

INVENTED LIVES, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

THE **BIOPIC** AND AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY



EDITED BY

WILLIAM H. EPSTEIN AND R. BARTON PALMER

Invented Lives, Imagined Communities

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The Biopic and
American National Identity



Edited by

William H. Epstein

and

R. Barton Palmer

SUNY
P R E S S

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Introduction

Strategic Patriotic Memories

WILLIAM H. EPSTEIN

Motion pictures are the most CONSPICUOUS of all American exports. They do not lose their identity. They betray their nationality and country of origin. They are easily recognized. They are all-pervasive. They color the minds of those who see them. They are demonstrably the single greatest factors in the Americanization of the world and as such fairly may be called the most important and significant of America's exported products.

—From a Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association internal memo, 1928



Entry Points

A “LIFE-PICTURING” DISCURSIVE MODALITY which has only recently begun to receive intense and systematic study, the biopic is almost certainly the most familiar and most significant form of biographical narrative to emerge from modernity (Christie 2002, 288). This first extensive look at the biopic in SUNY Press’s “Horizons of Cinema” series enmeshes it with “American National Identity,” itself a large and complex topic which has recently received a lot of attention. Thus I am going to ask you to think of this introduction as providing a series of entry points:

to an important but somewhat neglected biographical subgenre, to a familiar if often vexing politico-cultural formation, and to two emergent academic fields. In a sense, of course, *all* Hollywood films (the primary focus of our inquiry here) are about American national identity: Hollywood, as we know, is an important American industry, one of the “main instrument[s] of the ideological super-structure” of the nation (*Cabiers* 1976, 499), a powerful and influential discursive formation habitually and more or less reflexively deployed for both internal consumption and global export.¹ Moreover, biographical narrative of whatever kind has traditionally been an ally of dominant structures of socioeconomic authority,² as have the film industry in general and the industrial, technical, and aesthetic practices of biopics in particular. I will return later to the generic history and poetics of biopics, but first a few words about some influential conceptual practices associated with “National Identity” and then a few more about how those practices have intersected cinema studies, especially where this conjuncture is concerned with film history and American national consciousness.

As I’ve already indicated, “National Identity/ies” is a burgeoning field of study, situated in and among political science, area studies, ethnic and multicultural studies, history, and social studies, a congeries of interests exemplified in the learned journal *National Identities* (founded 1999), which is published in London and tilted toward Europe, but with a transnational and postnational perspective (on, for example, globalization, identity formation, political institutions) and an eye on ethnic diversity, cultural geography, and postmodern theory, as well as such familiar topics as race, class, and gender and such recurring tropes as (among many others) “borders,” “authenticity,” “myth,” “multiculturalism,” “homeland,” “orientalism,” “memory,” “birth,” “integration,” “patriotism,” “landscape,” and “local(ity).” The most frequently cited founding figures in the field are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983; 2nd ed. 1991; rev. ed. 2006), and Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (1991). Here is Smith’s familiar formulation of “the fundamental features of national identity”:

- (1) an historic territory, or homeland; (2) common myths and historical memories; (3) a common, mass public culture; (4) common legal rights and duties for all members; (5) a common economy with territorial mobility for members (Smith 1993, 14).

Moreover, and crucially for us, Smith recognizes that “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual

selves in the world,” although “the quest for the national self and the individual’s relationship to it remains the most baffling element in the nationalist project” (ibid., 17).

Anderson explains how this baffling nationalist project could be mediated: as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 2006, 6), “inherently limited and sovereign” (ibid.), which, since the invention of the printing press, is constantly “re-presenting” (ibid., 25) itself through the languages people choose in order to engage in public discourse and through the various discursive formations with which they imagine the communities they inhabit. Over the course of the Long Eighteenth Century, these vehicles of transmission and formation were likely to be the novel and the newspaper (ibid.), or, after the 1820s, “the inner premises and conventions of modern biography and autobiography” (ibid., xiv), or, in the twentieth century, radio, cinema, and television, or, “in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa,” “the census, the map, and the museum” (ibid., 163). Obviously, this is only a partial listing of the many ways in which Anderson traces the history, indeed, histories, of the emergence, transformation, and proliferation of what he calls “national consciousness,” which, he is at pains to point out, happens in different places at different times for some of the same and different reasons. Most pertinently for our purposes, perhaps, the modern nation is imagined first (“*well before* [it is in] most of Europe”—ibid., 50; italics in original) in the Americas in the late 1700s and early 1800s, where it is characteristically instrumentalized as a movement of national independence led by “pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen” (think Benjamin Franklin) (ibid., 65).

Anderson concludes the later editions of his book with two meditations on biography: a chapter subtitled “On the Geo-biography of *Imagined Communities*” and a piquant and (for us) apposite section on “The Biography of Nations,” from which I now quote at some length:

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. . . . The photograph [and, one might add, the cinema], fine child[ren] of the age of mechanical reproduction, [are] only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence . . . which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it cannot be “remembered,” must be narrated. . . .

As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of “forgetting” the experience of this continuity . . . engenders the need for a narrative of “identity” . . . Yet between narratives of person and nation there is a central difference of employment. In the secular story of the “person” there is a beginning and an end. . . . Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography cannot be written evangelically, “down time,” through a long procreative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it “up time”—towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archaeology casts its fitful gleam. This fashioning, however, is marked by deaths, which, in a curious inversion of conventional genealogy, start from an originary present. . . .

Yet the deaths that structure the nation’s biography are of a special kind. . . . [T]he deaths that matter are those myriad anonymous events, which, aggregated and averaged into secular mortality rates, permit [historians] to chart the slow-changing conditions of life for millions of anonymous human beings of whom the last question asked is their nationality.

From [the historians’] remorselessly accumulating cemeteries, however, the nation’s biography snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as “our own.” (Anderson 2006, 204–206)

As M. Lane Bruner observes, *pace* Anderson, in a 2005 *National Identities* article, “Rhetorical Theory and the Critique of National Identity Construction”: “The imaginary nature of collective identity has been thoroughly theorized” (Bruner 2005, 316); “*national identity is a politically consequential fiction based on a selective remembering and forgetting*” (ibid.; my italics); “human subjects are alienated from their actual material condition by discourses that obscure that material condition” (ibid.); “‘The presence of identity is merely a temporary discursive conjuncture in which certain discourses have stabilised their hegemonic forces upon the domain’” (Thongchai [1994], 173, as in Bruner 2005, 317); “The post-national critic seeks to investigate the suppressions involved in all unifying national fictions in order to determine their various characters, which in turn allows for a more reflexive understanding of the variety

of ways in which national identity constitutes both a sense of self and a sense of otherness” (ibid., 319–20). We also find such closely scrutinized “*strategic forgetfulness*” or “*strategic public memory*” (ibid., 316; my italics) in the work of film historians, critics, and theorists interested in “Cinema and Nation,” the title of a recent book of original articles edited by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (2000) as well as of two special issues of *Film History* (1996) edited by Mark Langer and Kristin Thompson.³ In “National Cinema, National Imaginary,” the lead article in the first of these special issues, Michael Walsh argues that “[t]he critical use of national imaginaries is heavily based [on] the slides that can be made between Anderson’s imagined (a form of social epistemology), Lacan’s Imaginary (a mechanism for explaining the fixity of meaning around identificatory positions), and a more everyday form of the term imagination (as what an aesthetic philosopher like Kendall Walton might call a game of make believe)” (Walsh 1996, 7). Thus, despite its apparent sophistication, Walsh is indicating that the discourse of national imaginaries is a slippery critical practice lacking theoretical rigor, (contingent) historical and other contextualist framing, and (what in cinema studies, which has always been the most intensely theorized of academic fields, would be considered) a viable and necessary methodology “link[ing] formal devices to spectatorial positioning” (ibid., 14) and to “a description of their repetition and circulation” (ibid., 16)—what in literary studies, I might add, would be called “mediation” and associated with, as Walsh recognizes (ibid.), one or another mode of formalist criticism and reception aesthetic: the kind of methodology we aspire to practice here.

In “Birthing Nations,” the concluding essay in the *Cinema and Nation* collection, Jane M. Gaines reminds us of Ernest Renan’s remark in his well-known 1882 lecture “What Is a Nation?”: “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation” (Gaines 2000, 301)—a conceptual practice enabling, many observers have noted, the recent study of national identities. The silent picture Gaines wants to talk about in “Birthing Nations” is, of course, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), in many respects the founding film of American narrative cinema, which, she notes, revealing her debt not only to Renan but also to Anderson and his “Biography of Nations,” “advocates *a nation that never was*. Contrary to most interpretations of the film that stress the constitution of the American union, the nation that is ‘birthed’ in the film is really the impossible, ‘invisible’ nation that only exists in the minds of stalwart Southerners” (ibid., 299)—a classic example, indeed, perhaps, *the* classic American example of how strategic public forgetting and remembering give birth to nations that never were, and of how American movies, repeatedly circulating throughout the country and all over the world,

became the privileged medium through which the imagined communities of the modern era were publicly memorialized. As Jenny Barrett reminds us in *Shooting the Civil War: Cinema, History and American National Identity* (2009), Griffith's controversial "epic melodrama" (Barrett 2009, 138) of the Civil War, the Reconstruction South, and the Ku Klux Klan is the story of the birth or rebirth of America as a "reunited white family." Barrett bases her approach on Anderson's contention in *Imagined Communities* "that there is an entire 'pedagogical industry' endeavouring to make Americans 'remember/forget the hostilities of 1861–65 as a great "civil war"' that led to "a national reconciliation" (ibid., 9–10, citing Anderson), an "uptime genealogy" (Anderson 2006, 205) which was underwritten, in large part and well into the twentieth century, by the ideology of white supremacy, the disciplinary practices of the American historical profession (the sitting president in 1915 was a Southern academic, Woodrow Wilson, who famously "declar[ed] that the film was 'like history written with lightning'" [Barrett 2009, 129]), and the generic conventions and economic exigencies of the American film industry. Barrett also relies on two of Smith's insights in *National Identity*: that Griffith's structuring of the film around two American families, one Northern, one Southern, which "are reunited" "when white rule returns to the South" (Barrett 2009, 138), is a classic example of how "the metaphor of family is indispensable to nationalism" (ibid., 148, citing Smith); and that *Birth of a Nation's* "appeal to distant [Scottish] ancestors from Europe," a ritualistic distancing which "makes whiteness even purer," is an instance of "nationalism[']s characteristic] appeal to 'ancient beliefs and commitments to ancestral homelands and to the generations of one's forefathers'" (ibid., 148–49, citing Smith), an appeal even more famously instanced in the Irish ancestry behind *Gone With the Wind* (1939), another epic melodrama with many of the same plot elements and ideological assumptions that helped to establish the "South" as an imagined domestic-regional space of "internal orientalism." This is the term David R. Jansson deploys in a 2005 *National Identities* article on the film *Mississippi Burning* (1988), in which the South emerges as America's "primary regional other," "a receptacle for the country's shadow," "an internal colony of the United States" (Jansson 2005, 268), constructed as "racist, violent, xenophobic, intolerant, parochial and corrupt (as well as white)" (ibid., 271). "In contrast, 'America' is understood as standing for the opposite of these vices," and the film "reproduces an American national identity that stands for tolerance, justice, and peace" (ibid., 265; italics in original).

Here and elsewhere, for example, in Michael Coyne's *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (1997), film historians and critics have stressed how readily certain film genres, especially

those associated with the cultural geography of the United States, have accommodated the interpellation of American national identity. Perhaps this is because, as Rick Altman claims, “[w]ith regard to location, it is instructive to note just how closely the notion of genre parallels that of nation” (Altman 1999, 86, as in Gaines 2000, 304), a clever observation stressing how genre and nation are both imagined constructions with material histories which are crucial to individual and communal processes of interpretation. I said much the same thing in *Recognizing Biography* (1987) about what I called the generic recognition of (written) biographical narrative, which, I claimed, derives its authority in part from the dynamics of repetition that characterizes the discourse of genre, and which traverses or emplots generic space through various cognitive activities of generic encoding and decoding, such as (among others) those associated with “recognizing” the biographer, the biographical subject, the life-course, and (what I called) the “life-text” (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). As Mikhail Bakhtin remarks, “Genre lives in the present, but it always *remembers* the past, its beginnings.”⁴ And, finally, as Roland Barthes observes, “meaning is a force: to name is to subject, and the more generic the nomination, the stronger the subjection” (Barthes 1974, 129–30).

All these concerns are as pertinent to biographical film as they are to biographical writing, and now, at long last, situated primarily in cinema studies and life-writing studies, a critical mass of intelligent informed work on the biopic has emerged, led by Dennis Bingham’s important recent (2010) book on the biopic as “a contemporary film genre” (see my summary below) and anticipated by Carolyn Anderson’s chapter-length generic history in 1988, George Custen’s pioneering book-length study on the biopic as “public history” in 1992, Eileen Karsten’s 1993 filmography, Robert Rosenstone’s continuing work on film and history beginning with *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (1995), special issues of the learned journals *Biography*, on “The Biopic” (2000) and “Self-Projection and Autobiography in Film” (2006), and *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2008), and interesting and useful articles and book chapters by (among others) Thomas Elsaesser (1986) on the studio style and film cycles of the 1930s Warner Brothers biopic, Chris Robé (2009) on the biopic, the historical costume drama, and 1930s Popular Front film criticism, Cynthia Hanson (1988) and Cynthia Rose (1993) on some crucial conventions of the rock (and musical) biopic, especially (*pace* Custen) the entertainer as talented and professionalized exception, Audrey Levasseur (2000) on “Film and Video Self-Biographies,” Lucy Fischer (2000) on “Modernity, Mortality, and the Biopic,” Ian Christie’s

(2002) survey of silent and early sound biographical films in Europe and America as agents of modernity, mass communication, psychology, nationalism, and the cult of personality, Carolyn Anderson and John Lupo's (2002, 2008) studies of Hollywood and "off-Hollywood" (ironic, camp) lives at the turn of the twenty-first century, James Chapman's *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (2005) and J. E. Smyth's *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema* (2006), the postmodern musings of Jason Sperb (2006) on "simulacrum as an autobiographical act" and Garrett Stewart (2006) on "vitagraphic time," and, of course, the Summer 2011 special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* upon which this book is, in part, based—all of it engaging, to a greater or lesser extent, with "the biopic and American national identity."⁵

Generic Plots

Now, the premise of this book is 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. Before describing the general outline of this generic plot, how it has already been noted in cinema studies, how the contributors to this book are helping to sophisticate it, and how we might use (what I will call) a generic gesture of *strategic patriotic memory* to track its distribution between and among filmmakers and films, formal devices and spectatorial positions, and the reception and circulation of mainstream American cinema over (post)modern(ist) time and space, I want to pause a moment to consider another much more complicated generic plot—Dennis Bingham's elaborate articulation of "the biopic as contemporary film genre." Bingham's generic plot evolves and devolves through what he calls "developmental stages, emerging from . . . historical cycles . . . that continue to be available to filmmakers working in the form": briefly, "the classical, celebratory" melodramatic biopic; the "warts-and-all" melodramatic/realistic biopic; "the transition [from] a producer's genre to an auteurist director's genre"; "critical investigation and atomization of the subject"; "parody"; "minority appropriation"; and "since 2000, the neoclassical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these" (Bingham 2010, 17–18). Bingham pursues this agenda over the course of *two* books, each strongly inflected by gender and race, each contained within the covers of *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, each nine chapters and roughly two hundred pages long: "The Great (White) Man Biopic and Its Discontents" and "A Woman's Life Is Never Done: Female Biopics." Let me try to give you some idea of the scope of this nearly epic production.

The first book begins with a brief glance at literary modernism and how Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) anticipates "the canny spectator positioning that made Hollywood films so successful" (Bingham 2010, 38), then how *Rembrandt* (1936, starring Charles Laughton) "epitomizes the centrality of star performances in showing the [unusual, virtually nonassimilable] life of a 'Great Man'" (ibid., 42). In a crucial, intelligently rendered chapter on *Citizen Kane* (1941), Bingham analyzes this famous film as "the central, genre-changing event in the history of the biopic" (51), for it "exposes the fact that the Great Man biopic is about nothing more than the vindication of the ego" (66) and induces the "relentless curiosity, unknowability, and lack of self-recognition [that] would reanimate the biopic in decades to come" (70). *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) "breaks through the boundaries of the biopic" (72), becomes "a Brechtian biopic . . . about the effects of power, fame, and adulation" (78) in which "Stracheyan irony" (75) and an imperial "subject steeped in ambivalence" (76) demystify, for "American audiences in the civil rights-aware year of 1963" (81), "one of the central myths of biography"—"that self-determination and destiny absolutely do go together" (78). In his chapters on Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995), Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994), and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), Bingham positions the biopic at the end of the American century in a late capitalist, post-Cold War, culturally diverse, deconstructed world: the "biopic protagonist" is now either "a postmodernist hollow man" (102) or the parodic "undeserving" subject of an "anti-Great Man biopic" (146, 151) or an overdetermined "enigma" (183) of "a new [neoclassical] tradition . . . of films that reappropriate the classical biopic form . . . to tell the stories of figures who were by definition outside the mainstream culture" (176).

The second book, on the female biopic, begins where the first book ends—with "breaking past the limitations of the patriarchal form to find a genre that tells the woman's story in a female voice" (Bingham 2010, 222), and with the director Todd Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a forty-two-minute graduate student's film made on a tiny budget deploying dolls and toys to interrogate anorexia, consumer culture, and "the genre of the melodramatic Hollywood female biopic" (ibid., 224–25), and to reveal how an "ideology of beauty, happiness, consumerism, heterosexuality, and middle-class respectability" (237) determines "What happens all the time?" in American culture" (224). This second book also concludes with a Todd Haynes film. *I'm Not There* (2007), a full-length relatively well-financed independent film by a now-established director, is "seven characters in search of [a biographical] subject" (382), a reimagining of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) as Bob Dylan, never actually named, 'embodied' by male and female actors

of various ages and races, in a biopic that explores “self-identification and self-invention” (378) as it rejects familiar and conventional notions of coherence, unity, presence, embodiment, representation, and meaning. In between these two defining projects, Bingham looks intensely at ’40s and ’50s melodramas of female victimization which explored criminality, celebrity, and gender construction and featured (most tellingly) Susan Hayward, who starred in four such films, all with first-person titles, of which *I Want to Live!* (1958, six Oscar nominations) is the most celebrated and provides “early evidence that with awareness and effort male filmmakers can tell a female protagonist’s story without forcing it into the [common] formulas of victimization and . . . downward trajectory” (258). *Funny Girl* and *Star!* (both 1968), “two hard-ticket roadshow musicals” (259) with transcendent female stars (Barbra Streisand, Julie Andrews), “deal with ambition, the dialectic of public and private, the meaning of celebrity, motherhood, the successful woman in the world, and the nature of stardom” (260–61). The ’80s “resurgence of female biopics” (290) reinforces how “[m]adness, hysteria, sexual dependency, the male gaze and a patriarchal authorship” continued to characterize “the classic female biopic” and poses the question, “Is there a way to tell the lives of women while critiquing, revising, and redirecting all these conventional tendencies?” (310)—a question answered by the following chapters on Jane Campion’s *An Angel at My Table* (1991), Steven Soderbergh’s *Erin Brockovich* (2000), Mary Harron’s *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2006), and Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), all “movies [which] reappropriate the male gaze directed at women” while “posit[ing] an iconic female exhibitionist inside a very patriarchal order” (349) and “examin[ing] the nature of female celebrity and subjectivity in the early twenty-first century” (350).

Distributed throughout Bingham’s “developmental stages,” the generic plot I am calling “The Biopic and American National Identity” comes to life with *The Birth of a Nation* and the emergence of narrative film itself in the formative years of the silent era. In “A Life on Film,” Christie remarks how, as the talkies replaced silent movies in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “[f]rom America to Russia, across all the national cinemas of Europe now able and required to speak in their own languages, there seemed to be a concerted project of ‘national biography’ through cinema. . . . In every national cinema, and especially in the supranational Hollywood cinema, ‘life-stories’ became a major genre” (Christie 2002, 292, 290). Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* takes up the story from here: during the classical, studio era (c. 1930–1960), the dominant and dominating corporate culture of Hollywood (as represented and enacted by its studio heads, departments,

and “styles”) characteristically induced and produced biographical films as if they were civics lessons in traditional American values, even (or especially) when the biographical subjects and targeted audiences of these films were not American.⁶ “Idols of production and/or consumption,” these inventors, scientists, explorers, politicians, sovereigns, warriors, artists, and entertainers are depicted as “extraordinary,” “abnormal” figures whose threatening difference must be recognized and celebrated before being reintegrated into the community, which, against a background of global depression and the rise of fascism and communism, is understood at this time (the ’30s and then, in a sense, the residual legacy of the ’30s during the war years and the first phase of the Cold War) as small town, democratic, capitalist, and American. Both Custen and Christie see this newly emergent genre as “preoccup[ied] with the nature of modern fame” and the star system, with “[t]he apparatus of modern mass communications” and the standardized consumption of “mass culture,” with “a commitment to popular education and ‘uplift,’” with the “ambivalent prospect of ‘total’ representation,” and with the problematics of truth, narrative, and “‘life picturing’” (Christie 2002, 283, 288, 291; Custen 1992, 6, 45–47, 87–89, 111, 149, 202–205, and *passim*).

Strategic Patriotic Memories

The classic film here is perhaps John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939)—which is almost wholly “fictional” in its various interwoven and invented stories about Lincoln’s lost love for Ann Rutledge, his adoption of law and then politics as a career, his first encounters with Mary Todd and Stephen Douglas, his immersion in frontier customs and values, his canny defense of an accused murderer—about which the great Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein wrote, “[O]f all American films made up to now [1945] this is the film that I would wish, most of all, to have made,” because, despite its factual inaccuracy, it captures the “popular and national spirit . . . [t]hrough the image of [its] historical protagonist, . . . a living embodiment of the positive ideals of freedom and justice for future generations of America” (Eisenstein 1968, 140, 141, 144).⁷ This claim is examined in a famous 1970 film studies article on *Young Mr. Lincoln* by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, who chose this film as the first in a “series of [what would come to be called postmodern] studies” offering a “re-scansion” of classic films in order to “make them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid” (*Cahiers* 1976, 494, 496). While barely acknowledging the biopic as a contemporary film genre (their only mention a mere nod to the film’s producer as “the man responsible [at Fox] for historical biographies which constitute[d]

the core of the company's productions"—*ibid.*, 500), the *Cabiers* editors remind us nonetheless that, as in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, traditional (written and filmed) biographical narrative of well-known, culturally received figures is a structure of "*specific repetition*," "of the future contained in the past" (506), of the reader/spectator's "universal knowledge" of the biographical subject's "fate" (507), and of a particular kind of memorializing and remythologizing "feedback loop" (my term) which this genre characteristically induces its readers/viewers to traverse. Indeed, it is worth remembering here how melodramatically commemorative and earnest, as well as how in(con)sistently accurate and authentic⁸ these movies on (among many others) Lincoln and Wilson, Edison and Bell, Pasteur and Madame Curie, Queen Elizabeth and Catherine the Great, Zola and the Brontes, Lou Gehrig and Knute Rockne, Rembrandt and van Gogh, Annie Oakley and Wyatt Earp, Lindbergh and Daniel Boone, Chopin and Glenn Miller were (in)famous for being.⁹

Moreover, I want to use a bit of the *Cabiers* editors' "re-scansion" of the end of this classic film to point to one of the ways in which the biopic characteristically interpellates American national identity.



FIGURE 1. *Young Mr. Lincoln* (Dir. John Ford, 1939). Lap dissolve to the final shot.

Final scene: Lincoln takes leave of his companion . . . by telling him “I think I might go on apiece . . . maybe to the top of that hill.” . . . A storm threatens. Lincoln is slowly climbing the hill. A last shot shows him facing the camera, with a vacant look, while threatening clouds cross the background and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” begins to be heard. Lincoln leaves the frame. Rain begins to fall violently and continues into the final shot of the film (his statue at the Capitol) while music intensifies. (*Cabiers* 1976, 524)

What the *Cabiers* editors call here “the excesses of Ford’s writing,” which, “by overlaying all the clichés, underlines the monstrous character of the figure of Lincoln” (ibid.), is a wonderful example of specific repetition, of the future contained in the past, of the viewer’s universal knowledge of the biographical subject’s fate, culminating in one of the great commemorative icons of American national identity—the Lincoln Memorial—and in the enduring abolitionist hymn written during and forever associated with the Civil War and the renationalized Union to which (the story goes) Lincoln gave his life.¹⁰ This is a familiar move, a *gesture of strategic patriotic memory*, if you will, in the script of this generic plot we are tracking: a visual or aural reference to something unmistakably identified with the United States of America, most often, of course, instanced by the American flag or the national anthem, but occasionally by a well-known monument, landmark, or cartographic feature or by a popular or folk song or an evocative piece of instrumental music.

Let’s briefly pursue this gesture through two other landmark films, *Citizen Kane* (screenplay, Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles; director, Welles) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (screenplay, Robert Benton and David Newman; producer, Warren Beatty; director, Arthur Penn), both of which are often said to have utterly changed the way Hollywood films were made and American national identity conceived. As we’ve seen, Bingham has made the fundamental case for Welles’s film: “an essential work of modernism” (Bingham 2010, 68), “the central, genre-changing event in the history of the biopic” (ibid., 51), “*Citizen Kane* fragments, objectifies, and, so to speak, psychoanalyzes the prototypical biopic subject of the 1930s” (ibid.). A satirical, mock-generic interrogation (emplotted through, for example, the *pastiche* newsreel with which the film opens, the journalistic search for the “real” Kane and then Rosebud, the remorseless and reflexive attention to the process of gathering, sorting, and interpreting fragmentary, confusing, and often contradictory biographical information) which “exposes the fact that the Great Man biopic is about nothing more than the vindication of the ego” (66), and which induces

the “relentless curiosity, unknowability, and lack of self-recognition [that] would reanimate the biopic in decades to come” (70), “*Kane* makes contact with the touchstones and archetypes of American myth, but does so in a way that reappropriates them” (57), a “‘narrative strategy [that] comes across as anti-heroic and anti-Hollywood’” (Mulvey 1992, 22, as in Bingham 2010, 70), that “alienates the ordinary spectator[,] and [that] turns the biopic from a majority [“mass entertainment”] genre to a[n] [“auteurist”] minority one” (Bingham 2010, 70–71). In a sense, *Bonnie and Clyde* reverses this “alienation effect,” turning an arthouse/European script into a mass-market American phenomenon, “the most popular and influential biographical film of the 1960s,” which “tapped pools of discontent in audiences throughout the country” (Anderson 1988, 335) and which inaugurated a brief era of auteurist, experimental, antiestablishment, independent, and yet mainstream (Wall Street–financed, popular, award-winning) filmmaking that transformed the American film industry.

To use the language and plot points of the film and several of the intersecting movie genres it coopts, in *Bonnie and Clyde* the “outlaws” have become the “in-laws”: in one sense, of course, the outlaws are the public and generic identities Bonnie and Clyde assume in the movie and in popular culture, while the in-laws are the visiting Barrows (Clyde’s brother and sister-in-law, who also become outlaws) and the visited Parkers (Bonnie’s mother and family) and, conversely in relation to them, Bonnie and Clyde themselves. In another sense, the movie’s remarkable success and influence induce what Jerome Christensen calls a postmodern “putting-on” of iconic branding, corporate auteurism, and American national identity. As we’ve already seen (and this is not exactly Christensen’s point), this “put-on” also has something to do with Hollywood corporate history—like the outlaw and gangster genres, the biopic emerged during the ’30s as a studio-driven film cycle, a more or less bankable genre that, in fact, was often appropriated by the outlaw and gangster genres, although, for a prestige genre most often identified with the received heroic figures of established structures of authority, the biopic was somewhat embarrassed when this was the company it was seen to be keeping. But *Bonnie and Clyde* changed all that: what was once “the shame of the nation” (the subtitle of the 1932 *Scarface*, based on the life of Al Capone) was now (despite the real-life C. W. Moss’s 1968 lawsuit against the studio claiming that the movie “brought [him] shame and disrepute”)¹¹ the generic appropriation that saved the American film industry and pointed the way to a new mode of postindustrial capitalism that would midwife yet another “birth of the nation.” An “outlaw” film Warner didn’t want to make or, once made, support, and in which corporate capitalism is represented as the class enemy of

ordinary folk who can't beat the system and are doomed to (one form or another of) violent death (foreclosure and starvation, a life of crime and punishment, the collapse of the grand political narratives, interminable hot and cold war), "*Bonnie and Clyde* [Christensen explains] undertook to save the motion picture industry by demonstrating how a declining major [movie company] anchored to a failing business model could be rebranded as a cultural icon of substantial value to corporate managers who understood their financial success to be bonded with their cultural and political role; the Tatira-Hiller [Beatty's production company] motion picture prefigures a new Hollywood, and, in doing so, a new model of citizenship, which . . . [Christensen dubs] corporate populism, as an alternative to the lapsed consensus that liberals esteemed or the participatory democracy of which radicals dreamed" (Christensen 2012, 275).

There are, of course, many examples after *Bonnie and Clyde* of the discursive distribution of this "corporate populism" across American cinematic culture in general and the biographical film in particular. Consider Michael Apted's *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), which, like country music itself, has often been treated as a traditional "repository of white, working-class authenticity" and "a conservative force affirming traditional American values" (Brackett 2001; Brost 2008), even though, remarkably, it does not overtly deploy the traditional generic gestures of strategic patriotic memory we've been tracing. Nevertheless, in the *Cabiers* spirit of "mak[ing] them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid" (*Cabiers* 1976, 496), we recognize that this gesturing has power even if it's not there—in this instance, I believe, because its British director was absorbed with portraying country singer Loretta Lynn's hillbilly background and apparently unaware or (more likely) unmindful of the Hollywood convention of employing such images. This lack is retrospectively filled, if you will, by two of the special features on the twenty-fifth anniversary DVD of the film (which, in the interim, had itself become a classic of Americana): the Loretta Lynn interview and President George H. W. Bush's September 1989 speech at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the federally funded American Film Institute (AFI). The Lynn interview is shot at Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter* museum, a much-visited tourist destination located inside the movie's replica of the house she was raised in: a brief special-features tour of the museum highlights various displays in which the American flag is prominently featured and in which Lynn's life and this movie of it have become closely associated with the Appalachian border South, with certain traditional rural values and customs, and with the commercialization of "hillbilly" music mediated by "Nashville," all these associations poignantly, aggressively, and patriotically glossed by the word *country*. This political reading

is reinforced by the DVD's replaying of Bush's AFI speech, in which the president recalls the founding of the institute during Lyndon Johnson's administration, acknowledges his friends and chastises his enemies in the movie industry, and celebrates film as "the mirror of America" and "also, in a sense, the conscience of America." He then goes on to mention *Coal Miner's Daughter* as an illustration of "the human spirit vanquishing poverty," thanks filmmakers for joining the war on drugs, and, in turn, assures film producers that in his administration their "property rights [will be] respected" and "American films [will] have unfettered access to foreign markets." Bush concludes this compact and yet comprehensive iteration of Hollywood as a political player in the ideological superstructure, as an instrument of hegemonic power and American national identity, by asserting, "[T]o understand the heart of America just look at the American film."

Let's conclude with Bob Fosse's *Lenny* (1974), another post-*Bonnie and Clyde*, corporate-auteurist "put-on," and yet another entertainer biopic that makes no traditionally overt visual or aural patriotic gestures: situated in very different regions of the American heart(land), it recuperates its "lack" diegetically by deploying language brutally and nakedly in an effort to speak truth to the very power structures Bush instances and symbolizes. This is a hermetic film, taking place entirely within the overlapping show business milieu of comics and strippers, from which the Jewish, childlike, career-destroying Lenny Bruce emerges, briefly and chaotically, as a spokesperson of his generation, jazzy, hip, "cool," intensely political, the quintessential "sick" comedian who articulates and analyzes the "obscenities" of contemporary American life, most famously perhaps in his "auction" routine, in which various ethnic and racial slurs are named, inventoried, and "sold American" (echoing a line from mid-century Lucky Strike ads). This comic style is laced with scatological language and intended, as a clergyman witness for the defense explains at one of Bruce's many obscenity trials (exemplifying and parodying the mostly invented trial scenes through which many traditional biopics vindicate their subjects), "to hold up and expose American society so they can really see themselves," thus providing, as Bruce cries out at the end in yet another trial scene, "the information [that] keeps the country straight. You need the deviant."¹² This poignant last phrase is a rearticulation in a somewhat different register of a discursive convention crucial to the generic emplotment of the biopic: as Custen, Bingham, and others observe, most traditional biopic figures are, in one way or another, eccentric, resisting "genius[es]" with extraordinary talents—deviants—who, "in the canny spectator positioning that made Hollywood films so successful," are transformed into sympathetic characters whom audiences root

for by being “play[ed] . . . against” various “sorts of rigid bureaucracies, greedy self-interests, warped value systems, and unimaginatively opposed families” (Custen 1992, 17, 121–39; Bingham 2010, 38). Of course, as before, the biopic’s characteristic structure of “*specific repetition*,” “of the future contained in the past,” of the spectator’s “universal knowledge” of the biographical subject’s “fate” (*Cahiers* 1976, 506–507), enables this deviant to be “normalize[d]” throughout the course of the film into a “well-adjusted, successful biopic hero” (Custen 1992, 17), the vehicle through which change has occurred and the world made whole again.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

The chapter epigraph is cited and quoted in whole or in part in Rosenbaum, 217, and Vasey, 43.

1. A routine observation. E.g., see Hayward (2000, 92): “Dudley Andrews states that ‘from the standpoint of economies, there is but one viable national cinema—Hollywood—and the world is its nation’ . . . and . . . *Le Monde* reiterates this idea by declaring ‘that there is no European cinema only American cinema.’” See also Hedetoft (2000, 281): “‘Hollywood,’ as a rule, produces national cinema, if by this concept we understand film whose thematic ‘aboutness[,]’ . . . interpretive framing, and sets of ideas and values are rooted in American perceptions of man, nature, society, and the world.” See also Custen, “The World Is an American Stage,” 90–93.

2. “The cultural activities of reading and writing the biographical subject have *histories*, marked by (among other things) a tradition of being allied with dominant structures of cultural, political, social, and economic authority,” Epstein, “(Post)Modern Lives,” 221–22. See also Custen (1992, 190): “Biopics are conservative because so many of the public institutions endowed with power shared and sustained a similar view of the world.”

3. See also the essays in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Williams, which is devoted primarily to theorizing and analyzing features of “national cinema,” not quite our topic, and the Nationalism Project Website, which describes itself as “a clearinghouse of scholarly nationalism information including: leading definitions of nationalism, book reviews, web links, subject bibliographies, a bibliography of more than 2,000 journal articles, and much more.”

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1963), as in Todorov, 84.

5. Three books not yet available at this writing also seem likely to engage the topic of this book and are yet another indication of the continuing emergence of sophisticated scholarly and critical work on the biopic: Bronwyn Polaschek, *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kablo, Woolf, and Austen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Doris Berger, *Projected Art History: Biopics, Celebrity Culture, and the Popularizing of American Art (International Texts in Critical Media Aesthetics)* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); and Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, eds., *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture (AFI Film Readers)* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

6. See also Elsaesser, who provides specifics about Warners in the '30s, and C. Anderson, "Biographical Film," 332.

7. See also Christie 2002, 297–98.

8. "What gritty realism was to the topical picture became *authenticity* to the bio-pic: the trademark for a genre," Elsaesser 1986, 23; stress added. As Custen demonstrates (passim, but esp. 34–45, 111–18), "authenticity" should be understood primarily as a sales technique highlighting the efforts of the studio's research department to faithfully reproduce period and other kinds of *mise-en-scène* detail. See also Robé (2009, 72) on 1930s leftist film criticism of the biopic as "historical spectacle" ("reactionary idealization of the past") and "costume drama" ("the empty affect of the *mise-en-scène's* surface details").

9. See Custen's various appendices, esp. his "Purposive Sample of Biopics" and "Biopics by Profession."

10. See also Smyth, "The Lives and Deaths of Abraham Lincoln," 167–94, who sees "the Abraham Lincoln articulated in *Young Mr. Lincoln*" as "a response to trends in contemporary Lincoln historiography, the relativist exploration of historical alternatives, and the vicissitudes of historiography" (187).

11. "The fictional C. W. Moss [was] a composite of gang members W. D. Jones and Henry Methvin. Jones sued Warner Bros for \$175,000. . . . He didn't see a penny" (Tunzelmann 2009).

12. David Mamet's 2013 HBO biopic *Phil Spector*, also dealing with an outrageous and self-destructive artist, alludes to Bruce and/or *Lenny* several times.

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PERFORMERS
AND SHOWMEN

Empty Words

Houdini and *Houdini*

MURRAY POMERANCE

On Biographic Portrayal

IN THE MIDDLE OF A QUIET DAY in July 2012, I received from an old and cherished friend a short communication to the effect that having just watched a terrific movie starring William Powell he had come to the conclusion that if ever “they” made a biopic of my life, Powell should be the one to play me. Notwithstanding the fact that the great William Powell, whose work I consistently admire, died March 5, 1984 (when I was thirty-seven, and before this chap had come to know me), I had to wonder, not, Why Powell?—since of course any reasonably skilled actor, such as he was, could assume the mantle of an easy to mock up, somewhat nondescript character called Murray Pomerance—but, What could have been implied in the whole process of thinking through Powell *as me*. Unlike many of the characters he played in his august career (but not all: Florenz Ziegfeld is a notable exception), I actually exist; I have a life, a biography, some memories, some tastes. If when an actor becomes a character he proceeds to invent for himself (and for his usage in the role) a biography, some memories, and some tastes, what is it to invent these properties in respect of someone not dreamed up by a writer but in fact “taken” from the “pages” of historical reality and everyday life—indeed, from a historical reality and everyday life that might be utterly foreign to the actor while he works?

For just one cursory example that will nail the planks of this thought, I write these lines on the day that Sacha Gervasi's film *Hitchcock* is being released, this containing an attempt by the much esteemed Anthony Hopkins to "become" a man whose memoranda I have spent years reading, whose sketches I have fondled, whose handwriting I have come to know, as it were, personally, and whose friendships and relationships have very often been opened to me either through correspondence or through direct communication with the people who collaborated with him. What was it, then, as he worked, for Hopkins, born in 1937, to "create" Alfred Hitchcock, born in 1899; Hitchcock who by the time Hopkins came into the world had already made *The 39 Steps*, *Young and Innocent*, *Sabotage*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, among so many other films? That is the sort of question I have in mind as I continue, even knowing that like other actors who labor in biopics, Hopkins is immensely gifted, spontaneous, inventive, intelligent, and caring.

The principal reason it is unlikely a biopic will actually be made about me (whether or not this is a pity I am in no position to say) is that my life, as I know it—and as others around me do, too—has not been transmogrified by the media into a mythical construct. In practice a biographical story can be told about anyone. With "appropriate subjects of biography," such a transformation and elevation have been accomplished. Each such subject—George Washington Carver, Lauren Bacall, Harry Houdini—exists in a public way that differs distinctly from his or her being as it is experienced privately; in some ways, then, the "appropriate" subject's life is likely pretty much the same as mine or yours, given that we share a culture. What it is for the biographical subject to be as and in himself is both something that no one can fully know or speculate upon and something that everybody can immediately imagine and believe he understands: tastes and emotions are secret, esoteric, but a knowledge base, its cultural formation, is widely shared. Playing a central character in a biopic is performing a myth, and biopics are reserved for those who have been mythologized. They are part and parcel of the high capitalism of cinema, and succeed by virtue of playing to a large and broadly conceived audience, the audience for myth. The content of the myth, and thus of the biopic, tends to be the collection of stories that, when taken together, constitute the received gossip about the subject. We have heard that one day . . .

As a historiographical problem, the biopic continually challenges the student to examine what it shows of its subject against the measuring standard of a "reality" constructed by media and sold as product to a willing audience. The standard against which the "facts" of a biopic are judged is thus not the viewer's observed reality but the stories that

made their way into print or visual journalism. To look at a biographical subject on the screen is to see against the background of newspaper or magazine accounts, not the background of direct experience. The biopic subject, then, mediated as a screen myth, is backgrounded by the public mythology of personality construction. Accordingly, biopics succeed not because they show fidelity to real events but because they present their central characters in a continually interesting, provocative, alluring way. The subject of the biopic is a mere character. What gives the biopic its *frisson* is the belief engendered in viewers that all of what is seen in it actually took place in the same real world where they sit watching; that the illusion up on the screen is not only on the screen, but somehow metamorphosed out of everyday life in such a way as to appear there. The ontology of the biopic differs from that of the conventional fiction film in its persistent, if repressed, suggestion that a transformative matrix interceding between actual life and screen presentation, and both shaping and cultivating that presentation, is effectively absent. Certainly the film was put together by a production crew, and the parts are being played by paid actors: but all of this is still drawn directly from what was, before; what history would have revealed if but we could have been there to watch.

One of the operations undertaken to enhance our acceptance of biopic reality is verisimilitudinous casting (a procedure explicitly [and artistically] rejected in Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* [2007], where among a number of other actors Cate Blanchett played Bob Dylan). The actor typically either already looks like the subject to be portrayed (Paul Scofield as Thomas à Becket; Blanchett as Katharine Hepburn); or can be costumed and made up to do so (Leonardo DiCaprio as J. Edgar Hoover; Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher; or Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II of England). Often in publicity, adjacent photographs cull and propagandize this similarity. Sometimes the "real," that is "off-camera," behavior of the actor seems to mimic what we have learned (from the myth) of the subject—as with the raunchy young Johnny Depp portraying Hunter S. Thompson—and this mirroring is interpreted as sufficient reason for the casting. Where the biographical subject is relatively unknown for his physique, the setting, costumes, props, and locations are used to convincingly portray a historically "real" scene that lends credence to the subject (Graham Faulkner as St. Francis of Assisi; Liam Neeson as Oskar Schindler).

The ontological spike in biography is central to its pedagogical effect, that by learning of the life of a notable personage we can transfer some moral power to ourselves, thus improving the nature of our own existence. There is always a spiritual message—a moral—in the biography

and the biopic, something to give us courage and foresight. Whether or not Jimmy Cagney resembled George M. Cohan, his sprightly song and dance performances and his indomitably optimistic (if utterly jingoistic) hopes show that loyalty and patriotism are worthwhile and tomorrow can be good. With the biopic subject in mind, the viewer does not have to stretch the imagination, as in standard fiction film, in order to find some bridging that allows for the transfer of the subject's putative experience as his own; the biopic, after all, takes place in the world space of the viewer's own life and experience. Even if removed by glory, power, or fame, the subject is always also a person one *could* have touched, waiting for a cocktail at the same party; feet upon the same floor; thirsty in the same basic way. Through the biopic, then, one feels as though learning history, the history of the same continuous world that leads up to this theater in which we take our seats now to watch.

It must be evident to viewers that as an account of a human life the biopic is radically compacted, with some events and periods selected out for special concentration and close development and the bulk of the everyday reality elsewhere elided. How else could a "life" be played out with all its significance in a mere hour and a half or two hours? The camera is a time machine, certainly; zooming forward and backward at will, skipping with incalculable speed through years and decades yet miraculously landing on precisely the right turf at precisely the right moment to reveal the apogee of a relationship, a quintessential sunset, a birth, a death, whatever it is that, according to the authorial presence, "must" be revealed. How is the relationship established between the film-making presence and the operational decision making as to what should and should not be included? Is the director taken to be an expert on the subject, or is the screenwriter? Are the events that are centered out for intensive treatment formulized, so that in virtually every biopic we learn about the same kinds of turn, the same crises, the same shocking obstructions, the same heroic overcomings, the same triumphs? Triumphs over what? Is the capitalist hero always the skeletal substrate of the biopic subject; indeed, can one be a subject only if one can be shown to be a capitalist hero? Will he find a girl to love? Will he make a lot of money, become famous? Will the world love him? When he falls from grace, will he find a way to climb back again through grit, determination, unflinching fixation upon the cause?

Biopics Are Not Biographies

Worked out in a vaster and less conventionalized form, the written biography can claim space for concentrating on the facts of a life, whether

these are central or peripheral to an author's concerns, whereas the biopic, owing to its need for constant dramatization, must draw focus on "significance." The biography tacitly claims the conviction that life, whatever it is, is unevenly distributed among the population, that the subject's life is of such special value *as such* that others might reasonably subtract out of their own lives the time necessary to become familiar with it. While my reading a biography is certainly part and parcel of my living, it remains true as well that usually biographers do not bother to tell us what their subjects sat and read or what biopics they sat and watched (so that we might read or gaze over their shoulders, as it were). The subject lives or lived; and we live by reading about that living. Expounding a Poetics of spectacle in the twelfth century, Averroes said "that an author who recounts tales, rather than history, makes an inventory of facts without giving them any order; whereas the poet gives measure and rule—that is, poetic metre—to facts both true and verisimilar, and he deals also with universals. Hence poetry is more philosophical than a simple imaginative chronicle" (Eco 1986, 103). There is an elevation of the person of the poet, rationale for the elevation of any particular individualism. The special life becomes interesting in its own respect, by virtue of what the narrating subject has done with it.

With a motion picture, the focus is on events, and the tacit claim is that the subject was a central player. The human character is thus made visible to us by connection with historical happenings, and the special life is one that was linked to special realities. Since this kind of focus is also present in motion pictures that are not biopics, it remains to determine by what principle the subject of the biopic becomes topical for a motion picture when any fiction would do. Perhaps, while any motion picture offers its viewers an invitation for time travel, the biopic resembles science fiction in being explicit about this fact, pointing as it does without letup to a time and place not only radically separated from the theatre but self-reflexively claiming this separation. The biography of Harvey Milk, transposed to the screen, becomes an open statement directed to "the time just before he was assassinated." In science fiction, time travel is effected by means of a diegetic device, and so the films themselves are generally about capital development in its relation to scientific exploration. At the center of things is the building of a tool (see, for one example, Pomerance 2011). With biopics, regardless of whether or not the subject is himself a tool builder, the thrill of time travel is effected by means of the filmic orientation. Thus, the time machine is cinema, not a rig depicted *in* cinema. Since the rig is invisible during the projection (by the laws of the medium), one could think of it as producing a *magical* effect, and in this way participating in an age-old tradition

dating back at least to Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where hierophants and enchanters “were accustomed to astonish their dupes with optical illusions” (*Dictionary of Arts* 1883, 207).

So a biopic is a kind of magic in which, through a process that is itself not given over to us, we participate to some degree in the experiences and events by virtue of which some other person has apparently become notable. We explore the notability that lingers in the story as a kind of shadow trace that follows the subject. The biopic subject is at once notable in objective terms, having become what he is; and notable dramaturgically, since the adoration of crowds is an ostensible component of the subject’s story as recounted on the screen. Social importance is less vital an aspect of the subject’s “life” than fame.

This notability of the biopic’s subject personality constitutes a kind of immortality conferred upon him by virtue of our concentration. He “comes back to life” or at least is “alive again for the duration of our consideration.” Our pantheon of immortals is populated by those who have earned our special attention, those of whom we have stories to tell and whose lives *as such* merit focus as the content of those stories. By telling of our heroes again and again, we extend their presence among us, since the subject of the biopic does seem to be present to the degree that we focus upon him and give him our interest. It is worth noting that what the subject did in life to deserve our abiding interest was something *beyond living itself*, since everybody does that and relatively few have their lives recounted. The biopic subject’s life was the ground of a notable act, and it is as the perpetrator of an act that he comes to be remembered.

As to the audience’s appreciation of the biopic as factual: this film is a depictive form that brooks no real comparison, since by and large the audience did not know the subject during his life. It is thus not with the actual life of the subject that the film depiction may be compared; but with some account of that life—the published biography, some account taken from it, the public record, the private correspondence. We are never in a position to really verify a biopic, only positioned to compare it with other depictive forms. In essence, the subject of the biopic emerges suddenly as out of thin air, materialized by the magician of the form (sometimes the actor, sometimes the filmmaker), much as a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat.

Womb to Tomb

Which brings me to the curious film *Houdini* (George Marshall, Paramount, 1953), ostensibly an adventurous account of the principal events in the life of the famous magician (né Erich Weiss) as, preparing to pull

a legion of rabbits from a legion of hats, he slaves in a circus sideshow, discovers a beautiful young student, woos and then elopes with her, and becomes the legendary master of legerdemain and escape artistry who escaped from mailbags, riveted boilers, the *carette*, the prison cell, the glass box, the belly of a sea monster; and astounded crowds on both sides of the Atlantic, including and notably at New York's gargantuan Hippodrome, where on January 7, 1918, he made an elephant disappear into thin air. *Houdini* is only ostensibly about the man's stage tricks, however, though the film's set pieces regale us with colorful reconstructions of them. More deeply, and more accurately, it is a tale of an obsession with death and with the boundary between death and life. In this way, it boldly reflects the two "biographical impulses" of cinema itself, as elucidated by Lucy Fischer:

one that is morbid and fascinated with death, and another that is vital and enchanted with immortality. Both conjoin in Bazin's image of the Mummy, simultaneously a repulsive artifact of petrified flesh and a magical icon of self-preservation. For Bazin, like mummification, cinematic representation has a special relation to reality, because unlike painting, sculpture, or the literary record, it is "indexical." (Fischer 2000, 196)

There is hardly a moment in the film when Harry's mortality is not invoked, either directly or by allusion; and he is made to seem a man who is profoundly obsessed with the spirit world and the end of life even if his manner is ongoingly buoyant, charming, and energetic. At a Coney Island dime museum, where during a performance of magic he encounters the beautiful young Bess (Janet Leigh), he wants contact, but one with transcendental overtones: "May I have your hand, please. . . . Oh, please. *It's going to help the vibrations*" (my emphasis). After the show he quickly tries to follow her and takes hold of her arm. "Let go my arm!" she demands, with propriety. "If I let go," says he cagily, "I'll never see you again." In both of these cases, the words Houdini utters are ambiguous, pointing not only toward desire but in the direction of finality, mortality, and transubstantial forces that cannot be seen. Attending a magicians' dinner with his new wife, at New York's Astor Hotel, he finds himself staring, while struggling to escape from a strait jacket, at a revolving crystal orb in a chandelier: the filmic moment suggests that there is a transference of energy, by way of his eyes and through the rays of light themselves, that makes it possible for him to escape.

In a sense, by focusing on this mortal aspect of the performer's life and experience the film becomes Montaignian. "Someone, looking

through my tablets the other day, found a memorandum about something I wanted done after my death,” the essayist writes:

I told him what was true, that although only a league away from my house, and hale and hearty, I had hastened to write it there, since I could not be certain of reaching home. Since I am constantly brooding over my thoughts and setting them within me, I am at all times about as well prepared as I can be. And the coming of death will teach me nothing new. We must always be booted and ready to go, as far as it is in our power, and take especial care to have only ourselves to deal with then. (De Montaigne 2003, 73)

Montaigne quotes Cicero—and could as well be describing the Houdini portrayed by Tony Curtis—when he reflects, “To philosophize is nothing else but to prepare for death. This is because study and contemplation draw our soul out of us to some extent and keep it busy outside the body; which is a sort of apprenticeship and semblance of death” (67). The filmic Houdini is constantly “studying” and “contemplating” his performances, tricks, operations, and plans, constantly—as it appears—feeling the presence of the boundary, the unpassable limit. In the film’s climax, we have the sense even as he expires that death is teaching him nothing new, that he has thought of it often and lovingly, lived with it as a constant companion (even, perhaps, more than Bess).

There is a climactic sequence in which Houdini has traveled with Bess and his manager Otto (Torin Thatcher) to Detroit, in order to be sunk in the frozen-over Detroit River and perform a daredevil escape from a locked trunk in the gelid waters. The scene begins as we see a team of bellhops delivering pails of ice to his hotel suite. Houdini is sunk in an ice-filled tub, preparing himself to weather the torments of the horribly cold water. Bess enters with Otto and urges him to come out, soothes him, and dries him with a supply of towels, while urging frantically that he cancel the stunt. The river is too cold, no one will expect him to do it. And there is no way to get his trunk through the ice. “They’ll cut a hole,” says Otto, just a little too matter-of-factly, and Bess is instantly thrown into a darker panic. “Do you know what day it is tomorrow?” she asks, presciently, “October 31. It’s not your day.” (We are, perhaps, to surmise, if we do not know, that Houdini perished on October 31.) But with characteristic Tony Curtis charm, he persuades her that everything will be all right.

Now we cut to the scene at the river, where, upon a bridge, he is being locked into the chest. As the crane operator lowers it toward the

hole that has in fact been surgically opened in the ice, the chains snap and the trunk plunges into the river. We see it (from beneath the surface) sink to the bottom, in water that is a chilly blue. In only seconds he is out of the trunk, of course, swimming toward the camera with a look of strain from the cold. But now he cannot find the hole and is struggling to get to a break where he can breathe. This he succeeds in doing twice, but the scene cuts back to the ice and the crowd formed there, and to Bess declaring that it has been far too long, he's never been under this long before. Otto calls for grappling hooks, and the trunk is lifted and opened, only to reveal that Houdini's not in it. She collapses in fear. As the crowd slowly dwindles, and the camera focuses on the dark, forbiddingly lapping waters in the ice hole, it becomes evident that Houdini is lost.

Back in the hotel, she is at the window, her hair pulled back in a golden bun (such as Hitchcock will position on the heads of Carlotta Valdes and Madeleine Elster in *Vertigo* five years later), when a sound behind her makes her turn toward the door. And here, in a spectacular shot, we see that the sunlight coming through the window has not illuminated the whole room since the doorway and the area near are swallowed in a dense shadow. In the opening, some figure is standing in a dark coat: all we can make out is a dark head, a dark body swathed in darkness, the pure form of a phantom. Otto is by his side. "Harry!" she exclaims.

He returns, then, first as a phantom and then as himself. The current carried him, says he, and he hadn't prepared for that. But then he heard his dear mother's voice calling, and he followed her voice, and found the hole.

While they are embracing—the woman afraid of death and the figure brought back from death—the telephone rings. It is long distance. Harry comes on the line, only to hear the news that his mother has died. We may note that he is not surprised. "What time did she die?" he asks calmly. And of course, the mother died at the precise moment that she was calling him to safety through the ice. In this way, the film offers us the suggestion of spiritual communication, the mother apparently speaking to her beloved son from the Other World; but also speaking in such a way as to save him from his own death, as he lingers on the chilly boundary.

"Why?" Bess asks him at one point, urgently and not without reproach. "Why must the act you do be flirting with death?"

"Because," says Harry, "it's the only act that will hold an audience spellbound. People fall asleep at the opera, but they stay wide awake at bullfights, because there's one man defying death down in that arena. You take this out of my act and I'm nothing. . . . You make it sound horrible."

“It is. People paying a dollar to see a man in love with death.”

The flirtation with death in Houdini’s case, repeatedly throughout his career and in a multitude of interesting ways, was connected to and physically apotheosized through the riddle of confinement. Bernard Meyer adduces the “belief that many features of Houdini’s professional repertoire, as well as his behavior, were unconsciously designed to cope with a latent claustrophobia” (111), and notes a sleepless night in Nova Scotia in 1896 when Houdini “saw nothing but strait-jackets, maniacs, and padded cells!” (117). “In addition to jail escapes and handcuff escapes,” writes Matthew Solomon,

Houdini encouraged challengers to provide other sorts of things from which he might prove unable to escape. In a series of highly publicized—not to mention carefully orchestrated—challenge escapes, Houdini freed himself from an array of containers that afterward seemed unaltered, including an oversized envelope, a giant football, . . . and a coffin. Most of these escapes emphasized suspense, since Houdini was often out of sight inside of the ghost house or behind the curtain for long periods of time. . . . In sharp contrast to these lengthy concealed challenges, Houdini also began to execute the straitjacket escape in view of the audience around 1905. . . . After 1907, Houdini’s act centered less on handcuff escapes and more on the Milk Can and the Water Torture Cell, underwater escape illusions that were, of necessity, accomplished quickly . . . the Water Torture Cell’s glass front allowed spectators to see Houdini submerged within the cell just before the curtains of the ghost house were drawn around it. Stage instructions for the illusion specified that the water used to fill the cell be transparent, to afford the audience a clear view of Houdini underwater moments before he escaped. (Solomon 2010, 87–91)

Raymund Fitzsimons, whose treatise on Houdini centers on an “escape artist” at the “threshold of death”—a man who “visited cemeteries, tending the graves of dead magicians”—notes that he “escaped from all kinds of containers,”

some macabre like a screwed down coffin, some bizarre like a roll-top desk and a piano box. The container did not have to be strong and impenetrable to arouse the interest of the audience. He escaped from a cardboard box and even a paper

bag. The audience were intrigued as to how he would get out of the paper bag without tearing it. . . . Whenever possible Houdini escaped from containers not made to his specifications, containers he had not tampered with. The most mysterious of these escapes occurred in Los Angeles, in the autumn of 1907, when he freed himself from a United States government mail bag. The bag was of regulation design; made of heavy canvas and sealed by a leather strap running through a row of metal staples fixed in the collar of the bag. The government secured its mail with great care. The leather strap went over a final staple and was held there by a rotary lock. The only way to escape from the bag was by opening the lock, and as that was on the outside then it was obvious to the audience that escape was impossible. (Fitzsimons 1985, 64–65, 77)

The photographs of Harry Houdini show him to have lived in a body that, if not exactly pudgy or plump, was muscular and well filled out. By contrast, Tony Curtis in 1953 was slender and wiry, hardly escaped yet from the tight confinement of his own adolescence. What Houdini had trained himself to do—and, thanks to the magic (*Techné*) of cinema, Curtis had no need for—was to systematically violate some of the strictures of the joints, to become, as was often called, “double-jointed,” so that he could twist his arms and legs in exemplary fashion as a method of arranging his escapes. He achieved, for the purpose of his performances, a magical body. Some exotic hint of this is given in the first scene of the film where he appears as a “wild man of Borneo” drawing close to the pretty schoolgirl who has played hookey to visit the side show. Between the hokiness of the staged setup, the perfection of the mask and makeup, and then the artful removal of the mask so that Houdini walks about in half a costume, we are given a portrait of the body as transformative, half of one thing, half of another. Its connection with the show, with the special vision, and with spectral experience all render this body poetic, irrational—because carried beyond rational limits in its secret ability to manipulate the rational configuration of enclosure and imprisonment. “The ‘magical’ body which the poet seeks is the ‘subtle’ or ‘spiritual’ or ‘translucent’ body of occidental mysticism, and the ‘diamond’ body of oriental mysticism, and, in psychoanalysis, the polymorphously perverse body of childhood” (Brown 1959, 313).

There must be a myriad reasons lodged in the human spirit for fearing, and being charged by, “impossible” confinement. The unbounded tedium of forever unchanging circumstances; the horror of powerlessness as one’s efforts to push down the door or the walls meet with

uncompromising resistance; a sensitivity to the dwindling economy of oxygen; muscular cramp; a frenzy of discomfort in not being able to shift the limbs. No doubt at the moment of birth we may have found ourselves trapped in an encasement, then serendipitously found the hidden key that would bring freedom. The first cry, a wail of triumph at breaking out. Yet at the same time, it is impossible to deny the crush of liberty, the fact that outside the confines of the private space we are subjected to the press of society, humankind's notorious and endless claim upon attention, consciousness, conscience, and capacity. Here is Charles Baudelaire, writing in the last decade of his life:

Enfin! Seul! On n'entend plus que le roulement de quelques fiacres attardés et éreintés. Pendant quelques heures, nous posséderons le silence, sinon le repos. Enfin! La tyrannie de la face humaine a disparu, et je ne souffrirai plus que par moi-même.

(Alone, at last! Not a sound to be heard but the rumbling of some belated and decrepit cabs. For a few hours we shall have silence, if not repose. At last the tyranny of the human face has disappeared, and I myself shall be the only cause of my sufferings.) (Baudelaire 1988, 22–23)

Enough, to be sure (as Baudelaire adds), of distributing “handshakes, without having taken the precaution of buying gloves.” So here, the prison of the self is finally liberating. Yet at the same time, what makes it so is that one can always escape, and in a breath, that city never sleeping, that society always twittering and shuffling around for one to bump into at one's peril. The terror of suffocation is compounded by the ambivalent feeling that the boundaries close in, and at the same time the world recedes.

While Houdini performed his water escape many times—at the Willis Avenue Bridge in Harlem; at New York's East River, near Pier 6; in Pittsburgh; in Philadelphia; into the Mississippi at St. Louis—in historical fact it was not after emerging from the waters off Detroit's Belle Isle Bridge that he learned he had lost his mother. Albeit with a profoundly dramatic intonation, William Kalush and Larry Sloman give in some detail the story of how after performing for royalty in Copenhagen he opened a telegram that had been put into his hands before the show, there seeing the news for the first time. As he and Bess had departed Hoboken, the parting with Cecilia Weiss had been attenuated and heartfelt: “Houdini was *the last person* to board the steamship; he

kept boarding and then running back on the gangplank to kiss his mother good-bye. She was worried *that the boat would sail without him* and told him to get back on board, but he kept coming back to embrace and kiss her again. While he held her in his arms, she looked at him *peculiarly*. ‘Ebrich, perhaps I won’t be here when you return,’ she said.” When at the Cirkus Beketow he opened the cable and read it, Houdini “collapsed to the floor, *unconscious*” (Kalush and Sloman 2006, 289, 291; my emphases). Implicit in the tone here, as we can read from my added stresses (and quite possibly resulting from the authors’ susceptibility to the spiritualist influence of the film), is a pervasive ether of morbidity, hopelessness, and otherworldliness. Houdini is the *last person* to board, that is, isolated from the social world of which he had been a part; he is kissing his mother good-bye, which carries the meaning of a double farewell, as though not only the ship and the journey but also some Great Boundary will part them. She looks at him *peculiarly*, as though with a focus on something no one else can see, noting directly that she *might not be here* when he returns (a foretaste of the future; or even a clear vision). And finally he collapses into instant *unconsciousness*, that strange and not wholly understood condition in which we seem to be both alive and not alive at once. As to the possibility of signaling present or anticipated circumstances at the border between life and death, we are informed by Kalush and Sloman that en route to Copenhagen, Houdini saw a “fleeting vision of his mother” (ibid., 382), this corresponding almost precisely to what is evinced in the film but through the report of an acoustic translation (as Houdini, under the Detroit River, can presumably see very little at all).

The opinion is widely shared that Cecilia Weiss’s death shattered her son. On her deathbed, writes Fitzsimons, she had been “too paralysed to speak distinctly.” The only word attendees could make out was Harry’s name. “He could never know whether the message contained the word, FORGIVE, the one word she would want to send, the one word he would want to hear. He had been denied the last words his mother had wished to speak at that most awful and solemn of moments, the time when the immortal soul is preparing to leave the human body” (Fitzsimons 1985, 92).

The film strongly implies that Houdini’s labors in the 1920s to debunk Spiritualist practices—there is one elaborate scene in which he and his assistant Otto take apart a medium’s tricks in front of her staggered eyes—were not wholly inconsistent with his own commitment to drawing some link between the worlds of life and death. After the mother’s death he is shown to have retired from show business for two years, during which period he has ostensibly been struggling to find spiritual guidance. According to Kalush and Sloman, he wrote to his

brother Hardeen, “Am hoping that eventually I will have my burning tears run dry, but know my Heart will ALWAYS ACHE FOR OUR DARLING MOTHER. Dash, I knew that I loved Mother, but that my very Existence seems to have expired with HER” (Kalush and Sloman 2006, 297). He was committed to a belief in the afterlife, “one where the deceased might even be able to intercede with God on behalf of those still living” (ibid., 298). At his burial, indeed, according to Meyer, “a black bag containing [his mother’s] letters to him was placed beneath his lifeless head” (176). In the context of what appears in the film to be a persistent otherworldly focus of his gaze—Curtis is shot with key-light in his eyes, to make them sparkle as though with reflection of an otherworldly source—Houdini’s attacks on Spiritualism and Spiritualists’ activities, his stripping the mask “from things as well as from persons” (De Montaigne 2003, 81–82), can be read as professional criticism of lesser qualified performers’ cheaper tricks, tricks that could not hope to rival the eccentricity and refinement of his own.

Contemporary readers might wonder at the capacity of an intelligent man, such as Houdini often proved himself (and as he is clearly depicted in the film), to believe in metaphysical forces in place of, or even in accompaniment to, a thoroughgoing and stable commitment to scientific explanation and the physical world. Further, the existence of widespread charlatanism speaks to a public credulousness at the time that might seem hard to understand now. But we should recall that even while Spiritualism was often, and widely, debunked, some aspects of belief in the afterlife, or in some esoteric material out of which living, universal, formerly living, and spiritual material were alike composed, had in the late years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries penetrated the thought of philosophers, artists, and practical thinkers alike. Arthur Conan Doyle, a committed Spiritualist, was a medical doctor trained in pathology, after all, whose Sherlock Holmes stories had gathered for him adepts around the world. Further, as Bruce Elder writes, “It was characteristic of modern art movements that they strived to bypass meaning in communicating and to deliver effects immediately, directly, and without semantic reference.” Under the influence of the early-twentieth-century Theosophy of Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, Wassily Kandinsky “concluded that to hear the sound of the cosmos was to receive communication from the Logos,” a single substantial reality of which everything in the universe was made (qtd. in Elder, 25). Superstition is a common enough response, after all, to the apparently inexplicable. Richard Altick notes the prevalence of automatons in British show culture: “The ill-educated who gaped at automatons at the eighteenth-century London fairs still retained vestiges”

of “superstitious awe,” this to the degree that the gilded-copper duck of Jacques de Vaucanson, which ate meal, digested it, and formed excretions upon a silver salver, astounded observers for more than a hundred and fifty years and required the conjuror Robert-Houdini (from whom Houdini took his stage name) to provide a rational explanation,—that the water and seed were falling into a secret box while green-colored bread crumb was being pumped out, while “the ingenious trickster laughed in his sleeve at the credulity of the public” (Altick 1978, 64–65).

With the spiritually minded Doyle, who in 1917 had authenticated through the publication of his book *The Coming of the Fairies* a claim by two teenaged girls in the North of England that they had seen fairies in their back yard, Houdini enjoyed a protracted friendship. “My dear Houdini,” Doyle had written solicitously on March 8, 1923, “For goodness’ sake take care of those dangerous stunts of yours. You have done enough of them” (Houdini 1972, 140). The previous June, at one of the scores of séances Houdini attended, Lady Doyle “produced supposed spirit messages from Houdini’s deceased mother. Houdini discredited them, however, and quarreled rancorously with Sir Arthur Doyle in the press” (Silverman 1999, 248). The amity now turned bitter, and Doyle publicly announced a taunting \$5,000 wager that he could bring his own mother back from the dead. What Houdini deplored was the enterprise of fake “mediums” selling contact with the other world through base chicanery; not the idea that some method of communication or transubstantiation might ultimately be found. Houdini’s “attitude toward communication between the dead and the living was complex. There had been strange circumstances in his own life” (Kalush and Sloman 2006, 382). He described his escape trick in 1914 as “a feat which borders on the supernatural” and supplied the press with material that would lead reporters to write that “he is credited with the power of dematerialization” (ibid., 221–22). Yet in *A Magician among the Spirits*, he makes plain his scorn for those, such as J. Hewat McKenzie, president of the British College of Psychic Science, who believed him subject to supernatural forces:

“Houdini, called the ‘Handcuff King,’ who has so ably demonstrated his powers upon public-hall platforms is enabled by psychic power (though this he does not advertise), to open lock, handcuff, or bolt that is submitted to him. . . . The force necessary to shoot a bolt within a lock is drawn from Houdini the medium, but it must not be thought that this is the only means by which he can escape from his prison, for at times his body has been dematerialized and withdrawn . . .”

As I am the one most deeply concerned in this charge I am also the best equipped to deny such erroneous statements. I do claim to free myself from the restraint of fetters and confinement, but positively state that I accomplish my purpose purely by physical, not psychical means. . . . My methods are perfectly natural, resting on natural laws of physics. I do not *dematerialize* or *materialize* anything. (Houdini 1972, 211; emphasis original)

At his moment of expiration in the film, however, he invokes the physical and the psychical in a single breath, looking up at Beth and whispering, "If there's any way, I'll come back."

The film's numerous (and, from the point of view of production technicalities, unavoidable) factual distortions include a (hardly troubling) misrepresentation of the cause of Houdini's death. Having apparently lost conviction in the value of being alive, he is trapped upside down in a water chamber in the "Chinese Water Torture," and is unable to escape. When Otto rushes onstage with an axe to split open the chamber, and manages with stagehands' help to get Houdini safely out of the water, it is already too late, and the magician is expiring in Bess's arms. This makes for an exceptionally dramatic finale, especially since the scene is written with her imploring him not to do the trick, and in fact extracting from him a promise that he will forgo it. He has been ill with an inflamed appendix and is in agony. At the last moment, as the audience jeers and demands more, he seems to see beyond the present moment again, into some off-camera space of foreboding and transformation, and rushes into his dressing room to prepare. The real Houdini died in a Detroit hospital after been transported there from McGill University in Montreal, where a student took up a dare and punched him too hard in the stomach, rupturing his appendix. A newly discovered serum, used in his case for the first time, was of no help (Obituary). The water cabinet trick had nothing to do with it, and had been performed by Houdini successfully on numerous occasions, with continual developments and changes to augment the audience's excitement, beginning with the early autumn of 1912 in Bremen. There, after several minutes in captivity, while the audience sat anxious and fearful, he emerged "dripping water, eyes bloodshot, specks of foam on his lips. . . . He had drawn aside the curtains of the cabinet as though from the mouth of a tomb, as though, like Lazarus, he had come back from the dead" (Fitzsimons 1985, 88). Marshall's dramatic device of using the water chamber makes possible close shots of the upside-down Houdini partially obscured from plain view by the pale blue bubbling water, in short encapsulated in a medium

that divides the solid from the gaseous, the substantial from the evanescent. Just as we saw him under the river, at a time when, as he recalls, he was hearing his mother's voice calling from beyond the grave, he is somewhat colorless, pallid, overwashed by blue, with the gentle circulation of the fluid causing his dark hair to move in suggestive, unearthly undulations. The blue face, eyes closed, hovers between life and death, hearing, perhaps, not only the maternal voice but the ancient echoing voice of the tavern-keeper who spoke to the king:

“O Gilgamesh, there never has been a way across,
nor since olden days can anyone cross the ocean . . .
The crossing is perilous, its way full of hazard,
And midway lie the Waters of Death, blocking the passage
forward. (*Epic of Gilgamesh* X, 79–80, 83–84)

The waters in which Houdini dips himself are the waters of death, where the voices one hears are siren calls. “If any one unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens,” writes Homer, “his wife and children will never welcome him home again, for they sit in a green field and warble him to death with the sweetness of their song.” When Ulysses attends, he hears their twin voices as one: “‘Come here,’ they sang, ‘renowned Ulysses, honour to the Achaean name, and listen to our two voices. No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song’” (*Odyssey* XII). Without staying, that is, in their trap.

Another ending had been written for the film, reflecting to some degree the widow's persistent attempts for ten years after Houdini's death to receive a coded communication from him, and derived at least in part from a story treatment for *Houdini the Great* written January 3, 1936, by Frank O'Connor and Dore Schary (the screenplay, unproduced, was finally written by Endre Bohem and Hilda Gordon). After lashing out at some men who have taken him in with phony spiritualism, he vows “that he will expose publicly, in newspapers, in periodicals, their chicanery and fraud. He further adds that he will use the stage as a means of demonstrating their heartless plundering of susceptible, gullible people. . . . He now reaches a conviction that there is no God—that there is no hereafter—that there is nothing. He is convinced that all claims of contact are false and he intends to go on a crusade which will teach everybody else the same thing” (O'Connor and Schary 1936, 37). But only a few pages later, onstage, he confesses to his audience that he has “suddenly learned” something. “He tells them that there is a God, that they must believe that. He tells them that there is a hereafter and they must believe that

too. And he says that they must not believe those crooked and ruthless charlatans who bleed them in the misled hope that they can establish contact with the spiritual world" (ibid., 42). This is a veritable reprise of the Cartesian criterion, "that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. Using the criterion, one can then establish that God exists, that He is no deceiver, and that He guarantees that the criterion really is true. With skepticism overcome, one can then prove that an external world exists and that through our clear and distinct ideas we can gain knowledge about it" (Popkin 1973, 244). In Philip Yordan's script for the Marshall film, there is an explicit plan for a sequence of short scenes: "Each Hallowe'en night for the next ten years, Bess waits in Houdini's study for him to keep that promise, but of course he never does. Finally, Houdini's old professional friend, Sydney, persuades her to give it up."

In Scene 185 of this April 23, 1952, script, set inside an ambulance, Bess senses that Houdini is dying. "His lips move. Bess leans forward to catch his words, tears in her eyes. HOUDINI (His voice barely audible): I'll come back, Bess—I'll find a way—She nods through her tears." In the following scene, after a fade, we are at Houdini's house "on 113th Street" (the Houdinis resided in fact at 67 Payson Avenue, Inwood, California) with Bess and Sydney. "BESS: His instructions were that I try on the anniversary of his death for ten years before giving it up. This is my last try."

They enter the house. "The hallway carpet has been removed." In the library, "the room is in pitch blackness, the boarded up windows, cutting out all light from the outside." Sydney wipes the dust from Houdini's desk chair for Bess. Soon their candles have burned down. "SYDNEY: One minute until midnight. . . . Ten seconds, Bess. Five seconds. Midnight. Complete silence fills the room. Bess sits staring past the candles into the darkness, her eyes alert for some sign, her ears straining to catch a sound." Sydney now prepares to escort Bess back to her hotel. "They start for the door. Bess suddenly stops. Out of the silence, at first almost inaudible, faint strains of music are heard. It is the Hungarian waltz they danced to so many times. Sydney looks at Bess, puzzled, for he hears nothing. The music swells, filling the room. A beatific look comes over Bess's face. Sydney, his eyes intent on Bess, becomes aware that some manifestation has made itself known to her. Bess begins to sway to the music and moves over to an ancient, faded yellow poster on the wall. The poster is from Houdini's early youth."

Three and a half months later a new ending was in place, in which there is a quick dissolve as Otto smashes the water cell onstage. We are in the bedroom of a brownstone at night, with "a crystal vase of red roses on a table before a half-opened window. A gust of wind whips the

curtains back against the vase. The vase topples to the floor and crashes. PULL BACK to disclose Bess, dressed for traveling, packing a wardrobe trunk. She crosses to the broken vase, gathers up the red roses, sees a small note twined around the stem of one of the roses. She lays the roses on the table and curiously unwinds the note from the one red rose. The wind whips the lace curtain across her face, shrouding it like a mourning veil. As she brushes the curtain aside from her eyes to read the note:

HOUDINI'S VOICE (Coming over her face):

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Even after I'm dead
I'll still love you.

Even as late as September 30, 1952, the body of Houdini is “lifeless” in the water cell when Otto smashes it. But, as the scene is actually shot, he manages to survive long enough to breathe his final words to his wife onstage. And the aura of otherworldliness implied in Yordan's script for the finale moment, the sense of an actual contact discernable to Bess, if to no one else, is now deftly excised. Houdini dies, she turns to regard his poster on the backstage wall, and that is the end. The film thus holds back from exploiting its audience with the intimation or promise of conversation from the afterlife, pulls away, as it were, into the consciousness of the somewhat suspicious Bess rather than lingering with the strain of Houdini's own conviction that some passageway back to the living might be found.

