

**The Musical Biopic:  
Representing the Lives of Music Artists in  
21st Century Cinema**

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# DECLARATION

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *The Musical Biopic: Representing the Lives of Music Artists in 21st Century Cinema* has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the contemporary musical biopic (biographical film) examining theatrically released feature films from the years 2004 to 2007. Focusing on selected case studies, each chapter discusses the representation of actual musical artists including musicians, composers and singers. The musical biopics; *El Cantante* (2006), *Control* (2007), *Beyond the Sea* (2004), *De-Lovely* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005), *Ray* (2004) and *I'm Not There* (2007) are analysed in depth. This thesis examines the text (the film itself) and context of the musical biopic. Through consideration of media representations of the respective music artists portrayed, the filmmakers and cast, significant factors are discussed including the omission and inclusion of certain biographical details, star/celebrity identities and cinematic elements such as visual imagery, narrative and musical integration; which shape the public perception of the persona.

The musical biopic demonstrates that biography is a subjective interpretation of a life history. There can be no 'truth' or accurate re-telling of an actual life narrative. The contemporary musical biopic represents the public memory of the popular musical artist through exploring their various public/private identities, while focusing on a certain attribute or persona. The filmmaker unavoidably conveys a biased perspective of the protagonist, effectively re-interpreting and re-representing media sources. Through unique styles of depiction in musical integration, audio-visual representation, storyline and narrative, the contemporary musical biopic attempts to present an exclusive view of the popular music artist. Hence, the contemporary musical biopic re-mythologises the music artist, creating a fabricated account of a life history.

Contributing predominantly to the discipline of film studies, this thesis is also significant to the areas of popular music studies, screen sound, biography and cultural studies. This thesis will draw attention to the undervalued scholarly study of the biopic, establishing new analytical tropes for further development in the field.

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# INTRODUCTION

The contemporary biographical film termed ‘biopic’<sup>1</sup> (a feature film based on or inspired by an actual person) has been a popular genre of film to produce and consume, confirmed through box office revenue and industry recognition. Since 2000 (and often in the decades preceding) biopics were nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture almost every year. These films include *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Pianist* (2002), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Hours* (2002), *Seabiscuit* (2003), *The Aviator* (2004), *Finding Neverland* (2004), *Ray* (2004), *Capote* (2005), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *Munich* (2005), *The Queen* (2006), *Frost/Nixon* (2008), *Milk* (2008) and *The Blind Side* (2009). According to *Box Office Mojo*<sup>2</sup> since 1978 the top 34 musical biopics (a feature film based on or inspired by an actual music artist) have combined box office revenue of over \$724 million. Of these, *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are the top two in box office rankings (over \$119 million and \$75 million, respectively) and are the two musical biopics discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. The remaining films that are analysed in this thesis are *De-Lovely* (over \$13 million revenue), *El Cantante* (\$7.5 million revenue), *Beyond the Sea* (over \$6 million revenue), *I’m Not There* (\$4 million revenue) and *Control* (\$872,252 revenue).<sup>3</sup> To further exemplify the biopic’s popularity, The Internet Movie Database (*IMDb*) suggests there are over 12 Hollywood biopics currently in development to be released between 2011 and 2013. There are rumours in the industry of negotiations for musical biopics of Janis Joplin,<sup>4</sup> Freddy Mercury,<sup>5</sup> Kurt Cobain<sup>6</sup> and Frank Sinatra.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘biopic’, readily used in contemporary media, was arguably coined by *Variety* magazine. It now appears on the list of unique words they deem ‘slanguage’ (<http://www.variety.com/static-pages/slanguagedictionary/>, accessed 31 December 2010). Although it is unknown when ‘biopic’ was first used, it is estimated to have been published in 1951 (the current editors “don’t recall” in a 1998 interview, <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/aug/23/entertainment/ca-15628/3>, accessed 31 December 2010).

<sup>2</sup> <http://boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=musicbio.htm>, accessed 27 October 2010.

<sup>3</sup> All figures are total lifetime domestic gross.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Adams is confirmed to play the role of Joplin in a musical biopic directed by Fernando Meirelles (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni3334637/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/aug/07/janis-joplin-biopic>, accessed 7 December 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Sacha Baron Cohen has signed to play Mercury in a musical biopic that will be produced by Robert De Niro’s Tribeca Productions (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni4373824/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/51942/218987>, accessed 7 December 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Courtney Love has agreed to the musical biopic of her late-husband, Cobain, on the provision she has a substantial amount of creative control (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni2043657/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.spin.com/articles/kurt-cobain-biopic-moves-forward>, accessed 7 December 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Scorsese intends to direct a Sinatra music biopic and is considering Al Pacino for the starring role alongside Robert De Niro as Dean Martin (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni2575806/>, accessed 27 October 2010).

Even though the popularity and public value of the biopic (and musical biopic) is justified above, the study of the (musical) biopic is incredibly undervalued in scholarly analysis.<sup>8</sup> Its primary function is the representation of the (musical) star identity. The seminal work of Richard Dyer (1979, 2004) will be discussed at length in this thesis as stars (both the music artist portrayed and actors cast in the musical biopic) are of great importance when interpreting and understanding film. Only two book-length studies of the biopic have been published and no equivalent study of the musical biopic has been accomplished at the time of writing. George F. Custen set the groundwork for the study of the biopic, analysing the state of the biopic in the Hollywood studio era in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992). In *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, Dennis Bingham states:

*the biopic is an endlessly fascinating genre. Even its neglect raises issues about the values and preferences of scholars and journalists who dismiss the importance of the genre, as compared to the continued enthusiasm for biopics shown by the film artists who keep making them* (2010: 27).

This thesis will confirm the contemporary musical biopic as a valid area of scholarly study. The following study will analyse how these films represent the life of the music artist, shaping the public perception of these stars.

This first chapter of the thesis will provide an overview of biography from its early forms in literature to its appearance in newer media such as television and cinema. This chapter will contextualise and frame the musical biopic as it stems from a history of biographical writing, commonly referred to as 'life narrative'. As the musical biopic will be framed in terms of the musical film genre, the work of Rick Altman (1987, 1992, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2004) and Jane Feuer (1977, 1982, 1986, 2002, 2004) will be applied. Analysis of the contemporary musical

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and <http://www.billboard.com/news/scorsese-to-direct-frank-sinatra-biopic-1003972860.story#/news/scorsese-to-direct-frank-sinatra-biopic-1003972860.story>, accessed 7 December 2010).

<sup>8</sup> The literature review and methodology of this thesis (Chapter One) will define the relative properties of the biopic and musical biopic, differentiating between the two terms.

biopic will be presented in the form of case studies divided into four analytical chapters. In postmodern and post-structural critical theory Philip Smith asserts that “Attention is given to the local. This encourages the study of specific research sites and issues rather than sweeping general theories” (2001a: 246). Hence the following thesis will examine films on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to generalising large groups of musical biopics, akin to the methodology adopted by Bingham (2010: 22). Instead of providing general claims on the state of the musical biopic, it will be suggested that the genre is constantly evolving. The following thesis will address the 21st Century musical biopic in reference to previous eras including the Hollywood studio era. David Bordwell argues that “despite the diversity that American movies have displayed since 1960, nearly all of them depend on storytelling principles established in the studio era” (2006: 21). Hollywood films (and others internationally) have remained formulaic in narrative approach, appealing to genre conventions. Custen (1992, 2000, 2001) has covered studio era biopics effectively and his findings will be utilised throughout this thesis. Comparisons will be drawn between these eras as there are similarities and differences in narrative structures of the musical biopic through time.

The methodology of this thesis is an analysis of the audio-visual representation of the music artist in the musical biopic. The analysis will involve discussions surrounding various media representations of the artist as these musical biopics are highly intertextual. The first analytical chapter of this thesis discusses the films’ focus on personal perspectives of the musical individual, drawing upon *El Cantante* (2007) and *Control* (2007), narrated through the perspective of the long-term partner (the wife, in both films). The second and third analytical chapters deal with genre, history and the self-reflexive musical biopic in reference to *Beyond the Sea* (2004) and *De-Lovely* (2004) in Chapter Three and *Walk the Line* (2005) and *Ray* (2004) in Chapter Four. *Ray* and *Walk the Line* seek to represent the various identities of the music artist and reinforce the subjectivity inherent in presenting a version of their life story. The fifth chapter discusses self-reflexivity and the future of the musical biopic in an analysis of *I’m Not There* (2007). This final chapter will discuss certain musical biopics that are targeted at the fan of the musical individual and depart from classical Hollywood narrative structure. Classical narrative includes the element of closure, as Bordwell suggests:

*The fundamental premise of the classical model is that the narrative must cohere. All questions asked in the course of the narrative must be answered by the end; all events*

*must take their course; nothing may be introduced that will not contribute to the narrative's denouement* (1981: 25).

This is commonly referred to as 'cause and effect'. Although many contemporary musical biopics maintain this classic structure, some purposefully steer away in order to self-reference: an idea explored in more detail in the context of the musical film genre.

Finally, the concluding portion of this thesis will focus on the production and reception of the musical biopic. A summary of the relationship between narrative and musical elements will be discussed and how they assist the film audience to assess and (re)construct the music star's identity. The function of the musical biopic is primarily for entertainment; however, it is also an important way of preserving the music artist in history. Even though the contemporary musical biopic often re-represents biographical detail relating to the music artist, these films remain a significant and compelling area of academic study as they offer new insights into the various identities of the protagonist. The contemporary musical biopic is a culmination and interpretation of all previous representations of the music artist, reflecting and constructing how the media and audiences interpret the individual.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **BIOGRAPHY IN TEXT AND ON SCREEN**

Biography has evolved not only through time but also as it has emerged in different media. Change is apparent in the subject of the biography, the creator of the biography and also the format through which biography is represented. As the recounting of life history has changed, audience reception has followed. Interest in biography (and to a wider extent, ‘true stories’) has been cyclical through history dependent on varying popularity levels and the advancements of new technology. From biography in text to biography on screen, the following chapter will firstly provide an account of the changes in audience reception and the significance of star/celebrity studies: from the printed texts of the Victorian Era to contemporary cinema of the 21st Century. Secondly, after noting the significant changes in biography, there will be an analysis of genre and genre theory from its classical beginnings to contemporary post-structural theory. Film genre theory will be defined and the biopic will be identified in the genre system. As this thesis focuses on the musical biopic it is essential to understand the categorisation in terms of film genre. The musical, its narrative structure and characteristics will be identified, including its subgenres: the backstage/show musical and the folk musical (Altman, 1987: 1), with a look at what is termed the ‘new’ musical. Finally, the methodology presented will illustrate the analysis of certain film case studies through a post-structural theoretical framework encompassing the disciplines of film studies, popular music, media and cultural studies to provide an agenda for the following chapters of the thesis.

### **The Subject of Biography**

The type of subject that literary biography focuses on has shifted from saints and divines to now include any person who has received some element of fame, such as sports people and criminals. A significant point of change in biographical focus occurred in the 18th Century which is noted by Richard D. Altick (1966: 79) as the Golden Age of biography. The 18th Century is also referred to as the Age of Enlightenment – a movement in European and American philosophy.

*The movement claimed the allegiance of a majority of thinkers during the 17th and 18th centuries, a period that Thomas Paine called the Age of Reason. At its heart it became a conflict between religion and the inquiring mind that wanted to know and understand through reason based on evidence and proof.*<sup>9</sup>

During the Age of Reason, Alexander Pope (1688 – 1744), an English poet, stated that “the proper study of mankind is man” (1733: 5) which reinforces the value of studying biography in this thesis. Biographers hence began to move away from writing of higher beings such as saints and commenced writing the life stories of men and women of literature. The Victorian era (1837 – 1901) continued the widening of subject matter and produced many accomplished biographers including James Anthony Froude and John Gibson Lockhart. *The Life of Scott*,<sup>10</sup> written by Lockhart, is seen by many as the most admirable biography since Boswell’s *Johnson* (Boswell, 1887).<sup>11</sup> The biography is the life story of Sir Walter Scott: a prolific poet and historical novelist who also became Lockhart’s own father-in-law. Laura Marcus describes both Lockhart and Froude’s work as ‘New Biography’:

*a new equality between biographer and subject, by contrast with the hero-worship and hagiography of Victorian eulogistic biography; brevity, selection, and an attention to form and unity traditionally associated with fiction rather than history; the discovery of central motifs in a life and a ‘key’ to personality, so that single aspects of the self or details of the life and person came to stand for or to explain the whole; and a focus on character rather than events* (2002: 196).

The life story of the individual changed from initially being eulogistic to, in the 18th Century, forming a new equality between the biographer and subject and between subject and audience. As the biographers of the 18th Century expanded their choice of subjects to include writers of literature, the 19th Century biographers adopted a more equal and in some

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<sup>9</sup> [http://history-world.org/age\\_of\\_enlightenment.htm](http://history-world.org/age_of_enlightenment.htm), accessed 3 July 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Written by John Gibson Lockhart, *The Life of Scott* was issued in seven volumes. Six were published in 1837, followed by the seventh volume in 1838.

<sup>11</sup> James Boswell (1740 – 1795) published a biography of Samuel Johnson which, unlike other biographies of the era, utilised direct conversations and personal details of the British author.

instances, a more intimate relationship with their subject. The focus of the biographical texts was centred on the person's characteristics as opposed to events in their lifetime. The change made the biographies, in a sense, more appealing as original readers of hagiography felt they were receiving a more personal account of a man or woman's life. The traditional function and role of biography, one of hero-worship, now became a way of not only commemorating the dead but also in identifying with another individual's life journey to aid in self-acceptance and self-understanding. The widened variety of choice regarding the subject of the biography often leads to the reader/viewer experiencing the opportunity to connect with that chosen individual on the same level. The reader/viewer can relate to the individual's life experiences and even identify with the subject on a more intimate or personal level.

### ***Celebrity and Star Studies***

Through watching the life story of a famous entertainer such as a musician or an actor, the audience member has the opportunity to view the 'celebrity' or 'star' figure on a different level to that attained via magazines, television entertainment news and the internet. The idea of relating to the individual and a life story carried through to these contemporary media representations of biography including feature film. In contemporary definition, celebrity is:

*attached to a particular kind of cultural figure: they will usually have emerged from the sports or entertainment industries; they will be visible through the media; and their private lives will attract greater public interest than their professional lives* (Turner, 2006: 358).

The celebrity differs from the star in that the latter develops meaning historically through his/her achievements in the industry and holds a certain social significance, such as the actor Marilyn Monroe (Dyer, 2004: 17). The celebrity is able to immediately claim a certain level of fame and escape it just as quickly: a case in point being the contestants on the global reality TV show, *Big Brother*. Overall, the celebrity is "a combination of the commercial interests of a cultural industry" (Turner et al., 2000: 11). The celebrity is constantly monitoring the desires of the audience and altering their image to suit the changing public taste and appeal to

the mass market.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the ‘star’ is more prone to biopic production because of their ability to sustain their status through a prolonged development over time whether it is a famous entertainer, sportsperson or any individual with an extraordinary achievement.

Through the biopic the viewer is able to see the star figure from a time before they were ‘discovered’ or became famous, up until and beyond their fame/stardom. Dyer states that the ‘star system’ in the Hollywood film industry in particular “is about the promotion of the individual” (2004: 7) and identifies that it existed long before film. Attendees of theatre and live entertainment who witnessed stars rising out of these industries expected stars to also emerge from the film industry. The first time that a film actor’s name was announced to the public was when Florence Lawrence (previously known as the ‘Biograph Girl’) had her name published in a newspaper in 1910, suggesting that she had been killed by a trolley car (Dyer, 1979: 9-10). A day later it was announced that it was in fact a lie, however the newspaper article acknowledged for the first time a film actor as a star. Although the Lawrence incident may have been the first public announcement of a film actor’s name, “Neil Gabler’s biography of newspaper columnist Walter Winchell [in 1925] suggests yet another point of origin and locates it where the representations of the private life of celebrities were first developed, the modern newspaper” (Turner, 2004a: 11). Celebrity biography in particular became quite popular in the US newspapers of the 1920s including the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier’s*, where over half of the published articles were entertainer biographies (as opposed to politicians and businesspeople). *Moving Picture World*, one of the first entertainment magazines directed at fans (now referred to as a ‘fanzine’), emerged shortly after the newspaper biographies and the star status of the actor had become a significant part of filmmaking and other entertainments such as live theatre. Overall the fanzine “played an important role in attracting audiences for the large industry that had grown up around moving pictures worldwide by 1925” (Grieverson and Krämer, 2004b: 4). The celebrity became a commodity: a marketing tool used to promote films and draw in audiences.

Dyer affirms that stars in the film industry have a market function and are created to make profit. Stars are able to sell almost anything from cars to toilet paper but “above all, they are part of the labour that produces film as a commodity that can be sold for profit in the market

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<sup>12</sup> The alterations in the celebrity or star’s persona are often controlled by the people who manage and work with these individuals.



place” (Dyer, 2004: 5). Stars are an attractive selling point for films and can be reason enough for the viewer to watch a film they might find not to their taste. Furthermore, Samantha Barbas (researcher of fan culture and the cult of celebrity) maintains:

*Although fans often raved about their star’s dramatic ability and spoke passionately about her face or his physique, what drew them most to their idol, they claimed, were the inner qualities of warmth, sincerity, and compassion (2001: 114).*

Fans’ insights into their idol’s represented personality are found in secondary texts – those outside of the profession the celebrity is involved in. Such texts include the aforementioned fanzine, interviews coinciding with the promotion of upcoming films, biographies such as those on television, entertainment news programmes and published books (known as ‘authorised’ or ‘unauthorised’ accounts and publications sometimes produced in autobiographical form). Secondary texts are important for fans and give them the opportunity to access a star’s personal life that they would not have direct access to in any other way. The inner qualities of an actor have virtually nothing to do with the types of films they are cast in, therefore making the presence of the star a powerful commodity in film marketing. Dyer states that the star phenomenon consists of anything publicly available about a star including interviews and biographies (Dyer, 2004: 2). Additionally, often multiple biographies exist of a single star which further alters the perception of the individual for the fan/audience leading a star image to be extensive and intertextual. Overall, “the meaning of a star’s image is never limited, stable or total” (McDonald, 1995: 83) which is largely a result of the constant perceptual change that star’s undergo in a variety of media forms.

Current literature focuses on the contrast that exists between the work of the actor on screen and the off-screen lifestyle of the performer (Feasey, 2006: 177). There is also duality present in the actor/character focus. In the biopic (depending on casting) there is a conflict between the star power of the actor and the character he/she is playing on screen. For example, *Beyond the Sea* (2004) is a biopic where a recognised actor, Kevin Spacey, plays the role of 1950s entertainer, Bobby Darin. As well as writing and directing the film, Spacey, aged 45 at the time, played Darin who died at age 37. The film received mixed reviews because some critics and the public believed that Spacey looked too old to carry out the role of Darin (discussed in

Chapter Three). Depending on which star-figure the public desires to see depends on the audience's admiration or objection to the film. Casting a star to play the leading role is vital in how any biopic (musical or otherwise) is interpreted by the viewer and adds another layer to the complexity of representing the subject on film. The character/actor duality will be discussed further in certain case studies featured in the forthcoming chapters.

## The Biographer

The role of the biographer has changed over time in terms of the author's position (in relation to the subject) and degree of artistic license in telling the story of an individual life. For example, Virginia Woolf's (1882 – 1941) 'biographical' works merged fact and fiction to express greater freedom. Virginia Woolf, an English essay writer and feminist, made obvious to her readers that she had fabricated what she deemed her 'biographical' works. Among *Flush: A Biography* (1998) and *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), Woolf's most famous 'biography' is titled *Orlando: A Biography* (1988). *Orlando* is a life story that "solved the problem of how to write the life of an intimate friend by substituting fantasy for realism, by writing it in a manner that proclaimed its fictiveness" (Briggs, 1995: 252). According to Richard Holmes, Woolf managed to perfectly marry truth with imagination, a feat that creates true biography (2002: 14). Woolf quite poetically defines how a biography is created and states that:

*Documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads* (1988: 63).

Woolf strove to find the balance between authenticity and fabrication throughout her career as a writer: "she was still opposing the facts of biography to the freedom of fiction, while making the crucial admission that the status of facts could change" (Briggs, 1995: 262).

Woolf reconceived biography by merging reality with imagination and gave the biographer a freedom through creativity.

There are many reasons why a biographer/life-writer would choose to fabricate the life of an individual or even create the subject altogether. Fabricating the life of an individual can give the author more power and presence in the text, providing them with an opportunity to interpret the events of another's life. Regarding the issue of completely imagining a subject, the biographer may be making social comment on an industry or a community by exploring the possible life of one individual. In the case of Virginia Woolf it was freedom through imagination. Often it is to fill the gaps in a biography. Laura Marcus states that biography is "the work of a craftsman rather than an artist, methodologically fitting together the jigsaw pieces of a picture which already had a frame and an image" (2002: 253). However, some fragments of a life history may be lost which makes it virtually impossible to create a completely accurate biography of any one individual. Often the biographer will not have access to certain items (such as letters or audio/visual recordings) that may tell them about different events in an individual's life. It is the role of the biographer to piece together the histories that he/she *does* have access to and create a biography from that available material.

From another perspective, P.B. Waite, Emeritus Professor of History from Dalhousie University, suggests that biography in Canada and Australia is more apt to be written by historians. In these biographies the author is presented as an "alter ego" of the person whose life is being presented in the text (Waite, 1983: 14). The biographer's position presents an interpretation or deduction of the person's feelings during different stages of his or her life. Waite suggests that a great biography should show the "evolving and lambent lights of memory" and elegiac in tone, of life passing. He suggests that in biography, men and women can only be, or they ought only to be, what the evidence, old and new, allows. Even in Waite's explanation, the biographer must be present in the text in some shape or form either out of necessity or desire in order to present a perspective on a life history. Jolanta T. Pekacz suggests that:

*critics argue now that the coherence of life presented in a traditional biography is illusory and created by papering over the cracks, concealing the unknown, and*

*making causal connections which stem from the mind of the biographer rather than from that of the subject* (2006: 6).

Overall, all biographies are to some extent, fictional. As previously mentioned, one reason is to cover missing pieces of a life but there are also instances where there is a need to publicise specific details of the subject that the family (or even the individual themselves) are not willing to disclose. In some cases, the family and/or friends of the individual do not want elements of their life to be made public as it may influence how the community of fans perceive them. For example, if the individual had an extra-marital affair made apparent through the letters that they wrote, the family may not want to give these letters to the biographer because it will affect how they will be remembered.

The argument over accuracy in biographical writing can also stem from *who* in fact writes the biography. Some historians tend to take a more objective approach as opposed to artists (including the film director and the entire filmmaking team) who hold a more creative position when telling a life story. An example is the work of film director Oliver Stone. Barbara L. Tischler states that filmmakers, in general, devote creative attention to visuality, emotionality and marketability, no matter what type of film they are trying to create (1998: 39). Oliver Stone is known for his controversial historical and biographical films including *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *The Doors* (1991), *JFK* (1991), *Nixon* (1995), *Alexander* (2004) and the George W. Bush tragedy/comedy, *W.* (2008). *JFK* in particular, “excited tremendous pressures in Congress that helped to spring the release of thousands of pages from the Warren Commission investigation and the subsequent Congressional investigations into the assassination of John F. Kennedy” (Toplin, 1998: 5). Both Tischler and Toplin see Stone as a ‘cinematic historian’ and suggest that the word ‘historian’ should be re-defined in order to include creative artists such as those who compose films because they too offer a valid interpretation on history. One of the reasons why Stone (amongst other filmmakers) merges historical fact with imagined scenes, such as the invention of dialogue for conversations that may have never taken place, is to create thought-provoking films for the viewers leading to a multi-layered representation of history.

The debate over the role of the biographer and his/her artistic license holds great importance as life stories are also being presented audio-visually through different media such as cinema, television and the internet. As biography has emerged in visual media, the creator (or creative team) does not necessarily have to be a professional biographer. The creator is able to present biography in any set structure that they choose. Largely, artistic license is lengthened or restricted depending on the form in which it is presented and how it is promoted to the consuming public (such as stating that it is an ‘historical document’, a ‘fictional film’ or a ‘documentary’). The differing formats that a life is marketed and displayed in changes the way a life story is perceived by an audience. Some historians argue that written biographies contain more detail than any film is able to (noted in *The American Historical Review*, 1988: 93, 5). However, a moving image can convey something about a person that a written word cannot. For example the film *Elgar* (1962), a biopic (directed by Ken Russell) of composer Edward Elgar, features only a narrator (voice-over by Sir Huw Wheldon) and no dialogue from the actors. The film sonically features Elgar’s musical compositions and visually expresses landscapes of where he lived in Worcestershire, England. The most significant sequence of the film is the series of shots of the Boer War in the 1900s accompanied by Elgar’s renowned marching music. Scenes of battle, death and burial grounds are presented as a part of the music and are connected to the war. For the film audience, Elgar’s marching music conjures up images of the Boer War and links Elgar’s music to these moments which exemplifies the significance of his work during the distressing period. Unlike a written biography, the film contains no dialogue because dialogue is not needed to communicate Elgar’s role during the war.

## **Comparing Written History to Filmic Representation**

During the Hollywood studio era, in the years 1930 through to 1960, the western public were exposed to a large number of biopics and received a considerable amount of its information about prominent people and historical events through film. Even though a number of ‘bio-features’ were released in the silent era, during the studio era many Americans’ “views of the world [had] been shaped, in part, by a lifetime (and not merely a single) exposure to filmic representations of powerful individuals and the roles they played in history” (Custen, 1992: 2), leading the biopic to play a powerful part in creating and sustaining public history. Tibbetts follows Custen’s views and also argues that it is increasingly apparent that visual

histories such as those found in film, television and print media are threatening to supersede written discourse as a popular form of historical representation (Tibbetts, 2005: 2). However, even though biopics were quite often sold to audiences as accessible versions of history (Custen, 2001: 34), it is through being entertained that interest is generated, leading film audiences to carry out follow-up research.

Stemming from the long tradition of biographical writing, cinema, from the silent era, has communicated history by means of re-enactments of the lives of significant public figures through time (Landy, 1996: 157). It can be argued that film biographies possess a more personal, graphic and emotional vividness as opposed to professional historians chronicling the subject's life work (Tibbetts, 2005: 2). To explain further, the form of the media changes the way in which a biography is interpreted and also to what demographic the media appeals to. Marcia Landy suggests that the biopic is polyphonic: it draws on the fragments that constitute commonsensical knowledge (1996: 37). Therefore film is more accessible to the audiences that written biography is unable to appeal to. Robert B. Toplin suggests that film is unable to replace written history because of its lack of detail: a two hour movie containing dialogue only amounts to approximately ten to twenty single-spaced pages of writing (2002: 18). Hence, film cannot compete with historical documents that are often hundreds of pages in length. Ian Inglis further states that:

*however meticulously researched, the numerous and isolated events of a person's life may not easily lend themselves to a two-hour treatment which follows a linear sense of time and presents a plausible sequence of events within an attractive and accessible framework (2007: 84-5).*

However, there is a considerable amount of information that can be communicated without words in a film that is not only dependent on dialogue but also on the visually dynamic image. Films quite often convey character emotions and relationships non-verbally: through music, sound and body language of the characters including physical gestures and facial expressions. Composed scores, the presence of popular songs and sound effects can also alter the mood of the film, assist as a form of commentary, and also help the viewer to identify a character, place, object, certain situation or recurrent idea of the plot. Largely, through its emotive

presentation, a film presents a life story that can leave a greater impact on audiences than from reading a historical written biography.

The popularity of the biopic amongst audiences has led some historians to question cinema and its validity. Historians have recently begun to inquire into the accuracy of these historical filmic portrayals because of the influence they have amongst audiences. Robert A. Rosenstone is a key figure in the academic debate and states that “Inevitably, something happens on the way from the page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work with words” (1995: 20). David Herlihy, another historian, states that films “cannot serve as independent statements regarding the past. They are illusions and must be recognized as such” (1988: 1192). Toplin further states that “Motion pictures cannot present comprehensive, definitive studies, and filmmakers understand the foolishness of even trying to cover a topic’s length and breadth” (2002: 17). Thus, according to Herlihy and Toplin, films can only serve as statements regarding the past if they coincide or are backed by written evidence. Herlihy’s statement neglects to mention that films are similar to written texts in that they are based the opinion of the author, director or screenwriter. The creator of the film or written text will only include parts of history that he or she deems appropriate or functional to the piece. Herlihy does acknowledge that there is bias and fault in the historical film yet does not address that it also occurs in written histories.

Roland Barthes, who acknowledges inaccuracies in written historical texts, states that:

*text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning... but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture* (1977a: 146).

One example is Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part 1* which presents a fictional account of the life of Henry IV of England. Even though Shakespeare’s works were fabricated, the texts became quite popular and led to publications of *Henry IV, Part 2* and *Henry V*. These historical plays were also criticised and raised issues such as “whether the play is a mirror for magistrates that

providentially demonstrates the wages of regicide, or a matter-of-fact record of a historical transition from feudalism to centralized monarchy” (Bevington, 1987: 1). The main reason why fabrication is such a concern amongst historians (referring to historical and biographical film) is that in written form, historians predominantly wrote the literature. Now with film, virtually anyone with creative aspirations can create biography and history through visual representation leading the historians’ authority to become threatened. From another point of view, the historian, according to Barthes’ theories on “the death of the author”, may not hold any authority over his/her text. Barthes suggests that “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (1977a: 148). It is conceivable that Rosenstone and other historians do not acknowledge that it is the set task of the reader/viewer as opposed to the author/director to understand and interpret the past based on a historical text. Hayden White, also following on from Barthes’ discussion, understands that the true recounting of history in any form cannot be done:

*No history, visual or verbal, ‘mirrors’ all or even the greater part of the events or scenes of which it purports to be an account, and this is true even of the most narrowly restricted ‘micro-history’. Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation (1988: 1194).*

White implies here that all history is a text and a text that cannot be mediated into a concise accurate history, no matter how it is done. Regardless, Rosenstone (1995: 22) contends that the audiences of these historical films such as the biopic, *Reds* (1981) and documentary, *The Good Fight* (1984), tend to treat the historical film not as a way of thinking about the past or even believing it to be a completely accurate representation of past events and people. Viewers see the historical film as a reflection of the wider community and cultural values of the period in which it was made. Therefore, whether the film is ‘accurate’ or not should not be a concern for historians and more study should be on how historical/biographical films are understood and interpreted by audiences (issues of spectatorship). That being said, historians tend to position themselves on a moral understanding of the biopic whereas this thesis concentrates more on the aesthetic aspects of the films.



The dramatisation of historical films, biopics and written texts is mainly for the purpose of entertainment and sustaining audience interest. It is likely that Hollywood's historical films such as *Braveheart* (1995) and *Glory* (1989) would not have been as popular and successful if they had not fabricated elements for entertainment purposes: "audiences will quickly turn away from cinematic history if they do not find its dramatic presentation compelling" (Toplin, 2002: 10). However, a biographical film is unable to stray too far from the 'truth', as Custen explains: "While most critics were willing to accept a certain amount of poetic license in biopics and other historical narratives, a film that wandered too far into biofantasy inevitably drew sarcastic critical comment" (2001: 70). In other words, if a film is too dissimilar from other accounts of an individual's life (from any number of texts such as magazines, television, internet and written auto/biography) the viewer would interpret the film as a 'biofantasy'. In order to seem 'accurate' the film has to link or draw from other texts that concern the individual being presented. Overall, a successful biopic, that is, a biopic that is able to capture the audience's attention and sustain it, needs to find a balance between entertainment and realism. Freeman expresses how a biopic should be understood: There needs to be "a deeper realisation that if the biographical film is essentially an attempt to dramatize history imaginatively, we must understand history more imaginatively" (1941: 906). Audiences and academics alike must understand that it is not possible to have factual films without some level of entertainment through creativity.

## **BIOGRAPHY AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION**

There is a cyclical pattern to audience interest in biography in general. Interest is dependent on the changing trends within society and also due to advancements in filmic technology. The changes can be noted from the Victorian era through to contemporary cinema of the 21st Century. During the Victorian era biography and true stories were accessible through texts such as literature, historical writing and newspapers. It was during the concluding decade of the Victorian era that, due to technological discovery, the first silent films emerged through three categories referred to as trick, comedy and actuality films. The actuality films will be discussed in detail later as the biopic stems from the real-life events developed in these short films. From silent film came the emergence of sound film and the biopic boomed in the

Hollywood studio era. Audience interest in the individual as subject increased and attention shifted to a new technology that offered weekly programs on biography and history. The first made-for-TV movies were screened in the 1960s and due to technological advancements, cable television allowed viewers to watch channels/networks that continually streamed programs relating to true stories and reality. According to Custen's research (2000: 154), biopic production increased in the 1990s with over one hundred biopics released in Hollywood alone, doubling the biopics released in the 1980s. Audience interest resumed in the theatrical release of diverse contemporary biopics that offered changes in visual representation, inevitably altering the audience's perception of public history. The following will provide a history of audience reception of biography from the silent era of film through to the re-emergence of the biopic in contemporary cinema.

## **Silent Film**

During the early 1880s photographs replaced drawings in newspapers to provide readers with the ability see how the people in these current affairs physically appeared. The expectation of seeing and not just reading about the famous carried through to motion pictures (Custen, 1992: 6) as it added dynamic imagery to present a story – it became a more attractive way to tell the news. In 1888, Thomas Edison began work on creating the moving image with an apparatus called a *Kinetoscope* that allowed people to watch films through a peephole (Grievesson and Krämer, 2004b: 2). With further technological developments in 1894 the *Cinematographe* allowed the projection of films to a larger audience on a screen, leading to the invention of the cinema: film projection to a paying audience. The date was 26 December 1895, where the first projection of films to a paying audience was given at the Grand Café, Boulevard des Capucines, Paris (O'Leary, 1965: 11). It was arguably the first cinema screening that soon after travelled to London. From this date onward, cinema has been defined as the projection of films on a fixed screen for the paying public (Hansen, 1991: 23) whereas the term 'film' describes the individual motion pictures.

The 'silent period' of cinema commenced in 1893 and continued until the first public projection of *Don Juan* (1926), the first feature-length film to use sound synchronisation (Vitaphone sound effects and music soundtrack), directed by Alan Crosland. In 1927 *The Jazz*

*Singer* was released (also directed by Alan Crosland) that was the first feature to use sound synchronised spoken dialogue. “Headlines in trade magazines and periodicals of the period [early 20th century] used the term ‘silent’, often in order to proclaim cinema’s independence from theatre and literature” (Usai, 2000: xviii). The cinema provided a different way of presenting entertainment as opposed to live acts and written words and in some ways combined the two with the use of moving images and subtitles displayed on the screen during the silent film period. Liam O’Leary poetically describes cinema of this period:

*Because it had no tongue it relied on visual action, and it was this which gave it its great beauty and directness of approach. It learned to weld the written word to the moving images. It learned to bend time and space to its needs. It developed a soul* (1965: 7).

Silent film marked a time of change in the entertainment industry and gave audiences the opportunity to see events, documented or imagined, through the frame of the camera.

### ***Music, Sound and Silent Film***

Cinema of the silent period was not only a visually dynamic experience: live music performances often accompanied film screenings and played a large part in the cinema’s success. Claudia Gorbman explains that “music covered the distracting noise of the movie projector. It served to explicate and advance the narrative; it provided historical, geographical, and atmospheric setting; it identified characters and qualified actions” (2000: 44). Music, although not yet synchronised with dynamic film images, held a great importance in some, particularly metropolitan, cinemas. Vaudeville theatres, as well as straight cinema venues, screened films with a pianist accompanying the moving images. After the ‘Panic of 1893’ (an economic depression in the USA that commenced in 1893), the 1901 and 1902 season showed the return of large, 15-piece orchestras to vaudevillian theatres (Altman, 2004: 103) of the country. These orchestras performed both ‘house music’ before the screenings commenced and ‘act music’ during film screenings to provide sound effects and waltz/march music (Altman, 2004: 105).

In the late 1920s the technology that provided significant change in film was the synchronisation of dialogue/sound to moving images: “Synchronous sound was not simply an extra feature that supplemented the film image; it wholly transformed the phenomenology of film” (O’Brien, 2005: 3). Films that were being synchronised to sound accreted the style now regarded as classical and as Charles O’Brien suggests, led to homogenisation-reducing film diversity. Most western film historians confirm that “the [western] cinema’s stylistic range was significantly reduced after sound conversion, so by the mid-1930s narrative films everywhere exhibited the same basic norms of narration and style” (O’Brien, 2005: 17). Homogenisation led to trademark styles of each of the top film companies of Hollywood in the coming decades commencing on 11 May 1928, where the film studios signed identical contracts marking the initial transition from silent to sound film.

### ***Trick, Comedy and Actualities***

As previously stated, early filmmakers of the silent period created three different styles of film: trick, comedy and actuality films. The trick films were full of action, usually involving people and objects disappearing, reappearing and the backward running of action scenes. Comedy films of the era tended to be slapstick, also including chase sequences. Generally, the trick and comedy films were quite fast-paced as opposed to actuality films. Pierre Sorlin observes that during these years Dickinson in the USA and Lumière in France were filming scenes of daily life, termed actualities (2001: 30). Actualities recorded topical events including the filming of strange places and exotic phenomena (O’Leary, 1965: 17). The early actuality films released in Britain from 1899 to 1902 presented topical events such as *Gordon Highlanders Leaving Aberdeen for the Boer War* (1899), *Funeral of Queen Victoria* (1901) and *Turn-Out of Leeds Fire Brigade* (1902). American actuality films displayed scenes from the Spanish-American War, the Boer War and biographical actualities of world leaders such as William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Nigel Hamilton suggests that upon their release, moviegoers did not appear to be as interested in these actuality films (which later evolved into documentary and biographical films). Audiences preferred to watch fictional voyeuristic films featuring elements such as boxing and other dramatised films. Differing from the sometimes strict Victorian values, people became even more open to explore

sexuality to a larger extent through these fictional and sometimes comic films (Hamilton, 2007: 170). Miriam Hansen reiterates the audience fascination by providing an example of *The Corbett- Fitzsimmons Fight* (released in 1897) attracting a large amount and variety of audiences and notes that in terms of attendance numbers, women made up 60% of the patronage (1991: 92). Along with the novelty of silent film came the audience's interest in fantastic performances of comedy and chase themes. The cinema of the era gave the film viewer a chance to escape reality and become immersed in fictional texts which led to the box office failure of the actuality and real-life films. However, Tom Gunning states that:

*early cinema was not dominated by the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium. First there is the extremely important role that actuality film plays in early film production... actuality films outnumbered fictional films until 1906* (1986: 64).

Gunning therefore supports the importance of the actuality film as more were produced during this period of early cinema.

### ***Classical Narrative and the Feature-Length Film***

Audience tastes soon changed and the novelty of short, manic, 15 minute films wore off in the 1910s. Filmic technology continued to evolve and one reel films became three reel films: "By 1913 the feature film had arrived. Just as the length of a film increased, so did the size of the subject" (O'Leary, 1965: 29). However, the use of the classical narrative structure in film was put into practice before technology extended film duration. The form of narration that was active during this time is deemed 'classical' by scholars of silent film, a mode formulated around 1909 although it can be discerned as early as 1907 (Hansen, 1991: 23). Explaining the term, Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer state:

*The classical feature film is characterized by the overriding objective of telling a particular kind of story, focusing on goal- oriented characters who set in motion a series*

*of causally linked events in which they confront and overcome, or less often are overcome by, counter-forces to the achievement of their goals. In either case, the ending closes the issue definitively, by resolving, usually happily but sometimes tragically, all tensions between the characters and their surroundings that were set up at the beginning* (2004a: 271-2).

Charles Musser discloses that the first short film with a developed narrative is *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), directed by Edwin S. Porter. The film duration time was 12 minutes and consisted of (as the title implies) a robbery, including a posse being formed and a final showdown in the woods. *The Great Train Robbery*, marketed as a re-enactment film, participated in the shift from actuality to fiction (Musser, 2004: 89). The film produced the illusion of authenticity by combining actuality and re-enactment and led the way for future films that based its narrative on the re-creation of true stories. Three years after the first narrative film, the first full-length feature film created by Charles Tait was filmed and released in Australia: *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), running for approximately 70 minutes (Beeton, 2004: 128). Although only nine minutes of the original film have been recovered,<sup>13</sup> the film showed re-enactments of the important events of Ned Kelly's life that include:

*The shooting of Constable Fitzpatrick, in which Ned Kelly defends his sister's honour by shooting the policeman in the wrist; the ambush at Stringybark Creek, in which the Kelly gang shoot three troopers; the final showdown at the Glenrowan Hotel, in which Joe Byrne, Dan Kelly and Steve Hart are killed, the police set fire to the hotel, and Ned is captured in his armour after attempting to shoot his way out.*<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, the first Australian feature-length film was based on the true life story of Ned Kelly and resembled what is now referred to as a biopic. Custen acknowledges when the first

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<sup>13</sup> *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) is inscribed in the UNESCO International Memory of the World Register and nearly one quarter of the original feature film was restored by the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), Canberra, Australia (UNESCO Register, [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=1538&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1538&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html), accessed 27 October 2010. NFSA media release, [http://www.nfsa.gov.au/the\\_collection/collection\\_spotlights/kelly\\_gang\\_essay.html](http://www.nfsa.gov.au/the_collection/collection_spotlights/kelly_gang_essay.html), accessed 27 October 2010).

<sup>14</sup> <http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/story-kelly-gang/>, accessed 27 June 2008.

biopics were released: “In many cases, in seeing biopics, filmgoers were witnessing the first visual attempt to recreate a narrative that they knew of only from reports in school texts or newspapers” (1992: 16-7). Audiences became more interested in these forms of actuality films and, as filmic technology extended from three to five reels, the classical narrative that re-enactment films provided became almost a necessity to sustain public interest in the cinema.

Feature-length biopics were subsequently released from France, Germany, USA and UK. These include *Queen Elizabeth* (1912), *Molière* (1909) and *Napoleon* (1927) from France. From Germany: *Madam Du Barry* (1919), *Anna Boleyn* (1920), *Danton* (1920) and *Peter De Grosse* (1922). *My Four Years in Germany* (1918) and *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) from the USA and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) from the UK. Another biopic produced and released in the UK is *Disraeli* (1929), a film that told the life story of British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. Adapted from the stage play, “Almost all of the key dialogue from the *Disraeli* play was used in the film version, and characterization was not sacrificed for ‘thrills’” (Fells, 2004: 54). George Arliss, the actor who played Benjamin Disraeli, received high praise for his acting ability in the film and received an Academy Award for Best Leading Actor in 1930 for the role. Even though “the prevailing attitude on the part of the critics towards these [historical] films was grudging tolerance” (Tibbetts, 1985: 115), film audiences began to see cinema as a higher art because of its similarities to live stage performance.

## The Studio Era

The studio era, beginning in roughly 1930, is the period where a system created by Hollywood inspired emulation in Great Britain, France, and many other film producing countries. The Hollywood studio system featured classical narrative film style (derived from the silent era) and the studio trademark<sup>15</sup> which thrived in the decades through to the 1960s. During this time studios such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Paramount, Warner Brothers (shortened to Warner Bros. throughout), 20th Century Fox and RKO (Radio-Keith-

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<sup>15</sup> The studio trademark is used to define and identify a certain studio, sometimes referred to as a brand name. For example, *Disney* is known for its animated and family films.

Orpheum) “made classic, narrative, genre films, starring some of the most famous figures in world culture” (Gomery, 2005b: 71). The famous figures that Gomery (2005) mentions are the Hollywood actors who starred in several films a year. The stars of each studio’s films were a powerful tool in their success, as audiences were able to choose among the genre films that the stars were cast in. Ivan Butler describes the studio styles and features of MGM, Paramount, Universal and Warner Bros. respectively as: all ‘glitter and gloss’, smart cosmopolitan, horror cycles, and “the swift, hard- hitting social indictments or contrasting lavish musicals”, respectively (Butler, 1971: 49). As a result, the film viewer could select films from a particular studio to suit their tastes. The importance of the star representing the genre is apparent during 1934 to 1936. Four of the top ten films over the three year period were the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers dance musicals (including *Top Hat* [1935], *Roberta* [1935], *Swing Time* [1936], and *Follow the Fleet* [1936]). The popularity of the musicals and the star status of Astaire and Rogers saved the RKO studios (Jewell, 1994: 43) and kept them in the top five majors in the 1930s.

The film studios produced films quite rapidly to keep audience numbers high and secure future productions with industry executives. Ronald L. Davis confirms that the studios “owned or controlled a chain of theatres, and those theatres needed a weekly product and in turn assured producers of a ready market” (2005: x). At the time audiences had high interest in life stories and as a result, Hollywood studios produced and released the biopics continuously. Searle Kochberg concurs with Davis and states that by 1935 the monetary wealth of the studios had risen: “As profits increased, so did film budgets. Studio genres changed too, with the entrenchment of the melodrama, biopic, Merrie England and film noir genres in the late 1930s to early 1940s” (1999: 22). Gill Branston compares this studio system of the film industry to the Ford Motor Company’s production line (2000: 24). Each studio had an identifiable style and sound and worked for profit, teaming with corporate businesses, using product placement and advertising to ensure financial gain and to ultimately keep cinemas in operation. The business strategy of the era can be described as a monopoly due to the identifiable features of films released that characterised the individual studios, playing to audience interests. Another important factor in the production system of the studio era is the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association), also known as the Hays Office. The MPPDA enforced high moral and artistic standards in the motion picture industry and (in 1924) issued a list of subjects that were not permitted in motion pictures including:



*Pictures that dealt with sex in an improper manner, were based on white slavery, made vice attractive, exhibited nakedness, had prolonged passionate love scenes, were predominantly concerned with the underworld, made gambling and drunkenness attractive, ridiculed public officials, offended religious beliefs, emphasised violence, portrayed vulgar postures and gestures, and used salacious subtitles or advertising* (Gomery, 2005a: 67).

With all of these taboo subjects during the studio era, biopics (and any film based on true events) were often fabricated if the elements mentioned above were relevant to the life story, therefore leading viewers of the films to believe a distorted view of history (the issue is explored in more depth in Chapter Three, exploring the representation of Cole Porter in 1946's *Night and Day*). In light of the Hays Office and its control over the film industry, it was not the intention of the film industry to provide historically accurate detail; it was mainly to provide entertainment.

George F. Custen's research discloses that the biopics of the studio era exceeded 300 in the 30 year period. He argues that the biopic constructed a Hollywood code of history out of a tightly controlled reference system, glamorising the creative team's own visions of what constituted a great life (1992: 3). John C. Tibbetts follows along the same line of thought and states that these biopics:

*revealed a kinship in theme and structure that answers to the same personal and political agendas of producers and writers... the star system... the censorship codes, and the economic necessity of appealing to the widest possible audience base* (2005: 19).

Custen also states that Hollywood's representation of history was derived from recycled plots played out on the film set, not from the world outside the studio walls (1992: 142). Custen raises a point worthy of note that filmmakers of the era created biopics from materials

available to them within the studio, they did not consult outside sources because the function of the biopic was for entertainment purposes only. Gill Branston further articulates the production of films during this era as follows: “with workers dedicated to specialized tasks, the distribution of film prints as the equivalent of wholesale arrangements, and exhibition of the product in cinemas as the final, ‘retail’ level” (2000: 30). The studios hence formed a narrow-minded and quite often fabricated view of prominent individuals in society. The one-sided view of an individual carried through to television and the made-for-TV movie as the studio era came to an end.

## Television

After World War II the motion picture industry in Hollywood (along with the popularity of the biopic) entered a recession that marked the conclusion of the studio system. Television formed a potential threat and is usually blamed for the industry’s cut in production even though it had begun development in the 1920s and radio had growth in the 1940s (Balio, 1990: 3). It was not until the mid-1950s that television made an impact, becoming a form of mass communication: “In the US, television crawled into a dominant position relative to cinema and was set to become the leading purveyor of images to the public” (Stokes, 1999: 37). During this period CATV (Community Antenna Television) came into existence (television that could only be received through an antenna). As technologies updated, a master antenna (MATV) replaced the antennas above every home and through innovation, cable television became the way in which consumers were able to see a clear picture on their TV screens: “The biggest event since cable began, and what many say is responsible for the rapid growth in the cable industry during the last two decades, was the development of satellite and pay TV programming.”<sup>16</sup> However, before the emergence of pay TV, free-to-air channels screened television shows exploring news and current affairs, attracting cinematic audiences to television screens, building up the interest in biography and true stories in this different format. Television also screened films that premiered on television, eliminating theatrical release altogether.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.k-state.edu/infotech/cable/history.html>, accessed 10 July 2008.

During the first decade of television's popularity "Many within broadcasting believed that television's 'immediacy' anchored in live programming, was its aesthetic essence" (Lafferty, 1990: 236). Hence, channels focused on developing formats for this live experience, neglecting the market for feature film screenings on television. The Hollywood majors (such as Paramount and Warner Bros.) eventually released their films to television and either entered into television film production or dropped out altogether, marking the end of the studio era. The next step for television in the 1960s was the made-for-TV movie, having its first appearance in 1966 on NBC, *Fame Is the Name of the Game*. According to Laurie Schulze made-for-TV movies were initially highly criticised for being "cheap", "shoddy" and "trashy" in terms of production values and formulaic characteristics (1990: 86). Television networks acknowledged public criticism and decided to change the content of their films to possess more mature and serious themes.

Since the arrival of satellite TV in Australia during the 1990s, additional channels have been created from five to currently over two 200 in Australia.<sup>17</sup> Channels and networks have been added to appeal to specific audiences from lifestyle channels for adults to cartoon networks for children. From the emergence of satellite television, biography slowly drifted away from film and onto television screens altering not only where the public receive their knowledge of lives in history but also *how* they receive it:

*Television is merely the most recent holder of a territory once occupied by film, magazines, and other mass media. But, not content with merely replicating previous media definitions of fame, TV has seen fit to alter them* (Custen, 1992: 215).

Television led to the alteration of narrative structure and representation. Custen further states that television biography resembles tabloids and popular magazines of the present generation (Custen, 1992: 220). The inspiration that popular magazines give television biography can be seen in a negative light: "Like the newspaper headlines and newsreel clips that accompanied the Devil's 'record' of [20th] century history, these biopics represented the past in terms of sensational gossip and private tragedy rendered public" (Eldridge, 2006: 28). For example, films such as *Beau James* (1957) and *Compulsion* (1959) centred on issues of greed, self-

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.foxtel.com.au/about-foxtel/what-we-do/default.htm>, accessed 23 February 2011.

indulgence and immorality. With access to satellite and pay TV, consumers were now able watch documentaries, television specials and made-for-TV movies every week and at any time in their own homes.

Paula R. Backscheider notes numerous channels on American cable television that present biographical programs. *A & E* (Arts & Entertainment) has the program 'Biography', expanding to include 'Biography: This Week', 'Biography for Kids' and 'Biography International'. The *Lifetime* network screens 'Intimate Portraits' and *The Nashville Network* screens 'The Life and Times'. *E!* (Entertainment!), an American entertainment channel, screens 'Celebrity Bio' for fans of actors, singers and entertainers as *MTV* (Music Television) similarly produced 'BIOrhythms', concerning singers and musicians. *CMT* (Country Music Television) increases the focus by including in its schedule biographical programs of country musicians. The *Learning Channel*, on the other hand, delivers a program titled 'Legends' for educational purposes (hence the name of the channel) as opposed to *E!* and *MTV* who are solely marketed for entertainment (Backscheider, 1999: xiii). Australian cable television has developed its own biography programs and has adopted America's ideas creating *The History Channel* (accessible internationally including Israel, Japan, Latin America, Korea, Scandinavia, Middle East, Turkey, India and China) and *The Biography Channel* (also accessible in Canada and the UK), screening the lives of the famous (and infamous). Australia's *Biography Channel* in particular has noted its unique representation of life history in suggesting that the channel provides "engaging in-depth profiles, exclusive entertainment specials, compelling documentaries, latest show-biz news and Australian premiers."<sup>18</sup> The channel further claims that it is the best place to learn about "everybody who is anybody" including Hollywood icons, world leaders, artists, monarchs, musicians and the infamous. With this ever-expanding list of biographical programs found on television, it is obvious that biography is a popular form or way of conceiving history in visual media.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.biochannel.com.au/aboutus.aspx>, accessed 10 October 2008.

## Contemporary Cinema

There has been a revival of biopics in the cinema with around 20 musical biopics released from 2000 to 2010 in Hollywood alone. Audiences became attracted to the new films because they had changed from the classical narrative feature film structure they had been subjected to in the past. Many of these new films are controversial and opinionated and have also changed in form. The biopics of contemporary cinema have become more complex, connecting past and present, merging truth and falsity, to create multilayered (and sometimes one-sided) perspectives on past events and individual lives. The same idea can be applied to (music) documentaries which have also been revived both on television and at the cinema.

Although the documentary-style format has been used since the inception of film, some contemporary documentaries have re-invented the style, presenting multiple viewpoints on true events in current affairs. Much like the biopic, the documentary film derives from the 'actualities' of the silent era (also named 'educational' and currently referred to as 'special interest' films) and tells the story of a real life, claiming reliability in terms of historical detail (Aufderheide, 2007: 2). Although the documentary has similar intentions as the biopic, the documentary film's visual representation differs. Interviews with the actual subject (or friends, family and colleagues) and footage of actual events are combined to represent a more realistic and hence believable interpretation on the subject. Furthermore:

*Documentaries are about real life; they are not real life... they are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to who, and for what purpose* (Aufderheide, 2007: 2).

Just as the biopic is the work of a creative team, the documentary is pieced together creatively: manipulating details to suit the director's intent. According to Bill Nichols, "In documentary, realism joins together objective representations of the historical world and rhetorical overttness to convey an argument about the world" (Nichols, 1991: 166) whereas the (musical) biopic is a self-referential, subjective representation of an actual individual.

Biased representations of real events and individuals are noticeable amongst many documentary directors. Michael Moore is a case in point: a documentary-maker who is noted for his controversial filmmaking, directing films such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009). These films deal with real life issues of gun violence, terrorist attacks and the American health care system, respectively. Al Gore, ex-vice president of the USA, used the film market to assist in informing the public of his concerns with global warming in *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) with assistance from director Davis Guggenheim. These documentary-makers are aware that film is an effective medium to communicate with the wider society on issues that affect a majority of the people. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner declare that:

*The ability for a documentary film to break into popular theatrical cinema is still there, given the right combination of story-telling, directing ability and the presentation of a theme already felt as important in the public imagination* (2005: 2).

In other words, audiences are now watching these documentary films in cinemas as they present views on issues directly affecting their current situation, in an entertaining way. The approach of the documentary is similar to the biopic in that they both present opinions on past (and often current) events and people. The difference lays in the visual representation as the documentary uses some element of real footage where the biopic solely utilises actors to re-create a life story.

Recent biopics, post-studio era and particularly from the 21st Century, provide audiences with an opportunity to view a new approach to content and form. The outstanding and more popular biopics in contemporary cinema tend to either present a one-sided approach to the interpretation of an individual life or go to the other extreme by presenting multi-layered readings of the subject. Films that present a one-sided approach tend to come from the interpretation of the director (Oliver Stone's *The Doors* 1991) or a close relation to the subject (*Control*, a production that employed Ian Curtis' wife, Deborah Curtis, to tell the life story from her perspective, featured in Chapter Two). One film in particular that presents multiple

interpretations of one person by disregarding the classical narrative structure of the studio era biopic is *I'm Not There* (2007) which looks at the life of musician, Bob Dylan. *I'm Not There* creates a multilayered perspective on Bob Dylan and leaves an open-ended question for audience, asking who Dylan really is. Joshua Clover offers insight by indicating that “*I'm Not There* is an artistic capture of Dylan’s escape artistry; this is an ambiguous achievement. The man gets his due, and the casting of Blanchett... serves at satisfying confirmation that we are all Dylan” (2008: 6). Certain musical biopics such as *I'm Not There* intend film audiences to learn more about themselves (and their own memory) than the subject on screen because they (the creative team) acknowledge that they are unable to offer a comprehensive portrayal of an individual life. Dylan is recognised differently depending on his relation to a person. It is not apparent how Dylan interprets himself so the viewer is left to judge him based on other people’s interpretations. Clover states that “we are all Dylan” for reason that the persona of any individual is a culmination of other people’s opinions. These issues and the Dylan musical biopic will be explored in Chapter Five.

## GENRE THEORY

Genre theory will be considered here in order to understand and frame the contemporary musical biopic within the genre system. Defining genre in particular can often be a difficult task as reflected by the extensive amount of literature available on the topic. The act of categorising literature or film must take into account so many elements that the activity is particularly complex. For example, when discussing genre in terms of film, factors such as period, country of release, director, star, film cycle, series, style, structure, ideology, venue screened, purpose, target audience, subject and theme amongst multiple others can be deployed to classify any given film into one particular genre, and then decisions must be made as to whether the given film is in fact a genre or a subgenre. Genres are complex and detailed and can be broken down into strands called subgenres. Subgenres are an extension of a particular genre: a specific style that focuses on a particular attribute of that main genre. For example, slapstick is a subgenre of comedy, reliant on physical interaction such as in action sequences and physical contact between characters.

Overall, genre is a classification system: a series of labels that have been created for cultural texts in order to better understand them. Hebdige suggests that culture refers to both a process and a product (1979: 5). The process involves deciphering how to identify a genre, defining a genre and then finally analysing it as a product of the culture that it has emerged from. Even though Dick Hebdige refers to subculture and youth, he states that, “the subcultural *milieu* has been constructed underneath the authorised discourses, in the face of the multiple disciplines of the family, the school and the workplace” (1988: 35). Subculture can be applied to genre theory as Hebdige implies that a subgenre cannot exist without the genre it extends from. The subgenre takes on the basic characteristics of the genre and alters them in order to create its own new form. Therefore, the subgenre acts independent of the genre (Hebdige refers to this as being ‘insubordinate’) yet is compared to and analysed against the genre. The subgenre remains a part of its genre even though it breaks old codes and creates new ones (Hebdige, 1979: 131). There is no practicable limit to how many subgenres can stem from a genre: “Presumably, any number of sub-levels can exist for any one genre, and new sub-genres may be invented at any time.”<sup>19</sup> It is argued in this thesis that the musical biopic is a subgenre of the musical film genre. The concluding portion of this chapter will consider genre from modernism to postmodernism, classical and neo-classical theories, concluding with post-structural genre theory. Additionally, there will be an exploration of the fundamental characteristics of the musical film genre and the musical biopic as subgenre of the musical.

### ***From Classical to Neoclassical Genre Theory***

Aristotle is acknowledged as beginning the discourse on genre and media in *Poetics* (335 B.C.) where he discusses the mode or manner of imitation in poetry by stating that art is an imitation (or *mimesis*) of nature. In this seemingly straightforward classical theory of genre, Aristotle contends that there are simply two main genres: comedy and tragedy, by identifying the medium, object and manner of the text. There have been significant changes in culture and its modes of consumption and perception since then and now, “Contemporary media genres tend to relate more to specific forms than to the universals of tragedy and comedy.”<sup>20</sup> The contemporary mode of thinking opposes classical genre theory in the time of Aristotle:

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<sup>19</sup> [www.asis.org/Bulletin/Dec-01/beghtol.html](http://www.asis.org/Bulletin/Dec-01/beghtol.html), accessed 1 November 2008.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>, accessed 2 October 2008.



*Ancient theorists and critics do not recognize generic ambiguity as an issue. They all share a certain confidence that poems do indeed belong unambiguously to one genre or another. They show no interest at all in generic indeterminacy, and do not even seem to recognize the possibility that the question of a poem's genre might be open for discussion* (Farrell, 2003: 386).

Aristotle affirms that each genre must be recognised as a separate entity, with its own individual rules and procedures. The classical theorists refused to acknowledge the mixing of genres even when tragedy and comedy combined in theatrical plays (Altman, 1999: 5). The concept that is central to Aristotle's system is of decorum: "the notion that certain subjects require appropriate forms and styles" (Dubrow, 1982: 48). In signifying that decorum is evident in genre, Aristotle suggests that different texts (such as poetry) which possess similar qualities will have the same effect on its audiences. However, if certain texts have similar influences on audiences they are not automatically of the same genre.

Classical genre theory intertwines history and theory, criticism and practice, audience and author, while the neoclassical genre theory suggests that texts imitate predefined original genres in order to be placed in the already established genre system (Altman, 1999: 5). Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, three centuries after Aristotle's death) drafted his *Ars Poetica* and unlike Aristotle, was "far less concerned with theoretical questions about the nature of art and the nature of its effect on the audience, far more with pragmatic issues" (Dubrow, 1982: 50). Horace, among further neoclassical theorists, including Torquato Tasso (see Tasso, 1997), Alexander Pope (1733) and Nicolas Boileau (*The Art of Poetry*)<sup>21</sup> argue that texts (mainly in literature and poetry) are all created to fit into a preconceived genre without any overlapping or mixing of genres.

### ***Structural and Post-Structural Genre Theory***

Currently post-structural genre theory suggests that any given text does not fit solely into a particular genre. It is argued that a text is irreducible to a single interpretive framework.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/BoiArtO.html>, accessed 28 February 2011.

Genres do not have a standard set of criteria as they are perceived differently depending on who interprets the individual text. Categorising a text also depends on the process of continuities through time and place: “genre is not just a matter of codes and conventions, but that it also calls into play systems of use, durable social institutions, and the organisation of physical space” (Frow, 2005: 12). In the case of literature, placement of a text in the genre system involves the merging of different viewpoints such as the author, reader and scholar. As opposed to the classical theory of genre where theorists tend to adopt a more *inclusive* listing of texts for a particular genre, the post-structuralist view argues for an *exclusive* list of texts that “generally occurs not in a dictionary context, but instead in connection with attempts to arrive at the overall meaning or structure of a genre” (Altman, 1995: 27). Frow highlights the exclusivity of a text by implying that a text is only able to participate in a genre as a “performative allusion” (2005: 18). Any text does not wholly belong to one genre but is able to participate in multiple genres leading to what might become a genre mixing of one text. Derrida discusses the idea of genre mixing in his paper, *The Law of Genre* and states that the defined law of genre “is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (1980: 59). The mixing of genres is unavoidable; it does occur and is acknowledged by post-structural theorists.

