WHOSE LIVES ARE THEY ANYWAY?
WHOSE LIVES ARE THEY ANYWAY?

The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre

Dennis Bingham

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY, AND LONDON
Dedicated to

Rafat Abonour, M.D.,
Bone Marrow Transplant Team,
Melvin & Bren Simon Cancer Center,
Indiana University, Indianapolis

Merrill D. Benson, M.D.,
Amyloid Research Group,
Indiana University School of Medicine

Gina Kramer, R.N., O.C.N
Melvin & Bren Simon Cancer Center,
Indiana University, Indianapolis

“IT IS MY VERY HUMANE ENDEAVOR
To make to some extent
Each evil liver
A running river
Of harmless merriment”
—W. S. Gilbert

In Memoriam

Roseanne Hoefel
1962–2001

George F. Custen
1950–2003

Scott Seregny
1950–2003

Alberto Diaz
1982–2006

Michael S. Coatney
1957–2003

Rowland “Tony” Sherrill
1944–2003

Deborah Coatney
1957–2003

Christian J. W. Kloesel
1942–2006

Patrick L. Bingham
1929–2007
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments  000
Introduction: A Respectable Genre of Very Low Repute  000

BOOK ONE
THE GREAT (WHITE) MAN BIOPIC AND ITS DISCONTENTS
1 Strachey’s Way, or All’s Well That Ends Welles  000
2 Rembrandt (1936)  000
3 Citizen Kane and the Biopic  000
4 Lawrence of Arabia: “But does he really deserve a place in here?”  000
5 Nixon, Oliver Stone, and the Unmaking of the Self-Made Man  000
   ~ P.S.: W.  000
6 Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould: Ghost Picture  000
7 Ed Wood: The Biopic of Someone Undeserving  000
8 Spike Lee’s Malcolm X: Appropriation or Assimilation?  000
9 Raoul Peck’s Lumumba: Drama, Documentary, and Postcolonial Appropriation  000

BOOK TWO
A WOMAN’S LIFE IS NEVER DONE: FEMALE BIOPCS
10 Prologue  000
11 Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story: Toying with the Genre  000
12 I Want to Live!: Criminal Woman, Male Discourses  000
13 Barbra and Julie at the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius  000
   ~ Funny Girl  000
   ~ Star!  000
14 Hacked: Gorillas in the Mist and Other Female Biopics of the 1980s  000
15 An Angel at My Table: Re-Framing the Female Biography  000
16 Erin Brockovich: Hollywood Feminist Revisionism, after a Fashion  000
17 Twenty-First-Century Women  000
   ~ The Notorious Bettie Page: Free Will and God’s Will  000
   ~ Marie Antoinette: The Female Biopic Gets the Guillotine  000
18 I’m Not There: Some Conclusions on a Book Concerning Biopics  000

Works Cited  000
Index  000
The biopic is such an unappreciated genre that virtually everyone who allowed me to teach a course, make a presentation, or publish an article, usually after giving me a quizzical look that said, “Biopics? Why biopics?” deserves to be thanked. Such would include Robert Burgoyne at Wayne State University, where I taught my first of many courses on biopics back in 1991. Once my interest in biopics developed into the book stage, the project spanned the terms of five chairs of English at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis: Richard Turner, Ken Davis, the late Christian J. W. Kloesel, Susanmarie Harrington, and Thomas Upton, and the tenures of three deans of the IU School of Liberal Arts: Herman Saatkamp, Robert White, and William Blomquist, as well as Associate Dean David Ford. Each of the aforementioned chairs and deans was generous and understanding in meeting my requests for time and resources as the book wended its way toward completion. The project received extensive institutional support, including an Indiana University President’s Arts and Humanities Initiative Fellowship, two IU School of Liberal Arts Research Summer Fellowships, one sabbatical travel grant, and a Grant-in-Aid from the Office for Professional Development.

An early version of Chapter 5 was published as “Oliver Stone’s Nixon and the Unmanning of the Self-Made Man,” in Masculinity: Movies, Bodies, Culture, ed. Peter Lehman (New York: Routledge, 2001), and appears here with permission. Chapter 12 was first published, in somewhat different form, as

During my research, the staff at the Performing Arts Special Collections at UCLA, Ned Comstock at the University of Southern California, and Barbara Hall at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences were extremely helpful in preparing scripts and other papers for my perusal and making my research trips to Los Angeles extremely productive. For help with photographs, I am most grateful to Murray Pomerance and to Stephen LeBeau and Joy Kramer.

Many colleagues have shared suggestions and feedback on my work at Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conferences (SCMS) and other meetings over the years. Amy Lawrence came up and told me that my work on *I Want to Live!* sounded “unusually polished.” Harriet Margolies, at an early version of my work on *An Angel at My Table*, set me straight on some of my suppositions about New Zealand and Jane Campion. Glenn Man graciously invited me onto a panel he constituted on biography in long-ago 1999–2000. Cynthia Baron, Frank Tomasulo, and Diane Carson coaxed me onto a workshop they would be presenting in eight months’ time, and I gambled that I would be recovering from my then-impending stem cell transplant and ready to go to Washington, D.C., in what turned out to be the last pre-9/11 spring. Cynthia Erb and Zivah Perel helped with ideas and encouragement. Kevin Hagopian, Michelle Arrow, and Clare Connors were good enough to join me for a session on biopics at the 2008 SCMS conference in Philadelphia. I owe many thanks to the Department of Media Arts at the University of Arizona and the Center for Film, Media, and Popular Culture at Arizona State University, which invited me to share my work on biopics with large, appreciative audiences. I also wish to thank Marcia Landy and James Naremore for their invaluable encouragement and suggestions.

Leslie Mitchner at Rutgers University Press has been more than patient with me through the numerous delays, setbacks that have beset this book over a period of several years, as well as the creative riptides that drove it forward. Leslie has also been the most encouraging kind of editor, allowing the book to take shape as changes to the genre dictated. We agree that it’s a bet-
WHOSE LIVES ARE THEY ANYWAY?
Introduction

A Respectable Genre of Very Low Repute

[I] tried to stay human and true to this man [George W. Bush]. It’s supposed to be a fair and true portrait. People get me confused with my outspoken citizen side, but I am a dramatist first and foremost.

Oliver Stone, 2008

At the start of Man on the Moon (1999), light comes up on a young man, played by Jim Carrey, filmed in black and white, surrounded by darkness. Speaking in an indistinguishable “foreign” accent and high-pitched voice, he looks directly but nervously at the audience, his eyes shifting, like a child making a presentation at school. “Hello,” he says. “I am Andy. And I would like to thank you for coming to my movie. I wish it was better, you know. But it is so stupid. It’s terrible. I do not even like it. All of the most important things in my life are changed around and mixed up for, um, [really struggles to get out this next phrase] dramatic purposes.” Announcing that he has “decided to cut out all the baloney,” “Andy” tells the unheard, unseen audience, “Now the movie is much shorter. In fact, this is the end of the movie. Thank you very much.” When the audience fails to leave, the man moves awkwardly to a child’s suitcase phonograph from the 1950s, which plays the “The Theme from Lassie” while the film’s actual end credits roll. Increasingly desperate, “Andy” tries playing the 45 RPM record over and over, until he gives up, shuts the lid on the “suitcase,” and the screen goes black.
After several seconds go by, the man slowly pokes his head into the frame, and Andy, rather than “Andy,” says, “Wow. You’re still here. O-kaay,” he exclaims, bounding into the shot with exaggerated heartiness. “I hope you’re not upset. I did that to get rid of those folks who just wouldn’t understand me, and don’t even want to try. Actually, the movie is really great,” he says, overly enthusiastic. We can’t be any surer about this Andy than we were about the one we saw before. Indeed, he says that the movie “is just filled with colorful characters, like the one I just did, and the one I’m doing now.” “Our story begins,” he says, in a sing-song tone, moving to a 16-millimeter projector, “back in Great Neck, Long Island.” The light of the projector shines right on us, making us not only the audience, but also the screen.

Now acting as voiceover narrator, Andy introduces his childhood home, a suburban Leave It to Beaver–type home of the late 1950s. His father, sister, brother, and mother are all shown in small-screen color home movies, until the inevitable widening out into the color widescreen film. Andy Kaufman (1949–1984) is now our protagonist in a re-created past, not the stand-up performance artist conjured up out of eternity. “We,” the audience, are ourselves, however, constituted from Andy’s own transcendence of physical existence, and we meet him in a liminal space between an afterlife and what we think of as our actuality. Here is Kaufman, the film says, performing his routines by making audiences doubt what is real and what is part of the act, all the while forcing them to receive as entertainment feelings of discomfort and uncertainty. The 1922 R.E.M. song “Man on the Moon,” itself a kind of index of the late comedian, starts playing as Andy says, “Our story begins . . .” and is yet another link from the extra-narrative Andy to the movie’s story world itself.