The American

By virtue of his fame, the nature of which was imbricated with the shallow and brilliant world of display, consumerism, and artifice, Houdini was a particular avatar of the early-twentieth-century American spirit. The Marshall film plays upon the established stardom of Janet Leigh and the upcoming, and very glamorous, stardom of Tony Curtis to reference a celebrity that was internationally well known—as Daniel Boorstin put it—for being well known. “Being known primarily for their well-knownness, celebrities intensify their celebrity images simply by becoming widely known for relations among themselves” (Boorstin 1992, 65). It need hardly be recounted here how America had become, by the 1920s, the quintessential nexus of celebrity culture—outstripping even Weimar Berlin. Nor will any reader of Houdini's biography, or

viewer of Marshall's film, fail to find repeated evidence of the performer's artful cultivation of the press as a way of furthering and expanding his public recognition. The very word *Houdini* came by the peak of his career, and remains to this day, a signal of human play with lightning dexterity, by means of the occult, that is to say, the hidden. Houdini's tricks were all occult, whether or not they depended upon spirits, since the audience was kept on the other side of the veil.

While Houdini blossomed in the twentieth century, he was principally a spirit of the nineteenth, a time when the spiritual aspects of life, determined or vague, proven or hypothesized in belief, held sway over cultural life in many ways. "From Harry Houdini's love for optical illusion and contempt for spiritualist trickery to Arthur Conan Doyle's passionate lectures to packed auditoriums on spiritualism's authenticity, the nineteenth century considered the relationships between spirituality and spectacle, intuition and vision, paramount," writes Sheri Weinstein. The séance table—transpose here, if you will, the theatrical stage with Houdini upon it—was already "part of a larger, American carnival of vision": the spiritual life, as organized through occult practice yet also as it underpinned Houdini's displayed marvels, "offered Americans an alternative version of scopic authority and ocular abilities" (Weinstein 2004, 127). Houdini's trickery offered his audiences a new, quintessentially American, way to see.¹ And his ongoing obsession with the boundary between life and death, a revisited signpost in his life, became transposed as a repetitive transgression of the boundary between the seen and the unseen as played out by means of his own masterful stage illusions on one hand and his critiques of other people's less masterful ones on the other.

And what was most American about Houdini is what is most artfully and blatantly celebrated in the film, his abiding commitment to show business—a commitment so fervent and intense that the unbreakable bond between Houdini and his mother, and the enchanted love he feels for his wife, are both used in the film as foils against which the obsessive yearning to be on the stage, confronted by and adored by an audience he could trick into believing in him, can be shown as paramount. Houdini was a show business personality, and in this way, a cultural revolutionary. "A civilization which in many areas broke radically with the European past," wrote Max Lerner in 1957, about the American personality, "cannot cling to it in the arts without violating the principle of wholeness. Most of the great art forms of the Western cultures—painting, sculpture, the drama, sacred and secular architecture, the ballet, the symphony, grand opera, the epic and lyric poem—arose in largely stratified societies. They subsisted on the patronage of the rich and powerful few; and they celebrated either feudal honor and gallantry—the traits of a society of

status—or the cementing power of religious belief” (Lerner 1957, 787). But Houdini’s showmanship, notwithstanding that it grew from European roots going back to Philidor and others, was classless, and thus rootless. It was mobile, electric, present-centered, apparently spontaneous. (Some of the most exciting moments in *Houdini* come from Curtis’s performance of staged “spontaneity.”) He had lost the mastery of Europe, let it fly; and had got a new master, the use of presentation.

Postscript

A fabulously intricate and continuous biographical chain of histrionic performances characterizes the more than one hundred screen roles—most of them in starring capacity—in the career of Tony Curtis (1925–2010): as a gigolo in *Cross Cross* (1949), a cowpoke in *Winchester ’73* (1950), an Arabian prince in *Son of Ali Baba* (1952), a gangster in *Forbidden* (1953), a peasant in the days of King Henry IV in *The Black Shield of Falworth* (1954), a sailor in *So This Is Paris* (1955), a high-flying acrobat in *Trapeze* (1956), an amoral New York publicity agent in *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), an ex-slave in *The Vikings* (1958), a convict chained to Sidney Poitier in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), a loyal Roman servant in *Spartacus* (1960), and many more, he showed a dazzling electricity of manner, a vivacious spontaneity, and a poetic sensitivity. The much-noted extremity of his masquerade in his three different performances in *Some Like It Hot* (1959) was merely par for the course for this performer, whose suave good looks and intense expressiveness helped form a career that finally spanned six decades. George Pal’s \$1.4 million dollar production of *Houdini* was his springboard to success (Pal [György Pál Marczincsak] was another Hungarian). He earned \$26,000 for the work, which began September 8 and ended October 9, 1952; met and fell in love with Janet Leigh (who was earning nine thousand dollars more); and became, as a result of his “exploits” here, one of the few matinee idols who dominated American popular culture in the 1950s.

In one particular respect, he was the ideal actor for this role. About a year before his death, the prolific actor-painter-raconteur told Mark Vieira how it came to be that in 1958 Billy Wilder had wanted him for *Some Like It Hot*, by recounting memories of his childhood days in New York. He had been born in the Bronx of Jewish Hungarian parents. Central for him there was his brother Julius, younger by four years. “Looking back on my life at that time,” he said, “I have to acknowledge that he was the only person in it that I really liked. He was a gentle little boy. I trusted him. He trusted me. But when I went out to play, I rarely took him with me. I was trying to find my own way through the

world. In 1938, when Julie was nine, he was hit by a truck. I lost him” (Curtis and Vieira 2009, 22).

Conflated for Curtis by way of memory, then, and throughout his adult life as an actor, were the boundary between life and death, an idiosyncratic intensity of feeling for someone whose life had prematurely come to an end, the sense that death had deprived him. It had been the same for Houdini. Both the actor and the magician, in their respective ways, longed to “strip the mask from things as well as from persons” and both could see the ultimate reward; “when it is off, we shall find beneath only that same death which a valet or a mere chambermaid passed through not long ago without fear” (De Montaigne 2003, 81–82). And both, in their respective ways, the one transforming the shape of himself so as to escape from a myriad confinements and the other becoming anyone the script asked him to be, could claim, just as the spiritualist’s phantom did, “I have not lost my body, because I have lots of bodies” (Wickland 1924, 238). For all his volubility as the magician, the vacant and aching glow of Curtis’s gaze continually point to a deep metaphysical silence underpinning the slick stage performances and glib interactions, a profound inability to speak in the way he most fervently wanted to—that is, in a direction that would take his words beyond the everyday world. “Get the nothingness back into words. The aim is words with nothing to them; words that point beyond themselves rather than to themselves; transparencies, empty words. Empty words, corresponding to the void in things” (Brown 1966, 259).

Notes

With gratitude to Matthew Solomon.

1. I have been considerably inspired in thinking about the relation between scopopic regimes and magic trickery by Colin Williamson, whose book *Hidden in Plain Sight* examines this issue with profound delicacy and insight.

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Woody Guthrie, Warts and All

The Biopic in the New American Cinema of the 1970s

DENNIS BINGHAM

If you want to make a Woody Guthrie movie that is solidly commercial, you have to have somebody kill him in the end.

—Hal Ashby, 1976



THE NEW HOLLYWOOD CINEMA (1967 to roughly 1976) is the most common name given to a cycle of inventive, risk-taking, modernist, and revisionist American films, with innovation to match that of any national cinema's "new wave."¹ Studio System Hollywood had been gradually crumbling since the late 1940s, but its final collapse came at the end of the 1960s, as unexpected youth-powered hits—*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), *M*A*S*H* (1970)—coincided with expensive, ruinous musicals and war epics—*Doctor Dolittle* (1967), *Paint Your Wagon* (1969), *Tora, Tora, Tora* (1970)—creating a chaotic yet fertile environment. The demise of the Motion Picture Production Code brought about a "New Freedom of the Screen." The studios, most of which had been sold to non-show business conglomerates, possessed little sense of what young audiences,

formed in the crucible of social upheaval, wanted to see. They turned to new directors, not all of whom were “movie brats,” such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg. A few were older journeymen such as Robert Altman and Hal Ashby. Overall, the era was transformative. American movies would never be the same because of it. However, it was also transitional. The “renaissance” turned out to be merely a phase, a means by which the industry moved from the old studio system to the global industry that began to take definite shape in the late 1970s and hardened into formula during the 1980s.

The 1970s were the best of times for American cinema. But they were the worst of times for the film biography, better known as the biopic. The watchword, the one by which the 1970s New Hollywood lived and ultimately died, was “genre.” The American film industry had been organized around genres almost from its beginnings, but the New Hollywood paid special attention to genre as an index of the changes in the culture. *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Soldier Blue* (1970), and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) were seen as “Vietnam Westerns,” even though Hollywood almost entirely avoided making films about the war until five years after U.S. involvement ended. Neo-noirs such as *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Night Moves* (1975) evoked Watergate and the nation’s disillusionment with its institutions, as did the “anti-musicals,” *Cabaret* (1972) and *Nashville* (1975). Todd Berliner, in a study of genre in the 1970s, lists twenty films in which the American film industry “challenged the narrative orthodoxies of its own tradition.” Only one of them, *Patton* (1970), is a biopic.

George F. Custen argued that biopics of the studio era were metaphors for the studios themselves; the genre signaled Hollywood’s willingness to make socially responsible and respectable entertainments. In the 1950s the biopic veered from what Custen, citing Leo Lowenthal, saw as idols of production and tilted heavily toward idols of consumption (Custen 1992, 6). This meant entertainers or sports figures rather than statesmen and scientists; antiheroes, not heroes; warts and all, not celebration. Biopics, like other historical films, were far less able to create metaphors for politics because they took actuality as their raw material. They had to represent politics to some degree in order to be true to their biographical subjects. Modern epics, such as *Patton*, confronted the political positions of their subjects. George S. Patton (George C. Scott), as has been widely noted, could be seen by hawks or doves on Vietnam as either the right kind of general to win a war, or as an embodiment of everything that is wrong with war and the military mindset. Patton came across as a complex antihero in a warts-and-all movie.

With these exceptions, however, biopics in the 1970s appear mired in conventions that hadn't been rethought in a generation. While other genres were being revised in the 1970s, the biopic lay largely stagnant. Fewer film biographies were made in the 1970s than in any decade of the sound period, before or since, justifying Custen's pronouncement that biography became mostly television fare after 1960. Moreover, the genre often wasn't recognized as such. *Bonnie and Clyde*, the film that kicked off The New Hollywood, electrified audiences while scandalizing traditionalists. It was received as a gangster film that dared make the outlaws sympathetic, an approach whose prevention was one of the original intents of the Production Code Administration. However, it can also be seen as a biopic that breaks the same rules, glorifying those whom the PCA would have had Hollywood movies condemn. If filmmakers had picked up on this thread, the history of the biopic would have been considerably different.² Biopics of the 1970s feel directionless, depending mostly upon the warts-and-all mode established in the 1950s as an answer to that era's call for a darker, more adult tone in most genres. The 1970s New Hollywood was a modernist phenomenon, as American film belatedly but powerfully responded to the innovations that had reshaped European films a decade earlier. In *Raging Bull* (1980), Scorsese made the "masterpiece" of the movement at its very end by pushing all the potentialities of the "warts-and-all" biopic beyond their furthest extremes.

The biopic proved as resistant to the modernism of the 1970s as it would be responsive to postmodernism and feminism in the 1990s and beyond. The notable biopics of the 1970s were *MacArthur* (Joseph Sargent, 1977), a pallid and unfocused retread of *Patton*, with a stolid performance by a miscast Gregory Peck, matched by a hasty run-through of the eponymous general's embrace of battle and power, when the film is not evincing its protagonist's abhorrence of war, in the alternating play of glorification and condemnation that had been a hallmark of war films since *Birth of a Nation* (1915). There was *Funny Lady* (Herbert Ross, 1975), Barbra Streisand's sequel to her already anachronistic Fanny Brice biopic, *Funny Girl*. Old Hollywood garnered inauthentic portrayals of Carole Lombard and Clark Gable (*Gable and Lombard*, Sidney J. Furie, 1976) and W. C. Fields (*W. C. Fields and Me*, Arthur Hiller, 1976). The masochistic female biopic was extended to an African American subject in the less-than-progressive Billie Holiday biopic, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972). *The Buddy Holly Story* (Steve Rash, 1978) was a competent but unexciting love song to the late singer, with a career-peak performance by Gary Busey. *Lenny* (1974), Bob Fosse's gritty take on the self-destructive, pathfinding standup comic Lenny Bruce, stayed

in warts-and-all mode, but with an interview-driven, *Citizen Kane*-like approach. However, the big-star likability of an engaging but miscast Dustin Hoffman scrubbed a few layers of grime off the abrasive comedian.

The film that demonstrates better than any other why the New Hollywood biopic never came to fruition is *Bound for Glory* (1976), Hal Ashby's film about the Depression-era experiences and artistic development of the seminal folk singer-songwriter, author, and political activist Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Guthrie (1912–1967). Ashby's film, with a script by Robert Getchell, compresses all it has to say about Guthrie into the period 1936 to 1939. The movie's Woody Guthrie (David Carradine) rides the rails and (literally) bums around the west, finding a measure of success in California. Eventually, he deserts anything that resembles a settled life and goes back to the road in order to "touch the people," as the film's Woody puts it.

The film represents a fascinating intersection in the trajectories of two American artists. One was Guthrie, whose career, as Cray points out, was genuinely active for only one intense period lasting ten years at the most. John Greenway wrote in 1964, "The literary men tell us that every poet has his ten years. Guthrie had his decade; before 1939, he was not yet Woody Guthrie; after 1948, he was no longer Woody Guthrie" (as in Cray 2004, 400). The other was Hal Ashby (1929–1988), who, prior to becoming a director, had made a twenty-year journey that started in the mailroom at Universal and wound its way through a labyrinth of cutting rooms. Ashby worked his way up, becoming, in the late 1950s, an assistant to editor Robert Swink on such major films as William Wyler's *Friendly Persuasion* (1956) and *The Big Country* (1958), and George Stevens's *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959). Later, as a lead editor, Ashby edited five films for producer-director Norman Jewison, winning the Oscar for Best Editing for *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). Jewison offered Ashby, age forty, the chance to direct with *The Landlord* (1970), a topical comedy-drama about race relations.

Ashby was hardly the establishment figure one would expect after such a long apprenticeship. His long hair and beard gave him the appearance of an aging hippie, with a bent, off-center artistic point of view and political views to match. Ashby reeled off one of the most remarkable consecutive strings of significant movies in film history, from *The Landlord*, and the cult classic *Harold and Maude* (1971), through *The Last Detail* (1973), *Shampoo* (1975), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978), and *Being There* (1979). His decline after the 1970s was just as swift. Ashby, along with other '70s auteurs such as Altman, William Friedkin, and even for a time, Scorsese, found his kind of filmmaking out of place in the blockbuster, youth- and fantasy-driven Hollywood of the 1980s.

Altman and Scorsese lived to make major comebacks in the revitalized independent film movement of the 1990s. Ashby died of liver and colon cancer in December 1988.

Ashby was neglected for years until a major study by Christopher Beach and a full-length biography by Nick Dawson both appeared in 2009. However, of Ashby's 1970s films, which racked up a total of twenty-four Academy Award nominations and seven Oscars, four of them for acting, the only one to which Beach's study does not devote a chapter or even part of a chapter is *Bound for Glory*, an omission Beach does not explain.³ In his introduction, Beach asserts that *Bound for Glory* "must be judged at least a partial failure: while it contains a number of memorable scenes, [it] lacks the tight narrative structure that had marked each of Ashby's previous efforts" (Beach 2009, 32). Dawson, on the other hand, portrays *Bound for Glory* as a watershed. "Ashby had previously been viewed by many critics as a journeyman director and certainly not an auteur, but *Bound for Glory* forced a reappraisal . . . suddenly he was being compared to the men he had served his apprenticeship under" (Dawson 2009, 181).

Bound for Glory stands out in Ashby's career as *Lust for Life* (1956), about Vincent Van Gogh, does in the work of its director, Vincente Minnelli. Both were biopics of legendarily troubled artists, on which successful directors gambled their considerable clout. Both films were made from projects that had been kicking around for years. At least *Lust for Life* had Kirk Douglas, whose resemblance to Van Gogh was so strong that the actor himself was working up a property on the painter when Minnelli and MGM invited him to join forces. *Bound for Glory* cast about for an actor who could be Guthrie. Ashby approached Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, and even Guthrie acolyte Bob Dylan before settling on David Carradine, who could play guitar and sing at least as well as Guthrie (Dawson 2009, 170). At first, Ashby had said that Carradine, who was 6'1", was "too tall" to play the 5'6" Guthrie. However, "he had the right rural look," Ashby said, "And he had a 'to hell with you' attitude," which obviously suited the character (Harmetz 1976, 13). Both films end up as artifacts of a certain type of biopic: large-scale and plentitudinous. Minnelli scoured the world in order to stuff the frame with Van Goghs. In Ashby's film, Pauline Kael remarked, "we can't help being aware that this is the most expensive-looking Depression we've ever seen" (Kael 1980, 229). While Minnelli follows Van Gogh up to his last tortured moments, however, Ashby fades out on Guthrie *before* he makes his largest impact. The film practically flashes forward to Guthrie's legacy and to the transcendence of physical existence that provides the resolution of nearly every biopic.

The division of biographical subjects into idols of production and idols of consumption, cuts interestingly across the biographies of Van Gogh and Guthrie, who were both impoverished for most of their lives. The issue of consumption rubs uncomfortably against the story of Van Gogh, whose inability to sell his paintings during his life stands in stark contrast to the value of his work, worth untold millions by the 1950s. The communist Guthrie was opposed in principle to private property and walked away on impulse from opportunities to make money and hold steady jobs. He was an innovator who invented the post-Tin Pan Alley popular music business before there was one, but, unlike most popular musicians, Guthrie did not make consumer items. As with Van Gogh, most of his success was posthumous. By 1999, Guthrie's songs generated more than \$100,000 in royalties annually. "This to a man who [his manager Harold] Leventhal estimated had never made more than \$50,000 in his entire working life" (Cray 2004, 396). To consider the two films themselves as consumer items, neither one was a box office hit; however, this does not mean they weren't packaged for consumption by mainstream if not bourgeois audiences.

It goes without saying that *Bound for Glory* is far less melodramatic than Minnelli's and other warts-and-all films, such as *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), *Love Me or Leave Me* (1956), *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), and *The Joker Is Wild* (1957). Its air of documentary observation is achieved at the lack of a conventional through-line on the protagonist. A classical structure does imbue the movie. Joseph McBride in 1976 called it "one of those rare pictures which are made with lavish resources, meticulous care, and concern for epic breadth that characterize the way the great Hollywood movies used to be made" (as in Dawson 2009, 180–81). "What is most striking . . . about *Bound for Glory*," wrote Darren Hughes, "is Haskell Wexler's photography . . . in soft, muted tones; the sky is as brown as the desert landscapes through which Woody travels" (Hughes 2004, 7). "The negative of *Bound for Glory*," said Frank P. Tomasulo, "was flashed with white light before shooting to achieve a desaturated, pastel color scheme and softened shadows" (Tomasulo 2007, 176).

The softness of Wexler's cinematography is hard to justify, however, given Guthrie's prickly personality and the hard truths about America to which he subjects himself. Ashby and Wexler, in seeking a fresh approach, avoided the hard-edged Walker Evans/Pare Lorentz look often associated with the Great Depression. They pursued instead a shambling, casual feel that evokes the exhausted 1970s as much as it does the depressed 1930s. *Bound for Glory's* assured place in film history, moreover, is as

the first commercial movie to use Garrett Brown's Steadicam, "a device that achieves smooth camera movement even when handheld" (Tomasulo 2007, 176). As with Wexler's lensing, however, the film supplies smooth sailing instead of the "Hard Travelin'" for which Guthrie was known.

Worse is the music. Leonard Rosenman, a veteran film composer (*East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause* [both 1955]), "adapted" a great many Guthrie songs for the film. Rosenman's arrangements for orchestra, even with (or especially with) guitar and harmonica, make Guthrie's folk music sound domesticated and bourgeois. Sometimes the songs are unrecognizable. (How can "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" be played by a full orchestra?) From Ashby, whose soundtracks for *Coming Home* and *Shampoo* were full of rock recordings, the choice of Rosenman's Muzak-y arrangements says that the authentic folk idiom was not enough by itself to carry a Hollywood movie. Since Ashby made the more than justifiable choice to have Carradine do his own singing, he couldn't very well use Guthrie's recordings on the soundtrack. But any one of a number of artists, from Dylan, who had beautifully scored *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), to Arlo Guthrie, could have recorded an instrumental score that wouldn't deny the essence of Guthrie's music.

One wonders if the filmmakers considered using Carradine on the soundtrack to sing some of Guthrie's songs of the same period, as heard on the *Library of Congress Recordings*, on *Dust Bowl Ballads*, his first real album, and in the voluminous 1944 *Asch Recordings*. How much more powerful the astonishing April 14, 1935, scene would be if we heard Guthrie/Carradine singing "The Great Dust Storm" while watching him run down the street for shelter and to shield his family from the "dust pneumonia." The film clearly was conceived as a different kind of musical biopic, one that is in no hurry to get to show how the music was created, but that wants to understand the realities from which the music and musician emerged. The filmmakers seem to feel a responsibility to the idea of *folk* music—this isn't just a "sound" that comes out of some genius's head, as in more conventional music biopics, such as *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945) or *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954); this is music of the people, of struggle. Falling back on generic "movie music" is a failure of imagination. Instead of making Guthrie an offscreen troubadour and truly putting him in charge of telling his story, Ashby approximates Minnelli's use in *Lust for Life* of the refined voice of the British actor, James Donald, injecting middle-class respectability into letters written by the rough-hewn outsider, Vincent Van Gogh.

The final insult is that Rosenman won an Oscar for this, as if to congratulate him for "taming" Guthrie's simple chords and melodies for

the movies. The ordinary spectator who knows Woody Guthrie only from "This Land Is Your Land" or the singer-songwriters like Dylan who were influenced by him, learns nearly nothing about Guthrie's songs or the socially critical point of view from which most of them came. The film telescopes nearly all of Guthrie's conflicts with capitalism and conformity onto disputes Woody has with the manager of the radio station that broadcasts his "country-western" show. An audience member unfamiliar with Guthrie's songs might not even know that even innocuous-sounding songs such as "Gypsy Davy," sung by others in the film, are by Woody Guthrie.

A note from Marcia Nasatir of UA to Ashby following an early screening suggests that Will Geer's voice in the finale, performing excerpts from the end of Guthrie's book, "is an intrusion. Dramatically, the spell is broken and the audience realizes that Carradine is an actor and not Woody." This tells us that *Bound for Glory* was made in the time when any reminder of the flesh-and-blood biographical subject violated unwritten laws of dramaturgy that forbade intimations of an actuality outside the film's illusion of reality. Since *Malcolm X* (1992), which brought in the real Malcolm at the end for didactic purposes, it has been *de rigueur* for biopics to end with photographs, film footage, and recordings of the actual person. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, this exclusion of actuality was a factor that kept the biopic from being taken seriously and from continuing to develop as a film genre. Over the end titles, moreover, is heard a medley of Guthrie's songs as sung by Pete Seeger, the Weavers, and others who figured in his life. The piling on of important songs as the audience heads for the exits gives the sense of a "Woody Guthrie Tribute Concert" not justified by the film we've just seen. What's more, if Guthrie wrote all this great work, why don't we see the creation of more of it in the movie itself?

In creating any kind of truthful picture of its subject, *Bound for Glory* must make Woody Guthrie an antihero. In Guthrie, artistic temperament combined with personal irresponsibility and nonconformity taken to its farthest extreme. Norman Pierce, who knew Guthrie in the 1930s, said, "Woody was a great lover of humanity in the abstract, but was rough on people individually" (Cray 2004, 143). Guthrie thought nothing of leaving his first wife, Mary, and their children for months at a time to gallivant about the country. As her brother put it, Guthrie loved his family, "but had this idea . . . [that] all children are equal. 'Mine aren't better than anyone else's.'" "Emotionally," Cray adds, "the runny-nosed kids of migrants playing in the fields were his children too" (ibid., 132).

Guthrie tended to rebuff any success that came his way, even though he and his family/ies usually were in desperate need of money. "He believed he was too 'honest' for the wealthy and powerful," wrote histo-



FIGURE 2. “Emotionally, the runny-nosed kids of migrants playing in the fields were his children too.” Woody Guthrie (David Carradine), flanked by two “Okie” children, near the California state line. *Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby, United Artists, 1976). Digital frame enlargement.

rian Guy Logsdon, “but he was actually too undependable. . . . Woody became the ultimate individualist in a world that demanded, and still demands, an element of social conformity” (Logsdon 1998, 8–9). In the film a middle-class couple who pick up a hitchhiking Woody go on about all the “interesting restaurants” they saw on their vacation. Woody, giving the back of his hand to people who represent capitalist values but nonetheless have shown him kindness, blurts out, “The more ya eat the more ya shit.” The next shot shows the car, from behind, braking to a halt, and Woody being tossed out, a moment that recalls the scene in *Bonnie and Clyde* in which Bonnie throws out a couple when the man tells them he’s an undertaker. Just as Bonnie knows death awaits the outlaws, Woody can’t help but breach the bounds of society, to the point where he becomes nearly sociopathic. Part of this was his iconoclastic “man of the people” persona, but it may also have been a subtle way for the film to suggest the uncontrollable behavior that was part of his approaching illness.

The early 1930s, with their radicalism and romanticized outlawism, often were made to rhyme with contemporary times in movies of the 1960s and 1970s. *Bound for Glory* revises *Bonnie and Clyde*, run through the definitive paean to “dust bowl refugees,” *The Grapes of Wrath*, and played along the lines of the warts-and-all biopic. *Bonnie and Clyde* drew parallels between its Depression-era bank robbers and the youthful anti-Establishment rebelliousness of the late 1960s. However, *Bound for Glory*’s “lack of box office success may have been a harbinger that the age of the Hollywood protest movie was over” (Tomasulo 2007, 179). In retrospect, it can be seen as the film that bookends with *Bonnie and Clyde*. Woody’s aimless rebelliousness is a metaphor for disappointed radicalism. The defiant attitude of *Bonnie and Clyde* was echoed in many Woody Guthrie songs written nearly three decades earlier. “Pretty Boy Floyd,” for example, expressed the popular viewpoint that romanticized outlaws amid the Depression. In Guthrie’s rendition, Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd was Robin Hood, stealing from the hated, foreclosing banks and giving, among other largesse, “a Christmas dinner for the families on relief.”

As *Bound for Glory* seems a thoughtful revisionism of *Bonnie and Clyde* almost a decade later, Ashby’s *Shampoo* “plays like a melancholy answer to *The Graduate*,” the other 1967 film that ushered in The New Hollywood. “The youthful naiveté and reckless adventure that mark those final, iconic moments of *The Graduate* have been replaced by disillusionment, pathetic posturing, and moral apathy” (Hughes 2004, 6). The Ford and Carter eras came accompanied by a sense that America was settling back into cultural norms, however changed some of them now were. In movies, the revisionism of the 1967–1976 period was becoming overshadowed by *Jaws* (1975), which introduced Hollywood to a whole new formula for blockbuster exploitation, and *Rocky* (1976), which helped bring back the Old Hollywood of simplistic morality and happy endings. Seen now, Hal Ashby appears the melancholy realist who eulogizes the 1960s and the New Hollywood, in a way that recalls the end of perhaps his greatest film, *Being There*, in which the grand old man, Ben Rand, is buried while the holy idiot, Chance the gardener (Peter Sellers) aka Chauncey Gardiner, walks on water.

The credits include the line, “Based on the Woody Guthrie Autobiography,” a claim that stretches the truth. *Bound for Glory* (1943), published when its author was barely thirty, is more fevered fantasy and impassioned yarn-spinning than autobiography. The book, writes Cray, “was a weave of Guthrie’s imagination in full flower and biographical incident. . . . He scrambled events in the interest of drama. . . . He omitted . . . his [first] marriage, his three children . . . all in the interests of dramatic urgency” (Cray 2004, 258). In short, Guthrie approached

his own life in the same way most Hollywood biopics of the 1940s treated their Great Men (and less often, Women). As with a classical biopic, the public was “to assume [the book’s] fantasies were true: there lay the seeds of myth” (ibid.). The classical biopic functions partly to enter its subjects into cultural myth. Similarly, no one who isn’t interested in self-mythologizing would title his book “Bound for Glory,” the title of one of Guthrie’s more than one thousand songs. Because of the fancifulness of Guthrie’s book, and because there was as yet no full-length biography written (the first one would be published in 1980 by Joe Klein), Ashby and Getchell returned to Guthrie’s life for many of the facts that the author dropped from what he “invariably called ‘an autobiographical novel’” (ibid.).

“[The book] *Bound for Glory* captures Guthrie vividly; he was fearfully gifted and ambitious, and also egalitarian—a most uncommon man” (Hadju 2004). Guthrie’s parents were upper middle class, but lost nearly everything. Guthrie, by his teens, was living with a series of foster parents and relatives, and living by his wits. When, later, he would be criticized for affecting the manner of “the hick who just fell off the turnip truck,” the criticism rang somewhat false because Guthrie often lived the life of the rootless, jobless vagrant. He did, however, claim only to have seen the movie *The Grapes of Wrath*. He thought he couldn’t admit that he had read Steinbeck’s six hundred-page book; it might harm his folksy image if people found out how well-read he in fact was. Perhaps he lived the life of someone who was excelling in fields for which there was no category—or at least, no *commercial* category yet: singer-songwriter, folk singer, country-rock artist. It is hard to believe now that the first recordings of Woody Guthrie were made by an ambitious young folklorist, Alan Lomax, who was “collecting” the works and stories of “authentic” folk artists at the Library of Congress. These recordings were not available publicly for nearly a quarter-century, and a decade after Guthrie’s performing career was over.

The film is an odd hybrid—loosely based on an autobiography that is itself loosely based on its own author’s life. The film omits his family history, his sister’s death at the age of fourteen, and his mother’s Huntington’s Chorea, a degenerative disease that is hereditary but which can also skip generations.⁴ There is no foreboding of the Huntington’s that would cut Guthrie himself down in midlife, and indeed no mention of the two wives and five kids after Mary. But then, Guthrie’s own book doesn’t even mention his then still-current wife and family!

Bound for Glory may hold the record among biopics for greatest number of composite and fictional characters. Mary Jennings Guthrie, Heavy Chandler, the “insane man” in Pampa who “sees newsreels in his

head,” and Guthrie himself are about the only actual personages in the film. Pauline (Gail Strickland), the well-to-do widow with whom Guthrie has an affair (the film only hints at his rampant promiscuity), and Luther Johnson (Randy Quaid), the representative Okie, who introduces Woody to the overcrowded migrant camp in California, are composite characters. Will Geer, probably Guthrie’s closest friend, brought him to New York in 1940 (the film ends with Woody’s leaving California and heading off east for the first time) and introduced him to the existing folk community, where he met Lomax, Pete Seeger, and others who would be essential to his development and eventual fame, and would also help get him involved in Communist causes and in unionism. In the 1970s America knew Geer as lovable Grandpa on *The Waltons* TV series and forgot his Communist Party affiliations and the fact that he, like Seeger, had been blacklisted for more than a decade; thus, Geer disappears into a composite character, Ozark Bule (Ronny Cox). “Ozark” also contains aspects of Guthrie friend and frequent singing partner Cisco Houston and Guthrie’s cousin Jack Guthrie, who first made a hit record of the song, “Oklahoma Hills,” credited to both him and Woody. Geer’s voice over the epilogue is apparently as close as he wanted to get to a project that would bring up his past.⁵ “Memphis Sue” is Lefty Lou from Old Mizzou, aka, Maxine Crissman, who was Woody’s radio partner on their popular show on KFVD in Los Angeles. The film lacks nuance about the station and Frank Burke Jr. (here called “Locke”), its owner and manager. To the film’s post-sixties sensibilities, the station manager, helpless in the thrall of “sponsors,” is simply The Man. Who would want to do what he says? The actual Burke was much farther to the left politically than owners of other, generally reactionary Los Angeles media outlets of the time.

The station and Guthrie parted ways only after World War II broke out in Europe, because the singer’s avowed communism was now too much to take with Hitler and Stalin having signed a nonaggression pact and with Germany and the Soviet Union dividing up Poland (Cray 2004, 160). Guthrie’s relation to American politics changed yet again once the United States entered the war, with the Soviets as allies. In the film the word *communism* is heard only once and quickly dispelled. One of the reasons that *Bound for Glory* took thirty-three years to reach the screen was the communist stigma that was burned into Guthrie in his time, and which took at least one generation to fade. Ashby’s film mostly avoids politics. Guthrie’s own writings gave the filmmakers an out: the book “tamed Guthrie’s political views to a tepid, back-the-underdog populism” (ibid., 266). As it was, filmmakers had no need to sanitize; Guthrie had done it for them.



FIGURE 3. Pauline Kael hailed *Bound for Glory* as “the kind of filmmaking that is possible only when a director is backed up by his studio.” The film’s lack of dramatic focus and point of view, however, is indicated by the poster. The bland copy and imagery could be promoting a “heartwarming,” patriotic biopic from thirty-five years earlier, making Ashby’s film look more like a movie lost in time than it actually is (Courtesy of MGM-UA).

The trajectory of Guthrie’s life may be the most frustrating imaginable to make into a biopic. The start-stop, Sisyphean pattern that Guthrie not only fell into but seemed to accept and even to seek out cannot help but make him an antihero. However, the film seems interested in celebrating him, though in warts-and-all fashion, without falling into the downward spiral to which Guthrie’s later life surely lends itself. The film can’t help but recall *The Grapes of Wrath*. In fact, Guthrie devoured John Steinbeck’s novel as soon as it came out, identified himself as one of the Okies of the novel, and befriended its author. Guthrie loved the novel and the movie made from it so much that he wrote a two-part song, “The Ballad of Tom Joad,” for *Dust Bowl Ballads*, cut while the film of *Grapes* was in release. He had been offered a role in the film, which was being made at Fox, the former studio of fellow Oklahoman Will Rogers (1879–1935), Guthrie’s idol and role model, and by Rogers’s frequent director, John Ford. Guthrie, however, was off singing for migratory workers’ camps and strikers’ rallies, and could not be reached when the film was being cast (Cray 2004, 161).

The film takes on the narrative structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as would have pleased the autobiographer. Out of luck and opportunities

in the Dust Bowl, the protagonist lights out for California, like the Joads in Steinbeck's novel and Ford and Zanuck's film, but finds that paradise does not hold the riches that were promised. Like Tom Joad, Woody is radicalized by the experience. In a sense, the film's narrative arc is a political education—precisely the thought that also occurred to me during my first viewing of Ashby's *Coming Home* in 1978. The change rung on the biopic is that instead of a vision emanating mystically from the subject, the subject (Guthrie) develops a social and political outlook from the things he sees and the people he meets. This structure, which smacks of Soviet Socialist Realism (appropriately, for Guthrie), is unique to a handful of films of the 1970s. Fonda's *Julia* (1977), about Lillian Hellman, is the only other biopic I know where it is found. Her *The China Syndrome* (1979) and even the comedy *Nine to Five* (1980) also take the form of the political education. The irony in *Bound for Glory* is that the politics are so wan.

As *Bound for Glory* begins, we see, in Arial Narrow type over a tan-colored background, a black-lettered epigraph, "Don't let nothing get you plumb down . . ." Woody Guthrie's signature is below it. David Carradine's strong voice sings out "Goin' to California," the Jimmie Rodgers song that Guthrie told Lomax filled hundreds of thousands of "dust bowl refugees" with a longing for that state "West of the West" (in Theodore Roosevelt's words). The first scene shows people in Pampa listening to the song on the radio as Woody Guthrie approaches the camera position from out of the distance. A traveling businessman, with sweat stains through his shirt and vest, comes into the gas station offering a dollar for "something worth listening to." As we know from the book, Guthrie acquires a reputation as a fortune teller in this way. Indeed, throughout the film, Guthrie appears to us as a kind of guitar-strumming sage, with Carradine reading his lines much as the actual Guthrie did for Alan Lomax, who was getting it all down on wax.

The following scene has Woody in his next "vocation," sign painting, as he tells a fantastically embroidered rendition of "Goldilocks" to his two small children. Again, the film telescopes data on Guthrie, in this instance his "collaboration," as his daughter Nora describes his writing of children's songs and stories with his daughter Cathy Ann (*W.G.: This Machine . . .*). Woody picks up his guitar when he and Mary can't agree on a way for him to find employment. "Talk it over," he sings, which is ironic given his inability to do just that with Mary. Still, the guitar, and the way Woody wields it throughout the film, does appear to provide him with a masculine identity, even though, during these years, he "didn't do the manly thing" (Cray 2004, 132). In the early scenes on the road, however, when Guthrie does not have his "music box," as he calls it in

his book, he seems powerless, unmanned. With the use of long lenses and, as Darren Hughes says, the look of “an inch of dust on everything,” Woody often emerges from the depth of a shot, making him seem part of whatever environment he inhabits at any given time (Hughes 2004, 7).

Also early in the film, while he is still living in Pampa, Woody is called in to help revive a grief-stricken woman who has not eaten, drunk, or spoken since her daughter died “of the dust pneumonia” (about which Guthrie, of course, later wrote a song) almost a week before. This is not the sort of film in which the subject has a mystical, God-granted gift. The creativity emanates from him as part of his daily life; Guthrie *was* something of a “natural,” without formal training in music or voice, and with a lot to say about his times. The scene, which comes from the book, most of the dialogue included, ends with the penniless Woody telling the woman’s family, “You don’t owe me nothin’” (Guthrie 1943, 182). “*Bound for Glory* would have been a better movie,” Pauline Kael wrote,

if he had taken the pay, knowing he had earned it; part of the charm of folk artists is their practicality, and the logic of this scene requires that Guthrie accept what is his due. I know that in his autobiography, Woody says he refused the money, but it’s still too self-serving a story for a man to tell about himself. That’s part of the problem of making a movie about Woody Guthrie: How can you stay clear of the embalming fluid of saintliness when Guthrie injected it into his own veins? (Kael 1980, 225)

The obvious reply to such objections is, “Well, that’s the way it happened,” according to the autobiographer. But what if Guthrie’s versions of events don’t always ring true? (And they don’t.) Is it the responsibility of the biopic to wrestle out truth from the subject’s life?

What often redeems the film is that it conveys the improvisatory nature of Guthrie’s personality. When Woody leaves the woman’s house, the film quickly cuts to him outside, exhaling with an “oooo-eeee,” then, “I did it”; as he walks away with the Steadicam following him, he adds, “I *think* I did it.” This is a life lived on the fly; the subject makes it up as he goes along. The film establishes Guthrie’s spontaneity, even if it does sacrifice some dramatic tension in the process. Woody, moreover, does not ask to be paid because he doesn’t think of himself as a professional. Guthrie, the eventual proselytizer for communism, would not have liked what real communism would do to his freedoms (and nobody moved about more freely than Woody Guthrie). He was a firm opponent, however, of private ownership and profit—an anticapitalist democrat. This is

best seen in a “copyright notice” printed on the songbooks KFVD sent to listeners of Woody and Lefty Lou’s show: “This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright #154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we dont give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, thats all we wanted to do” (Curtis 2007).

As Woody walks back home, again in long shot (the film’s signature), a woman moves into the foreground, with Woody in the background, out of focus. The woman is leaving with her husband out of this Texas town where nearly all opportunity has dried up, “going to California,” and offering Woody used furniture. This visually bold style makes Woody something of a reactive character. The aesthetic choice counteracts biopic convention; this is not a subject with a strong vision he forces on the world. Rather, Woody is an observer whose character is formed partly by what he sees and experiences. This is an open and—in a word that was everywhere in American culture of the mid-1970s—a sensitive man. “Sensitive” is defined as “quick to detect or respond to slight changes, signals, or influences,” and in a person as “having or displaying a quick and delicate appreciation of others’ feelings” (*The*



FIGURE 4. Woody Guthrie, sensitive male. This image may come close to the earnest, paternalistic American scathingly critiqued by two of Guthrie’s radical descendants, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, in *Letter to Jane* (1972). Woody’s improvisatory manner, however, is probably his most redeeming factor. Digital frame enlargement.

New Oxford American Dictionary, 2nd ed.). This Woody Guthrie is more attuned to others' feelings than the boisterous, ornery Guthrie of the 1943 book. In the 1970s, hardness and certainty were exemplified in the ruthlessness of Richard Nixon's clinging to power and by the rigid wrongheadedness that had mired the country in Vietnam. Ashby would play on this difference in masculinities in his next film, *Coming Home*, in the contrast between Luke (Jon Voight), the paraplegic Vietnam vet who learns sensitivity and persuasion, and Bob (Bruce Dern), the gung-ho career officer who must accept, after a traumatic tour in 'Nam, that his "realities" have turned illusory.

The male sensitivity of the 1970s was, however, in some ways a defensive response to second-wave feminism, a means of retaining male hegemony by co-opting femininity and rendering women virtually unnecessary. The New Hollywood ushered in the most male-dominated cinema in history, a situation that persists to this day; the 1970s ended with Hollywood's discovering "sensitive" versions of some of its founding archetypes. Thus, in *Rocky*, the sleeper smash hit of 1976, Rocky Balboa is a sensitive brute, in contrast with New Hollywood antiheroes such as the hardened, deadly Michael Corleone and the unknowing, wrongheaded buffoons played by Jack Nicholson (including his "Badass" Buddusky in Ashby's *The Last Detail*). Implicit when Mary begs Woody to give Mr. Locke the list of songs for his approval or Memphis Sue's eagerness to compromise with the radio station is the old saw that women don't understand the ways of politics and business and that, in their materialism, they perpetuate the system that requires men to earn money, thus impeding their freedom.⁶

The film, especially in the first half, is composed of vignettes that suggest the influences on Guthrie's creative development, rather than incidents that move the plot forward in a conventional sense. The Heavy Chandler scene forebodes disaster befalling the world in the 1930s. The bedroom scene with Mary after the dust storm makes the point to the audience that Woody still loves her. Just before Woody sets off for California, leaving a note tacked to the chifforobe, he waves her a fond farewell but still catches a ride and leaves his family. It's hard to approve entirely of what he does, and we see that he has mixed motives in doing it. There are no options left in his town, but he abandons his family nonetheless, an act that is hard to sanction. Ashby, ever the editor, weaves the film together mostly with lap dissolves so that one vignette rolls into the next. Guthrie's moves appear based on life experience, rather than deriving from the vision or destiny that in one way or another invariably drives the classical male biopic subject, even if the film questions that in the character.



FIGURE 5. Woody is most himself with the guitar in his hand, as in this scene when he pulls it into the shot and from among the belongings on the Johnson family's truck. The guitar quietly transforms him from just another Okie headed west to the poet laureate of the "dust bowl refugees." He is a late example of Kevin Hagopian's "Common Man as Uncommon Man," as celebrated in studio era films from, to paraphrase, the "vineyards where *The Grapes of Wrath* was scored" (Hagopian 2006, 185). Digital frame enlargement.

Guthrie's guitar is an extension of himself, not simply and banally his "manhood" but also his thought process. At moments of decision, Guthrie sits back with his guitar. In many biopics the artist is a different being while he/she creates; without artistic creation, these subjects sink back into the flawed humans they are. Guthrie is most himself with the guitar in his hands, but, as he is virtually inventing a new form that others will follow, in the 1970s he is seen as misconstrued by his contemporaries. Had the film been made in, say, 1969, instead of 1976, Guthrie would have been more of an activist, in the forefront of dissent and change. Ashby's two previous films—*The Last Detail*, about Navy lifers in the dispirited late-Vietnam period, and *Shampoo*, about self-involved people who don't recognize, on Election Day 1968, when no one is shown even voting, that the "revolution" is being snatched away without anyone noticing—have an exhausted, anticlimactic feel that fits the mid-1970s. *Bound for Glory*, similarly, has a sense of "pastness" about it, a film about a counterculture icon from the past, made when the sixties counterculture is already finished.

The nature of Guthrie's personality, through the mists of time, memory, writing, and song, differs according to the person who is asked.

In Gammond's 169-minute documentary, one speaker characterizes him as "essentially an angry man," another as "always cheerful." Guthrie found plenty to be angry about, as participants in the 1960s social change movements certainly had. Although, by 1976, many of the battles were being won, it didn't feel like victory, especially amid the backlash which the New Hollywood's retreat from female protagonists exemplified. In *Bound for Glory* it's hard even to get angry at the ruthless authorities or the railroad bulls who shoot freight jumpers. The material calls for the fierce engagement that Guthrie brought to his songs and his musical performances in the years when the film takes place. In a conventional biopic, the problems of the pickers being exploited would signal action from the protagonist. Here, however, the film has trouble showing how Guthrie's personal, career breakthrough on local L.A. radio has an effect on the California fruit pickers.

Bound for Glory has been the most forgotten film of, until recently, a mostly forgotten director. It seems Hal Ashby's least characteristic film; it is his only biopic, and indeed his only film set farther than a decade in the past. Cray called the film "inadequate to its subject" (2004, 395). Biographers usually say that about biopics of their subjects, if they acknowledge them at all. But, in this case, it is inevitably true. Guthrie himself is "inadequate to the subject" or at least to his legend. It is to the film's credit that it does not go into Guthrie's incredibly messy, often sad life after 1940, and especially after World War II, when he served in the Merchant Marine. But, in fact, the filmmakers, including Harold Leventhal, Guthrie's former manager who acquired the film rights and co-produced the movie, did not have life rights (which explains the great number of name changes of personages covered by Guthrie's book), and thus couldn't have gone beyond the period depicted in Guthrie's book. The film limits even that period: *Bound for Glory*, published during World War II, is full of references to Hitler and Mussolini, but the film stays behind, historically, in the era of the Joads. No biopic has ever seemed so glad to slip off with its subject into transcendental posterity, where Guthrie and his songs and stories can, ostensibly, live forever.

"For Ashby," wrote Nick Dawson, "*Bound for Glory* was . . . a film with great personal meaning" (Dawson 2009, 180). Ashby, like Guthrie, experienced family tragedy early (his father died when Hal was twelve in a shooting incident that was either an accident or suicide [ibid., 12–13]). He left a wife and family behind (permanently) to go to California. Raised a Mormon in Ogden, Utah, Ashby was "married and divorced twice before I made it to 21. Hitchhiked to Los Angeles when I was 17" (as in Hughes 2004, 1); "I understand Woody Guthrie very well," he conceded (Harmetz 1976, 13). Citing the talk in *Bound for Glory* of

California as “a promised land that has ‘everything a man needs,’” Dawson concludes that “this is how Ashby saw California when he himself was on the road, struggling to get by, and the twenty-odd years he had spent there since had not shaken his idealistic belief that this was the only place to be” (Dawson 2009, 180).

However, when Woody Guthrie spoke or sang of the Golden State, it was with rueful irony. “Do Re Mi,” before it was the title of a cheery Rodgers and Hammerstein standard, was Guthrie’s hard-bitten slang for the cold reception a poor family out of the Dust Bowl receives in California, “if you ain’t got the do [pronounced ‘dough’] re mi.” Guthrie’s book does not include a scene like the one in the film in which L.A. officials set up a checkpoint to turn people away if they don’t have fifty dollars, a vignette that smacks of Steinbeck. Nonetheless, “Do Re Mi” is one of the songs that Guthrie insists upon singing on the radio, instead of something more innocuous. However, the film makes Woody’s choices look impulsive and without purpose. The tempo is faster and Carradine’s delivery lacks the hard edge of Guthrie’s far more pointed recordings of the song.

Ashby’s outlook toward the state that had been so good to him may indeed have been sunnier than that of his subject. Guthrie with reason saw California as something of a con, a false promise reflective of the unfair social and economic contracts of American capitalism. Nonetheless, both men were idealists in their day. Guthrie loved the American people and the country, and truly got to know more of it than most Americans ever do. He genuinely thought that he could make things better. “Find out who is causing the Trouble in this here World—Remove the power from their hands—place it in the hands of those who aint Greedy, and you can roll over and go to sleep,” wrote Guthrie in *Woody Sez*, a collection of Guthrie’s columns for the *People’s World* and the *Daily Worker*, and a passage underlined in Ashby’s own copy (Dawson 2009, 165). Ashby turned from the narcissistic characters of *Shampoo* to a man he could celebrate, and he tried to deepen and personalize the legendary Guthrie.

Musical biopics are usually among the most difficult kinds of films to cast, unless they are designed as vehicles for a star who is both a musical performer and actor. One of the factors in *Bound for Glory*’s relative failure is the presence of David Carradine in the lead role. Carradine started out after college doing mostly TV. By 1976, he was known for *Kung Fu*, a cheesy series put on the air in 1972 to cash in on the martial arts film craze popularized by Bruce Lee; surprisingly, it ran for three seasons. With B-movies such as *Death Race 2000* (1975), Ron Howard’s directorial debut, under his belt, Carradine was no one’s idea of a movie star. He is hard to fault as Guthrie, and yet if the film feels weightless,

he might be a reason (besides the cinematography). I miss what the cantankerous, unpredictable Guthrie could have been like as played by Nicholson or De Niro—any actor of the time who could project dramatic tension and psychological complexity. Carradine is an intelligent actor, but he lacks the star charisma that could have made this reactive character more magnetic. Ironically, the dearth of biopics in the 1970s was partly attributable to the many strong parts in other genres for male actors; the lack of roles for actresses was also a factor. When action films and special effects blockbusters become the order of the day, actors with clout look for meaty roles and usually find them in biopics.⁷

Bound for Glory emerged in an era that did not lack for films with strong points of view toward the cinema and the world. American filmmakers, however, were not ready to rethink the biopic, just as *Bound for Glory* can't decide what to do finally with its ornery, irresponsible, but indispensable subject, whom, as Ashby points out, nobody can shoot. The film keeps Woody Guthrie alive to ride the rails another day: one of the open endings for which 1970s films are famous. Open also was the question of where the biopic would go from the year 1976. To paraphrase Guthrie in his song, "A Worried Man," "It takes a wandering genre to make a wandering film. It's wandering now, but it won't be wandering long."

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. *The Last Great American Picture Show* was the title of an anthology edited by Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King. Diane Jacobs titled her 1980 book, *Hollywood Renaissance*.

2. Similarly, the history of gender signification in popular culture would have been much different had Hollywood developed the feminist heroine posited by *Bonnie and Clyde*. Instead, Bonnie is displaced onto a male character in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). The male buddy film was born and the female protagonist has had to struggle for pride of place ever since.

3. When the webzine Good.com in 2008 ran an issue in which current A-list filmmakers, including Wes Anderson, Judd Apatow, and Alexander Payne, were each asked to pick an Ashby film from the 1970s and discuss what it meant to them, the two titles for which there were no takers were *Coming Home* and *Bound for Glory*.

4. Guthrie was married twice more after his marriage to Mary ended in 1943. Of his eight children, Gwendolyn and Sue, by Mary, died of Huntington's, both at forty-one. Three of his children, Bill (his third with Mary), Cathy Ann (the eldest of his children by his second wife, Marjorie), and his only child by his third wife, Anneke, died in tragic accidents, two in car crashes, and Cathy Ann at the age of four in a fire. Arlo, Joady Ben, and Nora, his second, third, and fourth children with Marjorie, are in their sixties at this writing and free of Huntington's, which is known to present in victims before age forty (*American Masters* . . .).

5. *The Waltons* (1972–1981) truly was Geer's last hurrah. He died in April 1978, sixteen months after the release of *Bound for Glory*. His family sang "This Land Is Your Land" at his deathbed (IMDb "Will Geer" Trivia).

6. That Memphis Sue and Mary are played, quite unrecognizably, by the same actress, Melinda Dillon (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977], *A Christmas Story* [1983]), only reinforces the sense that Guthrie meets with the same incomprehension by women everywhere he goes (even if it also demonstrates Ashby's ever-creative casting). Such unreconstructed misogyny was passed from the Old Left to the New Left (including the New Hollywood), and made second-wave feminism necessary.

7. For a fuller discussion of acting in the biopic, see Bingham 2010, 76–95.

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“Weird Andy Hardy”

Ed Wood and American National Identity

CONSTANTINE VEREVIS

Aim for the stars and if, at the end of your life, you’ve only reached Mars, remember one thing. Stars flicker in and flash out. Mars is a planet. A constant light. A stable entry that will be here as long as life itself.

—Edward D. Wood Jr., *Hollywood Rat Race*

There were people always hanging around Eddie, like a planet going through space, all sorts of things attach themselves to it. Spinning around Eddie. There were all sorts of people that wanted something from him, or had something to give him, and it became sort of a drag, if you’ll pardon the expression.

—Kathy Wood in Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.*



ALTHOUGH MAINLY IGNORED AT THE time of their release, the films of low-budget, exploitation filmmaker Edward D. Wood Jr. (1924–1978)—*Glen or Glenda* (1953), *Bride of the Monster* (1955), *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), and others—were revived throughout the 1980s by paean to “bad cinema” such as Harry and Michael Medved’s

The Golden Turkey Awards (1980). Affectionately known as “the world’s worst director,” Wood (and his tawdry life story) became the subject of a biography—Rudolph Grey’s “oral history,” *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (1992)—and direct-to-video biographical (documentary) films such as *Ed Wood: Look Back in Angora* (1994) and *The Haunted World of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (1996). These works overlap with Tim Burton’s glossy, eighteen million dollar, Disney-backed, (fictionalized) biopic *Ed Wood* (1994), a film (selectively based on Grey’s biography) that documents Wood’s close relationship with faded Hollywood actor Bela Lugosi, posits his inspirational (though fictional) encounter with Orson Welles, and celebrates Wood’s indefatigable passion for filmmaking and the “success story” of his achievements on film. In examining Burton’s *Ed Wood* biopic—arguably (and, given its focus, ironically) Burton’s most accomplished piece of narrative storytelling—this essay assesses not only the way in which Burton recreates the lifework of Edward D. Wood Jr., but also how Burton’s evocation of his own filmmaking (and close relationship with actor Vincent Price) presents *Ed Wood* not simply as a biopic, but as an (auteur) exercise in *auto*-biography.¹

Across his thirty year Hollywood career as producer-writer-director-actor, Edward D. Wood Jr.’s output followed a trajectory typical of low-budget (genre) filmmaking: from B-movie Western (*The Lawless Rider*, 1952) to exploitation docudrama (*Glen or Glenda*, 1953) and juvenile delinquent picture (*Jail Bait*, 1954), then to horror film (*Bride of the Monster*, 1955) and science fiction movie (*Plan 9 from Outer Space*, 1959), and finally on to soft- and hard-core pornography (*Take It Out in Trade*, 1970, and *Necromania*, 1971) (see Birchard 1995, 451). During his lifetime, Wood’s films received only limited theatrical exhibition, and mostly played in grind house and drive-in theaters: for example, what is now his best known film, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, was shot in November 1956 and previewed at the Carlton Theater in Los Angeles in March 1957, but did not go into general release until July 1959, when it appeared at the bottom of a double bill with Distributors Corporation of America’s *Time Lock* (Gerald Thomas, 1957) (Grey 1992, 203). Some of Wood’s films began to find a wider audience in the early 1960s when independent New York television station WPIX-Channel 11 bought a package of (then) recent horror and science fiction films—including the Bela Lugosi vehicles, *Bride of the Monster* and *Plan 9 from Outer Space*—and broadcast them every two months over a period of around five years (*ibid.*, 8). By the time of Wood’s death in 1978, his films—including his most personal work, *Glen or Glenda*—had undergone a revival of sorts at midnight screenings and repertory seasons of “bad movies.” For instance, J. Hoberman reported on the World’s Worst Film Festival, held at the

Beacon Theater (New York, 1980), which featured *Glen or Glenda*, *Bride of the Monster*, and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* ("Bad Movies" 9–10). That season of "objectively bad films" was itself inspired by two books to which young upstart critics Harry and Michael Medved contributed—*The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* (1978) and *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980)—which wryly celebrated the "imagination and creativity" of bad movies. In *The Golden Turkey Awards*, the Medveds had bestowed the (fictional) prize of "Worst Director of All Time" upon Wood, and—in a "people's choice" category—elected *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as the "Worst Film of All Time" (Medved 1980, 176–81, 203–208). More than this, by linking Wood's artistic proclivity—for "unconvincing magic, crackpot logic and decomposing glamour"—to his private life—his angora fetish, cross-dressing, and (later) heavy drinking—Hoberman (like the Medveds before him) made the argument that Wood's film work—*Glen or Glenda*, at the very least—was "partial biography" (Hoberman 1980, 10). Wood's notoriety, professional and private, was registered in subsequent publications, among them Danny Peary's *Cult Movies* (1982), which noted that Wood's "inept, berserk picture"—namely, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*—was "revered by a large and growing cult" and had "moved beyond camp . . . to [become] legend" (Peary 1982, 267).

Like the work of Hoberman and the Medveds, Peary's essay on *Plan 9 from Outer Space* replayed the fan legend—that Wood was a transvestite who wore his women's clothing on set, and who, as a World War II marine, fought with bra and panties under his uniform—but the story of Wood's life-work was (as Hoberman had noted) a subject for "further research" (Hoberman 1980, 10).² The situation was changed somewhat with the appearance of Rudolph Grey's *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (1992), a loose biography which confirmed much of the rumor, but also admitted that, "[with] most of Ed Wood's own documentation of his career . . . lost or sold throughout his three decades in Hollywood . . . the task of reconstructing [Wood's] life and documenting his work was arduous and complicated" (Grey 1992, 7). Described as an "an oral history [told] by those who knew Wood intimately" (ibid.), Grey's book assembles fragments from interviews with more than seventy of Wood's friends and associates, focusing mainly on the three phases of Wood's life in Hollywood: the initial period during which he attempted to establish himself in theater and film (1948–1953), his "entrepreneurial" period as film producer-writer-director of low budget movies (1953–1960), and his prose-fiction period during which he was mostly unemployable as a filmmaker (1960–1978). Grey writes that it was "inevitable [that the interviewee's recollections were] colored by the distortions of memory and vanity" and, in electing "not to eliminate an

individual's memory even if it contradicted another's account," declares that "discovering the objective 'truth' of [Edward D. Wood Jr.'s life was] impossible beyond a schematizing of life events" (Grey 1992, 7). Despite its limitations, Grey's book almost immediately became background and model for two (direct to video) biographical films—*Ed Wood: Look Back in Angora* (Ted Newsom, 1994) and *The Haunted World of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (Brett Thompson, 1995)—the latter made in collaboration with Crawford John Thomas, the (one time only) producer who had financed Wood's first film as actor-writer-director, *Crossroads of Laredo* (made in 1948, but unreleased until included as a DVD extra alongside the documentary film).

Grey's Edward D. Wood Jr. biography also drew the attention of Hollywood screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski. As film school students, Alexander and Karaszewski had (in the early 1980s) fashioned an (unrealized) Ed Wood documentary film project, *The Man in the Angora Sweater*, and (later) with the appearance of Grey's book drew upon its personal accounts and conflicting reminiscences to write a ten-page treatment for a (fictionalized) Ed Wood biopic (French 1994a, 12). A package of Ed Wood material, including the script treatment and copy of *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, was passed on to Tim Burton who "rediscovered" his childhood enthusiasm for Wood's films—"I grew up with *Plan 9 [from Outer Space]*, and I love it"—and requested a full screenplay (Burton, qtd. in Baecque 2011, 104). Burton was much encouraged that the 147-page script (promptly delivered by Alexander and Karaszewski in November 1992) was not a treatment for a "completely realistic biopic" (Burton in Salisbury 2000, 130), but instead an episodic account of Edward D. Wood Jr.'s middle period in Hollywood, from the production of *Glen or Glenda* through to the (fictionalized) premiere of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Embracing the paucity of objective detail, Burton invested instead in a kind of *emotional truth*, presenting Wood (and his entourage) as characters who undertook all things with great passion and enthusiasm:

If you read *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, the great thing about these people's story is that there is no story. The book is a series of recollections from these people who have a vague remembrance. . . . [*Ed Wood* is] an acknowledgment that there is no hard core [evidence]. I'm only taking what I think some of this stuff is, and trying to project *a certain kind of spirit*. . . . I find that most biopics are stodgy and really boring, because people . . . take too much of a reverential approach and it's fake. Every time I've seen a biopic, it just doesn't feel real. . . . I decided to go along with that a little bit more and

not to treat these people so reverentially or in a documentary style. . . . I don’t know [these people], *but I have a feeling about them.* (Burton in Salisbury 2000, 135, 141; emphasis added)

Burton interprets *Nightmare of Ecstasy* as a flawed chronicle—“a biography full of holes out of which pour[s] . . . optimistic naivety” (Baecque 2011, 110)—and forges a free adaptation, a (revisionist) history, which, eschewing objective fact, presents Ed Wood as a character with an obsessive, often delusional faith in his own artistic vision.

Jonathan Lupo and Carolyn Anderson write that Burton’s *Ed Wood* is one of several “off-Hollywood” biopics that focus on the life of an artist or entertainer as they caricature the typical Hollywood biopic by ironizing a major trope of this type of film—the tension created by an individual who is a great artist but a difficult person—and thus *invert-ing* the contradiction: “What [Ed] Wood lacks in conventional talent and success, he makes up for in the depth and sincerity of his personal and business relationships and in his ability to survive with these values intact in an often ruthless Hollywood” (Lupo and Anderson 2008, 106). Dennis Bingham says something similar when he describes Burton’s *Ed Wood* as a “Biopic of Someone Undeserving”: “[Ed Wood is a] biopic hero who has everything—enthusiasm, optimism, compassion . . . tenacity, and something he want[s] to say in films. He has everything [, that is,] . . . except talent” (Bingham 2010, 147).

Burton establishes this approach from the opening sequence, which depicts the premiere of Wood’s (1948) theatrical drama about the U.S. Marine Corps, *Casual Company*. The segment sets up the nature of Wood’s work and his attitude toward it. Despite the fact that the foxhole drama opens in a leaky venue to a small audience and attracts uniformly negative reviews, Wood is optimistic and unconcerned by the criticism: “Look” he sincerely tells his small troupe, “We’re all doing great work.” As Lupo and Anderson describe it, the sequence—in which Wood is seen standing in the wings enthusiastically following the dialogue of his play—suggests both “a tonal reading strategy and a narrative template” for the remainder of the film: “Wood’s unmitigated passion for creation and his unwavering belief in [theater and] filmmaking as a collaborative enterprise are heralded as his greatest accomplishments” (Lupo and Anderson 2008, 105–106).

Burton says that he pictured Ed Wood as a “weird [version of] Andy Hardy” (Salisbury 2000, 136), the character played by Mickey Rooney in the enormously popular MGM Andy Hardy cycle, initiated by *A Family Affair* (George B. Seltz, 1937) and consisting of some fifteen films made between 1937 and 1946. As played by Burton’s muse,

mirror, and canvas—Johnny Depp—the character Ed Wood channels Andy Hardy, not only for his unflappable enthusiasm and madman grin, but also for the entrepreneurial energy that links the two characters to a tradition of American innovators and impresarios (and finds further expression in Rooney’s lead role in the contemporaneous biopic *Young Tom Edison* [Norman Taurog, 1940]). As Robert B. Ray points out, “Even while working quickly and sticking to a formula, the Andy Hardy filmmakers had accidentally plugged into [this] main tradition of American culture . . . the mischievous good/bad boy, Andy descended from Huck Finn ([also] played by Rooney in 1939)” (Ray 1995, 4). Although Wood’s life is presented as a distorted version of classic American life, Wood’s rallying of his troupe of players and his idealistic relationship with Kathy O’Hara recall Andy’s partnership with Betsy Booth (Judy Garland) and the “let’s-put-on-a-show” ethic that makes its way from *Loves Finds Andy Hardy* (George B. Seltz, 1938) to such Rooney-Garland musicals as *Babes in Arms*, *Strike Up the Band*, and *Babes on Broadway* (Busby Berkeley, 1939, 1940, 1941). Similarly, the American small-town milieu of the Hardy films is invoked on the occasion of Wood and Kathy’s first date—an outing at the fair—during which Wood tells Kathy that he is “from back east. Poughkeepsie. You know, all-American small town: everybody knows everybody, my dad worked for the post office, I was a Boy Scout.” Perhaps most significant, though, is the way in which the (posthumous) interest in Wood’s work—in a (perverse) parallel to the success of the low-budget Hardy films—demonstrates how “a popular entertainment, made without aesthetic ambition, can gain an unprecedented hold on the collective unconscious” (Ray 1995, 4).

In *Ed Wood*, Burton carefully recreates—remakes³—three of Wood’s best-remembered films, in the process transforming and molding them through his own auteur and mannerist style. The film’s opening prologue—which incorporates the title sequence—involves a Burton signature shot, the camera moving toward a rain-swept, lightning-streaked, ramshackle Victorian mansion (an elaborately stylized miniature based on an actual house used in *Bride of the Monster*). As Gavin Smith describes it, here (as in other Burton works), the virtuoso opening is “part of Tim Burton’s [auteur] signature—his way of establishing unchallengeable control of the domain of each film, defining its reality as a privileged imaginary landscape of eccentric, mannered artifice” (Smith 1994, 53). The camera passes through a beckoning window into a living room where television psychic and Wood collaborator Criswell (played by Burton regular Jeffrey Jones) sits up in a coffin and delivers—in imitation of Criswell’s prologue for *Plan 9 from Outer Space*—a solemn introduction to the life story of Edward D. Wood Jr.:

Greetings, my friend. You are interested in the unknown, the mysterious, the unexplainable. That is why you are here. And now, for the first time, we are bringing you the full story of what happened. We are giving you all the evidence based only on the secret testimony of the miserable souls who survived this terrifying ordeal. . . . My friend, we cannot keep this a secret any longer. Can your heart stand the shocking facts of the true story of Edward D. Wood, Jr.?

As Criswell lies back in the coffin, the camera resumes its movement, pushing out through a window at the rear of the mansion and down into a cemetery—modeled on the infamous graveyard set for *Plan 9 from Outer Space*—where the film's opening credits are revealed on a series of tottering tombstones illuminated by lightning flashes. The titles continue as the camera moves from the cemetery, first dipping into a misty lagoon where it encounters an octopus (stock footage like that used in *Bride of the Monster*) and then tilting upward to follow three patently artificial flying saucers (modeled on the ones from *Plan 9 from Outer Space*) which wobble their way upward across a star field to rendezvous with a mother ship (also modeled after one in *Plan 9*). The concluding part of the shot has the camera drop back toward Earth, moving through a cloud layer toward the Hollywood sign and then across an area of Hollywood (a miniature of the city at night, from Beechwood Canyon to the Hollywood Freeway and Hollywood Boulevard, circa 1955) to finally come to rest in a dark alley where Ed Wood (Depp) nervously paces in front of a theater.

The dazzling opening sequence, which marks out Burton's affinity with Wood—their shared enthusiasm for filmmaking *and* the accoutrements of 1950s B-movie and popular culture—leads to the (abovementioned) opening of *Casual Company*, a segment important not only for reasons of establishing Wood's optimism but because it will find its rhyme in the (fictionalized) premiere for *Plan 9 from Outer Space* at the Pantages Theater that closes out the film and leads to another Hollywood flyover and end credits roll (more on this below). From the very outset, Burton presents Wood as a dedicated, heroic artist, someone with an unwavering (if unrealistic) faith in his productions, and also—like other Burton characters (Pee Wee, Edward Scissorhands, Willy Wonka)—a marginal figure and social outcast. This is established in the opening panel of Burton's film in and through Wood's (largely fictionalized) endeavor to get his first and most substantial feature film, *Glen or Glenda*, off the ground. Most often seen as an autobiographical work, *Glen or Glenda* has been described as "a passionate defence of transvestism—and

thus [of Wood's] free expression—cast in the mode of a half-heartedly 'scientific' exploitation flick" (Hoberman 1995, 10). In Burton's telling, Wood initially responds to an advertisement in the trade journal *Variety* announcing independent, exploitation film producer George Weiss's forthcoming feature *I Changed My Sex* (later known as *Glen or Glenda* and also *I Led Two Lives*), loosely based on the Christine Jorgensen story (at the time, a national sensation). Arranging a meeting with Weiss, Wood attempts to persuade the producer that he is best qualified to direct the film because, like Jorgensen, he is a transvestite: "I have never told anyone what I'm about to tell you. But I really want this job. I like to dress in women's clothing." Although Weiss is not persuaded (he tells Wood he doesn't hire directors for their "burning desires to tell their stories"), Wood ultimately lands the role of writer-director by securing the services of an established star (Bela Lugosi) and promising to deliver the picture on time and within budget. Wood subsequently casts Lugosi as a spirit-like God who arranges all things on Earth, and (under the pseudonym of Daniel Davis) takes the lead role of Glen/Glenda for himself. Although Weiss makes it perfectly clear that his only interest is in the commercial value of the material, Wood immerses himself in the work, allowing his own psychology to inform the film. *Glen or Glenda* also becomes the alibi through which Wood confesses his habitual cross-dressing to his co-star and off-screen lover, Dolores Fuller (Sarah Jessica Parker). Although Fuller is indignant—not only dumbfounded that Wood has not previously confessed the habit but also outraged that he should now put their story on film for all to see—she is nonetheless persuaded to play opposite Wood in the role of Barbara.

Dolores Fuller was an important early collaborator of Wood's, first joining him (according to Fuller) when he announced a call for an unrealized film, *Behind Locked Doors*, and going on to appear not only in *Glen or Glenda* but two subsequent features, *Jailbait* and *Bride of the Monster*. Although she parted ways with Wood after the completion of the latter—ostensibly because Wood replaced Fuller with Loretta King in the leading role (see Grey 1992, 61–62)—Fuller's significance in recounting Wood's life story is strengthened by the fact that she made herself available for interview in Grey's oral history project, *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, and appeared in the several documentary films that followed. In each of these sources, Fuller presents as a sympathetic and supportive collaborator:

Edward would sit there with me, and write his scripts, and bounce ideas off me. . . . He'd go over the scenes with me while he was writing. And then pretty soon he'd ask me if he could wear my angora sweater. I went along with it, because

it didn't seem like it was doing any harm. . . . He begged me to marry him. I loved him in a way, but I couldn't handle the transvestism. . . . I didn't need all those quirks. It wasn't just the angora sweaters, but when he got into the whole bit, the high heels and the whole drag. . . . Our relationship was pretty much like the movie, *Glen or Glenda*. (Fuller in Grey 1992, 36)

If simple acceptance is, as in the case of *Glen or Glenda*, one of the key themes in Burton's *Ed Wood*, then the character of Dolores Fuller is presented as a counterpoint to the close (father-son, mentor-student) relationship that will be established between Lugosi and Wood (and later, the more sympathetic characterization of Kathy O'Hara). In addition to her frustrated outburst on the occasion of reading the script for *Glen or Glenda* ("What kind of sick mind operates like that?" she asks), Dolores balks when Wood directs Lugosi's puppeteer scene in drag: "How can you just walk around like that in front of all these people? . . . You've surrounded yourself with a bunch of weirdos." As in Grey's book, Fuller departs following the (disastrous) premiere of *Bride of the Monster*, but (before that) she appears in an exhilarating and iconic moment from *Glen or Glenda* (one of three scenes reenacted in Burton's film). The segment (a still from which is featured in print ads for *Ed Wood*) is that in which Barbara, wearied by Glen's admission that he is a cross-dresser, leadenly delivers the film's penultimate lines—"Glen, I don't fully understand this, but maybe together we can work it out"—before standing to peel off her angora sweater and pass it over to Glen/Glenda.

A number of significant, early scenes in *Ed Wood* are played out between Wood and Fuller, but the emotional thread that runs through Burton's film is Wood's relationship with Lugosi.⁴ As has often been noted, Burton's great affection for Wood, and understanding of Wood's need to get close to his idol, Lugosi, is informed by Burton's own well-documented (student-mentor) relationship with actor Vincent Price (who played the father-inventor in Wood's 1990 film *Edward Scissorhands*). Burton says: "There was an aspect of [Wood's] relationship with Bela Lugosi that I liked. He befriended him at the end of his life . . . I connected with it on the level that I did with Vincent Price. . . . Meeting Vincent had a great impact on me, the same impact Ed must have felt meeting and working with his idol" (Burton in Salisbury 2000, 131–34). According to Lugosi's biographer, Robert Cremer,⁵ Edward D. Wood Jr. met Lugosi (through producer Alex Gordon) upon the actor's return from a stage revival of *Dracula* at the Little Theater in London at the end of 1950. Knowing that Lugosi's participation would be an immediate

boost for his current production, Wood set about trying to interest Lugosi in a role in *Glen or Glenda*, specifically creating for him the part of the puppeteer, “the spirit who pulls the strings of people’s emotions” (Cremer 1976, 212–13). In Burton’s version, Wood happens upon Lugosi (played by Martin Landau)—right after Weiss has rejected Wood’s initial pitch for him to direct *Glen or Glenda*—when he catches sight of Lugosi trying out a coffin in a mortuary (when asked, Lugosi explains that he is “planning on dying soon,” which is another way of saying that he is “embarking on another bus and truck tour of *Dracula*”). Wood is awestruck by the real-life encounter with his idol—he tells Lugosi he saw him tour as Dracula in his home town of Poughkeepsie in 1938—and, when Lugosi misses his bus, offers to give him a lift back to his modest house in the Los Angeles suburbs. In subsequent scenes, Burton works to establish a close (father-son) relationship between Lugosi and Wood, always underlining the fact that Wood’s obsession is first of all with his idol’s on-screen image (especially his title role in Todd Browning’s 1931 film version of *Dracula*). For instance, in Wood’s next visit to Lugosi’s home, Wood and Lugosi are seen seated on the living room sofa beneath a huge portrait of Lugosi as Dracula, watching Lugosi’s younger self in a television screening of *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) introduced by horror “ghost host,” Vampira. Wood is enthralled by the hypnotic hand gestures that Lugosi aims at Vampira: “You will come under my spell. You will be my slave of love.” Similarly, when Lugosi arrives at the dingy Larchmont Studios to recite the puppeteer’s (atrocious) lines for *Glen or Glenda*—“Beware. Beware of the big, green dragon that sits on your doorstep. He eats little boys, puppy dog tails, and big fat snails. Beware. Take care. Beware.”—Wood watches, dumbstruck, as Lugosi alchemically transforms the dross into a powerful monologue, magisterially raising his hand before Wood can cut, to deliver extra lines in a single take: “Pull the strings! Pull the strings!”