Structural theorists such as Vladimir Propp (translations, 1958, 1984), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1972), Northrop Frye (2006), Tzvetan Todorov (1973) and pioneer of semiology in film, Christian Metz (1974a, 1974b, 1975) focus on the semiotics of genre study which can be broken down into semantics, syntax and pragmatics. Semantics identifies the texts building blocks (in the case of film, character and location), syntax analyses how the semantics are arranged and finally pragmatics distinguishes how a text is different, in relation to all other texts. Chandler advises that:

*Increasingly, structuralism and semiotics focused either on the single, individual text, or on the general principles of signification and the politics of signifying practices, thereby effectively excluding the priority of the specification and analysis of genre and genres.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>, accessed 2 October 2008.

Structural theorists tend to look at the text and its features as a starting point in determining its genre. Therefore, in identifying the characteristics of a text and suggesting how they could be deemed a certain genre, the structuralist does not generalise but specifies the features of a genre on a case-by-case basis.

Genre finds balance between social situation and text and according to structuralist views, can only be understood as being a part of the genre system. In other words, a genre can only be defined in relation to other genres. All genres are linked to each other due to the fact that it is not possible to have a film genre without providing reasons for it not being another. In Todorov's analysis of the fantastic genre, he discusses literary genre theory and affirms that "we must understand that a text is not only the product of a pre-existing combinatorial system... it is also a transformation of that system" (Todorov, 1973: 7). Todorov states that genres change through time which leads the genre system to shift. Due to the instability of genre (hence, unpredictability), classification of a text is a matter of defining the possible uses that the text may have (Frow, 2005) which is a contextual matter. Overall, genre serves the purposes it is intended to be used for and "provides an important frame of reference which helps readers to identify, select and interpret texts."<sup>23</sup> Largely, post/structural genre theory acknowledges that genres change therefore each individual text should be analysed separately. Post-structural genre theory (and methodology) is the approach that will be taken in this thesis in order to interpret the musical biopic in the genre system and in the public sphere. The post-structuralist approach in particular will be discussed in more detail in the methodology of this chapter. Due to the evolution and ever-changing nature of genre, each film will be analysed individually throughout the thesis in the form of case studies in order to discuss the status of the contemporary musical biopic within the film system.

## **Film Genre**

Genre, in relation to film, is recognised in different ways by its audience, scholars and the industry itself. Andrew Tolson notes that genre is used as a marketing tool for the film industry: "Genre is now a category which mediates between industry and audience, through

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>, accessed 2 October 2008.

particular procedures for the distribution, marketing and exhibition of films” (1996: 92). Genre is a cultural practice that attempts to create some order in the variety of texts that circulate in society (Fiske, 1987: 88), however, film genre is not stable. Even though Altman states that, “We must see genres as stable if they are to do the work we require of them” (1998: 2), Telotte clearly suggests that with changing cultural attitudes, genres change (2002: 52). For example, over decades of being on the screen, the musical film genre has changed in liaison with audience attitudes and changing opinions which is especially apparent in contemporary musicals, in comparison to musicals of the studio era. Chandler discusses the dynamic nature of film genre in suggesting that, “Genres need to be studied as historical phenomena; a popular focus in film studies, for instance, has been the evolution of conventions within a genre.”<sup>24</sup> Thomas and Vivian C. Sobchack also noticed the changing of generic practices and offer an alternative way of viewing these films:

*For a movie to be considered part of a genre, or of a generic tradition, then, it need not include all the conventions of that genre, but it should include enough generic elements to cause the viewer to associate clearly and consciously with other films containing similar elements. These similarities of theme, plot, and characterization should also be quite specific* (1980: 194).

It is inevitable that genres will change over time. Some will disappear and some may even become dormant and reappear decades later. Depending on popularity or even technological innovation, genre evolution is apparent principally with contemporary film cycles (for example, the cycle of disaster films in the 1970s). Marcia Landy highlights the complexities of film genre by suggesting that a genre can never exist in isolation, it can only exist in relation to the genre system (1996: 158). Certain films that seek financial gain, aspiring to enter into mainstream popular film, are produced to fit within the genre system, to be accepted as a part of the chosen genre and even as a part of the genre community. Film genres are in place so that audiences can recognise and watch certain types of films that they know they will enjoy and the production-consumption cycle will continue. The film industry will carry on producing these types of films until audience interests and tastes change, when new genres or subgenres emerge. It is significant to note that:

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>, accessed 2 October 2008.

*We tend to be more aware of plot conventions than of formal conventions (such as camera work) but both kinds of conventions are crucial to the genre film and to the pleasure we derive from watching variations on the familiar* (Sobchack and Sobchack, 1980: 199).

Hence, according to Sobchack and Sobchack audiences tend to identify a genre film depending on its content as opposed to its form, but there are exceptions to the rule such as *film noir* which is most identifiable through its visual imagery.

In discussing genre, Daniel Chandler discusses emotional responses that are linked to different genres.<sup>25</sup> Emotion and its links with genre are particularly apparent in the categorisation of film. Stephen Halliwell discusses the concept of aesthetic pleasure in viewing a genre film and suggests that:

*the pleasure provided by the genre matches the distinctive emotional experience of it, and this emotional experience is itself integrated with the understanding of the structure and causation of human action dramatised in the tragic plot* (1998: 80).

Referring to the genre film, the viewer is able to identify general plot lines through promotion (including trailers, posters and print articles) and therefore judge similarities between films. In some instances, audience reception and enjoyment is dependent on predicting plot lines and character relationships – audiences select films to view according to their genre because they are aware of their textual properties such as narrative, characterisation, basic themes, setting, iconography and filmic techniques. Audiences are often likely to feel content when they view a scene or sequence in a genre film that they have predicted as it provides them with a sense of power and control. The viewer should not, however, be able to over-predict a film: it must still have some element of unpredictability to keep the audiences' attention. Of course, "an interest in contemporary movie audiences is still relatively rare in film studies" (Gripsrud,

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>, accessed 2 October 2008.

2000: 206) so this interpretation of the film viewer's experience is based on assumption through familiarity. Analysis of the emotional experience attached to a genre can be applied to any film genre when identifying its textual properties. For example, the romantic comedy's general storyline suggests a couple uniting at the conclusion of the story when, during the course of the film, they endure a turbulent relationship. Audiences who enjoy watching the romantic comedy look forward to its ending and are fulfilled when it ends to their expectations. Overall, the film viewer desires control over their experiences and the emotional response that is linked to genre is one of the main reasons why the genre film is popular. The biopic provides a similar emotional response in a way that audiences can predetermine what will occur in the film if they are familiar with the individual who is the subject of the film. However, as previously noted, these biopics are not completely in line with past media representations of the person. Utilising post-structural genre theory while suggesting that these films are postmodern texts, biopics are not genre films because they do not have comparable formulas and conventions. Some biopics do have shared patterns but they cannot be generalised to encompass all biographical films. The content of each individual biopic will determine if the film will have an emotional response.

### ***From Modernism to Postmodernism and Film/Genre***

Modernist forms occurred as alternative modes of representation and emerged in the 19th Century through to the early 20th Century. Modernism in literature, art, music and film moved away from realism and entered into an avant-garde form of representation. As an art term modernism "proliferated under the names of expressionism, imagism, surrealism, futurism, Dadaism, vorticism, formalism and... impressionism" (Childs, 2008: 15). Formalist theory in particular focused on form rather than content. An example of this is visual art: "modern formalist theory, beginning at the level of modes of formal composition, returned... to questions of stance which it could then interpret only in terms of permanent variables" (Williams, 1977: 184). However, formalist theory overlooks the importance of content in a text and how the content can influence and change the form. As well as those mentioned by Childs, modernism also related to Marxism. Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) was an economic, political and social theorist, a modernist arising out of alienation from capitalism. Marxist theory suggests that modernist art stems from the loss of identity in the European community due to capitalism and continual industrial acceleration (Childs, 2008: 218). Marxist accounts

of genre in particular “retain an academic categorisation, to which they add, in an epochal dimension, social and historical notes and ‘explanations’”(Williams, 1977: 187). Marxist theory suggests that genre is the mediation between history and aesthetics and some Marxists believe that genre is an instrument of social control.

Modernist writing is experimental, complex and aims to create tradition from its new styles. The form of writing emerged as a reaction to the hegemony of realist fiction and “challenged... narrative technique, character portrayal, self-referentiality and linearity” (Childs, 2008: 81). For the reader, modernist writing is difficult to immediately comprehend and “must be moved through and mapped in order to understand its limits and meanings” (Childs, 2008: 6). The push away from realism leads modernist writing and also modernist film (for example, German expressionism) to be a challenge to interpret by its readers/viewers. In modernist texts, the participation of the reader/viewer is thought to be irrelevant whereas “it has become not just relevant but crucial to the text in postmodernism” (Ashton, 2005: 1). Postmodernism rejected the cultural elitism of modernist artists and produced a more populist approach, recycling previous works and styles, intentionally creating nothing new (Storey, 2005: 133). Postmodernism involves the “changes that require a (re)working of previous aesthetic categories” (Constable, 2004: 54) and according to Storey, existed as early as the late 1950s. The postmodern image is defined as a copy of the real and it precedes the real (Constable, 2004: 43): a simulacrum, leading the reader/viewer into what Baudrillard terms ‘hyperrealism’. The hyperreal is noted by Baudrillard as the characteristic mode of postmodernity (Baudrillard, 1983: 147) and implies that “there is no longer a clear distinction between a ‘real’ event and its media representation” (Storey, 2005: 135). The audience can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is represented. In media such as film and television, the line between realism and representation is blurred, particularly in the biopic.

One of the key metaphors for the postmodern is the apprehension of the real as film (Constable, 2004: 44). In creating a new reality, the real becomes film-like, leading into the hyperreal. Hill suggests that “Postmodern cinema has been conventionally described in terms of its bright surfaces, intertextuality, knowingness, referentiality, and nostalgia for past forms, genres and styles” (Hill, 2005: 93). The nostalgia film, not to be confused with the historical film, recaptures and represents the atmosphere, stylistic features of the past and/or certain

styles of viewing of the past with a hyper-stylised 'sheen' (Storey, 2005: 136). Films include the *Star Wars* series (1977, 1980 and 1983) and also the *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985, 1989 and 1990). Nostalgia films "do not attempt to recapture or represent the 'real' past, but always make do with certain cultural myths and stereotypes about the past. They offer... 'false realism': films about other films, representations of other representations" (Storey, 2005: 136) and also representations of myth itself. These postmodern films tend to reference other films of the same genre, form or style. In order to understand and even appreciate the postmodern film the viewer must acknowledge past film trends and popular culture in general (including those found in television, music, fashion and cinema). Hill (2005: 94) provides many examples of postmodern films including the horror film, *Scream* (1996). The film continually references other films in the horror genre through either having the characters watch the film on their television or pull out the videos and comment on them at their local video store. One of the main characters, Randy Meeks (Jamie Kennedy), continually explains the 'rules' of horror films and how to survive them, referencing other horror films such as *Halloween* (1978), even explaining, in *Scream 3* (2000), the rules for the concluding chapter of the horror film trilogy.

To understand the postmodern film, the viewer must have an awareness of past genres and styles:

*The film and its audience 'know their own histories'. The pleasure of the text spills over into the audience's knowledge of other films, other performances, other musics: the referent becomes part of the treasure house of signifiers that constitute popular culture* (Hill, 2005: 96).

In terms of the musical biopic, the viewer is usually aware of the subject of the film and the context in which he/she resides (such as the era, culture, music genre and trends). Film audience knowledge is apparent in several instances in the musical biopic *Control* (2007), explored in Chapter Two. There is a scene in the film where Ian Curtis looks over at the clothesline hanging in his home. Viewers who are unaware of Curtis' life story will not understand the brief moment in the film until the end yet fans recognise that it is the object that he will inevitably use to commit suicide. There are other instances in the film where other



bands/musicians are mentioned: the band members of Joy Division discuss bands such as the Buzzcocks, Curtis has a Bob Dylan poster on his bedroom wall, and he takes his girlfriend to a David Bowie and a Sex Pistols concert. In terms of film references, Curtis states that his favourite movie is *The Sound of Music* (1965) and discusses the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and perhaps most importantly, Curtis watches *Stroszek* (1977), a film about a man released from prison, starting a new life, on television before he commits suicide.

### ***The Biopic in the Film Genre System***

Custen (2000: 6) acknowledges that biopics are quite different from each other and that in discussing them as one entity the Hollywood biopic can be constructed almost exclusively around the concept of fame. The idea of fame is one of the elements that all biopics have in common. The biopic is defined generally as a film that takes the life story of an actual person and uses it as the central narrative (Anderson and Lupo, 2002: 92) but to be categorised as an individual genre, the biopic needs to have various common features in content and/or form, which it does not. For example, Anderson and Lupo categorise the biopic by stating that “The biopic is typically considered a genre with adult (or educational) appeal yet, because many biopics avoid graphic sexuality and violence, they often provide the sentimental (and conservative) gratifications of family melodrama” (2002: 93). The reason why all or even a majority of biopics resist categorisation in the melodrama genre is that there are many biopics that do not avoid but, rather, highlight sexuality and violence. To name two examples, *The Doors* (1991), a musical biopic of musician Jim Morrison (Val Kilmer), highlights sexuality by presenting Morrison’s sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle in the 1960s, including sexual encounters with various women. *Monster* (2003) is one of the many biopics that tell the story of a criminal (in this case, Aileen Wuornos played by Charlize Theron) providing a highly violent narrative. Therefore, a biopic can be a melodrama but not all biopics are melodramas. The biopic, in general, cannot be placed wholly in one particular genre. Dennis Bingham claims that the biopic is a genre:

*Film studies has not recognized the biopic as a genre with its own conventions and historical stages of development, disintegration, investigation, parody, and revival... Not only has biography been left out of most genre studies of film, at least until very*

*recently, but the term 'biopic' is frequently used as a pejorative not much different from 'oater' for westerns and 'weepie' for the woman's film, and yet those hardly became the accepted terms for those genres (2010: 11).*

Bingham's reflection does reinforce the fact that there is a lack of academic study of the biopic which stems from the uncertainty in categorising the films in terms of genre. However, subsets of the biopic (particularly the musical biopic) are too different, in terms of genre characteristics, to be able to be categorised under the same umbrella.

From another perspective, John C. Tibbetts (in an interview with Jim Welsh) believes that the biopic is not a distinct genre, but a subset of the genre of historical films. He further states:

*I, for one, hesitate to keep breaking down these films into ever diminishing subsets. However, I do feel there has not been enough discussion of biopics in general as either a genre or a part of a genre (Tibbetts in Welsh, 2005: 86).*

Tibbetts generalises the biopic and implies that it is solely the subgenre of the historical film. The biopic does not need to be broken down into ever diminishing subsets as it can be categorised into a variety of film genres. The biopic can be termed here a universal or adaptive subgenre. Carolyn Anderson states:

*The [biopic] genre both parts and merges by the central content of the life story told and, therefore, biographies of entertainers... can be grouped together and also considered a subgenre of the musical, the lives of racketeers... share characteristics with the gangster movie, accounts of outlaws... follow the norms of the western, and so forth (1988: 332).*

Each biopic, dependent on content and/or form, can be identified as any genre based on these characteristics. Custen (2000) also appreciates the biopic and its adaptability in the genre system by claiming that the films are infused and suffused by the remnants of other genres. The list includes (and is not limited to) westerns, musicals, horror and melodrama. The genre that the biopic can be categorised into often depends on the individual the film is centred on.

Individuals include the explorer/adventurer (*127 Hours* [2010]), outlaw/criminal (*Chopper* [2000]), entertainer (*Mrs Henderson Presents* [2005]), journalist (*Shattered Glass* [2003]), a historical figure (*Marie Antoinette* [2006]), poet (*Sylvia* [2003]), artist (*Frida* [2002]) or teacher (*Freedom Writers* [2007]). The biopic can adapt to any genre in accordance to the person whose life story is being presented and also in how the film is visually displayed. Identifying what genre a certain biopic should be categorised as should be judged on a case-by-case basis since content and form can differ for each biopic.

## **The Musical Genre**

In order to understand and define the musical biopic, the musical genre will be defined, including its characteristics and how the musical biopic extends from this genre. The musical emerged and thrived during the studio era and Rick Altman (1987: ix) states that it is the most complex of all Hollywood genres. Although this claim is slightly exaggerated, the musical is far from simple. Its complexity is due to the musical's self-reflexive nature, constantly reminding the viewer that they are watching a film but also at the same time being very escapist. The musical number and its placement within the film identify with the myth of spontaneity and improvisation which at the same time launches the filmic audience into a fantasy/dream state. Jane Feuer reiterates this notion by stating: "In a sense, the Hollywood musical merely compounded an already existing and widely accepted fiction, that of direct and spontaneous performance" (1982: 2). A particular way in which the musical film creates this spontaneous eruption of song and dance in this fantasy/dream-like state is with the use of bricolage: the idea of using props at hand: creating a performance space or a musical scene with props that are normally used for other purposes (such as a broom or kitchen appliances). The musical makes it seem spontaneous through the use of these elements.

### ***Musical Narrative Structure and Characteristics***

Narrative structure is another very important element of the musical. The first point to mention about the role of the narrative is as follows:

*Perhaps the largest basis on which critics attempt to build a workable analytical methodology is the distinction between films that integrate the musical numbers and the dramatic intervals into a consistent storyline, and films that make little or no attempt at such integration* (Solomon, 1976: 71).

John Belton states that musicals operate on two registers: narrative and spectacle. Furthermore, every musical exists in the tension between narrative and musical number (Belton, 2005: 153). The integration is how narrative and spectacle are connected, whether through storyline or a break to create spontaneous song and dance. An integrated musical is defined as “the musical that tries to cohere narrative and music, musical numbers emerge as something of a problem, which the narrative must somehow solve” (Belton, 2005: 155). In other words, the musical numbers and narrative work together and function as a team: they flow from one to the other seamlessly. The musical biopic is a type of film that would be classified as an integrated musical as music is a central theme to the plot. For example, the film *Ray* (2004) presents the life story of popular musician Ray Charles. In one particular scene he is in a recording studio and is asked to play a song he has never heard before that his manager, Ahmet Ertegun (Curtis Armstrong) has written. Ertegun tells Charles (Jamie Foxx) in a few simple sentences how to play the piano parts and sings along with the lyrics. Within what seems a few minutes, Charles is recording the full song, ‘Mess Around’. The musical number in this sequence of the film flows directly into the narrative because there is a primary focus on Ray Charles as the musician. Integration of narrative and number is seen all throughout *Ray* (explored in Chapter Four), in other biopics that focus on the musician as subject and also films that focus on composers and choreographers/dancers such as *Amadeus* (1984) and *All That Jazz* (1979), respectively.

The unintegrated musical presents musical numbers that do not coincide with the narrative at all. An example of an unintegrated musical is *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (1929), a film that presented a selection of unrelated variety acts. Unintegrated numbers often make these musicals more identifiable as musicals because the viewer is able to more accurately distinguish narrative from spectacle. Narrative structure of the integrated musical is the opposite of the unintegrated format:

*Narrative space opens up to incorporate musical space; musical space invades a narrative space; distinctions between the two spaces become subject of a sophisticated play with traditional notions of what is number and what is narrative (Belton, 2005: 164).*

In the integrated musical it becomes difficult to pinpoint where the narrative ends and where the (musical) number begins. Therefore it is not apparent, in some instances, whether the film is a musical or not. The flow of narrative into number in the integrated musical should still, however, produce some sort of break in narrative flow which leads into the spontaneous display of song and dance and even deliver a clarity (an understanding of the psychology of the character/s) that cannot be achieved solely with dialogue. Heather Laing proposes:

*Music and words together can give the most apparently confusing emotions a clear voice, suggesting that there is nothing which cannot be expressed... an essential precursor to their return or balance, and, in narrative terms at least, to some kind of happy closure (2000: 12).*

The heightened emotion that is produced by the emergence of musical numbers can be seen in the subtle conversion between narrative and number so that the musical narrative can make its point absolutely clear. The lyrics are therefore often used to openly support the musical-emotional philosophy of the musical genre (Laing, 2000: 5). Without the ideal transition from narrative to number, the musical would not be able to function properly as a film that projects a pointed charge of emotion to both characters and audience.

Another important part of the interplay between narrative and number is the presence of either diegetic or non-diegetic sound/music. Altman states that diegetic music provides a bridge because it obeys the laws of 'natural causality' (the mouth moves, therefore it produces sounds) and 'rhythmical causality' (music produces rhythmical movement) (Altman, 1987: 65). It is possible that diegetic and non-diegetic music can be present at the same time.

Heather Laing acknowledges that it is normal in narrative film for music to move between the diegetic and non-diegetic levels, however, the simultaneous appearance of music at both levels is one of the defining points of the musical (2000: 8). Another defining point of the musical that Laing identifies, concerns the performing character as the perceived site of musical production. In the musical biopic the central character is the creator of the musical number and the people and objects surrounding him/her transform into elements of the spectacle. *De-Lovely* (2004), a musical biopic of composer/songwriter Cole Porter, shows that the central character is the driving force of the musical numbers in the film. In one particular sequence, Porter (Kevin Kline) discusses how he fell in love with his wife Linda Lee (Ashley Judd) and sets in motion the musical number by speaking the chorus of the following song, 'Let's Do It'. He continues to drive the musical number along by selecting a woman (played by Alanis Morissette) with a distinctive voice to sing the song as he leads her by playing the piano. Porter's life experiences, direction and composition of the performance are combined and become the driving force for the musical number (this and other musical numbers in *De-Lovely* are analysed in Chapter Three). Therefore, the central character in the integrated musical plays a key role in producing spectacle from narrative.

### ***The Backstage/Show Musical Subgenre***

The backstage/show musical is a subgenre of the musical that is the most comparable to that of the musical biopic. The characteristics and general narrative structure are almost identical to each other which make an understanding of this show subgenre vital. The backstage or show musical is a film that presents the creation of performance, from audition to rehearsal to show (an act presented in front of an audience). Altman suggests that the show musical includes biopics and compilation films and that the subgenre is primarily concerned with putting on a show (1987: 200). The show musical cannot include all biopics but a majority of musical biopics that display the life story of a man or woman who has dedicated their lives to music/musical careers such as a musician, composer, dancer/choreographer or performer/entertainer. Jane Feuer also discusses the show musical in her study of the Hollywood musical and states that this idea of 'putting on a show' "was a formula that made breaking into song and dance plausible, thereby justifying the inclusion of musical numbers in the film" (1982: vii), therefore making the backstage subgenre an integrated musical.

The backstage/show musical originated from vaudeville because of its revue format. Performers, thematics and the idea of alternating between comedy and songs all have origins in vaudeville. Altman advises that even if the musical itself was narrative-driven, the show they were creating was, in fact, a revue. This is not always the case if biopics are included in the subgenre. In the musician biopic, the music being created is not revue-style but autobiographical hence narrative-driven. Richard Dyer also identifies the revue format and discusses this subgenre's vaudevillian quality by affirming "The show-within-a-show format of so many musicals both reveals the labour and skill involved in putting on entertainment and yet passes it all off as improvisation, spontaneity, community and having a good time" (2000: 24). Both Dyer and Altman do not recognise all forms of the backstage musical and only identify the films concerning the creation of a Broadway stage show and similar – a popular show musical of the studio era. Feuer does acknowledge the element of improvisation that exists to some extent in all show musicals: "Although spontaneity must of necessity be ever an illusion in any film, the backstage musical compounds the illusion by giving us 'improvisation' in a rehearsal atmosphere" (1982: 12). For example, in teaching a routine (in the backstage subgenre) after presenting the steps (usually a slightly complicated sequence) the character is able to re-produce them and memorise them almost instantly. The film *Honey* (2003), which tells the story of young woman, Honey Daniels (Jessica Alba) who enters into the music video scene, features a series of rehearsal sequences. Honey's first job is a dancer in a Jadakiss music video where, upon only watching the choreography is able to pick up the first eight counts of dance steps and reproduces them immediately when the music is played back. When asked if she is able to choreograph a sequence on the spot, she is able to after no preparation. *Center Stage* (2000) is another backstage musical that presents rehearsal sequences but of the students of the American Ballet Academy. The ballet instructor teaches the students (mostly verbally) small sections of several routines only once and the students manage to produce them instantly. The rebellious dance students such as Eva Rodriguez (Zoë Saldana) and Charlie Sims (Sascha Radetsky) even manage to improvise additional choreography to rival their instructor.

## *The Folk Musical Subgenre*

Although Dyer, Feuer and Altman discuss the backstage/show musical in reference to the studio era, they all agree that this subgenre presents to the audience a sense of community between the characters in these films. Feuer suggests, “In backstage musicals the spectacle of a global community of singing and dancing folk gets mirrored within the films proper” (1982: 17) and further; “Over and over again in these backstage musicals we see the ‘kids’ triumphing over greed, egotism and all those puritanical forces which would, in the name of the community, conspire against entertainment” (1982: 17). The folk musical has its similarities to the backstage musical and is worth mentioning here as Feuer states that in folk musicals the characters are portrayed as amateur performers (even though, in reality, they are professional). This is done to allow a personal type of relationship with the character and audience so that the audiences are able to relate/sympathise more with the character (Feuer, 1982: 14). The singing and dancing leads to a sense of community (resonating with the backstage/show musical) which leads to an audience participation: the co-operative effort of ‘putting on a show’ extends to include the films audience (Feuer, 1982: 17). The film audience is able to see into the world of the performers/creators in the show musical through the camera and unlike other types of musicals such as the fairytale musical, the backstage/show musical relies on voyeuristic camera composition to encapsulate the content of the film. The subgenre, in essence, is a show-within-a-show performance which was first utilised as a common literary technique, the story-within-a-story. In the case of the backstage subgenre, there are two different audiences: the audience within the film and the audience watching the film. The filmic audience is able to see what happens behind the curtain (metaphorically and sometimes literally) as the camera travels beyond the live performance. Altman further explains that:

*the show musical camera becomes an agent of voyeurism. When we go to a backstage musical we lift a veil; by pulling aside the backdrop or peeking into the wings we are able to satisfy our natural desire to look beyond, behind, and beneath (1987: 207).*

The film audience is able to witness how a show is created and also to gain insight into characters’ traits, an opportunity rarely given to the audience in live performance.



## *The 'New' Musical*

As with all genres, the backstage musical has changed through time, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. J.P. Telotte discusses the 'new' musical and notices that these musicals do not allow the characters to burst into song and dance as the studio era (or classical musicals) constantly adhered to. Telotte suggests that "the 'new' musical tends to generate a more sober though still affirmative feeling, a sense that despite all restrictions, the 'show' – this singing and dancing – can go on" (2002: 48). Audiences have become more interested in realism on screen and watch the 'new' musical films (biopics included) that are released post-studio era that explore the inner world of a musical performance. The film audience is made to believe in what occurs on the screen by the creators of the film and trusts that what is being presented is what actually happens in the entertainment industry. In taking the film audience away from their own lives, the backstage musical gives them the opportunity to explore someone else's reality. Telotte suggests that the new backstage musical is:

*intent on reminding us that distinct boundaries separate musical activity from the 'real' world and while they do admit that there is a 'place' for song and dance in our lives, by underscoring the limited potential of that music, they also affirm that we can no longer withdraw from the real world to immerse ourselves fully in the expressive one (2002: 53).*

In contemporary cinema most musicals tend to be more realistic and show a balance between real and expressive worlds.<sup>26</sup> An example of realism in the 'new' musical film is the biopic of singer Tina Turner, *What's Love Got To Do With It* (1993). The film explores the abusive relationship between Ike (Laurence Fishburne) and Tina Turner (Angela Bassett) during Turner's musical career. In the 'real world' of the film, Turner is physically abused by Ike but does not show this in front of the cameras when she is interviewed or performs on television/stage (what Telotte deems the 'expressive world'). Although the audiences within

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<sup>26</sup> The balance between real and expressive worlds is also noticeable in television series such as *Glee*. The television show (which commenced in 2009 initially on Fox television network in the USA) features a high school club who enter into show choir competitions.

the film cannot see what is really happening in Turner's life, the film audience is able to witness the hardships she faced in order to achieve success in the music industry. It is in these 'new' musicals that audiences are able to distinguish when musical number is required (both visually and sonically) and when the spoken word/dialogue is more appropriate. Sometimes feelings and emotions are better expressed through song and at other times (in more serious scenes) they are better set in real world dialogue and movement. Whether certain film sequences are presented through expressive or real world forms is dependent on the desired effects that the films have on the audience.

## **The Musical Biopic**

The musical biopic differs from all other biopics in that its central focus is on music and musical performers. According to David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, musical biography is a genre based around the life of a composer and the individual's relationship with people and places (2005: 26). Beard and Gloag distinctly define musical biography as the composer's life story, dismissing all others: they do not recognise other musical lives/careers such as that of musicians, dancers, entertainers and singers. Musical biography centres on the relationship between private life and music career, exemplifying its importance in understanding the individual's musical work (Beard and Gloag, 2005: 27), however, should not be limited to a composer's biography. The musical biopic can be focused on any person who has spent a significant duration of his or her life creating, using or producing music. There are, however, some exceptions to the rule. For example *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) is a film that, even though it presents a religious figure, is a musical biopic because of the nature of its form: all dialogue in the film is sung. In order to eliminate films whose content does not match its form in the musical film, new terms must be created so that there cannot be any exceptions. Terms such as musician biopic and composer biopic narrow down the field and offer a smaller selection of films in the musical context.

### ***The Musical Biopic: An Extension of the Musical Genre***

The musical biopic is noted by Bruce Babington (2006: 84) as the most popular of all forms of musical during the 1970s. The classical song and dance musical declined in the 1960s leading the musical biopic to be the genre's most persistent mode of survival (Babington, 2006: 109). Drawing on Custen's statistics, during the 1950s, 28% of all biopics were about performing artists. In the 1960s these biopics concerning the entertainers declined to only 13% but rose to 31% in the 1970s (Custen, 1992: 88). Dunne suggests that the biopic is vital in the development of the musical because "one intrinsic problem of the Hollywood musical [is] how to provide narrative justification for performance numbers" (Dunne, 2004: 129). In the musical biopic virtually every number is justified by the storyline that the film follows – the numbers become fused in with the narrative, creating a flow and keeping the audience focused. Dunne further indicates that biographical musical numbers carried the narrative for a lot longer than other musical films, especially when administered in the third person (2004: 128). The audience witnessing a person's musical life through the third person sustains the voyeuristic look and feel of the biopic because the narration is not coming from a particular character in the film (through voice-over or physical communication with the film camera) but from an outside source, giving a panoramic view of the life of an individual.

Particularly for the musical biopic, Sobchack and Sobchack state that there is not a focus on biographical accuracy or completeness than there is on the filmic presentation of music (1980: 244). Sobchack and Sobchack do not acknowledge, from an audience perspective, what a life story means for a fan of the subject of the biopic, who already (from alternate sources) has knowledge of the individual's life events and experiences. This type of audience member will pay specific attention to the biographical details presented. An example of biographical fabrication can be found in the biopic *Night and Day* (1946), centred on composer Cole Porter. The film did not acknowledge Porter's homosexuality and his affairs with men in the entertainment industry by focusing instead on his relationship with his wife. A *New York Times* film review suggested:

*Corny and unreliable as biography, Night and Day is redeemed by the guest appearances of musical luminaries... [it] proved to be an audience favourite – except*

*for those ‘in the know’ Broadwayites who were bemused over the fact that Cole Porter’s well-known homosexuality was necessarily weaned from the screenplay.*<sup>27</sup>

Film reviewer, Hal Erickson, suggests that the only people aware of Porter’s homosexuality were the people heavily involved in the Broadway scene so it did not particularly matter to other audiences. Angie Errigo, film reviewer for *Empire* magazine, discussed the representations from Porter’s point of view:

*Thanks to his legendary wit and genius, Porter definitely rates a second biopic, primarily on the grounds that the first, 1946’s Night And Day, was absurd – even if Porter was tickled to be played by Cary Grant.*<sup>28</sup>

The second biopic that Errigo discusses is *De-Lovely*, released in 2004, where Porter’s sexual identity was properly acknowledged. Errigo claims that with the new biopic, “Porter’s homosexuality is a Big Deal”, something that was overshadowed in *Night and Day* by Cary Grant and his star appeal (these issues will be addressed in detail in Chapter Three).

### ***Defining and Identifying the Musical Biopic***

Terminology is an issue when defining a biopic, which is the case for the categorisation of any text. Depending on the prefix that is used the field narrows down to a smaller set, creating a more specialised area of focus. Ian Inglis, for example, analyses and defines the music biopic as “a film which purports to tell, in part or in full, the biography of a musical performer (living or dead) and which contains a significant amount of his or her music” (2007: 77). With Inglis’ definition, biopics such as *Evita* (1996) and *The King and I* (1956) would be excluded from the music biopic category even though they are considered to be both a musical and a biopic. A musical biopic can be further defined by the music genre (for example, country music biopic or jazz biopic) or by the occupation of individual (such as the composer biopic

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<sup>27</sup> <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/35185/Night-and-Day/overview>, accessed 26 September 2008.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.empireonline.com.au/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?DVDID=10458>, accessed 14 September 2008.

or the dancer/choreographer biopic). The musical biopic can encompass all films that are both musical and biographical; indicating the type of musical biopic (by re-termining the category of biopics) specifies the content of the film.

An issue in identifying the musical biopic is to distinguish whether the subject of the film is based on a real or fictional person. In some instances if the subject of the film is fictional, the genre of the film can change completely. It is apparent if the character is based on an actual person because the name of the character is the same as the actual figure, which is evident to the viewer before he or she sees the film. Promotion and marketing of the film tends to suggest that the biopic is based on an actual person in order to attract larger audiences. For example, the official website for *El Cantante* (2006) states that the film, “celebrates the life and music of the legendary Puerto Rican salsa singer Héctor Lavoe, a pioneer of the sound and sensibility that redefined Latin music in the 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>29</sup> By using this promotional technique, audiences who are fans of Héctor Lavoe and his music are attracted to watching this film (explored in Chapter Two). David Brackett affirms this distinction in his analysis of the country music biopic. He identifies the two types as follows:

*one in which the film is based on an actual historical figure; the other a ‘film à clef’ in which the film adapts aspects of the biopic’s syntax and semantics, and even elements of a historical figure’s life, into a film that is presented as fictional* (2001: 265).

There are a number of films “à clef” such as the fictional musical biopics *Almost Famous* (2000) and *Dreamgirls* (2006), mock-documentaries including *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), *A Mighty Wind* (2003), and the mock-musical biopic *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007). Although these films present invented characters, they are often loosely based on real figures in order to make the film appear to be more realistic and hence, for the mockumentaries in particular, more amusing and enjoyable for audiences. For example, *Dreamgirls* (originating from the Broadway musical) is suggested to be based on the lives of The Supremes: an all-female, soul pop group of the 1960s Motown era. *Almost Famous*’ fictional band Stillwater is arguably inspired by rock bands of the 1970s such as Led Zeppelin and The Allman Brothers Band.

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<sup>29</sup> www.elcantantemovie.com, accessed 30 October 2008.

Depending on who is cast in the leading role for a musical biopic, questions relating to whether the film is a true account of an individual's life or a completely imagined subject arise again. Inglis is aware of casting issues and brings to mind, "a number of movies that conform in all but name to the biopic format, in that they are presented as fictional... are frankly, and knowingly, based on the life stories of their respective stars" (2007: 81). A key example is the film *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005) where Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson plays the role of Marcus, a gang member/drug dealer who desires to move away from crime in order to pursue a career as a rap artist. The basic plot of the film is very similar to 50 Cent's own life experiences although the film is not promoted as a biopic. One of the central enquiries posed regarding biopics of these entertainers is how filmmakers decide when it is the appropriate time to create a biopic of an individual life. A biopic can be made too early in an individual's career before they have become an established figure in the music industry (as in the case of 50 Cent), so the creative team claim that it is a fictitious story. On the other side, a certain kind of biopic can be made too often which leads to mock-biopics (aforementioned *Walk Hard*) suggesting an end to a certain cycle of biopic.

## METHODOLOGY

The following thesis centres on a series of case studies of contemporary films and notions of intertextuality present within this medium, hence it is necessary to draw upon a conglomerate of methodological approaches. Therefore, the methodology that will be adopted throughout this thesis derives from a post-structural mode of analysis. While "there is no single poststructuralism, but rather a plurality of approaches that are loosely collected under this title" (Smith, 2001b: 117), there are nonetheless, key features of a post-structuralist framework that will be applied to this thesis. As previously discussed, post-structuralism is an extension or progression of structuralist thought: "While structuralism sees truth as being 'behind' or 'within' a text, post-structuralism stresses the interaction of reader and text as a productivity" (Sarup, 1988: 3). Hence, the post-structural analysis of texts is centred on the relationship between the given text and the audience/viewer/reader who acts as an interpreter (an active participant) in order to ultimately evaluate information and impressions that the text provides. In broad terms, post-structuralism is a critique of the human subject: "The term

‘subject’ helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as a product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious” (Sarup, 1988: 2). In dissolving the subject both structure and subject are viewed as a part of the same category. The notion that the text and reader are involved in a dynamic relationship will be emphasised through discussions of the individual texts (films) and also audience interpretations based on projected demographics, references to film reviews and online discussions in relation to each case study.

## **Post-Structuralism and Deconstructive Thought**

Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are the three most influential figures in post-structuralist thought. While Lacan focuses on a “return to Freud” (1975) and Foucault concentrates on critical studies of social institutions (1989), the work of Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1974), particularly with regard to ideas of deconstruction, applies specifically to the methodology of this thesis. Although Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis propose that “Derridean post-structuralism has not been an overwhelming presence within film studies, ‘post-structuralist’ film theory and analysis has been based less on Derridean deconstruction than on Lacan’s ‘return to Freud’” (Stam et al., 1992: 23), Derrida’s theories of deconstruction will be applied to the film analysis of this thesis. Hugh J. Silverman defines deconstruction as, “the reading of texts in terms of their marks, traces, or indecidable features, in terms of their margins, limits, or frameworks, and in terms of their self-circumscriptions or self-delimitations as texts” (1989: 4). In other words, deconstruction seeks to derive meaning from a text’s relation to other texts (intertextuality) and additionally underpin what is not explicit in a text in reference to what is included. In terms of the filmic case studies of this thesis, discussions will involve not only the analysis of the film as a stand-alone entity but also its relation to other musical biopics that have been previously released. Furthermore, it will be noted how the musical biopic was created (how knowledge was obtained in order to construct an audio-visual representation of the individual life story) through the referencing of multiple media texts concerning the musical individual in focus. Texts to be considered include previously released feature films, documentaries and television programs, interviews, written auto/biographies, memoirs and other various media resources including internet websites and radio broadcasts.

Deconstruction can be defined in numerous ways depending on the context of application. To explain deconstruction in an alternate way to Silverman, Brunette defines deconstruction as meanings that “do not stem from something inherent in the words and sounds themselves, but rather from their *difference* from other words and sounds” (2000: 90). To further explicate, a word or sound is unable to be understood without its relation to another. An example of this is the concept of the ‘truth’ which cannot exist without ‘error’. Both need to be present in order to interpret each individual notion. Furthermore:

*poststructural perspectives undermine our conventional notions of truth... knowledge and values reflect interests, experiences, standpoints, and identities. Thus a complete, accurate knowledge of the world is impossible* (Smith, 2001a: 246).

This thesis suggests that an accurate knowledge of an individual life story is likewise impossible. Similarly, ‘closure’ is another post-structuralist term implying that no amount of knowledge can offer one universal truth. In the context of film for example, no image can be attributed a single interpretation or set of meanings. In the case of the musical biopic, no singular representation of a life story is an accurate universal truth, it is merely a perspective or culmination of a variety of perspectives on one musical individual’s biography. As defined by Philip Smith, closure offers “no single right or wrong understanding or definitive meaning” (2001b: 120). Therefore, this thesis will not seek to uncover a universal truth on any particular musical individual but acknowledges how differing perspectives are understood and interpreted by film audiences. The analysis of the contemporary musical biopic in this thesis is not limited to one reading or interpretation of any given representation of the subject. Interpretations will be offered but will not stand as a single definitive meaning of the text. The analysis of each musical biopic will take into account events that influenced and altered the final cut of the film as well as an analysis of the film itself. The process of contextualising each case study will justify multiple readings and reaffirms how the musical biopic contributes to an understanding of music/culture.

As well as deconstruction and closure, concepts such as ‘relativism’ and ‘realism’ will be drawn upon in this thesis, also stemming from post-structuralist thought. Although there are problems associated with these delineations, for the purpose of this thesis terminology



relating to post-structuralist thought assists to reaffirm the central idea that the contemporary musical biopic is fabricated and subjective. Realism follows the ideology that there are no absolute conceptions of reality (Wachterhauser, 2002: 52) and relativism in particular follows the view that every belief is as qualified as another. The 'truth' has as many meanings as there are justifications (Rorty, 1991: 23). When discussing relativism/realism in terms of film:

*Realist theorists insisted upon the intrinsic relationship or similarity between reality and its filmic representation, but from a deconstructive perspective, once it is admitted that reality and its representation must always be different from each other (as well as similar), then difference has just as much a claim as similarity to being the 'essential' relation between the two (Brunette, 2000: 91).*

This thesis will ascertain the similarities and differences between other media and filmic representation of the musical individuals in order to understand the relationship between these forms. Although the reality (or truth) of an individual's biography is unattainable, each case study will draw upon representations and interpretations of the life of the musical individual in comparison to the musical biopic. In addition, the film's effect on the film audience and also people who are directly associated with the film (such as directors, actors and consultants) will also be examined as it contributes to the public memory of a popular artist. As previously stated, each case study will address the impact on film audiences not directly but through the various media aforementioned. There are two reasons that this thesis will only reference secondary sources (meaning, no direct communication with the filmmakers or film audience). One is that film audiences obtain details of the actual music artist from media texts and secondly, the overall thesis statement argues that audiences can only understand the music artist from the relating media that they are exposed to.

## **The Musical Biopic as Postmodern Film**

This thesis will draw on post-structuralism and postmodernism. Although comparing the two philosophies is difficult, they both have the same overarching approach in terms of cultural studies:

*There is no straightforward equation of poststructuralism with postmodernism, and the sharing of the prefix 'post' can lead to unwarranted conflation of the two. However, they do share a common approach to epistemology, namely the rejection of truth as a fixed eternal object (Barker, 2000: 19).*

Through analysing contemporary musical biopics in this thesis it is an underlying supposition that there will be no search for the 'truth' or any type of accuracy in representing the music artist due to the idea that it is not possible. The knowledge of a music artist is only available to the public (fans and audiences) through representation of that individual through the media.

Placing this theory in the cinematic context, it is implied here that the contemporary musical biopic is a postmodern film. Postmodern cinema, in particular, relies on the audience member to be knowledgeable of the cinema's past in order to appreciate, understand and interpret its current form. The scholarly assumption is that "postmodern style involves citation, the invisible quotation marks of parody... [which] has come to be an agreed-upon currency of its critical usage" (Friedberg, 1993: 174). According to Friedberg (1993), postmodern cinema in general takes its own history and form as its subject. There are multiple histories that need to be acknowledged when analysing the musical biopic as a postmodern film including film genre, music and the individual in focus. Firstly, the musical film genre and its characteristics (combining narrative and spectacle) provide familiarity for the viewer of the musical biopic. The music or soundtrack utilised in the film can also provide a history in itself (triggering a certain memory for each film audience member), as does the biographical narrative. How the film audience interprets film genre, music and narrative in the musical biopic will be discussed below.

The sense of nostalgia that is apparent in some musical biopics is often (not always) a signifier of a postmodern text. Nostalgia in itself is defined as stemming from the Greek word *nostos* ('return home') and *algia* ('pain' or 'longing') which literally translates to 'homesickness'. Often referred to as being temporal, this longing for the 'home' may be individual, collective, historical or may not even exist at all, "hence the term's further

extension as a mildly contemptuous descriptor for golden age myths of all kinds” (Wernick, 1997: 219). For this reason, nostalgia links strongly to postmodern musical biopics in view of the idea developed throughout this thesis that musical biopics aid in the mythmaking processes of each respective musical individual. For some musical biopics, audience knowledge of the music and the individuals of the era in the film are also important. This thesis will access background information concerning the individual not accessible through the film such as music, television, the internet and written texts including biographies, magazine and newspaper articles. Furthermore, researching the context in which the individual lived can also assist the viewer to interpret the musical biopic if required. Contemporary musical biopics tend to draw from other media texts relating to the protagonist and associated individuals hence the case studies that will be analysed throughout this thesis are largely based upon or inspired by details obtained through a variety of media sources listed above. The intertextuality present in the contemporary musical biopic and the interplay of the film with historical texts suggest that these films are postmodern.

## **Aspects of Film/Music Studies**

Film is an audio-visual medium and reading the images and sonic elements of cinema involves a dynamic process encompassing four main factors: the text itself, the audience, the director/s vision and the film’s position in a wider cultural context. As Jon Callow suggests, “All visual texts are influenced by the cultures, values, ideologies and world views in and through which they are created and consumed – just as spoken and written texts are” (1999: 2). The cultural context of the audio-visual material in each case study will be taken into consideration in analysing representation and cinematography. Furthermore, the main features of the films to be analysed include structure and sequence of the narrative, *mis-en-scène* and how the visually dynamic imagery works with the sonic (predominantly musical) elements of the film. Not only will this thesis draw upon aspects of film studies but also the rapidly expanding academic field of screen sound studies. Hence studies of film music and sound, the musical genre film (the show/backstage musical subgenre, addressed above) and how music is incorporated into the narrative structure of the musical biopic (musical integration) will also be discussed.

Film music analysis plays a crucial role in the study of the musical biopic. For example, popular song and classical score can both appear in a film and alter the way that a narrative or setting is perceived. As well as the visual imagery of the film creating a *mis-en-scène*, there is also the notion of music and sound creating a *'mise-en-bande'*: "Mise-en-bande analysis concentrates on the interaction among various components making up the soundtrack" (Altman et al., 2000: 341). It is important not only to discuss how images work together or how images work with the sonic elements of the film but how music/sound operate together: studying their own interaction is a method that is often neglected. In terms of how the music is displayed in the film text, "Areas of concern are the ways in which music inflects scenes with emotional and dramatic resonance, suggests character, setting, and mood, [and] influences perceptions of narrative time and space" (Gorbman, 2000: 42). Furthermore, for the musical biopic, the selection of music tracks is another area of concern. For example, in the musician biopic not all songs produced by the musician are played in the film. The songs that are chosen could be selected because of their popularity and success in the music industry (measured by record sales and the like) or because of their obscurity (b-sides, unreleased tracks). Therefore the film audience plays an important role in interpreting film music and narrative construction of the musical biopic: "Film, after all, is more than celluloid. It is socially constructed within a three-cornered association between filmmakers, film spectators, and the film texts themselves" (Tudor, 2000: 192). Hence this thesis will discuss the text of the film itself in relation to the role of the filmmakers and how the biopic is then evaluated by the audience.

Throughout this study there will be reference to the 'filmmaker' or 'filmmakers'. Most often the term implies (singularly) the director of the film or (in plural) all people who have creative control over the musical biopic's production. Specifically, the 'filmmakers' are individuals who work on the filmic project who are able to alter the audio-visual representation of the musical biopic (including narrative and storyline elements). The 'filmmakers' do not include the actual music artists themselves (even if they have had a creative contribution to the musical biopic) or family, friends or colleagues, unless they have specifically been employed to work on the film and are credited as such. These roles include and are not limited to: scriptwriters, producers, cinematographers, sound/music and visual effects personnel. However, the pivotal personnel in the contemporary musical biopic are the directors and producers. These individuals have the most control over the production process and influence

representations of the music artist. Both director and producer(s) are in charge of others involved in the film project including cast and crew.

## **Cultural Studies and Issues of the Spectator**

In discussing film context, the relationship between industry (film studio and creative team, stars/celebrities) and audience (viewers, fans) will be researched through a sociological and cultural studies framework. Jostein Gripsrud maintains that:

*The production of a film provides a raw material which regulates the potential range of experiences and meanings to be associated with it, but it is through audiences that films become 'inputs' into larger socio-cultural processes (2000: 201).*

The analysis of visual and sonic representations of a life history/biography will be conducted in terms of the individual case studies and also in comparison to other films, television programmes and literature that the fan or interested film viewer has access to. Although there will be no direct consultation with the audience members, this thesis will discuss issues related to the spectator, unconnected to the production of each film. There will also be research undertaken in relation to the film viewer associated with the film such as hired consultants. Included in the study of the spectator are film viewers associated with the individual subject of the film, some of which are friends, family and colleagues.

As well as the spectator partaking in larger socio-cultural processes, the filmic audience also belongs to certain socio-historical contexts. There has been a recent shift in screen theory from “the primacy of ‘the spectator’ as a hypothetical subject position constructed by the filmic text, to an increasingly expansive recognition of ‘the audience’, as actual, empirical viewers belonging to distinct socio-historical contexts” (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 127). The knowledge that film audiences belong to certain cultural groups will be taken into consideration when discussing the viewer feedback on the specific musical biopics. The cultural background of the film viewer influences how a film is read not only in relation to the

individual represented in the film but also in the context (time and place) of the film's diegesis. Race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender are some of the concerns that shape how the film audience relates to a life story. These issues are an additional reason why the following thesis is structured as it is: pairing certain musical biopics in each chapter to accommodate for alternate interpretations. The analysis of a broad range of contemporary musical biopics will be executed in each chapter, through identifying common structures, themes and issues.

Treating the chosen musical biopics as postmodern texts, analysis will extend beyond the selected films to the alternate sources that the creative team researched during the production of the film. Additionally, if the makers of the film directly communicated with the individual (in the case of *Walk the Line* and *Ray* in Chapter Four) or any close contacts (in the case of *El Cantante* and *Control* in Chapter Two), this will also be taken into consideration as a function of the final film release. In terms of film analysis of the selected musical biopics it will be noted how the narrative is represented both visually and sonically. Possibilities will be offered of its purpose including the mood it creates for the characters and also the unconscious identification processes with film viewers: identification with time, place, characters, and if the film provides a commentary (reflective evaluation) on the subject. The method will also entail recognition of the individual film promotion, taking account of interviews with cast and production crew including guest appearances on variety programmes, film trailers and promotional posters in accordance with theatrical release. In terms of DVD release, features such as deleted scenes, extended footage, director commentary and additional behind-the-scenes footage including interviews will also be explored (if available) in order to analyse how the musical biopic is constructed. From the methodology, it will be determined how the musical biopic shapes the public's understanding of the individual in music. Contemporary musical biopics differ from past representations of musical individuals because they are now becoming self-reflexive. The filmmakers are consciously aware that they are offering an unconstrained and creatively inspired view of the given subject which is then conveyed through the audio-visual nature of the film to the audience member. In turn, the film viewer interprets and recognises the musical biopic as re-interpreting the myth of the musical individual.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ***EL CANTANTE* (2006) AND *CONTROL* (2007):**

### **PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WIVES OF**

### **HÉCTOR LAVOE AND IAN CURTIS**

Héctor Lavoe's wife, Nilda Roman Pérez (nicknamed Puchi) and Ian Curtis' wife, Deborah Curtis, both assisted in the construction of the biopics of their husband's musical lives. Pérez took part in an interview in 2002 in New York City that became the basis for *El Cantante* and Deborah Curtis published a memoir titled *Touching from a Distance* (1995) as well as co-writing and producing *Control*. The following chapter provides an analysis of each musical biopic and suggests how the personal perspective of the wife shapes and influences the representation of the musical protagonist through narrative adaptation. Even though it would appear that watching a film from such a private perspective would disclose a distinctive (or previously unexplored) identity to the film audience, this chapter argues that these contemporary musical biopics still perpetuate the myth of these star personas. It can be argued that all biopics perpetuate (or debunk) the myth of the protagonist, however these case studies demonstrate that the fabricated identity has a significant effect on media audiences in terms of shaping music/culture. The wives represented in the following musical biopics are often only exposed to one facet of the individual's life, that is, their life at home. The wife, in these instances, often receives second-hand reports of their husband's life on the road (touring nationally and sometimes internationally) and as an onstage performer, to which he adopts an alternative persona to appeal to his fans. Pérez's recorded interview and Deborah Curtis' published memoir discuss Lavoe and Curtis' careers respectively, by referencing interviews with band members and colleagues. These films show that no matter who contributes to the re-creation of a life onscreen, the outcome remains somewhat mythic. Moreover, the musical biopics reinforce that these individuals influence an entire culture and its relative sound/landscape. Lavoe represents Latin American salsa music as Curtis represents the post-punk/goth music scene in Britain.

## EL CANTANTE

The following analysis considers the musical biopic *El Cantante*, released in 2006. The film is inspired by the life of salsa singer, Héctor Lavoe (1946 – 1993, born Héctor Juan Pérez Martínez) and features Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez in the leading roles. To interpret details the film provides about Lavoe's life, this section will firstly analyse the film narrative and its possible impact on an audience understanding of certain characters and events.

Secondly, the multiple readings that arise from casting popular star personalities such as Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez to portray the Puerto Rican protagonists will be examined. It will also be noted how star power functions in a biopic and how popular Hollywood personalities influence and even overwhelm the characters that these stars are representing. Finally, the audio-visual representation of musical numbers in the film will be discussed including the role of subtitles, integration of musical numbers and a comparison that will be drawn between the salsa songs featured in *El Cantante* and current music television (*MTV*) style and aesthetic. The central argument reinforced throughout this case study is that *El Cantante* is a dramatic, fabricated portrayal of Lavoe's life, highlighted through the self-reflexivity of narrative, star casting and execution of musical numbers in the film. Overall, the creators of *El Cantante* (including director, Leon Ichaso) acknowledge that the film simply offers a viewpoint on the private life of Lavoe and suggests how the events of his life could have determined his stage persona and music style. In addition, the filmmakers' interpretation<sup>30</sup> offers insight into what Lavoe symbolises in Latin American music culture.

### Narrative Construction and Audience Interpretation

Judgement on the effectiveness of the film, particularly with narrative construction, is dependent on what type of audience watches a film like *El Cantante*: whether it is a Héctor Lavoe fan searching for particular details about the star's private life or a Marc Anthony/Jennifer Lopez fan, eager to be entertained by the musical personality's acting roles.

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<sup>30</sup> Referenced throughout this chapter (and all subsequent analytical chapters) are interviews with the filmmakers and the actors involved in the musical biopic, predominantly from websites. Some are from magazines, newspapers, academic sites and others from 'movie sites'. The reason is that these interviews are readily accessible to the film audience and assist them in shaping an understanding of the musical biopic and the music artist's persona.



David Bordwell's analysis of narration in the fiction film notes that, "Generally, the spectator comes to the film already tuned, prepared to focus energies towards story construction and to apply sets of schemata derived from context and prior experience" (1985b: 34). Hence, the film audience perceives the representation of the individual in the musical biopic in the context of previously encountered media representations. Discussing narrative theory, Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state that this type of theory concentrates on style and the conversion of 'plot' into 'story':

*Story and plot overlap in one respect and diverge on others. the plot explicitly presents certain story events, so these events are common to both domains. The story goes beyond the plot in suggesting some diegetic events which we never witness. The plot goes beyond the story world by presenting nondiegetic images and sounds which may affect our understanding of the story* (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001: 62).

Adopted from Kristin Thompson (1988) and Bertrand Russell (1949, 1972), the theory suggests that in order to perceive the film narrative, there should be an focus on the creative construction. Hence, when applying the narratological theory to the musical biopic, the goal is not to uncover meanings or produce interpretations but to engage with the film audience's perception of narrative.

### ***Pérez's Interview: New York City, 2002***

The film's title cards in the opening sequence of *El Cantante* state that the story of Héctor Lavoe is narrated from the perspective of his wife, Nilda Roman (Puchi) Pérez. Specifically, *El Cantante* is seemingly based on an interview with Pérez after Lavoe had passed away. All interview scenes in the film are completely created by Jennifer Lopez, through the direction of the filmmakers. Pérez's interview in *El Cantante* is visualised through several black and white scenes where a small camera crew films her reflecting on her life with Lavoe. In an interview, Lopez states that she was unable to locate the original video footage of the 2002 interview and had to resort to audio tapings:

*We cannot find the actual video tape. I only had CD's of it that we had our hands on. I went crazy trying to get these tapes, but for some reason we could not get our hands on them. She, over a year or two, talked to David Maldonado who is one of the producers on the film and brought me the script at the beginning and this other writer David and they recorded everything. And they did video tape some, but they didn't videotape, I think, a lot of it. And so, I don't know what ever happened to those video tapes.*<sup>31</sup>

The scenes in *El Cantante* take place in an abandoned warehouse location in New York City. Parts of the interview are dispersed throughout the film and steer the narrative into directions that Pérez desires to take, stating at the beginning of the film, “Yes it is my version of it. If you wanted someone else’s version of it you should have had somebody else come.” In turn, the narrative is supposedly driven by what Pérez reveals in her interview. However, even though the audience is guided to interpret the film narrative as solely based on the interview, the role of the filmmakers must also be taken into consideration as they created *El Cantante*. The film is created by the filmmakers’ imagining of the interview. The merging of Pérez’s perspective (from the audio tapings) and the perspective of the filmmakers is particularly noticeable through certain self-reflexive scenes in *El Cantante*. An example is where Pérez, in her interview, discusses the wild lifestyle that she had with her husband and how she was never previously involved with taking any drugs or alcohol before she met Lavoe. The statement directly contradicts a scene where Pérez teaches Lavoe how to inhale a roll of marijuana upon meeting him for the first time [00:15:05].<sup>32</sup> In this case the filmmakers believed that Pérez was fabricating her innocence through placing the blame on Lavoe in the interview which is made apparent through the initial meeting scenes between the couple. In one of the first interview scenes with Pérez in *El Cantante* she asserts, “That’s what I want everybody to know. I want them to know how funny he [Lavoe] was, how much we laughed, how much fun we had.” However, a majority of the film focuses on his drug addiction and deterioration as his success in the music industry increased. Through this self-reflexivity the film audience obtains an insight into the stance of the filmmakers and suggests that Pérez may

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_12634.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_12634.html), accessed 19 May 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Through brief descriptions of scenes and sequences, it is assumed that the reader has previously viewed the key musical biopics discussed in this thesis. Often, DVD times are provided as a reference.

have had a negative influence on Lavoe. The scene also demonstrates that there are multiple readings of the event, reaffirming that the representation of life events is subjective.

In discussing the narrative of film, Janet Staiger states that “the experience consists of an absorption into an illusion” (2000: 12). However, in *El Cantante*’s self-reflexive representation, the film depends on the viewer to be immersed in the text yet remaining critical of the way Héctor Lavoe’s life is represented. The semi-absorption can be compared to Roland Barthes’ hierarchy of instances:

*To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding story, it is also to recognise its construction in ‘storeys’, to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative ‘thread’ on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next (1977b: 87).*

Barthes’ discussion relating to written narrative is also applicable to the film context and basically suggests that in order to follow a narrative, the reader (or film viewer in this case) must interpret the storyline as a progressive building. The narrative structure of *El Cantante* is uncomplicated hence assists the film audience to easily follow the progression of the storyline. The development of Lavoe’s life and career in *El Cantante* begins at his youth, marking his rise to fame and eventual deterioration and death due to medical complications. Lewis Beale suggests “the screenplay is clichéd and paint-by-numbers (country boy comes to the big city, gets in with the wrong crowd and starts a long, downward spiral)” (2007: 70). However, the film does offer flashback scenes and commences at the height of Lavoe’s career which is the middle-point of his life. These elements (as well as the montage sequences that will be analysed in more depth) add to what Barthes identifies as ‘storeys’ which the film audience acknowledges as contributions to a more detailed understanding of Lavoe’s life and career.

The first musical number in *El Cantante* is where Lavoe sings ‘El Cantante’<sup>33</sup> to a crowded stadium audience. A title card states that it is the year 1985 and it is evident that Lavoe was a very successful salsa singer at this stage in his career. Immediately after this sequence Pérez states<sup>34</sup> that Lavoe reached the peak in his career in 1985, after which he lost popularity in the music world and his drug addiction became problematic, affecting his wellbeing.

Subsequently, a title card appears in a different location stating it is Puerto Rico in 1963.

According to Barthes these title cards produce the first ‘storey’ of the narrative in the film.

Hence, following Barthes narrative theory, not only must the film audience follow the narrative, they are also required to predict where the narrative will lead in terms of the projected timeline. The filmmakers set the film up so that the film audience views *El Cantante* in order to follow events that led up to Lavoe’s success and also witness what occurred after the peak of his career, post-1985.

### ***Fabrication and Omission of Biographical Details***

There are various scenes throughout *El Cantante* containing events that Pérez could not have possibly had first-hand access to, highlighting the illusory nature of biographical representations. As well as following the film narrative from one scene to the next, the film audience must also be aware of how these scenes function as a part of Pérez’s interview. If they do not compare, the film audience recognises how they function as an alternative perspective offered by the filmmakers. An example of a fabricated segment within the film narrative is where Lavoe signs up for a record deal with Fania records [00:17:58]. Lavoe’s joke about changing his name from Pérez to Lavoe makes all the men (including recording producer Jerry Masucci and musician Willie Colón)<sup>35</sup> laugh. The scene immediately cuts to the Pérez interview where she is also seen laughing [00:19:38]. Through the editing choice it appears that Pérez is laughing directly at Lavoe’s joke. Pérez then comments, “He was corny. He was funny, he was corny.” Apparent in the record meeting scene, Pérez was not present to see what occurred between Masucci and Lavoe although the transition between these scenes makes it appear that Pérez was re-telling the story of what happened that day. Although it is

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<sup>33</sup> ‘El Cantante’ appears on Lavoe’s album, *Comedia* (1978, Fania Records). The song is written by Ruben Blades and album produced by Willie Colón.

