

**Mapping the British Biopic: Evolution, Conventions,  
Reception and Masculinities**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
University of the West of England, Bristol for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy**

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the West of England, Bristol**

**June 2016**

**90,792 words**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis offers a revaluation of the British biopic, which has often been subsumed into the broader ‘historical film’ category, identifying a critical neglect despite its successful presence throughout the history of the British film industry. It argues that the biopic is a necessary category because producers, reviewers and cinemagoers have significant investments in biographical subjects, and because biopics construct a ‘public history’ for a broad audience. This thesis provides a timeline of British biopics released from 1900 to 2014, constructing an historical overview of the continuities and shifts the genre has undergone. It also constructs an assessment of the representation of masculinity in the biopic, including detailed textual readings of representations of masculinity in biopics released between 2005 and 2014. This rectifies the critical neglect of masculinity in the biopic, despite the majority of biopics being about men.

Following a critique of existing critical approaches to the biopic, including the viability of applying American paradigms to the biopic as a whole, subsequent chapters analyse the major aspects of the British biopic: a history of the production and reception of biopics and a survey of the biopic’s conventions. An inter-chapter introduces the nature of representations of masculinity in the British biopic using specific paradigmatic examples and the final two chapters focus on a detailed analysis of the representation of masculinity in particular films from the contemporary period which are mapped onto contemporaneous understandings of masculinity. One chapter considers the diversity of homosocial representations and those depicting ‘wounded’ men; the other discusses the ways in which selected films depict wounded men rehabilitated through supportive homosocial bonds.

The thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in three ways: 1) an understanding and analysis of the biopic, a genre that has attracted few studies; 2) an historical overview of the British biopic which has not yet been attempted; 3) a detailed analysis of the representation of masculinity in the British biopic which, the thesis argues, is a distinctive and largely neglected aspect. The thesis argues that the British biopic has specifically national characteristics and that these patterns offer evidence of a profound difference between British and American paradigms.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The biographical film, or 'biopic', conventionally focuses on actual individuals who embody wider ideals, values or anxieties within society. Foregrounding the 'truth' is the biopic's ambition; it claims to offer a 'truthful' representation of individuals and the world in which they lived; it blends documentary techniques, extensive research into the historical figure, and the visual setting of different time periods to authenticate its representation. Through these characteristics the biopic gains its powers of persuasion. Alongside these 'truth claims' made within the text, the biopic reflects underlying cultural assumptions and values as well: the biopic projects particular figures as markers of historical significance. The figure selected for a biopic indicates who is valued within the wider culture and is considered worthy of remembrance in different historical periods. This 'remembrance' is ideological; the biopic elevates certain individuals but marginalises others.

This study of the British biopic has three aims. First, as a study of genre, it documents the British biopic through a longitudinal study of the genre's releases between 1900 and 2014. From this 'timeline', located in the appendix, this study constructs an historical overview of the biopic which charts the broad continuities and shifts within the genre since 1900. This provides an introductory platform from which further scholarly research can be conducted. Second, it offers a revaluation of the British biopic through an exposition of a broader debate regarding the historical film, identifying a critical neglect of the genre despite its sustained and successful presence throughout the history of the British film industry. It argues that the biopic is a necessary category and that producers, reviewers and

cinemagoers have significant investments in subjects and how they are represented. The third aim is to provide a detailed textual reading of the representation of masculinity in biopics. The representation of women in biopics has recently been the subject of scholarship but analysis of male-centred films is absent, despite men forming the majority of biopic subjects. This study considers two specific patterns of masculine representation: the depiction of ‘wounded’ men, and homosociality. These offer evidence of a profound difference between British and American biopic production, prompting an evaluation of the relevance of American paradigms to British biopics. Through addressing these questions, this thesis offers a contribution to knowledge through its detailed analysis of a genre that has attracted very few studies. This first chapter provides a broad summary of the genre’s significance, and outlines the structure and methodology of the remaining chapters.

### **Prestige and Controversy**

In British cinema the biopic has always been intertwined with notions of quality and cultural capital: cultural legitimacy is established across films through the dissemination of ‘highbrow’ cultural material in popular media conventions. Though biopics require some audience knowledge of history and of the figures portrayed, they do not assume a degree of cultural competence. However, their cultural status is often elevated through the association with sources which are perceived to possess high cultural value, such as plays, literary novels or respected biographies. For instance, *The Madness of King George* (1994) was adapted from the play of the same name, and many biopics are literary adaptations. Biopics frequently focus on subjects from ‘high-culture’ including painting, classical music and canonical literature. They frequently utilise actors who work across film and

theatre. Writing about British middlebrow culture, Lawrence Napper comments on this “blurring of the boundaries” between media, noting that in the interwar period, theatrically trained actors, pictorial aesthetics and literary adaptations “were transferred to new media, and deemed to carry their meanings (and also their cultural status) intact across the adaptation process” (Napper 2009: 9). Middle-brow culture is democratic, exhibited in the mass-culture sphere of cinema, but it also defers to, and legitimates, the high-brow culture. It is assumed to entertain but also to carry an educational function, and biopics, which construct public history and notable individuals from the past, form one particular example.

This cultural legitimacy is reinforced through the prestige of awards and ceremonies, events in which biopics have been recognised as significant British cultural achievements. Charles Laughton was the first British actor to receive the Best Actor Academy Award for his portrayal of a monarch in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). Between 1933 and 2014 five ‘British’ biopics won the Academy Award for Best Picture: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Gandhi* (1982) and *The King’s Speech* (2010). This compares favourably with the seven American biopics which won the Award in this period: *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), *Patton* (1970), *Schindler’s List* (1993), *Braveheart* (1995), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), the latter of which was directed by a Briton, and had British funding.

Domestically, prestigious screening events underscore how biopics are perceived to embody a specific version of national identity and celebrate the ‘national character’. The selection of films shown for the Royal Film Performance, a

screening attended by members of the royal family, suggests the selection committee has favoured middlebrow productions with high production values and “true story” status (Spicer 2005: 188). This is corroborated by the number of biopics shown since the screenings began in 1946, including *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948), *Beau Brummell* (1954), *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1970), *Mary Queen of Scots* (1972), *Chariots of Fire*, *Chaplin* (1992) and *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008). Though its significance has diminished, the ceremony was originally intended to celebrate British cultural achievement after the Second World War, and to elevate a specific type of British film as distinct from American production (Spicer 2005: 198). Focusing on British historical subjects and their achievements offered one means of distinguishing British production and celebrating the cultural worth of the wider film industry in the UK.

The biopic purports to represent British history. It offers a ‘lesson’ through depicting significant figures from the past, their contributions and achievements. It is characterised as a quality product through its high production values, theatrically trained actors, prestigious sources and awards. Yet the biopic can be controversial depending on the subject and his/her portrayal. The *Independent* film review of *The Iron Lady* (2011), a biopic about former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, illuminates some key concerns in its criticism of director Phyllida Lloyd and screenwriter Abi Morgan: “It’s not that Lloyd and Morgan approve of what Thatcher did; *it’s that they offer no trace of opposition*, no countervoice of doubt to the steamroller chug of The Lady’s unarguable will. *This is the way it was*, the film says, and this (by implication) is the way it had to be” (Quinn 2012 my emphasis). This criticism reflects the wider concern that biopics, and ‘historical’ films in general, simplify complex events and histories and are unable to grasp the

intricacies of specific issues. It also hints at the ideological significance of these issues: the reviewer considers the representation to be biased or one-sided, but the film claims “this is the way it was”. This second point is critical and encapsulates the chief discursive characteristic of the biopic: it purports to be a true story, often beginning with a title card or caption to reaffirm this. The majority of biopics employ strategies and conventionalised techniques in order to persuade an audience that the depiction is ‘factual’. The conclusion of the review in the *Independent* offers a further key discursive feature: “The uncritical nature of the film, its acceptance of Thatcher as a self-made legend, will infuriate *those who remember* the 1980s as a bitterly divisive era” (Quinn 2012 my emphasis). Biopics provoke passionate reactions because they construct a form of public history, shaping lives in ways that are powerfully ideological and, in the case of *The Iron Lady*, contestable.

### **Defining Biopics**

Despite its apparent cultural role, the biopic has often become marginalised or appropriated in other critical, generic and discursive contexts. Although work has been published on the British biopic (see Minier and Pennacchia 2014) the two major monographs on the genre, George F. Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) and Dennis Bingham’s *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010), privilege Hollywood production and their paradigms have limited applicability to British productions. Furthermore, and like other genres, the biopic is characterised by hybridity and films can easily be placed in other generic categories. When the biopic appears in scholarship about British cinema it is frequently positioned within discussions of



larger, over-arching categories such as the ‘historical’ film or discursive categories such as ‘heritage cinema’. This marginalises the unique remit of the biopic, namely that it examines the life of a specific individual in relation to history, constructs a public history through narratives of notable individuals and employs truth claims to legitimate the representation. Categories such as the ‘historical film’ and ‘heritage’ are broad, and generally group films according to wider criteria. Differentiating the ‘historical’ film from the biopic is therefore a key ambition of this study.

Historical films may feature historical personages but their principal focus is on a documented *event* rather than an individual’s life story. *Fire Over England* (1937) features Elizabeth I (Flora Robson) but also fictional characters, and centres on a national event (England’s victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588) rather than a single individual. *The Dam Busters* (1955) is a further example that illustrates the problematic nature of the biopic’s generic boundaries. The film focuses on a real event in 1943, the bombing of a series of German dams, but the early narrative centres on inventor Barnes Wallis (Michael Redgrave) and his struggle to invent the “bouncing bomb”. The film follows conventions of the biopic such as the talented individual conflicting with the establishment, and Wallis faces a struggle in his private life (his health is failing) and public duty (he continues, despite ill health, to see the bomb completed and used). Yet the narrative builds to a spectacular event as its conclusion, the blowing of the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams in Germany, and this is the film’s focus. In these latter stages of the film, the role of Guy Gibson (Richard Todd), the Commanding Officer of the Royal Air Force’s 617 Squadron, is foregrounded. The latter half of the film centres on Gibson preparing his team at the base, before Gibson and the team of pilots bomb the dams. Furthermore, promotional posters foregrounded Wing Commander Guy

Gibson and the pilot group rather than Wallis.<sup>1</sup> The *Monthly Film Bulletin* aligned the film with the war genre (J.G. 1955: 82), and so did audiences: a user review of *The Dam Busters* featured on the *Internet Movie Database* identifies the film as “One of the great British war movies” (Quentin 2004). The film can be placed in a range of generic categories; an event-focused historical film, a war film, a biopic of a scientist or RAF war hero. This is typical of biopics; they can be read in several different ways and can be located in various generic categories.

These two examples, both of which feature historical subjects, do not conform to my definition of a biopic. They are overwhelmingly driven by a specific *event*. The biopic, in contrast, can be defined broadly by its focus on “the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used” (Custen 1992: 6). It “narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world” (Bingham 2010: 10). Others argue that biopics are “structured in linear fashion, following the chronology of a life ... [t]he historical figure is the source of all actions” (Landy 1991:15).

However, a linear structure is not always necessary; for example, subjective flashbacks feature in *The First of the Few* (1942), a wartime biopic about Spitfire inventor R.J. Mitchell. Biopics such as *Mahler* (1974), the biopic about Austrian composer Gustav Mahler, develop a sense of subjectivity through traumatic memory, adopting narrative devices such as flashbacks to generate detailed characterisation. In the edited collection *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (2014), Belén Vidal argues that “[t]he term ‘biopic’ is used to refer to a fiction film that deals with a figure whose existence is documented in history, and whose

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<sup>1</sup> Publicity materials are available through *Screen Online* and accessed through <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/483144/>

claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story” (2014: 3).

These definitions fail to account for the slippery and overlapping nature of the

British biopic as film genre and especially its representation of homosociality:

British biopics frequently privilege the relationship between *two* male figures and

the bonding that occurs between them, the historical figure’s noteworthiness is

constructed out of rivalries or supportive relationships. The limitations of general

studies reinforce the need for a specific, detailed investigation of the genre in its

British context.

Applying an excessively rigid definition ignores the genre’s heterogeneity. While I

have stuck to the principle that a biopic is structured around a life, or part of a life,

of a singular historical figure, this is tested by the representations found in films

such as *Scott of the Antarctic*. *Scott of the Antarctic* represents Captain Robert

Falcon Scott’s doomed expedition to the South Pole in 1910. The film’s title

reflects a focus on the individual but the film itself is concerned primarily with an

event rather than a ‘life story’ of Scott specifically. The voice-over by John Mills as

Scott is taken verbatim from Scott’s journals which were discovered and then

published in 1913. The voice-over provides first person-narration which reinforces

the historical figure as the narrative centre. The voice-over constructs an intimacy,

probing motivations and the character’s mind-set. The film celebrates an individual

who expands horizons and seeks knowledge of new lands through exploration, and

involves representations of psychological resistance, memories and moments of

doubt or disillusionment. However, the film is equally concerned with the

dynamics of the wider expedition group, including equally memorable figures such

as Captain Oates (Derek Bond). Although Scott is represented as the leader, the

mutual support and reliance between members of the male team is of equal

importance. Such films foreground the relationships between male characters. The frequent representation of homosociality between men is a recurring feature of the British biopic's generic history.

Historical figures feature widely in films. To be included within my corpus, there must be an indication that the film was marketed as a narrative about an individual life story, through a title that emphasises the single subject, or through promotional materials that position the film for audiences. Within the text itself, there should be a foregrounding of the individual within the historical period depicted and extensive characterisation.

As noted above, films that can be labelled biopics can also be positioned in other generic categories such as the historical, war or crime film, or through critical categories such as the heritage film. Indeed, this remains a critical concern: "The hybrid status of the contemporary biopic raises the question of whether the focus on a historical life amounts to a genre of its own or needs to be considered a biographical variation within other, more established film genres" (Vidal 2014a: 17). This thesis argues for the distinctiveness of the biopic. Chapters two through five expand on the issues raised here to show why a biopic genre category is necessary and why the biopic merits study. These chapters examine the genre's discursive features and truth claims and how biopics acts as a conduit of public history. They explore the different investments made by producers, reviewers and audiences in the subjects chosen.

## **Masculinity in the Biopic**

Chapters six to eight are concerned with the representation of masculinity in British biopics, including the figure of the ‘Great Man’ and particularly two further patterns of representation: homosociality and the ‘wounded’ man. The table provided in the second appendix identifies one hundred and ninety nine biopics about men and seventy four about women released between 1900 and 2014. The column chart provided in section one of the third appendix compares the number of male-centred biopics to those that are female-centred across each decade. The subsequent pie charts included in appendix three indicate the dominant biopic subject types in different periods of film production. Roughly seventy three per cent of the total output focuses on male historical figures and twenty seven on female subjects. Of these, the dominant subject for women has been monarchs and eighteen of the seventy four films focus on Queens.

These statistics clearly show that women are under-represented and the biopic is dominated by representations of men. These representations of men are, in contrast, diverse and vary over time, reflecting a shift in the prevailing treatment of male historical figures. The ‘Great Man’ approach to history contends that change, innovation and progress are brought about through charismatic individuals. It gained resonance through Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), which argued “the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here” (Carlyle 1841: 1). The hero is an agent of change, elevated above other men, who shifts the contours of history through his leadership. Chapter three examines films,

such as *Rhodes of Africa* (1936), which adopt this concept and helped to reinforce this highly gendered account of the nation.

Other films resonate more strongly with the ‘New Biography’ approach which emerged in the early twentieth century. This marked a movement from the reverential and hagiographic towards greater critical self-awareness in biography, a stress on human character and motifs as key to personality (Marcus 2002: 196).

The term gained currency following the publication of Virginia Woolf’s essay ‘The New Biography’ (1927), which identified the new genre and explored practitioners such as Harold Nicholson and Lytton Strachey. Whereas the earlier approach emphasised heroic actions and achievements, a ‘public’ history of the Great Man, the emergent paradigm was preoccupied with personality, psychology and the narrator’s role in shaping key instances through stylised narration. Stressing satire and irony over deferential treatment, it signified “the radical ideological and cultural rupture between Victorians and moderns” (Marcus 2002: 196). The preface to Strachey’s influential *Eminent Victorians* (1918) articulates the rationale for the approach:

It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch. If he [sic] is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with careful curiosity. (1918: 6)

Whereas Victorian biography constructed accounts of notable people through an emphasis on their ‘public’ exploits, Strachey constructed historical figures by examining (and speculating on) their private lives and personal motivations.

*Eminent Victorians* is an example of how “the New Biography redefined the contours of biographical practice through its attention to *personality* rather than chronology” (Vidal 2014: 8 my emphasis). This drew on a framework which has had a privileged relationship to biographical forms: Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud himself wrote biographies, and constructed causal explanations between childhood, adult life, sexuality and art in his study *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910). Psychoanalytic understanding of the human personality offered a template with which to write about historical lives, and the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis in the latter stages of the nineteenth century has an interweaving history with that of the biography. Causal connections between creativity and childhood, subjective memories represented through ‘flashbacks’, feature in many biopics and suggest the subject’s unconscious motivation. For Malcolm Bowie, psychoanalysis offered an effective template as it “redramatizes one of the paradoxes that the modern biographer confronts from day to day: you need a simplifying model, a schematic life-pattern, in order to give your work an arresting plot and prevent it from becoming a mere chronicle of particulars” (Bowie 2002: 191-192).

Strachey’s ‘great ocean’ is an effective metaphor for why filmmakers select, condense, and compress history and lives to meet the demands of the medium (see Rosenstone 2006: 39). The “revealing searchlight” and the New Biography’s focus on the “inner life” (Christie 2002: 286) are manifested in those films which interrogate and speculate on the interior ‘emotional’ life of subjects, often through flashbacks which explain psychological subjectivity and articulate memories and trauma. For example, the incident in which Peter Sellers destroys his son’s trainset after the child uses paint to disguise a scratch on his father’s sports car in *The Life*

*and Death of Peter Sellers* (2004) constructs Sellers as a volatile and erratic figure and complicates reading him simply as a talented actor.

According to Dennis Bingham, British films displayed the irony and ambivalence characteristic of the New Biography earlier than Hollywood films (2010: 39). *The Private Life of Henry VIII* utilises many characteristics of New Biography; the dominant narrative motif concerns the King's inability to secure an heir and emphasises the human personality behind the palace doors. The closing sequence constructs intimacy between subject and viewer; the ageing King turns to the camera in close-up while eating a chicken leg in the film's first 'direct-address'. Reflecting on his many wives he claims, referring to Katherine Parr, "the best of 'em's the worst". The device democratises the relationship between monarch and viewer, speaking out of the screen and breaking the fourth wall, evoking Strachey's "revealing searchlight".

Comments from directors and producers suggest the approach of the New Biography permeates other British biopics. David Lean stresses the *construction* of Lawrence as a character in *Lawrence of Arabia*: "In treating Lawrence as a character we have not been able to avoid, or indeed wanted to avoid, the controversial aspects of his private life. Our treatment for instance shows him to be masochistic. We have not implied that Lawrence was homosexual, though it depends on what you call homosexual" (quoted in Organ 2009: 9). Masochism is, to borrow from Strachey's rationale, the "characteristic specimen" alongside an examination of the controversial 'private' life. Ken Russell, adopting a "Sherlock Holmes" approach for *Mahler*, "searched for the soul of the man in his music" and



“found a lot of bombast along the way – the sound and fury of a tormented artist”  
(Russell 2008: 141).

Searching for the *soul* similarly resonates with the revealing searchlight and suggests a desire to speculate. The director of *The King’s Speech*, Tom Hooper, also evoked Strachey’s rationale by foregrounding the importance of the King’s stammer in representing his ‘spirit’:

We had looked at archive footage from the 1938 Glasgow Empire exhibition – a long clip with decent close-ups of the King. What was so moving is that you can see the King wants to do the right thing. There is hope in his eyes. There is nothing subversive about him. And he keeps hitting these silences in which he starts to drown, then pauses, recovers himself, goes again ... and drowns again. I had tears in my eyes at the end of the five-minute, juddery clip. I thought: my God, if it can be this emotional and we can somehow catch the spirit of this, we are not going to have a problem. (quoted in Kellaway 2011)

A clip with emotional appeal is used to capture the “spirit” of the King. George VI is examined *through* his stammer. This is the motif, with an emphasis on childhood trauma as the cause. The close-up is perceived as critical to approaching George VI’s emotional interiority, just as the close-up in *Henry VIII* conveys the suffering of the monarch through foregrounding his eyes as he yearningly watches as his food is removed. The close-up’s capacity for representing feelings and emotions in these examples thus equates with the ‘New Biography’ emphasis on personality (see Marcus 2002: 215).

Two issues arise here. First, the use of adjectives such as ‘masochistic’, ‘tormented’, and a king who ‘drowns’ illustrate an ambition to probe human fragility and instability, to construct their subjects as ‘wounded’ rather than ‘great’ men. The concept of ‘wounded’ is effective because it is inclusive – though many

films depict male fragility these representations are diverse. Furthermore, using the term ‘wounded’ implies these figures can be *healed*, and this is especially important in contemporary biopics, such as *Nowhere Boy* (2009), *The Damned United* (2009) and *The King’s Speech* in which wounded men are rehabilitated through homosocial support.

The depiction of close male friendship found in different biopics similarly contrasts with the Great Man theory’s stress on individualism. The focus on relationships in contemporary biopics, as with the ‘wounded’ man, evokes the New Biography’s emphasis on personality and private lives. It is these two patterns of representation that are explored in this study. To tease out these dynamics, of relations *between* men rather than on the individual construction of masculinity present within the text, it is necessary to employ a framework that accounts for these interwoven male lives. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) employs the term ‘male homosocial desire’ to encapsulate the complex, contradictory relations between men. This framework is introduced in Chapter Two and then explained in detail in Chapter Six.

### **Structure and Methodology**

This study provides different ‘levels’ of analysis; a wide-ranging analysis of biopic production by decades identifies dominant themes, subject matter, and the broader shifts which have informed the genre. This quantitative analysis highlights the biopic’s role in the construction of public history, key decades in which shifts occurred and when new types of subject were depicted. The ‘timeline’ in the appendix, and the historical survey in Chapter Three constructed from it, are concerned with those films that had a UK release in cinemas. Television biopics are not included. Though this is partially motivated by the need to ensure a manageable

study, the close relationship between television and film production in the UK makes this a significant absence. However, a key concern of this study is ascertaining the types of subject considered appropriate for large-scale ‘prestige’ productions and international distribution, along with the reception of such films. These features distinguish biopic films from the ephemeral nature of television production, but the history of the TV biopic, such as the significant cycle of BBC4 films broadcast between 2002 and 2013 warrants its own extended study (see Andrews 2016: 409-429). The desire to produce a survey of biopic production that examines across a century of film production necessitates a broad perspective. Although the ‘Special Collections’ archives located within the British Film Institute include extensive materials relating to key figures in biopic production such as Michael Balcon, the ambition of this study is to move quickly through historical periods, identifying key films but maintaining a focus on the broader nature of biopic production, its continuities and changes.<sup>2</sup> As such, this study makes use of producer autobiographies as primary sources but not archival collections.

Film producers, reviewers and cinemagoers have significant investments in the type of figure depicted and how these figures are represented. Discourse analysis, which examines the views of these various parties in interviews, reviews and letters, indicates what the genre signifies to each. A detailed evaluation of the type of data collected from these sources is provided in Chapter Four. The sources used here avoid trade papers such as *Kinematograph Weekly* which are aimed at those working within the industry in favour of sources such as fan magazines and

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<sup>2</sup> See ‘Special Collections’, *BFI*. Available from: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/introduction-bfi-collections/exploring-collections/special-collections> [Accessed 30 October 2016].

newspapers that target, and feature contributions by, ordinary cinemagoers. Thus this study favours sources which indicate the popular reception of films and how they were positioned by reviewers, but these can only indicate and cannot be taken as representative. In addition to reviews and letters submitted to magazines, *Internet Movie Database* 'user reviews' are drawn on as a source. Though these offer an indication of viewers' responses to films in a period difficult to analyse, the comments made are not representative of the viewing public generally, but only those who volunteer responses. They are a self-selecting sample. However, there is a review rating system and I have selected reviews that were rated highly by other users system as these can be taken as representative of a significant number of viewers who use *IMDb*.

Close textual analysis is necessary to examine how masculinity is represented on screen, in particular how this is visually constructed through framing, staging and *mise-en-scène*. Arguments about representations require interpretation and detailed explanation in order to be convincing, and Chapters Seven and Eight provide this through a focus on a smaller sample of seven films with attention to specific sequences and their formal properties. These chapters form a series of case studies, and in addition to the close textual analysis of selected scenes each case study considers the context of production and reception of each film. Textual analysis is employed in earlier chapters, specifically Chapter Three, to show how certain filmic sequences exemplify a broader shift within the genre. For instance, Chapter Three features analysis of a sequence from *Lawrence of Arabia* to argue that the film signified a shift from the traditional Great Man approach presented in earlier biopics. However, textual analysis is predominantly located in these later chapters

to illustrate how the visual style contributes to depictions of wounded men and homosocial relations.

The study is organised as follows. Chapter Two is a critique of existing critical approaches to the biopic. A critical reading of secondary material such as books, chapters and journal articles shows the extent to which the biopic has been marginalised in existing scholarship, which has tended to subsume the biopic into larger generic categories of ‘historical’ film and ‘heritage’ film. Finally, Chapter Two contextualises the homosocial and masculinity within wider film scholarship. It proposes that the representation of wounded men and homosociality in the British biopic (unlike the ‘Great Man’) cannot be subsumed into American-centred paradigms. The review concludes by introducing the methodological framework used within the thesis to discuss masculinity: Eve Kosofsky Segwick’s formulation of the homosocial.

Chapter Three considers the types of biopics released between 1900 and 2014 and provides a critically-informed history of biopic production. It identifies key cycles, the emergence of new types of subject and contends that producers are critical to understanding what drives change in the genre. Key films are identified for closer inspection, focusing on their production, the ambitions of the industrial personnel involved and the cultural context in which the film was made. Chapter Two contends that the biopic’s significance has been underestimated in existing studies, and Chapter Three goes on to argue that the biopic is powerfully ideological, and that its construction of public history is tied to influential individuals involved in the production of films. This chapter highlights the dominance of men as subjects

within biopics, and this acts as an introductory platform to the discussion in Chapters Six through Eight.

After examining the motivations and ambitions of industry figures in Chapter Three, the study considers in Chapter Four the reception of films through analysis of reviews, fan letters and *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)* user reviews. The chapter considers how reviewers and audiences viewed these films and what they felt was important in a biopic. Through close primary analysis of magazines, newspapers and internet forums, this chapter examines the extent to which reviewers and cinemagoers, like the producers discussed in the previous chapter, make investments in specific biopic subjects and are anxious and critical of the representations of these subjects.

Chapter Five considers some general generic conventions of the British biopic. It draws on and develops Custen's summary of Hollywood conventions as a platform for discussing the British version. Whereas Custen examines a short period of film production, this chapter explores films from the 1930s through to contemporary production to show how conventions in the biopic have served a variety of functions and that the use of conventions shifts in different historical periods. These broader structures of meaning are explained because the analysis in Chapters Seven and Eight, which performs textual analysis on a smaller sample, relies on generic formulae that inform the representation of masculinity. For example, the flashback is a feature of various biopics, but this convention can be used differently and has increasingly, since the 1970s, been used to articulate traumatised male subjectivity. Such traumatic flashbacks are a habitual feature of contemporary film production and contribute to the depiction of a 'wounded' subject.

Thus the first two research aims, locating the biopic within a longitudinal study of the genre's releases and establishing the importance of the biopic category, are covered in Chapters Two to Five. Chapter Six acts as an inter-chapter summarising the third aim of the study and the methodology informing Chapters Seven and Eight. Whereas the historical overview in Chapter Three contends that various film producers were heavily invested in biopics about 'Great Men', Chapter Six introduces two further patterns of representation which require analysis. Using as examples a small number of films that were released before 2005, this chapter summarises the persistence of the 'wounded' man and the representation of homosocial bonds in biopics and provides a summary of Sedgwick's formulation of 'male homosocial desire'. This chapter sets the parameters for the close textual analysis of contemporary biopics, those released between 2005 and 2014, in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Chapter Seven examines four films, *Pierrepont* (2005), *Stoned* (2005), *The Railway Man* (2013) and *The Imitation Game* (2014). These films offer a diversity of homosocial representations. Some are loving and supportive, some are murderous and characterised by rivalry; whereas others represent social anxieties over homosexuality. Furthermore, many of these films also depict a wounded subject, a man victimised by another man, by homophobic cultures and legislation, or through traumatic experience.

Chapter Eight contends that there has been a shift in representations of the homosocial in contemporary British biopics in comparison to earlier periods. It expands Sedgwick's formulation of homosociality by recognising a fusion of two previously discrete biopic representational tropes: wounded men now healed

through supportive homosocial bonds. Close analysis of *The Damned United*, *Nowhere Boy* and *The King's Speech* shows how the biopic narrative has recently been concerned with a traumatised man recuperated from crisis through the support provided by a male friend. These representations are mapped onto contemporaneous understandings of masculinity and the emergence of a therapeutic culture, in which open emotion and self-disclosure are invested with the power of rehabilitation. Each film requires the wounded man to make his victimhood explicit and open to the male friend, who then supports them through their respective trauma.

The conclusion summarises these findings. This study addresses the inadequate coverage the biopic has received. It shows how the British biopic has changed over the past century, reflecting changes in the attitudes of wider society and the values as understood by film producers, reviewers and audiences. In particular, it displays how the treatment of biographical characters has shifted from the revered 'Great Man' to the 'wounded' man who is rescued through a homosocial bond with another man.



## Chapter Two

### Critical Review

This chapter critically examines existing research on the biopic and demonstrates the ways in which the biopic has been marginalised within dominant approaches. The first section of the chapter draws on genre theorists to explore how films which can be categorised as ‘biopics’ can also be considered through other generic categories, while noting the lack of a settled iconography within the genre and its intersection with the docudrama form. I go on to highlight how the biopic’s significance has been masked through its conflation with other genres such as the ‘historical’ film and critical categories such as the ‘heritage’ film. Existing scholarship tends to subsume the biopic within larger generic categories and critical discourses and consequently struggles to grasp the particular significance and the questions which the biopic, as a category, raises. When the narrative focus of a film is on a real historical person, specific considerations have to be recognised: what type of subject is depicted and what does this suggest about wider culture? What wider ideologies do these figures embody? Who is ‘important’ and who is marginalised in this process? These questions are marginalised by subsuming biopics into the broader category of the historical film, a category which can include films featuring both fictional and factual subjects and which frequently foregrounds a specific historical event rather than an individual’s life. Such questions demonstrate why the ‘biopic’ is a necessary category. The next issue concerns the representation of masculinity in the British biopic, a representation that forms a distinction between Hollywood biopics and British ones. This chapter analyses existing approaches to the biopic’s representation of masculinity and suggests Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s study *Between Men: English Literature and*

*Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) provides a productive framework for examining the distinctive treatment of masculinity in the British biopic.

### **Generic Boundaries**

Studies which consider the generic features of biopics identify their hybrid character and the subsequent problems in defining the biopic. The dominance of Hollywood cinema in genre theory has distorted understandings of the biopic in other national cinemas. Carolyn Anderson's chapter 'Biographical Film' in *Handbook of American Film Genres* (1988) creates a detailed profile of over 200 'American' biopics and examines them in chronological order to chart the historical shifts the biopic has undergone. Anderson observes that the biopic is frequently multi-generic, giving as an example *Al Capone* (1959) which exemplifies the conventions of the crime and gangster film as well as the biopic (1988: 332), and argues that because the emphasis is on an individual the biopic is frequently constructed as a star-vehicle (ibid.: 334). Anderson and John Lupo provide an update to Anderson's earlier work in their chapter "Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century" in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (2002) where they continue to emphasise the biopic's generic hybridity, suggesting that it "has contestable boundaries, as it shares borders with historical drama, docudrama and social issue drama; its subsets overlap with other genres to create gangster biopics, musical biopics, sports biopics, African-American biopics and so forth" (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 91-92). These issues are relevant to British production. For example, certain popular actors, such as Anna Neagle, featured in numerous biopics and this informed how they were positioned by critics. Equally, producers such as Herbert Wilcox would locate suitable biopic subject matter to utilise Neagle's talents. These issues are addressed in chapters three, four and five.

Neale similarly uses the Hollywood biopic as his focus in *Genre and Hollywood* (2000) and takes issue with Custen's definition that the biopic focuses on "the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used" (Custen 1992: 6). Neale argues that Custen includes some films, such as *The Star Maker* (1939), in his sample that were generally understood as depicting real persons with fictional names, but not others (2000: 61). Neale uses *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) to illustrate how biopics can centre on the lives of more than one individual, while the "portion of a life" criteria is ambiguous when most biopics focus on the span of a person's career but others examine one specific stage in a person's life (2000: 62). Neale's suggestion that greater flexibility is required in categorising the biopic also applies to British biopics. *Another Country* (1984), though it used the fictional name Guy Bennet, was largely understood to be based on the life of British spy Guy Burgess. Similarly, films such as *Mrs. Brown* (1997) depicting Queen Victoria and her servant John Brown suggest British films cannot be contained within Custen's definitions. This latter point is particularly critical for contemporary British biopics, which represent close homosocial attachments between two historical figures and which are the focus of chapters seven and eight.

In *Cinema Genre*, Raphaëlle Moine takes issue with the construction of generic categories which suggest that genres are pure and impermeable. Using *Napoleon* (1927) as an example, Moine suggests that the film is both a biopic, as it recounts the life story of a man, and a historical film because it reconstructs a historical period (2008: 20). This issue is critical to understanding how the biopic's discursive characteristics have been marginalised in existing research as studies display a tendency to consider the British biopic within discussion of the

'historical' film, an issue which loses sight of some of the biopic's distinctive features, its focus on the documented individual's life.

Although the biopic is absent as a category in some studies (see Schatz 1981), the ones mentioned above examine the biopic within discussions of genre and hybridity. Though they typically use American examples, and reveal the dominance of Hollywood-led generic formulations, studies of British biopics also contend that films do not exist in a pure form but can be placed within other generic categories. For instance, *Dance with a Stranger* (1985), the biopic of Ruth Ellis, "may be seen to be as much a film noir as it is a biopic" (Hill 1999: 126) and can be read as a "noir-melodrama" (Tweg 2000: 7). *Elizabeth* (1998) merges the iconography of the costume drama with a fast-paced, thriller style narrative to depict the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and "[t]he hybridity of the film is visible from the start, rendering it very difficult to reduce the film entirely to one or other generic tradition" (Higson 2003: 213). Recognising this elasticity is important, especially because, as is shown in the analysis in chapters three and four, producers and viewers recognised the hybrid status of biopic films and the representations were informed by generic frameworks outside the biopic itself. However, the biopic genre has specific discursive characteristics which differentiate it from other categories.

### **The Biopic as 'True Story'**

Though the diversity of historical periods and themes makes generalisations about the biopic more difficult, there are specific, recurring, visual strategies and techniques which indicate these films' generic status. The biopic has specific formal similarities with the docudrama. The most sustained approach to docudrama

is provided by Derek Paget whose study *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen, and Stage* (1990) examines the proliferating use of hybrid forms that merge fact with fiction across television, radio and theatre. The book traces the history of the development of the True Story form across both American and British traditions through a focus on theatre productions, docudramas, biopics, in relation to wider ideologies. Paget analyses *Gandhi, Caravaggio* (1986) and *Cry Freedom* (1987). *Gandhi* is framed as a project of cultural imperialism, reducing the political significance of the figure by foregrounding the individual's story and by the biopic's conventions which elevate the personal struggles over the wider political context (ibid.: 118-121). *Cry Freedom* foregrounds the white middle-class journalist Donald Woods over that of black activist Steve Biko and with it wider South African politics (ibid.: 26-27). By contrast, *Caravaggio* is praised for its anachronisms, demotic costuming and stylised reconstructions of the artist's painting (ibid.: 168).

Paget's approach is concerned with the 'True Story' category more broadly and examines the biopic as one form of factual dramatisation. However, his analysis of how True Stories persuade us of their authenticity is useful for my study of the biopic. Paget stresses that docudramas adopt a rhetorical strategy aimed at convincing the viewer of the validity of the text, its truthfulness and basis in fact, through a "discourse of factuality" (Paget 1990: 4). Paget claims this is a verifying discourse – imported from non-dramatic modes – to authenticate the depiction, and biopics construct such a discourse from non-dramatic modes of signification, such as captions, voice-overs and newsreel images. The biopic and docudrama share a similar aim, to persuade viewers of their factuality, commenting on real events, issues and people who exist outside the text itself. For instance, though the visual

style of *Dance with a Stranger* evokes film noir, the film concludes with a caption stating Ellis was hung on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1955. This forms an authenticating strategy and channels the biopic genre's key discursive characteristic: it purports to be true.

Although Paget is concerned with the broad category of the 'True Story' his examination of authenticating strategies is highly relevant to biopics: the majority of biopics, and Appendix One lists two hundred and seventy three films released between 1900 and 2014, employ such strategies. Biopics seek to persuade that their account of a life is 'true' and Chapter Five explores the techniques that signify these claims to truth.

### **Major Studies of the Biopic**

This section considers three major studies of the American biopic specifically. In the first major study of the biopic, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), George F. Custen examines Hollywood biopics produced between 1927 and 1960, the 'classical' era of Hollywood cinema. He examines how the depiction of fame within the biopic is cultivated through the values of major studio producers, such as Darryl F. Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox, and draws on archive materials such as memos and letters which highlight the influence of the producer in biopic production. He focuses on the 'organised culture of production' but also identifies biopic conventions such as titles, voice-over, flashback and montage sequences which feature in the sample. Custen also undertakes quantitative analysis by designating films according to studio, the type of profession depicted, the distribution of biopics within each decade, historical settings, and the gender and nationality of the figures depicted. Though centred on Hollywood production, Custen's approach emphasises the role of the producer in shaping the life of the figure depicted, and this is critical in British biopics in which

producers make significant investments in specific figures and influence how they are represented. Custen's discussion of the broader conventions present in the studio biopic provides a template for analysing the generic properties of British biopics. Chapter Five considers the extent to which British biopics released between 1933 and 2010 conform to Custen's analysis, which is based largely on studio biopics.

A third feature of Custen's study is the attention to two different eras of biopic production, a shift after the Second World War from figures of the conventional elite towards a new tendency to examine figures from entertainment (Custen 1992: 84). Between 1927 and 1940 studio production was predominantly centred on royalty and political figures whereas in the period 1941 to 1960 the emphasis was on entertainers, artists and sportsmen. A similar broad shift is detectable in British biopics and I have adopted Custen's quantitative approach to consider British production specifically. However, the enduring appeal of the monarchy film in British production, an appeal that strengthened with the global commercial successes of post-2000 royal films *The Queen* (2006) and *The King's Speech*, and the relative scarcity of the sports biopic, which only appears in the 1980s following the success of *Chariots of Fire*, mean that the shift Custen discerns in Hollywood productions is less marked in British ones. A further distinguishing feature of this study of the British biopic is the role given to reception. Though Custen examines the production of certain Hollywood biopics in extensive detail, my own study provides an account of production but also the broad issues and debates among reviewers and cinemagoers as well. This is critical in understanding the extent to which producers' ambitions and motivations for making biopics are compatible with those of different parties viewing biopics. This analysis illustrates what was

important to audiences themselves and the discursive context in which films were released and consumed.

Dennis Bingham's study *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* (2010) also concentrates on Hollywood production. However, Bingham emphasises the post-studio era, showing how this shift in infrastructure signalled a movement from the biopic as a producer's genre (Custen's argument) towards one characterised by 'auteur' filmmaking (Bingham draws on examples such as Spike Lee and Todd Haynes). His study addresses both Hollywood and independent American films, incorporating research into the subject's life, production context, textual and ideological analysis, but there are chapters focusing on 'British' biopics such as *Rembrandt* (1936) and *Lawrence of Arabia*. *Rembrandt* is noted for its measured development of the character rather than the goal-driven figure of Hollywood biopics (ibid.: 42), suggesting a distinction between national cinemas. Bingham also identifies the influence of the 'New Biography' in the film's contrast between the way Rembrandt lived and how he is remembered, and analyses how Charles Laughton's persona and acting style inform the depiction of Rembrandt, an issue I consider in Chapter Five. Though Bingham's chapters on British production provide the context for particularly significant British examples, these are placed within a trajectory that traces the genre's wider development (ibid.: 22). Hence *Rembrandt* is judged in relation to later Hollywood biopics such as *Ray* (2004) (ibid.: 46) which loses sight of *Rembrandt*'s place in the British biopic's generic development. Bingham's analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia* foregrounds the representation of gender, and notes a trajectory of victimisation. This is pertinent to my contention that the British biopic displays wounded masculinity. I return to this later when considering existing analysis of gender representation in the biopic.



Ellen Cheshire's *Bio-Pics: A Life in Pictures* (2015) examines British and Hollywood production since 1994. Through a series of case studies, grouped by profession or sub-genre and analysed in relation to themes, motifs and narrative structures, Cheshire considers the resurgence of the genre, the choice of subject and casting, how figures are represented and films' critical and commercial response. The study provides brief overviews and the focus is mostly on Hollywood and independent American production, but it does consider how *Iris* (2001) privileges Iris Murdoch's romantic life and illness over her writing career (2015: 50) and the representation of Nelson Mandela in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (2013) (ibid.: 104-107). Cheshire also considers Peter Morgan's approach to the biopic, how he focuses on one specific incident in a subject's life to gain insight into their life as a whole (ibid.: 79). Given that Morgan has been involved in a number of 'British' biopics, such as *The Queen* and *The Damned United*, this offers an insight into the characteristics of the British genre and the sort of templates employed to represent British subjects. However, through focusing on examples since 1994 the study does not purport to examine the construction of the biopic across an extended period, nor how the representations in contemporary biopics have generic precedents.

Studies that examine specific Hollywood and American biopics are present in broader works and single essays in journals. Some scholars write about specific examples and their relation to the genre (Elsaesser 1986: 15-31) or specific themes such as legislation on capital punishment (Bingham 1999: 3-26). Research centres on the nature of biopic performance (Bingham 2010b: 76-95). Rostenstone examines how biopics treat controversial events by analysing *Reds* (1981), the biopic of American journalist and political activist John Reed and his account of

the Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919) (2007: 11-29). More recently a journal issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (Epstein 2011) was devoted to essays that examine the relationship between representations of historical figures and their role in framing how ideas of American nationhood are 'imagined' (Anderson 1991). The edited collection *A Companion to the Historical Film* (Rosenstone and Parvulescu 2013) dedicates four chapters to the biopic, with essays focusing on Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) (Hesling 2013: 179-198), literary biopics (Shachar 2013: 199-218), the Hindi biopic (Dwyer 2013: 219-232) and an overview of the genre's approach, conventions, acting style and performance (Bingham 2013: 233-254). When coupled with the two monographs by Custen and Bingham, these essays, articles and collections suggest that the dominant understandings of the genre focus on American examples.

### **The Biopic as 'Historical' Film**

Those studies which have been made of the British biopic have framed it within larger generic categories, which marginalise the specificities of the biopic. The 'historical film' has generated a large body of American-centred research (see Rollins 1983, Eldridge, 2006, Burgoyne 2008). The 'historical film' category has a tendency to group films that focus on historical events *and* historical persons.

Jonathan Stubbs articulates this problem thus:

[it] seems illogical to suggest the historical film somehow overrules related genre labels such as the costume film or the biopic, or equally that these are 'sub-genres' attached to or descended from an overarching historical film 'master-genre'. Other genre categories may intersect with the historical film, but they also have discursive characteristics of their own. (2013: 20)

Stubb's approach to the historical film rests on Hollywood examples, but his observation can be transposed onto studies that examine the British historical film

specifically. Marcia Landy's *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (1991) devotes a chapter to 'The Historical Film' and includes examples such as *The Young Mr Pitt* (1942) and *Fire Over England*. While the former clearly designates the focus on the individual, the latter focuses on an event. The recurring 'historical' label has a tendency to relegate the biopic to a *sub-genre* of the historical film and to mask the key feature of the biopic that the emphasis is on an historical *individual* rather than an event. Landy's study does focus on some British biopics which are positioned within a larger investigation of British historical films and their place in British genre productions more generally. However, its broad aims, periodisation, and the large size of the sample explored leaves little room for close analysis of individual films.

In *The Romance of Adventure: Genre of Historical Adventure in the Movies* (1993) Brian Taves employs the term 'historical adventure' to discuss fifty films from the 1920s to 1950s but his study is largely limited to Hollywood production. The term historical adventure, he argues, distinguishes the genre from other types of action film, and can include real figures or actual events. This itself suggests a conflation of different texts, and does not acknowledge how films fit other generic categories. His analysis includes British productions such as *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) and *Scott of the Antarctic* and thus doesn't distinguish national contexts of production and cultural ideologies.

In *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (1994), Sue Harper employs the historical film category differently. She is concerned with mapping popular taste, and to interrogate this she focuses on costume dramas. She argues that these are still historical films, but that "[h]istoricity is differently nuanced in them ... they fulfil a heterogeneous range of functions.

These functions can only be understood by abandoning the expectation that historical film should be judged according to the accuracy of its version of events” (1994: 2-3). Harper focuses on those films which represent real historical people (*The Private Life of Henry VIII*), and costume dramas, particularly the Gainsborough cycle and films such as *The Wicked Lady* (1945), which are fictional narratives within recognisable historical settings. In *Henry VIII* the use of an historical setting for a narrative which emphasises romance and humour above claims to historical accuracy means that the film conforms to the conventions of the costume drama; but the use of real names, titles and historically accurate songs suggests that Alexander Korda wanted to achieve some degree of historical verisimilitude. *Henry VIII* fits both categories, depending on the argument put forward and the interpretation of the researcher who privileges certain traits.

This problem of classification continues in more recent studies: Sue Harper’s essay ‘Bonnie Prince Charlie Revisited: British Costume Film in the 1950s’, offers a distinction between ‘historical’ and costume drama: “Historical films deal with real people or events: Henry VIII, the Battle of Waterloo, Lady Hamilton. Costume film uses the mythic and symbolic aspects of the past as a means of providing pleasure, rather than instruction” (Harper 2009: 276). In claiming a difference between costume drama and historical film, Harper places the biopic within the historical category, which she differentiates from the costume drama; this is important given the different ambitions of the costume film, but it underscores how the biopic is assumed to lack discursive characteristics distinct from those of the historical film.

James Chapman’s monograph about the British historical film, entitled *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (2005), adopts

the broader ‘historical’ label rather than the ‘biopic’ label specifically as “there is broad consensus amongst most, though not all, scholars that a historical film is one that is based, however loosely, on actual events or real historical persons” (2005: 2). Chapman examines representations of the past in films varying from *The Private Life of Henry VIII* to *Zulu* (1964) through case studies and considers the wider historical context in which these films were produced and released. These are all historical films, in that they represent key moments in British history. *Henry VIII* dramatises the life of an historical *figure*, whereas *Zulu* is more concerned with a particular *event* – the Battle of Rorke’s Drift between the British Army and the Zulus in 1879 – but it does feature historical protagonists such as Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead (Michael Caine). Chapman’s study provides case studies of the production, reception and close analysis of a number of significant biopics and other films produced between the 1930s and 1990s, including *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, *Scott of the Antarctic* and *Elizabeth*, and considers how they relate to the wider contexts in which they were produced. Though these chapters provide productive examinations of significant biopics, Chapman generally discusses one or two films from each decade. Examples such as *Zulu* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968) are used to discuss 1960s filmmaking, which does not offer analysis of the biopic’s function in this decade, nor how it relates to previous decades.

The biopic has been grouped with films that privilege historical events over individuals, but the biopic’s focus on the life of an individual and its truth claims are ‘discursive characteristics’ which point to its significance. Such generic criteria differentiate the ‘biopic’ from the ‘historical film’.

Furthermore, two hundred and seventy three British biopics have been produced between 1900 and 2014. This makes the biopic an important category on its own and one worthy of attention. It has an extensive history. Furthermore, applying the term ‘historical’ masks the extent to which producers, reviewers and audiences make investments in the *figures* depicted.

### **The Biopic as ‘Heritage Film’, ‘Costume Drama’ and ‘Period Film’**

The rise of the ‘heritage’ film fuelled significant scholarly debate (see Vincendeau 2001, Higson 2003, Monk 2011). Studies frequently use biopics as case studies but are concerned primarily with the biopic’s place within specific cycles of ‘heritage’ filmmaking in British cinema during the 1980s and 1990s. The heritage category encapsulates a broader group of films and overlooks the specific features of the biopic. This critical category stems from the late 1980s, most clearly through the publication of Higson’s ‘Representing the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film’ (1993: 109-129). Debates centred on the image of national identity constructed through texts and their role within a larger heritage cultural industry including heritage sites and literature. Films identified as ‘heritage’ include Shakespeare adaptations, literary adaptations of canonical authors such as Jane Austen or costume dramas adapted from modern literary works and theatrical properties, such as *Shadowlands* (1993). They also include ‘Raj revival’ films set in colonial India, such as *Gandhi*, and historical dramas focusing on both historical events and figures (Hall 2009: 48). In addition, the heritage label is applied to television forms such as the single play or serial.

Higson's study of the British heritage cycles of the 1980s and 1990s *English Heritage, English Cinema* (2003) recognises films such as *Elizabeth* as biopics, and gives a thorough account of the production, distribution, marketing and exhibition of this film. As a 'quality' costume film, *Elizabeth* is located within wider cultural debates which have emerged through the preponderance of films released in the 1980s and 1990s which evoke the heritage idea (see Higson 2003: 36). Higson uses *Elizabeth* as an example of the limitations of the heritage category: the eclectic visual style, the feminist potential of the protagonist, and the conspiracy thriller narrative suggest that the popularity of the film resides in its appeal to a range of audiences. Though *Elizabeth* forms a detailed case study, Higson devotes less attention to other biopics released in the 1980s and 1990s. His primary interest lies in how *Elizabeth* exemplifies a wider issue of the popularity and preponderance of "quality costume dramas" with English subject-matter in the 1980s and 1990s.

Belén Vidal similarly uses biopics as case studies in *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (2012a), in which she shows how British and European heritage films negotiate new generic formations and respond to an increasingly globalised film industry and audience. Vidal uses *The Queen* and *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003) to show how the contemporary heritage film is shifting from original formulations. Hence the generic hybridity of *The Queen* is used to consider how the heritage film is constantly reconfiguring its generic boundaries, and Vidal places this film as an example of the past being transformed into a cultural commodity popular with global audiences, while expanding the notion of the monarchy film through its

interweaving of film and television styles (2012a: 35-50). *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* can be labelled a ‘post-heritage’ film in that it reworks the genre as a meditation on female agency. Within Vidal’s approach, the biopic is used to exemplify shifts and changes in the conception of the ‘heritage film’; this may obscure the biopic’s specific paradigms but does provide valuable analysis of two post-2000 biopics. *The Queen* is particularly important in the history of the biopic, and though Vidal references further monarchy films including *Mrs Brown* and *Elizabeth*, *The Queen* takes on additional significance when it is framed in a discussion of the enduring appeal of the royal biopic, from the 1910s through to the 2000s.

This body of work exemplifies how the biopic has often been subsumed into debates and criticism of heritage cinema. When extracted from this critical category, the biopic emerges as a genre with specific concerns, styles and approaches which should be examined on their own terms. The biopic text’s promise of truth, and its relationship to documentary modes, do not sit comfortably with, for example, a discussion of the Merchant Ivory Production *Howard’s End* (1992) which forms Higson’s second case study in *English Heritage, English Cinema* (2003: 146-193).

The subsuming of the biopic into larger debates persists with categories other than ‘historical’ and ‘heritage’. Vidal’s *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (2012b) examines the ‘period film’ cycle between 1990 and 2010. Using the ‘period’ label gives Vidal the space in which to discuss the distinct mannerist aesthetic she detects across several period films from different national cinemas. Her film sample is both European and American, and includes the John Keats biopic *Bright Star* (2009) (2012b: 164-166), as well as films such as *The*



*House of Mirth* (2000), *Onegin* (1999) and *Atonement* (2007). Vidal's ambition of interrogating film aesthetics uses detailed textual analysis of both European and American 'period' films released between 1990 and 2010, but it again marginalises the biopic within larger discursive structures, the 'period' film functioning in a similar way to 'historical films', and Vidal's approach is concerned with various national output rather than British films specifically. Hence Vidal's approach uses biopics as examples, as well as films that could be labelled 'historical', costume drama and heritage. The 'period' film is an inclusive category, but it does marginalise the biopic's specificity. The emphasis on the life of a historical figure found in *Bright Star* differs significantly from a film such as *Atonement* which features fictional characters.

Julianne Pidduck's *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and Past* (2004) is primarily a study of the costume film released between the 1990s and early 2000s and employs the Deleuzian concept of the 'movement-image', examining how spatial frames and dynamics are used within films to represent ideas about gender, sexuality, colonialism, class and queer identity. Pidduck includes the literary adaptations of James, Austen, Forster and Wharton with discussion of biopics of the Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in *Caravaggio*, Queen Elizabeth in *Elizabeth*, the composer Beethoven in *Immortal Beloved* and the French poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud in *Total Eclipse* (1995). Here too the biopic is located within a different genre. There are also chapters on the queer costume drama which examines *Caravaggio* and *Wilde* (1997) and in the final chapter Pidduck discusses *The Madness of King George* and *Elizabeth*. The study's emphasis though is on spatial dynamics and close textual analysis within the category

of costume film, rather than a discussion of the generic properties of the biopic specifically.