In *The Man Behind the Cape*, Cremer writes that Lugosi’s relationship with Wood was the faded actor’s sole salvation from loneliness and drug abuse (1976, 225). Although there are conflicting accounts—some insisting that Wood exploited the actor, others maintaining it was a true friendship (Carducci 1994, 27)—the Wood-Lugosi relationship (as depicted in *Ed Wood*) is respectful, invested with its affinity to Burton’s with Vincent Price. Burton dramatizes the close connection between the two characters: on one occasion Wood responds to a desperate late-night call from Lugosi (in which the actor confesses that he is broke) by promising to find him work in his next picture, *Bride of the Atom* (released as *Bride of the Monster*, 1955). On another occasion, when Lugosi appears as Count Dracula in a skit for the *Red Skelton Show* only to be confused

by unscripted lines, Wood reassures him: "Ah, don't worry about it, Bela. You're better than all this. . . . Forget it! We'll make our own movie and you'll be a big star again." At one level, the Wood-Lugosi relationship rehearses the emotional connection between "two significant and recurring [Burton] archetypes," the misunderstood outcast and the flawed father figure (He 2010, 21); at another it can be seen as a "dark, mirror-vision" of Burton's relationship with Price: "Lugosi ended his career in isolation and obscurity, while Price worked in projects worthy of his talents until the end. Wood struggled to put together work for Lugosi, while Burton had viable projects for Price" (Maidson 1995, 273). In either case, further evidence of Wood's admiration of Lugosi can be found in the scenes depicting Wood's endeavor to raise money for, and shoot, *Bride of the Atom* (Grey writes that actual filming began in October 1954 but was held over to the following March because of limited finance [1992, 201]).

As with *Glen or Glenda*, Burton recreates a number of scenes from *Bride of the Atom*, including Dolores Fuller's terse exchange with aspiring starlet Loretta King (Juliet Landau), whom Wood has cast in the lead, and several scenes featuring Lugosi (as the mad scientist, Dr. Eric Vornoff), and former wrestler Tor Johnson (as the sympathetic monster, Lobo). The scenes set in Vornoff's (carefully recreated) laboratory and the film's dramatic climax, in which Vornoff wrestles a giant (mechanical) octopus in a shallow pool, are mainly played for comic effect, but Burton treats Vornoff's extended monologue with sincerity. Upon completion of the marsh sequence (shot overnight under trying conditions), Wood thanks Lugosi—"I appreciate all you've done for me," he says. "A great man like yourself shouldn't have to be wandering through the muck at four a.m."—and presents him with a new scene, a monologue in which the Vornoff character rails against having been exiled from his home and hounded throughout the world. In Wood's film, the scene occurs a little over midway through the picture when Vornoff is visited by a former colleague, Strowski (played by George Becwar), who tells the scientist he has been following his experiments in atomic energy as he has pursued him across the world. Vornoff responds with bitter laughter, telling him:

My dear Professor Strowski, twenty years ago I was banned from my homeland. Parted from my wife and son. Never to see them again. . . . I was classed as a madman, a charlatan. Outlawed in the world of science which previously honoured me as a genius. Now here in this forsaken jungle hell I have proven that I am all right!

And, in response to Strowski's announcement that he has come to bring Vornoff home, the latter (now almost weeping) exclaims:

Home? I have no home. Hunted. Despised. Living like an animal. The jungle is my home. But I will show the world that I can be its master! I will perfect my own race of people . . . a race of atomic supermen which will conquer the world!

Filmed at a time when Lugosi's personal and professional life was collapsing (he had recently lost his fourth wife and only son through divorce), the scene is usually taken as evidence of Lugosi's strong identification with the character of Dr. Vornoff. Burton underlines this through his recreation of the sequence. Where Wood covers the exchange in a series of individual shot/reverse-shots of Vornoff and Strowski, Burton begins (at the line "My dear Professor Strowski") with the two actors facing each other in the foreground, Wood and his crew framed between them shooting the sequence. There are two inserts, medium close ups of Wood mouthing (as he does elsewhere in the film) the lines he has written, but when Lugosi begins the second part of his monologue ("Home? I have no home . . .") the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Lugosi. The shot of Lugosi is not unlike the framing in Wood's version but there is no reverse-shot of Strowski: thus, the single take allows the full intensity of the words and Lugosi's empathy for the character to register with the viewer.

If the production of *Bride of the Atom* makes good on Wood's promise to find work for Lugosi it is nonetheless bracketed by another desperate late-night call from Lugosi. This time the great actor is suicidal, out of money, and with no will to live, and the call precipitates his voluntary admission to the South Metropolitan State Hospital (Cremer [1976, 225] has it as the Motion Picture County Hospital). In the following segments, Burton sketches with great economy not only the final weeks of Lugosi's life, but also Wood's developing relationship with Kathy O'Hara/Wood (Patricia Arquette), the young woman he meets at the hospital (and who, as the film's final captions explain, will remain Edward D. Wood Jr.'s companion from 1956 through to his death in December 1978). Initially and irrepressibly drawn to her because of her angora sweater, Wood takes interest in Kathy, and (soon thereafter) during a visit to a night carnival, he opens up to her unreservedly, confessing his fetish for women's clothing. The admission takes place when Wood and Kathy are momentarily stuck in the "Spook House," a setting drawn directly from Burton's imagination and visual catalogue, and the message (in contrast to Fuller's hysterical outbursts) is a fantasy of simple and loving acceptance.

A little later, Lugosi is discharged from hospital (mainly because his insurance will not cover an extended stay) and, though frail, he asks Wood to initiate another production. In actuality, Edward D. Wood Jr. already had in preparation a script for *Graverobbers from Outer Space* (later released as *Plan 9 from Outer Space*) and used some promotional money to shoot advance footage of Lugosi (and others) at a disused Mexican cemetery and also a few shots of Lugosi, dressed in caped-coat and broad-brimmed hat, in front of Tor Johnson's suburban home (Wood in Grey 1992, 77–80). Burton recreates the filming of the latter as an intimate two-hander, Wood operating the camera himself and Lugosi improvising the scene: "Eddie. What if I'm not in so big a hurry?" asks Lugosi. "What if I take a moment to slow down; to savour the beauty of life; to, to smell a budding flower?"

A little later in the film, following the uproarious premiere of *Bride of the Monster*, Wood and Lugosi are seen strolling along a Hollywood street, the actor telling Wood that the last few days have been "a good time." When Wood expresses his disappointment that the film's opening was interrupted by its unruly audience, Lugosi says that it does not matter because he has committed the film to heart and then, on the steps of a building, earnestly launches into his soliloquy from *Bride of the Monster*: "Home? I have no home . . ." Lugosi's passionate act draws a small, appreciative crowd of onlookers, and when one of them tells Lugosi that he is just as great as ever, Burton takes it as opportunity for the actor to replay (almost verbatim) lines that are recorded in Cremer's biography: "When the brain is young," Lugosi advises the onlooker, "the spirit is still vigorous like [putting his arm around Wood], like a young man." In the scene immediately following the impromptu performance, Wood receives a call that Lugosi has died. The very next shot, Lugosi's funeral, repeats Wood's first encounter with the actor, the camera tracking in to reveal Lugosi lying in the open coffin, but, instead of the actor indignantly declaring (as he has at the start of the film) that the coffin is "too restrictive," this time the lid closes upon the actor (and a chapter in Wood's life). Right after the funeral, Wood is seen in the half-light of a projector, remembering his idol and friend, watching, over and over again, the ghostly footage of Lugosi shot outside Johnson's home for *Graverobbers from Outer Space* while strains of "Swan Lake" (the only music used in Lugosi's 1931 version of *Dracula*) play mournfully on the soundtrack.

As in other Burton films, and in a reprise of Burton's own relationship with Price (who died during the filming of *Ed Wood*), the death of the father figure is a key moment, one that opens to the final panel of the film. Impelled by his own limited finances, Wood uses the

small strips of Lugosi footage, “the acorn that will grow a great oak,” to convince his landlord Edward Reynolds, a well-respected member of a local Baptist church, to invest in *Graverobbers from Outer Space* under the pretense that profits from the picture will later finance a series of religious films—actor Paul Marco said that “Ed [Wood] could convince you to buy the Brooklyn Bridge” (Grey 1992, 76). With backing secured from the Church, Wood assembles his regular troupe of players—Tor Johnson (George “The Animal” Steele), John “Bunny” Breckinridge (Bill Murray), Vampira (Lisa Marie), Conrad Brooks (Brent Hinkley), and Paul Marco (Max Casella)—for principal photography at Quality Studios (Grey says shooting actually took place there in under a week in November 1956 [1992, 206]). Wood tells Kathy that *Graverobbers from Outer Space* will be “the ultimate Ed Wood movie. No compromises,” but as a precondition to financing Wood must agree to have the entire cast baptized by the Reverend Lemon in a service conducted (“because Brother Tor couldn’t fit in the sacred tub”) at a domestic swimming pool. At one level, the mass baptism is simply the diligent rendering of historical detail, but at another—and understood alongside the religious undertones of Burton’s oeuvre: his “gothic monumentalism, [and] the almost Old Testament moral gravity”—the segment implies “the possibility of salvation through cinema” (Smith 1994, 53).

Wood’s faith is, however, severely tested on the set of *Gravediggers from Outer Space*, where Reynolds and Reverend Lemon express a number of concerns: the concept of digging up consecrated ground, they say, is “highly offensive,” and the title is “very inflammatory” and should be changed . . . to *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. If this isn’t enough, the Baptists point to the film’s mismatched night and day shots and patently artificial sets, and then ask Wood whether he actually “knows anything about the art of film production.” Later, when the Baptists tell Wood that the church’s choir director will play the film’s young hero, Wood exclaims: “Are you people insane? I’m the director! I make the casting decisions around here!” and (in a paraphrase of lines famously delivered in the completed film) “They’re driving me crazy. These Baptists are . . . stupid, stupid, stupid!” Wood retreats to the dressing room to gather his thoughts and when he reappears, in drag—only to be told to “remove that get-up immediately. You shame our Lord”—the exasperated director orders a cab driver to take him directly to the nearest bar.

In perfect rhyme, Wood’s second visit to a bar—the first, immediately after Weiss’s initial rejection of Wood for director of *Glen or Glenda*, led to Wood’s unexpected encounter with Lugosi—leads him to another idol: this time no less a luminary than the great Orson Welles. Like Lugosi, Welles has been invoked from the very start of the

film—posters in Wood's office depicting not only *Dracula* (1931) but also *Citizen Kane* (1941)—and Wood refers directly to Welles on a number of occasions. At the very beginning of the film, following the disaster of *Casual Company*, Wood confides in Dolores Fuller: "What if I just don't got it? Orson Welles was only twenty-six when he made *Citizen Kane*. I'm already thirty." When Wood delivers *Glen or Glenda* to Weiss he tells him "I'm proud [of the film]. I wrote, directed and starred in it . . . just like Orson Welles did in *Citizen Kane*," only to be met with a blunt rebuke: "Yeah, well, Orson Welles didn't wear angora sweaters." And when Wood first meets Kathy, telling her that he is a Hollywood director-writer-actor-producer, Wood answers her reply—"Aw, come on. Nobody does all that"—with "Oh, yes, they do. Two people. Orson Welles and me." Burton says that the surprise encounter with Welles at Musso & Frank's legendary bar and grill, an event entirely fabricated by writers Alexander and Karaszewski, has more to do with Wood's connection with Welles than his own (French 1994b, 34), but the scene serves to recast Wood as an auteur: Wood and Welles are rendered as "two kindred spirits [who] complain about invasive money-men and the indignities of artistic compromise" (Hultkrans 1994, 11). When, for instance, Wood tells Welles that the backers want to cast their own man as the hero-lead of *Gravediggers from Outer Space*, Welles dryly replies, referring to *Touch of Evil* (1958), "Tell me about it. I'm supposed to do a thriller at Universal . . . but they want Charlton Heston to play a Mexican." Although Wood is dressed in women's clothing, Welles treats him with professional respect: "Ed . . . Visions are worth fighting for. Why spend your life making someone else's dreams?" Armed with this advice, Wood returns to Quality Studios with renewed determination: "Mister Reynolds," he says, "We are going to finish this picture just the way I want it because you cannot compromise an artist's vision."

The final part of *Ed Wood* depicts the filming, in Wood's reportedly brisk and uncritical shooting style, of a number of iconic scenes from (what will be known as) *Plan 9 from Outer Space*: Tor Johnson and Vampira as graveyard ghouls, "Bunny" Breckinridge as the Ruler of the universe, luminous flying saucers hovering over Hollywood, and the (near-nonsensical) opening lines of Criswell's prologue: "Greetings, my friend. We are all interested in the future for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives. And remember, my friend: future events such as these will affect you in the future." Wood calls it a wrap, and the next scene jumps to Wood and Kathy arriving for the premiere of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* at the Pantages Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. Before the screening commences, Criswell calls Wood up on the stage to take a bow, where Wood pays tribute to his mentor: "I

just want to say . . . that this film is for Bela.” A thunderclap announces the start of the movie and then, as in the case of *Casual Company*, Wood is shown passionately mouthing the narrator’s lines as the final flickering footage of Lugosi, picking a flower in front of Johnson’s suburban home, appears in the finished film. Transfixed, Wood mutters to himself, “This is the one. This is the one I’ll be remembered for.” In the final shots of the film, Wood, eternally optimistic, proposes to Kathy outside the theatre in the pouring rain: “It’s only a five-hour drive [to Las Vegas] and it’ll probably stop [raining] by the time we get to the desert. Heck, it’ll probably stop by the time we get around the corner.” The closing shot shows Wood and Kathy pulling away from the theatre, the camera then rising up over the building to complete a second Hollywood flyover before tilting up to the night sky. Finally, ahead of the end credits, there is a series of final updates, title cards briefly advising of the fate of Wood’s little community, his surrogate family, including one for Wood himself:

Edward D. Wood, Jr. kept struggling in Hollywood, but mainstream success eluded him. After a slow descent in alcoholism and monster nudie films, he died in 1978 at the age of 54.

Two years later, Ed was voted “Worst Director of All Time,” bringing him worldwide acclaim and a new generation of fans.

This final update suggests that the (imagined) premiere of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is further evidence of Wood’s delusional fantasy, his inability to recognize that his aspirations far exceed his ability, but screenwriter Karaszewski says, despite the fact that *Plan 9 from Outer Space* never premiered in Los Angeles, “thematically it was correct to end [*Ed Wood*] this way because *Plan 9* is the movie that eventually made Ed Wood known. . . . People seeing [*Ed Wood*] might not know that *Plan 9* was really a disaster [when it was made], but now it’s still seen and remembered” (qtd in French 1994c, 119–20). Karaszewski’s comment is consistent with Lupo and Anderson’s assessment that, with the sentimental triumph of the premiere, Burton gives the film a happy ending, “replacing the ‘rise and fall’ structure of many biopics with a delayed, fictional, phoenix-like rise to esteem, [an ending which] thereby nods to Wood’s actual posthumous success and redemption, partially a result of [the Burton] biopic” (ibid., 106).⁶ Furthermore, the uplifting ending also demonstrates that while, on the one hand, *Ed Wood* might be seen as a “travesty” of the classic Hollywood biopic, on the other it presents an inspirational (if distorted) version of American life: “a success

story preaching the importance of self-belief and the power of positive thinking” (Hoberman 1995, 11). The ending at once affirms Wood’s unyielding optimism—his devotion to his associates and true faith in filmmaking—and also reveals *Ed Wood* as a film “thoroughly infiltrated by the Life and Art of its director” (Newman 1995, 44), one in which Burton demonstrates, through the film’s dizzy celebration of (the success of) abject failure, his own uncompromising passion for filmmaking and his estrangement from American mainstream culture.

Notes

1. This article differentiates between the biographical personage—“Edward D. Wood Jr.”—and the biopic character—“Ed Wood”—portrayed by Johnny Depp in Burton’s *Ed Wood*.

2. For “corrective” accounts, that contextualize Wood’s work in 1950s B-movie culture, see Birchard 1995, 450–55, and Davis 2010, 190–200.

3. The recreations can be understood as official (limited) remakes, Wood having purchased the rights to remake *Plan 9 from Outer Space* from Wade Williams (see Thonen 1994, 22).

4. This is intensified in Burton’s film by selectively omitting such details as Lugosi’s fourth and fifth wives and Wood’s short-lived marriage to Norma McCarty.

5. In addition to Grey’s Wood biography, two Lugosi biographies, Cremer’s *The Man Behind the Cape* and Arthur Lennig’s *The Immortal Count*, were consulted by screenwriters Karaszewski and Alexander (French 1994a, 12).

6. Evidence of this is found in Jeffrey Sconce’s singling out of Wood as a privileged example of “paracinematic excess” in “‘Trashing the Academy’” and also Mark Carducci’s documentary *Flying Saucers over Hollywood: The “Plan 9” Companion* and the feature film *Plan 10 from Outer Space* (Trent Harris 1995).

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HOT AND COLD WARRIORS

Topography and Typology

Wyatt Earp and the West

HOMER B. PETTEY

Tombstone is a city set upon a hill, promising to vie with ancient Rome upon her seven hills, in a fame different in character but no less in importance.

—John Clum, “The First Trumpet,”
Tombstone Epitaph, May 1, 1880

Bill Hart Introduces the Real—Not Reel—Hero

—Headline for William S. Hart’s tribute to Wyatt Earp,
New York Morning Telegraph, October 9, 1921

I am sure that if the story were exploited on the screen by you, it would do much toward setting me right before a public which has always been fed . . . lies about me.

—Wyatt Earp to William S. Hart, July 7, 1923



AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY HAS always been geographically and metaphorically determined, a kind of vision of America as a place privileged by its exceptionalism. Certainly, the image of the West and the frontiersman created the myth of America’s spiritual, political,

and geographical destiny across the continent. National identity, then, became a visual and abstract construct of the biography of the West, that story of the region's maturation from a lawless wilderness to a socio-economic model of progressive civilization. Frederick Jackson Turner mythologized the West as a space, a stage, for enacting "frontier individualism" that would promote democracy (1986, 30). Westward migration would culminate in "men of capital and enterprise" infusing the region with a spirit of entrepreneurial freedom. Akin to John Clum's vision for Tombstone, Turner, in "Social Forces in American History," prophesied an unparalleled future for the West: "As the final provinces of the Western empire have been subdued to the purpose of civilization and have yielded their spoils, as the spheres of operation of the great industrial corporations have extended, with the extension of American settlement, production and wealth have increased beyond all precedent" (ibid., 312). Turner's vision of the inevitable ameliorating process of civilization would result from a masculine spirit of exploration, exploitation, and profit seeking. Certainly, this new man of the West describes the filmic attributes of Wyatt Earp in the many biopics devoted to his legendary career.

John Clum's ecstatic vision of a glorious frontier silvermining boomtown would prove untenable, since the boom of 1880 would begin to decline by the time the Earps were leaving Tombstone in 1882.¹ Like many middle-class settlers in the West, Clum combined Protestant tropes with post-Civil War optimism and added a flare for the dramatic, which were channeled through his belief in the benefits of three civilizing media—pulpit, press, and stage.² In his first editorial piece for the *Tombstone Epitaph*, Clum evokes religious imagery as well as theatrical spectacle—the moral certainty of the city upon the hill and grandeur that was Rome. His sanguine prophecy, a year before the fateful shootout at the O.K. Corral, recalls John Winthrop's paraphrasing of the Sermon on the Mount in "A Modell of Christian Charity": "[W]ee must Consider that wee shall be as a City vpon a Hill, the eies of all people are vppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee haue vndertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from vs, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world" (Winthrop 1938, 199). Winthrop unites secular with sacred history in the image of America as the haven for souls rescued from Babylon, but he cautions that their actions could turn the New Heaven into the newest Hell. John Cotton, too, viewed America as both a wilderness and a new Canaan, as the site of "special figure status" both spiritual and material (Bercovitch 1978, 42). In this sense, the founding American national identity relied upon the place (*topos*) as a type (*tupos*), prefiguring a special destiny in God's plan. Clum, however, also unwittingly invokes the most

anti-Christian of cities, the sinful, unregenerate, profligate Whore of Babylon—Rome. In the same year as the first appearance of the *Tombstone Epitaph*, the territorial governor of New Mexico, Lew Wallace, published his best-selling novel *Ben-Hur*, in which Hur's future wife, Esther, decries Rome: “[S]he is to me a monster which has possession of one of the beautiful lands, and lies there luring men to ruin and death—a monster which it is not possible to resist—a ravenous beast gorging with blood” (Wallace 2003, 340). Such is an apt depiction of the paradoxical topography and typology of the violent American West. In the midafternoon on October 26, 1881, in a mere thirty seconds, Tombstone, Arizona, would become a by-word, legend, and curse throughout the West, a city upon a boot hill, engraved into the media landscape of American culture ever since.

The *Tombstone Epitaph* began publication in an era of historic Western violence. Its first issue came out four years after the death of Wild Bill Hickok, two years after the Battle of Little Big Horn, a year before Pat Garrett killed Billy the Kid, and two years before the murder of Jesse James by Bob Ford. From this era would emerge the type to prefigure so much of violent American national identity—Wyatt Earp. He represented not only the lawman-gunslinger figure of dime novels, but also the retributive violence and masculine mode of domination that characterized the legends of the West. Wyatt Earp's association with the politics of violence and achieving law and order often through brutal means would have a paradoxical consequence. The Earp brothers—Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan—would themselves come to represent victims of an American strain of politically motivated violence: assassination. Eighteen eighty-one was a year of infamous assassinations: the death in St. Petersburg of Czar Alexander II by the bomb-throwing revolutionary Ignacy Hryneiwiecki; the shooting of President James Garfield in July by the psychopath Charles J. Guiteau, and the president's eventual death from blood poisoning on September 19, 1881, just a month before the events at the O.K. Corral.

Ten months after Wyatt Earp's death, in October 1929, John Clum wrote his “It All Happened in Tombstone,” in which he provided details of the famous shootout, the subsequent political assassination attempts on the Earps, and the assassination attempts on his own life, which occurred while he was still serving as mayor of Tombstone in mid-December 1881.³ The gunfight in Tombstone in October 1881 was followed by a “cowardly attempt at midnight assassination” on the streets of Tombstone in late December 1881 as shotgun blasts hit Virgil Earp, leaving him “maimed for life” (Clum 1929, 62). A successful murder by “skulking assassins” of Morgan Earp occurred in March 1882 as he was playing

pool, but the target may well have been Wyatt himself, who was watching the game: "The plan and purpose and hope of the assassins was to kill Wyatt Earp also, and his life was spared simply because their aim was faulty" (ibid., 63). After the Kennedy assassination in the Western town of Dallas in 1963, Earp biopics, from John Sturges's *Hour of the Gun* (1967) onward, included these political assassinations as part of the Wyatt Earp saga and certainly as a commentary on the American national psyche, as though violence were autochthonous to the West.

Certainly, the geography of the West is compelling both in its starkness and in its magnificence. Westerns position man within a landscape that mirrors his ethical principles, as Lee Clark Mitchell has noted of Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* saga: "Landscape is granted a kind of agency, then, in compelling individuals to become like itself: motionless, rooted, fixed, unmoving. The paradox in this position is that the stillness enjoined by Cooper's landscapes results in behavior thoroughly impersonal, even deathlike, yet the embodiment of moral principle" (Mitchell 1996, 46). Here, Western topography becomes typology. The land reflects the man. It is an onto-geography, a defining presence of the man within the natural world. The landscape functions metaphorically as a moral foreground and ethical backdrop for the Western hero. Cinematic clichés occasion the elegiac opening scenes of Westerns: long establishing shots of a lone rider across open territory, theme music accentuating his physical and ethical progress into the unknown. In Earp biopics, however, that undiscovered country, as Hamlet calls it, always leads to death. It is the mythic West, the legendary *terminus ad quem* of existence, that boundary point beyond which is death. The stunning, desolate vistas of Western landscapes portend a cinematic thanatopsis. For Earp films, the typology of the new American man of morality and justice is always linked to an imaginative necrophilia, a desire to witness the scene in which ethics and mortality collide in a split second, that cinematic moment of the American death wish.

Biopics and film in general rely upon topography (spatial-temporal axes) and typology (temporal figuration in imaginative space). Archives of historical persons—biographies, anecdotes, diaries, letters, memoirs, rumors—serve as plot points for biopics. In that sense, then, biopics project a map of an individual's life. There are theoretical and practical connections between the function of cinema and that of cartography: "A film, like a topographic projection, can be understood as an image that locates and patterns the imagination of its spectators."⁴ Biopics developed alongside the innovations in cinematic historical narrative and technology. In particular, Wyatt Earp's legend extends from the silent film era through the first sound movies into the post-World War II and Cold

War periods to become part of the revisionist strategies of New Hollywood and post-Classical cinema. With each new era of cinematic narrative, Earp films conform to and thereby comment upon the textual constructs and strategies revealed by the life of the individual and the West. Technologically, Wyatt Earp films follow the same innovations as Westerns in general, moving from the silent era through *noir*-like lighting aesthetics in the postwar era to the advances in color cinematography, principally Cinemascope and Technicolor to, finally, the inclusion of advanced computerized editing and special effects. It is as though each new cinematic technology must shoot this essential biography anew. Of course, much of the interest in Wyatt Earp's film biography began with the man himself, since he spent the last twenty years of his life in Los Angeles and Hollywood.

Still, Earp's work in the film industry is as rife with speculation, mythology, and legend as were his lawman days in Kansas and Arizona. He attained celebrity status in Hollywood as evidenced when Charlie Chaplin, according to a tale told by Raoul Walsh, recognized him immediately as that "bloke from Arizona" who tamed "the baddies" (Barra 1998, 341). The only Earp biopic to deal with his days in Hollywood is the adventure-comedy-murder mystery, Blake Edwards's *Sunset* (1988), which teams an elderly Earp (James Garner) with Tom Mix (Bruce Willis) to create a film parody of the outrageous storylines of Mix's serial Westerns. In reality, during his later years in Los Angeles, Earp frequented racetracks with his pal Jack London and hung around Western movie sets to provide background realism for his friends, cowpoke actors Harry Carey Sr., Tom Mix, and William S. Hart. Director Allan Dwan claimed to have included Earp as an extra in *The Half-Breed* (1916), which starred Douglas Fairbanks in Anita Loos's adaptation of Bret Harte's "In the Carquinez Woods." In a once thought to be lost scene, now part of Rob Byrne's restoration project of *The Half-Breed*, a proscenium long-shot of a church interior appears to include a white-haired, moustachioed Wyatt Earp in the background just left of the open, centrally framed doorway.⁵ At the time, Dwan had a less than favorable view of Earp, the man:

Earp was a one-eye mean old man in 1915. But he had been a real marshal in Tombstone, Arizona, and he was as crooked as a three-dollar bill. He and his brothers were racketeers, all of them. They shook people down, they did everything they could to get dough. But they had the badge and they had the gun, and they won all their gunfights simply by shooting the man before he was told he was arrested. And so they were terrific heroes in the eyes of certain people. (Brownlow 1979, 280)

Of course, those “certain people” included Tom Mix and William S. Hart, the great cowboy stars of the silent era. Dwan would later direct *Frontier Marshal* (1939), which took a very sympathetic view of Wyatt Earp as a marshal facing lawless bands alone, but on his own terms. Even the suspicious, calumnious Dwan would print the legend of Wyatt Earp rather than risk filming his view of the man.

For Paramount Pictures, William S. Hart wrote the original screen story and produced a seven reel, seventy-seven-minute Western biopic, *Wild Bill Hickok* (1923), the first film portrayal of the lawman-gambler, which also featured Jack Gardner as Bat Masterson. One of the film’s principal settings was Dodge City, where Hickok meets, in their first film portrayals, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. Speculation and controversy surround whether or not Earp was depicted in the film, even though a 1923 publicity still shows Bert Lindley as Wyatt Earp. In Hart’s thirty-six-page treatment of this film, two scenes include Wyatt Earp. In the first scene, behind the Santa Fe station in Dodge City gather together “the greatest group of gun men that the world has ever known or ever will know,” which includes Bat Masterson, Earp, Charlie Bassett, Bill Tighlman, Luke Short, and “Doc. Holladay,” along with Wild Bill Hickok. In the second scene, Earp, Masterson, Bassett, and Tighlman interrupt a tense, yet comic stud poker game that includes Doc Holliday. Wild Bill Hickok has rigged the game in favor of George Hamilton, the husband of the woman who has stolen his heart, although the seasoned gamblers need not-too-gentle prodding at times from Hickok’s “pointed boot toe” upon their sore shins in order to make them comply with his fixed game (Hart 1923, 9, 23). Over Hart’s byline ran promotional copy associating the three most famous gunfighters of the West: “Back in the days when the West was young and wild, ‘Wild Bill’ fought and loved and adventured with such famous frontiersmen as Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp” (Hutton 2012).⁶ Clearly, Wyatt Earp’s reputation as a cinematic gunman and lawman began in the late silent era.

Historically, cinematic license has prevailed over historical fact about Hickok, Earp, and Masterson in Dodge City. In early August 1876, Jack McCall assassinated Hickok in Deadwood, South Dakota, at Nuttal & Mann’s Saloon. By that time, Wyatt Earp had moved to Dodge City to work with his brother Morgan as assistant city marshal. In 1877, Bat Masterson arrived in Dodge and within a few months was elected Ford County sheriff. In 1878, Masterson suffered a personal tragedy when his brother Ed, as the assistant city marshal, was killed disarming a rowdy cowpoke. In June of that year, Doc Holliday arrived in Dodge City and, after saving Earp’s life, became the lawman’s trusted friend. A famous 1883 photograph by Camillus Sydney (C. S.) Fly of the Dodge

City Peace Commission includes a seated Wyatt Earp and a standing Bat Masterson, who had recalled Wyatt Earp to Dodge City to join him in a bloodless battle for the wicked city's political dominance, known ironically as the Dodge City War. At no time was Hickok in Dodge City with Masterson, Earp, and Holliday. Of course, historical fact did not deter William S. Hart in his film version of the gunman's life, nor did it seem to diminish Earp's own appreciation for the film, who saw *Wild Bill Hickok* twice.

Wyatt Earp began a correspondence with William S. Hart in 1920 about the prospect of making a biopic of his life that would tone down the sensationalism of the gunfighter and O.K. Corral incident. Earp was obsessed with correcting the details of his life that have become in popular culture's imagination the stuff of wild legends. To his friend, William S. Hart, Earp wrote that a recent draft of his biography had been rejected by Crowell, since it had not been "written in the style of a historical narrative" (Davis 2003, 207). Both friends suffered at the hands of publishers for insisting upon true accounts of their lives. Hart admitted to Earp that he had great difficulties trying to get his autobiography in print, because editors objected to his details about the trials of the motion picture industry, "wherein I told the truth." Wyatt Earp would die before reading his biography or seeing his dreamed-for biopic on the screen.

In 1927, two years before Earp's death, Walter Noble Burns published *Tombstone, An Iliad of the Southwest*, the first historical fiction to deal with the Earp legend and the first book to elevate Wyatt Earp, "the lion of Tombstone," to mythic status, even though, as C. L. Sonnichsen recalls: "The Tombstone residents I knew back in the thirties took very little stock in Burns' slick reconstructions. They were mostly against the Earps and inclined to feel that Sheriff Behan and the 'cowboys' were better men than the legends allowed. Outsiders hardly ever believe them" (Sonnichsen 1968, 62–63). Burns's purple prose also exhibits cinematic qualities, as though Burns wished to translate Tombstone to the silent silver screen. He described Ike Clanton as "swashbuckling," Curly Bill Brocius as "a mediæval robber baron," John Ringo as "like a Hamlet among outlaws," outlaw Russian Bill Tattenbaum as "a natural actor" whose life played out "before the critical eyes of an invisible audience," and Billy Clanton, when shot in the showdown by Morgan Earp, as "a heroic figure of dauntless courage worthy of deathless bronze" (Burns 1927, 200, 73, 133, 149, 213). For Doc Holliday's first murders with his six-gun, Burns created a scene straight out of D. W. Griffith:

Holliday was born in Valdosta, Georgia, of a fine and very old Southern family, members of which still live in the little

town just north of the Florida line. His ancestors had been cotton-planters and slave-holders for generations, and his father served through the Civil War as a major in the Confederate Army. The white boys of the town had reserved a swimming hole in the Wathlacooche river for their own exclusive use, and when they went to swim one day and found it filled with Negroes, young Holliday emptied his revolver among the darkies. (ibid., 49)

Persistent racial violence toward African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans in the Earp biopics have their roots in this Holliday incident, as evidenced by: the assassination of Pompey (Willie Best) in Charles King's *The Arizonian* (1935); Wyatt Earp's (Randolph Scott) shooting of Indian Charlie (Charles Stevens) and then dragging him by his heels out of a saloon in Allan Dwan's *Frontier Marshal* (1939); the voice-of-God narrator equating Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne with ruthless outlaws turning Dodge City into a battleground in William Castle's *Masterson of Kansas* (1954); and, the opening scene of the cowboys' (Ringo, Curly Bill, and their gang) bloody murder of the groom and Catholic priest (Pedro Armendáriz Jr.) at the Mexican wedding in George P. Cosmatos's *Tombstone* (1993). John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) repeats the Indian Charlie scene: off-screen, Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) buffaloes a besotted, war whooping, and reckless gunfiring Indian Charlie (Charles Stevens, again), drags him by his boots through the harshly backlit saloon door and into the Tombstone street, where Earp derides the town officials: "What kind of town is this anyway? Selling liquor to Indians." As a dazed Indian Charlie recovers, Earp kicks him hard in the rump, yet threatens with a smile, "Indian, get out of town and stay out!" Burns's novel *Tombstone* has often been disregarded for its historical inaccuracies, but what matters for cinematic history is Burns's establishment of a popular cultural legend, which attained a biography of its own. Moreover, Burns's significance to Earp films remains his mythopoeia of historical accounts, his ability to depict the famous showdown with an almost shot-by-shot editing skill, and his self-referential acceptance of *Tombstone* as filled with "its memories and its ghosts" for which "Once it was a romance" (Burns 1927, 388).

Early Earp biopics would rely upon Burns's characterization as much as they would the first Earp biography. Stuart Lake's *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, which had Earp's cooperation, came out 1931, two years after Earp's death. Lake had been corresponding and meeting with Earp since 1927, gathering evidence that often takes the form of undated, questionable quotations from Wyatt Earp on events. Lake had an inflated

sense of purpose for his work, which would “for the first time in print” provide “a full account of Wyatt Earp’s contribution to the taming of the last frontier” (Lake 1931, 238). Josephine Earp, Wyatt’s widow, tried unsuccessfully to stop its publication, primarily because she objected to the proposed subtitle, *Gunfighter. Frontier Marshal*. The sensationalism of Lake’s biography has met with considerable derision from revisionist Western historians, especially over Doc Holliday’s saving Earp’s life in Dodge City, but, as Loren D. Estleman reminds us: “Like today’s Hollywood, the publishing industry of Lake’s day seldom allowed facts to get in the way of a healthy bottom line” (Estleman in Lake 1931, xiii). *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal* provided Hollywood with the first full narrative account of Earp’s career in the West, thereby supplying the recurrent plot line of the self-reliant, duty-bound marshal confronting a violent, lawless breed of men in films, from Jacques Tourneur’s *Wichita* (1955), with Joel McCrea as Earp in his first position as a lawman, to the Tombstone epics of the mid-1990s, *Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994).

While many Earp biopics would credit Lake’s biography, it was a fictional account that spurred the first film versions of the O.K. Corral incident. Universal Pictures released *Law and Order* (1932) with Walter Huston playing a peace officer, Frame Johnson, based upon W. R. Burnett’s (author of *Little Caesar*) novel *Saint Johnson*, which was adapted by John Huston. The novel retells events leading up to Earp being in Tombstone and the O.K. Corral shootout, as Burnett made clear in the “Note” that prefaced the novel about Alkali, Arizona—a fictionalized Tombstone:

Two of the principal characters, Wayt Johnson and Brant White, are drawn in part from two of the Old West’s most famous men: Wyatt Earp, Dodge City and Tombstone peace-officer, and Doc Holliday, gambler, gunfighter, and wit.

The story itself is based on events leading up to and arising out of the Earp-Clanton feud. This famous old feud is still hotly discussed in the southeastern corner of Arizona.

In 1940, Ray Taylor directed a remake of *Law and Order* starring Johnny Mack Brown. Ronald Reagan reprised this fictional Earp role in a 1953 adaptation of Burnett’s novel. For *My Darling Clementine*, John Ford would rely upon, although not provide a screen credit, to Burnett’s novel. That iconic Western moment of Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) leaning back in his chair, putting his feet up on a porch post, and contemplating the Western vista, Ford clearly adapted from Burnett’s description: “He mussed up his lay-out, tipped back his chair and rolled a cigarette. He

recalled when he first landed in Alkali" (Burnett 1930, 118–19).

Two other mid-1930s Earp biopics would follow the first *Law and Order*. *Frontier Marshal* (1934) was originally titled *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal* to be in keeping with Stuart Lake's biography, but Josephine Earp sued 20th Century Fox and the title was changed, as was the main character's name, to Michael Wyatt (George O'Brien). In 1935, RKO released King Vidor's *The Arizonian*, which starred Richard Dix as Clay Tallant, a composite character representing legendary Western lawmen, but mostly a thinly veiled figure of Wyatt Earp. A decade after Earp's funeral, Warner Brothers distributed *Dodge City* (1939), with Errol Flynn as an Earp-like reluctant sheriff who cleans up the West, and that same year, 20th Century Fox would release *Frontier Marshal* (1939), with Randolph Scott actually playing Wyatt Earp, in the first sound film biopic of the lawman. *Frontier Marshal* (1939) relies upon dance hall entertainment to reveal the civilizing element of Tombstone as well as to underscore the barbarity of cowboys, who kidnap a terrified Eddy Foy Sr. (Eddy Foy Jr.) and force him to perform in their saloon, including the by then clichéd scene of the tinhorn dancing to gunblasts, which first occurred in Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Doc Holliday (Cesar Romero) and Wyatt Earp join forces to rescue Foy, which begins the lawman-gunman code-of-honor friendship that will culminate in the lone Earp avenging his friend's assassination in the O.K. Corral showdown. Historically, Eddy Foy Sr. did not perform at the Bird Cage before the O.K. Corral shootout, because the theater did not open until December 26, 1881, two days before Virgil Earp was nearly assassinated on the street. Historical Tombstone's penchant for traveling theatrical extravaganzas became a part of the plot structure of Wyatt Earp films, and even became a standard for campy Western moments, such as with Frenchy (Marlene Dietrich) in *Destry Rides Again* (1939) and the parodic rendition by Lili von Shtupp (Madeline Kahn) in Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974).

In all, there have been twenty-eight sound films devoted to Wyatt Earp or Earp-like characters, with seventeen different actors portraying the legend. Richard Dix played him three times, first in *The Arizonian* (1935), then in *Tombstone: The Town Too Tough to Die* (1942), and finally, *The Kansan* (1943). Dix was well known for starring in *Cimarron* (1931), the film adaptation of Edna Ferber's best-selling Western novel, which held the distinction of being the first film to receive more than six Academy Award nominations. Charles Vidor's *The Arizonian* has Richard Dix playing a newly sworn-in, yet still reluctant Earp-like marshal, Clay Tallant, who teams up with an erstwhile outlaw, Tex Randolph (Preston Foster), in order to rid lawless Silver City, Arizona, of a corrupt sher-

iff, Jake Mannen (Louis Calhern). The opening scene in the film script includes “an old Shakespearean actor of the long haired spouter school” portraying Hamlet confronting his father’s ghost, while adjusting a sheet over Pompey, whose “invisible hands pull the sheet from his face revealing a very black head and scared wide eyes,” with the additional direction: “This should be played very straight” (Nichols 1935, 1–2). Pompey (Willie Best) serves in the stereotypical Negro role for racist comic relief, which was a feature of Golden Age Westerns, among them *West of the Pecos* (1934), *Annie Oakley* (1935), and the gangster Western, *High Sierra* (1941), adapted from W. R. Burnett’s novel. The *Arizonian*’s first scene continues with Hamlet forced by six-gun play from the audience into “dancing for his life,” while Pompey “in his wild antics” falls “clawing the floor” (ibid., 4). Hamlet’s “Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell” foreshadows the ending of the film, during which Tallant’s brother and Randolph meet their end, while the smoke from guns and a blazing building obscure their deaths. Hamlet’s invocation also portends Sarah’s (Etta McDaniel) revenge for the death of her son Pompey, who had tried to warn the sheriff. Shot #278 reveals “old Sarah, like a primitive woman of the African jungle” with a shotgun that she fires with closed eyes; the explosion “knocks her back on the sidewalk.” Then, Shot #279 has Mannen hit squarely in the back by the shotgun blast, collapse, and fall (ibid., 110). White and African American plots coincide in terms of retributive and retaliatory violence, one in earnest and the other, darkly comic.

In William C. McGann’s *Tombstone: The Town Too Tough To Die*, Dix plays Wyatt Earp, who once again reluctantly accepts being deputized and, along with his brothers and Doc Holliday, rides the town of a ruthless gang (one member even shot a child!) and dishonest sheriff at the O.K. Corral. The homosocial friendship of lawman and outlaw follows the legendary camaraderie of Earp and Doc Holliday, and the civic and moral tensions between marshal and sheriff recast the troubles between Earp and Sheriff Behan in Tombstone, Arizona. This plot pattern—the duty-averse lawman befriendng disreputable yet colorful gambler and brigand in order to bring down corrupt officials and outlaws plaguing a Western town—forms the basis for many of Earp film narratives, including the most recent versions of the O.K. Corral shootout. Stuart Lake has Wyatt Earp explain his debt to Doc Holliday as matter of life and death: “One thing I’ve always believed: if it hadn’t been for Doc Holliday, I’d have cashed in that night. There was no real call for Doc to make the play he did; everyone else in camp had hightailed it, including some of my deputies, and why Doc wasn’t knocked off is more than I can tell you” (Lake 1931, 214). That obverse reflection of the duty-bound lawman and the marginal, lawless figure would also constitute the cinematic

image of the American Western hero, a psychosocial complex personality both divided and united by two antagonist ideologies.

In Director George Archainbaud's *The Kansan* (1943), based upon Frank Gruber's story "Peace Marshal," Dix plays John Bonniwell who arrives in Broken Lance, Kansas, and thwarts a Jesse James holdup, only to be shot at least four times for his efforts. While convalescing in hospital, he is elected town marshal by an unscrupulous banker, Steve Barat (Albert Dekker), who controls the cattle town. Vaguely referring to Bonniwell as an Earp-dressed, gun-toting, law and order marshal, the film relies upon a series of Western clichés, including Bonniwell's outdrawing rowdy cowboys and trying to stop a stampede. As is common with Earp biopics, a theatre production underscores thematic issues underlining the Western plot. Here, music hall gals, dressed in tight-fitting military outfits, sashay in front of a large American flag to George Root's 1864 "Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!" which is the same tune adopted for "Jesus loves the little children" (!), sing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again," and then march and high-kick to "The Battle Cry of Freedom," thereby placating Breen Office censors, while settling any lingering animosity over the Civil War. "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" and "The Battle Cry of Freedom" were popular tunes for both the Union and Confederacy. The town, however, remains divided, as was the real Tombstone of the early 1880s: alienated between Democrats, who were cowpokes and Confederate sympathizers like the Clantons, and Republicans such as the Union loyalist Earp brothers. To rid Broken Lance of the despicable goons, Marshal Bonniwell blows them up as they cross a bridge to confront his men in a showdown. This remarkably rare scene for any Western reinforces the antitotalitarian message of this wartime film of 1943, almost as though the incident were a French Resistance Movement tactic against Nazis and Vichy officials. The dancehall scene also prefigures the final onslaught of a torrential monsoon of bullets between marauding cowboys and barricaded townsfolk. Incidents of dangerous gunplay are again given racist comic relief with the shaking, fear-ridden antics of a Union cap-wearing, bug-eyed African American, Bones (Willie Best). This World War II-era Western captures the unfortunate patterns of the American national identity in films of the period—its historical misconceptions about its own conflicts and its persistent racial stereotyping, which, unlike the democratic denunciation of corrupt officials, maintains itself in the most flagrant, vulgar depictions.

All of the Dix-Earp films play fast and loose with the historical and biographical facts. Biopics scholarship views the discrepancy between historical fact and film representation in a manner that is not unlike

adaptation theory. Fidelity arguments—original literary text versus film adaptation—often confront what is lacking in the visual representation of the verbal text; the same holds for critics carping that biopics lack historical veracity. To counter such claims, Linda Hutcheon asserts that adaptations are palimpsestic, “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon 2006, 9). For biopics, the historical context emerges from within the films, but that palimpsest also relies upon a dialogical engagement by which the audience knows and compares the historical figure to the film portrayal. In this sense, then, fidelity posits the knowledge of historical fact prior to watching the film, so that the process of viewing is an act of transcoding, re-mediation, or translation. Postmodern adaptation theorists have adopted “translation” to describe the process of adapting a text. Such a process, not unlike transforming biography into a feature-length film, already produces gaps and disparities that make it difficult to situate an authentic original, as Peter Brooker has argued: “The moment of reading or viewing, moreover, can and frequently will reverse the chronology of source text and its adaptation, putting the second before the first” (Brooker 2007, 114). For biopics, such privileging of the film text over history often occurs in the public imagination.

The output of biopics from the major studios has never been more than 3 percent of the total number of films produced and distributed (Custen 1992, 83). This statistic, however, excludes Westerns from the genre of biopics. Wyatt Earp’s biography challenges several assertions about what constitutes a biopic, especially the reductive formulas of celebrating a great man’s life, investigating or atomizing virtues and flaws, or revisiting and revising social contexts of a life. First of all, Earp’s life in the post-frontier American imagination was based almost exclusively upon less than thirty seconds—the total time of the shootout in Tombstone near the O.K. Corral. Additionally, that incident soon became more the stuff of legend than reality, which historians, Western aficionados, and film scholars have been fighting over ever since. Any biopic of Earp’s life navigates that hinterland between reality and tall tale, between historical fact and the history of a Western myth, and between Earp the man and Earp the icon. Earp himself complained that popular views of his life were not only inaccurate, but also based upon the sensationalistic, dime novel fables of the six-gun-toting frontier marshal. Clearly, the legend of Wyatt Earp overtook the biographical details of the man. The catalogue of Wyatt Earp biopics, then, should include not only those films that bear his name, but also a number of films that re-mediate or translate his legend into formulaic Western plots. In many respects, Earp biopics are faithful to the legend, which has a biography of its own. In this

sense, Earp's legend reveals a very American penchant for constructing an identity as a pastiche of fact, fiction, and desire.

Among the Earp legend films that refashion the biography are several B-Westerns from the late 1940s, all of which display a Cold War sensibility. Few eras in twentieth-century American culture relied upon the images and legends of the frontier marshal more than the postwar period. *My Darling Clementine* (1946), like other Westerns of the Cold War period, indulged in national identification with empire building, so that these political actions and their ideological foundations, as well as the Western figures supporting these ideals, could be viewed "as a rational and moral imperative" (Corkin 2000, 74). Like *The Arizonian*, and later *Tombstone*, Ford's film includes a Shakespearean actor who sets the thematic paradox of life-affirming for Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) and death-seeking for Doc Holliday (Victor Mature), who darkly double one another, with the famous "To be or not be" soliloquy.⁷ Moreover, Earp stands for family values and progressive capitalistic entrepreneurship, whereas Holliday rejects his fiancée, Clementine, in favor of whoring with Chihuahua (Linda Darnell) and prefers gambling to his medical practice. The film's day-for-night shooting adds to the extreme shadows and chiaroscuro lighting effects that characterize dark moments of anxiety, particularly for Holliday. Daylight, however, belongs to Wyatt Earp. Most significant in contrasting these two figures is the scene of Clementine's departure. As she sits in the hotel lobby, hours too early for the eastbound noon stage, Earp shyly offers to escort her to the Sunday social, as we hear the strains of Ford's favorite hymn, "Shall We Gather at the River?" This Methodist hymn communicates the ideals of "salvation, predestination, and communal destiny" that are ingrained in the rhetoric of American exceptionalism (Kalinak 2001, 175). The scene shifts to Ford's famous affirmation of Cold War Americana, as the continuity script establishes:

Long shot from above the church area. On the open floor of the church—the sides and roof have yet to be constructed—people are dancing. In the foreground, two American flags are whipping in the breeze. Behind the church stretches the open Arizona country, with the mesas in the distance. (Lyons 1984, 82–83)

From the pulpit, old man Simpson (Russell Simpson) declares, "the First Church of Tombstone, which ain't got no name yet nor no preacher either" before he commands the congregation to "commence by havin' a dad-blasted good dance!" This exterior long shot frames the dancing

between the skeletal scaffold of a church bell tower and large, waving American flags, two emblems of American postwar nationalism—church and state.

This iconic shot represents a visual fulfillment of Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity," the literal construction of the church/city-state imprinted upon the new land. John Clum's optimism for Tombstone also finds visual confirmation in this scene, with the pulpit and theatrical staging combined. As the congregation looks on, Clementine and Wyatt dance in a ritualized, symbolic marriage of law with domesticity. The scene evokes all of the Cold War myths of the West: the construction of a new Protestant civilization; a spirit of national expansion over the land; and the conversion of the land into the stage for domestic bliss. Only treachery, deceit, and tyranny could upset such an image of domestic tranquility, as will the Clantons and their ruthless, wild, impetuous, homicidal father (Walter Brennan). The O.K. Corral gunfight will be analogous to U.S. military interventions to secure these American values. Ultimately, *My Darling Clementine* reinforces the Cold War propaganda that claims the necessity for a common defense in order



FIGURE 6. Church Dance, *My Darling Clementine* (dir. John Ford, 1946).

to secure these blessings of liberty. Yet, the fulfillment of the dream of Western progress, like John Winthrop's ambition for a stable Christian community in the wilderness, would inevitably confront "New World nature and natives, threats from abroad, and challenges from heretics and zealots within the community" (Bremer 2003, 184).

Combating anti-Americanism filters into Earp films of the 1950s. Ray Nazzaro's *Gun Belt* (1953) constructs a homespun enemy-in-our-midst McCarthyist plot that requires a form of double agent espionage to rout the lawless element that plans to ruin the local economy through bank and stage robbery. Marshal Wyatt Earp aids reformed outlaw Billy Ringo (George Montgomery) whose fugitive, homicidal brother Matt (John Dehner) seduces their kid brother Chip (Tab Hunter) into a life of retaliatory gang crime against Tombstone. Billy Ringo must infiltrate the gang in order to save Chip from their fraudulent and reckless scheme and to deliver the villains to Wyatt Earp. Significant for Cold War propaganda are the revisions of the Earp legend, in which Earp stands for righteous law and order that protects and preserves capitalism. The film also serves as a warning to American youth about the dangers of seduction to lies and treachery by those who wish to destroy American values.

The detrimental psychological effects of anti-Americanism also find expression in Cold War Earp films. Twentieth Century Fox's *Powder River* (1953), directed by Louis King and based upon Stuart Lake's biography *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, pairs Chino Bull (Rory Calhoun), a reluctant peacekeeper, with a suicidal, alcoholic gambler-gunman and physician à la Doc Holliday, Mitch Hardin (Cameron Mitchell), who experiences periodic tremors induced by brain fever. Additionally, Hardin endures a form of emotional and moral schizophrenia, confronting his image reflected in a mirror behind a bar and then shooting it. Chino subdues the psycho Hardin, who vows revenge. Yet, in heroic fashion, Chino and Hardin join forces to save the stagecoach from a perilous river crossing, sabotaged by outlaws. Hardin admits to the town angel, Debbie Allen (Penny Edwards), that he killed Chino's prospecting partner in a fair fight. Hardin proves his ethical worth by saving a gun-shot Debbie with his skills as a surgeon, replaying Doc Holliday as healing physician in *Frontier Marshal* (1939) and *My Darling Clementine*. He then joins Chino in a street fight against the lawless Logan brothers (read Clantons). In an odd twist, Chino discovers that Mitch killed his partner and challenges him to a showdown, in which Chino loses the draw, but Mitch suddenly collapses and dies of a cerebral rupture! This very confused plot relies upon the propagandist analogy of transformative morality and Mitch's brain affliction: lawlessness, amorality, and atheism are the etiology of his real disease. In this sense, Mitch, not unlike

amoral Communists and Godless scientists of 1950s films, must suffer for his ideological sins in order to counter “those who argued that Science had rendered Christianity superfluous” (Shaw 2003, 220). Like so many marginal figures of Cold War Westerns, Mitch Hardin suffered from a bad case of ideology.

Systemic ideological disputes between East and West and the growing fear of a communist threat to free market capitalism find analogs in shootouts on the frontier Main Street. The significance of the O.K. Corral gunfight has as much to do with its location as the men who blasted lead. It took place in the alley abutting C. S. Fly’s Photographic Emporium, just next to the Assay Office, and spilled onto Fremont Street catty-corner across from the office of the *Tombstone Epitaph*, the County Courthouse, the County Record’s Office, and the Mining Exchange Building. The West’s most infamous showdown took place at the nexus of commerce and government, not in a whorehouse, gambling hall, or saloon. A marketplace topography in Earp films maps out the ideological vision of the West as much as its haunting landscape that serves as establishing shots. By reading Cold War politics into these films, the Earp figures stand for the United States’ self-image of upholding progress, capitalism, and morality, elements John Clum’s pulpit, press, and stage already extolled. Their opponents are identified with the marauding, amoral, and profligate communism that could destroy the stability and entrepreneurship of the West. The gunfight will determine an outcome for democracy or lawlessness in the West; in turn, this conflict will result in a confirmed national identity. Of course, a reciprocal link exists between identity and conflict, whereby national identity exaggerates the otherness of enemy, while conflict can very well amplify “a collective sense of self,” as evidenced not only between Earps and Clantons, but also between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War (Jervis 2010, 27–28). Invoking the Western lawman as the proper symbol of American international diplomacy, David Shea Teeple ranted against weak foreign policy in 1958 in *The American Mercury*: “Would a Wyatt Earp stop at the 38th Parallel, Korea, when rustlers were escaping with his herd? Ridiculous!” (In Yoggy 1996, 166). Obviously, Teeple referred to the episodes “Marshal Earp Plays Cupid” (1956) and possibly “Cattle Thieves” (1958) of the television series *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955–61), since cattle rustling was limited to the last three seasons (1959–61). In particular, cattle thievery plotlines involved U.S.-Mexico border disputes in the final episodes of the series, when Wyatt Earp, and eventually his brothers, face off against the Clantons in Tombstone.

Not all Earp biopics were complicit with HUAC and McCarthyism. At the end of the 1950s, two Earp films stand in counterdistinction to

Cold War Americanism, Samuel Fuller's *Forty Guns* (1957) and Edward Dmytryk's *Warlock* (1959). In typical iconoclastic fashion, Fuller sexualizes the Earp-Clanton rivalry with a dominatrix Jessica Drummond (Barbara Stanwyck) leading her private army of forty men in an astonishing credit sequence as they thunder past former lawman Griff Bonnell (Barry Sullivan) and his brothers. Jessica politically, martially, and symbolically controls all of Cochise County, Arizona. The brothers arrive in town to find the timid, extremely myopic marshal cowering from Drummond intimidation. When Jessica's brother, Brockie (John Ericson), and his band of thugs harass the nearly-blind Marshal John Chisum (Hank Worden) and then shoot up the town's shops, Griff confronts them alone on the main street, with only his brother Wes (Gene Barry) covering him with a rifle. As he approaches the now-fleeing hell raisers, Fuller cuts from Griff's strides to his face to the face of Brockie finally to a full screen extreme close-up just of Griff's eyes. This iconic showdown shot sequence occurred five years before Sergio Leone would use it as his signature in Spaghetti Westerns. At first, *Forty Guns* appears to fall into the typical Earp narrative pattern, but here, the tyrannical powers oppress the citizenry through demagoguery, not unlike the HUAC and the feared communist menace. Fuller sets lawlessness against justice in the scenes of Jessica's unchecked desires for Griff. At a dinner scene in the Drummond mansion, she dismisses her posse in order to engage in sexually loaded banter with Griff: "I'm not interested in you, it's your trade I'm interested in. Let me see it," as she fondles his six-gun. As Griff departs her mansion, a close-up shows Jessica licking her lips provocatively. She wants to consume him as she has the land. They finally consummate their relationship, but only after they survive the ravages of a desert tornado! Fuller's heavy-handed symbolism inverts the religious rhetoric of Cold War Americanism, so that the wrath from an Old Testament YHWH transforms the stiff-necked Jessica, who forsakes her hired posse for the righteous Griff. That is, until Brockie assassinates Griff's brother Wes at his wedding. Escaping jail by using his sister, Jessica, as a shield, Brockie threatens Griff, who shoots Jessica (!), and then, empties his gun into Brockie. Griff then walks over Jessica's body! Exaggerated shot selection, moody chiaroscuro lighting, and hyperbolic narrative elements are Fuller's signatures, but here he manages to invert, if not pervert, classic Western film clichés in order to present political commentary. Here, Nature, Man, and Civilization defeat the oppressive powers of political outlawry, a not-too-veiled allegory against McCarthyism and communism. It is a defeat that comes with a price. Invariably, for Fuller, the social ills afflicting the American national psyche have yet to be cured, since it is not unity but death that perseveres in modern culture.

Dmytryk's *Warlock* also recasts the Earp narrative into a postwar commentary on the dysfunctional American character. Based upon Oakley Hall's popular novel, *Warlock* transforms the reluctant law officer Wyatt Earp figure into a vicious gun-for-hire. Dmytryk infuses this Western's plot with his scorn for his imprisonment for contempt of Congress charges because of HUAC, his distrust of the liberals who sold him out, and his disgust for the American public who allowed such terror to dominate the country. Dmytryk's *The Caine Mutiny* (1954) has been viewed as corresponding and reacting to the Army-McCarthy hearings, even with, as surreal as it may seem, "McCarthy himself ventured a punning reference to 'the Cohn Mutiny'" (Doherty 2003, 203). Reading Cold War politics into this Earp film offers explanations for its intriguing, if convoluted plot. Clay Blaisedell (Henry Fonda), with his gold-handled six-shooters, arrives in Warlock, Utah accompanied by his overly devoted, gunslinging friend Tom Morgan (Anthony Quinn), whose clubfoot symbolizes his dysfunctional, homoeroticized love for Clay. In some respects, they represent the legally sanctioned, but lawless and destructive vigilante Joseph McCarthy and his chief counsel and hatchet man, the unctuous Roy Cohn. The panicky Warlock officials have hired Clay and Morgan to clear out, by any means necessary, the outlaws and cowboys plaguing decent, god-fearing folk. Of course, the townspeople's complicity is analogous to the American public's irrational submission to McCarthy's vicious, illegal tactics. In between misguided citizens and the quasi-outlaw gunslingers stands Johnny Gannon (Richard Widmark), a one-time gang member now turned law-abiding agent of justice, the new deputy. To further complicate matters, Lily (Dorothy Malone) arrives in town, having tracked down Clay, who killed her lover in an angry gunfight. Morgan goaded Lily's lover into the showdown without Clay's knowledge. Additionally, Clay has become involved with a local woman, Jessie Marlow (Dolores Michaels), whom he plans to marry, which only increases Morgan's homosexual pathology and paranoia.

A showdown is set between three cowpokes, led by Gannon's brother Billy (Frank Gorshin), and Clay and Morgan. A long deep focus shot stages the shootout on that topography of American values, the Western main street, amidst the signs of Warlock's progress and capitalism—*Western Bank, Lumber and Building Supplies, Billiard, Livery, Haircuts, Seed-Feed, Western Hotel, Land Office, Prescriptions*. In an open-street style O.K. Corral gunblasting, Billy and another cowpoke die. A group of San Pablo Regulators, a newly formed committee of ruthless cowpokes, plan to kill Clay in retaliation. External threats to Warlock are matched by its internal hypocrisies about law and order. Fully succumbing to a homosexual mania, Morgan prevents Clay at gunpoint from entering the street

battle with the Regulators, on the pretense of elevating Clay's reputation, while destroying Gannon's. The deputy, in a reverse long, deep focus shot of the previous street battle, kills the Regulators, even with the wounded gun hand he received from being sadistically knifed by the leader of the Regulators. Morgan's mania becomes suicidal hysteria. Drunk and despondent, Morgan attempts one final act to elevate Clay's reputation in the eyes of the townspeople. He challenges his beloved, outdraws him and shoots off his hat, while Clay mechanically and instinctually kills him. Carrying his dead friend into the saloon, laying him out on a roulette table, Clay, now in a moment of his own psychosis, forces the gathered townsmen to sing a murmuring, atonal "Rock of Ages" before he sets fire to the place. This funeral pyre reflects Clay's mournful passions, but as thunder and lightning bring rain, the natural order is set right again, with Clay throwing down his guns before Gannon the next morning. Like *Powder River*, Dmytryk's plot necessitates the Holliday-figure's death, due to his overt, incurable ideology. Unlike *Powder River*, Dmytryk's plot necessitates the ridding of society of both the alien forces set to destroy its commerce and the illegitimate, tyrannical internal forces whose so-called protection can only bring about more doom.

Most Earp biopic Westerns focus upon the O.K. Corral shoot-out, since it represented an iconic moment in the civilizing of the West through violence. Moreover, it represented that Manifest Masculine Destiny that pervades the cultural imagination of the Western lawman taming the Wild West. The actual O.K. ("Old Kindersley") Corral incident took place nearly one hundred feet north of the corral, just outside C. S. Fly's Photography Gallery, but designating the location in that manner loses most of its punch, as Patricia Marks (1989) explains: "'The gunfight at the O.K. Corral' has a ring to it which 'the gunfight in the vacant lot between Fly's and Harwood's' clearly lacks. However, the fact is that the famous confrontation took place in Tombstone's Lot 12, Block 17, fronting on Fremont Street, while the O.K. Corral fronted on Allen and extended to the rear edge of Fremont Lots 5 and 6."⁸ And yet, that locale seems all too apt for the most significant Western biography portrayed in the medium extension of photography—cinematography. In 1881, alongside this historical event, in France Étienne-Jules Marey, the chronophotographer, was developing what a year later would become the "photographic gun," an instrument, a modified shotgun with a reel of film moved by the pull of a trigger, that could capture at twelve frames per second physical motion. The result of Marey's experiment was a collage of superimposed images that revealed multiple movements that feigned continuous motion. Much of the testimony in the subsequent Earp court hearings and trial in Tombstone come across as a series of

arrested, yet simultaneously linked motions in sequence. The cinematograph gave the world the concept of the shot, which occurred, ironically, nearly at the same time as the events near the O.K. Corral in Tombstone.

In this respect, then, Wyatt Earp's testimony in Judge Spicer's courtroom, as recorded in the *Tombstone Epitaph*, is worthy of consideration for the sequence of events in those historical thirty seconds, since it would prove to be the basis of so many biopics, as well as choreography for shootouts in Western films:

We came up on those close—Frank McLowry, Tom McLowry and Billy Clanton standing all in a row against the east side of the building on the opposite side of the vacant space west of Fly's photograph gallery. Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne and a man I did not know were standing in the vacant space about half way between the photography gallery and the next building west. I saw that Billy Clanton and Fred McLowry and Tom McLowry had their hands by their sides, and Frank McLowry's and Billy Clanton's six-shooters were in plain sight. Virgil said, "Throw up your hands I have come to disarm you." Billy Clanton and Frank McLowry laid their hands on their six-shooters. Virgil said, "Hold, I don't mean that; I have come to disarm you." They—Billy Clanton and Frank McLowry—commenced to draw their pistols, at the same time Tom McLowry threw his hand to his right hip and jumped behind a horse. I had my pistol in my overcoat pocket where I had put it when Behan told me he disarmed the other party. When I saw Billy and Frank draw their pistols I drew my pistol. Billy Clanton leveled his pistol at me but I did not aim at him. I knew that Frank McLowry had the reputation of being a good shot and a dangerous man and I aimed at Frank McLowry. I do not know which shot was first: we fixed almost together. The fight then became general. After about four shots were fired Ike Clanton ran up and grabbed my right arm. I could see no weapon in his hand and thought at the time he had none and I said to him. "The fight has now commenced; go to shooting or get away;" at the same time I pushed him off with my left hand. He started and ran down the side of the building and disappeared between the lodging house and the photograph gallery. My first shot struck Frank McLowry in the belly. He staggered off on the sidewalk but first fired one shot at me. When we told them to throw up their hands Claiborne held up his left hand and then broke

and ran. I never saw him afterwards until late in the afternoon after the fight. I never drew my pistol or made a motion to shoot until Billy Clanton and Frank McLowry drew their pistols. (Martin 1997, 204–205)

Of course, much more occurred during those thirty seconds. One bullet tore a hole in Wyatt Earp's black duster. Virgil Earp had been hit through the right calf by a grievously wounded Frank McLaury, while within moments, his brother Morgan was shot cross-angled through the shoulders, possibly by Billy Clanton or Tom McLaury. Out on Fremont Street, Frank McLaury raised up to kill Doc Holliday. With a murderous glee, he said, "I've got you now," to which Holliday responded: "Blaze away! You're a daisy if you have." Frank did blaze away and hit Holliday, while Morgan dropped McLaury. It was claimed that Doc Holliday spit upon the cowboy's corpse: "The son of a bitch has shot me and I mean to kill him" (Gunn 2011, 230). After barely a half-minute, American culture had been transformed irrevocably. Claims about who shot first have been disputed over the years, but Josephine Earp, Wyatt's common-law wife, confided that even though the political opponents of Earp claimed in damaging court testimonies that "Doc fired first and Morg second," that, in fact, was "absolutely true" (ibid., 90). Earp biopics rarely make clear who instigated the gunplay that paradoxically memorialized that notorious afternoon in October 1881.

The time sequence allotted to the shootout in films, the choreography of the shooters, and the number of edits demonstrate the centrality of this incident to the Earp biopics. In *Frontier Marshal* (1939), after Doc Holliday is assassinated just outside the saloon doors, Wyatt Earp packs rifle and six-guns and heads along the boardwalk toward the O.K. Corral with a final farewell: "Sorry you can't come along, Doc." In twenty-eight shots, often employing match-on-action and literal shot-reverse shot editing, a two minute and twenty-six second gun battle occurs. In *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Morgan Earp (Ward Bond), Simpson, and the mayor (Roy Roberts) head out to confront the Clantons, with Wyatt's iconic words: "Let's go." In a dramatic high-angle extreme long shot of the five men dwarfed by the Monument Valley mesas in the background, Ford captures a transformative moment of man over the landscape as he shifts to "cowboy" shots of the men processing toward the corral. Earp's men peel off from him and take cover as they surround the corral, while Wyatt moves along a latticed wood and barbed wire fence. Wyatt confronts the Clantons, asking them to talk as he informs them of the warrants for their murders of his brothers, James and Virgil Earp, as well as for incidental cattle rustling.

Ike Clanton (Grant Withers) swears to kill Wyatt and moves out of the corral. Ford cuts to an extreme long shot of an arriving stagecoach and then back to the scene as the stagecoach passes between lawman and outlaw, creating a blinding cloud of dust. Ike shoots and the gunfight, lasting three minutes and ten seconds, commences. It concludes ahistorically with the death of Doc Holliday in the corral and the death of Old Man Clanton, who, being allowed to leave Tombstone on horseback, turns to shoot Earp, but not before Morgan downs him. Ford achieves all of these shifts economically with seventy shots.

John Sturges's *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957) has the longest sequence in any film recreation of the events in 1881. Unlike other Earp films of the decade, Sturges's epic bears little relevance to the sociopolitical conditions of the era, but instead, was Hal Wallis's and Paramount Pictures' attempt to boost Westerns into the A-class of films, as evidenced by their hiring best-seller Leon Uris to write the screenplay. Wyatt Earp (Burt Lancaster), Doc Holliday (Kirk Douglas), Virgil Earp (John Hudson), and Morgan Earp (DeForest Kelley) begin the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse walk down the main street toward the O.K. Corral, not in Tombstone, but at the iconic studios at Old Tucson. Eight long minutes account for one hundred twenty-nine shots of this overly drawn-out battle, which include setting a man on fire and several demonstrations of Lancaster's acrobatic skills. It concludes with Wyatt chasing Billy Clanton (Dennis Hopper) into Fly's Gallery, where Doc Holliday shoots through the storefront window at Billy, who falls dead at Wyatt's feet. In the final moment, Wyatt tosses down his gun.

In *Hour of the Gun* (1967), his apology for *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, John Sturges places the gunfight during the opening credits, beginning with a series of long shots of the principal actors, James Garner as Wyatt Earp and Jason Robards as Doc Holliday, and culminating with a twenty-second corral shootout—nearly the exact time of the actual event. The entire credit sequence lasts just over five minutes but contains only thirty-eight shots. Unlike most Earp biopics, *Hour of the Gun* endeavors to portray historical truth, as the superimposed intertitle reads: "THIS PICTURE IS BASED ON FACT. THIS IS THE WAY IT HAPPENED." Biographical purists would contest that assertion. Sturges, however, is fascinated by the legal proceedings of Ike Clanton (Robert Ryan) against the Earps and Holliday, the assassination attempt upon Virgil Earp (Frank Converse) and the successful assassination of Morgan Earp (Sam Melville), and Wyatt Earp's maniacal revenge against the Clanton gang, including the town sheriff (Michael Tolan), Curly Bill Brocius (Jon Voight), Andy Warshaw (Steve Ihnat), and eventually Ike Clanton. Unlike most Earp biopics, here Wyatt, not Doc Holliday, has

lost his moral compass and become as vicious as the cowboys, which is the point of the film—to be a revisionist account of the legend and the man.

The most recent O.K. Corral biopics, since that incident has as much a biography of its own as Wyatt Earp's legend, include *Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994). Both films attempt historical accuracy: *Tombstone*, with the personal life and events surrounding the Earps' arrival and departure from Tombstone, including the marital problems of Wyatt; *Wyatt Earp*, with its *bildungsroman* early depiction of young Wyatt's movement through the West to the Dodge City and Tombstone days, concluding with Wyatt and Josie looking at the Alaskan landscape from a steamship as they follow the next gold rush. The films differ greatly in their portrayal of Doc Holliday—Val Kilmer in *Tombstone* and Dennis Quaid in *Wyatt Earp*. In *Tombstone*, the familiar homosocial bonding between Wyatt (Kurt Russell) and Doc occurs, but with a more tolerant view of Doc's eccentricities, indulgences, and excesses. In a memorable scene at the Faro table, Johnny Ringo (Michael Miehne) and Doc Holliday exchange three types of linguistic confrontations, all the while Wyatt keeps a sawed-off shotgun pointed at Ringo under the table. The first riposte occurs in a series of English taunts with Ringo berating a sotted, perspiring Doc, who upon acknowledging that they mirror one another, comments, "No, I'm sure. I hate him," in a moment of self-assurance and self-abnegation. The second verbal sparring is conducted entirely in Latin:

DOC HOLLIDAY (standing, drinking from his silver cup): *In vino veritas*. ["In wine truth."]

RINGO: *Age quod agis*. ["Do your best."]

DOC HOLLIDAY: *credat Iudaeus Apella, no ego*. [from Horace's *Satire 5*, lines 100–101: "Apella, the Jew believes it, not I."]

RINGO (touching his pistol): *Iuventus stultorum magister*. ["Fools (youths) learn by experience."]

DOC HOLLIDAY: *In pace requiescat*. [An inversion of R.I.P, with emphasis on "rest," for "In peace, rest."]

The third and final exchange occurs nonverbally, with Ringo twirling his six-shooter in rapid motions before replacing it in his holster, which Doc counters with the comic, debasing twirl of his silver cup, to the applause

of all in the saloon. This scene, fictional as it is, establishes the mood and meaning of the film. No revisionist, new Hollywood storyline prevails, but rather a reaction against such sociopolitical intrusions. Unlike other Earp biopics, Wyatt questions every moment of the shootout, from the initial walk to the O.K. Corral, "How the hell did we get ourselves into this?" to Wyatt's wary "Oh, my God" just before the outlaws grab their six-guns. The moments before the actual gunplay are conveyed through tight editing of facial close-ups of all of the participants, in particular Doc Holliday's derisive wink at Billy Clanton (Thomas Haden Church) which is the catalyst for the battle. The entire shootout of seventy-five edits takes only two minutes and forty seconds, an average of two seconds per shot.

Wyatt Earp (1994), the least successful biopic in terms of narrative, cinematography, and performance, follows nearly the entire career of Wyatt Earp from a youth in Illinois through his supposed lengthy drunken response to the death of his wife, then to Dodge City, then Tombstone and the O.K. Corral, and finally with Wyatt and wife Josie looking at the shores of Nome, Alaska. Marital strife underscores the Earp-Clanton conflict, romance replaces history, and sex appeal supersedes political allegory. Prior to Wyatt (Kevin Costner) meeting up with his brothers Virgil (Michael Madsen) and Morgan (Linden Ashby) to face down the Clanton gang, outside his hotel room he meets with Josie (Joanna Going) who professes her love for him. He re-enters the room as his harridan, laudanum-besotted wife screeches curses at him, to which Wyatt, the beleaguered husband, replies, "I don't have time for this." Morgan instigates the shootout, according to this version. When they arrive at Fly's Photographic Gallery and Studio, he goads the Clanton gang, "You sons of bitches have been looking for a fight. Now, you can have it." The entire gunplay, shot in a montage of long shots, medium shots, and extreme close-ups, takes only one minute and twenty-seven seconds for all forty-nine edits. For the final frame, of course, the camera rests upon a standing Wyatt, gun drawn, face snarled. *Wyatt Earp* lacks the emotional and psychological motivation for the incidents of previous Earp biopics. Unlike the B-Earp films of the 1950s, no political or social meaning can be discerned in this flat, slow-paced narrative.

For a sense of historical accuracy, *Hour of the Gun*, *Tombstone*, and *Wyatt Earp* include the arrest and trial of the Earps and Doc Holliday for the homicides committed near the O.K. Corral. *Hour of the Gun* reveals the political machinations and factionalism that divided Tombstone by playing out courtroom testimony. All three films move the story apace in order to reach the not guilty verdict. Only *Hour of the Gun* includes portions of the actual findings of the court, which cast a dim view on all

parties involved. In his decision, No. 94 “Territory of Arizona vs. Morgan Earp, Virgil W. Earp, Wyatt S. Earp and John H. Holliday. Testimony on examination of Wyatt S. Earp and John H. Holliday,” read in open court on November 30, 1881, Judge Wells Spicer offered an overview of the O.K. Corral occurrence. He castigated Police Chief Virgil Earp for calling upon the assistance of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday and claimed that he “committed an injudicious and censurable act.” Yet, Spicer confirmed the actions of the defendants when considering the conditions of “a frontier country” and “the lawlessness and disregard for human life; the existence of a law-defying element in [our] midst; the fear and feeling of insecurity that has existed; the supposed prevalence of bad, desperate and reckless men who have been a terror to the country and kept away capital and enterprise.” He therefore attached “no criminality” to the incident.⁹ Spicer’s condemnation of the Clantons and McLaurys fits with the Turner thesis of the frontier, since he notes that not only were they immoral and reckless about human life, but they also detrimentally affected commerce in Tombstone. In a December 17 letter from “A Citizen” to the *Tombstone Epitaph*, Spicer’s previous concerns were echoed: “The constant repetition of outrages by this gang of desperadoes known as cow-boys is driving capital, capitalists, and enterprise out of the country” (In Tefertiller 1997, 170–71). This narrative of the historical self-justified lawman who defeats predatory anticapitalist enemies is lost entirely in *Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp*, replaced by cinematic clichés of guns and violence.