<sup>34</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all statements attributed to Pérez come from the *El Cantante* interview scenes set in New York City, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Jerry Masucci is played by Federico Castelluccio and Willie Colón is played by John Ortiz.

unclear that her comment is directly linked with the event, the editing of the Pérez interview in the sequence marks the attempt to reiterate that the film is Pérez's reflection on Lavoe's life. It can be discerned that Pérez's interview scenes portray the traditional role of the narrator. However, Pérez is a character within the story; hence she is a viewpoint character. Pérez tells the story of Hector Lavoe's life from her perspective and how she remembers him. Yet there is also the presence of the filmmaker (author) in this particular scene as director, Ichaso visualises the viewpoint character's description. Represented events, such as the record company meeting, demonstrate that numerous biographical details represented in *El Cantante* are created from Pérez herself but also from the (re)imagining of the filmmakers.

Biographical omissions illustrate the assembled identity (based on previous media representations) of the individual portrayed in the film. In terms of biographical direction, representation in the musical biopic (and any filmic depiction of actual lives and events) embodies the filmmakers' perspective of the protagonist. An important biographical direction in *El Cantante* suggests that Lavoe only has one child by Pérez, a son, who dies at the age of 17 after being accidentally shot in the stomach. In actuality, Lavoe had a son with another woman he was romantically involved with, previous to his relationship with Pérez. According to the film and the interview with Pérez, Lavoe had impregnated two women at the same time but he chose to remain with Pérez. This is the only mention in the film of the other woman in Lavoe's life and the focus remains on the relationship between Lavoe and Pérez for the entirety of the film. In the interview sequence Pérez states that she stayed with Lavoe for twenty years and dismisses this issue by commenting that she was unaware of anyone else that had done the same. Carmen Ramírez is Lavoe's one-time girlfriend and mother of his only surviving son, Juan Pérez:

*In a telephone interview, Ichaso said he is aware of Carmen's relationship with Héctor. He preferred focusing on Héctor's music and the falling-star framework that succeeded with musician biographies Ray and Walk the Line. 'Could she have added something to the movie? She might've', he said. 'But we're trying to compress 20*

*years into a couple of hours. We couldn't have taken care of everyone. A lot of stories fell out of our narrative. You can't have it all.*<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, the filmmakers and Pérez herself intended to focus on the one son (Héctor Jr., credited as Tito)<sup>37</sup> because of the long-term relationship between the couple and also to heighten the dramatic outcome of their son's death. Director Leon Ichaso also sought to focus on the relationship between Lavoe and Pérez. In an interview Lopez discusses why the filmmakers adopted the perspective of the wife:

*I think he [Leon Ichaso] had just went to Fania records, where Fania Records used to be, and he was like, 'It's boxes, it's like this graveyard of this glorious time.' And he was like, 'I just think that's how we should start the movie. We should start the movie and just tell it from Puchi's [Pérez's] point of view through these interviews since this is a lot of the firsthand information we have'.*<sup>38</sup>

The focus on Pérez's perspective often overpowers Lavoe's musical significance and overall influence on Latin American music and culture. However, the interview sequences reaffirm her adoration and commitment to him which apparently assisted in Lavoe coping with his rapid rise to fame. The focus on the female perspective in *El Cantante* addresses issues relating to gender. Even though Leon Ichaso, a male, directs the film, the driving force of the narration is Pérez: independent, sexual and hence, powerful. Throughout the film Pérez exerts her sexuality and femininity by way of her dress, body language and dialogue, including her tone of voice. Pérez's control over narrative progression in *El Cantante* also alters the perspective of Lavoe which would be represented differently from a male point-of-view. Hence, the focus shifts from Lavoe's career to Lavoe's personal life – his emotional struggles in relation to his wife, son, family and drug-taking dependency. Lavoe's impact on salsa music in New York is downplayed and only referred to in order to contextualise his personal life story.

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<sup>36</sup> <http://blogs.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendId=84738773&blogId=299170472>, accessed 27 May 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Tito is played by three different actors in *El Cantante*. At four years old he is played by Jared Everleth, at seven years, Bernard Hernandez and 12 to 15 years, Christopher Becerra.

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_12634.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_12634.html), accessed 5 November 2009.

## Héctor Lavoe and Representational Images of Latin American Culture

Lavoe brought salsa to the mainstream music industry in the USA during his extended success at Fania records. Frances R. Aparicio suggests that Lavoe was one of the most important salseros (1998: 82) yet it was Eddie Palmeri to first bring salsa music to the country:

*In 1968 or 1969, he produced Justicia [1970] with musicians from La Perfecta, a record soon to become one of the first classics in a way of making music that was then just beginning to be called salsa (Quintero-Rivera, 2003: 211).*

*El Cantante* often draws focus away from the significance of Lavoe's life in terms of the cultural impact of his music and concentrates on the more personal issues he faced during his time in the limelight. Additionally, there is not an extensive amount of information available regarding Lavoe and his salsa music which has been translated into the English language. Although there is a considerable amount of material published in the Spanish language, this remains difficult to access by non-Spanish speaking people. Due to the language barriers, Leon Ichaso was motivated to create a film about Lavoe where dialogue is mostly spoken in English. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Ichaso states:

*'Those men and women brought a piece of the tropics with them', he said, speaking mostly of Puerto Rican artists but also of the Cuban musicians who settled in New York in the 1960s. 'And they didn't do it for money. They did it because they carried with them the pain of their ambulant island.' 'El Cantante,' he said, is nothing but a tribute to those musicians and a way to connect with the younger generations of Latinos.*<sup>39</sup>

Leon Ichaso's intentions were to give film audiences the opportunity to engage with and understand Lavoe's place in New York/Puerto Rican society. The film also provides some audiences with the opportunity to reconnect with their cultural history and initiate further interest into this particular form of music.

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<sup>39</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/movies/29ojit.html?pagewanted=2&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/movies/29ojit.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1), accessed 5 November 2009.

In analysing several Latin American films produced during the 1980s, Frederic Jameson suggests:

*What is engaged is certainly History, but then in that case history with holes, perforated history, which includes gaps not immediately visible to us, so close is our gaze to its objects of perception. These holes may first of all be characterized as gaps in information, yet in a succession of spatial situations seen too intensely for the mind to have the leisure to ask its other questions* (Jameson, 1986: 303-304).

Jameson refers here to the idea of ‘magic realism’ in film, where narratives are simplified in order to focus on violence or sexuality. Leon Ichaso engages with magic realism in *El Cantante* and the films he directed prior, including TV movie *Hendrix* (2000) and *Piñero* (2001), both biographical films. The visual and sonic direction of Leon Ichaso is constant throughout his films, giving him a level of authorship. Other Latin American themed films such as *Zoot Suit* (1981) and *La Bamba* (1987) (both directed by Luis Valdez) also employ the magic realism aesthetic.

The themes in Leon Ichaso’s films are similar, which include Latin American culture (Puerto Rican and Cuban), music and biography. In *El Cantante* Lavoe’s career was immersed in the Nuyorican culture, a title given to Puerto Rican migrants:

*The term Nuyorican is often used as an identifier of Puerto Ricans raised in the mainland who may speak and exhibit distinctive characteristics. For example, Nuyoricans are said to incorporate many English words in their usage of Spanish and speak Spanish with difficulty* (Lorenzo-Hernandez, 1999: 989).

The Puerto Rican people first began immigrating to the USA (particularly New York) during the 1950s and brought with them the salsa music tradition. According to Quintero-Rivera:



*The salsa movement, that 'way of making music' that Latinos like Palmeri developed in the late 1960s, was largely a response of (im)migrant youth of Latino-Caribbean culture to rock and roll, to the hedonist presentism of its origins and the homogenization that its 'globalization' appeared to imply (2003: 217).*

Lavoe, alongside Willie Colón, re-invented salsa music to cater for the younger generation of Puerto Ricans who were born in New York City. From his cultural background, Lavoe impacted on audiences from Puerto Rico and New York, a factor which also influenced his music (both style and lyrics). Lavoe is known as a Nuyorican and displays himself as such in the film with onstage performances accompanied by contemporary salsa musicians and dancers. *El Cantante* attempts to bring the significance of Latin American music/culture into Lavoe's musical performances by scanning shots of crowds gathering to watch, listen and dance to his music.

### ***Audio-Visual Montage***

To reflect Lavoe's impact on the Puerto Ricans and virtually all salsa music fans in New York, throughout the film there are images of album covers, newspaper headlines and archival footage of Lavoe's career in the 1960s through to the 1980s. According to Jean Mitry, "A film first and foremost comprises images, images of something. A system of images whose purpose is to describe, develop and narrate an event or series of events" (2000: 25). These three elements, although only appearing on screen briefly, assist in driving the narrative forward. They also support in contextualising and reiterating Lavoe's popularity and recognition by the media and the public. There are many album cover art designs that are splayed across the frame in *El Cantante*. One particularly significant cover is the Fania album cover, *Fania All-Stars Live* (Figure 1). The cover displays images of the musicians and singers superimposed within the text, 'F.A.N.I.A', representing the faces of the musicians who personify the record company. In *El Cantante* the same images are placed over the New York City skyline to symbolise the power and influence that the salsa musicians had over the city at the time. The image reflects how they appealed to audiences stemming from different

national backgrounds. However, the appearance of this image in the film follows a sequence where Lavoe and Pérez consume illegal substances and spend the evening with Colón and his anonymous girlfriend. Further, the FANIA image is then followed by Pérez and Lavoe's band that wait anxiously for Lavoe to arrive at a scheduled performance. Hence, although it appears that the image frames the Latin musicians as (untainted) iconic symbols, *El Cantante* demonstrates that this is a contrived media construction.

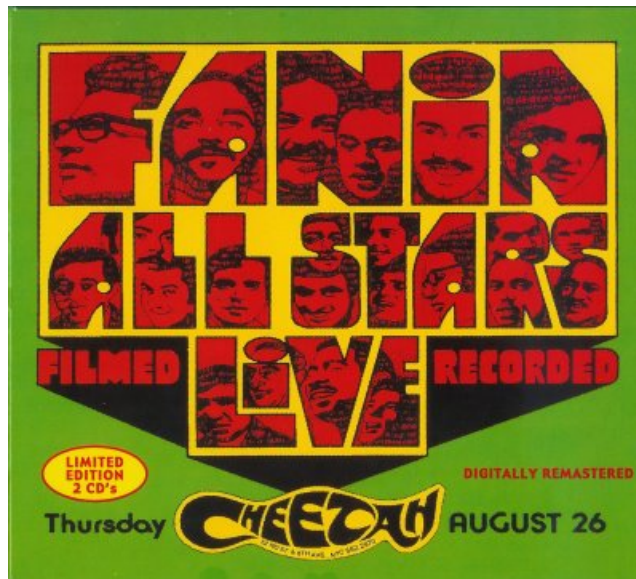


Figure 1: *F.A.N.I.A All Stars Live* album cover

Another album cover, *Comedia* (Figure 2), features Lavoe posing on his own, exemplifying Lavoe's sense of humour: a characteristic of his personality that is reinforced by Pérez numerous times throughout the film. Lavoe poses in his photo shoot for the album cover dressed like Charlie Chaplin [01:13:50] appealing to the comic side of his personality yet appearing agitated as he soon finds out that Pérez was cheating on him. The scene shows that even though Lavoe projects a light-hearted image to his fans, he is not necessarily the same persona in his private life, supporting the myth within the film.



Figure 2: Héctor Lavoe's *Comedia* album cover

The only reason *El Cantante* provides (through Pérez's character) about Lavoe dressing like Chaplin is that they both have a sense of humour. However, the appearance of Chaplin's star image reflects wider issues in American culture. According to Harry A. Grace, Charlie Chaplin's films are a function of the American culture at the time of their production (1952: 354), especially in regards to Chaplin's film, *The Immigrant* (1917).

*In The Immigrant, Charlie arrives in America with his customary small pouch of possessions. Although he has won a large sum of money in a crap game, he soon ends up destitute. The Immigrant has a happy ending because Charlie is saved by an artist* (Musser, 1988: 54).

Although the storyline does not directly reflect Lavoe's life experiences, the plot symbolises the difficulties that Lavoe also faced in settling into a new country. Discussing the implications of this film, Harry A. Grace further suggests:

*The problem of immigration was a pertinent one during the first few decades of this century. A pointed commentary upon this problem with particular emphasis upon injustices by public officials is made in The Immigrant (1952: 355).*

*The Immigrant* is one of the films where Chaplin plays the ‘tramp’: a vagrant who attempts to extend beyond his low socio-economic status. Chaplin plays the iconic ‘tramp’ figure in several films such as *The Tramp* (1915), *City Lights* (1931) and *The Great Dictator* (1940). The films provide a social commentary which represents the struggle for the ‘American dream’ – an ideal that Lavoe also aspired to throughout his life. The ‘American dream’ is represented in *El Cantante* as Lavoe moves from Puerto Rico to New York City to begin a successful career and start a family.

The montage scenes throughout *El Cantante* display images of Lavoe’s successful career and his rise to fame: “Typically, the montage sequence compresses a considerable length of time or space, traces a large-scale event, or selects representative moments from a process” (Bordwell, 1985a: 29). Upbeat salsa music plays throughout the various sequences and assists the film to transition from one scene, one location (or one time) to another. The scenes help drive the narrative forward and also contextualise the life story of Lavoe. The audio-visual montage also reflects the FANIA musicians and their accomplishments. Hence, through representing one individual, this musical biopic reflects the music/culture – the New York salsa music scene. In the montage scenes that display tour dates, newspaper headlines and promotional concert posters there are a few album covers that display rebellious images of both Colón and Lavoe. Wilson A. Valentin-Escobar insightfully suggests, “The ‘bad boy’ album covers cannot be dismissed simply as examples of youthful indiscretions; rather they are heavily laden with class and gender symbolism” (2002: 167). As opposed to the female-centred narrative representations through Pérez/Lopez, the album covers featured in *El Cantante* “signify other masculine-driven representations of national mythologies and identities” (Valentin-Escobar, 2002: 167). These constructions include the Wild West, urban street gangs, organised crime and ethnic rivalry. For example, one of the album covers features Colón holding a case in the shape of a gun and smoking a cigar, hovering over a body, titled *Cosa Nuestra*. The title is a pun on ‘Cosa Nostra’ (defined as the ‘made men’ of the Sicilian Mafia) which translates to ‘Our Thing’ (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Colón and Lavoe's *Cosa Nuestra* album cover

In *Crime Pays* both Colón and Lavoe stand next to a car with cigars and long jackets, appearing as gangsters (Figure 4). *Lo Mato* (Figure 5) is yet another album cover where Colón holds a gun to a man's head. According to Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene M. Dávila, "this bad-boy masculine image that Colón and Lavoe portrayed in their albums and performances may have contributed to the similar images adopted by many rappers from the late seventies to the current period" (2001: 212). Additionally, the "album covers were in intertextual dialogue with cinematic representations of New York City organized crime" (Valentin-Escobar, 2001: 212). Hence, these album covers positioned themselves as a part of the media trend to represent gang-related crime during the period of the 1970s. Cop films and even the crime subgenre of blaxploitation emerged in the 1970s, featuring characters such as hit men, drug dealers and pimps played predominantly by black actors. Crime genre films such as *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *The Godfather II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) and *Mean Streets* (1973) set in New York City, inspired the imagery associated with these Latin American musicians. Colón and Lavoe are not representing their own personality but media trends in America. The images on the album covers are essentially for shock value but also highlight social concerns of these minority groups.



Figure 4: Colón and Lavoe's *Crime Pays* album cover



Figure 5: Willie Colón's *Lo Mato* album cover

There is archival footage also present in *El Cantante* that links the representations to real life images. For example, when Lavoe visits the cemetery he reflects on his own life. To visualise his thoughts old wrinkled photographs are flashed onscreen of him as a child and with his new wife Pérez as well as video of him performing at concerts and old family photographs.

Although the images in this montage are not of Lavoe but replicated by Marc Anthony, they still provide the film with a sense of realism and reinforce that the film is based on a true life



story. The very final photographs presented in *El Cantante* are literally of Lavoe himself in concert, a photo of Pérez, and finally, the couple together. These final photographs disconnect the viewer from the star actors Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez (a self-reflexive technique) and ground the viewer in re-acknowledging the actual identities of the characters represented in the film.

### **Star Status, Power and Influence: Lavoe/Anthony and Pérez /Lopez**

The influence of star casting in a film, as discussed in Chapter One with reference to Richard Dyer's (1979) pioneering study, is particularly significant in *El Cantante*. As Butler notes, "The star's image dominates movie posters and appears on dozens of magazine covers, it is clearly one of the principal commodities that is used to market a film to an audience" (1998: 342). Casting the star entertainers Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez in the leading roles of *El Cantante* also adds to uncertainty for the film viewer in identifying what biographical details correspond with which star persona. For example, there are several similarities between Marc Anthony (the actor) and Héctor Lavoe (the character and actual singer). Similarities include the fact that they are both of Puerto Rican decent, they are both salsa singers and both performed sold out shows at Madison Square Garden. According to Linda Ruth Williams:

*These are stars who never quite shed their celebrity skins. Lopez co-stars and co-produces and this is the first title for her Nuyorican Productions house. It's also hard not to map life on to art and back again, given that real-life husband and wife Anthony and Lopez play biopic husband and wife Héctor and Puchi (2008: 53).*

In this particular case the actors' current star-power crosses over to the characters' pre-existing star-power, leading the film to merge both personae into one star identity – blurring the distinction between actuality and invention. Although this type of casting often occurs, Anthony and Lopez not only represent one character, they represent an entire culture and music style. Through playing Lavoe, Anthony has re-shaped his status as a Nuyorican singer. Anthony's music style is referred to as *salsa romantica* (ballad salsa), a more commercial style of salsa music which developed in the mid-1980s, whereas Lavoe sings *salsa dura* (hard

salsa) which is the original classic style of salsa music. By playing Lavoe in *El Cantante*, Anthony (and Lopez) has, in a way, legitimised his career as he has demonstrated the acknowledgement and ability to sing the original style of salsa.

Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez officially became a Hollywood star couple when they married in a secret ceremony on 5 June 2004. The marriage was publicly confirmed early in 2005 in a media interview with Lopez. In June 2006:

*Lopez and Anthony serve as grand marshals for the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City. That January, with an estimated \$255 million empire that includes music, movies, clothes and fragrances, the New York-bred Latina [Lopez] gets top billing in People en Español's<sup>40</sup> list of the top 100 Most Influential Hispanics.<sup>41</sup>*

Lopez is recognised as a powerful popular entertainer not only in Hollywood but also in the Latin American community. Therefore her presence in *El Cantante* affects how the film viewer reads the character, Pérez. Lopez's femininity and public recognition gives Pérez's character (and femininity) a certain increased level of intensity. Additionally, as Lopez is famous for certain physical attributes (as well as her singing/dancing/acting career), the representation of Pérez is altered to accommodate both personas. As well as the consideration of gender, "What we see are not two spheres of social reality, but two (or three) sets of social relations... relations of work and sex (or class and race, and sex/gender)" (Kelly, 1984: 58). As well as considering gender as an issue in interpretation, it must be framed in comparison to class and race. These factors are significant in analysing Lopez and Pérez which, in turn, influence the representation of Lavoe.

Although Lopez does not have as much in common to Pérez as Anthony does to Lavoe, Lopez is still of Puerto Rican descent, living in the US and is married to Marc Anthony with children. It is worth noting that Lopez had previously starred in the musical biopic, *Selena*, released in 1997. According to *People Magazine*:

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.people.com/people/jennifer\\_lopez/biography/0,,20008676\\_20,00.html](http://www.people.com/people/jennifer_lopez/biography/0,,20008676_20,00.html), accessed 17 February 2009.

<sup>41</sup> According to webpage *The Movie Times* (<http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/actress/actressProfiles.mv?jlopez>, accessed 15 December 2009), Lopez's earnings from the 11 films she starred in from 2000 up until (and including) *El Cantante* grossed an average of over \$42 million. Lopez also released seven music albums and four music DVD's during this time.



*Lopez brings the murdered Tejano [Spanish-Texan] singer Selena back to life in a biopic, but not before beating out 11,000 competitors who flocked to auditions around the country and winning approval from Selena's padre Abraham Quintanilla.*<sup>42</sup>

However, upon the film's release, many Mexican film viewers were disappointed with the casting of Lopez because she was of Puerto Rican descent. Although many of her fans of Mexican decent were anticipating the release of *Selena*, some were angry that the Puerto Rican actress was cast to play the protagonist (Carey, 1997: 5). On the other hand, "For many Puerto Rican viewers of Lopez's cinematic representations of Selena, Selena's Mexicanness was effectively trumped and thus erased by Lopez's Puerto Rican womanhood" (Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003: 91). Hence, the racial background of the film viewer depends on how the audience interprets a character and how they are remembered as a part of cultural history. Further, casting Jennifer Lopez has led Selena Quintanilla-Pérez to become a part of not only Mexican music history but of the wider Latin American cultural history because of Lopez's nationality. Although nationality was not a concern for Lopez's role in *El Cantante*, her status as a successful female entertainer alters the film audiences' perception of Pérez's characteristics. Throughout the film Lopez's star persona is more apparent than Pérez because of her overpowering popularity and femininity.

Both Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez had levels of creative contribution in constructing the identities of the characters that they played in the film. According to *The Sound and the Heat of El Cantante* (a behind-the-scenes documentary of the film included in the DVD features of *El Cantante*); Marc Anthony shared the same music manager as Héctor Lavoe. Therefore, through already being a popular musician and guided by the same manager, Anthony first related to Lavoe as a popular singer. Anthony prepared for his role by analysing Lavoe's music and became particularly motivated by the impact and honesty of Lavoe's music/lyrics. Anthony also had recalled meeting Lavoe years prior, before being cast in the film. He was introduced to Lavoe and spent the evening listening to him discuss the stories of his past. Anthony's performance in *El Cantante* reflects his perception of Lavoe and his interpretation draws from direct interaction with the salsa singer and also from second-hand sources. Marc Anthony's portrayal is consequently skewed as it stems from his brief meeting with Lavoe and stories passed on from various individuals. In preparing for her role as Pérez, Jennifer

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<sup>42</sup> [http://www.people.com/people/jennifer\\_lopez/biography/0,,20008676\\_10,00.html](http://www.people.com/people/jennifer_lopez/biography/0,,20008676_10,00.html), accessed 17 February 2009.

Lopez discloses in her interview that in researching for her role she discovered eight CDs of audio interview recordings that were administered for the film. In an interview with Lopez she discusses her role/s in *El Cantante*:

*Once Leon [Ichaso] came onto the project and we talked about what he wanted to do with it, we had these tapes of Puchi [Pérez]. I think it was his decision to tell it from her point of view because we had this. We talked about it. He's like, 'Well, I [talked] to Fania Records and I think the way I'm going to do it..., ' because he did the rewrite. He wrote the script. It's when that kind of took place. When I first got the script, I knew I was going to produce it. I wasn't even sure I was going to be in it.'*<sup>43</sup>

As well as acting in a lead role in *El Cantante*, Jennifer Lopez owns the production company; Nuyorican Film Productions,<sup>44</sup> which launched *El Cantante* and hence, Lopez was originally (before accepting the role as Pérez) one of the producers of the film. Lopez discusses her decision to take on the character:

*This was one of the first things with my production company that I felt like, 'This is something I really want to make.' ... The script was brought to me, I guess, about four or five years ago now, through Puchi, who had done interviews with the very first writer on the screenplay, David [Darmstaedter], and David Maldonado brought it to my manager at the time, saying 'Read it, it's the Héctor Lavoe story, and Puchi [Pérez] wants Jennifer to play her.'*<sup>45</sup>

Overall, in creating the film and its characters, Lopez had a higher level of power and control over the representations of Héctor Lavoe's life onscreen and clearly of the role of Pérez. *El Cantante* provides the opportunity to reinforce Lopez's star persona as an entertainer but also

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<sup>43</sup> <http://movies.about.com/od/lopezjennifer/a/cantantejl80207.htm>, accessed 9 June 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Nuyorican Productions is owned by Jennifer Lopez, which was previously co-owned by her ex-husband, Cris Judd. The company has since produced various films such as *Bordertown* (Gregory Nava, 2006) and television series such as *MTV's DanceLife* (Jennifer Lopez, Maurissa Tancharoen and Kevin Tancharoen, 2007) and *South Beach* (Matt Cirulnick, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.imdiversity.com/villages/hispanic/arts\\_culture\\_media/kam\\_jlo\\_0808.asp](http://www.imdiversity.com/villages/hispanic/arts_culture_media/kam_jlo_0808.asp), accessed 9 June 2010.

a film producer in Hollywood. The film specifically offers Lopez the ability to show off her physical form which has received much media attention.

### *Jennifer Lopez and the Media*

In engaging with and presenting the star persona of Jennifer Lopez through the role of Pérez, the filmmakers provide subtle images that draw from the media fame Lopez acquired in her Hollywood career as a singer and actor. Jennifer Lopez has been inundated by the media since her rise to fame in Hollywood. Apart from being a competent singer/dancer/actor, Lopez is also widely known for having a curvaceous backside. *Fame* online reports: “Jennifer Lopez’s bum has been the subject of much more discussion than her acting, and its perfection was such that she reportedly insured it for millions of dollars”.<sup>46</sup> Lopez’s publicity is briefly acknowledged in the film when Lopez (as Pérez) dances, rotating her bottom in front of Lavoe, blocking the television that he is watching [00:25:33]. The more significant element of this scene that allows Lopez’s star power to, in a sense, overtake Pérez’s character, is that Lopez actually blocks the film camera’s view of the television, as opposed to Lavoe’s viewing angle. The scene demonstrates what Christine Gledhill refers to as ‘crossover stardom’ where Lopez’s, “off-screen lifestyles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in performance” (1991: xiv). Hence, the film camera positioning demonstrates that the filmmaker’s are exploiting Lopez’s physical frame for the film audience in reference to Jennifer Lopez’s past media exposure. There are various camera angles throughout the film that subtly emphasise Lopez’s asset. The scenes focus on a medium shot that places the entire back-length of Lopez in the frame with lighting accenting the mid-region of her body. Examples include when Pérez is trying to locate Lavoe in their home [00:48:24 – 00:48:53], when Pérez and Lavoe discuss Colón in the recording studio [00:55:51 – 00:56:23] and when Lavoe questions whether Pérez has been cheating on him with another man [01:12:45 – 01:13:37]. To further accentuate her buttocks in these scenes, Lopez wears either high-waisted pants or silky dresses that reveal the outline of her underwear.

As well as her star persona, Lopez’s buttocks also have significance in terms of her Puerto Rican nationality. According to Negrón-Muntaner:

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<sup>46</sup> [http://www.metro.co.uk/fame/article.html?in\\_article\\_id=61812&in\\_page\\_id=7](http://www.metro.co.uk/fame/article.html?in_article_id=61812&in_page_id=7), accessed 3 February 2009.

*Like the camel hump, the Puerto Rican butt suggests that bodies are made of something else besides language, even when we can only speak about them discursively, and that the gap between the materiality of language and flesh can never be totally bridged (1997: 189).*

Lopez emphasising her physical form in *El Cantante* is linked with Lopez as part of the wider community of Puerto Rican women which is exemplified through salsa music style called *salsa dura*:

*A term that defines salsa as it developed in New York, with genres and rhythms drawn from Cuba and other islands in the Caribbean melding with the tempo, drive and improvisational techniques picked up by the immigrants in New York City (Pandey, 2005: 594).*

Lopez's physical figure in media is a representation of non-white women and their difference. Displaying her figure confidently throughout her film and music career (as well as openly discussing it in magazine and television interviews) demonstrates how her body contributes to a sense of power and control:

*Despite such genuine elements of containment in the Jennifer Lopez star discourse in her liminal period in Hollywood, this body-obsessed publicity also was a sign as well of Lopez's role and social power as an active agent in the star-making process and of most importantly of changing cultural standards within the mainstream media as a whole (Beltrán, 2002: 83).*

Lopez's physical attributes, although not the Hollywood norm (which implies a more slender body type), provide Lopez with a status that sits between Latin and white-American communities. Her visual appearance in *El Cantante* exemplifies her own persona in

Hollywood and also of Latin (American) women in the public eye. Originally perceived as traits of the oppressed, contemporary cinema, music and media represent the female Latin body as empowering.

## **Audio-Visual Representation**

The musical numbers in the film are vital elements that aid in the understanding of Héctor Lavoe's life story through lyrics and audio-visual execution. The placement of music in the narrative flow is also significant as it confirms whether his life impacted upon his music. The theme song and title of the film, 'El Cantante', is featured as a representation of the highest and lowest points of Lavoe's life. As Anahid Kassabian notes in relation to theme songs:

*The theme song, where it exists, is generally given a very high degree of attention. Audience members may be familiar with it before they enter the viewing situation, from radio play, television advertisements, or film trailers. It occurs most often during the main titles and/or establishing sequence of the film, when the film has not yet 'absorbed' the audience into the narrative world of the film (2001: 53).*

'El Cantante' is featured four times in *El Cantante*. It is sung at the beginning of the film by Lavoe to an overcrowded cheering audience that is filled to capacity. The song is then sung later in the film by a musician and fan of Lavoe. The third time 'El Cantante' plays is when Lavoe sings it the recording studio. The film then returns to the opening musical number and utilises Lavoe's performance of 'El Cantante' to conclude the film. The song's lyrics translate to:

*I am the singer you've come to listen to*

*The best of my songs, I'll sing them all to you*

*I'll sing to a life, of laughter and sorrows*

*I'll sing to the bad times, sing to the good times*

*I am the singer and I'm here to sing*

*And if you follow me, my song I'll share with you*

*People stop me in the street; you can hear them say – Hey Hector!*

*You've got it made, plenty of women and good times*

*Nobody asks if I suffer or cry, If I've got a pain, that hurts deep inside*

*I am the singer, because singing is 'my thing'*

*And audiences pay, to hear me out*<sup>47</sup>

Even though it was not written by Lavoe himself, 'El Cantante' narrates the personal struggles and emotions he encountered during his career. Lyrics, however, are not the only significant part of the musical numbers: visual representation (along with the music itself) is an element that assists the song to become incorporated into the film format.

### ***Comparison to the MTV Aesthetic and Style***

The audio-visual representation of Lavoe's music in certain sequences in *El Cantante* appears to draw upon the music television (MTV) style/aesthetic that developed in the 1980s:

*The creators of MTV believed that a fusion of 'album-oriented rock' with an advertising-style televisual sequence of images that would move very quickly with fast cuts and no transitions would have maximum appeal for the target audience (Weimann, 2000: 191).*

Similar fast editing and transitions between scenes also occur in *El Cantante*. The fast-paced style leaves the viewer with a certain emotion regarding the events that unfold. An example is

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<sup>47</sup> Translation from *Lyrics Translate* (<http://lyricstranslate.com/en/el-cantante-add-english-title-here.html> accessed 15 December 2009).

where Lavoe strives to win back his father's acceptance after ignoring his request, leaving Puerto Rico for New York City [01:16:23]. Lavoe, with Pérez and his son travel back to Puerto Rico to vacation after Lavoe's tour, taking the opportunity to reunite with family and friends [01:15:20]. The Puerto Rico sequence evokes a sombre, contemplative mood as Lavoe takes photos with his new family and reflects on a time before his fame, when he used to sing with his father. Holding a camera, the family take shots of each other in the tropical location which heightens the nostalgia formed through Lavoe's reflection. Each shot in this sequence lasts on average no more than three seconds each and the sequence jumps from Lavoe and family at the beach in Puerto Rico to the Fania performance on tour in 1984, interspersed with images of Lavoe experimenting with illegal drugs, newspaper headlines and packed, cheering crowds. Table 1 displays the timing of each scene and is mapped out to highlight the speed of scene changes. The sequence flows seamlessly because of the constant (uncredited) salsa instrumental audio track that plays throughout – an attribute of the music video aesthetic as the film is edited to the music. The scene finally concludes with a black and white flashback of Lavoe singing with his father in Puerto Rico (at which point, the music track stops) which leads into a confrontation between the father and son, leaving Lavoe with a sense of dismissal.

Scene	Time
<i>Fania performance:</i> musicians perform	01:15:20
<i>Vacation:</i> Lavoe's experimentation with illegal drugs	01:15:32
<i>Fania performance:</i> crowds stand and cheer	01:15:33
<i>Vacation:</i> family take photos beachside	01:15:34
<i>Fania performance:</i> Colón conducts musicians	01:15:37
<i>Vacation:</i> Lavoe and son embrace for photos	01:15:38
<i>Fania performance:</i> musician playing drums	01:15:39
<i>Vacation:</i> Lavoe takes photos of Pérez and son	01:15:41
<i>Fania performance:</i> musician playing the trumpet	01:15:43
<i>Vacation:</i> family leave beachside and walk together	01:15:44
<i>Fania performance:</i> Lavoe holds microphone by cord	01:15:51
<i>Vacation:</i> Lavoe embraces his son for photos	01:15:53

<i>Fania performance</i> : Lavoe sings to cheering audience	01:15:57
<i>Vacation</i> : Lavoe's son films Pérez beachside	01:15:58
<i>Flashback</i> : Lavoe and his father singing in Puerto Rico, 1963.	01:16:07
<i>Vacation</i> : Lavoe looks out onto the beach, reflecting	01:16:10

Table 1: Timing of scenes in Fania performance/Puerto Rico vacation sequence.

*El Cantante* offers extreme highs and lows that mark the positive and negative experiences in Lavoe's life. The positive moments tend to rely on the *MTV* aesthetic, chronicling his rapid rise to fame and also his dependency on stimulants such as cocaine (*MTV* aesthetic is also a tool utilised to cover vast amounts of time and allow for a more seamless flow between scenes). Use of these drugs results in heightened energy and pleasure responses: Lavoe's internal emotions during these periods are reflected in quick editing and rapid film camera movements, thus placing the film audience in Lavoe's position. It is during these scenes that the film audience is able to understand Lavoe's position and in turn, his identity. Kevin Williams notes that feature films can be produced in music video style: "Music videos present a specific look, a constructed, organized and stylized manner of visualizing music" (2003: 20). The study of music video style in film is discussed by numerous scholars including Marsha Kinder (1984) in *Flashdance* (1983), John Mundy (1999) in *Top Gun* (1986) and Kay Dickinson (2003) in *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (2006).

The *MTV* aesthetic provides a certain mood or emotion for the viewer, channelled through its mode of presentation. According to Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush, the emphasis is on feeling, rather than exposition (Dancyger and Rush, 2007: 162). In *El Cantante* the mood is of high energy and elation, resembling the fast-paced, frantic lifestyle that Lavoe led as a popular singer. Most often the music video style is identified in Lavoe's live on stage performances. According to Jody Berland "the contemporary image tends to present itself as representing (imagining, standing [in] for) what it is also displacing: the social context of the music itself" (1993: 27). Subtitled songs<sup>48</sup> performed by Lavoe draw the film audiences' attention to lyrical meaning and how they intersect with the plot of the film but also how they more generally

<sup>48</sup> Subtitled songs include 'Aguanile' (discussed in more detail below), 'El Dia de Suerte' (which translates to 'the day of luck') and 'Que Lio' (which translates to 'what a problem').



represent Lavoe as a star/icon, as do songs that are not subtitled. Saul Austerlitz argues that the music video (much like these musical sequences in *El Cantante*):

*marks the triumph of the visual over the oral, eschewing dialogue in favor of style, aura, and, occasionally, plot, propelled forward by a dependence on the cinematic language of montage as a necessary means of communication* (2007: 1).

The music video aesthetic promotes Lavoe as a popular artist and therefore, a commodity. According to Margaret Morse, the rock video endorses a concept used to sell a variety of products:

*This concept can be used not only to promote (a) album and audio tape sales, but also (b) video tapes of itself, (c) the image of a rock star, (d) box-office and video tape sales of movies as well as soundtrack albums, and (e) products and services related not just to the music and performers, but also to the life-styles and world-view depicted in the visuals of the rock video* (1986: 16-17).

*El Cantante*'s music video aesthetic promotes not only Lavoe's music and recorded albums but also the sales of Latin music referenced in the film including the FANIA albums, especially the music of Héctor Lavoe and Willie Colón. Marc Anthony (*Live from New York City*, 2007) and Jennifer Lopez's music albums (*Como Ama una Mujer*, translated to 'How a Woman Loves' and *Brave*, both released in 2007) released during the time are also recognised, including the *El Cantante* (2007) soundtrack.<sup>49</sup> In turn, this musical biopic also commodifies Latin American music/culture.

The extension away from the *MTV* style occurs at points during Lavoe's drug-taking when the positive mood becomes more paranoid and confused and various scenes slow in pace. It is also at points that there are negative occurrences and arguments between characters, often

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<sup>49</sup> The *El Cantante* soundtrack features nine Lavoe tracks sung by Anthony and one, 'Toma De Mí' (translated to 'Take From Me') by Lopez.

between Lavoe and Pérez. The more negative events in the story tend to be slower in terms of editing and sometimes represented in slow motion, for example Lavoe's failed suicide attempt. The nostalgic, melodramatic scenes in *El Cantante* offer primarily a sad and troubling emotion that permits the film viewer to empathise with the protagonist. One of the low points in the turbulent life of Lavoe is when his son dies. As Pérez discloses in her interview, this is the definitive point where Lavoe loses control over his life and his career slowly comes to an end. At this point in time Lavoe stopped creating new music and became a recluse, withdrawing from the media and his fans. The colours of the subsequent scenes in the film are dominated by dull blues and greys. Lavoe is positioned on screen with his head hanging and back facing the film camera. The music, featured both diegetically and non-diegetically, slows down in rhythm, becomes quiet and the patrons that arrive at his final concert performances fill few seats at each venue. At a comeback performance it even rains at the venue (an open-air concert hall) and the show is cancelled. All of the colours, textures and imagery chosen to highlight the end of Lavoe's career (and eventually his life) combine to create a dark and brooding atmosphere which is the principal layer of the last scenes of the film.

### ***The Function of Subtitles in Musical Numbers***

The pictorial aspect of musical numbers is one of the most important elements of the musical biopic. The musical numbers that are featured in *El Cantante* are when Lavoe is performing his music at a concert hall, festival or nightclub. The reason why the performance scenes are significant is because Lavoe's music is what he is known for and why he becomes famous and remembered in Latin American music history. The pairing of visual imagery with the music of Lavoe aids the film audience to interpret each song as stemming directly from specific biographical events. The musical numbers in *El Cantante* entice the viewer to maintain interest beyond the song and confirm narrative details through dialogue, often spoken in English and Spanish with subtitles.

Although all of the songs performed by Lavoe (Anthony's vocals) in *El Cantante* are sung in Spanish, some musical numbers in the film offer translations to English which are placed as subtitles across the screen. How the subtitles are aesthetically displayed differs to subtitles of

Spanish dialogue and conversations in the film. According to Thorsten Schröter's doctoral study of subtitling, "The letters are normally white, in a sans serif font, spaced proportionally, and with a greyish shadow or background box that becomes darker if the underlying picture becomes brighter, and vice versa" (2005: 31). However, when translating Spanish lyrics in music, the shape and position of the subtitles in the film continually change. The musical numbers in *El Cantante* merge the subtitles into performance imagery that, in turn, alters the function of the translation. The unconventional subtitles, only in the musical numbers in *El Cantante* provide the viewer with a further understanding of the music which is usually linked to, or integrated in, the film narrative. The way in which the subtitles are displayed onscreen assists the non-Spanish speaking viewer to further engage in the musical number as the subtitles are not a simple addition to the film placed as a small white text at the bottom of the screen: the subtitles are integrated into the audio-visual representation of the music and fade in and off screen as Lavoe sings each line. These musical subtitles are a part of the performance and the viewing experience, not just an addition for the non-Spanish speaking film audience. The subtitle styling is also linked to music video aesthetic which has a focus on the visual:

*Vision, visual perception, and the electronic media's knowledge and use of techniques stressing the visual, are being exploited by a new narrative form in our culture, found most often in music videos. It is a narrative based primarily on sight (though occasionally relying on sound as well) which carries with it its own logic* (Jones, 1988: 16).

The subtitled musical numbers in *El Cantante* are heavily reliant on the visible, as they demonstrate how the music is integrated into the film narrative. The subtitling demonstrates that the lyrics of the Spanish songs are important for all types of film audience. Miika Blinn argues that economic, aesthetic and educational factors are the three main concerns when translating foreign language in film and television and as opposed to dubbing: "The argument is that viewers' acquire foreign-language skills by hearing the original language in subtitled films/programmes" (2008: 2). The subtitle positioning in *El Cantante's* musical numbers aids the film viewer not only a minor opportunity to develop Spanish language skills but also to understand Latin American music/culture through performance. Furthermore, the subtitles

provide the non-Spanish speaking film audience an insight into the character of Lavoe and his personal struggles through his music.

The musical numbers with subtitles suggest that the lyrics have a direct reference to what is occurring in the plot of the film and assist in driving the narrative forward. An example of this is Lavoe's song, 'Aguanile',<sup>50</sup> which he performs after he visits a woman who tells him to wear a beaded necklace to ward off evil spirits. As he is seen performing onstage, the camera cuts to scenes where he is seemingly under a healing chant. The subtitles in this musical number state, amongst other lyrics, that Lavoe is singing "for those judging me, I got Aguanile" (Figure 6). The dancers onstage also link to the film narrative as they provide salsa-styled interpretive choreography of the ritual that Lavoe went through, visually apparent in the juxtaposed sequences. Overall, this song marks a point in Lavoe's life when he needed help and consulted his Christian faith in order to get through some of his more difficult times.



Figure 6: Musical number subtitling in 'Aguanile'

The decision not to translate some songs for *El Cantante*'s audiences suggests that the lyrics do not need to be interpreted literally. However, the musical numbers will have added meaning for Spanish audiences. These musical numbers provide an audio-visual function that

<sup>50</sup> In salsa, 'Aguanile' stems from the Afro-Cuban religion called Santería which is featured a lot in Cuban salsa. The full phrase used in Lavoe's song is "Aguanile mai mai": praying to the saint (orisha) Oggun. Translated, *Aguan* means 'cleaning' and *Ile* means 'house'.

demonstrates Lavoe's impact on his audiences, singing to packed crowds of fans who salsa dance in the aisles and sing along to his music. Subtitled songs establish the importance of the lyrics in relation to Lavoe's biography. These songs assist in mapping out Lavoe's life narrative in a more detailed and unique way. Musical performances without subtitles guide the film viewer towards a certain mood, either positive or negative, through the sound of the music and how it is represented visually. The focus shifts from the individual songs (and meaning) to the overall concert performance with regard to music sequences that are not translated.

Largely, *El Cantante* serves as an important case study in appreciating the creation of contemporary musical biopics. The musical numbers in the film attempt to include English translation in visual presentation of each Spanish song in order to engage all film viewers. The musical biopic utilises the Spanish and English language with subtitled translations to communicate dialogue and music lyrics to both types of audience member however at times favouring one over the other. Out of the 11 musical numbers sung in Spanish, 5 have English subtitles. Therefore depending on dialect and language, film viewers will interpret *El Cantante* and Lavoe's story in slightly different ways. English speaking audiences will have different insights to those of Spanish speaking decent depending on whether certain phrases are translated. Akin to *El Cantante*, "Music video promotes consumerism through forms of emotional manipulation practiced in traditional advertising" (Banks, 1996: 5) and furthermore:

*It evokes a kind of hypnotic trance in which the spectator is suspended in a state of unsatisfied desire but forever under the illusion of imminent satisfaction through some kind or purchase. This desire is displaced onto the record that will embody the star's magnetism and fascination* (Kaplan, 1987: 12).

Hence the film narrative is guided by the production team and actors and deciphered by the film audience. The story of Héctor Lavoe in *El Cantante* demonstrates that the mythology constructed around the life story of a popular singer is propelled by the filmmakers and the wife, Pérez, which is then interpreted by the media and fans.

## CONTROL

*Control* represents the image of the musician through the personal perspective of the life partner. However, as opposed to Pérez in *El Cantante*, Ian Curtis' wife Deborah Curtis had a direct influence over the portrayal of her late-husband in *Control*. Deborah Curtis wrote a memoir of her life with her late-husband, *Touching from a Distance* (1995) and co-produced the film aptly named *Control* which presents Ian Curtis as an individual who struggles to gain control over his own life and various personal relationships (Deborah Curtis and Annik Honoré). At 19 years old, Curtis married his girlfriend Deborah Woodruff and had a child named Natalie by the age of 22. During this time (in 1976) he formed a music band with Bernard Sumner (keyboards and guitar), Peter Hook (backing vocals and bass guitar) and Stephen Morris (percussion and drums) named Warsaw which changed to Joy Division after signing with Factory Records. In their career from 1976 to 1980, the band released *An Ideal for Living* (1978), *Unknown Pleasures* (1979) and *Closer* (1980). Curtis was a husband, father, popular musician and a victim of epilepsy, prone to epileptic seizures which occurred spontaneously including onstage, mid-performance. He struggled to maintain the personae that his friends, family and fans expected of him throughout his short career (and life) and finally committed suicide at the age of 23 by hanging himself on the clothesline in his kitchen on the eve of Joy Division's first tour of the USA.

Ian Curtis' character development and shifting personae throughout *Control* reaffirms the continually transforming identity of the musician represented through media texts. *Control* is self-referential in the interpretation of the recognised music star by manipulating and replicating iconic images and music tracks of Ian Curtis and Joy Division. Jeremy G. Butler states that, "A star must appear in numerous texts, which play off one another. Thus, one could say that a star is defined by his or her intertextuality, by the ability to correlate various media texts" (1998: 351). Therefore the following discussion will map out Curtis' alternative personae: the husband, father, musician and musical icon. This study will analyse the sonic and visual elements of *Control*, narrative structures and literary adaptation from Deborah Curtis' memoir, *Touching from a Distance*. The analysis will also include Anton Corbijn's direction in creating the music video for Joy Division's 'Atmosphere' (1988), its presentation

in *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and how they compare to the feature-length documentary, *Joy Division* (2007), released in the same year as *Control*. This study will conclude by drawing upon how Joy Division has (since the death of Ian Curtis) contributed to defining goth and punk music culture. Overall, the study of musical biopic *Control* will demonstrate that a star is defined by his/her intertextuality and that, more generally, musical biopics draw on this to shape their conclusive representation.

## **Diegetic Music in *Control***

The music tracks in *Control* are integral in establishing the context for the film and understanding Ian Curtis as a character. The music within the film often appears as part of the diegesis and is integrated into the narrative. In order to contextualise and frame the film the music foregrounds certain sequences non-diegetically and then slowly transforms into ‘visualised sound’: where the film audience is able to visually locate the source of the sound/music (Chion, 1994: 72). Visualised sound often occurs in *Control* when Curtis plays records in his bedroom and also when rehearsing Joy Division’s music for upcoming gigs. The two functions of the music in *Control* are to set the tone or mood of the film and to offer insight into the mind of the musician, Ian Curtis. It is also worth noting that the Joy Division tracks featured in *Control* are performed by the actors Sam Riley (Ian Curtis), James Anthony Pearson (Bernard Sumner), Joe Anderson (Peter Hook) and Harry Treadaway (Stephen Morris). All other tracks in *Control* are original recordings from popular artists including Iggy Pop, David Bowie, the Sex Pistols and The Buzzcocks.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, all incidental music is played by New Order<sup>52</sup> which are instrumental tracks that heighten on-screen action and drive narrative forward.

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<sup>51</sup> The music careers of David Bowie and Iggy Pop commenced in the 1960s. The Sex Pistols and The Buzzcocks were formed during the same time of Joy Division (1975 and 1976 respectively).

<sup>52</sup> After Curtis’ suicide, the remaining members of Joy Division changed their name to New Order in 1980. The band remained active until 2007 when Peter Hook publicly announced his resignation.

## ***Musical Integration***

There are two key examples of musical integration in *Control* which both reaffirm the persona of Ian Curtis and assist the filmic audience to witness Curtis' transformation into a star musician figure. The first of these examples is set after the potential band members of Joy Division attend the Sex Pistols live performance. Ian Curtis is presented in the view of the film camera, the morning after, casually walking along his street to his place of employment (according to Deborah Curtis' memoir, the couple moved into a house that was a short walk from Ian Curtis' workplace) as non-diegetic instrumental music (by New Order) plays in the foreground of the soundtrack mix. The camera pans around to face Curtis' back and reveals that he had written the word 'HATE' in large capital letters on the back of his jacket. As Deborah Curtis states:

*Seeing the Sex Pistols was confirmation that there was something out there for him other than a career in civil service. Their musical ability was dubious that night, which reaffirmed Ian's belief that anyone could become a rock star* (Curtis, 1995: 36-7).

Hence, when combined with the firm beat of the music (a repetitive short guitar riff), the audio-visual nature of the scene expects the film viewer to acknowledge that the Sex Pistols concert initiated Ian Curtis's image as the mythic musician of Joy Division to which he will soon become. The music also creates a sense of anticipation for the film audience at this point in *Control*.

The second example is when Ian walks with Deborah Curtis (Samantha Morton) along their street and confronts her about not being in love anymore. The scene sparks the song (played non-diegetically) 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' [01:02:35]. Deborah Curtis then proceeds to search their home to discover that Curtis is seeing another woman (Annik Honoré, played by Alexandra Maria Lara) and the music enters the diegesis of the film as the sequence visually presents Joy Division rehearsing the song. The band manager, Rob Gretton (Toby Kebbell), announces that the band will go on a two week tour of the USA and the film audience



becomes aware, through the forthcoming physical separation, that this is the first step towards the end of the relationship between Ian and Deborah Curtis. Film audiences with a greater knowledge of the band's history further read the sequence as a reference to Curtis' suicide prior to the US tour.

As well as music, Curtis' voice-over (by Sam Riley) is another sonic element of the film that assists in driving the narrative forward and also offers a poetic and overwhelming way of establishing the intense mood. Curtis' voice-over is the initial sonic element that is heard through the silence of the first scene in *Control* where he states the following:

*Existence*

*Well, what does it matter?*

*I exist on the best terms I can*

*The past is now part of my future*

*The present is well out of hand*<sup>53</sup>

The opening voice-over sets a certain tone for the film as it stems from the mind of the central protagonist. Curtis' voice sounds clear and stable yet cold, soft and low in volume, which provides the impression that his character is withdrawn and isolated. The words he speaks are of great significance as they imply, on the outset, that Ian Curtis is not in control of his own existence and that his past shapes his future. Curtis' understanding of his own status is another reason behind why this musical biopic was constructed of his life and career. It is important to see where/when the musician came into being and the public/private memory of the individual. The voice-over is then followed by a song by David Bowie, 'Drive-In Saturday',<sup>54</sup> that plays non-diegetically, which again merges into the diegesis as it becomes audible through Curtis' record player in his bedroom. David Bowie sonically re-emerges in another sequence which turns from diegetic to non-diegetic and back to diegetic again. The diegetic shift signals that the soundtrack of *Control* is also the soundtrack of Ian Curtis' life, so to

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<sup>53</sup> The opening monologue is the second verse of Joy Division's song, 'Heart and Soul', which is the first track featured on the second side of album, *Closer*.

<sup>54</sup> 'Drive-In Saturday' was released in 1973 on Bowie's album, *Aladdin Sane*.

peak. Curtis' musical tastes become a part of who he is as a musician and throughout the course of the film, provides insight into why and how he becomes an enigmatic figure. The music also extends beyond the film as it is a part of how he is remembered after his death and attempts to explain his life choices and experiences.

The scene begins as Curtis plays David Bowie's 'The Jean Genie'<sup>55</sup> on a record player in his room and parades in front of the mirror, re-enacting Bowie's persona. The music then becomes non-diegetic foreground music as he runs alongside Deborah (Woodruff, pre-marriage) to the David Bowie concert. Finally 'The Jean Genie' becomes diegetic again, playing in the bar where Curtis and Woodruff discuss the status of their relationship before walking in to the hall to watch the performance. David Bowie's music is selected for *Control* to set the time period (1970s) and also to emphasise Curtis' musical tastes before he became the frontman of Joy Division. As Deborah Curtis states in her memoir:

*Ian was a big Bowie fan and had already managed to spend time in his dressing room at one gig. He had David Bowie's, Trevor Boulder's and Mick Ronson's autographs, one of Woody's broken drumsticks and a spare guitar string (1995: 14).*

As demonstrated in both Deborah Curtis' memoir and Anton Corbijn's *Control*, Ian Curtis was immersed in music culture and was fascinated by musicians in the industry before he embarked on his own musical career. In a sense, Ian Curtis had a firm idea of how his life and career would unfold from an early age yet remained silent about his future.

### ***Ian Curtis' Influences: Music and Performing Artists***

The music and performing star artists that Ian Curtis was exposed to before joining Joy Division are imperative to how *Control* is interpreted and evaluated as a representation of his musical career. Furthermore, these influences contribute to how he is musically interpreted by fans and audiences after his suicide. Ian Curtis' musical influences are displayed and

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<sup>55</sup> 'The Jean Genie' was released in 1972, appearing on Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*.

reinforced throughout *Control* both sonically and visually: in dialogue, music, posters, stickers and lyrics scribbled down on pieces of paper which are splayed across his bedroom walls. *Control* exemplifies how significant Ian Curtis' musical tastes were and how they shaped his own musical qualities. The music and artists that Ian Curtis admired and adorned in his bedroom also indicates a level of cultural capital and musicality: talent and knowledge of successful musicians in the industry before Curtis reached his own level of fame.

During his high school years Curtis developed an interest in musicians who died at a young age. Musicians such as Jim Morrison,<sup>56</sup> Janis Joplin<sup>57</sup> and James Dean<sup>58</sup> became inspiration for Curtis ending his own life in his twenties. As Deborah Curtis recounts:

*Anyone who had been involved in the young, arty medium of any form of showbusiness and found an early grave was of interest to him. When he told me that he had no intention of living beyond his early twenties, I took it with a pinch of salt (1995: 15).*

These musical influences are featured in *Control* when, pre-Joy Division, Curtis spends most of his time alone in his bedroom listening to the music of these artists and posters of Jim Morrison, David Bowie and Iggy Pop covered his walls. As well as their individual life histories, Curtis was also influenced by their music style which carried on into his own musical creativity.

Ian Curtis' musical influences are introduced earlier in the film to establish an understanding of his character. According to magazine, *Melody Maker*, "Iggy Pop is the main inspiration of Ian Curtis' singing and dancing and much of Joy Division's music [translates] early Stooges and later solo Iggy Pop into a modern and English context" (Johnson, 1984: 35). As well as Curtis' attendance at various music shows such as the Sex Pistols, David Bowie and Iggy Pop (a gig that Deborah Curtis also attended in Manchester, 1977) a large portion of these musical

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<sup>56</sup> Jim Morrison was the lead singer of US music band, The Doors. It is unknown the exact cause of Morrison's death, however, he was found in a Paris apartment bathtub on 3 July 1971 at the age of 27.

<sup>57</sup> Janis Joplin was an American singer/songwriter. Joplin was found dead in her apartment on 3 October 1970, overdosing on heroin at the age of 27.

<sup>58</sup> James Dean was an American film actor. He died at the age of 24 in a car accident on the 30 September 1955.

introductions take place inside Curtis' bedroom when he is only surrounded by few friends or sometimes completely isolated. A majority of the time Curtis remains quiet in these music sessions, merely miming or singing along and letting the music speak for him. Demonstrated through *Control*, Curtis was continuously influenced by music, even up to the last moments of his life where he listened to Iggy Pop's *The Idiot*.<sup>59</sup> It is understood that:

*Ian Curtis was found by his wife, Deborah, hanging by his neck in his parents' home in Macclesfield – Iggy Pop's The Idiot was still spinning on the stereo, the needle stuck in the run-off groove. In his suicide letter, Curtis wrote that it was dawn and he could hear birds singing as he finished writing (Bibby, 2007: 235).*

The events that led up to Curtis' suicide reveal the impact that music had on his life and how he desired to emulate the lives of the musicians he admired and idolised.

### **Narrative Structures: *Touching From a Distance to Control***

Deborah Curtis' memoir is referenced throughout this analysis as it is the narrative basis for the film *Control*. In her memoir, Deborah Curtis chronicles Ian Curtis' life from a young child up until the last moments before his suicide and additionally provides never before published lyrics that Curtis wrote for the music of Joy Division. In the *Foreword* for the memoir, Jon Savage (a broadcaster and music journalist) states that the publication "tells us something that is ever present but rarely discussed: the role of women in the male, often macho, world of rock" (Savage, 1995: xiii) and continues by stating that Deborah Curtis' account:

*may also help us to understand the nature of the obsession that continues to stalk rock culture: the romantic notion of the tortured artist, too fast to live, too young to die. This is the myth that begins with Thomas Chatterton and still carries on, through Rudolf Valentino, James Dean, Sid Vicious, Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain. Touching from a Distance shows the human cost of that myth (Savage, 1995: xiii).*

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<sup>59</sup> *The Idiot* includes eight tracks and has a total running time of just over 38 minutes.

Deborah Curtis' memoir provides the reader with insights into Curtis' personal life from her perspective, describing the internal conflicts that he encountered and facilitates the constructed myth.

Although the book, and hence the film *Control*, seem to provide a perspective solely from Deborah Curtis herself, when viewed closely, *Touching from a Distance* was written not only based on her own memoirs but also in her extensive interviews with other band members, friends and colleagues who she continually quotes throughout her memoir. Additionally, Deborah Curtis refers to reviews in newspapers/magazines and fanzine interviews that Ian Curtis partook in and how his personality seemingly changed in the presence of different people. It is then made quite difficult to understand the private persona of Ian Curtis as he became quite withdrawn from his wife and immersed in writing music for Joy Division. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Deborah Curtis disclosed:

*'I saw a review on Amazon once, somebody had written, "She doesn't understand her subject". And I thought, "Well, surely that's the point?"' She sighs. And did Ian know her? "I think he thought he did." But do you think he did? She smiles in the stillness of her lounge. "No," she says distantly. "No, I don't think he did."*<sup>60</sup>

Deborah Curtis' comments confirm that even though the couple appeared to have a close relationship, Ian and Deborah Curtis did not believe they knew each other on an intimate level. Furthermore, in a review by Gerald Houghton in 1995,<sup>61</sup> Deborah Curtis' account is described as the last word on the life of Ian Curtis but still leaves many questions unanswered such as issues around Ian Curtis' sexuality and the band's interest in fascist imagery. Hence, the musical biopic based on Deborah Curtis' perspective adds to the subjectivity of the original text.

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/apr/11/popandrock.joydivision>, accessed 17 December 2009.

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.theedge.abelgratis.co.uk/booksmusic/touchingfromadistance.htm>, accessed 1 February 2010.

In the closing credits of *Control*, Deborah Curtis' memoir is directly referenced as being the basis for the content of the film; however, not all of what Deborah Curtis reveals in her account is replicated in *Control*. Only certain moments within the book are transferred to the screen. Such life events include Curtis' experiments with drug taking in his high school years, his marriage to Deborah Curtis, the birth of his daughter Natalie, his relationship with his mistress, Annik Honoré, his epilepsy and profound interest in death, war and human violence which emerged in the lyrics of Joy Division's music. In the same narrative structure as the memoir, *Control* has a simple linear approach. The story begins with Curtis' high school years and concludes with Deborah Curtis discovering his body after he commits suicide. A reason behind the decision to maintain a similar plot structure is to keep in line with Deborah Curtis' account of the events that led up to Ian Curtis' death.

The major visual aesthetic in *Control* is its black and white imagery. The entirety of the film is shot in black and white, an aesthetic decision of director Anton Corbijn. In an interview, Corbijn discusses the artistic choice:

*My memory of Joy Division is very black and white. If you look at the visuals that are available of Joy Division, especially stills, I would say it's almost 99% black and white. The reason being that in the 1970's and early 1980's, all the important music magazines were printed in black and white. A band had to have a hit to be photographed in colour for more commercial publications, but a band like Joy Division had no hits (yet). Also, their record sleeves were black and white, and the way they dressed was quite grey zoned. So, I felt this was the right way to think of Joy Division.*<sup>62</sup>

Questions arise again regarding the decision to use black and white in another interview and Corbijn adds: "Also, coming from Holland to England, travelling up north, it was so bleak, the poverty, it felt like a Third World country."<sup>63</sup> Hence, the choice to apply black and white stock throughout *Control* is inspired by media images of the band. Through colour (or lack of) Corbijn re-represents Joy Division and their aesthetic according to the era (time and place),

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/control-anton-corbijn-interview>, accessed 15 December 2009.

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.tntdownunder.com/article/2444881125.html>, accessed 15 December 2009.

making the film appear more authentic. The black and white film is also inspired by Corbijn's direct experiences with the band (taking their publicity photographs) and his own upbringing including the relative landscapes encountered. The grey tones also provide a certain mood for the viewer, associated with negative emotions: sadness, depression and melancholy.