This story world soon becomes loaded down with tropes of the classical biopic, many of which were identified by George F. Custen in his groundbreaking 1992 study, Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History. These include the narrative told in flashback, the voiceover (although it never returns after the opening), and the opposition of the subject’s family (the “Great Neck” scenes begin with Andy’s father asking why Andy has to perform make-believe TV shows in his room and why he can’t go outside and “play sports”). In good time, other tropes appear: the characters of The Sidekick, Bob Zmuda (Paul Giamatti), Kaufman’s writer and frequent partner in mischief; and The Mentor, his manager, George Shapiro (Danny DeVito, who co-starred with Kaufman on the TV sitcom Taxi, and whose production company made the film). Another frequent character of the Great Man film, the patient helpmeet-wife, is not here exactly because Kaufman never married. However, Lynne Margulies (Courtney Love), one of Kaufman’s girlfriends, allowed her name to be used and thus a number of Andy’s paramours are composited in her. The composite character, whether real (as here) or invented, as is usually the case, is a feature that few biopics of any type or era have done without. Finally, after the film’s ethereal prologue, the brief childhood scenes climax with Andy performing a childhood rhyme to his sister. Cut and we’re looking at the stage of a sparsely attended comedy club where a grown-up Andy sings the same rhyme to a puzzled looking audience. Now we’re into the in medias res opening, which I define as beginning the story at the moment just before the subject begins to make his/her mark on the world. This is what the film’s writers, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, call a strategy whereby they “get away with bizarro material by marrying it to Hollywood form” (Man xii).

This opening of Man on the Moon, one of a number of “biopic[s] of someone who doesn’t deserve one,” written by Alexander and Karaszewski, self-consciously confronts many of the objections made to the biographical film, or the biopic. Andy, acting like a critic objecting on grounds of historical accuracy, claims that his life has been “changed around and mixed up,” for that ubiquitous justification, “dramatic purposes.” Kaufman’s “act” often involved destroying the scripted, illusory routines of show business, from polished stand-up acts and well-rehearsed TV skits to, most incredibly, professional wrestling. Thus it follows that he, or his earthly representatives, should open his biopic by disrupting the genre’s operations and agreeing with its sharpest critics. Andy, having used some sort of celestial scissors, claims to have reduced the film to what many critics charge biopics and historical films would be without alteration, compression, invention, and metaphor: Nothing (Rosenstone Visions 73–75). When he returns to endorse “his” movie for being “filled with colorful characters, like . . . the one I’m doing now,” the second character appears to be Andy as he “really is,” fulfilling the aim of all biopics, to reveal the “real person” behind the public persona. Here the filmmakers self-consciously project their defense of a movie that turns Kaufman’s life into a “story,” one that combines much that is from, or of, actuality, with some that is invented and “changed around” for dramatic purposes.

To be sure, Andy Kaufman is in the realm of what Custen, taking off from Leo Lowenthal, referred to as the Idol of Consumption, an entertainer.
or sports figure who in effect is a consumer product and whose conspicuous consumption the spectator can vicariously enjoy but also see the limitations of. Andy, without a doubt, was a product of such consumer forums as comedy clubs and commercial television, especially the sitcom Taxi, which he hated doing by all accounts. But he fought these institutions all the way; in fact, the film’s opening is a reference to his ABC special “in which Andy claimed that he’d blown his budget, and said the entire show was just him in a chair, and he advised viewers to change the channel” (Alexander and Karaszewski Man 155).

Custen’s counterpart to the Idol of Consumption, by way of Lowenthal, was the Idol of Production. This was the man, and sometimes the woman, who made great things for society. Statesmen like Alexander Hamilton (1931) and Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), soldiers like Sergeant York (1941) and blinded Marine Al Schmid in The Pride of the Marines (1943), as well as scientists such as Louis Pasteur (The Story of Louis Pasteur [1936]) and Thomas Edison (Young Tom Edison [1939] and Edison the Man [1940]) and even Madame Curie (1943) are examples of visionaries who made the world better, heroes from the past whose determination was meant as a tonic for audiences during the Great Depression and World War II. The Idol of Production gave way to increased curiosity about the famous with the onset of the consumer society. This figure came back, however, as part of the neoclassical biopic revival of the 2000s, but with a warts-and-all or Citizen Kane–like investigatory tinge, in such films as Kinsey (2004) and The Aviator (2004).

As Man on the Moon positions its biographical subject in a liminal place between life and death (appropriately, since many who knew Kaufman refused to believe that his cancer and death were not some kind of joke), between story and direct address, the biopic genre finds itself in a liminal space between fiction and actuality. Late in the screenwriters’ research, they “realized something was off”:

We didn’t know what the movie was about. We didn’t know who Andy was. Panic set in. The thousands of anecdotes weren’t coalescing into a character, a guy whom we understood. Andy was just a cipher moving through a series of episodes—our greatest fear. We struggled, reading and rereading the notes, looking for our Rosebud, our key to Andy Kaufman. It was hopeless. . . . In a funk, we rang up Lynne Margulies, Andy’s girlfriend the last two years of his life. . . . We told her the problem. No matter how much we studied the material, we couldn’t figure out the real Andy. Lynne responded simply, yet provocatively. “Guys, there is no real Andy.” And that was it. Lynne had given us the secret to the movie. (Man xi–xii)

Every biopic is supposed to have a basis in reality. Man on the Moon subverts the genre by not insisting upon a reality for its subject, by not even maintaining that their subject was “real.” Actual? Yes. Real? No. Alexander and Karaszewski, with Milos Forman’s direction, pass their own dilemma on to the audience. The way to create a “true portrait” of Andy Kaufman is to accept that there is no real Andy Kaufman, no core that can be exposed, no “inner life” that explains him. The biopic subject, at least in the male Great Man variant, is usually posed as a visionary with a pure, one of a kind talent or idea who must overcome opposition to his idea or even just to himself. All of this is why the filmmakers put Kaufman in charge from the beginning, implying that he ultimately is in control of how much we can know about him; even the filmmakers are consigned to mere names on the credit roll that Andy switches on and off at will. Not for nothing then do Alexander and Karaszewski call Man on the Moon and their other biopics “anti–Great Man” films. Everything about the opening of this film recalls and also stands on its head a genre that in some way ends in emphasizing the success and the transcendently timeless importance of its protagonist.

As we see in such a counterexample, therefore, the biopic is by no means a simple recounting of the facts of someone’s life. It is an attempt to dis-

1. The subject and the sidekick. Man on the Moon (Milos Forman, Universal, 1999) parodies the inspired biographical subject as Andy Kaufman (Jim Carrey) watches wrestling on TV, transfixed. With Paul Giamatti as Bob Zmuda. Digital frame enlargement.
The courtship stuff and just get married.” Spacey replied, “The problem may never be solvable. I think people ought to stop searching for the biopic that solves all the problems. The truth is, you go see a Eugene O’Neill play, and it still has problems” (“Invading” 64).

Finally, David Edelstein, in a column on Slate.com in November 2004, wrote: “Reading through the hundreds of e-mails in response to my biopic challenge (‘Name one good one, I dare you’), I was struck by my rashness in declaring the genre the most vacuous in cinema. The explanation, I think, is that when I see a clumsy, superficial biographical movie, I think, ‘Ick . . . biopic.’ But when I see a biographical film that has the depth and compression of fiction, I think, ‘Hey, good movie!’” (“Readers’ Picks”).

There are reasons for the rocky reception the biopic has received, even if that reception is turning now into grudging acceptance. One, as I alluded to earlier, is the collision of actualities and dramatic fiction, which causes a lot of resistance. Another is that “genres construct the proper spectator for their own consumption,” as Dudley Andrew wrote in what has become accepted wisdom. “They build the desire and then represent the satisfaction of what they have triggered” (110). However, biopics are presented as the stories of individual real people, not as the latest entry in a genre. Thus, the frequent consternation that results when a spectator finds him/herself confronted with generic conventions in a film about an actual person.