Only *Tombstone* mentions Wyatt Earp’s death, with Robert Mitchum’s voice-over concluding the film by referring to his funeral. Of the sixty-two deaths reported in *The Los Angeles Times* on January 15, 1929, under “DEATHS with Funeral announcements,” only a few short lines were included about Earp’s death, stating that he was beloved by Josephine and his niece (20). In the Tuesday morning edition of the *Los Angeles Times* for that same day, in the fourth column, under an article entitled “WIFE SUING HOOT GIBSON FOR DIVORCE—Cowboy Motion Picture Actor Accused In Plaintiff of Desertion,” there appeared a short five-paragraph article entitled, “GUN-FIGHTER EARP’S RITES TOMORROW—Colorful Character of Old West Will be Paid Last Honor Before Cremation,” which read:

Funeral service for Wyatt Earp, two-handed gun fighter of the gold camp days from 1879 to 1900, who died at his home, 4004 West Seventeenth street, Sunday, will be conducted at Pierce Brothers’ chapel at 10 a.m. tomorrow. The body is to be cremated.

Mr. Earp, who was 79 years of age, figured prominently in the history of the untamed West when Nevada, Idaho, Arizona and New Mexico were territories. He served for many years as deputy United States Marshal and town marshal in many of the gold mining camps.

He figured in the Klondike gold rush and made several fortunes.

In recent years he had lived with his wife Sadie in Los Angeles.

Frequently he was called on by motion-picture directors to aid in the work of adding color to western pictures, but he never took an actual part in any of the productions. He often was sought out by William S. Hart and other western producers.

Mr. Earp had extensive holdings in oil and mining properties and until a week ago had been in good health except for a kidney ailment. Besides his widow he leaves a niece. (5)

Curiously, there is no mention of Wichita, Dodge City, Tombstone, Arizona, or the O.K. Corral, as though the legend, at least for this newspaper, would be buried with the man. Among his pallbearers were the cowboy stars William S. Hart and Tom Mix, John Clum, former editor of the *Tombstone Epitaph* and mayor of Tombstone, Wilson Mizner, owner of the Brown Derby restaurant, W. J. Hunsaker, Wyatt Earp's attorney, and George Parsons, a close friend from the boomtown days of Tombstone. Both Clum and Parsons supported Earp and "backed his play as vigilantes in the old days in Tombstone" (Myers 1950, 240). By the time of Earp's death, Hart had made nearly seventy Westerns and Tom Mix over eighty Western films. Both were dependent upon Wyatt Earp for tales and details of the Old West and for a sense of authenticity. Both were devastated by the loss of their dear friend and hero. Tom Mix is reported to have been nearly inconsolable, weeping openly during and after the funeral.

As with most of his life, Earp's biography had its detractors. In his "The Anatomy of a Western Legend," Frank Waters described Wyatt Earp as "an itinerant saloonkeeper, cardsharp, gunman, bigamist, church deacon, policeman, bunco artist, and a supreme confidence man" (Waters 1960, 7). And Earp's life and death have had their share of dark ironies. More than ten years after his death, Wyatt Earp's remains were buried by his wife Josie's family in a Jewish cemetery, The Hills of Eternity Memorial Park in Colma, California, near San Francisco: "Even his grave managed to break into headlines. Thieves broke into the cemetery and

stole the three hundred pound tombstone marking his grave” (Waters 1960, 219). That occurred on July 7, 1958. A new tombstone has replaced the missing one, in more ways than one. The dark irony remains that Clum’s “city on a hill” would end up a cemetery and that Earp, who always felt robbed of his chance to tell his version of Tombstone, ended up having his own tombstone pilfered.

Still, Wyatt Earp’s life and especially his legend remain standards for Western film narratives. On his deathbed, Wyatt Earp’s last words were prophetic not only as the summation of a life that relied upon retelling its own legend, but also as the need within the psyche of American national character to construct out of the space and time of history a figure who is its own summation. His final words were not the end, but rather the initial yearning voiced in all American legends, that first moment in the construction of a national narrative of the American self, and especially, that desire that begins all biopics: “Suppose . . . suppose.”

Notes

1. Clements, *After the Boom in Tombstone and Jerome, Arizona: Decline in Western Resource Towns*, 73: “Burnham’s [president of Tombstone Mill and Mining Company] report showed decreasing ore values in the years 1881 to 1883, declining ore production after March 1882, and exhaustion of ores in the Goodenough and Toughnut claims, the company’s two most important holdings.”

2. *Tombstone Epitaph*, December 13, 1881, as quoted and analyzed admirably in Anderson, “Protestantism, Progress, and Prosperity: John P. Clum and ‘Civilizing’ the U.S. Southwest, 1871–1886,” 361, note 3. Anderson reveals the significance of the stage in Clum’s views of progress for the West. Clum not only viewed theater as instilling moral values, but was also an amateur thespian himself, taking a chorus role in *H.M.S. Pinafore* (331).

3. Clum, “It All Happened in Tombstone,” *Arizona Historical Review* 2, no. 3 (October 1929): 46–72.

4. Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*, 1. Much of Conley’s cinematic analysis deals with maps *in* film rather than the theoretical speculation that films are maps, even though he does present post-structuralist and post-modernist conceptualizations of the interdependence and alterity of cartography and cinematography.

5. See Rob Byrne narrating the restoration of *The Half-Breed* at the San Francisco Silent Film festival: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J63LSilU54g>. The Library of Congress print was part of the Dawson City, former Yukon Gold Rush town, find, which unearthed from the permafrost of a swimming pool hundreds of pre-World War I nitrate reels.

6. Paul Andrew Hutton, “Wyatt Earp’s First Film: William S. Hart’s *Wild Bill Hickok*,” *True West Magazine*, May 7, 2012. <http://www.truewestmagazine.com/jcontent/entertainment/entertainment/western-movies/4585-wyatt-earps-first-film>.

7. For the dual Hamlet roles in *My Darling Clementine* and for a sustained treatment of the film, see Simmon, "Part Three. 'That Sleep of Death': John Ford and the Darkness of the Classic Western in the 1940s" in *The Invention of the Western Film*, especially ch. 20, "Shakespeare? In Tombstone?"

8. See Marks, *And Die in West: The Story of the O.K. Corral Gunfight*, 218. For anyone interested in this most famous of Western conflicts, no better source exists than Marks's admirable, scholarly work.

9. Turner, ed. *The O.K. Corral Inquest*, 219–20. Spicer's decision was filed on January 3, 1882. See also Roberts, "The Gunfight at O. K. Corral: The Wells Spicer Decision: 1881," 67.

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Patton (1970)

Celebrating the Un-American National Hero

R. BARTON PALMER

God, How I Hate the Twentieth Century

FRANKLIN J. SCHAFFNER'S *PATTON* (1970) offers a richly detailed and thematically nuanced version of the World War II career of George S. Patton (authentically reincarnated in George C. Scott's memorable performance), the only American general to achieve during that conflict an international reputation for compelling leadership, tactical brilliance, and battlefield aggressiveness. The film unsurprisingly celebrates Patton's unique accomplishments, but, true to the complexity of its subject, does not ignore the general's overweening egotism, his relentless pursuit of personal glory in what should, morally speaking, be thought a collective endeavor, and his often costly insensitivity to political realities. These failings, which were well publicized, perhaps contributed more than his battlefield successes to the fame that he went on to achieve and continues today to enjoy, as the several website shrines devoted to him attest. George Patton, Schaffner's film movingly demonstrates, learned the tragic truth of modern celebrity, that, as Leo Braudy puts it, "lurking behind very chance to be made whole by fame is the axman of further dismemberment," as the self, in all its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, is subjected to ever-increasing investigation (Braudy 1986, 8).

Patton takes great pains to anatomize that dismemberment, in the process revealing, as we shall see, the cultural ironies that shaped the

general's problematic rise to prominence and his ultimate fall from grace. Eschewing any evocation of his colorful early career (including a creditable performance as a pentathlete in the 1912 Olympics and some legendary World War I heroics), the filmmakers instead begin with Patton's rehabilitation of the Seventh Army after the Battle of the Kasserine Pass in the North African campaign, a calamitous defeat for U.S. forces in their first engagement with the Germans, which revealed systemic failures of discipline, organization, and command. Patton's insistence on strict discipline (especially the wearing of proper uniforms) and extensive training soon turned these forces into effective fighting units, to the surprise of subordinates such as II Corps commander Omar N. Bradley, who later in his memoirs confessed that "though trivial in themselves, these reforms promptly stamped his personality upon the corps" (Bradley 1999, 44).

Based closely on Bradley's memoirs (which offer a largely unsympathetic portrait), as well as on a more positive biographical account, Ladislav Farago's *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph*, Schaffner's film presents a retelling of the Patton legend that never seriously deviates from the facts, though there are a host of minor inaccuracies (see Farago and Bradley). Schaffner, to be sure, touches only briefly on Patton's substantial contributions to the final defeat of Rommel's Afrika Corps during the campaign-ending assault on Bizerte (in which II Corps played a central role), but concentrates instead on the Sicilian invasion, which followed immediately. Here the filmmakers' interest in character predominates. The military aspects of the successful operation are evoked to provide an unflattering dramatization of Patton's egotism (especially his questionable competition with that other noted Allied glory seeker, British general Bernard Montgomery) and his promotion of an uncompromising discipline, which this time has dire rather than positive consequences. Patton's impatience with unsoldierly weakness and disciplinary failure leads him during a visit to a field hospital to slap one of his soldiers, who, as the general is distressed to discover, is suffering not from any physical wounds but from "battle fatigue." What to Army doctors was a disabling psychological condition was to Patton nothing less than cowardice. Widely reported in the press, the incident became a debacle that led to his dismissal as Seventh Army commander. Unfortunately, Patton proved himself during subsequent public appearances (emphasized in the film) constitutionally unwilling to adhere to the protocols both personal and political that then were supposed to govern the behavior of senior American officers. Outspoken, opinionated, and too comfortable in the limelight, he was easily goaded by reporters into making bombastic remarks that were then readily portrayed as outrageous.

At this point in the war, as the filmmakers emphasize, both Patton's leadership and his tactical brilliance were admired, if misunderstood, by those above and below him in the chain of command, especially Omar Bradley (Karl Malden), who, as he says in a crucial scene, is fighting the war because he has to, unlike Patton, who glories in and loves everything about combat. His American peers like Bradley viewed Patton's self-promoting devotion to the heroic as a personal failing, and to be sure it created a public relations nightmare by threatening the fragile bonds joining the allies, as Patton started feuds with both the British and the Russians. In its representation of the Sicilian campaign, the film emphasizes the pettiness of Patton's competition with Montgomery, with Bradley offering disapproval, even dismay, as Patton makes decisions that will result, he thinks, in unjustified American casualties. Patton argues the contrary, pointing out the tactical advantages of his plans, which would also conveniently put him in possession of key objectives before the British can reach them. Here and elsewhere the viewer is left with an unanswered question: Is Patton's unbending commitment to aggressiveness and rapid movement the better approach in the long run, more sparing of lives and more likely to produce decisive victory? Or does his glory-hounding lead to unnecessary deaths and pointless distractions from the grim aims of war?

However much they ran against the grain of officers such as Bradley, who is pictured in the film as neither a strict disciplinarian nor an advocate of the daring offensive maneuver, Patton's controversial tactics did not compromise his career. But his treatment of the nation's citizen soldiers did. Because of the uproar that his behavior, seen as cruel and heartless, created among the American public, Patton became after the slapping incident a pariah sidelined for a time from substantial involvement in the war. As the film suggests, Patton was nearly sent home after his somewhat disingenuous apology to the soldier and some further incidents. No one believed in his contrition or reformation, and the film supports this view, which appears to be the correct one. In his memoirs, composed not long after the incident, Patton says forthrightly: "I am convinced that my action in this case was entirely correct, and that, had other officers had the courage to do likewise, the shameful use of 'battle fatigue' as an excuse for cowardice would have been infinitely reduced" (Patton 1947, 359) The general's impatience with "battle fatigue" would have created no problem in the Wehrmacht, which did not recognize the condition and which executed without any qualms thousands of soldiers found to be derelict in their duties. The American Army, in contrast, imposed the death penalty for such offenses only one time, in the notorious case of Private Eddie Slovik, who became the first American to be

executed for battlefield malfeasance since the Civil War. The postwar uproar over the Slovik case speaks volumes about the effect of national character on military values and practice, a theme to be treated in more detail later in this essay (see Huie 1954).

Bradley, Patton's former subordinate, is selected to command the formidable forces then assembling to invade France, while Patton is also passed over as commander of the allied armies fighting the Germans in the Italian campaign. Deprived of battlefield command, the disgraced general is shunted, instead, from one backwater to another, and he begins to question whether the destiny he strongly feels within will not be fulfilled. As the film makes painfully clear, these assignments were designed to fool the Germans, whose healthy respect for Patton's fighting abilities was used to energize one deception campaign after another, keeping the enemy guessing about where the Allies would strike next (Brown 1975, 474; also see Hesketh 2000). Ironically, even during the early stages of the invasion of Normandy in 1944, Patton was deployed as a decoy. His inaction was an essential element in an elaborate deception campaign that was largely successful in crippling the initial stages of enemy response. Patton was stationed near the Channel coast commanding what was essentially a ghost army, and the Germans convinced themselves that the landings were merely a feint to be followed by another crossing in force at the Pas de Calais, an operation that Patton, the offensive genius, would of course direct. Because Hitler and his general staff considered Patton the most able of Allied field commanders, the Germans kept vital armored reserves north of the invasion site ready to oppose him. Patton contributed to the success of the early stages of the operation by doing nothing, his effectiveness in that strange endeavor resulting equally from the enemy's healthy respect for his abilities and the reluctance of his own army to employ them.

Only later in the battle for France do his superiors make use of his dedication to waging a war of quick movement and tactical surprise. Seeking divine guidance to help him fulfill what he feels as his destiny, Patton finds that his prayers are eventually answered when, against Bradley's recommendation, he is provided with a new command. He quickly transforms the Third Army into an elite unit whose superiority to other Allied formations owes everything to his organization and imposition of strict discipline. With the general in visible command at the head of an armored spearhead, the Third Army races across France after the breakout that has been achieved by Operation Cobra, restrained only by supply problems. The film ignores the fact that the decision of the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, was to pursue the fleeing Germans on a broad front instead of opting for the

war of rapid, narrow penetrations leading to decisive encirclements, the approach advocated by Patton and others.

Later, at the crucial point of the war in the West, Patton effects a remarkable rescue of American forces trapped by the German winter counteroffensive known to Americans as the Battle of the Bulge, saving them through a long forced march followed by an assault in strength, an operation that no other Allied commander thought possible or even dared offer to undertake. But this moment of glory is fleeting. With the war at an end and four-power occupation of Germany in its beginning stages, Patton commits another faux pas, which this time ends his career. Not trusting Soviet cooperation, he bitterly insults his Russian opposite number at a dinner intended to celebrate their joint victory, thus causing a rift between allies who, with Germany defeated, would soon become rivals. Dismissed from his post as commander of the Third Army, Patton did not live long enough to see his views about Russian perfidy vindicated. Summoned home, before he could leave Germany he was mysteriously killed in an auto accident that many think might have been an assassination.

This anticlimactic and puzzling finale to a remarkable life, however, is neither mentioned nor represented in the film, but rather is evoked by a kind of foreshadowing. A runaway cart barely misses Patton as he walks along a narrow village street following his dismissal. The film does not reveal if this is an accident or a botched murder attempt. In any case, this hint at a destiny barely revealed (and perhaps imponderable) provides a fitting coda for a life that is shown as being both central to and yet strangely detached from history. In a reflective moment early in the film, Patton muses how much more satisfying warfare would be if reduced to a gentlemanly duel between the two commanders. The general's fantasy reflects his entrapment between times, a feudal past that determines his partiality to rule-governed judicial combat and yet his firm commitment to an unfolding modernity (especially the role assigned to armored formations), which is what has led to his military success. Patton imagines how he and Rommel might face off on a field of honor, armed with neither pistols nor sabers. Each, instead, would command a tank. Realizing the impossibility of his wish, which is underlined by its wistful anachronisms, Patton exclaims to his adjutant: "God, how I hate the twentieth century!"

Of Anachronisms, Cinematic and Personal

In large part because of its appropriately elaborate and authentic staging of battle scenes and military parades, *Patton* became one of the most

popular and artistically successful biopics released by Hollywood since the genre's golden age during the heyday of the studio era (roughly, 1925–1960). With its focus on a figure who interestingly embodies the contradictions of an important historical moment and thus possesses the heroic energy and will to challenge conventional wisdom, *Patton* recalls David Lean's blockbuster international production *Lawrence of Arabia*, released only a few years before in 1962. With its canny exploitation of the amazing financial and material capacities Hollywood still possessed to produce eye-popping spectacle on an epic scale, *Patton* was thus a magnificent anachronism. For many older viewers, the film must have poignantly recalled the salad days of the genre, when, as George Custen points out, nearly three hundred screen biographies (mostly high-budget and carefully researched projects like *Patton*) were produced, making the biopic one of the most characteristic and celebrated genres of the studio era.

The biopic, as Custen reports, “played a powerful part in creating and sustaining public history,” and its decline in popularity since the 1960s indicates both a fading interest on the part of filmgoers with the genre's characteristic rhetorical excesses (often bordering on an unabashed chauvinism) and also Hollywood's abandonment of its self-presentation as an industry vitally invested, if perhaps for its selfish reasons, in contributing to the intellectual and civic welfare of its paying customers (Custen 1992, 2). As Dennis Bingham points out, “The 1970s, when so many exciting things were happening in American cinema, was the low ebb of the biopic.” The genre did not disappear from the cultural scene entirely. “Biography provided much fodder for television ‘movies of the week,’” but such few biopics as were produced enjoyed little favor on larger screens (Bingham 2010, 19). In the last three decades, the biopic has emerged as a favored subject with prominent auteurs (such as Martin Scorsese), but the genre has never regained the widespread popularity with audiences it enjoyed before World War II.

By better informing them about the roles played by great men in (especially American) history, biopics during the studio era were intended to make their viewers better citizens. These screen narratives were designed to supplement the official public view of history as a succession of larger than life figures and uniquely significant events. That rich pageant of recoverable moments was governed by a teleology of modernizing advancement. America's story led inexorably to the ever-improving present, and this was precisely the vision of the past that American public education in the twentieth century strove to inculcate in its pupils (see Fitzgerald 1980). The biopic attested ostentatiously to Hollywood's commitment to enlightenment of a culturally useful nature, arguing that the

industry was interested not only in distracting Americans with frivolous fantasy and morally dubious (if carefully surveilled) spectacle. The studios were united after a fashion in pursuing at least one purpose of undoubted communal value—this is what the biopic proudly proclaimed to the nation and the world.

By the 1970s, however, this corporate civic-mindedness had been abandoned in the face of ever-deepening financial crises and near paralyzing doubts about what kind of product to offer a public that seemed suddenly to have lost interest in such forms of entertainment. In an age of sexual revolution and insistent questioning of national purpose, America, as industry spokesman Jack Valenti lamented, was perhaps witnessing the “death of quality exhibition.” In such an atmosphere, the traditional biopic seemed hopelessly outmoded (qtd in Lewis 2000, 158). The decision in 1968 by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) to abandon the Production Code and establish the ratings system that, as Jon Lewis points out, would allow the studios “to continue to produce and distribute films under a set of mutually agreed-upon guidelines” thus responded to the rapidly changing moral climate in America by permitting filmmakers greater latitude in the representation of sexual themes (ibid., 150). Two years after *Patton* was released, as Lewis somewhat distressingly chronicles, filmmakers would be pressured by the successful mainstream release of three lavish and witty pornographic features (*Deep Throat*, *The Devil in Miss Jones*, and *Behind the Green Door*) to devote their production energies to soft- and even hard-core projects. This anticipated change of direction was eventually derailed, but only by a surprising perfect storm of events and trends (principally the Supreme Court decision in *Miller v. California* [1973], which eased obscenity prosecution by individual states, and the evident box office appeal of an American auteur cinema), as commercial filmmaking struggled to discover what potential filmgoers in the wake of the turbulent 1960s might be interested in paying to view. In the event, we should hardly be surprised that not only the biopic but also another staple of the studio era, the short subject memorializing historical events or commenting on urgent matters of public concern, quickly faded from an increasingly unstable cinematic scene in which these two film genres had once played such prominent roles.

Like its notorious and enigmatic subject, *Patton* is thus an anachronism in the respectful (if hardly one-dimensional) tribute it pays to a great American. In the manner of such memorable productions as *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) and *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), the film presents its protagonist as, in Custen’s words, “largely self-made,” a powerful individual who is “able to override conventional definitions of a social reality held by a restrictive community.” Fighting to be granted the opportunity to

express his greatness, Patton, like his generic forebears, finds that he can “literally write—or rewrite—history” (Custen 1992, 151). Certainly, such a heroic military figure, one with the extraordinary capacity of bending events to his will, seemed out of place in America at the beginning of the 1970s. The film’s evocation of the past centers on its epical treatment of the “good war,” whose place of honor within the national narrative was then being questioned by many within the antiwar movement. When the lights in the theater came up, *Patton*’s viewers experienced a much gloomier present, marked by the inconclusiveness and moral uncertainties of the Vietnam “quagmire.” By beginning with the American humiliation at Kasserine and concluding with the complete defeat of a still-formidable foe in the Battle of the Bulge, *Patton* offers a poignant backward glance at the national “victory culture” brought into being by the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The film prompts the reliving and enjoyment of a signal moment of national vindication.

That backward glance, however, is focused through a figure who is presented from the beginning as problematic, despite, or perhaps because of, the key role he is called upon to play in unfolding events. When terrible defeat reveals weaknesses in American organization, discipline, and training that only Patton is thought to be able to rectify, one of the staff officers, dismayed at the prospect of the general’s imminent arrival, mutters “God help us.” The film then proceeds to explore the deep contradiction between Patton’s demonstrated indispensability to the eventual triumph of American arms over the Germans and the ways in which the exercise of his unique talents posed serious problems for the very institution whose success he made possible. Patton is an anachronistic figure, a natural-born aristocrat with the sensibilities, as his German opponents suggest, of a sixteenth-century professional soldier, but he is also out of place, culturally speaking: a distinctly un-American American.

Because the film shows that victory in Europe depended on the talents, vision, and energies of a figure whose values and sensibility were more European than native, *Patton* offers a far from straightforward account of American triumph in World War II. Victory in that conflict, the film suggests, depended on the disjunction between the enduring values of the national culture (especially an ingrained distrust of hierarchical institutions and a profound isolationism) and the demands of the global mission that America was forced to assume in two world wars. At first unwilling, the country eventually had no choice but to respond to the energies of its own unparalleled economic development, which necessarily brought the United States into conflict with two enemies far distant from native shores. Germany and Japan contested both American productive capacities and also the country’s potential military

strength, which, deliberately unrealized in the years leading up to the war, remained a threat that these two militarized powers, each seeking eventual world domination, could hardly ignore.

Involvement in such global conflict, and in the final total victory thereby achieved, proved nothing short of transformative. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's subsequent declaration of war, America was compelled for the first time to develop and rely on an increasingly professionalized military that was dedicated to waging war in the national interest. Such militarization ran contrary to the deeply held American aversion to war. As Patton observes in his memoirs, "It is an unfortunate and, to me, tragic fact that, in our attempts to prevent war, we have taught our people to belittle the heroic qualities of the soldier" (Patton 1947, 318). *Patton* extols these qualities, demonstrating their indispensable value, even as it dramatizes how deeply they are antithetical to American culture. The Wehrmacht, arguably the finest and most powerful army the world has ever known, could only be defeated by a general such as Patton who realized the benefits of strict training and discipline and who understood that unflinching aggressiveness (Patton, as he says, adopted the motto of Frederick the Great: "l'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace") created a mobile battlefield in which casualties would be minimized and success achieved with rapidity. Kasserine displayed the flaws of the American army, flaws that only a Patton, because he brought with him a vision of soldiering and of warfare that ran contrary to national ideals, could remedy. But both Patton's approach to making war and, more crucially, his views on military discipline barred him from a position of overall command and even brought into question whether he should be allowed to continue his service as a general officer.

The film's probing of the contradictions of the national experience makes it part of a more general postwar phenomenon. As Tom Engelhardt details, during the early years of the Cold War, Americans were increasingly moved by mystifying international conflict and domestic disunity to question their collective image. Reflecting something of that self-criticism, the film treats frankly, even coldly at times, Patton's grandiosity, his unbridled enthusiasm for battle, his seeming insensitivity to the suffering caused by war, and his exalted and unashamed image of himself (in his memoirs Patton forthrightly observes that "all very successful commanders are prima donnas," a rule from which, the film makes quite clear, he does not deviate [Patton 1947, 336]). Though wary, even suspicious of the European-style militarism that lies at the heart of both Patton's success and downfall, *Patton* does not question the moral rightness of America's involvement in and prosecution of the war against the Axis powers.

With its celebration of the role played by the American army in the defeat of Hitler's Germany, *Patton* thus contrasts markedly with other World War II films of the early years of the decade, including, most notably *Catch-22* (1970) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), both of which were based on fictionalized memoirs penned by disillusioned veterans (Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut) and offered deeply negative views of American triumphalism. Like the popular and much-discussed novels on which they are based, these films call into question the morality of American warmaking (the bombing of Dresden, a target whose military value was hotly debated) and the undeniably profitable connection between capitalism and modern war (one of the airmen in *Catch-22* forms a corporation that does profitable business with the German enemy). In contrast, *Patton* may occasionally detail the horrors of combat, but the filmmakers do not engage with the emerging critique of national purpose exemplified by *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22*. As a portrayal of American experience during World War II, *Patton* thus shares much more in common with earlier jingoistic memorializations of the conflict, most notably Darryl F. Zanuck's *The Longest Day* (1962), which offers a heroic account of the D-Day landings at epic length and with a huge cast of stars drawn from the Hollywood and international cinemas.

Patton figures as an industrial anomaly at the end of the 1960s, when Hollywood, faced with rapidly changing audience tastes and stiff competition from the international art cinema, was struggling to create a new product line that was adult, sophisticated, and intellectually engaged. *Patton* had no investment in the representation of sexual life (in the manner of other popular and critically acclaimed American-produced films of the period such as *Carnal Knowledge* [1971] or *Midnight Cowboy* [1969]), and it is just as old-fashioned in its own way as *Love Story* (also 1970), the most surprising hit of the year, a sentimental melodrama that was also a throwback to the studio era, with its one-dimensional star-crossed tale of true love drawn from the sappiness of Yale professor Erich Segal's somewhat cynical middlebrow best-seller. Its screenplay penned by Francis Ford Coppola and Edmund H. North, *Patton*, to be sure, offers the kind of thought-provoking entertainment that Coppola would bring to American screens with his adaptation of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* in 1972, but the film otherwise bears little resemblance, in terms of style and theme, to the more Europeanized releases that characterize the auteurist cinema of the decade, including Coppola's own impressive body of work.

A member (b. 1920) of an older generation that had learned its craft in live and series TV production, Schaffner enjoyed a certain success during the decade by specializing in intelligent, carefully directed, beautifully photographed, and star-driven large-scale productions, including

most notably *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971), *Papillon* (1973), and *Islands in the Stream* (1976). In a Hollywood dominated by hirsute film school graduates such as Coppola and Martin Scorsese or those like Hal Ashby who enthusiastically embraced the counterculturalism of the emerging American New Wave, Schaffner, much like Patton, was a throwback. He was a specialist in well-made, mainstream "A" dramas, particularly those that required elaborate historical reconstructions or location shooting, at a time when such films were otherwise very much out of fashion.

In fact, many Hollywood releases of what would emerge as an auteurist-dominated decade assumed the burden of presenting an alternative history that was not so flattering to the versions of American ideals and collective destiny that continued to be preached so ardently in classroom texts. In the 1970s, historical films, including such notable releases as *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), *The Godfather I and II* (Francis Coppola, 1972; 1974), and *Days of Heaven* (Terrence Malick, 1978), called into question the unreflective pursuits of manifest destiny and industrial capitalism, the very developments that in their reinforcing connectiveness had transformed the United States into a preeminent global power. The period's occasional biopic, such as *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (Robert Altman, 1976), characteristically deconstructed the celebratory triumphalism of the genre's classic period. Little of the heroic westerner whose famous life was reverently memorialized in William Wellman's 1944 classic *Buffalo Bill* remained in Altman's story of self-aggrandizing "showmanship" and narcissistic mythmaking, as the director argued for a different kind of national narrative, one that emphasized façade over substance, greed over honor and self-respect.

This Individuality Stuff Is a Bunch of Crap

With its reconstruction of "the good war," whose honored place in national history could hardly be decisively undermined, Schaffner's *Patton* carefully detached itself from such radical forms of revisionism, which spoke so eloquently to the New Left concerns of the era. It is revealing that *Patton* apparently became the favorite film of President Richard Nixon, who was then embroiled in the seemingly intractable difficulty of ending the Vietnam conflict. Nixon's hope for the kind of victory to which George Patton's energies had so substantially contributed twenty-five years earlier was proving increasingly elusive. In his criticism of the political restraints on war making that the leaders of democratic societies must respect, the film's Patton spoke to Nixon's own frustration with the caution he was strongly pressured to exercise in the conflict with North Vietnam, whose society could not be made to feel the full

fury of that “hard war” (in the famous formulation of General William T. Sherman) that American arms could have supported and which Patton had made his reputation waging (see Perlstein 2008). It is easy to see, moreover, how the film’s flamboyant militarism and uncritical promotion of the myth of the self-creating great man (who is misunderstood and underappreciated by contemporaries with lesser gifts and more limited visions) would appeal to Nixon’s conservative values and his personal history, whose deep troubles and surprising triumphs interestingly mirrored Patton’s.

It may be considered a part of its patriotic message that the film promotes American exceptionalism—the notion that the culture of the United States, as Seymour Martin Lipset has famously remarked, is an “outlier” compared to those of other Western democracies. Schaffner’s Patton, in fact, exhibits in larger-than-life form four of the five qualities that Lipset suggests make up the uniqueness of the American character: religiosity, optimism, patriotism, and individualism. Interestingly, the excessiveness of the film’s portrait of Patton was read by some reviewers at the time as the sign of the satiric intent of these filmmakers, who were purportedly debunking the perceived pomposity and casual inhumaneness of the war-loving professional military, whose standing among a disillusioned American public was at a very low ebb. Most of the film’s viewers, however, saw the general as an embodiment of hallowed national values, a real hero for a war that had produced few to celebrate. A lifelong member of that strictly hierarchical institution which is the military, Patton, unsurprisingly, did not manifest the concern with civic rights that Lipset sees as the fifth distinctive quality of Americanness. The general was instead devoted to duty and honor in his struggle for fame, which, in the terms suggested by Leo Braudy, may be seen as a normal extension of “everyone’s culturally fostered desire to be given his or her due” rather than either the exercise or pursuit of a right (Lipset 1996, 26; Braudy 1986, 5). In some important ways, Patton can be viewed as a quintessential American, his rough-edged individuality and impatience with what stands in the way of his self-realization stereotypical features of the national type.

And yet the film’s portrait of an acclaimed and exemplary hero also engages critically with perhaps the most widely discussed aspect of the assumed national character, one not emphasized by Lipset. In fact, the Patton who emerges from the film presents a compelling, essentially un-American alternative to what Alexis de Tocqueville famously identified as the American obsession with “equality of condition,” which in his view shaped the “public spirit,” gave a “certain turn to the laws and new maxims to those who govern,” and most importantly perhaps, determined

“the particular habits of the governed” (Tocqueville 2000, 3). Among the latter, we might note the habits of mind (identified by sociologist Dean Peabody) that relate to this supposed national embrace of equality of condition. These include humanitarianism, informality, other-directedness, an eagerness for conspicuous consumption, and competitiveness. For Peabody, however, a strong inclination to reject authority is the most significant of those American national qualities because it clearly reflects the country’s origin in an archetypal Enlightenment rebellion against a social order thought to be legitimated by tradition rather than reason. This is a personal orientation that, Peabody suggests, “derives from social equality applied to oneself (Peabody 1985, 165). That Americans customarily resist “any diffuse claims to deference” makes their service in the military structurally problematic, for this is an institution that, with its “feudal heritage,” is built around “qualitative differences as a categorical basis for privileges” as well as disciplinary protocols (*ibid.*).

Thus, the military is for Peabody an institution that rejects social equality completely, and the resistance of the founders and their successors to establishing a professional army is hardly surprising. Despite the experience of World War I, the American military (especially the army) in the years before the renewal of hostilities remained a marginal enterprise. Patton spent the 1930s absorbed in thinking about joint-arm tactics (the coordinated use of ground, armored, and air assets), and he was one of a very few professional American soldiers who not only anticipated another war but speculated about how it might best be waged. In the film’s evocation of Patton’s experiences during the North African campaign, he is even depicted in one scene reading a book on armored tactics by his opponent, the famed “Desert Fox,” German general Erwin Rommel. Respectful of the tradition that he takes pains to study, Patton is depicted several times during the film as deferring to higher authority, even accepting without grumbling or acrimony the promotion of Bradley, his erstwhile subordinate, to be his commander. If he is a *prima donna*, Patton offers no defiance to the system that in some deep sense blocks the full expression of his individuality. He is thus unlike most of the men he commands.

In an influential study written in the wake of the (only problematically successful) militarization of American society during World War II, George Spindler observes:

Authority and its corollary—discipline—are given low value by Americans. The only people who consistently value it positively are those who are responsible for its execution—mostly higher ranking officers. The adjustment of the majority on

the receiving end is one of constant avoidance and negation. . . . Enlisted men completely rejected the whole business. The polls show almost unanimous resentment against the implications of the status hierarchy. (Spindler 1961, 130)

The challenge for the American military during World War II was to turn into obedient soldiers citizens who were accustomed to making their own decisions and who had a natural resentment of both authority and the discipline required in a hierarchical organization. It was appropriate that Patton, in his famous speech addressing the Third Army (transformed by Schaffner into a kind of self-defining prologue), told his soldiers that “this individuality stuff is a bunch of crap (Patton, “Speech”). These largely reluctant warriors were opposed by an enemy whose national character was quite different. With their oft-noted *Ordnungsliebe* or “love of order” and expressed need for systemization, the Germans, as Peabody details, have traditionally made soldiers who accepted the need for hierarchy and discipline and were not disposed to question the orders they received (Peabody 1985, 116–20). The Germans were thus culturally inclined to share the military ethos that Patton also by nature embraced. Patton’s admiration for German military culture is expressed several times during the film, most notably, perhaps, when during the battle of El Guettar in North Africa, he beholds the spectacle of his own tanks and machine guns slaughtering advancing German soldiers and, in a spirit of characteristic inhumane humaneness, observes “God, what a waste of fine infantry!”

American soldiers, as Max Hastings describes, were “astonished to discover the strength” of what seemed to them to be the “unreasonable approach” of their German counterparts to waging war: the simple fact that they were soldiers and thus fought until they could do so no longer, obeying orders they knew often to be flawed in a struggle that they in the last years of the war likely thought hopeless (Hastings 1984, 185–86). Unsurprisingly misunderstood by more ordinary Americans, such as his companion-in-arms Bradley, and appreciated fully only by the enemies he was so ruthlessly and single-mindedly dedicated to wiping out, Patton sees himself as the reincarnation of a transhistorical type, the dedicated professional soldier. Because they participate in the same form of ritualized and intellectual militarism that Patton finds congenial, his enemies rightly recognize that the general is literally “out of time,” an early-modern European figure who, ironically, finds himself commanding units of citizen soldiers drawn not from an obedient peasantry but from a raucous democracy of men often more interested in self-preservation than in glorious self-sacrifice.

The Great Argument Unaddressed

So heavily invested is the film in drawing a stark contrast between the values and sensibility of Patton, on the one hand, and what is arguably the most pervasive quality of the national character, on the other, that *Patton* does not engage deeply with the then hotly debated military issues raised by the limited role that Allied Supreme Command permitted him to play in the war against Germany. Patton remained a controversial figure in the 1960s, when Farago published his hagiographical account of the general's accomplishments, but largely in connection with an issue that has since faded from view. Were American armies in the drive toward Germany poorly led, causing costly delays in the defeat of enemy units and even making it possible for the Wehrmacht to regroup and refit by the end of 1944 and then launch a powerful counteroffensive that temporarily staggered the Allies, causing huge numbers of casualties? J. E. Smyth has rightly pointed out that Hollywood filmmaking possesses the "potential to write and rewrite the text of American history, to compete with and even exceed the scope, complexity, and audience of traditional writings about the past," but *Patton* does not enter the controversy that, in the late 1960s, swirled around the part that the general played in eventual Allied victory (Smyth 2006, 4). Schaffner is not interested in writing history; he is fascinated instead by the complex ironies that shape Patton's life, determining his success even as they lead inevitably to his downfall.

The film's refusal to enter into the "great argument" is especially surprising because that controversy is featured prominently in the two historical texts that, as noted earlier, provided Coppola and North with the materials for their screenplay. Farago's biography offers a heroicizing, if not uncritical, account of Patton's career, while Bradley, a man of sober, modest temperament who found Patton's glory-hounding and rough manners deeply offensive, often unintentionally draws a portrait of Patton's eccentric military genius. Together, the two books could easily have yielded a balanced account of the role Patton played (and also did not play) in this crucial part of the post-invasion campaign against German forces in Western Europe.

In his review of Farago, S. L. A. Marshall argues that the book, like others of the era devoted to the general's accomplishments, constitutes yet another strident voice in the chorus of "lament that the battle for Europe went far too long," what Chester Wilmot, writing a widely influential account of the war in 1951, rightly labels "the great argument" (Marshall 1964, 34; Wilmot 1997, 458ff). Among historians inclined to this view, the blame for such a failure of Allied arms, as

Marshall suggests, falls equally on the commander of the multinational land armies, Field Marshal the Viscount Bernard L. Montgomery, who is faulted for both excessive caution in prosecuting post-invasion offensive operations as well as for tactical blunders in their conception, and the Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who, in Marshall's words, is considered by many to have been "too green, too obtuse or too timid a leader to seize opportunity in the autumn of 1944 and smite the German armies of the West when they were down" (Marshall 1964, 34). For Farago, Montgomery's vainglory was rendered risible by his mediocre generalship after the signal North African victory over the Germans at El Alamein. Montgomery's success in that campaign was followed by a string of increasingly less well-conceived operations, including, most notably, his failure to complete Allied encirclement of enemy forces as the battle for Normandy drew to a close and the near-disaster of Operation Market Garden or the Battle of Arnhem, which was an attempt after the Normandy break-out to invade Germany through Holland and thus bypass what were extensive and formidable German fixed defenses. Montgomery was subsequently largely blamed for the operation's conceptual flaws and poor advance planning, though bad luck also played a large role in the Allied debacle.

Patton, according to Farago, was the only Allied field commander with Napoleonic qualities: "a superb professional with a volcanic inner drive that pushed him on when others chose to halt," a general whose commitment to never-ending offensive pressure against the enemy meant that he came to fill a "special niche" among the commanders of that war (Farago 1964, 785). He is arguably the only American on a very restricted list that includes the names of such offensive geniuses as Erwin Rommel, Heinz Guderian, and Georgy Zhukov. Like Patton's other supporters (largely American historians), Farago, to quote Marshall once again, argues that the general's "hammer" was largely restrained from the "lethal blow" it might have delivered against a German army retreating in some disarray and confusion across France in the wake of the collapse of its front following Operation Cobra and the failed counter-offensive that, because of Hitler's foolish meddling, almost resulted in the complete encirclement of German forces, which, in the event, were badly mauled (see Hastings 1984, 244–330). Whether Patton, released by Eisenhower and Montgomery to annihilate the retreating Germans with the Third Army, could actually have shortened the war is, like all such counterfactual hypotheses, a matter for debate. Arguably the best informed among American historians of these European operations, Marshall himself thinks not. The Third Army, he plausibly suggests, was not "superhuman," though its amazing success during the Battle of

Bulge proves that it was an exceptional, elite unit, unlike all other Allied ground formations. In Marshall's view, Farago has been misled by Patton's stridently proclaimed but ultimately impractical plans for destroying the retreating Germans, plans that Allied commanders were in retrospect wise not to have endorsed and put into action. Marshall's estimation of Patton is not so positive and, like that of Bradley, seems to admit of a considerable amount of jealousy and resentment: "The small boy quirk in the great man o'war bothered Eisenhower tremendously and put the historians on many a wild goose chase, even as it has misled his biographer" (Marshall 1964, 34).

Counterfactual hypotheses, however, often have a lasting appeal, and this particular controversy, fed by the nagging sense among historians that a huge opportunity had been wasted by Eisenhower's decision to pursue the Germans on a large front (which sacrificed quickness and mobility), was hardly put to rest in the decades following the war. For many historians, the tactical situation following Operation Cobra demanded, in the words of Chester Wilmot, "a deep advance on a narrow front, since that would accentuate the restricted mobility and enforced dispersion of the Wehrmacht and would enable the Allies to exploit their greatly superior capacity for concentration of movement" (Wilmot 1997, 460). In such an operation, Patton would have found the ideal opportunity to exercise his particular gifts and predilections, and the Allies, it seems at least possible, would have seen the war end more quickly with the utter destruction of German arms on the Western front. Certainly nothing in Schaffner's film argues against such a possibility, but the screenplay hardly mentions the strategic controversy in which Patton played such a central role. The filmmakers were loath, perhaps, to criticize his superiors (which in 1970 would have included a former president), even though such a narrative pattern (the great man opposed by others of lesser vision) is central to the biopic tradition.

The conflict, moreover, could have been structured to make the Third Army's remarkable relief of American forces in Bastogne a resounding vindication of a resource hitherto not fully employed, if hardly wasted. This episode in the film is, unsurprisingly, handled in a triumphal fashion, but it is structured more as an element of characterization, as a montage of different scenes plays against a voiceover reading of the prayer for good weather that Patton had commissioned one of his chaplains to compose. The man is shocked by a request that asks God to intervene in human affairs in order to enable American soldiers to slaughter their enemies, but reluctantly complies. In the wake of this invocation of the divine, the wished-for clear skies return, allowing Allied planes to smash the German armored columns. Patton's belief in his own

destiny is thus confirmed, a destiny in which the Almighty arguably also seems to have a considerable stake.

In its representation of the Bastogne rescue, *Patton* thus leaves unaddressed the difficult issues posed by the “great argument,” emphasizing instead the inscrutability of an unflinching will that possesses the seemingly unlimited capacity to shape events to a purpose at which lesser mortals can only marvel. The film’s most memorable passage of romanticizing exaggeration demonstrates how Patton’s will to dominate and destroy, at last unfettered, becomes a palpable force of nature before which nature itself must give way. This apotheosis moves beyond the cultural ironies that hitherto structured the film’s moving account of un-American Americanness, as Patton’s intimations of greatness find their proper metaphysical reflex in a space that seems to move beyond both history and nationality.

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J. Edgar

Eastwood's Man of Mystery

DOUGLAS MCFARLAND

THE COMPETENT BIOGRAPHER, Dr. Johnson once argued, should understand that the “many invisible circumstances” of a subject’s life are often more important than the “public record” (Boswell 1953, 24). He points out that Sallust in his account of Catiline did not forget to inform the reader of the Roman’s oscillating gait, a physical sign of his mercurial personality. Cicero took this much farther when in a series of orations he was less concerned with Catiline’s personality than his sexual perversities. This speaks very much to the case of J. Edgar Hoover, whose public record, like Catiline’s, has been overshadowed by his “invisible circumstances.” In the years after his death, rumors circulated of Hoover’s intimate relationship with Clyde Tolson, the assistant director of the Bureau and Hoover’s longtime companion. By the 1990s, those rumors had become the public perception. This process began in earnest with a 1991 biography, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and His Secrets*, in which Curt Gentry portrayed his subject as a darkly sinister hypocrite. As the *Wall Street Journal* put it, Gentry “exposes epic philandering in salacious detail.” *Newsweek* asserted, “Eleanor Roosevelt was right: Hoover’s FBI was an American Gestapo.” Two years later, in *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*, Anthony Summers went into even greater detail in describing Hoover’s participation in sex orgies with “young blond boys,” (Summers 1993, 254) and the director’s proclivity for outrageous cross-dressing.

There have been attempts to correct what some perceive as an unbalanced portrait. Athan Theoharis, responding directly to Summers, argued that Hoover was an “astute bureaucrat” who “traded in information” (Theoharis 1995, 55), and if, in fact, Hoover had been gay, he would have kept it a secret. In *Puppet Master*, Richard Hack made the same point: “Hoover’s life was one of denial” (Hack 2004, 275). But these attempts have done little to stem the tide. In 2012, Darwin Porter, in *J. Edgar Hoover and Clyde Tolson*, revealed even more salacious details of the director’s sexual perversions. And, finally, in an ironic reference to Hoover’s own promotion of himself in the 1930s as a comic book hero, the founder of the F.B.I. has become the subject of an unflattering graphic comic by Rick Geary. Hoover remains in the popular imagination the Machiavellian deviant, the archetypal hypocrite, and a figure of derision. As recently as 2011, in a short digression on Hoover’s *Masters of Deceit* in a book otherwise devoted to Thomas Pynchon, a noted scholar claimed, “from a later historical perspective we know that the true master of deceit—from cross-dressing to political blackmail—was Hoover himself” (Coward 2011, 87).

Audiences for Clint Eastwood’s 2011 biopic *J. Edgar* might very well have expected something similar to these private disclosures. But, then again, Eastwood’s apparent political leanings toward the Right may have suggested a screen biography that attempted to restore Hoover’s reputation. In addition, the screenwriter, Dustin Lance Black, who also wrote the screenplay for *Milk* (2008), is a prominent activist for gay and lesbian rights, suggesting that the film might offer a more sympathetic perspective on Hoover’s sexual orientation. And indeed it does, but not at the expense of ignoring Hoover’s personal flaws. In *J. Edgar* a middle path is taken, resulting in a biopic that recognizes that public accomplishments and private failings form a complex relationship. In an interview promoting the film, Eastwood referred to Hoover as a man not of secrets but of “mystery” (Eastwood DVD). *J. Edgar* does not attempt to solve that mystery but rather to examine a life enmeshed in the interwoven complexities of familial, ethical, social, psychological, and political forces over a fifty-year period.

Narrative Time

Nearly all of the generic conventions of the biopic that have been identified by George Custen in his seminal study are evident in one form or another in *J. Edgar*: a narrative beginning *in medias res*, with a series of flashbacks; the subject portrayed as a self-made man or woman; a close companion who often functions as a conscience; a faithful and inspiring

romantic interest; outmoded ways of thinking that offer resistance to innovative ideas; a dramatic breakthrough moment; a public hearing or trial which serves as a venue for justification; and a climatic death. In *J. Edgar*, however, these conventions are reconfigured and contained within a complex modernist narrative structure informed by multiple flashbacks and shifting points of view. This narrative configuration constitutes the film's salient formal characteristic. Although these flashbacks differ from Deleuze's reading of the "sheets of time" in the temporal construction of *Citizen Kane*, a film with strong generic and structural similarities to *J. Edgar*, they do project a modernist complexity of shifting and dissolving perspectives, which creates a labyrinth of recollections that the viewer must navigate.

Again, as Custen recognized, the traditional Hollywood biopic typically begins *in medias res* with an extended flashback narrated by the protagonist. *J. Edgar* begins in precisely this manner, but unlike the normative function of the flashback, which is to establish the subject's claim to his own narrative, in this case the flashback arises out of a need for self-justification in the face of a crumbling public perception. In the first scene of the film, Hoover (Leonardo DiCaprio) is confronted by sharply worded criticism of his surveillance activities, especially his current campaign to discredit Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In response, as a means to justify not simply his current strategies but his entire career, Hoover brings in a typist to take down his own version of the past. Intending to shape that narrative as a Manichean struggle, he tells Agent Smith (Ed Westwick) that his story will "re-clarify the difference between villain and hero." The suspicion that what follows is fabricated is fulfilled when Smith asks Hoover if this characterization of himself is accurate. The director responds, "It's important that we give our protagonist a bit of mystery." The credibility of the film itself, insofar as it is narrated by Hoover, is thus immediately thrown into doubt, and the audience finds itself dealing with an unreliable first person narrator. In order to understand Hoover, especially the relationship between his public achievements and personal proclivities, the viewer must unpack the narrative that follows.

The complexities of narration, however, go beyond the issues inherent in a first person narration. At times, we sense that Hoover's dictation to a series of agents has been replaced by an omniscient narrator. There are other moments that only Hoover could have experienced, but they are not part of the dictated narrative. And, finally, on at least one occasion, there is a flashback within a flashback, a personal memory in the context of the larger narrative, a memory within a memory. Consider another example: in the midst of dictating the details of his arrest of the

terrorist who had planted the bomb in front of Attorney General Palmer's (Geoff Pierson) house, Hoover hesitates and has a slightly troubled look on his face as he privately remembers his men severely beating a communist suspect. A moment of self-doubt, even regret, has forced its way into his official recollection. It is not simply a complex figure that begins to emerge but the understanding that the "present tense" of human identity is informed by gaps and fissures, by conflicting and shifting points of view, and by the conflation of public and private representations of self. What emerges is a sophisticated modernist understanding of self as a set of inconsistent and contradictory perceptions, some hidden and others open, unfolding over time.

The most destabilizing characteristic of the narrative occurs near the end of the film. Clyde Tolson (Armie Hammer), the assistant director of the Bureau and Hoover's longtime companion, reveals that significant portions of the preceding two hours of narrative are quite simply false. Although the audience may have suspected this, it now becomes an overt assertion. In their final scene together, Tolson bitterly asserts that, in his public representation of events, Hoover "lied and kept all the glory . . . you made things up to sell comic books." Earlier in the film Hoover portrayed himself as the hero of the Lindbergh kidnaping case; we actually see Hoover with gun drawn make the arrest of Hauptmann. But now Tolson declares, "You didn't arrest Hauptmann. Agent Sisk did. You weren't even at the scene." The viewer is forced to recognize something of the character of Hoover, but must also reevaluate the film itself. The self-incriminating structure of the narrative demands that multiple viewings are essential for understanding the film's complex representation of Hoover.

The purpose, or rather the effect of this radical undermining of the audience's experience is conveyed in the moments following Tolson's accusations. Hoover retaliates by shouting, "I never should have hired you." But he almost immediately softens and turns against his own earlier narrative. He recalls the scene from earlier in the film where he had first interviewed Tolson for a position in the Bureau. He asks Tolson if he remembers why he had been sweating and Tolson responds that he thought Hoover had been exercising. Indeed, in the version that the audience has seen, this was precisely the case: Hoover was doing pushups immediately prior to Tolson's arrival. But now, in the present time of the film, Hoover confesses, "I realized at that moment I needed you . . . that's why I broke out in a sweat, not because I was exercising." The audience is required to return to that earlier scene (either in its memory or through a second viewing of the film) and reassess its interpretation, reassess how Hoover has told it and what that telling

might reveal. Indeed, Hoover is exercising and, indeed, he is sweating when Tolson is ushered into his office. But in a very subtle way conveyed primarily through DiCaprio's slightly off-balance physical gestures, traces of Hoover's uneasiness seem to lie just beneath the surface. The writer and director seem to recognize the complex ways in which individuals create their identities through the elusiveness of memory. This scene concludes in a powerfully moving manner when Hoover raises himself out of his chair and kisses Tolson on the forehead, and Tolson responds, "Thank you, Edgar." Private memories of that moment break down and become a shared memory.

The audience of *J. Edgar* is lulled into a kind of passivity—or rather that passivity is exposed at the conclusion of the film. The cinematic narrative does not challenge and initially confuse the audience in the manner that modernist conventions often do. For example, on the first page of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, narration shifts from an objective third person to an unreliable third person to interior monologue, with radical shifts in space and time. Woolf places great demands on the reader, who must necessarily reread in order to navigate a complex linguistic surface. In the case of film in general and *J. Edgar* in particular, the audience is confronted with a narrative machine, a picture in motion that does not wait for the audience to catch up. This narrative strategy is not intended merely to expose Hoover's self-deceptive attempts to rewrite his public record. Rather, it represents the fluidity of human identity, shaped and reshaped across time by the elusive capriciousness of memory and the shifting dialectic between public and private contexts. But perhaps most importantly, this narrative technique undermines the desire to judge Hoover's life. In large part because of Hoover's own relentless and hypocritical need to judge the good and evil in the lives of others, his own life has come to be morally judged. The series of books that attempt to expose Hoover as a perverted keeper of secrets attest to this. The sophisticated narrative technique of *J. Edgar*, however, precludes the possibility of easy and quick judgment.

Charisma and Bureaucracy

In a scene crucial for understanding the sociopolitical issues that inform the film, the director of the F.B.I. has come to the office of the attorney general to receive permission to wiretap the hotel room of Martin Luther King. In order to force Robert Kennedy (Jeffery Donovan) to grant approval, Hoover has brought with him tape recordings of an illicit sexual encounter of the attorney general's brother. Hoover's obsessive need to discredit King circulates throughout the film. In this scene, however, the

director and writer are not content, as many biographers have been, to revel in the corruption of Hoover or the philandering of President Kennedy. A range of political and social issues envelop Kennedy and Hoover: a history of institutional rivalry, the emergence of the looser sexual mores of the sixties, Cold War paranoia, class resentment, generational mistrust, the hypocrisies of powerful men, the personal risks those men are willing to take, the pathologies of repression and promiscuity, and the concurrent fear and need for government surveillance. In a broad and far-reaching sense, the scene captures the dynamic interplay between two criteria of power: the charismatic and the bureaucratic. Kennedy has the aura of the charismatic leader whose physical characteristics and elite social standing mark him out as one born to lead. Hoover is the appointed bureaucrat whose power is rational and technological. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Max Weber trenchantly argued that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the institutional power of the bureaucrat was supplanting the charismatic leader's reliance on mass emotional appeal. Weber's observations very much speak to Hoover and the institution he built: "Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. This is the feature of it which makes it specifically rational. This consists on the one hand in technical knowledge which, by itself, is sufficient to ensure it a position of extraordinary power. But in addition to this, bureaucratic organizations, or the holders of power who make use of them, have the tendency to increase their power still further by the knowledge growing out of experience in the service. For they acquire through the conduct of office a special knowledge of facts and have available a store of documentary material peculiar to themselves. While not peculiar to bureaucratic organizations, the concept of 'official secrets' is certainly typical of them . . . it is the product of the striving for power" (Weber 1947, 339). Indeed, it is precisely "official secrets" in which Hoover traffics and which he intends to use against the charismatic Kennedy brothers.

The confrontation, however, is complicated by Hoover's ongoing need to generate his own public charisma and his resentment that the younger newcomer possesses and uses it. The relationship between Hoover and the office of the attorney general has been a critical one from the very beginning of his career. Hoover serves at the discretion of the attorney general and is hence institutionally dependent. But Hoover's relationship to Palmer, the attorney general who had first appointed him, was a personal one. Palmer had been his mentor, an authority figure who validated his mission. Before going to Kennedy's office, Hoover is reminded of the meeting by Tolson, whose voice interrupts Hoover's recollection of the events that led to Attorney General Palmer's dismissal in

the wake of the notorious raids on communists in 1919. In this memory, as Palmer leaves his office for the last time, he turns and makes eye contact with Hoover, as if to say that I am passing along to you the mission of eradicating the communist threat in America. The irony of Hoover's relationship to the charismatic Kennedy is that, by the very nature of his position, Hoover himself is the victim of bureaucracy. He is an appointed official whose power rests in a hierarchy of relationships. Yet the basis of power for the charismatic Kennedy is, in this case, a bureaucratic one, the office of the attorney general—hence the importance to Hoover of his relationship to Palmer, which was based on passion for a common cause. After Tolson's interruption, Hoover recollects his initial meeting with Palmer's replacement. The new attorney general raises disturbing questions concerning his fitness, asserts there is a "bad odor" in the office, that Hoover has no social life, and that he seems obsessed with newfangled technologies of detection. He even infantilizes Hoover by confronting him with his embarrassing nickname, "Speed." Nevertheless, Hoover manages to be promoted to director and acquires the power to reshape the Bureau along new lines. In the absence of a relationship based on mission, the powerless bureaucratic subordinate will create his own bureaucracy, his own institution, developed by the technological acquisition of information. But, at the same time, Hoover would remain forever under the authority of the attorney general. To counter this dependency, Hoover relentlessly attempted, throughout his career, to create his own celebrity status. He became obsessed with fashionable appearances, dined with movie stars, attended the film premiere of *G Men* (1935), and promoted comic books celebrating his exploits. Although longing for charisma, Hoover ultimately relied upon the authority of information and the power of secrets, as well as his ability to create and operate the technologies of a complex centralized bureaucracy.

This set of relationships and perceptions informs the scene in Kennedy's office. The Harvard-educated, privileged, promiscuous, and charismatic denizen of Camelot and The New Frontier meets the clever, self-made, portly, anticommunist bureaucrat. The scene opens with Hoover apparently distracted by the ornate fireplace in Kennedy's office. He asks if it's new and then, tellingly, if it is ever used, betraying his own interest in its ornamental value, its aura of style and class. In a later scene in the film, workmen are busy installing what appears to be an identical fireplace in Hoover's office. His rivalry with Kennedy is coupled with envy, resentment, and need. He seems petty, no match for the aristocratic Kennedy, who gives such matters hardly a second thought. Hoover comes seeking permission to use wiretaps, but he also comes, as I pointed out earlier, armed with the transcripts of his recordings of

one of the president's sexual encounters. He enters as the charismatic moral crusader but leaves as the amoral bureaucrat. Kennedy dismisses Hoover, tells him to leave the transcripts of the president's sexual tryst on his desk. The director, however, has the final words. As he slips out of the office, he tells Kennedy, in a powerfully ironic tone, "I have a copy of my own in safe-keeping."

Post 9/11

Although the film charts the life and career of the founder of the F.B.I. from the Red Scare of the 1920s to the racial and political upheavals of the 1960s, *J. Edgar* cannot escape its own contemporary context. The classic Hollywood biopic typically has as its focus a figure who was responsible for shaping some aspect of the modern world, ranging from Alexander Graham Bell and Louis Pasteur to the fictionalized media mogul Charles Foster Kane (Bingham 2010, 50–71). Without question, Hoover falls into this category. Modern techniques of surveillance, forensic science, and the collection of personal data housed in a centralized crime bureau inform modern American culture. There is virtually no contemporary crime drama that does not reflect methods of detection and arrest that Hoover championed. The film was released, however, in a context in which these innovations had come under scrutiny. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the ensuing Patriot Act created a climate in which surveillance was taken to a new level, a level many saw as necessary and many others felt excessive and invasive. With the release of information by Edward Snowden, these issues have become even more germane. In short, the characterization in the film of the Red Scare that followed World War I and Hoover's response to it comment indirectly on the measures taken to prevent terrorist attacks in the aftermath of 9/11 (Theoharis 2011).

Although he had received a law degree before the 1919 Palmer bombing, Hoover is portrayed in *J. Edgar* as a young novice who arrives almost as a spectator to the destruction of Palmer's residence. Dismounting his bicycle, Hoover surveys the detritus from the bombing scattered on the street and begins to gather clues about the identities of the terrorists: the evidence he discovers will, indeed, prove decisive. The filmmakers here are emphasizing both Hoover's marginalization—he holds an insignificant position in the Justice Department—and his pioneering efforts to establish modern methods of forensic science. This reflects a standard convention of the biopic: the characterization of the subject as an innovative and often misunderstood pioneer in a science or technology that will change, in this case, social and governmental institutions.

The 1919 bombing is represented in the film as an act of social terrorism that is intended to undermine domestic security. It is Palmer's residence and family that are attacked, not his office. The attorney general and his wife are thrown to the floor and, in a state of panic, rush to their daughter's bedroom to see if she has been hurt. As he heads for the front door to confront those who have attacked his family, Palmer seizes a piece of wood from the damaged bannister to use as a club. His weapon is literally a piece of his home, of his domestic world. His response is visceral, paternally protective of his private life, but, interestingly, not necessarily of the public sphere, for which, as the Attorney General of the United States, he is responsible. Moreover, the bombing of Palmer's house is part of a series of coordinated terrorist acts: bombs were exploded in eight major cities of the United States. Much like the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, these events were symbolic attacks intended to create fear and paranoia. This incident shapes Hoover's perception of the ongoing communist threat for the next half-century: "That night my eyes were opened." Palmer himself makes the dire prediction that "This may be the end of days." Much, therefore, is expressed in this opening extended set-piece: the terrorist threat of communism, the significance of forensic science, and the role of Palmer in Hoover's life. Moreover, for the movie audience, it speaks also to the terrorist acts of 2001, indelibly written into the public consciousness of 2011.

These events, as I pointed out earlier, are at least initially narrated by Hoover himself. It is early in the 1960s and Hoover has decided to dictate his version of his involvement in the Red Scare(s). He intends to articulate his "side of the story." Moreover, Hoover's recollection of the events is told in response to pressure on the Bureau from its increasingly negative reputation in the context of the civil rights movement. Hoover intends to set the historical record straight in order to justify the present. He declares, "It is critical that we re-clarify the difference between villain and hero." The director of the F.B.I. is, in short, an unreliable first person narrator with a personal and political agenda. Can the audience trust what it witnesses at this formative moment in Hoover's life? To complicate matters, Hoover's voiceover narration shortly disappears, and the audience is lulled into forgetting that the narrative is from Hoover's point of view. This reflects the complex and often ambiguous quality of memory and narrative time in the film. The lines separating dictated defense, silent recollection, and objective portrayal are blurred. With the episode completed, the film returns to present time. Agent Smith prepares to leave the office, and Hoover tells him to leave the dictated pages behind, by which act the audience is reminded of Hoover's need to control the perception of his leadership of the Bureau, as well as the

precarious status of his narrative. In terms of the connections of the film to 9/11 and the steps taken by the federal government to combat terrorism in the twenty-first century, *J. Edgar* neither endorses nor condemns measures such as the Patriot Act. It offers instead a cautionary tale. The Manichean understanding of the forces at work in the world adopted by the Bush/Cheney administration, publicly expressed in statements such as “bring it on” and in the stated fears of nuclear attacks perpetrated against the United States, are echoed in Hoover’s obsession with communism and his willingness to shape a narrative to validate it. On the other hand, by 2011, when the film was released, the techniques of electronic surveillance Hoover championed were considered to have played a major role in preventing, over the ensuing decade, a second terrorist attack on American soil.

Rosebud

While avoiding sensationalism, the film does not shy away from the issue of Hoover’s sexual orientation and his relationship with his longtime companion Clyde Tolson. Indirect and at times direct references are made to Hoover’s sex life: his awkwardness with Helen Gandy (Naomi Watts); the report that Tolson has “no particular interest in women”; his apparent dread of dancing with women; his mother’s (Judi Dench) admonition that he not be a “daffodil”; an erotic physical confrontation between Hoover and Tolson; and a scene of cross-dressing. The most significant of these occurs at the end of the film. When Tolson learns that Hoover has been found dead in the bedroom of his house, he immediately leaves and arrives before anyone else. He does this not, as Helen Gandy will do in Hoover’s office, to destroy secrets files or to cover up other incriminating evidence. He clearly comes out of a sense of profound loss. He touchingly covers Hoover’s naked body in an attempt to bring a measure of modesty to the now utterly vulnerable director. Perhaps Tolson also recognizes the irony that this is the first and last time he will see Hoover’s naked body. And then, in a particularly telling moment, Tolson sits on Hoover’s bed and examines the one secret file that Hoover has kept in his bedroom.

When the camera focuses on its cover page, the audience recognizes that the file contains a letter written to Eleanor Roosevelt by her alleged lover, the letter that Hoover had used to neutralize FDR and that Hoover had read to Tolson some thirty-odd years earlier. At that time, the two had laughed over its contents: it seemed to bring about no self-reflection, no moment of self-recognition, no feeling of guilt and hypocrisy. But now it resonates differently. The secret revelations of others that Hoover

has used to exert power and control now serve to reveal Hoover's own inner world. The audience is left to assume that, in Hoover's final years, Roosevelt's secret relationship spoke to his own sexual orientation. The file was not kept in some secret nook of his office, but here in his own private space. When Tolson reads the same words that earlier in the film Hoover had derisively read to him, they now sound as if Tolson is directing the meaning of the words to Hoover himself and that he has finally and belatedly achieved the intimacy he desired but which Hoover denied him. It is a moving moment and reveals, I would argue, the meaning of the elegiac music that hovers throughout the film. It is as if the entire narrative has been moving toward this moment of loss, not simply Tolson's loss of Hoover, but Hoover's own lost chances for love and intimacy in his life. It is evocative of the "Rosebud" sled in the final shot of *Citizen Kane*, which ostensibly answers the mystery of Kane's final words. But, as Deleuze points out, it is an empty revelation: "When Rosebud becomes embodied . . . in an image it is strictly for nobody, in the hearth where the discarded sled burns. Not only could Rosebud have been anything; in so far as it is something, it goes down into an image which burns independently, is totally pointless and of interest to no one" (Deleuze 1989, 111) The "Rosebud" in *J. Edgar*, however, the file on Eleanor Roosevelt, does not emerge into pointless absence. Tolson bears witness to its significance.

My assertion that this final moment of intimacy is unique in the film is not, in fact, entirely correct. Any discussion of the filmmaker's approach to Hoover's sexual orientation must take account of an earlier dramatic encounter, an episode informed, however, by the intimacy of cruelty and acknowledged repression. It takes place on one of the many vacations that Hoover and Tolson took together to racetracks in Florida. Hoover and Tolson are seated in the director's hotel room, casually dressed in pajamas and robes. The room is filled with a sense of anticipated physical and emotional intimacy. They are jokingly making fun of show business personalities when Hoover in a friendly not romantic tone says, "I care so very much for you, Clyde." Tolson naturally and seamlessly responds, "And I love you." But Hoover then cruelly announces that it is time for him to marry, that he has chosen Dorothy Lamour, and that, yes, it has already been physical. Tolson snaps and the pair violently struggle until Tolson suddenly kisses Hoover on the mouth. Hoover is seemingly repulsed, but, after Tolson leaves, when it is too late, he mutters, "Love you, Clyde." The violence of repressed passions is punctuated by a failure of communion.

The sense of elegiac loss that informs both of these episodes also informs the one cross-dressing scene in the film. Shortly after the death

of his mother, Hoover enters her bedroom and puts on one of her dresses. There is no suggestion of erotic arousal, no Dionysian boundary crossing, none of the blatant exhibitionism of which Hoover is accused in Summers's biography. It is instead an utterly private moment of intense grieving over the loss of a loved one. Hoover acts out a complex gesture of retrieval, a merging of mother and son in the mother's garment that finally collapses in anger as he rips his mother's beads from around his neck, an anger not generated out of shame but over the visceral finality of death. Throughout the scene the recurring elegiac music plays, linking it to earlier and later moments of loss and regret.

Where does this leave the audience with respect to Hoover's sexual orientation and the alleged perverse acts that have become part of the public consciousness? The film portrays Hoover's sexuality as something deeply repressed and suspicious, not only from the perspective of society at large but also from Hoover's own. In pre-Stonewall America, especially within the context of public office, there is no space available for a gay man to be himself. The film seems deeply aware of and ultimately sympathetic to this. Hoover's sexual orientation precludes him from intimacy with anyone other than his mother and that too is compromised by her preference, as she tells him, for a dead son rather than a "daffodil." Hoover's own recognition of his personal failure is expressed near the end of the film when he asks Helen Gundy, "Do I kill everything that I love?" The regret he feels is not that he is gay but that he was never free to be gay.

Signature

The title of this film biography is cleverly represented on posters and in the opening credits as Hoover's signature of his first initial and middle name, J. Edgar. The audience is teased with the possibility that identity is inscribed in handwriting. In a film that is concerned with forensic science and, in one case, handwriting itself, it would be difficult for the viewer not to recognize the provocative tactic employed here. As I pointed out earlier, Eastwood understood Hoover as a man of "mystery." Hoover's signature sits at the edge of explication, raising expectations of a solution to that mystery as it concurrently enshrouds identity in the elusive curvatures of letters. The filmmakers provoke us to judge Hoover, to use his own methods of judgment against him. What that signature does reveal, however, is that Hoover's public identity was a practiced one. He is known by several names in the film: Hoover, John, Edgar, Director, and the pejorative Speed. In a telling scene, when he is being measured for a new suit, he is confused with another Hoover, whose

credit is suspect. Just as he is choosing, with the assistance of Tolson, a new wardrobe, he now chooses a new name and signs “J. Edgar” on the department store’s credit application. He leaves with a new suit and a new persona. Whatever lies beneath the surface of that signature, whatever “Rosebud” might lurk to demystify Hoover, the filmmakers have preferred to portray the elusive complexities of a life, imperfectly shaped, as all lives are, by family romance, psychological traits, political ideologies, social and economic forces, and contingent circumstances.

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ARTISTS AND WRITERS

Nationalizing Abject American Artists

Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and
Jean-Michel Basquiat

JULIE CODELL

ACROSS ALL TYPES OF ARTIST BIOPICS—whether Hollywood or independent or European art films—artists are represented as abject figures. Their abjection takes many forms: extreme poverty, sexual licentiousness, drinking, drugs, and antisocial behavior. These films imply a link between abjection and creativity that generates a conflict between artistic creativity identified with unrestrained behavior and the art world of dealers, critics, and exhibitions defined by economic success and social restraint. Unable to fit into the social order of their own art world, artists are even less likely to be portrayed as representatives of national character. In the cases of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Lee Krasner (1908–1984) in *Pollock* (2000, dir. Ed Harris, who also played Pollock) and Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) in *Basquiat* (1996, dir. artist Julian Schnabel), I argue that Pollock’s and Basquiat’s biopic representations, among the most abject in films, are obstacles to national identity that are partly overcome for Pollock but not for Basquiat (Jeffrey Wright). I consider the character of Lee Krasner (Marcia Gay Harden) in *Pollock* in the context of gendered national identity and the possibilities of artist socialization. In films, artists’ contributions to national identity appear possible only at the psychological expense of the artists themselves, who

are often sacrificed to their society, which, in turn, appropriates their art as a transcendent national achievement.

These two films address different moments in American cultural hegemony, differences that affect relationships between artist and nation. *Pollock*, set in a time when America claimed cultural hegemony to match its military hegemony and world leadership after World War II, is filmed in a realist mode—with historical *mise-en-scène* and chronological sequencing fitting the 1950s. *Basquiat* plays with time and consciousness in a postmodern mode fit for the 1980s. Sounds from one scene are overlaid on a subsequent scene; non-diegetic (“background”) music comments directly on the plot or foreshadows events through lyrics on death, suicide, fame, or drugs. The art world of the 1950s was becoming American, while that of the 1980s was becoming international and intensely speculative, making the idea of a “nation” seem anachronistic in a global market whose transactions required borderlessness (Pease 1997, 2). Basquiat’s many international exhibitions exemplify a very different art world than that of 1940s New York, still emerging from a regional system of exhibitions. By the 1980s, the U.S. postwar cultural anxieties of *Pollock* were gone. These films recognize artists’ historical circumstances: war and postwar periods in *Pollock*, changing global economics and race consciousness in *Basquiat*.

Themes of Artist Biopics

From their first biographical appearance in Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (1550), artists’ biographies have mythologized creativity and sensationalized their life stories. But, unlike Vasari’s celebration of even eccentric Renaissance artists, biopics’ representations of artists as unrestrained and antisocial do not suture them to an imagined national community. On the one hand, artistic creativity narcissistically looks inward for creative power; on the other hand, it threatens public bourgeois social relations in the art world of patrons, critics, and dealers. Artists’ depictions as deviants deny them the cultural iconicity with which to represent the nation. Furthermore, most artists are inspired by artists from any time and any place (Picasso inspired both Pollock and Basquiat), not just from one national culture, further diluting their identification with any nation.

National or community identity is foregrounded in films about statesmen, philanthropists, scientists, teachers working in ghettos, and social reformers—all clearly contributing to the public good (Custen 1992, 8–16). But artists’ contributions are problematic—their art does not improve others’ lives and contributes only in retrospect, and not for their usually philistine contemporaries. In artist biopics, then, heroics are

replaced by “psychological, sexual, and pharmacological examinations of subjects’ lives (sometimes to the point of sensationalism)” (Plagens 2006, 118). Biopic artists are always oversexed, either sadistic (Caravaggio, Bacon, Picasso) or masochistic (Van Gogh, Claudel, Gentileschi, Toulouse-Lautrec, Carrington) or both (Kahlo, Michelangelo), whether homosexual (Caravaggio, Francis Bacon) or heterosexual. Their rampant sexuality fuels their creativity; in biopics women artists are punished for their sexual freedom, men celebrated for it as inextricably bound to their genius. Only rarely does abject behavior not stigmatize the artist in cases in which the successful artist possesses agency and can navigate both society and the art world, as in *Caravaggio* and *Love is the Devil*, in which artists’ abject behaviors are intentional and do not result in social ostracism (Codell 2013).

Film’s sensationalist psychobiographical lens is deployed to reveal the “mysteries” of creativity, through what I call “inspiration spectacle,” in which artists’ fantasies or dreams are lavishly recreated as sources of inspiration, often in *tableaux vivants*, a common film device that promises to reveal the primal scene of creation. But, after all, the social demands of sober public or critical reception, not diligence, measures an artist’s success, and these conflict with creative fantasies. Many of these films start in medias res at mid-career and use flashbacks to recall artists’ beginnings, a common biopic device (Custen 1992, 149–52). Males appear as fully mature artists, while women artists are represented as students mentored by male artists: *Camille Claudel* (1988, Bruno Nuytten), Frida Kahlo (*Frida*, 2002, Julie Taymor), Artemisia Gentileschi (*Artemisia*, 1997, Agnès Merlet), and Françoise Gilot (*Surviving Picasso*, 1996, James Ivory). Artists’ trial-and-error sketches and hours in the studio are more common in women’s biopics than in male biopics, even when the process of painting is enacted, because male artists quickly produce well-known masterpieces with which the audience is familiar, unlike most women artists, whose works and names are unfamiliar to film audiences, Kahlo being the one exception.

Another theme of these films is that artists are estranged, isolated, and in social conflict with everyone—family, lovers, other artists, the art world, and friends—as part of the misunderstood genius myth. Their estrangement is the obverse of their extreme individuality, which marks their work as unique and authentic, while also fueling public hostility and instigating their downfall. In the melodrama deployed by this estrangement trope, artists appear hysterical, demanding, moody, and manic, an “aesthetic of victimization” usually associated with women’s biopics (Bingham 2010, 350). Despite excessive performances of masculinity (anger, throwing money around, sexual licentiousness), Pollock and

Basquiat are feminized by melodrama, which infantilizes them as without agency to determine their career trajectories or pursue their aims and as willing victims of their abject masochism.

This estranged, antisocial trope endorses an ideology of *sui generis* individualism as a source and measure of creativity. Individualism is a market value, an assurance that their works embody the creative genius we pay for when we buy art. Yet artists for centuries have worked together, shared studios, painted on each other's works, lived and socialized together, and affected each other's ideas and art production. In biopics, we do not see them collaborating in these centuries-old ways because the modern art market feeds on the fetish of originality. The historical time of the film narrative, during which an artist's work is usually scorned, is set against the time of the audience, who knows the work's "true" value. Biopics hail the audience as people who recognize genius. For the audience, the eventual commodification of artists' "masterpieces," their market value, justifies biopics about them and offsets their deviance.