Corbijn replicated the details of Curtis' personality discussed in *Touching from a Distance* including Curtis' use of makeup and drug taking in high school. However, there are some scenes in the film that differ from the version Deborah Curtis created in her memoir. Such examples include the discussion between Deborah and Ian Curtis about conceiving a baby. In her memoir, Deborah Curtis states, "I tentatively began to talk about babies thinking Ian would probably suggest a more appropriate time to have one" (1995: 35). However, in *Control*, Curtis is the first to approach Deborah about conceiving a child and suggests having a baby after she hands over 400 pounds in order for Curtis' band to afford studio-time to record their music. It is at this point where Curtis spontaneously suggests, "Let's have a baby" to which Deborah Curtis merely replies, "Okay". Another example is when Curtis writes a suicide letter to Deborah Curtis before overdosing on phenobarbitone. The letter states, "No need to fight now. Give my love to Annik". In *Control*, Deborah Curtis reads the letter in hospital, beside Curtis but in her memoir she is at home after having Curtis sent to hospital to get his stomach pumped (Curtis, 1995: 115). *Control* also alters a section of Deborah Curtis' memoir where she discusses Curtis' poem he had written for her on Valentine's Day. In the film there is a moment where Curtis lies on his bed, smoking a cigarette as a voice-over sonically appears of him reciting the poem that Deborah Curtis considers in her memoir. In these instances the focus has shifted from Deborah to Ian Curtis. Even though the film is based on Deborah Curtis' memoir, the decision to focus on Ian Curtis, where all thoughts and events arise out of his internal monologues, suggests that *Control* is a concentration of Deborah Curtis' reflections immersed into Ian Curtis' filmic persona.

## **Filmic Representations of Ian Curtis and Joy Division**

*Control* is not the only audio-visual representation of Ian Curtis and Joy Division. Music videos, documentaries and other feature films have attempted to recreate the musical careers of the band members and offer insights into their lives. Four of the most notable (and the most

recent) are Anton Corbijn's *Control*, his direction of the 'Atmosphere' music video, the feature film *24 Hour Party People* directed by Michael Winterbottom and feature documentary *Joy Division*, directed by Grant Gee and written by Jon Savage. These representations of Ian Curtis and Joy Division contribute to the constructed mythologies of the band and link to *Control* as they were released before the musical biopic. In developing their own understanding of Ian Curtis and Joy Division, audiences (and the filmmakers) will draw upon all of these existing media productions.

### ***Anton Corbijn, the 'Atmosphere' Music Video and 24 Hour Party People***

In addition to directing *Control*, Anton Corbijn also directed a re-released music video of Joy Division's song 'Atmosphere' which is featured in *The Work of Director Anton Corbijn* (2005). Within the DVD package there is a 56 page book insert of Corbijn's photos, text and drawings. Through a handwritten inscription in the booklet Corbijn reveals that he was asked by Factory Records to make a video for the re-release of Joy Division's song 'Atmosphere' which also partly appeared in *24 Hour Party People*. The 'Atmosphere' film clip itself is presented in black and white (as is *Control*) and symbolises good and evil through addition and subtraction symbols that appear in the introduction of the clip and also on the clothing of the anonymous individuals featured. These people appear, walking across sparse landscapes, carrying blown-up canvassed images of the music band members and particularly Ian Curtis. The people in the music video wear black and white cloaks that cover their entire body and faces, making them unidentifiable, in turn matching the tone (and particularly Curtis' baritone singing voice), lyrics and overall mood of the song. The major lyric of the song, "Don't walk away in silence", heightens the sombre feeling generated which emphasises the grey visual tones in the film clip, offering a tribute to Ian Curtis and the music of Joy Division after his death. Mikal Gilmore proposes that "Ian Curtis' descent into despair leaves us with a deeper feeling of our own frailty" (1998: 161). Accordingly, the appearance of the cloaked individuals can also be further interpreted as a fan pilgrimage: a search for understanding and reconnecting to Ian Curtis and his band's music.

As previously stated, the 'Atmosphere' film clip directed by Anton Corbijn is featured in *24 Hour Party People* which follows Factory Records during the 1970s through to the 1990s and



focuses on Manchester's popular music community. The film offers dramatisations of certain events regarding bands such as the Happy Mondays, A Certain Ratio and Joy Division/New Order. *24 Hour Party People*<sup>64</sup> represents Joy Division's career story from when they first met at a Sex Pistols concert through to and after Ian Curtis' death, when the remaining band members form the new band named New Order. Corbijn's music video appears in the film after Curtis (Sean Harris) commits suicide and Tony Wilson (Steve Coogan) visits him in an open casket viewing. As Wilson kisses Curtis on the forehead the 'Atmosphere' clip plays which reinforces that the film clip was created after the death of Ian Curtis and is presented in a way that pays homage to the singer. The film clip represents what occurred after the musician's death and how some of his followers remember him.

### ***Joy Division Documentary***

Shortly after *Control*, *Joy Division* was theatrically released. The documentary consists of a series of interviews with members of Joy Division, record company executives, music producers and friends. Archival footage of band performances including their first television performance on Granada TV, still images, album cover art, landscape shots of Manchester and text displayed across the screen all assist to contextualise the film in the UK during the 1970s. Anton Corbijn also appears in a brief interview and photographs that he had taken of the band appear onscreen as does a sped up version of his 'Atmosphere' film clip (which demonstrates Joy Division's difference and uniqueness from other bands as they deliberately packaged the album for a differently sized vinyl record). The documentary provides a perspective of the band and Ian Curtis from the remaining band members. The only account of Deborah Curtis' insight into Ian Curtis' life and musical career is through quotes placed as text onscreen from *Touching from a Distance*. This is not to imply that the facts and/or insights provided by *Joy Division* are in any sense false or misleading, the film simply presents another viewpoint into the biography of Ian Curtis. For instance, the promotional material for the documentary offered the key tagline: "Their own story in their own words",<sup>65</sup> which refers to the main source in creating the documentary. The members of Joy Division

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<sup>64</sup> *24 Hour Party People* has been discussed and analysed by numerous academics including John Orr (2008) and Constantine Verevis (2009) in relation to *Control* and other media associated with Curtis and Joy Division.

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.joydivisionmovie.co.uk/>, accessed 15 December 2009.

discuss their own perspective on themselves as a band. Keiran Grant, a film reviewer who posts on New Order's webpage, stated:

*An unofficial companion piece to Anton Corbijn's Ian Curtis feature, Gee's doc is sure to be the last word in Joy Division mythology. Of course, like Corbijn's film, it hardly deals in mythology at all: what's presented here is a tidy and stark history of the band's brief career from the perspective of the players, associates and onlookers, with the city of Manchester treated as a figure among those.*<sup>66</sup>

The use of 'mythology' here is a term that can arguably be applied to both fictional film and documentary representations of the music band. Although the documentary has a greater sense of realism in the interpretation of Ian Curtis and Joy Division (as it stems from direct interviews with the band members and close relationships) the documentary only provides a representation of reality. The format of a feature film (and any form of media in general) does not change its accuracy in reviewing/representing real life stories, as this is unattainable. Biographical representations, musical or otherwise, cannot be proven to be more 'accurate' than another. "Media products do not show or present the real world; they construct and represent reality" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2005: 35). Therefore the documentary still offers a certain perspective and representation of individuals and events which are then re-interpreted and evaluated by the film viewer. Mythologies are not only found in documentary and feature film representations but also in music culture itself. According to Deborah Curtis:

*John Talbot said of Ian's death: 'I was confused because everything I read about him made him out to be a doom merchant and I don't remember him like that. Music does propagate myths and people have tried to make that myth more than it was' (1995: 19).*

Myths of Joy Division's career are lampooned to a certain extent in both *24 Hour Party People* and *Control*. An example of such is the rumour that in signing Joy Division to Factory Records, Tony Wilson signed each individual band members name in his own blood. The

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<sup>66</sup> <http://www.neworderonline.com/News/News.aspx?NewsID=1349>, accessed 2 April 2009.

event is represented in both *Control* and *24 Hour Party People*. In *Control*'s version of the event it was not made apparent that the scene featured was a fictional occurrence but is still part of telling the story of Joy Division. In *24 Hour Party People* it was made obvious (through voice-over) that the signing in blood did not occur but the event did make the story of Joy Division's music career all the more entertaining.

## **Goth Subculture, Fans and Remembering Joy Division**

Ian Curtis is regarded by many of his fans as a goth music icon. Joy Division are argued to be the first gothic band by fans *after* Curtis' suicide (when the band reformed as New Order) which is relayed by academics including Joshua Gunn (1999), James Craig Holte (2002), David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004), Michael Bibby (2007) and Bill Friskics-Warren who refers to their music as 'dystopian brooding' and 'urban gothic' (2005: 112). The mutual understanding that Joy Division is a goth band is unusual because during their time as musical performers, Joy Division never referred to themselves as a part of any specific music genre or subculture yet, "Joy Division is regularly cited by goths and in the popular media as foundational to goth subcultures" (Bibby, 2007: 236). The categorisation of Joy Division as a goth band demonstrates the ability for the public and media sources to alter perceptions about the music band and create alternate histories that even the individuals themselves have not publicly claimed. The band, their music and lives, continually have diverse interpretations related to details accessible at different periods. In other words, a Joy Division fan in the 1970s will have a different view of the band to a fan in the 2000s. Exposure to live performances, media interviews, documentaries and musical biopics dramatically changes an audience's perception of these popular personalities. According to Kevin Williams:

*The star is accessible at a low cost to the consumer. Records, tapes, and accessories that carry the rock icon to the consumer are relatively inexpensive and can be collected. The icon must be mass-produced and easily accessible (2003: 27).*

Books, photographs, Joy Division's CDs and DVDs are still readily available to the fan hence Curtis is still able to carry on his iconic status.

Although Joy Division appeared on television, radio broadcasts and multiple live performances across Manchester, the band itself unusually became more popular after Curtis' death. According to Bibby, "Despite its relatively small following during its short existence, after Curtis's death the band became enormously influential and continues to retain a significant place in the 'alternative' rock market" (2007: 233). To some fans Joy Division are now referred to as a post-punk band<sup>67</sup> even though they emerged within the punk music genre of Manchester in the 1970s. Thus musical interpretation varies according to era and the personality type of the fan. Deborah Curtis plays a large part in the making of *Control* yet it was Anton Corbijn (originally a fan of Joy Division) who had ultimate discretion on the audio-visual representations of the feature film. Furthermore, audiences of *Control* will evaluate the film and have the final word as to whether they approve<sup>68</sup> of this screen biography.

To conclude, *Control* is a significant musical biopic that contributes to the mythology of the musician on film. Through intertextuality, drawing upon the photography of Corbijn, interviews with colleagues, Deborah Curtis and media accounts (written reflections, television programmes and film); *Control* has become what can be deemed a multi-textual fusion of stories regarding the short life of Ian Curtis and Joy Division. Corbijn's direction of both music and image implies that Ian Curtis, withdrawn and isolated, had already mapped out his life path before it was lived. Yet fans remember him in alternate ways, viewing Joy Division as a post-punk band and even as the first goth band. These different interpretations prove that the musical biopic is dependent on film audience reception. Corbijn's intentions, as well as Deborah Curtis' memories, are re-evaluated by the consumer and constantly change through time as new sources are uncovered and made publicly available.

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<sup>67</sup> *MySpace* (<http://www.myspace.com/joydivision>, accessed 15 December 2010), *New Order Online* (<http://www.neworderonline.com/common/topic.aspx?topic=joydivision>, accessed 15 December 2010) and *Vanity Fair* (<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2010/11/joy-division-slide-show-201011#intro>, accessed 15 December 2010) are few of the many that refer to Joy Division as a post-punk band.

<sup>68</sup> Upon its cinematic release, *Control* had mostly positive reviews. For example, out of 20,180 user votes, *Control* was rated 7.8 out of 10 on *IMDb* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0421082/>, accessed 15 December 2010).

## **Conclusion: A Musical Biopic from a Wife's Perspective**

*El Cantante* and *Control* present the life story of the musical individual from the perspective of the wife. Recounting a life history from this angle is significant as it personalises the story, making it appear more romantic and realistic for the film audience. Hence, the film audience is able to empathise with the characters as it is based on life experiences, predominantly with the music artist's romantic relationships. To add to the realism, both Nilda Roman Pérez and Deborah Curtis directly contributed to the making of the respective musical biopics, a detail that is specifically referred to in the opening titles of each feature film. It is also significant that even though the films are based on the life histories of male music artists, the stories are told from a female perspective. The gendered perspective shifts the focus from the artist's impact on the music industry and culture and tends to centre more on their individuality: how they struggled to balance work life with home, developing a music career and raising their own children. Here, the wife's values are of more importance and are conveyed through the biographical narrative.

Even though the wife's perspective may appear to be a more personal and insightful look at the individual's biography, the partner is still selective regarding the biographical detail that they disclose to their audiences. The filmmakers also select and manipulate the wife's interpretations to suit the feature film structure and also to fulfil their own view of the musical protagonist. Often details of the musician or singer's life are altered to depict the wife as being an innocent bystander who continuously stands by their husband no matter how they are treated which leads to fabricated constructions of the individual's identity and persona. The analysis of *El Cantante* and *Control* demonstrates that even though it appears, on the surface, that the films depict specific and potentially 'accurate' views of the musical individuals, the inclusion of other represented media texts and the perspective of the filmmakers leads these films to become distanced from reality: these musical biopics are inevitably reliant on public memory.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ***DE-LOVELY* (2004) AND *BEYOND THE SEA* (2004):**

### **STUDIO ERA AESTHETIC, SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND THE LIFE OF COLE PORTER AND BOBBY DARIN**

Both *De-Lovely* (2004) and *Beyond the Sea* (2004) focus on artists who contributed to the music entertainment industry throughout the 1940s and 1950s. In *De-Lovely*, Cole Porter (Kevin Kline) composes music for Broadway theatre and Hollywood cinema. In *Beyond the Sea*, Bobby Darin (Kevin Spacey) stars in Hollywood films, his own television program and records/performs popular music. The following musical biopics will be referred to as belonging to the backstage musical subgenre. Both *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* have the genre characteristics, such as integration of narrative and spectacle, which help define these films as backstage musicals. Furthermore, it will be argued that these biopics provide a self-reflexive approach to the re-imagining of the subject's life history. In the films, the protagonists attempt to re-create their life story in a theatrical production (*De-Lovely*) and in a feature film (*Beyond the Sea*). From Steve Vineberg's perspective, both films deliver an unorthodox approach to the representation of a life story and are "unmitigated disasters conceived in a Brechtian style" (2005: 19). Although these musical biopics provide a Brechtian style of storytelling, they are not necessarily 'unmitigated disasters'. *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* are unique and self-reflexive in narrative construction. Both films are based on events that did not actually occur but are depicted by the filmmakers, to tell the stories of Cole Porter and Bobby Darin. In other words, the overarching narrative structure is a vehicle through which the filmmakers provide new perspectives on the artist's life story.

The following musical biopics draw upon and re-create the audio-visual aesthetic of studio era musical biopics. Through the use of visual elements such as technicolour and sonic aspects including musical integration and spontaneous song/dance numbers, *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* offer a nostalgic view of the classical Hollywood era. Hence, on the level of style and form, these musical biopics appear reminiscent of studio era film. However, in terms of content (storyline and narrative) these contemporary musical biopics address issues that

would have been censored in the 1930s to 1950s. As John Kenneth Muir discloses, “The artists behind *Night and Day*<sup>69</sup> had no other choice in their style of presentation because the Motion Picture Production Code of the day did not permit any indication, let alone dramatization, of homosexuality” (2005: 249). *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea*, in turn, provide a more open engagement with the private lives of these stars. Through opting to utilise the aesthetic of studio era musical biopics while varying narrative content *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* clearly show how Hollywood censorship has changed from the 20th to the 21st Century. The narrative/storyline of the contemporary musical biopics signify not only how censorship has changed over decades of time, but also how the society (filmmakers and film audiences alike) have changed, in terms of their values. Additionally, the presence of star performers in both *De-Lovely* (Kevin Klein and musical performers including Robbie Williams) and *Beyond the Sea* (Kevin Spacey) is a key element discussed in this chapter. In reference to the career of the actors it will be suggested that casting changes the way a film audience interprets the subject.

The following chapter will be arranged predominantly through a textual analysis of musical numbers in each musical biopic and argues that cinematic representations of music biography are significantly altered depending on the time/era of production and release. Censorship and production codes<sup>70</sup> are vital industry guidelines that shift representations of the life history of an actual music artist. These codes change how the film audience perceives the protagonist’s life. *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* exemplify the significance of Hollywood production codes by maintaining studio era aesthetic and developing a narrative/storyline that reflects current concerns in Hollywood filmmaking.

### **Self-Reflexivity in *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea***

Self-reflexivity is an important narrative element of both *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea*. This device guides how the storyline unfolds and also how the music artists’ identities are interpreted. Essentially, *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* use the backstage musical genre characteristics to allow the protagonist to reflect on his own life. In these biopics the premise

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<sup>69</sup> *De-Lovely* focuses on Cole Porter’s homosexuality; an issue not addressed in the 1946 Porter biopic released in the Hollywood studio era – *Night and Day* (1946).

<sup>70</sup> Production codes are those discussed in Chapter One: MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association), also known as the Hays Office.

of each story is that there is a construction of a show: the representation of a life history within the film itself. Both Porter and Darin make the decision to create a show about their lives as both characters are nearing the end of their own life. The protagonists have creative impact on how their lives are represented within the film: a stage performance for Cole Porter in *De-Lovely* and a feature film for Bobby Darin in *Beyond the Sea*. To add to the complexity, both characters also communicate or refer to their younger selves:<sup>71</sup> characters that are cast, within the film, to portray them in their respective ‘shows’. Although, in actuality, neither Porter nor Darin attempted to create a representation of their lives in these formats, the films apply this idea to map out a certain perspective.

In *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea*, the narrator (who appears physically and in voice-over), who is the older version of the protagonist, offers a self-referential commentary. Throughout these musical biopics, the older versions of Porter and Darin discuss how their lives are being represented on stage and on screen. The argument here is that the function of self-reflexivity is to reinforce the subjectivity of the musical biopic. This narrative attribute creates awareness (for the film audience) that there is a considerable amount of fabrication in re-constructing a music identity. According to Jill Nelmes:

*This highly self-reflexive medium [animated genre films] enables animators to verify the freedoms of the form, and foreground perspectives which serve as a comment on the act of film-making per se, but more importantly, as a revision of accepted or naturalised constructions of ‘reality’, and a reinterpretation of received knowledge (2003: 221).*

Although Nelmes refers particularly to the animated film in this instance, her argument still applies to the contemporary musical biopic. *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* use the self-reflexive technique of the show-within-a-show narrative to reinforce that these musical biopics are re-representing reality. Gloria Withalm more generally discusses self-reflexivity in feature film:

*In the movies, reference from the film to the film itself is as old as the history of film... There are many forms, functions, devices, and textual strategies of self-reference or*

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<sup>71</sup> Young Bobby (William Ullrich) is in his early teenage years and Bobby Darin (Kevin Spacey) is in his mid-20s in *Beyond the Sea*. Kevin Kline plays the older Porter (in his early seventies) and young Porter (from his late 20s, onwards) in *De-Lovely*.



*self-reflexivity, for example, the strategy of creating an ironic or critical distance or even a sense of alienation (in Brecht's sense), the mere fascination with cinematographic possibilities, [or] the device of creating emotional bonds between the audience and the movies or movie stars (2007: 125).*

As with all film genres, the specific strategy of each musical biopic's self-reflexivity varies. In *De-Lovely* the self-referentiality draws attention to changes in Hollywood production codes/censorship. *Beyond the Sea* self-references the star figure (entertainer Bobby Darin and Hollywood actor Kevin Spacey) as well as the musical film genre itself.

*De-Lovely* is set up as a self-reflexive musical biopic from the very first scene. The older Porter<sup>72</sup> plays 'In the Still of the Night'<sup>73</sup> in his home, on the piano. Gabe (Jonathan Pryce) walks in (who later is confirmed as the director of the stage production of Porter's life) and asks Porter to play the first song that will set up the story of his life. Gabe states "your music will be our guide", which self-reflexively suggests that the songs featured in *De-Lovely* will be integrated into the film narrative. *Beyond the Sea*'s opening sequence also establishes the film as a self-reflexive musical biopic. Darin walks backstage with his entourage and is lead up to the stage where his band is playing and sings 'Mack the Knife' [00:02:00].<sup>74</sup> As the scene continues it becomes clear (for the film audience) that they are shooting a film, the film cameras become visible, the house lights are turned on and an alarm sounds that implies the filming has stopped. As Darin walks backstage with his brother, Charlie Cassotto Maffia (Bob Hoskins), a journalist enquires about the making of Darin's biopic which his brother confirms as a "self-portrait". The self-referencing techniques highlight four aspects of these musical biopics: the Hollywood film industry, musical film genre characteristics, the star persona and the music artist's biography. Additional examples will be examined throughout the chapter to support the argument that self-reflexivity in *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* underscore the fabricated, myth-making in Hollywood musical films.

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<sup>72</sup> Both Cole Porter's (young and old) are played by Kevin Kline in *De-Lovely*.

<sup>73</sup> Cole Porter wrote and composed 'In the Still of the Night' for feature film *Rosalie* (1937), a musical romance adapted from the Broadway show of the same name in 1928.

<sup>74</sup> Initially composed by Kurt Weill with lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, 'Die Moritat von Mackie Messer' ('The Ballad of Mack the Knife' in English) is from the music drama *Die Dreigroschenoper* (known in English as *The Threepenny Opera*) which was first recorded in 1928. "Mack the Knife" was recorded by Bobby Darin in 1959 on *That's All*. Darin's recording reached number one on US and UK charts in that year.

## DE-LOVELY

Cole Porter (1891 – 1964) was a composer and popular songwriter. Born in Peru, Indiana, Porter began studying music at an early age, focusing on piano and violin. He began composing in his teenage years which continued after high school while attending Yale University. Soon after, Porter began his studies in the Law School of Harvard University; however, his interests in music lead him to transfer to the School of Arts and Sciences in his second year. Porter did not complete his studies and opted to move to New York to seriously pursue his music career. The first Broadway show completely composed by Porter was the musical-comedy *See America First* (1916), playing for only two weeks and considered a flop. Two years later Porter met divorcée Linda Lee Thomas and the couple married in 1919. Linda Lee Thomas was eight years older than Porter and they remained married up until her death in 1954. During this time Porter composed music for the stage and cinema. He travelled with his wife around Europe in the 1920s and settled temporarily in Paris. During his stay he wrote songs including ‘You Don’t Know Paree’ and ‘I Love Paris’. Porter also contributed to stage musicals such as musical revue *Hitchy-Koo* (1919) and the *Greenwich Village Follies* (1925) while in Paris. Upon his return to Broadway he developed the music and lyrics to *Paris* (1928), *Wake Up and Dream* (1929), *The New Yorkers* (1930) and *The Gay Divorce* (1932) which feature popular songs ‘Let’s Do It, Let’s Fall in Love’, ‘What Is This Thing Called Love?’, ‘Love For Sale’ and ‘Night and Day’ respectively. Porter’s cinematic achievements include *Born to Dance* (1936), *Broadway Melody of 1940* (1940), *You’ll Never Get Rich* (1941) and *The Pirate* (1948). In 1937 Porter was involved in a horse riding accident that fractured both of his legs and crippled him for the duration of his life. He still continued to work and produced music/compositions through the 1940s and 1950s. Porter refused to have his legs amputated which resulted in over 30 operations. However, ultimately in 1958, one of his legs was removed and replaced with an artificial limb. This event followed the death of his mother in 1952 and his wife (due to emphysema) in 1954. Porter wrote music up until 1958: his final music score was for CBS’s (formerly Columbia Broadcasting System) television-special, *Aladdin*. Porter died as a result of kidney failure on 15 October 1964 at the age of 73.

## ***De-Lovely as Self-Reflexive Backstage Musical***

The dialogue and display of musical numbers in *De-Lovely* leads the film to be what Jane Feuer refers to as the self-reflexive musical (1986). Feuer suggests that the backstage musical subgenre (and more specifically, the musical biopic) refers to its own genre characteristics by discussing how they are represented on stage within the film:

*The ostensible or surface function of these musicals is to give pleasure to the audience by revealing what goes on behind the scenes in the theater or Hollywood – that is, to demystify the production of entertainment* (1986: 459).

However, in *De-Lovely*, the demystification of behind-the-scenes productions in theatre are then re-mystified through the musical film genre framework. As old Porter watches the theatre production of his life, the film audience watches the filmic adaptation of the production (not on stage from old Porter's viewpoint but on location) in order for the film audience to become immersed in the diegesis of the film and hence re-mystify the musical genre. It is also important to note that old Porter is unable to talk to any of the cast members while they are performing: they are only able to hear Gabe speak to them. Gabe then becomes a vessel of communication between the actors and old Porter, changing outcomes of the stage performance according to his own evaluation of old Porter's concerns. The interaction self-reflexively demonstrates that the film director has final control over how the protagonist is perceived in the biopic, even if the individual themselves is involved.

Narrative structure is also raised as an issue when characters are introduced, as old Porter and Gabe argue over when complications in the narrative should arise. Gabe states that the musical is "unconventional but honest" which reinforces how the entertainment industry has changed from the 1940s, embracing more contemporary biopic structures. According to George F. Custen:

*This body [the biopics released during the Hollywood studio era] forms a code with distinctive components. The films were shaped but industrial practices that no longer exist, were nurtured by a star system that limited the specific shapes a life could take, and were sold to moviegoing public through diverse publicity machines that created specific contexts for the reception of the great lives (1992: 3).*

Unlike contemporary biopics, studio era biopics were controlled by the studio and the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) Production Code. These biopics were insular, relying on the star system maintained within the studio, assisting in the publicity of the films, regulating how they were perceived by film audiences. In terms of film genre more generally, Jane Feuer asserts:

*After an early period in which the conventions themselves seem fresh and noteworthy, genres have to keep giving us something new without sacrificing the appeal those conventions held in the first place... Film-makers, that is, need to acknowledge within genre films the audience's growing familiarity with the language of the genre, their increasing generic literacy. Late genre films tend to expose the structure itself at the expense of a transparent conduction of the ritual value the genre carries (1982: 88).*

Utilising Feuer's analysis, *De-Lovely* falls into the musical biopic category of 'late genre films'. Hence, the film self-references musical film genre characteristics as they are already clearly understood by film audiences. An example is apparent in the dialogue after the 'Anything Goes' musical number. Here, Gabe asks Linda Lee (Ashley Judd), "Have you ever seen a musical without a happy ending?" Gabe implies that the stage musical (and hence the film itself) is a unique representation of a musical individual. *De-Lovely* is attempting to be different from previous representations of Cole Porter as well as other biopics of music artists, more generally. Jane Feuer states that "self-reflexive musicals are 'modernist' in that they systematically deconstruct those very elements that give the genre its regularity" (2004: 231). *De-Lovely* emphasises the wider issues of cinema practice, time, place and social values within the entertainment industry through the life of Cole Porter. Drawing upon the film genre characteristics of the backstage musical, the biopic self-references its own practices in

replicating a life story which is governed by the director, cast choices, selective intertextual references and when available, the individual themselves.

## **Sexuality in Cole Porter's Music**

In terms of the music/narrative content of *De-Lovely*, John Kenneth Muir identifies that:

*By the time [director] Irwin Winkler... approached screenwriter and former movie critic Jay Cocks about De-Lovely, movie mores had changed dramatically in America. In particular, homosexuality had come out of the Hollywood closet, meaning that Porter's story could be told without 'covering up' certain aspects (2005: 250).*

Due to changes in the values and morals of the film audience, *De-Lovely* is a film that is able to openly discuss alternate sexualities. The issue of homosexuality becomes integrated into a majority of the musical numbers in the film and informs how contemporary audiences interpret the music of Cole Porter. *De-Lovely* thus represents how the perception of homosexuality has changed since the release of Cole Porter biopic, *Night and Day*.

Larry M. Lance and Christina Berry (1985) are two of the many academics that have analysed the relationship between music and sexuality. Scholars including Susan McClary (1991), Edward W. Said (2008), Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (1990) have considered the way sexuality dwells within, and is communicated by, popular music. In their study of human sexuality and popular music, Lance and Berry suggest that "Music readily available in our technologically advanced society provides daily communication of sexual roles, sexual behaviors, and sexual relationships" (1985: 65). However, the interpretation of sexual messages can vary depending on the interpreter. Audience values and morals, actions, and positions on the various forms of sexual relationships are all factors that influence the interpretation of music. In other words, the interpreter's pre-conceived beliefs are a significant factor in understanding the subjective sexual nature of some forms of music. In the case of Cole Porter's music, the sexual message can also change meaning depending on the context in

which the songs are found. Porter's music is heard in feature films, stage productions and played on the radio. In each of these forms the meaning of song lyrics adapt to the surrounding storyline. Lance and Berry state that, "of the songwriters between the 1920s and the 1950s, Cole Porter was one of the most popular composers of tunes featuring sexuality in music" (1985: 67). Songs including 'Let's Misbehave', 'Love For Sale', 'Anything Goes' and 'Experiment' feature in *De-Lovely* and are integrated into the biographical narrative of Porter's life. Furthermore, they are all in some way linked to Porter's homosexual experiences during his married life.

Biographer William McBrien discusses the link between Porter's music and his homosexuality upon surveying his love letters to male companions:

*The passion here may startle those who know Porter only from the nonchalant persona he chose to present in society. But these words help those who are moved by Porter's songs to understand the origins of the ardor that is replicated in lyrics and in his throbbing rhythms and intoxicating melodies* (1998: 97).

McBrien implies here that followers of the music of Cole Porter during the 1940s and 1950s were not aware of his sexual connections to various men because of the era in which he commenced his career. During this time, Hollywood production codes reflected the society's views by banning homosexual content. To reflect the public acknowledgement of homosexuality decades later, production codes changed: "Eventually, in the early 1960s, the Hollywood Production Code officially ended its thirty-year-old ban on homosexual content, allowing for more manifest – if still mostly derogatory – images of queer people and queer concerns" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006: 87). Since the 1960s, images of the queer individual (particularly in cinema and television) have become less critical and developed a growing acceptance in the public eye. However, it may be assumed by film audiences that *De-Lovely* represents Porter's homosexuality as cause to commit adultery, reinforcing negative perceptions. Further, it could be interpreted by film viewers that Porter's need to fulfil homosexual desires trigger deception, withholding secrets, unfaithfulness towards his wife and covering up part of his identity to the public eye. This negative perception follows Richard Dyer's observation that "'homosexual' and 'lesbian' have been negative sexual

categories, at best to be viewed pathologically, at worst as moral degeneracy” (2002: 21). Yet these negative views have been challenged by homosexual civil rights and law reform movements:

*One has attempted to alter the object of the categories, to change the terms of what they refer to by shifting from persons to acts. The most familiar form that this argument takes is that people who perform homosexual acts are in every respect just like everyone else: their sexuality does not imply anything else about their personality* (Dyer, 2002: 21).

Adopting the argument that sexuality and personality should be assessed exclusively, Porter’s decision to commit adultery has no direct link to his homosexuality. Porter’s disloyalty to Linda Lee is a reflection of his personality as is his decision to involve himself with male prostitutes (discussed below in the analysis of ‘Love for Sale’). This being noted, the position of the film audience is not assumed: *De-Lovely* brings the issue of homosexuality to the attention of the film audience in order to consider their own opinion and inevitably draw upon their own conclusions.

In comparison to other media contexts the visual representation of Porter’s music in *De-Lovely* offers a unique interpretation of how his music can be perceived. It is suggested that all aspects of Porter’s personality influence his musical compositions. A conversation between wife Linda Lee and Cole in *De-Lovely* makes this clear:

Linda Lee: *Your music comes from your talent, not from your behaviour.*

Cole Porter: *It’s all the same thing. I can’t put my talent here and my behaviour here and my eating habits and sleeping habits and drinking habits... it’s all me!*

Through this line of dialogue, the makers of *De-Lovely* imply that the various facets of Porter’s personality should not be considered separate: each trait influences the other. Hence, Porter’s behaviour, habits and career affect (and are affected by) his queer relationships. The

events and circumstances that Porter encounters throughout this musical biopic, whether concerning his career or personal life, lead back to his homosexuality (the issue of whether Porter and Lee were homosexual or bisexual is addressed below). The issue of homosexuality is reinforced through dialogue and audio-visual representation of musical numbers to emphasise its significance.

### ***‘Anything Goes’***

‘Anything Goes’ is one of the first musical numbers in *De-Lovely* that introduces the main characters of the film including Porter’s family, friends, colleagues, gay affairs and his wife, Linda Lee. The entire cast gather onstage to perform the song in unison in front of old Porter and Gabe. Linda Lee<sup>75</sup> is first seen by the film audience entering behind the cast and sings a verse of the song solo. ‘Anything Goes’ was originally considered a song that celebrated life and individuality when featured in the context of the *Anything Goes* stage musical. The musical, which debuted on Broadway in 1934, is set on an ocean liner and follows the comical interactions with the characters onboard.<sup>76</sup> The song itself and its place in the musical is contextualised by the relationships of the characters where it is suggested that ‘anything goes’. In *De-Lovely* the context and lyrical meaning changes as ‘Anything Goes’ implies that Lee was aware that Porter had love affairs during their marriage (through the song’s lyrics). William McBrien suggests that ‘Anything Goes’, in the context of the original stage musical, is Porter’s “broadest, most mirthful celebration of what the freer spirits in America have achieved in their tussle with puritanism” (1998: 168). In other words, *Anything Goes* was a musical that provided social commentary on the idea that the values and morals of society (predominantly in the USA) were changing. The population was becoming more flexible and open in terms of personal relationships. In *De-Lovely* it appears that even though Lee accepted Porter’s sexuality, she was still emotionally affected by it, which is highlighted by her first appearance and choice of verse in the performed song. The context of the song in *De-Lovely* demonstrates that even though Porter, who originally wrote the lyrics of the song,

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<sup>75</sup> Porter’s wife, Linda Lee, sings ‘Anything Goes’; the opening number in the stage musical which is similar to the ‘Anything Goes’ musical number in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). In this action/adventure film, Willie Scott (Kate Capshaw) sings the song (partly in Mandarin) during the opening credits. It is a large-scale production number that introduces her character; a nightclub performer in Shanghai. Throughout the course of the film she becomes Indiana Jones’ (Harrison Ford) love interest. ‘Anything Goes’ in *Indiana Jones* sets up the character of Scott, whereas ‘Anything Goes’ in *De-Lovely* sets up the relationship between Lee and Porter.

<sup>76</sup> The characters in the stage show include a stowaway named Billy Crocker, heiress Hope Harcourt, nightclub singer Reno Sweeney and public enemy Moonface Martin. The musical, which was made into a feature film in 1936 and again in 1956, features Reno Sweeney singing ‘Anything Goes’.



believes that his wife has accepted his sexuality, she has not. Lee's verse selection sets up the film as being controversial and more revealing than other representations of Cole Porter's biography. The song also suggests that the film is from a perspective beyond Porter's own. *De-Lovely* is a reflection of Porter's life and music from various perspectives as opposed to *Night and Day* which had Porter's approval. The politics of these musical biopics will be discussed further below.

'Anything Goes' appears again approximately half-way through *De-Lovely* (00:49:18) and is pre-empted with the elderly Porter saying, "I couldn't hear the songs the same way anymore, suddenly the lyrics all sounded like code". In reference to Porter's lyrics Mark Fearnow suggests:

*Porter was driven to a level of 'codedness' in his work. Far from an artistic flaw, the complexity afforded by this intellectual loop-the-loop became the distinguishing mark of his artistic accomplishment... Porter's double life propelled him to a high level of metaphor in his work* (2002: 147).

At this point in *De-Lovely* Porter implies that the interpretation of lyrical meaning changes depending on time, place and individual perceptions. Furthermore, Porter refers to his disdain at the ongoing inability to specifically represent his homosexuality through his music. The scene in *De-Lovely* then transforms as Porter and Lee watch the song performed onstage in the 'Anything Goes' stage musical. The lead singer (played by Caroline O'Connor) is dressed in a feminine sailor suit similar to the chorus which consists of a stage full of women who tap dance and sing to the music. The costuming alone raises issues concerning homo/sexuality (linked to Porter) as sailors in the USA are often culturally recognised as being sexually promiscuous. Texts such as those by Steven Zeeland (1995), Carrie Little Hersh (2002) and Paul Baker and Jo Stanley (2003) discuss issues of sexuality, particularly in the US Navy. In *De-Lovely*, the performers sing the same verse that Lee initially sings at the start of the film and Porter asks Lee if she likes the song. Lee replies by stating that everyone in the crowd is enjoying it, however abruptly changes the subject. Even though Lee tells Porter his queer interests are not a problem it does seem to emotionally affect her when his songs are performed in public spaces. This is noticeable through her facial expressions, which vary

between contempt and sadness and physical gestures which are closed. Linda Lee's character is one of the few that are aware of the alternate meanings behind Porter's song lyrics and Porter unconsciously mocks her by flaunting his sexuality through the lyrical compositions of his music.

### ***'What Is This Thing Called Love?'***

'What Is This Thing Called Love?'<sup>77</sup> appears in *De-Lovely* to express Porter's emotional confusion in regard to his wife and male love interest as Porter plays the tune at his home in Venice amongst a small audience of friends and colleagues. In the musical sequence, Porter appears socialising with friends at various cafés across town and features a man (played by singer/songwriter Lemar) standing at the head of a gondola, singing the song as Porter watches him pass by [00:27:04]. The song continues non-diegetically as Lee and Porter attend the dance theatre performance, *Teatro di Venezia*. Porter and Lee watch as a young man dances on stage: the same man revealed in the following scene as the one Porter is having a secret affair with [00:29:12]. This musical sequence provides the impression that Lee accepts Porter and his attraction to men. In turn, Lee's thoughts and emotions reflect the film audience's acceptance of Cole Porter's homosexuality. Lee, married to Porter, accepts his sexual promiscuity hence the film viewer is also obliged to feel the same. However, as previously suggested, *De-Lovely* includes negative effects of Porter's homosexuality, hence the issue has multiple readings depending on film audiences.

During Porter's career there was rumour concerning both Porter and Lee's sexuality. According to Jean Howard, Porter and Lee spent much of their time travelling with and entertaining their gay and lesbian friends from as early as 1920 (1991). However, no public media material openly discussed Porter's homosexuality during his lifetime. Rumours spread that Cole was homosexual or bisexual and that Lee may have been homosexual herself or even asexual: "yet not one word was published or broadcast about Porter's actual sexual identity until Brendan Gill included the subject in a biographical essay in the *New Yorker* in 1971 – seven years after the composer's death" (Fearnow, 2002: 158). Hence, there was no media attention that referred to Porter's homosexuality until Brendan Gill's biographical

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<sup>77</sup> 'What Is This Thing Called Love?' was written by Cole Porter in 1929 for the musical revue *Wake Up and Dream*.

essay was published (1971). Gill's essay also discussed the idea that Lee could also have been homosexual or asexual because of her previous relationship with her first husband who was believed to be a sadist (Fearnow, 2002: 155). Two other published accounts of Porter's homosexuality include Truman Capote's discussion of Porter's sexual encounter with a male wine steward in *Esquire* magazine (Capote, 1975) and subsequently in Charles Schwartz's biography of Porter (1977). According to William McBrien, "One commentator remarked, [Lee] realized Porter was gay at first meeting and, on condition that he maintain a minimal façade, was prepared to accept it. It is likely that sex repelled her" (1998: 102). The documentary, *You're the Top: The Cole Porter Story* (1990) also discusses the issue. Porter's friends disclose that Porter was homosexual and that Lee was not interested in sex, so happy to marry him. Additionally, the documentary suggests that Lee was seen as more of a mother-figure to Porter and somewhat replaced his own mother (Kate Porter) who he was very close to.

*De-Lovely* does not explore Lee's sexuality, yet represents a certain point of view on her perspective through many of Cole Porter's songs including 'What Is This Thing Called Love?', yet more overtly through physical/facial gestures. Throughout the 'What Is This Thing Called Love?' sequence, Lee remains poised and speaks eloquently in the presence of her house guests. However, Lee's body language slowly becomes more obvious throughout the course of the film leading up to Porter's performance of 'Experiment' where Lee turns her back to him completely (Figure 7) and afterwards, leaves Porter to move from Hollywood to Arizona (discussed further below).



Figure 7: Linda Lee turns her back as Porter performs 'Experiment'

Even though the film openly represents Porter's homosexuality, Lee's past remains ambiguous. The focus of *De-Lovely* is on Porter's life history: by not clearly disclosing Lee's own history, the film maintains focus on Porter's homosexuality. Physical expression and song lyrics can be interpreted in various ways, however, they are reaffirmed in *De-Lovely* through dialogue between Porter and Lee and in the actions of these characters. *De-Lovely* essentially suggests that love is what keeps Porter and Lee together and sex is what keeps them apart. The indistinct nature of film narrative and character development in the contemporary musical biopic exemplifies the idea that these films cannot provide a completely detailed account of any individual's life story. The contemporary musical biopic offers an opportunity to express a viewpoint. Additionally, screenwriting is a specific form of writing based on dramatic action that is far more condensed than written biographies, for example. As in all contemporary musical biopics, the film centres on a particular issue (in this instance, homosexuality) and develops a narrative/storyline around it (here, the relationship between Porter and Lee). The function of contemporary musical biopics is to represent an aspect of the artist's life history, framed around a general issue that previously had little to no attention, creating a sense of awareness for the film audience.

### ***'Let's Misbehave'***

Performed by popular music artist Elvis Costello, 'Let's Misbehave'<sup>78</sup> takes place at a masquerade ball in *De-Lovely*. The scene presents people dancing, feeding each other, laughing, throwing streamers off the balcony, kissing and embracing: an occurrence that is reminiscent of the Renaissance carnival.

*As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (Bakhtin, 1984: 10).*

The carnival that Bakhtin discusses in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) is visually recreated for the musical sequence in *De-Lovely*. Set in Paris, the song is recognised as a humorous and light-hearted approach to the representation of sexuality (Lance and Berry, 1985: 67). Similar to the Renaissance carnival, the sequence features characters that become more open, physically and socially. Porter, in turn, becomes less conscious of how his sexuality may be reflected through his behaviour and relaxes into the party. The carnivalesque event reflects the behaviour of the characters when not conscious of how they will be interpreted by the public (often through media coverage). In the sequence they are free to conduct themselves in ways they desire without repercussions.

As an interlude to the song 'Let's Misbehave', Lee waves Porter down from the other side of the venue and they meet, with Lee handing Porter a letter from Irving Berlin.<sup>79</sup> In the letter he offers Porter the opportunity to move to New York City and write the Broadway musical

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<sup>78</sup> 'Let's Misbehave' is featured in films such as *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex\* (\*But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1972), *Pennies From Heaven* (1981) and *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994). The song was first performed in Cole Porter's stage musical, *Anything Goes*.

<sup>79</sup> Irving Berlin (1888-1989) is a Tin Pan Alley/Broadway songwriter and composer. His first hit song was 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' which became an international success in 1911. Throughout his life Berlin wrote hundreds of songs for stage including *The Ziegfield Follies* (1919) and *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946). His feature film scores include *Follow the Fleet* (1936), *Easter Parade* (1948) and *White Christmas* (1954). Irving Berlin and Cole Porter were the only two composers at the time who wrote both music and lyrics. The pair were seen as competitors, however in *De-Lovely* they appear as associates.

*Paris*. Lee and Porter discuss the idea of change (one of the main functions of carnival as phenomenon) and Porter becomes wary of leaving his male lover. Although he does not specifically reveal this in dialogue, the camera pans to the man who is seen dancing and laughing in the crowd. As the married couple join in the festivities, the final chorus exclaims:

*They say that bears have love affairs*

*And even camels*

*We're men and mammals*

*Let's misbehave*

The carnivalesque theme that runs throughout this sequence demonstrates that Porter's private life and sexuality is not openly accepted in the society of the time. The idea of Porter's hidden homosexuality is apparent in Lee's discussion with Porter as they quietly converse about Berlin's offer. Porter and Lee also mention, without being specific through dialogue, that Porter will be moving away from the male dancer that he has developed a sexual relationship with. The reference is made more apparent through film editing techniques as Lee's glance cuts to the male who is dancing in the crowd, unaware of the discussion. The couple discuss the circumstances without anyone else hearing, therefore remaining discrete about the issue. In an interview by Thomas Chau in Los Angeles, Kevin Kline is asked about Porter's homosexuality in *De-Lovely*:

*We've got to know. We have to know all the mythology, we have to know everything.*

*It's the fact that the news media, at the time, colluded by giving him a hero stature.*

*Their attitude was 'Let's not talk about it.' Everybody knew he was gay. It just wasn't talked about.'*<sup>80</sup>

Therefore *De-Lovely* draws attention to alternate meanings behind his composed lyrics. The carnivalesque setting in this number allows characters to be liberated from the norms of the established order and become free to disclose confidential aspects that they withheld.

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.cinecon.com/news.php?id=0406151>, accessed 5 May 2010.

### *'Night and Day'*

In the musical number, 'Night and Day', Cole Porter trains a frustrated actor, Jack (John Barrowman) to sing for an upcoming stage performance [00:42:30]. Porter climbs up onto the stage and rehearses the song with Jack but also subtly flirts with him by saying; "I wrote it with you in mind"<sup>81</sup> and "Think about the lyrics and just look at me". Porter also physically engages Jack by gently touching his chest as they sing 'Night and Day' in unison. Although the physical connection is not overtly sexual, it is still intimate as Porter enters Jack's personal space (Figure 8). The connection between Porter and Jack provides Jack with the ability to finally sing the song as it was written. The rehearsal scene then transforms into the public performance of 'Night and Day' [00:45:14]. Wayne Koestenbaum equates singing and use of the voice with sexual liberation (1991: 205) and concludes his research by stating, "homosexuality and singing require decisions to be made about placement – verdicts the body comes to as if by itself, naturally" (1991: 228).



Figure 8: Jack and Porter rehearse 'Night and Day'

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<sup>81</sup> In an interview, Fred Astaire discloses that Porter wrote 'Night and Day' for him; "Actually, I didn't recognize it as a potential great hit. I was more concerned about whether or not I could sing it... it had a long range – very low and kind of very high, and it was long, as they all said, and I was trying to figure out what kind of a dance could be arranged for it. I asked him to play it again and again, and after four or five times I began to get with it" (1967: 17-18).

Conveying homosexuality is dependent on the relationship between the placement of the body and the sonic quality of the (singing) voice. In order to express homosexuality in the 'Night and Day' musical sequence, Porter guides Jack's physical and sonic placement by touching him and singing with him. Jack's performance then becomes natural (initially forced, without Porter's guidance) as he is able to sing and experience the song Porter has written for him. Porter coaxes Jack to embrace his true feelings which assists him in singing the song about love and obsession. Jack and Porter establish an implied relationship outside of this setting, when Jack presents himself as a handsome cab driver; however it is the encounter in rehearsal that triggers a successful performance by Jack. The lyrics include:

*Night and day, you are the one  
Only you beneath the moon or under the sun  
Whether near to me, or far  
It's no matter darling where you are  
I think of you  
Night and day*

In a sense, in order for Jack to sing the song as it was intended, he thinks of Porter and the personal time they shared in rehearsal. Without Porter's guidance, Jack would not have been able to connect emotion to the song and act as if he were in love with the actress on stage. As Jack displays his love through song, to the woman accompanying him on stage, he is thinking about his encounter with Porter. Although this is not officially confirmed in *De-Lovely*, it is considered a character projection:

*A broad view of projection suggests that people can find expression for many of their feelings and thoughts by projection onto the environment, including people, animals, pictures, motion pictures, television, music, and a variety of objects (Zakia, 2002: 208).*



Further applying the psychological theory to *De-Lovely*, Jack projects his feelings for Porter through his performance of 'Night and Day'. Kevin Kline argues that *De-Lovely* explores:

*his [Porter's] prodigious sexual promiscuity and that enormous appetite he had, hedonistic appetite for sensual pleasures of the flesh, food and drink and cigarettes and music and beauty and art, beautiful men, beautiful women, beautiful art. Had he not had that appetite and that energy to sustain that appetite, he would not have been the artist he was.*<sup>82</sup>

Kline implies here that Porter's sexuality directly influenced his career as an artist. The 'Night and Day' number in *De-Lovely* reinforces that Porter is able to project his sexual nature (as well as other personality traits) onto his colleagues and performers that he works with. It should be noted here that although Porter did not publicly define himself as homosexual, he did participate in a gay lifestyle in the 'open' closet of the cosmopolitan circles in which he moved. Instead of publicly announcing his homosexuality, Porter transfers his own personal feelings through his music, then through the performers, and inevitably onto the public.

### ***'Experiment'***

In *De-Lovely*, Lee and Porter move to Hollywood so Porter can pursue his career in the movie-making business. Lee is obviously unimpressed with Porter's lifestyle in the new, warmer climate [01:03:26]. Lee becomes less of a priority in Porter's life when his success in Hollywood also makes him a desired guest at various social events. At a party located on a Hollywood film set, Porter is requested to perform a song in front of the guests. When asked onstage, Porter walks through the crowd and subtly makes plans with a man to meet a new set of male companions that evening. Lee is noticeably agitated and aware of his activities as shown through her facial expressions and drinking towards intoxication (refer back to Figure 7). Porter jumps on stage and sings his song 'Experiment'. The appearance of the song at this stage of the film reflects Lee's choice of separation from her husband and also Porter's experimentation with his sexuality:

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<sup>82</sup> <http://movies.about.com/od/delovely/a/delovekk062904.htm>, accessed 5 May 2010.

*Experiment*

*Make it your motto day and night.*

*Experiment*

*And it will lead you to the light.*

*If this advice you'll only employ*

*The future can offer you infinite joy*

*And merriment.*

*Experiment*

*And you'll see.*

‘Experiment’ is a song originally composed for the stage musical *Nymph Errant* that began playing in Manchester in 1933. The musical depicts controversial sexual subject matter which focuses on the experimentation of protagonist Evangeline Edwards who is intent on losing her virginity. For Lee, after witnessing Porter singing the song to a crowd of Hollywood industry personnel, it is humiliating. The audience is amused by the lyrics of ‘Experiment’ however it is unclear that the song is linked to Porter’s experimentation with people of the same sex. According to Marty Roth:

*By refusing to mark gender in his lyrics, Porter produces a situation where the heterosexual and homosexual texts coincide. Unlike the other major lyricists of the period, Porter either leaves his pronouns open throughout the song... or, if he has to make a heterosexual resolution, holds it off as long as possible (1993: 273).*

Therefore, through lyrics alone, it is not apparent who Porter is referring to.<sup>83</sup> Lee and the men present who are facilitating Porter’s homosexual encounters are the few who understand how the song relates to Porter’s personal circumstances. Demonstrating the affect of the song, after the event Lee tells Porter she will be leaving him and moving to Arizona. These performances, where Porter’s sexuality is conveyed through his music, are the times where

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<sup>83</sup> Modern music artists such as Melissa Etheridge, George Michael and K.D. Lang applied similar lyrical techniques before they publicly admitted their homosexuality. In doing so they additionally appealed to both heterosexual and homosexual audiences.

Lee is emotionally withdrawn from Porter. The songs highlight Porter's character traits and assist in exploring his intimate relationships.

### ***'Love for Sale'***

'Love for Sale', is a controversial song originally written by Cole Porter for *The New Yorkers*: a Broadway stage show performed between 1930 and 1931. Larry M. Lance and Christina Y. Berry imply that Cole Porter's 'Love for Sale', "was perhaps the first song ever written about love as a profession, a provocative number made all the more purient, and suggestive by Kathryn Crawford's performance in *The New Yorkers* in 1930" (1985: 67). The song was banned from the radio because of its lyrics, describing a prostitute selling herself:

*Appetising young love for sale*

*If you want to buy my wares*

*Follow me and climb the stairs*

*Love for sale*

However, from Timothy E. Scheurer's perspective:

[In] Cole Porter's 'Love For Sale' we are never told directly that the narrator and chief subject of the song is a streetwalker. Instead, through a series of symbols, a langorous rhythm and the subtle use of minor harmonies and shifts in harmonies, her image becomes clear. In short, her image must be evoked by the listener (1990: 25).

The musical number in *De-Lovely* is portrayed in an alternate way to its visual representation in *The New Yorkers*.<sup>84</sup> In *De-Lovely* the sequence is set in an underground jazz nightclub

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<sup>84</sup> *The New Yorkers* is a sociological musical satire and appeared on B.S. Moss's Broadway Theatre. In the stage production, 'Love for Sale' is sung by prostitute, May and features her three girlfriends.

where Porter pays for and meets male prostitutes. The musical sequence also features a woman (played by Vivian Green) singing 'Love for Sale' on a stage in spotlight [01:08:56]. The sequence demonstrates that visual imagery can alter the meaning of a song and its lyrics. 'Love for Sale' in *De-Lovely* describes Cole Porter's sexual encounters with men through paying for prostitution while married to Lee. It is in places like the nightclub where Porter sought intimacy and as the lyrics describes, "Old love, new love/ Every love but true love". The notion is reinforced by Porter's statement in one of the earlier scenes in the film: "I wanted every kind of love that was available. I never could find them in the same person or the same sex". Through lyrics, dialogue and audio-visual aesthetic, *De-Lovely* represents Porter as a passionate artist who constantly searches for love and reflects his own identity through his music. The 'Love for Sale' number illustrates the private, more secretive parts of Porter's biography. In a study of homosexuality and prostitution, Debra Boyer discloses that:

*The idea that homosexual expression is confined to impersonal and economic exchange is a widely held notion. The interdependence of homosexual expression and prostitution has led some researchers to argue that homosexuality and prostitution are perceived as inseparable, if not synonymous phenomena [such as Jeffrey Weeks (1981)] (1989: 153).*

As Boyer continues she asserts that "homosexuality is generally excluded as a motivation for prostitution by males" (1989: 154). And furthermore, in a study by Albert J. Reiss Jr., homosexual prostitution is a reflection of the greater sexual experience of males who did not define themselves as homosexual (1961). Throughout Porter's life he did not define or announce himself as a homosexual man. Therefore involving himself in the male prostitution scene is not a direct link to his homosexuality as it is to his involvement in the greater sexual experience. Assisting the film audience to understand Porter's love and sexual interests, 'Love for Sale' narrates the previously undisclosed part of his life which represents his desire for love and sexual experiences that is then visually affirmed by the filmmakers in *De-Lovely*.

Overall, through the musical numbers of the film, the meaning of Porter's music changes from what was originally perceived as a heterosexual context (in relation to *Night and Day* and the productions Porter's music was featured in) to a homosexual context in this

contemporary musical biopic. However, changing the sexual issues does not necessarily make *De-Lovely* the more precise representation of Cole Porter's life, it simply makes it a different representation. Director Irwin Winkler discussed the narrative content of the film:

*They [Lee and Porter] had a marriage for 38 years and were very much in love with each other, yet he was gay at the same time. That was a very interesting subject to examine and not a subject you see on the screen or told in any manner of form.*<sup>85</sup>

Contemporary musical biopics continually strive to represent the music artist in distinct ways to offer new viewpoints. Since Winkler (and other contemporary filmmakers) is not constrained by the same standards of censorship or production codes of the studio era, he is free to employ any perspective in representing the music artist (and the possible perspectives are innumerable). Contemporary filmmakers of musical biopics strive to re-construct the protagonist's identity and in doing so, create new myths of the life of the popular artist.

### **Cole Porter in *Night and Day***

Before *De-Lovely* was produced, *Night and Day* was released in 1946 while Porter's career was still active. This, along with the production codes that were still in effect at the time, influenced the structure of the studio era musical biopic. *Night and Day* was made to fit into the previously constructed genre mould that was required at the time. The film displays the characteristics of a musical genre film that follows the life story of the individual throughout his career. Wayne M. Bryant proposed that:

*The 1946 film Night and Day presented a straightened version of Cole Porter's life, with bisexual actor Cary Grant in the lead role and Alexis Smith as his wife. Porter's gay friend Monty Wooley appears in the film as a heterosexual version of himself* (2005: 116).

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<sup>85</sup> <http://movies.about.com/od/delovely/a/delovely062804.htm>, accessed 5 May 2010.

It is clear that the film adheres to the regulations concerning representations of sexuality by developing characters that appear heterosexual, who are based on actual individuals who are homosexual. Michael Dunne also comments on this important issue:

*Perhaps most important of all in terms of biographical accuracy, Porter was – like Lorenz Hart<sup>86</sup> – gay. Given the cultural environment in which the musical biographies of both songwriters were released, however, it should probably come as no surprise that the scriptwriters dreamed up traditional heterosexual movie romances for Larry Hart and Cole Porter (2004: 142).*

Conversely, as a way of overcoming this issue, rumour circulated that the sexuality of the actors cast in the film was uncertain. As well as the censorship codes that did not permit the dramatisation of homosexuality, Porter himself contributed to the decision-making process in casting for *Night and Day*. Custen discusses Cole Porter's contribution:

*Well aware of the conventions of show-business biographies, and experienced in business negotiations concerning artistic properties, Porter was willing to sign away certain of his biographical rights as part of the business of putting on a show. To this end, he, his wife, and mother signed release forms allowing six-foot-two inch Cary Grant and youthful Alexis Smith to impersonate the diminutive (five foot six inch) balding Porter and his older wife in a film that bore only the most superficial resemblance to their actual lives (1994: 160).*

Porter intended to have his life represented in a particular way which turned out to be a complete contrast to his actual life. Since Porter was a public figure, maintaining an appeal to audiences and fans relied upon a certain physical appearance. These cultural factors drove Porter to approve the biopic which represents a life that would be accepted by film audiences.

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<sup>86</sup> Lorenz Hart (1895 – 1943) is the lyricist of Rodgers and Hart; a Broadway songwriting team (with Richard Rodgers). Hart struggled with his homosexuality; however the biopic *Words and Music* (1948) did not address these issues.

Porter's closeted homosexuality is recounted in the aforementioned biographies as well as other media material released after his death.

*In addition to the pervasive gay subtext and risqué innuendo in his lyrics... which often were challenged by censors, Porter's music is replete with contagious and erotic rhythms. His songs reveal a desperate need for love tempered by the constant fear of inconstancy and solitude... a genius who remained an avid yet publicly closeted homosexual (Aldrich and Wotherspoon, 2001: 420).*

Porter found the way to express himself through his music yet avoided direct representations of his identity in *Night and Day*. Porter's relationship with the makers of *Night and Day* is visualised in *De-Lovely* where Porter and Lee attend a private screening of the musical biopic [01:24:02]. As the house lights come back on in the theatre Porter states, "If I can survive this movie I can survive anything". Both Lee and Porter appear to be aged, grey and wrinkled, polar opposites of their Hollywood film counterparts. They discuss the casting of Cary Grant and happy Hollywood endings, seeming nonchalant about the fabricated Hollywood representations. The two merely intend the film to bring success and assist in Porter's career progression. The scene demonstrates that *Night and Day* is a fictitious adaptation of Porter's life and was produced to benefit Porter's career.

Other issues relating to accuracy and fabrication appear throughout *De-Lovely* as old Porter watches his life re-imagined on the stage. Old Porter finds that there are some scenes that he is uncomfortable with, mostly in regard to his unconventional relationship with his wife. Gabe retorts that it is not his choice; he has no say in the matter and has no control over the representations (as opposed to his authority in *Night and Day*). Gabe's argument also suggests that *De-Lovely's* film audiences will read the film however they wish to as interpretation is ultimately left to the film audience no matter how much creative control the filmmaker has. The scene demonstrates a level of self-reflexivity regarding the production of a film based on an actual life story. *Night and Day* received mixed reviews from audiences and film reviewers:

*Despite generally lukewarm reviews by skeptical critics, who knew better than to accept this version of Cole Porter's life as anything but Hollywood fantasy, everyone loved Grant's acting and even his campy singing in a memorable rendition 'You're the Top'. Whenever Porter was asked how he felt about it, he insisted he loved the film as well, but he was always quick to qualify his opinion with the disclaimer that there wasn't a word of truth in it (Eliot, 2004: 244).*

That is not to say that *De-Lovely* has any more 'truth' in it than *Night and Day*. Both films contain fabrications that exemplify the unimportance of imitating reality and focus more on imagination and interpretation (dramatic action). Contemporary musical biopics are inspired by multiple sources and are not created to be informative. They are produced to be entertaining, pay homage to an individual and offer a new perspective on their life story.

## **Casting Star Performers**

Two different actors have represented Cole Porter in feature film: Cary Grant and Kevin Kline. Alongside these Hollywood stars, other performers in *Night and Day* and especially *De-Lovely* change not only how the film is perceived but also the type of patrons the film hopes to attract. Steven Cohan proposes:

*Far from reproducing the original person, a star image on film is itself always a copy of a copy, a mask or persona meant to authenticate a social, racial, and sexual type in the theatricalized settings of a movie and its promotion (1997: 26).*

Therefore the star actor and character are representations of themselves in a feature film: they are an image or symbol of something more generalised. In the case of the Cole Porter musical biopics the issues include masculinity, sexuality and musicality. In terms of musicality, Grant did not have any musical training leading up to *Night and Day*, however, Kline had developed musical skill prior to *De-Lovely*, studying classical piano while attending Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. Regardless, Grant and Kline's musical knowledge is not of



necessity as most songs are sung by other actors/performers in the films. Further, Cole Porter was a composer, not a performer – no singing abilities are needed. As biographer, Richard G. Hubler confirms, “He simply wanted to sing in his own key (and he sang badly in person) to his own notes and ditties” (1965: 66). In any case, the focus of these musical biopics (in terms of music) is not on the actor’s abilities, rather the music itself.

Rumoured to be bisexual, Cary Grant plays a heterosexual Cole Porter in *Night and Day*. According to biographical accounts of Grant, the actor was married five times and in-between marriages spent a considerable amount of time living with a man named Randolph Scott:

*As a consequence, the rumours of Grant’s bisexuality circulated around Hollywood for the rest of his life. After his death, somewhat predictably, such rumours were made more well known with the publication of a number of sensationalistic articles and biographies* (McCann, 1996: 126).