A humorous handling of the conflict between actualities and dramatic fiction is found in American Splendor (2003), about the comic book writer Harvey Pekar, a man accustomed to having his stories and dialogue interpreted by the artists who illustrate them. In one memorable section of the film, the courtship of Harvey (Paul Giamatti) and his third wife, Joyce Brabner (Hope Davis), is first shown in all the naturalism of a contemporary dramatic film. Joyce, who runs a comic book store in Wilmington, Delaware, first calls Harvey to order more comics. After striking up a friendship, the two decide to meet face-to-face. Joyce journeys to Cleveland, where Harvey takes her out to a corny “yuppie” restaurant. Back in his cluttered, filthy apartment, the couple kiss, but what sounds like Joyce’s cries of pleasure turn into groans of nausea, as Joyce runs to the bathroom to vomit. Harvey, thinking he is seeing his dream date derailed, remembers Joyce drinking lots of chamomile tea during their phone chats, and offers her some. Joyce, visibly touched, thinks, decides, opens the bathroom door, and speaks the film’s most devastating line, “Harvey, I think we should skip all
played by Davis turns into Joyce as drawn by several artists, representing Harvey’s stories about her. The actual Joyce critiques the version of reality constructed by the actual Harvey, who is right next to her, as “leaving out the happy stuff,” while the couple sits in director’s chairs on a bare white soundstage that is supposed to stand for a movie set, but seems more like a comic book frame, waiting to be filled in. The couple is interviewed by an off-camera woman, actually Shari Springer Berman, the co-writer and co-director of the film (and like Joyce Brabner, a member of a husband-and-wife artist team). Then we go to a scene from *American Splendor*, the stage play, which looks like a dollhouse version of their lives compared to the cinematic reality we’ve previously seen with actors, Molly Shannon and Donal Logue, who don’t look like either Brabner or Davis or Pekar and Giamatti. Moreover, while the film shows Harvey and Joyce as urban types, the play in Pasadena has “midwesternized” them, with Harvey in a flannel shirt and Joyce wearing a day-glo orange T-shirt and bib overalls, making her look like Peppermint Patty in *Peanuts*, decidedly the wrong comic.

*American Splendor* shows how far things have come from the critical discourse of 1970s and 1980s film studies, when differences between dramatizations and representations of actuality were discussed as ruptures through which would show the ideological assumptions at the root of the fiction and its production. “A Body Too Much,” Jean-Louis Comolli’s 1978 concept whereby the actor playing an actual person becomes the only version of the person that we have as we watch the film, while those two bodies—the body of the actor and the body of the actual person—compete for the spectator’s belief—“a body too much”—gets a workout in this film. To Comolli, the actor enacts as much as he can the stance and demeanor of the subject while in performance emphasizing his own separateness from him. “Here’s me, or the guy playin’ me,” says the real Pekar in his voiceover, “even though he don’t look nothin’ like me. But whatever.” Giamatti’s Pekar is a little softer, a little less raw than the genuine article. The film may be reminding us that film fiction renders life with an idealizing touch that may be inevitable. We crave the sensitivity and expressiveness that good actors and a creative mise-en-scène can provide. Harvey Pekar just doesn’t have the skills or the depth of emotional and mental projection to play Harvey Pekar. Don’t call us, Harvey. We’ll call you.

Illustrating the point even further, in 1988 Carolyn Anderson, in one of the few scholarly treatments of the biopic pre-Custen, wrote that *Pride of the Yankees* (1942) “featured [Lou] Gehrig’s teammates (most notably Babe Ruth) playing themselves, a practice which lends a special credibility to the biopic, yet simultaneously introduces the awkwardness of clashing styles of presentation and highlights the artifice of the biographic project” (333). *American Splendor* confronts the problem of how to represent the reality of a subject’s life in a staged, artificial form that looks real only thanks to “movie magic,” by not treating it, as Kevin Spacey suggests, as a problem. The film puts the reality of Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner up for grabs. It is a *Citizen Kane* in which Xanadu is a pile of comic books and a stack of old three-quarter-inch videos of *Late Night with David Letterman*, the memories of Pekar and Brabner, the interpretations of Giamatti and Davis, and the filmmakers’ attempt to create Harvey Pekar’s Cleveland out of, well, Harvey Pekar’s Cleveland.

Therefore, like any genre that dates back nearly to the beginning of narrative cinema, the biopic has gone through developmental stages, emerging from each of its historical cycles with certain modes that continue to be available to filmmakers working in the form. These are

- the classical, celebratory form (melodrama)
- warts-and-all (melodrama/realism)
- the transition of a producer’s genre to an auteurist director’s genre (Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Mary Harron, Julian Schnabel, etc.)
- critical investigation and atomization of the subject (or the *Citizen Kane* mode)
- parody (in terms of choice of biographical subject; what Alexander and Karaszewski call the “anti-biopic—a movie about somebody who doesn’t deserve one” [*Man* vii], mocking the very notions of heroes and fame in a culture based on consumerism and celebrity rather than high culture values)
- minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or third world, whereby Janet Frame or Harvey Milk and Malcolm X or Patrice Lumumba own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them)
- since 2000, the neoclassical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these

Furthermore, existing models of generic development over time can be proved to apply just as well to the biopic as to any genre of comparable
BOOK ONE

THE GREAT (WHITE) MAN BIOPIC
AND ITS DISCONTENTS
Strachey’s Way, 
or All’s Well That Ends Welles

The biopic has its foundations in popular forms that range from the lives of saints, national myths, and legends to melodramas and revues (as were, in part, some musical biopics such as *The Great Ziegfeld* [1936] and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* [1942]). In the genre’s evolution, however, two figures cast their eccentric and outsize shadows over the biopic’s destiny. With vastly different artistic orientations and influences, they had one quality in common: audacity. They were Lytton Strachey and Orson Welles.

Lytton Strachey (1879–1932) was a writer in the bohemian London Bloomsbury circle that also included Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. Strachey was an obscure author of some essays and poems when his book *Eminent Victorians* appeared at the beginning of 1918, in the final year of the Great War. *Eminent Victorians* was a slim volume comprising biographical portraits of icons, well remembered or not, of the Victorian era: Roman Catholic Cardinal Henry Manning, educator Thomas Arnold, pioneering nurse Florence Nightingale, and the most colorful figure of the four, Charles Gordon, the general who died in 1885 defending the city of Khartoum, in the Sudan, for British interests. An immediate sensation, Strachey’s book did for biography what the works of his Bloomsbury friends were doing for the novel—bringing a literary genre into the new century, helping to define modernism.

Victorian biographies duly set out the public deeds of prominent people, without looking into their private histories, probing their personal motives,
around them with the ambivalence and the irony of Strachey’s writing. I want to look first at a British film that shows a Stracheyan perspective influenced primarily by the development of the film medium, Alexander Korda’s *Rembrandt* (1936). I then examine how the end of the British Empire after World War II brought in its wake the ambivalent view of the romance of heroism and the sweep of Empire seen in *Lawrence of Arabia*, a film that on close examination appears as one of the most important biographies ever made. Intervening in historical order, however, will be an exploration of a certain film by Orson Welles that has had a continuing influence on biographies up to the time of this writing.

If the biopic is a genre based on destiny, then the narrative action of the subject would seem to be the act of dying, for only after death can the great one’s immortality and impact on the world really begin. As I mentioned in the introduction, the affinity of the genre for the story of Christ seems unmistakable. This is complicated, however. Take a film such as *Gandhi* (1982), which begins with the subject’s death and funeral and invites us to witness his life less as a life (not a mean trick in the case of Gandhi, who did seventy-eight years of living) but as a series of phases leading to immortality. There are, on the other hand, any number of films that bring a subject to life and want us to feel what it might have been like to be that person. There’s no evading the sense given by a film such as *Bound for Glory* (1976), which seems finally relieved to hustle its subject, Woody Guthrie (David Carradine), off the screen so that it can be the songs that live, and not the unpleasant, restless, unhappy man that Hal Ashby’s film has been honest enough to portray. Todd Haynes’s great film *I’m Not There* (2007), about Woody Guthrie disciple Bob Dylan, treats its subject finally as a ghostly figure haunting the landscape with indelible poetry and shape-shifting humanity. It’s hard to imagine Haynes’s ending being any different if his very much living subject had been no longer with us. Biopics often appear to be of two minds: Is the idea to demonstrate how to live (or in a few cases, how
Citizen Kane and the Biopic

Citizen Kane (1941) has been rarely discussed as a biopic, either in terms of how Orson Welles’s film uses the genre, or of Kane’s influence on the development of the biopic decades later. Because it fictionalizes its story, Citizen Kane is usually not considered a biography at all. It falls outside George Custen’s designation of the biopic, which is “minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose name is used” (6). This definition might seem devised to exclude Kane. If that was Custen’s aim, one can hardly blame him, since his purpose was to study the typical biopic and the typical Hollywood product. Citizen Kane, as has been well documented, is the studio era’s outstanding anomaly, the work that subverts the system in almost every way while taking full advantage of the resources of the studio—the first American mainstream art film.