Other themes consistent across these films problematize connections between artists and nations. Artist biopics are essentially historical dramas within art-historical, transnational categories of periodization or style—e.g., the Renaissance or Impressionism—that identify the artist's community. Alexander Korda's 1936 *mise-en-scène* reconstruction of Rembrandt's world of windmills, ice skating, and village life does not invoke nationalism as a political movement. Political commentary is often tied to internationalism. Francisco Goya (*Goya in Bordeaux*, 1999, Carlos Saura) attacks Spain in his art while living in a Spanish exile community in France. Frida Kahlo's use of Mexican folk elements is diluted through her cosmopolitan affinities with European surrealism and her left-wing internationalist politics. Dora Carrington's world (*Carrington*, 1995; Christopher Hampton) combines the English countryside that inspires her with the cosmopolitanism of her Bloomsbury circle. Other biopics recreate places as transnational, rather than national, sites, for example, London (Francis Bacon in *Love is the Devil*, 1998, John Maybury) or Paris (Claudel) or Rome (Gentileschi; *Caravaggio*, 1986, Derek Jarman). Artists' allegiances to historical periods and art movements rather than nations also mark Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1965, Carol Reed), Toulouse-Lautrec (*Moulin Rouge*, 1952, John Huston), Picasso, and Van Gogh (*Lust for Life*, 1956, Vincente Minelli; *Vincent and Theo*, 1990, Robert Altman).

Interestingly, documentaries, usually freer from restraints of narrative conventions and tropes, treat artist subjects very differently, often coolly, even academically. The documentary *Francis Bacon* (1988; David Hinton) presents a normalized, subdued artist, unlike the sadistic, abu-

sive, and sexually rampant artist represented in the Maybury biopic. Documentaries focus on art production; individual works are shown up close, and artists discuss their works in reflective commentary in which their lives are secondary and their sexual behavior irrelevant (e.g., *State of the Art* [Warhol and Basquiat, 1986, Illuminations Media]; *The Mystery of Picasso* [Henri-George Clouzot, 1956], *Alice Neel* [Andrew Neel, 2007]). But these, too, treat art discourse as an international exchange of ideas, influences, aesthetics, and artistic identities.

Abject Artists

Generally, biopics depict protagonists as outside social norms and driven by a calling or vocation: “The studio-era biopic sides with the subject, who must prove to the world that he (and it usually is a he) is right . . . and that the stances of inertia, convention, and the status quo are wrong” (Bingham 2010, 36). However, in *artist* biopics, the subject is not sutured with the audience because artists are abject. Pollock and Basquiat are among the most abject biopic artists—even Van Gogh has a roof over his head in films, while Michelangelo, Kahlo, Carrington, Claudel, Rembrandt, Gentileschi, Vermeer (*The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, 2003; Peter Webber), and Picasso have families, middle-class lifestyles, and social power. Caravaggio, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Bacon live in squalor out of choice, not loss of agency.

In the opening of *Basquiat*, critic Rene Ricard’s voiceover asserts that the template of Van Gogh’s abjection shaped all artists’ identities for themselves and for the public (G. Pollock 1980). The abject, according to philosopher Julia Kristeva, “disturbs identity, system, order,” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1982, 4), being “the place where meaning collapses” (*ibid.*, 2). Abjection is outside language, preserving instead “what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body [the mother’s],” a separation that becomes a “primal repression” (*ibid.*, 10). The abject, outside the social order, distinguishes human from animal and is a precondition for the narcissism of the mirror stage (Felluga 2003). Thus, while primal, abjection is also the first of various developmental stages that echo infants’ paradigmatic separation from their mothers.

The abject is associated with the intrusion of the Real, those natural phenomena so traumatic and disgusting (blood, pus, bad smells, etc.) that they are inexpressible in language and thus associated with a pre-language state. Pollock and Basquiat live in squalor and mess. In both films the artist urinates—Pollock in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace and Basquiat

in Albert Milo's hallway (Milo is a fictional proxy for director Schnabel). Pollock, habitually covered with paint or mud, falls into drunken stupors that leave him asleep in the streets. He appears on the toilet. Guggenheim calls him a "trapped animal." The often-drugged Basquiat walks down the street wearing pajamas and, by hostilely confronting powerful dealers or suddenly walking off the job, refuses to meet the social demands of the art world. Basquiat is homeless and lives in a cardboard box in the city, his "iconography of negligence" (Adams 1996, 39), despite having a middle-class family. Even their paintings are abject—Pollock's slash art and Basquiat's illegal graffiti.

These artists appear in an almost pre-language state: both speak haltingly and say little. Basquiat's thoughts appear as visual fantasies, memories, flashbacks, and drug-induced hallucinations. Warhol tells Basquiat that he is a "natural." Pollock intuitively communicates with the natural world, bringing home a lost dog and feeding a raven by hand. Krasner tells Pollock that he can only abstract from nature; he replies, "I am nature." She talks and paints; he just paints. Pollock's family is nonverbal, too. In his brother's apartment, they eat in silence.

Their art is like jazz, the mode and metaphor for these artists' creativity in their biopics. Pollock listens to big bands and Billie Holiday; jazz improvisation anticipates his later improvisational paintings. The film's composer was Jeff Beals (b. 1963), a jazz instrumentalist who incorporated Asian music (Bali, India). When Pollock paints, frenetic interlocking Balinese rhythms express his speed, instinctiveness, and improvisational style. The music of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker runs throughout *Basquiat*. An interviewer asks Basquiat where he gets his images; Basquiat answers, "Would you ask Miles where he gets that note from?" These artists' paintings appear as American as jazz, improvisational, spontaneous, highly individual, while their creators live on the margins of society. Jazz musicians, too, are often abject figures because of poverty, addiction, or race.

For Kristeva, the first abject experience is the baby's violent ejection from its mother's body (Kristeva 1982, 13). Both artists have fraught relationships with their mothers—Pollock is happy to see his mother at his exhibitions, but she always says something that upsets him. Near the end of the film, he weeps while in a fetal position. Krasner becomes his mother substitute and their increasingly hostile relationship replays the birth trauma. Basquiat's mother is institutionalized, but she is his tie to art, having taken him to see *Guernica*. He visits her in a Catholic mental hospital; one night after hours he tries to enter the asylum to take her home. Unsuccessful, he rants outside the asylum.

Another abject subject is food:

Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. . . . All food is liable to defile. . . . [F]ood is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce. (Kristeva 1982, 75–76)

We see Pollock making a mess of his meals several times in the film. He angrily overturns tables at family gatherings. Basquiat pours syrup on the table and “fingerpaints in it” to get waitress Gina’s attention before the owner throws him out. Later, while confronting a racist clerk, he buys expensive food in an exclusive grocery store, including \$3,000 worth of caviar. Food raises issues of racism in scenes in which Basquiat’s blend of race, expensive taste, and wealth seems incoherent to whites. Both Pollock and Basquiat betray those who bring them sustenance, whether it’s food, love, or friendship.

For the normative/hegemonic non-artist biopic subject, biography is “an agent in the great chain of enterprise, another institutional channel through which the modern state can materially produce or reproduce the individual in this world” (Epstein 1987, 67). Artists’ biographical identities, intimately tied to abjection, only partly share this (re)production as they also test its limits—even bourgeois artists are sexually unrestrained (Rodin in *Claudiel*, Kahlo, Rembrandt, Carrington, Vermeer). Films punish abject artists for sexual freedom and unrestrained behavior that nonetheless constitute their often-masochistic creativity. Pollock and Basquiat, like filmic versions of Caravaggio, Bacon, Van Gogh, Picasso, seek to *épater les bourgeois* in order to resist reproduction by society or the state. But this prevents their suture with the audience, however satisfying their abjection may be to the audience’s voyeurism, and their behavior inevitably becomes self-destructive.

For Kristeva, art may purify the abject, but in biopics artists embrace the abject. Abjection sustains Pollock and Basquiat in their confrontations with the art world by permitting them to resist the socially strict world of galleries and patronage that despises them for refusing the socialization and stable identities this world demands. A rich client wants to own the artist *du jour* and complains about Basquiat’s use of green color until Basquiat suggests the client hire an interior decorator. Struggling to find a place in the art world without losing their identities, Pollock and Basquiat acknowledge the abjection that “simultaneously

beseches and pulverizes the subject . . . weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside.” The subject “finds the impossible within . . . the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject” (Kristeva 1982, 5).

In these films, marginalized abject artists, struggling to maintain their identities, have to inhabit a speculative open market, being adrift since the eighteenth century from earlier court or church patronage’s certainties of taste and remuneration. In the open market, artists must speculate on how to attract buyers and align their work with public ideals and taste expressed fitfully in the market’s unstable, capricious benefaction. The Victorian critic John Ruskin argued that to produce works for the nation, artists required the state’s and the public’s surveillance to provide the stability that protects artists from their own desires for upward mobility and wealth, or, Ruskin feared, artists would work for money rather than the nation (Codell 2003, 79–96; 2008, 33–37). Biopics likewise imply that artists cannot be trusted with the seductions of success, but also acknowledge that the market’s capriciousness, avarice, and unpredictability play a role in artists’ unstable identities and their resistance through abjection.

Is New York City America? Is the Art World?

To claim America’s cultural hegemony, the Museum of Modern Art and the U.S. government jointly exhibited the Abstract Expressionists around the world from 1948 to 1956 (Cockcroft 1985, 129). The need to stamp modernism as American, which the government’s painting tour hoped to do, is a theme in *Pollock*. At the opening of Guggenheim’s This Century Gallery, Oct. 16, 1942, Krasner remarks, “Not one American painter in the whole goddamn show.” The question of how to insert America into modernism is answered by Pollock’s work. Krasner comments on his ties to cubism, surrealism, automatism, linking Europe and America. After his one-artist show at Guggenheim’s gallery, he signs a painting; the signature in a close-up becomes a brand, signifying his success. Later, at Pollock’s show at the Betty Parson Gallery, De Kooning notes that “Jackson broke the ice,” because European patrons attend this show. Greenberg tells Pollock that *Life* magazine sponsored a roundtable on modern art, signaling America as “the center of civilization and what you’re doing is the most original and vigorous art in the country.”

New York plays a major role in the cultural identification of modernism and America. The art world capital since the end of World War II, New York is identified with modern American art: Abstract Expressionism (Pollock), Pop Art (Andy Warhol, a character [David Bowie] in

Basquiat), and postmodernism (Basquiat). In many films (e.g., Woody Allen's), New York's skyline, accompanied by jazz or Gershwin's music, signifies America with a specific set of traits: cosmopolitan, multiethnic, exciting, fast-moving, fast-talking, and modern, purposely the opposite of rural, small town, or "middle" America. Popular notions of New York, humorously described as the capital of no known country, can be negative: unfriendly, cynical, too worldly. In both films, wealthy patrons populate galleries and control art consumption, successful artists inhabit sumptuous apartments, and struggling artists inhabit coldwater Greenwich Village flats, all united in and by the city. But in *Basquiat* the view of New York is harsh and less celebratory; other than a few elegant gallery openings, the city consists of rundown, graffiti-covered, garbage-strewn neighborhoods and junk-filled apartments with drugged-out inhabitants. We see no soaring views of New York. Characters walk through places that look like war zones with barbed wire on fences and walls.

Furthermore, the New York art world in both biopics is ruthless, volatile, deceptive, and fickle. Powerful art critic Clement Greenberg pontificates, alternately praising and attacking Pollock. When he likes a painting, he tells Pollock to do ten of these—a crass, commercial suggestion. He goads Pollock by saying his color is not as good as Picasso's. Krasner controls and exploits this world, but Pollock succumbs to it and reacts in angry outbursts. In *Basquiat*, dealers and patrons are cutthroat and competitive. Critic Ricard says, "I know who to hype; I will make you a star." Basquiat's friend Benny (Benicio del Toro) says the artist "might be a flash in the pan, you can never tell." Basquiat happily enters this cutthroat art world: he sells a painting, dedicated to a friend, to a prominent collector instead, betrays his first dealer to move "up," participates in interviews and reads all his reviews, as does Pollock. These highly competitive artists monitor their reputations' rise and fall, as enmeshed in the art world as in their abjection.

But abject artists embarrass the socioeconomic order of the art world. Dealers reject Pollock because of his drunken violence; everyone drinks in the art world but they remain controlled, well-dressed, and sociable while undermining each other. Artists are raised to the highest levels of recognition, only to become victims of art world persecution "because they bear the signs of victims" (Girard 1986, 21). Their vulnerability, abjection, and uniqueness as ever-infantilized geniuses outside the social order—working-class (Pollock) or black (Basquiat)—mark them as people who, because of their differences, *should* be victimized for threatening social and economic orders. Pollock and Basquiat circulate in a global art market, but appear wastrels in money matters (a myth about artists despite many wealthy Renaissance artists, Impres-

sionists, and modernists), rejecting bourgeois thrift, future planning, and prudence.

But is the capitalist art world, propelled in both movies by greed, power, money, and hype, more or less representative of America than these artists? This fickle world is partly to blame for artists' anxieties. Yet this world also "saves" art by finding a public place in the nation for it and by reinscribing artists' works with heroic values in order to erase the abjection of these works' production and make them hygienic for consumption in markets and museums. Artist and art world are locked in a conflicted embrace.

Do Artists Work?

Art's value exists in a marginalist economics, measured by consumption and reception, not a labor economics measured by hours at work. An artwork's true value exists, oddly, only in hindsight when, woven into national culture (and posthumous biography), its "true" value is "correctly" assessed. In artist biopics, actual labor is downplayed in favor of Romantic genius, which suddenly springs from nowhere in a spectacle of painting in which artists appear to be simply visualizing masterpieces whole. The moment of creativity is fetishized as outside reason, process, and labor. Some films also have aftertexts describing the artist's later success, providing narrative closure by signaling the posthumous measure of artistic worth as the ultimate one.

How do the magical elements—artists creating on the spur of the moment without visible processes or training—comply with American notions of hard work, manly physical labor, and feminized art and culture? I think labor is a key issue, given that the audience's America, now stripped of its manufacturing identity, still has a manufacturing work ethic. Can artistic labor, unable to fit into nine-to-five work structures, be suitable for representing the labor of the nation? In WPA artists' programs (in which Pollock found early employment), supervisors who visited artists' studios unannounced did not always find artists working there. Artists countered that they wandered the streets for views and inspiration and to think about their work.

Watching artists do sketch after sketch until they get it "right" is prosaic, quotidian grunt work not popularly associated with artists. Although moviegoers are expected to enjoy watching montages of underdog teams practicing until they are good enough to win, artists spending hours in the studio, erasing the canvas and starting again, or going to museums for inspiration would certainly damp down a narrative dominated by their titillating sexual transgressions and abject lives. In filmic

codes, sexual transgressions are characteristic of artists, but tedious labor is not, so that the model in the studio is the most common shorthand version of artistic work in biopics.

Ed Harris studied painting in preparation for his role, and his film does engage the labor of painting, but as melodrama. After weeks of doing nothing on a commissioned mural, Pollock, after a thinking process conveyed through intense, silent close-ups of his eyes cut with close-ups of the blank white canvas, suddenly paints furiously as the music swells during the equally intense physicality of his painting accompanied by rhythmic, Aaron Coplandesque music. Large canvas, heroic scale, slashing gestures, freedom from convention and tradition—all become American ways of painting. Another function of artists' work in these films is to make a space for directors' identification (Hayward 1998, 5), like Harris's with Pollock, in which directors can claim an imagined national culture by shaping that culture through film (Felleman 2001, 27). Artists' genius becomes a proxy for biopic directors' gifts.

Essential to making art is finding sources of inspiration. Krasner asks Pollock about his mentors; he first says "nobody," then Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), a regionalist American painter, Carl Jung, and John Graham (1886–1961). Graham, a Russian-born modernist considered a father figure for the Abstract Expressionists, Pollock's cohorts, curated Pollock's first group show in NYC in 1942, which also exhibited Krasner and propels her in the film to visit Pollock's studio. These references indicate that Pollock knows painting's history and current ideas. But Pollock also eschews the mediation of knowledge: "If people would leave their stuff at home and look at the painting, it's like looking at a bed of flowers, you don't worry about what it means." Asked "How do you know when you're finished with a painting?" he replies, "How do you know when you're finished making love?" But during his *Life* interview Krasner, always trying to socialize Pollock, adds to his short list of influences (De Kooning and Kandinsky) the better-known El Greco, Goya, and Rembrandt in order to make him appear more canonic and palatable to the public.

The film's central moment is his "accidental" discovery of drip painting, what Krasner calls a "breakthrough," which becomes filmic fetish and spectacle (Hayward 1998, 9). First in a close-up, he drips paint, not entirely accidentally, and then in a *mise-en-abyme*, a cinematographer films him dripping painting, and photos of his dripping in a *Life* magazine spread appear (see Orton and Pollock 1983). The staged reenactments of his discovery, however, become inauthentic to him and provoke him to drunken anger.

Is dripped painting also abject, like bodily fluids? In a radio interview in the film, Pollock insists he has control: "I don't use the accident,

I deny the accident.” He argues that art has a purpose to express its age—airplanes, radios—and that his painting on the floor is “like Orientals, using a liquid flowing painting, brushes as sticks that do not touch canvas, but just above it.” Thus, drip painting, unlike his drinking, urinating, and violent fits, is not abject effluence but has a Chinese prehistory, represents its age, and is controlled and conscious, work with a purpose, an art history, and an epistemology.

The Melting Pot of Euro-American Modernism

New York’s art world is, like the city, a melting pot. Krasner is the daughter of Russian immigrants. Pollock’s cohorts—Dutch immigrant Willem De Kooning, Franz Josef Kline (son of an immigrant German father and English mother), and others—recite poetry by T. S. Eliot, a paradigm of American modernism who lived in England and claimed that his poetry would not have been as good if he had been born in the UK or stayed in America (Hall 1959, 25). Like many others (e.g., Ernest Hemingway, Henry James, James MacNeill Whistler, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H. D., John Singer Sargent, Richard Wright), Eliot needed to leave in order to become a voice of America. But after World War II, European painters such as De Kooning and Russian painter Arshile Gorky came to America and contributed to New York’s centrality in a global art market that embraced Italian-born New York dealer Anna Nosei, Warhol, son of Slovakian immigrants, and the Swiss dealer Bruno Bischoffberger, all of whom appear in *Basquiat*.

But despite this mix, Basquiat’s racial identity is problematic in this diverse Euro-American world in which he does not fully participate. bell hooks claims that Basquiat’s representation as a modern primitive, unself-reflexive, one-dimensional, and instinctual, is shaped by “a racially unenlightened white world” (hooks 1996), which leaves inexplicable why he lives in a cardboard box, rejects his accountant father, constantly sabotages himself, and repeatedly tries to enter the white art world, but has no black friends. Yet hooks disregards Basquiat’s frequent witty remarks and the intense visualizations—blue hallucinations of surfing in Hawaii, the most frequent of his fantasies, dreams, and hallucinations—which express his desires, memories, addiction, and ambition. Basquiat’s infantilization and failure to understand the reality of his situation—perhaps compounded by stereotyping him as the “happy darky on the art plantation” (hooks 1996)—induces nonetheless the trope of infantilization in artist biopics. Most biopic male artists lack self-reflection; being spontaneous geniuses they do not need history, a turning point, or change of

character; only women artists change and reflect on their more stifling situations in biopics.

Yet, Basquiat responds to and recognizes racism's expression and effects. He hails but cannot get a cab; white Gina gets one immediately. They go to a party and he touches an African sculpture near the door. In a drugged state he imagines painting a pile of tires white, turning black into white. His best friend Benny asks him why he is so nasty and uppity and Basquiat thinks he means "uppity nigger," a comment that offends Benny, who later saves Basquiat from an overdose. In the film, the gay Ricard says, "I may be white but I'm a nigger, you ask anybody," linking race and homosexuality. A nasty interviewer (Christopher Walken) asks Basquiat if he sees himself as a primal expressionist; Basquiat asks if he means primate or ape. This interviewer-provocateur asks if Basquiat sees himself as a painter or a black painter; Basquiat replies, "I use a lot of colors, not just black." Basquiat defines his art as Creole, combining Africa and Europe, like a French-speaking Haitian. "How do you respond to being called the pickaninny of the art world," the interviewer asks, quoting *Time* magazine. Basquiat reminds him that *Time* wrote, "the Eddie Murphy of the art world" (no better!). Then the interviewer asks about his family, his accountant father, and why he lives in a box in Tompkins Square Park (which in the 1980s was full of homeless people, crime, drug dealing, and heroin use, preceded by a one hundred-year history of labor and political protests). The interviewer, stereotyping Basquiat as from the ghetto, asks, "Do you feel you are being exploited or are you yourself exploiting the white image of the black artist from the ghetto?"

Basquiat borrows Warhol's credit card to buy \$3,000 worth of caviar. When he pays cash for the remaining items, he asks the clerk, who looks suspiciously at his \$100 bill, if he checks everyone's money, or "only mine." The clerk replies, "Only yours." Basquiat complains that the press description of his "working in Nosei's gallery basement" is racist; if he were white, they would call him an artist-in-residence. In a fancy restaurant, he pays the bill for a table of white businessmen he thinks are discussing him (they point to him), and asks, "What year is this?," expecting that by the 1980s racism would be eradicated. He is fully aware of the racism of the interviewer, the press, the store clerk, and the restaurant customers. However, in the film, racism is ascribed to people, not institutions, and thus skirts criticism of its institutionalization in America, as hooks recognizes (see hooks 1994, 25–37, on Basquiat and art critics).

According to Roberta Smith, "Basquiat's rich tapestry of subject matter ranges through the history and culture of the world, of America

and of black America, tying things together in fresh ways.” Yet this film, focused on Basquiat’s insouciant resistance to the white art world’s exclusivity and elitism, never explores the artistic expression of race or America that Smith describes. Such expression appears only in his reactions to racism, not in his art, leaving him disconnected from a rich, diverse African American culture that goes well beyond the film’s clichéd use of jazz as a symbol of this culture. We see Pollock’s coherence with American entrepreneurial values—free, spontaneous, inventive, and improvisational—within an emerging American modernism, but such coherence with broad cultural values is absent from Schnabel’s film. We hear of Basquiat’s worldwide exhibitions, but do not see them, and his posthumous reputation is ambiguous in the film, unlike Pollock’s.

Class also divides artists from wealthy, snobbish patrons and dealers. But Pollock and Basquiat have bourgeois desires, too. Pollock wants a church wedding, though he does not know which church, and children. He carries Krasner over the threshold. Basquiat dreams of a house in Hawaii and buys caviar and expensive wine in an exclusive restaurant. When Pollock’s family arrives from L.A., Pollock brags about his success, until a family member asks if Picasso is more important to him than his family. Pollock dreams that his brothers try to push him off a cliff. These artists have little or no social capital from their families, although both families attend openings. Yet Pollock’s mother at his opening says, “God is good,” hardly a typical NYC art world comment, but a sign of her cultural difference and rural Americanness. Basquiat’s mother loves art but has a mental breakdown. Alienation from their families is presented as one cause, however vague, of their abjection.

Abject Artist versus Great Art: The Artist Must Die

Both artists struggle to achieve success, and achieve it in their lifetimes in these films, unlike most artist biopics in which artists’ works in their own time are scorned (contemporaries are philistines), while out of history, “ahead of their time,” their works have increasing, even excessive, posthumous value. Abject artists are usually punished for their deviance with miserable lives, and their rise-and-fall trajectories constitute moral dramas and social commentary, but their deaths permit hegemonic values to be inscribed on their art, so that their works’ value redeems them. Genius is normalized after death, just as other unconventional types—saints, explorers, and adventurers—are similarly reinscribed (Custen 1992, 17), leaving connections between abject artists and their art mysteriously incompatible, yet necessary.

Biopics emphasize this gap in order to provide titillation through the abject subject while also punishing such a subject, all to confirm art's endurance against its creators' frailties. After death, artists' self-destructive perversions and unstable identities are erased, and their art, and sometimes they themselves, are reinscribed with acceptable hegemonic values, permitting their works to be placed in museums/mausoleums in their memory. Here Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea of becoming minoritarian is illuminating. To become minoritarian, as artists who embrace their abjection become, one must withdraw from majority culture to explore an unfixing, unstable subjectivity not tolerated by the majority (MacCormack 2004). In these biopics, artists' unstable subjectivity and abjection appear to enable their minoritarian creativity. Redeemed after death by revisionism, artists then can enter majority culture.

Bingham points out that "only after death can the great one's immortality and impact on the world really begin," and that "the affinity of the genre for the story of Christ seems unmistakable" (41). But neither Pollock nor Basquiat sacrifices himself willingly for the common good, and both are seduced by the money and fame they seek, eager to enter the capitalist art market scathingly portrayed in both films. Pollock and Basquiat do not paint outside this art world, but in it, and their fame comes in their lifetime, not posthumously. If they are Christlike, it is not as selfless sacrifices, but as abject scapegoats, targets of scorn, as Rene Girard identifies the paradigm of Christ (Girard 1986, 200–207).

Lee Krasner: Non-abject Artist

Traditional women's biopics engage "the formative narratives of feminism—the struggle for women's self-expression; the identification between women artists now and then—while filtering them through the politics of romance" (Vidal 2007, 77), the love story that generates women's tragic conflicts between love and work (Bingham 2010, 213–15). But Krasner's motives are less romantic and more heroic—to raise American art by salvaging Pollock. She wants a commitment, a marriage, before devoting her life to him, but no children—she mothers him already. After his death, a text epilogue tells us that Krasner's later works were painted in Jackson's studio, as if even after death he dominates her art.

Women artist biopics try to fit them into hegemonic male artists' life patterns of obsession with work and wayward sexual desires, but these are antithetical to ideologies of femininity, whether for sixteenth-century Gentileschi, nineteenth-century Claudel, or twentieth-century Kahlo, Krasner, Carrington, and Gilot. These biopics reflect on differences

between the narrative's historical period and the time of the film's making. This split permits the audience to mix melodrama, history, and contemporary gender politics to "do their own work of revision . . . textualized through the spectator's positioning" (Vidal 2007, 78). Yet, despite such overt politics, women's biopics underscore the inappropriate application of the unrestrained bohemian paradigm to women artists. Sexually promiscuous women suffer dire consequences in films—Claudel's insanity, Gentileschi's torture, and Carrington's suicide. Krasner and Gilot are not promiscuous, and survive relations with tumultuous male mentors/lovers.

But none of these women authors her works' meanings. When Guggenheim comes to Pollock's apartment, she mistakenly enters Krasner's studio and is furious: "These are signed LK . . . I didn't come to see LK's work!" Redirected into Pollock's studio, Guggenheim is entranced. Male artists' lives do not determine their works' value, which is assessed instead by some mystical a priori judgment outside the film. But, unlike aesthetic "certainties" in male biopics, which permit more tolerance for deviance given the promise of great work to come, women's biopics are never certain about how great they are. Without aesthetic certainty, women artists' "deviance"—doubled by being outside social restraint *and* outside femininity, and including their desire to be artists at all—is threatening because there is no certainty that great art will be the consequence of female deviance. Biopics punish women for making genius and gender ambiguous and unstable.

Female artists are minoritarian in two registers: as women they are always already marginalized outside the Lacanian Symbolic Order; choosing a second marginalization as artists, they are punished (Claudel institutionalized, Artemisia raped), or succumb to majoritarian domesticity (Krasner, Gilot). Griselda Pollock sees biopics' differencing negatively: a male artist's art gives us "access to the generic mystery of (masculine) genius," while in female artist biopics, "blurring life and art merely confirms the pathology of the feminine, saturated by her sex, of which she becomes emblem and symptom. Her biography, therefore, is always made to hinge about a powerfully sexual, male figure" (Pollock 2005, 193). In every woman artist's biopic, she pursues a male mentor with whom she then has an affair.

I would argue, however, for more ambiguity. The male mentor has a liberating function: to free women from restrictive social conventions and help them prioritize their ambition over social and familial confinement, for example, Claudel's mother versus Rodin; mentor Tassi versus father Orazio, who supports Gentileschi's ambitions but not her artistic or sexual autonomies. Yet, sex, while liberating women from social restraints and permitting them to *become* artists, ultimately forces them

to enter a professional discourse that denies them master status and makes them forever apprentices, amateurs, or artists' wives, never able to *be* artists. In the melodrama between art and romance, biopics permit women agency *and* visual pleasure in their *becoming*, but not in their *being* artists (MacCormack 2004). As artists, then, they can never mature and thus cannot represent the nation.

Unlike many women artists' biopics, Krasner is not portrayed as gorgeous and sexualized (Claudel, Gentileschi, Gilot). Like Kahlo, she has a powerful personality and determination to succeed. Her pursuit of Pollock is for the good of art, and she calls his self-destruction a tragedy, as in Greek or Shakespearean. But throughout the film she paints; Pollock often finds her painting when he wants something, and she drops her work to help him. He even promises to put a studio in the house for her, though clearly her work is secondary to his. Pollock calls her a "good woman artist," at which comment she looks reprovingly.

Krasner participates equally well in bohemia and the gallery world and epitomizes how an artist should behave. Her maternal role costs her fame but not her art, as she continues to paint. She embodies a work ethic, a confident aesthetic judgment, and a stable identity, unmoved by critics' comments or changing tastes. She brings the art world to Pollock (utterly incapable of controlling himself or his career), contacts dealers and critics, and disguises his drunkenness in their presence. His masculinity appears diluted, except in violent rages. Krasner initiates sex and even helps Pollock undress. In his sexual encounter with Guggenheim, he has problems with premature ejaculation. He is even rejected from military service as 4-F. Krasner initiates their relationship, shapes his life, and maintains his art world connections. Her reward is a long life and a successful career, but no biopic of her own.

"Fame! I'm gonna live forever"

Obviously, it is important to include art works in these films; art rationalizes the artist's existence and efforts, no matter how abject the artist. Works of art suggest the transcendence that justifies the biopic (Bingham 2010, 45–46). Both *Pollock* and *Basquiat* focus on artworks in studio scenes that sometimes embrace the abject—Warhol's piss art, Basquiat's graffiti or his painting over Warhol's work or on Gina's best dress, and Pollock's aggressive slashing. Gallery exhibitions "clean up" this abjection, as both films recognize disjunctions between making and exhibiting art, represented in the conflicts around the concept of fame. In the very first shot in *Pollock*, based on the over nine hundred-page book *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, a group

of well-dressed, well-to-do women clutch a *Life* magazine containing the article that made him a household name by suggesting Pollock was “the greatest living painter in the United States,” thus linking him and the American public. But Pollock appears stunned by his celebrity, his face utterly affectless, without expression.

Fame for abject artists creates confusion over their identities—Basquiat’s graffiti name is SAMO, but after becoming famous he cannot use it and is beaten up by graffiti artists who don’t recognize him. Milo tells him that Chinese calligraphers regularly changed names in order to start over. But everything becomes a negative metaphor for his fluid identities—the pushcart-tending “duck man” on the street, jazz, or the spelling of “syste m,” with the “m” separated from the rest of the word, a dysfunctional system. In *Basquiat*, artistic identity is unstable, borderless, and all-consuming. To be sustained, fame demands a more fixed, conformist identity, something neither artist could construct in these films.

Coda: Is This the Nation After All?

Biopics participate in the posthumous reinscription of hegemonic values on artists and on their work. Deborah Shaw considers the “cinematic rewriting” of Frida Kahlo’s life in *Frida* an attempt “to integrate Latinos into the national body” (Shaw 2010, 299). *Frida* appeals to national identity by making the revolutionary, Stalinist Frida “womanly” and palatable to American liberalism (ibid., 310) in a very “Hollywood” film. But the biopics I examine here are neither pure Hollywood nor pure art films, and do not simply normalize their subjects. Nor do they fit Stephen Neale’s formula that biopic subjects “unwittingly” find fame and gratification (Neale 2000, 64). Pollock’s fame is unwitting until he gets a taste for it, but never gratifying; Basquiat greedily seeks fame but also without gratification. These artists remain unredeemably abused by their thirst for fame, the art market machine, and the art world’s social order and economics, while fulfilling the abject artist conventions of artist biopics.

The construct “nation” similarly has ties to abjection. Tina Chanter criticizes assumptions about nationalism as a rational discourse of improvement: “Ostensibly civilized and rational values attributed to Western nations were achieved at the cost of capitalist exploitation and colonial appropriation” (Chanter 2008, 250). Chanter suggests that abjection “is constitutive of the coherence and integrity of subjects and communities, such that a movement of rejection or expulsion is foundational to the identity of subjects and communities”; in this sense, “subjectivity is

indebted to and contingent upon a defining of boundaries . . . between subjectivity and otherness. . . . [T]hat which is designated other, is constitutive of subjectivity precisely in its exclusion” (ibid., 7). The expulsion of the abject endorses the illusion of communal unity, which is, however, the obverse of abject artists.

Minoritarian abject artists portray the underside of national identity. Their expulsion from the nation-community helps construct that community, which, in turn, reinscribes their art with normative values displayed in hygienic gallery/social spaces fit for a conforming, imagined nation. But is this revisionism the only way that art can be accepted and artists can enter a nation’s chimera of a unified identity? Or is this merely the limited option offered by biopics in which artists’ abjection is so conventional a trope and sensational an attraction that it cannot be replaced by representations of their hard work, social and political engagement, and warm family or professional ties?

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Adapting Plathology

Sylvia (2003)

CLAIRE PERKINS

The emergence of the “true self” as a writer was a shedding of Plath’s American identity along with the other ‘false’ identities she cast off. She did not write—and could not have written—*The Bell Jar* or *Ariel* in her native Massachusetts. The pitiless voice of the *Ariel* poet was a voice that had rid itself of its American accent.

—Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*



IN HER METABIOGRAPHY *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*, Janet Malcolm describes the Plath biographical situation as a “game” in which she has decided to become a “player”:

Like all the other players at the table, I have felt anxious and oppressed by the game. It is being played in a room so dark and gloomy that one has a hard time seeing one’s hand; one is apt to make mistakes. The air in the room is bad; it is the same air that has been breathed there for many years. The windows are grimy and jammed shut. The old servant’s hands shake as he brings watery drinks. Through a door one sees an open coffin surrounded by candles. A small old woman sits

in a straight-backed chair reading a manual of stenography. A very tall man with graying hair, dressed in black, comes through the doorway, having to duck his head, and stands watching the players. The door to the street suddenly opens, and a tall woman bursts in. She whispers something into the tall man's ear; he shrugs and returns to the room with the coffin. She looks after him, then gives the card table a malevolent little shove, so that drinks spill and cards scatter, and leaves, slamming the door. I look at my cards and call the bet. (Malcolm 1994, 41–42)

The figures are instantly recognizable: Sylvia is in the coffin, her mother Aurelia Plath is the old woman, her husband Ted Hughes is the tall man, and his sister (and long-time literary agent of the Plath estate) Olwyn Hughes is the tall woman. In her vivid description, Malcolm strips the Plath legend to the bare bones of these four key characters and the “players”—the biographers and commentators who constantly, obsessively, arrange and rearrange them in various poses. The description illustrates Malcolm's belief that the Plath biographical enterprise is an allegory of the problem of biography in general (*ibid.*, 28). It reveals that telling a life story is an endeavor where it is not easy to see what one is doing: information is restricted, contested and recycled, “one is apt to make mistakes.” Furthermore, Malcolm's description emphasizes how any commentator who steps up to engage with Plath, that is, any player who joins the game, is essentially *adapting* the familiar situation of the four people in this room. The broad elements of the story are known; the art of the adapter lies in how they are represented, and in how far this adaptation goes toward interrogating the complex question of their “truth.” With the film *Sylvia* (2003), John Brownlow (writer), Christine Jeffs (director), and Gwyneth Paltrow (actor) joined this game, and in commenting upon the film as a biopic, I am too.

I will argue in this essay that *Sylvia* is a “badaptation.” The term has been employed by Constantine Verevis and I. Q Hunter to describe the routine perception of the filmed versions of great literary works as misadaptations—texts always already regarded as deficient or inferior to an original source that came first and is verbal rather than visual (Verevis 2014, 206). In Verevis's conception, the notion of badaptation is also a critique of this perception: “a concept employed to engage with and challenge those approaches to adaptation and remaking that routinely employ a rhetoric of betrayal and degradation, of ‘infidelity’ to some idealized original” (*ibid.*, 216). I will take up here both senses of the notion of badaptation in order to discuss how *Sylvia* dramatizes Plath's identity as

an American national by engaging with her “life-text”—a term coined by William Epstein to describe how biographical recognition assumes that a life can be understood as a process of discursive encoding. The life-text is the “generic space” and process in which “the non-discursive can be transformed into the discursive, in which ‘life’ can be made into or construed as Text” (Epstein 1987, 39). Plath’s life-text is a complex, shifting mythology sustained by the ever-expanding network of biographies, artistic works, commentaries, and rumors that has grown around her in the years since her death in 1963. In conjunction with her highly personal writing—poetry, novels, short stories, letters, and journals—this mythology forms a publishing industry that has shaped Plath as a “posthumous literary celebrity” (Hawker 2013). Every commentary notes that, at the time of her death at age thirty, Plath had published only a single volume of poetry under her own name (*The Colossus and Other Poems*). Her fame came after her death, and was mobilized and shaped in important ways because of it. Plath is, ultimately, as Jacqueline Rose says, a “fantasy” that “haunts our culture” (Rose 1992, 1–5). I argue that by failing to engage with this discursive aspect of Plath’s persona and celebrity, the narrative of *Sylvia* can be judged a badadaptation, a film that is intensely conventional in its presentation of a victimized character who transforms from a bright American innocent to a suicidal, British depressive. But I will also argue that the concept of badadaptation enables an examination of how the film transcends and critiques this judgment—presenting a cinematic “digest” (to redeploy Bazin’s familiar term) of the Plath legend in the registers of style and performance. This analysis is interested foremost in how the adaptation and the biopic are both concentrated sites for the assessment of cultural value.

The Biopic as Adaptation

Biopics and adaptations are formats that are both essentially transformative. As Dennis Bingham writes, “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” (Bingham 2010, 10). Partaking of biography, history and fiction, the biopic dramatizes actuality as it seeks to reveal “the filmmaker’s own version of truth” (ibid.). The *necessity* of transformation here aligns with the central theme of contemporary adaptation studies, which recognizes that cross-media translation unavoidably “violates” an original text because of the divergent narrative and stylistic conditions in which different media are situated. Adaptation theorists such as James Naremore, Brian McFarlane, Thomas Leitch, and Imelda Whelehan advance (essentially postmodern) arguments that

seek to transcend the question of fidelity in order to privilege discursive and systemic issues of intertextuality, narratology and interpretation. Nevertheless, the work of adaptation as itself a transformative process remains a focal point for judgment—critics and commentators make situated evaluations of how well one work is refracted in another and thus strikes or fails to strike a nominally equivalent meaning. André Bazin offers a vivid example of this process in his declaration that *Devil in the Flesh* (directed by Claude Autant-Lara, 1947) is the “best” adaptation that could be made from Raymond Radiguet’s book:

The work of the screenwriters [Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost] . . . consisted, so to speak, in “transforming” (in the sense that an electric transformer does) the voltage of the novel. The aesthetic energy is almost all there, but it is distributed—or, perhaps better, dissipated—differently according to the demands of the camera lens. (Bazin 2000, 25)

Because this critical evaluation relies upon comparison, the question of how the “energy” of one text is dissipated in another is susceptible to being answered in “good” or “bad” terms. Moreover, the enterprise of adaptation itself has historically been regarded as an abjected object, and, according to the logic of a broad profit principle, grouped indiscriminately with other serial forms such as sequels and remakes, or, as Naremore writes, associated with a style of academic writing that is narrow in range: “inherently respectful of the ‘precursor text,’ and constitutive of a series of binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy” (Naremore 2000, 2). The biopic has a similarly “bad” reputation. It is, in Bingham’s description, “a respectable genre of very low repute,” a perception governed by two key themes. The first is akin to the fidelity issue in adaptation studies: biopics are perceived to be inherently fraudulent because they depart from an original “source”—falsifying reality by privileging entertainment over historical or biographical truth (Bingham 2010, 11). The second theme associates the biopic with an unsatisfying style of narrative that straightforwardly charts the motivations for the historical achievement(s) by which an individual is best known (Joannou and McIntyre 147). Privileging a traditional causal mode of presentation, the classical biopic is also hagiographic in tone—implicitly affirming the significance of the life it presents.

This trend toward the unproblematic organization of a life is challenged by recent biopics that many commentators see as the “rehabilitation” of the genre. David Bordwell describes a move away from the

celebratory tendency of classical films when he writes that the biopic as “stuffy prestige item”

has been revived with lesser-known eccentrics as the subject. So we get biopics about a pornographer (*The People vs. Larry Flynt*, 1996), a triple-X star (*Wonderland*, 2003), a world-class imposter (*Catch Me If You Can*, 2002), and a game-show host who may be a CIA hit man (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, 2002) (Bordwell 2006, 55).

These films fit into the contemporary parodic mode identified by Bingham, “mocking the very notions of heroes and fame in a culture based on consumerism and celebrity rather than high culture values” (Bingham 2010, 18). They are implicitly legitimated in this ironic move for being “smarter” and “better” than films in the classical, commemorative mode—something demonstrated in Bingham’s detailed attention to *Man on the Moon* (Milos Forman, 1999) and *American Splendor* (Shari Springer-Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) in the introduction to his biopics monograph, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. Other postclassical biographic modes cited by Bingham are valued in ways that rely similarly upon situated conceptions of “quality”: in terms of the movement from a historical producer’s genre to an auteurist director’s genre; through the critical investigation and atomization of the subject (*American Splendor*; *I’m Not There* [Todd Haynes, 2007]); and by way of minority appropriation, where figures such as Malcolm X or Harvey Milk “own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them” (Bingham 2010, 18). As with any discursive process of legitimation, the valuation of contemporary biopics along these lines does not dismantle the cultural hierarchy by which the genre has been historically denigrated. The conception of an individual biopic as a critical cultural object depends upon a perception of its movement away from the causal and hagiographic characteristics of the classical format, bifurcating the genre into “good” and “bad” examples. As in adaptation discourse, a “good” biopic is understood as one that is able to reflect upon the process of transformation itself. This is something that is demonstrated in the near universal acclaim for Haynes’s audacious examination of Bob Dylan in *I’m Not There*—a film that Bingham suggests will be “the definitive statement on film biography for a long time to come” for its conclusion that “only by *not* attempting to portray a famous person as a unitary subject can one find coherence in human personality” (ibid., 26).

Sylvia comes down on the side of the “bad” biopic when the genre is evaluated in these narrative terms. It is classical and chronological in

format, dealing with Plath's life from the age of twenty-three to the time of her death at thirty, and encoding this time as an unambiguous downward trajectory that imagines her life-text in a familiar but problematic way. Writing on *Sylvia* as a female literary biopic alongside *Iris* (Richard Eyre, 2001) and *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), Josephine Dolan, Suzy Gordon, and Estella Tincknell see this trajectory operating in terms of "a decidedly pre-feminist discourse" that connects women's writing to mental and emotional instability (Dolan, Gordon, and Tincknell 2009, 174). Framed within a conventional cinematic iconography of women's madness, Plath is "utterly knowable" as a woman whose body of work is indistinguishable from her physical body and her subjectivity (ibid., 184). In what follows, I will examine the two primary ways in which *Sylvia* encodes Plath's movement toward a state of instability: in the domestic terms of her relationship with Ted Hughes, and in the stylistic and contextual terms of her movement from America to England. The film's presentation of the latter picks up on a "hardened discursive trace" (Epstein 1987, 47) that is central to Plath's life-text, where her move away from America is understood as part of a larger shift toward a more volatile and authentic identity as an artist. As Malcolm writes:

The emergence of the "true self" as a writer was a shedding of Plath's American identity along with the other "false" identities she cast off. She did not write—and could not have written—*The Bell Jar* or *Ariel* in her native Massachusetts. The pitiless voice of the *Ariel* poet was a voice that had rid itself of its American accent. (Malcolm 1994, 53)

Plathology: The Plath Legend

Across the numerous biographies, the basic facts and experiences of Sylvia Plath's life are told in a remarkably consistent manner, a consistency largely attributable to Plath's detailed and extensive documentation of her own life in journals and letters written from a very young age, many of which are held in two large archives at Smith College and Indiana University. Comprehensive selections of each have been published as *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950–1963* (1975) and *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) and, together, the materials spell out a basic story that is very familiar. Born on October 27, 1932, in Jamaica Plain, near Boston, Sylvia was the first child of Aurelia Plath and her husband Otto—a writer and German professor twenty-one years Aurelia's senior. The family—with second child, Warren—lived in the seaside town of Winthrop until Sylvia was nine years old, when her father died from

complications arising from diabetes. Aurelia subsequently moved the children to live with her parents in the Boston suburb of Wellesley, where Sylvia lived as a high-achieving student until moving away to attend Smith College in 1950. Among the many activities she undertook while at Smith was a literary internship with *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York in the summer of 1953, which was almost immediately followed by a suicide attempt (an overdose of sleeping pills) back at the family home in Wellesley on August 24. After psychiatric treatment including Electroconvulsive Therapy, Sylvia returned to Smith to complete her senior year and graduate in 1955, before leaving on a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge University. Here, at a February 1956 party for the literary magazine *St. Botolph's Review*, she met the emerging Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes—whom she married four months later. After another year in Cambridge, the couple sailed to America in June 1957, living and working in Northampton and Boston until their return to England in December 1959. Sylvia and Ted's first child, Frieda, was born at their flat in Chalcot Square, London, on April 1, 1960, where the three lived until making a move to the rural property of Court Green in Devon in August 1961. A second child, Nicholas, was born on January 17, 1962, after which time Sylvia and Ted's marriage disintegrated amidst Ted's affair with Assia Wevill—the wife of a poet friend, David. Ted left Court Green in September 1962, and over the next two months Sylvia produced the majority of the poems that would ultimately make up her famous *Ariel* collection. In December 1962 she moved with the children to a flat—formerly occupied by Yeats—in Fitzroy Road, London, and it was here, on February 11, 1963, that she ended her life by poisoning herself with gas from the kitchen oven.

These developments function as “events” in the biographical recognition of Plath as a historical figure—they are treated as natural, non-discursive occurrences upon which the factual encoding of the life-text is performed (Epstein 1987, 35). To return to an earlier metaphor, they are the cards that biographers and commentators are dealt in the “game” that Janet Malcolm describes, and it is the ways these facts are interpreted and adapted that make up the legend. In all accounts, Plath's death is the defining event. The poet Anne Sexton once made the now-famous remark that Sylvia's death was a “great career move” (McGrath 2003), precisely identifying the nature of the postmortem star discourse that has driven her fame. Plath is an immortal star in the same American league as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain: her death mythologized her as someone cut short, and someone who thereby survives in—and as—the endless speculation on what she might have been. Such a discursive death is ultimately a victory over death,

as Edgar Morin has said of Dean (Morin 2005, 100), and it provides a precise analogy of the way stardom abstracts a real person into a malleable figure. The aura surrounding dead stars is frequently sustained by audience fascination with a “truth” that is perceived to belie their glossy image and lead to their downfall. This fascination is precisely the source of the mythology that anchors the Plath legend, as described by Malcolm:

How the child, “plump and golden in America,” became the woman, thin and white in Europe, who wrote poems like “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” and “Edge,” remains an enigma of literary history—one that is at the heart of the nervous urgency that drives the Plath biographical enterprise, and of the hold that the Plath legend continues to exert on our imaginations. (Malcolm 1994, 66)

Plath’s postmortem star discourse is fueled of course by the enormous amount of writing she left behind—both that which was designed for publication and that which was not. Her poetry, short stories, novel, journals, and letters are all taken up by biographers as evidence of a “true” self that—to a greater or lesser extent—explains her suicide. Differing interpretations make for different personas, but all implicitly attribute distinction to Plath’s life as one that is made coherent through death. In her life-text, this narrative is governed by the fact that Plath was unusually self-reflexive on the notion of the (auto)biographical subject as a doubled self. Her own subjectivity is indisputably the object of her fiction, and in the journals and letters the split that defines her as subject is made completely transparent. Across both realms, she refers frequently to a violent or malevolent self that subtends a public image. The memoir of Nancy Hunter Steiner—Plath’s Smith roommate—titled *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (1973) is one of the commentaries that attends most closely to this split, discussing the “paradox” by which Plath as the “bright, creative, pleasant, and otherwise unexceptional” young woman produced work that suggests she was “deeply troubled” (Steiner 1973, 33). In the memoir’s introduction, George Stade traces the motif across Plath’s poetry, vividly locating the image of a “prickly, fastidious defence” and an “imminent volcano” in the 1961 poem “In Plaster”:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one.

The theme of the opposed selves means that, as Stade writes, “[t]he persona speaking out of any given poem by Sylvia Plath . . . may

be either sulphurous old yellow, or the plaster saint, or a consciousness that sometimes contains these two and sometimes lies stretched between them” (in Steiner 1973, 9).

As one of the earliest substantial commentaries, *A Closer Look at Ariel* functions as a foundation text in the Plath legend—putting forward a persona and themes that were later taken up and amplified by others. Infamously, the most pervasive impact of the double-self motif that the book identifies has been to lock Plath and Hughes—or the phantasms of each—in a bitter struggle over who was responsible for her death. Two years before Steiner’s memoir appeared, Al Alvarez—a friend of the couple and editor for both at *The Observer*—published *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1971), with a prologue specifically concerned with Plath’s last days. Speculating that her suicide was a gamble and that she ultimately wanted to be saved, Alvarez’s work set the foundation for the “icon” narrative. This has distilled Plath into a feminist martyr who is understood to have sacrificed her own artistic talent for the sake of her husband, only to be abandoned at her most vulnerable point. This persona is quite evident in the work of Paul Alexander, whose *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (1991) ends with the author’s heartfelt, third-person reflection on the sad starkness of Plath’s unmarked grave in Heptonstall, Yorkshire (after three tombstones were defaced by vandals—or “iconographers”—who chipped the word *Hughes* from Plath’s name):

And when he began to consider why she—an artist of her caliber—should lie in a grave so embarrassingly marked, he noticed something that seemed to explain much about what had transpired before her death, and after. The plot next to Plath’s is empty. (Alexander 2003, 364)

In the iconography narrative, Plath is a victim of the “yellow” self that made her vulnerable and desperate, in need of understanding and protection that was not forthcoming from Hughes. The counternarrative is founded in the biography published by Anne Stevenson in 1989: *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. Where the second edition of Alexander’s *Rough Magic* includes an introduction that reveals that Aurelia Plath was his key source, Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* begins with an author’s note that states she received “a great deal of help” from Olwyn Hughes: “Ms Hughes’s contributions to the text have made it almost a work of dual authorship.” In this version of events, it is the people around Plath who are portrayed as victims of her violent and extreme persona. As the *Sunday Telegraph* review put it: “Earlier accounts gave us the Red Riding Hood in Plath, Stevenson gives us the wolf as well.” For

many, the effect is traceable to Stevenson's including as an appendix the brief memoir "Vessel of Wrath" by Dido Merwin—another writer friend whose London study Ted and Sylvia borrowed while they were living at Chalcot Square. Merwin offers up the "wolf" Plath by describing various "chronic" events and encounters in which she was rude, conniving and selfish. A central theme in the account is Plath's use of aggressive silence to convey her displeasure with individuals and situations:

To call them sulks because they were conducted in silence—apart from the occasional monosyllabic shrug—would be to suggest a switched-off, withdrawn dissociation on Sylvia's part that was exactly the opposite of the inescapable blast of active hostility that she directed at each individual who happened to be involved. This nonstop dispensation of condemnatory *Schadenfreude* made for a climate of sickened bewilderment that was (and still is) unforgettable and, I suspect, not believable for anyone who never came into contact with the anger of which Sylvia wrote: "I have a violence in me that is hot as death-blood." (Merwin, in Stevenson 1989, 331)

Suggesting that Plath directed her "vituperative powers" toward the figures of her mother and husband specifically, Merwin's unambiguous implication is that Ted was the martyr for staying with her as long as he did. Her broader point—and the one that is taken up as the basis of the "Hughesian" narrative—is that Plath's persona cast her in a state of defenselessness that put her permanently at risk and made her eventual suicide inevitable, unable to be prevented by Ted or anybody else (*ibid.*, 347).

Solidifying these two extreme narratives and the countless incarnations that fall between, Plath's postmortem star discourse has rendered the woman herself as a multivalent *figure* that belongs to both literary history and popular culture. The myriad sites in which she is evoked demonstrate how her image and name conjure varied and conflicting themes and ideas—depression, braininess, madness, martyrdom, hyperbole, sex, feminism, and a particular brand of 1950s repression. All of this is brilliantly distilled in the willfully rhetorical Twitter feed @itssylviaplath, which twenty-two-year-old Londoner Sarah-Louise Smith began in 2011—posting daily quotations from Plath's poetry, stories, and journals that span the literary and the prosaic:

Getting to know anybody is a hideous complex job (11/09/2013).

Now I am silent, hate up to my neck, thick, thick. I do not speak (11/07/2013).

My dream was someday ordering a drink and finding out it tasted wonderful (23/06/2013).

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman rises toward her, day after day, like a terrible fish (17/06/2013).

As well as sidestepping the famous tyranny of the literary estate, the mobilization of the work and the figure here in social media reflects how a new generation is appreciating Plath—less for her biography than her writing. In *The New York Times* in May 2013, Liesl Schillinger suggested that Plath is currently undergoing a “resurrection and image overhaul” spearheaded by young poets, academics, and readers in the United States. Here, she is foremost understood and valued as a ferociously talented young writer, not as a tragic woman. She is put in a lineage of “smart, strange girls diving into experience” that includes Rona Jaffe, Wendy Wasserstein, Mary Gaitskill, Fiona Apple, Liz Phair, and Lena Dunham (Nussbaum). The latter specifically reflects:

I wonder if Plath would have been saved had she been born in a different time: in a time when psycho-pharmacologists are no more shameful to visit than hairdressers and women write celebrated personal essays about being bad mothers and cutters and are reclaiming the word slut. (Dunham 2013).

Sylvia

How, then, to present all of this in a biopic? *Sylvia* is perhaps inevitably a badaptation in that it is impossible to stay “true” to a multivalent and mutating myth. It is worth noting that the film has also been labeled an official “bad” object by the Plath estate in the person of Sylvia and Ted’s daughter Frieda Hughes, who scorned the enterprise—and by implication the whole Plath biographical industry—in her 2003 poem, “My Mother”:

They think I should love it—
Having her back again, they think
I should give them my mother’s words
To fill the mouth of their monster
Their Sylvia Suicide Doll

Who will walk and talk
And die at will,
And die, and die
And forever be dying.

Hughes's words condemn a tasteless morbidity in the whole perpetuation of the Plath myth—a claim that was pragmatically echoed in Harvey Weinstein's reported reluctance to produce a Plath biopic, as a film that necessarily “ends with a woman's head in an oven” (Brownlow 2003). In a freer adaptation of the legend this would not necessarily be the case—as is demonstrated by Adriana Hölszky's opera *Giuseppe e Sylvia* (2000), where Plath and Verdi meet in the afterlife—but, in choosing to present the events of Plath's life in a conventional, more or less realistic manner, Brownlow's script does inevitably tie itself to this trajectory. The narrative of *Sylvia* presents a traditional, (melo)dramatic depiction of the woman before fame, figuration, and “Plathology.”

Brownlow himself has described how his objective with the script was to dramatize the love story “beneath” the poetry and lives of Plath and Hughes (played by Daniel Craig). Their story, in his view, is “only incidentally a story about two poets. . . . Hughes and Plath had done something that most of us only dream of: they had met their soulmate, and married them. But only one of them could survive” (Brownlow 2003). With this perspective, Plath's life is inevitably told in terms of Hughes, a telling that orients the film—and the legend—in particular ways. Most significantly, the film's narrative elides the first twenty-three years of Plath's life in America, beginning in Cambridge in 1956 just before the two meet for the first time. In the film's brief prologue, the face of Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath horizontally fills a dim, blue-filtered screen, her eyes closed, as, in voiceover, she recites the famous lines from “Lady Lazarus”: “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well.” The prologue is set in an unnamed space and time, but Plath's appearance and the color coding strongly evoke the *Ariel* period immediately before her death that will be depicted later—the time alone at Court Green when she would write in the “blue” hours before dawn. In this way, the prologue sets up the doomed endgame that the narrative will move toward—as unambiguously as the proleptic suicide of Nicole Kidman's Virginia Woolf at the beginning of *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002). The melancholy piano and oboe notes of Gabriel Yared's orchestral score fill out the impression. In the next scene, Paltrow as Plath is transformed: she barrels along a narrow Cambridge street on a red bicycle, academic gown flying behind her. She is blonde and full of energy, in a pink sweater, headband, and lipstick, the quintessential

young innocent abroad. With her troubled American youth erased, she is positioned at the beginning of a linear, downhill slide.

From here, *Sylvia* moves through a rapid, chronological compression of events told through the prism of Plath's relationship with Hughes. Within a handful of scenes the two have met, moved in together, married, and are on a ship sailing into New York harbor. Their time in America is depicted in three key sequences: a welcome party at Aurelia's (unrealistically lush) house in Boston, a summer writing/honeymoon period at the coast, and some months spent living near (an unnamed) Smith College, where Sylvia takes a teaching job. The two begin to fight in the latter period, ahead of a move to London, where Frieda is born and *The Colossus* is launched to an indifferent reception. The move to Devon is told primarily in terms of a dinner party scene with David and Assia Wevill, where Sylvia is withdrawn and angry. Ted leaves immediately afterward and, following a couple of scenes alone at Court Green with the children—including her contemplation of another suicide attempt when she drives to the beach and stands looking out at the water—Sylvia moves back to London. Her last months are told in terms of her encounters with three men: Al Alvarez (Jared Harris), to whom she reads her *Ariel* poems, the downstairs neighbor whom she (infamously) visits to borrow a stamp the night before she dies (Michael Gambon), and Ted himself, with whom she attempts to reconcile by projecting the wish that the family return to Devon in the spring. "We're not even two people," Sylvia says to him here: "we are just two people walking around with big gaping holes in us shaped like the other person." This scene cuts when Ted says he can't leave Assia because she is pregnant; the film then moves straight into Sylvia's final visit to her neighbor, and the prescient shots of her organizing to die: preparing food for the children and taping up the kitchen door. Her face is last shown in close-up, bathed in yellow light and half-smiling as though reeling from a vision—a saint.

Configuring Plath's story as a domestic (melo)drama, *Sylvia's* narrative makes the film into a badadaptation. As it exploits the tension between an understated literary ambition and an overstated, traditional orientation toward marriage and motherhood, Brownlow's script aligns precisely with the (melo)dramatic formula of the "female biopic" that presents a victim whose success is overlaid with conflict and tragedy—" [dramatizing], with proper Aristotelian pity and terror, the process of a woman's degradation" (Bingham 2010, 220). In so doing, the film is meticulously faithful to historical details—such as the poetry recording that Sylvia, Ted, Assia (Amira Casar), and David (Andrew Havill) listen to after their dinner party (Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*), the words of Alvarez's *Observer* review of *The Colossus*, or the name of the doctor whom Sylvia calls from a

London phone box days before her death—but is fatally *unfaithful* to the energy and complexity of the Plathist cult. This is the woman, not the myth, but—moreover—it is the woman as wife and mother, not as writer, depressive, or “wolf.” In the trajectory of the narrative, all of Plath’s anguish is attributed to Hughes and their domestic situation—her jealousy over his attention from other women, their fights, and her misery at being left by him. Her own internal struggles with depression and writing are radically underplayed—expanding the effect of eliding the first twenty-three years of her life in America, and confining details of her first suicide attempt to matter-of-fact anecdotes reported to Hughes by Aurelia and Plath herself.

Most notably, the theme of the doubled self, which is central to Plath’s life-text, is reduced to the realist parameters of the relationship. As I’ve said above, Stade and Merwin, among others, have described Plath’s violent and raging self as a trope central to both her writing and her iconic persona. The defensive “other” that veils and shadows this inner rage in her poetry and prose emerges (auto)biographically in the image that Plath projects in letters home to her mother—a self that counters the “not nice” persona of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* with a “healthy ‘real self’ . . . a kindly, ‘service-oriented’ good girl” (Malcolm 1994, 33). As Malcolm explains, the regulation and control of this doubled image have played out in and through the publishing choices made by Aurelia Plath and Ted Hughes in the years since Sylvia’s death. Hughes’s release of *The Bell Jar* in the United States in 1971 was countered by Aurelia’s publication of *Letters Home* (1975)—the “desired image”—only to be countered itself by Hughes’s making available *The Journals* in 1982, “a corrective to [a] corrective” (ibid., 41). In *Sylvia*’s narrative, this complex and discursive system of imagery is put in purely domestic terms. Plath’s fury emerges only in connection to Hughes, where it appears largely justified as a response to his indifferent and neglectful behavior. More tellingly, the “good” self appears only as a force for placating her husband. This is most apparent in an American morning scene where, following a violent late night argument, an apron-clad Plath is seen preparing breakfast for Hughes—squeezing oranges and frying eggs that she places on a tray and brings to him in apology.

While narratively reductive, this sequence is significant for its demonstration of how *Sylvia* puts Plath’s biographical trajectory in visual terms—using space, lighting, color, and Paltrow’s physical appearance to express its overall passage of degradation. A key site for the effect lies in the varying ways that America and England are depicted, in stylistic choices through which the film *does* effectively engage with the Plath

legend by continuing to worry at the myth in which the bright American girl becomes the suicidal English woman. The film's early scenes in Cambridge construct a moment that is charged with the joy of falling in love, but the *mise-en-scène* is oppressive, restricted mainly to the dark, cluttered interiors of narrow rooms with low ceilings. When Plath and Hughes arrive in New York harbor by boat it is as though the film is thrown open to space, light, and air—an impression that is exaggerated in the sequence where they vacation on the Massachusetts Cape. Here, the plot deals most fully with Plath's personal struggles to write, but this dilemma is belittled by soaring slow-motion scenes of the two body-surfing in crisp, green waves, and adrift in a tiny rowboat far out at sea. The beach shack they stay in here and the Boston house they move to next are both shabby, but spacious and filled with color and natural light. When the narrative shifts back to England in the next sequence, all of this energy drains out of the film, which is once again restricted to cramped interior shots that, even during the day, are artificially lit with a sickly, yellow light. When the scenes in Devon venture outside, the British landscape also seems constraining: thin sunlight, low skies and, in the moment when Plath drives to the coast in the inferred suicide attempt, small and tame seas.

The distinction is carried too by the commanding change in Paltrow's physical appearance. The American scenes model this on the famed 1950s photographs that adorn the various biographies and later editions of her poetry, stories and journals—Plath with a blonde, styled bob in glamorous twinsets and swimsuits, laughing out at the camera from the family home and from bright beaches on vacation with friends. When *Sylvia* returns to England in 1960, Paltrow's appearance changes in line with the archived photographs. Her hair grows longer and darker and is cut into unflattering bangs; her clothes become heavy and drab. Rugged up against the cold, she is thinner and bulkier at the same time, with her face set mostly in a blank or stricken pout. The effect powerfully indexes the mysterious transformation that animates Plath's postmortem star discourse—from the Fulbright scholar that a Cambridge instructor recalled primarily in terms of her “charming American neatness and freshness” (Malcolm 1994, 54) to the woman two months before her death, whose hair, in Alvarez's description, “hung straight to her waist like a tent” and “gave off a strong smell, sharp as an animal's” (Alvarez 1971, 26). Many interpretations have been projected onto Plath's path from a “clean” to a “dirty” state: for example, taking Aurelia Plath's perspective, Paul Alexander's biography characterizes the later state in terms of sickness, exhaustion, and delirium. Implicitly positioning the American Plath as a

healthier and happier self, he emphasizes that Sylvia was plagued before her death by flu and a sinus infection in addition to a depression brought on by the troubles in her marriage (Alexander 2003, 11).

Of course, the critical narrative that appropriates Plath as a feminist icon frames things differently, interpreting the English self as the culmination of the “not nice” persona that is celebrated for its bracing and courageous unpleasantness. The “dirty” self is here the vessel of Plath’s authentic voice, and its anti-American identity can be seen and heard emerging in *Sylvia* through the moments of scathing critique that subtend the fresh, bright visuals of the film’s American scenes. At the welcome party held at Aurelia’s house, and then later at a poetry reading, Ted is surrounded by fawning, middle-aged American women who delight in his Yorkshire accent with no regard for what he actually says. At the former event, Aurelia asks that Ted forgive her friends, who have not had the “advantage” of having to fight for what they want, as he has. This critique of American shallowness and privilege is taken to another level in a scene shortly after, where Sylvia recites from D. H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* to a room of blank-faced college girls:

Destroy! destroy! destroy! hums the under-consciousness. *Love and produce! Love and produce!* cackles the upper consciousness. And the world hears only the Love-and-produce cackle. Refuses to hear the hum of destruction underneath. Until such time as it will *have* to hear. The American has got to destroy. It is his destiny.

Taken from Lawrence’s chapter on Nathaniel Hawthorne, the quotation directly references a duality in the American psyche that chimes with the discursive split encoded in Plath’s life-text: “[t]he deliberate consciousness of Americans so fair and smooth-spoken, and the under-consciousness so devilish” (Lawrence 1971, 89). Its inclusion in the film looks forward to the transformation to come, where, back in England, the “inner diabolism” (ibid.) of her art and consciousness finally (e)merging, Sylvia will reflexively assume that her neighbor sees her as a “stupid American bitch.”

Whether imagined as a shift between a clean and dirty state, an American and English identity, or a false and authentic self, the Plath transformation is apt for visualization, and, by dramatizing the years 1956–1963, *Sylvia* necessarily takes this change up as its central subject. As I have asserted, the film’s narrative can be read as a bad misadaptation of the Plath legend, as a (melo)dramatic domestication of an iconic

cultural figure. Aligning with the passage of degradation that defines the classic female biopic, the change is here attributed wholly to the souring of Plath's relationship with Hughes, and implicitly charges the husband with the wife's downfall and death. The critical practices of badaptation, however, enable the film to be seen in a different light. This methodology acknowledges that texts that dramatize an original property in a new form will inevitably function as a site of cultural evaluation, but disempowers the routine evaluation of adaptations in terms of an idealized original. Understanding a film as a badaptation thereby involves examining how misadapted elements repurpose the energy of a precursor text in unpredictable ways.

For me, the aspects of *Sylvia*'s visual style that I have discussed achieve this repurposing. The contrast that is drawn between the *mise-en-scène* of the American and English sequences is designed to express the downward spiral of the domestic storyline. But these stylistic choices ultimately exceed themselves by transmitting other dimensions of the Plath legend, most obviously the fraught trope of the double self. The motif of the ocean, for instance, evokes Plath's childhood in the seaside town of Winthrop—a time before her father's death that is idealized in themes and imagery across her writing:

My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. (“Ocean’s 1212–,” 1962)

Similarly, Paltrow's persona and performance as Plath carries a level of affect that extends beyond the teleological narrative. When she describes her first suicide attempt to Hughes soon after they meet, she does so in a frank and undramatic manner that—while reducing the complexity of her American history to a few lines—precisely achieves the tone described by Alvarez:

There was neither hysteria in her voice, nor any appeal for sympathy. She talked about suicide in much the same tone as she talked about any other risky, testing activity: urgently, even fiercely, but altogether without self-pity. (Alvarez 1971, 16)

The accomplishment of the scene is supported by Alvarez's own description of visiting the set of *Sylvia* and finding Paltrow's resemblance to Plath “uncanny”: “With her hair piled up and her face tight with strain, she was exactly how I remember the woman. It was like seeing a ghost”

(Alvarez 2004). The ghostly effect resonates elsewhere in Paltrow's dialogue, often in scenes of anger directed at Hughes. Her proclamations here are reductive, but made in a transcendent voice—a strident New England accent that clips words with a specifically British diction, and seems directly modeled on the fearsome readings of her *Ariel* poems that Plath recorded for the BBC in the months before her death. The moments simulate the poignancy that various postmortem star discourses find in seeing a dead star animated on screen; the affect, for instance, that Laura Mulvey finds watching Marilyn Monroe: “an acute consciousness of her ‘then,’ before her death, condenses with the image as death mask and the poignant presence of the index as the ‘this was now’” (Mulvey 2006, 172).

Does the resonant affect of these moments redeem *Sylvia* as a “good” biopic? By and large critics thought not, and, aside from Alvarez, the film appears to have gone uncommented upon by any of the major Plath players. Viewed as a badaptation, the film is perhaps finally most interesting as a “digest”—the term that Bazin adopts from Jean-Paul Sartre to describe an adaptation as “a literature that has been previously digested, a literary chyle” (Bazin 2000, 26). For Bazin, the positive dimension of this notion lies in the way an original property is made more accessible through adaptation—“because of the mode of expression itself, as if the aesthetic fat, differently emulsified, were better tolerated by the consumer’s mind” (ibid.). *Sylvia* is “accessible” in that it simplifies the discursive Plath legend into a dramatized version of events that lends support to the anti-Hughes narrative. But, in and through this badaptation, the film also gives us access to the persona of Plath in visual and aural terms—where the realistically depicted, victimized woman of the narrative opens onto the transcendent figure of Plathology in style and performance.

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“The Dark Lady of American Photography”

Steven Shainberg’s *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* (2006)

MONIKA PIETRZAK-FRANGER

DIANE ARBUS (1923–1971) has been popularly remembered as a tragic figure, the privately schooled daughter of Jewish immigrants who left her husband and the fashion photographic studio to take arrestingly direct and visually disconcerting portraits of people on the margins of society. Inspired by Patricia Bosworth’s biography, Steven Shainberg’s 2006 film *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* offers a fictional account of Arbus’s artistic development. Spanning a three-month period in 1958, it captures the filmic subject in a moment of crisis. Dissatisfied with her life as a mother and as her husband’s assistant, Arbus embarks on a quest for self-discovery accompanied by her remarkable new neighbor, Lionel Sweeney, who introduces her to the netherworld of mid-twentieth-century New York and opens vistas of experience that have been hitherto outside her reach. As Arbus rejects the values represented by her family in favor of a Bohemian way of life, this quest for self-discovery also becomes a search for artistic expression.

In one of *Fur*’s many enigmatic scenes, Arbus’s husband Allan looks at the negatives of some pictures she has taken. Intriguingly, however, the still-frames that appear on the screen are very much unlike what we know to be Arbus’s idiomatic imagery. Her voyeuristically compassionate

photography (Bosworth 1984, ix) has often been compared to the work of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco (Soulages 2007, 241, 243) and has become associated with the journalism of nonnormative everydayness and with the school of the new documentary photography. Arbus's signature black and white prints, which combine heroic portraiture and the snapshot, have been credited with hailing a new, more participatory approach to portrait photography (Bosworth 1984, ix, xi). Praised for the "humanity" and "formal beauty" of her prints (Decarlo 2004, 69), she has also been criticized for her "cheap sensationalism and exploitation" (Smith qtd. in Charrier 2012, 424), for her exploration of an "anti-humanist" agenda, and for her unrestrained confrontation with "assorted monsters and borderline cases" (Sontag 1977, 32).

Today, especially after the 2003 MOMA retrospective *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, critics have reevaluated her achievements, most of them agreeing that Arbus contributed to the exploration of America's "remarkable people" (Charrier 2012, 424). In his reappraisal of Arbus's art, Philip Charrier notes her life-long preoccupation with "interior landscape," with journeying to the recesses of the human psyche (ibid., 433). This relentless "quest for the interior" (ibid.) often forced her to abandon the position of a disinterested observer and to assume an uneasy stance between observation and participation (ibid., 434). Moreover, Arbus's interest in everyday performances based on one's identification with various subcultures, classes, genders, and ethnicities led her to probe hitherto unexplored territories of common rites. Portraits of freaks, gays, lesbians, the dead, and the crippled became her major subject matter. Contemporary reevaluations of her works stress not their "sensationalism" and cheap spectacle, but rather Arbus's incessant quest for the recognition of "the merits of individual experience," her project of capturing "the shadows of fantastic creatures lurking behind expressions and countenances that perhaps wished to conceal or deny their existence" (ibid., 438).

In Shainberg's film, however, Arbus's sitters are expunged from her photographs. They leave no trace but the negatives of the spaces they have populated. A juxtaposition of her art and its visualization in *Fur* would suggest that the film strangely partakes of the cultural and art-historical erasure of women's authorship. In fact, critics and audiences alike have bemoaned not only the film's pseudo-feminist, oddly "misogynist" (French 2007) portrait of the artist but also the series of absences that dominate it, especially the absence of Arbus's photographs and of her style, displaced by glamorous, surreal frames that beautify her and her works. Mia Fineman, for instance, has argued that the problem with Shainberg's "fairy tale" about "an adventurous [if repressed] '50s

housewife in the process of discovering her bohemian side" is "that it divests her of any artistic agency" (Fineman 2006). It also misconceives a groundbreaking artist, "the Dark Lady of American photography," for new generations of unknowledgeable audiences (*ibid.*), thus effectively distorting her achievements, if not entirely obliterating them from popular consciousness.

Veering away from these readings, and repositioning this discussion within adaptation studies, I would like to argue that this absence can also be regarded as a complex site for the negotiation of women artists' cultural presence and for a metareflection on the film's generic limitations. Paradoxically, *Fur*'s erasure of Arbus's art allows the film to explore the complexities of her artistic processes. As it inflects the myth of the great artist in order to test out the truth claims traditionally made by the genre of the biopic, I argue, *Fur* simultaneously undermines and sustains our desire for the author. But before I make this argument, I want to comment briefly on the tenacious mythology that has traditionally surrounded the figure of the artist, on the generic requirements of the biographical picture (and biography in general) that have sustained this familiar myth, and on how the birth of the woman-artist biopic has been closely intertwined with the growing popularity of feminist interventions. I will then return to Shainberg's imaginary portrait and its striking erasure of Arbus's art.

Historical and Generic Limitations

As various feminist interventions have made clear, women's lives have been underprivileged in Western culture. In her groundbreaking essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists" (1971), the feminist art historian Lynda Nochlin famously contends that a number of grand narratives that have motivated biographical and critical work in art history continue to maintain the "myth of the Great-Artist," and insist on the "apparently miraculous, nondetermined, and asocial nature of artistic achievement" (Nochlin 1971, 231). In a similar manner, Griselda Pollock has argued that the discipline of art history has been liable to a "psychological emphasis" (Pollock 1980, 62), which privileges "the individuality of the artist" (*ibid.*, 59). Clearly, the cult of the artist as "a paternal origin" of "fully intentional creative acts" invested with "transcendental value" developed within the modern episteme (Jones 1994, 547), during which the "masculine self" was endowed with coherent individuality and functioned as a "guarantor of Kantian transcendentalism through what Jacques Derrida has called the 'divine teleology' of western aesthetics," whereby

the artistic genius is given “surplus value” by God or altogether replaces the creator (ibid.). With the convergence of postmodernism, second-wave feminism and performance/body art, the perception of artistic subjectivity has shifted toward its understanding in performative terms (ibid.). The celebration of performativity by cultural and art theorists, and its concomitant festive exploration in visual arts, has been accompanied by a debunking and reappropriation of the abiding myths of the artistic genius. Nevertheless, critics have shown, the myths of authorial creativity have, apparently, not loosened their ideological grip and remain a tangible presence in determining, for instance, the market value of particular artists. Myths thus must be seen not only as “effective (and often dangerous) literary [or representational] conventions” (Booth 1991, 103–104), or communicative structures that are scaffolds for our desires, but also as perlocutionary acts that, in shaping the canon and the social praxis, produce tangible “realities.”

