain of simulacra devoid of any authentic emotional weight. *Angel* deals with surfaces in its relentless evocation of melodrama's most vacuous aesthetic and narrative elements. In fact, if one takes into consideration Ozon's career, *Angel* looks like his alter-ego. As he himself admitted, "I recognised myself in her as this child living in her dreams. For me as a child, my strength, my way to survive difficulties, was to have a big imagination" (Gilbey). While he tends to collaborate with others in film writing, *Angel* is the only story for which, contrary to his usual methods, he wrote the script in French alone, the only collaborator being playwright Martin Crimp as a translator into English.

Geoffrey Wall's lyrically self-reflexive "Literary Biopics: A Literary Biographer's Perspective" laments what he sees as the incapacity of literary biopics to evoke "deep time", that is, the temporal and psychic life of the biographical subject beneath the surface flow of the narrative "We need a good ear, for the secret and the lie, and the half-truth; we also need to be attuned to something more elusive – the subjunctive mood: that mode of the imagination for which there is no visual cinematic equivalent. The subjunctive is woven deftly into the fabric of everyday life, but it is probably a more conspicuous feature of the life of the writer." (126) In literary biopics,

as parodied and taken to the extreme in *Angel*, the melodramatic mode is reflective precisely 'deep time', the mode of the imagination in excess of 'reality' and 'the real' for which the melodramatic aesthetic and emotional traction opens up a space.

### 3. Rebel with a cause

Chapter 3 is devoted to a series of politically-infused biopics which use the strategies of the melodramatic mode to explore the histories of persecution of certain authors. Such literary biopics have been a staple in the history of the genre, from *The Life of Emile Zola* in 1937 to *Quills* in 2000 to *The Happy Prince* in 2018. Subchapter 3.1 explores a number of literary biopics based on Oscar Wilde's trials and subsequent story of abuse and victimisation. Subchapter 3.2 continues the analysis with a look at the film *Howl* (2010), based on the trial not of a person, but of Ginsberg's irreverent and explosive poem.

#### 3.1. 'We are all in the gutter': *Wilde* (1997) and *The Happy Prince* (2018)

Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment (Wilde 84)

The above quote from "The Decay of Lying" may be a fitting summation of the history of biographical adaptations, save for, perhaps, art being absolutely indifferent to facts. To do biopics justice, one would need to replace "absolutely" with a more moderate quantifier – art is *somewhat* indifferent to facts, and, is all the better for it. Oscar Wilde has been the subject of numerous authorised and unauthorised biographies, fictional biographies, plays and film adaptations. No other figure has "proved so useful or durable a mask" (Metz 90) as Wilde. Indeed, in modern culture, "Wilde has become the empty space in which we inscribe our explanations, our much-altered hopes and fears of what a homosexual man is and might be" (Porton 8). In the manner of postmodernism's obsession with late-Victorian characters, be they Jekyll and Hyde, Sherlock Holmes or Dracula, the figure of the decadent writer has been adapted in numerous media to both reflect and further "particular

social or political agendas of the present day” (Metz 90), from fiction, plays and films to “Mick Jagger dressing himself up as Wilde in a film made after his arrest on a drugs charge in 1967” (Stokes 20). A case in point for Margaret Metz is Terry Eagleton’s *Saint Oscar* (1989), in which the critic and playwright has used Wilde’s Irish identity to criticise the British government’s policies towards Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century. Another use made of Wilde has been as predecessor of the rebellious, sexually subversive pop and rock stars of the 1960s through to the 1980s. However, the main purpose of adapting Wilde’s figure has been to address “the issues of homophobia, gay rights, and gay pride” (Metz 91), as his prosecution and imprisonment on charges of ‘gross indecency’ have become part of the history of persecution of sexual minorities.

Among TV and feature-length film productions, most notable are two British biopics released in the same year 1960, namely the black-and-white *Oscar Wilde* and *The Man with the Green Carnation* (*The Trials of Oscar Wilde* in the US) starring Robert Morley and Peter Finch, respectively, as the famed decadent writer. The coincidence of having two films released in the same year on the same subject was not really a coincidence, as they came following a government-commissioned inquiry into homosexuality and prostitutions from the mid-1950s, whose conclusions, published in 1957 in a document generally known as the Wolfenden Report, recommended the partial legalisation of sexual acts between consenting adults. Although the Sexual Offences Act was not passed until 1967, the report contributed greatly to the public debate over and the visibility of the discrimination of sexual minorities.

Unlike later films that reflect retrospectively on historical discrimination and criminalisation for an audience who has already been converted to the cause, the two 1960 biopics attempted to engage the audience’s sympathies for the figure of the persecuted writer and thus generate public response to the social injustice. These literary biopics



employ a variety of different strategies to achieve this. To signal its authenticity as a truthful account of the scandalous story, *Oscar Wilde* begins with a contemporary image of the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris – the camera pans slowly towards Wilde’s tomb as we hear the main character’s voice-over from across death and history telling us that this is where he lies, “an exile in death as I was in life. This is the story of my tragedy, a tragedy that began in England at the turn of the century”.<sup>1</sup> The narrative is framed as a tragedy caused both by personal hubris – at one point the voiceover says “No man is destroyed except by his own hand” – and societal conservatism, partly softening any overt social criticism. A sizeable part of the film is devoted to the trial at which point the film becomes a tense courtroom drama closely based on the available original transcripts of Wilde’s prosecution. Rather interestingly, both the prosecutor and Wilde break the fourth wall to address the camera directly, undermining the fictionality of the story to remind the audience of the trial’s historical reality and the injustice of punishing such a great figure on charges whose veracity remains doubtful since the crime is never made explicit. “The love that dare not speak its name” speech is delivered “with the intensity of a Shakespearean soliloquy” (Metz 96), creating an effect of melodramatic transfixion and “visual beatification” (96).<sup>2</sup> The ending ramps up the melodramatic pathos, with a drunk, broken

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the opening credits, the film is based on the play *Oscar Wilde* (1936) by Leslie and Cyril Stokes and literary works by Frank Harris.

<sup>2</sup> The speech reads: “‘The Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the ‘Love that dare not speak its name’, and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/Crimwilde.html>

Wilde asking a Parisian accordion player in a bar to “play something gay”<sup>3</sup> followed by hysterical laughter as the camera pans away from him. The use of the word ‘gay’ here is the first instance in which the screenplay addresses, mockingly, the ‘criminal act’ of which Wilde has been convicted.

The second 1960 production, *The Man with the Green Carnation*, has been favourably compared to *Oscar Wilde* in terms of its better casting and more appealing Technicolor look. Lord Arthur Douglas is played by a younger, more believable actor, while Peter Finch’s performance as Wilde was lauded for its intensity and won him a Bafta award. In terms of genre, the film constructs its protagonists and their conflicted relationships using the conventions of romantic melodrama, with the Marquess of Queensberry cast as the abusive villain towards his son and promiscuous husband to a long-suffering wife. Contrasted with the heterosexual villain, the homosexual characters’ gentle affections stand out, for the film carefully downplays the homoerotic component and consistently focuses on the platonic side of their friendship. By using the reassuringly familiar conventions of melodrama, this biopic avoids defamiliarising the narrative in order to induce the audience to associate the homosexual romance plot with the heterosexual romance plots and family melodramas popular at the time,<sup>4</sup> and thus engage their sympathy for the victimised protagonists, be they wives and sons ill-treated by cruel husbands or, as *The Man with the Green Carnation*’s political agenda implies, writers victimised by a villainous legal system.

Similarly to *Oscar Wilde*, this biopic also strives to include as many of the trial’s original dialogues as possible. It too gives its protagonist the famed soliloquy about the

---

<sup>3</sup> The association of the word ‘gay’ with sexual promiscuity can be traced back to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in the 15th century. According to Chambers Etymological Dictionary, the first appearance of the word to mean ‘homosexual’ is in 1951.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Sirk’s emotional melodramas were all produced in the 1950s and became commercially successful, among them *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1958), and *Imitation of Life* (1959).

“love that dare not speak its name”, this time delivered in a less theatrical manner, though not less affectingly. The reception for *The Man with the Green Carnation* was overwhelmingly positive, although one contemporary reviewer voiced his suspicion of the manipulatory tactics of the film’s affective representation:

These, then, are the people pitted in this film to make for a quite sympathetic presentation of the trials of Mr. Wilde. [...] The only thing is you wonder if this is a fairly true account, if Mr. Wilde was as noble and heroic as he is made to appear. And if he was, what was he doing with those cheap and shady young men? It looks to us as if they are trying to whitewash a most unpleasant case, which is one of the more notorious and less ennobling in literary history (Crowther Bosley).

What is interesting about the history of these two productions is also that, in the race to be first to reach the screen, Warwick Films, the production company behind *The Man with the Green Carnation*, began legal proceedings against its competitor on the basis that Warwick Films owned the copyright to the ‘verbatim accounts’ of Wilde’s trials, collected in a series of publications from 1912 and 1948. These records, which have been touted as supposed ‘truthful’, factual transcripts of the proceedings, have actually been proven to be “based on press reports and personal reminscences” (Moran 237). Instead of truth, the records turned out to be “edited and composite fabrications of the proceedings informed by the imagination and produced through a creative process” (Moran 242). What is ironic, is that, in order to be covered by copyright claims, the ‘verbatim accounts’ had to be proven to be literary works, and as such, fictional. However, the idea that these transcripts contain the facts is useful for the truth and authenticity claims of subsequent cinematic adaptations of Wilde’s story, where the trial scenes continue to provide the dramatic heart of the narrative.

Based on Richard Elmann’s biography and Wilde’s literary work, the beginning of the 1997 biopic *Wilde*, directed by Brian Gilbert, plays with the idea of filmic genre by setting the narrative in motion in the manner of an American western. The initial credits, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley’s black and white drawings, are humorously superimposed

over the rough landscape imagery of the American West – the decadent art of the old continent meets the young vibrant new world, full of possibilities and half-naked silver miners. Wilde (Stephen Fry) is eagerly awaited to deliver a lecture on Benvenuto Cellini to a group of Colorado miners. The recourse to Cellini is relevant insofar as the Florentine artist became famous for his reputation as a ‘sodomite’, trouble-maker and creator of “homoerotically appealing work” (Davis 130). Like Wilde, he was also accused and insulted publically for his unsanctioned sexual activities<sup>5</sup>. Portrayed as a celebrity orator whose appeal crosses national and class lines, Wilde rides into frame accompanied by loud cheers and celebratory gunshots. However, the next scene is constructed as a counterpoint to the humorously jovial initial scenes, and provides yet another sombre presage of future disgrace. As Wilde is lowered into the mine shaft, the music becomes more ominous and the camera follows his descent into darkness, framed by rattling chains. His flirtatiously witty remark, “I thought I was descending into hell, but with these angel faces to greet me, it must be paradise”, functions as a reminder to audiences that the reason for his coming ordeal is his sexuality. Hence the film’s focus, from the beginning, is on Oscar as a gay martyr, whose suffering at the hands of a repressed Victorian society and unjust legal system offers a poignant critique of still-existing discrimination based on sexual orientation – the film thus refashions the past to make a point about present injustice. As the film’s director states, “It is a story, on a simple level, of appalling injustice. It’s a kind of injustice we’ve perhaps been much more aware of in the last thirty years with the rise of gay rights, but it has always been there for people of conscience”.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the press notes for the film expressed this avowed purpose: “At last, at the end of the twentieth century, it is possible for a film to present a rounded picture of the Irish-born writer, of his hubris and of the consuming passion which brought him down. No

---

<sup>5</sup> One of Cellini’s contemporary fellow artists responded to Cellini’s criticism of his work with “vulgar terms of insult” – “*Oh sta cheto, sodomitaccio*” (Davis 131; italics in the original)

<sup>6</sup> Commentary in the Special Features of the DVD *Wilde*.

longer is there any need to falsify or ignore the sexual elements which are important parts of the story” (qtd. in Rains 187). Casting the celebrated comedian and gay political activist Stephen Fry as Wilde, who looks like Wilde and whose recognised erudition and wit match Wilde’s, is a testament to the filmmakers’ sensitive approach to the subject and contributes to the compelling point about ethics and justice being made. As film reviewers observed, “Stephen Fry brings depth and gentleness to a role that says what can be said about Oscar Wilde: that he was a funny and gifted idealist in a society that valued hypocrisy above honesty” (Ebert). As is common in other biopic posters, the poster for Wilde emphasises his flamboyant, aesthetic uniqueness as well as the rebel aspect of his story (fig. 2 left). We see Stephen Fry as Oscar Wilde dressed in a bright pink suit facing us while in the background a group of faceless judge figures in black gowns and white wigs are made to signify punitive conservatism and conformity.

On the other hand, other reviews compare *Wilde* to other, more experimental, self-aware films about gay love by Rainer Maria Fassbinder and Gus van Sant, and find it sorely wanting in terms of subversive, avant-garde cinematic value, calling it a “‘heritage’ soap opera with a muck-raking spin. This approach, like the visual style, is impossibly dated” (Rains 187). And yet, while the biopic does indulge in the visual pleasures of the heritage style of filmmaking, its mainstream appeal – and the reason for the reviewer’s condescending dismissal – is built around the relationship dynamics of the characters and the affecting depiction of a gentle giant’s fall from grace. Having constructed an image of Wilde as a brilliant conversationalist and author, gentle husband and devoted father, the effect of the fall is rendered even more painful. As Stephen Fry observes, with a touch of Wildean storytelling flair and a dash of concern for the non-academic viewer:

perhaps when you have an unconventional story to tell, a good rule of thumb is to tell it in a conventional way. When you have a conventional story to tell, perhaps then you can play around with the form.

There's so much to tell about Wilde's life that people don't know. Take a number of cabbies in London who said, 'You're doing that film about Oscar Wilde, who else is in it?' I'd say that Vanessa Redgrave is playing my mother and Jennifer Ehle plays my wife. Then I'd hear, 'Get out of it...He had a wife? He was 'ginger beer' – rhyming slang for queer – "wasn't he?" I'd reply, "Yes, but it wasn't quite that simple. He didn't know that when he got married, and of course, he had two children." And they'd say, "He had two children, bloody hell." You realize that it's extremely patronizing to assume that everybody knows all about Oscar's friends and everything about Robbie Ross and all of the biographies (qtd. in Porton 9).

However, in spite of Tom Rains's view of the film as conventionally dull, the narrative does have a degree of self-awareness, a campy theatricality which calls forth an interpretation that is melodramatically inflected. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Brooks proposes in that "melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized: they are assigned to, they inhabit persons who [...] are strongly characterized" (16). In Wilde, the 'good' represented by Oscar is victimised by the 'evil' represented by the Marquess of Queensberry, Alfred Douglas's father – and, by extension, by a Victorian society that does not recognise Wilde's moral innocence. Brooks contends that "evil is villainy; it is a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice [...] the ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 17). The self-aware theatricality in *Wilde* is made obvious, for example, in the scene where the Marquess, dressed in a long black cape, bursts into Wilde's house to insult and threaten him. Wilde, courageously, resists his attacks, describing him as "the most infamous brute and the least tender father in London", a description which starkly contrasts with Wilde's portrayal as gentle and doting. According to Gledhill, "melodrama's protagonists embody and enact – rather than represent – socioethical values" ("Prologue" xxi). The scene clearly marks the two antagonists as polar opposites on the moral spectrum, where personal ethics becomes connected to virtue and truth, and normative social morality is cast as its foil. A menacing, homophobic Victorian patriarchy becomes villainy embodied in the Marquess, dark cloaked and brutish. It acts

out its coercive, repressive social powers from the past onto the body of Wilde, who, in his turn, embodies innocent idealism and a modern, gentle fatherhood. The theatricality of the antagonism is supported by the placing the scenes of the villain menacing Wilde next to those in which the playwright basks in public adoration, at the theatre, after the performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This placement further marks the central conflict between the forces of evil and the forces of good as an essentially melodramatic one, a spectacle of villainy and virtue meant to elicit the audience's affective response. However, the villainy of the Marquess is also subtly and comically subverted by his 'unmanly' poetic leanings, as when he tells Wilde that he has written a poem called "When I Am Dead, Cremate Me" – the film's melodramatic strategies and its comical undercurrents playing off each other. The scene is meant to make viewers read this aggression towards Wilde also as a self-destructive impulse, a self-hatred that is redirected towards those he perceives as enemies. The recognition, on a human level, of a common interest in expressing oneself through art displaces the 'villainy' onto the body social. The fragments from Wilde's stories, plays and poems spoken in voiceover by the actor Stephen Fry provide the filmic narrative with an auditory punctuation that marks the different sides of Wilde read through his artistic production – "The Happy Prince" (1888) signifies his gentle fatherhood, "Salomé" (1891) represents carnal desire and destruction, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) reflects his despondency in prison.

The first trial scene provides the spectacle of innocence under siege, built upon what Williams calls the "dialectic of pathos and action" ("Melodrama Revised" 42). This attack on innocence embodied extends beyond Wilde himself onto his literary work, expanding the mantle of guilt and innocence beyond the man onto the whole of literature and art. Judging Wilde for 'indecent acts' becomes an 'obscenity' trial that judges works of art for daring to disturb the social order. Indeed, *Wilde* opens the trial section of the film

with the writer's declaration on aesthetics that "in writing a book or a play, I am concerned entirely with literature, with art, I do not aim at doing good or evil, but at making a thing that will have some quality of beauty". Moreover, the disturbance of the social order is also represented in terms of Wilde's disregard for class hierarchies and proper boundaries, as the film portrays him as a thoroughly modern man who mingles freely with gentlemen's valets and lowly grooms, to the horror of the diegetic audience: "I recognise no social distinctions at all, of any kind".

Naturally, like the earlier productions from the 1960s, in order to mobilise the audience's sympathy, *Wilde* includes the speech on 'love that dare not speak its name' as a potent indictment of ignorance and hatred. Stephen Fry delivers the speech with a slow, heartfelt cadence, as the camera cranes downwards from a position above the stand and zooms in closer on the face of the actor, the top of whose head is softly lit by an overhead source of light, halo-like. As he delivers his speech, the camera shows the faces of the attentive audience members, clearly stirred by his words:

'The love that dare not speak its name', in this century, is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan. Such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you may find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is, in this century, misunderstood. So much misunderstood that it may be described as 'the love that dare not speak its name', and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful. It is fine. It is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual. And it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man when the elder has intellect and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

At the end, a pregnant pause ensues, followed by applause and booing. As the young men applaud enthusiastically, an old bearded man is shown crossing his arms in defiance and disapproval. The juxtaposition signals, yet again, the patriarchal past as the agent of 'evil' in this scene of innocence persecuted. Brooks argues that melodrama "strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to 'prove' the existence of a moral universe which, though put



into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgement, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force” (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 20). Hence onscreen Wilde’s defence of love becomes this categorical force that indicates the underlying existence of a moral universe which requires the intensity of articulation and visual representation of pathos to be made fully present.

Adaptations of biographical figures to the screen are never short of critics lamenting, somewhat predictably, that the recreation does not do full justice to the real writer’s complex life – how could it? – or that it dumbs down their work: “Wilde’s rebirth on the cinematic screen has been a reincarnation (or ‘afterlife’) that tends to eviscerate Wilde’s status as author while reproducing him as spectacle for popular consumption” (Buckton 311). One wonders if the critic implies that Wilde’s status and literary persona can only be truly appreciated and preserved, in embalmed form, by respectful – and respectable – highbrow institutions.

In 2018, Rupert Everett brought to fruition a passion project he had struggled to bring to the screen for over twelve years, namely the release of the biopic *The Happy Prince*. Before writing, directing and starring in it, he played a series of characters in film adaptations of Wilde’s plays, including Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* (1999), and Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002), among others. On stage, Everett starred as Wilde in David Hare’s 2012 play *The Judas Kiss*. Moreover, on a personal level, Everett identifies with Wilde’s tragic plight due to his sexuality, as the actor has publicly stated that his coming out has negatively affected his Hollywood career:

The fact is that you could not be, and still cannot be, a 25-year-old homosexual trying to make it in the British film business or the American film business or even the Italian film business. [...] Because I've always tried to make it work and when it stops working somewhere, I try to make it work somewhere else. But the fact of the matter is, and I don't care who disagrees, it doesn't work if you're gay. (qtd. in Cadwalladr)

Given how strongly Wilde's life and work resonate with Everett, *The Happy Prince* becomes a vindication story – an emotionally intense yet self-aware, stylised approach to the writer's decline and death. As expected in a biopic, Wilde's writing is visually and aurally connected to the film narrative – his short story *The Happy Prince* is consistently woven into the film narrative, functioning as a framing device that connects the past with the present, Wilde's family with two orphaned prostitute boys he befriends, as well as his triumph with his death. Lines recited in voice-over from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" – "for each man kills the thing he loves" – become the soundtrack for his self-destructive relationship with Bosie, his inconstant lover.