These publications include Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon* (1981: 250) and Larry Adler’s *Me and My Big Mouth* (1994: 74). Regardless, casting Grant is a way to hint at Porter’s sexual position. As discussed by Custen:

*Night and Day and the narrative it constructed were affected by the evolving demands of the musical film, Hollywood’s sense of self interest when narrating a film about its own community, the interests of the living Cole Porter, the star image of Cary Grant, the interstudio conventions, and Warner’s own internal understanding of how the great life should be told, in this case complete with song, dance, and romance* (1994: 156).

Custen suggests that there is a combination of issues behind why *Night and Day* became the film that it is, one of which is the star image of Cary Grant. Due to the fact that Cole Porter was living at the time and Cary Grant had a certain image he intended to maintain in the

public eye, the musical biopic became a conservative representation of both individuals. Both stars did not want their careers to end based on the values of the community of fans.

Kevin Kline, on the other hand, who plays Cole Porter in *De-Lovely*, had previously embodied homosexuality in the film *In & Out* (1997). The film is known for representing gay men in mainstream Hollywood, particularly with the inclusion of a ten second kiss between Kline and actor Tom Selleck. *In & Out* is a mainstream Hollywood romantic comedy film focused on a teacher (Howard Brackett played by Kevin Kline) who's former student (Cameron Drake played by Matt Dillon) wins a Best Actor award. Drake announces in his acceptance speech, which is broadcast on television, that he would like to thank Brackett, adding that his teacher is "gay". Brackett, engaged to fellow teacher Emily Montgomery (Joan Cusack), spends the remainder of the film attempting to prove his heterosexuality. Towards the end of the film, at his wedding, Brackett confesses that he is gay and calls the ceremony off. Even after admitting his homosexuality and being fired from his position as a teacher, Brackett gains the acceptance of his students, family, friends and the townsfolk. With the film in mind<sup>87</sup> audiences have a pre-conceived understanding of Kline as an actor. Hence, in comparison to Cary Grant in *Night and Day*, Kline is able to display Porter through this alternate approach since it does not negatively affect his career or the career of Cole Porter.

Grant's previous filmic work before his role in *Night and Day* included the lead male role alongside Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) and *I'm No Angel* (1933), screwball comedy *The Awful Truth* (1937) and the film that launched his career, *The Philadelphia Story* (1940): a romantic comedy starring Audrey Hepburn as Grant's ex-wife and rekindled love interest. These films feature Grant as the key love interest which set up his star persona as being a masculine heterosexual celebrity figure. Kline's previous roles vary more than Grant's, however, due to the absence of studio control, Kline was able to adopt the homosexual persona in *De-Lovely*. Overall, the professional history of both Grant and Kline had impact on their interpretations of Porter. The star actors' reading then affects how they (the actors) are perceived by fans and film audiences. Therefore, the way Porter is discerned through *Night and Day* and *De-Lovely* relies on the awareness of star casting. The decision to

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<sup>87</sup> *In & Out* had a domestic total gross of \$63,856,929; significantly higher than *De-Lovely* which had a domestic total gross of \$13,456,633 according to [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) (accessed 25 August, 2010).

cast a star actor completely alters the film audience's comprehension of the musical biopic. Hence, the mere presence of the star actor alters the perception of the film's protagonist.

### ***Popular Music Artists in De-Lovely***

Although the popular music artists that appear in *De-Lovely* do not have any dialogue (they are only heard and seen singing Cole Porter's songs) they still play an important part in the film. For younger film audiences who may not know about Cole Porter in the detail that older audiences do, casting contemporary music icons emphasises the success that Porter had during his career and the impact of his music. Also, casting a variety of popular musicians, classical singers and performers in theatre, film and television increases the diversity of film viewers that would be drawn to the film and to Porter's music. However, *De-Lovely* is not the first to modernise Porter's music. In 1990 the *Red Hot + Blue* music album (inspired by Porter's stage musical *Red, Hot & Blue*, premiering on Broadway in 1936) was released which featured 20 tracks. Contemporary popular music artists and bands re-interpret the music of Porter on the album as part of AIDS awareness. In Richard Dyer's seminal study of stars he suggests that:

*Audiences cannot make media messages anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, the inflections and contradictions, that work for them. Moreover, the agencies of fan magazines and clubs, as well as box office receipts and audience research, mean that the audience's ideas about a star can act back on the media producers of the star's image (2004: 4).*

Although some film reviewers disagree, MGM's vice chairman and chief operations officer, Chris McGurk, believes that the use of contemporary performers in *De-Lovely* is beneficial in opening up the demographic to encompass the viewers under 25 years old (Burlingame, 2004: S18). The music artists originate from differing musical genres such as blues, jazz, pop, rock and punk music, bringing their own style into sonically (and visually) expressing Porter's songs. Included in the long list are Robbie Williams who sings 'De-Lovely', Elvis Costello

performing 'Let's Misbehave', Alanis Morissette singing 'Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love' and Sheryl Crow who performs a rendition of 'Begin the Beguine'. The popular performers featured in *De-Lovely* are established artists in the music industry who assist in representing the contemporary interpretation of Porter's life.

A few years prior to the release of *De-Lovely*, Robbie Williams released big band/jazz album, *Swing When You're Winning* that featured 'Well, Did You Evah!', a Cole Porter song, 'Beyond the Sea' and 'Things', written by Bobby Darin. In the film, Williams sings at Lee and Porter's wedding, a song that expresses the event as the couple dance in the centre of the floor:

*I understand the reason why  
You're sentimental, 'cause so am I  
It's delightful, it's delicious, it's de-lovely  
You can tell at a glance what a swell night this is for romance  
You can hear, dear Mother Nature murmuring low 'Let yourself go'*

Williams appears, arms and body wide open, centre stage (and engulfing the film frame) which often takes the focus off the wedded couple in the sequence. The star's strong presence in the scene is exemplified with his booming voice which is noticeably the most resounding sonic element of the scene. Dyer states "Stars are made for profit... stars are part of the way films are sold" (2004: 5). From this interpretation it is implied that Williams (and the other star personalities cast in the film) was cast in *De-Lovely* in order to increase audience numbers (box office sales). However, the musical scene featuring Williams also displays the pop performer's power and control not only over the song but also his professional career as a singer. Performances by these established artists fortify their significance in the contemporary music industry therefore strengthening the importance of Cole Porter.

The presence of the star in *Beyond the Sea* also exemplifies the importance of the music artist represented. Kevin Spacey, an established Hollywood actor plays Bobby Darin; the popular

1950s entertainer. However, Spacey had a greater creative contribution than the stars featured in *De-Lovely* which suggests that *Beyond the Sea* is largely from Spacey's perspective.

## BEYOND THE SEA

The following case study will frame *Beyond the Sea* by discussing not only media representations of 1950s entertainer,<sup>88</sup> Bobby Darin, but also Kevin Spacey as both personalities are present in the film. It will be argued that *Beyond the Sea* influences how the film audience perceives Darin and Spacey.

As a self-reflexive backstage musical, *Beyond the Sea* is contextualised with the narrative premise that Darin is involved (and stars as himself) in a feature film production of his own life. The following analysis of *Beyond the Sea* will address significant elements of self-reflexivity, memory and elements of fantasy that assisted in portraying Spacey's version of the Bobby Darin story. At the conclusion of the film, there is a disclaimer titled "Memories are like moonbeams..." which states:

*This film is not a literal telling of the life of Bobby Darin. It is a creative work based on fact, but in dramatising the story for the screen some characters, events, dialogue and chronology have been fictionalised and of course, much has been left out. No assumption should be made that any of the persons, companies or products shown or mentioned in the film have endorsed this production.*

The statement provides the film audience with an understanding that the musical biopic is a fabricated re-imagining of Darin's life. The film is intent on paying tribute to Darin's life and his contribution to the entertainment industry. The filmmakers acknowledge that the events of Darin's life are not represented chronologically and that some biographical details have been left out completely. *Beyond the Sea* is an entertaining vision of Bobby Darin's biography through moving image and sound. The argument reinforced through this chapter is that the

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<sup>88</sup> Bobby Darin's career was active between 1956 and 1973. Although he died in 1973 from heart damage, he acted in films and continued recording music, even starring in his own NBC variety programme, *The Bobby Darin Amusement Company*, from 1972 which ran until his death.

musical biopic focuses on one musical individual to reflect on the genre itself. *Beyond the Sea* self-reflexively addresses its own characteristics, displaying an awareness of the film audience and underpinning larger socio-cultural issues.

To conclude there will be an analysis of the representations of both Darin's recorded music and Darin's film acting. In addition to the release of many music albums throughout his career, Darin also starred in 12 feature films from 1961 to 1973. Hence, the influence of Darin's music will be addressed as well as how his films contribute to defining his persona. Darin's music and film career are the basis for his popularity and success hence analysis of rehearsal sequences and musical numbers in *Beyond the Sea* will be presented in order to map out Spacey's perspective. The analysis of audio-visual representations will further demonstrate how the filmmaker shapes the film viewer's interpretations of Bobby Darin.

## **Kevin Spacey: Writer, Director, Producer and Star**

*Beyond the Sea* is from the perspective or 'memory' of Kevin Spacey and his interpretation of Bobby Darin. Considering Spacey wrote, directed, produced and played the role of Darin in the film, he had the most influence over the representation of his life story. According to Steve Vineberg:

*Beyond the Sea, a project Spacey evidently invented for himself out of the same obsession that's making him tour the country in an all-Darin concert – is a tribute to the unfathomable depths of vanity and self-delusion* (2005: 19).

It is clear that Spacey has a level of admiration for Darin and his artistic work which he follows through the film and concert tour. However, in reference to Spacey's interest as "self-delusion", Vineberg suggests that he has no focus or objective for the film or concerts. Spacey states, "I'm going out on a concert tour because I want to absolutely reach the widest possible audience I can."<sup>89</sup> Thus Kevin Spacey's intentions are (as well as increasing box office

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<sup>89</sup> [http://movies.about.com/od/beyondthesea/a/beyondks121004\\_3.htm](http://movies.about.com/od/beyondthesea/a/beyondks121004_3.htm), accessed 13 October 2009.

revenue) to reach as many audiences as possible to convey his message about the importance of Darin's life in American entertainment history. In an interview with Kevin Spacey, he discussed when he first started listening to the music of Darin:

*I grew up in a house where Bobby Darin was playing all the time... I grew up listening to big bands, that brassy sound, and by the time I was 15 my mother had thoroughly converted me. Then it was when I was in my early twenties that a couple of books came out about Bobby's life, and I didn't know anything about him. I just knew him as a performer and I might have seen a couple of things of him on television. But by that point he'd passed away. But getting a hold of his story, and learning what he had overcome, and learning how much he'd crammed into a 15 year career, in a very short life... Then I heard they were making a movie, or trying to make a movie at Warner Brothers, this is now the late '80s. I thought, 'This is the part for me. I'm born to play this part. I've got to play this part'.<sup>90</sup>*

Bobby Darin influenced popular entertainment history. His life and achievements had a considerable influence on Kevin Spacey from a young age. Spacey's admiration of Darin is reflected through his interpretations in *Beyond the Sea* and also in Spacey's touring performances of Darin's music.

### ***Kevin Spacey as Star Icon***

Before taking on the film project, Kevin Spacey developed a successful acting career in the Hollywood movie industry. Including his breakout role as Roger 'Verbal' Kint in *The Usual Suspects* (1994), Spacey also played John Doe in *Se7en* (1995), D.A. Rufus Buckley in *A Time to Kill* (1996), Jack Vincennes in *L.A. Confidential* (1997) and Chris Sabian in *The Negotiator* (1998). Spacey received an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor (*The*

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<sup>90</sup> [http://movies.about.com/od/beyondthesea/a/beyondks121004\\_2.htm](http://movies.about.com/od/beyondthesea/a/beyondks121004_2.htm), accessed 12 May 2010.

*Usual Suspects*) and the Best Actor award one year later for *American Beauty* (1999). Even with these successes, Spacey rejects claims that he is a star figure in Hollywood:

*I don't recognize the term 'Hollywood star'. First of all, I don't live in Hollywood. Second of all, I'm a character actor who is primarily a theatre actor, who's done very well in movies. I'm not a celebrity. That's not a profession. I'm an actor. And I'm an artistic director. For the press, I'm often framed as a Hollywood star. But I think it's just lazy. I don't think of myself that way.*<sup>91</sup>

However, according to his fans<sup>92</sup> and media, Spacey is undeniably a star figure in Hollywood. It is not the decision of the celebrity to choose whether he or she is a Hollywood star, communities of devoted fans and media attention create the individual's fame. An academic study by Paul McDonald discusses the meaning of Hollywood stardom:

*Stars are mediated identities, textual constructions, for audiences do not get the real person but rather a collection of images, words and sounds which are taken to stand for the person. From their familiarity with a range of star texts, moviegoers form impressions of that person so that the star becomes a collection of meanings* (2000: 6).

Kevin Spacey is, in a sense, a fragmented persona that can be interpreted and understood in various ways according to the type of follower and what media interpretations they have been exposed to. Therefore interpreting Spacey's role in *Beyond the Sea* becomes confounding for the film viewer as they are unable to distinguish their interpretation of Spacey from the persona of Bobby Darin. According to Spacey himself, this difficult star separation is intentional: "I didn't want to be tied to an imitation... It had to come from me. Our goal was that those who know Bobby would go, 'Is that Bobby or is that Kevin?'"<sup>93</sup> In doing so, Spacey creates a hybrid persona where he avoids becoming Darin completely. Spacey still retains his own personality and moulds it to his own interpretation of Bobby Darin.

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<sup>91</sup> <http://www.hossli.com/articles/2007/04/01/fame-hasnt-really-intruded-on-my-life/>, accessed 9 February 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Fan sites such as [www.everythingspacey.com](http://www.everythingspacey.com) and [www.drivingmrspacey.com](http://www.drivingmrspacey.com) frame Spacey as a Hollywood star figure (both accessed 9 February 2010).

<sup>93</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2004-09-16-beyond-sea-spacey\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2004-09-16-beyond-sea-spacey_x.htm), accessed 9 February 2010.



### ***Kevin Spacey as Bobby Darin: Shifts in Time, Culture and Identity***

At the time of filming it was made clear that Kevin Spacey (in his early 40s at time of production) did not look like a young Bobby Darin (in his early 20s). The age difference is alluded to through dialogue between Darin and his management in *Beyond the Sea*. The self-referentiality is specifically noted in the film when a journalist tells Darin he is too old to play himself in the film about his own life story. At this point a younger actor is cast to play Darin in the early stages of his life. Christina Lee discusses the effects of time in cinema:

*The time traveller... commands an unparalleled authority to reimagine, even rewrite, history and vault through the fourth dimension... Reverting to the past is always an exercise in nostalgia, loss, and longing intricately intertwined with memory, and projections into the future are an attempt to improve on the present (2008: 2).*

Lee explains here that the use of time in cinema (exploring the past, present and possibilities for the future) creates a sense of nostalgia, altering history. The musical biopic is a tool that assists in changing the past. Its function is to re-interpret history and reflect on how the life of the musical individual influences their music. In the case of *Beyond the Sea*, there is a shift from appearing to be realistic to being consciously fantastical. Spacey is aware that his film is not a historical account of the life history of Darin. It is formulated in order to pay homage to the MGM musical films of the time and reflect the culture of North Americans in the 1950s.

In focusing on the entertainer himself, Spacey raises issues concerning socio-political discrepancies at the time (during the 1950s and 1960s). In *Beyond the Sea*, Darin dreams of performing at the Copacabana nightclub where his idol Frank Sinatra had performed. When his manager tells him the news that he has been booked for “the Copa”, he discusses the show with the club owner and makes a request to have African-American George Kirby perform stand-up comedy as a support act [00:49:50]. The actual event is also discussed in the biography *Roman Candle: The Life of Bobby Darin* (Evanier, 2004: 109). Darin transcends the social boundaries of the time in this sequence (by getting an African-American to open a

show at the Copacabana for the first time) and opens up opportunities that impact on the whole community. Through this example, even though there is a particular focus on the musical individual, the musical biopic takes one life history to comment and reflect upon an entire society or culture. The musical biopic also applies the life history narrative structure to show how an individual's music can impact and alter the ideals of a society. This will be addressed in more depth during a discussion regarding Darin's later music career.

As previously suggested, the character of Bobby Darin in *Beyond the Sea* is more effectively analysed in reference to Kevin Spacey. Further, in discussing the two popular personalities, there must be consideration for the role of the film audience:

*The character in the film may set the heroic type that the star embodies, but the relationship to the real person behind the image completes the construction of the celebrity. It is the solving by the audience of the enigma of the star's personality that helps formulate the celebrity: the audience wants to know the authentic nature of the star beyond the screen. Through reading the extratextual reports about a particular film celebrity, the audience knits together a coherent though always incomplete celebrity identity* (Marshall, 1997: 85).

Generally, the musical biopic also “knits together [an]... incomplete celebrity identity” (Marshall, 1997: 85) for both the actor cast to play the protagonist and the music artist represented. The premise of the biographical film (and its claims through marketing) is to deconstruct the star figure and publicise the private aspects of their life. However, interpretation of the star is achievable through access of extratextual, media-based reports which are essentially fabricated sources.

## **Integrating and Contextualising the Music of Bobby Darin**

Kevin Spacey draws upon his own memory and fantasies of Bobby Darin's biography through the self-reflexive mode of the musical genre. Both Darin's music and movie roles are

represented in the film, however, it is his music that becomes integrated into the life story narrative. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert suggest:

*To represent music, to take it as an object of interpretation, is to recognize it as a constituent part of a world and as an active force in the construction of that world rather than as a mere embellishment or appendage to a world the construction of which is otherwise complete (Goldmark et al., 2007: 7).*

Hence, all music in *Beyond the Sea* has a specific function and particular meaning in each scene. The popular music in the film (a majority of which is written by Darin himself) assists the audience to understand how his life could have possibly affected his music. Darin's acting roles that are represented in the film assist in framing certain biographical events in sequence and demonstrate Darin's abilities as an entertainer. Darin's film roles in *Beyond the Sea* also guide the developing relationship between himself and eventual wife, Sandra Dee. Darin initially met Sandra Dee on the film set (discussed in more detail below) for *Come September* (1961) in 1960, married in the same year, then made another couple of films together: *If a Man Answers* (1962) and *That Funny Feeling* (1965). *Beyond the Sea* illustrates their relationship through Darin and Dee's film roles: how they intersect and how their careers are measured against each other.

*Beyond the Sea* establishes that there are three stages of Bobby Darin's life – an often overused formula in the musical biopic:

*The Jolson Story [1946] established the formula for the showbusiness biopics to follow: it provided a sentimentalised, sanitised account of its subject's career... as a pioneer who creates his own style and who triumphs over adversity, effectively retelling his life story as a fulfilment of the American Dream in which individualism and self-confidence bring about career success (Chapman, 2006: 38).*

In *Beyond the Sea* the first stage begins during Darin's youth, before he is discovered. The period displays his development (via training and rehearsing) as a budding performer. The second stage is his most recognised persona: a popular entertainer at the peak of his career. The third and final stage marks changes in his age, a shift in personal interests and slow deterioration marked by ill health. Darin's music guides the film viewer through the three stages of his biography and also assists in contextualising Darin's musical development and stylistic changes.

### ***Stage One: Bobby Darin's Youth***

When Darin (Spacey) meets his younger self, the film audience is taken back to the time of his youth to witness his transformation from an ill child to a potential musical performer. A musical number featuring the song 'Lazy River' [00:11:53] performed on his home street marks the transition from boy to man (and from the young actor to Kevin Spacey). Young Darin's mother Polly (Brenda Blethyn)<sup>94</sup> teaches Darin how to play piano, dance and sing after he is diagnosed with rheumatic fever and told he may not live to the age of 15. The 'Lazy River'<sup>95</sup> musical montage sequence alternates between diegetic music – played on piano by Polly and young Darin and non-diegetic music – with additional (unseen) instrumentation. The lyrics of 'Lazy River' establish that this is a fantasy sequence:

*Throw away your troubles, baby, dream a dream of me*  
*There may be blue skies up above*  
*But as long as we're in love*  
*Yeah, we'll be up a lazy river, how happy we could be,*  
*Up a lazy river with me*

The following scene takes the audience back to the present where the two Darin's discuss the sequence of events:

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<sup>94</sup> Later in *Beyond the Sea* (after the death of Polly), his sister Nina (played by Caroline Aaron) confesses that she is the actual birth-mother of Darin and that Polly was in fact his grandmother. Nina was 17 years older than Darin and never told him who his biological father was. She re-married (Charlie Maffia played by Bob Hoskins) later in life.

<sup>95</sup> 'Lazy River' is a music track featured on *The Bobby Darin Story* (1961)

Young Darin: *What a minute!*

Darin: *What?*

Young Darin: *You didn't go dancing down the street like that.*

Darin: *I know; it's a fantasy sequence.*

Young Darin: *But it's not real.*

Darin: *Forget real. Listen kid, memories are like moonbeams; we do with them what we want.*

The sequence is a key example of self-reflexivity with the presence of both the younger and older Darin. As previously discussed, the shifting time narrator is employed to comment on the (mythical) representations of Bobby Darin in *Beyond the Sea*. Both young Darin and older Darin discuss the genre characteristics of the musical film genre after their rendition of 'Lazy River'. The production within the diegesis of the film is seen as an absorption in retrospection. The 'Lazy River' sequence is purposefully unrealistic in order to reflect on the characteristics of the musical film genre. Here, *Beyond the Sea* references the style of the studio era musical biopic. Additionally, the sequence shows the filmmakers' audio-visual representation of their own memories. *Beyond the Sea* "displays considerable self-consciousness about its status as a musical. Structured loosely around the concept of Darin starring in a movie about himself, the film repeatedly questions the believability of its story" (Schlotterbeck, 2008: 89) yet further reinforces that it is just a story and should not be taken as an accurate description of Darin's life experiences. The musical numbers such as 'Lazy River' reflect past genre characteristics of the musical biopic that are often highly mythological. *Beyond the Sea* is not a plausible story of the life of Bobby Darin, it is a self-reflexive account of his biography in the Hollywood studio era mode.

### ***Stage Two: Bobby Darin at the Height of His Career***

The album *That's All* (1959) is Darin's second and features the song 'Beyond the Sea'. In *Beyond the Sea* the album is placed on Polly who lies in an open casket at her funeral by the

young Darin. Darin (Spacey), who stands next to young Darin in the scene, leaves the church: metaphorically leaving his past behind to pursue his musical career. ‘*La Mer*’ (the original French song written by Charles Trenet that ‘Beyond the Sea’ is based upon) plays when Darin arrives in Italy to shoot the film, *Come September* (1961) with Sandra Dee and Rock Hudson. The song assists in sonically contextualising the following scenes where Darin meets Sandra Dee on set of his feature film debut. The ‘Beyond the Sea’ sequence is a large scale musical number in the film that establishes Darin’s interest in, and pursuit of, Sandra Dee’s affection. The musical number comments on the narrative structure of the biopic. The pace of the song emphasises the speed in which Darin is able to turn Sandra Dee from detesting him to falling in love and then marrying him in this short space of time. Through dialogue, Darin even goes as far as to state that he can convince Sandra Dee to marry him within one week.

Self-reflexively displaying the myth of love and romance, the courting continues as the couple run from the media journalists into a garden, find a moped and drive to another, more secluded garden as ‘Dream Lover’ plays non-diegetically [00:37:24]. ‘Dream Lover’ was written by Bobby Darin and recorded in 1959 as a single and first heard on the *Darin at the Copa* album in 1960. “Many of the love songs during the first ten years of rock pertained to an unrealistic idealization of a dream boy or girl. Such songs as ‘Dream Lover’... show that romantic idealization was present” (Kantor, 1974: 208). The lyrics reflect the unusually fast courtship process that begins with Sandra Dee disliking Darin at the start of the number to accepting a marriage proposal by the conclusion of the song. Additionally, both the ‘Lazy River’ and ‘Beyond the Sea’ musical numbers reflected studio era film. As Spacey discussed, “Certain sections were homages to the great MGM musicals. We actually wanted it to have that kind of Technicolor look to it.”<sup>96</sup> Hence there is an intention to replicate the musical films of the 1940s and 50s, which heighten the illusion and purposefully decrease any realism.

### ***Stage Three: Ageing and Shifts in Bobby Darin’s Career***

Throughout the film there is always a comparison between Bobby Darin and Frank Sinatra. Audiences, family and managers discuss Darin in relation to Sinatra, referring to his success

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<sup>96</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/11/23/kevin\\_spacey\\_beyond\\_the\\_sea\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/11/23/kevin_spacey_beyond_the_sea_interview.shtml), accessed 4 September 2009.

in the entertainment industry, critiquing where he performs and even in discussions of Darin's receding hairline:

*'Mack the Knife' and 'Beyond the Sea' [are] two songs that Bobby Darin recorded in the early 1960s in such a Sinatralike manner that people have always associated them at least as much with Sinatra as with Darin. (In truth, Sinatra did not record 'Mack the Knife' until 1984, and more's the pity, he never recorded 'Beyond the Sea')* (Nelson, 2004: 525).

In fact, 'Beyond the Sea' was composed in 1946 by Jack Lawrence and Charles Trenet, 13 years prior to Darin's recording. It is the song style (especially the vocal aesthetic) that connects 'Beyond the Sea' to Sinatra and hence Darin to Sinatra as his was the most popular recording of the song.<sup>97</sup> As well as Sinatra's successful singing and acting career, he partook in political activities during the 1940s and 1950s (Freedland, 1998) that Darin also emulated throughout his own career.

The final stage of his life is the period in the film where Darin's characteristics and personality change as he spends time at home with his new family and shifts his interest to politics. The change is influenced by the Vietnam War in the 1960s which inspires him to write and compose a new set of songs. "In 1969, Darin... wrote the song, 'A Simple Song of Freedom', a soft, guitar-based protest song which Tim Hardin [folk musician] recorded for a hit that year."<sup>98</sup> It was not recorded by Darin until 1971, live in Las Vegas and then released on *Live! At The Desert Inn* in 1987.<sup>99</sup> The chorus of the song ties in with the socio-political issues of the time and how it has affected Darin:

*Come and sing a simple song of freedom  
Sing it like you've never sung before*

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<sup>97</sup> Artists including Benny Goodman, Roger Williams and Gisele MacKenzie also recorded 'Beyond the Sea'.

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.pophistorydig.com/?tag=simple-song-of-freedom>, accessed 8 September 2010.

<sup>99</sup> 'Simple Song of Freedom' features on Darin's albums: *As Long As I'm Singing: The Bobby Darin Collection* (1995), *The Very Best of Bobby Darin 1966 – 1969* (1999) and live on *Songs From Big Sur* (2004) and *Commitment and Rare Darin* (2007).

*Let it fill the air  
Tell the people everywhere  
We, the people here, don't want a war*

To physically represent the change in Darin he also alters his appearance during this time by taking off his toupée and growing a moustache. Biographer Michael Starr recounts the physical change:

*Bobby replaced his expensive tuxedo with a Levi's version made out of denim. Gone were the lifts he'd been wearing for years, along with the stage makeup and toupee. He grew a moustache. Bobby now wanted to be known as 'Bob' Darin. The transformation from swingin' Vegas entertainer to folk troubador was complete (2004: 176-7).*

The visual alteration signifies a change in target market, moving from a younger generation of listeners to a more mature demographic. The visual and sonic transformation in these sequences establishes a context, reinforcing the time and place that Darin intended on re-inventing his career. The change in Darin's life reflects the musical biopic's ability to show how an individual and their music are able to influence and change a society or culture.

## **Representing Bobby Darin's Film Career**

Considering the musical biopic is based on Spacey's memory of Darin, it is important to understand the function of memory in cinema. As Roger Bromley states, "Memory is not simply the property of individuals, nor just a matter of psychological processes, but a complex cultural and historical phenomenon constantly subject to revision, amplification and 'forgetting'" (1988: 1). In other words, in order to remember the past, it must be forgotten. When remembering, the events are altered, revised and amplified to suit the needs of the individual. In this particular case, Spacey remembers Darin in the context of studio era cinema, which he nostalgically represents through the musical numbers in the biopic. Spacey



makes use of the genre characteristics of the studio era musical biopic to reflect not only Darin himself but also the particular period of filmmaking in general.

*Beyond the Sea* chronicles Darin's acting career that commenced in Hollywood throughout the early 1960s. Films such as the abovementioned *Come September* as well as *Too Late Blues* (1961), *Hell Is for Heroes* (1962) and *Pressure Point* (1962) are some of the feature films that Darin was cast in. Darin's movie career, although not as important as his music career in *Beyond the Sea*, also demonstrates Darin's personal characteristics, including persistence and determination: traits that audiences and fans found admirable. Musical biopics tend to lead the film viewer to empathise with and admire the protagonist as these types of films commemorate and sometimes eulogise the music artist. Ian Inglis discusses the various intentions of the musical biopic which can be any of the following: to present a mechanical reproduction of reality, manipulating reality to create a fabricated history or to ignore reality and focus on spectacle (2003: 78). In this particular case, Spacey states why he produced this film:

*I made the movie because I wanted to make the movie, and I made the movie I wanted to make. He's largely been forgotten and he was, without question, one of the greatest entertainers we ever had. Because he died young, and because he changed, because he didn't always be the Bobby Darin they wanted him to be, I think that had a detrimental effect on his legacy.*<sup>100</sup>

Here Spacey states that he desired to reflect a different Darin than the persona that was represented in the media. "Spacey evidently identified with Darin's legendary ambition, versatility, and self-assurance... Whatever the darker truths of Darin's rise to pop stardom, Kevin Spacey chose to focus on Darin's indomitable will and show business resiliency" (Niemi, 2006: 283). Focusing on the personality traits that are more clearly aligned with his own, Spacey represents only certain sides of Darin. An intention of many contemporary biopic filmmakers is to represent aspects of the musical individual that were not apparent to the film audience before the feature film release. Although Darin's film career is not the most

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<sup>100</sup> [http://movies.about.com/od/beyondthesea/a/beyondks121004\\_3.htm](http://movies.about.com/od/beyondthesea/a/beyondks121004_3.htm), accessed 27 September 2009.

significant part of his life, it is represented in *Beyond the Sea* to draw attention to relatively unpublicised facets of his biography.

The most significant film that Darin was cast in is *Captain Newman, M.D.* (1963) as Corporal Jim Tompkins. The cast of the film also includes Gregory Peck, Tony Curtis and Angie Dickinson (specifically mentioned in *Beyond the Sea*). The reason for the film's importance is that it also gave Darin an Academy Award nomination in the Best Supporting Role category. Although he did not win it still demonstrated his talent as an actor. Darin's acting career is an element of his life that Spacey finds of value because of his own career in feature film production. The appearance of this particular biographical event in *Beyond the Sea* demonstrates that the musical biopic is constructed according to the filmmaker's assessment. The biopic is shaped by the interpretation and memory of the director (as well as producers and scriptwriters) and is a reflection not of the individual represented but of the filmmakers themselves. Even though it appears to be a biased depiction, Eviatar Zerubavel's study of collective memory implies: "Although memory is not a mere reproduction of objective facts, this does not mean that it is therefore entirely subjective" (2003: 2). The public do not remember life events and relationships of popular artists in the same way however the biographical film is an accessible means through which public memory is communicated.

Bobby Darin has influenced contemporary music and cinema. Even after the death of the individual, star power can re-emerge after an extended period of time and the music of Darin emerged in different media texts. Biographer David Evanier suggested:

*Kevin Spacey's 2004 biopic Beyond the Sea is bringing Bobby alive to a new generation of fans. Robert Downey Jr. patterned his singing and dancing sequences in the 2003 movie The Singing Detective after Bobby. And Bobby's music is everywhere, timeless and uncannily fresh, used in the soundtracks of such popular movies as American Beauty... and Finding Nemo... He is played more now than when he was alive – and he was a superstar then (2004: xi).*

Approximately three decades after his death, Darin's music appeared in contemporary popular film soundtracks and Kevin Spacey has attempted to personify these songs and re-invent Darin's star image. Audiences who have not been exposed to Bobby Darin or his work are given the opportunity to learn about his life story and how it is interpreted by his fans/followers.

## **Conclusion: Hollywood Studio Era through Contemporary Perspectives**

To conclude, both *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea* are representations of music artists whose careers peaked during the Hollywood studio era. Both case studies embrace the studio era aesthetic yet provide a fabricated narrative framework, exhibiting self-awareness that the films are re-mythologising the life history of the artist. These contemporary re-imaginings of the musical individuals demonstrate that the contemporary perception of the protagonist is different to the Hollywood studio era perspective. Due to production and censorship codes, contemporary filmmakers have more flexibility and freedom in how they represent the protagonist. In *De-Lovely*, Cole Porter is reflected as a homosexual man and in *Beyond the Sea* 'memories are like moonbeams' which gives Spacey the opportunity to present his own memories of Darin on screen. These musical biopics demonstrate that the issues of self-reflexivity and intertextuality are central in interpreting the musical artist's biography, which is why casting star actors/singers plays a vital role in both case studies. The presence of star performers in each case study provide intertextual readings that are evaluated (in dissimilar ways) by each film viewer which contributes to the ongoing media mythology surrounding the popular figure. Both musical biopics are resigned to the fact that they are unable to make the life story of the music artist any more accurate than previous attempts (and understand that 'accuracy' is unfeasible), however do demonstrate that the lives of the stars can be read in diverse and multiple ways.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ***WALK THE LINE* (2005) AND *RAY* (2004):**

### **MAINSTREAM HOLLYWOOD RE-IMAGININGS OF JOHNNY CASH AND RAY CHARLES**

In terms of box office revenue, *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are the two most successful Hollywood musical biopics of the 21st Century (at time of writing). *Walk the Line* was released through cinemas in the USA on 18 November 2005 and grossed over \$186 million internationally. Theatrically released in the USA on 29 October 2004, *Ray* grossed over \$125 million internationally. Both films represent the life story of a musician whose career peaks during the mid-20th Century. *Walk the Line* narrates the story of Johnny Cash while *Ray* represents the life of Ray Charles. Both follow the simple linear narrative structure of the musical biopic, chronicling their youth through to being ‘discovered’ by music executives, achieving success in the industry, encountering personal struggles (including drug addiction and relationship issues) and ultimately emerging as a valued, revered member of society. Unlike musical biopics such as *I’m Not There* (2007), *Walk the Line* and *Ray* do not require the film audience to have any prior knowledge of the respective protagonists in order to follow, understand and be entertained by the biographical narrative in the feature films. Hence, the films are able to appeal to a wide range of audiences and provide the opportunity to create new fans of the popular musicians.

As argued throughout this thesis, the contemporary musical biopic re-invents the myth of the popular music artist by either debunking or supporting previously constructed mythologies. In other words, the contemporary musical biopic re-presents media material and biographical information to create a new perspective on the respective life history. The representations vary between the two musical biopics however the romantic relationship between the protagonist and his/her partner is often a focal point in the contemporary musical biopic.<sup>101</sup> In analysing *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, Glenn D. Smith Jr. frames the myth in terms of the concept

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<sup>101</sup> In musical film genre studies concentration on the male/female couple is termed the dual-focus narrative or duality.

of the ‘American dream’. In his evaluation of these contemporary musical biopics he develops the following line of argument in relation to the films’ narrative:

*The mythology allows for a more feminine narrative (heterosexual romantic love) as moral resolution. This narrative stresses the importance of family, compassion, and lifelong companionship, and it avoids the more incompatible and complicated notions of brotherhood (racial and class equality) as part of the ideological equation (2009: 224).*

Although *Walk the Line* and *Ray* raise issues in relation to class (Cash’s upbringing on a cotton farm in Arkansas, USA), race (Charles’ African-American identity) and even disability (Charles’ blindness), the storylines focus on the romantic relationships between the protagonist’s and their wives (including extra-marital affairs). Notably, the sons of Cash and Charles had a creative contribution to the construction of each musical biopic. John Carter Cash, son of Johnny Cash (with wife June Carter Cash) is executive producer of *Walk the Line* and Ray Charles Robinson Jr., son of Ray Charles (with wife Della Bea Robinson) is co-producer of *Ray*. Hence, John Carter Cash and Ray Charles Robinson Jr. focused on their parents’ relationship as the element of the life story that is most important to *them*. According to John Carter Cash:

*My parents had a vision for a movie about this that, first of all, told the story of their love affair, their life together, and their early relationship – how they made it through their struggles, how they got together and stayed together... I believe this film stays true to the vision that my parents had. It’s a movie about their love and their life, and they set it all up. It was theirs all the way.<sup>102</sup>*

Here it is understood that both Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash had creative input on the representation of their respective lives in *Walk the Line*. Therefore the film is based on personal interpretation of a life and career in music. According to Ray Charles Robinson Jr.,

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<sup>102</sup> <http://www.starpulse.com/forum/index.php?topic=15892.15>, accessed 12 July 2010.

who published a biography of his father (with Mary Jane Ross), *You Don't Know Me: Reflections of my Father* (Robinson Jr. and Ross, 2010):

*At the time [of the movie] my father was still alive. And my mother was very apprehensive at first about talking to anyone before the movie. This is the first time that she has really allowed us to peek into the home, to go behind closed doors. Ironically, the part [in the book] where I find my father bleeding to death from a heroin overdose... My father and I wanted that scene to be a part of the film. Why? Because you really, really would have had an appreciation and understanding of what he went through. His internal battles within himself were monumental. He was constantly searching for the love he missed as a child and the relationships that would provide it.*<sup>103</sup>

While the scene that Robinson Jr. discussed is not featured in the film he does reveal that he and his father did have creative input<sup>104</sup> in the production of *Ray*. However, the other filmmakers (including director Taylor Hackford, scriptwriters Hackford and James L. White and the 11 credited producers including Robinson Jr.) also controlled what was included in the film. Even though the makers of *Walk the Line* and *Ray* have the guidance of the immediate family members, the musical biopics offer multiple perspectives on the lives of the musicians due to the amount of people who are creatively assisting with the production.

The following chapter analyses *Walk the Line* and *Ray*: the production of the films, their audio-visual representation and narrative content. Specifically, the analysis of *Walk the Line* addresses the constructed identities of Johnny Cash while *Ray*'s analysis discusses the wider issues that the film raises in terms of culture, race and disability. Both film analyses will look at personal relationships developed in the films between the protagonist and the women in their lives as the narrative focus in both musical biopics. This chapter will argue that *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are Hollywood re-imaginings of Johnny Cash and Ray Charles respectively. In

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<sup>103</sup> <http://www.accessatlanta.com/celebrities-tv/ray-charles-son-recalls-541864.html>, accessed 12 July 2010.

<sup>104</sup> There exists a tension between filmmakers and associated individuals in terms of creative input in a musical biopic. This is evident in the analysis of *Control*, *El Cantante* and *Walk the Line* in this thesis. The fact that in this particular instance, a scene that Robinson Jr. wanted in *Ray* did not end up in the film reinforces that the musical biopic is a *creative* and contested construction.

addressing the previously constructed myth of the musician through stylistic audio-visual presentation these musical biopics create new myths surrounding identity from the perspective of the musician and his family.

## WALK THE LINE

Based on the autobiographies *Man In Black* (Cash, 1975) and *Cash: The Autobiography* (Cash and Carr, 1997),<sup>105</sup> *Walk the Line* is a Hollywood representation of the life of popular country musician, Johnny Cash. Born J.R. Cash on 26 February 1932 in Dyess, Arkansas, Cash grew up in a poor community with cotton farming parents Ray and Carrie Cash and was one of seven children. In 1944 when Cash was 12 years old, his older brother Jack died after a freak accident with a circular saw on their family farm. As mentioned in Cash's autobiography (and *Walk the Line*) the event impacted on him and stayed with him throughout his life: "Losing Jack was terrible. It was awful at the time and it's still a big, cold, sad place in my heart and soul" (Cash and Carr, 1997: 36). In 1951, Cash met his future-wife, Vivian Liberto. The couple dated for a brief period (several weeks) before Cash was deployed to Germany to serve in the Air Force. After three years, Cash was discharged and travelled back to San Antonio, Texas marrying Liberto within a month of his return. The couple had four children together, Rosanne, Kathy, Cindy and Tara; however during their marriage Cash began abusing drugs and alcohol. It was during their marriage that Cash became successful in the music industry, commencing in 1955 when he signed to label Sun Records. Cash also met June Carter while married to Vivian Cash and developed a close professional relationship with her. June Carter is a singer/songwriter, actress, dancer and comedienne who met Cash at the Grand Ole Opry.<sup>106</sup> Carter performed onstage from the age of ten, often with the music group (who were also her family members) the Carter Family. June Carter was married twice before Cash and had a child in each relationship. A culmination of drugs, constant touring and his relationship with Carter led to Johnny Cash and Vivian Cash filing for divorce in 1966. Two years later, Cash proposed to Carter onstage at a live performance in Ontario, Canada. It is at this point in Cash's biography that *Walk the Line* concludes, however, the two married shortly after on 1 March 1968. They also had one son together named John Carter Cash. Overall, Cash's career spanned almost five decades through to his death at the age of 71 in

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<sup>105</sup> The opening titles of *Walk the Line* clearly state that the film is based on these publications.

<sup>106</sup> The Grand Ole Opry is a weekly country music stage concert/ radio programme recorded live in Nashville, Tennessee.

2003. During this time Cash released 96 albums and 153 singles on several record labels including Sun and Columbia. Among many Country Music Association Awards and Grammy Awards, Johnny Cash received the Kennedy Center Honors in 1996, was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1980 and awarded the National Medal of the Arts in 2001.

*Walk the Line*'s executive producer John Carter Cash significantly influenced the narrative direction of the film. In terms of this narrative, *Walk the Line* is focused on the developing relationship between John Carter Cash's parents, Johnny Cash and June Carter. As summed up by producer of *Walk the Line*, James Keach:

*When Johnny Cash became a rock and roll star, he went into the ring of fire, as June would say. Ultimately, his story is a love story; it's about redemption it's about the history of rock and roll, and it's a spiritual journey of how a man found himself (2005: 5).*

Therefore the musical biopic tends to lean toward representing the romantic myth of the musician as it focuses on a developing relationship rather than the progression of a musical career through a life history. Glenn D. Smith Jr. infers: "Indeed *Walk the Line* is not as much a biopic as it is a 'cathartic' love story – a romantic narrative based on honesty, trust, and comfort between two characters" (2009: 234). Hence, *Walk the Line* is considered as a musical biopic of Cash *and* Carter, not just Cash himself. Through Cash the film audience also follows the life story of Carter, her relationships and musical career. The music biopic chronicles the life story of the couple, leading up to Cash's marriage proposal which reaffirms the significance of the relationship to the music/career of Johnny Cash, especially as the proposal is the climactic point of the film. *Walk the Line* demonstrates that Carter assisted Cash in becoming a popular music artist and that her role is seminal in constructing Cash's identity.

The casting of Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash and Reese Witherspoon as June Carter was extremely significant for the portrayal of Cash and Carter, particularly so given as Cash himself approved of the actors before he passed away on 12 September, 2003:



*Cash similarly established a mutual appreciation late in life with actor Joaquin Phoenix, the star of one of his favorite movies at the time. 'Cash loved Gladiator [2000]', Mangold recently remembered. 'He knew all the lines.' ... 'He was thrilled', the director [Mangold] said of Cash's reaction to the news that Phoenix would portray him in the biopic. 'John was a very trusting man. He was very easygoing, a very cool guy. When you've got someone like Joaquin who, frankly, is very similar, a very cool actor, John knew that we were moving in the right direction'.<sup>107</sup>*

Discussions on how both Phoenix and Witherspoon researched and prepared for their roles as Cash and Carter will also be studied through media interviews including how they worked with director, James Mangold and producer, John Carter Cash in developing each character for the screen.

## **Casting Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon**

Although Phoenix and Witherspoon had not previously held a musical career before working on *Walk the Line* (as opposed to Anthony and Lopez in *El Cantante*), they are well-known Hollywood actors. Phoenix's acting credits leading up to *Walk the Line* include Commodus in *Gladiator* (2000), Lucius Hunt in *The Village* (2004) and Jack Morrison in *Ladder 49* (2004). Cash recognised Phoenix from his performance in *Gladiator* for which he received an Academy Award in 2001 for Best Actor in a Supporting Role and a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) in 2001 for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role. Previous to *Walk the Line*, Witherspoon starred in feature films including Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001), Melanie Smooter in *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) and Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (2004). Upon the film's release, Witherspoon won an Academy Award in 2006 for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role for *Walk the Line* and Phoenix won a Golden Globe in 2006 for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy, for *Walk the Line*. Their feature film performances and recognition by

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<sup>107</sup> <http://www.mtv.com/movies/news/articles/1513769/story.jhtml>, accessed 31 March 2010.

fans and industry confirm that they are reputable Hollywood actors which also made their performances in *Walk the Line* more influential.

One of the most important points to address in relation to the casting of Phoenix and Witherspoon is that both actors utilised their own singing voices to perform the songs of Cash and Carter,<sup>108</sup> as opposed to *Ray* which mostly uses pre-recorded music tracks for certain aesthetic reasons. Neepa Majumdar suggests that in Hollywood cinema “authenticity of performance is cast in terms of the audience’s assumption of an actual match of voice and body” (2001: 165). The voices of Phoenix and Witherspoon are matched with their physical presence in *Walk the Line* hence a sense of authenticity is maintained. In Michelle Bigenho’s study of Bolivian music performance she determines that audiences were not concerned with the authentic *feeling* of the performance but rather with the authentic *representation* (2002: 2). In *Walk the Line* Phoenix and Witherspoon represent all aspects of their characters: the way they look and the way they sound, which adds authenticity to their performances.

Prior to her role in *Walk the Line*, Witherspoon was not a trained singer. In an interview she disclosed that it was difficult to sing like Carter:

*Well, [it was] nearly impossible so I just tried to be the best version of what I could be, because it was impossible to emulate her... we [Phoenix and Witherspoon] trained for five and a half months and learned to play instruments, record an album, and worked six or seven hours every day for five months on it. So you can’t say we didn’t try.*<sup>109</sup>

Witherspoon and Phoenix made the decision (in liaison with director James Mangold) not to impersonate the music stars but to develop their own interpretation of them. According to Christine Gledhill “the process of character representation through impersonation entails that the actor should strive to obliterate his or her sense of identity in order to become a signifier for the intentionality inscribed in character” (1991: 170). Hence Phoenix and Witherspoon maintained their sense of identity while re-creating their own reading of Cash and Carter

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<sup>108</sup> The recorded tracks featuring Phoenix and Witherspoon’s vocals (as well as other actors cast in the film) are also on the *Walk the Line* soundtrack (2005).

<sup>109</sup> <http://movies.about.com/od/walktheline/a/walkline090305.htm>, accessed 9 July 2010.

respectively. In an interview, Phoenix stated that he did not want to impersonate Cash, but create a new character based on the musician:

*In every film, whether it's a fictional character or not, you create an idea of the character and for me I always do a bad impersonation to start with. For me the key was to try to understand why he did certain things that he did, as opposed to just impersonating him by saying you would move like him... So it became just a natural part of how I performed... Those are the things that you tackled so that it doesn't feel like an impersonation.*<sup>110</sup>

For Phoenix, impersonation is a starting point in training to become a character (based on an actual person) in a feature film. He studied Cash's physical and habitual idiosyncrasies to develop his own portrayal of Johnny Cash. The idea of basing a new character or persona off an existing individual is discussed in *Walk the Line*'s Press Kit:

*Phoenix didn't want to imitate Cash's singing voice; instead, Phoenix's vocals had to come from somewhere deep inside. 'Jim wanted a raw approach, to capture the intimacy that comes from someone writing a song and then singing it in that moment', says Phoenix. 'You can't lip-sync that kind of scene because it's so integral to the character. Music is always part of how John communicates what he's feeling and seeing – and it couldn't be faked' (2005: 7).*

Using the actor's own vocals, as well as re-representing the physical/behavioural nature of music artist, the musical biopic provides a certain type of authenticity:

*Now, here it is the act of memory itself which ensures the authenticity of the subjective viewpoint. It is no longer a chunk of the past brought forward into the present like a*

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<sup>110</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/01/23/joaquin\\_phoenix\\_walk\\_the\\_line\\_2006\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/01/23/joaquin_phoenix_walk_the_line_2006_interview.shtml), accessed 20 July 2010.

*brick moved from one place in a building to another but the restructuring of the past through memory* (Mitry and King, 1997: 211).

The portrayal of Cash and Carter is largely dependent on the path in which Phoenix and Witherspoon have taken in *Walk the Line*. The research into Cash and Carter's lives and how it is then interpreted through on screen action is a representation of the actors' memory. Shared with the other creative controllers of the film, *Walk the Line* is able to re-represent the various identities of Cash and Carter.

## **Johnny Cash's Mythical Personae**

Throughout the five decades (1955 – 2003) that span his music career, Cash and his fan groups have created various personae that reflect recorded tracks and lyrics across time. According to Leigh H. Edwards:

*His [Cash's] icon status and personal mythology have turned the contradictions into symbols of Cash's identity – the personal mythology necessarily leaves the incongruities unresolved because they are the substance of the Cash symbolism. And it is through familiarity with that symbolism that audiences can express their expert fandom* (2009: 34).<sup>111</sup>

To certain fans, Cash is perceived (and remembered) as an outlaw: a rebel and a criminal who spent a considerable amount of time in prison. To others, he is believed to be a devoted Christian who reinforced his beliefs through his recorded Gospel music. Other fans understand Cash as the authentic southern country musician due to his upbringing and life experiences. Cash's autobiographies attempt to either discredit or highlight those myths, which are then reflected in *Walk the Line*. Hence, the biopic displays a distinct perspective on

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<sup>111</sup> Leigh H. Edwards initially discusses the identities of Johnny Cash, 'Walkin' Contradiction: Johnny Cash and American Ambivalence', in Bob Batchelor's *Literary Cash: Unauthorized Writings Inspired by the Legendary Johnny Cash* (2006).

the life and music history of Johnny Cash by representing the musician from this subjective perspective.

Identity in *Walk the Line* (and the musical biopic, more generally) deals with elements of national cinema, genre, geographical spaces and eras of time as the various facets of the music artist's identity is a significant contextual aspect of the film. Christine Lucia argues that identity is a manifestation of culture and nation and further suggests:

*Identity is intimately connected to performance, since music as cultural expression only exists in and through performance. The performance of culture is a major issue for music ethnographers – how people perform it, what that means, how societies and individuals frame, articulate, and own cultural identities (2007: iv).*

Lucia's notion of performance is vital in the construction of Cash's identity. This includes his music performances, live and recorded, and how he presents himself in interviews, visually and sonically. In essence, Cash's identity is composed of these various performances. His musical identity, which stems from country music style/culture, is reflected in *Walk the Line* through the integration of music tracks, audio-visual representation and narrative structure. *Walk the Line* shows the various ways that fans/audiences have perceived Johnny Cash as well as Cash's own identity constructions. The film then produces a romantic view of his life, implying it is the most personal, intimate and honest (according to John Carter Cash) of all personae developed through his career. There is a vast array of scholarly study on Cash's music style and the musician more generally. Instead of an exhaustive review of the literature, each created identity will be analysed in reference to appropriate scholarly examination, media discussion and analysis of these representations in *Walk the Line*.

### ***The Outlaw***

A common perception of Cash is that he was a criminal. The view is adopted from songs he released which describe the consumption of illegal drugs, physical assault and murder. Some of Cash's songs also describe being arrested and held in prison. The lyrical content of songs

such as 'Cocaine Blues' and 'Folsom Prison Blues' suggests that Cash is a criminal, however according to Cash neither song is autobiographical. In Cash's autobiography he states, "Many of the biggest, most popular songs I grew up with, in country and folk and blues, were about crime and punishment, mayhem and madness, trouble and strife writ large and lurid" (1997: 346-347). Hence, Cash is inspired to write songs of crime not from his own biographical history but from an interest in the type of music he enjoyed listening to. 'Cocaine Blues' was written by T.J. 'Red' Arnall and recorded by W.A. Nichol's Western Aces in the 1940s. Cash is seen performing the song (with minor lyrical alterations) at the Folsom Prison concert which was released on the *At Folsom Prison* record in 1968. 'Folsom Prison Blues' was written and recorded by Cash in 1955 as a single and also features on the *With His Hot and Blue Guitar* album released in the same year. However, the song is inspired by the feature film *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* (1951) that Cash watched during his time serving the United States Air Force in West Germany. Cash debunks the myth of his criminal past in his *Cash* autobiography:

*Question One: Why was I in prison? I never was. That idea got started because I wrote and sang 'Folsom Prison Blues', my 1955 hit, from the perspective of a convicted, unrepentant killer, and twelve years later I made a concert album, Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison. In fact, I've never served any time at all in any correctional institution anywhere. During my amphetamine years I spent a few nights in jail, but strictly on an overnight basis: seven incidents in all, different dates in different places where the local law decided we'd all be better off if I were under lock and key* (1997: 76).

Here, Cash tells that he did not serve time in prison and that the recorded songs were merely stories he fabricated from his own imagination, bearing no relation to his own personal life experiences. Cash does confirm that he spent time in local jails for drug related issues however these were only one-night events. In his autobiography, Cash continues by discussing the lyrics in 'Folsom Prison Blues':

*I'm sorry about this, but that line in 'Folsom Prison Blues', the one that still gets the biggest rise out of my audiences, especially the alternative crowds – 'I shot a man in*

*Reno just to watch him die' – is imaginative, not autobiographical. I sat with my pen in my hand, trying to think up the worst reason a person could have for killing another person, and that's what came to mind. It did come to mind quite easily, though (Cash and Carr, 1997: 77).*

The myth of Cash as criminal is demystified in his autobiography as it is in *Walk the Line*. 'Folsom Prison Blues' appears in *Walk the Line* twice, once where Cash is writing the song and another when he auditions in front of his potential record producer, Sam Phillips (Dallas Roberts). The biopic suggests that Cash joined the United States Air Force and was stationed in Landsberg, Germany in 1952. During his stay, Cash purchased his first acoustic guitar and begins to write music in secret. In one scene, Cash and the other Air Force members sit in a cinema setting to watch a feature film titled *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* (1951) which represents the lives of the inmates. The film inspires Cash to write 'Folsom Prison Blues' which he writes in secret in the following scenes: hiding in a locker room, in his office after dark and then behind a shipping container. The sequence shows that Johnny Cash is not the criminal he is perceived to be. Cash merely became inspired by a film based on the inmates at Folsom Prison to write a song that discusses criminal acts in first person narrative. *Walk the Line* debunks the myth of Cash as outlaw through the integration of the 'Folsom Prison Blues' song in the biographical narrative, music and visual styling of the film.

In the second instance that the song appears, Cash and his band audition for a record deal at Sun Records [00:27:45]. After Sam Phillips' motivational speech, Cash begins to sing 'Folsom Prison Blues' publicly for the first time. However, the represented turn of events in *Walk the Line* is not how Cash recalls it in his autobiography:

*Once we were in the studio, I sang 'I Was There When It Happened' and 'It Don't Hurt Anymore' for him. I sang 'Belshazzar'. I sang Hank Snow songs, a Jimmie Rodgers song, a couple of Carter family songs, whatever else I'd taken into my repertoire from among the popular country songs of the day. Sam kept directing me back to my own repertoire: 'What else have you written?' Though I didn't think it was any good, I told him about 'Hey, Porter', and he had me sing it for him. That did it.*

*'Come back tomorrow with those guys you've been making the music with, and we'll put that song down', he told me (Cash and Carr, 1997: 101-2).*

*Walk the Line* changes the audition song list to reinforce the significance of 'Folsom Prison Blues'. By playing this particular song, *Walk the Line* suggests that the song had an impact on Cash's fans and is a large part of how he is remembered. Even though the lyrics do not symbolise Cash's life experiences, the song contributed to his outlaw persona.

*Walk the Line* evokes the outlaw/criminal aspect of Cash's developed character and also draws attention to the notion that it is a fabricated part of his personality. The idea that Cash invented the outlaw image is reaffirmed in his performance at Folsom prison in one of the concluding scenes of the film. It is at this live concert Cash tells the audience of inmates that he had never spent any time in a federal prison however, he did get in trouble and spent nights in local jails. After his speech he performs 'Cocaine Blues' which narrates the story (in first person) of a man who kills his wife. The opening lyrics state:

*Early one mornin' while makin' the rounds*

*I took a shot of cocaine and I shot my woman down*

*I went right home and I went to bed*

*I stuck that lovin' 44 beneath my head*

Cash performs this song to maintain his fabricated persona in the presence of the diegetic audience. These scenes more generally comment on the ability of the musical biopic and all media representations of the music artist to provide fabricated accounts of biography. Each musical biopic will provide a specific view on the music artist in comparison to previously represented stories. In turn, the contemporary musical biopic positions itself as delivering a unique perspective on the individual and the various personae they may inhabit.



## *The Christian Gospel Singer*

Numerous scholars including Don Cusic (1990), Craig Mosher (2008) and John Hayes (2010) along with biographical publications by Dave Urbanski (2003) and Rodney Clapp (2008) reaffirm and contextualise Cash's identity as a Christian gospel singer. On a fan-based level, websites such as *Christian Activities*,<sup>112</sup> *Christian Music Planet*,<sup>113</sup> *Everyday Christian*,<sup>114</sup> *Think Christian*<sup>115</sup> amongst numerous others, all discuss Cash in relation to his music and his spiritual faith. In addition, magazine, *Christianity Today* (Olsen, 2003) and Christian journal, *Touchstone* (Moore, 2005) also discuss Cash's gospel music. These scholars, biographers and fans frame Cash as a Christian gospel singer not only in reference to his gospel recordings, but also due to his lifestyle. Throughout both of his autobiographies Cash discusses the importance of his Christian faith and how he attempts to incorporate it in his day-to-day life. In his autobiography, *Man in Black*, he remarks:

*I was well aware of the fact that the private lives of entertainers are anything but private. The public knows or will soon know the moral and spiritual position of any entertainer who comes on the scene (1975: 77).*

Throughout his autobiography Cash discusses his Christian faith and how he integrated gospel music into his music style, his live performances and recordings. There is a passage in *Man in Black* where he discusses his choice to publicly announce his Christianity on his television show, *The Johnny Cash Show*.<sup>116</sup>

*I felt I had to no choice but to declare myself. I was getting thousands of letters... I felt I had to answer those people and everyone else who was wondering but hadn't written... I'd been a Christian all my life, and while I'd never advertised it (and never*

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<sup>112</sup> <http://www.christianactivities.com/testimonies/story.asp?ID=3656>, accessed 14 April 2010.

<sup>113</sup> <http://www.christianmusicplanet.com/news/headlines/11626615/>, accessed 14 April 2010.

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/3567/>, accessed 14 April 2010.

<sup>115</sup> <http://www.thinkchristian.net/index.php/2005/11/09/the-faith-of-johnny-cash/>, accessed April 2010.

<sup>116</sup> *The Johnny Cash Show* is a musical variety show hosted by Cash. It aired from 7 June 1969 to 31 March 1971 on US television's ABC network.

*will; I've always guarded my testimony closely), I didn't believe I could compromise or evade when the question was put to me. I had to tell the truth (1997: 278).*

The character Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line* does not announce his faith in the film publicly or privately, even during scenes that represent *The Johnny Cash Show* (which, in the film, are live touring performances with June Carter from 1965). Omitting this event from *Walk the Line* demonstrates that, again, the filmmakers concentrated on representing other aspects of his life including his drug addiction and conflicting relationships with Vivian Cash and June Carter. In scenes that do represent the *Johnny Cash Show* tour, Cash becomes intimately involved with Carter off stage and spends one night in her hotel room. Carter also discovers Cash's prescription pills that he consumes in large doses and witnesses him collapse onstage in front of a large audience in Las Vegas. These two experiences are the focus of *The Johnny Cash Show* – his Christian faith is represented in *Walk the Line* to a minimal extent, hence considered a minor part of his persona. The reason why the focus extends away from Cash's Christianity is because even though Cash (and Carter) was always a Christian, he did not publicly announce this until around the time he proposed to Carter. As the film concentrates on Cash and Carter's romantic relationship, the public announcement of his Christianity and the marriage proposal, occurring at the same time, would have conflicted in *Walk the Line*.

There are two other achievements of Cash discussed in his autobiography *Cash* (1997: 308-312) that are omitted from *Walk the Line*. The omission is mainly due to the fact that they occurred in periods of time excluded from the film – *Walk the Line* concludes soon after Cash's marriage proposal in 1967. The achievements include Cash's film, *Gospel Road: A Story of Jesus* (1973) and published novel, *Man in White* (Cash, 1986). *Gospel Road* is a feature film that was completely financed and written by Johnny Cash. The story follows the life of Jesus, narrated by Cash himself. Cash's only published novel, *Man in White*, tells the story of the life of St. Paul and is fuelled with religious phrases and doctrine. Cash mentions the publication in his autobiography:

*Also interesting, for me at least, were the parallels between Paul and myself. He went out to conquer the world in the name of Jesus Christ; we in the music business, or at least those of us with my kind of drive, want our music heard all over the world... I'm*

*much more interested in keeping on down the roads I know and whatever new ones might reveal themselves to me, trying to tap that strength Paul found: the power of God that's inside me, that's there for me if only I seek it* (1997: 312).