Both ‘heritage’ and ‘historical’ are discursive categories, they offer ways of understanding the biopic that privilege specific characteristics. The studies discussed provide detailed case studies of biopics, their production and reception contexts, and textual analysis. Though heritage studies provide analysis of biopics, these are typically released during the period in the 1980s when the heritage label entered critical discourse rather than pre-1980s examples. This thesis removes the biopic from these larger “master genres” and critical categories to focus on it as a significant genre in its own right.

### **The Biopic and the History of British Film: Decade-centred Approaches**

Decade-centred works frequently discuss biopics in a context of a period of British film production. They are a source of critical and contextual discussions and offer an indication of the conditions of biopic production across different decades.

Rachael Low provided a series of studies titled *The History of the British Film* (1948, 1949, 1950, 1971) which offer invaluable context for the earlier periods of biopic production between 1900 and 1930, a period where surviving film materials are scarce and sources sparse. Sarah Street’s two editions of *British National Cinema* (1997, 2009) provide a broad overview of the British film industry, economic policies, stars and genres from 1900 to after 2000.

In *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* (1984), Jeffrey Richards discusses how *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, *Nell Gwynn* and *Victoria the Great* (ibid.: 259-62, 264-266) endorse monarchy while commenting on present-day concerns, and his edited collection *The Unknown 1930s: An*

*Alternative History of the British Cinema* (1998) features discussion of biopics including *Tudor Rose* (1936) (see McFarlane 1998:166-169). Stephen C. Schafer's study, *British Popular Films 1929-1939: The Cinema of Reassurance* (1997), considers how *Rembrandt* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* addressed cinemagoers during the decade's economic uncertainty (ibid.:80-84, 163-167). Charles Drazin's *The Finest Years: British Cinema of the 1940s* (1998) focuses on filmmakers, including key biopic producers such as Herbert Wilcox, who were active during the 1940s (ibid.: 213-244). In Christine Geraghty's *British Cinema in the 1950s: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (2000), *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958) and *Reach for the Sky* (1957) are analysed in relation to the wider rationale of modernity and gender construction in the 1950s (ibid.: 171-174, 188-189).

Alexander Walker's *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties* (1974) and *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties* (1985) include analysis of the career of Ken Russell and his approach to biopic production (1974: 387-392, 1985: 79-85). Robert Murphy's *Sixties British Cinema* (1992) focuses on the horror, crime and comedy genres in the 1960s with briefer mention of biopics such as *Isadora* (1968), about dancer Isadora Duncan (ibid.: 271-272).

The edited collection *Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s* features analysis of Glenda Jackson's star persona, and usefully highlights Jackson's role in securing finance for biopics such as *Stevie* (1978) (Williams 2010: 43-54). Sue Harper and Justin Smith's *British Film Culture in the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure* (2012) references biopics such as *Sebastiane* (1976) in relation to British censorship policy in the 1970s (2012: 146-147) whereas John Hill's *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999) uses biopics, including *Chariots of Fire* and *Dance with a*

*Stranger*, to illustrate how filmmaking responded to the wider social climate of the 1980s (1999: 20-28, 126-130).

Murphy's edited collection *British Cinema of the 1990s* (2000) includes analysis of *Elizabeth* in relation to issues of national identity and heritage filmmaking (Luckett 2000: 88-99, Church-Gibson 2000: 115-124) and Andrew Higson's *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s* (2011) explores biopics, such as *Becoming Jane* (2007), within a larger discussion of 'culturally English' cinema in the 1990s and 2000s (ibid.: 180-190).

These studies are decade-centred rather than genre-specific and tend to focus on individual films. Biopics are used to exemplify larger trends within the decade, to illustrate film policy or, because they were not as commercially significant, are marginalised through a focus on more popular films and genres. The rationale demands consideration of the industry and output of films over a ten-year period, they frequently look across genres or select films to illustrate how they are compatible with wider discourses within British society during the period. These studies do not purport to offer an understanding of the relationship *between* biopics, which is a central aim of this thesis.

### **Studies of Directors**

A similar issue is present in studies which centre on specific directors and their films. These studies provide detailed analysis of biopics, combined with accounts of their production history and place within the British film industry, but they centre on the oeuvre of the director and how it is shaped by the wider industrial and social contexts. These studies frequently look for continuities in director's

approaches, and although the selected films might include biopics they are compared to other films directed by that person rather than to others in the genre.

Colin Gardner's study of Karel Reisz (2009) contextualises the director's background as a political refugee and émigré before proceeding to consider how themes of displacement and dislocation recur across his work, including *Isadora*. Melanie Williams examines the career of David Lean (2014) between 1940 and 1980 through close analysis and archival evidence relating to production, marketing and critical reception. Williams sees clear continuities, motifs, themes and visual tropes between the films despite their different industrial contexts, and analyses the theme of repressed sexuality, the representation of tortured, obsessive personalities in *Lawrence of Arabia*. Richard Attenborough directed six British biopics including *Gandhi*, which won eight Academy Awards, and this makes Sally Dux's study *Richard Attenborough* (2013) especially significant. Dux discusses the biopics *Young Winston* (1972), *Gandhi*, *Cry Freedom*, *Chaplin*, *Shadowlands* and *Grey Owl* (1998) alongside discussion of Attenborough as an actor and producer. Dux identifies Attenborough's particular approach to the biopic; using subjects in whom he has a personal interest and a 'Reithian' approach to the biopic which informs and educates audiences while representing subjects in favourable terms. She notes the links between *Gandhi* and *Cry Freedom* reflecting the director's interest in controversial political subjects (ibid.: 124). Dux's study is especially critical to Chapter Three which contends that producers drive change within the biopic genre. However, other producers, such as Michael Balcon and Ken Russell, displayed similar investments in the biopic genre and this study offers comparison of the different motivations for producers.

## Studies of the British Biopic

The edited collection *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic* (Minier and Pennacchia 2014) focuses specifically on biopics and television biocudramas of British subjects and there is an emphasis on post-2000 biopics. It is a timely addition to scholarship as British biopic production has increased since the 1970s. The focus is on the inter-related themes of adaption, intermediality and celebrity culture that inform biopics. The collection thus gathers articles which foreground adaption as an intertextual process, the relationship between different media such as portraiture, literature, archival materials and celebrity culture and the influence these have on biopic representations. The collection raises the intermedial process as central to biopics, the way media are drawn on and utilised within biopics to authenticate their depictions, and I take up this issue in Chapter Five in my discussion of truth claims using examples from the 1930s to the present.

The majority of chapters examine female-centred biopics and the monarchy and literary biopics are dominant themes across the collection; but the essays on the John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy* (Esposito 2014: 195-213), which considers the Oedipal anxieties present, and the representation of bereavement in the C.S. Lewis biopic *Shadowlands* (Müller 2014: 179-193) are both relevant to my analysis of wounded masculinity in the biopic. Other essays contend that contemporary understandings of celebrity, emphasising a private life of fragility, inform the representation of monarchs in recent biopics such as *Elizabeth* and *The King's Speech*; such films display the monarch's weaknesses yet depict them heroically overcoming these weaknesses at moments of national identity crisis (Pennacchia 2014: 33-49). The essay recognises the importance of Lionel Logue in rehabilitating George VI: "he is the one who will be able to heal the 'disputed'

voice of the Nation” (2014: 42). Healing is a critical part of contemporary biopics and not merely *The King’s Speech* and this thesis contends that a similar healing is present in both *The Damned United* and *Nowhere Boy*. Other chapters recognise depiction of homosociality in biopics such as *Carrington* (Pietrzak-Franger 2014: 161-178) in which the attentions of different men position painter Dora Carrington as an object of male exchange and transaction (2014: 168). This triangulation of characters is a central theme of Chapter Eight which employs the concept in the biopics *Stoned* and *Nowhere Boy* specifically. Many of the essays concern the royal or literary biopic and chapters focus mostly on female-centred biopics and post-2000 productions. This fails to account for how the majority of biopics concern male figures and the study does not purport to provide a comprehensive history of the British biopic.

The edited collection *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (Vidal and Brown 2014) repositions the genre away from American texts and adopts an international focus, situating the biopic within various industrial contexts and specific cycles of film production. Similar to the study by Minier and Pennacchia, there is an emphasis on post-2000 biopics. The essays use examples from both mainstream and independent productions from South Korea, France and America. Given the international remit, the study is selective and the essays stress a case-study approach which privileges individual films or smaller cycles. Tom Brown examines oratory in *Amazing Grace* (2007) and the positioning of the biopic within a middlebrow mode of consumption (2014:118-139). Brown’s chapter is particularly useful for providing context for the continued presence of the Great Man approach in contemporary British production and the ideological implications of this approach, while the emphasis on the biopic as a middlebrow production provides a

productive reminder of a tendency which has been persistent in biopic production since the 1910s. Vidal examines three docudramas in which Michael Sheen has portrayed Tony Blair, arguing that these texts exemplify both industrial and aesthetic convergence between docudrama and the biopic (2014b: 140-158). The essay acknowledges Michael Sheen as a key actor in contemporary biopics and analyses his acting style and impersonation of historical figures (ibid.: 149-153). This is a feature I develop in my discussion of different star casting in the biopic, considering Sheen's persona, based on his skills of impersonation, alongside other types of biopic casting. Julie F. Codell examines the queer artist biopic by drawing on British texts *Caravaggio* and *Love Is the Devil* (1998); she employs Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection to examine how these films suggest the abject artist as a creative, positive force rather than the representations of abject masculinity found in earlier British productions in films such as *Moulin Rouge*. The chapter provides a productive analysis of "abject masculinity" presented in artist biopics, showing how these films resist the victimisation present in *Moulin Rouge* and represent Caravaggio and Bacon as inspired by experiences of abjection (Codell 2014: 165-172). The chapter provides useful context for considering the representation of the 'wounded' man, and though my sample focuses on popular musicians Codell's essay suggests a wider prevalence of victimisation outside my sample.

A special issue of *Biography* (2000) examines the biopic in its hybridised forms, television docudrama, self-biographies and mainstream film. Sue Tweg's essay on Ruth Ellis is particularly important as it focuses on the British films *Yield to the Night* (1956) and *Dance with a Stranger* and explores the generic hybridity found in these, their infusion of melodrama and film-noir aesthetics. Margaret D. Stetze



places two biopics, *Oscar Wilde* (1960) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960), within the context of debates and issues current within Britain at their time of production following the Wolfenden Report (1957). She examines how the latter text normalises Wilde, rendering him a non-threatening consensual figure, a ‘gay everyman’ (2000: 106), for cinema audiences. James Burns examines the various attempted productions of the life of Cecil Rhodes, including some abortive attempts and also *Rhodes of Africa* (1936), and places them in the wider political climate, including the anxiety of the Rhodesian government about the reaction of the African population (2000: 108-126). Ian Christie (2002: 283-301) provides a film-themed essay in an edited collection that encompasses biography and life-writing more generally. Drawing upon examples from Britain (the unreleased *The Life of David Lloyd George*), Germany, Russia and America, silent and sound, Christie discusses the links between early cinema practice and the emergence of wider biographical techniques within the ‘New Biography’ movement which emerged in the early twentieth century. In the film about Lloyd George, Christie identifies the shared sense of “interiority”, generated through metaphor which addresses the Prime Minister’s mind through metaphor and anecdote (ibid.: 289).

Carolyn Anderson and Jonathan Lupo’s guest-edited collection for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2008) has a predominantly American-centred focus but includes David Chandler’s essay on representations of George III including *Beau Brummel* and *The Madness of King George* (2008: 73-81). An issue of the postgraduate journal *Networking Knowledge* (2012) includes analysis of British biopics such as *Caravaggio* (Saunders 2012), queer biopics (Bovey 2012) and *Miss Potter* (2006) (Ellam 2012). These edited collections have similar characteristics to those extended monographs and print collections discussed previously, namely,

there is scholarship on the biopic, even a discussion of its hybrid status and its role in the formulation of national identity, but this is frequently framed through an over-riding emphasis on American output.

Essays and chapters on the British biopic often focus on cycles, sub-genres and specific themes, such as the royal biopic (see McKechnie 2002: 217-236, Richards 2007: 258-279, Bastin 2009: 34-52) or reassess specific films such as *They Flew Alone* (1942), the Amy Johnson biopic, within the historical context of imperial ideology (Dolan 2000: 25-41). The biopic has been examined through a focus on sub-genres such as British literary biopics, which have been produced in high numbers since the early 1990s (Shacha 2013:199-218). The edited collection *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship* (Buchanan 2013) has an international focus, but includes discussion of the representation of male poets in British biopics (Harris 2013: 64-76, North 2013: 77-91), an examination of different British writer biopics released between 1990 and 2010 (Higson 2013: 106-120) and the Jane Austen biopic *Becoming Jane* (Cartmell 2013: 151-163).

Thus the biopic does feature in existing scholarship on British cinema, but discussions are frequently located in the generic context of the historical film or specific cycles of heritage cinema, or within decade-centred approaches or essays that privilege cycles or sub-genres. The biopic genre has been subsumed into larger generic and critical categories. There is presently no overview of the British genre, its specific traditions, its construction of public history, conventions, truth claims. These issues are addressed in chapters three, four and five which consider biopic production, reception, and its generic characteristics. The remaining chapters are concerned with two patterns of representation, the wounded man and homosociality, which this thesis contends are distinctive features of British

manifestations of the biopic. This chapter now explores existing research into masculinity, in both biopics and wider British film, and introduces the theoretical paradigm which informs the analysis in chapters six, seven and eight.

### **Studies of Gender Representation in Hollywood Biopics**

The British biopic is dominated by depictions of men and displays recurring thematic concerns with male crises and victimisation, and with homosociality and the close bonds between males. Both tendencies emerge as central, revealing a distinct representational history to the British biopic. Indeed, the emphasis on homosocial bonds requires the formulation of new generic definitions: while existing scholarship has defined the biopic as a narrative of the life of an individual, many British biopics focus on a male ‘couple’.

The representation of the ‘wounded’ man in British biopics is difficult to situate within existing paradigms that account for gender representation in biopics. Custen and Bingham identify a distinctive split in representations of men and women. For Custen, the construction of fame across studio biopics of men and women is different: “The difference between male and female careers ... is striking: men are defined by their gift, women by their gender, or their gendered use of their gift” (Custen 1992: 106). Women are firstly governed by gendered, biological requirements, sexual desire, marriage and domesticity where the man is “ruled by the destiny of his talent” (ibid.). Bingham extends this to claim male and female biopics are characterised by differing trajectories: “[b]iopics of women are structured so differently from male biopics as to constitute their own genre” (Bingham 2010: 23). This is mirrored in his study’s two-part structure: “The Great [White] Man Biopic and Its Discontents” and “A Woman’s Life Is Never Done:

Female Biopics.” Female subjects are often punished through patriarchal structures and are situated as victims of wider patriarchal culture:

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 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. (ibid.: 217)

The female biopic, Bingham argues, posits a conflict between women’s public achievements and traditional expectations of female domesticity. However, this paradigm is ruptured in certain films, including *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2006) (ibid.: 222), which challenges the conventions that consolidate this discourse, subverting different patriarchal gazes to suggest how American culture seeks to control and restrain femininity. However, Bingham acknowledges that treatment is exceptional (ibid.: 11). Although male-centred studio biopics emphasised idols of production and ‘Great Men’ of history, later biopics such as *Ed Wood* (1994) are parodic, self-conscious and adopt an “anti-Great Man” approach (ibid.: 158). Many British films including *Dance with a Stranger* and *Hilary and Jackie* (1998) emphasise women’s victimisation. However, many men’s lives have been depicted as tragic and British biopics represent men traumatised by childhood experience, committing suicide or isolated by their refusal to conform. These men are not, in Custen’s phrasing, “defined by their gift” and have more in common with Bingham’s characterisation of female biopics.

Bingham cites *Lawrence of Arabia* as sharing much of the suffering present in female-centred biopics, and claims that the plot trajectory “marks something new in

male biopics, re-enacting a scenario seen in biopics about women who haven't stayed in their place" (2010: 98). This is a productive entry point into the British biopic and its representation of wounded masculinity, especially as Bingham himself describes *Lawrence of Arabia* as "[a] mostly British-made film" (2010: 72). However, other British-made biopics have represented male figures through victimisation and suffering and *Lawrence of Arabia* shares thematic patterns with other male-centred *British* biopics. The dichotomy Bingham detects in the biopic between the representation of male and female subjects is less applicable to films outside America, and his recognition of *Lawrence of Arabia* as an exception shows the American-centric nature of his study.

The representation of the 'wounded' man in the British biopic is the first strand in my discussion of the British biopic's depiction of masculinity. The second strand is homosociality; the intimate bonds between male figures which are a recurring feature of the British biopic. To interrogate this further, and reframe the discussion within analysis of the biopic specifically, it is productive to return to Custen. In his discussion of biopic tropes, Custen notes "[t]he presence of an older figure, the bearer of conventional (sometimes limited) wisdom is a staple of many cinematic biographies" (1992: 69). Custen gives a few examples of these close friends in Hollywood biopics, such as *Song to Remember* (1945), but these observations are limited which suggests the friendship dynamic is straight-forward and relatively insignificant. As the above quotation suggests, these relationships seem predicated on supplying knowledge and wisdom to the subject rather than on close emotional bonds. Their roles are frequently marginal: "While purporting to show how normal ... the famous person is, the figure of the friend instead convinces us the opposite is true ... the one-sided relationship friends enjoy with the famous suggests ... the

price of fame is often estrangement from friends and family” (Custen *ibid.*: 165).

This suggests that these friendships are not given significant narrative space and serve a relatively straightforward function. In British biopics close male friendship has been central to the exploration of the nature of achievement.

Custen’s analysis of *Night and Day* (1946), which charts the life of American composer Cole Porter, indicates how discourses of heteronormativity are maintained and how potentially transgressive or ambiguous masculine identities are negotiated in studio biopics. This might explain the absence of homosocial relationships in the biopics released during the classic era of Hollywood production. The biopic genre highlights those whom the dominant culture deems appropriate and Custen writes that “[t]he Hollywood biographical film created and still creates public history by declaring, through production and distribution, which lives are acceptable subjects” (1992: 12). The need to secure Production Code approval made the depiction of a gay figure and homosexual relationships unthinkable, so the film avoids the subject of Porter’s homosexuality by “redefining his relationship with his wife to conform to existing norms of glamorous heterosexual romance” (1992: 123). In doing so, this potentially radical subject for a biopic is hetero-normalised. While a homosocial relationship is not the same as a homosexual one, the closeness of the male bonds found in many British biopics, and the frequent exclusion of women from these narratives, is enough to generate ambiguity over the heterosexual identity of male characters. Custen writes “[f]or Hollywood as a sustainer of the social status quo, the first problem of picturing a life, then, might be to eliminate those areas that the culture tells us should not exist” (1992: 122). In the era of strict production code regulations over what could be permitted on screen, homosocial relationships would be too close to

male representations prohibited by that Code. This suggests that American biopics have avoided representations of masculine identity (and desire) which may seem ambiguous. Recent studies allude to homosociality in American biopics. Thus Rebecca A. Sheehan's essay on *The Social Network* (2010) focuses on the friendship and rivalry between Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Saverin (Sheehan 2014: 35-51). Sheehan focuses on the representation of male relationships and rivalries but does so through a larger focus on contemporary biopics which examine people still living, and how these biopics comment on ongoing cultural events. Ellen Cheshire's account of the Truman Capote biopic *Infamous* (2006) discusses the homoerotic tension between author Capote and Perry Smith, one of the accused murderers of the Cutter Family on which the writer's book *In Cold Blood* is based (2015: 59). Though only a brief discussion, it identifies the representation of homoeroticism as a key difference between the film and the earlier biopic *Capote* (2005). However this is not a homosocial bond, and the pair's relationship is marked as a homosexual attraction.

The Hollywood 'bromance' cycle (see Alberti 2013: 159-172) has also been discussed in terms of its representation of homosociality. Studies consider the representation of masculinity in films such as *Superbad* (2007), *Knocked Up* (2007) and *I Love You, Man* (2009). However, bromance films frequently emphasise heterosexual coupledness in the conclusion to their narratives, and the bromance is largely represented through the conventions of the romantic comedy and gross-out subgenre. Studies such as the edited collection *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television* (DeAngelis 2014) draw on Sedgwick's formulation of male homosocial desire to interrogate these representations and though the bromance is predominantly a Hollywood cycle, its presence suggests a

wider currency for homosocial depictions not confined to biopics. However, in British biopics women are frequently a peripheral presence; the films do not follow a trajectory towards men securing romantic attachments, but, especially between 2008 and 2010, depict supportive male bonds which rehabilitate ‘wounded’ men. These depictions are the focus of chapters six through eight of this thesis.

### **Studies of Gender Representation in British Biopics**

Studies of the British biopic and its representation of gender have analysed mainly representations of female literary figures (Dolan et al 2009: 174-185), with a specific focus on post-feminist discourse. Some essays focus on the depictions of ageing femininity in *The Queen* (Dolan 2012: 39-52) and mark a return to a concern with national identity by arguing that the ideological work of the film is bound up in the recuperation of the monarchy. These essays are important in their concern with gender, the use of close analysis, and methodologies which draw on cultural studies’ approaches to the study of film. The essays by Tweg and Cornell mentioned previously provide a further discussion of British biopics and their representation of gender identity.

*Royal Portraits in Hollywood: Filming the Lives of Queens* (Ford and Mitchell 2009) includes individual chapters which examine the portrayal of various Queens, including *Catherine the Great* (1934), *Victoria the Great* (1937), *Mary, Queen of Scots*, *Mrs Brown*, *Elizabeth*, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) and *The Queen*. The study examines both Hollywood and British production, the representation of private/public lives and the process of adaption and creative licence and how this reflects the historical discourse found in other sources. The monarchy-themed biopic is central to British biopic production and there have been eighteen biopics



produced which focus on Queens. The study provides context but does not purport to grasp the distinctiveness of the British genre.

Several studies have framed the biopic through a postfeminist framework. Bronwyn Polaschek's *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen* (2013) uses the British films *Sylvia* (2003), *Becoming Jane*, *The Hours* (2002) and the American biopic *Frida* (2002) as case studies. Drawing on a mixture of American and British production loses sight of national difference, but the author's ambitions rest on these films' relationship to post-feminist discourse, arguing that the 'postfeminist' biopic is now a distinct subgenre. However, Polaschek's study draws heavily on the American-centred research by Bingham and Custen to frame discussion of British biopics, which perhaps loses sight of these films' place in *British* biopic history and reinforces the need for sustained reflection of appropriate paradigms and generic definitions in British productions. Additionally, such research emphasises one specific trend in the biopic. The vast majority of British biopics concern men and the lack of sustained scholarship on the male biopic clouds understandings of the genre as the 'postfeminist' biopics exist in a field which is overwhelmingly male.

Studies that analyse masculinity in British biopics frequently focus on one or a few films, such as *Lawrence of Arabia*. For instance, E. Anna Claydon's study *The Representation of Masculinity in British Cinema of the 1960s* (2005) examines *Lawrence of Arabia* as one of four films emblematic of the 1960s and a crisis in 'masculinism', reflecting a declining sense of male superiority. Using psychoanalytically-informed textual analysis, Claydon considers reasons why *Lawrence of Arabia* was made in the 1960s, including the wider cultural climate, a post-Wolfenden Report shift in censorship and the changing representation of

homosexuality in theatre and film. The study usefully considers the casting of Peter O'Toole (2005: 227-234), arguing that he provided a "blank canvas" upon which to project Lawrence (ibid.: 231). I similarly consider biopic casting, but do so by examining the different types of casting in biopics. The study considers the depiction of Lawrence and masculinity in terms of sadism and masochism, focusing on the rape sequence at Deraa, but it only considers one biopic, and is not concerned with the film's relationship to other biopics. *Lawrence of Arabia* is examined in this thesis in chapters six through eight to illustrate the prevalence of a discourse of 'wounded' masculinity that is projected in a range of biopics.

There is some analysis of the homosocial in British biopics. Pidduck discusses how *Total Eclipse* "exemplifies a common homosocial creative bond, where women are depicted with ambivalence" (2004: 93) in the relationship between French poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. Chapman considers *Beau Brummel* an unusual 'historical film' for its focus on the relationship between two men, Brummel and the Prince of Wales, while marginalising female characters (Chapman 2005: 176-177), and the relationship between Lawrence and Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia* is recognised in some studies (Claydon 2005: 240). Chapters six through eight build on these observations to suggest that homosociality is a key feature of the contemporary biopic, but does so to suggest that in contemporary films wounded men are rehabilitated through supportive homosocial bonds.

### **Approaches to Masculinity in British Cinema**

The most extensive study of masculinity in British cinema is Andrew Spicer's *Typical Men* (2001) in which he identifies the existence of distinct cultural types of masculinity within British film: heroes, the 'Everyman', villains and rogues.

Spicer's study spans 1945 to the 1990s and draws examples from different genres. Spicer isolates films that are paradigmatic and draws on theories of homosociality (Sedgwick 1985) to inform his discussion. Spicer discusses homosocial tendencies in *The League of Gentlemen* (1960) (2001: 121) and *The Criminal* (1960) (2001: 141). The study provides the foundations for examining masculinity in British cinema by drawing on films from a range of genres. Some studies have an international focus which permits extensive discussion of masculinity in British cinema (see Powrie, Davis and Babington 2004). My research builds on this by examining the representation of masculinity within one specific genre (the biopic) through a focus on wounded masculinity and homosociality. Homosocial dynamics have been discussed in British cinema in connection with other genres including the triangulated relationships between male characters in British melodrama (Medhurst 1993: 95-105), the male collectives in British hooligan films (Rehling 2011: 162-173) and the male working-class communities of 1990s British cinema (Monk 2000: 156-166). Some studies examine male camaraderie in the war genre, such as the dynamics of male bonding and emotion (Medhurst 1985: 37, Spicer 2001: 35) and this thesis contends that the British biopic has a history of depicting male relationships that can be understood as homosocial.

### ***Between Men: A Critical Framework for the British Biopic***

My research emphasises that male subjects dominate the British biopic and that male bonds and close male groups have occupied a central place within the genre. In order to analyse these dynamics, a framework is needed which focuses on male relationships. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) is the paradigm I use in chapters six through eight to examine these representations. It is particularly significant for this thesis

because of the emphasis on ‘homosociality’. Her concepts such as “male homosocial desire” and “homosexual panic”, and triangulated rivalries, suggests continuity or resonance with psychoanalytical terminology – Freud’s formulation of the libido, the repression of unconscious desires and the triangulated Oedipal drama. However, Sedgwick’s position, intersecting Marxist and radical feminism, is preoccupied with exploring how the homosocial dynamic subordinates women and secures the continuation of patriarchal culture. Sedgwick’s study is directly critical of Freudian theory for its “historical blindness” (1985: 22) to the challenging nature of patriarchal power, and many of the biopic narratives I consider actively construct male relationships, female oppression and dilemmas in historically-specific situations.

So, while influenced by Freudian paradigms, Sedgwick’s ambition is to expose how patriarchy is sustained. Psychoanalysis is itself a reflection of patriarchy; within the framework women are marginalised or men taken to explain everything as the general. As Sedgwick observes of the Oedipal drama “Freud notoriously tended to place a male in the generic position of ‘child’ and treat the case of the female as being more or less the same” (1985: 23). The concept of male homosocial desire proposed by Sedgwick posits male interrelations as a ‘spectrum’ of male bonds which includes homosexual bonds but also close, intimate relationships between otherwise heterosexual men. The films discussed manage these bonds in different ways; in some female characters are peripheral and the emphasis is on homosocial spaces and the comradeship and support between men. In others the homosocial is highlighted through the anxiety produced when a female character is introduced as a romantic possibility and rivalry ensues between the men. Though the representations in biopics frequently connote these ‘erotic

rivalries' (1985: 162) in which female characters mediate the homosocial desire between men, there are other depictions in which female figures are absent and Chapter Eight examines three biopics that suggest a limitation in Sedgwick's model. Sedgwick's formulation is summarised in chapter six, and informs the textual analysis of the contemporary biopic in chapters seven and eight.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered explanations for the critical neglect of the British biopic. The biopic intersects with other genres and biopics are characterised by hybridity which makes a stable definition difficult. When the biopic is scrutinised within academic studies, any discussion of British biopics is minimal and often takes place in decade or cycle-based studies. Larger studies frequently privilege an American or, at best, an international focus with specific essays devoted to analysis of singular, or a small number of British texts. Edited collections that examine the British biopic specifically do so with an emphasis on both film and television production, and a focus largely on the royal biopic rather than other production trends and cycles.

The biopic's boundaries are porous; it shares a similar rhetorical strategy to docudrama while its relationship to the historical film suggests that identifying a film as a biopic requires us to think in terms of emphases and tendencies. The recurring depiction of homosociality requires us to rethink even the most basic definitions of the biopic which emphasise the single subject. Homosociality in the British biopic shakes these generic foundations and requires us to differentiate the *British* biopic from other nation's output, a task made difficult by the dominance of American-centric research.

The heritage film, the costume drama and the period film all subsume the biopic into wider categories which underline its heterogeneity. The historical film category relates the biopic to a sub-genre, but the structure, which emphasises the individual life, probes a specific question: whose history is privileged and who is worthy of remembrance? Each of my sample focuses on either a male or female figure. However, the majority of biopics are about male exploits, male creative endeavour. Female subjects are culturally devalued. The British biopic in general constructs history through male-centred narratives and this informs my analytical paradigm: the study of wounded masculinity and homosociality as patterns of representation distinct to the British version of the genre. Existing paradigms have limited applicability; Bingham's differentiation of the male from the female biopic unravels when examples such as *Lawrence of Arabia* are considered in relation to other British biopics. Yet the British biopic has an extensive history of narrating the lives of famous men through persecution, madness and suffering. If American biopics feature a limited representation of male friendships and heteronormalise 'deviant' figures, the British biopic is frequently a homosocial melodrama; male lives and histories are intertwined. Thus Sedgwick's homosocial framework is a productive framework, providing concepts such as male homosocial desire, triangulation and homosexual panic, whose applicability can be tested. These concepts are applied from chapter six onwards and interrogate the rationale of this thesis: the British biopic is characterised by a thematic concern with male victimisation and homosocial bonds. The following chapter contends that the biopic is an important category through an historical overview of biopic productions released between 1900 and 2014. It argues that biopic representations

are shaped by producers who drive change within the genre by foregrounding historical figures in whom they have personal investments.

## Chapter Three

### Producing the British Biopic 1900-2014

The first part of the appendix details biopic production from 1900 to 2014 and this chapter develops that ‘timeline’ into an historical overview, proceeding through each decade chronologically. The timeline from 1900 to 1994 was created using Denis Gifford’s *British Film Catalogue Volume 1: Fiction Film 1895-1994* (2000). Gifford’s definition of a ‘British’ film is based on that of the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927: that is a film made by a British subject or by a British company.<sup>3</sup> Gifford offers limited description and groups most biopics under the broad “history” label (2000: xiv). Thus, though he categorises *The Tommy Steele Story* (1957) as a “musical” (2000: 650), I treat it as a music biopic. Generic boundaries are not fixed entities and films can be positioned within several categories simultaneously; for example, biopics depicting war heroes or sportsmen resist easy categorisation, and the hybrid character of films is acknowledged throughout this overview.

Official definitions are used for films from 1994 to 2014. For the period 1994 to 2007 the films were gathered using the British Film Institute website and in particular the ‘Films, TV and people’ section.<sup>4</sup> Though this is a difficult period in which to obtain firm details concerning national origin, the webpage for each film assigns a nationality for that film and provides detailed information concerning the

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<sup>3</sup> But Gifford includes films made within the British Isles that nevertheless received a ‘foreign’ registration by the Board of Trade, as well as co-productions between British and foreign companies. He excludes films registered as British that were produced in the wider Empire (Gifford 2000: ix).

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Films, TV and people’, British Film Institute. Available from: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/explore-film-tv/films-tv-people>.



production companies involved. In 2007 the 'Cultural Test' was introduced by the then Labour government to determine whether a film 'qualified' as British and thus received tax-relief. Films were now assessed through 'cultural' rather than the previous economic criteria (see Higson 2011: 56-66). This sought to encourage the production of films about contemporary Britain, British 'heritage' and history and introduced a points-based test comprising four categories: cultural content, contribution, hubs and practitioners. *Control* (2007), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* and *Hunger* (2008) all passed by scoring at least 16 out of a possible 31 points.<sup>5</sup> Films also qualified as British, and were eligible to apply for tax relief, through co-production agreements between the UK and other approved countries or through the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production for film. For instance, *Mr Nice* (2010) was a co-production certified through the European convention between Britain and Spain. Though the cultural test and being certified as an official co-production are the two ways of qualifying as British, I have also included those films, such as *Amazing Grace*, which received a European Certificate of British Nationality. Films could apply if they gained approval as an official co-production or through following criteria stipulations, such as being made by a company registered in the European Economic Area (EEA). The Certificate was designed to help films secure distribution within the European Union and EEA in countries which might have quotas on the number of EU films they are required to exhibit. Though this could not, unlike the cultural test and co-production agreements, be used to claim tax relief, the certificate could potentially help

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<sup>5</sup> See 'The Cultural Test for Film', British Film Institute. Available from: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-film>. As of 29<sup>th</sup> January 2015 the cultural test has been revised, such revisions include raising the pass mark to 28 points out of a possible 35 and an increase in points available through features such as special effects. The full list of revisions is available at the web address above.

filmmakers screen their film in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Lists of films which were certified through the cultural test or co-production treaties and which received the certificate are available on the BFI website and these sources were used to compile the timeline since 2007.<sup>7</sup>

Using the films selected from these sources, this overview constructs a history of the biopic and its development. The British biopic has frequently been analysed within studies of the historical film (Chapman 2005, Landy 1991), costume drama (Harper 1994, Pidduck 2004) and British heritage cinema (Higson 2003, Vidal 2012a), or in edited collections which privilege single films or cycles (Minier and Pennacchia 2014, Brown and Vidal 2014). Where this overview differs is that it maps the continuities and changes within the biopic genre specifically, examining the relationship *between* biopics across a century of filmmaking rather than their relationship to a wider ‘master genre’ or prevalent critical debates in British film production. It centres firstly on the type of subject depicted in different periods and secondly on how that subject is approached. Though the overview is structured into decades, continuities and shifts between periods are identified and this separation provides a convenient short-hand through which to reference the broader changes that occur. However, decades are artificial units that can obscure key developments. For instance, the development and availability of cinema technologies in Britain, such as the introduction of sound in the late 1920s and Technicolor in the late 1940s, were important factors in the production of biopics, including *Nell Gwyn* (1934) and *Scott of the Antarctic*. The space given to different

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<sup>6</sup> See the ‘European certificate of British nationality guidance notes’ available at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/european-certificate-british-nationality>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief>.

decades varies: films from earlier decades may be unavailable, and some decades are more important than others in understanding the biopic.

Certain films discussed in this chapter, such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Young Winston* and *Mahler*, are discussed in Chapter Six. Similarly, various biopics released between 2005 and 2014, such as *Nowhere Boy* and *The King's Speech*, are considered in chapters Seven and Eight. These later chapters are concerned with the representation of masculinity within the biopic, whereas the films are used in the context of this chapter to exemplify broader issues within the genre, shifts in attitude towards certain subjects, or a key cycle of production.

Each film listed depicts the life of an historical figure and received a UK release, but rather than examining films which were commercially or critically successful, the overview identifies those which were culturally significant, representing a new type of subject or adopting a new approach. Thus though *Stevie* (1978), the low-budget film about poet Stevie Smith, received limited distribution, it is culturally significant as one of the first biopics about a woman writer and the casting of Glenda Jackson reveals a broader concern regarding biopic production and how biopics get made. Films which generated controversy or exemplified the key discourses which inform the genre, such as notions of 'quality' and authenticity, are highlighted. Similarly, the overview identifies shifts in the popular imagination, the movement towards representing figures known through popular culture rather than 'elite' figures of politics, industry and military.

The chapter identifies the broad continuities and changes which the biopic has undergone and shows how it has shaped a specific ‘public history’ of British national identity. Biopics form a thread of cultural production, constructing narratives which privilege certain figures and marginalise others. The concept of “organised forgetting” (Bromley 1988: 22), in which popular memory is constituted through cultural forms which reflect the values of dominant groups, is reflected in the investments made by individual producers in ‘remembering’ (and ‘forgetting’) particular subjects: “since the images which shape our memory of the past define its ‘reality’, the issue of *who* decides what is remembered is crucial” (ibid.: 2 my emphasis). This overview contends that producers and directors drive change within the genre, and autobiographies and interviews offer insight into their choice of subject and approach. Though these sources may be shaped by self-justification, and privileging these can obscure other agents in filmmaking, producers often secure the funding and many were active in the filmmaking process.

### **1900-1909**

Between 1900 and 1909 films which can be considered early ‘biographies’ focused on criminals, recreating robberies and police chases, and royal mistresses. In this period, characterised by small-scale production of short films exhibited in music halls or fairgrounds, the emphasis was on novelty and the thrill of ‘moving pictures’. Prior to roughly 1906, this “cinema of attractions” (Gunning 1990: 57) illustrated the medium’s capacities through visual presentation rather than narrative story-telling, an emphasis on ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’. The lives of criminals

and mistresses offered such spectacle through police chases and romance, exploiting the public's fascination with notorious figures such as actress and king's mistress Nell Gwyn or the criminal Charles Peace.

The 'criminal' films drew on earlier popular 'low culture' traditions of the eighteenth century Newgate Calendar, the nineteenth century 'Penny Dreadful' and the quasi-supernatural villain of popular myth, such as highwaymen in *The Hair-Breadth Escape of Jack Sheppard* (1900) and *Dick Turpin's Last Ride to York* (1906) (see Springhall 1994: 571). The fascination with cat burglar Charles Peace, executed in 1879, can be contextualised through shifts in the popular press towards the 'new journalism' from the 1850s which displayed sensationalised stories of a 'human note' such as crime and executions. Such narratives were adopted in films, romanticising crimes and adventure, providing early instances of biographical subject matter acting as a pre-sold commodity. For example, Frank Mottershaw's *Life of Charles Peace* (1905) recreated Peace's then famous leap from a train to escape the police. An editorial in the November 1905 edition of *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* illustrated the value placed by producers on authenticity: "Officials who had charge of the case have been interviewed with the object of getting the details as correct as possible" (quoted in Low and Manvell 1948: 122). This publicising of the research undertaken in preparing the film formed an early example of how producers attempt to negotiate a specific viewing context for biopics, stressing their factual basis and differentiating them from purely fictional subject matter.

*English Nell* (1900) and *Sweet Nell of Old Drury* (1900) drew on extant plays about Nell Gwyn, the actress and mistress of Charles II during the Restoration period. Gwyn was the subject of public fascination, acquiring mythic status through Samuel Pepys' diary and portraits by Peter Lely (c. 1668) and Simon Verelst (c. 1680). Gwyn's life has been invested with notions of "a British Cinderella" (King 1992: 84), a rags-to-riches narrative in which a lower class actress acquired the status of mistress of Charles II through her sexuality, beauty and wit. Whereas the Charles Peace films featured men actively resisting arrest and operating outside the norms of society, the first films about women emphasised female sexuality as a career and, in contrast to the independence shown by the criminal transgressors, focused on female careers which were dependent on male support. Gwyn was a regular subject in the following decades.

### **1910-1919**

In the second decade of the twentieth century the initial novelty of 'moving pictures' was replaced by films which constructed 'public history' and the range of subjects increased; alongside mistresses and criminals were films about playwrights, nurses, monarchs, politicians and military figures. This increase in biopic production mirrored a general increase in film production within the decade (see Appendix Four). Though *Florence Nightingale* (1915) was the only new addition in biopics about women, the lives of 'Great Men', individuals whose ambition and drive propel historical change, were represented in biopics about military figures such as Lord Kitchener and Horatio Nelson, and politicians David Lloyd George and Benjamin Disraeli. These reflected a growing awareness of films

as instruments of propaganda and conduits for transmitting notions of national identity, foregrounding politicians and military figures as emblematic of British imperialism and military power.

*Florence Nightingale, Nelson* (1918) and *The Life Story of David Lloyd George* (1918) were directed by Maurice Elvey who played a pivotal role in shaping the biopic as a conduit of public history.<sup>8</sup> Whereas early crime films capitalised on their subjects' notorious status, Elvey's films capitalised on recent events (Nightingale died in 1910) and biographies such as Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813). These films reaffirmed national sentiments during wartime: both *Florence Nightingale* and *Nelson* appealed to British patriotism in the era of the First World War (see Turvey 2011: 45-46, Sargeant 2005: 69-71). The approach was reverential. *Nelson* elevated the admiral's career as exemplary and the filmmakers employed numerous authenticating strategies, securing the Navy's co-operation and an appearance by Admiral Sir Robert Freemantle within the film (see Sargeant 2005: 69-71). Discourses of authenticity were foregrounded to construct Nelson as a symbol of British military might. These films underscore the cultural value biopics were perceived to possess and formed 'status' projects for studios: the Ideal production company used location shooting, hundreds of extras and a screenplay written by historian Sidney Low to make *The Life Story of David Lloyd George* a film of "national importance" (Low 1950: 93). The film was made to commemorate the end of war, and used Lloyd George's role as Prime Minister from December 1916 in the war against Germany to construct a public memory of recent events. *The Life of Lord Kitchener* (1917) was similarly a prestige picture with a narrative

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<sup>8</sup> *The Life of David Lloyd George* was only released in 1996 (see Christie 2008: 7-12)

which stressed Britain's military might and empire (Low 1950: 150). Biopics were increasingly considered worthy of large resources and functioned as a tool for propaganda, foregrounding the humanity of figures such as Nightingale and Nelson, while claiming the superiority of British military power.

Alongside the 'great man' approach and notions of prestige, discourses of 'quality' emerged in this decade. The Barker production company, headed by Will Barker, produced *Henry VIII* (as a co-production with G.B. Samuelson in 1911), *Sixty Years a Queen* (1913) which focuses on Queen Victoria, and *Jane Shore* (1915) about Elizabeth 'Jane' Shore, a mistress of King Edward IV in fifteenth century England. Barker focused resources on a small number of prestigious films, with an emphasis on "pictorial values" to signify quality (Low 1950: 215). *Henry VIII* was the first monarchy-centred film; the first two-reel feature in Britain; the longest British film of its time (Street 1997: 36); and the first British adaptation of an important stage production, performed by His Majesty's Theatre with the stage actor Herbert Beerbohm Tree hired at great expense (Low 1949: 119). It was exhibited in limited runs at high prices to imply exclusivity (Low 1949: 45) and was regarded as one of the first films to offer competition with imported historical films (Christie 2012: 31). Particularly successful historical films of the period included *The Fall of Troy* (Romano L. Borgnetto and Giovanni Pastrone 1911), an Italian film featuring extensive historical set reconstruction. This was particularly well received in Europe and America and similarly emphasised spectacle (Cherchi Usai 1996: 125).



*Sixty Years a Queen* secured the prestige monarchy biopic as a quintessential British genre. Actors were cast who physically resembled the subjects, at considerable expense (Lowe 1949: 119, 202). The film charts the ‘major events’ in the reign of Queen Victoria (Blanche Forsyth), from her accession to the siege of Ladysmith during the Boer War, and also domestic moments in the life of the monarch, offering an early template for filming the lives of royalty. Costing an unprecedented £12,000,<sup>9</sup> it was enormously successful, reportedly generating profits of £35,000 (Oakley 1964: 58). *Jane Shore* was similarly ambitious. Featuring crowd scenes and lavish set designs, it exemplified the continued cultural fascination with the figure of the royal mistress. Shore’s enduring significance since the sixteenth century was evidenced in poems, novels and ballads, and the film was adapted from Nicolas Rowe’s popular play *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (1714). The “rags-to-riches-to-rags” narrative of the beautiful, persecuted courtesan (played by Blanche Forsyth), who uses her power as the King’s mistress to help others before her public penance leads her to beggary projected a similar characterisation to the films about Gwyn. Unusually in this period, the film secured distribution in America (Low 1950: 40), suggesting that American distributors perceived a sexualised account of a tragic heroine as potentially marketable.

Barker was a significant figure in the emergence of the ‘quality’ biopic, a version consolidated in high production values, adaptations of canonical theatre productions, and films which explored national history and memorialised significant figures. The expense and scale of Barker’s projects, his prestige casting, and his idiosyncratic distribution methods, suggest a desire for spectacular,

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<sup>9</sup> See Simon Brown’s discussion of Will Barker’s career at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/519480/>

culturally valuable films. The focus on monarchs as emblematic of British national identity and history are early indicators of the monarchy's centrality in prestige filmmaking. Showcasing the growing capabilities of cinema through length, extravagant sets and theatrically trained actors, Barker's use of the biopic displays his aspirations for cultural esteem and recognition. The collaborations between theatre and film in this period illustrate the appearance of a middle-brow art in "embryonic" form (Burrows 2003: 229) and the transferring, and disseminating, of high-brow experiences into forms available for mass consumption. This is connoted through the adaptation of the West End play and the acquisition of Tree who, as the most renowned living English actor, negotiated cultural legitimacy.

### **1920-1929**

Though film production diminished in this decade, biopic production was roughly consistent with the 1910s and biopics represented a larger proportion of films made in Britain (see Appendix Four). New subjects in the 1920s included films about poets Lord Byron and Robert Burns and the writer Walter Scott, alongside films about criminals, mistresses, politicians and nurses. One further new figure was the explorer. *Livingstone* (1925) recounted the life of missionary David Livingstone (M.A. Wetherell) from his childhood in Scotland through to his work in Africa, his encounter with and subsequent denunciation of the slave trade until his death in 1873. Filmed in Africa, it espoused the popular imperialism that was prevalent in 1920s Britain, glorifying its subject and emphasising the civilising value of imperial expeditions through Livingstone's opposition to slavery (Rapp and Weber 1989: 3). However, the explorer biopic was also introduced as a response to the

perceived corrupting influence of imported Hollywood films whose dominance stifled British film production. It was hoped an empire film stressing the moral and self-sacrificing Livingstone would instil in young people 'essential' traits of the British character (see Rapp and Webber 1989: 5), and indicated the perceived function of the biopic in shaping public consciousness.

Following the emergence in the 1910s of an emphasis on quality and authenticity, Herbert Wilcox's *Nell Gwyn* (1926) and *Dawn* (1928), the only biopics in the decade depicting women, encapsulate further characteristics which would persist in subsequent decades. *Nell Gwyn* presented history through the conventions of romantic comedy and emerged as the most successful British film on American screens in the 1920s (Street 2002: 32), due particularly to the presence of an American star (Dorothy Gish) and a 'roadshow' exhibition organised by Paramount, in which the film was screened in selected cinemas with higher admissions. It also adopted a 'keyhole' approach to British history, involving a sexualised depiction of a British figure and the promise of access to private secrets. The narrative humanised the British monarchy, making the film appealing to American audiences (see Street 2002: 22-31). Barker's royal biopics had demonstrated the sub-genre's potential in the 1910s, and here was an approach which garnered international success.

*Dawn* was different. Following the story of Nurse Edith Cavell (Sybil Thorndike), executed for assisting the escape of prisoners in German-occupied Belgium during the First World War, the controversy it generated underlined the ideological significance of the biopic's truth claims. Whereas the films about Nightingale

emphasised humility, Cavell's execution made *Dawn* a significant shift in representing women in biopics. Whereas wartime nurses were predominately seen as selfless providers of care whose occupation did not contest existing gender norms, Cavell's active involvement in assisting the escape of allied soldiers through her clinic, and her subsequent death, positioned her as an international martyr (Grayzel 2010: 268). The image of Cavell was used as propaganda during wartime, featuring on postcards and in newspaper illustrations which located her as the innocent victim of a brutal German enemy (Hughes 2005: 428). However, the film's production in 1928, ten years after the war ended, generated considerable anxiety. Unlike the light-history *Nell Gwyn*, *Dawn* intervened in contemporaneous politics and instigated "the hardest fought British censorship struggle of the entire inter-war period" (Robertson 1984: 15). The Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain put pressure on the British Board of Film Censors to refuse the film a certificate amid concerns that its portrayal of Germans would undermine attempts at peaceful Anglo-German relations. The final cut removed controversial execution sequences and Cavell's pre-war work in Brussels dominates the narrative (Robertson 1984: 25). *Dawn* illustrated that biopics, with their appeal to authenticity and their capacity to function as 'public history', could generate political anxieties. However, in the next decade it was the irreverent strategy that Wilcox adopted for *Nell Gwyn* that would prove more profitable.

### **1930-1939**

In the 1930s cinema was consolidated as the dominant entertainment medium, the industry increased in size and film production was focused on the export as well as

domestic market. The production of films increased significantly, and twenty four biopics were produced during the decade which represented a substantial increase from the fifteen produced in the 1920s (see Appendix Four). Biopic production was shaped by three figures: Alexander Korda, who produced *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *Catherine the Great* (1934) and *Rembrandt* (1936); Michael Balcon, who produced *Jew Süß* (1934), *The Iron Duke* (1935), *Tudor Rose* (1935) and *Rhodes of Africa* (1936); and Herbert Wilcox who produced *Nell Gwyn* (1934), *Peg of Old Drury* (1935), *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938). Each used biopics to make different cultural interventions: Korda's high-art aspirations resulted in the first biopic about an artist; Wilcox produced 'quality' royal biopics in the style of Barker; and Balcon popularised the achievements of 'Great Men' of Empire.

The international success of Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* had major implications for the industry and future biopic production, and can partially be explained through the relationship between London Films and United Artists, which part-financed and provided distribution in America. By competing on both critical and commercial terms with the US studio products it "proved to the world that a British film could match the spectacle and lavishness of anything produced in Hollywood" (Balio 1993: 187). The 'key-hole' approach focused on a personal crisis, the King's attempts to secure a son and heir to the throne, and his consequent 'manipulation' by his wives. Korda's approach avoided the discourses of authenticity projected in earlier biopics: "you do not, after all, expect an historical film to stick strictly to the text-book. There is nothing more futile than to attempt to satisfy the painstaking exactitude of the expert. In my opinion, it is far more

important to gain the true atmosphere of the period” (Korda 1934: 34). The film replaced an existing historical discourse framing the monarch as a brutal tyrant with a comedic treatment of an infantile, gluttonous King. Korda had earlier made the successful silent film *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) which provided the thematic precedents for *Henry VIII*; both emphasised sexual comedy over historical issues and approached their respective subjects by foregrounding their ‘everyday’ problems (Kulik 1975: 45-47). Furthermore, everyone knew something about “bluff King Hal”, whose life was narrated in poems and rhymes (Kulik 1975: 89). *The Private Life of Henry VIII* exemplified successful, exportable British film making and drew on the discourses of ‘quality’ Barker established in his early biopics. Its budget of between \$55,000 and \$60,000 made it one of the most expensive British films of the time (Drazin 2002: 100), but it went on to gross \$500,000 on its first world run (Kulik 1975: 89).

Whereas *Henry VIII* aimed to be popular, Korda’s *Rembrandt* suggested a serious intervention in public history. Korda described his high-art aspiration in a magazine editorial: “In Los Angeles they talk too much shop ... there are very few people out there who are possessed of any genuine *culture* ... a film director must also be acquainted with the body of European literature and art” (Korda 1934: 84 my emphasis). An art collector and admirer of Rembrandt, Korda had a personal investment in the subject (Kulik 1975: 157); the reverential approach contrasted with the light-hearted *Henry VIII*, as did the episodic narrative which stressed the psychological complexity of a misunderstood artist (played by Charles Laughton) reduced to poverty and mourning his wife’s death. It was expensive and claimed to be meticulously researched, with sets constructed to resemble the seventeenth

century landscape depicted in Rembrandt's paintings (Kulik 1975: 154). However, the slow pacing of the narrative, coupled with its artist subject lacked the popular appeal of *Henry VIII* and it was commercially unsuccessful (Chapman 2005: 39). It was not until *Moulin Rouge* (1953) that the artist biopic would be attempted again.

Wilcox remade his earlier *Nell Gwyn* with sound and cast Anna Neagle in the role of Gwyn; but his main contribution in this decade comprises *Victoria the Great* – “the one film I had always wanted to make” (Wilcox 1967: 111) – and *Sixty Glorious Years*; both of which, like *Rembrandt*, reflected his desire to make culturally significant films. As with Barker, Wilcox's monarchy biopics connoted prestige and *Victoria the Great* reaffirmed its producer's ambition to demonstrate his cultural worth through films about high culture and national figures. *Victoria the Great* offered a conservative, reverential treatment of the monarchy whereas Korda's *Henry VIII* stressed extravagance and humour. Yet the domestic focus remained and the Queen's relationship with Prince Albert (as portrayed by Anna Neagle and Anton Walbrook) was depicted as “an ordinary married couple in rather good circumstances” (Wilcox 1967: 115). This was balanced with a desire to memorialise Victoria in spectacular fashion, with the final images filmed in Technicolor. The Queen and Albert spend only two days away following their marriage before the Queen returns to the palace to discuss an income tax proposal. Through such sequences, the film foregrounds the monarch's dedication to public duty and it offered a reassuring image at a time when the contemporary monarchy's public image was strained by the abdication crisis of 1937 and Edward VIII's marriage to Wallis Simpson (Richards 1984: 264).