Everett performs Wilde as alternately defiant and remorseful, extravagantly buoyant yet melancholy, a loving father to his children and a lover of "purple moments" (as he calls his sexual encounters) with street boys. Interestingly, in 2017 Nicholas Frankel's biography of the writer titled *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* challenged the image of Wilde as a tragic figure after his release from prison. In fact, as Frankel argues, Wilde was determined to live as he had before the trials: "unapologetic, unrepentant, and even defiant about the crimes that sent him to prison in the first place. England had already done its worst" (10). The beginning of the film sets up the trial narrative. It opens with a prologue informing us that "In 1895 Oscar Wilde was the most famous man in London. His lover was Bosie Douglas, son of the notorious Marquess of Queensberry. Enraged by their affair Queensberry left a card at Wilde's club addressed 'To Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite'. Urged on by Douglas, Wilde sued for libel – only to end up in the dock himself accused of gross indecency. He was imprisoned for two years with hard labour."

The opening titles thus bridge the gap between fact and fiction, and anchor the film's narrative in the written history of anti-gay discrimination. At the same time, by

using the word ‘notorious’ to describe Bosie’s father, the film posits him (like Gilbert’s *Wilde* in 1997) as the almost Gothic villain of the story, persecuting the innocent lovers who, thus engage the sympathies of audiences. The past itself, with its oppressive laws and social taboos that led to the imprisonment of such a gentle man as Wilde, becomes a ‘villain’ that must be vanquished. The first images, accompanied by Wilde’s voiceover whispering lines from *The Happy Prince*, are shot on a moving camera, gliding towards what seem like prison bars from the perspective of a prisoner. However, as the camera pulls back, the bars are shown to be from the window of a children’s bedroom, with Wilde sitting in an armchair and telling his sons the story of the prince and the swallow, implying that the short story is in fact autobiographical – the film’s Wilde is to be read as the carefree and bejewelled ‘Happy Prince’ who ends up with a broken heart, but is redeemed after death. Wilde’s physical imprisonment that the prologue has informed us about is thus visually connected to his imprisonment in heterosexual domesticity.



Fig. 37. Wilde’s accusatory gaze at the complacent present

The imagery in the opening scenes oscillates between past and present, fact and fiction, wealth and poverty. As the camera approaches a now broken Wilde sitting alone

dressed in black, already in exile in France, the character looks directly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall (fig. 37). Maintaining the direct gaze at the implied audience, he whispers “It’s a dream”, thus drawing attention to the fictionality of the cinematic narrative, as well as the dimension of the ‘real’ attached to the biographical subject. It is an interesting choice of a line also in terms of its intertextuality – Everett played Oberon in Michael Hoffman’s adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1999), a Shakespeare play that deals with dreams, sexuality and the blurring of various boundaries. The biopic has many such moments of self-awareness, in which characters address the audience ‘directly’, seemingly stepping out of the fictional realm into what Corrigan calls the “vague and indeterminant zone where a ‘real’ moves” (Corrigan “Biopics and the Trembling Ethics” 14) which is different from reality. These moments of implied ‘eye contact’ between character and viewer carry a multiplicity of potential strategic meanings. Since in biopics “the human subject typically anchors, discovers or acts as guide for the subjective terms of the real” (Corrigan “Biopics and the Trembling Ethics”15), the moments of direct address explicitly signal and invite human agency to produce a version of ‘the real’ imbued with particular social and ethical values. Indeed, throughout the film, the strategies of melodrama are mobilised to embody socioethical values and elicit sympathy. The seamless interweaving of different temporal layers accompanies the staging of Wilde’s melodramatic “struggle for public recognition of guilt and innocence” (Gledhill “Prologue” xxiv), while the *mise-en-scène* and camera work function as conduits of emotion.

In a scene that takes place in a seedy French tavern filled with prostitutes and their clients, Wilde is abused by the ‘villain’, embodied by a homophobic client, and is promptly defended by the outcasts of society amongst whose ranks, it is implied, he has always belonged. His innocence is then enacted in the performance of a music-hall song on top of a stable – a surrogate stage for the disgraced playwright – during which the use of

handheld camera underscores the dynamic spectacle of Wilde's hulking, decrepit body surrounded by smoke, lights and shadows, his increasingly distressed face prey to the remembered emotions of his celebrated past. Finally, he collapses on the ground, only to rise again – the narrative is propelled into the past through his body – from a deep bow on the glittering stage of a London theatre. However, in another dynamic temporal jump, the spectre of his subsequent trial and condemnation subsequently erases this version of a successful Wilde and chases him back into the humiliating past in which he is in the dock accused of unspeakable crimes. In a parallel shot to the direct gaze at the camera at the beginning of the film, we are shown the Marquess of Queensberry sneering coldly – breaking the fourth wall yet again. The 'villain' – the embodied force of discriminating tradition and oppressive power – gazes at us, asserting his triumph over the victim Wilde, as well as his agency over this part of the narrative. Wilde's suffering is thus once more detached from fictionality and attached to 'real' history, as adapted snippets from the judge's (real) sentencing statement are heard alongside a vaudeville song:

Oscar Wilde, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put a stern restraint upon one's self from describing those sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour. It is no use to address you. People who do these things must be dead to all sense of shame. I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. The sentence of the court is that you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years."

A further source of melodramatic tension resides in the bodily humiliations that Wilde must undergo before imprisonment. His head is brutally shaved, and his vulnerable naked body is submerged under water as if in a mock baptism. The affecting imagery of martyrdom amplifies the strong pathos of his circumstances, exposing the cruelty of the social and political order, and its deep injustice which the present must (retrospectively) condemn and eradicate. Throughout the film, Everett appropriates Christian imagery – baptism rituals, shots of statuary, a painting of gay icon Saint Sebastian – to paint a picture of gay martyrdom that oscillates between pleasure and pain and thus mimics religious

martyrdom. The secular martyrs of the historically oppressed gay community in the late Victorian period re-enact the sacrifice of the Christian martyrs who were persecuted and thrown to the lions by the powers that be.

Everett's biopic makes intertextual references to a variety of other films, one of them being the iconic beach scene in Luchino Visconti's ode to unrequited homosexual desire *Death in Venice* (1971). Interestingly, while Visconti's Gustav von Aschenbach is a composer, in Thomas Mann's novella he is actually a writer, like Wilde. As Neale points out, "melodramas tend to deal in terms of subject matter with desire and its vicissitudes, [...] its coming into existence, its realisation (brief or lasting) or its failure, and in particular the blockages to its fulfilment" ("Melodrama and Tears" 12). Wilde's desire turns to dread as the young Englishmen frolicking on the beach recognise and torment him through the streets of a picturesque European city. In the film, Europe – namely France and Italy – is depicted as a far more accepting place for men of alternative sexual appetites than buttoned-up, oppressive England. This is also apparent in the colour palette used – scenes taking place in Italy and France are shot in warm colours, in contrast with the cool, greyish colours used for the English sets. The film embodies the forces of hypocritical, suffocating propriety in a panoply of characters who display their contempt in several scenes throughout the film – young men turn to bullies, train passengers turn into spitting torturers. In these scenes, English history and society are put on trial by the filmmaker for their criminal cruelty, in front of an (imagined) empathising contemporary audience.

On the other hand, in contrast to the rejection of polite society, low-life characters are portrayed as appreciative of Wilde's talents. The film sets in opposition the cruel treatment he is subjected to by the members of the middle and upper classes, and the enthusiasm with which his singing and story-telling is received amongst the poor and the outcast. Towards the end of the film, Everett orchestrates a series of protracted 'death of

the author' scenes showing Wilde surrounded by solicitous friends and ex-lovers. Mirroring the scene at the beginning in which he tells the story of the happy prince to his children, on his deathbed, Wilde is kept company by two orphaned street boys eager to hear the end of the story. The film makes a point about solidarity and artistic interest among the outcast of society, contrasting their warmth with the brutishness of the rich and comfortable in a way that further appropriates Christian ideas of compassion, salvation and grace in its social critique. As Wilde receives the last rites from a hastily summoned Catholic priest, he is asked where he had lost sight of "our blessed Lord". Drawing his last breaths, Wilde replies "Clapham Junction" to the puzzled priest – the train station where the real Wilde had been submitted to the opprobrium of Victorian society. Indeed, the scene in which the priest administers the sacrament is intercut with images of crowds humiliating the vulnerable prisoner waiting on the platform, in convict dress, to be taken to Reading Gaol (fig. 38).<sup>7</sup> As the priest mentions Jesus Christ being nailed to the cross in Golgotha for our sins, the film shows Wilde being spat on by jeering crowds at the station – Wilde becomes thus a pathos-filled, Christ-like figure being judged and sacrificed to uphold repressive social convention.



Fig. 38. Wilde being subjected to public humiliation at Clapham Junction

---

<sup>7</sup> In June 2019 a Rainbow Plaque was unveiled at Clapham Junction commemorating the event. The plaque reads "Oscar Wilde 1854-1900 celebrated playwright and poet, was the victim of homophobic abuse at this station whilst being transferred from Wadsworth Prison to Reading Gaol. 2.00 to 2.30 pm 20 November 1895".

The epilogue informs viewers that “Along with 75000 other men convicted for homosexuality Oscar was pardoned in 2017”. It appears on the screen over applause and disembodied, clamouring voices uttering the word ‘author’ repeatedly, signalling thus that the present has finally vindicated the unjustly persecuted writer. The information provided in the epilogue is rendered even more poignant by the fact that the legal pardon was granted but one year before *The Happy Prince*’s release. Moreover, the closing moments underline Everett’s identification with Wilde even further, by having him sing once more a louche music-hall song Everett himself wrote for the biopic as the end credits roll. Even though Wilde the author is dead, this seems to imply, his irreverent spirit lives on in both Everett and his cinematic homage.

One might argue that one of the reasons biopics have been so resilient and successful in the history of cinema is the oscillation between adapting reality as a value-laden ‘real’ and the strategies of melodrama – the heightened emotional charge and embodied socioethical values vying for our sympathies and taking us into new affective and imaginary territories, functioning as potential instruments of social change. As such, the melodramatic mode is a form of expressiveness eminently suited for telling the stories of the historically persecuted.



### 3.2. “Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!”: the trial of *Howl* (2010)

Adapting the lives and works of the Beat Generation, as well as the spirit of beatnik culture to the screen has a fairly long history, including a sizeable number of feature films, TV productions and documentaries going as far back as the 1950s. This is unsurprising, since Beat literature explores and incorporates the manifold forms and effects of popular culture. The Beats expressed themselves mainly through writing, but they also became active in visual media: William S. Burroughs explored photography, calligraphy and assemblage art in addition to painting and film, Allen Ginsberg was interested in photography and Jack Kerouac was interested in visual art and film-making. As a consequence, the energetic and subversive aesthetic, the countercultural message and the rich mythology attached to the members of the movement – especially to Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac – has exerted a productive fascination across media since they emerged onto the cultural scene, but particularly within the last two decades: “growing recognition of the Beats’ productivity in areas beyond literature is part of the reason why Beat-related films have been visible in the theatrical and televisual marketplace more frequently in the twenty-first century than at any other time since the early 1960s” (Sterritt 277).

Among the more recent and better-known filmic engagements with the topic are, starting in the 1990s, David Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* (1991) based on William Burroughs’s novel and persona, and *Beat* (2000), based on Burroughs’s relationship with his wife. After a spate of indie films and documentaries in the 2000s, the second decade of the twenty-first century brought in rapid succession three productions starring young actors

of blockbuster fame: American actor James Franco<sup>1</sup> becomes Ginsberg in *Howl*, Sam Riley<sup>2</sup>, Garrett Hedlund<sup>3</sup> and Kristen Stewart<sup>4</sup> star in the adaptation *On the Road* (2012) and, in the biographical murder story *Kill Your Darlings* (2013) Daniel Radcliffe<sup>5</sup> plays Ginsberg as a young college student finding inspiration in the company of Rimbaud-loving troublemaker Lucien Carr, played by Dane DeHaan. Casting young up-and-coming actors with celebrity cachet and a history of blockbuster success in these three productions projected them beyond the ‘literate’ audience typical of literary adaptations into more mainstream territory – the Beat generation for a new generation.

Unlike in the case of many other biopics, where the estates of the authors in question either prevent the filmmakers from accessing the material for the film – *Sylvia* – or vehemently repudiate the end product – *Sylvia, End of the Tour* – scriptwriters and directors Bob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman were in fact approached by the Allen Ginsberg estate to develop a film for the fiftieth anniversary of the poem “Howl”. *Howl* is cinematically hybrid, as it is made up of several narrative and visual strands: the story of the 1957 obscenity trial against the City Lights publisher and bookstore, represented by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, for having disseminated obscenity when they published and sold the poem in the collection *Howl and Other Poems* (1956); the reconstruction of Ginsberg’s life as he is writing the poem and performing it at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on 7 October 1955; Ginsberg being interviewed about “Howl” by an unseen person; and animated sequences that illustrate and interpret the poem itself. This hybrid form harks back somewhat to the 1999 documentary *The Source: The Story of the Beats and the Beat*

---

<sup>1</sup> American actor James Franco had starred in the trilogy *Spiderman* between 2002 and 2007. Adding to the ‘young rebel’ image, in 2001 he had played James Dean in a TV production with the same name, winning the Golden Globe.

<sup>2</sup> British actor Sam Riley played Ian Curtis, lead Singer of the band Joy Division, in the award-winning biopic *Control* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Garrett Hedlund had starred in the blockbusters *Troy* (2004), *Eragon* (2006), and the SF movie *Tron: Legacy* (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Kristen Stewart had had the leading role in the *Twilight* saga between 2008 and 2012. In 2010 she had portrayed the rock star Joan Jett in the biopic *The Runaways*.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Radcliffe is best known for playing Harry Potter in the *Harry Potter* film series (2001-2011).

*Generation* where famous actors – e.g. Johnny Depp as Kerouac – deliver lines taken from Beat texts, a strategy mixing fact and fictional re-enactment which is not uncommon in the documentary genre.

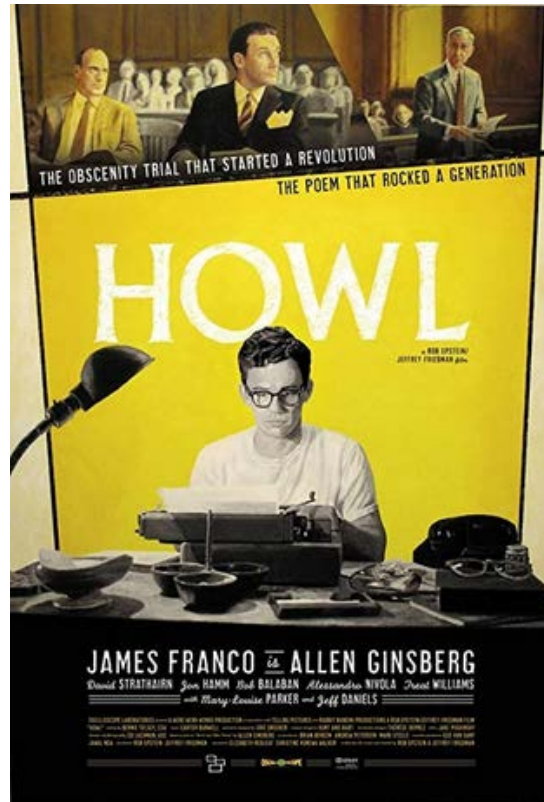


Fig. 39. *Howl*

The poster for *Howl* (fig. 39) made up of two images placed on top of each other, visually emphasises the hybridity of the narrative. The top part shows an image from the trial scenes, with the tagline “The obscenity trial that started a revolution”. Underneath, the bottom image emphasises the ‘authenticity’ aspect of Franco’s performance – the actor is shown in black and white against a yellow background, in front of a typewriter, with the tagline “The poem that rocked a generation”. The billing block section of the poster reads “James Franco is Allen Ginsberg” in large font, conveying thus the idea that the actor’s

performance is immersive to such a degree that he has ‘become’ ‘Ginsberg’ the author.<sup>6</sup> The selling points of the biopic are thus centred on the exciting story of powerful art vanquishing stale censorship, and the embodied impersonation of the rebellious originator of said art.

The significance of Franco’s performance is evident from the opening credits which blend images of the actor Franco and the real Ginsberg, together with animated pictures illustrating the spirit of the poem– reality and fictionality thus being placed on the same level of relevance. The first shots of the film further this fusion by having a title card informing us that “In 1955, an unpublished 29-year-old poet presented his vision of the world as a poem in four parts. He called it HOWL. His name was Allen Ginsberg.” As the last sentence appears on the screen, we see Franco, who has been shown walking towards the camera, breaking the fourth wall by looking up directly at the camera/audience in an acknowledgement of the artifice of the narrative about to unfold. The film thus posits itself as an alternative to conventional narrative filmmaking through its resistance to cinematic illusion, but it also highlights the illusion-generating identification between the real Ginsberg and the film’s fictional Ginsberg: “direct address seems to promise more vividly (or, alternatively, reflect ironically upon) the possibility of unmasking the ‘inner essence’ of character” (Brown *Breaking the Fourth Wall* 167).

The film insists upon the intimate connection between the verbal, the visual and the oral in its intertwining of different modes and techniques like documentary, animation, archival photograph, reconstruction and embodiment to depict the process of creation (and reception) across media. The prototypical image of the writer typing away is connected to the ‘moving’ elements of cinema, as the words that emerge on the page turn into musical notes and then animated characters and scenes, transitioning seamlessly and organically

---

<sup>6</sup> James Franco went on to write, produce and star in another biopic, *The Broken Tower* (2011) for his Master’s thesis in filmmaking at New York University. The film is based on the figure of the American poet Hart Crane, and uses several of the poster elements, cinematic and narrative techniques from *Howl*.

one into the other. The film then “dares to intrude on, participate in, and collaborate with the poetic operations of the poem ‘Howl’ and with its subsequently commissioned illustrations” (Buchanan “Introduction” 12). The film attempts to capture and illustrate all of these multitudes, striving for the completeness of vision hinted at in the poem itself: it shows the typewriter as “the mediator between the writing and film” (Marcus “The writer in film” 45) and brings the poem to life in a variety of ways – as written sign, as music, as ‘prophetic’ performance in front of an audience, as animated imagery that involves the faculty of sight as well as hearing.

*Howl* is highly dialogic, drawing in a variety of references, both literary and cinematic. The centrality of the typewriter, like that of the quill, or pen, is a common signifier in literary biopics. On the other hand, the uses made of this device can go from the reverential, such as in the TV biopic *Enid* (2009), or in *Howl* itself – where the camera lingers in affectionate close-up on the body of the machine – to the disturbingly experimental, as in Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch*, where the mutating typewriter becomes an instrument of mind control and connector with his repressed sexual desires.

*Howl* acknowledges and incorporates narratively the presence and potential emotional responses of a variety of audiences – Franco as Ginsberg breaking the fourth wall at the beginning of the film, a nod to viewers across time; the performance of the poem in front of an audience at the gallery in 1955 San Francisco; Ginsberg being interviewed by a barely seen figure; the trial being conducted in front of an audience. If *Wilde* asks the diegetic audience and, by extension, the film’s viewers to witness the staging of Wilde’s innocence and connect empathetically with the unjustly-accused author during the trial scenes, *Howl* stages the literary greatness of the poem before an appreciative diegetic audience, ultimately asking us, the film’s viewers to recognise the legitimacy of the verdict in the obscenity trial. According to the filmmakers, the trial

scenes were composed from court records. The insistence on historical authenticity is underscored by the inclusion of shots with newspaper headlines – “Battle of the Books is On”, “‘Howl’ Trial Starts – A Sellout Crowd”, “Critics Say ‘Howl’ is Art as Prosecutors Seek Dirt”, as well as of the legal definition of obscenity by the US Supreme Court, writ large in white on the black screen – “Material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest, utterly without redeeming social importance”. These sequences, accompanied by lively, upbeat jazz music, convey a sense of excitement connected to this watershed moment in cultural history, but they also highlight a sense of pastness through the use of black and white cinematography. Although present-day audiences are encouraged to ‘judge’ the merit of “Howl” as they witness the prosecutor and defence lawyer’s arguments, there is no doubt whatsoever that what is being put under unjust scrutiny is a masterpiece.