Myths evidently inform biographical practices. As Kris and Kurz (1934) have shown, the glorification of the male artist has been an aspect of biographical writing at least from the times of Pliny the Elder and Giorgio Vasari, who established the ideal of a *divino artista* by using narrative patterns characteristic of the lives of saints and ancient heroes. This tradition continued in the celebratory forms of nineteenth-century biography, which idealized the “prelapsarian” creator and ideologically sanitized the dangerously Bohemian and degenerate traits of the artist by removing him from economic and social constraints (Codell 2001, 5). In this context, biographies about women artists struggled to smooth “over contradictions among competing ideologies of domesticity, professionalization and femininity,” invariably “infantilized” women as “eternal student[s]” (ibid., 16, 24), and inscribed them into the only two available narratives—education or romance. Despite various feminist interventions that have emphasized the institutional bias against women artists and the constructedness of their social roles, these tendencies continue to inform contemporary biographical writing.

The generic profile of a biographical film endorses these abiding gender distinctions and sustains familiar psychobiographical explanatory models. As Andrew Higson and others have abundantly demonstrated:

Biopics are always about dramatizing a life, but as such there is always a tension in these films between biographical depth and historical substance on the one hand and, on the other, the need to create a compelling cinematic drama with an engaging narrative drive and a beguilingly attractive *mise-en-scène*. (Higson 2003, 110)

Inherently, then, the life of an artist gains priority over his work, as the latter is invariably used to tentatively explain artistic motivations and the nature of genius, and, of course, to tempt audiences with an alluring spectacle. The most widely cited historical critic of the genre, Dennis Bingham, differentiates between the classical-era traditions of male and female biopics. Bingham characterizes the latter as less changeable, as often focusing on the tension between the private and the public, and as downplaying women's ambition and displacing it onto their male counterparts. The films frame women as either "demure and deferential" or victimized (Bingham 2010, 213–14). The inclination of the traditional female biopic toward the melodramatic display of the tragedy of women's lives, as well as the prevalent use of "the downward trajectory" in plot construction, transforms the classical female biopic into a "victimology-fetish" (ibid., 217) which "dramatize[s] . . . the process of a woman's degradation" (ibid., 220).

The subgenre of the artist biopic characteristically disregards women visual artists as it perpetuates the myth of the male genius. In line with "patriarchal art history," the romantic mode in which many artist biopics are constructed privileges the image of the artist as a "misunderstood or tragic" (Walker 1993, 10) social outcast, a "rebel, . . . iconoclast and anti-bourgeois" (ibid., 17). Indeed, as the birth of the female artist biopic was concurrent with the dusk of second-wave feminism and the birth of postfeminism and its complex agendas, this subgenre no doubt references women's struggles for visibility and authorship. Critics highlight a certain "political usefulness" of the subgenre because it excavates the disregarded subjects and "enter[s] [them] into the pantheon of cultural mythology" (Bingham 2010, 10), and thus participates in the process of cultural canonization by historicizing "contemporary arguments on gender and authorship" (Vidal 2007, 70) and "[reflecting] on the differences between the narratives of historical period and the time of the film's making" (Codell 2011, 132). In this context, one could ask how far the subgenre reconfigures the relationship between gender and authorship as it reinvents the woman artist. While the earlier women artists' biopics are clearly driven by a feminist impulse, more recent films, I will next contend, appropriate the myth of the great artist in order to negotiate the visibility of women artists.

Women Artists on Screen: Changing Representation

Recent women artists' biopics largely reemploy classical-era generic patterns: by constructing women as artists of lesser value and by setting them apart from the misunderstood and suffering male genius, they

seemingly perpetuate a Victorian ideology of femininity. With only two exceptions (*Fur* and, to a certain extent, *Artemisia*), recent women artists' biopics follow a downward trajectory, emphasizing their subjects' mental deterioration (*Camille Claudel*, *Séraphine*) or their life and death in pain (*Frida*). Most use romantic narratives to accentuate the women's love lives and to feature them as dependent on their male counterparts. *Séraphine* excepted, women artists are fashioned as talented students who learn from and rely on their established teachers/lovers, sometimes at the expense of their own artistic development or mental health. While *Fur* concentrates on the relationship between Diane Arbus and Lionel Sweeney, her imaginary friend, lover, and artistic guide, all these other biopics depict sexual relationships between two artists: baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi and her instructor Agostino Tassi in *Artemisia*, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in *Frida*, Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin in *Camille Claudel*. They also emphasize the importance of sexual relationships to the women's self-development and present the men as either their instructors in seeing (*Artemisia*, *Fur*), connoisseurs of their art (*Frida*), or key figures in shaping their public recognition (*Camille Claudel* and *Séraphine*). All the films, *Séraphine* once again excepted, focus on what Susan Fellman calls the "erotics of artistic collaboration" by foregrounding art "as the progeny of sexual passion" (Fellman 2001, 28) and by featuring men's major role in women's artistic development.

A chronological reading of these recent films, however, shows a shift toward a more complex rendition of the relationship of gender and creativity, a shift that corresponds with the appearance of what is now being called the postfeminist biopic. In contrast to the feminist biopic, which typically entertains a feminist point of view as it knowingly parodies, subverts, or deconstructs the narratives of sexual dependency, female degeneration, and patriarchal authorship (Bingham 2010, 10), the postfeminist biopic interrogates the genre and its gendered traditions, spotlighting gender performativity, the plurality of feminisms, and the constructed and subjective nature of the biopic itself (Polaschek 2010, 74–78). As I shall argue, a chronological reading of these artist biopics—from *Camille Claudel* to *Séraphine*—shows an evolution from the ambiguous spectacle of the female artist's body to the poignant, canonical exhibition of her art.

Camille Claudel (1988) epitomizes the problematic entwining of feminism and cinematic depiction as it exemplifies the "paradox of representation" characteristic of the female biopic subgenre: namely, the "simultaneous subject-object position" of the female protagonist (Borda 2009, 228). Despite its initial depiction of Claudel as a self-willed, determined artist who encounters the limitations of the late-nineteenth-cen-

ture institutionalized art world, the film also contrasts her with Rodin, the embodiment of the great artist, as it sketches her growing artistic and personal subjugation (ibid., 234). Fashioning her work in terms of a "therapeutic" practice, the film never calls into question the institutional restrictions she faces (ibid.). In this way, as Borda notes:

Camille Claudel presents a rhetorical problem for feminism as it invites viewers to experience a film that not only documents the challenges faced by women in patriarchal society, but reaffirms them through the formal and narrative evolution of Claudel's character within the cinematic fiction, thereby contributing to the impossibility of a positive legacy for a woman artist. (Ibid., 241)

There is a similar development in Christopher Hampton's *Carrington* (1995), which, based on Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey, tells the story of the modernist artist Dora Carrington. Despite its aspirations to address the discrepancies between gender performance and sexual desire (issues crucial to gender theorists in the 1990s), *Carrington* foregrounds the subordination of the female artist to male creative powers. The film (and its promotional campaign) not only insists on the centrality of this relationship, but, indeed, makes it the artist's *raison d'être*. Bingham notes that the traditional *in medias res* beginning of female biopics marks a woman's entrance into the public world (Bingham 2010, 315). Hampton locates Carrington's "birth" not in any groundbreaking event at the Slade School or in any of her joint exhibitions, but repositions it outside of her formative artistic years, in 1915, when she meets Strachey for the first time, thus implying that her posthumous importance lies not in her art but in their relationship. Apart from this framing, the film also insists on portraying Carrington and Strachey as opposites, hence offering a reductive image of their bond and oversimplifying Carrington's character. It frequently depicts Carrington at Strachey's feet, as his devoted servant. In this way, Hampton's romantic fantasy of self-effacement in love finds its cinematic realization, while the nuanced masquerade in which Carrington in fact engaged (Morgan 1998), remains unnoticed. For Claire Monk, the scene that epitomizes this obliteration is the one in which Carrington offers Strachey a pen wiper with the embroidered request, "use me" (Monk 2001, 8). Critics and reviewers have repeatedly regarded this subordination, as well as the film's lack of contextualization for her artistic network, as detrimental to Carrington's presentation as an artist.

Similarly, *Artemisia* (1998) has been regarded as both addressing the difficulties that women artists faced in the seventeenth century and lav-

ishly exploiting the spectacle of Artemisia's body. When Artemisia's father grabs the genitals of a male student who, unlike his daughter, has been admitted to the academy and shouts "this is the only reason why you got here," the film highlights the institutionalized gender prejudice of the seventeenth-century art world. Cultural and institutional criticism follows when Artemisia is shown tracing the male nude from the shadows—she is not allowed to look at a naked man. The film has spurred contradictory readings. Art historians such as Mary Garrard (2003), for whom the artist is the embodiment of feminist thought *avant la lettre*, have bemoaned the film's anachronisms and historical infidelity, and have also pointed out its overindulgent association of creativity with sexual desire. Belén Vidal (2007), on the other hand, has seen in these anachronisms and in the seemingly problematic depiction of the woman artist's body a space for the recoding of historical developments within feminist and postfeminist thought and a platform for a cinematic renegotiation of women's visibility.

Critics have also noted that such biopics as *Surviving Picasso* (1996) and *Pollock* (2000) offer a more affirmative scenario for the understanding of women artists on screen (Vidal 2007; Codell 2011). Bypassing the circuit of victimization and subjugation, the films present Françoise Gilot and Lee Krasner as strong characters who are also critics, connoisseurs, and independent painters. Julie Codell argues that *Pollock's* Krasner embodies neither the degenerate femininity that Griselda Pollock has seen in women artists' biopics, nor the abject other that these films neutralize and sanitize through art (Codell 2011, 132–34). While these two biopics rethink the conditions within which women artists can be presented on screen, I would argue that they also sustain the association of the great genius with masculinity, even as they employ what Bingham calls the "neoclassical" model (Bingham 2010, 18) to undermine the greatness of the male artists. Indeed, Doris Berger (2009) argues that, despite its complex portrait of the artists, *Pollock* maintains the myths that have formed around the male artist's public persona, and, simultaneously, denies Krasner a place in the pantheon of American art. Despite these problems, the two films certainly rethink the nature of romantic liaison and its influence on the conceptual practices of artistic collaboration.

Frida (2002) not only reconsiders the character of a romantic union for the development of the woman artist, it also de-essentializes the female protagonist through an appropriation of various mythical structures and feminist and postfeminist rereadings of her art. In her analysis of the film as a postfeminist biopic, Bronwyn Polaschek points out how the film simultaneously uses hagiographic narratives, Christological imagery, psychobiographical readings of Kahlo's art, and postfeminist reevaluations that go beyond her iconic status as a suffering woman

(Polaschek 2010, 140). Polaschek sees this tendency as "suggestive of the blending of male and female biopic traditions in the post-feminist biopic" (ibid., 141). Finally, *Séraphine* (2010) appropriates the myth of the great artist as a misunderstood genius in order to (re)fashion the modern primitive Seraphine Louis. Yet the characteristically romantic depiction of the artist—a prelapsarian outcast endowed with divine powers—is here accompanied by an activation of other frameworks of signification which complicate this image. Like *Artemisia*, *Frida*, and the television biopic *Georgia O'Keeffe* (2009), the film highlights the importance of patronage and collaboration in the "discovery" and public construction of an artist and an art canon.

The Many Facets of Fur

A postfeminist biopic that negotiates the place of the woman creator even as it appears to be a monument to artistic inertia, Shainberg's *Fur* can be aligned with these recent generic developments. On screen, Diane Arbus puts the film into the camera and prepares it for shooting, but shoot she does not. The camera either dangles on her neck or is seen abandoned on the table as Diane contemplates the unusual spectacles Sweeney brings before her eyes. In the scene mentioned previously, when Allan Arbus looks at Diane's films, shapes magically appear on her negatives. Her own project, the project of portraying her neighbors, is merely suggested by the one and only photograph (of a shaved Sweeney) that she takes toward the end of the film. Yet, in the context of recent generic transformations in the female artist biopic, this absence and the film's apparent erasure of creative processes complicate the representational traditions; as it comments on the intricacies of Arbus's working method and her artistic legacy, *Fur* simultaneously relinquishes any claims to historicity and truthfulness.

At first sight, the film activates traditional patterns in the depiction of the woman artist. It positions her as a willing but inexperienced student who learns to see differently thanks to the masterly training provided by Sweeney. The melodramatic scene, in which Arbus breathes in the air that Sweeney pumped into a mattress before his death, echoes the myth of Pygmalion and configures Sweeney as her creator. Also, as the works of Arbus's teachers (for example, Lisette Model) do not feature independently in the film but merely adorn the hallway in Sweeney's apartment, the film again suggests that he is the major influence on her nascent artistic vision. Because he embodies a romanticized artist-teacher, she is forced into becoming the student, a stereotypical role which undermines her artistic significance.

Indeed, at first sight, the film's educational plot—an exaggerated metamorphosis of Diane Arbus from a meek and self-deprecating housewife to a “daring” nudist and explorer of subcultural rites and sexualities—misreads Arbus by conventionalizing her and by reframing Bosworth's laudatory biography. Bosworth emphasizes the adventurous character of the artist and her penchant for going beyond the limits sanctioned by the social milieu in which she grew up. Bosworth also insists on Arbus's artistic and sexual curiosity, which allowed her to explore uncharted terrains of experience. The themes and values fostered by second-wave feminism constitute an undercurrent in the biography: for instance, Bosworth indulges in graphic explorations of Arbus's experience as a menstruating woman (Bosworth 1984, 106). While the film generally disregards the biographer's penchant for exploiting the vicissitudes of Arbus's physical experience, Arbus's dissatisfaction with her status quo and her longing for freedom are at least symbolically evoked in Nicole Kidman's quasi-liberating unbuttoning of her dress on her balcony as she flees the reporters who have gathered for a press conference at her home. What can be read (from a classic Freudian perspective on women's art) as the sublimation of her repressed desires, a reading clearly favored by the director and many critics, can also be seen as a deliberate postfeminist inflection of neoconservative values, a celebration of the protagonist's choosing work over her family and motherhood.

Apart from its use of the limited narratives characteristic of women's classical-era biographies and biopics, and apart from its complicating the feminist impulse of Bosworth's work, the film activates a postfeminist appropriation of the conventions of the traditional artist biopic. By configuring Arbus as a foil to Sweeney, it fashions her as an outsider who undermines the values of the dominant capitalist order of consumption—a “freakish” transformation almost literally instantiated by Arbus's exchanging an expensive fur from her father's collection for a coat handmade from Sweeney's hair. Sweeney's death at sea signals Arbus's birth as an artist. Now she takes his place. Thus, the film also inscribes itself in the tradition of the male artist biopic: as in *Frida*, the othering of the protagonist is accompanied by Christological motifs and the color palette of blues, reds, and golds characteristic of religious imagery, while the indoor pool, in which Arbus contemplates her childhood experiences, brings forth associations with baptismal christening. Moreover, the casting of Nicole Kidman capitalizes on her role as Virginia Woolf in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours*, where similar imagery is used. The stylistic distinctiveness of the film, which partly arises from the appropriation of fairy tale conventions and various intertextual references (for example, to the 1987 *Beauty and the Beast* television series) and partly from the

decision to evoke Arbus's prints in a series of tableaux vivantes, supports this romanticized portrait of an artist as it also shifts attention away from her life and toward her working method. While Shainberg's decision not to use Arbus's photographs or her style could have been dictated by practical reason—the executrix of the Arbus estate, Doon Arbus, has been known to limit access to her mother's works—this aesthetic strategy also counteracts the popular biographical reading of Arbus's art.

Arbus's Working Method

Paradoxically, as the film obliterates Arbus's institutional, theoretical, and professional grounding, it also evokes, in these lacunae, her major preoccupations and her working method. *Fur* foregrounds her laborious processes of engagement with her subject, her emphasis on dialogue, her contemplation and recognition of the sitter as a subject at the moment of becoming. In other words, the film reconsiders her work from a contemporary art-critical perspective. Indeed, as they go beyond the early criticism (for example, Susan Sontag's) that focused on the ethics of representation and viewed Arbus's oeuvre in the light of her life and suicide, contemporary interpretations do not stress, as I noted earlier, Arbus's "sensationalism" and cheap spectacle, but her incessant quest for the recognition of "the merits of individual experience" (Charrier 2012, 438). *Diane Arbus: Revelations* (2003), the catalogue accompanying her 2003 retrospective, documents many of Arbus's artistic precepts and provides a complex reading of her as an artist and as a person. It spotlights the tightrope acrobatics that her prints perform between revealing and concealing, showing and hiding, saying and silencing, witnessing and performing. Approaching Shainberg's cinematic representation of Arbus in the context of these new critical developments emphasizes the significance of the film's representational lacunae.

Furthermore, the film explores the significance of dialogue to Arbus's art. In his commentary on the DVD of the film, Shainberg insists that he attempted to record Arbus's maturation process. Indeed, the camera follows her development from an observer to an engaged participant. "Take off your camera," Sweeney commands as he obliges her to engage with her subjects before taking their portraits. It is only when she befriends her subject that Sweeney allows her to take his portrait. The charged artistic inertia—the absence of the photographic process—throws into sharp relief the continuous necessity of an engagement with the sitter that lies at the core of Arbus's artistic preoccupations. Critics have highlighted her "personal connection" with her sitters, their cooperation, and the "closeness" that lay at the core of her art (Weiss 2002,

9). Arbus herself stressed her continuous fascination with the lives of the people she photographed.

Indeed, the early scene in the nudist community, which intermedially transfers Arbus's *Retired Man and His Wife at Home in a Nudist Camp One Morning, N. J.* (1963), reveals Arbus's intensive engagement with her subjects. In her interpretation of the print, Marta Weiss notices that the domesticity of the space that the couple inhabits is suggested by their photographs on the TV set. She also observes the striking contrast that their nudity provides to the "idealized" and "sexualized" body of the pinup girl on the wall (Weiss 2002, 18). In Shainberg's film, the domestic warmth of the interiors disappears: the scene is displaced to the depersonalized environment of a dressing room in a nudist community. The comfort created by the house interiors is exchanged for the film's slight discomfort and anonymity of space. On the wall behind the nudist couple now is an empty frame, an intriguing sign of the complex interplay of presence and absence. Referencing the photograph that the real Arbus will take in the future, the empty frame also evokes her lack of readiness: as yet, the filmic Arbus is not part of the nudist community and is unable to engage with them. "There are two rules," says the nudist couple (quoting Arbus's diary), "no erections, . . . and no staring." As they articulate the regulations, the camera catches the filmic Arbus inadvertently staring at the naked woman before her.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson regards staring as an initiation into intersubjectivity:

An encounter between a starrer and a staree sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences. This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring bespeaks involvement, and being stared at demands a response. (Garland-Thomson 2007, 4)

Indeed, this instance of staring marks Arbus's incipient engagement with the subcultural. Looking away is her culturally instilled reaction to the shame that she feels at being caught in a moment of absorbing curiosity. At the same time, the empty frame—a wooden frame that would customarily be used to display oil paintings—signals a shift from the Western tradition of displaying the nude as the property of the owner (as in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*) toward an engagement with the sitter as performer.

Arbus's insistence on a dialogue with the sitter is most vividly staged when the filmic Arbus takes Sweeney's portrait. Positioned vis-à-vis each

other, connected by the tone and saturation of the frame, she and the subject of her photograph appear to be equally significant actors in the scene. At this point, photography appears both as an apparatus of annihilation, "aggression, domination, predation, surveillance, and spectacle," as Sontag understood it (Baird 2008, 978), and as an instrument of immortalization—a receptacle for memories, opposed to death and forgetting. By coupling Sweeney's death with Arbus's photograph of him, the film comes close to Barthes's famous theorization of photography in terms of a "micro-version of death" (Barthes 2003, 23).

The reciprocal recognition and dialogue that the film foregrounds as essential to Arbus's work are paralleled by its emphasis on the complexities of posing for the camera. The anachronistic use of the Rolleiflex, which will become Arbus's signature camera in the sixties, underscores the importance of the performative character of photography. What is referenced here is Barthes's belief in the metamorphosis that the subject undergoes in front of the camera as s/he is transformed into an image (Barthes 2003, 22). Indeed, the film calls attention to the significance of masquerade and masking as both a social necessity and a mode of interpersonal engagement. The exaggerated framing of Arbus as an over-feminine character (a reference to the types of femininity popular in 1950s advertisements) at the outset of the film accentuates the masquerade-like quality of her gender identity. At the same time, the narrative development of the film—Arbus's gradual assumption of the position of a freak and a social outcast who wholeheartedly embraces subcultural rites—also suggests that masquerade is intertwined with her role as photographer, an echo of critical voices that argue that "[b]y posing herself, Arbus capture[d] the world half-posed" (Weiss 2002, 14).

Moreover, the film also references the multisensorial character of vision that for Arbus as photographer went beyond the surface directness of gazing and hinged upon the distressing reciprocity of staring. As Garland-Thompson remarks, "The permission to stare . . . is in part what makes Diane Arbus' photographs disconcerting and controversial. Perhaps it is less the Jewish Giant [one of her most famous subjects] himself that unsettles viewers, but rather more their own urge to stare at this startling disruption of the ordinary world" (Garland-Thompson 2007, 180). For Sontag, Arbus's art carries the uneasiness associated with her sitters' staring back—their recognition of our position as those who look:

Instead of trying to coax the subject into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to . . . pose. . . . Standing or sitting stiffly makes them seem like images of themselves.

Most Arbus pictures have the subjects looking straight into the camera. This often makes them look even odder, almost deranged. (Sontag 1977, 37)

In the film, the still frame that parades as Arbus's only photograph retains this quality: Sweeney stares straight back into the camera.

On screen, Arbus's photographs are used as reference points for a number of tableaux vivantes, which not only adapt her prints to Shainberg's Alice in Wonderland-like aesthetics but also stress the importance of participation to her artistic method. These tableaux gesture towards Arbus's continuous negotiation between observation and involvement. Arbus often commented on her ongoing oscillation between identification with her sitters and her relentless spectatorial curiosity: "There are always two things that happen. One is recognition and the other is that it's totally peculiar. But there's some sense in which I always identify with them" (Arbus 2011, 1). Indeed, the excursions of the filmic Arbus into the netherworld of her dreams and into the unknown of the subcultures that Sweeney embraces point up the significance of participation. In the film, Arbus literally enters her photographs: inhabiting her subjects' worlds, she is featured in tableaux vivantes referencing such works as *Dominatrix Embracing her Client* (1970) and *A Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents in the Bronx* (1970).

The invisibility of Arbus's work in the film also tentatively introduces the question of the modes and codes of seeing. Before we see the close-ups of Arbus's negatives, we witness a scene in which her daughters, apparently unhappy with how she leads her life, clandestinely recover her rolls of film and bring them to their father for inspection. As Allan Arbus tells the girls to leave him alone and not look at the pictures, they are framed sitting under a series of photographs of a lingerie model. A juxtaposition of this frame with Arbus's empty-spaced negatives, which we see next, is telling. In Shainberg's commentary on the film's DVD, the serialized photographs of Arbus's path to Sweeney's apartment function as landmarks that enable her homecoming: they offer her a possibility of return. Yet they can also be seen as records of the subcultural life unrecognizable to Allan Arbus, who functions in the film as a representative of the bourgeois order, which is prone to wipe out everything that may endanger it. In a sense, then, these empty-spaced negatives comment on the acts of seeing and their historical embedding, on the limits of the official gaze as a discursive matrix that erases deviance and concentrates on the normal.

Indeed, as the film repositions Arbus's subjects in the logic of staring—rather than in the hierarchy of gazing—the film offers a version

of America as a dreamland in which the exceptional becomes a site of renewal as it undermines the consumerist impulse embodied by Arbus's upper-class family. The promotional parties, the *Vogue* shootings, the constructed femininity of her husband's photographs, appear to be pretentious performances that hide the ugliness of a world that does not extend beyond the polished surface of things. In contrast, the surreal world of the "freaks" stands for the intimacy and complexity of interpersonal relations that are built not on the distinctions of social class but on mutual attraction and admiration. It is not the "grave of the Occident" that Sontag sees in Arbus's America, nor a "freak show" or "a wasteland" (Sontag 1977, 48). Rather, this "Surrealist country" (ibid.) is a space of participation and mutual recognition that is worth discovering. There is a grain of criticism in the juxtaposition of these two worlds in the film. Its 1960s America—the America of a glossy magazine—is an America that hushes and conceals its problems, a grotesque vanity fair of human vices. In contrast, the film's subterranean world, which slowly invades the familial spaces of the upper classes, is associated with hope and transformation. The netherworld offers a way out of social stagnation and slow decay. As Arbus escapes the city and goes to the nudist colony, the film alludes to the idyll of the Garden of Eden, where its inhabitants live in harmony with nature and with each other. Despite (or, perhaps now, because of) an overdose of sentiment and "Whitmanesque affirmation" (Sontag 1977, 48), *Fur* offers hope for an America that can reinvent itself through its "remarkable people" (Charrier 2012, 424). It thus clearly opposes Sontag's ethical criticism of Arbus's work.

As it records and addresses the history of criticism that has built around Arbus's work, *Fur* also alludes to the problems with her artistic legacy. As I remarked earlier, Doon Arbus has been known to limit access to her mother's photographs. The film's erasure of Arbus's work—the depopulated frames of the negatives, the subtle echoes of her most famous subjects (the dominatrix, the Jewish giant, etc.), and the empty frame behind the nudist couple—can be regarded as brief, if powerful, comments on the ways in which this type of management is destructive to an artist's reputation or perhaps on the ways in which such cultural legacies are fundamentally bound up with the complexities of (in)visibility. In the latest edition of her mother's photographs, Doon Arbus appended an "Afterword," which addresses the predicaments of her mother's legacy and the pitfalls of her own managerial responsibility:

In the early stages . . . the task seemed straightforward enough: to do what was necessary to make the work as widely available as possible. . . . She had achieved a form of immunity but the

photographs had not. The photographs needed me. . . . Someone to keep track of them, to safeguard them . . . from an onslaught of theory and interpretation, as if translating images into words were the only way to make them visible. . . .

The three previous books of her work, although hardly wordless, were informed by the stubborn conviction that the photographs were eloquent enough to require no explanations, no set of instructions on how to read them, no bits of biography to prop them up. . . .

This book and exhibition, by integrating her photographs and her words with a chronology that amounts to a kind of autobiography, do not signal a change of heart. But one of strategy, and a willingness to embrace a paradox: that the surfeit of information and opinion would finally render the scrim of words invisible so that anyone encountering the photographs could meet them in the eloquence of their silence. (Arbus 2003, 299)

Apart from the labored defense of her own decisions, Doon Arbus addresses here the questions with which cinematic representations (and art criticism) of women artists have to grapple: the aura of the artist's life and its influence on the perception of her work, the ceaseless interpretations that sometimes jeopardize the work itself, the vulnerability of the artist, who is no longer there to defend herself and her work—in short, the carnivorous noisiness and nosiness of critical voices and gazes that threaten to usurp the space of the art itself and to rob it of the effect it would have on the viewer were it left untheorized. In a way, and despite its preferred Freudian reading, Shainberg's film offers such an idealized space for the resonance of Arbus's work in the lacunae of its representation.

The Film's Metareflection on its Generic Limitations

To some extent, biopics are teratological spectacles that display exotic specimens for audiences' enjoyment. Shainberg's *Fur* curiously addresses this propensity by subtly drawing parallels between and among Sweeney, the freak subculture as a subject of Arbus's art, and Arbus herself as an object of our cinematic contemplation. By foregrounding the process of her development as an artist—a variation on the work of desire, the imaginary, and the unconscious—the film walks a tightrope between offering a strongly Freudian reading of art as a sublimation of repressed desires and addressing Arbus's working method. It also deals with the ethics of

representation by negotiating the visibility of her work and its subjects. As the film signals the complexities of Arbus's photographic approach, it also self-reflexively comments on its own generic limitations.

Although the two title cards after the opening credits leave no doubt about its self-fashioning as "an imaginary portrait," the serialized return to the trope of the artist's eye as the synecdoche of the creative "imagination at work" (Buchanan 2013, 10) promises to reveal the secret behind the idea of the artist. The discrepancy between Lionel Sweeney as we see him in the film and as he appears in the film's only (imaginary) Arbus photograph throws into strong relief the ambiguous character of the film as biopic. The stylistic and mimetic incompatibility in(tro)duced by the photograph spotlights the impossibility of arresting one's life on screen—or in a photograph, comments on the film's own constructedness, and denies its generic claims to authenticity and truth.

Imaginatively attempting to capture the artist and her creativity, *Fur* dramatizes its own failure. As Arbus prepares to take another photograph at the end of the film, she engages in a dialogue with a nudist. "Are you going to take my picture?" asks the woman. "No, not yet," answers Arbus as she lays down her camera, only to propose: "Why don't you tell me a secret." "Why don't you tell me one first," retorts her interlocutor. "Okay," agrees the protagonist. This moment reenacts one of Arbus's most frequently cited statements: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know" (Bosworth 2005, xi). Yet, since the film ends just after the imaginary Arbus promises to solve the mystery, we never learn what the secret is: all we are left with is a close-up of Kidman's face. The seductive character of this promise is caught up in the relentless circuit of an artist's insatiable desire. Although the film ends without disclosing the secret, it does support the mystical ideal of a creator as someone in possession of a secret, an idealization it abruptly demystifies by drawing our attention to the tongue-in-cheek character of its enunciation. Indeed, Shainberg's decision not to show Arbus's works, the film's emphasis on the process of artistic development, and the continuous framing of Kidman's eye as a synecdoche for artistic imagination showcase the myth of the creative artist as an empty signifier, a communicative structure that caters to and reflects our needs. Although we follow Kidman to the netherworld and witness with her its wonders, we never, in fact, learn anything about Arbus and her secrets. It is this failure that throws into sharp relief the character of the woman-artist biopic as an act of performative hermeneutics. While the preferred psychoanalytical interpretation of the film emphasizes the restrictive narratives and representational strategies that have traditionally accommodated the woman artist, an analysis that accounts for the status of the film as

an adaptation demonstrates the simultaneous reaffirmation and questioning of existing representational models in(tro)duced by a postfeminist, postmodern(ist), differentiated portrayal of women artists on screen.

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EMANCIPATORS
AND MARTYRS

The Great White Hope (1970)

A Forgotten Biopic?

JAMES BURNS AND ABEL A. BARTLEY

IN 2009, IN A RARE ACT OF bipartisanship, Arizona Republican senator John McCain and Nevada Democratic senator Harry Reid asked newly elected President Barak Obama to grant a pardon to Jack Johnson, boxing's first black heavyweight champion. Their request was the culmination of a campaign initiated by documentary maker Ken Burns, who had filed a petition on Johnson's behalf in July 2004. In an editorial published in the *Los Angeles Times* in that month, Burns argued that Johnson's 1912 prosecution for violating the Mann Act was racially motivated. The timing of the application coincided with the airing of Burns's documentary *Unforgivable Blackness*, the first film to be made about Johnson's life in a generation. The bipartisan support for the request reflects the remarkable rehabilitation of the image of a man who was feared and reviled by most of white America in his era.

In 2004 Johnson was an obscure figure to most Americans. However, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Johnson's prime, he was the world's most famous black celebrity. After defeating retired champion Jim Jeffries, "the great white hope," in 1910, he was known to more people and made more money than any black American before him. No black sports figure would rival his celebrity until it was eclipsed by Muhammad Ali, who felt a close kinship with Johnson. Johnson's celebrity spread in part because he was the world's most celebrated athlete at the dawn of the cinema age. Indeed, he was one of the first film stars. Movies of his fights were seen throughout the world, making him the

most significant black screen presence of the silent era. But after he lost the heavyweight crown in 1915, he was soon forgotten, relegated to obscurity for much of the remainder of the century.

Johnson was rescued from anonymity in the mid-1960s, becoming the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning play, a documentary, and in 1970 a feature-length film, *The Great White Hope*. This article explores the making of this film, which seemed poised to return Johnson to national prominence. It was based on a celebrated Broadway play. It was well financed and was widely reviewed in the press. It garnered several Academy Award nominations, and many Hollywood insiders assumed that its star, James Earl Jones, had narrowly lost the best actor award to George C. Scott's portrayal of Patton. Its subject matter—the threat of institutionalized racism to the American dream—could not have been more topical. And as a biography of a famous African American celebrity, it was a pioneering film.

Yet *The Great White Hope* ultimately left little mark on critics, audiences, or Hollywood. It is thus a forgotten biopic, one that has garnered scant attention in the extensive literature on sports movies, African American films, or biopics. It also failed to restore Johnson's place as a pioneering black athlete in the pantheon of American celebrity. This article attempts to explain the film's subsequent slide into relative obscurity. It argues that the movie was artistically and politically out of step with the trends of Hollywood cinema at the beginning of the 1970s. As a piece of filmmaking, it provided audiences with a confusing hybrid of genres, which offered little opportunity for identification with the protagonist. Politically, its presentation of Johnson was at odds with rapidly changing attitudes toward race, identity, and celebrity in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

At the same time, this article argues that this is a film worthy of scholarly attention: the first biopic of a black American since the end of the studio system, and one of only a handful made before 1970. Its images of miscegenation and domestic violence are remarkable, even though they provoked surprisingly little controversy at the time. And its commercial and artistic failure illuminates important shifts in the nature of black identity as it was being reconstituted by Hollywood during this turbulent political era. Overall, an analysis of the film provides insight into a transitional period in both the history of key Hollywood genres and the history of American racial politics.

Jack Johnson was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1878.¹ He got his start fighting at a young age and learned the art of boxing from a competitor when the two men were incarcerated together. In the late 1890s, he honed his skills in a series of bouts, using his remarkable speed and

agility to quickly climb up the ladder of the professional ranks. By 1902 he was already being considered as a contender for the heavyweight title. In 1908 he decisively defeated Canadian Tommy Burns to become the first black world champion. Soon thereafter boxing promoters began searching for a white contender to challenge him. They ultimately persuaded retired champion Jim Jeffries to agree to a title bout against Johnson in 1910. The fight, which was held on July 4, 1910, was a watershed event in American sports history. It was covered in newspapers all over the world, and telegraph reports of the bout brought it to American audiences almost instantaneously. The spectacle of a white man being beaten by a black man in Jim Crow America made the fight an international sensation. Indeed, when Johnson defeated Jeffries easily in front of a huge crowd in Reno, Nevada, it ignited riots across the country. The films of the fight were banned throughout the world, and the American government moved swiftly to pass legislation prohibiting the distribution of boxing movies (Grieverson 1998, 44).

The “fight of the century” (as it was dubbed even before it began) took place at the dawn of cinema era and not long after the birth of professional boxing. Professional sports were in their infancy in 1910, and boxing was the leading spectator sport. This was in part because it lent itself well to the technology of the early cinema. While large cameras had difficulty following the action of most sports, boxing was tailor-made for the new medium. Indeed, fighters like Johnson recognized that their livelihood depended on the drama and spectacle of the filmed version of their bouts. Thus, the top fighters ensured that the audience had a good, long show before an opponent was knocked out.

By the time of the big fight, Johnson was already a celebrity with a notorious reputation for fast living, which included several conspicuous relationships with white prostitutes. His defeat of Jeffries and his brazen lifestyle made him a target of law enforcement. He was frequently stopped by police while driving one of his several automobiles, and two years after the Jeffries fight he was arrested under the Mann Act for transporting a white prostitute across state lines for immoral purposes. Rather than risk the verdict of a white jury, Johnson fled the country and went on a tour of Europe. He fought several bouts before returning to the Western Hemisphere in 1915 to defend his title in Cuba against a white challenger named Jess Willard. Under a blazing sun the much larger Willard knocked Johnson out, thereby ending his reign as champion. Johnson was thirty-seven at the time of his defeat and would continue fighting for another decade. He returned to America in 1920 and served one year in federal prison. Upon his release, he spent the remainder of his days trying to capitalize on his former celebrity,

working in movies, vaudeville, and as a sideshow attraction. He died in an automobile accident in 1946.

While he was champ, Johnson enjoyed an ambivalent celebrity. To most whites, he was a menace to the social order of Jim Crow. And while African Americans applauded his defeat of Jim Jeffries, his conspicuous flouting of segregation at times led to recriminations against the black community. After he retired from the ring, he infuriated many in the boxing world by trying to become involved in the training of the young black fighter Joe Louis. When Louis successfully distanced himself from the former champion, Johnson became a bitter critic of Louis, who was otherwise beloved by the African American community. Thus, by the time of Johnson's death in 1946, white America had little regard for his memory, and he was already forgotten by most black Americans, who had replaced him with a new generation of athletic and entertainment celebrities ("Jack Johnson Dies," 46).

Johnson's memory lay dormant for a generation until it was revived by the production of Howard Sackler's play *The Great White Hope* in 1967. The play was a thinly veiled version of Johnson's life, which starred the then-unknown James Earl Jones as the black boxer "Jack Jefferson" and Jane Alexander as his white girlfriend. It was directed by theater veteran Edwin Sherin. Its Broadway debut in 1968 received rave reviews. Jones won the Tony Award in 1969 as Broadway's best actor, and the play won the Pulitzer Prize. The movie rights were purchased before the play had even been staged. Alexander and Jones were cast for the film, Sackler adapted his play for the screenplay, and veteran filmmaker Martin Ritt was brought in to direct. The praise for the play and the alacrity with which the movie rights were purchased suggest that the idea of a biography of Jack Johnson was in tune with the Zeitgeist of the middle years of the 1960s.

The film was a faithful adaptation of the play with almost no changes made to the original dialogue. However, unlike the play, it begins with a title that promises "Most of what follows is true." The first scene portrays protagonist Jack Jefferson winning the heavyweight crown by defeating a white boxer in Australia. The fight is not shown—as the credits roll, you see the crowd and only the legs of the boxers in the ring. The film introduces the Johnson character through the conversation of a group of sportswriters who are trying to persuade a former champ to come out of retirement to "wipe the smile" off the black champ's face. Anyone familiar with the real Jack Johnson's story would immediately recognize the screenplay's historical basis. The name "Jack Jefferson" is a thinly revised version of the real fighter's name, and Johnson did win the heavyweight championship in a bout held in Australia against the white

fighter Tommy Burns. The “wipe the smile” remark is taken verbatim from a comment published by Jack London, who covered the fight as a journalist (Bartrop 1976, 8).

Johnson’s character appears on-screen for the first time as he enters his dressing room after the victory. This scene introduces the central conflict of the film when his manager meets Eleanor Bachman, the white woman who has become Jefferson’s girl friend. In a heated exchange, the manager tries to discourage him from having an open relationship with the woman, arguing that, while the white public hates him for being the champion, they will never forgive him for miscegenation. Jefferson admits to past indiscretions but assures his manager that he is committed to his relationship with Bachman. This will be the basis of his subsequent suffering and heroism.

The climax of Jefferson/Johnson’s life—the fight with the Great White Hope—is staged early in the film in an elaborate scene with thousands of extras. Indeed, as its promotional material asserts, the film spared no expense to scrupulously recreate the setting of the fight in Reno in 1910.² But the match itself is not shown except for a few punches thrown by a smiling Jack Jefferson against a faceless opponent. Indeed, of the four fights included in the story, only one of them is presented to the audience, the final fight, which Jefferson throws.

After winning the fight, Jefferson and Bachman go to Chicago, where they celebrate his victory with a parade through the black community. But the white establishment is outraged by the fighter’s insolent and scandalous behavior. As Jefferson and Bachman are sharing a tender, intimate moment in bed, several armed men break into their room and arrest them. Jefferson is charged with transporting a white woman across state lines for immoral purposes. Out on bail, he decides to leave the country because he is convinced that he will not get a fair trial. Aided by a black baseball team, which disguises him as one of their members, Jefferson makes his way across the border to Canada. The next portion of the film follows him from Canada to Europe. His plans to settle in England are thwarted when London authorities refuse to permit him to box. Moving on to Hungary, he is humiliated by having to find work appearing in a stage version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. When he does get a bout in France, he beats his white opponent so savagely that no other fighter will face him.

This middle portion of the film establishes Jefferson’s historical significance. He is presented as an inspirational figure to downtrodden African Americans, one who is brave and independent enough to flout the unfair conventions of Jim Crow. Virtually all of the film’s white characters and several of the black characters implore him to end his relationship

with Bachman. But Jefferson alone has the dignity and fearlessness to stand up against racial intolerance. These qualities, rather than his athletic ability, are his heroic attributes. Indeed, his fighting prowess is never explained, and it is accepted that Jefferson can win any fight he chooses.

The final portion of the film plots Jefferson's downfall. Unable to work in Europe, he and Bachman find themselves living in squalid circumstances in Mexico. Meanwhile, back in the States, a group of boxing promoters collude with a government agent (introduced anachronistically as "a man from the bureau") to offer Jefferson the opportunity to have his sentence reduced in exchange for throwing a fight to a white opponent. The government man explains that Jefferson poses a danger to public order because he is encouraging insolence among the new black migrants in northern and midwestern cities. Conceding that there is no white champion that can defeat Jefferson fairly, the promoters agree to bring him an offer in Mexico.

Back in Mexico, Jefferson and Bachman are shown having a violent argument. Bachman begs him to make his peace with the authorities in the United States so that they can settle down to a quiet life as a couple. But Jefferson accuses her of trying to tame him, thereby siding with the white establishment. He becomes verbally abusive and begins whipping her with a burlap sack. In their argument there is the suggestion that Jefferson has recognized that they cannot have children together because society would not accept them, and therefore his rejection of her can be read as a noble gesture. He ends his argument shouting, "I don't wanna give you nothing, understand? I'd cut it off first." Bachman flees the scene as two men enter. One is an American who has been sent to make the offer of the fixed fight. His companion is a Mexican sheriff, who draws a gun on Jefferson and threatens him with extradition to America. Jefferson initially rejects their offer and invites them to shoot him. But as he is preparing to leave, there is a commotion outside, and several men enter carrying Bachman, who has committed suicide by jumping down a well. Jefferson breaks down and agrees to the fight.

The final scene is the fight that Jefferson loses. There is some attempt to build tension as Jefferson appears to lie down, then gets up suddenly and begins beating his opponent handily. But after recognizing the man in the crowd who has organized the fight's fix, he is resigned to being beaten. Rather than lie down, he permits his bigger opponent to strike him unguarded and then falls to the mat. The credits roll with no further information about the fighter.

The final portion of the film hews closely (for a biopic) to the historic record. One of Johnson's white wives, Etta Duryea, did commit suicide, though it was before he was arrested under the Mann Act. The event was

unlikely to have had the significant effect on the real Johnson that it did on “Jack Jefferson,” as he remarried three months after her death. He did lose the championship belt in a fight in Havana in 1915 to a much larger opponent, as the final scene depicts. But the film’s staging draws its inspiration from Johnson’s later claim that he threw the fight to get a better deal from the authorities in the United States. Whether or not he did is subject to debate. Footage of the fight shows that Johnson fell after being struck by a withering blow from Willard. But many of Johnson’s defenders point out that he can be seen lying on the canvas casually shielding his eyes from the bright Cuban sun as he is counted out.³

The ending of the film fails to provide any suggestion as to what came next for Johnson. He was thirty-seven when he lost the title to Willard and continued to fight professionally, winning more than a dozen prizefights in the ensuing decade. He finally returned to the United States in 1920 to serve out his prison sentence. After his career ended in the late 1920s, he continued to try to maintain a professional influence in boxing and made money off his celebrity by performing in vaudeville and in films.

The Great White Hope was released in 1970, to mixed reviews. As a drama, many critics found it well-meaning, if uninspired in its execution (e.g., “a classic tragedy geared for modern audiences” [Knight 1970, 50]). Others complained that the transition from stage to screen was flawed. As the *New Yorker* critic complained, “imagine a reputable director in 1970 thinking he could turn a play into a movie by filling it up with extras” (“Clobber-Movie,” 155). Some reviewers found the film patronizing toward African Americans (Kanfer 1970, 105), while a writer for *Life* found it generally “disappointing” (“Critics Roundup,” 10). It was widely reviewed as a biopic of Jack Johnson and was thus subject to criticisms about its historical accuracy. For the reviewer at the *New Yorker*, it provided a diluted version of Johnson’s life, as the protagonist “is never allowed to be brazenly successful with white women. The whole point of the play is that he infuriates the American whites by flaunting his black virility, but the movie, like the play, is so afraid of letting its hero antagonize the audience that instead of having a blonde tucked under each arm, like the actual Johnson, Jefferson is allowed only one dowdy brunette, whom he tries to protect from the limelight” (“Clobber-Movie,” 155). In a similar vein, the reviewer for the *Washington Post* lamented that “the career of Jack Johnson [was] . . . considerably more interesting” (Arnold 1970). Another writer recognized the film’s melodramatic tone, but argued that a historically accurate depiction of black life under Jim Crow would be too “hellish” for contemporary audiences to stand (Thomas 1970).

Some of the artists associated with the film were disappointed in it as well. James Earl Jones in his memoir complained, “The screenplay eliminated every poetic aspect that the stage play had conjured, so that the stage characters who were mythic, gothic, larger than life, were reduced in the film to mere social entities” (Jones 1994, 203). Jones attributed the problems in part to the shift from the play’s director, Edwin Sherin, to the film’s, Martin Ritt, a veteran film and Broadway director with impeccable liberal credentials who had come under the scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee during the 1950s. Thus, he seemed an ideal choice to make a serious message film, having already made fourteen films including *Hud* (1963) and *The Molly Maguires* (1970). He would later go on to make the African American–cast *Sounder* (1972) and the union drama *Norma Rae* (1979). Interviewed years later, Ritt also expressed disappointment in the film. Though he had high praise for his two leading actors, he intimated that he had been bound to Howard Sackler’s script in a way that prevented him from making an interesting film: “I didn’t like the *Great White Hope* very much except for the two actors” (Miller 2002, 81). Ritt’s biographer similarly attributes the film’s “failure” to the script. “Ritt was unable to rise above the agit-prop, one-dimensional flavor of the stage-play” (Jackson 1994, 124).

While the film did garner several Academy Award nominations, it was a commercial disappointment. Made with a ten million dollar budget and shot on location in several countries, *The Great White Hope* was taken “on a ‘test run’ . . . in advance of general distribution.” But, though it fared well in its market research, it did poorly at the box office (Jackson 1994, 114). Despite the fact that the NAACP recognized its merit, black audiences in particular expressed little enthusiasm for the film.⁴ Moreover, given its subject matter—the biography of the most controversial black celebrity of the century—the enormous critical attention it received, and the relatively large production budget, the film did little to revive Johnson as a historical figure in the public consciousness. Why did he lapse into obscurity soon after the film’s release? One problem was that it proved difficult for critics and audiences alike to categorize the film in a specific genre. While it appeared to be a conflation of two popular genres—the biopic and the sports film—it embraced the conventions of neither one. In his pioneering work *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, George Custen identifies several characteristics that define the genre. Most basically, a biopic uses the name of a real character blessed with a unique talent or genius, which he or she utilizes to transform the orthodoxy of his or her particular field. By the end of the biopic, through the assistance of friends or family, the figure has succeeded in replacing the old paradigm with a new one that is partially or

wholly of his or her making. The biopic frequently ends with titles that explain the subsequent impact of its subject on posterity.⁵

At first blush, *The Great White Hope* is not congruent with Custen's influential understanding of the genre. It does not use Johnson's real name. It shows an individual figure who gets assistance from no one—the only person he trusts in the film commits suicide, thereby leaving him to face his inexorable defeat alone. Nor is there any suggestion that Johnson will change the racist society that crushed him or leave any contribution to posterity. The classic Hollywood biopic shows the hero subverting the traditional paradigm through his or her genius and triumphing by reordering his or her particular field in a way that creates a new orthodoxy. *The Great White Hope* provides no such rooting interest for the audience. The film is about the sacrifice of a noble life with no benefit to anyone. While Johnson is locked in the final fight, a young black boy watches among a sea of white fans, all of whom are booing Johnson. When Johnson is finally knocked out, so (apparently) are the hopes of the young man. The film is ultimately about the tragedy of Jim Crow.

To understand the degree to which the film violates the structure of the genre, a useful comparison is the near-contemporary biopic of the black singer Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972). Like *The Great White Hope*, it tells the story of an icon of early-twentieth-century black celebrity. However, it conforms closely to Custen's formula. We meet the character in her teens, where her musical talent reveals itself. We see her struggle against the travails of poverty, racism, and drug addiction. The film ends triumphantly with her performing in Carnegie Hall and closes with a title that explains her significance to the history of American music.

Robert Rosenstone has argued that Custen's evaluation of the biopic as a genre ignores an important element of the historical value of screen biography. In Rosenstone's view, "Film creates a kind of dimensional, almost tactile historical figure in a way that is beyond the capabilities of the written word. Here a skilled performer takes what we know from historical accounts . . . and embodies that knowledge into movements and moments that allow the audience to feel as if they are (apparently) witnessing the past" (Rosenstone 2007, 17). Thus, to Rosenstone, Custen's formula ignores the potential of any given biopic to further the audience's historical understanding of its subject. But one could argue that *The Great White Hope's* greatest violence to history is not in the changing of names or rearranging of historical events but in its distorted embodiment of Johnson the man. Jones's portrayal and Sackler's script create a swaggering, charming, fearless character that effectively captures Johnson's charisma and authority. But beyond his immense self-confidence and

charm, the real Jack Johnson manifested few of the characteristics with which Jones invests him. As one of his obituaries commented, “Certainly he seems not to have been a bad fellow intrinsically—just a loud, flashy, good-natured Galveston roustabout” (“Jack Johnson,” 8). Writing four decades later, his biographer Randy Ross asserted, “It is only from a safe distance, intellectual as well as physical, that Jack Johnson could honestly be admired as a man” (Ross 1985, 230). But if the film did not conform to the structure of the biopic, it was consciously marketed as one and reviewed as such by critics. Indeed, Custen himself in a later article casually mentions it as one of the few biopics made about a black sports figure during the 1970s (“Mechanical Life,” 127). And today it is widely categorized in the biopic genre by film fans on the Internet.⁶

If the film fails to conform to the rules of the biopic, it is even more anomalous as a sports film. Several biopics of black athletes had preceded *The Great White Hope*, including *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) and *The Joe Louis Story* (1953). But *The Great White Hope* bears little resemblance to these or other predecessors in the genre. At no time is the audience permitted to watch Johnson use his skills to best an opponent. Nor are the boxing sequences particularly realistic—the one fight that is staged is punctuated by a series of clearly faked punches.⁷ While censorship concerns had kept previous boxing films from being too violent, audiences had become used to seeing credibly staged bouts in the movies. After all, professional boxing had long been a regular feature of weekly television broadcast programming. The limitations of the action in the film offer a stark contrast to the fight sequences staged in subsequent boxing films during the decade. The later 1970s witnessed a revival of boxing movies, beginning with the Oscar-winning *Rocky* (1976), which inspired a number of imitators (as well as a series of virtual remakes with different roman numerals attached). Then, in 1977, Muhammad Ali starred as himself in the biopic *The Greatest*. This was followed three years later by Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull*, which provided a new template for boxing films and biopics that change both genres forever. In all these films the fighting sequences were central to the story. Seen alongside *The Great White Hope*, these films appear to have been made in separate centuries.

Why was there so little boxing in the film? In his memoir, Jones claimed that he had pressed the director to add some. “‘If you want to make the film more realistic’ I asked, ‘Why doesn’t Jack do more fighting? Everything else in the equation was changed in the translation from theatre to movie screen, so why not the boxing?’” (Jones 1994, 203). Jones feared that this was a deliberate effort to reshape the story: “I began to wonder if there might be some unconscious motive to neuter the role, to diminish the tragic hero” (ibid.). Ritt, for his part, justified

the failure to film the boxing sequences by asserting that he didn't have to "hit the viewer over the head" for them to understand what was happening (qtd. in Jackson 1994, 113). Without a clear explanation, one can't say for sure why the scenes were not staged. But it is worth noting that by the time the film was in production America's most prominent black fighter, Cassius Clay aka Muhammad Ali, had been out of the ring for three years because of legal problems. And he had not fought any prominent bouts against a white opponent in front of an American audience. Perhaps Ritt feared that Americans were still not prepared to accept the spectacle of a black man beating up a white man in the ring.

The neglected boxing sequences point to a broader explanation as to why this became a forgotten biopic. When Howard Sackler was writing his play in the mid-1960s, the civil rights movement was associated with the moderate, reformist campaigns of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. One of the most talked-about films of 1967, the year the play hit Broadway, was the miscegenation drama *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Its story of white liberal parents (Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn) learning to accept a black Nobel Prize-winning scientist (Sidney Poitier) as their son-in-law epitomized middle-class America's fantasy of the future of race relations. But by the time the film version of Sackler's play was released in 1970, the tone of the discourse on race in America had changed dramatically. Events in the mid-sixties—such as the assassination of Malcolm X and the Watts riots of 1965—had drawn support away from the peaceful protests associated with Dr. King and toward new strategies. Malcolm X's fiery rhetoric had inspired a generation of urban African American youth who had grown increasingly frustrated with the reform advocated by black moderates and white liberals. Malcolm's prized recruit was Cassius Clay, the successful boxer from Louisville, Kentucky, who had a meteoric rise after winning a gold medal in the 1960 Olympics. By defeating the heavily favored Sonny Liston in 1964, Clay became the youngest heavyweight champion in history. Soon after winning the title, he renounced Christianity and joined Elijah Muhammad's nascent Nation of Islam. Having chosen the name Muhammad Ali, in 1967 he shocked ordinary Americans by refusing to serve in a "white man's war" in Vietnam. To Ali, his principled stance and subsequent prosecution made him a latter-day Jack Johnson. But unlike Johnson, Ali was able to associate his defiance with a national struggle and a mass movement, an association that transformed him into an antiwar icon.

Ali represented a new generation of African Americans who transformed Stokely Carmichael's message of "Black Power" into action. Their frustration fueled a series of devastating riots, which caused havoc in cities like Boston, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. Nineteen sixty-eight also

saw the rise to prominence of the Black Panther Party. The assassination of Dr. King in April 1968 further accelerated a transformation that had been underway for several years. By 1970 this transformation was being reflected in popular culture, from the words of James Brown's "Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud" to the beginning of blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971).

In this context, a Jack Johnson biopic should have seemed familiar to American audiences. But this particular film about a great black fighter didn't show Johnson standing up to anyone successfully. His bouts in the ring would have perhaps resonated with the Black Power movement had they been filmed. But without them, it was instead the story of the price to be paid for black pride. Indeed, audiences seeing the film would have inevitably compared the protagonist to Ali (several reviewers commented on the comparison between the two, and one suggested that Jones was consciously playing the character as an early-twentieth-century Ali). However, the crucial difference was that audiences regularly got to see Ali fight and triumph. Indeed, an important component of the collective forgetting of Jack Johnson after 1970 can be attributed to Ali's seizing the mantle of the earlier black champion. If the movie's version of Jack Johnson was historically accurate, there was no need to remember such a powerless figure when the real Muhammad Ali could turn the same confidence, swagger, and fearlessness into victory in the ring.

Set against this background, the film appeared to be neither about America in 1910 nor about contemporary America. Rather, it was a time capsule of 1967, a portrayal of an era that had been eclipsed by events. It was Ali himself who made this contrast apparent. Ali had befriended Jones during the stage play and frequently pointed out the resemblances between his and Johnson's careers. At the time the play was staged, Ali was in the process of being prosecuted. To Ali, Johnson was a victim of a government conspiracy that used trumped-up charges to prevent a brash black man from succeeding. As he told Jones, "Take out the white woman and put in the Vietnam war and you have my story" (qtd. in Collings 2007, 203). But by the time the film was released, Ali's image had been rehabilitated with the American public, as his opposition to the Vietnam War had become increasingly popular. He was legally vindicated when the Supreme Court overturned his conviction, thereby allowing him to continue fighting. In 1970, he retained his title in a match against Jerry Quarry, the first white American fighter he had faced since his prosecution (who was touted as "the not so great white hope" on the eve of the fight [Gildea 1970]). Thus, to a great extent Ali assumed the identity that the film had constructed for Jack Johnson. It is significant to note

that the next film about a black athlete to be released after *The Great White Hope* was *The Greatest*, an Ali biopic made in 1977 which starred Ali and featured Jones as Malcolm X. In this version Ali plays himself very much as Jones had played Johnson—as a brash, ambitious man of unimpeachable loyalty and honor.

Eclipsed by Ali, Johnson's story was forgotten for another generation. While he became the subject of several biographies during the 1970s and 1980s, his popular profile disappeared from public view. In 2004, however, Ken Burns returned Johnson to prominence with a documentary titled *Unforgivable Blackness*, which aired on PBS. It also had a companion biography of the same title written by Burns's collaborator Geoffrey C. Ward. In Ward's book, and in Burns's documentary, the centerpiece of Johnson's life was the fight of the century, which divides both film and book in the middle. In his presentation of Johnson's story, Burns stressed the elements of his life that might have given *The Great White Hope* greater relevance to audiences in 1970. First, Burns provided extensive footage of Johnson's fights, which put his power and talent on display. Second, the documentary constructed an argument about Johnson and his relevance to contemporary America. As Burns explained in a newspaper interview, "Jack Johnson's bravery permits the Jackie Robinsons, the Paul Robesons and Arthur Ashes, and the other trailblazers that had to swim upstream as well" (Harrington 2005, Y0). This element of Johnson's life—his gift to posterity—is a cornerstone of the screen biopic that is absent from *The Great White Hope*.

When the play *The Great White Hope* premiered in 1967 it was a critical and commercial success. But in 1970, many of the film's detractors blamed its poor quality in part on the fact that the original play had been mediocre.⁸ This changing evaluation illuminates the fluid nature of the dialogue about race in America during these crucial three years. In 1967 it would not have been politic for reviewers in popular newspapers and magazines to criticize a play that was widely recognized as a groundbreaking and daring exploration of racial intolerance in America.

But by 1970, some film critics were emboldened to trash Sackler's play in their reviews. Moreover, the failure of the film to make a commercial or critical mark had just as much to do with an important distinction between Broadway and Hollywood. Theater fans brought few expectations to Sackler's play in 1967.⁹ Movie fans had much more rigid expectations. They were accustomed to seeing the triumph of the great man in the biopic and the spectacle of athletic competition in a sports film. When *The Great White Hope* provided neither, the film and its once-famous protagonist were quickly forgotten.

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Notes

1. The biographical information provided is drawn from Ward 2004, the most comprehensive and recent biography, which, as do all the Johnson biographies, relies for details of Johnson’s early life on his published memoirs (see Johnson 1977).

2. Promotional materials for the film are available in “The Great White Hope” production file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

3. Upon his death, several obituaries presented Johnson’s claim as fact, with the *Washington Post* writer asserting, “No one could remember having seen the blow that felled him” (“Jack Johnson”). But the writer had probably never seen film of the fight, which is now readily available on YouTube.

4. Leab says of the film’s black audiences: “Nor did they want weighty films like the *Great White Hope* . . . , a flawed version of the play based on the career of heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson. As *Variety* informed its readers, black moviegoers ‘don’t cotton to such pix as . . . they feature . . . blacks in a losing light.’ What they wanted to see was what John Shaft and Sweetback had offered them” (Leab 1976, 253).

5. See Custen, *Bio/Pics*, passim, but especially p. 51 on the formal elements of the genre.

6. See, for example, “In a League of Their Own: The Best Sports Movies Ever,” or “Page Two Goes to the Movies.”

7. The staged nature of the fight scenes was commented upon by Arnold (1970).

8. As Vincent Canby put it, “Howard Sackler’s *The Great White Hope*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics Prize and the Antoinette Perry Award as the best drama of the 1968–1969 Broadway season, never was much of a play” (Canby 1970, 45).

9. Jones later recalled that when he first read the play his wife complained that it was “not avant-garde enough” (Jones 1994, 188).

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Kinsey

An Inquiry into American Sexual Identity

GABRIELE LINKE

Body and Nation

THE USE OF THE BODY METAPHOR—as in the “body politic” of the Mayflower compact—to conceptualize abstract and complex social organizations or institutions not only has a long tradition but has recently been analyzed and explained by cognitive linguists such as Zoltán Kövecses (2005, 209). Therefore it is not surprising that questions of sexuality, and the sexologist Alfred Charles Kinsey (1894–1956) as well as the “Kinsey Reports” of 1948 and 1953 in particular, have been considered to be “at the heart of the concept of national character” (Simmons 2007, 201). Miriam G. Reumann argues that because of the changes in sex talk and the sexualization of public discourse, sex can no longer be seen “as merely a private or individual matter” (Reumann 2005, 201) but has been more closely linked to the public order than in earlier eras. In the national-sexual discourses of the early Cold War period, the perceived decline of the male breadwinner family and male power was read as a sign of the decline of the virility of the nation while a hypersexuality seemed to be needed to resist communism—the pattern recurs in the war against terrorism in the 2000s. The parallels between the two eras, particularly between their paranoia (induced by communists and Islamists, respectively) and the responses to it have been pointed out by several critics (Felperin 2005, 38; Huetli 2007, 157; Munro 2004, 3476–77).

On the other hand, women's active sexuality and engagement in pre- and extramarital sex have often been seen as tainting not only individual but national purity; and, of course, homosexuality has been linked to weakness and the loss of (national) character. Recent texts abound with body metaphors that give Kinsey's work a national scope, as in "undressing America" (Ansen 2004, 58) or exploring America's silenced other half, the lower abdomen (Hüetli 2007, 158; the German original is *Unterleib*, which means both lower body and sex organs). Such metaphors of disclosure and exploration also assign an epistemological dimension to Kinsey's work on sexuality because both Kinsey's studies and the cinematic reconstruction of his life and research in the film *Kinsey* have been contributing to the nation's shared knowledge of sexuality. Furthermore, Kinsey's work and the film attest to the "explosion of unorthodox sexualities" that Foucault observed in modern industrial societies and linked with extending relations of power (Foucault 1990, 49). As knowledge of the actual multiplicity of sexual practices left the intimate and entered the public sphere, this knowledge became part of the process through which the construction of a national imaginary, including a national sexual imaginary, has been combined with complex structures of power.

Moreover, *Kinsey* has been categorized as one of the recent films "with queer content" that have been produced and distributed by the art house divisions of major Hollywood studios and have contended for Oscars (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 348). Indeed, this blurring of the lines between mainstream and independent film has allowed more serious films with queer content to be distributed more widely than ever before (ibid.). Attempting to read *Kinsey* as a film with queer content raises the question of the place of the queer—and, generally, the various sexualities embodied in the film—in the national sexual imaginary. Although, historically in American culture, homosexuality has been linked to weakness and the loss of (national) virility, it is increasingly being acknowledged as a contested and reconfigured aspect of the body of the nation and its networks of power. In this respect, Kinsey the man and the film are linked with the issue of sex panic, which has been observed to happen when the "moral and bodily sanctity of the normative citizen subject" is compromised by knowledge about the messiness of sex escaping privacy and entering the public and politics (Burgett 2009, 67). Burgett explains how panic characterizes a nationalist culture that polices sex, but also how this panic does so "in ways that produce nationalist culture" (ibid.). The historical Kinsey and the antinormative contents of his studies certainly illustrate the workings of sex panics, particularly as they dealt with, and were affected by, the policing of the boundaries of normative sex, which, especially in the 1950s but also in more recent times, came in the guise of

nationalist statements. However, power relations and the national sexual imaginary have been shifting through time, and boundaries have moved toward more inclusivity, changes that are reflected in the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s, to which *Kinsey* is said to respond (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 343–48).

Alfred Kinsey, Past and Present

If one considers the parallels between the moral-political situation in the 1950s and in the early 2000s, it comes as no surprise that Alfred Kinsey's life and work have recently witnessed a surge of attention in various forms, such as biographies by J. H. Jones (1997) and Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy (1998), the biographical novel *The Inner Circle* by T. C. Boyle (2004), the biographical film *Kinsey* (2005), and the substantial re-appreciation of the "Kinsey Reports" by Miriam G. Reumann (2005). Several reviews of the film refer explicitly to those parallels, observing a similar backlash then and now against the tolerance of sexual difference (for example, Felperin 2005, 38) and a similar political and moral climate during McCarthyism and then the culture wars under the second Bush administration (for example, Munro 2004, 3476). The battle over Kinsey and his legacy has been, in both eras, a metaphorical battle over the American character, over what is and is not American, and over the balance between diversity and normativity, freedom and control. In the debates, as in the film, some of the unresolved contradictions of American life are laid out in the open; nevertheless, I am arguing, the film *Kinsey* remains true to Hollywood in that many scenes and dialogues appear liberal and provocative on the surface, yet some less obvious aspects of the film convey a more moderate political message and render its ideological standing more ambiguous. The film's (re)presentation of the bodies of the actors, the sex history of the nation, and its own generic hybridity are significant and instructive sites of such ambiguities.

Kinsey—The Film

Kinsey is a product of Fox Searchlight Pictures, a subdivision of 20th Century Fox, a company characterized by George Custen as one of the leading producers of biopics in the classical Hollywood era, at the time portraying mainly conventional elites (Custen 1992, 83–84). Still pursuing this tradition, *Kinsey* features, as I shall argue, a clearly centred protagonist who is characterized as an innovative scientist and pioneer (Petrakis 2004, 35) of sexology and who bears all the signs of the conventional cinematic hero. Kinsey can be viewed as a character in the tradition

of the “cinema of sacrifice” (Taylor 2002, 17), since he exploits not only others but also himself, indeed, sacrifices himself to his life’s work—“He died for our pleasure,” as David Denby (2004, 173) puts it. Adhering to conventional biopic plot structure, the film commences in medias res (Custen 1992, 151), that is, at the point where the protagonist displays the behavior that will make him famous (ibid., 67). In Kinsey’s life it is the point where he is about to start his breakthrough survey of male sexual behavior: he is practising interviewing techniques in a mock interview with members of his research team. Key events of Kinsey’s childhood, youth, and early academic career are revealed through his answers to the interview questions he has invented and to which he is subjecting himself and through the flashbacks triggered by them. Interview and flashbacks show his repressed and repressive father, a professor of engineering and a Methodist preacher, young Alfred’s discovery of the outdoors and first confrontation with sexual issues as an Eagle Scout, his rebellion against his father and successful early research on the gall wasp, and his courtship and marriage with Clara McMillen. The narrative frame of the interview questions fades out at the time in his life when his interest turns to the scientific exploration of sex.

The film’s structure follows the classic biopic concentric form of the life story. After an in medias res exposition with flashbacks, a heterosexual romance humanizes the protagonist, who pursues his research with missionary drive, overcomes obstacles, emerges triumphant, and finds public recognition. Soon after the climax of his success as a scientist, the publication of *The Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* in 1948, his career starts to crumble when tensions among Kinsey’s team explode and the forces of McCarthyism and moral conservatism combine to drain his research of funding, discourage public support for him and his work, and isolate Kinsey socially, so that he finally suffers a breakdown. Nevertheless, the film ends on a more positive note with a woman seeking out Kinsey to tell him that his research saved her life. The reappearance of the interview situation at the end, where the interviewer notes that love is absent in Kinsey’s study and asks if it matters, establishes an important aspect of the ending. The film closes with Kinsey’s reaffirmation of his initial love of nature as well as his love of his wife, and his final statement that there is still a lot of work to be done.

Dialogical Structure and Polyphony

As I have pointed out before, the film starts (in black and white) as Kinsey practices his famous interviewing technique with members of his research team. The static camera shows the character Clyde Martin

(Peter Sarsgaard), team member and future interviewer, in close-up while a voice from offscreen, Kinsey's, gives him instructions. Martin starts with the first questions, and the camera alternates between Martin's face and the questionnaire sheet where he fills in the coded answers. Then the voice from offscreen is given a body, first his hands, then the bow tie, then Kinsey's (Liam Neeson's) face. This introduction establishes science as a central theme and emphasizes that verbal action, dialogue, rather than physical action will structure the film. In the interview scenes, the questions and answers are a concretization of the abstract idea of science asking questions in pursuit of knowledge, and they emphasize that scientific knowledge is produced and spread through discourse. Interestingly and crucially, dominant ideologies had previously attempted to ban sex from the public sphere, so merely talking about it in public and in a respectable environment, and writing about it for the public, were already innovations, which Kinsey carried much further than any of his predecessors in sex research (Bullough 2004, 285). People have always done what they have done in private, but sex has often become a controversial political issue when certain details leaked into the public sphere. Social perceptions of sex have been shaped through its negotiations in public discourse, a process of social construction acknowledged by many theorists (for example, see Butler 2003, 349). In the film, this process (re-)constructs sexuality by emphasizing the diversity of sexual practices and normalizing them, by trying to separate sex from marriage, and by establishing sex talk as a normal practice.

I will now look at several social groups that, in the film, respond to Kinsey's attempt at reconstructing sex. By having different persons voice these responses, writer-director Bill Condon creates a polyphony that is not only democratic but offers points of agreement to diverse audiences. This polyphony is another expression of the film's ideological ambiguity. The voices selected for discussion are mainly those of Kinsey, his family, members of his team, the press, and the interviewees.

After sex talk at the family's dinner table, Kinsey's son Bruce complains that his is "not a normal family." He voices a conservative critique of intergenerational, cross-gender sex talk in the family, which has been associated with hurting the innocent, evoking unhealthy sexual curiosity, and being generally harmful to the young. It is one of the scenes in which Kinsey's scientific approach to sex violates dominant 1940s social conventions of what topics are appropriate for discussion at the family dinner table. Very convincingly, the younger generation is shown to be less revolutionary than their father's. Furthermore, the father-son conflict is a stereotypical element of the American myths of the family and a man's coming of age (not to mention the Freudian aspect). Thus, the

son's rebellion is also ambiguous and allows two readings, one as the characteristic father-son conflict and one as an open criticism of Kinsey's breach of social rules.

Clara McMillen's role is even more prominent and ambiguous since she is portrayed as complicit as well as suffering and questioning. On the one hand, she is depicted delighting in sex with her husband and with Martin. On the other hand, when Kinsey confides to her that he had sex with Martin, she defends the social value and the good sense behind the social conventions of marriage and argues that conventions also serve to protect people against hurt. She refuses to acknowledge that, as Kinsey claims, "[i]t's all social conventions," and that sex is nothing compared with their life together. In this particular dialogue, Clara voices many people's concerns that disregard for the ordering force of convention will unleash the anarchic, destructive power of sex: indeed, it is crucial that Clara, who loves Kinsey and fully supports his sex research and sex education, voices this criticism. She represents those who are for sex education and sexual liberation but within the confines of stabilizing social rules.

The depiction of Kinsey's sexual encounter with Clyde Martin and the subsequent discussion with Clara, as well as the unnamed woman who, at the end of the film, thanks Kinsey for saving her life with his publication, can all be seen as part of the queer content of the film. Nevertheless, the film's gay practices are embedded discursively in such a way that they are also contained. The relationship between Martin and Kinsey is not legitimized by romantic love and is thus (as expressed by Clara) reprehensible, whereas the unnamed woman presents her lesbian relationship wholly in terms of romantic love. She represents a queer readership and community for whom Kinsey's study opened the door of the closet, as she voices the support by this community and offers the audience an (approved because romantic) queer perspective.

Like Clara, Kinsey's research team rebels at some point against the rules set up by Kinsey, especially the one separating their marriages from their sex lives. The loss of certainty about what marriage means results in a breakdown of order as Martin and Gebhard engage in a fist fight over Martin's wife. In the ensuing confrontation, Martin accuses Kinsey of treating them like "lab rats" and, again like Clara, expresses the pain resulting from the disregard of conventions and the separation of sex from love demanded by Kinsey. More criticism of Kinsey's projects comes from college professors, administrators, and other members of the establishment. The technique of giving conservative opponents a voice and thus integrating conservative spectators' positions in the film is as much a part of *Kinsey* as it is of many other Hollywood films. This polyphony represents a pluralism of opinions and can be seen as a "dem-

ocratic” approach to the phenomenon of Kinsey, a strategy that is given an ideological direction only at the end of the film when heterosexual romance in the form of the Kinseys’ married love provides a somewhat happy ending and affirms America’s dominant views of what are appropriate sexual relationships.

Furthermore, multi-discursivity is achieved through the montages of newspaper and magazine headlines, which have the referential function of authenticating Kinsey as a historical body as well as the discursive function of representing the *vox populi*. Twice, the newspaper headlines and magazine covers flash on screen in rapid succession, signifying the cumulative public response to Kinsey’s studies. While his first book, on male sexuality, is received with enthusiasm, and he makes it onto the covers of respectable magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Collier’s*, and *Time*, his second study, on the sexuality of women, evokes only rejection and abuse by the public, as expressed in “KINSEY INSULTS AMERICAN WOMANHOOD.” These voices are clearly marked as media fabrications and as historical, but they can still stand in for the contradictory assessments of a contemporaneous twenty-first-century audience.

Sex History, Life Story, and the Nation

Multi-discursivity is also represented by the many different voices and faces of the interviewees. While the few interviews that address crucial points such as gay sex and pedophilia are shown at some length, Condon also finds ways of representing the national scope of the study and the diversity of sex histories, which are also life stories. The beginning of the studies section is marked by a return to the interview-training situation but now in color. Then, for more than three minutes, brief shots of interviews are cut in rapid succession, first featuring an interviewer asking or an interviewee answering a question. Then, talking heads of interviewees are blended onto roads, road signs from different states, and patches from maps of the United States. Toward the end of the sequence, the talking heads rapidly melt into each other and pop up all over a map of the United States. The sequence signifies the melding of ages, skin colors, sexual orientations, and funny as well as tragic episodes into the story of the sexual life of the nation, into a collective sex history and biography. The individual voices rise and fade, overlap and merge into a polyphonic flow of voices and words. By the use of this imagery, Condon suggests that the “body” of Kinsey’s work comprises the sex history of the nation, which is another aspect of the complex meanings of body and biography in the film. Yet this melding and blurring of the multitude of sex histories is an ambiguous strategy because it not only signals

variety and inclusivity but also conceals the shape of the sexual imaginary and the underlying power structures. As we shall see, accommodating different sexual practices yet leaving them unevaluated is problematic. As the programmatic statement made by Kinsey in the initial interview sequence suggests, “a nonjudgmental attitude is harder than you think.”

Embodiment and Stars: From Double Bodies to Triple Bodies?

Starting from Ernst Kantorowicz’s idea of the double body of medieval kings, the “body natural” and the “body politic” (qtd. in Taylor 2002, 48), Henry McKean Taylor poses the thesis that biography produces double bodies, that is, bodies that are both real and symbolic, an individual and a symptom of a larger social aggregate (ibid.), and that, in the course of the life story, the real body becomes more and more symbolic. Indeed, the idea that life, “bios,” means both the individual and the community or country has been traced back to antiquity (ibid., 50). Taylor also indicates that film stars as protagonists of biopics create interesting problems of embodiment, but does not elaborate on this idea (ibid., 15). These problems, nevertheless, require attention. What happens in the biopic (perhaps as much as or even more than in other performing arts and practices, such as theatre and dance) is that a (simulacrum of a) third body, the actor’s, is added to the historical and symbolic bodies of the biographical subject.