*Sixty Glorious Years* repeated the formula but was filmed entirely in Technicolor, with royal approval to film in Windsor Park. However, Wilcox was aware the film was being produced in a climate where international relations with Germany were particularly tense (Wilcox 1967: 120) and these were addressed through a greater emphasis on foreign affairs and the need to ensure national security (Chapman 2005: 83). Both films were commercially successful (see Chapman 2005: 87). The early successes of *Henry VIII* in 1911, the longest British film of its time, and of *Sixty Years a Queen*, an expensive production in 1913, coupled with these productions in the 1930s indicated that the biopic's cultural prestige and role as the conduit of public history made it suitable for showcasing new technical innovations. The biopic, alongside films about empire, was popular "so it is not surprising that colour was used to 'complete' and 'make real' emotions and ideologies circulating around British history [and] spectacle" (Street 2012: 142). The use of Technicolor in Wilcox's films shared with Barker's an emphasis on 'pictorial values', showcasing the capacity of cinema and foregrounding British history as a site of spectacle. Similar to Barker's *Jane Shore*, Wilcox's approach stressed pageantry (Chapman 2005: 73) to commemorate the monarch, foregrounding public events and ceremonies such as Victoria's coronation in 1838 and Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Whereas Henry VIII was comedic and private, the emphasis on such rituals constructed the monarchy as a 'public' figure of reverence.

Balcon produced both *The Iron Duke* and *Rhodes of Africa* in the 1930s as part of a wider ambition for British cinema centring on "the building up of a native industry with its roots firmly planted in the soil of this country" (1969: 48) through films



that reflected 'British values'. For Balcon, these values were conventional and patriarchal, embodied in the biopic about the Duke of Wellington (see Chapman 2005: 45-63), and the imperialist and businessman Cecil Rhodes, who was portrayed as a self-sacrificing figure rather than a rapacious one, driven by the national interest and a faith in 'progress'. Despite his life-limiting illness, Rhodes is depicted achieving his ambition to expand Britain by colonising southern Africa, establishing rail networks and ensuring peace through his role as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. The opening credits stated that it was based on a respected biography by Sarah Gertrude Millin, a device similar to Sidney Low's involvement on *The Life Story of David Lloyd George* and designed to strengthen the film's claim to authenticity. Rhodes was framed as a 'Great Man' of empire, and the film stressed the 'civilising' role played by the imperialist and imperialism itself. Despite the casting of American actor Walter Huston to increase the film's export potential, and a budget of at least £100,000, it fared relatively poorly in the American market (Ryall 2009: 207) possibly because of the limited appeal and knowledge of Rhodes in America. Nevertheless, Balcon persevered with this approach in the following decade with *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948).

### **1940-1949**

During the Second World War subjects were chosen with a view to bolstering patriotic feeling. Though general production levels fell in the 1940s, the biopic represented a larger proportion of film production (2.6 per cent) compared to previous decades (see Appendix Four). Many of the biopics produced in this decade were informed by wartime circumstances; biopics focused on British

technical ingenuity and celebrated political figures combating foreign tyranny. New subjects were depicted in *They Flew Alone* (1942), the story of aviator Amy Johnson (again played by Anna Neagle), and spitfire inventor R.J. Mitchell in *The First of the Few* (1942). Released one year after her death, a strategy adopted by Elvey, *They Flew Alone* constructed Johnson as a patriotic heroine, an aviator who set long-distance records in the 1930s and a promotor of women's entry into wartime services. Following *Victoria the Great*, Neagle's persona encompassed a regal aura that lent itself to patriotic roles (see Dolan and Street 2010: 39). These 1940s films offered more varied definitions of patriotism than the Victoria biopics in the 1930s. *The Prime Minister* (1941) and *The Young Mr Pitt* (1942), the biopics about politicians Disraeli and Pitt the Younger, continued to emphasise 'elite' figures and illustrated the ambition to use film for propaganda purposes, stressing the aims of the Ministry of Information to promote national heroes as pioneers of freedom who embody social justice (Aldgate and Richards 1994: 141). On the other hand, the films about aeronautical engineer Mitchell and Johnson, a woman pilot, suggested a more democratic, egalitarian model of national identity. They serve as reflections of a 'people's war' sensibility in which collective crisis diminished class difference (see Clarke 2004: 207).

*The Great Mr. Handel* (1942), a high-budget composer biopic, was the Rank Organisation's first Technicolor film. It charted the life of the Anglo-German composer Georg Friedrich Händel (Wilfrid Lawson), focusing in particular on the years leading up to his 1741 oratorio, 'Messiah'. The film reflected J. Arthur Rank's personal interest as both a Methodist and head of the Rank Organisation in using films to promote religious messages of family values and to perform a social

role, rather than commercial concerns (see Porter 2009: 267-275). The film also possessed a clear propagandist impulse, constructing the German composer as loyal to Britain, featuring tableaux images from the Bible as Handel writes ‘the Messiah’, and emphasising his humility in caring for others (Landy 1991: 84-85). Though the film was unpopular (Harper 1994: 102) Rank continued financing religious-themed films, such as *John Wesley* (1954), underlining that he was driven by social rather than commercial concerns, and that shifts in the biopic were instigated by those with the necessary cultural and economic capital to influence filmmaking practice.

Later in the decade Balcon produced *Scott of the Antarctic*, depicting Captain Scott’s doomed 1910-12 expedition to the South Pole. The team embarked on the expedition to claim the South Pole for the British Empire, but were beaten by a rival Norwegian team led by Roald Amundsen, before dying on the return journey having battled terrible conditions. They were memorialised as national heroes after the recovery in 1913 of Scott’s journals, which were seen to embody patriotism and the spirit of British masculinity. This was exemplified in a letter to his wife Kathleen: “we have given our lives for our country – we have actually made the longest journey on record, and we have been the first Englishmen at the South Pole” (quoted in Chapman 2005: 147-148). The film echoes *Rhodes of Africa*, in which the ailing Rhodes was deified through his perseverance, and the wartime biopics about Mitchell and Pitt the Younger, which similarly depicted self-sacrificing subjects. The film continued a tendency to treat male establishment figures with reverence and as emblems of British determination and resolve.

*Scott of the Antarctic* was extensively researched and permission was sought from surviving family members of the expedition team to ensure authenticity (Balcon 1948: 153- 155). It was also a 'prestige' film, scored by leading English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, and featured expensive exterior location shooting in Norway and Switzerland, features recalling Ideal's ambition to make *The Life Story of David Lloyd George* a film of "national importance". This was coupled with an awareness of spectacle. Recalling Barker's 'pictorial values', Technicolor cameras were used to mount a film comparable with the Hollywood studios: "We soon realised that colour would give enormous additional value to the picture, with a great range of exciting and colourful backgrounds" (Balcon 1948: 154). It was Ealing's biggest financial outlay to date (Chapman 2005: 150), showing again how larger resources are made available to biopics featuring men.

The film was viewed as challenging: "Although I knew there would be enormous difficulties in making a worthy film of this great story – to say nothing of the hazards and cost – the decision to go ahead was taken at long last" (Balcon 1969: 171). The efforts for 'authenticity' suggest Balcon wanted to produce something which contributed to the 'national story'. John Mills was enthusiastic to play the role of Scott: "He was a fascinatingly complex character – a born leader, with tremendous physical stamina and courage. He had a quick temper, which he often found difficult to control. This I was never allowed to show, because of the possibility of upsetting relations still living" (1980: 295). The avoidance of the darker aspects of Scott's personality reflected a wider ambition to construct Scott as a 'Great Man' of history. This was conveyed through a reverential approach which stressed his patriotic motives for the expedition and locates Scott as the sole

instigator of the mission. Though the sequences with Kathleen suggest his humility, the opening credits establish the Great Man view by appearing over the commemorative statue of the explorer located in Christchurch, New Zealand which was Scott's base for the expedition. The film stressed the team's unquestioning loyalty to Scott and their dogged enthusiasm, reiterating a patriarchal world view of loyalty to the leader and mutual support between the team.

The film was a commercial and critical success domestically, and selected for the Royal Command Performance in 1949, but it failed in the American market: "The American public has no interest in failure, even if it is heroic failure, and certainly they do not easily accept other people's legends" (Balcon 1969: 174). Other 'prestige' productions were attempted after *Scott of the Antarctic*, including *The Bad Lord Byron* (1949) and *Christopher Columbus* (1949). Both were expensive to make and formed part of Gainsborough Pictures' 'quality' strategy in which a small number of 'special' films were made alongside a larger group of lower tier productions (Spicer 2006: 84). Although these were commercial failures in both domestic and American markets (ibid.: 211), like Balcon's film they underline how biopics were perceived as worthy of special treatment and considerable investment.

## **1950-1959**

Biopic subjects in the 1950s included an inventor, monarch, composer, artist, religious figure and writer. Though both biopic production and general film production displayed an increase on the 1940s, the proportion of biopics fell in the 1950s (see Appendix Four). Three biopics concerned musical performers, a trend

which was to continue in later decades: *Melba* (1953), *The Tommy Steele Story* (1957) and *After the Ball* (1957), featured respectively the Australian opera singer Nellie Melba, rock and roll musician Tommy Steele, and music hall legend Vesta Tilley. There were three films that depicted British wartime achievements. *Reach for the Sky* (1956), the story of RAF pilot Douglas Bader, was the only biopic to focus on a male military figure. Despite losing his legs in a flying accident in 1931 Bader (played by Kenneth More) joined the RAF during the Second World War, fought in the Battle of Britain, and was captured as a Prisoner of War. The film represented its subject as triumphing through his determination and patriotism, similar attributes to Captain Scott's in the earlier film. Two biopics about female spies were also released: *Odette* (1950) and *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958) told the stories respectively of Odette Sansom and Violette Szabo within the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in occupied France.

*Odette* followed Sansom being sent to France, captured, tortured by Nazis for refusing to disclose British war plans, and incarcerated in a concentration camp before her eventual release. The majority of post-war films, including *Morning Departure* (1950), foregrounded male heroism (see Summerfield 2009: 938); but *Odette*, and later *A Town Like Alice* (1956), *Carve Her Name with Pride* and *Conspiracy of Hearts* (1960), privileged female wartime experience, challenging the conventional memory of the war. Wilcox claimed: "I would like to be remembered as the man who made *Odette* ... it brought me into contact with Odette herself, a remarkable woman in every sense of the word. It also provided Anna [Neagle] with a story that resulted in her greatest dramatic performance" (Wilcox 1967: 183). Rather than other Neagle vehicles such as *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949) or *Victoria the Great*, Wilcox selected a less obviously 'commercial' film

because it added to the ‘national story’ and thereby advanced his reputation as a producer of culturally valuable films. The casting of Odette also illustrated that the selection of the subject for a biopic is influenced by star availability and their respective personas, an issue analysed in Chapter Five.

*The Magic Box* (1951), an account of British cinematograph pioneer William Friese-Greene, formed the British film industry’s special contribution to the 1951 Festival of Britain. The event celebrated British contributions to art, industry and science, conveying an image of modernity in a continued climate of austerity (Easen 2003: 51). Various films were scheduled (ibid.: 52) but only *The Magic Box* was finished, filmed in Technicolor, with cameo roles for renowned actors including Laurence Olivier. The choice of Friese-Greene reflected the Festival’s remit to foreground British technical achievement. The opening credits appeared over memorials for Thomas Edison and Louis Lumière, suggesting an illustrious line of inventors leading to Friese-Greene (Robert Donat), who was portrayed persevering with his inventions despite bankruptcy and finally dropping dead at a conference of film industry personnel, none of whom recognised him.

Nevertheless, his determination and dignity draw comparison with the heroic failure of Captain Scott and in the final sequence Friese-Greene’s name adorned a similar memorial to Edison’s stating “A Pioneer of the Cinema”. The film reflected a cultural, rather than commercial, motivation, celebrating Friese-Greene’s personal investment in developing cinematic processes. Its promotion of Friese Greene as an original pioneer led to accusations by American film historians that the film distorted history in order to foreground British achievements (see Burton 2000: 164-168). The Festival of Britain required a figure through which notions of *British* ingenuity could be channeled and, through the figure of Friese-Greene, the film

constructed a public history of the potential of British cinema. Prior to his death, Friese-Green's impassioned warning to industry personnel that cinema as a "universal language" was failing formed an overt attempt to mobilise support for the industry. Though this conveyed pessimism, the cameos from Olivier, Richard Attenborough and Peter Ustinov formed celebrations of contemporaneous talent and articulated the optimism of British film culture in 1951.

*The Tommy Steele Story* was a different type of biopic and marked a shift in the 'popular imagination', the myths and stories which contribute to a sense of national history and culture. It charted Steele (playing himself) from joining the merchant navy in 1952 to being spotted by manager John Kennedy performing in a coffee bar in 1956 and thrust into rock and roll stardom. Marketed as 'The Sensational Success Story of Britain's Teenage Idol', it was a vehicle to market Steele and to exploit the new youth and pop music phenomenon. Featuring musical performances, it depicted Steele as a talented but down-to-earth musician with his Cockney accent signifying his working class 'homegrown' status and a newly democratised and youth-orientated popular culture. It was commercially successful (Harper and Porter 2003: 192) and the first biopic to foreground a figure of the new youth and media culture. The source material was popular culture itself; Steele was known through commercial channels such as ITV's flagship show, *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, and interviews in music magazines (see Mitchell 2011: 212, 214). The film narrated an *ongoing* cultural development: Rock and Roll was still emerging, and Steele had only signed with Kennedy as a professional musician in September 1956, one year before the film's release. The film illustrated a shift from establishment figures to those from popular culture, corresponding with the shift



Custen detects in the 1950s studio biopic. Steele was “an idol of consumption”, a consumer product emerging in a period of social change and emergent consumerism, rather than an “idol of production”, a figure of the elite who shaped society such as Cecil Rhodes (see Custen 1992: 32-33). This biopic exemplified a new tendency in which popular culture – television and popular music – served as public history (see Appendix Three, Charts Three and Four).

### **1960-1969**

Though there had been an increase in female-centred biopics in the 1950s (see Appendix Two), in the following decade only *Isadora* (1969), about American dancer Isadora Duncan, and *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969) about Anne Boleyn and her relationship with Henry VIII, featured female subjects. Both overall production and biopic production fell in the 1960s, and the biopic represented roughly the same proportion of production as in the 1950s (see Appendix Four). The decade featured the first films about a homosexual subject. Oscar Wilde’s place in the public imagination, centring on literary work but also his conviction and imprisonment, was revisited in the 1960s with films depicting his life in the late nineteenth century. Both *Oscar Wilde* (1960) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) were released following the Wolfenden Committee’s recommendation to de-criminalise homosexual behaviour between consenting male adults in 1957. *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (released in America as *The Man with the Green Carnation*) was produced by Albert R. Broccoli, and featured Peter Finch in the role of Wilde. Contemporaneous debates concerning legislation were a factor in its production: “The success or failure of a film often hangs on a question of timing. *Make the*

*right subject at the wrong time*, and though you might have Oscar-winning performances and material, you can die at the box office. Though we didn't exactly start from strength ... we still thought we'd got it right" (Broccoli 1998: 142 my emphasis). It generated controversy and lobbying groups, such as the Boy Scout Lobby, demanded the removal of scenes where Wilde's homosexuality was made explicit, which Broccoli refused to do (see Broccoli 1998: 144). Such controversies made US distributors reluctant to handle the film; it received limited distribution and was commercially unsuccessful (Walker 1974: 1959). Though not commercially significant, *Trials* was released before other films, including *Victim* (1961), which focused on gay characters. It was thus an intervention in a climate where there was pressure to legalise homosexuality and focus on it as a 'condition' afflicting some of the populace, and the portrayal of a 'damaged' figure was clearly responding to contemporary concerns (see Walker 1974: 159). It exemplified a shift within the genre and wider British film, and demonstrated a willingness by producers to invest in controversial subject matter to secure cultural prestige.

Some 'British' films were successful in the American market, but these were part of, and shaped by, Hollywood, with budgets supplied through American studios (Murphy 1992:6). This American investment was propelled by the funds made available through the Eady Levy, introduced in 1950, which returned a portion of cinema tickets to filmmakers in Britain. American tax legislation made it profitable to commit to 'runaway' production whereby Hollywood produced films in countries such as the UK. There was a renewed concern with monarchical figures with a cycle of commercially and critically successful films released between 1964 and 1972: *Becket* (1964), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), *The Lion in Winter* (1968),

*Alfred the Great* (1969), *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969), *Mary Queen of Scots* (1972) and *Henry VIII and His Six Wives* (1972).

Hal B. Wallis produced *Becket*, documenting the friendship and subsequent rivalry between Thomas á Becket and King Henry II, for Paramount. Wallis subsequently produced *Anne of the 1000 Days*, about Anne Boleyn, and *Mary Queen of Scots*, concerning the relationship between Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I, for Universal. An independent producer, Wallis professed to being “deeply interested in English history. Britain, British institutions, and the pageantry of the royal court fascinates me” (1980: 163). Wallis’ approach privileged the rituals and ceremonies of British monarchy but his films were often adapted from ‘highbrow’ works; for example, *Becket* was adapted from Jean Anouilh’s play *Becket or the Honour of God* (1959). Believing “[p]eople will always enjoy the intrigue and drama of historical spectacle” (ibid.: 163) Wallis based his films on rivalries between characters played by prestigious British actors: Richard Burton and Peter O’Toole in *Becket* and Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson in *Mary Queen of Scots*. Wallis equated spectacle with the glamour of costumes and castles such as Bamburgh in Northumberland and Hever Castle in Kent. He was wary of historical depth, editing the script for *Mary Queen of Scots* to remove “the long dissertations on Scottish law [which] would mean little to American audiences” (ibid.: 170) rather than seeking the historical authenticity favoured by early producers. Wallis commented that, after *Anne of the Thousand Days* won an Academy Award for Best Costume design, “[n]aturally, I began looking for another important historical subject with cinematic possibilities” (ibid.: 169). Thus American producers sought to capitalise on recent successes, focussing on monarchs as biopic subjects, and

aiming specifically at American audiences with an emphasis on historical spectacle over authenticity.

*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) was a 'prestige' film and director David Lean's comments suggest continuity with Balcon's approach: "If one is going to do *Lawrence* properly one cannot do it cheaply. It costs a packet to take an enormous unit – cranes, lights, and thousands of extras – out into the desert" (quoted in Organ 2009: 11). Financed by Columbia, with a final cost of \$30 million (Claydon 2005: 214), *Lawrence of Arabia* was an international success and received seven Academy Awards. Whereas *Livingstone* and *Rhodes of Africa* celebrated imperialism, emphasising the supposedly altruistic actions of their subjects, and the imperial mission was portrayed as a source of national pride, *Lawrence of Arabia* indicated how attitudes towards Empire had shifted by 1962. Britain's imperial decline accelerated following the Second World War: the Indian Raj was dismantled in 1947 and the Suez Crisis in 1956 brought into question the discourse of imperialism as moral progress shown in *Rhodes of Africa*. Unlike Rhodes and Scott, Lawrence was represented not as a 'Great Man' of history but as a more complex and ambiguous character, as Lean acknowledged: "I hope we have created a very exceptional hero ... in certain ways he is the full-blown traditional hero figure and he does some heroic things, but he also does things which will shock an audience" (quoted in Organ 2009: 9). Whereas Balcon avoided the subject of Captain Scott's temper, Lean indicated a shift to critiquing the 'Great Man' approach and examining the imperial figure from a post-colonial perspective. Though Lawrence had previously been depicted as an imperial hero in the vein of General Gordon (Richards 1997: 56), the publication of his autobiography *Seven*

*Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (1926) suggested a more ambiguous and complicated individual. The autobiography conveyed a figure prone to doubt and self-questioning; Lawrence unpacked his motivations in a candid manner, suggesting “[t]here was a craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known. Contempt for my passion for distinction made me refuse every offered honour” (1926: 580). This lack of self-assurance and intense introspection was manifested through the film’s psycho-biographical approach.

The first half of the film depicted Lawrence (Peter O’Toole) as a determined individual who challenges the authority of the military establishment, driven by a desire to unite the Arabs against their Turkish oppressors during the First World War. The second half showed how his progressive disillusionment was linked to a growing awareness that his role in Arabia was serving British imperial interests. His uniting of the Arabs against the Ottoman Empire resulted in the final scene in which the leader of the Arab rebellion, Prince Faisal, discusses with General Allenby and Dryden, the head of the Arab Bureau, how the Arabian territory would be divided after the war, a scene depicting “the futility of individual agency” (Chapman and Cull 2009: 103). The notion of Lawrence as a Great Man was undermined through the film’s interrogation of his narcissism and sado-masochism. Lawrence was shown dressed in Arab robes, admiring his reflection in a dagger, and his rumoured homosexuality was commented on in ambiguous terms when he is tortured in Deraa. He led a massacre against Turkish soldiers, shooting unarmed Turks. His ‘Great Man’ image was unraveled in the film by the American war correspondent Jackson Bentley, modelled on journalist Lowell Thomas. Thomas represented Lawrence’s experiences in the travelogue *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* (1919), using the fascination with Lawrence as an imperial

hero to encourage American support for the war. In the film, having announced that he is “looking for a hero”, Bentley photographs Lawrence on top of a ransacked train, an elevated position befitting a ‘Great Man’; but the film documents the staging of that image, suggesting Lawrence’s image was manufactured to shape public mood and fuel imperial discourse. The sceptical treatment of the military establishment was consistent with wider cultural trends such as the satirical magazine *Private Eye* (1961- ), the stage production *Beyond the Fringe* (1960-1966) and the BBC’s *That Was the Week That Was* (1962-63), which similarly held up the establishment as something to mock rather than revere.

### **1970-1979**

The American financing which instigated some films produced in the 1960s dried up in the 1970s. The Rank Organization withdrew from financing, so that films were increasingly produced on an ‘ad-hoc’ basis (Barber 2013: 50-51). Though fewer films were produced in the 1970s, the proportion of biopics increased significantly. Biopics accounted for twenty five of the eight hundred and ten films produced. Ken Russell exemplified one extreme of film production, directing a number of self-financed biopics with small budgets. For example, *Mahler* (1974) was produced on a budget of £168,000 (Russell 1989: 144). Ken Russell joined the BBC’s arts program *Monitor* in 1959 and directed television films such as *Elgar* (BBC 1962), about the composer Sir Edward Elgar, before beginning a career in feature film production at the end of the decade.<sup>10</sup> He directed *The Music Lovers* (1970), *Mahler* and *Lisztomania* (1975) about composers Pyotr Tchaikovsky,

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<sup>10</sup> Russell’s career in film and television is the subject of a recent, special issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* vol. 12 issue 4 (2015).

Gustav Mahler and Franz Liszt respectively; earlier films about Classical and popular composers were limited to *The Great Mr Handel* and *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (1953). Russell also directed *Savage Messiah* (1972) and *Valentino* (1977) about French sculptor Henri Gaudier and Italian-born American silent film actor Rudolph Valentino. He disregarded the fixation with period accuracy but continued the psycho-biographical approach used in *Lawrence of Arabia*:

I love period films: the possibility of opening a book into the past fascinates me. You don't have to worry that every last detail is historically accurate; a lack of total authenticity doesn't matter; in the end a little roughness is not a bad thing. I generally select period material because all of the stories I do are about the relationships of people to their environment and to each other, and other eternal questions that we are just as concerned about today as people were in the past. (quoted in Phillips 1970: 12)

This acceptance of 'roughness' and a lack of authenticity contrasts with early filmmakers who sought the polish of high production values in their biopics, whereas Russell's biopics embodied a radically different aesthetic (see Phillips 1979: 91). Drawing on art cinema traditions, they featured symbolic and metaphorical set-pieces to convey their subjects' feelings regarding sexuality, music and persecution, using flashbacks and hallucinations to illustrate psychological states. They stand apart visually from the other biopics discussed, through their experimental narrative form and sexualised, controversial imagery. In the 1970s film censorship was regularly discussed and debated in Parliament, with calls made for stricter legislation (see Barber 2012: 23). Russell's films, most notable *The Devils* (1971), generated considerable anxiety and received local bans (ibid.: 25) but biopics such as *The Music Lovers* were also controversial.

In *The Music Lovers*, Russell interrogated the psychological state of Tchaikovsky (Richard Chamberlain) by merging hallucinations and flashbacks with his

symphonies, and showing flashback sequences of his mother's death and his battles with homosexuality while he composed. The film exemplified many of Russell's typical cinematic themes, including eroticism, physical revulsion and explicit violence (Grant 1993: 188). *Mahler* was framed through a train journey from Paris to Vienna in 1911 during which the composer (played by Robert Powell) experienced flashbacks and dreams to represent his turbulent marriage, experiences of anti-Semitism, and fear of death: "As is my custom when approaching a film on a composer, I donned my Sherlock Holmes outfit and searched for the soul of the man in his music, while also keeping the facts of his life in mind. And just as I had with Tchaikovsky, I found a lot of bombast along the way – the sound and fury of a tormented artist" (Russell 1989: 141). Whereas earlier films claimed authenticity through the authority of biographies or the cultural esteem of theatre adaptations, Russell privileged interpretation in representing the psychology of subjects.

*Young Winston* (1972) was the first of several biopics directed by Richard Attenborough and focused on the early life of Winston Churchill. It represented a return to internationally-funded films which examined British imperial history and the film's production followed Churchill's death in 1965. Whereas Russell's productions probed the psychology of their subjects and disregarded historical authenticity, *Young Winston* displayed a return to the 'Great Man' formula and period authenticity. Adapted from Churchill's autobiography *My Early Life* (1930), the narrative first situates Winston as child, his distant relationship with his father Lord Randolph Churchill, and his struggles at school. The second half concerned Churchill as a young man (Simon Ward), when he was sent to South Africa as a war correspondent during the Boer war, was captured, escaped, and was later



elected to Parliament. The ambivalence towards ideologies of empire in *Lawrence of Arabia* was not present here (see Chapman 2006: 817); Empire was often reduced to the level of setting and *mise-en-scène* through which to construct a heroic narrative. T.E. Lawrence was a contested figure embodying ambiguous motivations whereas Churchill, by his later opposition to Nazism as Prime Minister during the war, came to embody British opposition to fascism. The film was mostly reverential, avoiding the psycho-biographical approach of Russell's films about Tchaikovsky and Mahler. The opening images comprised archival footage of V.E. Day May 8th 1945, indicating the film's textual approach to filming Churchill. His time as a correspondent in India, Sudan and South Africa was portrayed as a series of courageous exploits and escapes, and there was little attempt to humanise or develop the characters of colonial subjects, unlike for example the treatment of Sherif Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

*Stevie* (1978) was one of the first biopics to represent a female writer and followed *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1957), a film focusing on Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett. Adapted from Hugh Whitemore's televised play *Stevie: A Play from the Life and Work of Stevie Smith* (1977), it formed an extended monologue by Smith (Glenda Jackson), addressing the camera. Smith's life, focusing on her refusal to marry, her dislike for suburban propriety and her caring for her ageing aunt, were mixed with her poetry and excerpts from her novels. Smith's career, beginning in the interwar period, contested discourses of conservative femininity in the interwar years and its associations with marriage and domesticity (Severin 1997: 7); documenting her life was a significant intervention. The availability of Glenda Jackson and the compatibility of her persona with Smith were critical: Smith's

radicalism was negotiated through Jackson whose “articulate, pragmatic, rebarbative nature seemed in tune with the raw new decade” (Walker 1985: 18). Jackson’s persona acquired cultural capital through her training in Peter Brook’s ‘theatre of cruelty’ and her two Academy Awards for best actress in *Women in Love* (1969) and *A Touch of Class* (1972). The persona of a “powerful autonomous woman” (Williams 2010: 53) was compatible with the shifting gender politics instigated by second wave feminism in the 1970s. Smith’s unconventional life was read through Jackson who is a constant presence on screen, and her status initiated a shift towards a new type of subject. Jackson claimed “I’m certainly not bankable in the way, say, Barbara Streisand is. But your name can help a small project like *Stevie*. When I said I would commit to it, the money was forthcoming” (quoted in Castell 1979: 260). Though Jackson’s reputation and cultural esteem ultimately made the film possible, the small budget contrasts with the scale of resources dedicated to the films about figures such as Scott, Lawrence and Churchill. *Stevie* underscores the struggle to legitimate certain, lesser-known, figures through biopic production with larger budgets reserved to those already widely known.

### **1980-1989**

Biopic production in the 1980s was marked by an increasingly critical eye towards British history, specifically different legacies of British colonialism and capital punishment. Though general film production fell significantly in the 1980s, biopic production increased and the genre represented seven percent of total film production (see Appendix Four). Raising finance remained problematic, but independent companies such as Goldcrest suggested the biopic was a ‘quality’

genre that could attract investment from America. Producer Jake Eberts explains the strategy behind Goldcrest: “I like to think that at Goldcrest we made, in the words of a motto once used by Columbia ‘movies that mattered’. *Chariots* mattered, as did *Gandhi*, *The Killing Fields*, *The Emerald Forest* ... if you are going to spend millions of dollars, you might as well go for projects and ideas that matter” (Eberts and Ilott 1990: 99). The ‘true story’ status was important in securing funding: “I found that people often expressed a greater interest if I could hang my pitch on a query like, ‘did you read the article in so-and-so?’, or if I could attach it to some real, historical event which they could be expected to know about ... In other words, the true story ... was as good a hook as a high concept” (Eberts and Ilott 1990: 33). ‘High concept’ is an industrial term first applied to Hollywood filmmaking in the 1980s and refers to films with easily pitched, comprehensible stories and marketed through stars (Wyatt 1994: 7). Eberts suggests Goldcrest’s biopics could compete successfully for funding in an industry in which ‘high concept’ filmmaking had emerged as a strategy. For instance, global recognition of *Gandhi* made the film an immediately recognisable commodity and the simple ad-line on posters reading “A World Event” resonated with high-concept marketing.

New types of biopic emerged during the decade, including the sports film, a feature of the classical Hollywood biopic since the 1940s (Custen 1992: 85). Both *Chariots of Fire* (1981), focusing on athletes Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson) and Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) and their preparation for the 1924 Olympic Games, and *Champions* (1984), the biopic about jockey Bob Champion (John Hurt), followed a similar trajectory, involving personal struggles and an heroic climax in which a major sporting event, the Olympics or the Grand National, was documented in

detail. The range of female subjects increased to include political figures and fashion designers. *Chanel Solitaire* (1981) was based on the biography of the same name by Claude Delay (1981) and depicts Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel (Marie-France Pisier). The film concentrates on the designer’s early life, her abandonment by her father and her affair with Boy Capel before his death in a car accident. The film reflected a growing interest in the life of the designer since her death in 1971, including the publication of Paul Morand’s biography *L’allure de Chanel* (1976), but emphasised a private life of romance and tragedy rather than her public career as a designer (see Vincendeau 2014: 183). Though the film reiterates the sexualised, romantic history familiar from earlier biopics about women, it demonstrated how the movement towards figures from popular culture created space for new types of female subject rather than monarchs, mistresses and nurses.

*Anne Devlin* (1984) approached Irish history from a feminist perspective, following Devlin (Bríd Brennan), the ‘housekeeper’ to Irish nationalist Robert Emmet, during the 1803 rebellion where Irish nationalists sought independence from the United Kingdom. The film examined her refusal to inform on Emmet when she was imprisoned and tortured by British forces before being released. Director Pat Murphy saw contemporary significance to *Devlin*: “When I read Anne Devlin’s journal, what struck me was how modern things are in terms of historicity. If people were in the film in modern dress, the story could be happening now. We still see women today who are excluded from history” (quoted in Sullivan 1999a). The film lent itself to the wider knowledge of the 1981 hunger strikes in which female republican prisoners conducted ‘dirty’ strikes in which menstrual blood and excrement were smeared in cells as protests, and Devlin was shown menstruating in

prison (see Sullivan 1999b: 288). The significance of female agency was framed through her refusal to cooperate under coercion, and depicted how, even amongst the revolutionaries, Devlin's gender rendered her unequal (ibid.: 282). *Anne Devlin* addressed female marginalisation in male-centred narratives of Irish history such as *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) and *Angel* (1982) which, though they featured women, did not portray them as active narrative agents: "I appreciated that male filmmakers were addressing how they felt about Ireland ... But now I think there is a problem, because I think what filmmakers who were telling a particularly male story were doing was obliterating women entirely" (quoted in Sullivan 1999a). The film formed a major intervention into Irish political history. Though Irish politician Charles Stewart Parnell was the focus of the Hollywood studio biopic *Parnell* (1937), and featured briefly in the British *Captain Boycott* (1947), and the Irish war of independence was depicted in *Shake Hands with the Devil* (1959), *Anne Devlin* rescued a largely forgotten political activist from the start of the nineteenth century, remembered as a 'housekeeper', to foreground female political action in Ireland.

Other films similarly addressed British history through a critical lens. *Dance with a Stranger* (1985) featured Ruth Ellis (Miranda Richardson), already famed as the last woman to be hanged in Britain after being found guilty of murdering her lover David Blakely. Though the early films about Charles Peace and *10 Rillington Place* (1971), about London serial killer John Christie, represented executed criminals, *Dance with a Stranger* was the second British film to foreground a female 'criminal' (following David Lean's *Madeleine* in 1950) and examined British

capital punishment critically.<sup>11</sup> It documented Ellis' struggles as a lower-class single parent working as a nightclub hostess. Abandoned by the wealthy Blakely she murdered him and was executed, but *Dance with a Stranger* placed Ellis as a victim of different men: her son's father, her lover and the nightclub owner who fired her. The sympathetic portrayal of Ellis carried clear messages about the ethics of capital punishment (Tweg 2000: 2) and the film was produced at a time when arguments for the death penalty were particularly intense. Though abolished in 1967 the reinstatement of the death penalty was a recurring characteristic of political discourse and was present in the 1980s, with calls for reinstatement centring on the "Northern Ireland factor" and murders linked to terrorism (see Doyle 2015: 719).

*Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* (1981), *Gandhi* (1982), *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *Cry Freedom* (1987) marked a new tendency in the genre by centring on figures who were not white British. Both *Gandhi* and *Cry Freedom* explored the legacies of British colonialism within a climate in which a wider exploration of multiracial Britain was underway in British cinema (see Hill 1999: 219-240). Richard Attenborough, who had earlier directed *Young Winston*, directed *Gandhi* which charted the rise of Mahatma Gandhi (Ben Kingsley) from lawyer to Indian independence activist up to his assassination in 1948. Attenborough continued to examine the legacy of colonialism in *Cry Freedom*, which explored the friendship between black South African Steve Biko (Denzel Washington), a leading figure in the Black Consciousness movement, who died in police custody in September

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<sup>11</sup> Though *Yield to the Night* (effectively a disguised biopic about Ellis) had implicitly criticised the death sentence in 1956, and was, in fact, released soon after Ellis' execution on 13th July 1955, *Dance with a Stranger* addresses its subject by name.

1977, and white South African journalist Donald Woods (Kevin Kline). *Gandhi* and to a less explicit extent *Cry Freedom* explored the legacy of British imperialism and racial conflict, but they featured mainly white casts and their subjects were framed in relation to white culture: thus Biko's legacy was framed through his meetings with Woods and the journalist's subsequent account once he escaped South Africa to reveal that Biko's death was caused by police brutality.

Attenborough's biopics were guided by a broadly liberal philosophy in which the subject of the biopic embodied a wider humanist concern: "I have tried, whether it be in *Cry Freedom*, *Gandhi*, or *Shadowlands*, to make films about the dilemmas, the problems, and the sacrifices which human beings are involved in" (quoted in Gilbert 2007: 28) but, significantly, these messages of political and colonial injustice were channelled by men. Attenborough also commented on the potential of the *medium* of cinema to shift public opinion: "I want cinema to contribute something to argument, to thought, to antagonism, to anger, whatever, but always related to human affairs and human decency" (quoted in Macnab 2003: 23).

*Gandhi*, released over thirty years after the end of the British Raj, adopted a critical approach towards imperial policy like *Lawrence of Arabia*, but focused on the colonised subject who contested British rule. The depiction of the Amritsar Massacre stressed the peaceful nature of the Indian protest at the Jallianwala Bagh Garden in April 1913 by intercutting between the seated Indians and the advancing British soldiers and tanks, followed by images of fleeing, screaming Indians being shot down. *Lawrence of Arabia* documented the Machiavellian role of senior politicians and military figures in imperialist policy and *Gandhi* depicted the enforcement of imperialism through violence.

*Cry Freedom* focused on the South African Apartheid system, which did not officially end until 1994, and was extremely contentious (see Dux 2013: 128-129). The relationship between Biko and Woods was clearly important to Attenborough: “What I have found fascinating was the story of how they’d formed a real friendship across the racial divide and how Donald had chosen to jeopardise everything he held dear – family, career, home, even his own life – to reveal the truth about Steve’s death” (Attenborough and Hawkins 2008: 158). Attenborough wanted to contribute to a *solution* to apartheid by foregrounding the friendship between a white and a black South African by raising awareness of the injustices of apartheid among a white audience. Attenborough’s career indicates that biopics can be invested with the power to exert political change, challenge injustices and inform a wide audience.

### **1990-1999**

In the 1990s two of the biopics about women depicted, for the first time, female artists and musicians; among male subjects there was an increase in writers and criminals. Overall production levels increased from the 1980s, but this was not reflected in the production of biopics specifically and the genre accounted for roughly four per cent of film production (see Appendix Four). A pronounced discursive change was the interest in homosexuality within biopic production, with eight biopics featuring homosexual subjects or supporting characters: *The Krays* (1990), *Edward II* (1991), *Wittgenstein* (1993), *Carrington* (1995) which focused on the relationship between Dora Carrington and Lytton Strachey, *Total Eclipse* (1995) which featured the relationship between the symbolist poets Arthur



Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, *Wilde* (1997), the Francis Bacon biopic *Love Is the Devil* (1998) and *Gods and Monsters* (1998) about the film director James Whale. Hitherto only six films - *Oscar Wilde*, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, *The Music Lovers*, *Sebastiane* (1976), *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) - had featured gay subjects. Lesbianism remained absent. This rise in gay subjects can be contextualised through the increasing cultural visibility of gay men, such as the *Gay Life* television series in 1980, the controversial Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality, and the emergence of AIDs. For instance, *Edward II* (1991) employed anachronistic devices and used metaphors and blood red imagery within a Renaissance England setting to discuss contemporary Gay liberation and AIDs (Richardson 2009: 78).

Other longstanding subjects persisted, including the monarchy: *The Madness of King George* (1994), *Mrs Brown* (1997) and *Elizabeth* (1998) were released during the decade. *The Madness of King George*, an adaptation of the National Theatre's production of Alan Bennett's play with Nigel Hawthorne reprising his role as King George III, reproduced Barker's approach to 'quality' in *Henry VIII*. It portrayed George III as the victim of the scheming Prince of Wales, who used his father's illness as a chance to seize power. The film took \$15 million at the US Box-office in 1995, the highest receipts for any British film that year (Street 2002: 202). *Elizabeth* was similarly the highest grossing British film in its year of release (Street 2002: 202): it took £5.5 million domestically and \$30 million at the US box-office (Pidduck 2001: 9). Directed by Indian filmmaker Shekhar Kapur with Australian actress Cate Blanchett in the title role, *Elizabeth* adopts an irreverent approach to English history that reflects the post-colonial status of its production

team (Higson 2003: 199-200) following the 1980s productions which examined the legacy of British colonialism and involvement in other countries. It centred on the early reign of Elizabeth I, her different suitors, and the Catholic Church's attempts to overthrow her. A focus on romance and domestic drama reflected the key-hole approach but with explicit sex, violence and thriller conventions, the castle and court a space of pillars and shadows where characters colluded and plotted against the monarch (see Higson 2003: 212). The approach was different from previous royal biopics: producer Alison Owen wanted "to do a historical movie in the style of *Trainspotting* ... we felt like we were really fed up with the nurtured [Merchant] Ivory chocolate box view of England ... let's do something that's really down and dirty and visceral and gritty" (quoted in Cubitt 2014). *Trainspotting* (1995) depicted heroin addiction in Edinburgh and by this reference Owen articulated a challenge to the representations of the past in 'heritage' films such as in Merchant/Ivory's *A Room with a View* (1985) and *Howards End* (1992), which some perceived as escapist, nostalgic fantasies of history (see Higson 2003: 46-47). Drawing on approaches and representations *outside* the biopic genre, *Elizabeth* illustrated that biopics respond, and are shaped by, wider film culture and practice.

*Michael Collins* (1996) was a further post-colonial biopic, a prestige production, budgeted at \$27 million (McLoone 2007: 62). It provided an account of the Irish war of independence, from the 1916 uprising up to the death of Collins (Liam Neeson) in 1922, and focused on Collins' role in the Irish resistance, negotiations over the treaty of independence, and the transition to democracy. With the exception of small-budgeted films like *Anne Devlin* and the artist biopic *My Left Foot: The Story of Christy Brown* (1989) there are few biopics that explored Irish

history and this was a motivating factor for producer Stephen Woolley: “Ireland has no history of cinema. Other than *Ryan’s Daughter* and one or two others, no period films have been made there” (Woolley 1996). However, Woolley was concerned that loyalty to historical record might undermine the film’s entertainment value: “What was important to me was that *Michael Collins* wasn’t going to be a dry movie... There had to be a sense of the surreal, of the strange, to make it fly, because without the Neil Jordan imprint on this, it would simply become a history lesson” (quoted in Schruers 1996). This reflected an anxiety amongst producers to combine historical accuracy with entertainment.<sup>12</sup> Yet director Neil Jordan insisted: “I’ve tried to be as accurate as I can to the issues in this film, so people can approach it as a document” (quoted in Coyne 1996). Jordan wanted *Michael Collins* to contribute to Irish national cinema through its focus on an Irish subject and history: “People couldn’t tell the story of these events for a long time because they’d been psychologically maimed by them. That’s why I thought that it would be a very positive thing to make this film. You’ve got to talk about this stuff before you grow up, address these aspects of your past to get beyond them” (Coyne 1996). The film was a national event with newspapers reporting on the film’s progress and Jordan said “I have never lost more sleep over the making of a film than I have over *Michael Collins*, but I’ll never make a more important one” (quoted in Connelly 2012: 58).

Following lengthy negotiations between the Republican leadership, the Irish and British governments, the IRA announced a ceasefire on 31 August 1994: *Michael Collins* thus offered a chance to intervene in the construction of public history

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<sup>12</sup> This issue is addressed in the following chapter that examines the reception of biopics.

surrounding Collins' role in the first Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 at a time when there was optimism that the conflict in Northern Ireland could be ended through negotiation. The film suggested that compromise and negotiation were necessary to ensure reconciliation and served as a commentary on the continuing peace negotiations in Northern Ireland (McLoone 2007: 63). English reviewers criticised *Michael Collins* as an "anti-British" and "I.R.A. film" with the car-bomb sequences, which reflected IRA practices between the 1970s and 1990s rather than the Anglo-Irish War of 1920, viewed as legitimising modern IRA tactics by associating them with the War of Independence (Connelly 2012: 59). Though domestically the film performed well, it performed poorly in the US market, possibly owing to a lack of promotion by Warner Bros. following the controversial end to the ceasefire in February 1996 (McLoone 2007: 62). As with *Dawn* and *The Magic Box*, the debates that surrounded *Michael Collins* illustrated the biopic's capacity as a medium of history and its potential to generate controversy. Though a disputed, controversial figure, the closing captions describe how Collins confronted the British Empire and negotiated the Treaty of Independence, before stating that "He died, paradoxically, in an attempt to finally remove the gun from Irish politics". Thus the film's contribution to public history is conveyed through its construction of Collins as a 'Great Man' because of his willingness to engage in peaceful compromise, at a moment when the Peace Process in Northern Ireland suggested a wider contemporaneous compromise could be reached.

## 2000-2009

The first decade of the twenty-first century was characterised by two changes in biopic production, the growth of the female writer and male musician film. The increasing number of biopics produced, forty three compared to thirty five in the 1990s, can be explained by the growing popularity of films about musicians and writers (see Appendix Two). However, overall production also increased significantly and the proportion of biopic fell to roughly two per cent in the 2000s (see Appendix Four). Though biopics about male literary figures featured, five biopics about female writers were released: *Iris* (2001), *The Hours* (2002), *Sylvia* (2003), *Miss Potter* (2006) and *Becoming Jane* (2007), concerning respectively Iris Murdoch, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Beatrix Potter and Jane Austen. Previously only two films had featured female writers, making this a significant shift.

Although some narratives are problematic in that they naturalise links between female creative production and pathology (Dolan *et al* 2009: 174) or frame female creative autonomy through conventions of romance (Haiduc 2013: 52), they nevertheless address female literary achievement within a male-dominated genre. This has been the subject of scholarship (see Polaschek 2013) but needs contextualising within the wider under-representation of women in biopics, who typically occupy secondary positions such as wives.

The cycle illustrates the slow recognition of women's contribution to cultural production and the biopic's shifting trajectory following the patriarchal narratives channelled through earlier films such as *Scott of the Antarctic*. Though each intervened in public history to secure the historical importance of female writers,

some had, like Pat Murphy, consciously feminist ambitions. Alison Owen, the producer of both *Elizabeth* and *Sylvia*, underlined the producer's role in instigating change in the genre:

Selfishly the most important thing for me is that I've achieved what I want to with it. For instance, *Sylvia* got mauled critically and it didn't do very well financially but I still feel like we made a really good movie ... I feel like I really wanted to make a film about Sylvia Plath and do her justice and I did and that makes me happy that I did it and I would do the same again. (quoted in Cubitt 2014)

This resonates with Balcon's view of Captain Scott and provides another example of personal convictions' overriding financial concerns. Owen's ambition to "do her justice" reflected wider postfeminist aims (as did Pat Murphy in *Anne Devlin*), of rescuing literary figures previously excluded from the canon and exposing the underpinning patriarchal values of that canon. *Sylvia* also constituted a response to the publication of *Birthday Letters* (1998) by Plath's husband, the poet Ted Hughes. These poems recounted their relationship until Plath's suicide in 1963 and were the subject of feminist criticism. They "demonstrated for the majority of the reviewers Hughes' reclamation of history; his relation to the past became for them that of a possessor" (Whitehead 1999: 227). Though the film does exonerate Hughes and falls into the trap of conventions which conflate women's creativity and pathological instability (see Dolan *et al* 2009: 183), constructed from Plath's point of view, *Sylvia* intervened in this discursive struggle about the status of the poet, to "do her justice", at a moment when there was continued insecurity regarding her legacy.

The rock biopic was the decade's other significant trend: *24 Hour Party People* (2002), *Stoned* (2005), *Control* (2007), *Telstar: The Joe Meek Story* (2008) and *Nowhere Boy* (2009) concerned Tony Wilson, Brian Jones, Ian Curtis, Joe Meek

and John Lennon respectively. They reflected the inclination to foreground figures of popular culture in contemporary production. *The Tommy Steele Story* had constructed a narrative of Steele's fame as it took place, whereas this cycle looked back at the 1960s and 1980s, forming part of the "retromania" impulse alongside memories, biographies and rockumentaries in the decade (Reynolds 2011: xi).

When asked about the Britishness of his film's subject, Nick Moran, the director of *Telstar*, replied: "there are so few opportunities for truly British stories in the cinema. They just haven't been exploited, as a nation, we are the richest on earth when it comes to culture" (quoted in Hargreaves 2009). The rock biopic offered a different channel through which to articulate the global cultural influence of Britain, a significance exemplified in the footage of John Lennon singing "Imagine" which was used in the closing ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012 (see Esposito 2014: 196). The global reach of the British rock musician confirms his place as an emblem of British cultural imperialism but these films also reflected the producer's role in constructing the canon of British music history. Simon Jordan, producer of *Telstar*, claimed: "Every part of the production has my footprint on it. Without wanting to be arrogant it's my film – the only reason it was made is because I wrote a cheque out and had the desire to tell this story" (quoted in Archer 2009). Unlike Lennon, Meek was a marginal figure and *Telstar* mythologised Meek's role in British pop music history as an underdog. The film placed him in a pantheon of 'lost' geniuses like Brian Jones in *Stoned* and Ian Curtis in *Control*. Though classical musicians such as Jacqueline du Pré have been depicted in *Hilary and Jackie* (1998) biopics of female pop musicians are a striking

absence, although a film about British soul singer Dusty Springfield, entitled *Middle of Somewhere*, is currently in development.<sup>13</sup>

The royal biopic persisted in *To Kill a King* (2003), *The Queen* (2006), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) and *The Young Victoria* (2008). *The Queen* best exemplifies the enduring international appeal of this sub-genre. Budgeted at \$15 million, and produced without the major US involvement which guarantees distribution, the film demonstrated the continued attraction of monarchy-themed British films to wide audiences by grossing \$123 million worldwide (Cheshire 2015: 123). *The Queen* covered the period following Princess Diana's death in August 1997, when Elizabeth II's private 'mourning' was met with a hostile response from the media and the general public. The conclusion suggested that the Queen (portrayed by Helen Mirren) responded to the needs of the public rather than the media; her public acknowledgement of Diana's death was framed as serving the British nation rather than its press, suggesting a compromise between traditional values and the need to adapt to the modern media (see Dolan 2012: 48). Domestic scenes such as a barbecue recalled Wilcox's earlier rationale to emphasise the monarch's ordinariness, but unlike previous biopics *The Queen* portrayed a crisis for the *present* monarch and reflected on the intimacy and irreverence which characterise the royals in modern mass media.

When asked about securing finance, producer Andy Harries responded: "I always thought it was a movie right from the beginning ... the Queen is a universal brand" (quoted in Pham 2006). Mediated images of British monarchy have been

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<sup>13</sup> See [http://number9films.co.uk/current\\_projects/middle\\_of\\_somewhere/](http://number9films.co.uk/current_projects/middle_of_somewhere/)



consistently popular since Barker's *Sixty Glorious Years* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and 'universal' implied an awareness of overseas markets and the global appeal of certain subjects. It also reflected the wider positioning of the British monarchy in the popular imagination as constituted through films, television, books, tabloids and magazines aimed at both domestic and export markets. The 'universal brand' was reaffirmed in the 2012 London Olympic games' opening ceremony, in the footage of Daniel Craig as James Bond with the Queen entering the stadium to the sound of Monty Norman's iconic Bond theme music. The monarch's meeting with this global entertainment franchise illustrates an embodiment of British tradition and heritage while operating as a global, and heavily mediated, cultural brand.

*Cass* (2008) was a film about Cass Pennant (Nonso Anozie), an English-born man of West Indian heritage who became a prominent member of a British football hooligan firm in the 1980s. It was based on Pennant's memoir of the same name (2000) which formed part of a wider emergence since the late 1980s of autobiographies and biographies about former hooligans (Poutlon 2007: 153-154). *Rise of the Footsoldier* (2007) was, like *Cass*, a further hooligan life story released, following the success of the 'fictional' *Football Factory* (2004). *Cass* charted Pennant's adoption by a white family and his experiences of racism growing up in 1960s London, before gaining acceptance within the firm through his fighting ability until his eventual rehabilitation. Though significant as a biopic about a black subject, *Cass* was moulded within the stylistic and narrative tendencies of other football hooligan films. These includes fight sequences backed to diegetic scores, shot with hand-held cameras with fast-paced editing and a narrative that foregrounds male bonding, inter-firm rivalry and a character's growing

disillusionment, alongside a “confessional” voice-over (see Rehling 2011:165-166). Though *Cass* is a biopic, it is best understood as an example of the biopic’s generic hybridity. Jon S. Baird, who was both director and a producer, conveyed how interest in the subject stemmed from its ‘true story’ status and the ethnicity of Pennant. After reading Pennant’s memoir, Baird was enthusiastic: “It had enough ingredients as a film narrative but also, more importantly for me, enough different ingredients from the things that had been done in the past about hooliganism. One, it was a true story; two, it had the identity issues; and three, it was a redemption story” (quoted in Poulton 2013: 776). The film’s production was motivated partially by its difference from other hooligan films rather than contributing to the biopic genre through a film about a black subject. Whereas the stylistic approach in *Elizabeth* was a response to successful filmmaking and the desire for an innovative approach to British history, it was the biographical element that differentiated *Cass* from its contemporaries. The film’s status as both hooligan film and biopic exemplified how shifts in the type of subject depicted are achieved through the splicing and blending of different generic traditions.

### **Since 2010**

Between 2010 and 2014 twenty eight biopics were released, nineteen about men and nine about women. Popular subjects were the criminal, including eighteenth century body-snatchers *Burke and Hare* (2010) and *Mr Nice* (2010), about modern drug smuggler Howard Marks, and the monarchy. *The King’s Speech* (2010), documenting the impact of the speech impediment suffered by George VI and how it was overcome by therapist Lionel Logue, won several BAFTAs and Academy

Awards including Best Picture. By the end of 2011 it had grossed £45.7 million at the UK box office and \$414 million worldwide,<sup>14</sup> a significant return for a film that cost \$15million (Macnab 2011). There are exceptions - *Diana* (2013), which portrayed the late Princess of Wales' alleged relationship with surgeon Hasnat Khan, performed poorly in both the domestic and American markets (O'Brien 2013, Runcie 2013) - but generally the monarchy biopic continued to garner critical and commercial success. As in the previous decade, female-centred films represented roughly half of production, with biopics about playwright Andrea Dunbar in *The Arbour* (2010) alongside Marilyn Monroe and Margaret Thatcher respectively in *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) and *The Iron Lady* (2011). Though a female prime minister and playwright represented new subjects, the majority of biopics displayed themes familiar from the previous decade: *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll* (2010) and *Good Vibrations* (2013) looked back to the 1970s punk movement in their depictions of the Blockheads frontman Ian Dury and record store owner Terri Hooley. The royal mistress film, familiar from early decades, returned in *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) and *The Invisible Woman* (2013) which featured the mistress of Henry VIII, Mary Boleyn, and that of Charles Dickens, Nelly Ternan, respectively. Though figures from entertainment and popular culture featured in the sports-themed biopics *Risen* (2010) and *Rush* (2013), films about artists and scientists were also released during the decade. Biopics about 'scientists' including Alan Turing (*The Imitation Game* 2014) and Stephen Hawking (*The Theory of Everything* 2014) were released alongside films about artists such as the painter J.M.W. Turner (*Mr Turner* 2014). This reaffirms that the movement

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<sup>14</sup> See *BFI Statistical Yearbook 2012*. p. 6. Available from <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook> [accessed 29 November 2014].

towards figures from popular culture is not straight forward, and that ‘traditional’ biopic subjects continue to have a presence in contemporary production.