Although Ginsberg is not present in the courtroom, the film extends the critical assessment to the poet as well, by having him declare during the interview that one must “write the same way you are” – “Howl”, then, is Ginsberg. Consequently, the court hearing is not only about the literary merit of the poem, but also, by extension, about the writer’s sexual morality which the prosecutors deem to constitute a threat to the social order. This association is made explicit when Ginsberg tells the invisible interviewer that “the poetry generally is a rhythmic articulation of feeling. And the feeling is an impulse that begins inside, like a sexual impulse”. The film includes a variety of witnesses who testify against and in favour of the literary merits of the poem. In the case of *Wilde*, in spite of the mildly witty lines uttered by Oscar Wilde during the trial, the film essentially projects its late-Victorian protagonist as a victim of social intolerance. On the other hand, *Howl* constructs the trial scenes as comedic, with prim-looking English school instructors and pompous English professors declaring the poem to have no merit on the grounds of its deficient

style, unpalatable vocabulary, and lack of ‘moral greatness’. The judge’s verdict scene, however, treads familiar melodramatic territory. Supported by barely audible softly-playing piano music, the judge delivers a speech about poetic language – “an author should be real in treating his subject” – and the need to protect diversity of artistic expression:

the freedoms of speech and press are inherent in a nation of free people, these freedoms must be protected if we are to remain free, both individually and as a nation. Therefore, I conclude that the book *Howl and Other Poems* does have some redeeming social importance and I find the book is not obscene. The defendant is found not guilty.

Throughout the speech scene, the filmmakers intersperse shots of Franco as Ginsberg gazing out the window, as if in expectation, suggesting thus that the historical verdict applies not only to the poem but to the man as well. After the judge brings down the gavel to mark his final ruling, the music soars and we hear howls, celebrating the aesthetic justice of the decision and the liberating re-assertion of the above-mentioned freedoms.

Both *Wilde* and *Howl*, then, place their emotional climaxes during a trial scene that contains emotionally-charged speeches that are used as instruments of resistance against authoritarian morality and are meant to generate empathetic reactions from both diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences. Empathy thus becomes a site of social cohesion across time – the individual protagonists under scrutiny embody social forces that drive progress, operating on the stage of (cinematic) history.

#### 4. Vicious circles

Chapter 4 examines a series of literary biopics where the central themes revolve around suffering, excess and death. By far, such a category contains the largest number of biopics, as the image of the artist in pain, whether caused by writer's block or romantic trials and tribulations is a culturally persistent one. Alongside the examples that I am going to analyse, one might add *Prick Up Your Ears* (1997), a take on the life and death of irreverent British playwright Joe Orton, *Barfly* (1987), a tragicomedy soaked in alcohol based on the figure of Charles Bukowski, or *The Libertine* (2004), on the political troubles and demise of the Earl of Rochester, among countless others. Subchapter 4.1 looks at the 1994 adaptation of Dorothy Parker's relationship with the Algonquin Round Table, while subchapter 4.2 explores the scene of the 'death of the author' in the melodrama *The Hours* (2002) and three other biopics.

##### 4.1. "What fresh hell is this": *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994)

Dorothy Parker's contemporaries, her biographers and critics have all mentioned personal unknowability as one of her cardinal features: "If you didn't know Dorothy Parker, whatever you think she was like, she wasn't. Even if you did know her, whatever you thought she was like, she probably wasn't", wrote Wyatt Cooper in his *Esquire* profile of the by-then deceased writer, amusingly entitled "Whatever You Think Dorothy Parker Was Like, She Wasn't" (57). A central figure of the now quasi-mythical Algonquin Hotel Round Table, Parker's biographical legend, based on her biting wit, her most prominent intellectual characteristic, was forged in numerous magazine columns, articles, writer's memoirs, interviews and literary texts. She even became a character in three plays, which indicates the extent of her influence on the



cultural life of the 1920s and 1930s; indeed, as one of her biographers points out “she was the most talked-about woman of her time” (Keats 9). Her literary output was rather small but whatever she published became a bestseller. She wrote for a number of important magazines of her day, such as *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker* or *Esquire*. Her often barbed reviews of plays and books helped create a national critical style and humour laced with wry disdain for mediocrity and intellectual posturing.

Throughout her life, Parker underestimated her own literary talents and resented her reputation as a wit: “My verses are no damn good. Let’s face it, honey, my verse is terribly dated – as anything once fashionable is dreadful now”, she confesses in a *The Paris Review* interview (Capron 1956). The only piece of writing she declared herself to be happy with was *The Ladies of The Corridor*, an unsuccessful play she wrote in collaboration with playwright and Hollywood screenwriter Arnaud d’Usseau in 1953.<sup>1</sup> In 1934 she had moved to Hollywood to write screenplays, where she received an Oscar nomination for her collaborative work on *A Star is Born* (1937). Even though Hollywood made her and her then husband Alan Campbell fairly rich, she disliked the industry’s philistinism and mistreatment of talented writers like Scott Fitzgerald. It was also in the 1930s when she becomes fully involved in political activism. She had been arrested in 1927 for protesting against a mistreatment of justice, and spoken of the women’s right to vote (albeit without bothering to cast a ballot herself once she had that right), but it was in Hollywood where she demonstrated an acute political awareness, declaring herself to be a socialist, helping found the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, going to Spain during the Civil War to campaign against the Fascists and contributing to numerous political leftist organizations for which she was blacklisted in the anti-communist purge of the 1940s. Her time in Hollywood opened her eyes to the

---

<sup>1</sup> She told Marion Capron in the 1956 interview: “that play was the only thing I have ever done in which I had great pride.”

exploitation of film writers by the studios: “I saw some of the stinkingest [sic] practices you’d ever want to see. People – honest, hard workers were thrown out of their jobs, without warning, without justice” (qtd. in Meade 257).

Whilst her reputation as one of the funniest people of her age helped her enjoy the material rewards of the company of the rich (whom she despised for their ignorance) and secure work for magazines, the bulk of her published short fiction and poetry collections, whose titles speak of death, such as *Enough Rope* (1926), *Death and Taxes* (1931) or *Here Lies* (1939), bears testimony to her profound despair and sadness which she constantly fought off with irony like in her poem “Coda”:

There’s little in taking or giving,  
There’s little in water or wine;  
This living, this living, this living  
Was never a project of mine.  
Oh, hard is the struggle, and sparse is  
The gain of the one at the top,  
For art is a form of catharsis,  
And love is a permanent flop,  
And work is the province of cattle,  
And rest’s for a clam in a shell,  
So I’m thinking of throwing the battle -  
Would you kindly direct me to hell?

(Parker 240)

Her inner life, whilst commonly seen as reflected in her work, remained a puzzle for most of her friends, many of whom had trouble associating her witty self-deprecating persona with any real pain, even after she had tried to commit suicide: “no one who could say the tough and funny things that she could say could be suffering all that much” (Keats 88). The persona Parker presented to the world was that of ‘Mrs Parker’, the world-weary, sophisticated wit whose elfin physical appearance paired with a “habit of blinking and fluttering her eyelids” hid “the quickest tongue imaginable” and “the keenest sense of mockery” as one of her employers and friends observed (Calhoun 4). One of the Algonquin group members, Aleck Woollcott, described her as a combination

of “Little Nell and Lady Macbeth” (Pettit 25). Her reputation had been growing before she joined the group. Their quips and conversation subjects were promptly taken up in the participants’ newspaper and magazine columns the next day. The group of regulars and occasional participants around the Algonquin Round Table comprised drama critics, press agents, editors, artists, writers, all of them competing for attention and appreciation by making the wittiest, most irreverent contributions to the conversation. To avoid accusations of mutual back scratching, they began to criticise each other’s work viciously, hence the name ‘the vicious circle’ they gave themselves. Except Parker, none of them had any particular claims to literary talent. The literary figures of the day such as Scott Fitzgerald or Ernest Hemingway never became part of the group. However, their collective projection of intellectual sophistication and carefree living against the background of the ‘Roaring Twenties’, a time of intense cultural dynamism and postwar recklessness, contributed to the construction of the Algonquin Round Table legend.

Director Alan Rudolph’s interest in the group began in his childhood. His father, also a film director, had worked with Robert Benchley, one of the regular Algonquinites whose books found their way into the Rudolph household. Following the convention of the obligatory romance plot in biopics, the screenplay for the literary biopic, written in collaboration with Randy Sue Coburn, bore the initial title of *Mrs. Parker and Mr. Benchley* before the writer’s name took centre stage in the final title. Interestingly, *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994) presents a series of elements from Rudolph’s earlier filmography. His 1991 mystery thriller *Mortal Thoughts* makes heavy use of flashbacks, a technique which subsequently became central to his portrayal of Dorothy Parker. Moreover, even though it was his first film to have a real life character as the protagonist, *The Moderns* (1988), an earlier film about an expatriate artist in the Paris of

the 1920s, features Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway as secondary characters. Commenting on the commonalities between *The Moderns* and *Mrs Parker and The Vicious Circle*, Rudolph admits his vision of the 1920s is devoid of the nostalgic stereotypes associated with the Jazz Age period: the romantic clichés, the flowing champagne and the dancing flappers. After all, the period did end with the devastating Great Depression.

Rudolph's film contains a complex narrative structure including a frame story in black and white, monologues that break the fourth wall and a central story crowded with an array of colourful characters. It is an irony-filled biopic with elements of melodrama whose plot focuses on the unfulfilled love story between Dorothy Parker (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Robert Benchley (Campbell Scott), her friend and Algonquin Table companion. The film opens with Parker's voice-over reciting her poem "Theory" about romantic pain – starting "Into love and out again" – published her second poetry collection in 1928.

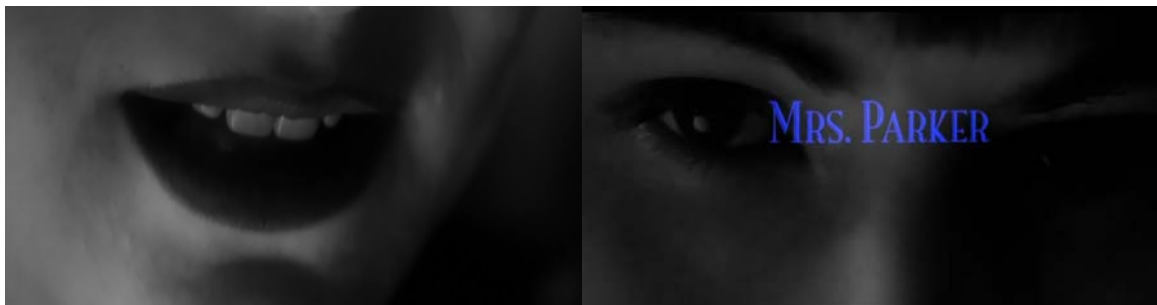


Fig. 40. Disembodying Mrs Parker

The black-and white opening shots dismember the body of the writer before the flow of the narrative re-embody her. We hear her voice first, against a melancholy jazz score, then we see a hand picking up a cigarette from a cigarette holder; next, we are shown Parker's lipsticked mouth reciting the words as she lights up a cigarette, and lastly, the

camera travels up her face in close-up to reveal dark eyes looking languidly at the audience as the art-deco blue title appears across her face.

Rudolph's decision to open with "love" might hint at the sentimentality of much of Parker's lyrical and fictional work. The sentimentality of the word is, however, ironically undermined by the phallic dimension of the cigarettes popping out of the holder precisely when the word is being pronounced by the disembodied voice, just like the sentimental side of Parker's texts is sharply undercut by her coldly perceptive observations about love and sex. The poem warns the wielder of the 'pen', and potential teller of Parker's story, that she is aware of the history associated with the word, and yet seems incapable of restraining herself, joking about her own masochism. Indeed, Dorothy Parker's childhood was marked by the death of her mother when she was five and her feeling of displacement and loneliness "in a household that held no love for her" (Keats 17).

Pointing at the emphasis the film places on Parker's platonic relationship with family man Robert Benchley, we next see Benchley in a documentary-style comedy scene on a film set in what the subtitles inform us is Hollywood 1937. In a self-reflexive reference to its own medium, the film opens with Parker's career as a screenwriter, a type of writing she despised in a place she hated. Accompanying her is her second husband Alan Campbell, although the scene makes it abundantly clear where her affections lie when they meet Benchley outside the studio. To reinforce the unconsummated-love aspect of the plot, when they part Benchley is shown looking back wistfully and twisting his wedding ring – a gesture of regret at having chosen marriage with a woman not his equal intellectually instead of Parker. The whole scene has an almost theatrical fluidity about it, with no obvious visual cuts, as the camera accompanies Benchley out of the studio into the light, stops for their reencounter, and

swoops back into the darkness of the studio with Parker who proceeds to sit down, throw barbed remarks and knit without paying much attention to the scene being filmed in front of her, presumably from the movie she co-wrote.

The beginning of the film shows a Parker dissociated from literature, as Rudolph's biopic introduces her through her Hollywood activities. The first diegetic reference to her as a literary figure comes from an admiring young film assistant who is made to ask her about life in the 1920s and the group she became associated with: "So many famous writers are from the Algonquin Round Table, Mrs. Parker!" To clarify this piece of literary information, Parker dutifully informs the audience about the established critical view on the Algonquinites' importance in the history of literature: "Ah, but no real giants, just a bunch of loud-mouths showing off, writing it up in their columns the next day". The film's neat formal geometries are evident in the shift from the monochrome frame story to the central story set in the 1920s. As Parker knits away reflecting on her past, the audience is offered a shot of the film set, further reinforcing the multiple metanarrative layers in the plot. The film-within-the-film technique casts the monochrome present as a dull 'reality' and, by contrast, Parker's 'colourful' past takes on an idealised, nostalgic hue enhanced by warm colours. The camera closes in on Parker's knitting hands, a visual pointer to the 'yarn' of her past life to follow, as the on-set director shouts the word "cut". At the same time, the action cuts to the 1920s, with the camera still on Parker's now coloured hands yielding a pair of scissors to 'cut' a piece of paper. The film thus establishes a skilful connection between the celluloid-based medium and the cellulose of Parker's paper, the medium through which she became iconic.

While the narrative line centres on the fictional unconsummated romance with Benchley, the screenplay is nonetheless replete with historical information from

Parker's life, as well as scenes inspired by her work. The first 1920s scene is set in the office of *Vanity Fair*, where she worked as a drama critic. It evokes in rich detail gleaned from material to be found in interviews, memoirs and biographies the playful atmosphere of the magazine and the cash-strapped yet seemingly carefree beginnings of Parker's writerly career. On the other hand, the immediately following scene in which her husband Edwin comes home from the war is directly inspired by one of her short stories, "The Lovely Leave" (published in 1943) in its tone of sadness and marital disconnect. But while the husband in the short story distances himself from the lonely wife because of the new and exciting male comradeship he has found in the military, Edwin Parker's estrangement in Rudolph's biopic is caused by addiction to morphine and alcohol.

As mentioned in previous chapters, biopics of writers rely heavily on shots featuring the writing process and the writer's tools. *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle* is no exception – Dorothy is shown scribbling away on a piece of paper while waiting for her husband. In a following shot, the camera focuses on her abandoned typewriter containing a sheet of paper with one sentence on it: "Please God, let me write like a man", something she may or may not have said. Parker's legend grew at the time of the *Algonquin Table* to such fabulous proportions, particularly through her wisecracks being quoted in the magazine columns of her friends, that if the author of a witticism were unknown, authorship would be unfailingly attributed to her. While in the scene with Edwin the typewriter is silent, she recovers her inspiration in the presence of Robert Benchley. After she is fired from *Vanity Fair* and he resigns in protest, they start off as freelance writers in a minuscule office in which they complete each other's sentences in blissful intellectual communion.

The film includes strategically placed black-and-white monologues in which a middle-aged Parker recites verses meant to reflect upon the events unfolding on screen. Rudolph's choice of voice-over supports the overall tendency of the film to tilt the narrative towards romance. In a scene with Benchley, as she types away at her typewriter across from him, we hear the lines from her poem "Day Dreams": "We'd build a little bungalow / If you and I were one / And carefully we'd plan it so / We'd get the morning sun". The scene at this point cuts to black-and-white footage of a tired-looking, older Parker who continues reciting the poem, detailing domestic scenes until the film returns to colour footage of Parker trailing after Edwin in a busy street to their new apartment. The montage thus combines her fantasies of a domestic life with Benchley with her disappointing marriage against the background of her future lonely life in a hotel room. Aided by Jennifer Leigh's reciting style, a mixture of slurred lines with a monotonous, sardonic edge, Rudolph reads Parker's poetry autobiographically, turning her poems into bitter retrospective commentaries on her past. Interestingly, the majority of the poems used in the film were written by Parker in the 1920s. Interspersing them throughout the narrative seems to give the story of her life a deterministic slant. The inexorable progression towards a (generally glorious) destiny is a rather conventional theme in biopics – here Parker's destiny seems to be to become a profoundly cynical commentator. One could argue that is what she was, in the light of her acerbic reviews; however, it is still slightly problematic that Leigh's somewhat forced mimicry of Parker's voice in the monologues and later scenes gives the impression that Parker was permanently submerged in an alcoholic haze: "biographical details such as Parker's bouts of depression and alcoholism and several failed suicide attempts continue to overshadow her literary work in the public imagination" (Weaver 30).



In interviews, Leigh explained that she had researched Parker's life scrupulously, reading her work and listening to recordings in an attempt to imitate her ragged voice. Her interpretation of the Parker persona becomes a "love-it-or-hate-it film performance" (Appelo 1994), out of which the writer emerges as "so ensnared in her own unhappiness that she seems to move like a woman aching from the heart outwards" (Francke 8). Only one poem, the morbidly funny "Résumé" that details the inconveniences of a variety of suicide methods before it concludes "You might as well live" (Parker 99), is diegetic – she recites it at a party where the rich host demands the guests be entertained with a "darling little" poem. The poem's shock value contrasts with the carefree atmosphere at the party and the warm colours of the cinematography, reflecting Rudolph's intention to subvert the stereotypical image of the 1920s. Unlike in the monochrome monologues where she looks directly at the camera, here Parker delivers for the audience at the party. The poem's title and subject matter reflect not only her fascination with death, but also the irony of being defined in a sensationalist manner by her suicide attempts which become her life's accomplishments.

Interspersed amongst Parker's unhappy musings on her life are scenes portraying the rambunctious Algonquinites and their mythical lunch conversations. Since the main activity around the table is talking, Rudolph imbues the scenes with dynamism by using the multiplicity of characters in his favour. In the first group scene, the characters arrive at the table one after the other, crowding the available space in a manner almost reminiscent of the overcrowded cabin scene in the Marx Brother's 1935 comedy *A Night at the Opera* – Harpo Marx was actually a member of the Round Table. In subsequent scenes the camera circles the table fluidly capturing the cheerful chaos and witty chatter of the circle in a skilful choreography of words, gestures and faces which constructs a dynamic, polyphonic history in the making. No one stands out in

these scenes – the words eventually become a blur, suggesting perhaps that their cultural importance lies not in the individual output but in the collective contribution (fig. 41). The characters become each other’s audience, reflecting the intellectual elitism of the group, while the film audience, unable to follow the quick repartees, beholds them as one. Although the Algonquinites found comfort in each other’s company and had a terrific time, they did refrain from discussing their more serious problems. Many of them were suffering from depression or were drug addicts and alcoholics. Dorothy Parker herself had a disastrous marriage, several disastrous liaisons, an abortion, and several attempts to take her own life. On the other hand, belonging to the group made it possible “for them as individuals to avoid loneliness and self-examination” (Meade 82).



Fig. 41. The Algonquin Round Table

According to Rudolph, the word that best defines Parker is “contradictions”, as there is “considerable discrepancy between her life and her work” (qtd. in Coursodon 54). The film conflates the writer and the work to construct a dramatically coherent reading of her person through her literary persona. What is, however, missing from the narrative is Parker’s intense political engagement which even led her to distance herself

from Benchley. As noted earlier, Parker got arrested in 1927 during a political demonstration, and her Hollywood years were filled with activism, for which she was blacklisted. In the film's final scenes we see an old, slightly inebriated Parker answering journalists' questions about her activities during the MacCarthy years and, over the closing credits, telling them the proudest thing she had ever done was get involved in the Spanish War. With her political consciousness and age came a reluctance to continue her performance of the amusing 'Mrs. Parker', complaining that "my work is dismissed, and on the strength of what seems to me a curious adjective – 'unpleasant'. The last editor [...] told me that if I changed my piece to make it in favour of Franco, he would publish it. 'God damn it', he said, 'why can't you be funny again?'" (qtd. in Calhoun 25). It is worth mentioning that even though the film includes over thirty characters associated with Parker, her friend Lillian Hellmanis, surprisingly, left out, possibly because they bonded over professional and political matters rather than the personal dramas which Rudolph's biopic seems to favour.<sup>2</sup>

In treating Parker's poems as autobiography, Rudolph follows the example of her biographers, who use substantial parts of her short stories to narrate portions of her life. The de-mythologizing process in Rudolph's biopic relies heavily on the marked contrast between the convivial atmosphere of the Round Table and Parker's loneliness, and further on, on her emotional dependence and lonely descent into alcoholism and bitterness. The film tends to overemphasise the sensationalist aspects of Parker's life at the expense of her many literary achievements, testifying to the "strength and longevity of Parker's negative reputation as a celebrity" (Weaver 30).