In the film, Kinsey is played by Irish actor Liam Neeson, born William John Neeson in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, in 1952. He was a boxer in his youth, studied to be a teacher, worked in various jobs but was also involved in theatre projects, and finally embarked on an acting career. Neeson performed in various Irish theatres before getting his first film role in 1978. In the early eighties, after his success in *Excalibur* (1981), he moved first to London, then, in 1987, after more film roles, to Hollywood (“Liam Neeson”). David Denby observes that, despite the praise Neeson received for his performances in *Schindler’s List* and other films, he was not quite a star, and his “earthy directness and largeness of spirit” made him difficult to use in contemporary settings, where he excelled only when his character was troubled as well as strong (Denby 2004, 171). These critical assessments call for a closer look at what a star is and at Neeson as a star.

Richard Dyer’s seminal outline of star studies dates back to 1979 but has remained a major point of reference in recent publications (Watson 2007, 130). Dyer suggests that “[s]tars embody social types, but star images are always more complex and specific than types. Types are, as it were,

the ground on which a particular star's image is constructed. This image is found across a range of media texts. . . . A star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as *promotion, publicity, films and commentaries/criticism*" (Dyer 2000b, 121). For a person to be understood as a star, it is necessary that various media provide their reflections and constructions of this person. Applying this criterion, I would contradict Denby's assessment that Neeson was "not quite a star." Neeson may not be a megastar, but the number and success of the films and TV programs he has featured in, the list of nominations for BAFTA, Golden Globe, and Best Actor Academy Awards, and his publicity listings—the Internet Movie Database recorded, among others, sixteen magazine cover photos ("Liam Neeson. Publicity Listings")—are clear indications of stardom. By 2004, Neeson had been established as a star intertextually through his many roles in films and on stage, and extratextually in other contexts and through publicity.

To understand some of the meanings that Neeson's stardom contributes to *Kinsey*, it may be useful to describe what distinguishes him from other stars. Christine Geraghty develops the categories of celebrity/professional/performer (Geraghty 2000, 187). Neeson's profile is low on celebrity but high on his qualities as a professional and performer, and his professionalism is substantiated by his roots in Irish theatre and his extensive stage credits in London and New York, where he earned praise, for example, for his role as John Proctor in *The Crucible* at the Virginia Theater in 2002 (Brantley 2002). Neeson's acting comes across markedly as performance, as "work with cultural value," and not as "stars-as-professionals who act as themselves" (Geraghty 2000, 193). The emphasis is shifted away from the body of the star as spectacle "to the body as site of performance, worked over by the actor" (ibid.). In *Kinsey*, Neeson's body and acting lend his role seriousness and gravity, but on the other hand, also maintain a slight distinction between the historical American persona and the (non-American) performer, thus de-familiarizing *Kinsey* for the audience rather than merging and overwriting his historical body with the body of some American superstar.

Another set of categories refers to the choices actors face when they decide for roles and the ways the star image can be used in the construction of character in a film. Dyer claims that a star's presence in a film can already signal character because of the audience's foreknowledge and the star's image (Dyer 2000a, 125). A star's image is polysemic, which means that it signifies multiple meanings, but the multitude of meanings is finite and structured. Neeson has been said never to be better than when he plays real-life figures, and real-life figures that make tormented heroes (Mottram 2005, 55), a description that applies to his

performance in *Michael Collins* as well as, to some extent, *Kinsey*, to name two of his most critically acclaimed films. Although there are signs that he is particularly good at playing tormented real-life historical figures and that this has established one strong meaning of his star image, his filmography presents him as a versatile actor who first achieved success with historical adventure (*The Bounty*, *Rob Roy*). His breakthrough came with his performance as Oskar Schindler, a real-life figure and flawed hero, in Steven Spielberg's Holocaust drama *Schindler's List*. He has also been featured in a host of other genres, such as action (*Taken*) and romantic comedy (*Love Actually*), and given his voice to characters in a video game and various films. From these few examples it is evident that his star image is truly polysemic, but also that his most critically successful roles were indeed in historical dramas and biopics. The variety of roles played by Neeson points to his selective use of individual elements of his star image, but it seems as if his star image fits best the role of real-life figures as problematic heroes.

This is the baggage Neeson carries to *Kinsey*, and occasionally reviewers notice the relevance of star semiotics, as when, for example, Hüteli claims that the guardians of public morals were up in arms when they heard that Neeson, the protagonist of *Schindler's List*, was playing social educator Kinsey. The character of Oskar Schindler received his vitality from the contradiction between his materialism and selfishness on the one hand and his raw humanity and compassion on the other. Nevertheless, his compassion won over and, through a lucky alliance with his interest in profit, made him a hero and savior of hundreds of lives. The message that a flawed hero is nonetheless a hero is spelled out in the closing section of Spielberg's film when the actual survivors and their gratitude are presented visually. It may be read as an intertextual connection that *Kinsey*, like *Schindler's List*, ends with an evaluation of the flawed hero as someone who saved lives, because, in the last scene before the return to the black and white mode and the onset of closure, an unnamed woman visits Kinsey to thank him and tell him how his book saved her life. Thus, Neeson's presence in *Kinsey* adds another layer to the reconstruction of the historical person. The work of the sex educator takes on the meaning of work that saves human lives against all odds.

In this outline of Neeson's star image, no queer meanings seem to have become attached to his roles and persona. Although Neeson is shown half naked a few times and, once, gazing at a naked Clyde Martin and then engaging in sex with him, the presentation of his body (in pajamas) does not openly evoke a queer gaze but, in fact, appears to contain (that is, limit and restrict) queer sexuality. A comparison between Neeson's Kinsey and Sean Penn's Harvey Milk in the 2008 film *Milk* brings out

clearly the differences in the visual aesthetics. Although Julia Erhart points out that *Milk* has been criticized for misrepresenting and domesticating Harvey Milk's gay sexuality by excluding the more mundane facets of gay male culture in the 1970s, such as anonymous, casual sex (Erhart 2011, 163), and by "displacing" romance with political activism (ibid., 164), the film does feature physical intimacy between men, including kissing, nudity, and sexual acts, for all of which the "Parents Guide for *Milk*" provides a comprehensive list. Sean Penn's performance as Milk earned him great praise (for example, Clover 2009, 8), but it should be noted that Gus Van Sant claims he chose Penn partly because he was impressed by YouTube videos of Penn as a public speaker (Maupin 2013), and that Penn is an actor with an outstandingly rich acting career who is known to be, on the one hand, heterosexual and, on the other, a politically active liberal. Furthermore, Penn's masculine physique, and his muscular torso in particular, have become part of his star image (for example, in a recent photo article on Penn in the German women's magazine *Bunte*, J. Kranz presents him as a sex symbol). The physical side of Penn's star image is enhanced in the recurring shots of Penn/Milk half-naked, and the biopic character's involvement in clearly romantic relationships and in erotic and intimate situations distinguishes gay sexuality in *Milk* from the purely physical sexual act shown between Kinsey and Martin.

This sketch of the different contexts of Penn's performance as Milk should highlight the differences in the (gay) meanings of the star's body in the sexual order constructed in the two films. Penn's star image becomes part of Milk's complex and contradictory layers of meaning: it shows some affinity with gay politics and visual culture yet marks him as clearly heterosexual. The historical and cinematic bodies of Milk as a gay man are therefore not overwritten but somewhat contained—distanced and mediated—by Penn's star persona, while Penn's high professional standing adds status to the cinematic and, indirectly, historical Milk. The film's emphasis on Milk's political activism further contributes to its restraining of gay sexuality, as has also been pointed out by Julia Erhart (156).

The homosexual content of Kinsey occurs in two settings. One is the Chicago gay community, especially its gay bars, in which Kinsey sees a "gold mine of information" and from which he expects "great help to science," thus defining his interest as scientific and not erotic. The second is the hotel room where Neeson's Kinsey is shown to engage in gay sex. The act is preceded by Clyde Martin's moving about naked and offering himself to Kinsey's gaze and by a discussion between Martin and Kinsey about the sexuality continuum as well as Kinsey's sexual history, during which Kinsey admits a shift toward a homosexual orientation. The naked

Martin initiates the sexual encounter, and Kinsey responds passionately. Nevertheless, the academic conversation makes the encounter appear to be Kinsey's enactment of the sexuality continuum, detached from love, an experimental adventure further explicated to the audience in a subsequent conversation with his wife. These scenes as well as the number and diversity of sexual practices mentioned in the film are strong arguments for both the queer content of the biopic *Kinsey* and its containment.

Laura Linney can also boast a star image. She was born American but her profile resembles Neeson's in that it is low on the celebrity end and high as a performer not only in films but on stage and TV. For example, she happened to perform with Neeson in *The Crucible* on Broadway in 2002. She has also accumulated an impressive number of film awards and nominations, and her publicity listings indicate that her image is constructed in a variety of media but features, for example, only two magazine covers ("Laura Linney. Publicity Listings"). In an interview, Matthew Broderick calls Linney "acting's snow-covered volcano" and praises the complex persona that waits under a friendly and approachable surface (Broderick 2004, 54). Before performing as Clara McMillen in *Kinsey*, Linney was most successful as the lead in *You Can Count on Me* (2000) and in supporting roles in *Mystic River* (2003) and *Love Actually* (2003). Her acting as Samantha Prescott in *You Can Count on Me*, a realistic drama about family and relationships, was praised as honest, believable, complex, a character who is nonformulaic, dynamic, and struggling with issues of right and wrong (Ebert 2000). This is the image Linney brought to her role as Clara McMillen, who was her first real-life character. Linney's well-known positive attitude toward supporting roles in male-dominated film projects can be seen as fitting the role of Clara McMillen in the film, where she plays the role of the helpmate. Furthermore, Fred Topel quotes her fending off any excitement about a partially nude scene in *Love Actually* by saying, "Believe me, I've been so naked in so many movies at this point, please," reducing nude scenes to a routine part of acting. Thus, Linney's image as the "snow-covered volcano" enriches the meaning of the character of Clara McMillen, who is portrayed as both the bourgeois housewife and the passionate lover and participant in Kinsey's own experimenting with sex.

Neeson's stature as a star and Linney's strength in complex characters and supporting roles agree with the relatively conservative formula of the classic scientist biopic at work in *Kinsey*. The star images of Linney and Neeson neither subvert nor question the meanings of this formula; additionally, their images are open enough to accommodate the unusual challenges to their acting that come with the subject of sex research and the taboos attached to the issue.

A last element of the star images that needs to be addressed is national identity. At the time when *Kinsey* was shot, Neeson was an Irish actor (he took American citizenship in 2009) who had achieved stardom playing characters that often were not Americans. Although the historical Kinsey was a dyed-in-the-wool American, he is embodied here by a non-American. The persona of the star opens a possibility of understanding the character Kinsey as an outsider, as someone slightly foreign and not quite American. This would be a modification of Kinsey's real and symbolic historical body that gives its name to, and informs the character in, the film. This modification has an ideological dimension, though an ambiguous one. It allows the audience to focus either on the historical person and the character informed by it, that is, the great American pioneer of sexology, or on the dimension added by the body of the international star, which could signify Kinsey's apartness from mainstream America. Furthermore, casting Neeson as Kinsey can be read as a strategy to extend the meaning of the biologist and his work beyond the United States so that he becomes a complex signifier of the struggle for sexual liberation in Western cultures in the twentieth century. The latter two meanings are engendered by the third body (of the star, or rather the star image) interacting with the (traditional, literary) double body of biography. The multiplicity of meanings is characteristic of protagonists in biopics, in which the body of the historical person, which is physically absent, competes with the body of the star and is replaced by it (Taylor 2002, 91) and by the polysemy that is a feature of star images in general.

Nevertheless, names, actions, and other references to the historical person with the facets of his real and symbolic bodies anchor the character solidly in American culture, that is, in white middle-class America. The foreign body of Neeson as Kinsey may be a major device for reconciling the Americanness and "un-Americanness" of the historical Kinsey. Un-Americanness is meant here as a term indicating that Kinsey's life and research violated, and criticized productively, certain historical core values of the very white middle-class America he represented. It is to be understood without the association with communism and without the derogatory slant "un-American behavior" took on in the files of HUAC and the FBI, which persecuted Kinsey.

The Question of Genre: *Kinsey*—an American Romance?

The macrostructure of the film and the question of genre provide another way to track down its hidden ideological ambiguities. In biopics such as *Kinsey*, the evaluation of innovation is one site of such ambiguity.

Custen points out that in biopics the “veneration of innovation is at odds with Hollywood’s own marked conservatism in modes of production, where . . . innovation is typically slow and occurs within controlled contours” (Custen 1992, 74). He claims that innovation is commonly presented as deviation from ordinariness, which is a price too high for the average spectator to accept. The process of normalizing the genius by making him normal in spheres other than his creativity is one means of accommodating innovation in a conservative Hollywood frame. In Kinsey’s case, the characters of his own children and wife do much to expose both his conventional and unconventional sides. Although he claims that for him marriage is between equals, he lets Clara give up her graduate work when their children are born, takes for granted her role as a housewife and helpmate, and rules his family in largely patriarchal ways. Moreover, although in the film Kinsey’s family certainly serves as his anchor in normality and conventional middle-class life, it is also a site of struggle between innovation and conservatism with regard to marital fidelity and heterosexuality. In the depiction of the Kinseys’ early married life, sex is shown to be liberating when practiced in marriage but becomes much more problematic when practiced across the boundaries of marriage and heterosexuality and without regard for social and cultural constraints. One of the key sequences of the film shows Kinsey on the road, in a motel, first calling his wife and telling her that he loves her, later engaging in a sexual encounter with Clyde Martin, the kiss between the two men having received much attention from reviewers (Mottram 2005). When he returns home, he confesses his sexual encounter to his wife, who feels she is “not enough” and claims she has been faithful because she does not want to hurt him. She exposes as a mere justification his argument that “it’s all social conventions,” and defends social conventions such as faithfulness in marriage as meaningful social rules that protect people against hurt.

The two final sequences nudge the film toward a celebration of the mystery of (heterosexual) romantic love. In the first sequence, the final return to the black and white interview situation with which the film started, Clyde Martin asks “one more question.” At the beginning, the camera has shown the interviewer questioning and Kinsey’s voice answering from off; the last interview sequence reverses the situation—Kinsey’s face is shown in close-up while he is answering the questions. The close-up on Kinsey signals that he is to be perceived as a man of emotion, not merely the social type of the impersonal scientist. The interviewer states that, in Kinsey’s entire story, there has not been a single mention of love. The following dialogue ensues:

KINSEY: That's because it's impossible to measure love. And as you know, without measurements, there can be no science. But I've been thinking a lot about the problem lately.

MARTIN: Problem?

KINSEY: When it comes to love, we are all in the dark.

MARTIN: So—you do think it matters?

Kinsey assigns love a metaphysical quality that defies any attempt at describing it with the means of “exact” science. The dialogue indicates that he feels and acknowledges the power of love in relationships and that this power poses a problem because he cannot “measure” the relationship between sex and love.

Instead of a verbal or visual answer to the last question, the camera cuts to Clara's face, and the film closes with Kinsey and Clara stopping for a walk in the woods, just as they, two biologists and lovers of nature, began their relationship decades earlier. After some contemplation of a sequoia tree and how content it looks, they wander off, holding hands. The film suggests that it is his marriage and his wife's love that have carried him through crisis and physical breakdown and that her married love is more reliable than any of his sexual relationships and any of the successes of public life. This ending suggests a return to the state of nature, to the state of innocence before the Fall. Nevertheless, this ending, the couple under the big trees associated with nature and Eden, is also ambiguous. It can be read from a conservative angle as a return to their married love after the turbulence of extramarital relationships, implying that marriage is the natural state. It can also be read as turning away from the confines and distractions of civilization to find each other and the essence of their relationship. In any case, the scene confirms the naturalness of the form of the couple. After this, the seasoned couple is shown walking away hand in hand, returning to the struggles of civilization. With these last images of the loving couple among ancient trees, Condon gives the previously complex and ambiguous representations of the relationship between marriage and sex a direction by suggesting that, finally, the positive force in the Kinseys' life is their (heterosexual) love and marriage. Kinsey's hurrying Clara off because he has “a lot of work to do” serves to underline the invigorating force of nature—also part of the American mythology of the West—and of love. By closing with Kinsey the loving husband and workaholic, the film (almost) restores him

to normality. Indeed, this ending offers only a moderate closure: there is neither an apotheosis nor a deathbed nor is the hero restored to fame, but, having briefly suffered defeat, he takes stock of the situation and finds his task unfinished. Closure is not complete and Kinsey's existence remains to some extent an "open wound" (Taylor 2002, 33).

This ending raises the question of genre. On the one hand, *Kinsey* is a classic biopic that retells the life of a central figure who is a visionary and a pioneer, and who sacrifices his health to his research and the betterment of the lives of the common people (Custen 1992, 211). On the other hand, the biography of the scientist is intertwined with the great romance of his life, his relationship with Clara McMillen. Sexual desire must be, and finally is, contained by love—this is the overall message of Kinsey's life story as presented. Therefore, it is possible to apply the formula of the romance to the film. Two people meet, fall in love, and have to overcome all kinds of obstacles before and in marriage. Together, they resolve physical and emotional problems and the conflicts induced by Kinsey's liberation of sexual desire. This liberation represents the innovation that is required by the biopic formula, even though, as here, the innovations introduced by the protagonist are shown to interfere directly with the love story. Nevertheless, the film closes with an affirmation of their married, heterosexual love that has turned out to be stronger than sexual bonds. Likewise, his assistants, the "inner circle," who have been encouraged by Kinsey to seek sexual pleasure across the boundaries of marriage, prove human enough not to be able to separate sex and love as neatly as demanded by Kinsey, and he applies his authority only to command them to save their marriages. In this scene, Kinsey's contradictions are skilfully exposed: he clings to the idea that sexual practice should by no means be confined to marriage but at the same time holds on to his belief in love and marriage. Again, when romance and marriage are about to fail, Kinsey attempts to contain the damage and restore the order of a world of heterosexual married couples.

Romance structures the film in yet another way, as Robert J. Corber points out (Corber 2005, 465). After Kinsey is shown to be crushed by the public criticism of his volume on female sexuality, there is a scene when an unnamed woman comes to talk to him about her life: how she was married happily, with three children, until she fell in love with a female secretary; how she almost committed suicide but Kinsey's book saved her because she learned that many other women had experienced similar feelings. Here the romance is no longer heterosexual but lesbian. It is important to note that the unnamed woman's talk appears quite different from the other interviews in which Kinsey or his interview-

ers rapidly ask detailed questions about the subject's history of physical sexual activity. In the scene with the lesbian, there is no scientific interview, and there is no catalogue of questions. The woman tells her story coherently as a love story rather than giving details of physical sex as elicited by the usual interview questions, and she ends with a description of her happiness with her female friend and her gratitude to Kinsey for his publication. Corber points out that the scene "focuses on romantic love and couple formation": how lesbians are shown to be committed to monogamy and domesticity as well as to be looking for emotional intimacy (ibid., 468), thus imitating forms of heterosexual relationships. Corber goes on to criticize the film for constructing the prototypical lesbian in a way that actually contradicts Kinsey's findings on female sexuality and covers up his emphasis on the importance of sexual activity for many women.

Furthermore, Corber finds that Condon's presentation of the happy lesbian couple reflects the current lesbian and gay movement's growing conservatism, which expresses itself in a transfer of heteronormative values such as the high status of a family and a marriage-like relationship, on to gay and lesbian life (Corber 2005, 468). Condon's film does show how Kinsey's research helps to normalize gay and lesbian identities, but, at the same time, it molds relationships along the matrix of heterosexual couples and romance. Corber observes that there is a "shift to a discourse of love in its final scenes" and detects the reasons for this shift in "a mass-mediated public sphere dominated by a discourse of family values" (ibid., 467). I would further conclude that the shift to a discourse of love also presses the stamp of the romance genre onto the film plot. Since, as we know, the beginning and ending of a text are usually more important for its understanding and recall than its middle parts, it is psychologically relevant that the discourse of love, couples, and family dominates the closing scenes of the film and provides a resolution, counteracting the focus on sexuality that was established in the interview scenes of the opening exposition. As if Condon becomes afraid of his own courage in focusing on sexuality throughout much of the film and especially in the scenes of Kinsey's research and teaching, he offers love as the cure to the suffering caused by society's conservatism.

The aesthetic strategy of letting romance dominate the plot can be read, as I have shown with Corber, as an expression of the ideological double strategies of the film. *Kinsey* acknowledges but at the same time domesticates gay and lesbian sexuality, includes but contains it. The film largely endorses Kinsey's approach to sex education and the study of sexual behavior as a means of overcoming the barriers of convention and

misinformation but also suggests that love, couples, and families are as or even more valuable for people's happiness, thus indirectly arguing for the containment of sexual desire through social conventions.

More Questions about Genre

A slightly different route to an understanding of the contradictions and complexities of *Kinsey* starts from the hybrid character of the biopic as a genre. However much the term *genre* has been criticized, it is alive and has explanatory power. Taylor calls the biopic a "supra-genre" that contains a multitude of genres with the help of which the inherent drama of becoming a person and finding one's identity is given shape and structure (Taylor 2002, 21). From a narratological perspective, he argues, the biopic is a genre that tends to have a weak narrative which typically manifests itself in an episodic structure; to compensate for this weakness, the script often resorts to stereotypical mythic story schemata (ibid., 18). The romance would be one such narrative schema that strengthens the narration and provides cohesion. Nevertheless, the assumption of a narratological motivation for the combination of genres does not mean that the previous ideological interpretations of the components of the genre are unfounded. The choice of romance as a supporting genre has exactly the ideological implications explicated above; that is, it confirms the power of love and of life in couples. Finally, the marketability of the film should be considered as a major factor behind the combination of genres and ideologies found in biopics. As Custen claims, any life story must be rendered predictable, congruent with the audience's own experiences and expectations, and thus mass producible and consumable (Custen 1992, 18). The—in *Kinsey*'s case, happy—love story is the part of the narration that is most predictable and mass-consumable.

The aspects of the film that render it a classic biopic of a scientist—a central (patriarchal) hero fighting to proliferate his innovative ideas against all odds—also carry relevant if contradictory meanings. It is the scientist *Kinsey* who is presented as one of Frederick Jackson Turner's American pioneers pushing the frontier in pursuit of happiness, and who is attracted by the mysteries of nature, overcoming the confines of academic, scientific, and social conventions in order to conquer the "free land," the terra incognita of knowledge on human sexuality. *Kinsey* the scientist is shown overthrowing the debilitating social conventions, meeting resistance by the establishment and being rejected by it, but, since he works for the betterment of common people's lives, he takes the energy to continue from their support, which is expressed in the

unnamed lesbian's gratitude. Interestingly, as we have seen, these narrative elements correspond with 20th Century Fox's classic "house style" (Custen 1992, 83).

Another element of classic biopics is incorporated in *Kinsey* in a rather ambiguous way. Custen observes that the hero is contained by the very establishment he tries to overthrow and that the establishment is elastic enough to accommodate him (ibid., 211). I would argue that in *Kinsey*, this containment is facilitated through the dominance of romance at the end. It is one of the film's strengths and irregularities with regard to genre that Kinsey's passion as a sex educator and researcher cannot be contained by the academic and political establishment of the time, that the audience sees him suffering under the loss of support but driven to struggle on regardless. Closure is denied in this area and the wound inflicted by rejection is left open, the task unfinished. This modification of the genre conventions is relevant because it links the historical situation as depicted in the film—the unfinished project of understanding human sexuality as well as the unresolved relation between sex and love—directly to the current situation in the United States, in which questions of sexuality and sex education are as much as ever at the heart of social and cultural conflicts.

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Toward a New LGBT Biopic

Politics and Reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*

JULIA G. ERHART

“I AM NOT A CANDIDATE, I AM part of a movement. The movement is the candidate. There is a difference.” Spoken by Harvey Milk’s character in Gus Van Sant’s *Milk* (2008), these words emblemize a critical tension in a film that both is and is not a conventional biopic. Appearing to advance a key theme in the movie, these words downplay the significance of the individual in favor of a collective movement, and in so doing express an idea of group identity that runs counter to the conventional privileging of the individual in the generic biographical form. At the same time, the fact that they are spoken by a blockbuster Hollywood star chosen to play an “exceptional” individual within a movie bearing a one-man title makes it difficult *not* to view the film as a biopic (Custen 1992). The tension between the individual “Harvey Milk” and the gay political community disturbs—in interesting ways—the movie’s compliance with generic conventions. In what follows, I will explore how, because of its downplaying of the individual in favor of a focus on politics, the movie both is and is not a conventional biopic. Because it is not a mainstream film but a movie targeted at a presumably guaranteed, albeit niche, audience, *Milk* can elevate a different set of priorities than is normally seen. Yet, because of the film’s fortuitous resonance with topical issues and the foregrounding of these issues by critics, *Milk* is able to exceed its non-mainstream boundaries and potentially reach a wider audience.

While there has been no shortage of critical scrutiny of single, isolated biographical films, there are surprisingly few long studies of the biopic as a media genre. George Custen's foundational *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) remains the only single-authored, book-length resource on the biographical film of the studio era.¹ Focusing on films created in the heyday of the studio system, Custen investigates how the practices of the studios (including the work of producers and directors, and the value of stars) circumscribed from the inside the versions of lives and histories that were able to be told. Hardly authentic versions of people's lives, the films Custen scrutinizes fashioned contents from refurbished and fictionalized plots, largely through the vehicle of studio stars. While Custen did publish a follow-up essay ("Mechanical") on more recent biopics (1961–1980), his claims are limited by his exclusion of made-for-TV movies and movies released after 1960.

The media landscape in which the current-day biopic is located has grown vastly more complex. Biographical works, as several scholars including Custen have noted, became staple TV fare during the eighties and nineties (Custen 2000; Anderson and Lupo 2002; Rosenstone 2007). In cinemas, there is robust evidence that the biopic has survived the studio system's demise (Anderson and Lupo 2000 and 2008; Mann 2000; Rosenstone 2007; Welsh 1993). And biographical and autobiographical material currently comprises an enormous amount of bandwidth on social networking sites and on the realityTV-oriented world of television. What is clear is that the number of smaller-budget, independently funded films is on the rise (Anderson and Lupo 2008) and the conventional subject of the biopic as outlined by Custen has changed. The studio-era preference for heroic white men has made way, in this post-civil rights, postfeminist era of diversified marketing, for interest in a greater range of subjects. If, as Custen sensed, "we no longer [believe] in an old-fashioned idea of greatness" (2000, 131), our fascination with celebrity culture has opened up new representational opportunities. Heidi Fleiss, Harvey Pekar, Eugène Terreblanche, Ed Wood, the non-famous and the infamous, the ordinary and the unpopular, are all suitable biopic subjects (Lupo and Anderson 2008; Bingham 2010).

Dennis Bingham's *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* encompasses both recent auteurist works by directors such as Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, Tim Burton, and Jane Campion and outliers from the studio era such as *Citizen Kane* and the British film *Rembrandt*. Taking up where Custen leaves off, Bingham positions Todd Haynes as emblematic of the twenty-first-century biopic director, who, Bingham claims, is drawn to the genre in "postmodern times" (Bingham 2010, 20). The book is organized into two major sections,

“The Great (White) Man Biopic” and “Female Biopics,” both of which chart the positioning of various films within cycles in the genre. The cycles include the classical, celebratory biopic form, the “warts and all” biopic, parody, minority appropriation, and finally what Bingham terms the “neoclassical” biopic (17–18). In spite of both his self-declared interest in openly gay director Haynes and in biopics about queer historical figures, Bingham laments that a section on “queer appropriations” had to be omitted from *Whose Lives* due to time and space constraints (*ibid.*, 27).

Because of the recurrence of a number of themes—an ambivalence toward public recognition, that is, the state of being out; the link between visibility and social value (positive as well as negative); the relevance of sexuality and other intriguing “private” matters; a degree of exceptionalism (a lack of fit with the status quo)—LGBT lives have made and continue to make apt biographical subjects whose figuration shifts depending on prevailing cultural expectations and available commercial forms. The dramatic changes in social and political capital that many (especially middle-class, developed-world) LGBT individuals have enjoyed since Stonewall and particularly into the twenty-first century, make possible a commercial interest in “other” historical LGBT lives, lived elsewhere and/or under more challenging circumstances than current-day audiences experience. While there is no single unified LGBT biopic, and films about LGBT lives conform to the newer biopic cycles identified by Bingham (mentioned above), their forms are also contoured by LGBT subject matter and targeted marketing campaigns. In so being, they share qualities that set them apart from non-LGBT biopics. What are these qualities and at what point—and in which ways—do the LGBT lives depicted in contemporary biopics become visible on-screen?

The LGBT Biopic

The suitability of LGBT lives and gender nonconformity as themes for the commercial biopic became apparent as early as 1933, when *Queen Christina*, the historical costume drama about the eponymous seventeenth-century Swedish queen, opened at the box office. Subject of considerable interest to contemporary LGBT media scholars, the film has been touted as an early example of lesbian screen visibility because of the drag attire and manly swagger adopted by Greta Garbo (as the queen) and the single mouth-on-mouth kiss between the queen and her court favorite, Countess Ebba Sparre (Russo 1981, 63–66). While the film makes clear the protagonist’s historically documented gender nonconformity—her disdain for marriage, preference for male attire, and affectionate relation with her female friend—subsequent biopics did not

enjoy such openness. For example, although there is historical evidence of Cole Porter's many liaisons with men inside of his long marriage to Linda Lee Thomas, *Night and Day* (1946) presented a sanitized version of the composer's life from which all signs of same-sex relationships were absented (Purdum 2004).

In the post-Stonewall period, and after the 1968 demise of the Motion Picture Production Code, biopics began to appear telling stories that more straightforwardly spoke to gay liberation struggles. Set in the nascent proto-gay communities of 1930s and 1950s United Kingdom respectively, both *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) take place in perilous times when gay sex was illegal. Dealing with issues of criminalization and homophobia and emphasizing the courage of their respective protagonists, these films set the stage for *Milk* and other contemporary biopics in ways which I will later discuss. In addition to *Milk*, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a burst in films about historical LGBT personalities. Focusing on significant characters in cultural and political histories as well as on victims of homophobic violence (*The Laramie Project* [2002]; *The Matthew Shepherd Story* [2002]; *Boys Don't Cry* [1999]), contemporary LGBT biopics are a corrective against both the industrially sanctioned repression of images of "sex perversion" (the actual wording in the Production Code) and the spectrum of religious prohibitions that continue to make many forms of gay representation commercially unprofitable. Visionary in their depiction of LGBT pasts, such biopics supplement community historiographies, which recognize the significance of gay historical figures but have not always possessed resources to create visual depictions of them (Waugh 1996, 5).

Many contemporary LGBT biopics choose to show subjects that are not easily embraced as heroes within LGBT communities; in so doing, they qualify hegemonic conceptions of queer relations. As the biopic has seen a decline in celebratory storytelling and a move toward a "warts and all" approach (Bingham 2010), the contemporary LGBT biopic is likewise witnessing more complex matters both in the stories that get produced and in the aspects of a person's life that are revealed. Challenging themes are depicted in *J. Edgar* (2011), about the powerful, closeted, and sometimes capricious long-term director of the FBI. Disclosing Hoover's homoerotic relationship with colleague Clyde Tolson to audiences who previously may not have been aware of it, the film also asks gay audiences to accept people on the "wrong" side of history as part of the historical gay past. If Hoover is an ambiguous figure for contemporary LGBT communities to adopt, other films give shape to yet more controversial stories. Child killing, attempted murder, and

serial killing are some of the events dealt with in *Swoon* (1992), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), and more recently *Monster* (2003). Embodying links between criminality, sexuality, and violence, the subjects of such films present fundamental challenges to the conventional image of community worthiness. A manifestation of anger felt by lesbians and especially gay men toward an indifferent political climate during the heyday of the AIDS crisis, the experimental biopic *Swoon*, about convicted child killers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, demonstrates the power and potency of New Queer Cinema to feature images of provocation and overtly queer desire. With their depictions of homicidal women, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, about radical feminist writer Valerie Solanas, and *Monster*, about convicted serial murderer Aileen Wuornos, are likewise disturbing in their breaking of taboos on women and violence. Because the agents of the crimes are lesbians, the films recycle well-worn conventions associating female violence with sexual deviance (Hart 1994). In so doing, they may also serve to deconstruct such conventions, demonstrating violence to be a “last resort” for the protagonists living in repressive societies.

While the above-named biopics trouble somewhat the convention of the “acceptable” biopic subject, the majority of LGBT biographical movies depict well-known individuals associated with more or less positive contributions to society and culture. In the twenty-first century, biopics and biographically oriented screen works have shown the lives of literary legends Reinaldo Arenas (*Before Night Falls* [2000]), Truman Capote (in both *Capote* [2005] and *Infamous* [2006]), Allen Ginsberg (*Howl* [2010]), Virginia Woolf (*The Hours* [2002]), Hart Crane (*The Broken Tower* [2011]), and Christopher Isherwood (*Christopher and His Kind* [2011]); artist Frida Kahlo (*Frida* [2002]); composer Cole Porter (*De-Lovely* [2004]); entertainer Liberace (*Liberace: Behind the Candelabra* [2013]); film critic Vito Russo (*Vito* [2011]); and actor Sal Mineo (*Sal* [2011]).² Common to most of these films is the idea that same-sex attraction and/or unconventional gender attributes are central to the biopic subject’s identity, significantly impacting his or her life and work. For example, in *Infamous*, Capote’s research into the events of the Clutter family murder develops alongside his feelings for one of the convicted murderers, Perry Smith. These feelings both impede Capote’s distance from the story he is researching and enable, it is suggested, the development of a new literary style, in what ultimately became the blockbuster novel *In Cold Blood*. While the 1930s Woolf is not shown herself with a lesbian lover in *The Hours*, the lesbian attraction felt by one of Woolf’s characters (the moment when Mrs. Brown shares a kiss with her buxom neighbor) is the precipitant for a chain of important movie events, namely the abandonment of the child who grows up to be the protagonist Richard in the contemporary story.

Concerning an obscenity trial, on the one hand, and state-sanctioned antigay persecution, on the other, the story lines of *Howl* and *Before Night Falls* are given shape in both cases by their respective protagonists' sexuality. Sidestepping conventional "coming out" story formats, such films track lives lived within and against historical practices of intolerance.

In telling these histories, many post-2000 LGBT biopics refashion the celebratory biopic, espousing postmodern, revisionist storytelling styles. Generically, many are marketed as highbrow, award-attracting films in the "arthouse" genre. Crosscutting between live action and animation; interweaving scenes of the literary personality with scenes about characters from the writer's work; incorporating cutaways to mock interview subjects; inserting obviously anachronistic material in the form of contemporary songs, are a few of the tropes that animate *Howl*, *The Hours*, *Infamous*, and *De-Lovely*, respectively. The anachronistic framing device in *De-Lovely*, where an older Cole Porter looks back and comments on his life as a younger man, typifies how the past may be framed in these biopics—as something worth knowing yet also worth maintaining distance from. At the same time, audiences (especially LGBT audiences) are not slow to condemn films that they perceive to have manipulated the facts, especially if the story is well known. Indeed, audience expectations of historical fiction films, and biopics in particular, are my next topic.

Historical Fidelity and the Biopic

Most scholars looking for serious history have ended up being disappointed by what the biopic has to offer. Reminding us that the biopic is first and foremost a "fictionalized or interpretative treatment," Glenn Mann (2000, v), for example, has claimed that "certain patterns of this genre dictate departure from historical accuracy" (*ibid.*, vi). Putting the case more strongly, James Welsh has cautioned us that in the medium of film "even more than on the printed page, history and biography are likely to become imaginative exercises, perhaps not intentionally designed to confuse the viewer, but resulting in mass confusion none the less" (Welsh 1993, 59). Custen's comments on the subject have been the most unequivocal. Comparing Hollywood biography's relation to history with Caesar's Palace's relation to architectural history, the biopic, he writes, "is an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity" (Custen 1992, 7). In spite of critical agreement about the lack of conventional factuality in the biopic, audiences have come to the movies with a different set of expectations. Regardless of what Custen and others acknowledge to be the case, historically themed movies, which, of course, include biopics, have often been judged on

factual grounds. As Custen puts it, the biopic has provided “many viewers with the version of a life that they held to be the truth” (Custen 2000, 2); audiences have wanted to know which movie elements are “accurate” and which ones are not.

A good deal of the paratextual materials that emerged over the course of the making of *Milk* and around the time of its release seemed to cater to audience demands for factuality. For example, that the makers took pains to recreate original locations (such as Harvey’s and Scott’s shopfront, recreated on the site of the original camera store [Marler 2008; McCarthy 2008; Lee 2008; Maupin 2009]) and events (such as the candlelight march [Cleve Jones 2008]) was well publicized. Preproduction consultations with historical advisors such as Cleve Jones and Jim Rivaldo (Black 2008, 107) added to the sense of historical fidelity. Postproduction praise from well-known gay people who lived in San Francisco in the seventies testified to the historical faithfulness of the project (Maupin 2009). The film was judged in the light of Robert Epstein’s 1984 documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, with one critic claiming that the similarity between the two films lent credibility to Van Sant’s project (Tueth 2009, 31). Lance Black’s “enormously researched script” received praise (McCarthy 2008, 39; Holleran 2009, 19), while cameos by historical personalities from the period such as Tom Ammiano, Allan Baird, and Frank Robinson suggested approval of the project from those in the know and promised a film that would be true to life.

A considerable amount was written about the lengths the actors went to research their characters. Sean Penn’s “metamorphosis” into Milk attracted positive press (Ansen 2008; McCarthy 2008; Travers 2008), while Emile Hirsch spoke on several occasions about his research for his role as Cleve Jones (Rosenblum 2008; Cleve Jones 2008). Actors discussed the advantages and challenges of making a film on a subject about which there existed a great deal of archival imagery. The presence of such imagery was deemed a mixed blessing: though it helped actors to get an understanding of the subject, it also created demands in viewers and critics for the actors to get things right (Tueth 2009, 32; Cleve Jones 2008, 36). As Armistead Maupin, speaking to Van Sant, put it: “You had such a responsibility to a number of living people who remember the characters and the events that are shown in the film” (Maupin 2009).

Although much of the affirmative commentary circled around the issue of historical fidelity, not all of the commentary was positive. What few negative reviews the film received (and there weren’t many) generally tracked the film’s success in capturing and honoring Harvey Milk’s life—and found it lacking. In a scathing review, Michael Bronski took issue with the film’s politically naive and ahistorical representation of the period in

question, criticized the film for depicting Milk's radicalism as *sui generis*, and lamented that Milk was portrayed as a "singular hero who triumphs almost entirely as a result of his own will" (Bronski 2009, 72). Bronski then went on to bemoan the film's failure to show that "San Francisco in the mid-Seventies was a hot bed of grass-roots organizing that had existed for over a decade" (*ibid.*). While the target of Bronski's attack was the film's portrait of historical San Francisco politics, other critics found fault with the events and characters that the film left out. Nathan Lee queried the film's decision not to show the White Night Riots, which occurred after Dan White's sentence was announced, suggesting that to leave that event out told "only half the story" (Lee 2008, 20). Hilton Als criticized the paucity of female voices in the film, noting it was out of step with the facts of Milk's life and, indeed, with Epstein's 1984 documentary (Als 2009, 9). Preferring the more honest, prefatory images of the men being rounded up at the film's beginning, Als also noted the film's downplaying of Milk's "outsider" status. And, as I will go on to discuss in greater detail, numerous writers took issue with what they saw as a desexualizing of the San Francisco gay community and Harvey Milk's life in particular (Simpson 2009; Holleran 2009; Klawans 2008; Bronski 2009).³

Apart from their adjudication of the film's factuality, there is one further thing to note about negative reviews of *Milk*: nearly all of them appeared in the gay press and/or in articles by self-identified gay writers. Of the relatively few negative reviews I unearthed, one appeared in the gay press (in *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*) and five were by self-identified gay writers (Hilton Als, Nathan Lee, Andrew Holleran, Michael Bronski, and Mark Simpson); only one appeared in the nongay press by an apparently straight-identified writer (Stuart Klawans, writing in *The Nation*). Within these reviews, there was a propensity to expound on the facts of Milk's real life. While some writers included a paragraph of details expanding on what the movie showed, other writers, such as Hilton Als, wandered away from the subject of the film altogether, spending nearly one-third of his review amplifying the events of Milk's life. Taken together, these points are evidence of ownership claims, declarations of authority on the part of various writers about the subject. What the attacks on *Milk*'s faithfulness to history evidence are the high stakes in the story of Harvey Milk's life and in the film's representation of it. Clearly, *Milk*'s links to current political movements and communities amplify the pressures on the movie to be accurate beyond what would ordinarily be required for a biopic. Likewise, the critical attempts to augment the facts of Milk's life evidence an anxiety that *Milk* might have left something out or misrepresented key historical aspects. Reviewers

with links to the gay community obviously had high stakes in the movie; and when it failed to live up to their expectations, they were not slow in pointing this out. Does this make *Milk* a “specialized audience film,” as Todd McCarthy has called it (McCarthy 2008, 39)? In a short while I will consider how the film managed to transcend this category and achieve crossover appeal for nongay community audiences. But first I want to show that, ironically, while a number of gay community critics approached *Milk* as a “specialized” product, the movie itself makes use of many rhetorical tropes from the generic, studio-era biopic.

Harvey Milk as Biopic Subject

In many ways Harvey Milk’s life is an ideal subject for a biopic. A naturally colorful, theatrical personality with celebrity credentials, Harvey Milk found his calling as a gay activist when he migrated to San Francisco in 1972. The film tracks Milk’s move from his repressed New York City life to the more liberated San Francisco on the eve of that city’s transformation into a gay mecca. The film opens on the night of Milk’s fortieth birthday, when Milk meets and picks up his future lover and eventual fellow activist Scott Smith and takes him back to his apartment. In spite of the somewhat risqué subject matter, the film enlists a number of stereotypes from the studio-era biopic. The movie presents an individual who is charismatic and stands out from the crowd but who is humanized and whose uniqueness is contained. Visually, for example, Milk is frequently shown standing apart at the front of a crowd (typically with a bullhorn), but over and over the narrative positions him as another regular gay guy from the Castro. As a two-hour-long movie, the film condenses and abbreviates Milk’s life, presents his personality as a seamless package, and makes his motivations and personal goals clear and comprehensible. For example, where the real-life Milk had been in the Navy and had spent many years working in the insurance industry and on Wall Street, the film focuses on the symbolically straightforward and politically more consistent aspects of Milk’s life after his move to San Francisco. The film simplifies the story of the development of Milk’s political consciousness by beginning not just in the middle of Milk’s life but literally in medias res, inside a subway station as Milk is making his way home from work.

According to Custen, the trope of in medias res was a staple of the studio era, through which the hero’s personality could appear as an effect of self-invention rather than family (Custen 1992, 149). In *Milk*, such a trope allows the film to gloss over, all at once, Milk’s Jewish heritage, the politically awkward facts of his corporate life in NYC, and

the more messy and ambivalent aspects of Milk's attitude to sexuality that existed prior to his "out" San Francisco life.⁴ To show these aspects would confuse viewers and would be, in narrative terms, uneconomical. Instead, the film promotes a fairly one-dimensional understanding of character motivation, a reading of the political landscape in terms of "good guys" and "bad guys," and a vision of "coming out" as the single practical political answer (evidenced in interactions with minor characters such as the gay publisher and the young staff member to whom Milk hands the phone).

In narrative terms, a number of aspects make the real-life Milk's life biopic-worthy. Although Milk spent only ten months in elected political office, his career in San Francisco contained a number of highly dramatic points, including not one but four runs for political office, a high profile referendum fight (touching on the hot-button issues of sexuality in schools), numerous TV appearances, and finally his death by assassination at the hands of conservative onetime fire fighter and fellow supervisor Dan White. As a historically real individual, Harvey Milk and the events of his life have been heavily documented and many artworks have been inspired by them. For example, there are the aforementioned Oscar-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, a popular biography by San Francisco journalist Randy Shilts, interviews, television footage, photographs, other materials held in the Harvey Milk archives, and even an opera (Holleran 2009, 18). The film makes liberal, dramatic, and poignant use of archival materials: for example, the candlelight vigil after the murders, and, most notably, a tape-recording of Milk's personal testimony, which he made several months before his death, and the reconstruction of which serves as a dramatic frame structuring the movie.

As in the studio-era biopic, characters in *Milk* are introduced and positioned to showcase personality traits of the movie's main subject. According to Custen, the "friend" in the biopic may chronicle and showcase key qualities of the famous person; his or (less frequently) her normality may act as a foil to draw attention to the extraordinary qualities of the hero. The friendship is frequently asymmetrical; in most cases, the friends are the "helpers" (Custen 1992, 164). In *Milk*, Cleve Jones functions as precisely such a friend to Milk, managing his campaign, providing unequivocal support, and facilitating his manipulation of crowds. Jones acts as a stand-in for audience members who would like to be close to the main charismatic character. The significance of the Jones character as chronicler/witness/enabler of Milk's life story is further secured by the character's attachment to the real-life person Cleve Jones, who acted as a historical consultant for the film (Cleve Jones 2008; Black 2008).

Sex and Romance in *Milk*

If *Milk* conforms to the studio-era biopic in how it introduces and constructs its main and supporting characters, where the film breaks ranks is in its positioning of a life partner for Milk. In studio-era films generally, a romance line was nearly ubiquitous, and the biopic was no exception. Often supplemented or ameliorated where the factual partner was insufficient, the heterosexual romantic partner had the effect of lightening the otherwise serious stuff of the biopic. In some cases, where a romantic figure was altogether lacking, one was added—sometimes against the will of the subject in question (Custen 2000, 160). The overall effect of the heterosexual partner on the subject of the biopic, according to Custen, was a stabilizing or “humanizing” one. Writing more recently about the function of the romantic partner in two contemporary celebrity biopics, *Walk the Line* (2005) and *Ray* (2004), Glenn Smith argues that in each film romantic love helps repair psychological traumas stemming from deprivation and disadvantage. In so doing, Smith claims, romantic love displaces more controversial issues of classism and racism and works to distract viewers from the more challenging issues in the story (Smith 2009, 236). Romantic love, it would seem, both domesticates the male lead and contains the more controversial issues introduced elsewhere in the films.

From a brief look at movies such as *Boys Don't Cry*, *Swoon*, and *Monster*, mentioned near the start of this essay, it is clear that conventions of romantic love indeed do animate some gay or queer biopics, albeit in nonheterosexual forms. Yet, unlike the lives depicted within those stories, the historical facts of Milk's life pose a challenge not just to the heterosexual component of the framework outlined by Custen and Smith, but to the convention that the partnering be life-long and more or less monogamous. Because of its subject's well-documented commitment to non-monogamy (Shilts 1982), *Milk* cannot help but put pressure on the generic conventions outlined by Smith and Custen. How does the film deal with the subjects of sex, love, desire, and coupling?

Although publicity around *Milk* made much of the fact that the movie would open with a “really big sex scene” and be faithful to Milk's life (Maupin 2009), the movie garnered criticism from some quarters for its tepid and inaccurate representation of 1970s gay sex and Harvey Milk's sex life in particular. The film devotes precious little screen time to gay sex or gay sex cultures, containing but one explicit sex scene (between Milk and Scott Smith) and virtually no anonymous, casual sex scenes of any sort. And while Milk waxes positive about the beauty of having “many lovers” to Cleve, he is shown coupled sequentially with only two—Scott and Jack Lira. The misrepresentation of Milk's life and gay sexuality more

generally was not lost on critics. Writing for the *Guardian*, Mark Simpson blasted the film for its domestication of gay sexuality and, in his words, “castration” of its hero. Simpson writes: “Far from ‘destroying every closet door,’ it instead builds a brand new bullet proof one around its subject’s sex life. Van Sant’s film is, in fact, living a lie” (Simpson 2009). Indeed, considered in generic terms, the film contains considerably fewer sex scenes, for example, than the aforementioned *Prick Up Your Ears*, about the United Kingdom playwright Joe Orton. Made at the height of the AIDS pandemic, *Prick up Your Ears* stresses the centrality of sex and desire to gay male culture, featuring scenes of sex in a public toilet and an industrial estate, a threesome, and a sex tourism holiday in North Africa. Other gay-oriented biopics from this period and after are not as explicit as *Prick up Your Ears*, but focus centrally on themes of male longing. *The Hours and The Times* (1991), about Brian Epstein’s relationship with John Lennon, and *Gods and Monsters* (1998), about Hollywood director James Whale, are organized wholly around the themes of desire (albeit frustrated desire).

Appearing in a post-AIDS activism climate, *Milk*, it would seem, is a different film altogether. Does the film “domesticate” its lead, along the lines of how the lead males in *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are contained, as discussed above? I think not. In simple terms, the representation of each of Milk’s two partners is not sufficiently fleshed out to permit a domestication of Milk. Neither of Milk’s boyfriends is developed with any real depth; several scenes of emotional intensity with each are resolved inconclusively. For example, the aftermath of the scene where Jack locks himself in a closet is not shown; audiences are given no indication of how the closet episode wraps up. While this scene succeeds in conveying Jack’s instability, it conveys precious little about the overall relationship between the two men or about Harvey’s feelings for Jack. Moreover, Scott’s “return” to Harvey and the normally histrionic Jack’s response, are likewise not fleshed out, again leaving viewers uncertain about the significance of either man to Milk (and about the significance of romance to Milk in general). Finally, there is no fallout shown from the aftermath of what ought to be a major narrative event, that is, Jack’s suicide. While we might expect a few scenes showing Milk coping with finding Jack’s body, we hear simply Milk’s voiceover telling us he “had to keep on,” as the image switches abruptly to scenes of the Proposition 6 campaign.

Milk and Politics: Toward a New LGBT Biopic

Although it is possible to dismiss the above examples as poor character plotting, I believe they are an indication of the film’s ambivalence

about the convention of monogamous romance. Largely uninterested in casual sex, profoundly ambivalent about romantic love, the film is driven overwhelmingly by an interest in the mechanisms of gay politics. In *Milk*, the space (usually) occupied by romantic love gives way to the hustle and bustle of the world of politics. This is narratively the case with Jack: the film barely takes a breath after Harvey discovers Jack's body before launching into the next political event. And this is no less true of Milk's relationship with Scott, whom the film depicts as moving out on the occasion of Milk's renewal of his political ambitions. In narrative terms, Scott's departure from the center of the story makes way for the campaign to resume. In the cases of both Scott and Jack, politics *literally* displaces romance. So what is the status of politics in the movie?

The film draws strong parallels between Milk's self-fashioning as a political entity and the growth and maturation of the gay community as a political force in its own right. *Milk* devotes nearly all of its story arc to the political goings-on of the time, which eclipse all other plotlines, including any serious probing of Milk's psychology and/or his sentiments about sex, romance, family, aging, and the like.⁵ In spite of the one-person title and Penn's Oscar-ready performance, *Milk* throws its investigative energy into the story of the 1970s San Francisco gay rights movement, which is conveyed far more compellingly than are the conventional biographical issues of psychology formation and emotional development. Even Milk's recurrent exhortation—for individuals to "come out"—yields little in terms of character exposure, in Milk or other major characters (who are essentially already "out"). Instead, "coming out" is a rallying cry, a symbol of the political aims of the period, and a fully depersonalized theme with consequences for only minor characters.

Generally speaking, there is virtually no dialogue or scene in the movie that is not about politics to some extent. Commentators made note of this fact, including the film's director, who acknowledged both the novelty and indeed risk of such an approach (Black 2008, 118). As Van Sant says, "One of the weird things about Lance's [Black's] script was that it seemed to be entirely political. . . . I kept asking Lance to put in some more ancillary dialogue that just wasn't at all about the political side of the story . . . and it was something that Lance COMPLETELY avoided" (ibid.). Other commentators expressed anxiety that the film would come across as "agenda-driven agitprop," though, like Van Sant, they came to the conclusion that their fears were unfounded (McCarthy 2008, 39).

Arguably, the film is less a biopic per se than a film about a gripping, dramatic political era, which happened to have a charismatic leader at its center. In so being, *Milk* breaks rank with earlier gay biopics such as *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987).

About the legendary gay personality Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* shows Crisp's coming of age at a time (the 1930s in Britain) when effeminacy was the target of near-universal hostility, a jail sentence was an ever-present threat, and violence at the hands of street thugs was routine. The most open depiction of homosexuality that had yet been seen, *The Naked Civil Servant* emphasized the singularity and courage of its fiercely and flamboyantly "out" protagonist at a time when most men gathered surreptitiously in coffee shops or danced fearfully with one another in private. Set primarily in Britain about twenty years after *The Naked Civil Servant*, *Prick Up Your Ears* depicts a world less obviously perilous than Crisp's but dangerous and discriminatory nonetheless. Successful evasion of the police is a strong theme in the film, which highlights both the pleasures and risks of gay life in a world where homosexuality was still illegal. Because of their settings in emergent gay communities, *The Naked Civil Servant* and *Prick Up Your Ears* emphasize subjects of antigay discrimination and heterosexual panic rather than the formation of an organized political movement. They are thus blueprints for a more contemporary film such as *Before Night Falls* (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), set in revolutionary Cuba, which likewise features aspects of antigay violence and harassment. While each of these films focuses on the life and achievements of a single individual, as does *Milk*, the protagonists are cut off from all but a tiny community of like-minded outcasts.

In contrast, *Milk* depicts the birth and formation of a well-structured political movement in its own right, and picks up where earlier biopics leave off by depicting the transformation of its gay characters into organized, successful, powerful political actors. In so doing, the film differs from the aforementioned films because it represents the complexity of political formation and prioritizes that process rather than character development. A new kind of gay-targeted biopic that focuses on a process not previously seen, *Milk* thus marks a departure from both the generic studio-era biopic and the earlier gay biopics. Moreover, it does so while succeeding both critically and at the box office. How an essentially non-mainstream, gay-targeted film was able to achieve this is a matter to which I will now turn.

Milk and Current Events: Topicality, Reflexivity, and the Box Office

Rarely does a film come along that resonates so strongly with current events. The film's release, it must be recalled, came a mere three weeks after the 2008 U.S. federal election, an election that provided liberal

voters with both extraordinary pleasure (on account of the election of Barack Obama) and unanticipated pain (because of the passage in California of Proposition 8, which defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman). Apparently at the forefront of many writers' minds, these two events rated a mention in most critical reviews of *Milk*. The topic of California's Prop 8 generated the greatest amount of commentary. Many writers remarked on the ironic timing of the events, lamenting that debates and discussions that appear in *Milk* to be over and done with were still largely unresolved. Overwhelmingly, most critics saw the film as amplifying the cause for gay rights, crediting it for raising awareness and inspiring a new generation of activists. Even writers who otherwise criticized the film, generally praised it on this account.⁶ One review went as far as to say that activists should "learn" from the film, the activism of which was more successful than current-day political strategies (Holleran 2009, 20).

Almost without exception, throughout the gay-authored as well as the mainstream press reviews, writers remarked on the similarities between Harvey Milk and the newly elected U.S. president. Ryan Gilbey, for example, said that the film would "epitomize" Barack Obama's presidency (Gilbey 2009, 44). Frequently, reviewers cited Milk's and Obama's shared identities as "community organizers" and "outsiders." "The election of Barack Obama proved what a band of outsiders could achieve in support of an unlikely, charismatic candidate," wrote Richard Corliss (2008, 63). Writers repeatedly cross-referenced the significance of the trope of "hope" in the respective campaigns. Stuart Klawans's reference is perhaps the most intricate, in metaphorically mapping Harvey Milk's words on to the persona of Barack Obama. Klawans concludes: "Here is the story of a successful community organizer—the first member of his social group to rise to a certain office—who continually tells his supporters that they are the true source of change, and whose final words of the film are, 'You gotta give 'em hope. You gotta give 'em hope. You gotta give 'em hope.' Think of the audacity" (Klawans 2008, 44).⁷ In another mashup of current politics and popular culture, Peter Travers blends the identities of the two men. Elevating Harvey Milk to the status of the 2008 Democratic candidate, Travers concludes his article with the words "John McCain, meet a real maverick" (Travers 2008, 132).

What is the function of these relentless and recurring references to current events in reviews of a historical biographical film set in the 1970s? I believe these rhetorical ploys work to update the 1970s story and make it relevant for present-day audiences who ordinarily would have little interest in history. While it is not possible to definitively prove the box-office relevance of such references, we know that liberal media

tend to do well in conservative times (as voters would have felt with the passage of Prop 8); from this we can at least *hypothesize* a box-office effect. Two writers remarked as such, noting the film's opportunism (unwitting or not) in relation to current events (Klawan 2008s; Holleran 2009).⁸ Andrew Holleran, for example, directly attributed *Milk's* critical and box office popularity to the dislike for Prop 8. "It's Harvey Milk, but also the gay rights movement itself, that reviewers are responding to, I suspect" (Holleran 2009, 19).

In an article about historical fiction films, Marita Sturken explains that our relationship to images of the past goes beyond questions of "accuracy." For Sturken, that relationship is complex and paradoxical. On the one hand, we view historical images (such as those we see in *Milk*) as evidence of what actually took place and endow them with empirical truth. As I have tried to show, these are the terms by which many gay writers engaged with and evaluated the film. On the other hand, continues Sturken, we may be engaged by the fantasy of popular films "to feel as though we have acquired an 'experience' of a particular historical event" (Sturken 1997, 66). By referring over and over to contemporary topical circumstances, critics link the past of Harvey Milk's time with events of the present day and in so doing solidify an audience's feeling of understanding toward past discontents, anxieties, and satisfactions. Repeated references to material in the news—Prop 8, Obama's election—add value to the film, assist audiences to overcome any potential uneasiness brought about by the film's subject matter, and open up, for mainstream as well as minority cultural audiences, a possibly esoteric subject. Such commentary has the effect of projecting on to the film a reflexive quality, which, had it been released two years later, it perhaps would not have had.

A number of contemporary historical films, including biographical films, strive for such reflexive qualities. *Malcolm X* (1992) is often cited in this regard, for the way it switches back and forth between the past of *Malcolm X's* time and contemporary images, which include the videotaped beating of Rodney King and Nelson Mandela speaking to a classroom. *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), which problematizes what happened at the flag raising on Iwo Jima, likewise offers a reflexive take on its subject. In that film, audiences are asked to reflect on what occurred in the past and what the legacy of the past is now in the present. The film cautions us against too much certainty about historical events, suggesting that it is always possible to make mistakes. While *Milk* does not self-consciously set out to be a reflexive film in the ways that *Malcolm X* and *Flags of Our Fathers* do, it nonetheless functions to draw attention to commonalities

between and among past and present eras, politics, and political figures. Because of how critics responded to the historical confluence of events surrounding the film's release, resonance is added to the film that was not otherwise there. And in so doing, critics both secured their own inroad to the non-mainstream movie and also made *Milk* accessible for general audiences.

Acknowledgment

A somewhat different version of "Toward a New LGBT Biopic: Politics and Reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008)" was originally published, under the title "The Naked Community Organizer: Politics and Reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*," in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 26, no. 1 (2011).

Notes

1. *A/B Studies*, *Biography*, and *Journal of Popular Film and Television* have featured special issues on the biopic.

2. Furthermore, films about Freddie Mercury and James Dean are reputedly in production.

3. And there were general criticisms that the film was "conventional" (McCarthy 2008), the framing device "regressive" (Lee 2008), and that the film's generic requirements as a biopic resulted in a lack of emotional complexity (McCarthy 2008; Als 2009).

4. Prior to his move to San Francisco, Milk worked for the financial securities firm Bache and was a onetime supporter of conservative politician Barry Goldwater. See Shilts 1982.

5. Proof of how little is known about the historical figure in such areas is evidenced in an article in *The Advocate*, where friends and observers speculate about what Harvey would be doing now had he not been killed. To take just one example, the discrepancy of opinions about Milk's stance on the current debate about gay marriage is indicative of how little is actually known about Milk's feelings in a range of areas (Martin 2008, 43–44).

6. The exception to the praise was Mark Simpson, who used the film as a platform to criticize the gay marriage campaign as tame and apology-ridden.

7. The phrase "audacity of hope" emerges in Barack Obama's keynote address to the 2004 Democratic Convention and is the title of his second book.

8. Only one writer viewed the question of the film's release date with scorn. Criticizing Van Sant's decision not to release the film prior to the U.S. election, Henry Barnes suggested that an earlier release date could have "tipped the vote in the anti-prop-8 camp's favour had it arrived before 4 November."

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Spielberg's *Lincoln*

Memorializing Emancipation

R. BARTON PALMER

A Sesquicentennial Message

UPON ITS MUCH-HERALDED RELEASE in the fall of 2012, Steven Spielberg's biopic *Lincoln* quickly established itself as one of the more culturally significant films of this century, offering entertainment and enlightenment in equal doses. The efforts of the distinguished cast and production team were suitably acknowledged by the industry. Among a multitude of other recognitions of its cinematic and political virtues, *Lincoln* received a total of twelve Academy Award nominations and won for Best Picture and Best Actor (Daniel Day-Lewis, who portrayed the title character). But, with its revivification of controversial historical figures and events, Spielberg predictably ruffled the feathers of numerous academics, who have not yet tired of questioning the accuracy, or the fairness, of the script written by Pulitzer Prize winner Tony Kushner, which was based (if only superficially) on a book about Lincoln by journalist turned popular historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

Interestingly, most of what is in the film does not find itself contained in the substantial tome produced by Goodwin, an indication of how widely, and deeply, the filmmakers researched the staggeringly huge, ever-expanding library of academic writing devoted to Lincoln, the Civil War, and its leading military and political figures. Just to take an obvious example, one of the film's most important characters, House Republican

leader Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones), makes no appearance in *Team of Rivals*, which focuses on the deliberations of the president's cabinet, whereas many of the film's dramatic scenes are set on the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue and involve a quite different group of policymakers. *Lincoln* is in part a Civil War film, yet its "battles" are not fought in the nation's farmlands and woodlands but in the House of Representatives, where the successful struggle to effect passage of the Thirteenth Amendment banning slavery is waged. This compelling story provides Spielberg's biopic with an unaccustomed focus, reconstructing historical events that most filmgoers, even those with a fair knowledge of Lincoln and the period in general, would know little if anything about.

Even with this engaging newness, more collectivist and political than (strictly speaking) biographical, *Lincoln* is certainly a biopic in the traditional sense of offering filmgoers, as George F. Custen suggests, "the possibility of connecting concretely with a glamorous image of a famous historical person in the guise of a contemporary movie star" and of being "absorbed by the narrative constructed about selected episodes in the life of the subject" (Custen 1992, 34). These "episodes," as in this instance, are customarily "epic" in the sense that they repeat and hence memorialize for a perhaps yet uninitiated group the *topoi* of both biographical and media-specific representational traditions. While much of the material presented in the film is unfamiliar per se, Kushner and Spielberg dramatize it in ways that connect to what is already known about the great man's character: his vigorous opposition to slavery on moral terms; his political trickery; his propensity to fill awkward moments with the telling of "humorous" anecdotes that often prove more tedious than funny; his perceptive reading of the interests and character of others; his intense devotion to the nation conceived as a work in process; his neglectful personal appearance; his kindly, even gentle manner; his deep sorrow at the unexpected and extraordinary human costs of the war he pursued in order to save the union; and the pleasure he took in respectful political debate. *Lincoln* has undoubtedly succeeded with audiences because it offers a story featuring a cast of interesting characters who become embroiled in a history-making plot that is marked by unexpected twists and turns. Moreover, in the grand style of Hollywood filmmaking, this story concludes with a moment of triumph that depends on a profound and agonizing movement of conscience. But, because the narrative traces a political struggle in the House of Representatives, that movement belongs to the most important member of that body, Thaddeus Stevens, and not, awkwardly, to Lincoln.

At the same time, the film reverently perpetuates the Lincoln legend, performing the work of creating/sustaining a national identity in

which he is inarguably the central figure. It could not be otherwise. And so *Lincoln* cannot end with the successful passage of the amendment in which Stevens plays a crucial role. In something like a coda, the already-known events of Lincoln's final days are rehearsed: his refusal in a meeting with Confederate peace envoys to negotiate anything but the surrender of the states "then in rebellion," which he will not recognize as a nation; his mournful tour of the recently abandoned battlefield at Petersburg, Virginia, and his discussion there with General Ulysses Grant (Jared Harris) about the carnage of the war whose continuation he has just rendered inevitable; a meeting with the cabinet in which he discusses the possibility of enfranchising the freedmen, reversing his earlier opinion; and then the trip to Ford's Theater, the assassination (not actually depicted), and his death. In a poignant gesture at memorialization, the film ends with a flashback that seems inevitable in a Lincoln biopic: the great man delivering the Second Inaugural Address, not the first part of the speech in which he calls the nation to account for its collective guilt in permitting the institution of slavery, thereby finding possible divine justification for the price in blood then being exacted as expiation, but rather, more optimistically, his closing promise to "do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

This is beyond a doubt the film's most epic moment, an indirect first person plural summons ("ourselves") to political renewal and moral regeneration that Spielberg revoices for a new generation, his camera positioning the viewer as a member of the original audience. In the best tradition of the biopic, he allows the great man to speak for himself and to his own greatness. If their author is now dead, Lincoln's indispensable words are demonstrably immortal because, through the cinema's power to reconstruct the past, he can forever be reimagined as speaking them. Though Stevens played an indispensable role in the reconstruction of American society that Lincoln was prevented by John Wilkes Booth from directing, he does not merit such personal memorialization. He figures most meaningfully as an example of where the social conscience of the nation is tending. Stevens's *moyen de vivre*, his breaking of the rules that then were supposed to regulate the relationship between the races, points toward that "new birth of freedom" that Lincoln, in another context, imagined as an essential part of the nation's future.

With its focus on the legislative battle that led to the proscription of slavery, *Lincoln* offers the viewer an attractively familiar unfamiliarity, but it also breaks new ground with a revisionist portrait of the great man. What I mean is that the film is "novelistic" in the sense that, like all biopics, it permits itself the opportunity of moving beyond the repetition of commonplaces, treating its revered subject not only as an object of

continuing cinematic adulation but also as a character whose essence and meaning emerge gradually from the linear progression of the narrative, which is thus revelatory as well as ritualistic. The genius of Kushner's screenplay is that he establishes Lincoln's identity not only through his dramatic interaction with others, but also through an elaborately developed and particularly effective comparison, one with historical and, more interesting perhaps, cinematic precedents. The socially radical Stevens, in many ways the president's political opponent, is portrayed as someone who lives out the injunction that all men should be treated as equal in ways that Lincoln finds himself not disposed to do. A part of the Lincoln legend, of course, is that the most astute student of our national history ever to occupy the White House was himself absorbed with both the memorialization and transformation of our national traditions. Through his rearticulated borrowings from Jefferson, particularly in the Gettysburg Address, he thoroughly racialized the foundational principle of the national creed, namely that "all men are created equal." This major proposition of Enlightenment universalism likely held for Jefferson more classist than racial meanings, a challenge to inheritable privilege more important in a document that publicly contested the power of a monarchy justified by lineage. As Lincoln himself asserted at Gettysburg, our national history can be judged, in part, by our persistent, collective failure to live up completely to this creed, as witness, just to take the most obvious example, the felt necessity in the 1960s to repeat and strengthen the civil rights legislation of a full century before, and thus making up, as much as possible, for the failure of laws such as the 1866 Civil Rights act and the subsequent Fourteenth Amendment (adopted in 1868), which was designed to create a nation in which, to quote from Section One, no "State [shall] deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

Lincoln dramatizes the passing of the foundational legislation that lies behind the incorporation of Jeffersonian idealism in the Constitution through the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (whose strongest supporter was Thaddeus Stevens). But it also points out the limitations of such a strictly public and legal approach to the establishment of racial justice, offering for the viewer's consideration in its depiction of Stevens an alternate view of what equality in our national culture might mean, and, at least to some degree, has now come to mean. Lincoln's amazing political accomplishment is thus justly celebrated even as the narrative makes clear his uncertainty about what the next step might be in the achievement of equality for the newly liberated members of American society; his embrace of the idea of Negro suffrage just prior to his death

was, as Kushner's screenplay correctly points out, tentative. The film traces the lineaments of Lincoln's peculiar talents, particularly his perseverance and cunning as a political leader, but also clearly establishes that there were limitations to his version of the national creed. He is revealed as being unable to imagine just what a racially just society might be, how the two peoples, once separated by their contrasting relations to the notion of liberty, might come to constitute a single society. Like Lincoln, Stevens must play a somewhat duplicitous game in order to ensure legislative victory. The two men are equally consummate politicians, even if Lincoln is shown as getting the better of Stevens in an angry exchange. Lincoln dismisses as "untempered" Stevens' insistence on a reconstruction to be funded by the confiscation of the wealth and property of former slaveholders. He pledges his opposition to such a radical remaking of American society, which, he argues, popular opinion will not support. Stevens rejoins that he doesn't "give a goddamn about the people and what they want." Such zeal is worth admiring, Lincoln replies, but had he followed Stevens's advice to push for immediate abolition once secession occurred, the union would have lost the border states and thus the possibility of prevailing in the war that soon followed. If Lincoln proves the better because more cautious politician, Stevens just might live a personal life more in conformity with what Lincoln argues in the Gettysburg Address is central to the American experiment. This is because in his personal life and commitments, Stevens models a form of racial egalitarianism that the film not only sanctions but also demonstrates is far beyond what Lincoln can even conceptualize: Stevens lives, as man and wife, with a woman of mixed race in defiance of one of the era's foundational prohibitions.

The film's initial dramatic sequence makes much of the influence of Lincoln's Gettysburg address, suggesting that the speech prompted the enlistment into the Union Army of young white men who were inspired by its Jeffersonian vision of the president's war aims. The president has visited the staging area for the attack soon to be launched against Wilmington, North Carolina, and the soldiers stop to talk with him as he sits on the back of a wagon. And yet this hagiographic moment passes quickly, with its easy glorification of the known (because what is better known about Lincoln than this particular speech?) establishing a reverential and celebratory tone entirely appropriate to the biopic. The white soldiers remember the speech vaguely, but it has been more thoroughly and completely memorized by a black soldier who joins the group. Properly appreciative of the more radical meaning of the president's words, this soldier is unhappy with the unequal treatment meted out to former slaves in uniform and with the apparently gradualist approach of the

administration in providing full equality under the law to those of all races. In one of the film's most dramatic moments, Lincoln finds himself reproached with his own impassioned reformulation of Jeffersonian idealism, a principle that his own actions perhaps have not satisfied. A suitable chorus to this dialogue is furnished by another black soldier, who is less outraged by the inequities of a segregated army, which gall his comrade-in-arms. Willing to give his life to advance the cause of freedom, this survivor of the ghastly Battle of Jenkins Ferry (with which the film opens) winds up playing Booker T. Washington to his erstwhile companion's somewhat acerbic W. E. B. DuBois. Lincoln listens respectfully to both men, trying and failing to defuse the moment with a humorous story, as was his constant habit. The disgruntled man starts to leave with no further comment, but then he turns, and, with greater accuracy and emotion than his white comrades have displayed, recites the closing sentences of the Gettysburg Address, thus measuring against that ringing call for social justice and legal equality Lincoln's failure to solve (for an army of freed blacks struggling to defeat the Slave Power) a series of injustices (less pay than whites, no black officers) that remind them daily of their presumed inferior social position.

"A Rough and Noble Democratic Masterpiece" (Scott)

Remarkably, a tendentious, archly liberal engagement with the complex political issues of a hundred and fifty years ago did not harm in the least the film's audience appeal. That *Lincoln* did not turn into a static and pious talkfest is a testimony to the commercial and intellectual genius of the filmmakers. Its several releases have been immensely profitable for a historical film short on spectacle, glamor, and large-scale action, having earned to date more than \$275 million dollars at the box office and thus measuring up quite well to Spielberg's other influential lesson in American history, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which, not unexpectedly for an action-dominated release, has now earned more than \$480 million worldwide.¹ *Ryan* was in theaters just three years after the fifty-year anniversary of the various events of World War II, including the 1944 Normandy landings. On June 6, 1994, D-Day + 50 years, President Bill Clinton joined other dignitaries for commemorative ceremonies at the American cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, which also figures as a deeply moving site of remembrance in Spielberg's tribute to what Tom Brokaw lauded as "The Greatest Generation," in a history book also published in 1998. Brokaw's appreciative remembrance was so popular it eventually generated a sequel, which is certainly unusual for what is essentially a work of popular prosopography. In the manner of the Brokaw tomes

and the often jingoistic work of other popular historians such as Stephen Ambrose, cultural memory as celebration is everything in Spielberg's American films (see Brokaw 1998 and 1999). At least in these two historical reconstructions, his big-budget productions have depended on carefully taking advantage of those times when public interest in history in general and the national patrimony in particular, normally at low ebb, substantially increases.²

It is thus no accident that *Lincoln* was produced for release during the five years of the Civil War sesquicentennial, which has given rise to a spate of (what else to call them?) celebrations around the country. Unlike other popular-culture representations of the conflict, however, Spielberg's film does not participate in what Blight terms the customary prioritizing of "sentimental remembrance . . . over ideological memory [and] . . . the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies" (Blight 2001, 6). Sentimental remembrance, to be sure, has been everywhere to be seen on the national stage since the spring of 2011, with the memorial events in Charleston Harbor including several "children's musket firing" sessions.³ Perhaps the largest of such memorials, the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in July 2013, featured more than twenty thousand reenactors, who produced "fighting" on a large enough scale to be disturbingly reminiscent of the original tragic encounters, which ended with more than 51,000 casualties (including nearly nine thousand killed), the highest total of the war. More than five hundred journalists covered the three days' worth of memorializing events, and the faux warfare attracted more than two hundred thousand spectators (Gast n.d.).⁴ Featured speakers evoked the unimaginably bloody slaughter of the original battle only in euphemistic, patriotic platitudes about sacrifice and honor, continuing a tradition from a hundred years earlier, when the first Gettysburg reenactment featured surviving veterans of the battle from both armies (Blight 2001). The representations of the war in *Lincoln*, in contrast, capture much of the horror of the conflict: amputated limbs, dripping blood, are hauled away in a cart to be dumped in a refuse heap, while the just-abandoned earthworks at Petersburg are depicted strewn with bloated, mutilated bodies and the detritus of wrecked military equipment. Alone, Lincoln on horseback carefully picks his way through this devastated landscape, contemplating, as later emerges from a brief conversation with General Grant, the consequences of decisions, political and military, taken far away from those blasted landscapes where the bloodletting between determined foes has taken place.