There has been much research into the film’s basis in the life of the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951), around which controversy began to rage almost as soon as the film was finished. It has been shown, by Laura Mulvey, Robert Carringer, Simon Callow, and Louis Pizzitola, among others, that Kane was inspired partly by Welles’s and Herman J. Mankiewicz’s desire to make a coy investigation into the life, career, and politics of Hearst, and so to dramatize the relations among capitalism, power, sex, and modern mass media in America. As the film that almost all agree is the greatest ever made, Citizen Kane stands at a crossroads with one road leading back toward films and culture that went before it and to which it is reacting. The other road, as we know from retrospect, reaches toward much that comes after it both in terms of cinema and of how cinema looks out at the world. Morris Dickstein writes:

Like many daringly innovative works of the early modern period from Les demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) to The Rite of Spring (1913), Kane has begun to look more traditional, more familiar, appearing less like a rupture, a sharp break with the past, and more like a culmination, a synthesis of what preceded it. . . . In Welles’s case critics still seem preoccupied with his originality. They see Kane through the lens of what followed it; instead, I began to wonder about the books and films that had shaped it. (83)

In order to understand Kane as the central, genre-changing event in the history of the biopic, we need to look both forward and back. One critic at the time of the film’s release, Tangye Lean (brother of director David Lean), described the film as “technically . . . perhaps a decade ahead of its contemporaries” (Dickstein 83). Kane’s influence on biopics did not even begin to be seen until two decades after its release and was really not felt en masse until forty or fifty years later. However long it took due to the vagaries of the genre, we cannot appreciate how Kane would model a new type of biopic without first analyzing the ways in which Welles worked with conventions of the biopic as the genre had developed by 1941.

Is “a sharp break with the past,” as Dickstein puts it, ever feasible? Startlingly different works like Kane, while stretching the formal envelope, also respond to what came before. As these are, with few exceptions, the works of young people, they are retorts to the world of the artists’ parents and grandparents. In Kane this world is embodied by one of the powerful men who helped make it, Hearst. Implicit in the approach of Welles and Herman Mankiewicz to Hearst was satire of the sensationalism and excess of “Great Yellow Journalist” and his descent from Progressive Era reformism to New Deal isolationism, fascist sympathy, hysterical anticommunism, and refusal to acknowledge the causes and extent of the Great Depression. It has not been documented that Welles and Mankiewicz had their minds on the biopic. They did end up, however, including nearly every convention and character type the genre had developed by 1940. In its disguised satire of Hearst, Citizen Kane fragments, objectifies, and, so to speak, psychoanalyzes the prototypical biopic subject of the 1930s. It also questions the worth
Lawrence of Arabia

“But does he really deserve a place in here?”

Lawrence of Arabia (1962) is significant in the early postclassical development of the biopic. A mostly British-made film with a Hollywood independent producer and backing from Columbia Pictures, Lawrence of Arabia shows the influence of everything from the British “Angry Young Man” school, the Hollywood warts-and-all biopic with its antihero (although this time eschewing star casting), and, most important, Citizen Kane. Like Kane, Lawrence questions cultural definitions of individuality and accomplishment and the purposes to which a culture puts its great ones. Unlike Kane, it does so in a way that, as the decades have shown, satisfies mainstream audiences’ desire for identification, adventure, spectacle, and narrative sweep while leading them down a trajectory into contradiction and psychological complexity. In doing this, Lawrence breaks through the boundaries of the biopic.

In a peculiar start for a biopic of epic sweep, Lawrence of Arabia opens with a static shot taken in 70-millimeter Super Panavision from an eighteen-foot platform looking straight down. On the right of the frame we see plain gray pavement, which provides a “screen” for the credits. On the left, a man prepares a motorcycle for riding, twice crossing the screen to fetch oil and a cleaning cloth. Thus T. E. Lawrence prepares for the ride that will take him to his accidental death. To viewers in Britain and the Middle East who are familiar with Lawrence, David Lean’s film sets the mythohistoric figure instantly on the stage where legend, enigma, and perhaps even history may play out. Lawrence is known after his retirement from the officer ranks to have tried twice to disappear into the identity of an ordinary soldier. He lived in obscurity even after the 1926 publication of his memoirs, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, which was more widely known in its time in an abridged version, titled Revolt in the Desert. The book established his fame, mystique, and place in history.

The motorcycle sequence already satisfies the expectations set by the 1960s “roadshow spectacle” for “you-are-there” visceral sensation. Lawrence’s face is obscured by goggles and the only sounds are those of the cycle’s engine and the wind whistling past the cyclist. The rider, swerving to avoid two bicyclists scarcely seen by the spectator, loses control and sails off the road. In a sound bridge we hear organ music, and the film cuts to a bust of “T. E. Lawrence 1888–1935,” which was unveiled at a memorial service in January 1936, more than eight months after Lawrence’s death. The reverse shot shows a priest, with a man we later learn is “Colonel Brighton,” a composite character comprising a number of army officers with whom Lawrence served in Arabia. “He was the most extraordinary man I ever knew,” says Brighton, setting off a scene in which forms of the word “know” are spoken twelve times by numerous characters within ninety-six seconds, all to the effect that the world either did not know Lawrence or wished to disavow knowledge of him, while still going through the motions of celebrating him as a national hero.

Brighton’s remark is challenged by the priest: “Well, nil nisi bonum” (the end of a Latin axiom, “Of the dead say nothing unless it is kind”), “but does he really deserve a place in here?” This first injection of skepticism is followed by the exposition of “here”: a spire-to-pavement establishing shot of the front of Saint Paul’s Cathedral. A reporter asking General Allenby about “Lawrence, himself” is rebuffed, “No, I didn’t know him well, you know.” Another prominent character, Jackson Bentley, a journalist based on Lowell Thomas, issues a pompous statement for the record, then mutters to a companion that Lawrence was “also the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey.” A bystander indignantly objects; when Bentley asks if he knew Lawrence, the man states that he “once had the honor to shake his hand in Damascus.” This is followed by a cut to another departing mourner, General Murray. With Murray, we don’t even hear a question asked, just his demurral. “Knew him? I never knew him,” he says as he becomes isolated from the background and walks into close-up range. “He
England kept her word in letter and spirit. In this comfort they performed their fine things: but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed” (275–276).

Previous treatments of the story appear to have chosen different parts of passages like this one. The Korda script has Lawrence responding to the discovery by Feisal and Auda of Sykes-Picot with a passionate speech about how truly England keeps her word. Rattigan’s utterly sour play depicts a dispirited Lawrence who tells Allenby upon their first meeting in Cairo that the man who leads the Arab Revolt

Lawrence: . . . must forget that he’s ever heard of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Allenby: What agreement?

Lawrence: (impatiently) The secret treaty partitioning post-war Arabia between the French and us.

Allenby: I’ve never heard of it.

Lawrence: No? Nor, for the moment, has Feisal, but if he finds out there’ll be hell to pay. So it’s essential that he and his people should be fed, from now on, the right kinds of lies by the right kind of liar. Therefore, this man of yours has to be a very senior officer. Then his lies will have real weight.

Allenby: I thought you didn’t approve of senior officers.

Lawrence: I don’t approve of the man I’ve just described. And, nor, I suspect, do you. But it’s the man you want for the job. Not me. (48)

And yet, later in this scene, Lawrence says, “This job is for a Messiah. For a visionary with real faith—not for an intellectual misfit” (49).

Lean’s film depicts a more innocent and idealistic Lawrence, and then, typically, picks apart that initial impression. The film’s Lawrence doesn’t learn of the secret pact until February 1918, on his post-Deraa visit to Allenby after the British have taken Jerusalem. This comes at the 176-minute mark of a 217-minute movie. The filmmakers invent a scene in which Lawrence enters the general’s office to encounter Feisal, after the latter has learned of the agreement. After the emir leaves, Allenby and Dryden confront Lawrence about the treaty, the existence of which the general assumes is Lawrence’s reason for asking not to be reassigned to Arabia. Lawrence’s reaction to the news is indignation, prompting an upbraiding from Dryden.

“You may not have known, but you certainly had suspicions. If we’ve told
transformations gracefully, and Omar Sharif, who as Lean had famously noted was performing in his first major English-language role, made a charismatic and magnetic screen presence. But he didn’t quite yet possess the skill to carry off the role’s more awkward transitions.

In the Bolt screenplay events and conditions are pithily condensed in scenes dense with biographical subtext. The film’s depiction of Feisal exemplifies the aspects of omission and selection in the biopic. The most influential Arab leader during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire was Sherif Hussein, the Emir of Mecca, “guardian of the Holy Places . . . a religious leader revered . . . throughout the Moslem world” (Wilson 164). After the outbreak of war, in which Turkey was allied with Germany, Hussein followed a careful path of resistance to the Turks and furtive favoritism toward the British. This resistance began when Hussein in effect ignored the call for an Islamic jihad against the Allies, issued in November 1914 by the Sultan of Turkey in his role as Caliph (Wilson 166). By June 1916, the Arab Revolt was under way, initiated, as the film mentions, by the not-shown emir, then sixty-one. Hussein had four sons; the film eliminates out of existence the two eldest, Ali and Abdullah, and the youngest, Zeid, and concentrates on the third son, Feisal. In justification, the filmmakers get much help from Lawrence himself. Lawrence extols Feisal, writing, “I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek—the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory” (91).