Hence, it is clear that Johnny Cash was a devoted Christian and often celebrated his faith through his life and music. However, *Walk the Line* shifts the focus predominantly to his romantic relationship with June Carter. *Walk the Line* represents elements of the Christian gospel singer persona, mostly during the early stages of his life (before his success in the music industry) and briefly when battling drug addiction in the later sections of the film. The biopic suggests that Cash learnt about the Christian faith during his childhood, listening to his mother sing hymns while farming cotton at their residence in Arkansas. Upon leaving the farm to join the Air Force in *Walk the Line*, Cash's mother hands him a copy of *Heavenly Highway Hymns* (Taylor, 1956). His Christianity is briefly represented in the storyline again as he attends church [02:02:29] with June Carter during the period where he attempts to overcome his drug addiction. The sequence duration is less than two minutes and is followed by Cash putting on his black suit and sunglasses, deciding to perform in front of the inmates at Folsom Prison after reading their fan letters. One of his music managers states, "Your fans are church folk Johnny – Christians. They don't want hear you singing to a bunch of murderers and rapists, trying to cheer them up." Cash replies, "Well they're not Christians then." In a Christian review of the musical biopic Mary Fairchild states:

*In a way, Johnny Cash had a prison ministry before he ever knew it. The inner battles he sang about in his songs touched something deep within the souls of prisoners and inmates, causing them to identify with Cash's music. The opening and near closing scenes, depicting his famous Folsom prison concert of 1968, reveal a sense of destiny, the call of God that guided Cash's life.*<sup>117</sup>

In *Walk the Line* Cash has developed an understanding of Christian values and faith and has adopted this into his career. However, the film suggests he was only able to do this with the help of June Carter. Therefore Carter is the reason for his rehabilitation (overcoming drug addictions), not his faith alone.

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<sup>117</sup> <http://christianity.about.com/od/christianmovies/fr/walkthelinerev.htm>, accessed 28 July 2010.

As well as biographical narrative, Cash's Christianity is reaffirmed through the gospel music featured in *Walk the Line*. In one particular case before Cash accepts his recording contract, he rehearses with his band (The Tennessee Three) on the front porch of his house singing 'I Was There When It Happened'. The same song is performed again as Cash and his music band audition for a recording contract at Sun Records. The song, written by Fern Jones (country/gospel singer/songwriter) appears on re-mastered album, *The Glory Road*, released in 2005 during the period of *Walk the Line*'s cinematic release. The chorus of the song reinforces Christian faith:

*Yes, I know when Jesus saved me  
The very moment He forgave me  
He took away my heavy burden  
And He gave me peace within  
Satan can't make me doubt it  
It's real and I'm gonna shout it  
'Cause I was there when it happened  
And I guess I ought to know*

In both sections of the film where Cash sings the song with his band, the characters that observe the performance (Vivian Cash and subsequently Sam Phillips) respond negatively. In the first sequence, Vivian Cash glances disapprovingly through the window at Johnny Cash while playing cards with a female friend. It is apparent, through the events that follow, that Vivian Cash does not approve of Cash's potential career path in the music industry. Hence, even though the characters do not discuss the song specifically, the choice of song in the scene shows that the filmmakers intend on shifting Cash's persona away from the 'Christian gospel singer' identity and focus more on his personal relationships, implying that the personal struggles with his wife are more significant than his Christian faith.

In the audition scene in *Walk the Line* where 'I Was There When It Happened' is performed, gospel music and Christianity are discussed by Sam Phillips and Johnny Cash. Phillips asks the band to stop playing mid-song which sparks a dialogue that flows between the two characters:

Phillips: *I hate to interrupt but do you guys have something else?* (Silence) *I'm sorry, I can't market gospel anymore.*

Cash: *So, that's it?*

Phillips: *I don't record material that doesn't sell, Mr Cash, and gospel like that doesn't sell.*

Cash: *Was it the gospel or the way I sing it?*

Phillips: *Both*

Cash: *What's wrong with the way I sing?*

Phillips: *I don't believe ya.*

Cash: *You saying I don't believe in God?*

Two important issues stem from this conversation; *Walk the Line* makes it apparent that Cash is a Christian and the music industry executives did not believe that Cash's Christian identity would provide him with any success as a popular musician. The filmmakers of *Walk the Line* also follow this line of thought as gospel music and issues surrounding the Christian faith are not central biographical concerns. Dr Jack Langer's review of the film also comes to a similar, yet heavily opinionated conclusion:

*In order to establish the tired Hollywood trope that Christians are strange and intolerant people, the movie inserts several incongruous scenes that serve no purpose other than to ridicule Christianity... Thus it comes as no surprise when the story of Cash's real-life conversion into an evangelical Christian is reduced to an insignificant ten-second scene in which he and June walk from a parking lot toward a church. Due to the filmmakers' discomfort with Christianity, the film ignores the entire aspect of Cash's career that was occupied by gospel music... Cash's real-life decision to leave his original record label partly because it prohibited him from recording gospel albums (of which he would record many throughout his career) is omitted from the film... It never explores the fascinating duality of Johnny Cash that was reflected so strongly in his music – the outlaw Man in Black who was deeply enmeshed in Christian spirituality.<sup>118</sup>*

Langer concludes that *Walk the Line* does not focus on Johnny Cash's Christian faith. The film *does* represent this part of his persona through narrative and musical elements however,

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<sup>118</sup> <http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=10410>, accessed 28 July 2010.

they are placed sporadically throughout the film and are very short (sequence time/duration) even though Cash released 11 gospel albums from 1959 through to 2004. Whether Cash's gospel music and Christian faith were a large part of his life and career is subject to the fan and/or film audience. In an interview, director James Mangold states that there is a line of dialogue in the film that can sum up the whole film. Character Sam Phillips suggests; "It's not about believing in God. It's about believing in yourself."<sup>119</sup> Hence, Mangold chose to centre on Cash's early life and map out his struggles in his personal and public life to establish how he became a clearly reputable and 'authentic country' musician. The film draws on aspects of his life that were not previously focused on in other media representations hence drawing awareness to this portion of his life.

### ***The Authentic Country Musician***

Early in his autobiography Cash writes about being 'country' and how this characterisation has changed over the decades of his career (1997: 16-17). He questions whether lifestyle influences music or vice versa. Cash goes on to state that he believes that he is an authentic country musician because he worked the cotton fields in Arkansas as a young man:

*I was eight, though, I too was dragging a cotton sack. We didn't carry those nice baskets like you see in the movies, we used heavy canvas sacks with tar-covered bottoms, six feet long if you were one of the younger children, nine feet long for big kids and grown-ups (1997: 24-25).*

Cash implies that a country musician's life should reflect the music style he/she composes in order for them to appear 'authentic'. Furthermore, he argues that the musician should have encountered socio-economic struggles and emerged from them successfully. Numerous academic studies describe country music and its direct links with working-class culture including the work of Aaron A. Fox (2004), Bill C. Malone (2002b) and Richard A. Peterson (Peterson and Maggio, 1975, Peterson, 1997, Peterson and McLaurin, 1992). Following

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<sup>119</sup> <http://www.popentertainment.com/mangold.htm>, accessed 28 July 2010.

Cash's argument, an authentic<sup>120</sup> country musician is defined or confirmed through their life history, not as a musician, but how they were raised: family, profession and socio-economic status. In light of this, Cash's life as a working-class citizen (at least during the first few decades of his life) influences his music and makes his country music style 'authentic', by that definition.

However, it is important to define what 'country music' is before following the argument that Cash is an authentic country musician. According to Bill C. Malone:

*Country music is no longer simply an American cultural expression; it is now a phenomenon of worldwide appeal. Nevertheless, it defies precise definition, and no term (not even 'country') has ever successfully encapsulated its essence. It is a vigorous hybrid form of music, constantly changing and growing in complexity, just as the society which it thrives also matures and evolves (2002a: 1).*

Malone implies here that there can be no simplistic definition of country music; therefore authenticity is dependent on the society and its development. Whether Cash's music is authentic country is discussed at length by academics and music journalists. *Grove Music Online* (entry by Liz Thompson) discusses Cash's music style: "His work draws together threads of folk, country and gospel singing, reflecting a sincere passion about the human condition, delivered in his characteristic world-weary baritone",<sup>121</sup> confirming Cash's style as part of the country music genre. Comparatively, according to the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* (sixth edition), Cash "mingled elements of folk, country, and rock in his music" (2009) and magazines such as *Rolling Stone* (DeCurtis, 2003), *Time* (Grossman, 2003) and *People* (Shaw, 1994) suggest Cash draws upon both country and rock music. Hence, based on music alone, Cash cannot be considered an authentic country musician. Cash draws upon both country and rock styles to develop his unique sound.

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<sup>120</sup> 'Authenticity' is a highly contested term in popular music studies. It has been covered extensively by many academics including Sherry Johnson (2000) Allan Moore (2002) and David Looseeley (2003).

<sup>121</sup> <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/05087>, accessed 10 June 2010.

When referring to Cash's lyrics, Peterson categorises them as 'hard-core': "Concrete situations, simple vocabulary; references are concrete and evoke specific personal experiences; singers perform songs that express a wide range of emotions, and these change with their own life experiences" (Peterson, 1997: 151). According to Peterson, identifying an authentic country musician requires an analysis of both the music compositions and the biographical history of the individual. A musician cannot be classified as 'authentic' based on music or life story alone – they must be viewed holistically, as music and life influence each other. Other popular country musicians such as Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie based their music on their lives as working-class people. Subsequently, feature films, documentaries and TV-movies were created to reflect the importance of their lives and furthermore, their authenticity as country musicians. *Sweet Dreams: The Life and Times of Patsy Cline* (1985), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), *Your Cheatin' Heart* (1964) and *Bound For Glory* (1976) are musical biopics that reflect the life of these country stars, respectively. Producer of *Walk the Line*, Cathy Conrad states, "A big influence on us was the film *Coal Miner's Daughter* – especially because we both [Conrad and Mangold] remembered how phenomenal Sissy Spacek was in that film, performing as Loretta Lynn" (2005: 10). Conrad intended on capturing the authenticity not only of the country music artist but also the actor playing the role. Thus, in making the musical biopic more believable and realistic, biographical elements of the film (narrative and storyline) link with music and performance of the actor/s seamlessly.

*Walk the Line* represents Cash's youth – working in the cotton farm with his family in Arkansas. Early scenes reflect his family's economic struggle through the Great Depression. *Walk the Line* then maps out Cash's next move to serve in the US Air Force. The film also shows Cash's struggle to earn money when married to Vivian and trying to raise his children. As recounted by Cash himself in his autobiography, he sold appliances door-to-door in various neighbourhoods, often not returning home with any sales or profit. Hence, as re-represented in *Walk the Line*, the early stages of Cash's life represent him as an authentic country musician. However, according to Glenn D. Smith Jr., *Walk the Line* aims:

*not so much to bring attention to Cash's class position, or the economic struggles he faces on his upward climb, but to give indication as to the sorry state of his marriage and thus foreshadow the film's romantic line of action* (2009: 231).



Even though Cash appears to be the authentic country musician (the identity the filmmakers perpetuate) this is not the focus of the filmic representation of his life. The focus always comes back to his romantic relationships between both Vivian Cash and June Carter. The personae discussed are clearly represented in the film, yet the narrative focus is on Cash's personal relationships with his wives.

## **A Wife's Perspective: Vivian Cash and June Carter Cash**

Chapter Two of this thesis analysed *El Cantante* and *Control* based on the premise that both of these musical biopics draw upon the perspective of the wife of the protagonist. Even though *Walk the Line* is not based on the perspective of Cash's wives – Vivian (Liberto) Cash and after, June Carter Cash – the biography of Johnny Cash is recounted by these women in their autobiographical literary publications. Both June Carter Cash's *Among My Klediments* (1979) and *From the Heart* (1987) and Vivian Cash's (co-written with Ann Sharpsteen) *I Walked the Line* (2007) are important contributions to public knowledge of the private life of Johnny Cash. Both publications also assist in the analysis of *Walk the Line* and reinforce the priority in representing romance/intimate relationships in the musical biopic. Mangold, director of *Walk the Line* notes the relationship between Cash and Carter:

*The story of John and June as a couple was so beautiful and is such a uniquely American love story that you couldn't have written it any better than the real thing... For ten years their intimacy existed almost only on stage. Yet there was something deeply romantic about that because on stage, everything melts away and you're just alive and connected in the most primal way with the other person singing with you. It took them a long time to be able to take that on-stage connection and pull it into their off-stage lives* (2005: 4).

It is apparent that Mangold prioritised the intimate relationship between Cash and Carter in the film's storyline. However, how their relationship develops in the film and also how the

marriage of Cash and Vivian Cash ended is biased – the story represented in *Walk the Line* favours June Carter. The subjectivity in representing the characters in *Walk the Line* is due to the standpoint of the filmmakers (especially John Carter Cash's involvement) and their interaction with the actual individuals who are represented:

*For the aim of the social drama is not to present a seemingly objective recital of a series of events; it is concerned, rather, with the different interpretations put upon those events, and ways in which these give subtle expression to divergent interests or switches in balance of power* (Turner, 1985: 121).

*Walk the Line* conveys a clear opinion on the relationships Cash develops through his life which is not a new concept in film studies, however, an important issue to address in interpreting/analysing the film. The subjectivity in representing actual events assists in creating a new, distinctive persona of the music artist.

### ***June Carter Cash: Among My Klediments and From the Heart***

In 1979, June Carter Cash published an autobiography of her life which included the chapter, 'Johnny Cash' (Cash, 1979: 79-108). In this chapter, June Carter Cash discusses Johnny Cash's addiction to pills and how it affected their relationship and marriage. Throughout the chapter she references her Christian faith and how it assisted her to deal with the issues she faced, along with being married twice before Cash. In 1987, June Carter Cash published another autobiography, *From the Heart*. However, this particular publication is structured into a series of short stories that June Carter Cash recounted from significant events experienced and important people she had known. June Carter Cash does not discuss any specific moments in her life history that are represented in *Walk the Line*. However, as in *Among My Klediments*, she does re-tell stories of Cash's drug addiction and constantly refers to her Christian faith. In the preface of *From the Heart*, June Carter Cash writes:

*God did hear my prayers, and if reading this book will show you how to strengthen your faith and learn to live thanking God for all things good and bad, then I've chosen to share some of my innermost secrets and thoughts with you (Cash, 1987: ix).*

These autobiographies influenced John Carter Cash and were so important that he utilised them to write his own view of the biography of his mother.

John Carter Cash published the biography, *Anchored in Love: An Intimate Portrait of June Carter Cash* (2007). Although the book was published two years after *Walk the Line* was theatrically released, John Carter Cash references the film and its biographical representations:

*Dad always carried his feelings on his sleeve, and those [drug addiction and divorce from Vivian Liberto] were very difficult times for him. One thing I feel the film Walk the Line lacked was a strong depiction of his loneliness during this time, his sense of isolation, and his internal struggles. Those struggles within him were surely his greatest challenge of all (Cash, 2007: 49).*

John Carter Cash's confession that elements of *Walk the Line* should have been explored in more depth demonstrates that he did not have the degree of creative control that he had for his own publication. It also reinforces that the film was concerned not just with Cash but the lives of Cash and Carter. Assisting in the narration of his mother's biography, John Carter Cash references June Carter Cash's aforementioned publications as well as two other published biographies; *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 2004) and *The Man Called Cash* (Turner, 2004b). John Carter Cash's discussion of other publications based on his mother's life shows that contemporary representations of biography are often based on previous media representations. Therefore, more generally, the contemporary biopic is a re-representation of the individual. It is a recycling of related texts to construct a distinctive image of the established music artist.

## ***Vivian Cash: I Walked the Line***

*I Walked the Line: My Life with Johnny* is a written autobiography by Vivian Cash with Ann Sharpsteen (2007). In 2002, Sharpsteen was hired through *MTV Networks* to produce a television documentary on the life of Johnny Cash. During her 12 weeks of research, she developed a relationship with Johnny Cash's first wife, Vivian Cash, even though Cash declined to be a part of the television production. As Sharpsteen worked on the project, she and Vivian Cash established a friendship through regular phone conversations. According to Sharpsteen:

*I was shocked to learn that there exists a vast underlying story that nobody knows about – regrettably a story markedly different from the one I had written and produced in my documentary... Through my friendship with Vivian, I would learn that the realm of public knowledge and perception, some stories we have long believed to be true are not true at all (2007: 2).*

Sharpsteen argued that Vivian Cash's autobiography was constructed as an accurate recounting of the early life of Johnny Cash, as perceived by his first wife. Sharpsteen and Vivian Cash suggest that Johnny Cash's turn to drug addiction changed his life and without it, he and Vivian Cash would still be married. In the introduction of the book, Vivian Cash discusses her experiences after Johnny Cash passed away in September 2003. She describes meeting with Cash to ask his opinion on writing the story from her perspective to which he replied, "It's time" (Cash and Sharpsteen, 2007: 7). With Cash's blessing, Vivian Cash started compiling her thoughts and his letters into the book.

From the period commencing 4 September 1951 to 17 June 1954, both Vivian Liberto and Johnny Cash corresponded by handwritten (and some typed) letters. In *I Walked the Line*, Vivian Cash includes the letters that were written to her by Johnny Cash in an attempt to show how he communicated his feelings towards her while serving in the US Air Force in Germany. It is important to note that none of her responding letters are included. Even if none of her letters could be recovered, Vivian Cash still makes no attempt at recounting her replies

to Johnny Cash's letters even though she was writing as frequently (the couple wrote daily which, over the years, increased to several times a day). Although Sharpsteen argues that this is the 'true' story of what happened between the couple, it is merely another perspective, in this instance, told from the point-of-view of Vivian Cash.

*Walk the Line* clearly portrays Vivian Cash in a negative light, guiding the film audience to appreciate the romantic relationship between Cash and Carter. Throughout their relationship Vivian Cash appears angry at Cash's life choices (music and travelling) as she stays home and raises their children. She shouts and argues with Cash throughout their marriage in *Walk the Line* and is particularly resentful towards June Carter. Before Cash and Carter meet (in the film), Carter is referenced a few times, leading up to the couple's first meeting at a live performance. The first instance is where, as a child, Cash hears June Carter on the radio and tells his brother Jack that he can tell her voice apart from the rest of the Carter family [0:02:55]. In the second instance, during his time in the Air Force, Cash reads a magazine about June Carter's marriage to Carl Smith [0:16:21]. In the third and final instance, when waiting to appear on a radio program, Cash notices the headline 'Carl Smith, June Carter Announce Divorce' in a local newspaper [0:32:30]. Cash's interest in June Carter's life before meeting her (they bump into each other backstage at the Grand Ole Opry for the first time soon after Cash reads about her divorce [0:36:30]) implies that their relationship was, in a sense, predestined. In an interview with John Carter Cash he states:

*The movie is not about his relationship with Vivian... That was never my father's intention, or my mother's, to have a movie about their life before they met. What they wanted was a movie about their love.*<sup>122</sup>

In order to represent that love, the character of Vivian Cash is perceived as a somewhat hostile wife in order for the film audience to empathise with or relate to the relationship between Cash and Carter.

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<sup>122</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/2005/11/My-Father-Was-A-Wildfire.aspx?p=2>, accessed 23 June 2010.

Ginnifer Goodwin plays Vivian Cash in *Walk the Line*. According to the *Walk the Line* press kit, in preparing for her role:

*Goodwin found few published accounts of Vivian's life and marriage to Johnny Cash. 'She was a very private and protective person', notes Goodwin. 'We can only surmise that she was a romantic and that she found herself growing lonely in her marriage. In the only interview I could find with Vivian, she talked about John's addiction, and that she was so naïve: she knew something was wrong with him, but she had no idea what it was. And when she found out that it was pills, she still thought he could just stop taking them and everything would be fine' (2005: 13).*

Due to the fact that there was only minor media representation of Vivian Cash, the filmmakers (along with Goodwin) fabricated her character to suit the interests of John Carter Cash and his family. Vivian Cash did not contribute to the production of *Walk the Line* in any way which is reflected in her negative portrayal.

In conclusion, *Walk the Line* is a Hollywood representation of the early life of Johnny Cash and June Carter. Focusing on the given time and characters explored in the film, the musical biopic conveys a specific perspective on Cash's private and public life. In mapping out and analysing Cash's represented identities, the influence of John Carter Cash and his parents is clear in the creative construction of *Walk the Line*. The filmmakers' subjective re-representation suggests that the aim of the film is to visualise how significant the relationship between Cash and Carter was. Even though negative aspects of Cash's personality are represented his commitment to Carter is ongoing, from the first scene in which he hears her singing voice on the radio through to his public marriage proposal and their life afterward. As the screen text suggests, "For the next 35 years they raised their children, recorded music, toured and played the world together". Essentially, *Walk the Line*'s primary concern is representing the myth of continued romantic love between the two music stars.

## RAY

*Ray* is a musical biopic that focuses on the history of musician Ray Charles. Born Ray Charles Robinson (30 September 1930), he became a singer/songwriter and musician, producing various styles of music including soul, rock and roll, blues, jazz, country, pop and gospel. Charles was born in Albany, Georgia (USA), however, grew up in an underprivileged black community on the western side of Greenville in North Florida with his mother Aretha Robinson and brother, George Robinson. 12 months after witnessing his brother drown in a wash tub; Charles became completely blind by the age of seven. Charles was sent to Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind where he developed his music-making skills and by the age of 17 he moved to Seattle to start his career in the music industry. Charles signed with record company Swing Time before moving to Atlantic and then on to ABC Records, releasing a combined total of over 75 studio albums, as well as a 76 singles on best-selling charts and various compilation albums. Throughout his career Charles won many awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award (1988) and an induction into the Hall of Fame (1990) at the Grammy Awards. Charles is a Kennedy Center Honours Recipient, he received a National Medal of the Arts, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Blues Hall of Fame and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Image Awards Hall of Fame. Although respected and appreciated in the music industry, in his private life Charles was considered a womaniser. According to biographers Michael Lydon (2004) and Norman Winski (1994) (among many others), in his lifetime, Charles was married twice and had 12 children to nine different women. Regardless, throughout his career Charles raised over \$20 million for African-American charities, education and the arts. In 1979, 'Georgia on My Mind' (from *The Genius Hits the Road*, 1960) became the official state song of Georgia and Charles was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame.

There are three significant issues represented in *Ray* that will be addressed in the following study. The first discusses the creative contributors to *Ray* and how they influenced the audio-visual representations of Ray Charles' biography on screen. Director Taylor Hackford had principal creative control and chose to seek out Charles' opinion of the script as well as enlisting his son, Ray Charles Robinson Jr., to aid in producing the film. The context of the film production will be analysed and specifically how these individuals impacted on filmic representations. It is argued that the actual individuals' perspectives are represented in *Ray* yet

there still remains a level of fabrication to suit the requirements of the film format. The other two areas explored in this study relate to the film (text) itself. An analysis of the chosen music tracks of Charles and how they are integrated in the narrative/storyline will be addressed. The music used reflects Charles' relationships, both public and private, and highlights larger issues including race and religion. In addition to music tracks, there will also be an analysis of other sonic elements and visual aesthetics represented in *Ray*. The musical biopic draws attention to Charles' blindness in its various stages of development throughout his life. Due to the fact that Charles is dependent on his hearing throughout the majority of his life, *Ray* utilises soundscapes and heightened sound effects to assist audiences in empathising with Charles. The focus on sound during the later period of his life is reinforced through the heightened visual aesthetics during his younger years. The analysis of text and context in *Ray* will ultimately argue that *Ray* contributes to the myth of Ray Charles as a star artist. *Ray* is a musical biopic that alters Ray Charles' persona to re-invent the myth of the contemporary musician in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

### **Ray Charles' Contribution to *Ray*: Casting, Scriptwriting and Direction**

Taylor Hackford suggests that he intended the story of *Ray* to reflect how Charles interpreted and remembered his own life experiences. In an interview quoted in the press kit of *Ray*, Hackford stated:

*Ray Charles' life was an absolutely fantastic journey. In this film I wanted to present the complexity of this American genius, warts and all... With Ray we have tried to show the evolution of an artist through an incredible period of cultural change. I hope people see through this film that Ray Charles is so much more than a musician of the past. He influenced a vibrant, cultural revolution in America that is still going on today* (2004: 4).

Hackford created the film as a form of education, to show how important Charles' music career was (and still is). The director shows how Charles' life and musical work impacted on future musicians and the community in general. Although Charles passed away before the



musical biopic was theatrically released, the filmmakers presented one of the final drafts of the script to Charles (translated to Braille) to read before shooting the film. In an interview, Charles discussed Hackford's film script:

*I can see that Taylor's done his homework. He's got my life down pretty good. I would like for the people to understand the trials and tribulations I've gone through from when I was a little kid up until I really got into my career and all the different things that happened to me over the years. I mean, I've had some wonderful things happen to me, but yet I've had some pretty dramatic things happen to me, too. I would like for people to know that you can recover from a lot of adversity that you might have in your life if you keep pressing on (2004: 4).*

Ray's storyline is essentially from the perspective of Hackford in liaison with Ray Charles and his first-born son. The film conveys what Charles mentions: the struggle through adversity to achieve a successful career in the music industry. However, the film also shows the negative side to his personality which Charles also candidly discusses in his autobiography *Brother Ray* (Charles and Ritz, 1978). The positive and negative aspects of Charles' identity presented in the film demonstrate the filmmakers' intentions toward realism. Ray is not a glamorous, overly sensationalised representation of Charles' life but one concerned with actuality. Hackford disclosed:

*'I took some creative license and dramatized two things that Ray said didn't happen,' Hackford says. 'Originally I had Ray getting into music at a much later age in life than what he said really happened. He wasn't happy with that, and I took it out... 'I also had a scene with his [mistress] Margie shooting up heroin in the band's [touring van], and Ray said that never happened, even though it has been written over the years that it did happen. He was sure it never happened, so I respected his wishes and left those things out of the movie. I'd known Ray for years, and he trusted me to tell his story' (Hackford quoted in Hay, 2004: 18).*

Hackford's decision to alter the film according to Charles' opinions and memory of his own life experiences demonstrates that he intended on representing the story mainly from Charles' perspective. However, there are still some events in the musical biopic that did not occur in

Charles' life, fabricated by Hackford and other creative contributors of *Ray*. Cathy Shultz, Professor of History, states that some key moments in *Ray* are Hollywood fiction. These include, and are not limited to: Charles' marriage to Della Bea Robinson, his affairs and children with other women, the death of his brother which drove him to abuse heroin and his ban from the state of Georgia for not playing in front of a racially segregated audience (2004: 1). Some of these fictional elements are discussed further below.

### ***Casting Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles***

Ray Charles died of liver cancer (June 2004) in the months before the theatrical release of *Ray* (October 2004). However, Charles was involved with the production, particularly with the casting of actor/singer/comedian Jamie Foxx to play his character in the biopic. In numerous interviews Foxx recounts his meeting with Charles:

*When I met Ray he said, 'Oh, let me check those fingers out. You got strong fingers.' ... And then I hit a wrong note and he said, 'Now why the hell did you do that?' He was very serious about it. He wasn't laughing. I said, 'Well, I don't know.' He said, 'You didn't know what?' I said, 'Well?' And he said, 'Notes are right underneath your fingers.' I started listening to him as he was speaking and he was very serious. His music is his harmony... He said, 'The notes are right underneath your fingers, Jamie. You've just got to take time out to find them, young man.' So I used that as a metaphor through the whole movie that our life is notes underneath our fingers, and we've just got to figure out which notes we want to play to make our music... When I finally got it [the riff], he jumped up, slapped his thighs and said, 'The kid's got it.' And he walked out. That's when I knew we had it.<sup>123</sup>*

Ray Charles approved of Foxx in part because of his piano playing abilities and his commitment to learn. Jamie Foxx had previous training in classical music and composition after high school when he was awarded a scholarship to attend United States International

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<sup>123</sup> <http://www.popentertainment.com/jamiefoxx.htm>, accessed 2 July 2010.

University. After university, Foxx shifted his career to television and joined the cast of *In Living Color*, a sketch comedy show that ran from 1990 to 1994. He then released the music album *Peep This* (1994) and created a sitcom, *The Jamie Foxx Show* (1996 to 2001), as well as starring in feature films including *Toys* (1992), *Any Given Sunday* (1999) and the biopic, *Ali* (2000).<sup>124</sup> Foxx's history in entertainment: on stage, screen and recorded music, demonstrates that he is a recognised performer and appeals to various audiences. Hence, Foxx's casting in *Ray* attracts a diverse film audience, attracting younger generations of fans. With Foxx's extensive experience as an entertainer and versatility, he is a credible performer. Foxx's past success as a musician and actor makes his role as Charles more believable for audiences. In preparation for the role, Foxx only spent a small amount of time with Charles due to health issues, scheduling, and the film required him to play Charles at a younger age: from 16 through to 49.<sup>125</sup> Charles was in his early 70s when he met with Foxx.

## The Music of *Ray*: Text and Context

In order to pay tribute to Ray Charles' large body of work, 28 of his recorded songs are featured in *Ray*, along with music tracks from other artists including soul musician Wilson 'Willie Tee' Turbinton<sup>126</sup> and country music singer Eddy Arnold.<sup>127</sup> The choice of songs used help to contextualise the story in time and place.

*For several years in the early 1950s, Ray Charles lived and worked in New Orleans.  
Drawing from his experience here and with the encouragement of producers like*

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<sup>124</sup> After starring in *Ray*, Foxx released the music album *Unpredictable* (2005), starred as Curtis Taylor Jr. (based on Motown founder Berry Gordy Jr.) in *Dreamgirls* (2006). In the 2009 feature film *The Soloist*, Foxx played Nathaniel Ayers: a mentally-ill homeless street musician who previously attended Julliard (a prestigious school of dance, drama and music), which was based on a true story. At the current time of writing, Foxx is also in early negotiations to star in an untitled Mike Tyson (boxer) biopic (<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1623225/20091006/story.jhtml>, accessed 5 December 2010).

<sup>125</sup> C.J. Sanders plays Ray Charles Robinson in *Ray* when the character is six and seven years old.

<sup>126</sup> Born Wilson Turbinton, 'Willie Tee' is a singer, songwriter, keyboardist, singer and producer active in the music industry (particularly the New Orleans music scene) from 1962 until his death in 2007. Turbinton appeared briefly as a performing actor in *Ray*.

<sup>127</sup> Born Richard Edward Arnold, 'Eddy Arnold' is a country musician who commenced his career in 1937, retiring in 1999. Arnold contributed to the 'Nashville sound', a production sound for mainstream US country music. Other personnel involved include record producers Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley and musicians Ray Price and Jim (stage name 'Gentleman Jim') Reeves.

*Ahmet Ertegun, Ray Charles 'incorporated gutsy New Orleans R&B techniques'*  
[(Ellison, 1985: 230)] *in his music* (Stewart, 2000: 307).

*Ray* represents this period of time: the music that Charles recorded in the 1950s through to the 1960s. Charles' unique 'sound' developed after years of singing the music of artists that inspired him (such as Nat King Cole and Charles Brown). The first original tracks Charles released and performed were developed from gospel music tracks. However, he altered the lyrics so the meaning of the songs changed from faith and Christianity to intimate relationships with sexual partners. The re-working of these compositions drew public attention to Charles both in a positive and negative way. As reiterated in *Ray*, many audiences enjoyed the music whereas others believed it was disrespectful:

*Some bluesmen and some preachers too, complained that... Ray's later blues-gospel hits joined what God had put asunder. 'He mixing the blues with spirituals. I know that's wrong', said Big Bill Broonzy, and Josh White agreed: 'How he takes a spiritual and makes it into a love or sex song, it's a kind of sacrilege'* (Lydon, 2004: 114).

Mixed responses to Charles' gospel-inspired songs are reflected in *Ray*, namely with featured performances of 'I Got a Woman' and 'What'd I Say'. As well as his blues/gospel, soul and jazz works, Charles also released a country music genre album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* (1962) in two volumes. *Ray* also represents this album and various music tracks in performance to showcase Charles' diverse musical influences and tastes. The film also reinforces Charles' musical abilities, reflecting Hackford's respect and admiration for the entertainer. The Ray Charles music tracks featured in *Ray* significantly contribute to the biographical history of Charles, exploring his private and public life. Contrarily, Charles stated:

*To sing about something – that's your art, that's what you do. What you do from your art form is one thing. Your private life is another. The two don't mix. At least I don't*

*think so. I play piano but that ain't got nothing to do with my private life* (Charles in DeMain, 2004: 22).

Nonetheless, building on the myth, these music tracks are integrated into *Ray*'s narrative and more often than not, centre on his private relationships with the women in his life. However, in some cases the musical numbers in *Ray* focus on displaying Charles' musical talents. Overall, the music of *Ray* assists in shaping the identity of Charles and how the public perceive him through his music.

### ***'Mess Around'/'What'd I Say'***

'Mess Around'<sup>128</sup> is introduced in *Ray* in the recording studio where producer Ahmet Ertegun (Curtis Armstrong) teaches Charles to play the song he has written [00:42:23]. In *Ray*, Ertegun explains how to play the song by revealing a minimal amount of detail to Charles. Ertegun first asks Charles if he has heard of stride piano style to which Charles responds by playing immediately. In playing the style effortlessly, *Ray* represents Charles' music talent and knowledge. Ertegun suggests Charles make it sound more like "a Pete Johnson<sup>129</sup> thing", with Charles again adapting his playing immediately. Ertegun sings along with his self-written lyrics and in the following scene Charles records a near flawless performance of 'Mess Around'. The musical sequence, which carries into a subsequent scene where Charles is being interviewed on radio about his new music release, displays Charles' capabilities as a musician. 'Mess Around' was Charles' 1953 Rhythm and Blues hit single and lead him to develop his own unique sound, moving on from his cover songs of Nat King Cole. *Ray* affirms that 'Mess Around' is a significant song recording by Charles as it helped launch a successful career and also helped create Charles' individual sound.

Another musical number in *Ray* that exemplifies Charles musical ability and improvisational skills is 'What'd I Say'. According to website *Second Hand Songs* (a cover songs database)

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<sup>128</sup> The single, 'Mess Around', was recorded on 17 May 1953 and released as a single on 19 June 1953. The song has been covered by UK band The Animals in 1965 (*The Animals on Tour* and *Animal Tracks*) and featured in the comedy film *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987).

<sup>129</sup> Pete Johnson (1904-1967) is an American jazz pianist known for his stride piano technique.

after Charles' recording of 'What'd I Say' in 1961 through to June 2005 the song was covered by 58 artists,<sup>130</sup> showcasing how influential the song has been on other musicians. *Ray* also reinforces its importance by playing the track three times throughout the course of the film. Once as an opening to the film; offering close-ups of Charles and his piano (instrumental track only), secondly in a live performance and thirdly in a scene where the track is being recorded by Atlantic Records.

*Charles broke through to larger audiences with 'What'd I Say?' a 45-rpm disc divided into two parts... it was for its time sexually explicit, with a grunting 'unnh' and 'ooh' interchange between Charles and his Raelettes, and the tune was banned on some radio stations. Recorded in February 1959, 'What'd I Say?' reached number one on the rhythm and blues charts and number six on the pop charts later that year (Carnes, 2005: 86).*

The sexual nature of the lyrics is addressed in *Ray*; however it is quickly dismissed as the focus remains on the popularity of the song and how it launches Charles' music career. Michael Campbell and James Brody refer to the style as "ecstatic gospel" (2008: 96-97), highlighted through the call-and-response section between Charles and (his female back-up singers) The Raelettes: "The term Call-Response is used... to convey the dialogical, conversational character of black music. Its processes include the signifyin(g), troping practices of the early calls, cries, whoops, and hollers of early Afro-American culture" (Floyd Jr., 2004: 83). 'What'd I Say' reflects Charles' African-American heritage yet in *Ray* the song represents his individuality as opposed to a culture or community. Through the track, *Ray* emphasises Charles' uniqueness as one of the principal reasons behind his success.

The song was one of the only tracks that Charles played for a live audience before recording in a studio. The song formed out of necessity at a live performance (the song developed on the road, while touring) with Charles and The Raelette's, improvising the song into creation. The scenario is similarly represented in *Ray*. The scene in question draws attention to Charles' musical capabilities (particularly with improvisation) and charisma, yet simultaneously

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<sup>130</sup> <http://www.secondhandsongs.com/performance/14238>, accessed 21 July 2010.

references the myth of spontaneity in the musical genre film. As discussed in Chapter One, Jane Feuer developed the idea of the ‘myth of spontaneity’:

*The musical... has always been the genre which attempts to give the greatest illusion of spontaneity and effortlessness... The self-reflective musical is aware of this in attempting to promulgate the myth of spontaneity... the self-reflective films promote the mode of expression of the film musical itself as spontaneous and natural rather than calculated and technological. Musical entertainment thus takes on a natural relatedness to life processes and to the lives of its audiences. Musical entertainment claims for its own all natural and joyous performances in art and in life. The myth of spontaneity operates... to make musical performance, which is actually part of culture, appear to be part of nature (1977: 318).*

When applied to the ‘What’d I Say’ sequence in *Ray*, the spontaneous performance of the song shows the natural, effortlessness of music construction in the film. More generally, none of Charles’ songs in the film are represented as difficult to either record or perform. In fact, the improvisation in numbers such as ‘What’d I Say’ are based in an interlocking network of conventions including the blues progression, Latin rhythms and call-and-response. The song’s conventions are in fact not uncommon in blues traditions, however are controversial when based on gospel hymns (discussed below).

*Ray* provides an illusion of near perfection, striving to contrast Charles’ professional life with his imperfect private circumstances. Creating the juxtaposition highlights the musical genre characteristics adopted in this film. Furthermore, the musical biopic is self-reflexive by way of quick edits from scene to scene in order to heighten the sense of mastery that Charles had over his musical creations and performances. Charles’ musical proficiency is exemplified in both live performances and recording sequences. The quick editing reflects Charles’ musical intelligence when composing, recording and performing his music.

### ***‘I Got a Woman’/‘Hallelujah I Love Her So’***

‘I Got a Woman’ was co-written by Ray Charles and Renald Richard and recorded as a single in 1954.<sup>131</sup> The tune was inspired by the gospel song ‘It Must Be Jesus’ by The Southern Tones,<sup>132</sup> hence causing controversy upon its release. Charles altered the lyrics from Christian values to intimate and sexual experiences with a woman. In *Ray*, Charles first performs the song privately for Della Beatrice Howard (who marries Charles and becomes Della Bea Robinson) after they spend the afternoon in bed together. The opening lyrics state:

*I got a woman way over town that’s good to me, oh yeah  
Say I got a woman way over town good to me, oh yeah  
She give me money when I’m in need  
Yeah she’s a kind of friend indeed  
I got a woman way over town that’s good to me, oh yeah*

In *Ray*, Howard tells Charles that his song is sacrilegious [00:52:08], yet Charles argues that he is attempting to find his own voice and create a style that is unique to him. In the following scene [00:54:20], music managers Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler arrive at a nightclub where Charles and his band are rehearsing onstage. When the band starts playing ‘I Got a Woman’ the managers instantly agree to record the song. The scene changes again and a radio disc jockey announces that the song represents “the new Ray Charles” and its connection to gospel music is no longer an issue.

*The gospel vocal style itself, as typified by Ray Charles, consists of a variety of features of the blues system, such as the use of blues-scale notes, pitch blends, glissando, melisma, gravelly vocal style, and extreme vocal range (falsetto and full voice). Charles’ rendition of ‘I Got a Woman’ is in his ‘gospel-shouter’ style... an extreme emotion exists in his performance (Ripani, 2006: 73).*

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<sup>131</sup> ‘I Got a Woman’ was subsequently released in 1957 on *Ray Charles and Hallelujah I Love Her So* in 1962.

<sup>132</sup> ‘It Must Be Jesus’ (1954) was recorded on *The History of Rhythm and Blues 1952 – 1957* in 2010.



During the mid-1950s, Charles developed his own style of music which became very successful yet controversial as he shifted gospel/Christian themes to more overtly sexual lyrics. ‘Hallelujah I Love Her So’<sup>133</sup> is another example of this, interpreted by Lonnie H. Athens:

*By 1955, at the age of twenty-three, Ray Charles had finally consolidated his artistic self, which was signalled by his taking completely for granted the relatively unique viewpoint from which he had been creating ‘sounds’ between the early and mid-fifties (1995: 580).*

‘Hallelujah I Love Her So’ is inspired by Christian faith. The word ‘hallelujah’ alone is defined as a praise or shout of exclamation to God. However, in the song’s lyrics, Charles refers to a woman:

*In the evening when the sun goes down  
When there is nobody else around  
She kisses me and she holds me tight  
And tells me, ‘Daddy, everything’s all right’  
That’s why I know, yes, I know  
Hallelujah, I just love her so*

Ray represents the public’s upheaval with the song and how it negatively impacted on the community. In the film Charles performs the song in a nightclub while the diegetic audience dance along. A man and woman<sup>134</sup> enter the nightclub and shout to Charles, saying the song is sacrilegious. When the couple leave, Charles asks the remaining audience members if they would like him to continue playing the song. The patrons cheer and Charles starts playing ‘Hallelujah’ again [00:57:18 – 00:59:02]. The sequence demonstrates that even though the gospel inspiration is an issue, most of Charles’ audiences enjoyed the song and took no

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<sup>133</sup> ‘Hallelujah I Love Her So’ was written and released as a single by Ray Charles in 1956.

<sup>134</sup> Credited as ‘angry husband’ and ‘angry wife’, the couple are played by Afemo Omilami and Elizabeth Omilami respectively.

offence to the lyrics. Ernest Cashmore further suggests that at the time, the issue was not of Christian values but of the African-American community:

*In replacing the individualism of blues with the community spirit of gospel, Charles' music implicitly lauded collective action. The commercial success of Charles' records and his appearances on national television were certainly accompanied by a rising sense of confidence among many sectors of the black population (1997: 68).*

The diegetic audience that appear in this musical sequence of *Ray* are all of African-American decent (including Charles' music band and the abusive couple). Hence, what is originally interpreted as an issue of Christian faith turns into liberation of African-Americans at a time of racial prejudice and segregation. The majority of the African-American people featured in the scene are positive about Charles' song, demonstrating that a community, or at least a community ideal, has emerged from the style of music. Overall, *Ray* reiterates the significance of race through these musical numbers, using Charles' biography to highlight the socio-cultural issues of the period.

### ***'Mary Ann'/'What Kind of Man Are You'***

'Mary Ann' and 'What Kind of Man Are You' are musical numbers in *Ray* that introduce and farewell the character Mary Ann Fisher (Aunjanue Ellis). Fisher is a rhythm and blues singer who performed with Ray Charles from 1955 to 1958, moving on to pursue a solo career.<sup>135</sup> *Ray* represents the relationship between Fisher and Charles as sexual and intimate, forming while Charles remained married to Robinson. However, the affair does not last long as Charles moves on to another adulterous relationship with singer Margie Hendricks. The musical numbers 'Mary Ann' and 'What Kind of Man Are You' highlight Charles' womanising persona. The first scene with Fisher is where she auditions for Charles by singing 'Drown in My Own Tears'.<sup>136</sup> Charles asks Fisher if she has a problem with singing the song in a gospel style (again, referring to the controversial nature of his music) and she replies that

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<sup>135</sup> Mary Ann Fisher continued to perform until her death at the age of 81 in 2004.

<sup>136</sup> 'Drown in My Own Tears' is a blues single written by Henry Glover in 1956. Charles released the song in the same year and it went to number one in the US rhythm and blues music chart.

it does not affect her. Suggested through acting style, Charles is trying to ascertain Fisher's religious and moral stance before he attempts to turn the professional relationship into a more intimate and sexual one [01:02:05 – 01:04:24]. The following scene shows Charles and Fisher in bed together as Charles injects heroin into his arm. These initial scenes set up the relationship between the two characters for the duration of Fisher's time on screen. The scenes also demonstrate that Charles' self-destructive behaviour (his addiction to heroin and adulterous relationships) has a negative impact on his private life; however it does not conflict with his public music persona.

Released by Charles in 1956, 'Mary Ann' plays through several scenes in *Ray*. The song begins diegetically where Charles is performing the song live onstage. Mary Ann Fisher dances next to him, the focus of the performance (and the film's scene). As the track continues to play the following scene represents Charles and wife, Della Bea Robinson with their first child Ray Charles Robinson Jr. leaving a grocery store. The scene shifts to Charles and Fisher in the back seat of a car discussing their career and relationship. It is in this scene where the music track plays in the background of the mix to focus on the dialogue. The music track foregrounds the concluding scene where Charles finishes performing the song onstage and embraces Fisher in front of an applauding audience. The song connects these scenes together to provide a commentary on the romantic and professional relationships of Charles. Anahid Kassabian explains music commentary, "*Commentary music*, for example, might tell us that a seemingly romantic situation is actually humorous, or that the daisy-filled meadow contains some unseen danger" (2001: 59). In the case of 'Mary Ann' in *Ray*, the song commentates that the seemingly romantic situation is actually causing Charles' marriage to suffer. While on tour, Charles and Fisher are a couple and when Charles is back at home, he assumes the role of the dutiful husband and father. In the 'Mary Ann' sequence, the visual montage shows filmmaker commentary, suggesting that Charles and Fisher's relationship cannot be maintained alongside Charles marriage and family. The song's lyrics imply Charles' feelings towards Fisher:

*Well, now oh Mary Ann*  
*You know you sure look fine*  
*Well, now oh*  
*You know you sure look fine*

*Well, now oh Mary Ann  
I could love you all the time*

As well as demonstrating Charles' thoughts and feelings, the song introduces Fisher as an important character in the film. 'Mary Ann' is a song that reflects Charles' interpretation of Fisher; however the visual montage represents how the relationship is negatively interpreted by the filmmakers. Robinson Jr.'s role in the film's production contributes to the negative portrayal as he sides with his mother, Della Bea. Additionally, Robinson Jr. himself is represented as their child in the musical sequence.

'What Kind of Man Are You' was written by Charles and performed by himself and Fisher. In *Ray*, while the couple continues their adulterous relationship, Fisher asks Charles for a solo in his show. Charles then writes 'What Kind of Man Are You' and offers a solo part to Fisher. In a rehearsal scene, tension is built up between Fisher and potential new interest Margie Hendricks. Hendricks (and the other two Raelette's) is new to the group that is signed to perform and record with Charles [01:15:32]. The following scene represents the performance of Fisher, in her solo, accompanied by the three Raelette's. The song's lyrics, sung in first person narrative, refer to being ill-treated by a man. Some of the lyrics include:

*Why do I love you so?*

*Why can't I let you go?*

*I just can't satisfy*

*Why do you tell me lies?*

*I'm always left alone*

The song is sung mainly by Fisher and in *Ray* reflects how Charles' feelings have changed towards Hendricks as she is angered about the outcome. In the 'What Kind of Man Are You' visual montage, Charles spends more time with Hendricks and becomes sexually intimate with her, disregarding Fisher. Fisher comes to understand she is being replaced by Hendricks

(both in private and public) and the song builds to a dramatic conclusion as Fisher then throws a brick onto Charles' new car, smashing the front window. Fisher jumps into a waiting taxi cab and is not seen or discussed by the other characters again.

'What Kind of Man Are You' was written by Charles, yet the song is sung by Fisher in *Ray* and comes from her perspective. The song narrates the current status of her relationship with Charles. In various scenes in the visual montage, Fisher witnesses the development of Charles and Hendricks' personal relationship. The song also acts as a farewell to the character Fisher, as Charles announces "Miss Mary Ann Fisher, ladies and gentlemen" (from the performance scene) at the conclusion of the song where Fisher is last seen entering the taxi cab [01:16:10 – 01:18:45]. In the musical sequence, the visual imagery and music both illustrate the circumstances for Fisher's departure. The song functions as an aid in character development (Fisher, Hendricks and Charles) while also representing the changing relationships between them. 'Mary Ann' and 'What Kind of Man Are You' focus on Fisher and how she became a significant part of Charles' life. In an interview with *BlackFilm.com*, Aunjanue Ellis states that she played a composite character and that the only biographical accuracy is that Fisher was Charles' first background singer.<sup>137</sup> Hence, the filmmakers fabricated Fisher's character and relationships in order to integrate her songs into the film narrative. A majority of Charles' songs featured in *Ray* represent his intimate and personal relationships with women. The musical biopic suggests that women (including mother, Aretha Robinson) have had a profound effect on Charles' life and his musical creativity.

### ***Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata'***

To reflect Charles' internal feelings towards his changing relationship between Fisher and Hendricks he plays the 'Moonlight' Sonata (01:14:53 – 01:15:18) while waiting for his band to arrive for rehearsal. The 'Moonlight Sonata' was composed by Ludwig Van Beethoven and is considered to be inspired by a romantic love that the composer had lost. To reinforce the sense of loss *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* compares the sound of the movement to a funeral march (2010). Originally titled 'Piano Sonata No. 14' when completed in 1801, the

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<sup>137</sup> <http://www.blackfilm.com/20041022/features/aunjanueellis.shtml>, accessed 24 August 2010.

song was rumoured to be based on Beethoven's love for his seventeen year old student. According to Timothy Jones:

*Perhaps the 'Moonlight' Sonata is not, after all, an expression of Beethoven's sorrow at losing [student] Giuletta Guicciardi: the claim, though made often enough, has absolutely nothing to recommend it from a biographical perspective. A far more precious loss to Beethoven at that time was his hearing* (Jones, 1999: 14).

In Charles' autobiography he mentions playing the 'Moonlight Sonata' in school and refers to it as an "innocent classical piece" (Charles and Ritz, 1978: 53). However, greater connections can be made between Beethoven and Charles with regard to the 'Moonlight Sonata' in *Ray*. Firstly, Beethoven began to lose his hearing in 1796 and by 1814 he was completely deaf: Charles had a similar loss with his blindness. Beethoven had a lack of success in his romantic relationships and although it is rumoured that he proposed marriage to various women, he never married nor had any children. Although Charles had great success with women, he was not considered 'romantic' as such and was considered somewhat of a womaniser (Robinson Jr. and Ross, 2010, Simmonds, 2006: 520). In terms of the Sonata's appearance in *Ray*, the song allows the film viewer (who has knowledge of the 'Moonlight Sonata' and Beethoven) to gain insight into the internal struggle of Charles. The Sonata also anticipates Charles' move from Fisher to Hendricks and a more distanced relationship between his wife and children. The use of intertextuality also suggests that Charles is just as crucial a figure as Beethoven was in his era of music. None of the characters acknowledge the Sonata that Charles is playing in *Ray* and Charles stops playing as soon as he can hear that the other band members have arrived to commence rehearsal. Therefore the Sonata is directed at the film audience, and open for multiple interpretations.

### ***'Leave My Woman Alone'/'Night Time is the Right Time'/'Hit the Road Jack'***

'Leave My Woman Alone', 'Night Time is the Right Time' and 'Hit the Road Jack' are songs that assist in narrating the developing relationship between Charles and Hendricks. Firstly, 'Leave My Woman Alone' introduces Hendricks and The Raelettes. The song, set in a

recording studio in *Ray*, gives Hendricks the opportunity to see Charles perform in-person and it is clear by the way she looks at him that she is impressed by his performance. Secondly, 'Night Time is the Right Time' reaffirms the passion that Charles and Hendricks have for their music and also each other. The scene in *Ray* (also set in a recording studio) shows the couple singing emphatically. Finally, 'Hit the Road Jack' highlights Hendricks' anger at Charles when she becomes pregnant with his child and he refuses to leave his family for her. She fortifies her anger through singing the song in rehearsal and in performance. The three songs represent the three stages in Charles and Hendricks' relationship from the first time they meet; through to the last time they see each other.

In *Ray* Charles and his management ask The Raelettes to sing for his album and record 'Leave My Woman Alone'<sup>138</sup> together. As the group sing, the camera focuses in on Hendricks as she glances over at Charles while he sings. Hendricks smiles and watches Charles sing and play the piano. After the successful recording which in *Ray* is recorded in one take, The Raelettes bargain with Charles on how much they will be paid per week to go on tour with him. After it is decided it will be \$30 a week, Charles offers his hand to shake on the deal. Hendricks takes Charles' hand and he feels her wrist to determine whether she is attractive or not (Figure 9). Charles and Hendricks then verbally establish a connection:



Figure 9: Charles feels Hendricks' wrist to determine her physical attractiveness

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<sup>138</sup> 'Leave My Woman Alone' was written by Charles and appeared on his album *Yes Indeed!* (1958).

Ray Charles: *From now on you guys are going to be called The Raelettes.*

Margie Hendricks: *Does that mean we have to 'let Ray'?*

Ray Charles: *Oh Lord, what am I going to do with you?*

Margie Hendricks: *I'm sure you'll think of something...*

The blues standard 'Night Time is the Right Time' was originally recorded and released as a single in 1937 by Roosevelt Sykes ('The Honeydripper'). In 1958 Ray Charles released the song as a single and it appeared on his albums: *Ray Charles at Newport* (1959) and *The Genius Sings the Blues* (1961). The song is performed in *Ray* by Charles and The Raelettes. The song commences non-diegetically as Hendricks helps Charles pick up the pills he has dropped on the bathroom floor. Hendricks tells Charles how much she wants to be with him and they embrace with a kiss. The following scene (where 'Night Time is the Right Time' becomes diegetic) presents Charles and The Raelettes recording the song in the studio. It is apparent through Hendricks' strong and powerful voice that she is passionate not just for the song but also for Charles (as she looks at him while singing). The recording of the song reflects the state of Hendricks and Charles' relationship – highly sexual, intimate and intense. In commentating on their relationship, the song continues to play into the next scene (becoming background, non-diegetic music) where Charles and his wife celebrate their son's third birthday at home. The scene change emphasises Charles' parallel lives, his home life and his life in the music industry and suggests that the two cannot be maintained. In other words, through the visual montage the filmmaker's imply that the relationships Charles has with these women will ultimately end. The perspective of the filmmakers is clear in the musical sequence and guides the film audience throughout the film to perceive Charles' personal relationship choices in a negative light.

'Hit the Road Jack' was written by Percy Mayfield, recorded and released by Ray Charles as a single in 1961.<sup>139</sup> In *Ray*, 'Hit the Road Jack' exemplifies Hendricks' anger towards Charles as their relationship (both personal and professional) comes to an end. Leading up to this musical sequence, Hendricks' relationship with Charles deteriorates as he chooses to spend more time with his wife and kids and less time with her. Hendricks begins to drink heavily

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<sup>139</sup> Since Charles' recording many other artists have covered 'Hit the Road Jack' including Suzi Quatro (*Quatro*, 1974) and John Mellencamp (John Cougar, *Chestnut Street Incident*, 1976).



and becomes careless in recording sessions: arriving drunk, mocking Charles and becoming increasingly argumentative. The tension builds between the couple which comes to a climax in the Theresa Hotel, Harlem [01:40:44]. In *Ray* the couple are in the hotel room together and Charles practices the tune to 'Hit the Road Jack' on his piano. Hendricks vomits in the bathroom, discloses that she is pregnant with Charles' child and asks him to leave his wife to be with her. Charles refuses and Hendricks confirms, through dialogue, the filmmakers' commentary leading up to this scene:

*You're a damn fool, you know that? Between the dope and the music and me, you already have left your damn family. And you know what the sad part is Ray, you don't even know it [01:42:32].*

Here the filmmakers' imply that Charles was unaware of how his relationships with women affected his life and musical work. The perspective established in *Ray* through the Mary Ann Fisher and Margie Hendricks-centred music concludes that Charles was a womaniser, however was unconcerned about that aspect of his identity. Charles' ignorance of how his drug-dependency and adultery affected those closest to him exemplifies that his music was most important to him (and his fans).

The aforementioned musical numbers identify with the myth of musical integration (Feuer, 1977: 318-321). Each song explores the distinct relationships and events that Charles encounters. Songs that describe the negative aspects of a relationship are integrated into instances where Charles' relationships are not working whereas when the more positive tracks are integrated, they parallel with Charles' flourishing relationships. However, whether the songs are positively or negatively reflecting Charles' private life, the songs all provide him with career success. Therefore, the film signals that the most significant attribute of Charles' personality is his musical talent.

## ***‘Georgia on My Mind’***

‘Georgia on My Mind’ is a significant music track in *Ray* that represents Charles’ African-American identity and his (and the community’s) struggle with racial equality. Ray Charles grew up in the USA when segregation of black and white communities was still in practice. Referred to as the Jim Crow laws, racial segregation in public facilities was legalised between 1876 and 1965. Places including public schools, transport, restrooms, restaurants and drinking fountains were marked ‘colored’ or ‘white’ stating where people of the given race were able to use the aforementioned public services. Racial segregation is highlighted to a certain extent in *Ray*, however more overtly in a scene where Charles refuses to perform in front of a segregated audience. The pivotal scene shows a large group of protesters, gathered at the performance venue. One unknown African-American male (uncredited) in the protesting crowd calls out to Charles, who arrives on his tour bus, to inform him of the segregated audience he will perform to that evening. Charles eventually decides to leave the venue and the African-American protesters cheer. The male commends Charles by suggesting that he is the first to boycott playing a segregated audience. The film narrates its importance by displaying representative media headlines about the event in a montage following his withdrawal from the venue in Georgia. *Ebony* magazine, *Jet*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Louisville Defender* include feature articles about Charles’ stand for equality in *Ray*. According to the *Ray* Press Kit:

*He [Charles] would become the first artist to boldly refuse to play in segregated clubs, a move that cost Ray a substantial amount of money and spurred the state of Georgia to ban him ‘for life’. (In 1977 the State of Georgia issued a formal apology to Ray Charles, the state legislature honored him and they declared ‘Georgia on My Mind’ the official state song) (2004: 7).*

Charles’ ban from Georgia is unconfirmed, however, it is documented that ‘Georgia on My Mind’ became the official state song of Georgia. Charles did refuse to perform in front of the segregated audience, however, there are no records that show he was ever banned from the state. Research into the *Augusta Chronicle* (local daily broadsheet newspaper of Richmond County published in Georgia), Georgia State Archives and state legislature including Charles’

own autobiography *Brother Ray* (Charles and Ritz, 2004) do not mention the ban ever occurring. The fabricated occurrence exemplifies the value (according to the filmmakers) of African-American civil liberties in Ray Charles' lifetime and how he worked to alter rights to achieve equality. In other words, the ban represented in *Ray* is a fabrication to heighten the dramatic nature of the film's issue. According to the government's website:

*On April 24, 1979, 'Georgia on My Mind', with music by Hoagy Carmichael and lyrics by Stuart Gorrell, was designated Georgia's official state song. It was performed on March 7, 1979 before a joint meeting of the Georgia Senate and House of Representatives by Georgia-born recording artist Ray Charles.*<sup>140</sup>

Although Ray Charles released the music track 'Georgia on My Mind' in 1960, the song was written in 1930. Composed by Hoagy Carmichael with lyrics by Stuart Gorrell, Carmichael recounts composing the song in his autobiography:

*Frank Trumbauer prompted me to write it. One day he said 'Why don't you write a song called Georgia? Nobody lost much writing about the South'... A week later I was playing it and trying to think up lyrics for it. Stu Gorrell, one of my roommates, pitched in and gave me some help. As a result I gave Stu an interest in the song (Carmichael and Longstreet, 1965: 216).*

The lyrics of the song do not contain pronouns which make the subject, 'Georgia', undefined however; Trumbauer's reference to the 'South' implies that the song is inspired by the southeastern state of the US. One of Carmichael's biographers further describes the song's construction:

*From the first bars, music and words strike an elegiac tone. Perhaps intentionally, the lyric is ambiguous: is Georgia of the singer's thoughts and longings simply a place, or is the apostrophe also a person? The verse sets up this duality (Sudhalter, 2002: 137).*

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<sup>140</sup> [http://sos.georgia.gov/archives/state\\_symbols/state\\_song.html](http://sos.georgia.gov/archives/state_symbols/state_song.html), accessed 18 July 2010.

The song's lyrics include:

*Melodies bring memories that linger in my heart  
Make me think of Georgia, Why did we ever part?  
Some sweet day when blossoms fall and all the world's a song  
I'll go back to Georgia 'cause that's where I belong*

It is unclear in relevant literature who or what originally inspired the song 'Georgia on My Mind'. Hence, following from Sudhalter's argument that it is dependent on the singer, it is clear (through *Ray* in particular) that Ray Charles is referring to the US state of Georgia.

'Georgia on My Mind' plays twice in *Ray*. In the first instance Charles performs the song in a recording session with orchestra and choir. The music also marks a change in Charles career as he moves from Atlantic to ABC. The orchestra in the recording studio scene consists of over a dozen violinists, five double bass players and nearly 20 choir members. The amount of musical participants demonstrates Charles' newfound level in the industry. The sound of 'Georgia on My Mind' is substantially different to his previous recordings as the song is slower and more sombre as opposed to the upbeat, sexually-driven music he recorded at Atlantic. The second and final time 'Georgia on My Mind' plays in *Ray* is at the conclusion of the film (and during the end credits) where Charles is accepted back into Georgia in 1979. A formal apology is addressed to Charles and he is presented with a framed award welcoming him back to the state and announcing 'Georgia on My Mind' as the official state song. As the diegetic audience give Charles a standing ovation, 'Georgia on My Mind' plays non-diegetically. As the song plays a visual montage follows including an image of his mother and his younger self embracing and footage/images of the actual Ray Charles. Through the final montage and imagery of the film it is implied that 'Georgia on My Mind' is a song that is used to remember Charles after his passing in 2004.

The song has also been covered by numerous artists including Louis Armstrong, Dean Martin, Glenn Miller, Willie Nelson, Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown, Fats Waller, Billie Holiday and

Jerry Lee Lewis. However, Charles' version of the song (a ballad featuring full orchestra and choir) was most successful in the US music charts, reaching number one on the 1960 US Billboard Hot 100.<sup>141</sup> In the year following the release of *Ray*, Jamie Foxx provided vocals for the song 'Georgia' by Field Mob featuring Ludacris. 'Georgia' contains sampling of Charles' 'Georgia on My Mind', however the song style is hip hop/rap. The song was initially released on Ludacris' compilation album, *Ludacris Presents: Disturbing Tha Peace* (2005) and later of Field Mob's *Light Poles and Pine Trees* (2006). 'Georgia on My Mind' was also performed in honour of Charles by Jamie Foxx, Alicia Keys and Quincy Jones<sup>142</sup> (a minor character featured in *Ray*, played by Larenz Tate) with his orchestra at the 2005 Grammy Awards. The performance and its significance in *Ray* demonstrate that 'Georgia on My Mind' is an important song that represents not just the music artist but his impact on culture and values in the southern states of America during the time. Not only has Charles' recording of 'Georgia on My Mind' affected the community, it has also shaped and impacted subsequent music artists careers.