However, the future of the biopics suggests shifts. Subjects from racial groups other than white British were represented in the 1980s in films exploring colonial legacies and *Cass* depicted the life of a British hooligan of Jamaican heritage. *All Is by My Side* (2013), a film about Jimi Hendrix, is a significant entry into the musical biopic, however the black subject remains a marginal presence. This “invisibility of, and silence around, Britain’s black history ... is, of course, a problem permeating British society and culture, not a phenomenon confined to British films” (Bourne 2002: 47-48). *Belle* (2013) explored the life of Dido Elizabeth Belle, the illegitimate daughter of Sir John Lindsay, a captain in the Royal Navy, and an African slave in the eighteenth century. Directed by Amma Asante, a female director of Ghanaian heritage, *Belle* is evidence of a further shift within the white dominated genre. The career of black British director Steve McQueen further exemplifies how ‘organised forgetting’ can be challenged. McQueen, director of the Bobby Sands biopic *Hunger* (2008), is scheduled to direct a biopic about African American political activist and film actor Paul Robeson: “His life and legacy was the film I wanted to make the second after *Hunger* ... [b]ut I didn’t have the *power*, I didn’t have the *juice*” (quoted in Needham 2014 my emphasis). Since *Hunger*, McQueen has received the Academy Award for Best Picture for *12 Years a Slave* (2013), a biopic based on the memoir of abolitionist and former slave Solomon Northup, making McQueen the first black director to win the award. With this critical and commercial success, McQueen now possesses the necessary cultural capital, the “juice”, to initiate a film about a black subject whose career

developed within Britain (Robeson appeared in *The Proud Valley* (1940) and other British films). McQueen's comments articulate the much wider concern of this chapter: the role of individual producers and directors in selecting biopic material, which in turn shapes 'public memory'.

## **Conclusion**

This overview traces the development of the biopic and how it has changed since 1900, using the views of producers and directors to explain what motivates shifts in approach and subject matter. Certain producers have favoured the genre, notably Korda, Wilcox, Balcon, Russell and Attenborough, but their motivations often contrast. The biopic possessed a clear cultural value to producers such as Barker and Wallis, offering a chance to generate prestige for the studio and the producer themselves. Since Barker's early films the biopic has been invested with notions of quality and both Balcon and Lean emphasised how biopics were large-scale commitments requiring extensive resources and financial support. Though the shift in subject matter reflects the wider influence of media culture in the popular imaginary, the discourse of 'quality' continues to permeate contemporary biopics and is manifested through processes of differentiation and perceived cultural value.

Biopics are invested with clear ideological significance, offering producers a platform to intervene in public history, to stake a claim for a historical subject. Often this ideological motive is foregrounded over commercial concerns. However, it is in the process of staking a claim that the biopic's perceived significance is illustrated; underlying the controversies and anxieties that circulated around *Dawn*,

*The Magic Box* and *Michael Collins* is the perception that biopics can influence, shape and construct wider opinion and public history. For other producers, the biopic offered an opportunity for their films to reach a wide audience. Korda's *Henry VIII* reworked a successful template from *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, and Wallis was careful to ensure the representations of British history in his monarchy biopics would not undermine the spectacle and *mise-en-scène*. When the formula was successful it was repeated. However, some films indicate the drive of individual producers to instigate change. Korda's *Rembrandt* was a personal project that was commercially underwhelming whereas Balcon invested heavily in realising *Scott of the Antarctic*. Some of Russell's films were partially self-funded whereas Attenborough used the biopic to make statements about racial oppression.

The biopics released during both the First and Second World Wars indicate how the choice of subject was motivated by wider international relations; but patriotism also inflected the approach of specific filmmakers. Balcon popularised heroes of empire and the imperial mission, but later figures such as Lean and Attenborough would approach the biopic differently, critiquing British imperialism or placing the colonised figure himself under the spotlight. Thus these differing approaches reflected wider contemporaneous discourses and the biopic changes with the wider social-political climate. However, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* illustrated that capturing the *Zeitgeist* is difficult and that new types of subject could receive hostile reactions; Broccoli's awareness of the film's timing indicated that biopics are shaped by the wider sociopolitical climate and offer the chance to intervene within it. Some biopics themselves were responses, 'reactions' to wider politics. Hence *Anne Devlin*, *Sylvia* and *Stevie* can be seen as major shifts in a male-

dominated genre, aiming to foreground women's achievements in periods characterised by the emergence, and ambitions of feminist politics. Similarly the films of Attenborough and Jordan were interventions into South African and Irish history, foregrounding troubled racial histories and reflections of post-imperial discourse. Other shifts were dictated by the power of individuals and their personal preferences; hence Russell's composer films of the 1970s, where others, such as *Elizabeth*, indicated how biopics respond to successes within the British film industry. Change in the genre is thus propelled by two intertwined properties; key individual agents with cultural capital who desire to represent a specific subject but also the wider historical context in which these agents, and their ambitions, emerge.

The broadest change, the shift in the 1950s to sourcing subjects from popular culture, beginning with *The Tommy Steele Story* which exploited Steele's status as a figure of consumerism, was part of a wider movement towards a consumer society. Prior to the 1950s, the films about Nelson, Rhodes, Pitt and Scott celebrated figures whose vision and charisma shaped British imperialism, politics and embodied its military superiority. From the 1950s onwards, producers and filmmakers increasingly took their inspiration from popular culture rather than the biographies of the elite (see Appendix three, charts three and four). A new source for biopic material was found in television, film and sport through figures that entertained rather than contributed to politics and military. Biopics about actors were released in the 1970s in *The Incredible Sarah* (1976), about stage and film actress Sarah Bernhardt, and *Valentino*, alongside popular thriller writer Agatha Christie in *Agatha* (1979). There were no inventors or explorers in the 1980s, but there were films about sportsmen, rock musicians and fashion designers. In the first

decade of the twenty first century the writers, musicians, sportsmen, actors, poets and entertainers outnumbered the monarchs, politicians and scientists, but these latter subjects continued to have a presence.

Though there are shifts in each decade the male subject remains predominant.

Given that biopics before the 1950s focused on members of the military and imperial themes it is unsurprising that so many of them depicted men, but the shift towards popular culture created a space for different types of female subject.

Before the 1950s women appeared as monarchs, royal mistresses and occasionally nurses, aristocrats and aviators. In the 1950s there were two biopics about female resistance fighters but this was mixed with biopics about female singers in *Melba* and *After the Ball*. Subsequent decades would see this open up with films about poets and actors and later biopics about writers, artists and fashion designers.

However, the range of themes afforded to men is greater than those afforded to women. Though the mistress, nurse, dancer and fashion designer are reserved solely for women, and exemplify traditional 'feminine' spheres such as caring support and fashion, beauty and eroticism, the themes confined to men include the traditional 'Great Man' roles of explorer, inventor, and scientist alongside sportsman and film director (see Appendix two). Roughly a quarter of the films about women detail the life of a monarch, which emphasises the meagre number of films that examine women's *active* achievements rather than their inherited powers.

The male biopic also offers a greater range of sexual identities; the post-2000 release of *Telstar* and *The Imitation Game* (2014) takes the total to seventeen films about gay subjects. There are notable exceptions. *Stevie*, *Anne Devlin* and *Sylvia* were motivated by the concerns of individual actors, directors and producers, with



significant cultural capital to address female exclusion from history. However, the ongoing marginalisation of women conveys how the genre reasserts dominant ideologies of masculinity and cultural importance.

The timeline suggests that the most successful biopics feature subjects already widely known, such as those of Henry VIII, T.E. Lawrence, Gandhi, and Queen Elizabeth II. Goldcrest secured worldwide distribution with Columbia for *Gandhi*, which organised an extensive, worldwide promotional campaign (Eberts and Llott 1990: 96) whereas *Cass* opened in under fifty screens in Britain (Poulton 2013: 777). Both *Stevie* and *Cass* were low budget productions, but even films with larger budgets, such as *The Magic Box* and *Michael Collins*, experienced difficulty in their attempts to legitimate controversial figures. Those films which attempt to shift the consensus by validating forgotten or controversial figures exemplify how the public history channelled through biopic production is a site of contestation and struggle. Films which reaffirmed the consensus, representing figures widely known, were generally the most commercially successful and those depicting lesser-known figure were difficult to realise.

Whereas this overview has focused on biopic production, the next chapter shifts to reception and employs qualitative analysis of reviews, fan letters and viewer comments to ascertain the debates that circulated following a film's release. Though producers are key in understanding the ambitions of biopics, comments and reviews suggest what actual audiences enjoyed about biopics and the type of viewing context established by reviewers.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Reception of the British Biopic**

Comments taken from autobiographies and interviews were used in Chapter Three to consider the motivations and ambitions of producers. This chapter shifts the focus from production to reception, using reviews and fan letters to ascertain what critics and audiences felt was important in biopic production and whether this matched producers' views. Analysing reception is critical as audiences disagree on what constitutes an effective biopic, which in turn affirms that the biopic offers multiple sources of appeal. This chapter explores some of the recurring issues and debates among reviewers and audiences to reveal these various readings. Though it is difficult to discuss audience taste when the evidence itself is highly mediated, it is initially clear that the biopic is a problematic genre category, and that producers' motivations have not always matched audience taste. The first sections of this chapter surveys the different sources available, the type of data produced and its limitations, and issues of definition and classification: not all biopics were perceived as such by reviewers and cinemagoers. There are also broad issues which recur in reception. Accuracy is important to many viewers, and biopics are often judged by their 'authenticity'; but biopics are also required to entertain, and the demands of drama and entertainment often conflict with the requirement to 'get the facts right'. These debates underscore the biopic's capacity to shape 'public history' and educate the cinema-going public. Reviews and fan letters illustrate a profound mistrust of biopics which reflects their potential power to shape knowledge of historical events and figures. The biopic is also valued for its contribution to British film culture: biopics are praised and viewed as prestige

ventures and the biopic is perceived to be a genre at which Britain excels, linked to the tradition of quality theatre and the cultural prestige of British actors.

### **Sources and Evidence**

Reviews indicate the cultural assumptions that have been prevalent concerning specific films and the tastes of publications. Locating these responses within historically-specific contexts helps to gauge how films were received and represented at their original time of exhibition, but ascertaining what cinema-goers actually thought about these films is more problematic. Though cinemagoers' views expressed through oral histories and diaries are difficult to find (see Kuhn 2002) other materials are available which indicate the film's position within the wider culture and context. Advertisements such as posters, preview material and industry press books, are all indicators of how a film was *positioned* for consumption, but the views of marketing teams do not necessarily match the views of those actually making the film, or, indeed, the audience. A further avenue is the review of a film at its time of release. For Janet Thumim,

Critical discussion published at the time of [a] film's first release remains ... our only trace of the discursive context in which [a] film circulated, and is thus a valuable resource *provided we keep in mind both its limitations and other contextual factors*.  
(Thumim 1992: 169 my emphasis)

In the analysis below, the majority of reviewers are male, and their class, age, race and sex may have influenced their reviews. Furthermore, box office results may conflict with reviewer opinion, suggesting contemporaneous audiences viewed the film differently from these arbiters of taste.

British newspapers drawn on include *The Times* and the *Guardian*, both quality broadsheets containing detailed political and economic coverage and possessing well-educated readerships. Reviews from the *Monthly Film Bulletin* are also used. Published through the British Film Institute, this ‘middlebrow’ publication paid attention to movements in world cinema but also contained editorials, articles and reviews from industry figures and academics. Reviews from America are generally from the *New York Times*, which has a nationwide circulation and similarly upmarket, educated readership, and the weekly entertainment trade magazine *Variety* offers detailed film reviews. Though trade papers are generally avoided here, *Variety* is an effective source for gauging American responses to British biopics. Qualitative data, including critical writing such as film reviews, can be revealing about the issues concerning the biopic’s place in public discourse, but reviewing is a cultural practice with shared generic values and conventions rather than simply an individual’s opinion.

In chapter three box office returns, when available, were used as broad indicators of popularity, but this data cannot indicate *what* made certain films popular and what audiences found enjoyable. There remains little in the way of empirical evidence about audiences’ preferences, the films they enjoyed and how these were received. J.P. Mayer’s *British Cinemas and their Audiences* (1948) documents over one hundred audience reactions in the form of their own “motion picture autobiographies” (1948: 13), which were collated from about 400 responses through competitions advertised in *Picturegoer*. But the guidance notes do make the questions leading. The interest in “the impact of the cinema on the *development* of the individuals who responded” (ibid.: 15 original emphasis) is reflected in the construction of questions, such as “Trace the history of your interest in films. How

you first became interested. What films you liked at first? What kind you liked next?" Though the study asks for the occupation of the respondent and their family and can thus offer some class differentiation, the expectation for respondents to write expansively and "not to feel any restraint in writing fully" (ibid.: 14) does suggest a privileging of a literate 'middle class' voice, and in the section on film preferences "[t]he documents represent naturally only the most 'reflective' film fan" (ibid.: 154).

Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan's *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (1987) is also used here. Mass-Observation, the social survey of everyday British life, conducted various reports on the preferences of cinemagoers between 1939 and 1945 and the study forms an anthology of these. This also revealed crucial evidence of the experiences and values of audiences rather than critics. Questionnaires were distributed by Mass-Observation researchers to the patrons of three different cinemas in Bolton in 1938 who were judged to represent different class demographics (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 32). As with Mayer's study, responses from the 559 received were shaped by the seven questions asked and the anthology notes that women gave a higher priority to history than men (ibid.: 35) and a general preference for American films rather than British (ibid.: 41). Patrons were asked about their preferred film genre and what they would like to see more of in films, and a space at the bottom invited them to write whatever they liked about films: this is especially important given that the questions are carefully framed, often requiring respondents to rank the genres they liked from one to ten.

Fan magazines can reveal the differences between cinemagoers and reviewers in relation to a film. The fan letters and opinion polls, in *Picturegoer* and *Film Pictorial* especially, may reveal why a film is liked regardless of reviews. Popular

film magazines can be used to gauge what was successful with reviewers and cinemagoers as both had, at one stage or another, a rating system for films released. Fan polls can indicate the popularity of a specific film. For instance, *Picturegoer* annual awards gave best actor of 1957 to Kenneth More for *Reach for the Sky* (Anon 1957: 5). However, this audience preference was recognised as being confined to those who regularly subscribed to the magazine and was a poll rather than detailed explanation of what audiences enjoyed about More's performance.

*Picturegoer* was in circulation between 1913 and 1960 when it became the short-lived *Date* magazine, a 'lifestyle' magazine aimed at young women with articles discussing appropriate feminine etiquette and romance (Macnab 2000: 202).

Though a commercial product with a specific target audience, the fan pages and articles make *Picturegoer* a useful source for gauging audience taste. This is clearly selective but it still offers a useful snapshot. By 1939 it had become Britain's most popular and longest running film magazine with a large female readership (Glancy 2011: 455) and the quantity of advertisements concerned with beauty products and clothing suggests women were the primary target (ibid.: 457). Such fan magazines were read predominantly by women and thus play an instrumental role in constructing how women should respond to films, through the publication of certain letters over others, and foregrounding certain opinions. This is unsurprising given that women made up the majority of the audience in the 1930s (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 41). *Film Pictorial* ran from 1932 to 1939 when it merged with *Picture Show*, which was later discontinued in 1960. *Film Pictorial* featured fan pages but was more image-orientated than *Picturegoer*; nevertheless the letter page and especially the 'star letter' are a useful way to gauge readers views and the editorial position, though their opinions are likely shaped by commercial factors

including advertisers. *Film Pictorial* was a more “downmarket” publication than *Picturegoer* (Kuhn 1996: 184), and the emphasis on photo spreads as opposed to written articles, combined with a more restricted circulation, makes this publication less significant. *Picturegoer* had the broadest appeal in the mid-1930s with its rival publications *Film Weekly*, *Film Pictorial* and *Picture Show* having smaller circulation figures (ibid.). The periodical *Films and Filming* was distinctly more ‘highbrow’. Published between 1954 and 1990, it had greater emphasis on film reviews rather than articles aimed at fans. This chapter therefore makes considerable use of the letters obtained in *Picturegoer* and *Film Pictorial* but also draws on some reviews from *Films and Filming* where appropriate.

A further source for audiences’ views is the *Internet Movie Database* (1990 –) which, though useful, raises further complications. *IMDb* is primarily an internet reference tool rather than a weekly magazine, cataloguing reviews, production information and actor information. However, it also features ‘user reviews’. The site is useful for the range of reviews included, and as an internet source used globally it is valuable for considering the different national and cultural background of respondents. Unlike those magazines that have now ceased publication, *IMDb* is valuable for film viewers’ responses to contemporary films, but users can review *any* film released at any time and not just contemporary releases. The earlier fan magazines reflected linear consumption practices, with letters predominantly discussing recent films, whereas *IMDb* allows for non-linear responses and therefore a larger number of films are discussed throughout the history of cinema. There is no editorial team assessing these reviews once they are submitted, but there is a grading system which allows users to rate others’ reviews and I have targeted those reviews which scored highly as these suggest some consensus

among viewers.<sup>15</sup> Between the 1960s, when fan magazines ceased, and the 1990s, when *IMDb* was first available, I have relied on letters written to newspapers. These are scarce and generally restricted to the most ‘significant’ films, focusing on widely known figures and those films publicised widely; but they do offer insight into viewer opinion in a period difficult to analyse. Furthermore, in both letters and later *IMDb* user reviews there are instances where tone and style indicate the different discursive positions of film viewers, some embracing the popular ‘fan’ title and others positioning themselves as more educated experts or film buffs. These distinctions provide a useful context through which to consider their responses, offering an indication of how viewers identify themselves.

### **Definitions**

Reviews establish a viewing context for films, providing information about cast, narratives and genre and assessing the performances and quality of a film, and it is significant that many films that can be considered biopics were not explicitly positioned by reviewers as ‘biopics’ at their time of release. *Elizabeth* is described in the *Guardian* as “[d]eploying the richness of a pageant and the sweep of a thriller” and as exemplifying “the very model of a successful historical drama - imposingly beautiful, persuasively resonant, unfailingly entertaining” (Williams 1998). Similarly, *The King’s Speech* is a “traditionally mounted, handsomely furnished British period movie” (Bradshaw 2011); the *Monthly Film Bulletin* describes the second reissue release of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* as an “[h]istorical comedy-drama” (V.M.C.D. 1946: 94). This perhaps signals how the biopic is perceived to lack a secure iconography and agreed characteristics. It

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<sup>15</sup> There are a set of ‘User Review Guidelines’ available at [http://www.imdb.com/help/show\\_leaf?commentsguidelines](http://www.imdb.com/help/show_leaf?commentsguidelines)



reiterates the dominance of the 'historical' label as a larger category which subsumes the biopic and the biopic's generic hybridity. Audience responses were similar. For example, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was often seen in terms of genres other than the biopic. A Mass-Observation contributor writes "Both my husband and myself like historical romances, if not too far-fetched. That is, we enjoyed *Elizabeth and Essex* and *Henry VIII* but disliked *The Black Swan*" (Mayer 1948: 205). An American *IMDb* user states "I enjoy sports films, especially when they are used to exemplify greater human truths. In that regard '*Chariots of Fire*' is one of my favorite sports films" (FlickJunkie-2 2001). Such a comment reaffirms the biopic as middle-brow genre, educational but with an easily transmitted message, familiar from Attenborough's approach to the biopic. Again, a similar issue arises which suggests heterogeneous approaches and understandings of what a biopic is and what it should be. The above quotations suggest some audiences and reviewers were primarily viewing films and understanding them through generic traditions other than biopics.

Reviews also convey how the generally agreed definition amongst critics that the biopic focuses on the life of an individual can be disputed. *Chariots of Fire* focuses on *two* athletes Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson) and Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) and their preparation for the 1924 Olympic Games. Liddell struggles to balance his devout Christian faith with his athletic career while the Jewish Abrahams is the victim of anti-Semitism. This was recognised in a 1981 review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, which claims that the film "marshals the diverse biographies of athletes Liddell and Abrahams into a package" (Imeson 1981: 90). *Hilary and Jackie* is described in the *Guardian* as a "portrait of cellist Jacqueline du Pre and her flautist sister Hilary" (Romney 1999). The films were positioned as narratives that explore

the lives of *two* people and highlight the need for flexibility in even the most basic definitions. This reaffirms a significant element of the British biopic in particular: there are many which narrate the lives of two individuals. Chapters six, seven and eight interrogate this dynamic, arguing that the biopic has frequently depicted male same-sex friendship through representations connoting homosociality.

### **The ‘Accuracy’ of Biopics**

The most pervasive debate amongst reviewers and audiences concentrates on the biopic’s claim to represent real people and events and its status as a commercial film and the need to entertain. This leads to a variety of responses and judgements by reviewers and audiences. One position taken is that biopics must be historically accurate and attempts to make them entertaining undermine this. Others consider that biopics, like other films, must entertain their audiences, even at the expense of strict historical accuracy. For some the tension between accuracy and entertainment must always involve compromise, a trade-off, but others believe that the biopic can be both accurate and entertaining.

Throughout the history of biopic reception, the most pervasive issue concerns the biopic’s claims to truth and authenticity. This is because, unlike other purely ‘fictional’ genres, biopics make ‘claims to truth’. However, this is negotiated through the medium in which these claims are made. There is a tension between the demands of accuracy and the need to be entertained through drama. The ‘Reel History’ series published through the *Guardian* newspaper website features British historian Alex von Tunzelmann grading films by their values as ‘history’ and ‘entertainment’ separately (Tunzelmann 2008- ). This exemplifies the on-going negotiation between these values, and the need to strike a balance. Occasionally, a

biopic is commended for addressing the dual concerns of historical accuracy and dramatic entertainment. In an article for *Picturegoer* entitled “History with a Smile”, Lionel Collier praises Herbert Wilcox’s direction on *Victoria the Great*:

He has kept to fact, but sought for those detail touches which would give us an intimate picture of the life of a great Queen and not a dry-as-dust biography concerned only with the major happenings in her long and eventful reign. In doing this he has successfully combined romance with history, a thing that very few producers have hitherto been able to do. Either they have distorted facts and characters to conform to their romantic element or else ignored the human side and presented us with a series of dull facts. (Collier 1938: 9)

This article resonates with Stephen Woolley’s concerns to ensure that *Michael Collins* was not a “dry movie” and Balcon’s awareness that Technicolour could make *Scott of the Antarctic* “exciting”. The reviewer also identifies entertainment and accuracy as qualities a biopic must manage, qualities that *Victoria the Great* was able to manage effectively. The relationship between entertainment and accuracy has been seen as problematic across decades of biopic production and reception, and biopics are often felt to succeed against one criteria but to fail against the other. An *IMDb* user review of *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* thinks the film “tends to ignore the facts when they get in the way of the story” and, although the film is “good fun” it is “simplistic, cartoon history” (eastbergholt2002 2007). Some viewers felt that excessive drama could impede the accuracy of the depiction. In a *Picturegoer* letter about *Odette*, a viewer writes “this true story of a heroic woman failed to stir the emotions as it should have done. This, however, is a compliment to the Wilcox-Neagle team. They told an unvarnished and true epic without sensationalism” (Graham 1950: 3). The cinemagoer here praises the film’s understatement and implies that too much cinematic gloss, employing devices that enhance the film’s affective appeal, would detract from the ‘truthfulness’ of the

depiction. Yet the letter suggests that the film was not as emotionally involving as a result, and suggests this is a necessary compromise to ensure accuracy.

Contemporary user reviews suggest that this remains a balancing act, which one *IMDb* user demonstrates in their review of *The Queen*: “The design of The Queen’s home and her surroundings are convincing without being overly showy” (PizzicatoFishCrouch 2006). This might hint at how contemporary audiences have more experience of the discourses that circulate in biopic discussion: rather than suggesting truthfulness the viewer stresses the *mise-en-scène* as *plausible*. Indeed, other user reviewers hint that audience members see the biopic depiction as providing a convincing portrayal of a subject rather than situating it within a true/false binary. An *IMDb* user review of the Dylan Thomas biopic *The Edge of Love* (2008) makes explicit how the demands of accuracy and entertainment must be balanced: “The production has been at pains to project the spirit of Dylan Thomas without *compromising* historical accuracy too much” (Chris\_Docker 2008 my emphasis). The issue of balancing and compromising is of paramount importance here, the demands of entertainment and accuracy must be carefully managed.

Some viewers professed a prior knowledge of the subject and their comments suggest that this knowledge guided their viewing and subsequent assessment of the film. One contributor to Mayer’s study remarks: “I have a great dislike for films which distort and alter historical facts. *Lady Hamilton* was an outstanding example of this” (Mayer 1948: 156). However the film proved extremely popular when released in 1941 (Harper 1994: 91) suggesting that, though this viewer wanted to see an attempt to convey events and figures accurately, the pleasure which it gave others made this biopic successful. The film was directed by Alexander Korda and

his biopics were often targeted for disregarding historical accuracy. In a letter published in *Film Pictorial* entitled “Whitewash on the Screen”, a reader voices their displeasure at the depictions of historical figures in *Catherine the Great*. The letter opens, “Sir, - The movie-makers are allowing their so-called love-interest to knock the life out of the great characters of history” before proceeding to expose the accuracy/entertainment tension: “the film is good entertainment. But how much finer, how much more worth-while it would have been if the producers had allowed the players to portray the *real* Catherine and the *real* Peter!” (Carroll 1934: 30 original emphasis). Though *Catherine the Great* succeeded in being entertaining, historical accuracy was perceived to be more important. The final sentence neatly illustrates how the demands of entertainment and historical accuracy are presented as competing features of biopics. *Catherine the Great* was similarly criticised by a respondent in Mayer’s study, who claims the film “was the supreme example of twaddle. Anyone who knew but the bare facts of Catherine’s life and her marriage with Peter must have blushed or giggled at such a ridiculous film” (Mayer 1948: 69). Unlike the previous cinemagoer’s response, this one differentiates between different types of viewer and firmly situates themselves as a learned, educated film viewer who possesses some historical knowledge. Korda’s view, quoted in chapter three, that “you do not, after all, expect an historical film to stick strictly to the text-book”, was at odds with these cinemagoers who privileged accuracy over entertainment.

This type of cinemagoer continues to be present and they sometimes express an assumption that films will neglect historical accuracy in favour of entertainment. In a review of *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, a British *IMDb* user writes that “Like most bio-pics, facts that don’t fit the overall picture are thrown over the wall”

(Peter Hayes 2011). This conveys the perceived divide between the values of accuracy and entertainment. It suggests that this is a prevalent feature of the genre *as a whole*, and that filmmakers have a preconceived idea of how to present the life and merely utilise those ‘facts’ which are compatible. A user review of *Elizabeth*, released in 1998, is particularly useful as a comparison to *Catherine the Great* as it evokes similar issues despite being released over sixty years later. The user criticises the film on the ground of historical accuracy directly: “To say that this movie takes liberty with historical fact is a gross understatement. I like Blanchett as an actress, but this movie was so far from accurate as to fall in the category of fiction. About the only thing it got right was the names of key figures” (satuit59 2007). Alison Owen’s ambition to make a film “in the style of *Trainspotting*” was met with a competing definition of the biopic in this instance.

Some respondents provided a clear indication of what they believed the rationale of any historical film should be: “Historical films should be authentic in outline without too much divergence from the actual story” (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 80). This has been an on-going concern amongst some groups of cinemagoer, the sense that biopics, and historical films, take liberties with the truth, and that filmmakers select material which strengthens the dramatic potential at the expense of historical accuracy.

### **Drama and Entertainment**

Certain reviewers and cinemagoers value entertainment more highly and suggest that the entertainment value of a biopic can make up for shortcomings in historical accuracy. This review, taken from the *New York Times*, expresses how a certain type of ‘quality’ British actor can render a biopic appealing:

It would be easier to dismiss *Amazing Grace* for its historical elisions if it weren't also filled with so many great British actors larking about in knee breeches and powdered wigs; if it weren't, in other words, an *entertainment* ... no matter how stuffy the room or the speeches, the reliably brilliant Michael Gambon, who plays Lord Charles Fox [sic] with trembling jowls and flashing eyes, brings a sense of the world and its sensual pleasures with him. (Dargis 2007 my emphasis)

The reviewer firmly situates the film as piece of drama, of *entertainment*, and considers that as such, it succeeds. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of *A Man for All Seasons* criticised the film's attempts at historical verisimilitude as *hindering* the film's potential: "Time after time the history-for-schools dialogue debases the style that Zinnemann creates in the shooting, and disappoints the sensitive performances he gets from the actors" (C.H. 1967: 73). This implies that the balance between historical accuracy and entertainment is perilous, and that an effective biopic manages this tension carefully. It also suggests that different viewers make different value judgements of what constitutes a successful biopic.

Other reviewers suggest that the aesthetic value, the visual design and craft, can redeem a film on their own. John Kobal's review of *Lady Jane* (1986) in *Films and Filming* criticises the romantic representation of the relationship between Jane Grey and Guilford Dudley: "in fact the two never loved each other ... but the Romeo and Juliet angle was obviously too good to be ignored" (1986: 35). This recalls those viewers sensitive to the depiction of Peter and Catherine in *Catherine the Great* but critically the reviewer subsequently praises the alluring imagery: "The film has an incredible visual richness, not just the superb camerawork but the costumes ... and the sets, some real, some recreated for the film" (ibid.). This foregrounds the visual appearance of the film as a source of pleasure, and though the film departs from fact there are other criteria against which it succeeds. Aesthetic appreciation and an emphasis on the visual appearance of biopics have been of on-going importance to

the genre. This, and historical accuracy, are both critical in assessing the merits of a biopic, depending on the taste of the viewer. Both the *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Films and Filming* were middlebrow publications which might explain their privileging and careful consideration of filmic qualities, whereas the importance of entertainment is stressed in more ‘popular’ publication such as *Picturegoer*. As with the review of *Amazing Grace*, these cinemagoers value the entertainment found in biopics *over* issues of historical authenticity.

In a letter to *Picturegoer*, one reader remarks of *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (1948) “We go to the cinema for entertainment. Not to sit worrying about whether Bonnie Prince Charlie landed on the twelfth or the fifteenth, or whether Flora MacDonald really wore a blue hood!” (Farrell 1948: 18). The emphasis on ‘we’ acknowledges alternative viewing positions and this cinemagoer suggests that a large proportion are interested in entertainment, and that the concerns with historical accuracy, reduced to a matter of dates or colour of hats, are arbitrary. We can attach additional significance to fan letters when they were awarded prize money for being the best letter of that particular issue; this suggests some agreement between both the magazine editors and their readership. In the star letter “Fifty Million ‘fans’ Can’t Be Wrong!”, a *Film Pictorial* reader launches a populist defence of *Henry VIII* which complicates the views of producers’ motivated by historical accuracy: “An English director *would*, probably, have produced the film strictly according to type – most probably school text-book type! ... Such a film would doubtless have pleased the pedantry, the dilettanti [sic], and the cleverly critical – but the picture would have had no ‘fan’ appeal!” (Alexander 1933: 38 original emphasis). As in the previous comment, the cinemagoer differentiates themselves and foregrounds Korda, as a European émigré director, as critical in appealing to



the typical fan viewer. This contrasts with those earlier views, which identified Korda's films as having limited appeal because of their supposed *inaccuracies*. The viewer takes issue with those biopics that are too academic, evoking the school as a source of criticism which similarly contrasts with those viewers who appreciated strict accuracy. These thinly-veiled attacks on further groups who value historical accuracy works as a defence of populism and offers an alternative to those viewers who located themselves within a knowledgeable, historically-aware group. An *IMDb* user review of *Becoming Jane* suggests this debate is ongoing nearly sixty years after the release of *Bonnie Prince Charlie*:

Nobody in their right mind would ever accept the version of events presented by a Hollywood biopic as historical gospel. The only viewers who will be taken in by the story seen here will be those who are too lazy, too uninterested or too credulous to do the modicum of research needed to find out the real facts, and who cares what such people think? This film may be largely untrue, but what really matters is whether it works on its own terms, qua film. (tomboy236 2007)

Though the user differentiates themselves from the lazy and uninterested cinemagoers who might be persuaded by biopic representations they suggest that a film must work "on its own terms". This user differentiates themselves from the 'fan' letter and suggests that viewing films and learning about history are distinctly separate and that research is required to find out the 'real' facts. Even in amongst those viewers and reviewers who valued entertainment in biopics, there is no unified reading and there are internal divisions and hierarchies.

### **The Biopic as 'Public History'**

Alongside the debate about drama and historical accuracy in the biopic, many reviewers and cinemagoers express concerns about the role which the biopic plays in shaping 'public history' and consolidating public understanding of historical

events. This is illustrated in fan letters and user reviews which foreground how views are shaped by biopic representations. Though one viewer of *Becoming Jane* dismisses the biopic as a source of historical knowledge outright, some profess to use biopics to learn about history. One viewer sees ‘historical’ films as an interesting way for viewers to engage with history. Films such as *Victoria the Great* and *The Young Mr Pitt*:

make the History books seem much more interesting and alive. I have often seen a film of a certain person’s life and then found a book on that subject and thoroughly enjoyed that book which might otherwise have been very uninteresting – just because, in my mind’s eye, as I am reading, I have a picture of that person and the surroundings in which they lived. (Mayer 1948: 174)

The biopic stimulates interest in the subject, but the visual images within the film also provide a basis from which the viewer learns about historical events and personages. The pleasures of biopics are linked to their contribution to the existing historical discourse. They encourage research into historical figures and resonate with Attenborough’s motivations for producing biopics which stimulate viewers’ interest in a subject. The sense that biopics contribute to public history is reaffirmed as Attenborough emphasises the educative potential of the biopic: “I hope the movie would interest people sufficiently that they might choose to learn more about Gandhi” (quoted in Winship 1982). Evidence suggests this view was shared by American audiences. One user review of *Elizabeth* believes the story “wasn’t exactly historically accurate, but it got my 15-year-old interested in Elizabethen [sic] England” (CCO-3 1998). Though there are misgivings about the authenticity of the film, *Elizabeth* inspires interest in the period depicted and other viewers contribute similar opinions. One respondent writes that *Victoria the Great* “is educational and still first class entertainment” (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 71) which reaffirms how for some for these values *are* compatible. Others feel that the

distinct properties of cinema provide a type of historical value other media cannot: “In Historical pictures one seems to get a better Idea of the costumes and houses than one can read in books” (ibid.: 55). Underlying these comments is the perception that biopics can function as public history, they provide popular expressions of the past that are entertaining, that complement the existing historical discourse and stimulate further discussion. They offer a counter to the review of *Amazing Grace* which firmly situates the film as an entertainment rather than history.

This in turn produces an anxiety, evidenced in reviews and letters, about the biopic’s specific contribution to historical discourse. There is a persistent sense that biopic representations contribute new perspectives and offer new arguments that might challenge existing perceptions. This becomes especially contentious when the ideological project of overturning received wisdom becomes too visible. Reviewers and viewers have often isolated instances in which the biographical representation is at odds with historical ‘fact’, suggesting that the biopic’s focus on real people invites direct comparison with the existing historical discourse that circulates around a figure.

Attenborough’s reverential approach to representing historical figures was under attack following the release of *Gandhi*. Louis Heren, who had been *The Times* correspondent in Delhi in 1947, wrote in to the same paper to contest the depiction:

Sir Richard Attenborough has said that Gandhi showed us how to stop killing each other, which is an astonishing misreading of history. The Mahatma hoped to achieve independence by non-violent means but at least one million people died when India and Pakistan became independent in 1947 and he could not avoid some responsibility for those deaths. This was his tragedy. (Heren 1982: 6)

The director has constructed a perspective on history which is *selective* but the letter conveys the anxieties that biopics are used as historical documents.

Underlying the letter is the anxiety that Attenborough's film will shape public opinion of the British Raj and its subsequent dismantling, framing Gandhi through an approach which oversimplifies the complexity of post-imperial India and the internal conflicts following partition. In his review of *Cry Freedom* for *Films and Filming*, Alan Stanbrook argues:

The fact is that Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement, stressing the inalienable right of the black South African to own everything in his country, was a radical threat to Pretoria ... In Attenborough's film ... Biko emerges as a kind of South African Gandhi – a man of peace and reason, clamouring for fair shares for all. (1987: 30)

Stanbrook takes issue with Attenborough's approach, contesting his depiction of Biko's politics and his tendency towards reverence and the ideological implications of this. Attenborough's previous film, *Gandhi*, is drawn on to infer that the director adopts a formulaic approach to different historical figures. This approach simplifies Biko's complex, and radical, politics within the Black Consciousness Movement which challenged the rights of whites in South Africa and proposed a mass, collective response against the oppressions experienced under apartheid law. The issue is that Biko is rendered *unthreatening* in Attenborough's film (see Ngugi 2003: 65).

These comments communicate anxiety regarding the biopic's influence as a conduit of public history, and this anxiety becomes more acute when relatives of the subject depicted feel an injustice has been committed by the film. The following chapter examines instances where family members, relatives and friends are used as 'truth claims' within the biopic film, but there are also instances where letters, written by relatives of the subject depicted, convey deep hostility. Ken

Russell's two-part television biopic *Clouds of Glory* (Granada 1978), which documents the lives of Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, received criticism from descendants of the subject. Giles Wordsworth wrote into *The Times* complaining:

Apparently Mr Russell is attracted by the private lives of men and women of genius, and it is to be feared that he will strike again. I suggest that the only hope of those who wish to preserve some of our inheritance unsullied may be to arouse his interest in someone more his own size. Have we no poets or composers bad enough to deserve his attentions? (Wordsworth 1978: 15)

Wordsworth conveys a deep anxiety about the 'private life' approach to filming subjects, suggesting that attentions to the private, rather than the 'public' life of the figure is disrespectful. His comment also conveys the surviving family's concern for the legacy of the subject depicted, and the sense in which the film's representation of their relative can alter that legacy. Additionally, Wordsworth attacks Russell's ability as a director, suggesting his lack of respect for the subject depicted is a disservice.

Some viewers suggest that a degree of invention is expected and accepted, but that this dramatic licence may be taken too far. Sir Basil Liddell Hart, a former soldier and military historian who wrote about T.E. Lawrence in *'T.E. Lawrence' in Arabia and Others* (1934), submitted a letter to *The Times* beginning:

The film called *Lawrence of Arabia* raises in an acute form the question how far history and personality can justifiably be twisted to serve a dramatic purpose. The photography is superb, the production brilliant, while Peter O'Toole gives a most vivid performance of the principal character ... Yet to anyone who knew T.E. Lawrence it rarely bares any resemblance to him in manner. (Liddell Hart 1962: 9)

Stella Papamichael's review is even more explicit in criticising the representation of Tony Blair as the 'saviour of the monarchy' in *The Queen*: "In suggesting that he

saved the monarchy from demise, screenwriter Peter Morgan takes dramatic license too far. No doubt Blair's advice to the Queen led to historic breaks with protocol, but not enough time has elapsed to properly assess the impact of these seven days" (Papamichael 2006). Such a statement encapsulates the uneasy balance between dramatic license and historical accuracy. The reviewer notes that "not enough time has elapsed" and this has been an issue for reviewers since the 1940s.

*Picturegoer's* review of the biopic *They Flew Alone*, which focuses on aviator Amy Johnson, claims "It is well done, but somehow one feels we are too near the people concerned for this picture to be in the best of taste" (Collier 1942: 12). This and other reviews and letters reflect anxiety about how the biopic can shape the general public's perception of historical events. There is a sense that the historical discourse surrounding historical figures is *insecure*; that biopics can intervene and change the public's perception of them. They illustrate how a concern with biopic representations, their 'mythmaking' potential and ideological messages, has always been a feature of the genre. The biopic's role in constructing public history is clearly central to the history of the genre's reception, films and the reviews of them are locked in a discursive struggle over the 'truth' about the past. This lends weight to the views expressed by Balcon and Jordan who foreground the attention to historical detail in their productions. Their statements attempt to anticipate the debates which follow a film's release, and the next chapter examines the biopic's 'truth claims', of which these producers' statements are one, as tools to pacify anxieties by persuading viewers to view the representations as authentic.

## **The Biopic as a Contribution to British Film Culture**

Alongside historical accuracy, entertainment and public history, a further strand concerns the cultural significance of the biopic. Reviews have emphasised the significant scale of biopic productions and cinemagoers have felt that biopics, and historical films more generally, are a particular strength in the British industry, rivalling Hollywood productions. Since the 1930s the cultural value of biopics has been highlighted in reviews and linked to their status as prestigious projects. This is reaffirmed in the *Picturegoer* review of *Henry VIII*: “I want to congratulate everybody concerned in the production. Above all, I want to thank Alexander Korda for having made a film that will do more for the prestige of British pictures than all the ‘windy’ writing and talk imaginable” (M.B.Y. 1933: 10). Later in the same decade, the review of *Sixty Glorious Years* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* similarly identifies the prestige nature of biopic production but presents a different claim for the biopic’s national significance. The film is described as: “A magnificent, satisfactory and satisfying successor to *Victoria the Great*. Covering the years from 1840-1901, this film gives, in beautiful colour, an unforgettable picture of a great Queen, and of a wonderful period in English history” (E.P. 1938: 237). Both reviews emphasise the ideological and cultural value of the genre, the technical aspects such as Technicolor and the biopic’s position as a genre at which Britain has excelled. Both films were released in an industrial climate that had the stability of infrastructure through the duopoly of the vertically integrated Gaumont-British Picture Corporation and British International Picture, but also the derided ‘quota quickies’ that gave the impression British films were poorly, and quickly, produced. These reviews suggest that the biopic was identified as a production of

particular cultural value, which demonstrated the potential and viability of the British film industry.

It is notable the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, a more ‘middlebrow’ periodical than the popular *Picturegoer*, spoke so glowingly of *Sixty Glorious Years* when the publication was usually so cautious. A month before the review, in September 1938, anxieties over German expansion in Europe were especially acute following the Sudeten crises, and the Munich agreement was negotiated with Hitler on the 29<sup>th</sup> September by Neville Chamberlain. The review’s glowing adjectives describing British history and heritage suggest the release of a biopic offered a platform for mobilising pro-British sentiments. The ideological significance of the biopic is evident here, and *Sixty Glorious Years* was highly reverential in its treatment. The review of the film emphasised that this is a heritage worth celebrating and *worth preserving*, and the biopic was here framed as a vehicle through which ideas of nationhood, shared history and national identity were transmitted.

The latest technology could be used to add to biopics’ prestige. The quality of the photography is described in an early review of *Scott of the Antarctic* for the *Monthly Film Bulletin*: “Magnificent exterior photography, capturing the grandeur and beauty of the Antarctic and, in contrast, portraying its treachery and ferocity, will rank as some of the finest ever seen” (Anon. 1949: 4). Subsequent reviews similarly affirmed the technical merits of biopics. Citing the use of Technicolor and super-panavision 70mm technologies, Peter Baker writes in *Films and Filming* that “on the level of cinema spectacle, *Lawrence of Arabia* makes the films about Jesus Christ seem as empty as a used can of beer in the desert” (1963: 33). Drawing attention to films about Jesus Christ, films that include *King of Kings* (1961),



connects the biopic with 'epic' filmmaking. The epic refers to films with historical settings and narratives and also to the technical properties such as high production values and special approaches to distribution and exhibition (Neale 2000: 85). The key function here is *spectacle*, an emphasis on visual presentation. As such, the review is concerned more with the aesthetic value of the film than with its historical value, suggesting competing definitions of the biopic's function. Its capacity for competing readings is exemplified through the letters written about *Lawrence of Arabia* which were concerned with its degree of authenticity and its representation of historical figures.

Brenda Davis' review of *Gandhi* for *Films and Filming* also approvingly emphasises the epic nature of the production: "Crowd scenes, whether processions or riots or refugee marches, flow across the wide screen in evocation of India's teeming millions" (1982: 26). Emphasis upon features such as camerawork, photography, spectacle and visual richness implies that biopics were valued by some for their technical and financial investment as much as for their historical validity.

Audience responses suggest that the historical film (a category that includes the biopic) was a genre at which the British film industry excelled. One respondent says: "There are far too few historical films, which give tremendous scope for really good acting and dramatic interest" (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 65). One contributor is scathing about British film but reserves praise for the historical, "One good point in favour of the British films is the ability in portraying historic events" (ibid.: 90) and another writes "The film *Victoria the Great* type is needed more" (ibid.: 91). However this was not universally agreed. Evidence suggests differing opinions amongst audiences and reviewers regarding the most appropriate subjects

for films. A letter in *Film Pictorial* questions the dominance of kings, emperors and queens in historical films and asks whether other types of figure are less appealing (Classey 1934: 30). However, this is countered by one cinemagoer who glowingly writes about historical films including *Sixty Glorious Years* “[t]hese films gave me an exultant pride in my own country and her achievements” (Mayer 1948: 84). This resonates strongly with the *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of *Sixty Glorious Years*; it suggests some cinemagoers had an intense emotional and cultural investment in biopics, using them to learn about the history of Britain. This reaffirms how the biopic works as an ideological project in securing a sense of British national identity, one which is centred on the Royal Family as a symbol of the nation.

### **The Relationship between British and American biopics**

Audiences were equally concerned about authenticity in biopics when Hollywood was involved in the production of them: “In *The Prime Minister* if Hollywood must ignore all the political side of Disraeli’s life except the sensational moments of victory and defeat, and concentrate on his romantic life, why misrepresent it?” (Mayer 1948: 69). A Mass-Observation viewer states “What I do strongly object to is American films about British history” (Richard and Sheridan 1987: 118). Such views imply an anxiety over American appropriations of British history, and this is a recurring feature amongst audiences. Contemporary reviews illustrate similar attitudes. The review of *Amazing Grace* in the *New York Times* summarises the film as “part BBC-style biography, part Hollywood-like hagiography, and generally pleasing and often moving, even when the story wobbles off the historical rails or becomes bogged down in dopey romance” (Dargis 2007). The ‘British’ and “BBC” approach is distinguished from the “hagiography” of Hollywood. The review suggests that the British approach to biopics is more constrained and

historically accurate, with the Hollywood approach characterised by excessive idealisation and reverence. Audiences perceive British and Hollywood productions as different, with the former considered more historically accurate.

However, one viewer offers a telling description of what the British industry lacks in relation to its American counterpart:

Although I have seen good British films, there is usually some little point lacking which tends to lower British standard of production, one instance of what I mean was to be seen in *Victoria the Great* a fine film, but was marred by the scene of the arrival of Prince Albert, the boat was obviously a model and the 'sea' a wash tub, lacking reality. (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 64)

This viewer, who is fixated with period accuracy, suggests that the expense and crafting on the production were important to some audiences. This recalls both Balcon's comments that *Scott of the Antarctic* required money to do justice to the subject, and Lean's assessment of *Lawrence of Arabia* that "[i]f one is going to do Lawrence properly one cannot do it cheaply" (quoted in Organ 2009: 11). The respondent illustrates a concern with the industrial, and specifically the financial, capabilities of the British industry and views certain sequences as lacking Hollywood production values. Evidently this sequence would have been incredibly difficult to re-create, and the efforts of 'accurate' re-creation were important to this viewer. This echoes Balcon's view that a relatively large budget was necessary to achieve a worthy film, and reviews similarly praised a biopic that displayed ambition and raised the status of the British film industry. This is a recurring theme amongst respondents who praise the historical verisimilitude that British biopics may offer.

Chapter three conveyed the commercial importance of the royal biopic throughout the history of British film production and American reviews emphasise the monarchy film as a key biopic sub-genre. Notably, American film reviews frequently make ideological points about the USA's commitment to democracy in contrast to a Britain deemed to be stuck in a moribund class system. In his review of *The King's Speech*, Peter Debruge, the Chief International Film Critic at *Variety*, recognises the glamour and appeal of the British monarchy for American audiences but notes: "Americans love kings, so long as they needn't answer to them, and no king of England had a more American success story than that admirable underdog George VI, Duke of York, who overcame a dreadful stammer to rally his people against Hitler" (Debruge 2010). This ideological claim suggests that the film could be understood as an inherently 'American' narrative of the persevering underdog. The reviewer later remarks that *The King's Speech* "should tap into the same audience that made *The Queen* a prestige hit" (Debruge 2010). Royal themes and subjects meant that a film's 'Britishness' could also connote cultural prestige and Debruge observes the on-going appeal of royal biopics amongst American audiences. This appeal has an extensive history, with the 1930s biopics of Henry VIII and Queen Victoria through to the post-2000 biopics such as *The Young Victoria*. Though *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was enormously successful with reviewers and audiences in American in the 1930s (Street 2002: 48) this review of *The King's Speech* illustrates how this perception of royal subject matter is on-going. Debruge's remarks indicate that the subject matter of the British Royal family and its history is perceived as prestigious by American audiences and a British approach to the genre that audiences *continue* to enjoy.

Earlier reviews suggest similar sentiments. Bosley Crowther's review of *Beau Brummel* for the *New York Times* criticises the excessive sentimentality of the film before praising it as "gorgeous in settings, in costumes and in its photography. It was produced in England, so that such things as hussars on parade, the furnishings of palaces and mansions and a sequence of a fox-hunt in full cry have an uncommon richness, a genuine cachet" (Crowther 1954). Such comments indicate that the biopic was perceived as a genre the British film industry 'did well'. Furthermore, they demonstrate the interest of American audiences in British history, an interest that Hal Wallis exploited in the 1960s and 1970s. As with Wallis, Crowther's review emphasises British locations as a key source of pleasure, but also British customs such as fox-hunting, customs which represent British class hierarchies through being chiefly associated with the gentry and British aristocracy. Distinctive features of British history including the class system, aristocracy and royalty are presumed to appeal to the North American market.

### **The Cultural Capital of British Actors**

The review of *Amazing Grace* foregrounded Michael Gambon and "great British actors" as appealing features of British biopic production. British actors, with clear British accents and theatrical training, are considered important in the portrayal of historical figures. Crucially, the presence of well-known British actors can play a role in negotiating the borders between entertainment and history. Regardless of any perceived inaccuracies, appropriate casting can be key to determining a biopic's reception by reviews and audiences. The prevailing discourse around stardom undoubtedly influenced a film's reception. The *Picturegoer* review of *The Lady with a Lamp* (1951) claims the film lacks conflict but that "Anna Neagle will doubtless delight her millions of admirers by her placid, painstaking and restrained

portrait of the great nurse” (C.C. 1951: 16). This suggests an intersection of star discourse and biopic casting: Neagle’s calmness and modesty in this role reaffirmed the regal persona consolidated around her following the release of *Victoria the Great*, a persona emphasising stoicism, hard work and feminine modesty (Street 1997: 126). The characteristics of the persona were thus read in her subsequent portrayal of Florence Nightingale. More generally viewers often commented approvingly on actors belonging to the British theatre tradition. One Mass-Observation respondent thought American films were technically better “[b]ut there are other outstanding stories like *Fire Over England* for which only England can produce the right actors” (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 112). This film featured both Laurence Olivier and Flora Robson who trained at the Royal Central School of Speech & Drama and Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and thus embodied the ‘quality’ British theatre and stage-training. Audiences felt prestigious, historical films such as *Fire Over England* required a certain type of actor, one with proven credentials and the necessary cultural capital which came through an education in drama. Britain’s strong theatrical heritage is here crucial to the historical film, and by extension the biopic.

Though British audiences responded positively to some Hollywood films about British history (see Glancy 2014: 34) American accents and dialogue emerges as a problem for other respondents: “I think it is ridiculous to see some prominent British subject portrayed by an American actor with a strong American accent and using American slang” (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 118). This view is mirrored by others respondents: “It is ... objectionable to see the part of a British monarch or a member of the aristocracy played by an American, doing all the wrong things and speaking in the wrong accent” (ibid.: 132). Both respondents are precise about their

issue of concern; it is the use of an American actor playing a British historical figure. Their accent and actions do not resonate with viewers' beliefs of how historical figures have acted in history and British audiences have reacted negatively to American accents and initially found them alienating (Glancy 2014: 91).