The scene in Feisal’s tent involving Brighton, Ali, Lawrence, and Feisal dramatizes the impatience and condescension with which most of the British officers in the Hejaz regarded the Arabs. Anthony Quayle’s performance as Brighton embodies what Lawrence biographer Jeremy Wilson calls the “attitude towards natives prevalent” in British colonies such as India, Egypt, and the Sudan and which “was inappropriate for work in Arabia, where the British were acting as advisors, not masters” (357). Lawrence, on the other hand, had vast experience in the region and knowledge both of the various tribes and nationalities and of the relations to them of their Turkish masters. This comes out early in the scene when Lawrence completes a passage from the Quran that he knows by heart. Again, while the actual Lawrence’s knowledge of Arab cultures and of Islam came from experience and study, the film, like most biopics, makes this look like a special talent, if not a mystical connection.

Feisal, as portrayed by Alec Guinness, is a stately, careful man who keeps his own counsel. Feisal is willing to trust Lawrence, not realizing at first

perial values and methods on the Arabs. Even he, however, comes to admire Lawrence after the taking of Aqaba and in the film’s second half becomes sympathetic to, though still skeptical of, Lawrence’s actions, while serving as a go-between from Lawrence to Allenby.

Conversely, Sherif Ali, an actual person largely fictionalized here, starts out antagonistic toward Lawrence. When it is clear they will have to work together, on the expedition to Aqaba, the tension between them provides much of the drama. After Lawrence’s rescue of Gasim, Ali and his kinsmen acclaim Lawrence as a courageous leader who does care more about them than he does about the British. This new function as friend and sidekick leads Ali to become sounding board and critic to the protagonist. Sherif Ali passes through a number of functions or phases:

1. Cocky young challenger to Lawrence, beginning with Ali’s stunning appearance out of the distance (the famous deep-focus shot in which Ali rides on horseback out of the void of the desert from the vanishing point up the foreground of the shot, aiming at and killing Tafas, Lawrence’s guide). This stage climaxes in the chance meeting of the two men in Prince Feisal’s tent.
2. Reluctant and skeptical partner on “impossible” landward attack on Aqaba.
3. Admiring friend and advisor following Lawrence’s rescue of Gasim, an event that goes against everything that to the Muslim mind is “written.”
4. A critical commentator on Lawrence, often to third parties such as Bentley or Auda. This begins at the raid on the Turkish train, which is the first we see of Ali in act two. In the rhetoric of the roadshow spectacular, this provides a starting-over point. It is he who anxiously awaits outside at Deraa, who berates him when he appears to be abandoning the Arab Revolt and when he hires mercenaries for the final push on Damascus—anytime that Lawrence appears to abandon principle for contingency, the main risk of rebelling against belief systems.
5. A politician in a new nation. When he puts away the weapons of war and stays in Damascus “to learn politics,” he becomes part of a hopeful (and hopelessly vague) future of Arab self-determination that (as Lean suggests but hardly details) will be betrayed by European chicanery.

These are a lot of functions for one character to play, a lot of phases for one character to evolve through. The film doesn’t always demonstrate these
As we see in Book Two, female biopics, by and large, fetishize victimization. The female subject is either victimized because of her position in society or implicitly punished for her presumption and ambition in trying to make a life outside it. Madness is a frequent destination in these films. Tellingly, Lawrence qualifies in all these areas. Lawrence’s illegitimacy, his status as an outsider in the military, and his inability to be an Arab, to “want what he wants,” all make him a victim of his place in society. He is punished, at least in his own mind, for his ambition to lead the Arabs, for having made promises to them that he knows he cannot keep and for a modern standard of individualism and self-invention (“Nothing is written”) of which he repeatedly and disastrously falls short. This plot trajectory marks something new in male biopics, reenacting a scenario seen in biopics about women who haven’t stayed in their place.

While Lawrence of Arabia takes on much of the suffering and pain of the female biopic, its protagonist falls victim to male hubris of various sorts. This is where the film both harks back to the self-destruction of the subject that we see in Citizen Kane and also departs from it. Lawrence, very unlike Kane, is tortured by self-knowledge. He is caught between his myriad ambiguous desires and the rigors of British patriarchy, conflicted with both but directly confronted by neither. Moreover, Citizen Kane takes a single word, a signifier, and demonstrates its unknowability and that of its speaker. Lawrence takes that sine qua non of the biopic, the valedictory tribute and monument, moves them from the climax of the film to the exposition, and interrogates their worth and meaning for the nation. By giving him a spot in St. Paul’s, the cathedral of the Empire, as it were, the film implicitly questions the values of that Empire. Instead of a monument, the film’s actual ending leaves Lawrence in the dust and wind of the desert and the debris he leaves behind. Reaping the whirlwind indeed.

In its sprawling, elaborate way, the film portrays Lawrence as unknowable. Meanwhile, it presents the aspects of his personality that are known. As the film ends with Lawrence fading out into the self-willed obscurity from which he is drawn at the beginning of the film, Lawrence of Arabia has worked as good drama, transporting the spectator subjectively to the world of its subject. But as historical biography, the film is an early example of the biopic as a self-conscious deconstruction of its subject, a concession to the irrecoverability of the past.

5

Nixon, Oliver Stone, and the Unmaking of the Self-Made Man

He wrote a bad notice. The way you wanted it. I guess that’ll show you.

Bernstein to Leland in Citizen Kane

Susan: You don’t know what it’s like to know the whole audience just doesn’t want you.

Kane: That’s when you gotta fight ’em.

Citizen Kane

Of all the remarkable dialogue in Citizen Kane, these two exchanges, commented on nowhere I know of in the vast literature on Welles’s film, have always stood out for me. They are nonsensical and confounding. Yet they express a certain pathology in American life, one that Richard M. Nixon embodied for many Americans. I have always associated Kane’s delusion with Nixon’s because just after seeing Citizen Kane for the first time in my twenty-year-old life in an Introduction to Film class early in the evening of 1 May 1974, I returned to my dorm room. I turned on my TV to hear what I expected would be the latest installment in the seemingly interminable Watergate melodrama. President Nixon was explaining in his unique tone of voice, both guilty and sanctimonious, why and how, after numerous court orders, he was finally releasing impressively bound transcripts of conversations secretly recorded in the Oval Office during his presidency. These were not the tapes themselves, mind you, but transcripts heavily edited by White
Republican rival, needles him at a 1963 party about the title of his book, Six Crises (“Sounds like you’ve got a crisis syndrome. Aren’t you exaggerating a hours of White House tapes. This charge to find the man behind the image is one of Stone’s many indirect references to Citizen Kane. Moreover, the projector also symbolizes the beam whose object is never just interior or exterior. For Stone, the personal story is also the larger political and historical story. And for Nixon, the political is always the personal.

On the trip back from China, Nixon tells Pat, “Think of the life Mao’s led. In ’52, I called him a monster. Now he could be our most important ally. Only Nixon could have done that.” The dialogue winds up being not about Mao at all, but about Nixon himself. In a rage following a stormy news conference Nixon thunders, “I did everything the New York Times editorial page said I should do. . . . So why are these assholes turning on me? Because they don’t like the way I look. They don’t like where I went to school,” and ultimately these slights turn into a slam on America itself: “They don’t—they don’t trust America!” Even the film’s Ehrlichman picks up this thread: “You think this is about politics,” he asks Haldeman. “This is about Richard Nixon. You got people dying because he didn’t make the varsity football team. You got the Constitution hanging by a thread because he went to Whittier and not to Yale.” This is perhaps the most troubling revelation the film makes: that systems of government on which millions of lives depend turn finally on individual subjectivities, on men, mostly, who take vast systems personally and who are really incapable of understanding the large implications of what they do.