### **Blindness: A focus on *Ray*'s Soundscapes**

Ray Charles' blindness is one of the main issues represented in *Ray*. In his autobiography, *Brother Ray*, Charles discusses how his mother Aretha Robinson taught him to do things on his own – to wash and cook and take care of himself without being dependent on others. The community that he and his mother resided in had a different perspective on the matter and disagreed with Aretha Robinson's parenting to which she would respond; "He's blind... but he ain't stupid. He's lost his sight, but he ain't lost his mind" (Charles and Ritz, 1978: 17). This line of dialogue that Charles recounts in his autobiography is spoken throughout *Ray* by both Aretha Robinson (Sharon Warren) and Ray Charles (Jamie Foxx). *Ray* shows that blindness does not imply any lack of intelligence or independence. It is a philosophy that Charles held during his life and music career:

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<sup>141</sup> The US Billboard Hot 100 is the United States music industry standard singles popularity chart issued weekly by *Billboard* magazine.

<sup>142</sup> Quincy Jones is a music conductor, record and television producer, musical arranger and film composer. He is noted for producing Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1982) album which sold over 110 million copies worldwide. Jones also worked with Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and Peggy Lee. He was a close friend of Ray Charles, initially meeting when the two were still teenagers.

*It wasn't that I wanted to fool myself. Hell, I knew I was blind as a bat. But I didn't want to go limping around like I was half-dead. I didn't want to have to depend upon anyone or anything other than myself* (Charles and Ritz, 1978: 41).

Many academics, such as Martin F. Norden (1994) and Charles A. Riley (2005), argue that various media tend to represent disability (including blindness) in a negative light. However, *Ray* reinforces Charles' abilities which overshadow his inability to see. Furthermore, the musical biopic shifts the focus to Charles' heightened sense of touch and hearing.

*Ray* constantly shifts in narrative from Charles' youth to the 'present time'. In doing so, *Ray* highlights the audio-visual differences between the time in which Charles could see and the time that he remained completely blind. Apart from music, sound plays a significant role in the musical biopic. Sounds from Charles' youth are heard repeatedly throughout *Ray* including the clinking of glass bottles, white linen blowing in the wind and the sound of water. Gianluca Sergi notes:

*Contemporary filmmakers have shown an increasing awareness of the 'physical', three-dimensional qualities of sound, and audiences are encouraged not just to listen to sounds but to 'feel' them – filmgoers experience sound more sensually than ever before* (1998: 162).

The natural sounds in *Ray* reinforce Charles' dependence on hearing, especially later in his life. Sound (and the physical sense of touch) is a tool that assists Charles to remember his past in *Ray* to remember his youth, when before and after his sight began to deteriorate. The sonic and tactile scenes also guide the film audience to understand Charles' own perspective and experience how Charles' senses shifted throughout his life. Both the clinking glass bottles [00:01:28, 00:17:42, 00:27:54, 00:33:33, 01:06:40] and the white linen blowing in the wind [00:01:36, 00:17:42, 00:28:07] represent the soundscape of Charles' youth. Defined by Rick Altman, a soundscape is "the characteristic types of sound commonly heard in a given period or location" (1992: 252). In the case of *Ray*, the glass bottle and white linen sounds provide an auditory link to the period of the early 1930s as well as the location of Jellyroll, west of

Greenville, Florida. The clinking of the glass bottles also assists in the transition from 'present time' back to Charles' youth where he spent his final days playing with brother, George.

The water motif in *Ray* represents the event in Charles' life where he witnessed his brother George drown in a washtub. The presence of water in the film suggests that Charles remains haunted by his brother's death. Leading up to the representation of the incident in *Ray*, Charles has episodes in his 'present' life that cause him to reflect on the tragedy. For example, in one scene Charles is packing his suitcase in his bedroom. He places his hands in the opened suitcase and feels that it has filled with water [00:12:00]. He further searches to find a child's hand resembling his young brother, George. A similar event occurs in the 'present time' where Charles notices that he is standing in a puddle of water backstage at a nightclub [00:26:20]. The floor is filled with water and Charles finds a child's feet, again, resembling George. These two scenes build up to the representation of Charles, as a child, watching his brother trip and fall into a washtub and eventually drown [00:28:44]. The water motif is an audio-visual element of the film dependent on sound as much as the dynamic image:

*Every cinema-goer will know of sound films in which one single sound motif remains constant during a longer scene of action: it may be a particular sound, a particular tone, a particular word... short clear-cut forms that stamp a rhythm on the foreground of the plot like metronome beats* (Arnheim, 1997: 47).

The rhythm of the water is sporadic and rapid in order to reflect George's struggle in the washtub while also exemplifying the trauma Charles continues to experience throughout his life.

In progressively becoming blind, Charles grows more dependent on his sense of hearing. In a scene during his youth, Charles' eyes are blotchy and blurred causing him to trip over and fall on the floor inside his home. His mother notices, however remains silent, forcing Charles to stand up on his own. Charles eventually stops crying for help and slowly gets up and wipes his eyes. He notices many sounds from inside and outside his home including a cow, kettle (water boiling and steam), fireplace (wood burning and crackling), birds chirping, grass

rustling in the wind, a horse-drawn cart and a cricket that he picks up from the floor. Charles then verbalises that he can also hear his mother who was standing and watching her son the entire time. The soundscape [01:06:40 – 01:09:10] in this scene is referred to as a ‘hifi soundscape’:

*This is where all sounds can be heard distinctly. It is like being in a forest where you hear a branch snap somewhere nearby and a rustle of leaves slightly further away. Sounds are not competing. The hifi soundscape is typical of ambient music, or of some kinds of folk music that wish to increase sensual effect. In this kind of soundscape there is no overwhelming background hum. Rather there is a space and calmness that can connote pre-industrial settings (Machin, 2010: 217).*

The ‘hifi soundscape’ in this scene assists in establishing geographical location and character. Animal/insect sounds and natural sounds such as the fireplace and rustling grass all emphasise the rural location of Charles’ upbringing. The scene displays Charles’ development and independence while also underpinning the importance of sound in his life. Charles’ dependence on sound is reflected throughout *Ray* as the sound/music in the musical biopic has primary focus, especially in his later life. An example of this occurs during Charles’ first date with Della Bea Howard (Robinson). In the scene Charles asks Howard if she had sung tenor in ‘Jesus is My Shepherd’. Surprised, Howard asks how Charles had known it was her voice. Charles replies; “I hear like you see... like that hummingbird outside the window for instance”. Howard sees the hummingbird outside the window of the cafe but cannot hear it. She pauses and closes her eyes as the film camera engages in a close-up shot of the hummingbird. A faint humming sound is audible to both the film audience and Howard [00:45:31]. The scene shows that Charles’ hearing is just as significant for his character as it is for the film audience. Sonic elements are paramount in the musical biopic. Visual aesthetics assist in highlighting the music of the artist and how it fits into the general life narrative. The importance of hearing, in the case of Ray Charles, is not only supported through the sonic elements of *Ray* but also in the film’s visual representation of his life.



## ***Visual Aesthetics***

As well as heightening auditory perception, *Ray*'s filmmakers adopted editing techniques and specialised photography to reinforce the changes in Charles' vision throughout his life. In terms of editing techniques Hackford noted:

*What we did do was use our transitions in interesting ways. I'd say we used fade in/fade outs more than in most films today. There are several instances where we fade in only after the scene has begun, with voices in darkness, which subliminally gives the feeling of blindness* (2004: 26).

The visual aesthetics assist the film audience to understand Charles' inability to see on an empathetic level. By having the film audience experience it themselves through viewing the film. As well as fade in/out techniques, *Ray*'s use of colour is significant in representing Charles' change in eyesight. Hackford discusses his and Paul Edelman's (director of photography) creative direction and the use of colour in the film:

*'Usually filmmakers will photograph their linear, "real time" sequences in natural colors and then de-saturate or mute their flashbacks', supplies Hackford. 'We reversed that equation, deciding to use a de-saturated bleach bypass for the Linear Story and go with a natural color look for the Flashbacks. Actually, even our "natural colors" were ultra-saturated... almost hyper-real. Remember, Ray was born sighted, so I wanted to communicate how vibrant the colors must have seemed to him on his first Spring day'* (2004: 24).

Through the use of colour, the filmmakers reflect Charles' progressive blindness. In doing so, the film audience does not directly see what Charles sees, however, they are able to gain a minor level of understanding in how his blindness affected his day-to-day life. The contemporary musical biopic often empathises with the protagonist to draw a feeling/emotion from the film audience. These films guide the audience to interpret the music artist in a

specific way, from a distinct perspective. In turn, the film has the effect of functioning as a homage or tribute to the music artist's success even though they encounter personal misfortune in their life.

## **Conclusion: Identity Re-Constructions of Johnny Cash and Ray Charles**

*Walk the Line* and *Ray* are contemporary Hollywood musical biopics that represent the various identities of the respective musicians. Both films map out the previously constructed personae of the music artist and proceed to implement a certain perspective on the protagonist by debunking other represented myths. The filmmakers of each Hollywood film suggest a particular interpretation of the life narrative and reflect their views through various filmic techniques. Focus is attributed to biographical events and music that the filmmakers deem of highest importance.

Narrative construction, musical integration, sound and visual montage are all elements employed by the filmmakers in order to highlight the unique representation of the music artist. As *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are mainstream Hollywood musical biopics, they adopt the recognised genre narrative formula. With the use of musical integration, these biopics invent direct connections between music and biography. The integration of songs into the films' narrative supports the negative/positive views of the filmmakers. The myth of spontaneity in both films draws attention to the musical talents of Cash and Charles, implying that their music is their strongest personal asset. The value of musical composition is held by both filmmakers and fans (film audience).

Both films suggest that the death of the protagonist's brother during their youth impacted on the rest of their life (drug addiction, relationships) and additionally, their music career. Hence with the use of flashbacks and visions, the films create original insights into the biographies through style and form. The audio-visual representations of the biographies suggest new ways of interpreting or remembering Cash and Charles. However, as the filmic representations are based on their own autobiographies and the assistance of Cash and Charles' son's, the musical biopics merely offer a re-packaged representation of the music artist. *Walk the Line* and *Ray*

are key examples that demonstrate that the contemporary musical biopic creates biased perspectives of the music artist.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *I'M NOT THERE (2007):*

#### DISJOINTED REPRESENTATIONS OF BOB DYLAN

*Sometimes you say things in songs even if there's a small chance of them being true. And sometimes you say things that have nothing to do with the truth of what you want to say and sometimes you say things that everyone knows to be true. Then again, at the same time, you're thinking that the only truth on earth is that there is no truth on it* (Dylan, 2004: 220).

*I'm Not There* (2007), the musical biopic directed by Todd Haynes, is a film inspired by the life and music of Bob Dylan. Employing the use of disjointed narratives, the film also reflects on 1960s counterculture including the poetry, theatre styles, visual art and films of the decade. The film utilises the poetry of Dylan's role model Arthur Rimbaud, friend Allen Ginsburg and Dylan himself as well as exploring the theatrical styling of Bertolt Brecht and the pop art of Andy Warhol. The artistry of these individuals combine to create an audio-visual aesthetic that contextualises the film and also defines Dylan's personae. Through archival footage and images the film visually represents key events during the period including the Vietnam War and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. As a result of Haynes' background research the film applies techniques of the films of Gus Van Sant, Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini and Richard Lester. The film's content is inspired by previous documentaries of Dylan such as Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* (2005), D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967) and Dylan's self-directed *Eat The Document* (1972). *I'm Not There* also draws on Dylan's media profile by re-enacting press conferences, public speeches, television appearances on *The Steve Allen Show* and live performances. The most significant element of Haynes' film is that six different actors portray the various personae of Dylan. The function of employing several characters/personae in the one film is to highlight Dylan's refusal to be reducible to a single identity.

The film's characters include Cate Blanchett as Jude Quinn, Ben Whishaw as Arthur Rimbaud, Christian Bale as Jack Rollins, Richard Gere as Billy the Kid, Marcus Carl Franklin as Woody Guthrie and Heath Ledger as Robbie Clark, none of whom are ever referred to as 'Bob Dylan'. Jude Quinn has a striking physical resemblance to Dylan in the 1960s (Figure 10) and provides a re-imagining of specific media conferences and events to which Dylan was involved. Arthur Rimbaud is based on the poet of the same name and upon being interrogated throughout the film, replies with direct quotes that originate from Dylan himself. Jack Rollins symbolises Dylan's musical persona in various albums released during the 1960s such as *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) and also marks his turn to Christianity in the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Billy the Kid is inspired by Dylan's appearance in the film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) and also ties in with the perception of Dylan as an outlaw, accompanied by his withdrawal from the public eye. Woody Guthrie is based on the folk singer of the same name that Dylan admired and emulated during the early part of his career where, according to the characters in *I'm Not There*, Guthrie (the character) lived in a "time before his own". Finally, Robbie Clarke is an actor cast to play Jack Rollins in a biopic within *I'm Not There* and symbolises Dylan's struggle with his personal relationships.



Figure 10: Bob Dylan (right) compared to Cate Blanchett's (left) portrayal in *I'm Not There*

The following chapter will discuss how past documentaries, filmmakers, media representations and Dylan's own artistry contributed to the creation of *I'm Not There*. Initially commencing with discussions on the films/professional background of director Todd Haynes and the music of Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There*, this chapter will be structured in accordance with the six characters presented in the film. This chapter will demonstrate how a musical biopic can draw on many different perspectives and representations of a musician in order to emphasise the mythologies constructed around a star identity.

*Stars serve as a cultural form on which we can project our beliefs about privacy and individuality... Whatever we think, know or believe about Dylan, we think, know or believe from what we see in front of us, not from anything backstage... this ideology is developed most fully in an institution – the media – [and] it is actually the condition of its existence* (Marshall, 2007: 41).

Haynes reinforces the idea that fans/audience can only understand Dylan through the media. The self-reflexivity present in the representation of Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There* will be interrogated as it reinforces Haynes' notion that 'Bob Dylan' is a fabricated identity: the musical individual is a mythical icon, preserved in the contemporary feature film.

## **TODD HAYNES**

Through films such as *Poison* (1991) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), Todd Haynes has developed his own directorial style and filmic techniques. Interweaving documentary-style presentation and constantly referencing other texts including film (such as the cinematic techniques of other directors) and written works, Haynes has an avant-garde, unconventional style of filmmaking. Justin Wyatt suggested that Haynes' direction is transgressive as he experiments with structure, narrative and character in his films (1993: 3). For example, Haynes' first short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) is shot documentary-style using Barbie dolls instead of real actors. *Superstar* is:

*a film biography cowritten with Cynthia Schneider of the singer Karen Carpenter, who died of anorexia nervosa in 1983 at age thirty-two. This forty-three-minute, 16mm film using dolls to enact the life of the 1970s singing star was not Haynes's first work, but it was the one that authorized him as a promising director of alternative cinema* (Desjardins, 2004: 24).

Todd Haynes' first film (produced while still in high school) is *The Suicide* (1978). He then went on to study at Brown University (majoring in semiotics) where he first directed *Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud* (1985). *Far From Heaven* (2001), the last film that Haynes directed before *I'm Not There*, concerns issues such as race, sexuality and class in the 1950s and draws its audio-visual style from filmmakers Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

## **Dylan's Music and Haynes' Visual Aesthetic**

Music is the most important part of Bob Dylan's persona and hence the most significant part of the film. There are 43 credited songs that appear in *I'm Not There*. Of the songs, 39 are written by Bob Dylan and of these, 22 are performed by Dylan.<sup>143</sup> The first song to appear on the soundtrack that introduces the context of the film is 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again' which is featured on Dylan's 1966 album *Blonde on Blonde*. The song commences after character Arthur Rimbaud states "a song is something that walks by itself", suggesting that the song seeks no further explanation. The song is linked to images of New York in the 1960s such as subway trains and their passengers while the opening credits flicker on the screen. Each actor's name that plays a Dylan persona is displayed consecutively, linking them together. The camera pans along the streets of New York and the people who walk along gaze into the camera as if it is a presence that is unwelcomed in their neighbourhood. These scenes appear in black and white to further represent the earlier time

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<sup>143</sup> The four songs in *I'm Not There* that are not written or performed by Bob Dylan are: 'If I Had A Hammer (The Hammer Song)', performed by Trini Lopez and written by Lee Hays And Pete Seeger; 'Jude's Waltz', performed by Calexico and written by Joey Burns; 'Il Casanova Di Federico Fellini', written by Nino Rota with orchestra conducted by Carlo Savina and; '(I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone, performed by The Monkees and written by Bobby Hart and Tommy Boyce.

frame. Additionally, the two Dylan documentaries, *Don't Look Back* and *No Direction Home*, were produced in black and white and feature archival footage.

*I'm Not There* has both black/white and colour sequences, depending on which Dylan characters are on screen. Wendy Everett notes that "Colour, if foregrounded and used self-consciously, has the power to disrupt the narrative" (2007: 106). According to Everett's argument, the use of colour distracts the viewer from the progressing storyline. Therefore in *I'm Not There*, the film audience is emotionally distanced from the characters and relationships, objectively engaging with the mise-en-scène. In varying the use of colour throughout the film, the personae appear to be more mythical and disjointed. In the 'Stuck Inside of Mobile' musical sequence in *I'm Not There* the song lyrics change to a subsequent verse that narrates:

*Now the rainman gave me two cures*

*Then he said, 'Jump right in'*

*The one was Texas medicine*

*The other was just railroad gin*

*And like a fool I mixed them*

*And it strangled up my mind*

*And now, people just get uglier*

*And I have no sense of time*

*Oh, Mama, can this really be the end*

*To be stuck inside of Mobile*

*With the Memphis blues again*

At this point the images change and are in complete contrast with the previous scenes. The colour and rural location opposes the black and white scenes of Greenwich Village (referred



to by the characters as “the village”) in New York. Bright golden hues saturate the screen as the location transforms into an open rural landscape. Haynes’ *All That Heaven Allows* “also uses the ability of color to function as an emphasis in itself: as spectacle, as excess and as potentially distractive of the primacy of narrative” (Haralovich, 2006: 152). As *All That Heaven Allows* employs the 1950s colour schemes within the melodrama film genre, *I’m Not There* is inspired by Gus Van Sant’s use of colour that he adopted in *My Own Private Idaho*. The 1991 film is visually reliant on textures and structures in nature, apparent through the use of colour. Colour appears vibrant in both urban and rural landscapes with glistening shades of brown, yellow, red and green, similar to the sequences that feature Woody Guthrie and Billy the Kid in *I’m Not There* (discussed below). In this new series of scenes the film audience sees Billy for the first time, waking up on a train and Woody, who is running through the fields to jump onto a train. ‘Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again’ not only introduces the film and some of the characters but also allows opposing locations to be linked through Dylan’s song. The musical sequence suggests that even though the characters featured in *I’m Not There* are not connected in narrative (they do not interact with each other), they are connected through the music of Dylan. Therefore all characters are linked as they represent the diverse aspects of the music artist’s persona.

## **THE SIX DYLAN PERSONAE IN *I’M NOT THERE***

The six characters in *I’m Not There* represent Dylan’s passions, interests and personality as well as, most importantly, his music. As well as Ben Whishaw and Marcus Carl Franklin, the more popular Hollywood actor/star personalities in the film (who are specifically featured on the DVD cover: see Figure 11) are Christian Bale, Richard Gere, Heath Ledger and Cate Blanchett. Not only do these actors represent parts of Dylan’s life in the film, they also have a star quality of their own that creates dual personalities within the film. Thus the film audience will view not only an actor playing Dylan but a *star* actor playing Dylan, denoting preconceived ideas attached to the actor even before the film has commenced. In a post-structuralist frame, the star actor’s status in a film can be phrased as iterability or repeatability: “For example, when we see an actor in a film, our response is inevitably conditioned by his or her appearances in other films” (Brunette, 2000: 92). However, in the case of *I’m Not There* and other musical biopics, the star actor portrays an already established musical figure, combining both personas into one text. Therefore, as John Langer suggests:

*The star's presence in a film is one of the major ways by which films are 'read' by audiences... The star absorbs the identity of the film character, taking it over as his/her own, so that finally it vanishes completely* (2006: 189-90).

According to Langer's argument, 'Bob Dylan' is not present in the characters of the film however appears (in archival footage) at the conclusion of *I'm Not There* to reaffirm that the film was inspired by his life. In the film, Cate Blanchett and Bob Dylan function as one personality. Their star personae combine to create what will be deemed here as a 'hyperreal star persona'. It is not straightforwardly discernable by the film viewer when either Blanchett or Dylan is wholly present in the character of Jude. Overall, George F. Custen maintains that:

*Movie biographies presented a double level of the articulation of fame. At the first level, one was absorbed by the narrative constructed about selected episodes in the life of the subject. At the second level, one encountered the famous figure in other filmic texts as well as through repeated exposure to publicity materials* (1992: 34).

Custen suggests that the music artist is interpreted at two levels through the biopic: text and context. The text is the film itself (*I'm Not There*) and context is the surrounding media representations of Bob Dylan (including the star actors mentioned above). The media representations can include anything from feature films, documentaries, television appearances, written auto/biographies and magazine/newspaper interviews and articles. These media materials that are released or published before *I'm Not There* affect how Dylan and the star actors are interpreted in Haynes' film. Stephen Scobie states that Dylan is "a text – made up of all the formal biographies, newspaper stories, internet statistics and just plain gossip that has entered into public circulation" (2003: 85). Some of these media types that Scobie lists are taken into account by the film audience or fan of the celebrity figure and assist in shaping their understanding of that individual through the musical biopic.



Figure 11: *I'm Not There* DVD cover

To personify the diversity in Dylan's music, *I'm Not There* presents six different characters to give the sonic elements (dialogue, sound effects and music) a visual counterpart. To introduce the characters in *I'm Not There* Arthur Rimbaud is announced as the 'poet', Jack Rollins as the 'prophet', Billy the Kid as the 'outlaw', Woody Guthrie as the 'fake', Robbie Clarke as the 'star of electricity' and Jude Quinn<sup>144</sup> as the most iconic and visually identifiable Dylan in the 1960s. The minor characters in *I'm Not There* also play an important role in representing the differing interests and relationships Dylan encountered during the 1960s. The characters are symbolic, composite characters according to character names. The minor characters based on actual people include The Beatles<sup>145</sup> and Allen Ginsberg (David Cross), while the composite characters include Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and Coco (Michelle Williams) who represent Dylan's intimate relationships. Keenan Jones (Bruce Greenwood) is a journalist who reflects the power of the media over Dylan. In Jack Rollins' 'documentary'

<sup>144</sup> It is significant that in the opening scenes of *I'm Not There*, Jude Quinn is announced as being dead, whereas at the time that this film was made and subsequently released, Bob Dylan was alive (and still is at time of writing). Through the narrative decision, Haynes reinforces that the film is a representation of Dylan's lives through one era. The death of Jude Quinn further implies that the musical biopic is fabricated, subjective account of a life history.

<sup>145</sup> In *I'm Not There*, John Lennon is played by Johann St-Louis, Paul McCartney is played by Mickael Sébastien Vitanza, George Harrison is played by Pierre-Luc Lebeau and Ringo Starr is played by Jean-Nicolas Déry.

Carla Hendricks' (Kim Gordon) name is inspired by the rock/folk fusion band, The Carla Hendriks Band and Morris Bernstein (Peter Friedman) plays Rollins' producer. Alice Fabian (Julianne Moore), who appears in interviews regarding Jack Rollins, represents Joan Baez. Dylan discusses Baez in *Chronicles*: "The 'Queen of the Folksingers', that would have to be Joan Baez. Joan was born the same year as me and our futures would be linked" (Dylan, 2004: 254). In *I'm Not There* Fabian appears as a folk singer and activist, much like Baez, who discovered Rollins (Dylan's) talent to produce 'finger-pointing' songs in a folk music genre. Fabian assisted in launching Rollins' career in the early 1960s.

## **Marcus Carl Franklin as Woody Guthrie**

First to appear in the film, Woody Guthrie is based on the actual folk singer of the same name. Guthrie (1912 – 1967) was a significant figure of the folk movement in North America and mentored/inspired future musicians such as Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Bob Dylan. One of his well-known songs is 'This Land is Your Land': a gospel hymn melody with lyrics that describe the act of sharing and being a part of the USA. The song was recorded in 1944 and covered by folk artists in the 1960s such as The Kingston Trio, The New Christy Minstrels and Bob Dylan. Much like Dylan, Guthrie wrote a considerable amount of unpublished poetry and prose, eventually publishing the (somewhat fictionalised) autobiography *Bound for Glory* (1943). A biopic about Guthrie's life was released in 1976 of the same name. Dylan visited Guthrie (who died of Huntington's chorea) at a New Jersey hospital in the early 1960s and befriended him.

*Written after Dylan's first meeting with Guthrie, 'Song to Woody' announces Dylan's intent to follow in his hero's footsteps... Dylan imagines that he has embarked on the same road that Guthrie travelled, yet he ignores the political responsibility to which the open road leads... Dylan observes that few men can boast of Guthrie's accomplishments but provides no sense of the commitments he made or hardships he endured (Garman, 2000: 148).*

Therefore, although Dylan emulated Guthrie through singing his music and following his way of life, Dylan never took on Guthrie's persona. The hospital visits Dylan made are replicated in *I'm Not There* through Woody and an unnamed man in a hospital bed (Garth Gilker). The scenes reinforce Guthrie's profound effect on Dylan and his music career. Additionally, in

*I'm Not There*, Woody carries in his possession a guitar that, on its case, states 'this machine kills fascists'. The real Woody Guthrie had the same phrase written on his guitar further demonstrating that Guthrie's music heavily influenced Dylan's own music style as well as his values.

### ***Dylan's Autobiography: Chronicles***

Haynes' research for the film included drawing from Bob Dylan's own written work, *Chronicles: Volume One*. The book, written in autobiographical form, was first published in 2004 and is often described by reviewers as a collection of memoirs because Dylan does not completely recount his life story. The book offers Dylan's memories of his musical career in what may be referred to as a disjointed stream-of-consciousness. Haynes adapts certain passages from the book to scenes in *I'm Not There*, particularly through the character of Woody. In the book, a man named Billy asks Dylan how he arrived in New York. Dylan states that he caught a freight train:

*'How did you get here?' he asked me.*

*'I rode a freight train.'*

*'You mean a passenger train?'*

*'No, a freight train.'*

*'You mean, like a boxcar?'*

*'Yeah, like a boxcar. Like a freight train.'*

*'Okay, a freight train'* (Dylan, 2004: 8).

Later, Dylan writes, "I hadn't come in on a freight train at all. What I did was come across the country from the Midwest in a four-door sedan, '57 Impala" (2004: 8). The story that Dylan tells is one of the many fabrications he creates of his life and experiences throughout his career. Considering the book was written by Dylan and he tends to be quite secretive about his personal life and the meaning/inspiration behind his music, it is fitting that he carries the

ambiguity through to *Chronicles*. The obscurity that Dylan has built up is now an accepted part of who he is and becomes part of his identity. If in fact Dylan became blunt and open about his life and relationships in *Chronicles*, he would be significantly different to his public persona. Dylan maintains the mystery of his identity in order to control the public perception of him.

In *Chronicles*, Dylan discusses when Gorgeous George<sup>146</sup> came to his hometown and the effect he had on Dylan's self-esteem:

*I was playing on a makeshift platform in the lobby of the building with the usual wild activity of people milling about, and no one was paying much attention. Suddenly, the doors burst open and in came Gorgeous George himself... He had valets and was surrounded by women carrying roses, wore a majestic fur-lined gold cape and his long blonde curls were flowing. He brushed by the makeshift stage and glanced toward the sound of the music. He didn't break stride, but he looked at me eyes flashing with moonshine. He winked and seemed to mouth the phrase 'You're making it come alive'. Whether he really said it or not, it didn't matter. It's what I thought I heard him say that mattered, and I never forgot it. It was all the recognition and encouragement I would need for years to come. Sometimes that's all it takes, the kind of recognition that comes when you're doing the thing for the things sake and you're on to something- it's just that nobody recognises it yet. Gorgeous George. A mighty spirit (2004: 43-4).*

The passage in *Chronicles* is represented with a different approach in *I'm Not There*. Haynes stated, "I loved the little Gorgeous George part in *Chronicles* and I had to have them in the movie. I just thought that was a really nice touch".<sup>147</sup> In the film Woody has a flashback where he performs at a travelling carnival. After being thrown out of the tent, Gorgeous George lends a hand to help Woody back onto his feet [00:08:04]. Although described in differing circumstances both *Chronicles* and *I'm Not There* show how Gorgeous George

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<sup>146</sup> George Raymond Wagner (1915 – 1963) was an American professional wrestler whose stage or 'ring' name was Gorgeous George.

<sup>147</sup> [www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_13495.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_13495.html), accessed 10 September 2010.

impacted not only on Bob Dylan's music career but also his ability to understand himself. During the short sequence the song 'Moonshiner'<sup>148</sup> also plays in the background. The choice to play 'Moonshiner' during the sequence is to provide commentary on Woody's mysterious nature but also to heighten the reflective flashback. The song highlights the fact that Woody lives in the past and not in his own time. Woody announces that he is 11 years old to the two men he meets on the train. The lyrics in 'Moonshiner' state: "I've been a moonshiner, for 17 long years." The issue is brought up again at a dinner conversation when a woman suggests to Woody that he has to live and sing about his own time.

The character Woody Guthrie is played by a young African-American, Marcus Carl Franklin.<sup>149</sup> Even though he plays a persona of Dylan (who is a white male), race never becomes an issue within the film and is never raised as a concern for anyone who interacts with Woody. Haynes discussed the reasons behind his choice:

*We all know that Dylan wasn't a little black kid who called himself Woody but by using that as a recourse for describing the young Dylan, who really did enact this other person his life to such a degree that when none of it added up - when all his crazy tales of his past were obviously constructed - it was the sheer performance and conviction and exuberance that he manifested that made people not care so that they didn't ask him 'Aren't you from Minnesota? Aren't you a middle-class Jewish kid?' In this case, they aren't saying 'Aren't you black?' It just takes things that are real and takes them one step further into the unreal so that audiences can kind of play along with that process.*<sup>150</sup>

Casting Franklin for the role of Woody in *I'm Not There* can also be traced back to *Chronicles*. There is a section of the autobiography where Dylan mentions his admiration for popular African-American actor Denzel Washington who seemed to continuously choose roles based on individuals (actual and fabricated) including: Xavier Quinn in *The Mighty Quinn* (1989) and Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter in *The Hurricane* (1999), whom Dylan had

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<sup>148</sup> 'Moonshiner' appears on *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3* (1991).

<sup>149</sup> Marcus Carl Franklin was a relatively unknown actor, cast in several minor television roles before appearing as Woody Guthrie in *I'm Not There* at about 13 years old.

<sup>150</sup> <http://efilmcritic.com/feature.php?feature=2303>, accessed 10 September 2010.

previously written songs about.<sup>151</sup> Dylan considers the following: “I wondered if Denzel could play Woody Guthrie. In my dimension of reality, he certainly could have” (2004: 187). Although Haynes did not pick up on this passing enquiry and employed the young African-American actor for the role of Woody in *I’m Not There*, Haynes still allowed Dylan and his ‘dimension of reality’ to emerge on the cinema screen. As Haynes stated:

*The Woody story is really just about the early years of Dylan when he first came to New York and he was in the thrall of Woody Guthrie and his music, attitude, and style and look and all those things.*<sup>152</sup>

Hence, casting the African-American actor exhibits Dylan’s alternating guises.

## **Richard Gere as Billy the Kid**

Billy the Kid is linked to Guthrie through visual similarities in rural setting and brightly coloured landscapes. Additionally, the landscape shots that are displayed in *Eat The Document* while Dylan’s band is on tour are similar to those in *I’m Not There*. In *Eat The Document* the camera pans through the window frame onto freight trains and green fields, similar to the landscapes utilised in scenes in *I’m Not There* that feature Woody Guthrie and Billy the Kid. Both characters are linked through their constant wandering through these types of locations, both riding on a freight train to new, unknown destinations. The same visual aesthetic is also featured in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), directed by Gus Van Sant. Haynes and Van Sant are part of what film academics affirm as the new queer cinema. Gaining momentum in the 1990s, queer cinema is a significant mode of film criticism. Relationships between these two and other queer directors such as Gregg Araki and Rose Troche are chronicled in *The New Queer Cinema* (Rich, 2004), *Greg Araki and the Queer New Wave* (Yutani, 1994) and the *Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Popular Culture* (Prono, 2008).

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<sup>151</sup> Bob Dylan wrote and released ‘Quinn the Eskimo (The Mighty Quinn)’ in 1968 which features on *Self Portrait* (1970). Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy co-wrote ‘The Hurricane’ which was released on Dylan’s *Desire* (1976).

<sup>152</sup> <http://www.thecinemasource.com/celebrity/interviews/Todd-Haynes-Todd-Haynes-IS-there-to-talk-about-I-m-Not-There-interview-609-500.html>, accessed 10 September 2010.



The character Billy the Kid is inspired by a few aspects of Dylan. The first ties in with Dylan's motorcycle accident in 1966 where, soon afterwards, Dylan moved to the country. Haynes refers to Dylan in this respect as the "cultural outlaw" in the film. The second refers to Dylan's apparent interest in Western genre films which cinematically re-emerged in the late 1960s. Another way in which the audience can interpret the character of Billy is through Dylan's *Chronicles*. There is a passage in which Dylan describes his distaste for how his music and lyrics were interpreted by the public:

*Whatever the counterculture was, I'd seen enough of it. I was sick of the way my lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted into polemics and that I had been anointed as the Big Bubba of Rebellion, High Priest of Protest, the Czar of Dissent, the Duke of Disobedience, Leader of the Freeloaders, Kaiser of Apostasy, Archbishop of Anarchy, the Big Cheese. What the hell are we talking about? Horrible titles any way you want to look at it. All code words for Outlaw (2004: 120).*

Here, the character highlights how Dylan was wrongfully perceived by the public and misread by his fans. There is also a link between Billy the Kid and Dylan through Dylan's music and acting career. Dylan released the music album *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*, a soundtrack for the film of the same name (Peckinpah, 1973) where he played the role of Alias. In actual history Billy the Kid, born Henry McCarty (1859 – 1881), was an American frontier outlaw and gunman. According to legend he killed 21 men however; the New Mexico Tourism Department states that he was only responsible for four.<sup>153</sup> Billy the Kid became a symbolic figure of the American Old West after he was murdered by Pat Garrett. *I'm Not There* draws upon these intertextual and mythical references to underscore Dylan's outlaw persona that the media constructed for him.

### ***Eat The Document***

*Eat The Document* is Dylan's self-directed documentary of his own tour of the UK in 1966. The documentary has not been released either theatrically or commercially. Seemingly as a

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<sup>153</sup> [http://www.newmexico.org/billythekid/billypages/life\\_legend.php](http://www.newmexico.org/billythekid/billypages/life_legend.php), accessed 18 February 2011.

test for the true ‘Dylanologist’ there are particular segments of *Eat The Document* that have been re-created for *I’m Not There*.

*Dylanology, perhaps like religion and genre, has nothing to do with uncovered secrets, with insights revealed by a fresh look, even if that is their stated goal. They are repetitions of a narrative, our narrative – a reminder that there is some stability to be found in this world, even if it is relegated to a shared nostalgia.*<sup>154</sup>

Haynes re-creates and re-represents media material based on Bob Dylan throughout *I’m Not There*, not to ‘reveal’ anything but to draw attention to what is already publicly accessible. For example, there is a sequence in *Eat The Document* where Dylan witnesses a street march and a man in the crowd wears a sign reading ‘it is appointed unto men once to die’, a bible passage taken from Hebrews 9:27. A sign with the exact same statement appears in *I’m Not There*, in a sequence set in the town of Riddle where Billy follows a crowd to a funeral. On his way he passes the sign that appears in *Eat The Document*, nailed to a tree trunk, next to a hanged man. Nearby, a man publicly announces the current state of the township of Riddle. The scene reflects the street march in *Eat The Document* yet the statement does not only hold significance for film audiences that have previously seen the documentary. It also is quite important to Haynes himself as it is displayed through a slow close-up shot of the text in *I’m Not There*. Amongst many other references there is also a short series of scenes where Dylan draws a moustache on his face and walks around with it in his hotel room – Jude does the same in *I’m Not There*. Although appearing only briefly in Haynes’ film, these small events are important for the Dylan fan and reaffirms that the film is targeted at the fans that appreciate and understand the range of elements that make up Dylan’s life.

## **Christian Bale as Jack Rollins**

Jack Rollins in *I’m Not There* maintains the re-representations of Dylan, particularly from media texts such as previous documentaries about Dylan. Announced as the ‘prophet’ in the opening sequence of the film; Rollins represents two parts of Dylan’s life. The first concerns

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<sup>154</sup> <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/62/62dylan.php>, accessed 16 September 2010.

Dylan's shift towards the Christian faith and the second is initially introduced through a documentary-style format that follows a series of interviews with fans, friends and associated industry professionals. Haynes discussed his decision to present Rollins in documentary sequences:

*I thought if it was a documentary, it would put the Jack Rollins character in a kind of legendary status out of our direct access and framing him within a frame in the film and that we could recreate those kind of fake archival clips and stuff and that would give it an extra legendary brand to it.*<sup>155</sup>

Set in Greenwich Village, New York, a voice-over states that *The New York Times* hailed Rollins as a "troubadour of conscience". The documentary-style sequences display stills of concert posters, album covers and 'archival footage' of Rollins concerts, interviews and performances. One album cover in particular, *Time Will Come*, is an imitation of the cover of *The Times They Are a Changin'* (1964). Similarly, *Travelin' On* by Rollins is an imitation of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963). Comparing the two, the notable difference is that Rollins stands by himself whereas in Dylan's album cover he is embracing his girlfriend at the time. The variation highlights Haynes' choice to focus on Dylan's own personal development with Rollins and illustrate Dylan's personal relationships, exemplified through Robbie Clarke, a character who is also introduced in the documentary sequences. The Jack Rollins 'film-within-a-film' sequences reveal the structural complexity of *I'm Not There* in comparison to musical biopics like *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea*. The intricacy is also apparent in the Robbie Clarke scenes where he plays Jack Rollins in a film within the diegesis of *I'm Not There*.

### ***No Direction Home***

In *I'm Not There* Jack Rollins receives a civil rights award from the Civil Liberties Union and is presented the award at a function inspired by the event featured in Dylan documentary, *No Direction Home*. One of the interviewees, Alice Fabian, suggests that Rollins had drunk three

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<sup>155</sup> [www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_13495.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_13495.html), accessed 10 September 2010.

vats of wine before making his speech. The guests at the function react disapprovingly as Rollins discusses his empathy for Lee Oswald, who assassinated John F. Kennedy. Rollins then voices his opinion on the situation outside of the venue to the media journalists that await his comment. The dialogue from this sequence [00:40:27] is extracted specifically from Dylan's own speech that he gave in 1963 as he accepted the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee.<sup>156</sup> The event was featured in *No Direction Home* because of the controversy that it created. *I'm Not There*'s representation of the event highlights Dylan's struggle with his own identity at the time. Rollins (akin to Dylan) does not understand what the public expects from him. Bob Dylan, reflected through Rollins, speaks his mind regardless of how he imagines he will be interpreted by audiences and fans.

*No Direction Home* (2005) is a documentary film that highlights Dylan's control over the media and the elements of his life that are accessible to the public. Peter Doyle notes that the Dylan-to-camera interviews/material in the documentary were produced by Dylan and manager Jeff Rosen and then passed on to director, Martin Scorsese: "There was no direct interrogation of Dylan, friendly or otherwise" and furthermore, "everything else in the film positions itself around the artefact" (2007: 68). In a sense, Todd Haynes provides Dylan with the same level of ambiguity by not giving any of the Bob Dylan personae the character name of 'Bob Dylan' in *I'm Not There*. Alternate character names relay the notion that Dylan does not intend and (to a certain extent) refuses the audience/fan to understand and become aware of every part of his life. There are numerous scholars who analyse the diverse personae of Dylan that emerge from the history of his music, embodying various characters through the different stages of his life. Christophe Lebold, for example, suggests that Dylan uses his music to 'write' himself; constructing a series of numerous and competing personae (2007: 57). In Robert H. Bell's analysis, Dylan has a double identity whose "development indicates a seriously comic and self-ironic interrogation" (2000: 109). Screenwriter Larry Gross suggests that Dylan can be compared to Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962).<sup>157</sup> In noting Gross' comparison, Laura Marcus states that like Dylan, "Lawrence, without ever losing his uniqueness or, in contrast, ever truly revealing himself, becomes the emblematic figure of his age" (2007a: 50). The many different interpretations of Dylan and his music by scholars, filmmakers, media and fans is reason behind the utilisation of six different persona's in *I'm Not There*; reflecting the multitude of equally plausible perspectives on Bob Dylan.

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<sup>156</sup> <http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm>, accessed 18 February 2011.

<sup>157</sup> [http://moviecitynews.com/archived/festivals/toronto\\_2005/gross\\_dylan.html](http://moviecitynews.com/archived/festivals/toronto_2005/gross_dylan.html), accessed 12 January 2011.

## ***Don't Look Back***

Another documentary that is a stimulus for certain scenes and characters in *I'm Not There* (particularly with Jack Rollins) is *Don't Look Back*, which follows Bob Dylan's tour of the UK in 1965. One set of scenes featured in *Don't Look Back* shows Dylan in an open field amongst a crowd of predominantly African-American men singing 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll'.<sup>158</sup> A topical song recorded in 1963, 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll' narrates the murder of an African-American woman, Hattie Carroll and comments on racism and segregation in the 1960s. Keith Negus describes the song as follows:

*The ballad dramatizes a newspaper report about a rich, white real estate magnate who attacked a black kitchen maid with such a ferocity that she died from her injuries. Yet he only received a sentence of manslaughter and served just three months in prison. Initially served as a consciousness-raising call for action, forty years later it had become a sombre lament reminding audiences of the brutality and injustices that were such a prominent feature of the very recent past (2008: 34).*

The same moment in *Don't Look Back* is represented through Jack Rollins in *I'm Not There* [00:14:40]. The event is significant not only because it originally appeared in *Don't Look Back* but also because it is a part of the 'documentary' of Jack Rollins within *I'm Not There*. The footage is in black and white to contextualise the event in the past and make the scene appear more archival. Interviews with fans on the street within the documentary segments are in colour, suggesting that these interviews took place after Jack's 'Hattie Carroll' performance. The film proposes, through the documentary-style presentation, that form/style does not imply that the content is any more 'accurate' than in a fictional feature film. *I'm Not There* self-reflexively demonstrates that any (filmic) representation of Bob Dylan (or any individual onscreen) is just another representation of Dylan and comparatively are no more conclusive than each other. Haynes insightfully suggested that "What's more interesting is the way we attribute such markers of utter authenticity onto things that are so unbelievably

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<sup>158</sup> 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll' is featured on Dylan's, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964).

constructed.”<sup>159</sup> Most biopics are focused on the common structures of the subgenre without taking into consideration that each individual (musical or otherwise) is unique. The same audio-visual representation cannot apply to every subject. Haynes discussed the structure of the biopic and noted:

*It seems to be a construct of the narrative form that has to find beats in a person's life to dramatize ... it's a formula, almost more nakedly so than other film genres because whatever the life is has to fit in this one package.*<sup>160</sup>

Haynes indicated that the structure of the biopic is restrictive. Therefore creating *I'm Not There* is an opportunity to push the boundaries that the subgenre has maintained since the Hollywood studio era and open up the possibility of a new wave of contemporary musical biopics.

### ***Christianity***

Another important song performed by Jack Rollins in *I'm Not There* is 'Pressing On' which marks Dylan's involvement with Christianity. According to Michael J. Gilmour, Dylan converted to Christianity in 1978 (2004: 2). Since then several books have been written about Dylan and his expression of faith through music such as *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (Cartwright, 1992) and *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (Ricks, 2003). Although interpretation of Dylan's song lyrics tend to be subjective and not fully explained by Dylan himself, the lyrics to 'Pressing On' clearly reference Christianity and state, "Well I'm pressing on, to the higher calling of my Lord". The song appears in *I'm Not There* in the documentary-style sequences with Jack Rollins. Haynes discussed choosing this particular song to signify Dylan's change:

*I picked it purely for the narrative needs of the film at that point... It started quietly and it kept building and building into this very rousing number. It helped move the*

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<sup>159</sup> <https://www.greencine.com/central/toddhaynes?page=0%2C0>, accessed 10 September 2010.

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.greencine.com/central/toddhaynes?page=0%2C0>, accessed 10 September 2010.

*story forward because it started quietly and surreptitiously at the end of Christian Bale's speech and it keeps building and building.*<sup>161</sup>

Leading up to 'Pressing On', another religiously influenced song, 'Trouble in Mind',<sup>162</sup> plays which references God and Satan ("Lord take away this trouble in mind. Here comes Satan, prince of the power of the air"). The song begins to play in the background in a scene where Jude and Allen Ginsburg stand in front of a large white crucifix and seem to heckle the icon, shouting "Why don't you do your early stuff?" and "How does it feel?" These are questions that Jude has been barraged with numerous times during interviews and press conferences and appears to find release through relaying them to the crucifix. As 'Trouble in Mind' continues to play, Jack Rollins looks up on a dark and rainy night and sees three angels appear brightly in the sky. Soon after, a journalist states that in the spring of 1974, Rollins enrolled in Bible study courses at the California Gateway Brotherhood Church. Six months afterwards, Rollins, according to the journalist, converted to Christianity. Rollins appears preaching to a small crowd in attendance at the Church and sings 'Pressing On'. The lack of enthusiasm from the churchgoers (all the adults sit contemplatively and children play behind them, paying no attention to the performance) emphasises that Dylan's change to gospel music was not as popular according to some fans.

## **Heath Ledger as Robbie Clarke**

Heath Ledger (1979 – 2008) was an established Australian-born actor who appeared in Hollywood films such as *The Patriot* (2000), *Monster's Ball* (2001) and *The Brothers Grimm* (2005). For his role in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) Ledger received numerous awards including the Central Ohio, Las Vegas, New York, Phoenix and San Francisco Film Critics Award for Best Actor. In *I'm Not There* Ledger portrays Robbie Clarke, a "Hollywood rebel" who stars in the film *Grain of Sand*,<sup>163</sup> a biopic about Jack Rollins. While away from his family, Robbie has adulterous relationships with women. Playing Robbie's wife, Charlotte Gainsbourg, an actress and singer/songwriter, was born in London in 1971 and grew up in

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<sup>161</sup> <http://efilmcritic.com/feature.php?feature=2303>, accessed 10 September 2010.

<sup>162</sup> 'Trouble in Mind' is an unreleased song written by Dylan in 1979 published by Special Rider Music (SESAC). The song is available on an unreleased compilation *Hard to Find Volume 3* (1996).

<sup>163</sup> *Grain of Sand* is a reference to Dylan's song 'Every Grain of Sand', first released on album *Shot of Love* (1981).

Paris, France. Since the age of 15, Gainsbourg had acting roles in French, Italian and English-speaking films as well as a singing career. Leading up to her role in *I'm Not There*, Gainsbourg starred in films such as *The Science of Sleep* (original French title: *La science des rêves* 2006), *Golden Door* (original Italian title: *Nuovomondo*, 2006) and *I Do* (original French title: *Prête-moi ta main*, 2006). Gainsbourg plays Claire Montfort Clarke, Robbie Clarke's wife of nine years in *I'm Not There*. Claire is a French painter turned stay-at-home mother who takes care of their two young daughters as Robbie is away on location for his film acting work. According to Haynes, Robbie is inspired by "photographs of Dylan taken in the mid-'60s when he was hanging out in New York locations with dark-rimmed eyeglasses and shooting pool or reading the newspapers in the classic Godardian striped crew-necked shirt."<sup>164</sup> Robbie and Claire's tumultuous marriage in *I'm Not There* is inspired by Dylan's actual relationships with girlfriend Suze Rotolo, first wife Sara Dylan and second wife Carolyn Dennis.

### ***'Visions of Johanna'***

Obviously a significant event of the 1960s was the Vietnam War. The first time the film audience views any depiction of the Vietnam War in *I'm Not There* is on the television screen in Claire's living room [00:23:29]. Claire appears busy cleaning up the house but pauses to watch the screen which features a news reporter who suggests that an agreement has been reached and the war is over. The news report is faded out by Robbie's voice-over which states that, as well as the war, the relationship between the couple is over. Dylan's song 'Visions of Johanna' (from *Blonde on Blonde*) plays non-diegetically. The lyrics, "Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're tryin' to be so quiet? We sit here stranded, though we're all doin' our best to deny it", suggest images of a woman that was physically present but now exists as a memory for Dylan. Wilfrid Mellers' insights affirm that "the words are usually considered to be psychedelically obscure, though they are intelligible enough if one grants that Dylan is using a cinematic rather than a chronologically linear technique" (1984: 145). Its application to the film context is why 'Visions of Johanna' is effective in assisting character development and narrative progression in the relationship between Robbie and Claire. The song links to the sequence through creating a nostalgic view of not only the relationship that Robbie and Claire once had but also of the society that they live in, which is constantly changing.

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<sup>164</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/movies/moviesspecial/04lyal.html>, accessed 17 September 2010.



The sequences that feature Robbie and Claire, especially the one previously mentioned, feature a voice-over (by Robbie/ Heath Ledger) that contextualises their relationship. The voice-over refers to their relationship status as the socio-political events occur. There are segments that contain archival footage of socio-political events that break up and connect scenes such as protests, images of Martin Luther King Jr. and his speeches. One segment in particular features Billy the Kid who rides on his horse until he reaches a valley that he looks over. Images of the valley are dispersed with images of war and the music emanating from the village becomes louder. The war imagery merges on the television screen that Claire watches from underneath her bed sheets. Loud and aggressive music plays to heighten the chaotic images and Robbie is seen walking into the house with his luggage in silence. The scene is then transported back to Billy who is still looking out into the distance, eventually being distracted by his dog. The segment which connects the lives of Billy, Robbie and Claire, suggests that the Vietnam War, though appearing to physically be a fair distance away, had a significant effect on people in their own environment. The scenes reaffirm how individuals can be affected by events they are not directly a part of, also demonstrating that war and conflict between countries can inform and shape the creative arts, displayed through Claire's paintings and the music of Bob Dylan.

### ***The Cinema of Jean-Luc Godard***

Jean-Luc Godard released approximately 30 films during the 1960s including *Alphaville* (1965), *Weekend* (1967) and *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968).<sup>165</sup> Beginning their careers as critics for the magazine, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Godard, along with François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer, became a part of the 'New Wave' in French cinema from the late 1950s and the 1960s. Andre Bazin co-founded *Cahiers* in 1951 and became a major influence on French cinema during the period (Hillier, 1985). Godard in particular is known for his anti-narrative films that Todd Haynes applies to *I'm Not There*. According to Royal S. Brown "one of the prime ways Godard has broken most strongly with traditional filmmaking is through his avoidance of just about anything resembling a conventional storyline, narrative or plot" (1972: 7). Godard chose to create films that broke

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<sup>165</sup> The 30 films include documentaries, short films and film segments directed by Jean-Luc Godard from 1960 to 1969.

with convention in order to provide the opportunity for the film viewer to distance themselves from becoming immersed in the film. In other words, the films prevent the audience establishing an emotional engagement with characters/relationships so that they can then identify the underlying meanings associated with politics, gender and other socio-political issues of the era. The notion of *I'm Not There* as a musical biopic is the result of Haynes' cinephilia, drawing upon the work of Godard and other texts. The other musical biopics discussed in this thesis do have elements of self-referentiality and intertextuality, however, *I'm Not There* is set apart as it encompasses such a diverse variety of texts that remain unlinked through narrative thread. *I'm Not There* purposefully represents a discontinuous stream of references.

Richard Roud suggested over three decades ago that "the history of the cinema is no longer encompassed by the memory of the young filmmaker. He now has got to do the research" (1972: 9). Roud's statement still applies today and can be applied directly to Todd Haynes' direction for *I'm Not There*. In an interview with Edward Douglas, Haynes has discussed the amount of research he undertook in 2000:

*That was when I was listening to all this stuff that I had and I already knew and then it just kept kind of opening up. Little crevices would open, or doors would open, and I could enter into these much deeper avenues of material that I had never encountered before.*<sup>166</sup>

In his audio commentary of the film, Haynes openly acknowledges the work of Godard and the amount of influence his work had on the film, encapsulating the 1960s aesthetic. In *I'm Not There* Haynes mainly takes Godard's cinematic techniques to construct the relationship between Robbie and Claire. The techniques are particularly noteworthy in the meeting sequence at the café that indirectly links to the café sequences in Godard's *Masculin Féminin* (1966). Haynes takes filmic techniques and even exact dialogue from *Masculin Féminin*, a story of the relationship between couple, Madeleine and Paul (played by Chantal Goya and Jean-Pierre Léaud, respectively), displayed through 15 vignettes. In the café sequence in *I'm Not There* Robbie is sitting in a booth facing away from Claire but notices her in the mirror.

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<sup>166</sup> <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=39353>, accessed 10 September 2010.

Robbie's voice-over narrates and contextualises the scene by stating that they first met in New York, January 1964 in the Village and "they just buried their president" (referring to John F. Kennedy who was assassinated not two months prior). Claire is positioned in the corner of the film's frame, only just visible to Robbie. The camera angles replicate those produced in *Masculin Féminin* where the characters in the café sequences are often viewed off-centre. The placement of the characters in relation to the camera gives the impression of realism, almost as though they are not actors at all which, in turn, creates a sense of voyeurism: a technique Godard uses in his own films.

In *I'm Not There*, during the conversation between Robbie and Claire in the café, Claire asks what is at the centre of Robbie's world. Robbie is slightly taken aback by the question but replies that he is 22 and so it is himself. Claire tries to agree with him but suggests that there are other things in the world that are important. Similar and almost exact dialogue occurs between Madeleine and Paul in *Masculin Féminin* where Madeleine asks Paul what is at the centre of his world. He replies "love" and Madeleine states that she would have answered "me". The dialogue between Robbie and Claire in the café sequence allows the viewer to understand the characters' personality in the development of their relationship and also (for those who had seen *Masculin Féminin* prior to watching *I'm Not There*) a possible juxtaposition of the masculinity/femininity of the people of France to the masculinity/femininity of the people of the US during the 1960s. However what is clearly implied in the scene is an insight into Dylan's persona, as a young self-focused man who believes he is at the centre of his own world. As Robbie is all about himself, the relationship between him and Claire is doomed from the outset. The scenes that express Claire and Robbie's developing relationship and their later break-up comprise of certain filmic styling adapted from Godard's work. Examples of these include the slow close-up of Claire as she looks through her notes at her desk and also when Claire gazes directly into the camera: other identifiable features of Godard's film aesthetic.

Playwright Bertolt Brecht was a considerable source of inspiration for Godard and according to David Sterritt, was the key to his 1960s film aesthetic (1999: 65). Godard's films, much like Brechtian theatre, are known for provoking and alienating the audience. Brecht's term *Verfremdungseffekt* expresses the alienation of the audience: a distancing of the audience from the illusory narrative world (Brecht, 1964: 99). In making sure that the audience does

not become emotionally involved (through empathy for characters, for example) the audience is able to understand the underlying message of the play, whether it be a political or social statement. There is a very brief scene in *I'm Not There* where Robbie and Claire are watching a Brechtian play [00:32:23].<sup>167</sup> The brief scene is a self-reflexive statement that suggests that *I'm Not There* is a series of re-enactments of the significant events of Bob Dylan's life through the multiple characters. The scene disarms the film audience, pointing out that *I'm Not There* has a tenuous relationship to reality in parts. Through creating distance, it is reaffirmed that this musical biopic is symbolic.

The Godard-inspired techniques that Haynes applies are placed throughout the film and not solely with the Robbie/Claire sequences. The quote, "A view of the world belonging to one generation" is presented as white text on a black screen that is placed immediately after Robbie and Claire attend the premiere of Robbie's *Grain of Sand* film and prior to Woody waking up in a hospital bed after falling off a bridge from a train [00:33:29]. The text is on the screen in three segments accompanied by the sound of gunshots. The sounds seem as though they are diegetic when Woody is seen waking up abruptly. These same gunshot sounds, a clear reference to Godard,<sup>168</sup> are heard when the six personas are initially presented in the film. As each image of the characters flash up on the screen, a gunshot sound is heard. Scholarly analysis of Godard's films, in some instances, can be directly applied to *I'm Not There*. Royal S. Brown suggests that "Godard's narratives, when they exist at all, are more or less composed of a series of diachronic juxtapositions within the structure of the film itself" (1972: 10). The placement of the text in between these two scenes creates the distancing affect of the audience from the story world, preventing the viewer from becoming emotionally involved in the narrative. In Godard's films the text-on-screen technique sometimes coincides with the dialogue of a particular character and introduces the following sequence or assists to explain the previous sequence. In the case of *I'm Not There*, the text has no direct link with any one element of the film. The text gives the impression of an overview of the 1960s from the point-of-view of one generation.

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<sup>167</sup> It is understood that it is a Brecht performance through visual cues. The set consists of a mirror backdrop so that the audience is consciously aware that they are watching a play (they are able to see themselves do so through the reflection). The performers hold scripts and play instruments on the same small stage, their costumes are made from plastic and cardboard and they also have symbols and designs painted on their exposed skin.

<sup>168</sup> According to Larry Gross "*I'm Not There* opens and closes with offscreen gunshots much like those that begin and end *Masculin-Féminin*, Godard's most concerted effort to intervene in Sixties youth culture in its pop-music aspect ('the children of Marx and Coca-Cola') and incidentally the only major film of the period to name-check Dylan" (<http://www.filmfeline.com/fcm/so07/imnotthere.htm>, accessed 6 January 2011).

## Ben Whishaw as Arthur Rimbaud

Unlike the aforementioned characters, Arthur Rimbaud has the least on-screen time and is sitting in the same position throughout the film (Figure 12). Early in *I'm Not There*, Arthur (Ben Whishaw) spells out his entire name in front of an anonymous interview panel, identifying himself as Arthur Rimbaud. Arthur Rimbaud was a French poet (1854 – 1891) born on 20 October (Whidden, 2005: xx). The birth date is noted by one of the interviewers in *I'm Not There*, who then calculates that Rimbaud is approximately 19 or 20 years old, which Arthur verbally confirms is correct (00:05:57). Arthur appears sporadically throughout the film and replies to questions, all of which are quotes originally from Bob Dylan (Table 2). Arthur states ideas about himself which, in turn, indirectly comment on the other personas' current situations in order to link the Dylan personae together. The sequences which feature Arthur are all shot in black and white which suggests a difference in time and place between his character and most others in the film. Jude Quinn's appearance in *I'm Not There* is the only other featured in black and white.

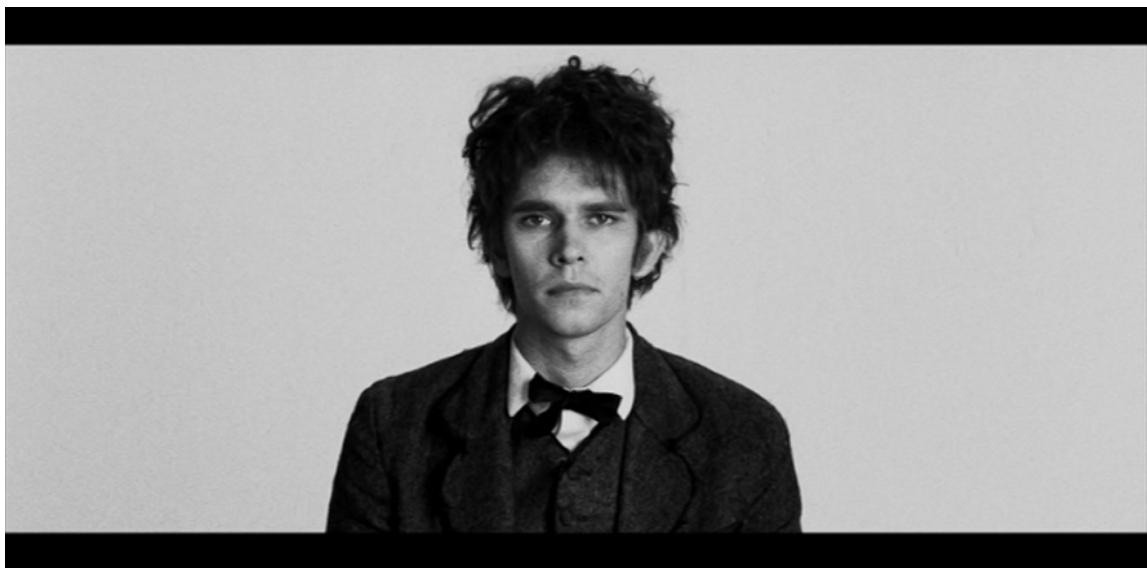


Figure 12: Arthur Rimbaud in *I'm Not There*

Time	Quote
(00:02:08)	A song is something that walks by itself
(00:09:17)	...Bank tellers are fatalistic, clerks are fatalistic. I'm a farmer. Who ever heard of a fatalistic farmer?
(00:19:15)	You don't need to write anything down to be

	a poet. Some work in gas stations, some shine shoes. I don't really call myself one 'cause I don't like the word. Me, I'm a trapeze artist...
(00:42: 13)	Woody Guthrie was dead; Little Richard was becoming a preacher; so whether you were a folk singer or a Christian, rock and roll was the devil. Me I was in a ditch, up a cliff, out of step, ready to quit.
(00:55:19)	Silence, experience shows, is what terrifies people most
(01:10:40)	I accept chaos. I'm not sure whether it accepts me
(01:23:42)	Seven simple rules for a life in hiding...
(01:53:38)	I know I have a sickness, festering somewhere... I'm against nature. I don't dig nature at all. The only truly natural things are dreams, which nature cannot touch with decay.