This continues to be an important issue for audiences. A British *IMDb* user is similarly critical of the casting of Renée Zellweger in *Miss Potter* “Renee was woefully miss cast [sic] in the lead, she seems to think playing an English character means pulling stupid faces and speaking in that mannered fashion she used to such nauseating effect in the Bridget Jones movies” (jdmoore63 2007). The issue here is that the actor is American, and her portrayal of an English subject is artificial and unconvincing; the user also highlights the centrality of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004) to Zellweger's ‘star-image’, a star-image consolidated through the culturally devalued romantic comedy genre, a contrast to the perceived cultural prestige attached to theatrically trained actors such as Olivier and Robson. A persistent thread is that American actors do “all the wrong things” and this is reinforced in an English *IMDb* user review which criticises the casting of American actress Anne Hathaway in *Becoming Jane*: “Why Oh [sic] why cast Anne Hathaway as Jane Austen? The girl can't act. She has a dodgy English accent and has only two expressions ... Does Britain not have a talented pool of actors that could have played the part and given it something extraordinary as Kate Winslet did in *Sense and Sensibility*?” (njmollo 2007). Winslet, whose “star-image” is invested with notions of “quality” acting, middle-class connotations, but also a “fighting feminine spirit” (Redmond 2007: 263) offers a possible explanation for this audience member's preference. The

reference to *Sense and Sensibility* evokes ‘middlebrow’ heritage film production, a celebrated adaption of Jane Austen’s novel and winner of both BAFTAS and the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay in 1995. This viewer had a significant investment in the casting of Jane Austen and wanted a *British* actor from the ‘talent pool’ of British actors from films in the heritage mode, itself a group of films which draws heavily on the traditions of quality British theatre. Casting decisions are thus clearly critical in determining the accuracy and enjoyment of a biopic for audiences. A British user writes in a review of *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll* that “[i]f it wasn’t for the fantastic performance by Serkis I don’t think this film would be worth seeing, so thank goodness they chose him, it is a colourful, musical and really likable [sic] biographical drama” (Jackson Booth-Millard 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Though the evidence is always highly mediated and selective, this analysis of reviews and fan letters reveals common themes, concerns and debates regarding the reception of biopics. Notions of prestige and spectacle form one strand. American-centred studies describe the biopic as “an aesthetic embarrassment” (Burgoyne 2008: 16) and “a disreputable genre” (Rosenstone 2007: 11). The historical evidence here suggests that audiences felt British biopics and historical films were something the industry *excelled* at, and they trusted their depiction more than Hollywood versions. Evidence from British audience also suggests they felt the biopic was an important genre, they wanted to learn about historical figures and took issue when the representations did not corroborate with their prior knowledge. They wanted to see British history on the screen and took pride in viewing their country’s achievements.



The most important debate that emerges is an ideological concern with historical accuracy versus 'excessive' drama. Many viewers and reviewers sought out inaccuracies and compared the film in question to the existing historical discourse. Other viewers and reviewers praised visual pleasure, drama and spectacle and distanced themselves from the accuracy debate. Reviewers and audiences often employed alternative generic labels to biopics, while reviewers and viewers stressed the star performance which suggests certain films were moulded and presented as star-vehicles rather than biopics. Reviewers at times stressed the role of the star in the biopic, and evidence suggests that reviewers favoured those with an established star such as Neagle rather than a relative unknown. However, audiences responded to theatrically trained, culturally 'British' actors, suggesting theatre credentials and vocal training were important to audience perception of this genre in particular. The circulation of competing discourses around the biopic by reviewers and viewers emphasises the polysemous nature of these representations.

These different positions are apparent in the debates surrounding the notion of 'authenticity'. Viewers commented that films representing historical events and people should be "authentic in outline without too much divergence from the actual story" which conveys how for some authenticity was a question of how the film was compatible with their own pre-existing understanding of events and personages and the narratives that centre on them. Others took issue with settings and props and identified these could be "lacking reality" which suggest that certain viewers understood the visual appearance as key to a realistic representation. Some viewers took issue with casting and identified British actors, accents and mannerisms as critical factors in assessing whether a film representation was plausible and convincing. Authenticity was debated when biopics depicted a recent past, such as

the review of *The Queen* in which it was suggested that the representation of Tony Blair conveys how notions of authenticity are tied to the extent to which representations conform or contradict the popular memories of the period. This debate suggests that reviewers and viewers have considerable investment in biopics and the extent to which they were authentic, but that this notion is unstable, lacks an agreed upon meaning, and that viewers understand it differently.

Biopics provoke ongoing discussion and debate. There is frequently a struggle over their meaning with little consensus. Producers, reviewers and audiences have an investment in them, as projects with cultural value but also problematic representations that contest existing historical knowledge. The range of views analysed here indicates that people are rarely indifferent to the biopic genre, and this is what makes the genre significant.

Having established the multiple viewpoints and diversity of attitudes in this chapter, the following chapter looks more extensively at biopic conventions. This analysis will build on the work in this chapter by examining the various structures of meaning which inform how biopics are understood. Issues of accuracy and validity are a characteristic that runs through discussion of biopics by producers, reviewers and cinemagoers. Chapter five considers how these concerns are managed within the biopic film and how the biopic uses 'truth claims' to negotiate the remit to represent an actual historical figure.

## Chapter Five

### Conventions and Themes of the British Biopic

Some studies have claimed that generic definitions of the biopic are “notoriously difficult” because “unlike most other genres there is no specific set of codes and conventions” (Cheshire 2015: 5). Indeed, the previous chapter surveyed some instances in which films focusing on the lives of real people were placed in generic categories other than the biopic. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was considered an “[h]istorical comedy-drama” and *Chariots of Fire* a “sports” film. Genres in general have problematic boundaries and the biopic, partly because it lacks an obvious iconography, is particularly beset by this. For example, a film such as *The Krays*, with a narrative trajectory tracing the twins’ rise to underworld leaders before their imprisonment, because of its iconography of suits, guns and nightclubs, can be understood as a crime or gangster thriller; and the regular musical performances in *The Tommy Steele Story* suggest it is a musical (Gifford 2000: 650).

However, George Custen has argued that the Hollywood studio biopic does have recognisable conventions and themes which distinguish it from other genres. These conventions and themes, as is also the case with some other genres, are not exclusive to the biopic, but the combination of some or all of them distinguishes the biopic from other genres. Though these different conventions are separated in the analysis below, it is crucial to recognise that they operate *together* to authenticate the film’s representation of the biographical subject. This chapter will examine in what ways the conventions and themes which Custen identifies apply to the British biopic, and the extent to which British examples complicate, or extend

the conventions he identifies. Title cards and captions, voice-overs, montage, flashbacks, *in media res* openings, romance, friendship and star casting are explored here, as well as the use of archival materials and endorsements from friends and relatives of the figure depicted. The themes of the individual standing in opposition to common knowledge and the wider community, and a conflict between their private responsibilities and desires and their ‘public’ ambitions, are also examined.

## **1. Conventions of the British Biopic**

### *1.1 Titles and Captions*

Custen identifies titles cards as one of the ‘formal elements’ (which also include voice-overs and endorsements) which are used to assert a biopic’s factuality (Custen 1992: 51-55, 167-168). They work to legitimate the discourse of ‘truth’, which in turn is the genre’s key characteristic: biopics claim to tell the stories of real people. Opening title cards serve as ‘the introductory assertion of truth’ (Custen 1992: 51), anchoring the meaning and rhetorical style of the film. They can foreground a specific perspective on the figure in question. *Moulin Rouge*, the biopic of French artist Toulouse-Lautrec, begins with two title cards which seek to assert the significance of the artist and his continued relevance. The first states “His palette is caked, his brushes are dry, yet the genius of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is as fresh and alive as the day he laid them down”. The second reads “Here for a brief moment, they shall be restored to his hands, and he and his beloved city and his time shall live again”. The first title justifies Toulouse-Lautrec as worthy of a biopic, and an entry into public history, the second title serves to enhance the status of the film by foregrounding the efforts made in recreating his life and the Paris

setting. Shared with the documentary, where they are also frequently used, captions may describe the biographical subject in a certain way and establish time period and setting. For example, *Champions* and *Shadowlands* (1993), about jockey Bob Champion and writer C.S. Lewis respectively, begin with captions stating “This is a true story...” and thus assert the authenticity of the diegesis.

Captions also function as disclaimers and as managers of expectation and meaning. Papamichael’s review, discussed in chapter four, conveyed the controversy biopics generate when they challenge existing knowledge, and captions can be used to manage these tensions. *Gandhi* begins with the caption “no man’s life can be encompassed in one telling” and “[t]here is no way to give each year its allotted weight”. This underscores the necessity of compression (Rosenstone 2006: 39) by citing the dilemma of what to include/exclude, but a caption then states the film must be “faithful” to the “spirit” of the historical record. Thus the opening captions of *Gandhi* attempt to manage the anxieties and expectations associated with the genre, highlighting how the depiction is constrained by the confines of the medium. In *Cry Freedom*, captions underline that the subject matter, South African apartheid, is politically sensitive and controversial, stating “[w]ith the exception of two characters whose identity has been concealed to ensure their safety, all the people depicted in this film are real and all the events are true”. The captions justify the film’s significance, but here they also assert the representation is politically challenging.

Concluding captions are frequently used because it is rare for a biopic to tell a whole life story, from the cradle to the grave. *Pierrepont* exemplifies how the supposed objectivity of captions renders them ideologically potent, and their capacity to channel the filmmaker’s interpretation of the contentious subject and

wider history. In the final scene the eponymous hangman writes his resignation letter. Then a quotation from Pierrepoint's autobiography, *Executioner*, appears against a black screen stating "The fruit of my experience has this bitter aftertaste ... Capital punishment, in my view, achieved nothing except revenge" (Pierrepoint 1974: 8). Though the autobiography is not referenced as the source for the quotation, it is attributed to Pierrepoint and channels a powerful truth claim, the authentic 'voice' of the subject, and affirms the present discourse regarding capital punishment. Pierrepoint retired in 1956 and capital punishment for most crimes was abolished a decade later. The film focusses on Pierrepoint's life as an executioner from the 1930s through to his retirement. His autobiography, which articulates his belief that the death penalty was an ineffective crime deterrent, was published in 1974. The quotation stresses that the filmmakers consulted historical documents, but it also validates *Pierrepoint's* anti-capital punishment position. The narrative represents a tearful, guilt-ridden Pierrepoint who struggles with the moral and ethical dilemmas his profession generates. Although the autobiography stresses the failure of capital punishment as a system, Pierrepoint presents himself as complying with the requirements of the state and relatively unburdened which contrasts with the film's depiction of a guilt-ridden hangman. The film forcefully argues that capital punishment is an unethical practice through *selecting* a quotation from the autobiography to reiterate the authenticity of the diegesis. The concluding caption thus fixes the meaning of the film and justifies its ethical stance, collapsing Pierrepoint's 'voice' and the film's stance into each other.

### *1.2 Voiceovers*

Custen identifies that introductory voice-overs are a recurring feature of the classical Hollywood biopic. These were presented in contemporaneous

documentaries and were probably utilised in studio biopics to further assert factuality (1992: 54). However, there are different types of voice-overs, some serve a didactic function and assert how the figure in question should be understood, others are used to transmit information, the setting and the major events of the period depicted. Rather than asserting that the film is true, some voice-overs are spoken by characters within the film and, combined with flashback, they assert how the figure depicted is being remembered by a certain character. Others are deliberately contentious and are characterised by irony, calling the status of the narrator into question. Sarah Kozloff's study *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (1988) does not focus on biopics specifically, but it is a productive source to draw on here due to Kozloff's extensive analysis of the voice-over's function.

Voice-overs are again frequently used in British biopics. Some use voice-over to imitate documentaries and newsreels to negotiate a sense of authenticity and authority (Kozloff 1988: 74). Though voice-over narrators in biopics convey historical facts, information and the period set, they can also establish the film's ideological position (ibid.: 80). In some films a didactic voice-over establishes a context through which the figure represented should be understood. In *Khartoum* (1966) an unknown and unseen narrator provides a voiceover in an omniscient tone narrating the history of Sudan, Egypt and the Nile and introduces the film's protagonists General Gordon (Charlton Heston) and Muhammad Ahmad, "the Mahdi" (Laurence Olivier), with documentary-style footage of Egyptians on the Nile and helicopter shots of Sudan. In 1883 British colonel William Hicks and his army was attacked by a group of Arab tribesman led by the Mahdi and Gordon was sent by British Prime Minister William Gladstone to evacuate Khartoum. In the

Sudan, Gordon met the Mahdi and grasps the magnitude of the leader's ambitions to invade Cairo, Baghdad and Istanbul on his religious mission. However, Gladstone sent General Wolseley to save Gordon and not Khartoum. Gordon refused to leave, and is depicted as advocating peace. He is then killed in Khartoum by the Mahdi's forces. The voice-over narration reappears following Gordon's death, to state "A world with no room for the Gordons is a world that will return to the sand". The voice-over brackets the dramatic depictions and the closing message positions Gordon as an imperial martyr, a man of peace and vision.

Other voice-overs are more neutral. The voice-over in the opening sequences of *The Queen* is informative rather than didactic. In the opening scene an off-screen newscaster describes the Labour Party's confidence that Labour candidate Tony Blair (Michael Sheen) will be elected and become the youngest prime minister of the twentieth century over factitious news images of Sheen-as-Blair walking to a polling station from his home. The style and tone reflecting news discourse and the voice-over contextualises the time period as Tony Blair's election in 1997. These images take up the whole of the frame which then cut to show the Queen watching the news programme on a television as her portrait is painted. Whereas the voice-over in *Khartoum* shapes a specific understanding of Gordon, the voice-over and images used in *The Queen* are used to establish major political events.

Other voice-overs are supplied by figures within the film, remembering the subject in question after their death. These voice-overs often trigger flashbacks, which signal a movement from the narrative present to an early moment. Unlike the informative, expository voice-over, these voice-overs underscore that the story of the subject is told from a particular perspective and position the character who retells the story as "narrator-witness" (Kozloff 1988: 62). Whereas *Khartoum's*



didactic voice-over is authoritative and implies objectivity but asserts a certain perspective through which to understand Gordon, these character voice-overs can be nostalgic; in certain films the character remembers their time spent with a deceased figure whose importance is constructed through the friend's memory. In *The First of the Few*, Station Commander Geoffrey Crisp (David Niven) narrates the story of Spitfire designer R.J. Mitchell (Leslie Howard) to a group of RAF pilots and a dissolve signifies the movement into the past with Crisp saying the year is 1922. The voice-over is brief and works to bridge the narrative 'present' of 1940 with the past remembered. A similar brief, nostalgic voice-over is used in *Becket* in which Henry II (Peter O'Toole) makes his peace with Thomas à Becket (Richard Burton) crouched by his tomb in 1170. Recounting their life together, this cuts to the image of a brothel with the voice of the king now forming a voice-over describing their experiences drinking and visiting brothels. Though flashbacks are subsequently discussed in detail, here there is evidence of how the voice and flashback work mutually to frame Mitchell's and Becket's lives through a specific narrator.

The ironic voice-over deliberately foregrounds the unreliable status of the narrator, compromising their authority through "clashes" between the narration and the images presented (Kozloff 1988: 110). Custen identifies that this is rarely used in the Hollywood studio biopic (1992: 54). However, an ironic voice-over is utilised in *24 Hour Party People*. The voice over of Tony Wilson (Steve Coogan), owner of the Factory Records music label, is frequently undermined by the events on screen. For instance, in voice-over Wilson describes how he and his wife Lindsay (Shirley Henderson) desire ordinary things all young couples want, a nice car, house and children. This appears over the images of the pair walking in hills, and as the voice-

over concludes the camera zooms in on the pair kissing. This suggests consensus between the information conveyed in voice-over and the image. However, the on-screen Wilson then enquires whether Lindsay would like to have children and she responds that it would be a “nightmare”. Rather than the voice-over in *Khartoum* which powerfully reinforces the notion of a single narrative of General Gordon, *24 Hour Party People* foregrounds multiple perspectives and undermines the authority of Wilson’s commentary.

Captions and voiceovers gain a persuasive power partially through their intertextual relationship to modes of filmmaking which are already assumed to possess objectivity. But some films denaturalise these conventions. *Young Winston* features the actors playing the subjects being interviewed by an off-screen interviewer, a device familiar from documentaries but here staged as Winston Churchill (Simon Ward) and his mother Lady Randolph (Anne Bancroft) are interrogated about their relationship with Churchill’s father and his political ambitions. This illustrates how the visual conventions of the biopic can be subverted, and used self-consciously to draw attention to their status as constructions.

### *1.3 Montage*

Montage sequences can condense a life into manageable, ‘cinematic’ form. They can provide an accelerated summary through the subject’s career, signified in shifting newspaper headlines or inventors persistently failing until a breakthrough ‘moment’ in which their theory is proved correct. They can signify both movements through extended periods of time and the individual’s rise to fame or their decline. Montage in studio films typically asserts a figure’s progression and advancement in a specific field (Custen 1992: 184-186) and this also occurs in

British biopics. For instance, *Moulin Rouge* depicts a series of paintings by Toulouse-Lautrec in rapid succession to convey his growing reputation as an artist.

Certain British biopics use montage to show triumphs *and* failures. In *The Magic Box* montage signals the passage of time in Friese-Greene's professional and personal life, the success of his photography business and the growth of his child. Friese-Greene receives a customer in his studio at the same time his daughter is born. A montage sequence shows different people posing for photographs which dissolve into images of the resulting black-and-white photographs. The final people posing, and the resulting photograph, are his wife and child, no longer a baby. The camera zooms onto the window of the shop to the words which signal that the business, initially failing, has expanded from Bath to Bristol and Plymouth. The film later employs a 'reverse' montage as Friese-Greene becomes increasingly obsessed with developing motion pictures and his photography business declines. This montage is composed of different 'sitters' complaining to studio staff after Friese-Greene has forgotten their appointment, with dissolves showing the movement from successful photographer to obsessive inventor as these 'sitters' are intercut with footage of Friese-Greene experimenting in his laboratory. The first montage show the expansion of the business, the second suggests its rapid decline.

Some films uses montage differently. For instance, *The Young Mr Pitt* begins in 1770 with Pitt as a child observing his father, Pitt the Elder, speaking in the House of Lords. That evening, the father warns that "evil days" are approaching. Then as the child sleeps, Pitt the Elder and a nurse stand over the child's bed as the father says "We must watch over him. One day there may be need of him", and the scene ends with a dissolve. Rather than a montage which centres on Pitt's rise and decline specifically, the following montage establishes the wider social and political

climate within which Pitt the Younger is growing up. However, he is not present within the montage images. The montage sets up Pitt's *challenges*. It begins with waves crashing and a brief sequence showing the birth of Napoleon Bonaparte in France. Then a non-diegetic voice-over narrates over montage images, both techniques working mutually to signify the passage of time and social change. These establish the death of Pitt the Elder and Britain's subsequent declining status, images of aristocracy and the poor dressed in rags, the pouring of wine into glasses and a drunk lying in the street, an image of a dock in disrepair to show the declining status of the British navy, then an image of Charles Fox and Lord North within Parliament. The montage constructs the "evil days" that follow the death of Pitt the Elder. The threat of Napoleon, poverty, military decline and the excesses of the aristocracy are linked to the present coalition government. The film then shows the Fox-North coalition being dismissed by King George III and the twenty-four year-old Pitt (Robert Donat) accepting the monarch's offer to form a government in 1783. Rather than a rapid rise or decline, the montage establishes obstacles which Pitt must overcome as Prime Minister, the corruption in the House of Commons and challenging foreign tyranny.

#### *1.4 Flashbacks*

In the classical Hollywood biopic the flashback functions to retell history from the point of view of a specific narrator and this "allows the narrator to frame the life not just in terms of the order and content of events, but to frame its significance" (Custen 1992: 183). This provides a personal slant to the figure remembered. In *Becket*, Henry II enters the tomb of Thomas á Becket and reminisces about the pair's relationship which triggers a flashback to a brothel he describes, his voice becoming the voice-over which locates the flashback as personal memory.

Flashbacks “economically situate a tale” (ibid.: 184), foregrounding the narrator’s point-of view which in turn naturalises the selection of events represented. Custen’s brief discussion suggests the flashback’s function in the studio biopic (ibid.: 182-184) is of limited relevance, but in British films flashbacks are utilised in various ways, reflected in the contemporary tendency to employ flashbacks to articulate personal trauma. Flashbacks are often glossed by voiceovers, which position and explicate them. The flashbacks employed in British biopics are used in four main ways: i) those films in which the figure’s death is visualised in the opening scene before a flashback retells their life up to that death; ii) those which adopt the “rags-to-riches” perspective by beginning with the subject already famous and then in flashback constructing how they arrived at that point; iii) films which use multiple flashbacks from different points-of-view; iv) the traumatic flashback which conveys the damaged psychological state of the subject.

Maureen Turim uses American, European and Asian films to chart the development of the cinematic flashback from the 1910s to the 1980s and considers the “biographical flashback” in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood films (1989: 110-122). Though her emphasis is on ‘fictional’ characters in films such as *The Power and The Glory* (1933), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Humoresque* (1946) and *Body and Soul* (1947), Turim analyses how flashback structures interrogate the characters’ rise to power as critiques of the American dream (ibid.: 112).<sup>16</sup> The only genuine biopic discussed is *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) which features entertainer George M. Cohan (James Cagney) retelling his life to President Roosevelt through a flashback which conveys a conventional rags-to-riches narrative. The ‘rags-to-riches’

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<sup>16</sup> Though both *The Power and The Glory* (1933) and *Citizen Kane* (1941) can be seen as ‘loose’ biopics of C.W. Post and William Randolph Hearst respectively, Turim does not discuss this.

flashback is present in British biopics, but neither Custen nor Turim offers a sustained analysis of how a convention more commonly associated with film noir and melodrama, is used in the biopic.<sup>17</sup> Roger Luckhurst's genealogy examines the "traumatic flashback" in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1957), *The Pawnbroker* (1965) and the TV movie *Sybil* (NBC, 1977) and argues that, since the 1990s, traumatic experience is conveyed through complex temporal arrangements, mosaics and narrative loops (Luckhurst 2008: 177-208) and biopics correlate with this.

The structure of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* is basically chronological, but British films are instead characterised by flashbacks which contribute to non-linear narrative structures. *Gandhi*, *Michael Collins* and *Veronica Guerin* (2003) focus on subjects who were assassinated. The first scene in each either recreates their death or conveys it through character conversations. Flashbacks, accompanied with dated captions, then signify a shift to an earlier period and chart the life in chronological order up to the death established in the opening scene. Each is bracketed with two deaths with their achievements in life depicted in between, conveying how the death is as important as the life in determining their legacy and suggesting personal sacrifice and martyrdom. Following the opening scenes, the extended flashbacks show their subjects' struggle to establish an independent India (*Gandhi*), secure the independence of Ireland (*Michael Collins*) and expose organised crime in Dublin (*Veronica Guerin*). Representations of these struggles are laced with knowledge of the eventual outcome, which is then reimaged in each film's conclusion. The captions and voice-overs which end the films, following the 'second' death, place their subjects within the wider history of the nation by consolidating their influence post-death. Following the re-staging of his death in the film's conclusion *Gandhi*

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<sup>17</sup> Turim devotes a chapter of her study to these genres (1989: 143-188).

(Ben Kingsley)'s voice-over states "the way of truth and love has always won" as his cremated ashes are spread. The closing captions to *Michael Collins* re-tell his role in overseeing the country's transition to independence through negotiating the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. The closing captions of *Veronica Guerin* state her death led to legislative reform in Ireland which stripped criminals of their assets. In this way the subject becomes transcendent, a feature of the classical Hollywood biopic (Bingham 2013: 236). They continue to shape the nation, their legacy and influence carried through political and legislative reform.

Other films use flashbacks to construct a "rags-to-riches" story of the individual's life. *Melba*, about Australian-born soprano Nellie Melba, opens with the singer (played by Patrice Munsel) meeting and singing to Queen Victoria, before the flashback draws the narrative back to a ranch in Australia where a younger Melba sings. Thus narrative knowledge is constructed to show her eventual success before returning to her humble beginnings in rural Australia. However, the sound of Melba's voice bridges the narrative present with the past, suggesting an ability she has always possessed and that, through her innate ability, Melba will rise to stardom. Some British biopics use multiple flashbacks to construct a fragmented textual rhythm that shifts from narrative present to past, and offer competing definitions of the subject. *The Bad Lord Byron* begins with the libertine poet (played by Dennis Price) in bed accompanied by a voice-over of different, interwoven, female voices detailing Byron's actions, before cutting to a courtroom scene dreamt by Byron in which a judge and witnesses put forward competing cases for how he will be remembered. The usually 'objective' trial sequence in which figures are judged is used as a platform for different 'subjective' memories of Byron which are retold in flashbacks. *Immortal Beloved* (1994) focuses on

Ludwig van Beethoven (Gary Oldman). It begins with Beethoven's funeral and details the composer's friend, Anton Schindler, searching for Beethoven's "immortal beloved", the recipient of his will. Schindler encounters hoteliers, relatives and lovers who recount segments of Beethoven's life in flashbacks narrated by the different story tellers, mirroring *Citizen Kane* where journalist Jerry Thompson seeks to uncover the meaning of newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane's dying word, "rosebud". Characters offer competing interpretations which fragment the subject's legacy; some are appalled while others admire him. The flashbacks support this investigative approach and the contradictory accounts correspond with *Lawrence of Arabia* in which characters offer competing interpretations of Lawrence's legacy (see chapter 6).

Flashbacks are also used to illuminate traumatic events, wherein the subject returns to one scene repeatedly through dreams, conscious flashbacks or hallucinations. These are present in *Moulin Rouge*, in which Lautrec recalls his unhappy childhood, and in *The Elephant Man* (1980) flashbacks convey Joseph Merrick being beaten as a child. Tchaikovsky recalls his mother's death in *The Music Lovers* and in *Mahler* the Jewish composer Gustav Mahler has flashbacks during a train journey which convey his experience of anti-Semitism within Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century.

Biopics released since 2000 are marked by *persistent* flashbacks. In *Creation* (2009) Charles Darwin's dead daughter Annie appears in flashbacks and hallucinations and John Lennon repeatedly dreams of his childhood in Liverpool and the place where he last saw his father in *Nowhere Boy*. In *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, Ian Dury (Andy Serkis), punk performer and lead singer of the Blockheads, experiences flashbacks which convey the abuse he suffered at a school



for disabled children. Riding an exercise bike, the subject's voice is audible stating "sweating, cured". Bright light engulfs the screen signalling a flashback to Dury as a child in the boarding school for disabled children, and then the sequence cuts back and forth between past and present. The sadistic school ward pulls back the covers to reveal the child Dury has defecated in bed. The other students chant, humiliating and embarrassing the child, while cutting back and forth so that the sounds from the past can be heard in the present footage of Dury on the bike. This then mixes with images of Dury sat at a desk smoking, the words 'Stagger' and 'Frustration' float on the voice over track as he creates lyrics for songs. These biopics feature subjects dreaming, hallucinating and recalling traumatic memories which manifest themselves as persistent flashbacks. They exemplify how conventions are informed by wider social and cultural shifts.

### *1.7 Endorsements*

The permission, assistance and endorsement received from subjects or their friends and family is a further authenticator used in the studio biopic. Custen identifies that producers would often seek approval from the family of the figure depicted as this formed a key asset in asserting their efforts to achieve authenticity "though only occasionally were their contributions more than symbolic" (1992: 41).

Endorsements form a further convention which is present in the British biopic.

Often these take the form of a credit at a film's beginning, but the truth claim can also be secured through introductions with the people connected to the figure who announce their support for the film and its truthfulness. For instance, Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, wartime head of the French section of SOE, introduces *Odette* in person, with the words "I know . . . that this story is a true one." The real

Blockhead band appears with frontman Ian Dury (played by Andy Serkis) in *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*. More commonly, figures provide advice to the producers. The opening credits of *Nurse Edith Cavell* (1939) state the Imperial War Museum and Cavell's colleagues provided documents for the filmmakers; Odette Churchill was an advisor on both her own biopic, *Odette*, and the Violet Szabo biopic *Carve Her Name with Pride* (Gilbert 2010: 182). The closing film titles of *Scott of the Antarctic* state "This film could not have been made without the generous co-operation of the survivors and the relatives of late members of Scott's Last Expedition". The importance of satisfying these figures can be taken to extremes; the use of a voice recording of Charles Bronson, the notorious English criminal who was born as Michael Gordon Peterson before changing his name, to introduce the London premiere of *Bronson* (2008), in which the prisoner states "I'm proud of this film" and "See you at the Oscar awards" sparked concerns over how the filmmakers smuggled a recording device into a high-security prison (MacInnes 2009).

Custen identifies that in rare cases endorsements are used ironically, such as in *The Magnificent Yankee* (1950). Certain British films re-work the convention as post-modern parody by inserting 'real' people within the diegesis to contest the legitimacy of the story. *24 Hour Party People* charts the musicians signed to Tony Wilson's Factory Records music label between the 1970s and 1990s. Though the film recreates Manchester's Hacienda nightclub, and uses archival footage of the Sex Pistols' performance at The Free Trade Hall in 1976 to convey historical verisimilitude, it also self-consciously foregrounds its own filmic status. The former Buzzcocks frontman Howard Devoto is played by Martin Hancock, but the real Devoto appears as a fictional toilet janitor and later 'as himself'. Hancock's

Devoto is discovered by Wilson (Steve Coogan) having sex with Wilson's wife Lindsay (Shirley Henderson) in the nightclub toilet. As Wilson leaves, the camera focuses on the janitor who turns to the camera and 'becomes' the real Devoto to say: 'I definitely don't remember this happening' and the shot freeze-frames on Devoto's face as Wilson states in voice-over that this is the real Howard Devoto and that he and Lindsay insist the event is fictitious (see Smith 2013: 476-477). This comedic parody of a long-standing biopic convention reinforces how endorsements are understood as a characteristic of the genre.

### *1.8 Archival Material*

Custen also focuses on the role of the American studio's in-house research departments, their research processes and the subsequent efforts to replicate costumes (1992: 111-118). He identifies that Eve Curie's biography of her mother was the source material for *Marie Curie* (1943) (ibid.: 41) whereas *The Actress* (1953) begins with images from a photo album and *Madam Du Barry* (1934) uses a series of constructed oil paintings which depict the figures as they resemble the actors from the film. In each case, the use was, like title cards, to convey "facticity" (ibid.: 52). Rather than dedicated research departments, British biopics use archival material to convey time period and place. The use of archival footage – news and documentary material, photographs, objects and historical sources – needs to be considered as a convention within British films. Important shifts in the use of such material can be discerned over time.

Documentary material, such as that taken from news programmes and documentaries, both conveys information and works to authenticate the claims of docudrama, establishing time period and setting (Paget 1998: 69). This serves a

similar function in biopics. The newsreel images in *Young Winston* of the real Winston Churchill waving from the balcony of Buckingham Palace after victory in the Second World War serve to authenticate the biopic through their truth value, and justify why Churchill's early life is worth exploring. As such, the archival material selected helps to determine the meanings of the historical figure represented. However, contemporary films utilise archival material in complex ways and blend these into the fictional re-enactment.

*The Damned United* uses archival television footage to present an interpretation of the legacy of Brian Clough (played by Michael Sheen), who managed several British football teams in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on the forty-four days when he managed Leeds United. The film opens with a caption identifying the year as 1974, with a montage of television images of the Leeds football team celebrating trophies backed to the tune of "Leeds! Leeds! Leeds! (Marching on Together)". In using this footage, *The Damned United* persuades the viewer to recognise the film's relationship to a wider historical discourse and other football films but it is the arrangement and selection of authenticating materials which anchor the meaning of the film. Some televised sequences foreground Leeds' 'aggressive' style, opposition players are repeatedly fouled, backed with the (now ironic) music. The footage authenticates the film's depiction while suggesting that the successful Leeds United cheat and lack discipline. The archival footage and music selected work to contextualise the two conflicting contemporary discourses which characterised debates about the Leeds team, a dominant side which won various championships, but also a competing discourse which constructed the cheating team as embodying everything wrong with British football. Later, when Clough (played by Michael Sheen) watches the Leeds team play Liverpool in the 1974

Charity Shield match, the original televised footage of the match is shown, a match in which both Leeds' captain Billy Bremner and Liverpool's Kevin Keegan were sent off and famously threw their shirts away in anger. While *fictional* re-enactment has shown the Leeds team smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol and refusing to train under Clough, the film selects *archival* footage of Keegan's shirtless, athletic torso as he exits the pitch to contrast the famously dedicated, hard-working, professional Keegan with a Leeds team that is in decline.

Archival material can also be used more ironically. *The Queen* features constructed news-style footage of Tony Blair (as played by Sheen) shortly before he was elected Prime Minister in 1997, shot with a jerky hand-held camera and newscaster voice-over, but here the crafted footage, a "simulation of documentary material" (Paget 1998: 73), exposes how these news images are formed. *Veronica Guerin*, *Telstar* and *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll* use archival photographs of their subjects in their closing credits. *Telstar* is particularly significant in that it stresses its claim to truth by juxtaposing photographs alongside the recreated images from the diegesis, stressing the meticulous nature of the production's reconstruction of Joe Meek's life and death. This acts as a disclaimer, suggesting attention to period detail but also foregrounding the difference between fiction and fact. *The Queen* draws attention to the problems of using archival materials as authenticators in its opening scene in which Queen Elizabeth II (Helen Mirren) poses for a portrait. Further images frame the artist painting and the painting itself. The staging of the portrait is foregrounded, with one image displaying the monarch sitting mid-ground, in the centre of the frame, with the artist and painting in the foreground in the right of the frame. This staging underscores the film's desire to interrogate this carefully moulded 'public' image. The scene concludes with the Queen turning to

face the camera directly, breaking the fourth-wall and the sense of an enclosed diegetic world. In self-reflexively exposing both the process of painting and the mechanics of filmmaking, the scene underscores how biopics, and the strategies they use to persuade, have become naturalised (see Dolan 2012: 42). Such post-2000 films suggest a shift in the use of archival materials and the awareness of filmmakers that viewers understand the genre's visual conventions.

In addition to visual records, objects and settings are often accumulated as indications of a film's authenticity. The aerial sequences in *Reach for the Sky* feature authentic Supermarine Spitfire and Hawker Hurricane aircraft, and *Sixty Glorious Years* features scenes filmed inside royal palaces. *Elizabeth* references portraits of Elizabeth I in the film's costumes and *Khartoum* references George William Joy's 1893 painting of "General Gordon's Last Stand" (Chapman 2005: 87). When originals are unavailable, productions can go to (extreme) lengths crafting replicas. For *Scott of the Antarctic* materials used in the expedition, such as chocolate, were borrowed or replicated (Balcon 1948: 155). Such practices signify the efforts of productions to convey historical verisimilitude, but some films contest attempts to construct the authentic 'look' of the past. Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*, about the seventeenth century Italian painter, was shot indoors, and features deliberate anachronisms: a motorbike, calculator and contemporary language (Hill 1999: 155) with a pictorial aesthetic produced through chiaroscuro lighting and colour washes (Sargeant 2005: 309). *Wittgenstein* uses a black soundstage and minimal props which contribute to a stage-play aesthetic with coloured costumes contrasting with the blackened studio space. Such decisions reflect the film's overt stylisation and its use of anachronisms foregrounding how

the processes of historical replication have become naturalised as guarantors of authenticity.

The use of pre-existing sources conveys an inter-textual relationship between the film and other texts, some of which are perceived to carry connotations of cultural value. The credits to *Rhodes of Africa* claim the film was adapted from *Rhodes* (1933) by Sarah Gertrude Millin, a respected biographer and novelist active in South Africa between 1917 and 1965. Biographies by authoritative sources are perceived to hold a higher 'objective' status than autobiographies and memoirs. *Young Winston* was based on Churchill's autobiography *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* and though autobiographies are perceived as selective, and reliant on memory, they channel the authentic voice of the figure in question and typically offer sustained reflection and psychological examination. *Touching from a Distance* (1995), Debra Curtis' memoir of her marriage to Joy Division singer Ian Curtis, is referenced in the opening credit sequence of *Control* as the basis for the film. Memoirs are generally perceived as personal accounts, reliant on memory and often, as is the case with *Touching from a Distance*, are written from the perspective of a family member. Unlike biography, the perspective is foregrounded explicitly. As with voice-overs and captions, archival footage and documents are staple material of documentary practice, and its connoted links serve as an assertion of truth in the British biopic.

### *1.9 Casting and Performance*

Custen stresses the importance of casting in shaping the life of subjects, how actors' star personae and physical resemblance inform understanding of that

subject, and how the availability of stars under studio contract influenced the type of biopic produced. The persona of a star could temper a figure's alienating qualities but a powerful persona could limit the roles an actor could play. Some actors were applauded for playing against their star persona in a demonstration of their acting ability but roles could also be adjusted to fit the star's qualities (1992: 193-205). Custen acknowledges that his discussion of how the star persona shapes depictions is limited (ibid.: 194). As the focus of this study is primarily biopics which represent male figures this section focuses on male actors in six different British biopics to identify some conventions of British biopic casting.<sup>18</sup> These conventions include using actors who physically resemble the figures depicted and those actors whose star personas suggest continuity and compatibility between actor and figure.

Casting and performance in biopics is characterised by constraints and pressures which are distinctive to the genre. Satisfying those figures who are represented or are close to those represented is the first issue. Endorsements are powerful truth claims but depictions which fail to satisfy the figure, or their family and friends, risk litigation and public denouncement. For instance, John Mills' wish to portray a temperamental Captain Scott was vetoed and the eventual film met the family's approval (Chapman 2005: 151). Director Lewis Gilbert acknowledged the constraints in casting aviator Douglas Bader in *Reach for the Sky*: "When your hero actually exists, getting the casting right is even harder than usual" (2010: 155). Mat Whitecross, director of *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, believes "when you're making a film about someone like Ian Dury, there's a responsibility to be true to his

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<sup>18</sup> The personas of key female actors within the genre are discussed elsewhere, see: Anna Neagle (Street 1997: 124-134, Dolan and Street 2010: 34-48, Macnab 2000: 66-73) and Glenda Jackson (Williams 2010: 45-53).



life and to his family” (Karamat 2013). These anxieties are well-founded as interviews and comments are sought from figures with a connection to the production, and their criticism can bring a project under scrutiny.

The second, related issue is the pressures on actors and their performance. A particular situation arises in biopics because “[i]f the imaginary person, even in a historical fiction, has no other body than that of the actor playing him, the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much” (Comolli 1978: 44). The audience identification oscillates between the actor’s body and the figure they portray. This “double game” cannot be resolved, with the bodies “held together for us by this oscillating movement, by the to-and-fro which makes us pass from one to the other without ever abandoning either” (ibid.: 48). Strategies to manage this ‘competition’ include making both bodies visible, as with Howard Devoto in *24 Hour Party People*, or casting an actor who physically resembles the subject. The ‘body too much’ can also be negotiated through an actor’s existing persona or ‘star image’, a signifying system consisting of signs and meanings through which the star is understood “made out of media texts that can be grouped together as *promotion, publicity, films* and *commentaries/criticism*” (Dyer 1979: 68 original emphasis). These meanings can make the historical figure portrayed seem more persuasive, their persona may inform the role and make the figure appear more empathetic or their persona may share continuity with how that figure is popularly understood. Just as the use of visual conventions, such as captions and archival footage, can propose an intertextual relationship between the documentary and the biopic, the casting of a specific actor lends textual meanings to the historical figure portrayed.

In 1934 Alexander Korda offered an insight into the casting of Laughton in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* which suggests the actor's star-image was moulded around his skill and thoughtful approach: "he is the greatest English actor I have directed. But he is very nervous, and because of this sometimes difficult to handle" (Korda 1934: 84). Laughton was perceived as capable of managing conflicting characteristics in performance. The appeal of Laughton was found in "his ability to invest even the most hardbitten villains with a measure of pathos, and, sometimes, even humour" (Macnab 2000: 165). This is corroborated in *The Times* review of *Henry VIII*: "His delight in music and his self-pity when he is without a wife provide moments of welcome restraint in an otherwise unbridled passage across the scene" (*The Times* 1933: 12). The film, which circumvents events which would frame the King as a tyrant, succeeded in making him empathetic through Laughton's ability to portray him as a buffoon but also a sympathetic 'victim'.

Korda responded to one critic's disapproval at the lack of resemblance between Elsa Lanchester and Anne of Cleves in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*: "surely it is ridiculous for critics to expect a director to produce a cast that exactly resembles the historical characters being represented" (1934: 34-35). However, physical resemblance was critical to resolving the 'body-too-much' dilemma in Laughton's depiction; his frame and bulky physique were described in reviews to foreground his resemblance to the famous painting of Henry by Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1537). Mordaunt Hall's review in the *New York Times* conveys the perception of Laughton as a 'cultivated' actor while stressing the historical resemblance:

Mr. Laughton not only reveals his genius as an actor, but also shows himself to be a past master in the art of make-up. In this offering he sometimes looks as if he had stepped from the frame of Holbein's painting of Henry. He appears to have the massive shoulders and true bearded physiognomy of the marrying ruler. (Hall 1933)

The body-too much negotiation was neatly circumvented by Laughton's physical likeness to Henry as depicted in the painting (Street 2002: 53). Hall's review emphasises how part of the genre's appeal lies in seeing bodily transformation and this is in itself an authenticating strategy.

John Mills' star-image corroborated with the way the producer Michael Balcon wanted to portray Captain Scott in *Scott of the Antarctic*: "My first choice to play the part of Scott was John Mills ... John worked hard ... his sincerity comes through in everything he does" (Balcon 1969: 175). Mills' star-image articulated an 'everyman' status characterised by ordinariness, sincerity and hard work. This sincerity was highlighted in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of *Great Expectations* (1946), the success of which "owes much to the sincerity of John Mills in the difficult, hesitant part of Pip grown-up" (R.M. 1946: 166). Mills' 'everyman' image enabled him to negotiate the potentially domineering figure of Scott and the *Monthly Film Bulletin* review foregrounded how Mills' performance characterised Scott as both empathetic and personally driven: "John Mills gives a polished performance as the charming, undaunted and untiring Captain Scott" (Anon. 1949: 4). The perseverance which characterised the persona of Mills matched the popular memory of Captain Scott, a figure who the audience knows will fail, but who perseveres despite various setbacks (see Plain 2006: 118). However, physical resemblance was also important and *Variety* claimed the film's "greatest asset is the superb casting of John Mills in the title role ... Mills' close resemblance to the famous explorer makes the character come to life" (*Variety*

1947). As with Laughton-as-Henry, physical resemblance is a critical marker in how the actor is assessed.

Unlike Laughton and Mills, Peter O'Toole was relatively unknown when cast as T.E. Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia*, after which he played monarchs in both *Becket* and *The Lion in Winter*. Lean identified O'Toole having seen him in a supporting role in *The Day They Robbed the Bank of England* (1960): "I thought he had a wonderful face and could act" (quoted in Brownlow 1996: 416). O'Toole's relative anonymity in Britain and America suggests a further method to navigate the 'body-too-much'. Lean felt "Lawrence is not a stock character, and that's his fascination" (quoted in Brownlow 1996: 410). The lack of an established persona strengthened O'Toole's apparent suitability to play an enigmatic figure, the *New York Times* observed that "The inner mystery of the man remains lodged behind the splendid burnoused figure and the wistful blue eyes of Mr. O'Toole" (Crowther 1962). But being an unknown actor could also be a disadvantage when portraying a historical subject. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of *Lawrence of Arabia* commented: "Peter O'Toole's performance, likeable, intelligent and devoted, lacks that ultimate star quality which would lift the film along with it" (P.H. 1963: 18). This reinforces the idea that certain biopics – those of major historical figures – require 'experienced', internationally recognised actors such as Laughton and Mills. The same publication spoke glowingly of Charlton Heston as General Gordon in *Khartoum*: "The character of Gordon is both historically accurate and sympathetically conveyed" and "what one remembers here is Heston's performance – a carefully rounded study, suggesting depth and complexity, and never slipping into caricature" (D.W. 1966: 104).

However, casting an unknown was sometimes necessary if the subject was contentious. Dustin Hoffman was initially considered to star in *Gandhi*. However, producer Jake Eberts felt that he “is a fine actor, but, no matter how cleverly he disguised himself, and no matter how brilliantly he immersed himself in the role, it would have been impossible to forget that it was Dustin Hoffman – no audience would have believed that he was Gandhi” (Eberts and Llott 1990: 82-83). The ‘body-too-much’ is difficult to negotiate when both subject and actor are widely known and casting a white actor could evoke hostility given the legacy of British imperialism in India. Like Lean, Attenborough cast a relatively unknown actor, Ben Kingsley. As an Anglo-Indian, Kingsley’s cultural identity and extensive preparation for the role (see Bennetts 1982, Eberts and Llott 1990: 82), managed the tensions of portraying an Indian subject within a British/Indian film (Dux 2013: 114). Casting Hoffman, an American actor with a consolidated screen persona, would have clashed with the spiritual meanings of Gandhi whose own persona was consolidated around the name Mahatma (‘great soul’) by his followers. Although not contemporaneous to the film’s release, an *IMDb* user review suggests British audiences had similar reservations: “he [Kingsley] was a relatively unknown actor at the time, so the ‘big-time actor’ persona did not get in the way of viewing the film” (Rod-88 2002). Though Kingsley is taller than Gandhi, reviews were favourable. *Vogue* claimed Kingsley “is a Gandhi look-alike who goes far beyond physical resemblance to capture the otherworldly essence of the man” (Haskell 1982: 45) and Kingsley won the Best Actor category at the 1983 Academy Awards.

Other actors are cast through their ability to impersonate figures. Though impersonation carries connotations of parody and cliché (Vidal 2014b: 141), Michael Sheen’s performances, which can be read as impersonations, have met

with acclaim. His performances as Tony Blair have been analysed in detail (see Vidal 2014b: 149-153) but this analysis places Sheen's persona within the wider context of British biopic casting. Sheen's growing reputation for versatility in impersonation had been evidenced in *Frost/Nixon* (2008), in which he portrayed British talk-show host David Frost, and his performances as Prime Minister Tony Blair in *The Deal* (Channel Four 2003) and *The Queen*. Sheen also portrayed football manager Brian Clough in *The Damned United* and, on television, Kenneth Williams in *Fantabulosa!* (BBC 2006) and William Masters in *Masters of Sex* (Showtime 2013 –). A review of *The Deal* identifies this versatility, while also underscoring how impersonation carries parodic connotations: “Michael Sheen at first plays Blair in the style of Spitting Image's David Steel puppet: bounding along next to his far superior colleague like an over-eager puppy ... [t]he actor later transforms Blair into something more sinister and cynical” (Davies 2003). His role as Blair in *The Queen* was described as “another uncanny, insightful performance” (Newman 2006) and Sheen is described as “the Jon Culshaw of *legitimate* acting” (Bradshaw 2006 my emphasis). The latter comment underscores that Sheen's acting style is similar to impression and mimicry (drawing on a known English impressionist) but maintains his seriousness as an actor, a seriousness channelled in later reviews of *The Damned United*: “great though Sheen's Blair and Frost were, his Clough is of an even higher order, combining psychological insight with dead-on accuracy” (Elliott 2009).

Whereas O'Toole and Kingsley lacked established personae, Sheen's persona is consolidated through his chameleon-like unknowability and dedication. An article entitled “The many faces of Michael Sheen” describes him as “a chameleon who

disappears into the skins of others” (Lang 2013), whereas another suggests “[i]t’s Sheen’s ability to get under the skin of people we think we know well that makes him so compelling” (Elliot 2009). Sheen is praised for his mimicry of mannerism, gesture and tone of voice, a style which has frequently been devalued as superficial and artificial (see Naremore 2012: 36). However, this style is suited for these specific roles precisely because the figures depicted are so familiar (see Vidal 2014b: 141). When asked about his preparation for different roles Sheen responded: “Well you have to do a tremendous amount of research [if] you’re playing someone who’s a real life person, especially someone who’s alive or recently alive. The audience is going to be very familiar with them, so you do have to meet the audience’s *demand for familiarity* with the character” (quoted in McLaren 2008 my emphasis). Frost was still alive at the time of *Frost/Nixon* and Sheen’s depictions of Blair are representations of a heavily mediated figure influential in the past twenty years. Similarly, Clough’s televised work in interviews and punditry is re-used in football documentaries and in *The Damned United* itself. These figures are heavily circulated through the visual media and the footage is recycled in documentaries and uploaded via peer-to-peer video sites such as YouTube. Portraying figures already heavily mediated is made additionally problematic because of the risk of caricature and, if the actor has a clear persona, sudden shifts in style can be unsettling (Naremore 2012: 40-41). These figures require an acting style centring on impersonation, and which can evoke the “uncanny” and “familiarity”, because direct comparisons are readily available. Sheen’s status as a ‘legitimate’, serious *actor* rather than a star, and his chameleon-like ability to impersonate convey an unusual method of negotiating the body-too-much. Interviews and articles repeatedly stress how he disappears “under” and

“into” the figures portrayed, consistently emphasising how his acting and mimicry is legitimate, capturing the essence rather than a superficial, shallow act of imitation.

Rather than physical resemblance or imitation, reviews of *The King’s Speech* centred on the continuity between Colin Firth’s performance as King George VI and his previous roles. Firth had previously portrayed historical characters, including traumatised war veteran Tom Birkin in *A Month in the Country* (1987). His portrayal of Fitzwilliam Darcy as a Byronic anti-hero, a figure who combines sadistic, erotic and melancholic qualities, in the serialisation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC 1995), formed a crucial element in his persona. In his subsequent roles Firth had built a reputation as a serious actor with the ability and gravitas to portray the nervous and tormented king with sensitivity. Hugh Grant was initially considered but director Tom Hooper later claimed that “I wasn’t interested in Hugh doing a light version. It was a blessing, really, because once I started talking to Colin Firth and getting to know him, the rightness of him playing the part was so profound” (quoted in Hutchings 2011). However, the lack of physical resemblance was an issue initially for casting director Nina Gold: “He’s older than the real king was at the time and his face isn’t the same, [but] of course as soon as we cast it he just fell into the part and embodied it. You can get really hung up on some details that in the end are unimportant” (Gilbert 2014). Firth’s *embodiment* of George VI suggests his qualities as an actor were important in casting and reviewers emphasised Firth’s ability to convey emotional repression and vulnerability. The *Vogue* review of *The King’s Speech* commented: “In Firth’s portrayal, George VI is a powerful yet vulnerable man” (Wood 2010: 293) and



*Sight and Sound* linked his performance to previous roles: “ultimately this is Firth’s film, confirming his status as one of our finest screen actors, with a matchless line in agonisingly repressed Brits” (Kemp 2011: 62). Prior to the film’s wide release articles such as ‘The King’s Speech: The Real Story’ (Farndale 2011) were published which emphasised the real King’s crisis and vulnerability, a historical discourse that blended the real king with the actor’s star-image.

## **2. Themes of the Biopic**

This chapter now moves from discussing the audio-visual conventions of the genre to analysing its broader narrative conventions and themes. The first of these is the thematic structure through which the figure is placed in opposition to his or her wider community. The second is the tension between private happiness and romance and that of public ambition and responsibility. Finally the roles of the family, romance and friendship in the British biopic are considered.

### *2.1 The Individual versus the Community*

Custen identifies a recurring theme of the studio biopic in which the protagonist is in conflict with the views of the wider community as they attempt to challenge common-sense within a certain field through, for example, a scientific innovation or a radical approach to music: “the arguments of the opponents of the great man or woman are often framed as shaped by lack of exposure to the world, or else are depicted as a desperate clinging to outmoded ‘conventional’ ways of thinking” (Custen 1992: 188). The individual faces resistance from a community which underestimates or refuses to believe in their ability. Often specific strategies in

*mise-en-scène* are used to imagine this conflict, a courtroom or trial setting in which the subject convinces a pessimistic panel. In these scenes the subject is required to speak against the systems of authority which make him/her the object of wider scrutiny (Custen 1992: 187). This theme is at the heart of most British biopics. Inventors are initially unable to secure funding to build their radical designs (*The First of the Few*), or no one believes that a man who has lost his legs will ever fly again (*Reach for the Sky*), but it is a broad template utilised in different ways. *Gandhi* and *Amazing Grace* use the theme to convey the “Great Man” view of their subject, an individual who sacrifices themselves to inspire reform.

However, the theme is also deployed to show the figure failing to overturn the norms and values of the wider community, and thus exemplifies the elasticity of conventions and the different readings they accommodate. British examples sometimes inflect this theme differently from classical Hollywood, using it to emphasise the protagonist’s *inability* to change wider public opinion. The theme is also problematic as it channels historical change through narratives of individuals, stressing their agency and omitting larger social forces.

This emphasis on the driven, motivated individual who successfully overturns social norms is problematic, resulting in complex historical processes being condensed as narrative agency is granted to the individual and their struggles: “the solution to their personal problems tends to substitute itself for the solution of historical problems ... the personal becomes a way of avoiding the often difficult or insoluble social problems pointed out by the film” (Rosenstone 1995: 57). The result of this, it has been claimed, is that the biopic’s “style of historiography is regarded as suspect, a dubious attempt to encapsulate or exemplify a major historical period in the life of an individual protagonist” (Burgoyne 2008: 40). Tom

Brown's analysis of oratory in the William Wilberforce biopic *Amazing Grace*, underscores the historical implications of oratorical address present in the film. Through this emphasis, conducted in drawing rooms and the House of Commons, and the film's privileging of Wilberforce as narrative agent, the film "tells" rather than "shows" the experience of the slave trade (2014:119). The experience of the Atlantic slave trade is evoked through Wilberforce's speeches, dreams and hallucinations, exemplifying a "Great White Man-centric view" (ibid.: 135) in which the abolitionist movement is channelled through the white upper-class Wilberforce's personal struggles within parliament, and disregarding other factors, notably the slaves themselves, as agents of resistance.