---

<sup>2</sup> Part III chapter 2.1 of this thesis analyses Fred Zinnemann's biopic *Julia* (1977), based on Lillian Hellman's political activities during the second world war.

#### 4.2. “Dying is an art”: *The Hours* (2002) and the death of the author

This chapter examines the figuration of the writer in the biopic/queer melodrama *The Hours* (2002), and connects it to other early twenty-first-century biopics with which it shares imagery and strategies, particularly *Iris* (2001) and *Sylvia* (2002). Indeed, apparently in agreement with Edgar Allan Poe’s famous statement from “The Philosophy of Composition” that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical thing in the world” (qtd. in Bronfen 59), both the Oscar-winning *The Hours* and *Sylvia* are based on the lives and works of women writers who committed suicide, and both make Barthes’s ‘death of the author’ literal on screen. Not only in these two aforementioned, but also in the earlier production *Iris* (2001), based on two memoirs by writer Iris Murdoch’s husband John Bayley, the figure of the writer is constructed around the tropes of struggle with trauma, self-destruction and the shackles of mental illness.

*The Hours* adapts both Michael Cunningham’s Pulitzer-Prize winning homonymous novel (1998) and Virginia Woolf’s modernist novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), alongside biographical material from Woolf’s life and letters. In fact *The Hours* was the working title for Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose opening passages deal with theme of time. Directed by queer British director Stephen Daldry, the film is constructed in a non-linear manner, weaving together narratively and visually three separate stories across one single day. The three lives bound together are Virginia Woolf’s (Nicole Kidman) as she tries to write the aforementioned novel in 1923; the fictional life of a housewife named Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), who is reading *Mrs Dalloway* in suburban America in 1951; and Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep) – the projected figure of Mrs Dalloway herself – as she is busy organising a party for her dying former lover and friend Richard, who is also an author. The film’s intertextual resonances are of such richness, it would be impossible to tackle them all. As

scriptwriter David Hare explains, referring to Cunningham's novel, "this was a book which did not belong in any obvious genre" (viii). Consequently, when offered to write the screenplay, he felt attracted by the idea of a film for which "quite simply, there was no model. It was certainly not a conventional women's picture [...] nor was it, in any sense, heritage cinema" (viii). Concerning the target audience of the production, Daldry feels directly addressed: "I find the stories speak directly to me. [...] The themes of entrapment, of accumulated grief and that real need at a certain point in your life to reinvent yourself seem to speak to a male audience as well as to a female one" (qtd. in Johnson "A Day" 27).

In its preoccupations with time, death, memory and the constraints of both heterosexual and homosexual marriage, this queer adaptation participates in both the biographical and melodramatic modes, using their expressive articulations to produce a meditation on literary and affective connections across time and space. The film seems to adapt not only the afore-mentioned material, but also literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism – the intertextuality of all literary texts, and chronotope – the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships. To mention but a few instances of this, via visual juxtaposition, Virginia Woolf writing *Mrs Dalloway*, as well as her suicidal tendencies, are connected across time and space to the fictional figure Laura Brown reading the now published classic modernist text while contemplating suicide in the stifling domestic environment of her post-war suburban hell. The water that engulfs Woolf is shown to metaphorically engulf Laura as well in an erasure of the boundaries between life and fiction. Another connective element worth mentioning is the theme of haunting memories. Clarissa in the film is haunted by the summer she spent with Richard in her youth, while in Woolf's novel, Clarissa Dalloway is haunted by the memory of Sally Seamore's kiss when she was

young, a fleeting moment of same-sex desire potentially pointing to Woolf's love affair with Vita Sackville-West.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Woolf's fear of the servants is connected to Laura's domestic failure to bake a cake for her loving husband's birthday which, in turn, mirrors the opulence and wastefulness of Clarissa's failed birthday party for Richard. Cooking as a gendered performance of love and family life is shown to fail repeatedly. Love, in the film *The Hours*, is not locatable within married life as lived experience, but is only possible through the medium of writing and literature, as an ideal, fictionalised concept. The film begins with Woolf's character scribbling down a last note to her husband Leonard about being unable to write due to her mental illness, and we hear her voice: "You have given me the greatest possible happiness [...] What I want to say is that I owe all the happiness of my life to you. [...] Everything is gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been. Virginia." During the time these lines are spoken, she is shown wading into the river towards her death. As she utters her name, her head goes under water in a visual performance of Barthes's authorial demise – the author's body as point of origin of writing must be destroyed in order to liberate the text. However, this sacrificial gesture is but an aspect of the collaborative dynamic between writer, reader and character the film hints at.

The film's symmetrical framing seems to support this reading, as the beginning and the ending are similarly constructed. As the main characters prepare to go to bed at the end of the day, Virginia's voice is heard once more addressing Leonard, and, by extension the film audience watching the film: "Dear Leonard. To look life in the face, always, to look life in the face, and to know it, for what it is. At last to know it, to love it for what it is, and then, to put it away. Leonard, always the years between us, always the years. Always, the love.

---

<sup>1</sup> Woolf and Sackville-West's relationship was brought to the screen in the 2018 biopic *Vita and Virginia*, directed by Chanya Button and starring Gemma Arterton as Vita and Elizabeth Debicki as Virginia. Due to time constraints, this film has not been included in this thesis.

Always, the hours.” As she speaks, the last scene shows Woolf wading into the river once more, but this time she does not go under, but turns slowly away from the viewers, standing against the current of the glimmering river and of time. Her gesture may be interpreted as a confirmation that, even though the body has ceased to exist, the life-text embodied in the film’s narrative and imagery, as well as the love that connects not only the characters, but also the filmmakers and audiences remains and resists the passing of “the years” and “the hours”. As Pidduck persuasively argues, “framed by Woolf’s suicide, *The Hours*’s dialogic assemblage of life and literature is indelibly marked by the writer’s voice, her singular preoccupations with death and suicide, and a saturated ontological experience of time as duration” (“The Times” 43).



Fig. 42. Death of the author in *The Hours*

Critics have noted the symbolism of water in the film, as a creative and destructive element, as well as the religious tone of the introductory and concluding scenes in which Woolf is connected to the idea of martyrdom, “linking it with a Christian symbolism of water as a baptismal ritual, bathed in the light of transcendence from death, resurrection from madness, holiness from sacrifice” (Shachar 115). Indeed, the religious undertones are hard to miss, especially if these two instances are viewed as pictorial, as narratively disconnected

from the body of the film. On the other hand, I would add that the sacrificial scene can also be connected with the aesthetic articulations of the melodramatic mode that pervades Daldry's adaptation. From this perspective, after having witnessed the unfolding of the characters' affecting experiences and emotionally-charged choices, the final scene can be located within the gestural repertoire of melodramatic performance. The suffering bodies in *The Hours* are 'melodramatic' bodies grounded in an aesthetic of emotion, situated within particular temporal and spatial narrative contexts, and subject to the social and cultural pressures represented in the film, eliciting thus the audience's emotional response. Moreover, as a filmic narrative built around emotion, empathy and connection, *The Hours* can also be said to participate in the discourses of the newly-coined metamodern sensibility that has emerged as a consequence of the ethical and cultural shortcomings of the dominant postmodernist paradigm.

*The Hours* has many elements in common with *Sylvia*, from the iconography of the woman writer as a suffering body to the emphasis on literary collaboration. If in Daldry's film this collaborative connection is between the characters, filmmakers and spectators, all bound together by the written and filmic texts, in *Sylvia* the collaboration is between poets as equals. *Sylvia*, directed by Christine Jeffs, stars Gwyneth Paltrow as the iconic American writer Sylvia Plath and focuses on the relationship of the poet with her husband and firebrand working-class Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig), from their meeting in 1956 to 1963, when Plath committed suicide. More than the biopic of a single artist, as the title would suggest, *Sylvia* is in fact the story of a woman poet finding her voice in collaboration with and in opposition to the male poet Hughes. According to scriptwriter John Brownlow, his brief from the producers of the film was to write a "romantic Hollywood drama about mental instability and one of the most controversial literary marriages ever" (Brownlow).



In a manner similar to *The Hours*, *Sylvia* opens with a scene of potential death and transcendence. The screen fills up with a close-up of the writer's face, eyes closed, as if either sleeping or dead and her voiceover utters an adapted version of a section from Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), her portrait of the artist as a young woman: "Sometimes I dream of a tree, and the tree is my life. One branch is the man I shall marry, and the leaves are my children. Another branch is my future as a writer and each leaf is a poem. [...] But as I sit there trying to choose, the leaves begin to turn brown and blow away until the tree is absolutely bare." As the voice stops, the image fades to black, followed by the static shot of an autumnal tree rustling in the wind. However, unlike *The Hours*, *Sylvia* is a relentlessly bleak film befitting Brownlow's aforementioned brief. On the one hand, Plath's suicide has sparked more controversy than Woolf's, not only because of the manner in which she died, but also because the feminist critical industry around Plath has demonised Hughes as the main cause of her plight and subsequent death. The fascination with her radical act of self-destruction is apparent in several of the written biographies based on her life. For example, Ronald Hayman's 1992 biographical study, tellingly titled *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, starts with the death of the writer. The foreword announces its purpose: "There can be no question of telling the whole truth about suicide" (xvii). The author goes on to persuade readers that it is "impossible to understand Sylvia Plath's life without understanding the long relationship with death which was eventually consummated in suicide" (xviii-xix). The book is a thanatological study of the writer's life through the lens of her work. Some of the assertions are rather disturbing, to say the least, based as they are on borderline libellous speculation: "In the last poem, 'Edge', as in 'Death and Co.', the implication is that she'd been intending to kill the children when she killed herself" (178). It is unsurprising that the literary executors of Plath's estate should have refused to give the filmmakers permission to use her poetry. To compensate for this and show their literary interests, the two characters are made to engage in

literary and erotic sparring using Shakespeare's or Chaucer's words. Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, makes reference to what she perceives to be the media's voyeuristic interest in her mother's death, and vilification of her father in a poem titled "My Mother": "They think I should give them my mother's words/ To fill the mouth of their monster / Their Sylvia Suicide Doll" (Hughes 13-14)

Possibly imitating the symmetrical structure of the *The Hours* (released a year earlier), *Sylvia*'s closing shot is of the tree we were shown at the beginning, losing leaves in the wind, a symbol of Plath's gloomy descent traced in the film. Ted Hughes's depiction in the film as a dominant Alpha male, irresistible to women, whose attitude to poetry is hyper-masculine and erotic, connects him "to the hyperbole of the Byronic legend" (Harris 69). Moreover, one of the final shots is a highly suggestive image of Ted Hughes, after her death, standing behind a barred window as a vision of guilt and punishment – the melodramatic villain entrapped by the consequences of his infidelities and Plath's radical gesture (fig.43). In real life, Hughes cuts a tragic figure in the light of his subsequent refusal to speak about his relationship with Plath for decades. The publication of his last collection of poetry *Birthday Letters* in 1998 ended his silence, as many of the poems are directly addressed to Plath.



Fig. 43. Hughes trapped by Sylvia's suicide



Fig. 44. Visualising psychological entrapment in *Tom and Viv*

Interestingly, a strikingly similar image of male entrapment (fig. 44) had been used in the Oscar-nominated biopic *Tom and Viv* (1994) based on the marital relationship and creative collaboration between T. S. Eliot (Willem Dafoe) and his first wife Vivienne Haigh-Wood (Miranda Richardson). Directed by Brian Gilbert, who went on to direct *Wilde* in 1997, the narrative focus is on the unhappy marriage destroyed by Viv's ill health, as well as her support of and contributions to Eliot's literary output: "Who gave you the title to *The Waste Land*? Me.", she declares possessively at one point. The film paints a dire picture of her inability to control her symptoms, as well as of Eliot's struggles with creative doubt and marital dysfunction. As her health degenerates and her behaviour becomes more erratic, her agency is obliterated by the perception of her as a chronically-ill woman: "it's her disorder who speaks, not Viv.", says one of her brothers. Eventually, she is consigned to a mental asylum where she dies eleven years later. In one of the final scenes of the film, after Eliot tells the character of Bertrand Russell "Don't think it doesn't hurt. She's with me all the time, every minute of the day" inside a lift, the camera tracks his descent at length, as if to suggest

a descent into Purgatory burdened by guilt. Not unexpectedly for a biopic based on a romantic relationship, the film's imagery suggests that Eliot's poetic work derives from his life experiences with his wife Viv.

Another biopic production that has a marriage at its centre is the award-winning BBC adaptation *Iris* (2001), based on the two memoirs by Iris Murdoch's husband John Bayley. *Iris* is structured around the contrast between the lively free-spirited Iris (Kate Winslet) at the beginning of their relationship and the old, fragile Iris (Judi Dench) whose intellectual and emotional capacity has been ravaged by Alzheimer's disease. As her formidable self is gradually eroded to a caricature, the biggest losses are shown to be her autonomy and her language. "I wrote", she seems to remember, as Bayley (Jim Broadbent) reads to her from *Pride and Prejudice*, thus signalling that Murdoch and Austen belong to the same category of the woman author and linking them through time via the act of reading the work of one to the other, as the privileged producers of words capable of touching others. The adaptation dwells painfully on the ravages of Alzheimer's – in spite of the title, it is not so much a film about the writer Iris Murdoch, as one about loss of self and the value of devoted domestic love. The passage from Austen's novel that Bayley chooses to read to her is the one where Darcy notices Elizabeth's charms, thus poignantly highlighting the character, past and present, of their own long-term relationship. As the film unfolds, the carefree young Iris is incrementally confined to a house full of clutter and a husband who is slightly unsettling in his obsession with possessing her entirely. Relying on allusions to the fleeting quality of words and the fragility of the mind, however, writer-director Richard Eyre reaches repeatedly for charged symbolism through which to narrate her decline. Scenes devoted to eloquent speeches on love and freedom contrast with the repetitive babbling pouring out of Iris's decaying mind; stones on the beach are placed on papers to signal her losing battle with the disease; glass panes distort the character's figure; and the songs of the Teletubbies replace the sparkling

conversation of her Oxonian friends. Remaining true to his own words in interview that “All drama is about extremes”, the director seems to dwell as obsessively as Iris’s husband on the humiliating aspects of a disease that displaces and, eventually, replaces the bright Iris almost entirely. Furthermore, the film is marketed with a specifically consciousness-raising and educational agenda: the DVD extras contain a message about Alzheimer’s with information and advice for viewers if affected. The vulnerability of the creative mind so painfully depicted on-screen is therefore explicitly invited to speak to comparable vulnerabilities off-screen.

These biopics illustrate the variety of possible approaches possible to the question of creative collaboration, contestation and oblivion. Constructed around the vulnerabilities of the figure of the writer, whether in marriage or mind, they oscillate between alternating humanising and mythologising impulses to deliver affecting melodramatic stories about suffering, connection and transcendence.

## 5. Decentring the author

Chapter 5 explores two biopics in which the figure of the author has been removed from the centre of the narrative to leave space for secondary figures that have been historically sidelined. Starting in the 1990s, numerous literary biopics have begun to tell the life stories of formerly voiceless figures, such as authors' partners or wives, editors, and so forth. Some recent examples that spring to mind are *Nora* (2000), on the romantic relationship between Nora Barnacle and James Joyce, *Bright Star* (2009), a Campion film which focuses on Fanny Brawne instead of John Keats, *The Invisible Woman* (2013), on the secret relationship between Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens, or *Genius* (2016), on the turbulent yet fruitful relationship between writer Thomas Wolfe and his editor Maxwell Perkins. Subchapter 5.1 looks at such a biopic, based on the relationship between Novalyne Price and pulp-fiction author Robert E. Howard. The final subchapter in this thesis is devoted to the biopic *The End of the Tour* (2015) – a fitting title – based on the encounter between David Foster Wallace and journalist David Lipsky.

### 5.1. Pulp fictions: *The Whole Wide World* (1996)

The biographical film *The Whole Wide World*, set in a small-town in Texas in the 1930s, narrates the romantic relationship between Novalyne Price (Reneé Zellweger), a young teacher and aspiring writer and pulp-fiction author Robert E. Howard (Vincent D'Onofrio), the creator of sword-and-sorcery characters such as Conan the Barbarian and Red Sonja.<sup>1</sup> The film is based on Price's memoirs, *One Who Walked Alone* (1986), published at the age of 76. Focusing on the two protagonists' turbulent romantic

---

<sup>1</sup> Two years earlier, D'Onofrio had acted in Tim Burton's comedy *Ed Wood* (1994), a biopic about the aspiring director Ed Wood, where he played the role of writer/director Orson Welles. In a comical scene, Welles delivers the lines "Visions are worth fighting for, why spend your life making someone else's dreams?" to the star-struck, despairing 'artist'.

relationship, it explores in a sensitive manner their artistic ambitions and diverging aspirations against the background of a conservative with limited tolerance for idiosyncratic behaviour and sexually-inappropriate fiction.

Robert comes across as an eccentric, intense writer, with a slightly unhealthy attachment to his sickly mother; however, as the story is told from Novalyne's point of view, Robert remains a somewhat mysterious character. The film's emotional impact is stronger precisely because of its refusal to represent visually the sources of his imagination. As a reviewer in *Variety* puts it "How a young man almost literally in the middle of nowhere came up with his fantastic characters and tales remains a mystery to the end" (McCarthy). The only representations of Robert's mental images are aural, as we hear non-diegetic sounds of clashing swords and women's cries superimposed over Robert's voice telling his imaginary stories. The pulp fiction world of Robert's imagination, peopled with wild men yielding axes, young women in distress and violent encounters, fits awkwardly in this taboo-laden environment, contributing to his isolation and mental distress. Although the film seems to pass no judgements regarding the literary qualities of Robert's fictional output, it does juxtapose his 'vigorous' macho fantasy with Novalyne's artistic inclinations which lean towards banal confessional stories, as yet unpublished, about small-town 'real people', illegitimate daughters and movie stardom. Stung by Robert's dismissive laughter at her writerly attempts, she challenges the inspirational sources of his fantastic stories: "Well I haven't seen any giant snakes or big-busted women frolicking through the West Texas hills lately", to which he retorts with a serious mien: "Oh, but I have. You look more closely next time". The point that the film seems to be making is not that fantasy is a higher form of literature than confessional stories – both are published in pulp popular magazines addressed to a less than discerning readership – but rather that what matters is the passion and dedication to one's art, and the courage to stay

true to one's artistic aspirations. The film visualises the creative process in a way that it not necessarily innovative – the first time we see Robert typing away it is through Novalyne's eyes when she comes to visit. Having heard a bellowing voice, she follows the noise and spies on him from the window as he performs the words he is typing vigorously. The scene manages to convey both his passion for words – a prototypical moment in literary biopics – and his neurotic attitude verging on mania.

Throughout the film, the two characters extend invitations to each other to explore their respective 'realities', the spaces that matter. Novalyne lures Robert out of his isolation and the clutches of his sorceress-mother into her family circle and community, with varying degrees of success, while Robert entices her with vividly-dramatised exotic stories. However, the narrative is imbued with a sense of repeated missed opportunities. When Robert dresses and behaves inappropriately in public, she lashes out: "I care what those people think!" The pressure she exerts on him to socialise takes a toll on his mind, prompting him to run out into a cornfield, sword in hand, hacking at the demons in his mind. When he breaks down, weeping, it is his mother who takes him into her arms, calming his demons, but tying him to her emotionally. On the other hand, having received a volume of illustrated erotic stories by a French author as a Christmas present, Novalyne throws it into the dark space under her house in a symbolic gesture of self-repression. The camera follows the flying book in slow motion, underscoring her refusal to follow Robert into the realm of his 'pagan' imagination. On a stylistic level, the stillness of the frames and the fades to black convey a sense of solidity, constructing a background against which the emotional tribulations of the characters become more sharply defined as they come together and drift apart unable to convert their connection and emotional commitment into domestic solidity.



At several points in the film, the narrative contrasts the quietness of the landscape and the sedated manners of its inhabitants with the violent turmoil of Howard's inner worlds. The oppressiveness of the environment is never made jarringly obvious, there is no external enemy to hamper the hero's progress except the guarded dismissiveness of the inhabitants, the mutually dependent relationship with his mother, and Novalyne's attempts to 'tame' his unruly, antisocial behaviour. She seems to function as a civilising force to his 'barbarian' energies. Moreover, a further contrast is constructed between Novalyne's supportive mother, who offers sound advice and emotional kindness, and Robert's family made up of an absent father and a possessive mother who stunts his growth into adulthood and keeps him tethered to her emotionally. Like one of his fantastic evil characters, her neediness consumes his energy and time until, faced with her inevitable death, he commits suicide.