. . . Some mornings I linger
in Pat’s closet, among all the incompatible species
of fox and alligator, ostrich and lamb.
And I’m reminded of my Russian stacking dolls:
how the smallest is absolutely empty
but for silence, longing, a residue of perfume.
—from “Nixon on the Pleasures of Undressing a Woman”
by Karen Kovacik

Nixon fascinates because he is simultaneously a figure of dogmatic rigidity, and yet he appears so insecure. He lied extravagantly and everyone seemed to know it but he. He appeared to be trapped by the limitations of his era, his ethnicity and family background. He had aspirations as a na-

ational leader that went beyond his capacity to imagine many kinds of Americans other than himself. (Oddly, as a foreign policy enthusiast, he seemed to have less trouble with people of other nationalities.) He aimed for unifying, Lincolnesque rhetoric, choosing the slogan “Bring Us Together” as his administration’s motto. Even if he believed in the idea, it was not in his nature to be capable of anything of the sort. Similarly, when he ventured out to the Lincoln Memorial in the middle of the night of 9 May 1970 to meet with protesting students, he was utterly unable to connect. To submit Nixon, as Stone does, to a combination of psychoanalysis and the kind of political reeducation that the protagonists of Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July undergo is to subvert his memory. However, it’s also to stretch ourselves, to imagine possibilities beyond our own ideologically conditioned identities. This may well be why Nixon, the most willfully unmade, and remade, of self-made men, seems such an essential icon. Oliver Stone has shown that the way to approach this male product of Atomic Age fear is to atomize him. And why not? We’re still living with the fallout.

P.S.: W.

It seems too easy to see W. (2008). Oliver Stone’s second biography of a Republican president, only through the keenly focused lens of the Stone “father complex.” To do so would be to cast Stone a bit too true to auteurist type. Shot in forty-six days with a script by Stanley Weiser (who wrote Wall Street, another plot about a son in the shadow of a disapproving father), W. was released three months before the end of George W. Bush’s presidential term and three weeks before the 2008 election. It is fair to say that the film never establishes a tone. However, W. is in the investigative mode. “Who is George W. Bush?” is its question, and that may be enough to accommodate was released three months before the end of George W. Bush’s presidential empathetic drama, satire, anthropological observation, and tragedy (the nation’s), all at once.

Although the film was made too much on the fly to accommodate the dense “vertical editing” and “inside-outside” point of view of Nixon, Stone tries for a modified version. From key meetings and events of the run-up to and aftermath of the Iraq War—from January 2002 to April 2004—the film
In theory, the structure is taken from the Goldberg Variations, but that’s really just a gimmick; outside the number, there is no similarity. In fact, Girard’s technique has more to do with Citizen Kane or A Coffin for Dimitrios or Lawrence Durrell—trying to capture a subject by presenting a variety of partial glimpses or reflections.

Andy Klein, L.A. Reader, 14 April 1994

Gould is in the black between the films. There you can find the ghost picture of Gould, much more than inside the film.

François Girard

The protagonist of a 1993 biopic made by some of his fellow Canadians, Glenn Gould (1932–1982) is in many ways the perfect subject for a sympathetic postmodern biography. Gould was a prodigious pianist who had mastered all of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier by the time he was ten and maintained a professional concert career before he was out of high school. He emerged, as if by magic, from a stable though ordinary middle-class upbringing in the then-quiescent town of Toronto. Gould burst onto the international music scene in 1956 with his first release for Columbia Records, a recording of the then-rarely heard Bach Goldberg Variations that unexpectedly became CBS’s best-selling classical album to that time and has never been out of print; even the mature Gould’s 1981 re-recording of the Variations didn’t replace it. He impressed practically all who heard him by the technique, delicacy, and emotional intensity of his playing, as well as by the uncompromising nature of a repertoire that favored the baroque and the modern and eschewed for the most part the Romantic works that were and still are the mainstays of most piano soloists. At the same time, Gould emerged before a delighted press as an eccentric’s eccentric; floppy-haired and unkempt, he sang and hummed his way through his performances, waving like a conductor whenever he had a free hand. He bundled up in scarf, gloves, and overcoat during the heat of summer and carried a briefcase full of medications to ward off every ailment, real or imagined. He would play only while seated on a chair, made for him by his father, which had the legs sawed off by four inches, making the seat only fourteen inches from the floor and giving the pianist the appearance of practically lying on the keyboard as he played (Bazzana 109).

Gould chafed, if not rebelled, against the tradition of the concert performer who appears in white tie and tails and is hailed as an artist while living a laborious if luxurious life on the road. Gould attacked the cosmetic fineries first, making his entrances dressed in a business suit and tie rather than in a tux. His delicate constitution and undenied hypochondria earned him notoriety as an avoider of germs and canceller of concerts. Eventually, in a well-considered and scrupulously philosophized decision, one he documented in many of the numerous magazine think pieces he wrote and interviews he gave, Gould, at the age of thirty-one, walked away from the concert stage, never to return. What followed his last concert, in Los Angeles on 10 April 1964, and continued until his death from a stroke on 4 October 1982, was a successful career played out entirely through mass communications media, on records, radio, and television.

Gould thought that the phonograph record, which decentered the performer and put the listener in control over the conditions of listening, created the correct “artist-to-public relationship” for the late twentieth century; many would call this a properly postmodern attitude. Gould’s post-concert-career recordings, unlike the albums of most classical artists, were not just the programs of current concerts and recitals laid down on wax. Rather, they featured performances specifically conceived as recordings. Given Gould’s unorthodox approach to works in the standard repertoire (he hated
can recognize not only Gould’s approach to performance but especially the difference between the classical biopic and Girard’s approach and style (if not his ultimate aim).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODERNISM</th>
<th>POSTMODERNISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form (conjunctive, closed)</td>
<td>Antiform (disjunctive, open)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery/Logos</td>
<td>Exhaustion/Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation/Totalization</td>
<td>Decreation/Deconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>Absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centering</td>
<td>Dispersal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre/Boundary</td>
<td>Text/Intertext</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Metonymy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Combination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Root/Depth</td>
<td>Rhizome/Surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative/Grande Histoire</td>
<td>Anti-narrative/Petite Histoire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Code</td>
<td>Idiolect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin/Cause</td>
<td>Difference–Difference/Trace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determinacy</td>
<td>Indeterminacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Immanence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Qtd. in Frow 16–17)

More than just set out to make a postmodernist biography, writes the historian Laura Mason, Girard’s film “is able to appropriate Gouldian technique so effectively because the heart of the film lies in its engagement with Gould’s philosophy of art” (337). This philosophy involves, Gould wrote, “the gradual, life-long construction of a state of wonder and serenity” (246). For Mason, “Girard’s film brings Gould’s philosophy to life in two ways: by illustrating the director’s and others’ engagement with Gould’s work, and by becoming a new invitation to the introspection that Gould celebrated” (337). Mason’s analysis, which works hard to relate Gould’s ideas about performance, recording, and the ideal of the role of the listener, does not consider Gould himself. Conversely, those who have studied Gould’s work most closely, such as Kevin Bazzana, who has spent the greater part of his life as a scholar researching the artist, don’t have much use for the film. Bazzana dismisses the film’s style as “trying too hard to make an artistic movie” (while seeming to consider the last term oxymoronic). While

Gould’s aspirations themselves can be thought of as contributions to musical, technological, and media postmodernism, Girard’s film gathers all the pieces of Gould’s life and career, leaving it to the spectator what those elements should mean, at least for the most part.

Thirty Two Short Films presents its subject as untouched and untouchable by reality in several ways. Gould appears to us across a great distance, his reemergence is as that of a ghost, and his interactions are at one remove at least. He is separate from the sound he produces. Many of the films are indeed about him rather than directly of him—interviews of actual people who knew him, letters he wrote or personal ads he dictated without sending, segments that represent him by means of metonymy, as in the film “Pills” in which Gould is the medicine he takes, or “Diary of One Day” in which he is signified by his X-ray. Gould is literally the film’s structuring absence; in exact opposition to the biopic whose subject is in nearly every scene, Glenn Gould as played by Colm Feore is present in exactly half the films, and is heard as a disembodied voice in three others.

What is more, although the spectator of this film is immersed in an environment of constant Glenn Gould music, the playing does not seem to issue from him. Gould, as played by Feore, never touches a piano; he scarcely even goes near one. The director and actor refuse to unify sound and image by having the actor pretend to play the piano. Girard’s explanation for this is simplicity itself: “You don’t ask an actor to play like Glenn Gould” (Schultz 11). Girard told an interviewer that he knew there would come a moment where you have to get your actor to give a great performance and play like Glenn Gould at the same time. Have you seen those old TV pictures? He’s so intense. You try to reproduce that, you’re dead” (Johnston). This in itself doesn’t satisfy, because drama is verisimilitude. Biopic history is full of just such transformations as the ones Girard rules out: James Stewart learning to play the trombone like Glenn Miller at least well enough to mimic him; Robert De Niro and Will Smith training with Jake LaMotta and Muhammad Ali, respectively, in order to box like they did; Jamie Foxx, a trained pianist, auditioning for Ray Charles in order to win the title role in Ray. Indeed, the latter is an example of a film that might not have been made had an improbable combination of musical and acting talent not happened along. Yet however much a biopic refers to its genre, as a number of reviewers argued that Ray does, films in the Hollywood tradition do demand embodiment. While I don’t mean to argue that Thirty Two Short Films can discard the formula just because it’s an independently made
Funny Girl

I don’t know where Fanny ends and Barbra begins.