*Christopher Columbus* opens with a close-up image of a world map with a voice-over delivered by an anonymous narrator stating that the year is 1485, the Mediterranean is the centre of the world, and that most people believe the earth is flat. The theme is manifested through the voice-over. The narrator then introduces Christopher Columbus as a "crackpot fellow" who believes the world is a sphere, thus positioning Columbus as challenging existing knowledge. Over three days within the Spanish Court, the passage of time signified through dissolves, Columbus paces back and forth attempting to convince the court to provide him with a fleet of ships to sail west to the Indies. In the trial sequences in *Gandhi* the subject states his beliefs in an independent India, in opposition to the ruling British colonial government. Such sequences are effective because of the interplay between the historical scene and the contemporary values which audiences bring to the film: released in 1982, Gandhi's challenge to the British is viewed in the context of post-colonial discourse which aligns the contemporary viewer with the outspoken hero who contests imperial hegemony. But earlier the film shows a

younger Gandhi as a lawyer resisting and then being ejected from a train carriage designated for white South Africans in 1914, before focusing on his rise as an independence activist. The motivation for Gandhi's beliefs is represented, as with Wilberforce's dreams, through personal experience.

Trials and similar settings are a characteristic of British films. However, it is often used to convey how the individual is oppressed or *unable* to shift wider understanding, whereas in the studio biopic trials are used to signify the figure's "public triumph" and ability to shift wider opinion (Custen 1992: 187). The courtroom in *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* and in *Wilde* conveys how Wilde is powerless to overturn the persecution he faces regarding his sexuality, the subject's beliefs contrast with the wider British legislative system and he is imprisoned. In *Valentino*, the life of silent film star Rudolph Valentino ends with a boxing match and drinking contest, in which the film star takes part in order to overcome the ubiquitous misconception that he is homosexual. To overcome the wider community's perception of him, he competes in front of an audience around the boxing ring but later dies following the drinking contest.

A particular challenge to community or social values is provided by films that present criminals sympathetically. The criminals represented in *Dance with a Stranger* and *Let Him Have It* (1991) are convicted and executed for their (supposed) crimes, but each film treats its protagonist sympathetically and conveys the lack of power the individual has as an agent. In the former Ruth Ellis struggles to manage sole parental responsibilities of her son while working as a hostess in the nightclub where she meets the rich, volatile David Blakely. Blakely leaves her once he is advised by his parents and friends that she is unsuitable and, crucially, not 'respectable', owing to her status as a lower-class single mother. Working within

the patriarchal structure of the nightclub, run by a business man who fires her after Blakely causes disruptions, abandoned by her son's father and later by Blakely, Ellis is portrayed as a victim of a patriarchal class structure. Her doomed attempt at agency occurs when she murders Blakely, but she is then executed through the British legal system. Though *Dance with a Stranger* doesn't focus on her trial, it firmly suggests that as lower-class single mother the subject has little autonomy and, despite her crime, deserves sympathy. *Let Him Have It* details the life of Derek Bentley, his being diagnosed with learning difficulties, meeting 16 year-old delinquent Chris Craig, and getting involved in a confrontation with police in which Craig, armed with a pistol, is urged by Bentley to "Let him have it". The subsequent court case centres upon the meaning behind Bentley's instruction, before the jury finds the pair guilty. Craig is imprisoned, whereas the 'adult' Bentley is sentenced to hang. The film suggests that it was the inability to understand his condition by both the judicial system and the public who hound him which leads to his execution. The film laces contemporary discourses of both learning disability and capital punishment into the historical narrative to present Bentley as a 'victim' of legislation.

## *2.2 Private and Public Lives*

The second major theme of the biopic places figures as conflicted or forced to decide between their 'private' desire and 'public' responsibility. Custen identifies that subjects are frequently forced to choose between love and a career (1992: 149). Women are positioned in a conflict between heterosexual desire, marriage and romance and their professional responsibility whereas in films about men "the career/love conflict has the male star so wrapped up in his career that he is unable to give love" (1992: 105). The individual's life is constructed as both 'public',

containing their known achievements, and ‘private’, their personal desires, familial relations, romances and responsibilities. This is similarly a feature of British films. However, the discussion below initially centres on the emergence of the private life as a legitimate focus. The discussion then centres on some of the ways in which biopics have focused on both the private and the public, and placed these in tension.

Though films in the 1910s, such as *The Life of Lord Kitchener*, reconstructed the major events that the subject lived through, later biopics, namely *Nell Gwyn* (1934) and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, adopted a “keyhole” approach that emphasised the private life. The focus on private lives resonates with the emergence of other discourses, specifically the growing emphasis in popular journalism on stories with ‘human interest’ and celebrity culture. Profiles of celebrity figures changed over the course of the nineteenth century from a focus on carefully choreographed ‘public’ moments towards revelations about their private lives. As such, “the modern popular press, launched at the end of the Victorian era, set a template of plenty of pictures, accessible writing and news which emphasised human interest factors” (Temple 1996: 176). Reliant on advertising revenue, newspapers tried to secure a wide readership by focusing on notorious figures, sensational stories, cinema and vaudeville. Rather than emphasising “the distance and aura of the celebrity”, this approach in journalism “worked to make the famous more real and worked to provide a greater intimacy with their everyday lives” (Marshall 2006: 317-318).

The circulation wars of the 1930s had a significant impact on the nature of journalism, generating the million-selling newspaper, and human stories, entertainment and gossip offered a distraction during the interwar period from the

upheavals and political ramifications caused by the First World War and the onset of the Great Depression (see Williams 2010: 160-161). Narratives of celebrities constructed through interviews, editorials and speculative gossip provided one such focus. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* intersects with these shifting discourses of journalism, celebrity and stardom. It offers a key-hole examination of its subject at a time when magazines and newspapers were looking ‘behind-the-scenes’ at film stars and other celebrities. The emphasis on the ‘private’ life in the title, and the narrative which emphasises sexual relationships, encapsulates the organisation of stardom, and the wider world, into public and private spaces (Dyer 2004: 10). The rise of popular film magazines such as *Picturegoer*, led to an emphasis on speculation, the ‘true’ self and the media’s ability to probe it. The cinematic construction of *Henry VIII*, its thematic approach and bold appealing title, situate the biopic as a particular product of 20<sup>th</sup> century mass media, emphasising an intrusive approach to a private life, one in which sexual behaviour is central.

Often there is a near complete avoidance of the public image of the subject and their achievements, and instead an emphasis on the “human interest”, such as personal relationships, romance, feuds and crime. *Valentino* looks at the effect which accusations of homosexuality had on the private world of the silent film star and *Sid and Nancy* (1986) examines punk musician Sid Vicious’ temperamental relationship with his girlfriend Nancy Spungen rather than his role as a member of the Sex Pistols. *Best* (2000) foregrounds the alcohol addiction suffered by footballer George Best and *Iris* examines the elderly Iris Murdoch as she battles Alzheimer’s disease. Again there is an emphasis here on scandalous behaviour, addiction, affairs, sexuality and illness. This offers a potential explanation for the biopic’s foregrounding of male traumas and suffering, an attempt to probe the

*personal* psychology of the subject which is the focus of chapters six, seven and eight.

The two conflicting ‘lives’, public and private, are often structured through a dichotomy, with the subject sacrificing one for the other. Biopics of monarchs display one form of this tension. In *The Rise of Catherine the Great*, the Russian Queen is represented as a loyal and loving wife despite the various affairs of husband Grand Duke Peter (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.). She is depicted “evolving into the figure of a queen, but her desire for love is finally subordinated to her queenly responsibilities” (Landy 1991: 63). *Mrs Brown* depicts the alleged relationship between Queen Victoria and Scottish servant John Brown which develops following the death of Prince Albert and leads to growing public disillusionment with the monarchy. When Brown advises the Queen to return to public duty the relationship between the pair is broken, and the Queen returns to her public role. Thus for women private romance is shown as incompatible with public responsibility, and Brown supposedly sacrifices his love in the interests of the wider nation. Recent biopics of monarchy have displayed this tension differently.

*The Queen* portrays the current Queen Elizabeth II at the time of Diana’s death in 1997. The narrative concludes with the Queen’s public rehabilitation, having faced the media and publicly mourned the death of Diana. This theme of a rehabilitated monarchy is repeated in *The King’s Speech*, where the King’s inability to speak in public is explained by his difficult relationship with his father, his bullying siblings, and his abusive nanny. The King is eventually rehabilitated through his speech therapist Lionel Logue, and this culminates in his successfully addressing the nation in a key radio speech in 1939, preparing the country for war. The King’s private rehabilitation allows him to fulfil his public responsibilities.



Films released during and after the Second World War use this trope of duty to articulate their subject's dedication to protecting and preserving Britain. By foregrounding how the subject pursues their national responsibilities at the cost of their private lives, these films emphasise their subjects as self-sacrificing. *The First of the Few* shows Spitfire designer R.J. Mitchell in declining health as he develops the Spitfire fighter aircraft to aid the British war effort, the film suggests that his willingness to continue working on the designs leads to his death. In *Odette*, Odette Churchill leaves her family to travel to Cannes in 1942 to fulfil her role as a British spy and thus sacrifices private, domestic happiness for public, professional duty. In biopics of politicians, subjects sacrifice their personal health to realise public ambition and fulfil national duty. In *The Young Mr Pitt*, the prime minister's health worsens as Britain battles Napoleon and France and he eventually resigns. Pitt returns to politics when his replacement, Henry Addington, signs the treaty of Amiens with France and the French army soon remobilises. Reinstated despite his health, Pitt calls for the confrontation with Napoleon which culminates in victory at Trafalgar. The portrayal of the subject is overwhelmingly positive. Pitt is a stoical, calm subject who sacrifices his own health and romance with Eleanor Eden in pursuit of protecting Britain from foreign threats. Such a narrative tension celebrates the subject and the theme continues in contemporary biopics. In *Amazing Grace*, William Wilberforce is shown as suffering colitis while he struggles in parliament to have slavery abolished. In all of these films the protagonists sacrifice themselves for the nation.

### *2.3 In Media Res and the Role of Family*

Custen identifies narrative conventions, including films beginning *in media res*, when subjects are past the age where they can be influenced by family, a device

which stresses the subject's self-creation and ability to dictate their own future (1992: 150-152). This is a feature of certain British films; *Rhodes of Africa* introduces an adult Rhodes informing a doctor his desire to expand Britain by colonising South Africa, a Great Man and powerful individual who is driven by patriotic ambition. Similar to the studio biopic, films featuring a "cradle to the grave" narrative are rare (Custen 1992: 150) though *Wittgenstein* begins with the philosopher as a schoolboy and concludes with him on his deathbed. Though it is common for figures to exist as individuals rather than within a family network and thus stress their self-creation, Custen identifies other, less common, models. Some figures "inherit" a career path from their family (ibid.: 152). This is displayed in *The Young Mr Pitt*, as Pitt the Elder tells the child he hopes he will continue his legacy as "Pitt the commoner", a title given to him by the people, and instructs his son to enter the House of Commons when he is older. Furthermore, his comments to the nurse that the child must be protected, for one day he will be needed, shows a character prefiguring their remarkable characteristics (Custen 1992: 153)

The family's role in shaping the figure is relatively rare in studio biopics. When the family is present, subjects faced opposition within their home environment through characters who resist their attempts to forge a career (Custen 1992: 154). They form a hindrance, and this is especially apparent in films of women: "The female great person, prohibited by cultural prejudice from competing with men in most spheres, must learn to manipulate herself and others if she is to succeed" (ibid.: 158). Combating a disproving family and male prejudice is a feature of *The Lady with a Lamp*, which tells the story of Florence Nightingale. There is a conflict between Nightingale's ambitions to nurse and her family who wish her to marry. Their wealthy life style is constructed as an environment the subject breaks from

through her ambitions to work. In Scutari in 1854, traveling to work at the Turkish barrack hospital, the male doctors are initially resistant to female nurses but overcrowding leads to Nightingale's opportunity. She is stoical and dedicated to her work, criticising overly emotional nurses and continuing to work when ill. The remaining narrative examines her social reforms in nursing, changes to military healthcare and sanitation in 1859. In 1907 the elderly Nightingale receives the order of merit from the King. The text figures the subject as breaking with gender conventions through her professional ambitions, sacrificing heterosexual romance with Sydney Herbert, but also sacrificing her comfortable upper class identity to pursue work.

However, the family as resistant is a characteristic of many British films about men. British films depart from this convention through placing men in opposition with fathers, a feature explored more extensively in the following chapter in reference to the representation of 'wounded' men.

#### *2.4 Discourses of Heterosexual Romance and Friendship*

By starting *in media res* and isolating the figure from family, the studio biopic provides romance and friendship as a substitute, without which that figure would appear "inhuman, and ultimately unlovable" (ibid.: 159). Romance was a base through which all films were constructed in the classical film period. Thus a love interest and romantic possibility was central to the studio biopic, providing a "stabilising influence" (ibid.: 161). Supportive wives feature in British films. R.J. Mitchell has Diana in *The First of the Few* and Captain Scott has Kathleen, though these are peripheral presences and instead the emphasis is on all-male worlds. Others, such as Cecil Rhodes in *Rhodes of Africa* and Lawrence in *Lawrence of*

*Arabia* exist apart from heterosexual possibilities and female characters are absent. Rather than romantic potential, some films foreground manipulating women – such as those in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *Valentino*.

The representation of friendship is also different in British films. In studio production, Custen identifies “[t]he presence of an older figure, the bearer of conventional (sometimes limited) wisdom is a staple of many cinematic biographies” (ibid.: 69). However, Custen also contends that “the one-sided relationship friends enjoy with the famous suggests ... the price of fame is often estrangement from friends and family” (ibid.: 165). Though romantic interest is present in British biopics such as *Amazing Grace*, some films focus on all-male environments and close bonds between men. In British films the friendship is not as “one-sided” as Custen suggests of the studio film. This suggests that the representation of homosociality marks a difference across different nation’s constructions of the genre. Both this representation, and the depiction of fathers and sons, are analysed in the remaining chapters.

### **3. *Amazing Grace* as Paradigmatic Biopic**

*Amazing Grace*, about abolitionist William Wilberforce, draws on many of the conventions Custen identifies and serves as a productive, paradigmatic example of how these operate in one particular biopic. The film begins with opening captions that situate Wilberforce as the film’s focus and position him as an individual who challenges the wider consensus by claiming slavery is barbaric. The narrative begins in 1797, depicting Wilberforce at thirty-eight years old and thus starts *in media res* rather than examining his birth, childhood and family. The first scene establishes his humility and dedication to ethical causes – he stops a carriage driver

whipping a horse, despite protests from relatives that he is ill – and a secondary narrative thread is quickly established through Barbara Spooner, his future wife and romantic interest. Though a convention of male-centred films emphasises a private/public conflict, with the man consumed by ambitions rather than romance, this is negotiated through Spooner's support of these ambitions. The film uses flashback sequences, in which captions dated fifteen years earlier represent Wilberforce arguing within the House of Commons. Sequences in parliament are frequent, and evoke the trial settings in which the innovative individual is required to state their beliefs explicitly and be judged by the wider community. Preacher John Newton, a former sailor on a slave ship, forms the friend a disillusioned Wilberforce seeks advice from periodically. The slave trade is conveyed through two further biopic conventions – the voice-over of James Stephen reports on conditions in Jamaica over montage images depicting slave experience on sugar plantations. Later montage sequences convey rapid movements through time as Wilberforce and the abolitionist movement campaign and rally support. Following the final sequence, in which the abolition bill is passed, the closing captions secure his legacy, stating that Wilberforce subsequently campaigned for education, health and prison reform before dying in 1883. Though Ioan Gruffudd lacks physical resemblance to Wilberforce, there is continuity between role and his star persona. Gruffudd portrayed naval officer Horatio Hornblower in the television series *Hornblower* (1998–2003) which, set during the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars, represents the same period Wilberforce lived. *Amazing Grace* thus exemplifies that the conventions and themes identified by Custen are relevant to the analysis of British examples. However, there are certain British examples which display how these conventions can function differently in British biopics.

## Conclusion

Though many of the conventions identified by Custen are present in British examples, there are variations and analysis of contemporary films illustrates that conventions shift. It was suggested at the outset that the biopic lacks “specific” conventions and this relates to a series of factors. First, the biopic is difficult to define; many films feature historical subjects though not all are biopics. Similarly, if a biopic is the representation of the life of someone who once existed, film such as *The Queen*, focusing on a single week in the life of Elizabeth II, are problematic. Others are less contestable; *Rhodes of Africa*’s bold title and a narrative focus that centres on the life of Cecil Rhodes make the film a central part of the generic corpus. *Chariots of Fire*, examining two athletes and their preparation for Olympic Games, is less central. Furthermore, conventions can be utilised in different ways and thus construct different meanings. For instance, though Custen’s discussions of voice-over and flashback are relatively brief, British films contain voice-overs which can be divided into sub categories: didactic, nostalgic, informative and ironic. Flashbacks can construct a ‘rags to riches’ narrative, foreground a character as narrator-witness, or convey inner psychology and traumatic subjectivity.

The use of conventions shifts across time. *24 Hour Party People* generates humour through its self-consciousness and reflexivity, including real figures who contest the story told and a voice-over commentary that is undermined by diegetic characters. *The Queen* uses simulated news footage and *Young Winston* stages interviews. These sequences function by drawing on, or subverting, existing expectations associated with the genre. These examples suggest there must be consensus regarding certain generic functions within biopics, as these sequences,

especially those which are comedic, play on the extent to which conventions are understood by audiences.

As conventions change, and serve different functions, it is not that the biopic lacks a specific set of conventions, but that these are *unstable* and *shifting*. Additionally, these conventions do not signify a biopic when deployed individually, and the examples discussed show how these conventions work together. For instance, a voice-over is often accompanied with archival footage and a flashback is explained through a caption. It is the *combination* of conventions that make a film recognisable as a biopic. Equally, the biopic lacks a set of conventions that translate seamlessly across different national productions. Many of the conventions Custen identifies are used differently in British examples, such as the representations of subjects persecuted by the wider community, those who cannot convince a pessimistic society or overturn a judgement.

The representation of masculinity is informed by these larger structures and conventions; the keyhole approach and the desire to humanise figures suggests some compatibility with the biopic's foregrounding of male suffering, private trauma and homosocial bonding. The private desire/public duty convention can be mobilised to discuss specific individuals who overcome their private troubles in order to achieve success, and the figure at odds with their wider community is often depicted as persecuted. The attention to truth claims serves as a basis for the analysis of contemporary biopics about men, many of which serve to anchor their narratives of male suffering and homosociality through such 'truth claims'. The next chapters discuss some key features of British films which are different from Custen's formulations, specifically the depiction of father-son relationships,

traumatic flashbacks, the presence of close friendships and films in which a wounded man is unable to overcome the terms of the community.



## Chapter Six

### **This is His Story: ‘Wounded’ Men and Homosocial Bonds**

Chapters two through to five focused on the production, reception and conventions of British biopics; chapters seven and eight examine the depiction of masculinity in biopics released between 2005 and 2014. Whereas the historical overview identified films which approach their subjects as ‘Great Men’, these later chapters analyse two further treatments of masculinity: films representing homosocial relationships and those depicting men as ‘wounded’ or victimised. The present chapter introduces the causes of the development of these two representations of masculinity and the theoretical model which informs the close textual analysis conducted in chapters seven and eight. As an inter-chapter, it moves the focus from the broader ambitions of the previous chapters to a deeper, sustained analysis of a smaller number of films and their representations of men.

The British biopic has a pronounced preoccupation with depictions of male relationships and wounded masculinity. Both patterns have ramifications when considered in relation to American-centred paradigms and offer a major distinguishing feature of British biopics. Custen’s study of the Hollywood studio biopic analysed the preoccupation with the Great Man model, who is “ruled by the destiny of his talent” (Custen 1992: 106), and the marginal role played by close friends of the historical figure: “[f]riends of the biopic famous are just as distanced as the audience watching the tales, and their distance within the film may signal [to] the real audience watching the film that such a pose is appropriate” (ibid.: 165). Bingham’s study proposed that American biopics follow different trajectories depending on the sex of the figure in question: women are victimised and

persecuted whereas men move through different stages such as celebratory, revelatory and parodic. Both Custen and Bingham base their arguments on analysis of predominantly Hollywood and American biopics. British biopics, by contrast, privilege close bonds between men, and display a preoccupation with depictions of male suffering, trauma and persecution. These representations cannot be accounted for within Custen or Bingham's paradigm and thus the depiction of masculinity offers a distinctive feature of the British biopic which differentiates it from the American form. Michael Balcon explained why *Scott of the Antarctic* performed poorly at the American box office: "The American public has no interest in failure, even if it is heroic failure, and certainly they do not easily accept other people's legends" (Balcon 1969: 174). The perspective identifies a further distinction between British and American biopics: their differing attitudes towards heroism.

It is significant that key events in British history, such as Dunkirk and Khartoum, stress heroic defeats (Richards 1997: 53). The differing attitudes towards heroic failure in Britain and the US are explored by Stephanie Barczewski in *Heroic Failure and the British* (2016), in which she argues that 'the glorification of failure' stems from guilt about the legacy of British colonialism. The British biopic's construction of masculinity intersects with this tradition of heroic failure by representing its subjects as flawed individuals who do not achieve their ambitions. The lives of Cecil Rhodes and William Wilberforce, shown in *Rhodes of Africa* and *Amazing Grace*, construct their subjects through a 'Great Man' approach that emphasises the moral purpose of individuals driven by specific goals. The masculinity of these figures is defined through their 'public' careers and their single-minded pursuit of these goals. This is comparable with the Hollywood tradition and the films stress their leadership and charisma through a reverential

approach. Other films, such as *Scott of the Antarctic* and *The Magic Box*, celebrate their subjects' *pursuit* of their ambitions, even if they ultimately fail. *Lawrence of Arabia* signalled a major shift in the representation of masculinity in the British biopic, stressing a flawed individual whose ambitions are ambiguous. *Lawrence of Arabia* challenged the Great Man formula through an approach that stressed Lawrence's personality, ambiguous sexuality, and psychological state. The film significantly influenced subsequent approaches to biopics about men and how they represent masculinity. Rather than the charismatic, driven leader of the Great Man approach, British biopics frequently present self-doubting figures who are persecuted or victimised by wider cultures.

The close bonds between men in many British biopics can be characterised as "male homosocial desire", a concept formulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, which I use to analyse certain recent biopics in chapters seven and eight. The present chapter explains the concept and its application to the biopics, illustrated by two biopics, *Becket* and *Backbeat* (1994). The representation of the 'wounded man' is introduced through a discussion of *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Mahler* and *Young Winston*. This prepares the way for detailed examination in the following chapters of certain more recent biopics: the period 2005-14 has seen a marked increase in British biopics which focus on homosocial bonds or the wounded man; indeed, as I explain, some films have used both treatments, showing wounded men who are rescued by homosocial bonds.

### **Sedgwick and the concept of 'Homosexuality'**

Sedgwick's formulation of 'male homosocial desire' accounts for the various dynamics which characterise male bonding. In *Between Men: English Literature*

*and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) Sedgwick explores the shifting treatment of homosocial desire within English literature. “Desire” is used in this context to refer to “the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (1985: 2). The homosocial usually designates social bonds between men without sexual desire, and is therefore distinguishable from ‘homosexual’. Sedgwick proposes a continuum between homosocial and homosexual desire to challenge the notion that the relationships between heterosexual and homosexual men are easily differentiated: “[t]o draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire’, of the potentially erotic ... is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (ibid.: 1-2). Sedgwick argues that the structure of male relations is characterised by disruption; she uses ‘male homosocial desire’ to refer to “the spectrum of male bonds that includes but is not limited to the ‘homosexual’” (ibid.: 85). Sedgwick draws on René Girard’s analyses of ‘erotic triangles’ in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1972), the triangulated relationship between two men in rivalry over a woman, to suggest that homosocial desire between men is mediated through women. Sedgwick suggests that Girard “seems to see the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved” (ibid.: 21). This triangular relationship between two males and a desired female provides the channel through which male homosocial relationships are represented, emphasising the exchange and control of women by men and “preserving the continuity of the existing dominant culture” (ibid.: 34).

The solidarity between males which exists within patriarchy, and the intense male bonds which express this solidarity, are difficult to distinguish from those bonds formed in homosexual relationships and this ambiguity generates anxiety.

Sedgwick sees those heterosexual males within patriarchal structures as navigating a set of contradictory impulses which induce a state of 'homosexual panic', promoted by the homophobic values in wider society (ibid.: 89). Thus homosexual panic works to channel the bond through an obligatory heterosexuality with homophobia acting as "a tool of control over the entire spectrum of male homosocial organisation" (ibid.: 115). This panic regulates male relations, keeping the bonds between men moving in directions which secure heterosexual patriarchy.

Though Sedgwick's is a literary framework, the biopic forms part of the 'quality' British cinema that has a privileged relationship to literary adaption. British biopics are frequently adapted from literary forms, including screenplays adapted from theatrical productions and biographies. Indeed, a distinguishing feature of British cinema, as opposed to American filmmaking, is its preoccupation with the literary adaption (Hill 1992: 14). Hence Sedgwick's concepts can be mapped onto biopics because both forms are interrelated. The following chapters are informed by concepts such as 'male homosocial desire', 'homosexual panic', 'triangulated rivalries', and my own term 'homosocial rehabilitation'. Breaking the broader concept into components allows a deeper exploration of the shared thematic concerns and representational continuities between biopics which is my focus in this thesis, although not Sedgwick's. This is especially important as some biopic representations extend Sedgwick's model, such as those in which female figures are absent as mediators of homosocial desire. Equally, filmic representations provide different frameworks of understanding to literary media, and the analysis in

the following chapters will foreground audio-visual techniques, such as the use of a non-diegetic score, that generate meaning around the representation of homosociality.

### **Homosociality in the British Biopic**

British biopics have displayed homosocial relationships over many decades.

British war films of the 1940s and 1950s depict close, intense male bonds which exclude women (Spicer 2001: 36, 37); war films form “a licensed space for the otherwise inexpressible” (Medhurst 1985: 37), where men can be openly emotional and display loyalty and comradeship, albeit through silent looks and small gestures. Homosocial relationships are also at the centre of a range of biopics including *Scott of the Antarctic* and the sports biopic *Chariots of Fire*. These films involve larger homosocial groups, but others are concerned with the relationship between *two* men only. The monarchical biopic *Beau Brummell* depicts the bond between fashion leader and dandy George ‘Beau’ Brummell and George IV in the Regency period. This is a supportive bond, with Brummell attempting to “rouse the man” in the self-conscious Prince and to restore his public image. The crime biopic *The Krays* explores the close bond between the infamous East End twins Ronnie and Reggie Kray through a love triangle, whereby the homosexual Ronnie becomes jealous of Reggie’s girlfriend Frances whose presence threatens their relationship. *Total Eclipse*, a literary biopic, characterises the relationship between romantic poets Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine as a sadomasochistic one which damages the drunken Verlaine’s relationship with his wife Mathilde. *Pandaemonium* (2000), another literary biopic, depicts the intense rivalry between romantic poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. This rivalry is figured through Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy (Emily Woof) over whose affections the poets

compete. These films articulate a range of relationships between men; some of these bonds are supportive, others are characterised by jealous rivalry.

The royal biopic *Becket* and the music biopic *Backbeat* form paradigmatic examples that illustrate Sedgwick's insights, specifically how male bonds are mediated through women, and the anxieties which accompany close male bonding. These films highlight particular representational strategies which are important in order to contextualise the discussion of contemporary films in the subsequent chapters.

*Becket* depicts the relationship between the English King, Henry II (Peter O'Toole), and Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury (Richard Burton), as one of rivalry which is structured through the exchange, and ownership, of women. The biopic dramatises the institutional conflict between Church and Monarch during the Middle Ages, a period when the Pope claimed authority over all kings and bishops, and clerics were tried in Church courts rather than royal courts. The King intends to use his friendship with Becket, appointing him Archbishop in 1162, to encourage the reform of the Church courts and reduce the Church's power. However, following his appointment, Becket affirms his loyalty to the Church and refuses Henry's attempts to reform the Church courts. To reduce the Church's influence, the King introduced the Constitutions of Clarendon in 1164, to increase the authority of the Monarch over bishops and Church courts, which Becket refused to sign. The archbishop subsequently excommunicated three bishops who supported Henry in 1170, before being murdered in Canterbury by the king's knights later the same year.

Thus *Becket* represents both the institutional rivalry between Church and monarch and a personal rivalry between Henry and Becket. When the unstable King expresses his desire for a Saxon peasant, Becket protects the girl by claiming he also desires her. The King then pursues Becket's lover Gwendolyn (Siân Phillips) and, seeking permission from Becket, he references the previous incident with the peasant girl. The three characters, Henry II, Becket and Gwendolyn, are positioned in Becket's bedchamber. The King remarks "favour for favour" while holding Gwendolyn around the shoulders but staring directly at Becket. Becket reluctantly concedes to the King's wishes and the latter leaves the bedchamber before returning with the peasant girl, suggesting an exchange of women between men. However, Gwendolyn commits suicide before the King can spend the night with her. The men use female characters to influence power relations within the friendship; Becket uses the friendship to protect a fellow Saxon, while the king pursues Gwendolyn aware of her relationship with Becket. This homosocial dynamic depicts women's relegation within the homosocial network as "exchangeable ... property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (Sedgwick 1985: 25-6). The film is a study of power relations between the two men, first through the ownership of women, and then through their respective roles as monarch and church leader. *Becket* illustrates how close male bonds in biopics are mediated through women, as objects over which men compete.

Whereas *Becket* depicts a male bond which is mediated through women who operate as tokens for barter, in *Backbeat* women refuse to be marginalised. *Backbeat* is a significant example because it illustrates how biopic representations cannot all be easily contained within Sedgwick's paradigm. The film constructs how the relationship between art student and 'fifth Beatle' Stuart Sutcliffe (Stephen



Dorff) and John Lennon (Ian Hart) in Hamburg is destabilised by Sutcliffe's desire for German photography student Astrid Kirchherr (Sheryl Lee). Women are initially framed as sex objects securing male relationships; Sutcliffe is shown painting a nude female model when Lennon enters the room and enquires whether Sutcliffe has had sex with her, before informing Sutcliffe "I'll shag her for you", it's "what friends are for". The pair refer to guitars in a shop window as blondes and brunettes, reinforcing the commodification of female bodies as objects to be admired between males. The introduction of Kirchherr threatens their relationship. Lennon is displeased at their mutual attraction and makes misogynistic remarks, suggesting a preference for homosocial over heterosexual attachments, while Sutcliffe accuses Lennon of lacking the courage to pursue her himself. This echoes the triangulated rivalry between males over a female from *Becket*, where power relations within the homosocial are managed through the ownership of female bodies. However, as a photographer, Kirchherr is a threat to the group's treatment and expectations of women; instead of the eroticised body of a striptease performer or artist's model in whom the men take pleasure together, *she watches them*, and photographs the Beatles in Hamburg. Gradually Sutcliffe becomes separated from the band as he pursues Kirchherr. Lennon frequently tries to persuade him to return, and Paul McCartney (Gary Bakewell) accuses Lennon of being infatuated with Sutcliffe, which in turn provokes Lennon to angrily accuse McCartney of suggesting he is a "fairy". This angry outburst can be read through Sedgwick's paradigm as an instance of 'homosexual panic', manifested as the outward expression of homophobia.

*Becket* and *Backbeat* both depict homosocial cultures and close male bonding. In these examples homosocial desire is mediated through the bodies of women and

characters experience homosexual panic. However, some contemporary biopics go beyond Sedgwick's paradigm by representing wounded men who are rehabilitated through homosocial bonds, a representation which forges links between two central but previously unexamined patterns of representation in the biopic genre. As such, Sedgwick's approach informs my analysis, but the analysis is not contained by it. It is to the representation of the 'wounded' man that this chapter now turns.

### **'Wounded' Men**

The representation of the wounded man in contemporary biopics evokes a broader 'masculinity-in-crisis' narrative. This 'crisis' predates the women's movement and can be traced back to the 1890s and the anxieties over the loss of Empire and its alleged psychological effect upon British men (see Roberts 2014: 4-5). This crisis narrative is renewed at regular intervals and has become a cliché of gender studies (see MacInnes 1998: 11). Post-2000 studies of cinema posit that masculinity is increasingly characterised as 'damaged'. In 2001 Spicer argued, with reference to the depiction of Derek Bentley in *Let Him Have It*, that "the damaged man is so frequent in recent British cinema that it could be said he has become its most representative type" (Spicer 2001: 195). By analyzing the representation of masculinity in biopics released between 2005 and 2015, the following chapters build on Spicer's analysis. Similarly, studies addressing European and American cinema contend that "[t]he screen male would appear even more fragile, more 'damaged' ... than a decade ago" (Powrie, Babington and Davis 2004: 5). Thus the representation of 'wounded' men is more widely present than in the biopic, suggesting a general trend across European cinemas.

Recent studies such as Fintan Walsh's *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (2010) draw on Judith Butler's concept of performativity to consider how male victimisation and crisis is articulated in theatre performances, films and literature. The essays in *Debating Modern Masculinities: Change, Continuity, Crisis?* (Roberts 2014) take as their starting point the argument by Labour politician Diane Abbott in 2013 that trends in male education and unemployment are leading to a contemporary gender crisis in British men, which suggests that the 'crisis' discourse continues to have currency. However, the British biopic's representations of male vulnerability have a longer historical reach: crisis and victimhood have been present since the 1960s. Thus recent biopic representations can also be seen as a continuation of earlier representations.

The characteristics discussed in the next chapters, the foregrounding of male emotionality and depictions of brutal and dysfunctional familial relations in contemporary biopics, have generic precedents. *Lawrence of Arabia* forms a paradigmatic example and has been widely analysed (Dawson 1994: 165-230, Claydon 2005: 211-261, Swanson 2007: 100-146, Bingham 2010: 72-99). Chapter Three discussed how it signaled a shift in representations of British imperialism, but it also suggests a pivotal shift in the biopic's representation of masculinity. In foregrounding male vulnerability and emotionality, trauma and crisis, *Lawrence of Arabia* exemplifies various tendencies which characterise those biopics released between 2005 and 2014.

Lawrence's exploits were documented in journalist Lowell Thomas's travelogues, which were presented in London in 1919 and subsequently throughout the British Empire; Lawrence also gave his own account in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. Thomas' travelogues presented Lawrence as a celebrity and a 'Great

Man', which generated public curiosity about Lawrence. However, the publication of his autobiography presented him less as a charismatic, driven leader and more as a complex figure, self-doubting and contradictory. This alternative view added to Lawrence's fascination by suggesting a multifaceted individual; his reclusive later life enhanced his mystery.

According to Graham Dawson there have been various imaginative investments in Lawrence. In Thomas' travelogues, Lawrence became the "blond Bedouin" who absorbs certain Arabic characteristics and combines them with traditional traits of British masculinity to produce an ideal of imperial masculinity. Lawrence's self-imagining in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* fashioned a damaged and contradictory figure, lacking the assurance of Thomas' image. This was articulated through the description of various "disturbances" (Dawson 1994: 196) including the attack on the Turks at Tafas, the immorality of which undermines Thomas' heroic image, and Lawrence's experience of torture when captured in Turkish-occupied Deraa (ibid.: 199-200). In his autobiography, Lawrence described being captured and then tortured by the Bey for refusing his sexual advances: "he lumbered to his feet, with a glitter in his look, and began to paw me over. I bore it for a little, till he got too beastly; and then jerked my knee into him" (1926: 452). His refusal to cooperate leads to a beating by the Turkish troops who "soon conquered my determination not to cry" (ibid.: 454). However, on the following day Lawrence suggests both a masochistic pleasure in his wounds, "a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me" (ibid.), and a sense of shame: "in Deraa that night the citadel of my integrity had been irrevocably lost" (ibid.: 456). The Deraa episode conveys a crisis and powerlessness lacking in Thomas' heroic account and illustrates Lawrence's self-construction as a wounded man, fundamentally changed by his

experience in Arabia. The Oriental encounter, traditionally based on racial stereotyping to construct Western superiority (Said 1978: 7), is here described in terms which suggest a vulnerable, corrupted masculinity.

Lawrence's fractured, contradictory account in *Seven Pillars* is imbued with the modernist practices familiar from Lytton Strachey's writing and the New Biography approach, including the emphasis on personality and the private world of its subject. The irony typical of New Biography is present in the subtitle "A Triumph" which contrasts with the self-questioning and representation of events in Deraa and Tafas. Following the Suez crisis in 1956, the Lawrence narrative was adopted by filmmakers to articulate the effect the loss of Empire had on British masculinity and Dawson identifies *Lawrence of Arabia's* trajectory as representing this movement from Lawrence's omnipotence to self-punishment. The film follows an "imaginative investment in an ideal form of imperial masculinity and its increasing disturbance and breakdown as it enters a post-colonial world" (Dawson 1994: 218).

*Lawrence of Arabia* illustrates characteristics such as trauma, persecution, and the open display of emotion that are critical to British biopic's representations of wounded men. The opening scene shows the death of Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) in a motorbike accident, followed by his memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral. Gazing at a bust of Lawrence, Colonel Brighton (Anthony Quayle), a British liaison official during the Arab Revolt who introduces Lawrence to Prince Feisal and the Arabic tribes, remarks "He was the most extraordinary man I ever knew" to which the priest replies "But did he really deserve a place in here?" General Allenby (Jack Hawkins), Lawrence's commanding officer while he is stationed in Arabia, responds to a journalist's questions by saying that the revolt in the desert was a

decisive part of the Middle Eastern campaign but that he did not know Lawrence well. The journalist then approaches Jackson Bentley (played by Arthur Kennedy and modelled on Lowell Thomas) who says “he was a poet, a scholar and a mighty warrior” but adds an aside to his companion that “he [Lawrence] was also the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey”. A soldier in turn takes offence at this latter remark, claiming to have shaken Lawrence’s hand in Damascus although he did not know him personally.

The range of responses from different figures fragments the subject into a series of contradictory judgements: the priest questions the suitability of Lawrence’s bust within the Cathedral, Bentley’s glorifying description to the journalist is contradicted in a private aside, which in turn is contested by a soldier who never knew Lawrence personally. The responses reflect the controversy surrounding Lawrence’s reputation. Biopics conventionally employ captions that function primarily to secure a stable, single meaning regarding the subject. Rather than claiming that “This is a True Story”, the opening sequence refuses to anchor the meaning of Lawrence, instead offering a series of conflicting perspectives. The remainder of the film is a flashback. It begins by foregrounding Lawrence’s instability and masochism as he burns himself with a match. Once he is sent into Arabia – “It’s going to be fun” he remarks to Dryden (Claude Rains) of the Arab Bureau – the desert becomes a corrupting landscape, a “disturbance”, with extreme long-shots emphasising its scale and vistas framed to convey expansiveness. He is an outsider, burdened by his illegitimate birth, and remarking that Britain is a “fat country”. His narcissism and contradictory character are depicted when, after informing Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) of his illegitimate birth, he replaces his officer attire with white Arabic robes and admires himself in the reflection of a dagger.

Acquiring the robes signals his adoption of Arabic traits and the “blond Bedouin” identity as described by Thomas.

Close-up shots are used to convey male emotion, psychology, and wounded subjectivity. These foreground Lawrence’s reaction to traumatic events: the shooting of his Hazimi guide by Sherif Ali for drinking from a rival tribe’s well, and his helpless witnessing of his servant Daud (John Dimech) dying when he is ‘swallowed’ by quicksand. In this latter sequence, Lawrence attempts to save Daud by throwing him part of his white robes. When this attempt fails, and Daud is depicted disappearing beneath the sand, the camera remains on Lawrence’s face and foregrounds his viewing of this event as Daud, now off-screen, cries out. Lawrence, his hair blowing in the wind and his brow furrowed, comforts his other servant Farraj (Michel Ray) and the pair lower their heads into the sand as Daud disappears. Thus the sequence is more concerned with constructing the *effect* this event has on Lawrence, than with the event itself. The subsequent dirtying of Lawrence’s pristine white robes as he and Farraj arrive in Cairo visually conveys how he himself is becoming corrupted by the alien culture. In the later sequence at Deraa, reaction shots construct Lawrence’s damaged psyche and his transition from imagined omnipotence to wounded man.

As Lawrence and Ali enter Deraa, Lawrence deliberately walks through a large puddle laughing, his arms outstretched allowing his robes to flow in the wind. His comment to Ali that they needn’t hide as he is “invisible” suggests an assumption of western superiority and the ability to blend seamlessly into other cultures, as conveyed in Thomas’s ‘blond Bedouin’ construction. This egotism is ruptured when Turkish troops stop the pair and escort Lawrence to the Bey who strips off his robes and touches his body. The sequence reproduces the passage from *Seven*

*Pillars of Wisdom*: the Bey pulls at Lawrence's flesh and remarks on the fairness of his skin, before an extreme close up shot of Lawrence's blue eyes widening connotes the realisation of the Bey's sexual desire, reinforced by a subsequent close-up of the Bey's moist lips. Lawrence kicks the Bey and the guards proceed to beat him, holding him in place on a bench, his legs splayed and lying on his front. The Bey stands at a distance watching from the next room, but positioned behind Lawrence's outstretched legs. As he hears him cough, Lawrence turns to look back towards the Bey. Ali waits outside, and a dissolve edit from day to night signals the passage of time in which Lawrence is confined. Ali witnesses Lawrence ejected by the troops, thrown into a puddle he would previously have walked through confidently.

The subsequent assault on Tafas can be understood as an act of revenge. Framed in a close-up, shaking and wide-eyed, Lawrence shouts "No prisoners" before engaging in bloody battle, shooting unarmed Turks. As Lawrence watches the destruction, the camera gradually moves in from a medium shot to a close-up of his face, intercut with footage of the skirmish as Lawrence begins to shoot the Turks indiscriminately. Whereas earlier sequences suggested altruism, here it is Lawrence who sanctions the bloodshed. *Lawrence of Arabia* thus forms a crucial film for contemporary representations of male emotionality, vulnerability and persecution. The figure of Lawrence suggests an unstable masculinity, one which is profoundly altered and disturbed by his experiences. The interrogating of human psychology in *Lawrence of Arabia* resonates in the traumatic flashbacks used in later biopics which suggest damaged, fragmented masculinity.

*Mahler*, the life story of Jewish composer Gustav Mahler (Robert Powell), similarly foregrounds trauma, caused in this case by the artistic compromises which



Mahler makes in pursuit of his ambitions. Opening with a close-up image of the composer screaming and engulfed in flames, the narrative is structured around a train journey in 1911 during which Mahler experiences flashbacks and nightmares which convey anti-Semitism, self-betrayal and paranoia. Flashbacks show Mahler as a child being berated by his father Bernhard (Lee Montague) for failing to win a school scholarship. When his father discovers his son's truanting from school, Mahler locks himself in a cupboard while his father bangs on the door; the camera zooms in and out repeatedly onto Mahler's face as he watches the door, terrified and covering his ears. The image then cuts between the boy and the adult Mahler riding on the train who similarly covers his ears. The composer's fear of death and unhappy marriage to Alma (Georgina Hale) is signified through dream sequences in which he is trapped inside a coffin carried by Alma and her former lover Max (Richard Morant), and then cremated. His conversion to Catholicism from Judaism allows him to secure the directorship post at the Vienna state opera, sanctioned by Cosima Wagner (Antonia Ellis), the widow of the composer, and anti-Semitic, Richard Wagner. This sequence, introduced through a title card "The Convert", depicts Mahler's begging Wagner to accept him as he is whipped by her and she forces him to jump through flaming hoops on top of a mountain. The scene conveys the sense of self-betrayal and guilt which Mahler feels at the compromises which he has made.

A destructive father-son relationship is a recurrent feature in British biopics, and this dynamic is used to explain why the figure is 'wounded'. *Lawrence of Arabia* conveys Lawrence's damaged psychology as the illegitimate son of an absent father; *Mahler* displays a traumatic relationship between father and son. *Young Winston* emphasises Winston Churchill's efforts to secure his father's approval.

The film constructs a distant relationship between Winston Churchill (Simon Ward) and his father Lord Randolph Churchill (Robert Shaw). Though Winston is depicted in the ‘Great Man’ mould this is complicated by the familial dynamics. Whereas *Lawrence of Arabia* signaled a shift towards representations of wounded masculinity in the biopic, the Great Man approach continued to have resonance and this was displayed in *Amazing Grace* (see chapter five). *Young Winston* forms an uneasy mixture of both approaches. It is both a hagiographic celebration of a man of destiny, but equally stresses his damaged private life and unhappy childhood. As Randolph’s health deteriorates he frequently berates Winston, referring to him as his “greatest disappointment” when Churchill requires three attempts to enter the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. This representation contrasts with the supportive father-son relationship in *The Young Mr Pitt*. Following Randolph’s death, Churchill’s voiceover articulates his ambition to “vindicate his memory” and once he is elected to Parliament he argues for a reduction in military expenditure in the House of Commons, as Randolph had done previously as Leader of the House of Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Churchill’s ambitions are given meaning through the desire for the abusive father’s approval.

## **Conclusion**

These dynamics persist in contemporary productions. A damaging relationship between father and son, and a trajectory in which the son follows the father’s career path, are critical to the contemporary biopics discussed in the next chapters.

Through the foregrounding of a trauma rooted in a relationship with an absent or abusive father, these films suggest a wounded masculinity explained through the father’s inability to be physically and emotionally present. Trauma is a ubiquitous feature of the genre and “[c]hildhood as [a] site of character-shaping trauma has

become a recurring trope that the contemporary biopic finds hard to escape” (Vidal 2014a: 9). This trauma takes various forms and various father-son dynamics are presented, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

Though generic definitions frame the biopic as depicting the life of a single figure, many British films represent close bonds between two figures. These films, across sub-genres including the literary, music, sports and royal biopic, are preoccupied with masculine friendship and rivalry. The moments of homosexual panic, the triangulation of characters through which rivalries are staged, and the homosocial exchanges, of gifts or female bodies, all feature in contemporary films. Chapter Seven considers the diversity of these patterns of representation in contemporary films, and Chapter Eight focuses on those which depict ‘wounded’ men who are rehabilitated through homosocial support. Rather than depicting a man’s decline as the victim of trauma or an abusive, absent father figure, these films show the ‘healing’ of wounded men. Thus the subsequent analysis extends Sedgwick’s thesis, revealing that the British biopic has its own complex representation of the homosocial.

## Chapter Seven

### The Contemporary British Biopic 1: Wounded Men

The representation of men as ‘wounded’ and engaged in a homosocial relationship are patterns that persist in contemporary films released between 2005 and 2014. The films selected construct the lives of figures whose achievements differ dramatically and can be categorised through various sub-genres such as the literary and music biopic. Despite this diversity, they are grouped together here because each foregrounds homosocial bonding and/or a ‘wounded’ man. Furthermore, each biopic focuses on a male subject who has a problematic relationship to ‘the Establishment’. *Lawrence of Arabia* avoided the Great Man formula and portrayed T.E. Lawrence as an enigmatic outsider whose ambitions are ambiguous. These contemporary examples continue to foreground ‘outsider’ figures who challenge, or are the victims of, wider Establishment ideologies.

The films examined are *Pierrepont*, about hangman Albert Pierrepoint, *Stoned*, a film that recreates the alleged murder of musician and Rolling Stones founder Brian Jones, *The Railway Man*, focusing on the officer Eric Lomax’s experience as a Prisoner of War in Japanese-occupied Thailand during the Second World War, and *The Imitation Game* about the code-breaker, and homosexual mathematician, Alan Turing. *Pierrepont* is unusual in that it extends a prominent type of film production, the criminal biopic, which has been a consistent type since the biopic’s inception in the films of Charles Peace, released in 1905, through to *Let Him Have It*, but focuses on the hangman. *The Railway Man* does not represent a cycle or trend (although its subject, British involvement in the Second World War, also features in the biopics of Pierrepoint, Jones and Turing), but merits inclusion for its

construction of traumatic memory through an un-signalled flashback, a technique which reinforces how conventions evolve and mutate. To enlarge the scope of these examples, comparisons will be drawn with other contemporary biopics, to illustrate the ubiquity of particular themes and representations, but also to highlight the diversity of representations of masculinity.

### ***Pierrepoint* (2005)**

*Pierrepoint* depicts the life of the British State hangman Albert Pierrepoint (Timothy Spall) from 1932 through to his resignation in 1956. Pierrepoint executed 608 people including high profile, controversial cases such as Derek Bentley, Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in Britain, and the “beast of Belsen”, Josef Kramer. The film was produced by Granada, the production arm of ITV, and was originally intended to be broadcast as a television drama. It was given a cinema release following an injection of £330,000 of Lottery funding from the UK Film Council and premiered at the Toronto Film Festival with the aim of securing international distribution (Alberge 2006: 21). Following the screening, IFC Entertainment acquired the U.S. distribution rights to the film and its president, Jonathan Sehring, remarked: “Adrian Shergold [the director] has made a remarkable and bold statement. It may be an English film, but challenges what is one of the seminal conflicts in the U.S. today” (quoted in Mohr 2005). Notwithstanding its English subject matter, the film was seen as contributing to the contemporary debate about capital punishment in America, a theme explored directly in recent American films including *Monster’s Ball* (2001) and *The Life of David Gale* (2003).

The history of the death penalty in Britain had previously been addressed in films about serial killer John Christie (*10 Rillington Place*), Ruth Ellis (*Dance with a Stranger*) and Derek Bentley (*Let Him Have It*). Though the execution of Ellis and Timothy Evans (wrongly executed for Christie's crimes) are depicted in *Pierrepoint*, the film focuses on the life of the hangman himself rather than prisoners and criminals. *Pierrepoint* offers a criticism of capital punishment and, released in 2005, followed a series of events in which the procedure came under intense scrutiny. Derek Bentley was granted a Royal Pardon on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1993, forty years after his execution on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1953, and on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1998 the Court of Appeal reversed his conviction for murder. Timothy Evans was granted a Royal pardon in 1966 but in 2004 his surviving family argued in the High Court that Evan's conviction should be officially quashed, citing the ongoing stigma that the pardon failed to dismiss. Despite the judicial review description of Evan's conviction as "an historic and unique injustice" the review ultimately refused to quash the conviction (Prior 2010). Both these cases were particularly high profile, articulating the desire for a revision of State procedures and a critique of capital punishment. The Royal Pardon forms an admission of guilt on the part of the State. *Pierrepoint's* representation of the hangman's life is informed by these debates.

*Pierrepoint's* long career and role in various high profile cases, coupled with his commentary on the death penalty post-abolition, granted him a prominent role in shaping attitudes towards the death penalty (Seal 2016: 84). The film forges a specific representation of *Pierrepoint* to emphasise the burden which the death penalty places on the executioner by moving between his personal life, his marriage to his wife Annie (Juliet Stevenson), and his public life as a state executioner. The film switches between domestic scenes and sequences which recreate various

hangings within British prisons to convey Pierrepoint's attempt to live two separate lives: one as a loving husband and popular figure in the local pub, the other as a respected hangman who travels across Britain executing criminals. The film suggests these two lives cannot be reconciled. *Pierrepoint* channels a criticism of the death penalty in a period when reinstatement was debated with regard to particularly sensitive cases involving paedophile murderers Ian Huntley and Roy Whiting, and some politicians advocated its reintroduction for certain crimes (Brown and Bamber 2003). The film's intervention into death penalty discourse is focused through the hangman as guilt-ridden and traumatised. Shergold argued:

Pierrepoint would say that it wasn't him in the cell, that it was just the King's executioner doing his job. But, at the same time, he had to have that emotional moment when he could connect with each person he was going to execute. He had to look them in the eyes. Most of the time he could do it without it affecting his feelings. But eventually it took its toll. (quoted in Maher 2006: 9)

This conveys Shergold's ambition to construct a figure burdened by his responsibilities to the State and foregrounds the emotional life of the hangman. Shergold's construction suggests an emphasis on male interiority that contrasts with the existing cultural persona and self-representation of the hangman constructed through interviews and his autobiography: "Certainly in relation to the persona that he chose to convey, Pierrepoint was not haunted or traumatised by his prolific career as the nation's hangman. Rather, his craft and professionalism were constructed as a source of pride, even if he acknowledged that the institution of capital punishment was flawed" (Seal 2016: 95). The film stages this trauma and the collapse of Pierrepoint's dual identities through the execution of his friend and

singing partner Tish (Eddie Marsan), who is charged with murdering his lover Jessie (Claire Keelan).

The film constructs Pierrepoint's attempt to maintain a separation between professional responsibility and his domestic life. The denial of responsibility is made clear as he explains to his assistant Kirky (James Cordon): "When I walk into that cell I leave Albert Pierrepoint outside. I never mix the two." This is maintained through strategies of dehumanisation, the application of the hood, the fetishising of execution speed and the reduction of the guilty to a series of measurements relating to height, weight and physical condition. Following the Second World War, he is assigned by Field Marshal Montgomery to execute Nazis convicted in the Nuremburg trials. Though he maintains a conscientious, dignified approach to his profession, the executions both disturb him and make him a public figure. The parallels between Nazi genocide and the hangman's efficiency are evoked as Pierrepoint watches newsreels reporting on the trials that comment on the Nazis' "hideous precision", inviting comparisons with his own statistical measurements of prisoners' weight and height in order to hasten the speed of executions.