D'Onofrio lends the character the physicality of an awkward boxer<sup>2</sup> gradually consumed by a violence that seems to lurk under the surface and erupts in sudden emotional outbursts. The choice of performer is interesting insofar as D'Onofrio had played the role of Private Pyle in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), a character whose brutal treatment at the hands of a drill instructor leads him to murder and subsequent suicide. The two characters share the same ungainly appearance and emotional fragility, with D'Onofrio's earlier role lending his performance as Robert a meaningful layer. If Kubrick's film is an impactful exploration of the violence that soldiers both suffer and inflict on each other during war time, *The Whole Wide World* is the slow-paced story of a man whose violent stories peopled with wild men and beasts seem to have emerged out of a troubled psyche unable to function normally in 'civilised' society. He himself described his projections: "I lived in the Southwest all my life, yet most of my dreams are

---

<sup>2</sup> The real Howard had trained as a boxer. He also wrote a series of boxing stories for popular magazines.

laid in cold, giant lands of icy wastes and gloomy skies [...] With the exception of one dream, I am never, in these dreams of ancient times, a civilized man. Always am I the barbarian [...] I always find myself instinctively arrayed on the side of the barbarian, against the powers of organized civilization” (qtd. in Horton 50). As is common in biopics, the film suggests that the type of character he constructs, “a morose, ungainly misfit among men”, as he describes the type, is a reflection of his own personality.

On the other hand, the film also points to meta-cinematic and intertextual connections with earlier cinema history, drawing attention to itself as mass-produced media, as well as to its categorisation as a film adaptation. Twice in the course of the narrative, the characters go to the movies, in the first instance together, and afterwards separately. The film they watch together is the classic screwball comedy *Twentieth Century* (1934) starring John Barrymore as a grandiloquent, overly possessive Broadway impresario who takes unknown ingénue Carole Lombard under his wing and turns her into a star – an amusing parallel with Robert and Novalyne’s disputatious relationship, and Robert’s blustering attitude regarding his status as “the greatest pulp writer in the whole wide world”, as he calls himself. The second film, which Novalyne watches with another man while Robert is shown seething a few rows behind them, is the swashbuckling pirate romp *Captain Blood* (1935) featuring a type of reckless adventurer and philanderer Robert dreams of becoming through his fiction. These films function as generic commentaries on the style and the characters inhabiting *The Whole Wide World*, oscillating between the representation of a biographical, non-cinematic ‘real’ and the performative nature of cinema.

Filled with both pathos and humour, the film consciously undermines what might be perceived as melodramatic clichés in the dialogue with visual and narrative counterpoints that highlight a melodramatic sensibility built around emotional

expressiveness. The form of courtship Robert is most comfortable with is driving the object of his affections around the countryside, talking. It is during one of these drives, after a picnic where they kiss for the first time that Novalyne enumerates the positive qualities she sees in him, and “places her hand affectionately, perhaps even a little proprietarily, on his” (Murphy 13). He immediately draws it back, declaring “I can’t be tied down. The road I walk, I walk alone.” However, his hurtful statement and macho attitude are at odds with the obvious fact that, at that moment, the road he is driving is in the company of Novalyne, and most of the affecting moments in the film are incorporated in these driving scenes, when he is not alone. The car is the safe, mediating space that allows him to undertake journeys out of his imagination and into the real world, yet, ultimately it will become the medium of his departure from the world when he commits suicide in it. The violence that permeates the fictional worlds of his imagination has spilled into the “real” world of the narrative, killing its author.

The film’s slow-moving pace and “lyrical realism” manage to convey “a sense of time and pace more realistically than most other American period films” (Horton 49), yet they also project a landscape of the past imbued with a sense of loss. The ending tries to offer consolation against this loss through the affecting mechanisms of melodrama. After Robert’s death, as Novalyne returns home on the bus grieving for her loss, she is comforted by one of the female passengers, a motherly figure, as well as the spectacle of the sun rising, a reminder of Robert’s repeated, amusingly grandiloquent claims during their drives that he has ordered beautiful sunsets just for her. Accompanied by soaring instrumental music, the woman’s question “Are you glad you had the chance to know him?” can be interpreted as addressed not only to Novalyne, who has lost a friend and someone she loved, but also the viewer who has had the chance to experience Robert as an embodied presence rather than a biographical name. The strong pathos of the scene, as

Novalyne smiles through her tears, connects the character's emotions with the viewer's, the performance with the lived experience, illustrating poignantly melodrama's "aesthetic of emotion" (Pribram 242).

The end credits inform the audience that Novalyne Price went on to become an inspirational teacher for thousands of students. After her retirement in her mid-70s, she wrote her first book on which the film is based, and dedicated it to Robert. The film, on the other hand, is dedicated to her, placing her choice of professional career as a teacher on the same level as Robert the writer's. It is implied that they both provide inspiration – one through instruction, the other thorough entertainment. This equivalence delivers a fitting comment on the implied purpose of the biographical film itself.

## 5.2. “Emptiness at the center”: *The End of the Tour* (2015)

*The End of the Tour* starring Jason Segel as the author David Foster Wallace and indie-film darling Jesse Eisenberg as *Rolling Stones* journalist and writer David Lipsky is a biographical film based on recorded conversations the two writers had during a road-trip over a period of five days, as Wallace was touring to promote his novel *Infinite Jest*. These conversations, initially meant for a feature article in the *Rolling Stones* that was eventually left unwritten, were eventually published in book form under the title *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* in 2010, after Wallace’s suicide two years prior. Given the relatively recent date of the author’s death, the release of the adaptation unleashed a flurry of reactions from both the legal custodians of his legacy – his literary estate – and self-appointed guardians of his memory, as well as praise from film critics.

As in the case of the Plath biopic, the family and the writer’s literary trust, whose consent had not been requested, were starkly opposed to this adaptation – but not to all adaptations, only those that, in their estimation, would ‘disrespect’ Wallace’s memory and legacy: “The David Foster Wallace Literary Trust and David’s family prefer that David be remembered for his extraordinary writing. The Trust remains open to working with a range of artists who are interested in respectful adaptations, and will vigilantly protect David’s literary and personal legacy” (Kellogg). In a *Guardian* article tellingly headlined “Why ‘The End of the Tour’ isn’t really about my friend David Foster Wallace”, American critic Glenn Kenny, who had maintained a friendly relationship with the author, laments that the film gets everything wrong, from the script to Segel’s performance:

Wallace the artist and Wallace the conversationalist take a distant back seat to Wallace the eventual suicide. Even when he’s cracking wise, there’s no light or lightness to the character. When uttering lines like “I’d rather be dead” or “I’m not so sure you want to be me”, Segel might as well be nudging the viewer in the ribs.

He, and the movie, insists that suicide loomed over everything Wallace did a full 12 years before the end. (Kenny)

The critic's vehement protestations are reminiscent of Frieda Plath's poem "My Mother" written in reaction to the release of the biopic *Sylvia*, which includes the lines "Their Sylvia Suicide Doll, / Who will walk and talk/ And die at will/ And die, and die/ And forever be dying." (Hughes 13-4). Film critic Matt Zoller Seitz assesses the story in terms of what it really is and is not: "one of cinema's finest explorations of an incredibly specific dynamic—that of the cultural giant and the reporter who fantasizes about one day being as great as his subject, and in the same field. What it definitely isn't is a biography of David Foster Wallace, much less a celebration of his work and worldview" (Seitz). On its part, *The New Yorker* applauded both Segel "for his portrayal of Wallace as a skeptical, ambitious, modest, hyper-self-conscious, depressive, and fundamentally generous figure of genius" and Eisenberg for his performance as David Lipski, "the Salieri role" to Segel's Mozart (Mead). The film is a slow-paced exploration of the fraught relationship and unstable intimacy that emerges between an interviewer with artistic ambitions of his own and the object of his desires: the urge to pin down the origins of the writer's talent, the envy and masochistic, competitive impulse to measure oneself against greatness, the morally dubious choices to rifle through the private life and dirty secrets of his subject.

Given that Wallace's fiction is associated with terms such as irony, authenticity, simulacra, and the new structure of feeling called 'new sincerity', it is telling that the film should start with a 'death of the author' scene. Before the first images appear on the screen we hear the clickety-clack of the keyboard announcing the presence of 'writing'. Subsequently, we see the writer in mid distance framed by the door, typing away. The identity of the character is uncertain until a telephone caller announces that, according to an unconfirmed report, Wallace is dead. The following shot shows Lipsky looking at a

bookshop window with a stack of Foster Wallace books and a note with the dates of his birth and death, confirming his demise while at the same time enshrining the dead author in the pantheon of literary fame. The title of the biopic itself, *The End of the Tour*, implies a parallel between life and 'tour', collapsing the separating lines between the writer's life and his fiction. It is debatable whether approaching Wallace through the lens of his death is to sensationalise the writer figure or it is simply to construct a visual narrative that foregrounds its own attempts at 'authenticity' and 'sincerity', for what is more sincere (in its original Latin meaning of 'clean', 'pure' and 'whole') than death, in a late capitalist, corporate American society bent on obscuring the unpleasant parts of the human condition like loneliness, alienation and fractured community through consumerism, medication, and manufactured happiness – issues that are central to Wallace's critique of US culture. Indeed, according to Wallace, sincerity and the rejection of what he saw as the problematic, essentially ironic, attitude to life of his times are necessary to counteract the ills that were consuming his generation: "today's sub-40s have different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without once having loved something more than yourself" (Wallace qtd. in Thompson 2). The engagement with these problems, then, is an integral part of real art: "I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny" (Wallace qtd. in Jenner 106). By framing the narrative in terms of the writer's death, the film does not necessarily fetishise or reduce Wallace's figure to a "Suicide Doll", in Fried Plath's words, but may seek to echo the historical Wallace's interest in 'sincerity'. It is also worth bearing in mind that the film is not the only medium to start with Wallace's death. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, the first published

biography of Foster Wallace by New Yorker journalist D. T. Max, also opens with “At the time of his tragic death in September 2008, David Foster Wallace was the foremost writer of his literary generation...”, going on to mention his depression and drug abuse in the second paragraph (Max ix).

Most of the film is taken up by a succession of scenes that probe the weary friendship and intimacy that is created and enforced by the writer and the interviewer’s temporary proximity, although the end goal of their meeting is always in sight – the interviewer’s recorder is hardly ever out of frame (fig. 45). The narrative oscillates between the glimpsed possibility of authentic connection between two men and the inescapable artificiality of the interviewer/interviewee interchange. Circling each other guardedly, the two characters are made to represent narratively, to an extent, a critically recognised characteristic of Wallace’s fiction:

the capacity to make it personal and impersonal, emotionally affective and ruthlessly abstract, both at once [...] he preferred to keep his distance from the more ossified realms of higher education and from the cumbersome publicity apparatus associated with contemporary culture in all its synthetic forms, but it was his ultimately self-immolating willingness to wrestle with these behemoths of corporate life, to seek to identify some spirit of authenticity even amidst such disheartening narratives of alienation and simulation, that constituted the profound genius of his art. (Giles 19-20)



Fig. 45. Performing intimacy



One of the film reviewers questioned the necessity of having Wallace as a character in the film: “there is nothing in the film besides some of Wallace’s dialogue to indicate that the movie has any interest in illuminating Wallace’s fiction, or the obsessions that he worked into them” (Seitz). Yet a film about Wallace that is in the form of an extended interview makes sense insofar as there is a whole cottage industry of his interviews, both in print and on film. “This is Water”, the commencement speech he gave at Kenyon College in 2005 has over 3 million views on YouTube, was included by Time magazine among the Top 10 Commencement Speeches alongside Winston Churchill’s 1941 one, and Steve Job’s 2005 speech at Stanford. Interviews and videos featuring Wallace available online have a sizeable number of views, well into the hundreds of thousands, and a growing body of enthusiastic commentaries. Moreover, as Stephen J. Burn observes, “these thematic obsessions – self-consciousness, the difficult exchange economy that exists between characters’ interior landscapes and the world around them – draw on the same energies that might be located in the interview process” (ix). The form also allows the film to critique its own voyeurism, and implicitly the ethics of journalism and representation. At several points in the film, the character Lipsky examines with an unsettling interest Wallace’s house, the household objects that function as repositories or carriers of meaning. In a comical scene towards the end, he speedily walks through the house enumerating into the recorder the objects he sees, reminiscent of Julian Barnes ironic lines in his novel about authorial sleuthing, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984):

Why does the writing make us chase the writer? [...] Don’t we believe the words enough? Do we think the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth? When Robert Louis Stevenson died his business-minded Scottish nanny quietly began selling locks of the infant’s hair which she claimed to have cut forty years earlier. The believers, the seekers, the pursuers bought enough hair to stuff a sofa.” (Barnes 12)

This scene mirrors an earlier one where, given permission to use the bathroom, Lipski furtively opens the bathroom cabinet and writes down what he finds there. The scene also reflects an episode in Wallace's biography where, in a piece on the grunge American novel a *New York Times Magazine* reporter questioned Wallace's sincerity and straightforwardness in his public appearances which he saw as "projecting the perfect measure of aloofness, particularly in his appearance, which flouts conventional vanity in a manner that doth protest perhaps a bit too much" (Bruni). The 'proof' that Wallace was in fact vain and was simply constructing a fake public persona was found in his bathroom cabinet containing special tooth polish to combat the effects of chewing tobacco and acne medication to keep his skin unblemished. For the reporter, demonstrating the constructedness of Wallace's persona was worth the unscrupulous intrusion into his private space. On the other hand, the need to come into contact with objects that belong to the writer seems to be part and parcel of the biographer's task. As literary biographer Geoffrey Wall professes, "among the many things I need to know, my subject's favourite things, her special objects, will figure consistently. These objects, chosen for their private evocative power, are often present, literally and symbolically, at the scene of writing" (127-28). The material objects, then, are used as a means "to declare special and to render ordinary" (Buchanan 15) to 'humanise' the author and bring his/her cultural and literary exceptionality down to a more manageable level. However, as Wall suggests, the objects associated with the author's craft remain imbued with "evocative power", pointing to an intellectual and psychic realm that remains inaccessible to biographers and spectators alike, except obliquely through the lens of the author's fiction. Moreover, "in the compressed time-frame of the movie", it is particularly helpful for filmmakers to use objects as "economically encoded signifiers of a more expansive emotional landscape" (Buchanan 16). In the case of *The End of the Tour* this is subverted by the futile comical listing of

material items that make up his domestic world, in an attempt to find evocative power where there is only mundanity. We see Lipski walks around the house speaking into a recorder:

dog stuff, throw toys, chew toys, crap stains on carpet, fireplace, American flag, shark doll on bookcase, Alanis poster, soda cans, lots of them, there's Pepsi, there's Mountain Dew [...] There's a Botticelli calendar, Birth of Venus. Wooden chess set, postcard of Updike, 'Brain comparison: male, female, dog' cartoon. In the bedroom there is a Barney towel used as a curtain, there is a tennis ball, dental floss on top of books, there's a photo collage of his family, the kind kids put in their dorm rooms.[...] There is stuff everywhere, clothes everywhere, sneakers on the floor, clothes draped over stuff. Blue toiled seat cover looks like a rug. Postcards, Clintons, baboons, a St. Ignatius quote: Lord, teach me to be generous, teach me to serve you as you deserve" to give and not to count the cost, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for reward, save that of knowing that I do your will.'

The irony of finding a postcard with a religious prayer for generosity and self-sacrifice stuck on the bathroom wall under a picture of baboons is in line with the image of Wallace as a man and writer torn between the desire for meaning and authenticity and the awareness of being immersed in a hollow pop culture steeped in artifice. After a meaningful pause following Lipsky's delivery of the lines above, he stops the recorder and the next shot shows him entering the private space of Wallace's office. The room is in complete darkness, and as Lipski pushes the door open, a shaft of light from the corridor reveals a desk with a computer and stacks of books. Completely silent, he enters the darkness and advances to the window covered with heavy curtains. His back turned towards the camera, he lifts the curtains and peers into the light outside, without turning to look at the room. The symbolic meaning of this scene points to the impossibility of illuminating the site of artistic creativity, of revealing the 'real' David Foster Wallace. It seems to suggest that listing the items in this space is utterly pointless – faced with the inscrutability of that part of 'Wallace' the author that matters artistically and culturally, the

whole journalistic enterprise of profiling depicted in the film seems to be an exercise in futility.

Given the film's close portrayal of two individuals circling each other, trying to reach across the divides that separates them as human beings it is perhaps inevitable that the filmmakers should have made use of the strategies of melodrama to convey emotional depth and the retrospective sense of loss associated with the writer's suicide. After an affecting scene where they share an intimate moment admiring the beauty of a wintry landscape followed by a McDonald's meal, Wallace receives a telephone call inviting him to a dance, in the course of which he whisperingly names Lipski as the "Rolling Stone guy". It is at this moment that the artificiality of the setup becomes apparent once more – the pendulum has swung from closeness back to distance – and Lipski, realising he is not 'special' in the same way that Wallace is 'special' to him, reaches for his recorder. The scene is broken by a leap forward in time after Wallace's death, to David listening to the recorded conversation and tearing up – the emotional connection is shown to be malfunctioning and fragmented in that moment, but reaches a certain degree of completeness by radically separating the two subjects. Connection, then, is only possible by distancing, whether it be through fiction or time.

The film ends on an uplifting and emotionally affecting note with David Lipsky reading from his now published book to an audience:

When I think of this trip, I see David and me in the front seat of his car. We are both so young. He wants something better than he has. I want precisely what he has already. Neither of us knows where our lives are going to go. It smells like chewing tobacco, soda and smoke. And the conversation is the best one I ever had. David thought books existed to stop you from feeling lonely. If I could, I'd say to David that living those days with him reminded me of what life is like, instead of being a relief from it. And I'd tell him it made me feel much less alone.

Human connection as an antidote to existential loneliness is, yet again, placed at the centre of the narrative. Not devoid of irony is, of course, the fact that Lipski should have

transferred his lived experience onto the pages of a book, and achieved a certain degree of authorial fame following its publication, yet, at the same time, the scene also situates him in the position of the moved reader. In homage to Wallace's drive "to depict the difficult challenge of choosing to be human in a highly mediated, irony-infused, commercially driven culture that seeks to dehumanize us" (McLaughlin 170), the ending is unapologetically infused with the visceral dimension of melodrama. As David reads, tears rolling down his cheeks, we see Wallace dancing, joyous and uninhibited, in a room in a Baptist Church full of equally joyous people, now part of a community that celebrates being alive, together, and offers an antidote to the loneliness associated with modern individualism. Linda Williams contends that "if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama" (42). I argue that *The End of the Tour* uses the affecting mechanisms of this modality to convey certain ideas about 'sincerity' and 'truth'. Wallace's body, ecstatically hopping and flailing his arms around, becomes thus a site of moral legibility, a "staging of innocence" whereby the body is made to carry meanings in excess of itself, meanings connected with individual suffering, community, the artificiality of human relations in the age of consumerism and mass media, and the ultimate desire for connection. To underscore the intense pathos of the closing scene, the filmmakers make non-diegetic use of Brian Eno's experimental song from 1975, "The Big Ship", a pared-down, circular, instrumental tune in relation with which Wallace himself wrote in his last, unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011):

... because obviously that's why we're into music, that it makes us feel certain things, otherwise it would just be noise – and not only have them, listening, but be aware of them, to be able to say to yourself, '*This song is making me feel both warm and safe,[... ]and also at the same time feeling sad; there's an emptiness at the center of the warmth like the way an empty church or classroom with a lots of windows through which you can only see rain in the street is sad, as though right at the center of this safe, enclosed feeling is the seed of emptiness.*' (183; italics in the original)

We do not hear the diegetic song to which Wallace is dancing, but Eno's track, which, with its equally celebratory and melancholy mood, works to enhance the strongly empathic drive of the scene, the "felt affect, the aesthetic-emotional experience that lifts audiences" (Gledhill "Preface" xxii) which is at the heart of the melodramatic experience.

One of the topics in Wallace's novel *The Pale King*, is, in fact, 'truth' in fiction. In the well-known "Author's Foreword" inserted as chapter 9, the author addresses the reader directly: "Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona. [...] But this right here is me as a real person, David Wallace, age forty, SS no. 975-04-2012, addressing you [...] to inform you of the following: All of this is true. This book is really true. [...] That *The Pale King* is, in point of fact, more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story" (66-7). Through its use of references to this novel, *The End of the Tour* thus positions itself as a 'truthful' account of a meeting with a writer who described his work as using a postmodern aesthetic "to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would find very old-fashioned, so that there's a kind of melding, it's using postmodern formal techniques for very traditional ends, if there's a group...that's the group I want to belong to" (qtd in Roiland 36-7), and whose work was infused with a longing to "articulate experiences of being human that somehow transcend the self-enclosed mind" constructed around the ethical dimension of connection and "being the being that someone else is being-with" (Timmer ch. 7). Ultimately, *The End of the Tour* is an oblique approach to the figure of David Foster Wallace that manages to convey the complications involved in maintaining genuine, 'truthful' human connection while, at the same time, being expected to perform the role of a cultural icon – a theme that is central to the genre of the literary biopic.