That meditative, even peaceful scene completes the meaning of an earlier sequence. In a manner reminiscent of *Saving Private Ryan*, which begins with a disturbingly realistic reconstruction of the Omaha Beach

landing, *Lincoln* opens with a horrifying, if fairly brief, representation of one of the war's myriad minor battles (Jenkins Ferry, Arkansas, April 30, 1864). The part of the battle depicted in the film takes place in a muddy stream with the combatants reduced to roaring beasts who slaughter each other with knives, bayonets, rifle butts, and their bare hands. Spielberg thus takes us far from the heroic representations of fraternal strife that have long predominated in national imaginings of the war, announcing from the beginning of the film his abandonment of the collective amnesia expressed in battlefield reunions and reenactments, their pomp and circumstance, their grand uniforms and stirring music. Spielberg's evocation of the Pyrrhic victory of Federal troops at Jenkins Ferry not only avoids triumphalist militarism, but breaks new cinematic ground in another way. The Union soldiers are all black and do not extend to their Confederate foes the opportunity to surrender, in this way taking revenge, as the viewer is later informed, for the similar, racially motivated slaughter of their own comrades during earlier battles in the campaign at Poison Spring and Mark's Mill. This horrifying picture of interracial struggle rhymes, as we will see, with a sequence toward the end of the film that offers a contrasting vision of harmony between black and white that goes far beyond the legal liberation from bondage promised by the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. In emphasizing the costs, human and otherwise, of the war, *Lincoln* suggests that its gains for the nation, primarily the end of slavery, must be recognized and appreciated.

Interestingly, a sense of gruesome, apocalyptic struggle dominates in all three of the Lincoln films released in 2012, providing an appropriate memorialization of the war as a confrontation of bitterly opposed enemies, and of Lincoln's part in furthering what became its aims, not only preserving the union but ending slavery and the powerful social institutions that supported its continuation. Except for Jefferson Davis, no other American president, of course, can be held responsible in some sense for anything like the horrendous scale of slaughter that followed Lincoln's issuing of a call for volunteers and the beginnings of a Union Army that would include over the four years of the war more than 2.2 million men on its rolls. The other two 2012 Lincoln films are not biopics, conventionally speaking, even though they offer versions of his life, concentrating as does Spielberg on the war. The fact that they were even produced, however, certainly testifies to the enduring appeal on many cultural levels of the nation's most revered political leader. In *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (Timur Bekmambetov) and *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies* (Richard Schenkman), the war's large-scale slaughter is reimagined as resulting from the attack on the living of the undead, requiring a heroic Lincoln personally to give brutal battle to these onto-

logical enemies, who must be chopped to pieces with his railsplitter's axe (*Hunter*) or blown to bits with gunpowder supplied, *mirabile dictu*, by none other than Stonewall Jackson (*Zombies*). Spielberg's protagonist is no less heroic than these graphic novel types, even if he is not the direct purveyor of nation-cleansing violence, wielding his formidable rhetoric rather than some edged weapon or keg of gunpowder.

Given its focus on a secular saint, of course, *Lincoln* could not avoid providing a cinematic reflex of sorts to the Lincoln Memorial (dedicated in 1922). The biopic in general, of course, deals in memorials, creating public history in the most elementary sense, as Custen suggests, "by declaring, through production and distribution, which lives are acceptable subjects," thus establishing what counts as national history and potentially achieving "an enormous impact upon viewers' conceptions about the world" (Custen 1992, 12). *Lincoln* is certainly yet another version of the medium's long-established tradition of moralizing biography, making room for sequences depicting Lincoln's stormy but loving marriage to Mary Todd (Sally Field), in which he shows tolerance and love for a woman generally acknowledged to be difficult, and his fond feelings for sons Robert (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Tad (Gulliver McGrath), scenes that illustrate the softer side of his personality. The Lincoln that emerges in Spielberg's film is clearly to some degree "the great heart" of the legend that developed in the decades after his death, incarnated most movingly in the famous, and immensely popular, book by W. Francis Aitken, *The Boy's Life of Greatheart Lincoln: The Martyr President* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1910). But Spielberg and Kushner do not construct him as this figure deprived of ideological zeal (especially of a deep-seated opposition to slavery), who, as Barry Schwartz suggests, had by the 1920s been transformed into a "demigod"; by this time, ideas of Lincoln's greatness had been so abstracted from the political context of his presidency that "parallels between his life and Christ's were drawn so often as to approach cliché" (Schwartz 2000, 12).

Lincoln, Stevens, and Emancipation

By making clear that the end of slavery did not simply follow the battlefield victory achieved by Federal arms, *Lincoln* asks viewers to rethink this traditional, hagiographic narrative of Lincoln's hallowed place in the national past. Perdurable abolition resulted instead from contentious political debate and maneuvering in which the legislative goal just barely attained was constantly in doubt. The film's dramatizations depend on the revivification of complex, less familiar figures from the national past, including, besides Stevens, Secretary of State William Seward (David

Strathairn), Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (Bruce McGill), and other members of the cabinet, as well as Rep. Fernando Wood (Bruce Pace), the bill's most determined Democratic opponent, and even political power brokers such as noted Republican operative Francis Preston Blair (Hal Holbrook). Many commentators have noted that this debate between the two parties, exacerbated by bitter divisions within the Republican caucus, can, or perhaps should, be read as of great current relevance, suggesting as it does that the present gridlock in the national government might well be only the prelude to a movement toward renewed functioning. To be sure, a typically Spielbergian chauvinism is evident throughout, as the bill passes when Stevens, put on the spot to espouse his views about civil rights, prevaricates, proclaiming that he does not believe in the full social equality of the two races, even though this is a position he has vigorously proclaimed for years. Stevens's statement, though implausible to everyone in the chamber, is, in effect, a promise not to pursue more radical aims, reassuring the more conservative members of his party that the end of slavery does not portend a thoroughgoing reformation of American society or a vigorous challenge to then-dominant notions of the inherent inferiority of Negroes, whose gaining the franchise is viewed by many in the chamber, even those supporting the amendment, as a horrifying prospect.

However a simplification of history in many ways (as an army of commentators have been eager to point out), this moment of conscience denied in the service of political expediency provides the film with a suspenseful and generically interesting focus. Lincoln, as the film shows, participates in the bending of the truth that eases the bill's passage from long distance, as it were, sending a note to the Capitol during the debate that, worded with Clintonian evasiveness, denies that delegates from the Confederacy have come to Washington in order to open peace negotiations; delegates have crossed Union lines, but Lincoln has kept them from proceeding to the White House. The opening of peace talks would perhaps have encouraged many in a war-weary North to opt for compromise on the future of slavery in order to obtain peace and thus destroy the fragile coalition assembled to enable passage of the Bill. Nevertheless, the dramatic focus is clearly on Stevens.

But then, this film is perhaps as much about the enduring meaning of Federal victory in the Civil War for national institutions as it is about the indispensable leader of the winning side in the struggle. The ever-evolving national memory of the Civil War offers a struggle among three separate visions of its significance: the reconciliationist (the union strengthened through its trial by fire); the white supremacist (the Lost Cause of Southern independence, redeemed eventually by segregation);

and the emancipationist (the moral wrong of slavery ended and racial justice secured by bloody sacrifice) (See Blight 2001, 6–12). There is no doubt about which vision Spielberg intended to promote. *Lincoln* offers a powerful reminder that the war was fought, perhaps mainly, for that very end, and to ensure as well racial equality in some form for the transformed society projected to emerge from the difficult process of reconstruction.⁵ Neo-Confederate views have hardly disappeared from contemporary America, and an important political aim for engaged political liberals such as Stephen Spielberg remains reminding the national public that the Civil War erupted over a regional disagreement about the perpetuation of an immensely profitable economic practice, which could only be ended on the battlefield. With its incredible carnage and brutality, the war unleashed energies that, had they proven more enduring, would have threatened the survival of the nation, as the deliberately unheroic evocation of Jenkins Ferry establishes from the outset.

Spielberg, of course, has concerned himself before with the political and social issues raised by slavery. In *Amistad* (1997), he cherry-picks from American history an episode in which national institutions proved peacefully triumphant over the evil of slavery; in this film then-dominant social values, and the power wielded by “special interests,” are challenged by ex-president John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins), who advocates for the end of slavery and repeatedly denounces the “Slave Power,” even as, in a more limited sense, he wins a court case that frees a group of Africans who are deemed wrongly enslaved and thus enabled to return home. This verdict, so Spielberg suggests, validates the American commitment to existential equality, though slavery continues, and the film’s coda briefly evokes the Civil War and its role in extending emancipation to all those previously in bondage. *Amistad* testifies to the power of the federal government to do the right thing. *Lincoln* does much the same, providing a political victory that contrasts with, even as it anticipates, the triumph over the Confederacy on the battlefield, which of course provides the Federal government with the power to enforce an amendment whose ratification will depend, as it turns out, on the crucial fact that the defeated Southern states will have no real opportunity to resist effectively. *Amistad* is in some sense a stealth biopic of Adams, even though it ostensibly focuses on an event in which black agency is foregrounded in a successful slave revolt. The righteous violence of that insurgency, however, quickly gives way to a judicial confrontation, as those who have freed themselves are once again deprived of liberty. It is in the justice system that the issue of their freedom is decided, an outcome that can be read as counterbalancing the grievous failure of the Supreme Court in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) to recognize that no African Americans

could be American citizens and thus had no standing in court. *Lincoln* is self-evidently a biopic, but its focus is split between two larger-than-life figures, both of whom are viewed, as is typical for the genre, in their private as well as their public selves. And, in Hollywood terms, it is Stevens, not Lincoln, who is provided with a character arc, as his public denial of deeply held views delivers the crucial message about the workings of the American system, so dependent on Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers and its promotion of compromise between competing interests as the only way in which national business can be conducted peacefully and effectively.

In a detailed history of the always-evolving ways in which Lincoln has figured in the national memory, Schwartz declares that "we find the past to be neither totally precarious nor immutable, but a stable image upon which new elements are intermittently imposed. The past, then, is a familiar rather than a foreign country" (Schwartz 2000, 303). Certainly the summative brevity of Spielberg's title speaks to the hyperfamiliarity of this biopic's announced focus: for Americans, there is no other man worthy of celebration with this surname. But the title leaves interestingly vague the decision on what in the complex personal and political career of Abraham Lincoln the film will focus (and this was a difficult issue for the filmmakers as well, as discussions of the film's production have recounted).⁶ Spielberg's hero is not a "young" Lincoln whose embryonic years are reconstructed in order to be dramatized, someone for whom the title "Mr." rather than "Mr. President" is appropriate, with this unaccustomed lacuna promising, and delivering, a meaning-rich prequelness anticipating a blank space that the viewer is called upon to fill in at will. Nor is he the soon-to-be great man observed in his early career as a country lawyer "in Illinois" (once again an interesting form of displacement), with the small-bore but character-revealing struggles for justice, fairness, and respect in which he is embroiled on behalf of his clients functioning as a series of predictive metonymies for the more challenging, larger-scale tasks that will be his grim destiny in the nation's capital. Produced during the high tide of Hollywood's support for the patriotic idealism given shape by the Rooseveltian New Deal, the two films to which I am here alluding brilliantly allude to the greatness that is the biopic's accustomed theme: *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (John Cromwell, 1940). But they present a Lincoln who, by virtue of the life that they evoke, is the worthy subject of a reverential biopic.

They say what they can say, as the ideological and political meanings still clinging to Lincoln during that era could only be evoked indirectly, euphemistically. They say what can be said for all Americans,

both South and North, to hear and appreciate (unqualified praise for Lincoln's preeminent virtues, including his folksy wisdom), while avoiding what it was then "uncomfortable" to dramatize at length (his role as commander-in-chief of an army that destroyed the Southern independence). If by the middle of the twentieth century, Southerners in general no longer saw Lincoln as the racially ambiguous monster who unleashed the deadly destruction of "the war of Northern aggression," Hollywood could by no means focus on his role as a commander-in-chief in a struggle that saw hundreds of thousands of their countrymen killed. A different atmosphere prevails today. Among Lincoln films, what is unique about *Lincoln* is its focus on emancipationist themes, including the president's refusal, when he finally meets (if not in Washington and so not "officially") with Southern peace delegates, to compromise on the slavery issue. A Southern surrender is the only terms he will discuss, much to the distress of Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens (Jackie Earle Haley), who asks in vain that what Lincoln calls "the states currently in rebellion" be recognized as an independent country. At least as Spielberg and Kushner depict him, Lincoln is eager that the war not end before the abolition of slavery is established by the legislative passage of an amendment whose passage to ratification Lincoln has already confidently plotted. Spielberg's film is the first Hollywood release to present a Lincoln firmly committed to completing the process of emancipation only begun about two years earlier with the issue of the famous proclamation, which legally released from bondage only slaves in those states currently in rebellion against the Federal government.

Some have pointed out that Spielberg's film is emancipationist only in a qualified sense. There is perhaps some justice in this position. Most controversially, *Lincoln* slights the multifarious contributions of blacks to the final victory, representing them instead as the recipients of the gift of freedom rather than as indispensable agents of its achievement. Most of the key figures involved in the flurry of events, both political and military, that marked the closing months of the war are represented. These include, perhaps surprisingly, the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, Robert E. Lee (Christopher Boyer), whose surrender at Appomattox is depicted in a brief sequence that Blight would call reconciliationist, and the lesser known Union officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ely S. Parker (Asa Luke Twocrow), General Grant's military secretary and the man who drafted the surrender document signed by Lee (See Blight 2001, 6–12). Following long-standing traditions of how the end of the war should be represented, Spielberg emphasizes the exchange of respectful salutes between the mortified Confederate leader and his recent, but now former, Federal enemies. This is arguably the film's most persuasive,

and conventional, image of the war as involving issues that, once fighting ceased, could easily be put aside. It can hardly be read as other than a gesture toward Southern sensibilities. Negro troops, to be sure, figure importantly in the film's opening sequence and in a dramatic scene that follows immediately, and are represented as well in various scenes featuring detachments of Federal troops. Their collective role in winning the war, however, is only noted *en passant*, which is somewhat strange since the importance of former slaves in the Federal military became crucial as Union ranks were thinned by the horrendous casualties of the closing campaigns of the war, especially in the increasingly apocalyptic confrontations between Grant's Army of the Potomac and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, a tragic subject that the film does briefly treat.

At the same time, *Lincoln* features two African Americans associated with the president and his family, both historically interesting figures: his valet William Slade (Stephen Henderson) and Mrs. Lincoln's confidante/modiste Elizabeth Keckley (Gloria Reuben). Only Slade functions as a servant in the traditional sense, but in their actions both characters usually make clear their subservience to the first couple and then mainstream racial protocols. There is an important exception: at one point, Mrs. Keckley confronts Lincoln on what seems to them both to be the crucial issue once slavery disappears. In response to the president's inquiry, "Are you afraid of what lies ahead for your people?" she responds frankly, "White people don't want us here." Asked for his own view on this question, Lincoln provides an indirect, almost incoherent answer: "I . . . I don't know you, Missus Keckley. Any of you. . . . You have a right to expect what I expect, and likely our expectations are not incomprehensible to each other. I assume I'll get used to you." Lincoln remains silent in the face of her poignant response: "My son died, fighting for the Union . . . I'm his mother. That's what I am to the nation, Mr. Lincoln. What else must I be?" Lincoln has no answer for her, as if the question of what might come after abolition was one he had not yet asked. The script, in fact, paints Lincoln as something uncomfortably close to a white supremacist who assumes that the major task for American society is for white people to "get used" to the presence of freed blacks among them, even as he acknowledges Mrs. Keckley's people have a right to the same expectations (whatever those might be—the vagueness of the formulation is telling) as whites.

Absent from the film's reconstruction of the past (and unmentioned) is the most important figure of the national black community, Frederick Douglass, who might have provided an answer of sorts to Mrs. Keckley's question. His tireless advocacy of abolition rallied many to the cause. Throughout 1863–64, he toured the North, advocating the legal pro-

scription of slavery in order that all Americans might live in a country that “shall not brand the Declaration of Independence as a lie” (qtd in Blight 2001, 18). There is some evidence that Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner originally intended to include scenes with Douglass in the film but then deleted them for reasons that are unclear, perhaps because to offer another important figure in the struggle for abolition might have been judged as diluting the biopic’s focus on the great man, already conceived as sharing the spotlight with Thaddeus Stevens.⁷ An unconvincing excuse for this lacuna is offered by Princeton historian Sean Wilentz, one of the foremost contemporary authorities on the Civil War. Wilentz, somewhat peevishly, responds to those who have criticized *Lincoln*’s exclusion of Douglass, by proclaiming that the film is “not an epic treatment of emancipation.”⁸ The film, to be sure, has its epic qualities, but these are connected not narrowly to emancipation as such but to the crucial events of the last month of the war and the assassination that followed so quickly in its wake. It is perhaps wiser to take a wider view of the film’s racial politics and concentrate on what it does represent instead of what it leaves out. In terms of the traditions of American filmmaking, it is difficult, as surely Spielberg realized, to understand *Lincoln* as other than a profound revisioning of D. W. Griffith’s spectacularly successful Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). *Lincoln* can be seen as a thorough rewriting of the connection between Lincoln and Stevens that was commonly held by early-twentieth-century historians, a view embodied most meaningfully for a national audience in Griffith’s sprawling epic of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

In *Birth*, the president who had made successful war on a seceding South figures largely as a poignant absence, his dying presented fairly early on in one of the film’s most conventional tableaux; the president’s passing is depicted as bitterly regretted, somewhat implausibly, even by the defeated South. In the power vacuum that then develops, the film’s thinly disguised version of Thaddeus Stevens, Senator Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis), becomes, in effect, the film’s anti-Lincoln, the embodiment of an irrational and ultimately self-defeating Northern desire for revenge through the complete social transformation of the defeated Confederacy, in which the enslavement of Africans is to be punished by the suppression of their former masters. No self-respecting white Southerner, so Griffith suggests, could accept the desire of freedmen for social equality, and the exercise of political power by blacks, now provided citizenship and the right to vote by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, passes unchallenged by disenfranchised ex-Confederates. Even more unacceptable is what Griffith presumes to be the irrepressible innate desire of black men for white women, to be satisfied by rape after

righteous, self-respecting refusal. In order to protect white womanhood, the depredations of black men quickly result in the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. Stoneman, who moves south with his daughter Elsie (Lillian Gish), not only promotes intermarriage, but is shown cohabiting with a mulatta housekeeper named Lydia Brown (Mary Alden), who wields what seems to be a sexual power over him. The inevitably deteriorating political and social condition eventually forces Stoneman to face up to the hypocrisy of his supposed racial tolerance. The freedmen he puts in charge of the South Carolina town of Piedmont run amok, provoking a deadly racial conflict, and the mulatto politician whom Stoneman supports, Silas Lynch (George Siegman), cannot be discouraged from pursuing marriage with Elsie, while white society in general is preserved from murder and mayhem at the hands of the plundering black soldiers, and Elsie in particular saved from Lynch's unwanted sexual advances, by a heroic troop of Klan cavalry. Blacks are put back into what Griffith suggests is their proper place (a nonvoting, subservient underclass), while Stoneman is forced to experience the error of his misguided views on racial equality. In a finale that cements the reconciliation of former enemies and the reinstatement of "proper" racial boundaries, Elsie marries the leader of the Ku Kluxers, Colonel Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall), while her brother marries Ben's sister.

This double constitution of Northern/Southern white couples reestablishes the reunited United States as, effectively, a whites-only country, from whose social life blacks can be marginalized and relieved of their civil rights, including voting, thanks to the intimidating presence of the Klan on election day. Like Spielberg, Griffith focuses on equality, taking his characters down what proves a slippery slope, as the granting to freedmen of political rights, including the franchise, inevitably leads them to demand full social equality, which is shown impractical because the recently freed blacks cannot behave in a properly civilized fashion. Like novelist Thomas Dixon, who penned the film's fictional sources, Griffith seems to believe it inevitable that black men are moved by an irresistible, natural desire for white women, which they will pursue at any cost. Though he endorses freedom and equality under the law (including, perhaps, the franchise) for freed blacks, Spielberg's *Lincoln*, as the film suggests in several scenes, cannot imagine that full social equality, including the possibility of intermarriage, would ever be acceptable to most Americans. If lacking hysterical fearfulness over black sexual desire, *Lincoln's* views on the possible or desirable social relations between the races are not totally opposed to those of Griffith, as revealed by his inability to answer Mrs. Keckley's provocative and anguished question: "What else must I be?" Cannot she simply be a mother, like many thousands

of others in the North, mourning a son killed in the war to end slavery? With no doubts that slavery is an intolerable moral evil that, so political considerations convince him, can be ended only before the war itself is concluded, Lincoln pushes for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment with no hesitation. But as far as Negro social identity is concerned, he has no answer to her heartfelt question of what that might be in addition to human personhood. What will the newly reunited nation see as the social position of blacks now free from the legal disabilities of slavery? Can they simply be judged by who they are as people, which is not only the hope of Mrs. Keckley but the dream of Martin Luther King as well?

The two Republicans, Lincoln and Stevens, are shown to approach the battle to pass the bill with different understandings of that key phrase from the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence—"All men are created equal." As is well known from the glory-shedding accounts of Gary Wills and others, with this speech Lincoln revivifies the Declaration, rescuing it from reverential obscurity and enshrining its first two sentences in the pantheon of foundational American ideas (Wills 1992). The key word here, of course, is "equal," which is not an absolute but a relational term. Equal, yes, but equal in what. The film's Lincoln understands "equal" in more or less the same terms that both the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments define it—equal under the law, meaning that one and all, regardless of race, are deserving equally of the protection the law affords. Stevens, as the film's most surprising and dramatic moment reveals, believes that "equal" means full social equality, that the social barriers separating the races should be removed, including prohibitions against what was once called race defilement or miscegenation, some state laws forbidding which have only been repealed in living memory.

In their portrait of Stevens, Spielberg and Kushner not only recycle historical fact, but also arguably, and provocatively, make history. Stevens never married, but lived for many years with a mulatta named Lydia Hamilton Smith (S. Epatha Merkerson), who was presented to the world as his housekeeper. Speculation that their relationship was in fact romantic always dogged Stevens, who was thought by many not only to be cohabiting with a woman to whom he was not married, but also to be in violation of then-existing laws prohibiting miscegenation. There is no convincing proof one way or the other. Interestingly, *Lincoln* and *The Birth of a Nation* both make the same historical judgment by suggesting that they did live as man and wife. *Birth* portrays Stevens (Stoneman) from the beginning as bewitched by his hysterical, jealous, out-of-control housekeeper, only thinly disguised as Lydia Brown. *Lincoln*, in contrast, dramatizes the revelation of their loving, committed relationship, presenting this eminently private moment as connected ineluctably to the

passage of the amendment, which is achieved only because Stevens repudiates the true radicalness of his views on racial equality. Asking the House clerk for a draft copy of the bill, he hurries home, where Mrs. Smith greets him in the seeming manner of a housekeeper. But, as Stevens prepares to get into bed for the night, the camera suddenly, and surprisingly, pans to reveal that Mrs. Smith is occupying it with him. Public disavowal is thus transformed into a perdurable private commitment, pointing toward a form of equality between the races that even for some of Spielberg's viewers might seem undesirable or immoral. It is certainly one that the film's Lincoln, even in the deepest recesses of his imagination, could never begin to contemplate.

As a biopic, *Lincoln* can hardly disavow the conventionality of the form. The film must—its makers have no choice—invoke and celebrate the places of memory that cluster around Lincoln. His turbulent marriage to Mary Todd, lovingly endured. His affection for his sons, with his paternal desire to protect Robert from the dangers of military service even though he has himself ordered thousands of other sons to risk their lives in order to save the union. His Shakespearean intimations of impending death. His offer in the Second Inaugural of a merciful form of regional reunion. His dying staged as an archly familiar theatrical tableau, including a famous proclamation (“He now belongs to the ages”) whose accuracy is problematic. These are all epic places of memory. If the narrative moves beyond epicness into a private, fictionalized realm that remains as unknowable for them as it does for everyone else in his world save Stevens and Hamilton, it is not, however, to offer an ironic contrast between a public event—the passing of the bill that will eventually lead to the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment—and the kind of private moment that makes such legislation irrelevant. If in the film Stevens is summoned up and focused on in order to identify something lacking in the film's main figure, this sense that two kinds of heroic action are required is not managed in such a way as to undercut or deny the importance of Lincoln's central role. What Kushner and Spielberg provide with the bedroom scene is not irony, but fulfillment—the movement of hearts that becomes fully possible once political action has been taken. It is the presentation of the now-passed resolution to Lydia that seems to raise the level of their commitment to one another, cementing the inevitable connection between private and public. *Lincoln* demonstrates how the biopic can embrace troubling contradictions or conflicts, often refusing easy or crowd-pleasing understandings. In fact, it seems that the more interesting entrants in the genre deconstruct at least in part the very myths they perpetuate, promoting a new, often challenging version of whomever they simultaneously honor.

Notes

1. Figures from the Internet Movie Database. They do not include earnings from subsidiary markets such as DVD release.

2. For a full, if relentlessly pro-Spielberg, discussion of this issue, see Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2006). As many have suggested, *Amistad* (1997) might be a more personal film, intended as a response to the negative comments Spielberg received from the African American community for his adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985). In *Amistad*, of course, he does offer a wish-fulfillment version of American history in which our legitimate institutions, including and especially the courts, rule against slavery (sort of) and free the powerful, attractive leader of the plaintiffs (Djimon Hounsou), who is able to return triumphant to his Mende homeland. This film promotes the African American agency that is notably lacking in *Lincoln*.

3. For full details see <http://www.nps.gov/fosu/planyourvisit/civil-war-sesquicentennial.htm> (accessed 3/2/2014).

4. Such celebrations, to be sure, accommodate themselves to what the travel/event business thinks advisable. Avoiding the regularly uncomfortable weather in Atlanta in July, the reenactment of the Battle of Atlanta has been scheduled for late September, when cooler temperatures can reasonably be expected. See <http://www.atlantacampaign.com/schedule.html> (accessed 2/10/2014).

5. Emancipationism has arguably become the dominant trend among historians, prompting revisionist accounts of the war and its aftermath such as James McPherson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty: An American History* 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

6. In an interview at Harvard, Kushner reported that Spielberg suggested the focus on the Thirteenth Amendment fight, which Kushner originally thought risky: "We both laughed about that—it seemed like an insane idea," Kushner said. "It's as much about the House of Representatives as it is about Lincoln, and the idea of making a movie about the House of Representatives seems completely insane—there is no organ of government in the history of the world less popular! The whole movie was just going to be a lot of guys talking." <http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/11/tony-kushner-talks-lincoln> (accessed 2/11/2014).

7. See, among other accounts, that of lissajuliana at <http://pastpersistent.com/2013/02/14/a-valentine-for-frederick-douglass/>.

8. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/111242/the-lost-cause-and-the-won-cause> (accessed 2/10/2014). Originally published in *The New Republic*, December 21, 2012.

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Afterword

The Making of Americans

WILLIAM H. EPSTEIN

The Making of Americans

INSPIRED BY AND DILATING UPON some of the essays you've just read, I want to bring you out of this book by offering yet a few more examples of how often, how variously, and how significantly the biopic gestures to the conceptual practices of American national identity. I'll begin with *Houdini* (1953; screenplay, Philip Yordan; producer, George Pal; director, George Marshall), the subject of Murray Pomerance's essay, a film that enacts yet another variation on George Custen's extraordinary biopic individual, whose difference, in this instance, makes him unsuitable for (what Michel Foucault called) "bio-power, . . . the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production" (Foucault 1980, 140–41). As the film opens, Harry Houdini (Tony Curtis) is hiding in plain sight as two "dime-museum" acts: Bruto the Wild Man (in leopard skin and African mask) and the Great Houdini (in tails and rolled-up sleeves), both of which "alienated" identities he must learn to reject in order to marry Bess (Janet Leigh) and become, as it were, domesticated. Unhappy working in a safe and lock factory,¹ from which he must escape in order to work (at) his magic (indeed, to become the very name of the magician as escape artist), Harry will not, cannot embody this new identity unless and until—in an interesting, obliquely rendered "immigration and assimilation" twist on the conventional biopic plot²—he can escape conventional domesticity (job, mortgage, his mother; he takes

Bess with him as part of the act) by *leaving* America and going (back) to Europe, “where I really could learn something,” and where his recognizably American magic is at first degraded (“All you Yank magicians are fake”), constantly tested (“Let’s teach the Yank a lesson, Inspector”), and ultimately valorized in and through the English jails and continental safes from which he, famously, escapes.

Having won European fame and fortune, Houdini *re-immigrates*, sailing past the Statue of Liberty, reprising his (never-acknowledged) Hungarian Jewish family’s original impoverished and obscure immigration, returning to what he now assumes will be a widely publicized and triumphant reception. Yet his arrival goes unremarked: no press, no ballyhoo, no occasion for show-business bravado. “That was in Europe, Harry,” his mother (Angela Clarke) tells him, her own assimilation marked by her use of a middle-American cliché of the period, “Americans are from Missouri, you have to *show* them.”³ Which of course he does, repeatedly, obsessively, publicly, until, thoroughly “imbricated with the shallow and brilliant world of display, consumerism, and artifice,” he becomes (as Pomerance eloquently posits) “a particular avatar of the early-twentieth-century American spirit”—American showmanship itself, “classless, . . . rootless[,] . . . mobile, electric, present-centered, apparently spontaneous.” Or, as E. L. Doctorow explains (for a 2000 *American Experience* documentary exploring how Houdini became “our greatest showman”): “He was escaping over and over again. [This is] the same impulse that brought people from foreign countries here in the first place—to escape social hierarchy, to escape from poverty, to escape from injustice. That kind of self-assertion appealed to people.”⁴ Like “the séance table,” which he famously debunked, like “the theatrical stage,” where he dazzled audiences for decades by challenging “the boundary between death and life,” like the silent movies, in which he appeared (and disappeared),⁵ “Houdini’s trickery [Pomerance clarifies, citing Shari Weinstein] offered his audiences a new, quintessentially American, way to see,” “‘an alternative version of scopic authority and ocular abilities,’” “‘an American carnival of vision.’”

For its contemporary audience, *Houdini* was promoted not only as “The Real-Life Thriller of the Greatest Daredevil of All Time!” but also as a Toni Curtis/Janet Leigh film (the first of five), “Starring Hollywood’s Most Exciting Young Lovers” (Theatrical trailer intertitles: *Houdini* DVD special feature). Achingly beautiful and designedly glamorous, Curtis and Leigh, who were married in 1951, appear together in virtually every Technicolor scene: they flirt familiarly and even suggestively (caught by his mother sneaking into the house, “I was going to show her some of my magic”); she is his scantily clothed, on-stage assistant; they argue over his

increasingly dangerous escapes; he dies in her arms (“I’ll be back, Bess”). This romantic plot (first-act comedy mutating into third-act melodrama) is sutured to the alienated/domesticated, immigration/assimilation, greatest showman biopic plot in various ways, most obviously perhaps when—as Harry and Bess finally connect after their third “meet-cute” (for each of which she inadvertently and then accidentally-on-purpose comes to see him perform magic tricks and undergo “transformations”) and he asks her out on a date, which will end with their marrying (apparently, that very day)—she coyly temporizes, “We’re strangers,” and he passionately responds, “We were never strangers.”

This romantic exchange, in which love wondrously overpowers estrangement, recapitulates as well the alienating/domesticating transformations magically enacted over and over again by the conceptual practices of the “melting pot,” the dominant mythopoetic trope of late-nineteenth, early-twentieth-century American immigration and assimilation—what Gertrude Stein, with high modernist (in)sincerity, called “the making of Americans,” the title of the book she was writing just as Israel Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot* (1908) was popularizing the term. And just as Harry Houdini’s turn-of-the-century, world-famous, top-of-the-bill vaudeville act—dedicated as it was to “Metamorphosis” (the name of his most famous and enduring escape trick) and thus to a spectacularly harrowing “drama of bodily risk and recovery, mutilation and integration, death and rebirth” (Kasson 2001, 85)—was revealing to his audience, show after show, how strangers can be (dramatically, spectacularly, magically) transformed into “true Americans.”⁶ This shape-shifting, death-defying drama is a reiteration, a restaging, if you will, of Benedict Anderson’s fundamental insight into “the biography of nations”: that both personal and national “identity” emerge from the “estrangement” of (dis)continuity, and that the communal remembering/forgetting of this “experience . . . engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity,’” indeed, for multiple narratives, constantly repeated, in which (among other things) real and imagined, “remorselessly accumulating . . . violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own’” (Anderson 2006, 204–206).

Un-American Activities

In his essay for this book, Homer Pettey traces the legend of Wyatt Earp and what he calls “Earp films” across and among the evolutions and devolutions of American moviemaking, “from the silent-film era through the first sound movies into the post–World War II and Cold War periods [. . . where they] become part of the revisionist strategies of New Hollywood and post-Classical cinema.” The films’ “recurrent plot line

of the self-reliant, duty-bound marshal confronting a violent, lawless breed of men,” “would also come to constitute the cinematic image of the American Western hero, a psychosocially complex personality divided and united by antagonist ideologies.” Especially during the early Cold War era, Pettey argues, “[s]ystemic ideological disputes between East and West and the growing fear of a communist threat to free-market capitalism find analogs in [Earp films, most spectacularly in concluding and conclusive] shootouts on the frontier Main Street.” Thus, Pettey asserts, “identity and conflict are reciprocally linked in these films: national identity exaggerates the otherness of the enemy, while conflict can very well amplify ‘a collective sense of self,’ as evidenced not only between [the] Earps and [their O.K. Corral antagonists, the] Clantons, but also between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War.”

The ultimate cold warrior was, of course, J. Edgar Hoover, the only American lawman as culturally configured, recognizable, and frequently portrayed in film and television as Wyatt Earp, whose late-nineteenth, early-twentieth-century gunslinger-lawman persona was the antithesis of Hoover’s carefully cultivated managerial rebranding of the mid-century FBI agent as an exemplar of (what would soon come to be called, after William H. Whyte’s best-selling 1956 book) “the organization man.” Thus, as the man who organized the organization and for almost fifty years governed its elaborated and complicated, celebrated and sinister bureaucracy, Hoover was, in a sense, the very image of modernity—the Director, lionized and feared, the most carefully watched watcher of the Cold War America that he was, for better and for worse, instrumental in creating. In his essay for this book Douglas McFarland views the most recent of these portrayals, *J. Edgar* (2011; screenplay, Lance Dustin Black; director, Clint Eastwood) as “a narrative machine,” “a modernist complexity of shifting and dissolving perspectives,” by which “writer and director seem to recognize the complex ways in which individuals create their identities through the elusiveness of memory.”

“Labyrinth[ine],” “self-incriminating,” and “unreliable,” the film “does not attempt to solve [what Eastwood calls] the mystery [of Hoover’s personality] but rather to examine,” McFarland claims, “a life enmeshed in the interwoven complexities of familial, ethical, social, psychological, and political forces over a fifty-year period.” One of the effects of this complex and sophisticated narrative, McFarland establishes, is the way it “captures the dynamic interplay between two criteria of power[,] the charismatic and the bureaucratic,” especially Hoover’s ongoing contentions with the attorneys general and presidents who are, nominally, his superiors, but whose constitutional authority and electoral popularity he resists by his remarkable “ability to create and operate the technolo-

gies of a complex centralized bureaucracy,” and by his collection and hoarding of “information” and “secrets,” through the careful and ruthless manipulation of which he manages to stay in office for a half-century and profoundly influence American public life. As *J. Edgar* (and Leonardo DiCaprio’s brilliantly nuanced performance in the title role) reveals, Hoover is a dark and unnerving avatar of a classic modern(ist) type, “the man without qualities,” the bureaucratic man of mystery whose “practiced” “public identity” (which McFarland cleverly recognizes in the film’s use of Hoover’s signature as both a plot device and logo design) reveals and conceals everything and nothing.

An obsessed and obsessive hoarder of both official and unsanctioned secrets whose mastery of “[m]odern techniques of surveillance, forensic science, and the collection of personal data housed in a centralized crime bureau [irresistibly shape and] inform modern American culture” (McFarland, this volume), the film’s J. Edgar identifies with and eroticizes, indeed, fetishizes, such data collection, even, or especially, when he takes on a date the only woman (besides his domineering mother, played with a kind of messianic ferocity by Judi Dench) to whom we ever see him attracted, Helen Gandy (Naomi Watts), who, at the end of this scene, will turn down his awkward advances and become instead his longtime and trusted private secretary. The date, remarkably enough, involves a visit to the Library of Congress Card Catalogue. “I helped organize that Library just as I did this Bureau,” he tells her, then, choosing the subject heading “Indiscretion—Present Day,” he shows her how quickly and easily he can find what he’s looking for. “Imagine,” he fantasizes, “if every person in this country were uniquely identified by their own card and number.” Later, during the first Red Scare that led to the 1920 Palmer Raids, he rearticulates and repurposes this fantasy: “I want a card on every radical person in this country,” he orders Gandy and his staff. Indeed, Hoover’s FBI went a long way toward achieving both these dreams in the Bureau’s “domestic countersubversive surveillance program, which [during the Cold War] apparently occupied more of the Bureau’s agents and resources than any of its other activities . . . [and] consist[ed] primarily of a huge catalogue of words, file after file describing individuals’ affiliations, associations, and beliefs, each dossier organized on an evaluative scale of patriotism and betrayal signified by a security-risk ranking” (Epstein 1990, 77).

For all its narrative sophistication, emotional sensitivity (especially, as McFarland poignantly notes, to Hoover’s “deeply repressed” homosexuality and “lost chances for love and intimacy in his life”), and historical discernment (particularly, McFarland explains, in the way that “the characterization in the film of the Red Scare that followed World War

I and Hoover's response to it comment indirectly on the measures taken to prevent terrorist attacks in the aftermath of 9/11"), *J. Edgar* glosses over this personal and organizational preoccupation with anticommunist surveillance and its use (indeed, its virtual apotheosis) in the so-called McCarthy Era (*the* great Red Scare, the late forties and early fifties), when "Congress passed the Internal Security Act, which (among other things) 'provided for the confinement of suspected citizens [political dissidents listed on the FBI's massive Security Index] in detention camps in time of emergency or insurrection' [and when] the FBI secretly supplied names of suspected security risks to House and Senate investigating committees [HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and SIS, the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Internal Security]" (Epstein 1990, 79). In this context, I am tempted to say that one of the other purposes, or, at least, consequences, of the narrative complexity and temporal elusiveness of Eastwood and Black's film is how easily these stylistic and formal choices enable and obscure the elision, the selective forgetting, of this life- and soul-destroying, mid-twentieth-century crisis in American national identity, a crisis which was induced, in large part, by Hoover, prosecuted, in no small way, by the FBI, HUAC, and SIS, and is *never* really depicted in the movie. Thus, not altogether surprisingly, I suppose, given its progenitors, *J. Edgar* teaches us, that, for Hoover and his political descendants, American national identity was—and still is—more or less synonymous with an obsessive, ubiquitous, unimpeded, and fetishized surveillance of the homeland's national security.

The Great American Insurance Company

In her essay for this book on Bill Condon's *Kinsey* (2004), Gabriele Linke relates how "the talking heads of [Kinsey's research] interviewees are blended on to roads, road signs from different states, and patches from maps," then "melt into each other and pop up all over a map of the United States," the whole "sequence signif[ying] . . . the story of the sexual life of the nation" and reifying how Kinsey and his 'Reports' were and perhaps still are situated "'at the heart of the concept of national character.'" Moreover, Linke speculates, "The national-sexual discourses of the 1940s and '50s that were stimulated by and associated with Kinsey's life and work are employed [in this film] to make a cinematic statement about the insecurities of the nation at the beginning of the new millennium," a post-9/11 "destabilization" mediated and "normalize[d]" by (among other things) the generic conventions of romance and the (re) imposition, despite the sexual diversity the film elsewhere celebrates, of "heteronormative values" near the end of the movie.

Milk (2008; director, Gus Van Sant; screenplay, Lance Dustin Black, who, as we've seen, also wrote *J. Edgar*) is a film very much about interrogating why and how these heteronormative values dominate American national identity: as Harvey Milk (Sean Penn), the first openly gay elected public official in American history, insists, "There must, there should be a place for us in this great country." "Largely uninterested in casual sex, profoundly ambivalent about romantic love, the film is," as Julia Erhart observes in her essay for this book, "driven overwhelmingly by an interest in the mechanisms of gay politics," and is thus saturated with traditional gestures of strategic patriotic memory intersecting with the iconography and other features of the gay movement's emergent identity formation. The American flags and red, white, and blue bunting of political campaigns, the imposing front steps and façade of San Francisco's city hall, Walter Cronkite's and other newscasters' covering and thus valorizing gay and antigay ordinances, ballot propositions, and electoral campaigns as "national" news, are intercut throughout the film with the "shaming" vice raid arrest scenes beneath the opening credits, with the posters, rallies, marches, slogans, and speeches of Milk's and the gay rights movement's constant campaigning, with the funereal candlelight parade after Milk's assassination—all of it under the sign, if you will, of "the Great American Insurance Company," the place where, as the chronological biopic narrative begins in 1970, Milk tells Scott Smith (James Franco) that he works.

Now, this is not factually accurate: Milk had worked for this company in the late '50s and early '60s, but had since moved on to Bache and Company and other investment firms (Shilts 1982, 21, 31). But, as it is conventional to say about biopics, this inaccurate cinematic statement is nonetheless true: 1970 is also near the beginning of a long transitional moment for Harvey Milk and the "gay liberation" movement of which his life is emblematic. Closeted but sexually active, apolitical now but earlier a Goldwater conservative, Milk is on the eve of his fortieth birthday and (he doesn't know it yet) a series of profound changes in his life. As he also says to Smith, whom he is picking up in the New York City subway and who will become his lover, business partner, and fellow activist in San Francisco, "I am part of that corporate establishment that you think is the cause of all the evil in the world from Vietnam to diaper rash." In the terms of this film, underwritten as it is by Randy Shilts's popular and influential biography *The Mayor of Castro Street: the Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (1982) and Rob Epstein's Academy Award-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, and thus, almost certainly, portraying America's best-known, most strategically public, and most remembered/forgotten gay politician, Milk must (in the familiar words of the movement) "come out" from under the shaming, inauthentic, disempowering protection of

“the Great American Insurance Company” and learn how to be proud, real, and (a conceptual practice he is fascinated with throughout the movie) “powerful.” “That is what America is,” he proclaims at the Proposition 6 rally, articulating the fundamental notion of cultural diversity in postmodern democratic society, “It’s about the ‘us’ out there.”

All-American Travesties

Although commercially unsuccessful in theatrical release, *American Splendor* (2003; directors and screenwriters, Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini) won numerous independent film awards and has emerged as a touchstone postmodernist biopic. Dennis Bingham employs it in *Whose Lives* to introduce “‘A Body Too Much,’ Jean-Louis Comolli’s 1978 concept whereby . . . two bodies—the body of the actor and the body of the actual person—compete for the spectator’s belief” (Bingham 2010, 17). Jonathan Lupo and Carolyn Anderson claim that *American Splendor* has “the most successfully ironic approach to the biopic of the films” that focused at the turn of the century on “off-Hollywood lives” (Bingham calls these movies “BOSUD[s], Biopic[s] of Someone Undeserving” [ibid., 159]) because it uses “a playful, often ironic sense of identity and concern with representation,” especially in “the degree to which [the late Harvey] Pekar [the comic book writer who is the subject of the film, played by Paul Giamatti] participates in the deconstruction of his life” (Lupo and Anderson 2008, 103, 108–109). Jason Sperb links *American Splendor* to various postmodern theories of “simulacra” and “trauma,” and concludes: “It is a film about painful life experiences, and about the impossibility of representing those experiences” (Sperb 2006, 128), a thematic and narrative concern instanced most intensely perhaps by the film’s attention to Pekar’s *Cancer Year* and his wife’s (Hope Davis) relief work with war-orphaned Palestinian children, but really, in the sense and to the extent that Pekar’s comics and this movie are *about* living on the edge of poverty, sanity, obscurity, and death, a strategic political issue explored throughout the film somewhat in the spirit and logic of Wallace Shawn’s *The Fever* (as play 1990, as film 2004). The impossibility of representing painful life experiences and the difficulties of framing arguments and artworks dealing with this anguish—“memories too painful or intense to be captured through cognition or understanding, or to be reproduced through representation” (ibid.), but to which we return again and again trying to understand, of which the Holocaust is the quintessential modern experience, but which, for Americans at least, encompasses (among other things) black African enslavement, Native American genocide, and capitalist exploitation of subject peoples at home

and abroad—thus underlie Pekar’s and the film’s subversive apprehension of individual human identity as well as its (Anthony D. Smith might say) “baffling” (Smith 1993, 17) metaphoric and metonymic relationship to American national identity: it is now also impossible to imagine and represent all the individual and collective trauma that had to occur, is still occurring, in order to remember/forget the national imaginary, the “splendor” of American lives.

Tim Burton’s *Ed Wood* (1994), the subject of Constantine Verevis’s essay for this book, is another crucial cinematic text in recent discussions of postmodern “BOSUDs,” reflexive, deconstructionist, “off-Hollywood lives.” “Burton says that he pictured Ed Wood as a ‘weird . . . Andy Hardy,’ the character played by Mickey Rooney in the enormously popular MGM Andy Hardy cycle.” Verevis continues: “As played by Burton’s muse, mirror, and canvas—Johnny Depp—the character Ed Wood channels Andy Hardy, not only for his unflappable enthusiasm and madman grin, but also for the entrepreneurial energy that links the two characters to a tradition of American innovators and impresarios (and finds further expression in Rooney’s lead role in the contemporaneous biopic, *Young Tom Edison* [Norman Taurog, 1940]).” Verevis continues: “Wood’s rallying of his troupe of players and his idealistic relationship with [the actress who became his wife] Kathy O’Hara . . . recall Andy’s partnership with Betsy Booth (Judy Garland) and the ‘let’s-put-on-a-show’ ethic.” “A ‘travesty’ [in the compounded sense of a cross-dressing burlesque] of the classic Hollywood biopic” and a “dizzy celebration of (the success of) abject failure,” *Ed Wood* “presents an inspirational (if distorted) version of American life,” especially the studio-era “American small-town milieu of the Hardy films,” which, Verevis notes, is specifically “invoked on the occasion of Wood and Kathy’s first date—an outing at the fair—during which Wood tells Kathy that he is ‘from back east. Poughkeepsie. You know, all-American small town: everybody knows everybody, my dad worked for the post office, I was a Boy Scout.’”

The use of “all-American” here is very interesting, worth a book of its own—indeed, at least two recent books, although neither really tropes the term much beyond its appearance in the title. Larzer Ziff’s *All-American Boy* traces the concept among the “good boys” and “bad boys” of juvenile biography and fiction, from Parson Weems’s George Washington to J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, and concludes, not altogether approvingly, that “[t]he literary history of the all-American boy . . . rests confidently upon the belief that . . . for all its imperfections, America, like the all-American boy himself, is morally justified” (Ziff 2012, 120). Jeffery P. Dennis’s *Queering Teen Culture: All-American Boys and Same-Sex Desire in Film and Television* seeks to “demonstrate,”

how, in the most “heteronormatively polic[ed]” of “mass-media texts”—the film cycles and sitcoms depicting (and marketed to) postwar and Cold War all-American teenage boys—“same-sex desire . . . marginalized as abnormal, unnatural, infantile, a threat to the American way of life,” would, nevertheless, “not be silenced,” ignored, or denied, would, in fact, be infiltrated everywhere in mid- and late-twentieth-century teen culture’s “myth[ological] nuclear famil[ies],” girl-crazy adolescents, juvenile delinquents, rebels without causes, teenage Frankensteins, singing idols, beach boys, biker-hippies, psycho-slashers, nerds, and Brat Packers (Dennis 2006, vii, 9, 33, and *passim*). Despite (or, indeed, because of) what Verevis calls Burton’s “estrangement from American mainstream culture,” *Ed Wood* epitomizes and anticipates this queering and the diverse and diverse ways in which the term *all-American* and its cognates have been and are still becoming a mass media, titular indicator of counter-cultural subversion.⁷

I’ve Never Forgotten That Moment

As R. Barton Palmer’s other essay for this book reminds us, Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012) is constantly “performing the work of creating/sustaining a national identity in which [Lincoln] is inarguably the central figure.” The film’s focus on the last four months of Lincoln’s life, on the congressional battle over the Thirteenth Amendment, and on the end of the Civil War is projected as an overlapping series of strategic patriotic memories gesturing to (among other things): the fiercely contested, contemporaneous political discourse of nation and union, rebellion and secession, freedom and slavery which permeates the language of Tony Kushner’s intensely researched screenplay; the iconography of Lincoln’s face, which is generally considered “the most familiar face in American history” (Foote 1986, I, 802), “probably the only American [face] whose image could produce the kind of public response that tapped directly into contested meanings of national identity in the [mid and] late nineteenth century” and subsequently in “the rhetorical history of American visual culture” (Finnegan 2005, 33–35), and which Day-Lewis’s uncanny resemblance to and performance of seem to have captivated, if not mesmerized, his director, the other members of “Team Lincoln,” and many of the film’s reviewers (Spielberg: “It wasn’t a game we were playing; it wasn’t method acting. When Daniel came onto the set, he was Abraham Lincoln, not just to me but also to the other actors in the scene and to the entire crew”);⁸ and the ubiquitous displays of the (once-and-future American, but now, throughout most of the film) Union flag, its stars and stripes and its colors, conspicuous elements in

the film's artistic design, which seeks to recreate with meticulous, historical accuracy the interior décor and exterior spectacle of a patriotic nation at war with itself.

This fetishizing of authenticity is, of course, the traditional biopic's "trademark" (Elsaesser 1986, 23): a sales technique highlighting the efforts of the film's designers to faithfully reproduce period and other kinds of *mise-en-scène* detail, spectacularly reified in this instance by the production of a coffee-table book (*A Steven Spielberg Film—Lincoln: A Cinematic and Historical Companion*, published by Disney, the film's U.S. distributor), Part One of which, "Players on the Stage of History," juxtaposes photographs of the historical figures portrayed in the film with posed, wardrobe and make-up publicity stills of the actors, who were cast for their resemblance and then, replicating those period prints, made up, coiffed, (often) bewhiskered, and costumed to produce an "authentic" album or portrait gallery⁹ of simulacra—a process repeated, with variations, to "authenticate" the film's choice of locations, the set designs and their material artifacts, the composition of scenes, the dark ambient lighting, even the wallpaper, the handkerchiefs, the ticking of Lincoln's pocket watch, and the ringing of the church bell across Lafayette Square from the White House.¹⁰ The book also features running commentary, boxed sidebars offering excerpts from interviews with "Team Lincoln's" principals. Here's Kushner, expounding a somewhat different mode of authenticity, reeling off a series of (im)modest, syllogistic equivalences between style and substance, as if identity (national and otherwise) really is in the eye of the beholder: "The film has a very modest feeling that seems to me in keeping with the essential modesty of the man the movie is about. There's something Lincolnian about it—it's not melodramatic, it's not an enormous spectacle, it's not a great display of studio wealth. In a certain way, it's a small movie, but I think it digs into some very big issues, and it does so by focusing inward and staying within the realities that these people were trapped in. What you see is what was there" (Rubel et al. 2013, 170).

And then there are the flags. Union flags (and red, white, and blue flag-like bunting) are everywhere in *Lincoln*: (among many other instances) carried in the opening battle scene and later by Lincoln's bodyguard on horseback; running up a new flagpole Lincoln dedicates outside the Treasury Department; displayed in the House chamber and the White House, in Lincoln's and Thaddeus Stephens's offices, in corridors and on walls; glimpsed through windows; hanging outside a hospital and the Capitol building; painted on the side of an ambulance; waving in the Amendment victory parade and on the steps of the Capitol for the Second Inaugural speech. Spielberg's (his name used here and elsewhere

to include the efforts of his production team and film crew, many of whom have been with him for decades) remarkable facility with coordinating design elements and camera angles and with the blocking and staging of scenes constantly produces—in the language of the historical moment and under the signs of Kushner’s screenplay, Lincoln’s face, and the Union flag—“life-pictures” (Christie 2002, 288) that metonymically reproduce the film’s narrative content, a confluence of the technical and the aesthetic that characterizes the “immersive” directorial style of Spielberg’s later, non-storyboarded, historical films (Wasser 2010, loc. 993), except that here, interestingly and once again (im)modestly, the director attributes this profound, authenticating “immersion” (the term and the practice with which his “blockbuster” style has long been associated) to the screenwriter and the star. “I believe Daniel Day-Lewis and Tony Kushner understood Lincoln on a sub-atomic level—a level that goes beyond anything I could articulate. . . . I was in the middle constantly saying to myself, oh, don’t mess this up, get that performance, get it in the best way you know how—but let them cast the giant shadows.” And again, and even more specifically: “So many of my movies have had a visual outpouring of imagery. I tell the story through pictures, not words. In this case, the pictures took second position to the language of Abraham Lincoln—his actual language—that Tony re-created based on his total *immersion* in the way people spoke and wrote in this nineteenth-century period. In that sense, I took a backseat and watched this theatrical experience evolve before my eyes” (Rubel et al. 2013, 150, 152; stress added). This modesty isn’t strictly the case, of course: the words “A Steven Spielberg Film” appear above the title on the cover of this “cinematic and historical companion” as on movie posters and print ads, trailers, featurettes, and DVDs, and they still mean what they’ve always meant—a dazzling “visual outpouring of imagery” that collects and records, reflects and redeems, shapes and distorts the strategic patriotic memories of (one of the main interpreters and presenters of historical and contemporary) American cultural experience. Let’s look, briefly, at just two frames of *Lincoln*.

Odd Fellows Hall. The presidential box. The Lincolns and Elizabeth Keckley, “a light-skinned black woman, thirty-eight, Mary’s dressmaker and close friend” (Kushner 2012, 14), watch Gounod’s opera *Faust*. Mary (Sally Field) is agitated, whispering anxiously, obsessively, to her husband: “I believe you when you insist that amending the Constitution and abolishing slavery will end this war. And since you are sending my son into the war, woe unto you if you fail to pass the amendment.” Day-Lewis’s Lincolnesque profile, his head characteristically bowed down by the weighty intricacy of all the Faustian bargains he has had to make,



FIGURE 7. *Lincoln*. (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 2012). The theater.

dominates the right foreground; in the center of the frame, Mary is turned, facing him as she speaks; behind her is Mrs. Keckley (Gloria Reuben), “tr[ying] not to listen” (Kushner 2012, 113), and behind her, in the background, is the flag. Everything is more or less in shadowy focus: the president and his wife, the freed black woman, the Stars and Stripes, all the personal and political relationships between and among them, all the promises they have made, all the (U/u)nions they are struggling to preserve, all the hopes and fears they represent, all the futures they already inhabit in the collective memory of our national imaginary, including, of course, what will happen in the very near future in another presidential box in another theater, a scene Spielberg and Kushner do not, (im)modestly, recreate.

Now we are “Outside Petersburg, Virginia.” Lincoln, with his military escort, “rides slowly . . . across the battlefield,” on which “a terrible battle has concluded a couple of hours ago.” “[B]odies lie twisted, burned, headless, limbless, torn in two, blown out of their clothing or charred too badly to tell.” Increasingly, as the president passes through this macabre landscape, “gray-and-blue-uniformed corpses and badly wounded men intermingle.” Finally, “he reaches the other side of the field” (Kushner 2012, 154–55) and begins to pass out of the frame of the shot, *this* shot: his stovepipe hat, center left, is just disappearing (a prefiguring of his own, imminent death) between a dead body in left foreground and a living soldier, a Union picket with a rifle, watching over (in a foreshadowing of Reconstruction?) a background of siege debris; a battered Confederate



FIGURE 8. *Lincoln*. (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 2012). The battlefield.

flag occupies the center of the frame; just appearing center right, behind another dead body in right foreground, is the leading edge of the Union (soon to become again, after this virtually climactic battle, the American) flag. Here, in this imagined, patriotic memory, is a visual representation of the film's and the country's essential narrative of the Civil War and its meaning, the familiar, artless, schoolboy story of American national identity—how Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, gave his life so that the Union could be saved, a narrative so “sacred”¹¹ that, despite the humanizing complexity of their portrait of Lincoln for which the filmmakers have been much lauded, it could not be entirely abandoned, although now, as a deal-making politician and harried husband and father undergoing his own as well as his country's midlife crisis, “the hero is not chiseled out of stone” (Wilentz 2012), but, recapitulating and reversing the lap-dissolve at the end of John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, is being reanimated as, in Spielberg's words, “a man not a monument” (DVD Bonus Feature interview).

As so often with Spielberg, the inspiration for and configuration of the film project emerge from the movies he has seen and internalized, as well as from his past, the feelings and memories of his own all-American, suburban Sunbelt childhood (Wasser 2010, loc. 356–415 and *passim*). Thus, in the coffee-table book as well as the DVD Bonus Feature interview (the version quoted here), Spielberg traces his interest in Lincoln to being “taken at four or five years old to see the Lincoln Memorial, and at first [I] was terribly frightened by the immensity of the statue, [but] as I got closer and closer and closer I was completely captivated, I felt, by the comfort I found in looking at this face. It was a warmth and a safety, I felt really safe, as a little boy looking at him. I've

never forgotten that moment.” And this is, indeed, the “American Journey to *Lincoln*” (combining the titles of the DVD bonus feature and the similar TV-movie featurette)¹² he takes us on—returning to the complex simplicities of childhood; being frightened by the terror of immensity; having the courage and curiosity to come closer and closer; feeling the warmth and safety of the human face and figure, even when it is not “there” but is merely being represented or simulated or projected onto the memory screens of our patriotic imaginations; warily, even cynically, learning to trust again our parents, our leaders, our institutions—a personal and industrial journey through which, ever since he “shifted to more overtly engaged filmmaking after *Schindler’s List* (1993),” a “shift [that] correlate[d] with erosion in” domestic “box-office support” and the rise of the foreign market as “a vital source of profits for Hollywood in general and particularly for Spielberg’s politico-historical critical films,” “Spielberg has become,” as Frederick Wasser asserts in *Steven Spielberg’s America*, “the Hollywood director who both explains America to the world and gives the American perspective on world events” (2012, loc 130).

This Land Was Made for You and Me

Let’s conclude with another film, a bicentennial film, that is also, in its way, *about* American national identity, Hal Ashby’s *Bound for Glory* (1976), which “has been,” Dennis Bingham claims in his essay for this book, employing the language of strategic patriotic memory, “the most forgotten film of, until recently, a mostly forgotten director.” Moreover, Bingham shows us, the film marks “a fascinating intersection of two American artists”: Woody Guthrie, whose “incredibly messy, often sad life” seems to be “inadequate” to “his legend,” and Ashby, who, as a young man, also went “on the road” to the “promised land,” California, and, as one of the few studio-era veterans (he was an editor for fifteen years) who made the transition to New Hollywood auteur, found it to be “sunnier” than did Guthrie, for whom “California [w]as something of a con, a false promise reflective of the unfair social and economic contracts of American capitalism.” Indeed, Bingham sees Guthrie as a self-mythologizing contrarian whose “artistic temperament, . . . personal irresponsibility, and nonconformity” ought to induce a “warts-and-all” biopic “antihero,” but whom the “visually bold style” and reticent, narrowly situated narrative of Ashby’s film depict as “something of a reactive character,” “an open and . . . sensitive man” of the 1970s, “in some ways a defensive response to second-wave feminism,” a response that became, in the New Hollywood, “a means of retaining male hegemony by co-opting femininity.” “A different kind of musical biopic, one that wants to understand the realities

from which the music and the musician emerged," *Bound for Glory* evokes for Bingham a variety of classical and revisionist, studio and post-studio Hollywood genres (musicals, protest movies, "warts-and-all" biopics of "legendarily troubled artists"), styles ("large-scale and plentitudinous," "classically structured," "shambling [and] casual"), technologies ("the first commercial movie to use Garrett Brown's Steadicam," Haskell Wexler's "desaturated" cinematography), directors (the Vincente Minnelli of *Lust for Life*, the John Ford of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the filmmaking team behind *Bonnie and Clyde*), and entertainment-industry issues (auteurism beginning to encounter "disappointed radicalism," the gender politics of the New Hollywood, "the post-Tin Pan Alley, popular music business"). Yet, ultimately, for Bingham, *Bound for Glory* is an interesting failure, "the film that demonstrates better than any other why the New Hollywood biopic never came to fruition."

I come from an older generation than Dennis: perhaps I was there at the Newport Folk Festival the year *before* Dylan went electric, perhaps I was one of those disappointed would-be radicals for whom this biopic is a bittersweet memory of what might have been and yet (we always knew) never could be, perhaps I remember and forget all sorts of things that Guthrie's music and Wexler's eye and Ashby's ambition call forth from the treacherous past, perhaps I have an Afterword needing a conclusion. In any event, for me, *Bound for Glory* is an interesting failure in, let us say, a different register, a two-hour-and-forty-eight-minute epic of dystopian despair and progressive remediation about American national identity, a people's history of the Great Depression which, by going on the road, hitchhiking and riding the rails with the folk singer and songwriter Woody Guthrie, remembers the "forgotten man"¹³ (and women and children) of the 1930s. Guthrie (David Carradine) wanders the Southwest and the movie as an underclass, radicalized troubadour through whom traditional folk music and Marxist ideology are being received and transmitted, and as an unemployed and unemployable original artist, gradually, haltingly, piecing together a new American songbook, scraps and bits of which flow along the background score, emerge occasionally and fragmentarily, a chord here, a melodic line there, from the guitar or harmonica or even piano he is, habitually, almost absent-mindedly, strumming or picking, mouthing or fingering, on front porches or the tops of boxcars, in hobo encampments, migrant labor camps, and roadside honkytonks. The strategic patriotic memory here is, of course, Guthrie's music, especially the "people's (national) anthem,"¹⁴ "This Land Is Your Land," which comes together only at the very end of the movie, swells up over the closing credits and yet another train escaping into the spacious landscape of the American West.

As Carradine, guitar slung over his shoulder, hops the freight, Will-Geer's-as-Woody-Guthrie's voice (performed as if live in concert) rises up, presenting the song and the man, exhorting, teaching, uplifting, as he strums the intro: "I hate a song that makes you think you're not any good, I hate a song that makes you think you're just born to lose, bound to lose, no good to nobody, no good for nothing. . . . I'm out to sing songs and prove to you that this is your world . . . no matter how hard it's run you down, no matter what color, what size you are, how you're built, I want to sing the song that will make you take pride in yourself"—a thrilling moment really, and yet (perhaps it's all the simulacra) somehow already shading into something else, a Me Generation domestication of what was once a radical collectivist challenge, or a late-capitalist appropriation of cultural diversity in the name of consumer populism. And then, Carradine now playing and singing on top of the boxcar, we hear the familiar lyrics and melody, "This land is your land, / This land is my land, / From California to the New York island," his version blending into those of Pete Seeger and the Weavers and (on the soundtrack or in our memories) all the other folk music soloists, trios, and quartets, minstrel groups, choruses, and choirs that preserved and treasured and recorded and covered and denatured and depoliticized his songs, and the audiences who sang along with them, and the times you sang them with your friends, and the way they endure in your heart and in your head—American voices raised in American song.

In a sense, this closing homage to "This Land Is Your Land" squares a kind of circle that begins with *Bound for Glory's* theatrical trailer. Over images of a painted ('30s magazine-style) still of Carradine on the boxcar playing the guitar and singing "This Land," and then the usual montage of brief moments from the film (all of them blessed with Wexler's beautifully muted, antequely distressed, Academy Award-winning cinematography), the voiceover presents Guthrie (and this biopic of him) as a strategic patriotic memory: "The man who wrote those words was Woody Guthrie. His music has become as much a part of America as its mountains, its rivers, its forests, and its people. His life has touched all our lives. This is his story. . . . He travelled America on its rails. . . . Wherever he went, he made music and he made friends. He saw what was right with this country, and what was wrong. He touched the people, he felt their spirit, and he fought for their dream." And this, I suppose, is as good, as inevitable, a place to end as any—with a song, a story, a dream, and a sales pitch, with the biopic as one more (or less) cynical (re)articulation of the American dream, "the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us," and with American national identity as "the last and greatest of all human dreams," already remembered, already

forgotten, “already behind [us], somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic [roll] on under the night.”¹⁵

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. Harold Kellock’s authorized biography, upon which Yordan based his screenplay, actually has Houdini working in such a factory, but in Appleton, Wisconsin, before he was married (Kellock 1928, 113).

2. Pal (György Pál Marczincsak) and Houdini (Erik Weisz) were born in Hungary; Curtis (Bernard Schwartz), the child of Hungarian immigrants, was born in the Bronx, but “[u]ntil I was four or five, we spoke only Hungarian at home”; Yordan was the son of Polish immigrants (Bateman and Lambert 2011, 211; Curtis, 2008, 29; McGilligan 1997, 345).

3. In fact, the (primarily) German-speaking widow of a Hungarian rabbi, Cecilia (Steiner) Weisz knew little English, regional American or otherwise—“she spoke hardly a word of that language to the day of her death” (Kellock 1928, 321).

4. Houdini, it should be remembered, is a character in Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime*, where Doctorow “cleans the land of immigrants and describes the process by which the melting pot is installed in popular culture through mediation and forgetting” (Messenger 2002, 211).

5. For instance, the French *Merveilleux Exploits du Célèbre Houdini à Paris* (1909), and the fifteen-part Octagon Films serial, *The Master Mystery* (dated 1918, released 1919). See John Cox, “Biography,” on his well-researched Wild About Harry website, <http://www.wildabouthoudini.com/p/houdini-biography.html>. Accessed November 9, 2015.

6. This familiar phrase is used, instructively, in Vicki Cobb’s “children’s book” biography of Houdini; she is explaining why he changed his name and claimed he was born in Appleton, not Budapest: “Like many children of immigrants, [Erik/Harry] wanted to leave the ‘old country’ behind and become a true American” (Cobb 2005, 15, 128). John F. Kasson sophisticates Cobb’s extenuation: “Houdini was a self-made man with a self-bestowed name and a keen desire to escape, first and foremost, from his humble, at times humiliating, origins” (Kasson 2001, 80).

7. As in, e.g., the ironically and redemptively titled biopic *Jim Thorpe, All-American* (1951), the rock album *All-American Alien Boy* (1976), the coming-out memoir *All-American Boy* (1995), and the gay-themed, country music Youtube

hit *All-American Boy* (2013).

8. Rubel et al. 2013, 171; see also Wilentz 2012, “He and Day-Lewis have produced the finest portrayal of Lincoln ever presented on film,” and Gizzi, “Day-Lewis has given us a way back into the icon—the voice as weapon and wonder. He has given us back the face that pierces the viewer, that secured the peace . . . [and] creat[ed] a moving picture of the Great Emancipator” (2013, 25).

9. In the mid- and late-nineteenth-century senses of the terms, as in Matthew Brady’s National Portrait Gallery, which opened in New York in 1860, or the publication *Brady’s Album Gallery*. See the National Portrait Gallery (Smithsonian Institution)’s quite wonderful website, “Matthew Brady’s World.”

10. Rubel et al. 2013; Haithman 2013; and Ryzik 2013. Ryzik also offers perhaps the design team’s best example of fetishizing authenticity: costume designer Joanna Johnston’s saying that she “‘would not allow even unseen anachronisms, like plastic buttons.’”

11. “Team Lincoln” often evokes the term: e.g., “‘Steven Spielberg considered this a sacred topic,’ says [sound designer, Ben] Burt, ‘so did I’” (“Sounds of History,” 9); “‘It had this sacred quality,’ Joanna Johnston, the film’s costume designer, said” (Ryzik 2013).

12. The title of the DVD Bonus Feature is “The Journey to *Lincoln*”; the twenty-minute, TV movie featurette is called *Lincoln: An American Journey*.

13. The phrase “forgotten man” was introduced into Democratic campaign rhetoric in a 1932 FDR radio speech, then became, and has remained, popularly identified with New Deal policies, as in, for example, Amity Shlaes’s *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (2007). The figure is personified in the film by Luther Johnson (Randy Quaid), the unemployed migrant farm worker whose family Woody befriends. See also the remarkable production number, “Remember My Forgotten Man,” in *Gold Diggers of 1933*.

14. “‘This Land Is Your Land’ often was mentioned as a possible replacement for ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ as the national anthem. . . . [F]ew of [the many singers who recorded it] could have realized that they were singing a song originally intended as a Marxist response to ‘God Bless America’” (Klein 1982, 451).

15. These memorable phrases occur, of course, at the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (189).

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Contributors

Abel A. Bartley is the director of Pan African studies at Clemson University. He is the author of *Keeping the Faith: Race, Politics, and Social Development in Jacksonville, Florida, 1940–1970* (Greenwood Press, 2000). He is currently working on a book on the difficult process of integrating the Duval County (Florida) Public School System, and a study of seven racially charged sporting events in American history.

Dennis Bingham is professor of English and director of film studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. He is the author of *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (Rutgers, 2010), *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood* (Rutgers, 1994), and many articles on gender and genre in film, as well as on acting and stardom.

James Burns teaches African history and film and history at Clemson University. He is the author of *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Ohio University Press, 2002) and co-author of *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). He is currently working on a history of movie audiences in the African Diaspora.

Julie Codell is professor of art history at Arizona State University and an affiliate faculty member in English, gender studies, film and media studies, and Asian studies. She wrote *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Life Writings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (Cambridge 2003; paperback 2012), edited *Transculturation in British Art, 1770–1930* (2012), *Power and Resistance: The Delhi Coronation Durbars* (2012), *The Political Economy of Art* (2008), *Genre, Gender, Race, and World Cinema* (2007), *Imperial Co-Histories* (2003), and co-edited (with Joan DelPlato) *Orientalism, Eroticism and Modern Visuality in Global Cultures* (2016), (with Laurel Brake) *Encounters in the Victorian Press* (2004) and (with Dianne S. Macleod) *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (1998).

William H. Epstein, professor of English at the University of Arizona, is a distinguished biographer, biographical critic, and biographical theorist. He has written *John Cleland: A Life* (Columbia, 1974) and *Recognizing Biography* (Pennsylvania, 1987), edited *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (Purdue, 1991), and contributed many articles on these and related subjects to learned journals. His work has been nominated for the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize and Phi Beta Kappa's Christian Gauss Award, and has won the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies' Clifford Prize. He has been awarded grants from ACLS and NEH, has served as chair of the executive committee of MLA's non-fictional prose division, and is on the editorial board of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*.

Julia G. Erhart is associate dean (academic) in the School of Humanities and Creative Arts at Flinders University, where she teaches and researches in documentary and other nonfiction media, women directors, and L/G/B/T studies in media. Articles by her on these subjects have appeared in *Camera Obscura*, *Continuum*, *Screen*, *Screening the Past*, and a number of edited anthologies. Her manuscript, *Gendering History Onscreen*, about contributions by women directors to the history film genre, is under contract with IB Taurus.

Gabriele Linke is professor of British and American cultural studies at the University of Rostock, Germany. In her book on popular literature as cultural memory (*Populärliteratur als kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 2003), she examined contemporary British and American series romances with regard to their contribution to the construction and memorialization of national history. Her current research in cultural studies has focused on, among other things, contemporary Scottish autobiography, auto/biographical film, and postcoloniality and transculturality in British and American film. She has co-edited three collections of essays on gender studies (in German) and edited the volume *Teaching Cultural Studies. Methods—Matters—Models* (2011).

Douglas McFarland is retired Professor of the English department at Flagler College in Saint Augustine, Florida, where he taught Renaissance literature, classics, and film. His many publications include pieces on Rabelais, Montaigne, Hitchcock and the Coen Brothers. He is currently editing a collection of essays on John Huston as adapter.

R. Barton Palmer is Calhoun Lemon Professor of Literature at Clemson University, where he also directs the film studies program. He is the

author, editor, or general editor of nearly sixty volumes on various literary and cinematic subjects, including most recently *Larger Than Life: Movie Stars of the 1950s* (Rutgers, 2010) and (with Robert Bray) *Hollywood's Tennessee: the Williams Films and Postwar America* (Texas, 2009). He has also recently edited (with Steven Sanders) *The Philosophy of Steven Soderbergh* (Kentucky, 2010), (with David Boyd) *Hitchcock at the Source: the Auteur as Adapter* (State University of New York, 2011), (with Murray Pomerance) *"A Little Solitaire": John Frankenheimer and American Film* (Rutgers, 2011), (with Steven Sanders and Aeon Skoble), *The Philosophy of Michael Mann* (Kentucky, 2014), and (with Homer B. Pettey), *Film Noir and International Noir* (Edinburgh, 2014).

Claire Perkins is lecturer in film and television studies at Monash University, Melbourne. She is the author of *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh, 2012) and co-editor of *Film Trilogies: New Critical Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and *B is for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value* (State University of New York, forthcoming 2014).

Homer B. Pettey is professor of film and literature at the University of Arizona. He serves as the general/founding editor for two book series, *Global Film Studios* and *International Film Stars*, for Edinburgh University Press. With R. Barton Palmer, he co-edited a forthcoming collection on *Hitchcock's Moral Gaze* (State University of New York Press 2016). Palmer and Petty also have advance contracts for collections devoted to *British Biopics and National Identity* (State University of New York Press 2016) and *French Literature on Screen* (Manchester University Press 2016). This year, he has published chapters on "Class in Hitchcock's American noirs" for Jonathan Freedman's *Cambridge Companion to Alfred Hitchcock* (2015) and on "Violence, the Production Code, and noir," for David Schmid's *Violence and American Popular Culture* (Praeger 2015). Currently, he is completing a book on *Transnational Silent Film* (Edinburgh University Press 2016).

Monika Pietrzak-Franger is assistant professor at the English department of Braunschweig University, Germany. She is the author of *The Male Body and Identity* (WVT, 2006), co-editor of *Adaptation—Performing across Media and Genres* (WVT, 2009), *Rethinking Darwin* (Ashgate, 2014), and editor of *Women, Beauty, and Fashion* (History of Feminism, Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 2014). Her project "Spectres of Syphilis: Medicine, Knowledge and the Spectacle of Victorian (In) Visibility" was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation with a one-year research grant. Her current research focuses on adaptation and media

studies, neo-Victorianism, and gender studies, as well as biographical fiction and medical humanities. Since 2011 she has been book review editor for the learned journal *Adaptation* (Oxford University Press), for which she is currently co-editing a special issue on “Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation: Transnational Dissemination of Nineteenth-Century Cultural Texts.”

Murray Pomerance is professor in the department of sociology at Ryerson University. He is the author of *Alfred Hitchcock's America, The Eyes Have It: Cinema and the Reality Effect, Tomorrow, The Horse Who Drank the Sky: Film Experience Beyond Narrative and Theory, Edith Valmaine, Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue: Eight Reflections on Cinema, Savage Time, Johnny Depp Starts Here, An Eye for Hitchcock, and Magia d'Amore*; and editor of numerous volumes, including *The Last Laugh: Strange Humors of Cinema* and *Cinema and Modernity*.

Constantine Verevis is associate professor in film and television studies at Monash University, Melbourne. He is the author of *Film Remakes* (Edinburgh, 2006) and co-author of *Australian Film Theory and Criticism, Vol. I: Critical Positions* (Intellect, 2013). His co-edited volumes include *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* (State University of New York, 2010), *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* (Routledge, 2011), *Film Trilogies: New Critical Approaches* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), *Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions: Remake/Remodel* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), and *B Is for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value* (State University of New York, 2014).

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