Ray Stark

Funny Girl is an adaptation of a Broadway book musical with a largely original score (lyrics by Bob Merrill, music by Jule Styne) and a heavily fictionalized account of Fanny Brice’s rise and her relationship with her second husband, Nick Arnstein. Funny Girl was brought into being by movie producer Ray Stark, whose determination to make a film about his late mother-in-law Fanny Brice drove him through several writers and concepts in the late fifties until he found a script to his liking. It was “My Man,” drafted in 1960 by Isobel Lennart, whose earlier credits included Love Me or Leave Me. After Stark interested Columbia Pictures, the project hit snags over casting. Wanting to get the project off the ground, Stark hired composer Jule Styne (Bells Are Ringing, Gypsy) and lyricist Bob Merrill to write a score for a Wanting to get the project off the ground, Stark hired composer Jule Styne Broadway musical, using Lennart’s script as the show’s book. Streisand, who had attracted attention on Broadway at the age of twenty in a featured role in I Can Get It for You Wholesale in 1962 and recorded three albums for Columbia Records, was cast as Fanny. The show shed an hour from its playing time in out-of-town tryouts; most of the cuts were from Lennart’s book. Wanting to get the project off the ground, Stark hired composer Jule Styne When it opened on Broadway in February 1964, Funny Girl drew mixed reviews but raves for Streisand, who landed on the cover of Time in April; the original cast album quickly went Gold, all leading to 1,348 performances on Broadway and a successful run on the London West End, starring Streisand.

Funny Girl at play and film is just slightly less fanciful a treatment of actual people and events than The Sound of Music, which changed the marriage of Maria and Captain Von Trapp from 1927 to 1938, showed Von Trapp leaving his fortune behind in Austria when in fact he had lost it all in a Depression-era bank failure, had the family fleeing Austria in secret when they actually left uneventfully by train with no Nazis after them, and had the Von Trapps escaping from Salzburg into Switzerland over the Alps, a route that would have taken them into Germany! For these reasons, The Sound of Music fails to qualify under Rosenstone’s generous criteria for historical truth and is too much a fairy tale for the most forgiving biopic standards.

Funny Girl at least begins with Fanny singing at Frank Keeney’s theater in Brooklyn and debuting with the Ziegfeld Follies in 1910 and ends with Nick Arnstein’s release from prison following their divorce in 1927, all of which have bases in actuality (Kenrick). In between, however, the show sanitizes Nick beyond recognition, a potentially crippling transformation. “The actual Nicky was considered unacceptable as a leading man,” said the 10 April 1964 Time cover story. “He was a shiftless con man with a column of mercury for a spine, a criminal record, and a cavalier attitude toward Fanny’s devotion and fidelity” (“The Girl”). Karen Swenson put it more gently in 1982: “Nicky Arnstein was a colorful character—perhaps too colorful. His elegance was something many admiring friends and acquaintances tried to emulate, but he could also be amazingly cool and indifferent to people he professed to love. Something closer to the ‘true’ Nicky Arnstein would have been an actor’s dream (Jack Nicholson would probably play him today), but taking into consideration all the people who may have wanted his character cleaned up left Lennart with little more than a storybook prince” (35).

The Nick in Lennart’s 1960 script, “My Man,” is not the vague but high-class card sharp in the ruffled shirt who never dreams of crime until he’s desperate. He is a jack-of-all-trades, a high-rolling Ralph Kramden looking for the big score that will make him rich. In every version Arnstein has a different failed scheme in the second act—in “My Man,” instant coffee (in the 1910s; Arnstein, ever the loser, rejects the label “instant,” deciding that “concentrated coffee” sounds better); in the ’64 play, Florida land deals; in the ’68 film, Oklahoma oil wells. Lennart’s original script, however, although it first sketches out Fanny’s road from Keeney’s to Ziegfeld to love and troubled marriage with Nick, is more complex about real matters, such as how much things cost (Ziegfeld reveals that he’s losing $2,000 a week even while playing to packed houses every night, foreshadowing his even-
distant 1950s. Harron cuts to a shot of a woman’s foot in black pumps, as the camera proceeds to perform the clichéd tilt up the woman’s body, an overbearingly sexist device for introducing an attractive woman, treating her body as territory to be explored. Taking up from the line about “something rotten” within, Harron suggests that femininity is under investigation, and that American official culture and laws must restrain it. This is ground covered, as we’ve seen, in *I Want to Live!* Indeed, Kefauver’s New York hearings took place the same week in early June 1955 that Barbara Graham was executed in California.

Harron’s cinematic strategy is to start with the various patriarchal gazes and subjectivities that approach Bettie Page, appropriate those gazes, and return them to Bettie herself. The opening sequence insinuates that Bettie’s femininity is officially seen as a threat that must be contained. The gaze implied in the tilt up her body evinces suspicion and investigation as much as it does lust. The tilt begins as the title *The Notorious Bettie Page* appears on the screen contradicted by the demure, decorous woman perched, with perfect posture and white gloves, on a bench in the courthouse foyer. The face at the top of the camera tilt is big-eyed and meltingly beautiful, with an innocent apprehensiveness that leaves no doubt that this is a heroine, in the Hollywood tradition of heroes and heroines as honest, determined, and sincere. There is also an authorial gaze here. The director said in a 2006 interview that “I wasn’t interested in her being sexy. I was interested in what it was like to be that kind of girl. . . . What is it like to be the object of that much attention or that gaze?” The first several minutes of the film set out these questions and also establish a mystery of Page’s life, without that mystery leading to wonderment at “Woman, the dark continent” or asking “What does woman want?” There is a touch of melodrama—the earnest protagonist outmatched by the stone walls and marble corridors of official authority. The spectator might think of Hitchcock’s *Notorious* (1946), which also opened with a beautiful woman, under suspicion, waiting at a Federal courthouse.

According to one account, Page waited for sixteen hours before she was dismissed without being called to testify (Hancock 3). Harron punctuates Page’s long wait with two flashback sequences. In the first, Bettie takes out a letter from her sister, triggering a flashback to “Nashville 1936.” We see thirteen-year-old Bettie in church with her mother and sister. As she looks flirtingly at a boy from her pew, her mother smacks her hand. The preacher asks members of the congregation to come forward to give themselves to

**The Notorious Bettie Page**

*Free Will and God’s Will*

Mary Harron dares early in her film to use techniques inscribed with the male gaze. The opening sequences are worth looking at in detail. Harron opens her mostly black-and-white film in the mid-1950s with an undercover sting on a Times Square bookstore that sells bondage magazines from behind the counter. Cut to the convening of U.S. Senate subcommittee hearings held at the Federal Courthouse in New York and presided over by male gaze. The opening sequences are worth looking at in detail. Harron Senator Estes Kefauver (David Strathairn) of Tennessee. The hearings focused solely on the effects of “smut” on minors (Salisbury “Senators”). A Catholic priest with an Irish brogue warns that “Communism will never defeat America. . . . Something from within . . . will rot and corrupt it.” A contemporary audience may well contemplate the corruption caused by the priest sex abuse scandals that were occurring and being covered up even in the
pastes the various dramas, positing them as objects for endless study. “Study” is surely the right word for a filmmaker who likens the effort to a “dissertation, probably the Ph.D.,” who originally subtitled the film “Some Suppositions for a Film About Bob Dylan,” and whose *New York Times* Magazine profile said about *Superstar*: “Academics loved it” (Sullivan). *I’m Not There* presents the apotheosis of the biopic as it has evolved to date. It breaks one of the hidden assumptions of the genre: it feels no need to prove Dylan’s worth or to establish his mythology. Haynes assumes that the spectator already knows about Dylan’s importance. Therefore, he can set about at once to dissect his myth and meaning. It is *Citizen Kane* without the newsreel.