However, the execution of Tish causes the collapse of these dual identities of 'Pierrepoint' and 'Executioner'. Pierrepoint's autobiography briefly mentions Tish (by his proper name, James Corbitt) as a pub regular with an excellent singing voice who "was everybody's friend and no-one knew a thing about him" (1974: 165). The film gives greater emphasis to this relationship and constructs an intimacy between the pair that suggests a homosocial bond. The relationship is introduced through their "Tish and Tosh" amateur comedy routine performed in a pub, a routine characterised by singing accompanied by a pianist. The routine



begins with a quick exchange ended by a punch-line delivered by Pierrepoint-as-Tosh before the pair sing “Makin’ Whoopee” first performed by Eddie Cantor in the 1928 musical *Whoopee!* (1930). The title itself is a euphemism for sex and the bodily movements of the pair evoke this intimacy; Pierrepoint removes the hat worn by Tish and places a handkerchief over his head, rendering Tish a feminised bride. As they dance Pierrepoint thrusts his body into his partner’s back simulating a sex act. This signals the end of the performance, as Pierrepoint instructs the laughing audience to avert their eyes. During the performance different images show the reactions of the audience and in particular Jessie who, following the song, Tish introduces to Pierrepoint as his lover.

The sequence evokes the music hall comedy tradition of double-acts such as Flanagan and Allen, a link rendered explicit as Pierrepoint and Annie are depicted viewing performances by The Crazy Gang (of which the duo were members) in cinemas. The pairing of Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen was popular in the mid-1920s through to the end of the Second World War. Their routine was characterised by slapstick, bawdy comedy and duets. However, these double-act dynamics are also characterised by deliberate sexual undercurrents. The bond’s ambiguity generates laughter in the pub and articulates the dynamics of the male double-act in which jokes centring on sexuality and appropriate male bonds form “one method of policing the boundary between homosocial and homosexual” (Medhurst 2007: 117). The sequence, with its pair of male dancers, one of whom is in drag, lends itself to such as reading, with homosexuality inferred to generate humour. Acts such as Morecambe and Wise:

are shaped and driven by a recurring and often nervous  
fascination with the precise dimensions of love between men ...  
the boundaries and complications of male devotion become an

explicit part of the source material and subject matter of the comedies ...Most obviously, this means recurring jokes about homosexuality, which is repeatedly invoked yet relentlessly mocked in an attempt to draw a firm line between 'us' (straight men who are devoted to each other) and 'them' (queer men who have sex with each other). In this way, comedy is used as a means of establishing how far, at any given social moment, one heterosexual man can go in expressing feelings for another. (Medhurst 2007: 111-112)

In *Pierrepoint*, humour polices normative and 'deviant' sexuality within the homosocial, and the sequence draws humour from the diegetic audience through the ambiguity in the pair's emotional closeness, feminisation and physical thrusting. The handkerchief foregrounds the performativity of the pair's actions, transforming Tish into the feminised role by placing a performative layer over his masculine identity. The double-act dynamic moderates homosexual connotations through foregrounding the superficial nature of performance, and this sequence shows how the open expression of homophobia moderates close homosocial bonds (Sedgwick 1985: 115).

However, these connotations are not easily managed. The men use their nicknames outside their performance and Pierrepoint only learns that Tish's real name is James Corbitt shortly before executing him. Thus the bond articulated in performance is not confined to it. Following the performance Pierrepoint leaves the pub and, on hearing a noise behind a gate, peers through a hole to view Tish and Jessie locked in an embrace. Averting his eye, his gaze is drawn back to the hole. The pair are now engaged in the sex act that "Tish and Tosh" have previously suggested in their double act performance. His status as voyeur is complicated as, previously, he instructed the audience to avert their eyes but here he is the audience to a sex-act which is not contained within the double-act dynamic. The un-simulated, authentic act performed here reaffirms the artifice of the previous

performance and Pierrepont is forced to acknowledge Tish's sexual desire outside the role-play setting. The visual style of the sequence, in which the darkened frame is punctured by the small hole through which the hangman peers, mirrors the framing of images as Pierrepont observes prospective criminals through the prison door's metal flap in point-of-view shots. Furthermore, the act prefigures a shift in the male pair's relationship as Tish's strangulation of Jessie in a jealous rage leads to his execution and the termination of the male bond.

The execution of Tish is depicted as critical in collapsing the dual identities Pierrepont adopts. At the prison Pierrepont is informed that the prisoner, James Corbitt, claims to know him personally and expects recognition. Pierrepont hears Tish singing in the cell and realises that Tish is Corbitt. After inspecting him through the prison door latch, the hangman turns away from the door framed in a close-up, wide-eyed and unable to calculate the correct rope length for an efficient hanging. As Pierrepont enters the cell Tish greets him as Tosh, and Pierrepont returns the greeting before executing him. The hangman's traumatised subjectivity is conveyed as he first returns home tearful and drunk and later as he lies awake in bed visualising Corbitt as a hooded scarecrow which he embraces. This dreamlike confrontation, coupled with the executions in Germany and the protests following the execution of Ruth Ellis, culminate in Pierrepont's guilt and suffering. Bob Mills, the co-writer, claimed: "Pierrepont never changed. What happened was that in a very short period the world changed completely. Within ten years capital punishment was abolished and he'd gone from being a revered person to being spat upon in the street" (quoted in Maher 2006: 9). One manifestation of the thematic concern that sees the subject at odds with public opinion is to focus on that subject's *persecution* via the wider community, rather than the theme identified by

Custen in the Hollywood studio biopic in which the Great Man trajectory is manifested through his staunch belief in his own actions which conflicts with the views of the community.

*Pierrepoint* was received positively in both the British and American press, and is reported to have grossed \$639,656 worldwide.<sup>19</sup> This return is notably smaller than many of the other films discussed here, and it perhaps hints at how a film about a hangman is a difficult and problematic subject for audiences and reviewers. Philip French's review for the *Observer* identified the film's contemporary relevance and the ongoing debates regarding reinstatement of the death penalty:

Given that a referendum might well lead to the restoration of the gallows in this country, people of good will should welcome Adrian Shergold's modestly powerful *Pierrepoint*, a fascinating portrait of our most prolific chief hangman of the 20th century and, next to Arthur Koestler, the most celebrated opponent of capital punishment as well. (French 2006)

*Pierrepoint* was considered as intersecting with an ongoing debate over the death penalty, and this review expresses how the procedure is a site of controversy. Whereas French's review identifies *Pierrepoint* as an indictment of the death penalty other reviews considered the film in different terms. A review for *Time Out* magazine foregrounds the depiction of the hangman's emotional state and how this differs from previous representations:

Pierrepoint, in his 1974 autobiography, interestingly declared himself an opponent of capital punishment. Thankfully, screenwriter Jeff Pope resists the temptation to give the film a campaigning or moral spin; rather he grounds the film in character, teasing out not only Pierrepoint's bottled-up emotions but also, by extension, those of Britain in those grey, pre-'libertarian' years. (Hammond 2006: 56)

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<sup>19</sup> *Box Office Mojo*, available from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=pierrepoint.htm> [Accessed 31 March 2016].

The depiction of Pierrepoint's emotional interiority is recognised in this review which identifies how Pierrepoint is characterised through repression. Other reviews, such as one in *The Times*, noted a trajectory towards suffering experienced by the hangman: "though it avoids any bold-faced hagiography on Pierrepoint's part, it doesn't shy away from contextualising the epic sense of tragedy that eventually defined his life" (Maher 2006: 9). Though this review praises the film for approaching Pierrepoint without excessive reverence, it locates the film as a narrative of downfall, but these characteristics have been placed onto Pierrepoint, and contrast with the cultural persona that he conveyed in interviews and his autobiography. As such, the filmic representation can be seen as intersecting with contemporary discourse on capital punishment. In American publications, reviews foregrounded that *Pierrepoint* constructs a wounded figure. Stephen Holden, writing for the *New York Times*, similarly identifies the tragedy within Pierrepoint's story: "As this sad, shambling antihero swings from one pole to the other on the issue of capital punishment, you are inclined to follow every step of the way toward his tragic enlightenment" (Holden 2007).

Shergold's ambition to construct the damaging effect that the procedure has on Pierrepoint was also noted in *IMDb* users' reviews. These adopted similar words to the director's, and viewers frequently described the film's ideological stance towards the death penalty: "Pierrepoint's determination to remain detached takes a terrible toll on his life and is bound to fail eventually. The obvious conclusion is that killing corrodes our humanity, whether the killer is a murderer or an executioner on the state's payroll" (James McNally 2006). A further review identifies the overt display of male emotionality: "The film celebrates dignity and

humanity but is laced with a uniquely British attitude evocative of *Vera Drake* and *The Remains of the Day*. Like these earlier social dramas, *Pierrepoint* culminates memorably in a momentary quivering of its previously resolute stiff upper lip” (Tom Clark 2006). This refers to the tearful outburst and highlights the biopic’s movement towards explicit male emotion, a representation considered extensively in the following chapter.

*Pierrepoint* constructs a traumatised hangman, haunted by dreams of the dead friend. Whereas in *Dance with a Stranger* and *Let Him Have It*, the execution procedure is absent or depicted briefly, *Pierrepoint* stages in meticulous detail the perspective of the figure trusted with the hanging, and questions the morality of burdening individuals with State responsibility. Whereas some reviewers identified contemporary relevance others were concerned with the portrayal of male emotionality. There was a recurring concern with how *Pierrepoint*’s life is depicted as tragic, with certain reviewers suggesting the film is sympathetic towards the hangman. Though some felt that *Pierrepoint* was a necessary film, addressing an important aspect of British history, *Pierrepoint* forms a problematic figure for a biopic, a reminder of the legacy of capital punishment in Britain. There is a recurring sense that contemporary audiences found *Pierrepoint* a difficult film which illustrates how biopics can be problematic and generate mixed responses.

### ***Stoned* (2005)**

Whereas *Pierrepoint* was an isolated case, *Stoned* formed one of a series of films, including *24 Hour Party People*, *Control*, *Telstar* and *Nowhere Boy*, which represent the history of British popular music. *Stoned* recreates the life of Rolling Stones’ founder and rhythm guitarist Brian Jones (Leo Gregory) but focuses on the

final three months prior to his death in July 1969. Jones forms a significant figure within the history of British music, his musical innovations and skill as a multi-instrumentalist were coupled with a hedonistic lifestyle. He was convicted twice, in 1967 and 1968, of cannabis possession and his death made him the first of the 1960s' rock performers, including Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison, to die aged twenty seven. His place as a rock martyr was secured in the various obituaries published following his death. In an obituary subtitled "Not just a guitarist for the Rolling Stones, but an embodiment of the music itself", *Rolling Stone* magazine wrote about Jones' talents but also his status as a public figure who embodied 1960s' fashions and courted controversy: "Jones was perhaps more of a Rolling Stone than any of the others. What the Stones as a group sang about, what Jagger and Richards wrote about, Jones did, and he did it right out in public, and he got caught, and he looked the part". The same obituary later states that Jones "wasn't acting out the Stones' music, he just happened to *be* the Stones' music" (Marcus 1969 original emphasis). Such statements secured Jones' position as a rock martyr, a 'creative genius' who embodied the hedonism of the 1960s and died in controversial circumstances. Although the official verdict was "death by misadventure", *Stoned* adopts the supposed 1993 deathbed confession of builder Frank Thorogood, who reportedly admitted drowning Jones by holding him underwater in the musician's swimming pool at his house in East Sussex.

The sense that Jones embodied the era was important to producer Gary Smith: "He was the original rock 'n' roller. He was the guy who taught Mick and Keith how to rock 'n' roll" (quoted in Docherty 2004: 3). Smith also highlighted how the film was challenging the existing historical discourse of Jones' life by speculating on the circumstances surrounding his death: "I am sure the film is going to be

controversial because we say that Brian was killed by Frank” (ibid.). Producing a film about the former member of the Rolling Stones had wider resonance as the Rolling Stones had released their fortieth anniversary compilation album, *Forty Licks*, in 2002 followed by a global concert tour that took place throughout 2002 and 2003. Though the popularity of the tour illustrates the band’s ongoing relevance, Jones’ death had continued to fascinate in the thirty years following 1969 and was the source of numerous books and conspiracy theories. *Stoned* was based on the two accounts of Jones’ death provided in *Paint it Black: The Murder of Brian Jones* (Geoffrey Giuliano 1994) and *Who Killed Christopher Robin? The Truth behind the Murder of Brian Jones* (Terry Rawlings 1994), both of which claimed that Jones was murdered by the London builder hired to renovate Jones’s home, and a third, *The Murder of Brian Jones* (2000) by Jones’ girlfriend Anna Wohlin. She was present at the house when Jones was murdered, and similarly denied the official verdict that Jones drowned following drug-taking, and pointed to Thorogood as the cause of Jones’ death. The film was produced by Audley films and Finola Dwyer Productions, Scala Productions and Number 9 Films, the latter run by Stephen Woolley, who directed *Stoned* and had previously produced biopics such as *Scandal* (1989), a recreation of the 1963 Profumo Affair, *Backbeat* and *Michael Collins*. Woolley was the driving force behind the production: “I got into this project because I thought it was a fascinating mirror of the hedonistic 60s. He seemed to me to be somebody who was completely out there completely pushing, completely experimenting all the time ... That seemed more interesting than making a film about a rock god” (quoted in le Couteur 2005). Producing the film during a period when the Rolling Stones status as ‘rock gods’ was reaffirmed through the success of the *Forty Licks* world tour, Woolley’s film marginalises the



band to focus instead on Jones as the rebel who is its crucial innovator. Though the film foregrounds Jones' musical inspirations through visits to Morocco, the film is equally concerned with revising the official verdict of his death.

The foregrounding of Jones' death in the opening sequences use of BBC news footage hints at how the film is more concerned with the event of his death, rather than a 'life story' specifically. The text concludes with newsreel footage of the Rolling Stones' free tribute concert to Jones in Hyde Park on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1969 and the titles prior to the closing credits anchor the textual representation of revenge and murder: the credits inform the viewer that Jones was 27, that the coroner reported "death by misadventure" but that Thorogood would confess on his deathbed to the murder in 1993. The biopic concludes by employing authenticating strategies and wider news coverage to consolidate the narrative that has preceded it. Woolley explained the characterisation:

There were two contrasting worlds in the 1960s, the tiny elitist world of Brian Jones, with its sex, drugs and decadence, and the real world, Frank's world, which was still very grey. Frank was very bitter, and jealous of the kids who were reaping the benefits of what he had helped to create. He was one of the forgotten generation who had won the war and survived terrible things, in his case losing an eye. And they'd done it though [sic] discipline and self-control. Then along came the 1960s with this 'Let it all hang out' attitude. It was like a red rag to a bull. (quoted in Sandall 2005)

The film's focus is thus the relationship between Jones and Thorogood (played by Paddy Considine) whom Jones hires to renovate his house in East Sussex.

Thorogood becomes obsessed with Jones and eventually murders him. Defined through his muscularity, occupation, and a glass-eye following injury in the Second World War (he claims to have "lost it for King and country"), Thorogood embodies an embittered working-class veteran. The representation of Thorogood as bitter

articulates how popular notions of collectivism and personal sacrifice, perpetuated during wartime, were subsequently undermined in a post-war period of emerging affluence that Jones represented. This is contrasted with the 'new' ambiguous, feminised masculinity of Brian Jones, who embodies the permissive 1960s lifestyle characterised by hedonism and sexual freedom. His slender, androgynous body differentiates him from the 'fit to work' body of the builder. The film represents Thorogood as hypnotised by the affluent and bohemian 'Swinging Sixties' lifestyle that Jones embodies but unable to transcend his social position to access it. *Stoned* constructs a murderous bond between musician and builder characterised by jealousy over the younger man's success and portrays Thorogood's gradual immersion into this wealthy, hedonistic vision of the 1960s before he is cruelly discarded by Jones.

Jones is also depicted as a wounded figure; confined to the house, his alienation from the rest of the band and memories of an earlier romance with Anita Pallenberg (Monet Mazur) are represented in a series of flashbacks. These show the pair's initial infatuation and romance in Munich in 1965, before the relationship ends in Marrakech later that year as Anita begins a relationship with Keith Richards (Ben Whishaw), citing Jones' drug abuse and physical violence as reasons for leaving him. In the narrative present of 1969, Jones is unable to join the band on tour in America because of previous drug convictions and is then sacked by the band and forced to rely on a compensation fund that the Stones establish. Unable to perform and drinking heavily, the aimless Jones is confined within the large country house. The house in Sussex is the dominant narrative fixture; both men are unable to drive (Thorogood has impaired vision and Jones has no licence) and it becomes both a hedonistic paradise and also a claustrophobic location. Though reliant on

Thorogood for entertainment and ejecting trespassers from the property, Jones also invites the builder to adopt his life-style of drinking and drug-taking. Thorogood experiences hallucinations that insert Jones into the variety shows he watches with his wife on television, a show in which Jones' face is mapped onto the figure of a woman, to signify the psychological infiltration of the musician into the builder's psyche and his obsession with Jones. Such sequences evoke the "maladjusted veteran" (Spicer 2001: 161) of post-war British cinema as Thorogood becomes paranoid and violent. The builder emulates Jones' appearance to signify his immersion; he grows his hair long and practices rolling joints alone.

Jones undermines Thorogood by flaunting women and assigning mundane tasks. The power dynamic is conveyed through the ownership of women's bodies and specifically Jones' girlfriend Anna Wohlin (Tuva Novotny). As the three eat dinner, Jones encourages Thorogood to perform fifty press-ups, claiming he will permit him to sleep with Anna if he succeeds. Jones, dressed in gold flares, a pink shirt and long thin silk scarf, rises from his chair at the table and maintains eye contact with the builder as he moves across behind Anna and begins playing with her hair, before languishing in an armchair. The sequence, with its promise of sex, suggests the sadistic, manipulative Jones granting Thorogood access to the "permissive" sexual norms which characterised the decade, a perceived liberation of sexual thinking and expression instigated through legislation that relaxed controls over sexuality, abortion and oral contraceptives (see Donnelly 2005: 116-17). This offering of the woman's body secures the hierarchy within the pair's relationship and reduces Anna to a tradable commodity, an exchangeable prop used to secure male power relations (Sedgwick 1985: 34). As Thorogood performs press-ups, Anna removes a sock but Jones then asserts that a further fifty press-ups

will secure sex. The perspiring builder is himself forced to remove his shirt before continuing, as Jones observes both characters' performance from the chair. As orchestrator, Jones's attitude to both Thorogood and Anna is exploitative. He is positioned further back from the two characters and views the performance of both Thorogood's exertions but also Anna's gradual removal of clothing. This objectification is reproduced in the framing and movement of the camera across Anna's body which glides across her exposed legs and close-ups of her underwear as Thorogood 'performs'.

Thorogood completes this second challenge but Anna refuses his advances, citing her preference for "brain" to "brawn", reaffirming Thorogood's inability to integrate himself into the 1960s permissive culture embodied by Jones, who pats the builder on the head as he and Anna leave the room. Thorogood's initial admiration transforms into humiliation and jealousy, exacerbated when he is sacked without pay. Returning to the house, he drugs a nurse assigned to monitor Jones and intends to have sex with her, but his advances are again rebuffed. Twice rejected, Thorogood confronts Jones in the swimming pool who remarks "Don't tell me you wouldn't like to look like me, be like me" before Thorogood drowns him. Whereas *Pierrepont* created a close bond between men that results in the hangman's damaged subjectivity, *Stoned* recreates a brief historical moment and constructs a bond of murderous obsession between two men. The pair's confinement within the house, and the psychological infiltration of Jones into Thorogood's psyche, recalls the power dynamics between men in *The Servant* (1963). *Stoned* also draws direct comparison with the relationship between gangster Chas Devlin (James Fox) and rock star Turner (Mick Jagger) in *Performance* (1970) in which Devlin's sense of identity, his masculinity and heterosexuality, are

undermined by Turner who transforms him into a counter-culture figure closer to the rock star (see Spicer 2001: 142-144). Through focusing on Thorogood, his humiliating rejection by Jones, *Stoned* constructs the 1960s as a period of competing masculinities. Though stressing the extravagance and excess of Jones's lifestyle, the film also emphasises the *exclusiveness* of this mediated "Swinging Sixties" lifestyle through the figure of Thorogood, a lifestyle the film suggests was only available to a select few.

With a reported budget of \$10 million (Thomas 2005), the UK box office figures were disappointing (*Birmingham Post* 2006) and reviews mixed, to the extent that Woolley issued a defence of the film in a letter to the *Guardian* (Woolley 2005: 21). Reviews identified how the relationship between Jones and Thorogood echoed the dynamics in those earlier British films, *The Servant* and *Performance* (Bradshaw 2005, Floyd 2005: 59, French 2005). Referring to Gregory in the role of Jones, the *Daily Mirror* praised the film's actors: "Having a relative unknown carrying things means there's none of the baggage that would've come with a bigger star" (Edwards 2005: 5). The review resonates with the views expressed about biopic casting in films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Gandhi*, that the lack of an established persona is one method of negotiating the 'body too much' dilemma. Other reviews were more critical, the *Independent* attacked the film for being sensational and criticised the depiction of sex and drugs within the film: "If only *Stoned* weren't so relentlessly tabloidy; Woolley has produced one or two sophisticated films in his time, but here he seems terribly in thrall to the frisson of a spliff and a flash of miniskirted Euro-thigh" (Romney 2005: 14). Other reviews felt that the relationship between Thorogood and Jones was underplayed: "The dramatic potential in the story of a working-class married bloke hired by a

dissipated, foppish rock star exploring androgyny and bisexuality is squandered; the movie is more interested in evoking Jones's disorientation than in focusing on the underlying tensions in the relationship" (Holden 2006).

*IMDb* user reviews expressed how the film drew on established myths associated with rock music: "Jones portrayed as never happier than when making music is rock and roll myth personified" (come2whereimfrom 2006). Other reviews wanted a greater focus on Jones' inspiration and sources of creativity: "Although the film documents Brian's fascination with the Blues in his early years and living a decadent jaded life in his later years it fails to impress on the uninitiated the sparkle of sitars, early synth work, recorders, etc, etc that Brian enhanced the pop charts with on his journey through the sixties" (jason-turnbull 2006). These user reviews each illustrate certain expectations viewers have about biopics focusing on creative figures; they are expected to offer explanations for the musician's inspiration and creative influences. However, the reception of *Stoned* also conveys how viewers expect biopics to avoid sensationalising the past and reproducing long-standing myths of creative production. The reception of this biopic underscore that biopics are often perceived to have an ambiguous relationship to the truth.

### ***The Railway Man* (2013)**

*The Railway Man* depicts the life of Eric Lomax, a British signals officer stationed in Singapore during the Second World War. Lomax was captured by the Japanese Army following the fall of Singapore in 1942 and sent to a prison camp in Kanchanaburi to work on the notorious Burma – Thailand Railway, the 'Death Railway'. While imprisoned, Lomax was tortured by the Kempetai, the Japanese military police, who suspected him of drawing railway maps and hiding radios. Lomax was released at the end of the war and in 1991 agreed to return to

Kanchanaburi to meet Takeshi Nagase, the Kempetai interpreter stationed at the prison, who had dedicated his post-war life to activist work for reconciliation among Pacific war veterans. The men exchanged letters and Lomax returned to Kanchanaburi to meet Negase in 1993 where the pair were reconciled in an event which was widely reported in the media (Kennedy 1993: 17). Lomax's autobiography, *The Railway Man*, was published in 1995 and chronicled his experience of imprisonment and torture. It was extremely well received, winning the NCR Book Award in 1996 and was subsequently made into the television drama *Prisoners in Time* (BBC 1995) starring John Hurt. The book intersected with the 'memoir boom' of the 1990s, and one element in this success was the trauma memoir exemplified in David Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'* (1995), released the same year (see Luckhurst 2008: 117-146). The trauma memoir documented the subjective experience of distressing events and resonated with Lomax's description of being tortured through the 'water boarding' technique. The passage describing this experience is expressed, like Lawrence's account of Deraa in his autobiography, as a 'disturbance' and evokes a wounded masculinity:

The NCO [non-commissioned officer] suddenly stopped hitting me. He went off to the side and I saw him coming back holding a hosepipe dribbling with water ... He directed the full flow of the now gushing pipe on to my nostrils and mouth at a distance of only a few inches ... This is the sensation of drowning, on dry land, on a hot dry afternoon. Your humanity bursts from within you as you gag and choke. I tried very hard to will unconsciousness, but no relief came ... they turned on the tap again, and again there was that nausea of rising water from inside my bodily cavity, a flood welling up from within and choking me. They alternated beatings and half-drownings for I know not how long. (Lomax 1995: 163)

This sequence is recreated in the film and similarly stresses the event as traumatising. The continued use of water boarding as an interrogation technique

was important to the filmmakers who wanted to imbue Lomax's life story with contemporary relevance.

*The Railway Man* was an official co-production between British company Archer Street Productions and Australian production company Pictures in Paradise on a reported budget of \$20 million (Dawtre 2011b: 6). The British producer Andy Paterson had attempted to make the film for over a decade: "it's the best story I've ever been told" and "[a]t a certain point, I decided that I couldn't not make this film ... 'The King's Speech' reminds us that no one knows where the next hit is coming from" (quoted in Dawtre 2011b: 6). The production of a film about Lomax thus serves as an example of producers responding to wider taste and film culture. *The King's Speech* was widely popular and both films featured Colin Firth, whose involvement was critical in securing finance for *The Railway Man*. The screen writer Frank Cottrell Boyce commented, "Colin Firth was always interested in it and when he got his Oscar for Best Actor in *The King's Speech*, he had bigger clout to attract the money" (quoted in *Liverpool Echo* 2013). The narrative of post-war psychological trauma was compatible with Firth's star persona (see chapter five), and, as was explained through Glenda Jackson's involvement in *Stevie*, the cultural capital of stars can be critical in securing funds for particular subjects. The film was marketed as intersecting with contemporary discussions surrounding torture and post-traumatic stress disorder. Boyce said: "This isn't just about a forgotten moment in history. The way that Eric was tortured was water-boarding. When we first started working on this film that seemed like a kind of antique, remote thing, and now, it's part of how we do business in the West" (quoted in Coyle 2013). The use of water boarding within the film intersects with contemporary debates.



Though U.S. President Barack Obama ended this practice of interrogation in 2009, its legacy continued to be debated. This was identified as a central concern by the director Jonathan Teplitzky: “This kind of maltreatment has incredible resonance for contemporary times. I mean, it’s not even called ‘torture’ anymore – it’s called ‘enhanced interrogation’ ... Waterboarding has a very strong tentacle to the modern day, and we were very conscious of that” (quoted in Bond 2014).

*The Railway Man* also evokes earlier films; the conditions in the railway prison camps were depicted in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and female historical figures were subjected to torture in the espionage biopics *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*. Placing *The Railway Man* within the development of the Prisoner of War film provides a context for how the representation of masculinity in contemporary films differs from earlier representations. The POW film began to appear in the post-war period in films such as *The Captive Heart* (1946) and has moved through different stages of development (see Cull 2002: 283-287). *The Railway Man* follows the formula established since the inception of the POW film in being based on an authenticating written source, a memoir or autobiography based on actual experience. Films such as *The Colditz Story* (1955) embodied the virtues of inventiveness and audacity. The dogged resilience of British masculinity was depicted in the biopic *Reach for the Sky*, about RAF pilot and amputee Douglas Bader who was imprisoned in German occupied France and made numerous escape attempts before being liberated. Later films diversified, showing women interned in East Asia in *A Town Like Alice* and Hollywood/British productions including *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which was about British POWs in Burma in 1942 forced to build a railway bridge to aid the war effort of

their Japanese captors. Based on a novel by Pierre Boulle (1952), the film lacks the purported authenticity of *The Railway Man* but both share a focus on the interactions between the British prisoner and Japanese officer rather than the 'escape' narrative typical of POW dramas (Landy 1991: 175). *The Bridge on the River Kwai* questioned heroism and focused on the pointlessness of war. Like *The Railway Man*, the film stresses the conditions within the camp, disease and incarceration. Commander Nicholson (Alec Guinness) willingly commands the British POWs to build the bridge in a show of British perseverance and ingenuity to the Japanese commanding officer Saito (Sessue Hayakawa), to the confusion of the camp medic Clipton, and when the Allied team set about sabotaging the bridge, Nicholson's code of conduct, shaped by notions of the nobility of hard work and self-discipline, is called into question as he actively resists their efforts.

*The Railway Man* forms a significant entry into the POW genre as it foregrounds the psychological cost of internment and the wounded subjectivity caused through torture. Furthermore, it is about Japanese torture rather than the Nazi incarceration more typical of the 1950s POW dramas. Whereas earlier treatments of the POW narrative emphasised escape and the experience of British captives, *The Railway Man* is informed by contemporary debates regarding reconciliation between Japan and Britain. This is marked most clearly in the representation of Negase who in later life is depicted as burdened by the guilt of his treatment of British prisoners. The representation of reconciliation within the film resonates with a wider concern for Anglo-Japanese reconciliation. On May 27<sup>th</sup> 1998, during a state visit made by the Japanese emperor and empress to Britain, former British POWs protested at the lack of a satisfactory apology from Japan for the treatment of POWs during the

Second World War as the royal pair made their way to Buckingham Palace. This was widely reported across the media in addition to articles that stressed the need for cultural understanding between the two nations given Japanese investment in the British economy (see Murakamai and Middleton 2006: 274-275). Since then, the narrative of POW experience in the Far East has received increased attention. In 2000 the government announced a compensation scheme, a 'debt of honour' for British civilians interned by the Japanese during the Second World War and memoirs such as *Prisoner of Japan: A Personal War Diary, Singapore, Siam & Burma 1941-1945* (Atcherley 2012) and television documentaries *Building Burma's Death Railway: Moving Half the Mountain* (2014) show how debates over the nature of reconciliation and the psychological cost of internment continue. These debates are incorporated into *The Railway Man*.

Though the narrative 'present' is set in 1980s Britain, Lomax (Colin Firth) is represented as a traumatised veteran unable to come to terms with his experiences of torture during the war. *The Railway Man* foregrounds a traumatised homosocial culture of war veterans, an "army of ghosts" who meet at a Veterans Club in Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1980. Though the club is introduced with close-up images of medals and photographs of the prisoners as younger men, subsequent wide-angle shots frame the veterans, at tables in a darkened room, each silently drinking beer. The club, positioned overlooking the sea, conveys their inability to reintegrate successfully into society, existing on the margins and unable to process their experiences as POWs. The fixed shots and wide-angle framing of these images visually connote the sense of stasis in the veterans' experience. The code of silence between veterans, and their enclosed homosocial experience is evoked as Lomax's

wife Patti (Nicole Kidman) enters the club, the veterans turning in surprise to see a woman arriving. The problems of civilian readjustment are represented as Lomax is depicted sleepwalking and fighting with debt collectors whom he visualises as Japanese officers, recalling the maladjusted veteran. The film uses flashbacks, as Finlay (Stellan Skarsgård), one of Lomax's fellow officers, explains to Patti the men's experience of the camp. This centres on their attempt to construct a radio receiver in order to hear news of the war effort, sequences which resonate more closely with the escape plots of POW films. When the men are caught, Lomax takes sole responsibility and is subsequently taken for interrogation. In the narrative 'present' Finlay commits suicide and around his grave the troops recount in order their individual numbers as assigned by their Japanese captors during the war.

There is a further kind of 'ghost' embodied in Takashi Nagase, the interpreter for Lomax's Japanese torturers. The figure of Negase (Tanroh Ishida) appears in 1980 following Lomax and Patti's wedding ceremony. As Patti showers in the hotel room, Lomax is depicted lying on the bed and the camera moves around behind his head before the sound of the shower is replaced by the noise of a train moving across tracks. The camera follows Lomax as he raises his head and 'views' Negase, dressed in military uniform, 'enter' the hotel room and order Lomax to dress before escorting him through the hotel. The sequence depicts trauma through an anachronism, a visual rupture of time periods. This is the first 'meeting' between the pair staged within the film, arriving after Lomax's initial train encounter with Patti and their subsequently marriage. Negase cannot therefore, at this point in the narrative, be identified with a specific time period or location, and his introduction signals an abrupt shift in mood from the romantic opening sequences which show

Patti and Lomax falling in love. The following image conveys disorientation through placing actor Colin Firth on a track as he is walked down the hotel corridor by Negase, creating the impression that Lomax is floating towards the destination in a trance-like state. A ghost only Lomax can see, other guests and staff are unaware of Negase. Through the hotel entrance the pair emerge in Kanchanaburi, signified through the dense foliage that surrounds a dirt track. Led into the prison, he is forced by guards into a darkened room and the sequence ends with the sound of water dripping, cutting to the present day Lomax writhing on the floor of the hotel room. Lomax is depicted returning to Thailand to kill the interpreter, having been shown an image of Negase in a newspaper by Findlay shortly before the latter's suicide. However, the same figure of the young Nagase stands in a field as Lomax travels through Thailand on a train. It is when Lomax confronts the older Nagase (Hiroyuki Sanada), who leads tourists around the prison, now a memorial site and museum, that the interrogation incident is revealed and the sequence switches between flashbacks to 1942, as Negase and a Japanese officer interrogate Lomax, and the present day interrogation of Nagase by Lomax. Trapping Nagase in a wooden cage, Lomax returns to the water torture room in the prison and visualises his previous experience of water torture which triggers a flashback that depicts the method in extensive detail.

The film suggests that Nagase is similarly traumatised, revisiting the experience as a tour guide and burdened with guilt, which mirrors Lomax's encyclopaedic knowledge of train routes and the train memorabilia that litter his office at home, an obsession that acts as a displacement for the trauma. Typically, the POW film permitted "the thrill of a crime or prison escape story, with none of the moral

problems of identifying with a criminal” (Cull 2002: 287) but *The Railway Man* is significant in focusing on psychological problems, and charting the possibility of rehabilitation between captive and guard. Lomax later returns to Thailand with Patti and meets Negase a second time and the pair are reconciled.

Though the producer Andy Paterson wanted to replicate the triumph of *The King’s Speech*, *The Railway Man* failed to repeat the former’s success but still performed well, taking £5.3 million from the UK and Ireland box office (Furness 2015). The graphic depiction of water boarding resulted in an ‘R’ classification in North America that limited potential audiences, and user reviews suggest that viewers found these sequences particularly upsetting. Reviews for the film were mixed. A reader’s review in *Time Out* magazine commented approvingly on the realism of the torture sequences: “The film shifts between the present and the war, with the POW scenes not shirking from the reality of their suffering. The acting and direction is subtly understated and accomplished enough to deliver the film’s message” (Jones 2014: 7). Other reviews were less positive. The *Daily Telegraph*’s reviewer suggested that: “[t]he film’s problem, in a way, is a starchiness comparable to its protagonist’s. As cinema, it’s in the mould of *The Reader* — it bottles up emotions, and history, and dutifully uncorks them as a form of therapy” (Robey 2014a). *The Railway Man* follows a trajectory from victimisation towards rehabilitation, and the therapeutic and cathartic release as depicted in the pair’s reconciliation in the film’s conclusion is critical to the biopics discussed in the next chapter.

American reviews highlighted Firth's performance: "Mr. Firth gives a reserved, compelling performance of a tormented man ... behind Lomax's stiff-upper-lip facade are wartime memories he is too frightened to confront" (Holden 2014). As with the user review of *Pierrepont* described earlier, the review emphasises the movement from repression to emotion as critical to the film's representation. The stiff upper lip, the sense of constraint as the key to successful management of emotion, is celebrated in earlier biopics about men such as Captain Scott in *Scott of the Antarctic* but these reviews identify a shift. Furthermore, the sense in which men are presenting a superficial appearance of emotional control is critical to contemporary films about masculinity which, as will be shown more extensively in the next chapter, lead to moments of cathartic release of emotion. Other reviews similarly praised Firth's performance: "Playing Lomax as a shell of his former self decades after his imprisonment, Firth is both quietly distracted and fitfully tormented" (Lemire 2014). However, the same review suggests *The Railway Man* "offers [a] tastefully safe treatment of a horrific subject" (ibid.) and this was contested in user reviews in which viewers describe their discomfort at viewing these sequences.

*IMDb* user reviews described their enjoyment of *The Railway Man* by suggesting that its status as a 'true story' was critical, and that genres that purport to have some authentic basis are more powerful in conjuring emotional affect: "I do recommend taking something to dry your eyes with and stay to the end to learn about Lomax and Nagase - the real people. The truth in the story adds so much more to the film" (HelenMary 2013). For some viewers, biopics are pleasurable because of their truth claims and the sense in which they recreate events that actually occurred. Other

views concentrated, and reflect on, the war imagery and characterisation: “Some scenes are harrowing but then this is a war film. However the film’s approach is not ‘gung-ho’, it is not about heroes and villains and avoids the usual platitudes associated with war. Instead it tackles the subject at an individual and very personal level giving it, if anything, much greater power to move the audience” (catherinejohnson9 2014). This reiterates how *The Railway Man* avoids drawing firm moral boundaries in its depictions by foregrounding the suffering of Negase as well as Lomax and is not concerned with the typical heroic escape of the POW drama. Other viewers commented on the anti-war stance taken in the film, and suggest alternative reading to the American review that suggested the film is “safe” in its depiction of the imprisonment: “The scenes of the prisoner war camp and Burma railway are brutal and shocking but absolutely compelling and its definitely not a glorifying war film” (sarahj-787-918632 2013). The ‘water board’ sequences resonated with an American viewers in particular. One viewer considers the ethics of contemporary interrogation and the film’s ability to intervene in these debates and shift opinion: “Teplitzky is graphic when it comes to the torture scenes. It’ll get you to question the morality of torture and if it is an effective way to get answers. An important idea we continue to look at today” (Kirk Ostojic 2014).

This reception suggests that *The Railway Man* was viewed as commenting on contemporary issues and both viewers and reviews described the depiction of a tormented subject that evokes the wounded man pattern of representation.

However, people’s opinions of *The Railway Man* were divided and, in some cases, conflicting. The torture sequences made various viewers uncomfortable and they sought contemporary parallels when describing them. On the other hand, some



reviewers viewed the biopic in negative terms, comparing *The Railway Man* to *The Reader* (2008) which was described in the *New York Times* as “another movie about the Holocaust that embalms its horrors with artfully spilled tears” (Dargis 2008: 1). Though this comparison is used to suggest that *The Railway Man* relies on melodrama and that this itself a problem, many viewers described the explicit nature of the torture sequences, and how these differed from other films about war, in positive terms. This underscores how the function and criteria constituting an effective biopic remain contentious.

*The Railway Man* offers the possibility of redemption through returning to the site of trauma and reconciling with the captor. Whereas the films selected in the next chapter depict wounded men rehabilitated through homosocial bonds, *The Railway Man* constructs the collective of veterans as bonded by their shared repression and inability to process traumatic memory.

### ***The Imitation Game* (2014)**

*Pierrepont* and *The Railway Man* were unusual subjects, whereas the biopic about Brian Jones reflected the wider shift towards films about figures from popular culture. Contemporary biopic productions also display a renewed interest in figures from science, previously depicted in the 1970s biopics *The Darwin Adventure* (1972) and *Galileo* (1976). The scientists depicted in contemporary films included Charles Darwin (*Creation*) and Stephen Hawking (*The Theory of Everything*). *The Imitation Game* is a third biopic of this type. Released at the same time as the Hawking biopic, *The Imitation Game* focuses on the life of computer scientist and mathematician Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch). The film is unusual in how it addresses a controversial subject who, despite his achievements during the war

decrypting the German Enigma Code, was prosecuted for homosexuality. Though the Darwin biopic represented a figure whose achievements took place in the nineteenth century, the interest in British contributions to science and technology in the biopics about Hawking and Turing indicates a wider fascination in popular culture. Hawking has become a global icon, recognised by being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in America in 2009 alongside appearances in popular culture such as *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989 –) and documentaries such as *Hawking* (2013). Turing's developments in computing technology, a subject foregrounded within *The Imitation Game*, resonate with the contemporary fascination with other example of technical creatives such as Steve Jobs, founder of the Apple company, who died of cancer in 2011. Jobs' death was widely reported and his life was depicted in the biopics *Jobs* (2013) and *Steve Jobs* (2015). Further figures from digital culture have been the subject of biopics. For example, Facebook inventor Mark Zuckerberg was the subject of *The Social Network*. Though these American figures are heralded for digital innovation, the films about British scientists, physicians and computer celebrate a British tradition of technical genius.

*The Imitation Game* follows the team of code-breakers led by Turing based at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, which is assigned to decode the enigma machine used by the Nazis during the Second World War. Turing was later convicted in the 1950s for homosexual activity, undergoing chemical castration before he committed suicide in 1954. The film was produced after Turing received a Royal Pardon on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2013, only the fourth granted since the Second World War. The pardon followed a series of events in 2012 which celebrated his

legacy and marked the centenary of his birth. Turing's pardon, as requested by Justice Secretary Chris Grayling, was prompted by a desire to re-evaluate Turing to secure an admission of mistake by the State which prosecuted him for his homosexuality, and to reposition him as national hero. This growing ambition to reevaluate Turing was important to the American producers, Ido Ostrowsky and Nora Grossman, and American screenwriter Graham Moore. When asked about finding the story of Turing, Ostrowsky commented:

In the fall of 2009, Nora and I saw a story in the *Telegraph*, in which then Prime Minister Gordon Brown apologized on behalf of the government for the treatment of Alan Turing during World War II. That was the first time we had heard of Alan Turing's name. From there, we started to research who he was and found his story incredibly moving. We didn't know why his life hadn't made more of an impact on popular culture. (quoted in Grosz 2014)

This remark illustrates how biopics intersect with contemporary debates, a product of producer taste but also wider concerns. Though it suggests *The Imitation Game* was an attempt to rescue a figure from obscurity, Turing had already impacted upon popular culture. The film was based on Andrew Hodges's biography *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (1983) and his legacy had featured loosely in the espionage thriller *Enigma* (2001) through the fictionalised character of mathematician, but heterosexual, Tom Jericho. This earlier film, based on the eponymous novel by Richard Harris, omits Turing's homosexuality and he is portrayed as a conventional romantic hero (see Pullen 2011: 398). Turing was also depicted in Hugh Whitemore's play *Breaking the Code* (1986), its subsequent adaptation by the BBC into a television film in 1996, as well as the television film *Codebreaker* (Channel Four 2011). Though fascination with Turing's life and achievements has been persistent, *The Imitation Game* formed the first internationally distributed,

‘prestige’ production to address him by name with a reported budget of \$14 million (Feinberg 2015), a significantly larger scale production than other films discussed here. The involvement of the Weinstein Company, which had previously distributed the award-winning *The King’s Speech* in North America, offers a possible explanation for this, suggesting that this larger independent distributor became involved after other commercial and critical successes of films that focused on British subject matter.

*The Imitation Game* secures Turing’s legacy as characterised by state betrayal and tragedy, a war hero forced to live an ‘imitation game’ in which he disguised his homosexuality from school teachers, fellow code breakers and government officials. Indeed, the suppression of Turing from public memory relates both to the sensitive nature of his wartime work but also contemporary homophobic legislation (Bennet and Royal 2009: 215). The screenwriter Graham Moore said: “In a lot of ways, I wanted to write about Alan Turing my entire life ... He is this tremendous inspirational symbol of this sort of secret queer history of the Second World War, the secret history of computer science that has been whitewashed out of the official record” (quoted in Peterseim 2014). Through the different narrative threads, *The Imitation Game* both constructs Turing as a ‘wounded’ figure, persecuted for his sexuality and under surveillance by the police, and a mathematical genius who played a critical role in secret wartime work. The final scenes depict Turing as unable to complete a crossword puzzle due to his ‘medication’ and confined to the house with the machine he invented and named after Christopher, his childhood friend at Sherborne School. Moore also conveyed the victimisation experienced by Turing following the Second World War: “we really wanted

to watch this vibrant, brilliant mind slowly be extinguished under this terrible medical treatment, under societal pressures and the public shaming that happened to him” (ibid.).

As a film about the Second World War, it evokes the ‘boffin’ stereotype that was utilised to depict scientists in post-war British films (see Jones 1997: 31-48). Turing is shown as a similarly obsessive figure, an isolated mathematician who is neither assimilated into society nor within the team at Bletchley. Though he is intelligent, he is characterised as individualistic, firing two of his fellow codebreakers, refusing to participate in the group’s shared project and challenging the authority of the commanders stationed at Bletchley. However, and according to the lineaments of the boffin stereotype, he is also socially inept and awkward; he refers to breaking the enigma code as a “game” and has difficulty following the group’s jokes. This boffin characterisation intersects with his status as a homosexual man; both identities make him an ambivalent figure who sits uncomfortably within the camp and in wider society.

In addition to the team of code-breakers deciphering the enigma machine at Bletchley Park in the war years, the film moves between two further periods. In 1951, Detective Robert Nock (Rory Kinnear) investigates a robbery at Turing’s Manchester home and, suspicious over the mathematician’s evasiveness, discovers Turing is homosexual. The film also depicts Turing’s childhood friendship at Sherborne School with Christopher Morcom (Jack Bannon) in 1928. Though it traces the technical achievements of the team, and Turing’s design of an automated machine to decipher the Nazi communication streams, the narrative ‘present’ of 1951 shows Nock

investigating Turing's past, uncovering his classified war-work, and his homosexuality. Homosexual acts between consenting adults remained illegal until 1967 when the Sexual Offences Act was introduced. Turing is shown being arrested, charged with gross indecency, and undergoing chemical castration. Following his death, a caption details that the official verdict declared that the mathematician committed suicide in 1954, at the age of forty-one.

The text is concerned with different modes of surveillance and constructs parallels between the lives of spies and the lives of homosexuals in Britain, conveying both as a life of imitation and concealment. When a spy for Soviet Russia is discovered at Bletchley Park base, Commander Denniston (Charles Dance) assumes it is Turing, when it is actually Turing's fellow codebreaker John Cairncross (Allen Leech). When Cairncross uncovers Turing's homosexuality, and Turing subsequently uncovers Cairncross's espionage, both men are placed in an uneasy alliance. The characterisation of spies as outsiders, informers who hide in plain sight, is critical to the biopic's construction of Turing, who is initially accused of being the spy: "in the post-World War II, Cold War period, there was increasing surveillance due to a belief that homosexuality was a contagion spread in homosocial military environments, as well as paranoia about the vulnerability of those engaged in espionage" (Lovesey 2015: 162). This was particularly acute when the case of the Cambridge Spy Ring was revealed in the British press in 1951. Two members, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, are evoked by Nock who uses the case as justification of his pursuit of Turing.<sup>20</sup> Burgess and Maclean

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<sup>20</sup> Burgess' life before he became a Soviet Spy was the subject of the historical film *Another Country* (1984). For an account of the different film and television representations of the Cambridge five see Willmetts and Moran (2013: 49-70).

defected to the Soviet Union in 1951 and, when the pair's homosexuality was uncovered: "The scandal established a parallel between sexual and political deviance which was one of the central tenets of the ideologies informing the Cold War" (Medhurst 1984: 25). Nock's investigation of Turing, and his verbal justification, is used within *The Imitation Game* to place Turing similarly at the intersection of such 'deviances'.

The depiction of Turing's experiences at Sherborne School similarly evokes comparisons between espionage and homosexuality. The school, a homosocial institution, is characterised by hierarchical relationships. Turing is bullied by other students but forms a close relationship with Christopher. It is initially established that all the boys at the school adopt the same uniform of blazer, white trousers and tie. Visually they are homogeneous, appearing as interchangeable. However, the opportunities for a close homosexual attachment within the school is conveyed between Turing and Christopher who develop a cryptographic code to communicate within the classroom which signifies both the homosexual desire of Turing for Christopher and differentiates this relationship from the wider homosocial network of the boy's school. The physical intimacy between Turing and Christopher is conveyed in the touching of knees and the gentle gripping of an arm to bid goodnight. Their emotional intimacy is constructed through their exchange of notes in codes which cannot be deciphered by the other boys or male teachers. As Christopher presents Turing with a book on cryptography, the framing of images marks this relationship as different from other bonds formed in the boys' school. Divided by a line of trees on the school playing field, they sit resting against a tree which divides them from the other boys who are playing rugby. Throughout the scene, the rugby players remain a peripheral presence,

indecipherable shouts and instructions are heard and the game is visible but out of focus in the background between the trees.

The scene is one of the few where the two boys are not visible to teachers or other students. The sense of surveillance persists in later sequences when Turing is informed of Christopher's death from bovine tuberculosis by the school headmaster, which prefigures the present-day narrative in which Turing's homosexuality is interrogated across a table within the police station. Turing first enquires who told the headmaster of their "friendship" and seeks to disguise the deep attachment. When the death is revealed, the camera remains on Turing's face as the headmaster offers condolences. The camera moves in to frame him in a tight close-up as he stares ahead, claiming he didn't know Christopher that well, but visibly trembling. The scene conveys a paranoia about male homosexuality in boys' schools, suggesting that though they privilege male relationships and physical closeness through sports such as rugby, the presence of homosexuality must be distinguished from the homosocial. The representation of public school life evokes Alec Waugh's controversial account *The Loom of Youth* (1917). Waugh himself was a student at Sherborne, and was nearly expelled after forming a homosexual relationship there, and the semi-autobiographical account of the fictional Fernhurst School forms an overt criticism of the hypocrisy of public school institutions. The book details the bullying and game-playing but also the presence of homosexual relationships between students, and the hypocrisy of staff who were aware of such activity but failed to stop it (see Richards 1988: 239-240). This ambiguity is captured in the sequence of Turing's repression and the headmaster's inability to distinguish emotional closeness between heterosexual male students and closer, homosexual attachments.



Turing's relationship with Christopher is nuanced and shown in brief flashbacks, and his relationship with prostitute Arnold Murray (uncredited), who is found by Nock and admits to the robbery of Turing's home, is only briefly shown. Hodges' biography, on which the film is based, describes Turing's relationship and attraction to Christopher in detail (1983: 35-53), whereas the film devotes considerable narrative space to Turing's friendship and brief engagement to Joan Clark (played by Kiera Knightly). Hodges was critical of the film prior to the release: "They have built up the relationship with Joan much more than it actually was" (quoted in Day 2013) and the space provided to their relationship in the biography suggests the relationship was less significant than that with Christopher (1983: 206-8, 210-1, 216-17, 263-4). The screen adaptation could be considered a reflection of a more pervasive unease about celebrating a homosexual war hero.

Though the triangulation of characters is not a feature of *The Imitation Game*, this biopic foregrounds the relationship between Turing and Joan to convey the marginalisation and oppression of women who are excluded from homosocial networks: "in any male-dominated society there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (Sedgwick 1985: 25). Joan explains that she was not invited to be made a Fellow at Cambridge despite achieving a double-first in Mathematics, unlike Turing who was made a Fellow at the age of twenty-four (Cambridge only began awarding full degrees to women after 1948). Turing performs as a spy; secretly providing encrypted material to Joan away from the base by cycling to her dorm room in the night, a practice Cairncross performs when traveling in the dark to post-boxes to submit documents to the Soviets. However, Turing becomes similarly marginalised and is under surveillance when his

homosexuality is leaked to the press. In the 1951 sequences in which Turing's 'imitation' is detected three policemen stand outside the interrogation room containing prostitute Arnold Murray and label the mathematician a "poofter" and claim his actions are "bloody disgusting". They exchange labels which similarly work to oppress the male mathematician and underscore the regulation of homosocial cultures through overt displays of homophobia. The police officers, embodying the legislation that regulates and punishes non-normative desire, convey homophobia as a "tool of control" (Sedgwick 1985: 115) through voicing their disapproval and prosecuting Turing for gross indecency.

The film was hugely successful, grossing \$200 million globally (McClintock 2015), and was reviewed positively. *Empire* magazine identified that the film "seamlessly combines its thriller and biopic elements: the story of Turing, it posits, is the story of the Enigma codebreaking" (Jolin 2014). This reiterates a key concern across this study; the potential hybridity of biopic subject matter and the combination of conventions familiar from different generic frameworks, a feature that was also used in *Elizabeth* (1998). However, other publications, such as the *Daily Telegraph*, were critical of the film's representation of Turing, believing that the mathematician's homosexuality is marginalised:

It's the lack of risk here that grates most ... the film backs away in embarrassment from showing a single encounter between him and another man ... It shouldn't matter in the slightest that Turing was gay. It shouldn't have ended his career in disgrace the way it did. But one can be forgiven, surely, for wondering, and wanting to see, if it mattered to him. (Robey 2014b)

Given the wider context in which *The Imitation Game* was produced, Turing's pardon in 2013 and the celebration of his life that featured in 2012, the review

suggests that the film reflects a continued unease with Turing's legacy. The *New York Times* reviewer probed this issue further:

For their part, the filmmakers, though willing to treat Turing as a victim of bigotry and repression, also nudge him back toward the closet, imposing a discretion that is at once self-protective and self-congratulatory. It's not that we need to see him having sex — the PG-13 rating must be protected, I guess — but that a vital aspect of his identity and experience deserves more than a whisper and a wink. (Scott 2014)

These reviews convey how Turing's legacy is marked as much by his status as a persecuted homosexual as it is by his mathematical ability. Turing's status as a gay icon has increased since 2009 when gay publications, including *Pink News*, campaigned for Gordon Brown to apologise on behalf of the British government for Turing's prosecution (see Cohen 2009). The director Morten Tyldum defended the representation: "I'm not shying away from it. His whole relationship, how he falls in love and the importance of him being a gay man, was all about secrecy" (quoted in Lee 2015). The reaction in reviews expresses the belief that the film's contribution should be to address Turing's homosexuality.