Table 2: Appearances of Arthur Rimbaud in *I'm Not There*

## Cate Blanchett as Jude Quinn

Cate Blanchett is an Australian-born actor and theatre performer (primarily at Belvoir Street Theatre Company and the Sydney Theatre Company – which she co-directs with her husband Andrew Upton). The Hollywood films she starred in leading up to her role in *I'm Not There* include her portrayal of Elizabeth I of England in *Elizabeth* (1998), Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, and 2003) and Katharine Hepburn in *The Aviator* (2004), to which she received an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. Blanchett's role in *I'm Not There* is distinct as she plays an iconic male musician. In an interview with Patrick Barkham, Blanchett confirmed Haynes' casting decision:

*That's why he's cast a woman, because it's the most iconic silhouette of his musical career. It was a really ironic gesture and also very clever. If a man played the role, people would have assessed it in a different way, whereas they've been able to get into*

*the strangeness of what Dylan must have been like in that period by the very fact that I'm a woman.*<sup>169</sup>

Hence, casting Blanchett as a persona of Dylan reaffirms the musician's oddity and his ability to constantly shift how the public perceives him as an individual. The focus, for the film audience, is drawn away from how Blanchett plays a male character and more so on Dylan's qualities and traits. Generally, Jude Quinn is a depiction of Bob Dylan during the 1960s. Jude namely represents Dylan's decision to use the electric guitar which caused much controversy amongst his, previously acoustic folk-loving, fans.

### ***Jude as Judas***

There are a number of significant scenes in *No Direction Home* that are replicated in *I'm Not There* through Jude. Noel King states that "There is a striking scene in *No Direction Home* when Dylan says with a mixture of artistic exasperation and 'teacherly' information to one of his English audiences, 'It's not British music, it's American music, now c'mon'" (2007: 36). Similar words are spoken by Jude in *I'm Not There* who, after being jeered on stage after his performance states:

*You know what you're hearing is not English music alright; you haven't heard American music before. What you're hearing, I'm gonna say it right now, doesn't have a name. It's words, alright, it's sounds. If it's something you disagree with, that's great.*

Even though at this point Jude suggests a new form of music that the audience has not previously heard, Jude still does not seem to win the acceptance of the crowd and is finally called a 'Judas'<sup>170</sup> from an unknown member of the audience. The word 'Judas' marks the

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<sup>169</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2007/oct/26/awardsandprizes>, accessed 22 September 2010.

<sup>170</sup> 'Judas' refers to Judas Iscariot, one of the 12 original disciples of Jesus Christ who is known for betraying Him (according to the New Testament Bible). Suggesting that Bob Dylan is a 'Judas' implies that he deceived his fans/followers.

entry of a composed score, a non-diegetic score that is heard in certain scenes throughout the film and which could be considered a leitmotif. A leitmotif is defined as:

*a short theme or musical idea consistently associated with a character, a place or an object, a certain situation or a recurrent idea of the plot... motifs are used, not as rigidly fixed melodies, but in a very flexible manner* (Apel and Daniel, 1960: 56).

The leitmotif in *I'm Not There* is a cross-faded, distorting and reverberating electric guitar/bass riff. It is attached to the crucial and significant events in Bob Dylan's life and is represented through his persona's narratives in the film. Such events include when Jude's actual identity is revealed by Keenan Jones on the television programme *Culture Beat* and also after Jack Rollins presents his controversial speech at a dinner function. The leitmotif symbolises Dylan's identities in the film: it is attached to Dylan and is heard at these significant points in his life, represented in *I'm Not There*. The described guitar riff emphasises Dylan's creativity and ability to change and adapt him to certain environments. After Jude's real name is revealed on *Culture Beat* (Keenan Jones announces that his real name is Aaron Jacob Edelstein) the musical leitmotif is paired with a visual montage of the Dylan personae in their most revealed state. The character of Arthur Rimbaud simultaneously discusses creativity, how it can be misinterpreted and follow an individual for the rest of their lives without ever changing. The use of the leitmotif in this sequence demonstrates that Bob Dylan is an ever-changing musical individual who does not intend the public to reveal his personal or non-musical identities. Dylan constantly re-invents himself (hence the presence of the electric guitar in the leitmotif) which continually alters the public perception of him as a musician.

### ***Reflecting on Dylan in/and the Media***

Jude Quinn is interrogated at a press conference in *I'm Not There*, representing Bob Dylan's actual press conference at San Francisco in 1965. The conference highlights the media's obsession with Dylan and how the journalists take his every word to possess a deeper meaning than he sometimes intends. An example of this is when Jude arrives from his plane



and walks to his car, being harassed by fans and media crew. One of the journalists asks Jude “Have you got a word for your fans?” and Jude replies with, “Astronauts”. The camera pans to the left to view several reporters frantically jotting down the meaningless word on their sketch pads. In the conference sequence, reporters ask Jude questions relating to his music and meaning [00:46:44 – 00:49:36]. Jude avoids answering some questions, acts confused and repeats the questions and responds to some by going on nonsensical tangents. Jude avoids answering some questions, acts confused and repeats the questions and responds to some by going on nonsensical tangents. He appears quite comical; reminiscent of the press conferences that The Beatles had in the 1960s (the visual aesthetic also resembles The Beatles’ press conferences). The press conference in *I’m Not There*, among interrogations by other reporters throughout the film, demonstrates that Jude (much like Dylan) refuses to answer to anyone, especially those in the media. Therefore, Haynes refuses to answer to the filmic audience by not attempting to exploit Dylan through Jude and other characters such as Jack Rollins. As Haynes stated, “The film is funny and not over-reverent and over-worshipful and laden with that whole... Dylan thing. It has a spirit that I feel Dylan would appreciate”.<sup>171</sup> In saying this, Haynes intended to produce a film that the actual Dylan would enjoy, in part because it refused to provide any singular, authoritative depiction of Dylan.<sup>172</sup>

### ***‘Ballad of a Thin Man’***

In a scene from *Don’t Look Back* a *Time* Magazine journalist questions whether Dylan cares about what he says. Dylan replies with:

*How can I answer that if you have the nerve to ask me? You’ve got a lot of nerve asking me a question like that. Do you ask The Beatles that? I don’t question you because I don’t expect any answer from you.*

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<sup>171</sup> <http://www.timeout.com/film/features/show-feature/3964/todd-haynes-on-bob-dylan.html>, accessed 10 September 2010.

<sup>172</sup> Bob Dylan had no part in the production of *I’m Not There*. After the cinematic release of the film, Haynes disclosed in an interview that he had not confirmed if Dylan had seen the film, although he is aware that Dylan did receive a copy of the DVD (<http://www.thecinemasource.com/blog/interviews/todd-haynes-interview-for-im-not-there/?id=609&wordcount=0>, accessed 22 September 2010).

This moment is re-invented by Jude in *I'm Not There*, in the backseat of his car, being interviewed by Keenan Jones. As established above, Keenan Jones is a character in *I'm Not There* who questions and inevitably discloses Jude's actual identity, his past and his family on national television. The idea that Jude only intends to divulge information about his personal life to the public represents Dylan's control over the media. When Mister Jones announces on television who Jude really is, Jude reacts by typing up what becomes his book of poetry, *Tarantula*, that he works on all through the night as his friends sleep. Even though one of his identities has been exposed, he keeps creating new identities through his creative work. Dylan's 'Ballad of a Thin Man' plays as a reflection on the relationship between these Jude Quinn and Keenan Jones.

*There is one of Bob Dylan's songs they keep playing and replaying, a kind of esoteric diatribe against a certain 'Mister Jones' who seems to symbolize the 'oldies' and 'squares' of my generation and the hoarsely reiterated refrain is taunting. 'Something is happening here and you don't know what it is - do you. Mr Jones?' (Johnston, 1969: 101).*

Mister Jones first appears in the back of a car interviewing Jude in the presence of a friend named Sonny Dover (Joe Cobden). Jones asks Jude what he thinks about social and political issues arising out of his music and if he genuinely cares about the music/issues he sings about. Jude replies by saying that he is just a storyteller, that he does not need to answer Jones' questions. After Jones continuously presses Jude about whether he cares about what he sings each night, Jude reacts by exiting the car, cueing 'Ballad of a Thin Man'<sup>173</sup> which begins to play non-diegetically [01:04:15]. During the musical sequence a series of unexplained events occur to Mister Jones in a public bathroom. As he walks towards an elevator, the first verse of the song commences:

*You walk into the room  
With your pencil in your hand  
You see somebody naked*

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<sup>173</sup> 'Ballad of a Thin Man' is a song written and recorded by Dylan and featured on *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

*And you say, 'Who is that man?'*  
*You try so hard*  
*But you don't understand*  
*Just what you'll say*  
*When you get home*

Jones leans over and finds Jude standing on a stage singing the chorus of the song, the lyrics that George Johnston mentions above. These lyrics taunt Mister Jones in the musical sequence and in alternate ways; assist Jones to become aware of his own perspective on social and political issues. Within the musical number, Jones finds that he is sitting down in the audience watching a man in a cage who is killing live chickens. Jones then becomes the caged performer and is laughed at and humiliated by the audience. Jude appears and hands a microphone to Jones which suggests that Jude would like Jones to be in his position. To see what it is like from the other side, from Jude's perspective. Wilfrid Mellers' insight suggests that:

*There have been many specific identification of Mister Jones and none of them matters. We need recognize only that he's the (fairly) respectable man in the street, and possibly you or I. He might even be Dylan himself, for the singer is no longer outside his victim (1984: 141-2).*

With the constant shifting placement of Mister Jones, who continually stands in the place of other characters in the sequence, Dylan's lyrics, paired with the visual aesthetic, reaffirm that Mister Jones (although an identifiable individual character in the film) can be anyone, including Dylan. There is also a moment in this sequence where a group of African-American men stop the recording from their cassette tape and discuss the socio-political meanings in the song: that all people should have equal power and control over their own lives regardless of their race.

The 'Ballad of a Thin Man' sequence demonstrates that even though a musical biopic seems to focus on one life, this type of film tends to incorporate larger socio-political issues into the

narrative. Other musical biopics analysed in this thesis such as *Ray* (in Chapter Four) and *De-Lovely* (in Chapter Three) also concentrate on ‘big picture’ issues/events, specifically relating to racism (black/white segregation in the USA) and homosexuality, respectively. The contextualisation gives the individual a place not only in music history but also in cultural history. The musical biopic represents the individual in a specific era and location, exemplifying the morals and political positions of the society. This is further represented in the disapproving audience/fan reactions to Dylan’s music in *I’m Not There*, especially when he performs his first electric music set that commences with ‘Maggie’s Farm’.<sup>174</sup> Many contemporary musical biopics display how socio-political issues of the period affect an individual’s creation of music. This is particularly important in the representation of Bob Dylan as much of his music is based on events in history, referred to in *I’m Not There* as topical ‘finger-pointing’ songs.

### ***‘Maggie’s Farm’***

Andy Warhol’s pop art and more specifically his Elvis Presley screen print are dynamically recreated as Jude enters the stage at a local folk musical festival to play ‘Maggie’s Farm’ with his band. According to Richard Hamilton, pop art is: popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short-term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low cost, mass produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business (1982: 28). The musicians in *I’m Not There* appear to shoot the gathered crowds with machine guns that Jude and his crew pull out of their guitar cases [00:43:43]. It is difficult to interpret this short scene as pop art, “neither attempted to resolve some impending problem in art, nor did it provide a platform for advocating change” (Cagle, 1995: 50). However, Haynes employed the visual imagery of Warhol’s pop art based on grounds that link with Warhol’s own logic for replicating images of star individuals. The Warhol imagery also links to the iconic photo of Dylan’s visit to The Factory in 1965 (Figure 13).

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<sup>174</sup> ‘Maggie’s Farm’ is written and recorded by Bob Dylan, featuring on *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965).



Figure 13: Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan at The Factory

Van M. Cagle states that, “these film stars had been bought and sold for their looks – they were people who had become, in essence, public property” (1995: 57). Therefore the star image has been replicated continuously through the media for the public eye and the images in *I’m Not There* are a reflection on this. Furthermore, the star image and particularly in the above case, the image of the musician is public property. Just as the music is bought and sold, the individual’s image is also the public’s to own. Haynes is conscious of the representation which is highlighted through the pop art scene.

Another interpretation of the pop art scene is metaphorical of Dylan’s attitude regarding his change from acoustic to electric amplified music at the Newport Folk Festival on 21 July 1965. The event is discussed in numerous texts including an unauthorised biography by Robert Shelton (1986) and a reflection on Dylan and the 1960s by Mike Marqusee (2005) as well as documentary, *The Other Side of the Mirror: Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival* (2007). The new music is obviously unappealing to the fans in *I’m Not There* and they proceed to heckle and abuse the band for producing the loud, electric song, ‘Maggies Farm’. The machine guns, in this instance, represent Dylan’s own resentment of the fans that have turned against him as he develops a new style of music.

### ***Representing Dylan's Eat the Document and Tarantula through Jude***

Dylan's poetry and own filmic direction is referenced in *I'm Not There*. As previously mentioned, *Tarantula* (Dylan, 1971) is a book of poetry written in 1966 and published in 1971 by Bob Dylan. According to the publisher, the book "captures the tone and spirit of the turbulent times in which it was written" (1971: back cover). There are a series of scenes in *I'm Not There* where an image of an actual tarantula crawls along the projected screens on various walls behind the character of Jude in a nightclub location, visually representing the inspiration behind Dylan's poetry during the 1960s. It is during this time that Jude faces fatigue and is seen busily typing on his typewriter even when the rest of his entourage are asleep. Haynes represents Dylan through Jude as a nervous, constantly alert and rapidly functioning mind. Reflected as the future of music, Dylan is portrayed as a musician who experiments and changes his sound which establishes new styles and forms. Jude is utilised to replicate a key event represented in *Eat The Document*. The event is when Dylan appears to be quite fatigued, in the back of a car with John Lennon. In *Eat The Document* Lennon sees Dylan's exhaustion and states "Do you suffer from sore eyes, groovy forehead, or curly hair? Take Zimdon! Come, come, boy, it's only a film. Pull yourself together." In *I'm Not There*, Sonny Dover (who looks quite similar to Lennon in *Eat The Document*) delivers the same line of dialogue to a tired Jude. Not only does the scene literally represent an actual event in Dylan's life, it also represents the event through Dylan's own perspective, stemming from the film that he directed.

In the aforementioned instances, Haynes praises Dylan's filmmaking style (and poetry), offering signs of adoration through the film. Even though the scene in *Eat The Document* is in colour (black and white in *I'm Not There*) the characters/individuals wear dark sunglasses in both representations and the camera jumps around inside the car, gazing up at the pair as if they were idols that the camera (or film audience) is to worship and marvel at. Even though Dylan is not known for his filmmaking style, Haynes places the scene in the film as a self-reflexive understanding of Dylan's attempt to represent his own life in what may be deemed an auto-biopic. *Eat The Document* has given Dylan the opportunity to provide footage of himself from his own perspective. An interpretation of himself with the view of how he would prefer to be understood by the media, his fans and the general public.

### ***The Cinema of Richard Lester***

Richard Lester, an influential director of the 1960s, directed The Beatles films including *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), inspiring the cinematic direction of several scenes in *I'm Not There*. One segment commences with a big puff of smoke and the film audience sees Jude running about with The Beatles. This is apparent as Jude's friend Sonny begins to announce that Jude is with John, Paul and George. The music in the scene changes from classical to unfamiliar (previously unrecorded) instrumental country/folk style music, which suggests the playfulness of the young men that are tumbling about and rolling around on the ground. It also highlights the difference between the elegantly dressed people that are previously featured in the scene and the rebellious musicians seen mucking around on the hill. Another important attribute is that this segment is sped up. Jude and The Beatles have high-pitched rapid voices and the visually dynamic imagery appears more frantic in these scenes as opposed to the fluid slow movements of the elegant characters. The country/folk music plays right up until Jude wins the argument with the *BBC* (British Broadcasting Corporation) host, Mister Keenan Jones, making everything seem quite comical. Haynes features The Beatles in this very energetic scene and also the frantic segment featured in the background of the film as the band run from their screaming fans (akin to the audio-visual comedy of *The Benny Hill Show* – a television programme that aired on the *BBC* during the 1960s and 1970s). Haynes references Lester and his cinematic style more than the actual relationship between Dylan and The Beatles which leads this segment to be not so much a representation of The Beatles but a representation of Lester's representation of The Beatles. This continual re-representation, combined with the farcical cartoon-like imagery, distances the viewer even further from the idea of Dylan which highlights ambiguity and fabrication through these differing perspectives.

### ***The Cinema of Federico Fellini***

Federico Fellini, another influence in Haynes' film, is an Italian filmmaker who directed films from the 1950s through to the 1990s and is renowned for his cinematic style, meshing reality,

memory, dreams and fantasy in his filmic works. Fellini's interest in Jungian psychoanalysis influenced his film direction. He preferred, "Jung to Freud because Jungian psychoanalysis defined the dream not as a symptom of a disease that required a cure but rather as a link to archetypal images shared by all of humanity" (Bondanella, 2002: 94). In *8 ½* (1963), Fellini explores the intermixing of dream imagery with reality in a self-reflexive attempt at representing his own struggles with filmmaking. *8 ½*, "seems to evolve to the point where imagination and reality converge in a 'higher' or transformed reality in which the material world is infused with spirit" (Burke, 1996: 125). Fellini's film displays how dreams influence reality in a transgressive, modernist interpretation of the filmmaking process through its narrative which follows the protagonist Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) who, in the effort to complete the creation of a new film that he has lost all inspiration for, detaches from the pressures of reality and submerges himself into various dream states. As Peter Bondanella suggests:

*Almost everything in 8 ½ contradicts the traditional seamless story line of the conventional Hollywood film. but now the peculiarly Fellinian technique of stringing together a large number of loosely related sequences becomes a stream-of-consciousness narrative with the intrusive presence of dreams, waking fantasies, and imaginative visual creations on the screen that represent the subjective perspective of the protagonist-director* (1992: 196-7).

*8 ½* is one of the most imitated in contemporary cinema and has inspired subsequent films such as *Mickey One* (1965), *Alex in Wonderland* (1970), *All That Jazz* (1979) and *Stardust Memories* (1980). Fellini's film influenced particular sequences in *I'm Not There* and his anti-Hollywood style also crosses over into Haynes' overall artistic direction for the film. Haynes uses Fellinian cinematic techniques in *I'm Not There* to represent Dylan's own imagination and consciousness. There is a dream sequence in *8 ½* where a man holds a rope that is attached to another man's leg who is floating in the air like a kite. Similar imagery appears in *I'm Not There* where Jude becomes ill from overwork. He lies on his back while his friends look upon him and the scene immediately shifts to Jude floating in the air, with rope tied to his ankle. The Dylan song, 'I'm Not There'<sup>175</sup> plays in the background as Arthur (in voice-

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<sup>175</sup> 'I'm Not There' is an unreleased track by Bob Dylan. It was written in 1956 and appears on the *I'm Not There* soundtrack (2007).



over) states “the only truly natural things are dreams, which nature cannot touch with decay”. Paying homage to Fellini’s vision, the dream sequence presents Jude confronting and accepting himself by means of his individual dream-state as opposed to viewing himself through the other (the general public/fans) which is the case for other personas such as the Jack Rollins.

There is an outdoor scene in 8 ½ where men and women assemble in a garden, listening to classical music, some sitting on elongated long white chairs. These chairs are replicated in *I’m Not There* where Jude is approached again by Mister Jones. There are several reasons why the sequence was shot Fellini-style. One is that it is a tribute or homage to the film which was released during the 1960s (specifically in 1963). Another is that it is to heighten the dream/fantasy-like atmosphere, playing with reality and fiction, making it more difficult for the film viewer to distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. The daydream-like state of the sequence reaches its pinnacle when Jude hears Coco’s voice emerging out of the surrounding gardens stating “You might think nothing can reach those tens of thousands living by the dollar but you’d be wrong”. Coco is a representation of Edie Sedgwick, who is thought to have had an actual short-term relationship with Bob Dylan. In the scene Jude follows Coco until she disappears. Jude begins to cough on his cigarette until the fantasy sequence ends. The whole Fellini-inspired section of the film also emphasises the uncertainty regarding certain relationships in Dylan’s life. The vagueness of the relationship between Sedgwick and Dylan is also present in the film *Factory Girl* (2006) where Sedgwick (Sienna Miller) has a short relationship with a folk musician (Hayden Christensen) who is never referred to by name during the film and is finally credited as the ‘musician’.

As well as Bob Dylan’s own music, other artists’ songs appear in the film. One in particular is ‘Venusia O Venezia, Venaga’ from *Il Casanova Di Federico Fellini* (1991), a soundtrack album for the film of the same title and a score that plays as a leitmotif to signify a fabricated event. The music adds to the illusory state developed by Fellini, as discussed previously. The song appears in the scene described above where Jude sees Coco emerging from the garden and also when Jude meets Allen Ginsberg for the first time. In this scene, Ginsberg rides up to Jude in his golf cart with his partner to talk while Jude travels in the backseat of his car. Jude and Ginsberg briefly discuss the media attention that Jude has received and what Jude’s future intentions are. Haynes admits in his director commentary of the film (on DVD) that the

meeting between Ginsberg and Dylan (Jude) is unlikely to have happened this way but it is how Haynes fantasised it would have occurred.

## **Conclusion: Bob Dylan Is Not There**

*I'm Not There* is a self-reflexive representation of Dylan in the 1960s and perpetuates the myth of the musician. Drawing upon a multitude of references to Bob Dylan including *Eat The Document*, *Don't Look Back* and *No Direction Home*, the film represents the media representations of Dylan's music career, referring not to the individual himself but to other perspectives on the musician from writers, directors and journalists. Haynes stated:

*there's no reality. It's about music. It's about creation and it's about an intensely fascinating artistic subject so reality is just such a sad thing to impose on such a rich body of work and such an amazing period of a life.*<sup>176</sup>

This film represents symbols (both sonic and visual) that are linked and can be traced back to Bob Dylan's personae and his music career. Although this particular film is not a conventional musical biopic, it is a significant contribution to the genre as Haynes consciously critiques the previously established classical narrative structure of the biopic. The construction and cinematic presentation of the film suggests that every individual (musical or otherwise) is unique; therefore the subject deserves a distinctive filmic structure when their lives are represented on screen. Haynes stated:

*The subject of Dylan was clearly an expansive one, and one that doesn't stop growing, given his profuse and unending output. In addition to this I was applying a structure that was expansive by design – the opposite, in my mind, of the traditional biopic's determination to reduce and simplify* (Haynes in McDonald, 2009: 63).

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<sup>176</sup> [www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_13495.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_13495.html), accessed 10 September 2010.

A biography or life story is complex and detailed chronology is often overly abridged to adapt to the feature film format. Haynes transgresses these boundaries and reasserts that a star individual has more than one identity and is understood diversely by various fans and audiences. Robert Strachan asserts, “it is important to see the individual biography as just one element within a particular cultural field where meaning is negotiated and the collective memory constructed” (2008: 74). In turn, the film audience recognises that the musical individual represented in the biopic is only a constructed image or icon created by the media which is then interpreted by the public.

# CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to provide an overview of the various styles and forms of the contemporary musical biopic, spanning from 2004 to 2007. The specific films selected cover a variety of ways that a music artist can be represented cinematically in a fictional film. Overall, the seven films discussed in this thesis demonstrate how the contemporary musical biopic is a tool that illustrates how star identities are shaped and manipulated in popular music culture/history. This thesis exemplified the popularity and value of the musical biopic, confirming that this is a valid area of scholarly study. The contemporary musical biopic reflects the public perception of the music artist and influences film audience opinions on how these individuals are to be understood and remembered.

The following conclusion will provide an overview of the musical biopic and how it has evolved across time. The function and popularity of other forms of music biography will also be discussed including written auto/biography, feature documentaries and digital media. Table 4 offers a summary of the elements of the contemporary musical biopic from production to reception and their function. The filmmakers' construction of the musical biopic will be mapped out as well as how the film audience interprets the audio-visual representation. Finally, the female biopic will be considered as well as the musical biopic in other (non-English speaking) national cinemas. A projection of the future of the musical biopic will conclude this thesis with a view of avenues for potential research directions.

The films analysed in this thesis are only a small portion of the musical biopics that have been released in the 21st Century thus far. Since this project began there have been many more theatrical releases of musical biopics such as *Cadillac Records* (2008), *Notorious* (2009), *The Soloist* (2009) and *The Runaways* (2010). Table 3 provides an overview of the musical biopics theatrically released from 2000 to 2010 from the USA and UK.<sup>177</sup> Some of these musical biopics depict lesser-known music artists<sup>178</sup> whose musical careers were marginally successful, yet whose lives were remarkable.

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<sup>177</sup> Table 3 has a focus on English-speaking musical biopics to narrow the field even though there have been many musical biopics released in European and Asian countries over the decade (amongst other nations).

<sup>178</sup> To offer some examples, *The Soloist* represents the relationship between mentally-ill, homeless, Julliard-trained musician, Nathaniel Ayers (Jamie Foxx) and Los Angeles journalist, Steve Lopez (Robert Downey Jr.). *The Runaways* is about the 1970s teenage punk band of the same name were most successful in Japan, however broke up after five years together. Guitarist Joan Jett went on to have greater success in her own band (and record label Blackheart Records), The Blackhearts.

<b>Year of Release</b>	<b>Country of Release</b>	<b>Film Title</b>	<b>Protagonist</b>	<b>Career</b>	<b>Gender</b>
2002	UK	24 Hour Party People	Tony Wilson	Music Manager	Male
2002	USA	The Pianist	Wladyslaw Szpilman	Musician	Male
2004	USA	Beyond The Sea	Bobby Darin	Singer/ Actor	Male
2004	USA	De-Lovely	Cole Porter	Songwriter/ Composer	Male
2004	USA	Ray	Ray Charles	Musician	Male
2005	USA	Walk the Line	Johnny Cash	Musician	Male
2005	USA	Last Days	Kurt Cobain	Musician	Male
2005	UK	Stoned	Brian Jones	Musician	Male
2005	USA	Copying Beethoven	Ludwig van Beethoven	Composer	Male
2007	UK	Control	Ian Curtis	Musician	Male
2007	USA	El Cantante	Hector Lavoe	Singer	Male
2007	USA	I'm Not There	Bob Dylan	Musician	Male
2007	USA	What We Do Is Secret	Darby Crash	Musician	Male
2008	USA	Cadillac Records	Leonard Chess	Record Producer	Male
2008	USA	Who Do You Love	Leonard Chess	Record Producer	Male
2008	USA	Crazy	Hank Garland	Musician	Male
2009	USA	Notorious	Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace)	Rapper	Male
2009	UK	Nowhere Boy	John Lennon	Musician	Male
2009	USA	The Soloist	Nathaniel Ayers	Musician	Male
2010	USA	The Runaways	Joan Jett and Cherie Currie	Musicians	Female

2010	UK	Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll	Ian Dury	Musician	Male
2010	USA	The Day The Music Died	Buddy Holly	Musician	Male

Table 3: Musical biopics (2000 – 2010) from the USA and UK (with theatrical release)

Many musical biopics are being made due to the filmmakers' interest in the music artist (such as Kevin Spacey's *Beyond the Sea* and Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*). However, some filmmakers are more interested in wider issues, rather than a focus on one individual. *Cadillac Records*' director Darnell Martin was initially interested in a film about how blues music became popular and affected civil rights in the USA and was not particularly attracted to making a musical biopic of record producer, Leonard Chess.<sup>179</sup> Moreover, there are some cases where the producer has different motives. *Notorious*' executive producer (and entrepreneur) Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs was originally Notorious B.I.G.'s (Christopher Wallace) music manager at Bad Boy Records. Apart from being a long-time friend, Combs profited from the musical biopic<sup>180</sup> as well as the film's soundtrack<sup>181</sup> which was released through Bad Boy.

From this study it is apparent that the musical biopic is transforming. From its emergence in the Hollywood studio era audiences viewed the music artist as the hero. In contemporary cinema, the individual's flaws are exposed and sometimes critiqued, yet there remains a level of admiration for the film audience to engage with. In her analysis of cinematic realism, Laura Marcus proposes that "'Realism' and 'illusionism' are the poles around which the history of film has been structured, but we might rather think of them as, at a number of levels, profoundly interrelated" (2007b: 177). The combination of realism and illusion in the musical biopic defines the music artist's appeal to the film audience. These films represent the negative aspects of the music artist's personality yet push them further into the 'star realm' (Dyer, 1979) by glamorising other aspects. In other words, the musical biopic does represent actual events however it does so in a stylised form. As film is essentially a representation of reality (Hallam and Marshment, 2000, Jerslev, 2002, Bazin, 2005), the musical biopic

<sup>179</sup> <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Exclusive-Interview-Cadillac-Records-Director-Darnell-Martin-11120.html>, accessed 17 January 2011.

<sup>180</sup> *Notorious* has a total domestic gross in North America of over \$36 million (<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=notorious08.htm>, accessed 17 January 2011).

<sup>181</sup> The *Notorious* (2009) music soundtrack sold 42,950 units within the first week of release (<http://www.xxlmag.com/news/latest-headlines/2009/01/%E2%80%9Cnotorious%E2%80%9D-soundtrack-debuts-high-on-the-charts-luda-offically-goes-gold/>, accessed 17 January 2011).

continues to weave these juxtaposing notions together to create new histories. Using the filmmakers' background knowledge and imagination, the musical biopic becomes a unique perspective on the music artist. Therefore, through the musical biopic, the music star is reconstructed. Fabricated elements are added to existing knowledge of the individual which transforms how the film audience perceives the protagonist. The musical biopic adds to the already established public perception of the artist and helps shape the star's identity.

Stars, musical and otherwise, have continually been of interest to the consuming public. Apparent through Custen's (1992) research, there was a biopic boom in the Hollywood studio era as the genre had the ability to launch and sustain careers of actors<sup>182</sup> who played these celebrated individuals. The same reasons are evidence for the resurgence of the (musical) biopic in the 21st Century: audiences remain fascinated by stars and actors gain credibility for playing them. The popularity of music biography in particular is also notable through the increase in production of the music documentary (both theatrical and made-for-TV releases) as well as the written music auto/biography. In 1988 Carolyn Anderson stated, "Just as print biographies display a penchant for recalling the lives of literary figures, the film biography privileges the performer as central figure" (1988: 334), although print auto/biographies in the 21st Century remain a popular way to recount the life of a music artist. Publications such as *Scar Tissue* (Kiedis and Sloman, 2004), an autobiography by Anthony Kiedis, lead singer of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and *Slash* (Slash and Bozza, 2007), an autobiography by the Guns N' Roses guitarist, were featured in *The New York Times* Bestseller List.<sup>183</sup> A considerable amount of feature-length music documentaries have also had theatrical release including *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004), The Rolling Stones' *Shine a Light* (2008) and Michael Jackson's *This is It* (2009). These texts, whether written publications or filmic representations, demonstrate the popularity of music biographies and how the public perceives and consumes life narratives of these celebrated individuals. Additionally, in a more direct way, online media such as social networking (*Twitter*, *MySpace* and *Facebook*) has given the star a direct link to their fans, allowing them to communicate their own thoughts and messages which are then published on the sites. "Some celebrity Twitterers – most famously Ashton Kutcher – have crossed the million-follower mark, effectively giving them a

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<sup>182</sup> As discussed in the Introduction, many lead actors have won awards for their portrayal of actual people in biopics.

<sup>183</sup> Other music autobiographies included in the *New York Times* Bestseller List were: *Tommy Land* (Lee and Bozza, 2004), *The Heroin Diaries: A Year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star* (Sixx and Gittins, 2007), *The Dirt: Confessions of the World's Most Notorious Rock Band* (Lee et al., 2002), *Walk This Way: The Autobiography of Aerosmith* (Aerosmith and Davis, 2003), *I Am Ozzy* (Osbourne and Ayres, 2010) and *Heaven and Hell: My Life in the Eagles (1974 – 2001)* (Felder and Holden, 2008).

broadcast-size audience.”<sup>184</sup> Although scholars have begun to examine the connection between stars, fans and the internet in terms of contemporary celebrity culture (including Soukup, 2006, and Muntean and Petersen, 2009), this is still an emerging and significant area of study to pursue in terms of star interpretation.

## MEDIA AS COMMUNITY

A large part of how film audiences interpret music artists is through the use of internet-based social media. Discussed below, blogs, online forums and other social media outlets are vehicles for discussion on music artists and their respective musical biopics. Participants on these sites also propose ideas on casting choices and possible protagonists for (musical) biopics. Online social media offer fans a simple, accessible means to discuss star identities and their relationship to the musical biopic. For example, official music artist sites such as those of Johnny Cash<sup>185</sup> and Bob Dylan<sup>186</sup> have community pages where fans can post blogs and comment in forums on anything relating to the music star, including the representation of various personae in musical biopics. Independent of official pages, film audiences and fans also create personal blogs that are publicly accessible. These free sites, such as *Blogger*<sup>187</sup> and *Wordpress*,<sup>188</sup> are utilised to share perspectives. Other users can read these blogs and comment on them, providing different insights into the given topic area. Through these opportunities the public are able to connect and create a dialogue on artists and films that interest them, playing a part in reconstructing the identity of the star and the perception of their music.

It is apparent that film studios that release these musical biopics monitor public discussion by providing their own outlets on social media sites, predominantly *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*. As of January 2011, Universal Studios (who released *Ray* [2004], *The Soloist* [2009] and *Gainsbourg* [2010]) had 364,672 ‘like’s’ on their Universal Studios Entertainment *Facebook* profile page.<sup>189</sup> When a *Facebook* member ‘like’s’ the page they are then able to post messages on the page therefore allowing the marketing/public relations department to monitor discussions and feedback. The Weinstein Company (who released *Control* [2007], *I’m Not There* [2007] and *Nowhere Boy* [2009]) has a *Twitter* account that is currently (as of

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<sup>184</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1902604-2,00.html>, accessed 16 December 2010.

<sup>185</sup> [www.johnnycash.com](http://www.johnnycash.com), accessed 17 January 2011.

<sup>186</sup> [www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com), accessed 17 January 2011.

<sup>187</sup> [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com), accessed 19 January 2011.

<sup>188</sup> <http://wordpress.org>, accessed 19 January 2011.

<sup>189</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/universalstudiosentertainment>, accessed 16 January 2011.



January 2011) being ‘followed’ by 10,743 *Twitter* account holders and is ‘following’ 5,699 account holders.<sup>190</sup> In order to monitor others, *Twitter* users can reply to or mention another user in their ‘Tweet’ by using the ‘@’ symbol preceding the username. They are also able to ‘hashtag’ using the ‘#’ symbol to categorise their tweet (this is accessible in *Google*<sup>191</sup> search). Film studios also have *YouTube* Channels where they upload clips from television programmes and feature films (including behind-the-scenes footage). MGM’s Channel (who released *De-Lovely* [2004] and *Copying Beethoven* [2006]) has 6,016 subscribers (as of January 2011) who are able to view, comment on, ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ the uploaded material. Through these social media sites, the film studios are able to communicate directly to the prospective audiences and engage with them, altering future film and television productions. Film studios are able to more effectively market their films by setting up these networking sites. These social media strategies allow material concerning these musical biopics to become readily accessible to a wider audience that would complement the reach they gain from print media and television. It is difficult to gage whether the social media sites directly contribute to the success of the films but it is evident that it increases the exposure of these musical biopics. Allowing the audiences to comment on the releases may hinder the marketability as negative responses can be posted, however, the studio’s account holder can simply delete these comments to avoid the issue which inevitably manipulates audience interpretations.

## THE CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL BIOPIC

The sonic and visual components of 21st Century musical biopics were explored in this thesis. In order to summarise the arguments, Table 4 offers an overview of the contemporary musical biopic. The table shows that the filmmakers construct the film, interweaving narrative and music. In terms of the narrative, the filmmakers formulate a biographical story (which is somewhat fabricated), referencing other texts (intertextuality) as well as referencing its own characteristics (self-reflexivity). When adding the musical component, the filmmakers often weave the tracks into the storyline (integration) and alter the meaning of the songs through the visually dynamic imagery as well as the sound of the (re)recording. The arrangement, setting and selection of the music along with the issue of sound all affect how the music artist’s identity is understood. Upon the film’s release the audience offers ultimate interpretations of the film by constructing (or re-constructing) their image of the music artists identity as well as

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<sup>190</sup> <http://twitter.com/#!/weinsteinfilms>, accessed 16 January 2011.

<sup>191</sup> <http://www.google.com>, accessed 16 January 2011.

the star identity of the actors cast in the film. Although many of these elements tend to overlap, the table provides a general summary of the elements and function of the contemporary musical biopic.

FILMMAKERS' CONSTRUCTION		AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION
Narrative +	Music →	Identity (Re)Constructions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intertextuality</li> <li>- Biographical story (omissions and inclusions)</li> <li>- Self-reflexivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integration</li> <li>- Audio-visual nature</li> <li>- Re-recording tracks</li> <li>- Arrangement and setting</li> <li>- Song selection</li> <li>- Sound</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Music Artist</li> <li>- Actor(s)</li> </ul>

Table 4: The elements and function of the contemporary musical biopic

## Defining the Filmmakers

When discussing films priority is often given to the role of the director, however, many other creative personnel associated with the film play a large part in its construction. Contributors include screenwriters, producers, cinematographers, music supervisors and composers. However, when referring to the 'filmmakers' in this thesis, certain pivotal people involved in the production (or creative process) are of greater importance. These are the producers and director, who assist in (re)constructing the music artist's identity. The importance of the producer is evident through Chapter Four's discussion on the creative control of family members: John Carter Cash for *Walk the Line* and Ray Charles Robinson Jr. for *Ray*. Apart from attaining the rights to the musical biopic, the producers are actively involved in all aspects of the film's production. The director works closely with the cast and crew of the musical biopic, directing how the film is shot (camera angles and lighting), how it will sound (music and sound effects), as well as how the actors represent the characters. The film stems from the vision of the director, particularly apparent in Kevin Spacey's *Beyond the Sea* (Chapter Three) and Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (Chapter Five). As suggested in Table 4, these filmmakers re-create the life story of the music artist in two broad ways: through narrative and music.

## *Narrative*

In terms of the narrative (and storyline) component, intertextuality, biographical omissions/inclusions and self-reflexivity are the key components. “The theory of intertextuality insists that a text... cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system” (Worton and Still, 1990: 1). Therefore, the musical biopic can only function as a part of a wider (media-related) context. As the musical biopic is a filmic text, intertextuality is apparent in stardom, the film director, producer(s) and genre. In terms of stardom, included are the music artist/s portrayed and the star actors cast in the film. Film audiences often remember previous films that the actor starred in as well as any media publicity on their private lives. Kevin Spacey’s primary role in *Beyond the Sea* is a case in point. Addressed in Chapter Three, Spacey’s Hollywood stardom altered the interpretation of his character, Bobby Darin. This is also the case for Cary Grant and Kevin Kline’s interpretation of Cole Porter in *Night and Day* and *De-Lovely* respectively (also featured in Chapter Three). In reference to the music artist portrayed, all texts publicly available (to the film audience) regarding the star will assist in defining him/her in relationship with the respective musical biopic. Film audiences draw comparisons between the musical biopic and other representations of the music artist in order to form a perception of the star. In terms of the film director, the idea of authorship defines some musical biopics more strongly than others. This was particularly the case for Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There* in Chapter Five. However, the intertextual focus tends to be on the stars and genre. In this case it was the musical film genre and biopic genre that were explored at length throughout this thesis.

Discussions of the films in this thesis addressed biographical omissions and inclusions. Although these musical biopics remain quite subjective it was vital to research whether certain relationships or events in the protagonist’s life were fabricated, added or completely left out altogether.

*A few of the biographers of this generation admitted that the sheer number of facts necessitated selection and condensation, and that this could lead to distortion, or when there were too few facts, the necessity for invention. Some noted that this meant edging towards fiction and fabrication (Zinsser, 2004: 204).*

The above quote, although particularly referring to written biography, is still an important consideration for filmic representation. As stressed throughout this thesis there is a difference

between the method of producing biography by a historian and biography by an artist (filmmaker), however, as Judith P. Zinsler brings to mind, both the biographer and filmmaker add a level of fabrication to their representations. Much like the biographer, the makers of the musical biopic fabricate events and relationships in order to: underline a particular issue, fill gaps in the biography, make the film more entertaining and/or avoid lawsuits from the music artist and family. Underlining issues in the musical biopics of this thesis centred on topics such as sexuality (homosexuality in Chapter Three's *De-Lovely*), race (racial segregation in Chapter Four's *Ray*), culture (Puerto Rican immigrants in Chapter Two's *El Cantante*) and disability (Curtis' epilepsy in Chapter Two's *Control*). Therefore, the musical biopic utilises the life of an individual to comment on important issues in the broader community. There is evidence that the issues stemming from these musical biopics initiate discussion with film audiences. On the *Christian Spotlight*<sup>192</sup> website *De-Lovely* has an 'offensive' moral rating. People who viewed the film commented on the website's message thread, discussing their views on homosexuality. On the *Guardian* (UK)<sup>193</sup> website an article on *Control*'s depiction of Ian Curtis' disability triggered discussion on epilepsy and its representations in feature film.

As well as reworking the biography, contemporary musical biopics are self-reflexive. They reference both the musical and biopic film genres as well as other media forms. Documentary films are self-reflexive, however, in more of an autobiographical way (Ruby, 2005): the individual reflecting on themselves. In the musical biopic the filmmaker's reflect the media constructions of the protagonist. Comedy film genres (particularly parody) are also (self) referential. Indeed, the function of reflexivity is predominantly for the purpose of humour (Seidman, 2003). For the musical biopic, however, it is to draw attention to the history of representation and how the film contributes to the public understanding of the music artist. Self-referentiality in the contemporary musical biopic is evident in terms of narrative structures and musical characteristics.

*Quotations, allusions, adaptations, influences, borrowings from texts, films, or any other medium are the sources of intertextual self-reference. When several media are involved, such as painting in the cinema, films in games, or novels in the film, there is intermedial self-reference* (Withalm, 2007: 19).

<sup>192</sup> <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2004/delovely.html>, accessed 19 January 2011.

<sup>193</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2007/oct/01/doescontrolstakeondisabili>, accessed 19 January 2011.

Apparent in the film analyses of this thesis, the contemporary musical biopic often references its own genre characteristics and other media forms such as novels, television programmes and music recordings. Examples of what Withalm refers to as intermedial self-reference includes: *Walk the Line*, based on Johnny Cash's autobiographies and *El Cantante*, developed from the interview recordings of Héctor Lavoe's wife, Nilda Roman Pérez. Further, all of the films discussed in this thesis were inspired by the music artist's recordings. The self-referentiality demonstrates that the contemporary musical biopic is understood as part of a wider context. Some films like *I'm Not There* demand prior knowledge from the film audience in order for them to appreciate the film and Dylan's life. However, most musical biopics do not depend on these pre-established understandings. It is the filmmakers who require a clear understanding of the music artist (and their representations in media) before embarking on the film project. Additionally, film audiences expect self-referentiality through intertextuality (and other means) to make the musical biopic appear more realistic and even 'authentic'. For this reason the contemporary musical biopic is not an exclusive biographical representation: it is produced to be a part of a larger cultural history of the music artist.

### ***Music***

Musical integration, audio-visual representation, re-recording of music tracks, musical arrangement and setting, song selection and sound quality are the significant sonic elements in the contemporary musical biopic. Discussed at length in the first chapter of this thesis, characteristics of the musical film genre were applied to the study of these contemporary musical biopics. As Peter Larsen notes (with translation by John Irons), "Film music is part of the film, part of the film experience and part of the cultural context surrounding the film. As simple as that" (Larsen and Irons, 2007: 7). As Larsen suggests, music is not (analysed) in isolation when presented in a feature film. This is where the points listed in Table 4 overlap as the music in the musical biopic is read in relation to the visually dynamic imagery and biographical narrative.

Just as the music is understood in relation to the moving image and narrative, the representation of music tracks is interpreted according to their original recordings. For example, Marc Anthony sung the music of Héctor Lavoe in *El Cantante* and the actors performed the music of Joy Division in *Control*. In a majority of instances, the actor/actress will provide their own vocals for the musical biopic. The main reason for the re-recording is to heighten the realism. However, there are some instances where there is no re-recording of

music tracks (instances in *Ray* and *I'm Not There*), which will be addressed below. Using the actual music artist's vocals creates a different type of aesthetic for the musical biopic; it appears more nostalgic and archival. In addition, established fans become less critical of the sonicity and more focused on the visual aspects of the musical biopic.

Musical arrangement and setting: when and where the music is played in the diegesis of the musical biopic; helps the film audience to understand the character in the context of where they live (geographical location) and the period of time that they live in. Additionally, song selection is crucial to how the protagonist (as well as time and location) is depicted in a musical biopic. Not all songs that are written and/or performed by the music artist are featured in the musical biopic. Hence, the filmmakers decide on the music tracks that will be utilised and what effect they want to achieve from their inclusion. Choosing some songs over others can completely change how a music artist is represented. The selection process demonstrates that the musical biopic is developed from the filmmakers' perspective. However, with the film audience's previous knowledge of the artist, the film is finally interpreted by the viewer.

As music is so central in the musical biopic, sound is an element that is often missed by film scholars. More generally, sound has often been overlooked in the scholarly study of film and other media including television and radio. Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda affirm:

*Once film sound has attained equal standing with the image in film analysis, it becomes possible to revisit established cinematic texts to reevaluate how they generate meaning and to rethink the current canon of cinema history* (Beck and Grajeda, 2008: 18).

The film analysis in this thesis provided equal attention to the sonic elements of the film as much as the visual. Although more attention was given to the musical aspects, sound is argued here to be a fundamental component in interpreting the identity of the protagonist in the musical biopic. Non-musical sounds contextualise the film and assist in positioning the film audience in the story (through perspective, for example). Sound creates empathy for characters and exemplifies the shifts in space and time. Overall, sound is a crucial factor when analysing the representation of music stars in the musical biopic and continues to remain an important field of study.

## Audience Interpretation

This thesis did not attempt to provide a definitive audience interpretation of each musical biopic analysed. Every individual audience member who watches these films will construe the films in various ways. Therefore, in the chapters of this thesis audience responses and critical reviews were discussed. Eric Smoodin refers to this as the ‘rhetoric of reception’:

*Of course, we can never conclusively reconstruct any film audience, just as we cannot chart all the variations of an audience’s interpretation of a film. But we can study a ‘rhetoric of reception’; that is, the various discursive forms that articulate possible responses to a movie – fan letters, exhibitor reports, government documents, and so on – and also help shape it – advertising and star interviews for instance. We must also keep in mind the historical specificity of any of these discursive forms and attempt to place them, as well as the members of the film audience, within at least a fairly precise context (Smoodin, 2001: 345).*

A clear way that audience reception of (musical) biopics can be read is through online media. Countless online blogs, websites and journalistic pages rank (musical) biopics.<sup>194</sup> Further studies can address audience reception by searching through official pages (of the film and the music artist, if available), magazine/newspaper websites, popular movie search engines such as *IMDb* and social media websites (as discussed above). However, as Eric Smoodin advises, consideration must be taken into who the audience is: location, age, nationality, culture and religion. An audience member’s circumstances affect how they interpret a musical biopic. Therefore, another way to analyse audience reception is more directly with a qualitative interview study, survey, focus group discussion and/or the use of questionnaires. However, Janet Staiger stresses:

*No approach to meaning-making and effects avoids doing textual analysis of something: movie reviews, ethnographic notes, individuals’ statements, focus group remarks, statements about memories, the objects spectators are looking at and listening to. This is ironic, since to study meaning-making, scholars have to interpret.*

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<sup>194</sup> Many websites rank musical biopics and then allow users to add comments: [http://www.denofgeek.com/misc/rss/%5C/%5C/Array.env.HTTP\\_HOST%5C/movies/436019/top\\_10\\_music\\_biopics.html](http://www.denofgeek.com/misc/rss/%5C/%5C/Array.env.HTTP_HOST%5C/movies/436019/top_10_music_biopics.html); <http://unrealitymag.com/index.php/2008/12/09/ten-of-the-best-performances-in-music-biopics/>; <http://www.movieretriever.com/blog/248/top-of-the-charts-the-top-ten-musical-biopics> (all accessed 29 December 2010).

*Every approach has the same basic problem of researchers eventually interpreting evidence they have gathered in some way (Staiger, 2005: 13-14).*

The role of the audience is essential in (re)constructing the identity of the music artist however the difficulty lies in the sheer volume of scholarly readings of audience/fan interpretations. This thesis administered a textual analysis of the selected musical biopics, additional behind-the scenes footage, interviews with filmmakers and actors. The analysis in this thesis is a clear approach to meaning-making however these interpretations will be continually open to debate. There can be no authoritative understanding of these musical biopics.

### ***Identity Re(Constructions): Music Artist and Actor***

The musical biopic represents the multiple identities of the music artist yet gravitates towards one particular interpretation. By focusing on one identity the musical biopic will either perpetuate or debunk the constructed myth of the star in relation to previous media texts. (Re)constructing the myth of the music artist makes the musical biopic inherently subjective. Madan Sarup discusses the idea of identity:

*There are, broadly speaking, two models of identity. The 'traditional' view is that all the dynamics (such as class, gender, 'race') operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity. The more recent view is that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process, and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors... Identities, our own and those of others, are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities (Sarup, 1996: 14).*

The 'recent view' that Sarup describes relates particularly to the musical biopic and representations of the star music artist, especially when considering that film is a creative art and the filmmakers are considered artists. The musical biopic provides a certain perspective on an identity in music entertainment. Its subjectivity makes the representations fabricated. When placed in the context of media representation, the identity of the popular music artist constantly changes through time (for example Cole Porter from *Night and Day* to *De-Lovely* in Chapter Three). Through media re-representations the film audience is exposed to varying degrees of identity transformations and refers to the culmination of all texts (not only the musical biopic) in order to develop their own unique perception of the music star.



Identity in the musical biopic focuses on various aspects of national cinema (Hollywood aesthetic in Chapter Four's *Walk the Line* and *Ray*), genre (the backstage musical in Chapter Three's *De-Lovely* and *Beyond the Sea*), geographical spaces (Macclesfield, England in Chapter Two's *Control*) and eras of time (the 1960s in Chapter Five's *I'm Not There*). However, each film tends to focus on a specific area in order to represent a particular aspect of the protagonist's identity. Wendy Ellen Everett's study of identity (in European cinema) argues that it is multiple, unstable and perpetually changing (2005: 6), making it continually fascinating for scholars and film audiences alike. Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon explore geographies of mobility and identity in feature films (2002) and state "Film is one site where the issue of identity can be temporarily fixed or visibly challenged" (2002: 67). Musical biopics visibly *and* sonically address the notion of musical identity and contemporary forms challenge the pre-conceived perception of the music artist. The 21st Century musical biopic sheds a new light on the biography of the protagonist which, in turn, attracts audiences.

As well as the music star, the film audience re-constructs the identity of the actors who are cast in the musical biopic. As explored in the analysis of *El Cantante* in Chapter Two and *Beyond the Sea* in Chapter Three, established actors that portray these music artists are an influential factor in exploring the respective identities. The actor and the music artist form one personality in the musical biopic hence, as the identity is reconstructed for the music artist, it is changed also for the actor. More often than not, a performance by an actor carried out to the film audiences' (and critics) standard can boost their reputation as a quality actor. Furthermore, audiences compare what they know of the music artist to how the actor portrays them on screen. There are many websites that discuss casting of stars<sup>195</sup> and even suggest possible casting options for future biopic productions.<sup>196</sup>

Apart from comparing the physical appearance of the actor to the character,<sup>197</sup> one of the main issues (previously mentioned) in the *musical* biopic is the music recordings. The

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<sup>195</sup> Blogs often list the best and worst performances:

<http://community.livejournal.com/ohnotheydidnt/43845329.html>; <http://blog.moviefone.com/2009/11/05/worst-movie-biopics/>. *IMDb* lists best performances in a biopic: <http://www.imdb.com/list/hKp4r7fEA6c/> (all accessed 29 December 2010).

<sup>196</sup> *Vibe* developed a 'wish list' for future biopics: <http://www.vibe.com/photo-galleries/casting-couch-stars-wed-see-biopics/>; @U2 forum discusses who would play Bono in a biopic:

<http://forum.atu2.com/index.php?topic=12156.30>; *Pop Eater* published casting ideas for comedian biopics: <http://www.popeater.com/2009/10/13/casting-comedian-movies-richard-prior/> (all accessed 29 December 2010).

<sup>197</sup> A gallery on the *New York Daily News* compares the profile of the actor to the character they play in their respective biopic: [http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/galleries/actors\\_brave\\_upcoming\\_biopics/actors\\_brave\\_upc](http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/galleries/actors_brave_upcoming_biopics/actors_brave_upc)

concern is whether the songs are lip-synced by the actor or if they use their own vocals for the performance.

*The musical bio-pic invites audiences to remember and forget their memories of celebrated performances. The genre asks the same contradiction of its leading players, since the original recordings are normally not used and bio-pic actors are usually accomplished performers in their own right* (Anderson, 1988: 336).

Accomplished musical performer Marc Anthony uses his own singing voice in *El Cantante*. However, in most instances in *Ray*, Ray Charles' actual singing voice was used even though actor Jamie Foxx is an established recording artist. Out of the films discussed in this thesis, *Ray* and some numbers in *I'm Not There* do not record the actor's singing voice but use the original artist's recording. This is not because the actors are incapable of singing – it is due to the overall aesthetic. Often the original recordings are used to showcase the music artist's talent and to reinforce the abilities of the singer/musician. From a musicological perspective, the re-recording of tracks makes the musical biopic less authentic in terms of clearly representing music history. Though, as continuously stated throughout this thesis, the musical biopic is an entertaining film genre that does not replicate but re-invent all facets of the music artist. Further, the protagonist's aesthetic in the musical biopic is not assessed on music alone. Molly Brost argues that it is a “complex interplay between actor, role, and persona” (2010)<sup>198</sup> taking into account elements such as physical appearance, demeanour, sound and musical performance. The film audience considers the various aspects in assessing the realism and authenticity of the musical biopic.

## THE FUTURE OF THE MUSICAL BIOPIC

Clearly this thesis selected films with a male protagonist. A larger percentage of musical biopics tend to be focused on a male music artist throughout time and there are very few that represent the life story of a female (less than 5%). Table 4 offers a list of UK and USA female biopics (with cinematic release) from 2000 to 2010. The majority of female biopics released during this decade focus on a creative individual (42%); predominantly authors (only one female musical biopic was released: *The Runaways*). Royalty and members of the aristocracy

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oming\_biopics.html; an *Empire* online forum discusses the similarities:

<http://www.empireonline.com/forum/tm.asp?m=2683781> (accessed 29 December 2010).

<sup>198</sup> <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=18&id=1247> (accessed 29 December 2010).

follow (16%) which leaves career women including lawyers, pilots, chefs, teachers and journalists. Only one criminal protagonist is recorded (*Monster*), however many films centre on issues of crime (30%).

<b>Year of Release</b>	<b>Country of Release</b>	<b>Film Title</b>	<b>Protagonist</b>	<b>Career</b>
2000	USA	Erin Brockovich	Erin Brockovich	Legal Assistant
2000	USA	Isn't She Great	Jacqueline Susann	Author
2001	UK	Iris	Iris Murdoch	Author
2001	USA	Riding in Cars with Boys	Beverly Donofrio	Author
2002	USA	Frida	Frida Kahlo	Artist
2002	USA	The Hours	Virginia Woolf	Author
2003	USA	Monster	Aileen Wuornos	Criminal
2003	UK	Sylvia	Sylvia Plath	Poet
2003	UK	Veronica Guerin	Veronica Guerin	Journalist
2004	USA	Against the Ropes	Jackie Kallen	Boxing Manager
2005	USA	Domino	Domino Harvey	Bounty Hunter
2005	USA	The Notorious Bettie Page	Bettie Page	Model
2005	UK	Mrs Henderson Presents	Laura Henderson	Theatre Founder
2006	USA	Miss Potter	Beatrix Potter	Author
2006	UK	The Queen	Queen Elizabeth II	Royalty
2006	USA	Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus	Diane Arbus	Photographer
2006	USA	Factory Girl	Edie Sedgwick	Actress
2007	UK	Becoming Jane	Jane Austen	Author
2007	UK	Elizabeth: The Golden Age	Queen Elizabeth I	Royalty
2007	USA	Freedom Writers	Erin Gruwell	Teacher
2008	UK	The Duchess	Georgiana	Aristocrat

2008	UK	The Other Boleyn Girl	Anne and Mary Boleyn	Aristocrats
2008	UK	Skin	Sandra Laing	Civilian
2008	USA	Changeling	Christine Collins	Civilian
2009	UK	The Young Victoria	Queen Victoria	Royalty
2009	USA	Julie & Julia	Julia Childs	Chef
2009	USA	Amelia	Amelia Earhart	Pilot
2009	USA	A Single Woman	Jeannette Rankin	Politician
2010	USA	The Runaways	Joan Jett and Cherie Currie	Musicians
2010	USA	Conviction	Betty Anne Waters	Lawyer
2010	USA	Fair Game	Valerie Plame	CIA Operations Officer

Table 4: Female Biopics (2000 – 2010) from the USA and UK (with theatrical release)

In Bingham's study he suggests that biopics of women are so different that he separates an analysis of these films from the 'great (white) male biopic'. Bingham expresses:

*In contrast to Great Man films... female biopics overall found conflict and tragedy in a woman's success. A victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and a non-traumatic personal life. Early deaths were preferable to long lives. Female biopics frequently depicted their subjects as certainly or possibly insane, made so by the cruelties of a victimizing world, or by the subject's insistence on having her own way in the world. These principles hardened into conventions (2010: 217).*

Specific female *musical* biopics show this victimisation and suffering such as *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) where Billie Holiday (Diana Ross) dies at 44. *What's Love Got To Do With It?* (1993) represents Tina Turner (Angela Bassett) who is physically and sexually abused by husband Ike Turner (Laurence Fishburne) and German musical biopic *Hilde* (2009) concerns international star Hildegard Knef (Heike Makatsch) who finds herself caught in the midst of

the Cold War battle. Other notable female musical biopics with similar themes include: *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), *Sweet Dreams* (1985), *Hillary and Jackie* (1998), *Sister Smile* (Italy: *Suor Sorriso*) (2001), *La Vie En Rose* (2007), *Cadillac Records* (2008) and *The Runaways* (2010). Examples of TV-movies include: *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991), *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999) and *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001). Due to their clear difference in representation, this thesis chose to focus on the male music artist. Future research should focus on how these female protagonists have been represented in film and why biopics have tended to stray away from the focus on female music stars. From studying the male protagonist in this thesis it is clear that the female (as wife, girlfriend, mother, or partner) has a key role in, often positively, influencing the life of the male music artist. However, it is not often in cinema (particularly that of the US and UK) that the life of the female music star is fully explored.

With the exception of *Control*, all of the musical biopics discussed in this thesis are Hollywood/US films. The films from the US tend to be more accessible, more mainstream and therefore reach a wider audience internationally. Hollywood films are also more formulaic in order to meet goals in terms of budget box office sales. This being said, musical biopics from other nations are a popular genre of film. Germany (*The Red Baron* 2008, *Hilde* 2009), the UK (*The Queen* 2006, *Nowhere Boy* 2009) and particularly France, had a recent surge of biopic releases with more in the making. French (musical) biopics are worth exploring further as Tobias Grey of *The Wall Street Journal* suggests that the French have a new wave of celebrity biopics.<sup>199</sup> Biopics including *Sagan* (2008), *Coco Avant Chanel* (2009) and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* (2009) along with musical biopics such as *La Vie En Rose* (2007) and *Gainsbourg* (2010), were released in the 21st Century. Hence, as with separating the analysis of male from female, it would also be of great value to separate the different national cinemas. Each (especially the non-English speaking films) represent different cultural sensibilities and representations of protagonists, formations of star-texts, musical traditions and would bring valuable examples to future research in the genre.

The current state of the (predominantly Hollywood/US) biopic, according to Bingham, is at the neoclassical stage which involves and incorporates all the preceding stages of the genre. These include melodrama, realism, the movement from the auteurist producer to the auteurist director genre, critical investigation and atomisation of the subject, parody and finally, minority appropriation (2010: 17-18). The current state of the *musical* biopic is also at this

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<sup>199</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121632610509163013.html>, accessed 9 November 2010.

neoclassical stage, moving from the producer genre (in the case of the Hollywood studio era) to a more director-centred genre, however, it also encompasses other modes including self-reflexivity and idealism. Visualised in Table 4, the musical biopic remains attentive to the relationship between narrative and music. Perspective is guided by the filmmakers then ultimately left to the film audience to interpret the music artist (and star actors, if present). Additionally, the impact of different technologies is imperative to the audience's interpretation of the film and stars. This is apparent especially through the internet which has opened up communication between members of the public, film studios, stars, filmmakers and audiences. With the rise of feature documentaries, auto/biographical publications and the ability of the stars themselves to update *Twitter* accounts and post messages online for the public to see, the musical biopic will become more authoritative. Fans will demand a more detailed, well-researched account of the individual's life. Overall, the direction that the musical biopic will follow will continue to perpetuate or create new myths of the music star. Following the postmodern ideology, these films will maintain intertextuality, repackaging and re-interpreting the lives of these star music artists.

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