## V. Conclusion

In a scathing review article on *Quills* tellingly titled “Perverting De Sade”, one of the writer’s biographers decries the factual inaccuracies and crude simplifications that plague the plot of this Hollywood production, concluding bitterly:

What is the harm in misrepresenting the true nature of De Sade’s life and career? [...] Of course, playwrights and movie-makers are not under oath when they show us their work. And without condensation, there can be no art. The artist must make choices to put some things in and leave others out, a rule that applies to biographers as well. But if a biographer makes a mish-mash of his subject, there is hell to pay. If a movie does the same, there could be talk of Academy awards for all concerned, as there has been in this case.” (Schaeffer)

Less vexed about the factual indignities biopics have inflicted upon history and biography, Tibbetts points to the challenge of reconciling the historical record with the fanciful screen dramatisations, only to realise that it was “no use trying to reconcile story with history” (4). On the contrary, a more fruitful strategy is “to enjoy their doubled pleasures as a synergy, a cooperation, a polyphony of separate but related elements” (4). Nevertheless, some vigilance is advised, for “one might come to regard these films as if they were wayward children who, with the best of intentions, sometimes stumble and break things. [...] we viewers must practice tolerance while warily remaining on the watch. Support them, yes, but don’t let them stray too far” (5). Indeed, one of the causes of discomfort in critics and viewers alike when faced with “the most maligned of all film genres” (Bingham 11) seems to be the impurity of the biopic, the fact that it is “neither fish nor fowl, not really fiction and not really biography” (Hollinger 158). Yet, I would argue that it is the biopic’s characteristic intersection with other film genres, its generic hybridity, which is the source of its longevity in the history of cinema as its strategies percolate into and draw from the domains of other genres.

This study has therefore claimed that, alongside other attractions such as the pleasures of recognition they afford to a variety of audiences, as well as the Oscar-winning performances of their lead actors, the generic impurity of biopics has made a key contribution to their continued success. While subject to critical derision, a cursory look at the biopic's Oscar-winning record shows its star-making potential. In the last two decades only, a large number of the golden statuettes have been awarded to actors playing historical figures from politicians to scientists to artists, in high-profile productions: Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (2003), Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Capote* (2006), Marion Cotillard in *La Vie en Rose* (2008), Meryl Streep in *The Iron Lady* (2012), Eddie Redmayne in *The Theory of Everything* (2015), Gary Oldman in *The Darkest Hour* (2018), and Rami Malek in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2019), to name but a few. The pandemic year 2020 saw the release of a variety of biopics including *Respect* on Aretha Franklin, *Ammonite* on fossil collector Mary Anning, *The Glorias*, based on the activities of feminist activist Gloria Steinem, and *Hillbilly Elegy*, the adaptation of a memoir by J.D. Vance about life in the American Rust Belt. *Deadline*, the online film and entertainment news site, reported on November 2, 2020 that British director Terence Davies had wrapped up shooting his biopic titled *Benediction*, based on the figure of the Second World War poet Siegfried Sassoon. The film, produced by the BFI and the BBC, had reportedly had to go on a lengthy hiatus because of the pandemic. The article reveals Davies's thoughts on his subject "he is a human being trying to navigate a difficult life, which is what we all do but art can be the greatest consolation for us all" (qtd. in Wiseman).

When I began researching for this thesis, very little scholarship had been published on the subject of the biopic. In the last few years, however, work on the topic has picked up pace, with several monographs and collections now tackling the history



and heterogeneity of these films from a variety of angles including national perspectives, genre considerations, or cultural and ideological interpretations. Still, to this day, there is only one volume devoted specifically to the literary biopic, namely Hila Shachar's 2019 *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic*. In the conclusion, Shachar expresses her wish for future studies of the biopic to take up "questions of the future of auteurship in cinema, authorship in culture, and female subjectivity, above say, concerns of nostalgia, heritage, and the intense focus on the 'worship' of capitalistic and patriarchal individualism" (187). I would agree with Shachar on the need for further study of the topic of authorship in the contemporary era with its shifting paradigms and emerging sensibilities, which this thesis connects to the rise of metamodernism, and hope my own work has contributed to pushing the boundaries even minimally in new directions. I would also suggest a few other potentially fruitful avenues of enquiry, which might include questions of generic hybridity, stardom, traditional and new media intersections, as well as audience reception in a globalised context that extends beyond purely national considerations.

This study has examined the representation of the authorial figure, or rather, the authorial 'life-text' in a series of literary biopics from the Hollywood studio era to the present day, with a sharper focus on the variety of contemporary biopics from the 1990s onward. One of the greatest challenges has been to select representative cases from the wealth of material available, construct a cohesive body, and carry out the analysis in a reasonably coherent manner, pointing out commonalities without falling into excessive repetition, while, at the same time, doing justice to the variety and versatility of the material under scrutiny. The thesis has been structured to reflect the various elements present in film adaptations of 'life-texts'. After the Introduction detailing the rationale, aims and methodology of the thesis, Part II. "Critical and Theoretical Framework" has

explored the various debates around the author from the mid-twentieth-century onwards, remarking on the persistence of the authorial presence and desire as a site of struggle and potential agency in spite of deconstructionist strategies. The chapter has also tackled the matter of literary biography, pointing out its enduring success as well as recent developments, from hagiographies of ‘great men’ to the more diverse panoply of biographical subjects approached as historically-contingent entities, and, ultimately, showing that, while striving for a certain degree of ‘objectivity’, biography has become more self-aware of its pursuits and limitations, while bringing to the fore the potential affective connections between the parties involved in the biographical project.

The next chapter moved the discussion further into the domain of film genre, and explored the debates and difficulties involved in generic categorisation, touching upon concepts such as gentrification and genre hybridity, in order to establish their relevance for the discussion of the literary biopic. This chapter has concluded that, while being oftentimes called a genre for the sake of convenience, it may be more fruitful to define the literary biopic as a “multi-generic film form” (Hollinger *Feminist Film Studies* 158) similar to literary adaptation. As Deleyto points out, because genres are abstract systems rather than clearly defined groups of films, generic analysis should concern itself more with “the actual workings of generic elements” (227-28) rather than issues of belonging and generic purity. This proposal ties in with the subsequent discussion of melodrama and its recent reassessment as a mode and a sensibility rather than a genre. As Gledhill argues, the melodramatic mode of aesthetic articulation is adaptable across a range of genres, as well as across time and national boundaries: “rather than defining content, *mode* shapes different materials to a given end” (“Prologue xiii; italics in the original). Melodrama is thus a generic fertiliser with a long history in literature, theatre and cinema. As a mode grounded in an aesthetic of

sensibility, melodrama demands the reintroduction of aesthetic feeling into critical dialogue, for “ideologies, structures of feeling, social convention, and cultural stereotypes are *themselves* the materials out of which new melodramas are engineered” (Gledhill “Prologue” xxiv; italics in the original). Consequently, I have argued that critical interpretations of cultural productions such as literary biopics might profit from taking into account the rhetoric of melodramatic affectivity alongside other critical considerations.

Subchapter 2.2 in Part II has provided an overview of the critical reception of the biopic and literary biopic, as well as the critical assessments available to date. It is clear that, as several studies note, in spite of its commercial success and constant presence in the industry’s yearly output of films, the literary biopic is an underresearched field in which interest has only picked up pace within the last decade. This section of the thesis lists the most important publications, and mentions my own modest contributions to the on-going critical discussions in the form of two book chapters and a review article.

Part II has continued with a section on the question of ‘authenticity’ and its importance in the commercialisation of literary biopics, using Buchanan’s concept of textual penumbra, the body of extra-textual information attached to a film that inevitably influences any potential interpretations. I have focused here particularly on the topic of poster design in an attempt to identify the elements that allow potential viewers to locate and interpret the filmic text generically, functioning as formative filters through which viewers access cinematic experiences. The last chapter in the critical and theoretical framework block has scrutinised the body of the star actor as a potential site of meaning, concluding that the question of stardom is essential for any analysis of literary biopics, given that the source of the visceral dimension of

melodrama, as well as the emotional connections biopics seek to establish with potential audiences, is located mainly in the star's body.

The main body of the thesis, Parts III and IV, consists of a series of case studies, beginning in the studio era with two biopics of female writers as examples of predecessors to the contemporary literary biopic. Constructed in keeping with the constraints of the industrial apparatus of the big Hollywood studios and the cultural paradigms of the 1930s and 1940s, these biopics unsurprisingly privilege the private over the historical, and elevate romance and psychodrama in their representation of authorship, constructing thus a series of templates of female agency that have persisted to this present day. Moreover, they capitalise on the star power of their lead actors creating a layered star image, as audiences are encouraged to draw parallels between the lives on screen and the off-screen lives of the stars, combining thus “aspects of the impersonator as well as the life impersonated” (Custen 34). The multiplicity of bodies on screen – the implied writer, the embodied character and the star – creates a complex matrix of meanings and potential references connecting literature, film and the industrial star system.

The second chapter in Part III has examined two literary biopics from the 1970s, one of them a female friendship story set during the Second World War, the other a light-hearted period drama based on an Australian writer's writing and life. As the chapter demonstrates, the two biographically-inflected films challenge the traditional romance template and construct the authorial figure in accordance with the cultural and political reassessments of female agency taking place during the heyday of second-wave feminism. The bulk of the thesis, in Part IV, is taken up by a variety of case studies of contemporary literary biopics. This is a consequence of the fact that, starting around the 1990s, the number of literary biopics increased greatly owing to major shifts in the

industry, including the rise of New Hollywood directors and the commercial success of independent production companies such as Miramax. The first chapter in Part IV examines the representation of two ‘greats’ of English literature, namely Shakespeare and Austen, in four adaptations of their ‘life-text’, arguing that while the filmmakers continue to conflate life and work in the literary biopic, and persist in elevating romance above other considerations, they also incorporate a variety of postmodern elements such as ramping up self-referential irony, as well as metamodern strategies, in blending the irony with a visual rhetoric of affectivity. As the following chapter on auteurist connections goes on to argue, the force field of melodrama and its articulations of sympathetic identification extend to include the ‘auteur’ directors who insert themselves into the semantic field of the literary biopic through either their authorial signature, or interventions in the textual penumbra through interviews imbricating their authorship with that of the writer on screen.

The third chapter in Part IV has tackled the politically-inflected literary biopic, illustrating how the aesthetic articulations of the melodramatic mode challenge the deficiencies of the social and political system, and showing how the protagonists embody social forces operating on the stage of cinematic history that drive potential progress. As the case studies demonstrate, the figure of the persecuted writer personalises social issues, and embodies and enacts socioethical values. Chapter 4 in Part IV looks at a number of literary biopics whose narrative revolves around self-destruction and death, fairly frequent themes in the biographies of creative artists and other types of cultural icons. Finally, the last two case studies in Part IV have examined another category of the literary biopic which has been persistently produced in the last two decades, namely the one where the narrative is focused on a historically marginalised character such as a female partner, an editor, or an interviewer – the figure

of the writer emerges thus decentred, mediated through formerly neglected figures. These biopics may either attempt to recuperate the figures that are generally forgotten in writers' biographies, in keeping with the contemporary ethos of restorative justice, or provide self-aware approaches to the literary biopic subgenre itself, underlining the unknowability of the biographical subject. Indeed, as Vidal notes, "past the postmodernist moment, the biopic has become a metagenre: that is, a genre that intently reflects on its own forms of life writing" ("Introduction" 15)

In what is now considered to be his manifesto for the revival of sincerity in fiction, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", Foster Wallace observes:

The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels', born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. [...] These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal'. Accusations of sentimentality, *melodrama*. Credulity. Of softness. (Wallace 192-23; my italics).

Trying to elucidate what biopics do, Dennis suggests that "at the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth" (10). This thesis may have risked the yawn and the rolled eyes in arguing that literary biopics employ the melodramatic mode to make visible this ambiguous yet recognisable emotional 'truth' attached to the figure of the author – a paradoxically present absence – which chimes with the new structures of feeling and aesthetic sensibilities emerging within the cultural paradigm of metamodernism, and resonates with diverse audiences across time and space.

## Works Cited

### I. Bibliography

“Maya Angelou talks Shakespeare.” YouTube, uploaded by Holly Denise, 6 Jan. 2009. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMs3Rl60gUg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMs3Rl60gUg)

*a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 26, no.1, 2011.

Allott, Miriam, editor. *Emily Brontë: Wuthering Heights*. Red Globe, 1990.

Altman, Rick. “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre.” *Film Genre Reader IV*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, U of Texas P, 2012, pp. 27-41.

Altman, Rick. “Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process.” *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, edited by Nick Browne. U of Carolina P, 1998, pp. 1-41.

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. BFI, 1999.

Amis, Martin. “Jane’s World.” *The New Yorker*. 1 January 1996. [newyorker.com/magazine/1996/01/08/janes-world-martin-amis](http://newyorker.com/magazine/1996/01/08/janes-world-martin-amis).

Anderson, Carolyn and Jonathan Lupo. “Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century.” *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve Neale, BFI, 2003, pp. 91-104.

Anderson, Carolyn. “Biographical Film.” *A Handbook of American Film Genres*, edited by Wes D. Gehring. Greenwood, 1988, pp. 331-51.

Andrew, Dudley. “The Unauthorised Auteur Today.” *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, edited by Jim Collins et al., Routledge, 1993.

Appelo, Tim. “Finding Dorothy Parker’s Voice.” *Entertainment Weekly* 23 Dec. 1994.

Aragay, Mireia, and Gemma López. “Inf(lecting) Pride and Prejudice: Dialogism, Intertextuality, and Adaptation.” *Books in Motion*, edited by Mireia Aragay. Rodopi, 2005, pp. 201-219.

Arnold, Gary. “The ‘Love’ Charm.” *Washington Post*, 16 October 1981. [washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/10/16/the-love-charm/bd11a25f-92e0-4f41-a346-e5ce78c3c8ae/](http://washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/10/16/the-love-charm/bd11a25f-92e0-4f41-a346-e5ce78c3c8ae/).

Asibong, Andrew. *François Ozon*. Manchester UP, 2008.

Astruc, Alexandre. “The Birth of a New Avant-garde: La Caméra Stylo.” *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, edited by Peter Graham, BFI, 1968, pp. 17-23.

- Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead. A Writer on Writing*. Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Penguin, 1994.
- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Penguin, 1994.
- Avery, Simon and Rebecca Stott. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Routledge, 2003.
- Ayto, John. *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins*. Bloomsbury, 1991.
- Baisnée, Valérie. *Gendered Resistance: The Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou and Janet Frame*. Rodopi, 1997.
- Barker, Andrew. "Toronto Film Review; 'Mary Shelley'." *Variety*, 9 Sept. 2017, [variety.com/2017/film/reviews/mary-shelley-review-toronto-1202553317/](http://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/mary-shelley-review-toronto-1202553317/).
- Barnes, Julian. *Flaubert's Parrot*. Picador, 1985.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, The Noonday Press, 1975.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977, pp. 142-148.
- Roland Barthes. *Michelet par lui-même*. Éditions du Seuil, 1954.
- Bazin, André. "Adaptation or Cinema as Digest." 1948. *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore, The Athlone Press, 2000, pp. 19-27.
- Beauman, Nicola. *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. Persephone, 2009.
- Benfey, Christopher. "The Mystery of Emily Dickinson." *American Audacity: Literary Essays North and South*, U of Michigan P, pp. 35-53.
- Bennett, Andre. *The Author*. Routledge, 2005.
- Benshoff, M. Harry and Sean Griffin. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. Wiley Blackwell, 2009.
- Benton, Michael. *Literary Biography. An Introduction*. Blackwell, 2009.
- Bergan, Ronald. "Whatever Happened to the Biopic?" *Film and Filming*, no. 346, July, 1983, pp. 21-22.
- Bergfelder, Tim. "Popular European Cinema in the 2000s: Cinephilia, Genre and Heritage." *The Europeanness of European Cinema: Identity, Meaning, Globalization*, edited by Mary Harro et al., IB Tauris, 2015, pp. 33-57.



Bernstein, Mark. "10 Tips on Writing the Living Web." *A List Apart: For People Who Make Websites*. 16 Aug. 2002. Accessed 4 May 2009.

Besier, Rudolf. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street. A Comedy in Five Acts*. 1930. [www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/besierr-barrettsofwimpolestreet/besierr-barrettsofwimpolestreet-00-h/](http://www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/besierr-barrettsofwimpolestreet/besierr-barrettsofwimpolestreet-00-h/).

Bingham, Dennis. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. Rutgers UP, 2010.

*Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, Special Issue: The Biopic, vol. 23, no.1, 2000.

Bloom, Paul. *How Pleasure Works. Why We Like What We Like*. Vintage, 2010.

Boozer, Jack. "Introduction: The Screenplay and Authorship in Adaptation." *Authorship in Film Adaptation*. U of Texas P, 2008, pp.1-30.

Bradshaw, Peter. Review of *Becoming Jane*, directed by Julian Jarrold. *The Guardian*, 9 March 2007, [theguardian.com/film/2007/mar/09/drama.periodandhistorical](http://theguardian.com/film/2007/mar/09/drama.periodandhistorical).

Branigan, Edward and Warren Buckland, editors. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*. Routledge, 2013.

Braudy Leo. "Afterword: Rethinking Remakes." *Play it Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, edited by Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal. U of California P, 1998, pp. 327-337.

Braunstein, A. Néstor. "Desire and jouissance in the teachings of Lacan." *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 102-115.

Brody, Richard. "A Masterly Emily Dickinson Movie." *The New Yorker*, 22 Feb. 2016, [www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/a-masterful-emily-dickinson-movie](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/a-masterful-emily-dickinson-movie).

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic*, Manchester UP, 1992.

Brontë, Charlotte. "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell". 1850. Appendix in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, edited by Ian Jack, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 301-6.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. Penguin, 1994.

Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. Yale UP, 1976.

Brooks, Peter. "Melodrama, Body, Revolution". *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, edited by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill. BFI, 1994, pp. 11-24.

Brophy, Brigid. *Don't Never Forget. Collected Views and Reviews*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1966.

Brown, Tom. "Consensual Pleasures: Amazing Grace, Oratory, and the Middlebrow Biopic." *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, edited by Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, Routledge, 2013.

Brown, Tom. *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in Cinema*. Edinburgh UP, 2012.

Brownlow, John. "Who's afraid of Sylvia Plath?" *The Guardian*, 22 Aug. 2003, [www.theguardian.com/film/2003/aug/22/londonfilmfestival2003.poetry](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/aug/22/londonfilmfestival2003.poetry)

Bruni, Frank. "The Grunge American Novel: A New York Times Magazine Profile." *The New York Times*, 24 Mar. 1996, [www.nytimes.com/1996/03/24/news/the-grunge-american-novela-new-york-times-magazine-profile](http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/24/news/the-grunge-american-novela-new-york-times-magazine-profile).

Bryer, R. Jackson, editor. *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*. U of Mississippi P, 1986.

Buchanan, Judith. *Shakespeare on Film*. Pearson, 2005.

Buchanan, Judith. "Introduction. Image, story, desire: the writer on film." *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 3-32.

Buckton, S. Oliver. "Oscar Goes to Hollywood: Wilde, Sexuality, and the Gaze of Contemporary Cinema." *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, edited by Joseph Bristow, Ohio UP, 2008, pp. 305-337.

Bugbee, Teo. "Wild Nights with Emily Review: Emily Dickinson as Romantic Comedy Heroine." *The New York Times*, 11 April 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/movies/wild-nights-with-emily-review](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/movies/wild-nights-with-emily-review).

Bukowski, Charles. *Run with the Hunted. A Charles Bukowski Reader*, edited by John Martin, Harper Collins, 1993.

Burgoyne, Robert. *The Hollywood Historical Film*. Blackwell, 2008.

Burke, Séan. "Reconstructing the Author." *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader*, edited by Séan Burke, Edinburgh UP, 1995, pp. xv-xxx.

Burke, Séan. "Feminism and the Authorial Subject." *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader*, edited by Séan Burke, Edinburgh UP, 1995, pp. 145-150.

Burn, J. Stephen, editor. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. U of Mississippi P, 2012.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Byars, Jackie. *All that Hollywood Allows. Reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*. Routledge, 1991.

Cadwalladr, Carole. "I wouldn't advise any actor thinking of his career to come out." *The Observer*, 29 Nov. 2009, [www.theguardian.com/film/2009/nov/29/rupert-everett-madonna-carole-cadwalladr](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/nov/29/rupert-everett-madonna-carole-cadwalladr).