Haynes splits Dylan into multiple characters. He appears to tell the same story as *No Direction Home* (2005), the three-and-a-half-hour documentary attributed to Martin Scorsese. Rich with historic footage, much of it not seen before publicly, and peppered with interviews, including material from a ten-hour sit-down with Dylan, *No Direction Home* covers the period from young Robert Zimmerman’s upbringing in the Iron Range town of Hibbing, Minnesota, through his rise in the early and mid-1960s. Scorsese’s film ends with the motorcycle crash near Dylan’s home in Woodstock, New York, that temporarily halted Dylan’s unprecedented influence and allowed him to change direction, not for the last time. Haynes’s film begins as if the motorcycle crash had administered a mercy killing to the insane glare of the “Dylan Goes Electric” period, and allowed new lives to rise for the singer. “He gave up the limelight,” as Haynes’s *Superstar*-like narrator intones, “for a different kind of light.” This new light is defined throughout the film variously—by Sara, his wife, whom the film names Claire, his children (“My family was my light,” Dylan wrote in *Chronicles, Volume One*, his 2004 memoir [123]), and his Christian conversion. Haynes’s subject (who is never named Bob Dylan) arises and withdraws, to emerge again and again in a series of career phases that continue as of this writing. Thus Haynes’s film begins as if the subject was identified. There is a familiar kind of show business communication with the public going on when a title such as *Yankee Doodle Dandy, La Bamba, Coal Miner’s Daughter, or What’s Love Got to Do with It?* is emblazoned across a marquee. By this token, a biopic of Dylan should announce itself as *Like a Rolling Stone or Blowin’ in the Wind*. Surely filmmakers concerned for their commercial prospects would give their film such a title, which would amount to a brand, and would also appear to guarantee a certain kind of conventional biopic. *I’m Not There*, by contrast, is taken from the title of a song Dylan recorded with The Band in 1967. It was left out of the double-album culled from the sessions, *The Basement Tapes* (1975), and could be heard only in bootlegs right up until the day the film’s sound track CD went on sale. That Haynes would use it as his title shows he’s interested only in its thematic value, suggesting the biopic subject as absence, as well as Dylan’s frequent movement from one position, one style, to another. By the time audiences, or anyone else, expected to find Dylan in a particular place, be it folk, or protest, or rock, or country . . . he was no longer there. He was somewhere else.

If Dylan was not “there,” then where, or who, was he? “I am another,” wrote Dylan’s favorite poet, Arthur Rimbaud. Haynes’s film shows one “other” on top of another and another. But with all these “others,” who is the “self,” the “I”? Jonathan Cott described an interview with Dylan near the release of the four-hour concert film- cum-fantasia, *Renaldo and Clara* (1978):

“... Renaldo, there’s a guy in whiteface singing on the stage, and then there’s Ronnie Hawkins [who incidentally weighed 300 pounds] playing Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan is listed in the credits as playing Renaldo, yet Ronnie Hawkins is listed as playing Bob Dylan.” “So Bob Dylan,” I surmised, “may or may not be in the film.” “Exactly.” “But Bob Dylan made the film.” “Bob Dylan didn’t make it,” he told me. “I made it.” [Cott x–xi; brackets in the original]</EXT>

Wherever or whoever Bob Dylan is, *I’m Not There* exists in the personae, the fictions, each of which I will analyze at length.

1. “Woody Guthrie” (Marcus Carl Franklin). This is the prodigy, the nineteen-year-old baby-fat singer who showed up out of nowhere in Greenwich Village with a fantastic (and invented) personal background, a determination
to emulate his hero Woody Guthrie, and an ability to sponge up musical and poetic styles and traditions. Played by a twelve-year-old African American actor, Woody seems a magical figure, yet he is in truth none other than the visionary biopic subject, full of confidence, unable to keep from doing what he is doing. The archetypal subject is infused with childlike enthusiasm and faith, so why shouldn’t Haynes make him a child? In a remarkable passage in *Chronicles*, Vol. 1, furthermore, Dylan describes seeing the Denzel Washington film *The Mighty Quinn* (1989), whose title came from one of Dylan’s songs. “Denzel Washington. He must have been a fan of mine . . . I wondered if Denzel could play Woody Guthrie. In my dimension of reality, he certainly could have” (187). This is a peculiar comment, considering that Dylan himself turned down the role of Woody in *Bound for Glory* (1976) (McDougal 168). There is no Denzel in Haynes’s film, but in Dylan’s “dimension of reality” spirit transcends physical reality. Marcus Carl Franklin is perhaps Haynes’s idea of Denzel Washington at twelve: poised, inspired, and self-assured. Woody, moreover, is the only one of the “Dylans” who sings in the actor’s own voice. It is an amateur voice, in the tradition of and best-known films. For instance, Jack Rollins, the former child prodigy, Woody, is played by Bale, the former child star who proved his coming of age by starring in *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000) and won on to play toughened characters personally tested outside society in *Rescue Dawn* (2006), *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), and even *Batman Begins* (2005), with its ascetic, battle-hardened Bruce Wayne. (The sequel, *The Dark Knight* [2008] paired as the Caped Crusader and The Joker—characters often portrayed as doppelgangers—Bale and another of Haynes’s Dylan avatars, Heath Ledger.) “Jack Rollins” is earnest and weather-beaten. He looks like he has been riding the rails and pitching hay, even if he hasn’t (which is surely the case). When Dylan enters his born-again Christian stage in 1979, Jack, unseen for fifteen years, resurfaces, converted into “Pastor John,” crusading for Christ just as “Jack” once protested racism, greed, and war.

2. *Arthur* (Ben Whishaw), the poet-philosopher. Arthur is a repository of Dylan interviews and statements. As Haynes posited Oscar Wilde as the forebear of his David Bowie figure, Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) in *Velvet Goldmine*, so Arthur Rimbaud is nineteen or twenty, is garbed as a late-nineteenth-century bad boy, and faces an inquisition that looks like the star chamber in the dream sequences of Arthur is the only persona who does not interact dramatically with other characters, does not sing, and is static throughout.

3. *Jack Rollins* (Christian Bale). The sinewy, denim-wearing folksinger on the cover of *The Times They Are a-Changin’* (1964); the darling of the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. This is the Dylan who performed at the March on Washington later the same summer; the young performer whom Joan Baez (named “Alice Fabian” here and played by Haynes regular Julianne Moore) brought onstage with her and with whom she apparently fell in (unreciprocated) love; the singer of protest songs such as “Masters of War” and “With God on Our Side”; the “voice of a generation.” Peculiarly, *I’m Not There* revitalizes the biopic as star vehicle, in ways that serve Haynes’s purposes and enrich the various Dylan personae. Even though actors were attached and then became unavailable as Haynes’s project wound its long trail toward production, the eventual actors are uncannily resonant of their personae and best-known films. For instance, Jack Rollins, the former child prodigy, Woody, is played by Bale, the former child star who proved his coming of age by starring in *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000) and went on to play toughened characters personally tested outside society in *Rescue Dawn* (2006), *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), and even *Batman Begins* (2005), with its ascetic, battle-hardened Bruce Wayne. (The sequel, *The Dark Knight* [2008] paired as the Caped Crusader and The Joker—characters often portrayed as doppelgangers—Bale and another of Haynes’s Dylan avatars, Heath Ledger.) “Jack Rollins” is earnest and weather-beaten. He looks like he has been riding the rails and pitching hay, even if he hasn’t (which is surely the case). When Dylan enters his born-again Christian stage in 1979, Jack, unseen for fifteen years, resurfaces, converted into “Pastor John,” crusading for Christ just as “Jack” once protested racism, greed, and war.

4. *Jude Quinn* (Cate Blanchett). The rock-and-roll heretic. The frizzy-haired speed freak who “went electric,” the outrage of the 1965 Newport Folk Festival and the 1966 British tour, the author of the novel *Tarantula*, denizen of Andy Warhol’s “Factory,” jilter of Baez, and erstwhile lover of Edie Sedgwick. The Jude section conflates the Dylans of the 1965 and 1966 British tours, even though they were perceived very differently, as Haynes concedes (IFC News). Tracing this Dylan through the three landmark albums he/she encompasses, released in one fourteen-month period—*Bringing It All Back Home* (March 1965), *Highway 61 Revisited* (August 1965), *Blonde on Blonde* (May 1966; the title is said to refer to Sedgwick and Warhol)—one realizes how incremental yet rapid was Dylan’s change from acoustic folk to electric psychedelic rock. Jude is the dazed and bedazzled “thin wild mercury” singer shown out of focus and androgynous on the *Blonde on Blonde* cover. “He was bizarre,” said Haynes.

The way he would play piano in concert, which Cate . . . mimics in the
also makes their lives into cinema, just as Bob Dylan makes life into music and poetry. The point then is to release them from those scenes into some lasting meaning, into transcendence. As they find their meaning in life, so perhaps do we. We would love to imagine our own lives in story form, wouldn’t we, ourselves as the subjects of our own biopics? Perhaps in cultures that most celebrate a myth of the individual, biopics are devoutly to be desired, for the same reasons that any hint of conventional generic form is deplored. Each of us has his or her own story and each is unique. As Susan Alexander says to Mr. Thompson at the end of his interview with her, “Come around and tell me the story of your life sometime.”

works cited

Als, Hilton. “Picture This: On the Set, the Street, and at Dinner with X Director Spike Lee.” Village Voice 10 November 1992, 38+.