Caine, Barbara. *Biography and History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Calhoun, Randal. *Dorothy Parker. A Bio-Bibliography*. Greenwood Press, 1993.

Callil, Carmen. "Introduction" to *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin. Virago, 1980, no pages given.

Campion, Jane. "In Search of Janet Frame." *The Guardian*, 19 Jan. 2008. [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/19/fiction5](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/19/fiction5).

Canby, Vincent. "Journeys of D.H.Lawrence." *The New York Times*, 11 October 1981. [www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A02E6DC103BF932A25753C1A967948260?](http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A02E6DC103BF932A25753C1A967948260?)  
Capron, Marion 1956: "Dorothy Parker, The Art of Fiction". *The Paris Review*, no. 13, Summer, 1956.

Carman, Emily and Philip Drake. "Doing the Deal: Talent Contracts in Hollywood." *Hollywood and the Law*, edited by Paul McDonald et al., BFI, 2015, pp. 209-234.

Carroll, Rachel, editor. *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*. Continuum, 2009.

Cartmell, Deborah. "Becoming Jane in screen adaptations of Austen's fiction." *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 151-163.

Cartmell, Deborah. "The Golden Age Hollywood Biopic: The Barretts of Wimpole Sreet 1934-1957." *A Companion to the Biopic*, edited by Deborah Cartmell and Ashley Polasek, Wiley, 2020, pp. 147-158.

Cartmell, Deborah. "The Shakespeare on Screen Industry." *Adaptations: From text to screen, screen to text*, edited by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, Routledge, 1999, pp. 29-37.

Cooper, Wyatt. "Whatever You Think Dorothy Parker Was Like, She Wasn't". *Esquire*, July 1968, p. 57.

Coursodon, Jean-Pierre 1994: "Mrs. Parker et le cercle vicieux : «You might as well live ». *Positif* 403 Sept: 53-57.

Catsoulis, Jeannette. "'All is True' Review: Regret Is the Thing, as Shakespeare Comes Home." *New York Times*, 9 May 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/movies/all-is-true-review](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/movies/all-is-true-review).

Christie, Ian. "A Life on Film." *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*. edited by Peter France and William St. Clair, Oxford UP, 2002, pp. 283-301.

Coleridge, Samuel. *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Kathleen Coburn, Pilot Press, 1949.

Comolli, Jean-Louis. "Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much?" *The History on Film Reader*, edited by Marnie Hughes-Warrington., Routledge, 2009, pp. 65-74.

Cook, Pam. *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema*. BFI, 1996.

Cook, Pam. "Melodrama and the Women's Picture." *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, edited by Marcia Landy, Wayne State University Press, 1991, 248-262.

Corrigan, Timothy. "Friction, Failure, and Fire. Truffaut as Adaptive Auteur". *A Companion to François Truffaut*, Blackwell, 2013, 317-331.

Corrigan, Timothy. "Biopics and the Trembling Ethics of the Real." *A Companion to the Biopic*, edited by Deborah Cartmell and Ashley Polasek, Wiley Blackwell, 2020, pp. 13-22.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*. Routledge, 1991.

Corrigan, Timothy. "Defining adaptation." *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, edited by Thomas Leitch, Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 23-35.

Corrigan, Timothy. "Which Shakespeare to Love? Film, Fidelity, and the Performance of Literature." *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, edited by Jim Collins, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 155-180.

Costeix, Eric. *André Téchiné: Le Paysage Transfiguré*. L'Harmattan, 2008.

Cronin, Jan. "Review of 'Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame'." *Kotare*, vol.3, no. 2, 2000, [www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-Whi032Kota-t1-g1-t8.html](http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-Whi032Kota-t1-g1-t8.html)

*Cowboys and Aliens*. Directed by Jon Favreau, performances by Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford, Universal Pictures, 2011.

Crowl, Samuel. *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era*. Ohio UP, 2003.

Crowl, Samuel. *The Films of Kenneth Branagh*. Praeger, 2006.

Crowl, Samuel. "Flamboyant realist: Kenneth Branagh." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, edited by Russell Jackson, Cambridge UP, 2000, pp. 222-238.

Crowther, Bosley. "Screen: Wilde Absolved: Writer's 'Trials' Get New Examination". *The New York Times*, 28 June 1960, [www.nytimes.com/1960/06/28/archives/screen-wilde-absolvedwriters-trials-get-new-examination](http://www.nytimes.com/1960/06/28/archives/screen-wilde-absolvedwriters-trials-get-new-examination).

Crowther, Bruce. *Hollywood Faction: Reality And Myth In The Movies*. Columbus Books, 1984.

Cunningham, Michael. "My Novel, the Movie: My Baby Reborn; *The Hours* Brought Elation, But Also Doubt." *The New York Times*, 19 Jan. 2003. [www.nytimes.com/2003/01/19/movies/my-novel-the-movie-my-baby-reborn-the-hours-brought-elation-but-also-doubt](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/19/movies/my-novel-the-movie-my-baby-reborn-the-hours-brought-elation-but-also-doubt).

Cunningham, Stuart. "The 'Force-Field' of Melodrama." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 191-204.

Currie, Susan and Donna Lee Brien. "Mythbusting Publishing: Questioning the 'Runaway Popularity' of Published Biography and Other Life Writing" *M/C Journal*, vol. 11, no. 4. 2008. [www.journal.mediaculture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewarticle/43](http://www.journal.mediaculture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewarticle/43)

Custen, George. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. Rutgers UP, 1992.

Davis, Natalie Zemon. "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity." *Yale Review*, vol. 76, no. 4, Summer, 1987, pp. 457–82.

Davis, Whitney. *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond*. Columbia UP, 2010.

De Ornellas, Kevin. "Mustabeens and Mightabens: The Unknowability of English Renaissance Playwrights." *A Companion to Literary Biography*, edited by Richard Bradford, Wiley Blackwell, 2019, pp. 325-337.

Dean, Andrew 2011: "Reading *An Autobiography*: Michael King, Patrick Evans and Janet Frame." *Journal of New Zealand Literature* vol. 29, no.1, pp. 46-65.

De Baecque, Antoine, and Serge Toubiana. *Truffaut: A Biography*. Translated by Catherine Temerson, U of California P, 2000.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. 1983. Continuum, 2009.

Deleyto, Celestino. "Film Genres at the Crossroads: What Genres and Films Do To Each Other." *Film Genre Reader 4*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, Uof Texas P, 2012, pp. 218-236.

Dempster, Sarah. "Lost in *Lost in Austen*: Episode 1". *The Guardian*, 4 September 2008, [www.theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2008/sep/04/lostinlostinaustenepl](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2008/sep/04/lostinlostinaustenepl).

Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. Wordsworth, 1992.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R.W. Franklin, The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999.

Diehl, Karen. "Once Upon an Adaptation: Traces of the Authorial on Film". Mireia Aragay, ed. *Books in Motion*. Amsterdam and NY: Rodopi, 2005, pp. 89-106.

Diliberto, Gioia. "A Hemingway Story, and Just as Fictional". *The New York Times*. 26 January 1997, [movies2.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-diliberto](http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-diliberto).

Di Mattia, Joanna. "Davies, Terence." *Senses of Cinema*, August, 2017, [www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/great-directors/terence-davies](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/great-directors/terence-davies).

Dixon, Thomas. "'Emotion': The History of a Keyword in Crisis." *Emotion Review*, vol. 4, no.4, Oct. 2012, pp. 338-200.

Dobie, Margaret. "Gender and the Heritage Genre: Popular Feminism Turns to History." *Jane Austen & Co: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson, SUNYP, 2003, pp. 247-259.

Dyer, Richard. *Stars*. BFI, 1979.

Eagleton, Mary. *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Ebert, Roger. "Review of Wilde." 12 June 1998, [www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wilde-1998](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wilde-1998).

Ellen, Barbara. *The Observer*, 25 March 2007, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/mar/25/comment.gender](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/mar/25/comment.gender)

Elliott, Kamilla. "Screened Writers." *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*, edited by Deborah Cartmell. Malden: Blackwell, 2012, pp. 179-197.

Elliott, Kamilla. "Postmodern Screened Writers." *Screening Text: Critical Perspectives on Film Adaptation*, edited by Shannon Wells-Lassagne and Ariane Hudelet, McFarland & Company, 2013, pp. 22-42.

Ellis, David. *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search For Understanding*. Routledge, 2000.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Film as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-pic." *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1986, pp. 15-22.

Eng, Matthew. "A Quiet Fascination: Terence Davies Meets Emily Dickinson." *Tribeca Film*, 10 April 2017, [tribecafilm.com/news/terence-davies-a-quiet-passion-cynthia-nixon](http://tribecafilm.com/news/terence-davies-a-quiet-passion-cynthia-nixon).

Epstein, H. William. "Introduction: Strategic Patriotic Memories." *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity*, edited by William H. Epstein and R. Barton Palmer, SUNYP, 2016, pp. 1-21.

- Epstein, William H. and R. Barton Palmer, editors. *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity*. SUNYP, 2016.
- Erkkila, Betsy. "The Emily Dickinson wars." *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Wendy Martin, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 11-29.
- Everett, Wendy. *Terence Davies*. Manchester UP, 2004.
- Faulkner, Sally, editor. *Middlebrow Cinema*. Routledge, 2016.
- Felski, Rita. *Literature After Feminism*. Chicago UP, 2003.
- Finney, Vanessa. "What Does 'Janet Frame' Mean?" *Journal of New Zealand Literature* no. 11, 1993, pp. 193-205.
- Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader*, edited by Séan Burke, Edinburgh UP, 1995, pp. 233-246.
- Fox, Alistair. *Jane Campion: Authorship and Personal Cinema*. Kindle ed., Indiana UP, 2011.
- Frame, Janet. *An Autobiography*. George Brazillier, 1989.
- Frame, Janet. *To the Is-Land*. Flamingo, 1993.
- Frame, Janet. "Beginnings." *Landfall*, March 1965, pp. 40-47.
- Francke, Lizzie 1995: "All About Leigh". *Sight and Sound* 5.2: 8-9.
- Frankel, Nicholas. *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years*. Harvard UP, 2017.
- Franklin, Miles. *My Brilliant Career*. Virago Press, 1980.
- "Fred Zinnemann: Cinema of Resistance", Walter Murch and Alvin Sargent discuss *Julia* at the Getty Center", 24 April 2012:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te1C1r2YqmQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te1C1r2YqmQ)
- Gale, Maggie. *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918-1962*. Routledge, 1996.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. 1857. Penguin, 1985.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Geraghty, Christine and Shannon Wells-Lasagne. "Introduction: the incipit in screen adaptation." *Screen*, vol. 56, no.2, 2015, p. 234.

Geraghty, Christine. "Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance." *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Arnold, 2000, pp. 183-201.

Geroult, Daniel. "Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama." *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, edited by Marcia Landy, Wayne State UP, 1991, pp. 118-34.

Gilbey, Ryan. "Angel Delight." *The Guardian*, 27 Aug. 2008, [www.theguardian.com/film/2008/aug/27/1](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/aug/27/1).

Giles, Paul. "All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, U of Iowa P, 2012, pp. 3-22.

Gillan, Anne. *Truffaut on Cinema*. Translated by Alistair Fox, Indiana UP, 2017.

Glancy, H. Mark. *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' Film 1938-1945*. Manchester UP, 1999.

Gledhill, Christine. "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill, BFI, 1987.

Gledhill, Christine. "Introduction." *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, Routledge, 1991, pp. xiii-xx.

Gledhill, Christine. "Rethinking Genre." *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. Arnold, 2000, pp. 221-242.

Gledhill, Christine. "Signs of melodrama." *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. Routledge, 1991, pp. 207 – 229.

Gledhill, Christine. "Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama." *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Columbia UP, 2018, pp. ix-xxv.

Gledhill Christine and Linda Williams. "Introduction." *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Columbia UP, 2018, pp. 1-11.

González, Ana Marta. "Emotional Culture and the Role of Emotions in Cultural Analysis." *The Emotions and Cultural Analysis*, edited by Ana Marta González, Routledge, 2016, pp.1-15.

Gordon, Felicia 1989: *A Preface to the Brontës*. Longman, 1989.

Grant, Barry Keith, editor: *Auteurs and Authorship. A Film Reader*. Blackwell, 2008.



- Gray, John. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York UP, 2010.
- Greenblatt, Stephen . *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. Jonathan Cape, 2004.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. U of California P, 1988.
- Greiff, K. Louis. *D.H. Lawrence: Fifty Years on Film*. Southern Illinois UP, 2001.
- Grosvenor Myer, Valerie. *Jane Austen, A Biography*. Michael O'Mara, 1997.
- Hadley, Elaine. *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*. Stanford UP, 1995.
- Haiduc, Sonia Amalia. "Biopics and the Melodramatic Mode." *A Companion to the Biopic*, edited by Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek, Wiley-Blackwell, 2020, pp. 23-44.
- Haiduc, Sonia Amalia. "Books on Biopics." *Adaptation*, Oxford UP, 2014, vol.7, no. 3, 2014, pp. 353-360.
- Haiduc, Sonia. "Here's the Story of My Career: Looking at the Woman Writer on Screen." *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 50-63.
- Hamilton, Nigel. *Biography: A Brief History*. Harvard UP, 2007.
- Hare, David. *The Hours*. Screenplay by David Hare, Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Harold, Denis and Pamela Gordon. *Janet Frame in Her Own Words*. Kindle ed., Penguin Books, 2011.
- Harris. Siân. "'Mad, bad and dangerous to know': the male poet in *Sylvia* (2003) and *The Edge of Love* (2008)." *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 64-76.
- Hayman, Ronald. *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. Minerva, 1992.
- Hayward, Susan. *Film Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2000.
- Heilbrun, G. Carolyn 1988: *Writing a Woman's Life*. Ballantine Books, 1988.
- Hellman, Lillian. *Pentimento*. Libreria Editorial Argos, 1977.
- Higgins, Charlotte and Caroline Davies. "AS Byatt says women who write intellectual books seen as unnatural." *The Guardian*, 10 August 2010, [www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/20/as-byatt-intellectual-women-strange](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/20/as-byatt-intellectual-women-strange).

Higson, Andrew. "Brit-lit biopics, 1990-2010." *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 106-120.

Higson, Andrew. "English Heritage, English Literature, English Cinema: Selling Jane Austen to Movie Audiences in the 1990s." *Janespotting and Beyond. British heritage retrovisions since the mid-1990s*, edited by Eckhart Voigts-Virchow, Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004, pp. 35-50.

Higson Andrew. *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*. Oxford UP, 2003.

Hitchcock, Alfred. "Why I Make Melodramas." *Hitchcock on Hitchcock. Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by Sidney Gottlieb, vol. 2, University of California Press, 2015, pp. 76-7.

Hoffman, Jordan. "Papa: Hemingway in Cuba review – Hollywood's Havana horror". *The Guardian*. 27 April 2016, [www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/27/papa-hemingway-in-cuba-review-hollywoods-havana-horror](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/27/papa-hemingway-in-cuba-review-hollywoods-havana-horror)

Holden, Stephen. "A Mythical Hemingway In a Blur of Muted Love". *The New York Times*. 24 January 1997. [www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A07E7DF173AF937A15752C0A961958260](http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A07E7DF173AF937A15752C0A961958260).

Holderness, Graham. "'Author!Author!': Shakespeare and biography." *Shakespeare*, vol. 5, no. 1, April 2009, pp. 122-133.

Hollinger, Karen. "From Female Friends to Literary Ladies: The Contemporary Woman's Film." *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve Neale, London, 2002, pp. 77-90.

Hollinger, Karen. *In Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. U of Minnesota P, 1998.

Hollinger, Karen. *Feminist Film Studies*. Routledge, 2012.

Holmes, Richard. *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*. Flamingo, 1985.

Holroyd, Michael. "The Art of Biography No.3." *The Paris Review*, No. 205, Summer, 2013, [www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6223/the-art-of-biography-no-3-michael-holroyd](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6223/the-art-of-biography-no-3-michael-holroyd)

Horton, Andrew. "The Whole Wide World." *Cineaste*. vol. 23, no. 1, 1997, pp. 49-50.

Huffer, Lynne. "The Persistence of Unreason: Michel Foucault's Mad Melodrama." *Criticism*, vol. 55, no. 4, Fall 2013, pp. 637-653.

Hughes, Frieda. "My Mother." *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, edited by Frieda Hughes, Harper, 2004, pp. 13-4.

Hughes-Warrington, Marnie. *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*. Routledge, 2007.

Hunt, Liz 1996: "Get Down and Party with Mr Darcy; Video-watching Sessions, Fundraising Balls, Country House Trails." *The Independent*, 19 July 1996, [www.independent.co.uk/life-style/get-down-and-party-with-mr-darcy-1329343](http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/get-down-and-party-with-mr-darcy-1329343). (Access date: 10 February 2012)

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.

Ince, Kate. *Five Directors: Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon*, Manchester University Press, 2008.

Interview with director Gillian Armstrong. Special features. *My Brilliant Career*, DVD Disc 2, Margaret Fink Productions, 1979.

Izzo, Kim. *The Jane Austen Marriage Manual*. Hodder and Stoughton, 2012.

Jackson, Russell, editor. *Shakespeare on Film*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

Jarrold, Julian and Kevin Hood. Audio Commentary. *Becoming Jane*, Miramax, 2007.

Jenner, Paul. "Plights of Mind and Circumstance: Cadwell and Wallace on Scepticism." *Fictional Worlds and the Moral Imagination*, edited by Garry L. Hagberg, Palgrave, 2021, pp. 97-112.

John, Juliet. "Metamodern Melodrama and Contemporary Mass Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, edited by Carolyn Williams, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 289-304.

Johnson, L. Claudia. "Austen Cults and Cultures." *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, Cambridge: CUP, 1997, pp. 211-226.

Johnson, Sheila. "A Day in the Life." *Sight and Sound*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 24-27.

Johnson, T. David. "Adaptation and Fidelity." *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, edited by Thomas Leitch, Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 87-100.

Jones, Lawrence. "'I can really see myself in her story.' Jane Campion's Adaptation of Janet Frame's *Autobiography*." *Jane Campion: Cinema, Nation, Identity*, edited by Hillary Radner, Alistair Fox and Irène Bessière, Wayne State UP, 2009, pp. 77-100.

Jones, Liz. "Beyond 'Sex and Drugs and Lyrical Ballads': High In/fidelity in Julien Temple's *Pandaemonium*." *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*, edited by Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia, Routledge, 2014, pp. 129-141.

*Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Special Issue, vol. 36, no.2, 2008.

Kamuf, Peggy. "Writing Like a Woman." *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, edited by Sally McConnell-Ginet, et.al. Praeger, 1980, pp. 284-99.

Kaplan, Deborah. "Mass Marketing Jane Austen. Men, Women, and Courtship in Two Film Adaptations." *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, Kentucky UP, 1998, pp. 177-187.

Keats, John. *You Might As Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker*. Simon and Schuster, 1970.

Kellogg, Carolyn. "David Foster Wallace's estate comes out against *The End of the Tour*." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 April 2014, [www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-the-david-foster-wallace-estate-comes-out-against-end-of-the-tour-20140421-story](http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-the-david-foster-wallace-estate-comes-out-against-end-of-the-tour-20140421-story).

Kenny, Glenn. "Why *The End of the Tour* isn't really about my friend David Foster Wallace". *The Guardian*, 29 July 2015, [www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/29/why-the-end-of-the-tour-isnt-really-about-my-friend-david-foster-wallace](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/29/why-the-end-of-the-tour-isnt-really-about-my-friend-david-foster-wallace).

Kernan, Lisa. *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*. U of Texas P, 2004.

Kershaw, Ian. "Biography and the Historian. Opportunities and Constraints." *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, edited by Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig, Berghahn Books, 2008, pp. 27-39.

King, Barry. "Articulating Stardom." *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, Routledge, 1991, pp. 167-183.

King, Michael. *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame*. Viking, 2000.

Kline, T. Jefferson. *Unraveling French Cinema: From L'Atalante to Caché*. Wiley Blackwell, 2010.

Koresky, Michael. *Terence Davies*. U of Illinois P, 2014.

Landy, Marcia. "Sheets of the Past: Folklore, the Biopic, and The Scarlet Empress." *Cinematic Uses of the Past*. Uof Minnesota P, 1996, pp. 151-90.

Langford, Barry. *Film Genre. Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh UP, 2005.

Lanier, M. Douglas. "'There won't be puppets, will there?': 'Heroic' authorship and the cultural politics of *Anonymous*." *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy*, edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, Cambridge UP, pp. 215-224.

Le Faye, Deirdre, editor. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Oxford UP, 1995.

Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. Vintage Books, 1997.

- Leff, Leonard J. *Hemingway and his Conspirators: Hollywood, Scribners, and the Making of American Celebrity Culture*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1997.
- Lehmann, Courtney. *Shakespeare Remains. Theater to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern*. Cornell UP, 2002.
- Leighton, Angela. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Indiana UP, 1986.
- Leitch, Thomas. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007.
- “Les Fantômes de Haworth.” *Bonus Materials. Les Soeurs Brontë*, Gaumont, 1979.
- Lipkin, N. Steven. “Melodrama”. *Handbook of American Film Genres*. Ed. Wes D. Gehring. Greenwood Press, 1988, pp. 285-301.
- Longworth, Polly. *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd*. U of Massachusetts P, 1984.
- Lukow, Gregory and Steve Ricci. “‘The Audience’ Goes ‘Public’: Intertextuality, Genre, and the Responsibilities of Film Literacy.” *On Film*, no. 12, 1984,
- Lynch, Deirdre. “See Jane Elope: why are we so obsessed with Jane Austen’s love life?” *Slate*, 3 August 2007, [slate.com/culture/2007/08/what-becoming-jane-gets-wrong-about-jane-austen-s-love-life](http://slate.com/culture/2007/08/what-becoming-jane-gets-wrong-about-jane-austen-s-love-life).
- MacCabe, Colin. “The Revenge of the Author.” *Film and Authorship*, edited by Virginia Wright Wexman, Rutgers UP, 2003, pp. 30-41.
- Marie, Michel. *The French New Wave. An Artistic School*. Translated by Richard Neupert, Blackwell, 2003.
- Martin, Adrian. “Light My Fire: The Geology and Geography of Film Canons.” *Australian Film Critics Association*, Feb. 2008, [www.filmcritic.com.au/essays/canons](http://www.filmcritic.com.au/essays/canons).
- Martin, Angela. “Refocusing Authorship in Women’s Filmmaking.” *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 127-134.
- Maguire, Laurie and Emma Smith. *30 Great Myths about Shakespeare*. Wiley Blackwell, 2013.
- Marcantonio, Carla. *Global Melodrama: Nation, Body, and History in Contemporary Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Marcus, Laura. *Autobiographical Discourses. Criticism, Theory, Practice*. Manchester UP, 1994.
- Marcus, Laura. “The writer in film: authorship and imagination.” *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 35-49.

Marie, Michel. *The French New Wave. An Artistic School*, translated by Richard Neupert, Blackwell, 2003.

Marshall, Bill. *André Téchiné*. Manchester UP, 2007.

Max, D.T. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. Penguin, 2013.

McCarthy, Todd. "The Whole Wide World." *Variety*. 21 January 1996, [variety.com/1996/film/reviews/the-whole-wide-world-1200444385/](http://variety.com/1996/film/reviews/the-whole-wide-world-1200444385/).

McLaughlin, L. Robert. "Wallace's Aesthetic." *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, edited by Ralph Clare, CUP, 2018, pp. 159-172.

Meade, Marion. *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?*. Heinemann, 1988.

Mead, Rebecca. "How *The End of the Tour* Nails an Entire Profession". *The New Yorker*, 20 August 2015, [www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-artificial-intimacy-of-the-magazine-profile](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-artificial-intimacy-of-the-magazine-profile).

Mendelsohn, Daniel. "The Melodramatic Moment." *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 March 2003, [www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-melodramatic-moment](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-melodramatic-moment).

Mercer, John and Martin Shingler. *Melodrama: Style, Genre, Sensibility*. Columbia UP, 2004.

Metz, Margaret D. "Oscar Wilde at the Movies: British Sexual Politics and *The Green Carnation* (1960)". *Biography*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 90-107.

Miller, K. Nancy. *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*. Cornell UP, 1988.

Miller, Lucasta. *The Brontë Myth*. New York : Anchor Books, 2001.

Miller, Gabriel, editor. *Fred Zinneman: Interviews*. U of Mississippi P, 2005.

Minier, Márta and Maddalena Pennacchia. "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Biopic: An Introduction." *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*, edited by Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia, Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-31.

Modleski, Tania. *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. Routledge, 1990.

Moi, Toril. "'I am not a woman writer'. About women, literature and feminist theory today." *Feminist Theory*, 2008, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 259-271.

Moine, Raphaëlle. "The Contemporary French Biopic in National and International Contexts". *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, edited by Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, Routledge, 2014, 52-67.

Moine, Raphaëlle. *Vies Héroïques: Biopics Masculins, Biopics Féminins*. Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2017.

Monk, Claire. "The British 'heritage film' and its critics." *Critical Survey*, no. 7, no. 2, 1995, pp. 116-124.

Monk, Claire. "The British heritage-film debate revisited." *British Historical Cinema: the history, heritage and costume film*, edited by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant, Routledge, 2002.

Monk, Claire. "From 'English' Heritage to Transnational Audiences: Fan Perspectives and Practices and Why They Matter." *Screening European Heritage*, edited by Paul Cooke and Rob Stone, Palgrave, 2016, pp. 209-234.

Moran, J. Leslie. "Transcripts and Truth: Writing the Trials of Oscar Wilde." *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, edited by Joseph Bristow, Ohio UP, 2008, pp. 234-258.

Murphy, Kathleen. "Weird Tales, True Confession." *Film Comment*, vol. 32, no. 5, 1996, pp. 10-13.

Neale, Steve. "Melodrama and tears." *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6, 1989, pp. 6-23.

Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. Routledge, 2000.

Neale, Steve. "Questions of Genre." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 157-178.

Needham, Alex. "Charlotte Brontë's manuscript bought for £ 690,000 by Paris museum". *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2011, [www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/15/charlotte-bronte-manuscript-paris-museum](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/15/charlotte-bronte-manuscript-paris-museum).

Neupert, Richard. "The French New Wave. New stories, styles and auteurs". *Traditions in World Cinema*, edited by Linda Badley et al., Rutgers University Press, 2006, 41-51.

Neupert, Richard. *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007.

O'Malley, Sheila. "Review of *Wild Nights with Emily*." Roger-Ebert.com, 12 April 2019, [www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wild-nights-with-emily-2019](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wild-nights-with-emily-2019).

Orgel, Stephen. "The Authentic Shakespeare", *Representations*, vol. 21, January, 1988, pp. 1-25.

Parker, Dorothy. "Oscar Wilde: An Ideal Husband." *The Collected Dorothy Parker*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Parrill, Sue. *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations*. McFarland, 2002.

Pettit, Rhonda. *A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction*. Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2000.

Petitier Paule. "Le Michelet de Roland Barthes". *Littérature*. No.119, 2000, pp. 111-124.

Philippon, Alain 1988: *André Téchiné*. Cahiers du Cinéma, 1988.

Pidduck, Julianne. "The Times of *The Hours*: Queer Melodrama and the Dilemma of Marriage." *Camera Obscura*, Vol 28, No. 1, 2013, pp. 37-67.

Pidduck, Julianne. *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past*. BFI, 2005.

Polaschek, Bronwyn. *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Poore, Charles. "Ernest Hemingway's Memoir of Paris in the Twenties". *The New York Times*. 5 May 1964,  
[archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-feast](http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-feast).

Porton, Richard. "The Actor as Critic: An Interview with Stephen Fry." *Cineaste*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1998, pp. 8-12.

*Presumption – The Life of Jane Austen*. Prod. Randall Wright. BBC, 1995.

Pribram, E. Deirdre. "Melodrama and the Aesthetic of Emotion." *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Columbia UP, 2018, pp. 237-251.

Rains, Tom. "Wilde." *A Sight and Sound Reader*, edited by Ginette Vincendeau BFI, 2001, pp. 186-188.

Raitt, Suzanne. "Virginia Woolf's early novels: Finding a voice." *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Sellers, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 29 - 48.

Roberts, C. Robert. "Emotions and Culture." *The Emotions and Cultural Analysis*, edited by Ana Marta González, Routledge, 2016, pp. 19-30.

Roberts, C. Robert. *Emotions in the Moral Life*. Cambridge UP, 2013.

Robson, Jocelyn and Beverly Zalcock. *Australian and New Zealand Women's Films*, Scarlet Press, 1997.

Roe, Jill. *Her Brilliant Career: The Life of Stella Miles Franklin*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.



Roiland, Josh. "Getting Away from It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, U of Iowa P, 2012, pp. 25-52.

Rosenstone, Robert A. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Rosenstone, Robert A. editor. *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*. Princeton UP, 1995.

Rosenstone, Robert. "In Praise of the Biopic." *Lights Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, edited by Francavaglia, Richard and Jerry Rodnitzky, U of Texas P, 2007, pp. 11-29.

Rothwell, S. Kenneth. *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*. Cambridge UP, 2004.

Rueschmann, Eva. *Sisters on Screen: Siblings in Contemporary Cinema*. Temple UP, 2000.

Samuelian Flieger, Kristin. "Piracy is Our Only Option." *Jane Austen In Hollywood*, edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, Kentucky UP, 1998, pp. 148-158.

Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. Routledge, 2006.

Sargeant, Amy. "Making and selling heritage culture: Style and authenticity in historical fictions on film and television." *British Cinema, Past and Present*, edited by Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson, Routledge, 2000, pp. 301-315.

Schaeffer, Neil. "Perverting De Sade". *Guardian*, 13 January 2001, [www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jan/13/biography.film](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jan/13/biography.film).

Schilt, Thibaut. *François Ozon*. University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Schuessler, Jennifer. "Return of the Barfly." *The New York Times*, 26 Dec. 1999, [archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/12/26/reviews/991226.26schuest](http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/12/26/reviews/991226.26schuest).

Scott, A.O. "Another Side of Bob Dylan, and Another, and Another ..." *The New York Times*, 21 November 2007, [www.nytimes.com/2007/11/21/movies/21ther](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/21/movies/21ther).

Seitz, Matt Zoller. "Review of *The End of the Tour*." 31 July 2015, [www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-end-of-the-tour-2015](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-end-of-the-tour-2015).

Sewall, B. Richard. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard UP, 1994.

Shachar, Hila. *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic*. Palgrave, 2019.

Simpson, David. "Raymond Williams: Feeling for Structures, Voicing 'History.'" *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, edited by Christopher Prendergast, U of Minnesota P, 1995, pp. 29-50.

- Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Sinyard, Neil. *Fred Zinnemann: Films of Character and Conscience*. McFarland, 2003.
- Smyth, J.E. "The Long Road of Women's Memory." *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, edited by J.M. Smyth, Palgrave, 2012, pp. 165-182.
- Spence Jon. *Becoming Jane Austen*. Hambleton Continuum, 2003.
- Stam, Robert. "Introduction to 'The Author'." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, Blackwell, 2000, 1-20.
- Sterritt, David. "The Beats and Visual Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, edited by Steven Belletto, CUP, 2017, pp. 265-278.
- Stokes, John. *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations*. Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Stoneman, Patsy. "The Brontë Myth." *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, edited by Heather Glen. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 214-240.
- Stubbs, Jonathan. *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Svoboda, Frederic J. "The Great Themes in Hemingway: Love, War, Wilderness, and Loss." *A Historical Guide to Ernest Hemingway*, edited by Linda Wagner-Martin. Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 155-172.
- Taylor, Gary. "Stephen, Will, and Gary Too." *The Guardian*, 9 October 2004, [www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/09/biography.classics](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/09/biography.classics).
- Thomas, Sam, editor. *Best American Screenplays 2*. Crown Publishers, 1990..
- Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. McGraw-Hill, 1994.
- Thompson, Lucas. *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Tibbetts, C. John. *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography*. Yale UP, 2005.
- Tichenor, Austin. "Ben Elton's 'Upstart Crow' and 'All is True': Shakespeare in different keys." *Folger Shakespeare Library*. 28 June 2019. [shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2019/06/28/ben-elton-upstart-crow-all-is-true](http://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2019/06/28/ben-elton-upstart-crow-all-is-true). (Accessed 2 Dec. 2020)
- Timmer, Nicoline. "Radical defenselessness: A New Sense of Self in the Work of David Foster Wallace." *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker et al., Kindle ed., Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, ch.7.

- Tomalin, Claire: *Jane Austen, A Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Troost, Linda and Sayre Greenfield. "Introduction: Watching Ourselves Watching". *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, Kentucky UP, 2001, pp. 1-12.
- Toplin, Robert Brent. *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*. U of Illinois P, 1996.
- Truffaut, François. "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema". *Movies and Methods*, Volume I, edited by Bill Nichols, University of California Press, 1976, 224-37.
- Vidal, Belén. "Introduction: The biopic and its critical contexts." *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, edited by Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-32.
- Vidal, Belén. *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic*. Amsterdam UP, 2012.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. "Introduction." *A Historical Guide to Ernest Hemingway*, edited by Linda Wagner-Martin. Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 3-14.
- Walker, Cheryl. "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author." *Critical Inquiry*, 1990, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 551-571.
- Wall, Geoffrey. "Literary biopics: a literary biographer's perspective." *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, edited by Judith Buchanan, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 121-134.
- Wallace, David Foster. *The Pale King*. Penguin, 2011.
- Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 1993, pp. 151-194.
- Watts, Philip. *Roland Barthes' Cinema*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Weaver, Angela. "'Such a Congenial Little Circle': Dorothy Parker and the Early-Twentieth-Century Magazine Market." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol 38, no. 3 and 4, Fall/Winter, 2010, pp. 25-41.
- Weber, Brenda. "For the Love of Jane: Austen, Adaptation and Celebrity." *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*, edited by Rachel Carroll, Continuum, 2009, pp. 186-196.
- Welsh, James M. "'Hollywood 'Faction' and the New Biofantasy". *Studies in Popular Culture*. vol. 15, no. 2, 1993, pp. 57-66.
- Werness, B. Hope. *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*. Continuum, 2003.

Wexman, Wright Virginia, editor. *Jane Campion. Interviews*. U P of Mississippi, 1999.

Wexman, Wright Virginia. "Introduction." *Film and Authorship*, edited by Virginia Wright Wexman, Rutgers UP, 2003, pp. 1-19.

Wikse, Maria. *Materializations of a Woman Writer: Investigating Janet Frame's Biographical Legend*. Peter Lang AG, 2006.

Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol.4, edited by Josephine M. Guy, Oxford UP, 2007.

Williams, Linda. "Melodrama Revised." *Refiguring American Film Genres. Theory and History*, edited by Nick Browne, U of California P, 1998, pp. 42-88.

Williams, Linda. "When is Melodrama Good? Mega-Melodrama and Victimhood." *Melodrama After Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*. Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

Williams Raymond. "Film and the Dramatic Tradition." *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins, Blackwell, 2001, pp. 25-41.

Wiltshire, John. *Recreating Jane Austen*. Cambridge UP, 2001.

Wiseman, Andreas. "Terence Davies' WWI Drama 'Benediction' Wraps Shoot With Geraldine James, Jeremy Irvine, Simon Russell Beale Among Joiners; First Look at Jack Lowden Pic." *Deadline*, 2 Nov. 2020, [deadline.com/2020/11/jack-lowden-terence-davies-benediction-wraps-shoot-geraldine-james-simon-russell-beale-1234607510](https://deadline.com/2020/11/jack-lowden-terence-davies-benediction-wraps-shoot-geraldine-james-simon-russell-beale-1234607510).

Woolf. *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Woolf, Virginia. *Flush*, edited by Kate Flint. Oxford UP, 1998.

Woolf, Virginia. *Jacob's Room*, edited by Kate Flint, Oxford UP, 1999.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. Chancellor Press, 1994.

## II. Filmography

*A Quiet Passion*. Directed by Terence Davies, performances by Cynthia Nixon and Jennifer Ehle, Hurricane Films, 2016.

*All is True*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, performances by Kenneth Branagh and Judi Dench, TKBC, 2018.

*An Angel at My Table*. Directed by Jane Campion, performance by Kerry Fox, Hibiscus Films, 1990.

*Angel*. Directed by François Ozon, performances by Romola Garai, Michael Fassbender and Lucy Russell, Fidelité Productions, 2007.

*Barfly*. Directed by Barbet Schroeder, performances by Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway, Golan-Globus Productions, 1987.

*Becoming Jane*. Directed by Julian Jarrold, performances by Anne Hathaway and James McAvoy, HanWay Films, 2007.

*Bright Star*. Directed by Jane Campion, performances by Abbie Cornish and Ben Whishaw, Pathé Renn Productions, 2009

*Capote*. Directed by Bennett Miller, performances by Philip Seymour Hoffman and Catherine Keener, United Artists, 2005.

*Devotion*. Directed by Curtis Bernhardt, performances by Olivia de Havilland, Ida Lupino and Paul Henreid, Warner Bros., 1946.

*Edgar Allen Poe*. Directed by D.W. Griffith, performances by Herbert Yost and Linda Arvidson, American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1909.

*Factotum*. Directed by Bent Hamer, performances by Matt Dillon, Lili Taylor and Marisa Tomey, Bulbul Films, 2005.

*Genius*. Directed by Michael Grandage, performances by Colin Firth and Jude Law, Desert Wolf Productions, 2016.

*Howl*. Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, performances by James Franco and Todd Rotondi, Werc Werk Works, 2010.

*Iris*. Directed by Richard Eyre, performances by Judi Dench and Kate Winslet, BBC, 2001.

*Julia*. Directed by Fred Zinnemann, performances by Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave, Twentieth Century Fox, 1977.

*Les Soeurs Brontë*. Directed by André Téchiné. Performances by Isabelle Adjani, Marie-France Pisier and Isabelle Huppert, Gaumont, 1979.

*Mansfield Park*. Directed by Patricia Rozema, performances by Frances O'Connor and Jonny Lee Miller, BBC, 1999.

*Miss Austen Regrets*. Directed by Jeremy Lovering, performances by Olivia Williams and Greta Scacchi, BBC, 2007.

*Miss Potter*. Directed by Chris Noonan, performances by Renée Zellweger and Ewan McGregor, Phoenix Pictures, 2006.

*Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle*. Directed by Alan Rudolph, performances by Jennifer Jason Leigh and Matthew Broderick, Fine Line Features, 1994

*My Brilliant Career*. Directed by Gillian Armstrong, performances by Judy Davis and Sam Neill, Margaret Fink Productions, 1979.

*Nora*. Directed by Pat Murphy, performances by Ewan McGregor and Susan Lynch, GAM, 2000.

*Pandaemonium*. Directed by Julien Temple, performances by Linus Roache and John Hannah, BBC, 2000.

*Prick Up Your Ears*. Directed by Stephen Frears, performances by Gary Oldman and Alfred Molina, Zenith Entertainment, 1987.

*Priest of Love*. Directed by Christopher Miles, performances by Ian McKellen and Janet Suzman, Milesian Films, 1981.

*Quills*. Directed by Philip Kaufman, performances by Geoffrey Rush, Kate Winslet and Joaquin Phoenix, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2000.

*Shakespeare in Love*. Directed by John Madden, performances by Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes, Universal Pictures, 1998.

*Sylvia*. Directed by Christine Jeffs, performances by Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig, BBC Films, 2002.

*The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. Directed by Sidney Franklin, performances by Norma Shearer, Fredric March and Charles Laughton, MGM, 1934.

*The Edge of Love*. Directed by John Maybury, performances by Keira Knightley, Sienna Miller and Matthew Rhys, BBC Films, 2008.

*The End of the Tour*. Directed by James Ponsoldt, performances by Jason Segel and Jesse Eisenberg, Modern Man Films, 2015.

*The Happy Prince*. Directed by Rupert Everett, performances by Rupert Everett, Colin Firth and Emily Watson, Maze Pictures, 2018.

*The Hours*. Directed by Stephen Daldry, performances by Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman and Julianne Moore, Paramount Pictures, 2002.

*The Invisible Woman*. Directed by Ralph Fiennes, performances by Ralph Fiennes and Felicity Jones, BBC Films, 2013.

*The Libertine*. Directed by Laurence Dunmore, performances by Johnny Depp, Samantha Morton and John Malcovich, The Weinstein Company, 2004.

*The Life of Emile Zola*. Directed by William Dieterle, performances by Paul Muni and Gale Sondergaard, Warner bros., 1937.

*The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe*. Directed by Harry Lachman, performances by Linda Darnell and Sheperd Strudwick, Twentieth Century Fox, 1942.

*The Whole Wide World*. Directed by Dan Ireland, performances by Vincent D'Onofrio, Renée Zellweger, Cineville, 1996.

*Tom and Viv*. Directed by Brian Gilbert, performances by Willem Dafoe and Miranda Richardson, British Screen Productions, 1994.

*Wild Nights with Emily*. Directed by Madeleine Olnek, performances by Molly Shannon and Susan Ziegler, Embrem Entertainment, 2018.

*Wilde*. Directed by Brian Gilbert, performances by Stephen Fry, Jude Law and Vanessa Redgrave, Samuelson Productions, 1997.

*Pride and Prejudice*. Directed by Joe Wright, performances by Keira Knightley, Matthew Macfadyen. Focus Features, 2005.