Viewers expressed concerns about the film's accuracy. A British user review suggests the events are misrepresented because the writers imply Turing was solely responsible for the design and building of the machines used to decode the Enigma machine:

I consider that filmmakers, when depicting real people or events, have a responsibility to tell the truth and not distort things simply for dramatic effect. When this responsibility is ignored the filmmakers have decided to, in effect, spread lies in the name of entertainment. *'The Imitation Game'* may be entertaining but it makes this dismal mistake and cannot be recommended. (Qrobur 2015)

This comment revisits an ongoing concern with viewers regarding the need for biopics to balance entertainment with accuracy and that biopics are judged by their

authenticity. In addition, this viewer emphasises that filmmakers have a “responsibility”, a duty to represent events and figures accurately. This points again to the significance of the genre as a whole, events need to be represented accurately because the biopic is perceived as a reading of history. An American reviewer discusses the British film industry and its reliance on American revenue:

It’s an unfortunate truism nowadays that any major film production in the UK must at least try to secure US funding, and failing that, aim in part at US audiences to have a hope of recouping production costs. *The Imitation Game* is a prime example of this phenomenon. The fact that this mess garnered an Oscar is testament to where the movie was aimed at, and apparently hit its target. (gregory\_quinn 2015)

This viewer was concerned with what they perceived to be “melodrama” present within the film and fictional characters, suggesting that this trait is associated more closely with Hollywood production. One viewer felt the depiction of Turing was stereotypical and that film was dull: “the plot was almost identical to every other movie about a genius - Turing was played as unrecognized and an oddball” (Frazzle 2015). This suggests the boffin characterisation was recognised amongst viewers and that film failed to adequately represent Turing as a figure audiences could relate to. Other viewers echoed similar sentiments to the reviews published in the press:

Why Hollywood thinks that the Enigma story is so dull that they have to dress it up this way is beyond me. I laughed out loud several times, and not at anything funny. The script piles cliché on cliché and I found the whole experience embarrassing and rather offensive. Alan Turing was a complex and difficult individual, but here he is reduced to a comical cardboard cut-out. (robin-dunford1 2015)

This indicates the investments made in Turing as a figure by audiences and a distinct distrust of Hollywood storytelling devices. There is a sense running through user reviews that Turing has been appropriated by American filmmakers

and this has detracted from the film. However, some viewers were more complementary:

The saddest thing about Alan Turing is that he's one of a handful of people who ever existed of whom it could be said he bent the course of history and in his life he could receive no recognition for it. In fact we do see what did happen to him post World War II. Now his nation and the world can appreciate him for what he was and what he did.  
(bkoganbing 2015)

The reception of *The Imitation Game* illustrates that people hold different opinions on the function and criteria of what constitutes an effective biopic, some reviewers praised the blending of different generic conventions whereas user reviews suggested that biopic filmmakers have a responsibility to convey events and personages as authentically as possible. One user review suggested that the film was paradigmatic of the ambitions of British films in general and argued that the representations of British figures are shaped according to conventions and styles that will appeal to American audiences and this undermines the biopic's authenticity. Though most reviews described the biopic positively, there was a recurring criticism that suggested the filmmakers should have addressed Turing's homosexuality in greater detail. This illustrates a wider perceived remit of the biopic in general; it should construct the 'private life' of the subject. This was especially important in a biopic about Turing because of the significant investments made by different groups in him as a persecuted homosexual man rather than a skilled mathematician. The film generated debate about the function and approach filmmakers should adopt when representing real subjects. Some viewers expect efforts to depict the past authentically and others felt that the characterisation of Turing was stereotypical. These responses underscore a distrust of biopics and an anxiety about the type of history they represent.

In *The Imitation Game* homophobic structures, the oppressive homophobia of legislation and police attitudes, are paralleled with the paranoia surrounding espionage and relationships with the Soviet Union. Turing is prosecuted, undergoes chemical castration, and is confined to his house with the decoding machine.

Whereas *Stoned* constructs homosocial attachments through the bodies of women, either as eroticised objects to be shared between men or as threats to the homosocial bond, *The Imitation Game* constructs Turing's life as a web of secrecy, forced to disguise his sexuality within wider homosocial networks that perceive homosexuality as a threat.

### **Conclusion**

The films analysed here exemplify the diversity of homosocial relations and representations of 'wounded' masculinity in the contemporary biopic. These films foreground 'outsider' figures, men who are persecuted through homophobic legislation, the victims of shifts in wider attitudes towards capital punishment, men who are neglected upon their return from war, or men that represent a counter culture which challenges existing social values. The reception of each film reaffirms certain characteristics identified in chapter four; biopics are problematic, contested and provoke different reactions. *Pierrepont's* anti-capital punishment stance is conveyed through the shifting friendship between the hangman and Tish. The film depicts the transferring of State responsibility to a singular figure, but by foregrounding Tish, the only victim who is seen outside the prison setting prior to his execution, *Pierrepont* depicts the emotional breakdown of the hangman as he is forced to recognise each of the accused as a human being rather than a set of measurements. In *Stoned*, the relationship between Jones and Thorogood is characterised by obsession and jealousy. Though the hedonism and permissiveness

of the era is represented through Jones, *Stoned* equally foregrounds the war veteran Thorogood's perspective and his desperate, doomed attempt to integrate into the shifting social landscape. *The Railway Man* also foregrounds marginalisation through the homosocial collective of POWs, a group trapped in stasis at the veteran's club. However, and in a wider climate in which the relationship between Japan and Britain was debated, the film represents the reconciliation between Lomax and the guilt-ridden Negase as key in processing both men's traumatic memory. *The Imitation Game* depicts Alan Turing's life as a homosexual as a series of deceptions made necessary by contemporary legislation and surveillance which sought to persecute homosexuality. The homosocial relationships depicted in *The Imitation Game* and *Pierrepont* end in tragedy and contribute to the representation of wounded men as traumatised and persecuted. However, the films selected in the following chapter construct a different trajectory. Using *The Damned United*, *Nowhere Boy* and *The King's Speech* as examples, Chapter Eight contends that the representation of the 'wounded man' and homosocial bonds have merged and led to depictions of crisis-ridden males *recuperated* through homosocial support.

## Chapter Eight

### The Contemporary British Biopic 2: Homosocial Recoveries

Certain contemporary biopics released between 2008 and 2010 exemplify a new tendency in which psychologically-wounded men are recuperated via a supportive male friend. There is a generic shift in which the representations of male victimisation and failure become interwoven with homosocial support. The films represent figures from diverse fields; *The Damned United* is about football manager Brian Clough and his doomed forty-four day tenure as manager of Leeds United, *Nowhere Boy* concerns the musician John Lennon as a young man before he became famous as founder of the Beatles, and *The King's Speech* focuses on King George VI and his relationship with speech therapist Lionel Logue. Despite these differences, each of these biopics is characterised by a trajectory in which a wounded man is supported by another man, and this suggests a shift in biopic representations of male relationships and male trauma.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the films discussed in the previous chapter, these biopics depict wounded subjects who are rehabilitated through the homosocial dynamic. They portray homosocial recoveries from trauma and humiliation: male crises concerning familial abuse, trauma and professional failure are overcome through homosocial bonds. This conveys a different discourse of masculinity from previous biopics, which rarely show these two representations as inter-linked. This is contextualised in relation to the 'new man' discourse but also the genre's movement towards overt and explicit displays of male sensitivity and emotion. This shift in the depiction of

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<sup>21</sup> An early draft of this chapter was published in *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*. See Robinson, M. (2011) "Please Baby, Take Me Back" Homo-social Bonds in the Contemporary British Biopic. *Networking Knowledge*. 4 (1). A copy of this is included at the end of the thesis.



masculinity displays some continuity with wider social discourses and specific public expressions of grief and emotion during the 1990s, including footballer Paul Gascoigne's tears at the 1990 world cup and the collective mourning that was circulated in media images following the death of Princess Diana on August 31<sup>st</sup> 1997. Each film is considered in turn, but common representations persist across them: specifically, a vulnerable subject damaged by a dysfunctional father-son relationship who is repaired through a supportive homosocial bond. Analysis of the individual films leads to the identification of a common critical depiction of overt male emotion: the subject reveals traumas and psychological wounds to a male friend, who is positioned as a therapeutic agent capable of redeeming and rehabilitating the wounded figure. These sequences of self-disclosure are considered in relation to the emergence of a therapeutic culture that privileges the open and public expression of vulnerability as key to recovery.

### ***The Damned United* (2009)**

*The Damned United* was adapted from David Peace's novel (2006) of the same name, a fictionalised account of Brian Clough's brief period as manager of Leeds United Football Club in 1974. Clough remains one of England's most successful football managers, winning the league title with Derby County and two prestigious European Cups wins with Nottingham Forest, and is frequently referred to as "the best manager England never had". Though Clough died in 2004, his position in the public consciousness has endured as an outspoken and quick-witted authority on football, and he is the subject of numerous books, including his autobiography. This persona was consolidated through media interviews and television punditry work on sports programmes such as TV's *On The Ball*, broadcast in the 1970s and 1980s. The most notorious of these media appearance was the interview between

Clough and Don Revie for Yorkshire TV on the eve of Clough's sacking from Leeds on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1974 and the film meticulously reconstructs the events.

Peace's novel presented an interpretation of Clough's psychological state during his unsuccessful role at Leeds from a first-person perspective. The novel constructs a complex depiction of a manager plagued by self-doubt, alcoholism and fierce rivalry with his peers. The blending of fact and fiction caused considerable controversy, with Clough's surviving family objecting, and stirred debate regarding the ideological implications of using real figures in a story that mixes the factual with the speculative (Cox 2009). Earlier in the decade, *Best* depicted the life of footballer George Best but concentrated on his struggles with fame and alcoholism. *Best* presented George Best as a vulnerable alcoholic, and earlier football autobiographies, such as Tony Adams' *Addicted* (1998), foregrounded the emotional struggles of a footballer's combat with alcoholism and identified football as a site of psychological trauma. Thus these prominent sportsmen are depicted as vulnerable, and the 'confessional' autobiographies of sportsmen can be viewed as further examples of self-disclosure that are key to the contemporary biopic representations discussed here. The decision to produce a film about Clough can be explained through the success of Peace's novel and Michael Sheen's growing reputation for portraying historical figures with uncanny accuracy (see chapter five). In addition, Manchester United beat Chelsea FC in the UEFA Champions League final in 2008 and in the three preceding seasons an English team participated in the final of the competition, an indication of British sporting achievement and prestige that evokes Clough's achievements in the European Competition. A film about Clough thus fed into a pervasive discourse of English football as highly successful.

Budgeted at around \$10 million, and produced through Sony Pictures Entertainment, BBC Films and Screen Yorkshire (Dawtre 2008), the film adaptation avoids Clough's alcoholism in favour of depicting the interlocked dynamics between three men: Clough (Michael Sheen), his sensitive assistant manager Peter Taylor (Timothy Spall) and Clough's rival, the former manager of Leeds United, Don Revie (Colm Meaney). The screenwriter Peter Morgan and director Tom Hooper distanced their version from Peace's novel prior to the film's release. Morgan stressed "we all wanted to be careful that Clough was likeable. He doesn't come across as particularly likeable in the book" (quoted in McLean 2009a). Hooper foregrounded his own interest in the relationship between Taylor and Clough: "It was this amazing professional marriage ... We got more and more interested in exploring the idea that Clough without Taylor was not able to be great, and making that the film's backbone" (ibid.). The representation of this "professional marriage" is the focus here.

Whereas Peace's novel is characterised by a first person narrative, the film adaptation centres on the collaborative relationship between Clough and Taylor. The depiction clearly suggests a homosocial relationship and *The Damned United* constructs the bond between Clough and Taylor as stronger than their relationships with wives. For instance, in an early scene Clough's Derby team has lost to Revie's Leeds team in the third round of the FA Cup, humiliating Clough in the process. Clough and Taylor are shown in Clough's office debating methods of overcoming Revie's domination of English football before the sequence cuts to establishing shots of rural Yorkshire. The idyllic sound of birds immediately contrasts this environment with the aggressive, war-like setting of the earlier football match. Framing Clough's house in a long-shot, the next image is within the kitchen where Clough's

position as husband and father is explored: the kitchen table is positioned across the length of the frame, Clough and his wife Barbara (Elizabeth Carling) occupy opposite ends and their three children are positioned eating lunch between them. This image of hetero-normative family life is disrupted by a telephone call. The parents exchange looks, Barbara asks Clough to ignore the call, but he argues that it might be from Taylor and so he must answer.

The relationship between Clough and Taylor is not simply tied to specific geographical locales with overt connotations of male bonding, such as the stadium or training ground, it is also privileged within the home. In the telephone conversation sequence, both men are positioned in their respective halls, suggesting uneasiness with domestic rooms and a desire to escape them. Both collude in whispers about the possibility of signing footballer Dave Mackay (Brian McCardie), turning their heads back to the rooms where their families eat and their wives watch them. The humour is derived from their symmetrical, secretive, experience: their presence in the hall and their wives demanding their return to the table. The background *mise-en-scène* is dominated by the Clough's open kitchen door and, in Taylor's house, by the out-of-focus family composed of wife Lillian (Gillian Waugh) and children in the background. Both the open doorway and out-of-focus family capture the reduction of the family to peripheral *mise-en-scène* and peripheral threat to the homosocial relationship. This preference for homosocial attachments is secured in the next images: Taylor reveals Mackay is available for a limited time and Clough smiles. A gentle acoustic guitar riff is introduced into the otherwise silent scene as Barbara discovers her husband has left abruptly, and the riff continues over the following image of Clough's car accelerating away from Taylor's house.

Whereas the domestic scene is permeated with formality as the Clough family quietly eat, the atmosphere within the car is characterised by light-hearted banter. The score proceeds through the brief scene, as the pair passionately discuss and joke about McKay. Clough drives and Taylor places crisps directly into his mouth as he does so, the snack replacing Barbara's meal, and an intimate gesture positioning him as Barbara's substitute. Clough reaches between the legs of Taylor in the passenger seat and retrieves a can of beer which he drinks, before returning the can to Taylor who then drinks it himself. Though the dialogue is concerned with the acquisition of McKay and underscores a professional bond, the close physical intimacy of characters within the car conveys a deeper personal relationship. These sequences contrast the blandness of domesticity with the pleasures of the homosocial, a technique also used in British sitcoms in which marriage is depicted as a form of servitude: "Female characters have repeatedly been given the role of joyless authority figures in these shows, wives who are simultaneously mothers to their infantilized husbands" (Stott 2005: 81). This dynamic is evoked as the gleeful Clough and Taylor flee their homes, having thwarted Barbara's and Lillian's attempts to contain them.

Football is a homosocially-dependent institution, often mediated through expressions of homophobia and sports films have a "male institutional bias" that sanctions close male bonding (Wyatt 2001: 52). However, this 'scouting mission' takes Clough and Taylor *away* from the stadium and training ground, spaces associated with homosocial expression, and is instigated through Taylor's infiltration of the domestic space. The presence of wives and children affirms the heterosexuality of the pair, but the homosocial bond is constructed as more pleasurable, intimate and 'natural' than relationships with women.

When Clough and Taylor dance together after winning the Second Division championship, the wives are visible in the background, a marginal presence with little agency in the narrative apart from defining the heterosexuality of their husbands. The celebration of male friendship is reaffirmed in the men's rendition of "Love and Marriage", a Frank Sinatra song connoting the homosocial bonding between 'Rat Pack' members Dean Martin, Sinatra, and Sammy Davis Jr. and the 'masculine' traits of heavy drinking and womanising. Clough begins singing and beckons Taylor to the middle of the room to join him. As wives and players form a circle around them they hold each other and the camera follows their movements around the room, privileging this relationship over those with their seemingly accepting wives. Ryan Gilbey notes that *The Damned United* distorts the representation of Barbara found in Peace's novel: "Among numerous instances of support, Peace records Clough's wife organising a female delegation to protest when Derby lets him go. From the Peter Morgan version, you would scarcely know she wasn't joined at the hip to the kitchen stove" (Gilbey 2009). Present yet marginal, women represent an uncomfortable domestic space from which men try to escape.

Whereas the bond between Clough and Taylor is light-hearted, sensitive and characterised by close physical intimacy, the relationship between Clough and Revie is one of destructive rivalry. Both of these relationships can be understood as homosocial because, according to Sedgwick, homosocial desire can refer to supportive, intimate relationships and those that are motivated by hatred and hostility (Sedgwick 1985: 2) Metaphorically, Don Revie embodies an 'older' ideal of football management which is quickly established. In the opening scene archival images signify the omnipotence of Revie within English football through newsreel

footage of trophy successes with Leeds United, but also shows the team's notorious violent misconduct. Having been appointed England manager, and thus become the 'father' of English football, Revie hints at his chosen successor but the board of directors subsequently appoint their own choice, Clough. Clough's motivations for accepting the role are established as a personal rivalry with the older man when Clough says "I won't eat, and I won't sleep until I have taken whatever that man has achieved, and beaten it."

The narrative of *The Damned United* is arranged in a mixture of diegetic present and flashback sequences. A key moment depicts Revie's failure to acknowledge Clough with a handshake when he took Leeds to Derby for an FA Cup tie in January 1968. A montage of images first displays Clough meticulously preparing the stadium and citing their shared regional, class and career positions to Taylor before Revie arrives at the ground. Critically, it is Taylor who remains unsure and puzzled by this admiration, criticising Revie's superstition and Clough's obsession. However, upon his arrival Revie fails to acknowledge Clough and walks straight past him. The present time, in which Clough has taken Revie's position, is thus shown as motivated through a mixture of hatred and admiration.

In pursuing the role as Leeds manager, Clough abandons Taylor. After resigning from Derby, the pair agree to manage Brighton but the bond is severed when Clough subsequently opts to manage Leeds. Revie's continued influence at the club is foregrounded visually; Clough's office is littered with the trophies won by Revie and the stadium halls are adorned with photographs. Framing consistently emphasises the absence of Taylor by foregrounding Clough's isolation. Thus when senior players Johnny Giles (Peter McDonald) and Billy Bremner (Stephen Graham) argue with Clough, berating his lack of preparation for the upcoming

game against Queens Park Rangers, Clough stands alone in a wide corridor leading to the pitch and the Leeds team line up around the smaller Bremner in an intimidating huddle. His back to the camera, the manager turns and walks out towards the pitch, and a caption reading “Leeds 0 QPR 1” appears at the bottom of the frame as he gazes out at the vast empty stadium. When Revie returns as England manager to observe the failing Leeds team, the crowds cheer him and the players wave to him. Positioned in the dugout, the camera frames Clough in close up shot of his head and shoulders, the background dominated by the fans sitting behind pointing at Clough and singing Revie’s name. This framing with Clough in the centre surrounded by Leeds fans visually connotes the generic theme of the individual who is unable to overturn the wider community’s perception of him and his capabilities.

The football manager/player relationship as a metaphorical father/son bond is made explicit when the sacked Clough is interviewed alongside Don Revie for *Yorkshire News* in a sequence that recreates the actual interview between the pair. As Clough emotionally accuses Revie of being cold, Revie retaliates “I was like a father to them. In that club every morning massaging those boys ... I soaped those boys down with me own hands”; and he accuses Clough of failing to do the same. The following scene signals Clough’s breaking with the father-figure and moving back towards the homosocial bond with assistant Peter Taylor. Undermined and humiliated, Clough drives straight from the interviews in Yorkshire to Taylor’s house in Brighton and begs forgiveness. As instructed by Taylor, he pleads “Please baby, take me back”. Taylor acknowledges the younger man and embraces him, in contrast to the earlier missed handshake between Revie and Clough. The closing archival images establish the narrative’s new equilibrium. Whereas the opening



archival footage served to illustrate the dominance of Revie in English football, constructing his omnipotence through cheating, these closing archive images focus on the trophies won by Clough and Taylor and on Revie's tax misdemeanours. The conclusion to *The Damned United* shows one figure's reputation rehabilitated and the other's destroyed. The 'real' of the newsreel is woven into the fictional drama and validates the enactment of a paternal melodrama. Crucially, their successes are figured through Clough and Taylor's management of Nottingham Forest, a different team from Leeds, which removes traces of this father figure's dominance. Thus the archival images which frame the diegesis reflect the movement from a destructive to a therapeutic dynamic, with dependence transferred onto another man who offers an alternative paternal model to the authoritarian patriarch. Whereas *Mahler* and *Young Winston* depict, in different ways, damaging father figures, *The Damned United* constructs the homosocial bond as offering recuperation.

Upon its release, *The Damned United* received mixed reviews and grossed £2.4 million in the UK.<sup>22</sup> The film's success overseas was largely constrained by the cultural specificity of a film which focuses on a British football manager. British reviews took issue with the representation of Clough and the lack of psychological interrogation that characterises Peace's novel. A review for the BBC called *The Damned United* a "watchable, entertaining film, but not one that tries to explore the complexities of a controversial character" (Austin 2009). The implication here is that the film is attempting to avoid the depiction of Clough in Peace's novel which was considered controversial, but a review in the *Guardian* identifies the film's tone as different from the novel through the foregrounding of the relationship

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<sup>22</sup> See 'The UK box office in 2009', available from <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/official-statistics-release-calendar> [Accessed 8 February 2016].

between Clough and Taylor: “The tone is much sweeter and more conventionally funny and sympathetic. It’s really a tempestuous love story between two Northern Males: Clough, played by Michael Sheen, and that invaluable but horribly mistreated assistant Peter Taylor – a lovely, warm performance from Timothy Spall” (Bradshaw 2009). American reviews of the film were different, reflecting Clough’s lack of cultural resonance outside Britain. A.O. Scott, writing in the *New York Times*, foregrounded his own lack of knowledge about British football and Clough specifically. His review stresses the unusual characterisation in comparison to American filmic traditions:

Back in the old, pre-cable days, “Wide World of Sports” on ABC used to promise “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” That famous catchphrase contained an implicit recognition of a fact seldom acknowledged in America’s triumphalist sports culture, namely that failure can be as compelling as success, sometimes even more so. Maybe England is different. In any case, “*The Damned United*” is the rare sports movie that deals with – indeed positively relishes – humiliation and disappointment. (Scott 2009: 8)

Though Scott’s review is about sports cultures specifically, it expresses a much wider distinction in national cultures and in particular the representations in biopic films. This recalls the reception of *Scott of the Antarctic* in America and producer Michael Balcon’s response to it (see chapter three). Though Clough’s and Captain Scott’s achievements and cultural resonance differ dramatically, both narratives ultimately celebrate failures and these are pivotal to British biopic’s celebrations of national figures. However, Scott’s review similarly foregrounds humiliation, a different representation to Captain Scott’s expedition which was represented as a dignified defeat. The review similarly stresses the ambivalent relationship between Clough and Revie and suggests a complexity that was missing in the BBC review of the film, writing that Clough’s “obsession with Revie – a combination of rivalry

and idolatry, visceral loathing and disappointed love – turns out to be as much a driving force in his career as his own ambition” (Scott 2009: 8). Rather than the relationship between Clough and Taylor, the *New York Times* stresses the dynamic between Clough and Revie as a complex depiction that presents Clough’s motivations as ambiguous. However, neither recognises the importance of recuperation in these narratives.

*IMDb* user reviews were broadly favourable and two reviews from cinemagoers in the UK share an interest in Clough as a figure and the representation of the relationship between Clough and Taylor: “Cloughs [sic] family have apparently repudiated this work, which is a shame. It is broadly favourable with the wrinkles as foibles rather than damnable weaknesses” and “[t]he final reconciliation between Clough and Taylor is as brave a depiction of a male platonic relationship as has been screened for a very long time” (gary-444 2009). ‘Platonic’ evokes those relationships characterised by close intimacy and affection but not sexual desire, and ‘brave’ suggests the reviewer considered the final sequence, in which Clough apologises to Taylor and begs forgiveness, unusual. This sequence is discussed at length following the analysis of *Nowhere Boy* and *The King’s Speech*, which feature similarly affective sequences. Another review foregrounds how Clough is presented as a complicated figure and this contrasts with the BBC review, reaffirming the multitude of responses to biopics: “Clough is portrayed as a complex individual with the sort of charisma and wit, which may endear him to cinema-goers who have little knowledge of football or the man himself” and “The ultimate strength of the film is that the story manages to become more about friendship (the relationship between Brian and Peter Taylor) and the

destructiveness of vanity rather than how many football matches Clough won” (thependragon-1 2009).

American user reviews, though relatively rare, reveal different responses. Two user reviews identify *The Damned United* as an unusual biopic in how it depicts human flaws and male relationships. The first, like Scott’s review in the *New York Times*, foregrounds his lack of knowledge of Clough before stating: “I wasn’t expecting an affecting bromance when I went into see *The Damned United* and I was pleasantly surprised to find out that the theme of how a friendship can survive through fame, fortune and failure was what *The Damned United* was really about” (Michael McGonigle (mmcgonigle@philamuseum.org), 2010). The review positions *The Damned United* in relation to the contemporaneous ‘bromance’ cycle of Hollywood film production, consisting of films that centre on close male bonding and intimacy such as *I Love You, Man*. However, the viewer’s surprise at the representation of male bonding conveys how the British biopics have a different tradition of representation and a sustained preoccupation with male homosocial cultures and are not merely a recent cycle of male-centred comedies. A further American reviewer praises the film for its depiction of Clough as a complicated figure: “What makes this film so unusual is the uncompromising portrayal of that flawed coach with his ambition, ego, inferior complex, and, of course, his genius with football” (jdesando 2009). Clough is viewed as a multifaceted figure in this viewer’s summary, and the phrasing evokes the characterisation of T.E. Lawrence, a flawed egotistical figure driven by ambition.

The film adaption depicts Clough’s recuperation from the humiliating experience at Leeds, a recuperation not presented in Peace’s novel. Though *The Damned United* shows Clough’s egotism and self-destructiveness, it offers the figure of Peter

Taylor as a therapeutic agent. Rather than intense psychological probing of the manager's psyche, the film stresses the collaborative and therapeutic possibilities of their bond.

### ***Nowhere Boy* (2009)**

John Lennon is a highly significant figure in post-war popular culture, a position derived largely but not wholly from his role with the Beatles, the most successful band in the history of popular music. His later solo career and role as peace activist and critic of the Vietnam War, through to his assassination in December 1980 by Mark Chapman, are also crucial and located Lennon as a further pop martyr.

Lennon's life has frequently been the subject of films. *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) was a self-reflexive, 'behind the scenes' musical following a 'typical' day in the life of the real Beatles who play themselves. *Birth of the Beatles* (1979) depicted the band in the 1960s and *Backbeat* focused extensively on Lennon's relationship with Stuart Sutcliffe, his art school friend, in Hamburg when the group were based there. More recently, Lennon's assassination was reconstructed from the point of view of his killer in both *The Killing of John Lennon* (2006) and *Chapter 27* (2007).

*Nowhere Boy*, part of the pop biopic cycle that includes other films such as *Stoned* and *Telstar*, addresses Lennon's youth and childhood growing up in Liverpool. The script by Matt Greenhalgh was reportedly based on the biography *Imagine This: Growing up with my Brother John Lennon* (2007) written by Lennon's half-sister Julia Baird, though this was uncredited. Like the biography, *Nowhere Boy* depicts Lennon's early years before the Beatles met, his difficult adolescence and dysfunctional family, and his sources of inspiration and creativity.

This network of creative influences resonated with the policies of the ‘New Labour’ government between 1997 and 2010: ‘New Labour’ discourse stressed the critical role of the creative industries within the UK’s economy. The government promoted British creative industries “not only as an assertion of national identity but also as a key form of economic competition” (Schlesinger 2007: 378). A biopic of Lennon, a globally recognisable symbol of British cultural achievement and one whose continuing relevance is signified through reissues and compilations of music, could be seen to reflect the wider importance placed on Britain as a “creative hub” (ibid.). The film was released in December 2009 to coincide with the seventieth anniversary of his birth (9 October 1940) and the thirtieth of his death (8 December 1980) (Espoisto 2014: 195). Budgeted at £6.7 million (McLean 2009b), it received National Lottery funding of £1.2 million from the UK Film Council Premier Fund, and was produced through Ecosse Films in association with Film4, North West Vision, Lip Sync Productions and Aver Media.

*Nowhere Boy* details Lennon’s adolescent life in Liverpool before the Beatles, constructing the role of childhood experience in forming his later creativity as both co-founder of the Beatles and solo artist after the group disbanded in 1970. Though *Nowhere Boy* mainly concerns John Lennon’s relationship with his aunt and mother, the image of the damaging father persists in traumatic flashbacks. The film foregrounds the relationship of Lennon (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) with his estranged mother Julia (Anne-Marie Duff) and his aunt Mimi (Kristin Scott Thomas) who raises him. The film was directed by photographer and visual artist Sam Taylor-Johnson (formally Taylor-Wood), part of the Young British Artists movement of the 1990s. When asked what attracted her to the script, Taylor-Johnson emphasised the foregrounding of traumatised subjectivity as critical: “I think it was just mainly

that I had no idea of the story of his childhood. I had no sense of what he'd come from, or any of the traumas that he'd been through. So that made me feel that it was a story worth telling" (quoted in Handy 2010). The film emphasises the wounded subjectivity of the subject rather than his 'public' career as a musician. However, Paul McCartney (Thomas Brodie-Sangster) serves a critical function in the film, supporting Lennon through the trauma following his mother's death, and it is the bond between the supportive McCartney and the vulnerable Lennon which is considered here.

*Nowhere Boy* does not offer a familiar version of the homosocial as proposed by Sedgwick because the relationship between *women* is central to the creation of the homosocial bond between Lennon and McCartney. Rather than the triangulated relationship between male rivals over a woman (Sedgwick 1985: 21), in *Nowhere Boy* Mimi and Julia compete for the attentions of Lennon but the film stresses the women's relationship as sisters in addition to their respective relationships with Lennon. The possibilities of the homosocial bond emerge through the rivalry between Mimi and Julia who embody competing versions of femininity and class. These characters serve to convey how femininity was structured as sexually repressed and respectable (Mimi) or sexually promiscuous and disreputable (Julia) within 1950s Britain. Mimi is authoritarian and repressive, demanding Lennon wears his glasses and embarrassed by his truanting and swearing, while Julia's ability to inspire Lennon's creativity is hindered by her pathology as depressed housewife. Following Lennon's birthday party at Julia's house, the three discuss Lennon's upbringing, his absent father Alf, and why he lives with his aunt. This event has previously been hinted at in Lennon's fragmented dreams and flashbacks to Blackpool depicting a tearful child, Blackpool pier, and the sounds of waves.

The flashbacks build a sense of traumatic memory, but it is only explained fully when Mimi, Julia and Lennon argue and Mimi explains how his father left him and why Mimi assumed custody. Mimi details Julia's 'promiscuity', her love affair with a soldier while Alf was away at sea. When Alf returned, Julia refused reconciliation and Alf attempted to take the five year old John to New Zealand, but Mimi assumed custodianship. With this revelation, a distraught Julia argues that her 'illness' makes it difficult for her to perform as a mother, evoking the discourses that circulated around post-war familial dislocation, anxieties over female sexual promiscuity, motherhood and psychological care (see Geraghty 2000: 80). This is conveyed in the flashback of Alf, Julia and Mimi debating the status of the vulnerable John. Mimi and Julia represent different post-war choices for women, with Mimi's taking of John signifying post-war familial responsibility against Julia's desire for freedom, conveyed through her flirtations and visits to rock and roll cafés. However, the film stresses Julia's bi-polar condition, undiagnosed by doctors, and her condemnation by Mimi for refusing to perform as a responsible mother. Following an argument with Mimi about his truanting, the adolescent Lennon visits Julia at her house. She ignores his knocks and sits in the living room alone, the curtains are closed and her hair uncombed, in a dark, messy, domestic space. Her relationship with Lennon, allowing him to truant, her flirting and travelling to Blackpool suggest romantic rebellion against the trappings of the domestic space and a desire for sexual and social freedom.

To manage the transition from undirected rebellion into creative production, the film constructs McCartney as a vital support to Lennon. In addition to the triangulation of characters, *Nowhere Boy* is characterised by a homosocial group which polices appropriate attachments. McCartney's introduction offers an



alternative 'feminised' model of masculinity which differs from that of The Quarrymen, the 'skiffle' band Lennon creates with school friends. A binary representation of the two Beatles is constructed with Lennon an eroticised object of machismo and volatile rebellion against the feminised, suburban conformism of McCartney. This is signified through casting; Thomas Brodie-Sangster's McCartney is physically smaller in stature while Aaron Johnson's Lennon is tall, broad and muscular. This binary representation locates the softly-spoken McCartney as an alternative masculine role model to other male characters and his emotional maturity enables the physically (but not emotionally) mature Lennon to channel his frustration into creative production.

Following The Quarrymen's performance at a fête in July 1957, McCartney and Lennon are introduced. The group share Elvis-inspired hair-styles, and drink with their lumberjack checked shirts rolled to the elbow, signifying their adoption of working-class masculine traits mediated through Elvis Presley. McCartney's difference is marked specifically through his smaller, slender build but also through costume; a bright white suit jacket, a flower in the breast pocket and a hair-style combed to the side that falls onto his forehead in contrast to the band's distinctive Elvis quiffs. The potential threat which McCartney poses to this group's conception of masculinity is signified through their homosocial mockery of his appearance, laughter at the wearing of a flower and the references to masturbation as a useful exercise to improve guitar playing ("strengthens the wrist muscles" Lennon jokes). However, the quiff conveys their idolisation of a male icon and the attention the group have paid to meticulously replicating Elvis' appearance, an admiration and attention to the details of the male body which contradict the overt macho display of drinking and the bodily emphasis signified through rolled sleeves.

Earlier sequences have depicted Lennon and Julia viewing newsreel footage of an Elvis concert at the cinema in Blackpool. Following this sequence in which Lennon watches his idol, Lennon is depicted carefully replicating the hair-style in the bathroom mirror. Elvis' gyrating hips and open display of male sexuality was viewed as a source of anxiety (Horrocks 1995: 54). Though his appeal was traditionally understood to be to young girls, his music was also popular with men and Elvis was the subject of voyeuristic looking. The anxieties over the sexualised male body positioned as a spectacle, as something to be admired and contemplated by both men and women, could be understood as an instance of homosexual panic (Sedgwick 1985: 89). In *Nowhere Boy*, later scenes depict Lennon jokingly asking McCartney if he has "a ticket for the show" as he leaves the toilet, insinuating that McCartney wishes to look at his penis. The heterosexuality of the close male group, whose physical intimacy is signified through the sharing of cigarettes and meetings staged in the school toilets, is maintained through homosocial mockery. The scene also teases out a contradiction: the criticism of McCartney's appearance as feminine reasserts how Lennon and the band study the appearance of men, as in the carefully replicated and heavily stylised haircuts. The solidarity between group members is maintained through a shared appearance modelled on Elvis, it is a solidarity located as heterosexual through self-governance and taunting of traits which could be conceived as homosexual. Lennon is domineering; as band leader he initially dismisses McCartney to reassert authority over the group, who are impressed by McCartney's superior guitar-playing ability, which draws Lennon into a homosocial rivalry with McCartney, manifested through the attention of Julia. McCartney's guitar skill is made evident at his informal audition for the band at the fête, and later Lennon watches uncomfortably as Julia enjoys both his public

performances and a private song at a birthday party she organises for her son. On both occasions reaction shots foreground Lennon's unease with McCartney as the focus of Julia's attention.

In *Nowhere Boy* two women compete over Lennon, but the homosocial dynamic with McCartney provides the necessary support for him, combining the creativity of the unstable Julia with a more nuanced stability than Mimi can provide. Julia's death is constructed as crucial in securing their bond. Prior to the death, sequences depict Lennon and McCartney's shared creative production and discussion of music, but it is not through creative practice that their homosocial bond is secured. It occurs in a sequence at Mimi's house while the pair practice on their guitars. McCartney informs Lennon that his own mother has died. At Julia's house, at a party organised for Lennon, he arrives late and witnesses McCartney playing "Love Me Tender", an Elvis song, on the guitar which McCartney once played for his own mother. The sequence articulates how McCartney has channelled the traumatic passing of his mother through creative production and suggests that Lennon must reject destructive rebellion in favour of this, which is not possible while Julia is still alive. Julia's death in a car accident strengthens the narrative parallels between the men. The bond is secured at Julia's funeral through the mutual experience of familial loss and traumatic memory. Lennon flees the wake after head-butting his friend Pete Shotton (John Bolt) but is pursued by McCartney. First McCartney invites Lennon to hit him which Lennon does, but Lennon then apologises and helps McCartney to his feet and embraces him. As the pair embraces, Lennon tearfully remarks that his mother is not coming back and McCartney responds empathetically "I know".

This representation is bound together in the subsequent scene in which the band record “In Spite of all the Danger”, following the death of Julia. The song is intercut with footage of Lennon and Julia dancing in her brightly lit living room, light which is located outside and streaming through the windows. Though this scene can be identified as a flashback, as previously scenes have shown the pair within the living room, the bright light pouring through the windows marks it as a fantasy constructed in Lennon’s mind in the present, rather than being firmly located as a past event. The pair move to the rhythm of the music performed by Lennon in the studio in the present and thus his memories of his mother are mediated through the music. A close-up of Lennon shows him wincing and closing his eyes while continuing to play the guitar, a detail which foregrounds the therapeutic possibility of creativity.

The depiction of McCartney as caring, supportive and stable is configured through the relationships between Lennon and his wider family. The narrative trajectory from rebellion to rehabilitation can be read in the film’s trajectory of embraces: first, Lennon embraces Uncle George who has given him a harmonica; following George’s death Lennon embraces Mimi and she doesn’t reciprocate; Julia subsequently embraces Lennon when he surprises her at her house. Julia’s ‘open’ emotion and interest in music aligns her further with George rather than Mimi. However, like George, Julia dies. These characters are defined by instability. The embrace with McCartney marks Lennon’s successful move from destructive rebellion into positive masculinised cultural production. Significantly, the final scene shows Mimi embracing Lennon before he leaves for Hamburg, their relationship secured only by the rehabilitation Lennon experiences through McCartney’s support after the loss of Julia. The film thus reiterates the myth of the

intense but musically productive rivalry between Lennon and McCartney (see Doggett 2009) but argues that without Julia and her death The Beatles would not have come into being.

There is also an overt Oedipal thread to this narrative through the connotations of incest in the relationship between Lennon and Julia (see Esposito 2014: 204). This lends itself to Freudian readings as George's death and Lennon's meeting Julia incite an Oedipal crisis motivated by sexual desire for Julia and rivalry with the different 'father' figures, Mimi and Bobby, Julia's common-law husband. The foregrounding of oral satisfaction, Julia's lipstick, smoking, incessant kissing and feeding of cakes into Lennon's mouth, articulates an excessive maternal nurturing that connotes erotic pleasure. The pair's physical closeness, her sexual frankness and flirtation with men in cafés, construct her as a desired, but transgressive, erotic object. Both Bobby and Mimi attempt to disrupt the relationship: the former insists Lennon leaves their house and Lennon does so after hearing Bobby and Julia having sex. Mimi punishes Lennon, selling his guitar and insisting he returns to her house and leave Julia. Mimi's refusal to embrace Lennon initially situates her as an emotionally absent, authoritarian surrogate father-figure.

An Oedipal reading requires Lennon to transfer these attachments to a female outside the family to achieve stability and McCartney encourages Lennon to separate Julia from their band while revealing his own separation from his mother after her death. McCartney's gentle guidance, instructing Lennon to make this transition himself, contrasts with the sanctions imposed by Mimi. However, he also mediates the role played by Julia, providing the creative channels and the positive male role model following George's death. The tearful embrace between Lennon and McCartney at Julia's funeral thus serves to affirm the successful transition

from sexual desire for the mother to identification with the father. The use of Lennon's song "Mother" in the credits reaffirms the film's depiction in which Lennon is encouraged by McCartney to channel his traumas through music. The music signals the relinquishing of desire to possess the mother. The lyrics to that song, which read: "Mother, you had me/ But I never had you/ I wanted you/ But you didn't want me/ So I/ I just got to tell you/ Goodbye/ Goodbye" are used in this context to reaffirm the film's overarching message, that Lennon and McCartney shared a fundamental bond through maternal loss and overcoming that trauma through creative production.

*Nowhere Boy* proposed a different construction of Lennon from the earlier *Backbeat*. In the latter, Lennon is viewed primarily from the perspective of his friend Stuart Sutcliffe and the film focuses on the deterioration of their relationship following Sutcliffe's meeting with Astrid Kirchherr. In contrast, *Nowhere Boy* constructs the developing relationship between Lennon and McCartney and suggests that, without the rehabilitative potential which McCartney offers, Lennon would be consigned to a life of undirected rebellion and self-destruction.

*Nowhere Boy* received positive reviews and was popular at the box-office, reportedly making \$8 million worldwide (Dawtre 2011a). However, some reviews felt Lennon's inspiration and creative influences were excluded: "rather than dwelling on the unique circumstances that produced a musical genius, it's an affecting movie about coming of age and leaving home, and about the radical changes in British life since the Second World War" (French 2009b: 13). This review, taken from the *Observer*, considers *Nowhere Boy* as a representation of the socio-economic changes that occurred in British society during the 1950s and 1960s, as discussed in relation to *The Tommy Steele Story* (see chapter three).

Whereas that film was released as these ‘radical changes’ were taking place, *Nowhere Boy* and other biopics including *Stoned* and *Telstar* examine the period retrospectively and position the late 1950s and 1960s as a period of British creative accomplishment. Other reviews displayed different perspectives and, though Lennon is a globally recognised figure, some American reviews suggested that the film should have stressed Lennon’s later achievements. *Variety*’s review reflected that “the pic assumes perhaps too much that viewers will know where the story is headed after the final credits roll, concentrating wholly as it does on what shaped Lennon rather than what he achieved” (Felperin 2009). Other reviewers centred on the nature of these character-shaping instances within the film. The *Sunday Times* review took issue with “the film’s suggestion that the mother drama produced the demons that produced the great Lennon who produced the Beatles”, arguing that “It’s a romantic notion of the artist making wonderful things from his wounds, and you could argue that it was only after the Beatles split, and Lennon wrote songs such as *Mother*, which is used in the end credits, that the *Mimi v Mum* drama really surfaced” (Landesman 2009: 3). This review suggests that tropes of the suffering genius, in which creativity is linked to personal experience and suffering, are manifested in the film and produce an idealized view of Lennon’s musical origins. However, the *New York Times* wrote “The film’s best and boldest move is how it brings maternal love and sexual desire into play with artistic longing and youthful ambition” (Dargis 2010: 12).

Audience responses to the film were mixed. An Australian reviewer was critical of the film’s focus on Lennon’s life prior to the Beatles, a period the writer perceives as less interesting than Lennon’s later career:

I suspect many of this film's flaws come from the film being based on a single memoir by one person who knew only one aspect of the subject's life. This is a common flaw with celebrity memoirs and biopics, but it's an especially major flaw when the memoir deals [with] one of the least interesting aspects of one of the least interesting periods in his life. (gut-6 2010)

This statement reaffirms that audiences have significant investments in how public figures are depicted, and their responses are shaped by their own prior knowledge.

However, the viewer also expresses a more widespread distrust of biopics, suggesting they are biased and one-sided and cannot offer multiple perspectives.

Other reviews on *IMDb* underscore the investments made by people in biopic subjects and take issue with their representations. An American user comments on the final sequence:

The film's scenarists would like us to believe that the climactic scene where he assaults McCartney, is where he exorcises his demons and achieves his catharsis (recall that he hugs McCartney afterward and apologises). It's all cheap melodrama which never happened and the type of made up incident which Lennon would have also rejected had he been around to see the movie. (Turfseer 2011)

It is significant that this viewer adopts popular psychoanalytical terminology to discuss the sequence. Biography and, by extension, biopics have a privileged relationship to psychoanalysis and this sequence has some similarity to the conclusion of *The Damned United* in which the embrace between men signals the wounded man's recuperation.

An American *IMDb* user claims that Taylor-Johnson, Greengalgh's script, and the strength of the actors' performance created a film:

that is very different than a lot of films that focus on the lives of renown [sic] figures in history. They do this by focusing a narrow period of time allowing them to delve deep into the plot and story development giving the audience time to take in the entirety of the story, instead of stretching the film over a twenty plus year period of time. (jonnyhavey 2010)



Though the *Variety* review identified this as a flaw, this viewer praised the short time period the film depicts and claims this is unusual for biopics. Though the cradle-to-the-grave narrative arc is rare (see chapter five) biopics generally focus on a larger period of time. Films following the ‘Great Man’ trajectory, such as *Michael Collins* and *Gandhi*, use flashbacks to condense narratives which move through extended periods of time. These films focus on ‘public’ careers and this viewer suggests that, as in *The Queen*, focusing on a shorter period allows for greater depth of characterisation. The film’s reception conveys the passionate investment which individuals make in a heavily mythologised figure. While the majority of reviews and user reviews focused on Lennon’s relationship with Julia, the cathartic potential of Lennon and McCartney’s relationship was also identified as crucial, and I return to this after considering *The King’s Speech*.

### ***The King’s Speech* (2010)**

*The King’s Speech* is a third contemporary biopic which constructs a wounded subject rehabilitated through a supportive homosocial bond. The film concentrates on the relationship between Prince Albert, the Duke of York, or ‘Bertie’ (Colin Firth), and his Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush). It depicts the Duke’s struggles with a stammer and his unexpected ascent to the throne as King George VI after his brother, Edward VIII, abdicates on 11 December 1936 in order to marry the American divorcée Wallis Simpson. It concludes with the new King’s successful radio address to Britain and the Empire following the declaration of war with Nazi Germany in 1939. *The King’s Speech* was produced by See-Saw Films, the Weinstein Company and Bedlam Productions with support through the UK Film Council. Despite costing a modest \$14 million, *The King’s Speech*

grossed over \$400 million worldwide, making it the most successful independent British film in history (Pulver and Brooks 2011). The film also won four Academy Awards, including the Best Picture award previously given to other British biopics including *Gandhi* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. It exemplifies the enduring global appeal of the British 'monarchy' film alongside other notable successes including *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, *Victoria the Great*, *Elizabeth*, *The Queen* and *The Young Victoria*.

Cultural memories of George VI are consolidated around his image as a monarch who combated both shyness and a chronic stammer to reign as King from 1936 until his death from coronary thrombosis in 1952 at the age of 56. Whereas Edward VIII's abdication constructed him as an irresponsible figure, George VI, with his two daughters Elizabeth and Margaret, was invested with family values. He was similarly invested with notions of duty and commitment. The family's continued residency in Buckingham Palace during the war (the palace was bombed by the German Luftwaffe), further symbolised a sense of British resolve and resilience. The relationship between George VI or 'Bertie' and Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, had previously been depicted in the television film *Bertie and Elizabeth* (ITV 2002). In *The King's Speech* the key focus is on the relationship between the King and Logue. The comments by director Tom Hooper, quoted in the introduction, exemplify how producers and directors have chosen to represent male figures as damaged, vulnerable and wounded. Hooper, describing archival footage of George VI speaking at the 1938 Glasgow Empire exhibition, commented on the affective appeal of viewing a man who appeared to be drowning under the burden of expectation and his affliction. Moreover, the film equally charts a much larger

vulnerability, that of the British monarchy during the period of Edward VIII's abdication in 1936.

The film, depicting the crisis of the royal family in the 1930s and George VI's personal crisis, was produced after *The Queen*, which constructed the present monarch in the aftermath of the death of Princess Diana in 1997 (see chapter three). This also restaged a crisis in which the monarch's reputation and relationship with the British public were significantly strained, suggesting a recent shift in the royal film towards an intimate examination of the emotional state of the monarchy and a pronounced vulnerability. This 'vulnerability' also informs the representation of George VI in *The King's Speech* and his fraught relationship with his father and brother.

*The King's Speech* is a film which represents life behind palace doors as one of domineering patriarchs and inter-sibling conflict, coupled with moments of heightened, exteriorised emotion, and evokes a melodramatic structure in which the Duke must move beyond the influence of his father and brother to become King and successfully reign over Britain during war as George VI. Various unusual framing and staging strategies convey Bertie's emotional oppression. Confinement is evoked repeatedly and his instability is conveyed through his frequent outbursts of aggression. The opening sequence, in which Bertie is introduced as the Duke of York and gives the closing speech at the Empire exhibition in Wembley London, 1925, begins with the duke standing with his head lowered and extreme close-ups of his mouth as he quietly practices the words of the speech. Following Edward's abdication, Bertie arrives at St James Palace in 1936 to meet the assembled Accession Council which agrees his succession. As Bertie paces outside the room where the Council is waiting and then enters, the camera follows him closely. The

camera turns with him as he faces them, but then slowly directs the focus upwards at the high ceilings. The room, with its curved golden balconies encircled with large portraits of previous monarchs, could have been framed through the “pictorialist” style of camerawork typical of heritage filmmaking to showcase the splendour of period settings and props (Higson 2003: 39). However, because the camera is placed so closely to Bertie as he enters, this setting becomes daunting and threatening. This is further emphasised by filming the scene from a second floor balcony, so that Bertie appears dwarfed by his surroundings, and his isolation is signified through a low-angle fish-eye lens that depicts the council in front of the Duke as he struggles to address them.

*The King's Speech* mobilises a specific father-son dynamic through early scenes in which Bertie's father, George V, is still alive and which establish the father's authority over the son. King George V (Michael Gambon) finishes a radio transmission in Windsor Castle and instructs Bertie to replicate the Christmas broadcast in preparation for the role of King should Edward (Guy Pearce) abdicate. The camera frames Bertie trying to speak and the sense of confinement is signified through *mise-en-scène* and framing; the camera frames the Duke sitting behind a desk but in the foreground are three microphones, one before him and a further microphone on either side. The Duke is thus surrounded by microphones, and those at either side are taller, reaching his shoulders. In this practice radio address, orchestrated by his father, the role of the father in this oppression is foregrounded. Bertie's attempt to speak is ruptured by aggressive close-ups of the then present king's reaction as he becomes increasingly enraged and frustrated by Bertie's stammer. The arrangement of shots establishes the dysfunctional dynamic: the image of the son struggling with his stammer and looking away from the King's

gaze, the sudden cut away to the King's volatile reaction as he consistently interrupts the attempt. Bertie's crisis is represented through the framing and editing of images in which the authoritarian father is central: he blocks the son's attempt to speak as both a future king but also as a survivor of a bullying father.

*The King's Speech* also constructs the figure of a male friend as critical in rehabilitating a wounded subject who is damaged by a father-figure. As in other biopics, tokens portray the symbolic exchange of male intimacy. In *The King's Speech*, Logue places a bet with Bertie that he can cure his stammer, Bertie subsequently keeps the shilling from Logue in his pocket, before later returning it to Logue. This evokes the significance of receiving the King's shilling when enlisting in the armed forces. Though the exchange signifies the unequal relationship between monarch and commoner, it also signifies devotion and loyalty. The exchange of tokens such as gifts and food are often used to visually evoke close male friendships and *The King's Speech* depicts certain sequences through representational strategies that evoke the British sit-com. These centre on the fear of being caught with the other man and unease in the domestic space. Furthermore, it involves one man's infiltrating the other's home. Following the scene in which Bertie's fear of public speaking culminates in his breaking down in tears and being comforted by Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), he arrives at Logue's home to apologise for arguing with him. Crucially, the Queen sits for tea in the dining room while the two men discuss the King's anxieties in the adjacent living room.

The staging and *mise-en-scène* of rooms resonate with the homosocial in *The Damned United*; it figures the necessity of the female presence to secure the friendship as heterosexual men engaged in a homosocial relationship rather than a homosexual one. However, it similarly foregrounds that this male bond is more

nurturing and 'natural' than bonds shared with women. While Bertie has the therapy session in Logue's living room, his wife, Elizabeth, waits in the adjoining dining room. When Logue's wife Myrtle (Jennifer Ehle) returns to the house earlier than expected, an unsettled Logue fears his wife will be overawed to discover the Queen of England in her dining room. The two men lurk out of view of the door joining the two rooms. Logue informs the King "I haven't told her about us", invoking their homosocial affair as both men share the frame with Logue leaning against the wall beside the door. This ambiguity generates humour which exposes the mechanics of the homosocial; it can be expressed because of the female characters outside the room who signify heteronormative relationships while at the same time reaffirming close homosocial attachments. As in *Pierrepont*, the humour generated also evokes the male double act dynamic which deliberately raises sexual ambiguity through performance. The scene continues with the camera positioned further back to underscore that both men share the far right of the frame, with the other half dominated by the patterned wallpaper of Logue's front room. The composition is different but the humour resembles that in *The Damned United* and the ambiguity presented there. Their roles temporarily reversed, Bertie informs Logue that he should overcome his fear of Myrtle. As they whisper about their wives' reactions, the sense of collusion mirrors the secretive discussion between Clough and Taylor. The wives are placed in the next room and operate on the margins of the male couple, allowing intimate male friendships to exist while asserting the men's heterosexuality. Again there is an exchange of looks, as Logue's eyes mirror those of Clough by moving from the other man to the door that separates them from the women. Both films construct homosocial relationships where women are present but marginalised.

Each film locates relationships with women as simultaneously necessary but unfulfilling and each evokes a homosocial bond. Logue's comment to Bertie, "I haven't told her about us", as Myrtle returns unexpectedly, and the whispered conversation between Clough and Taylor who anxiously look around for their wives, both suggest collusion and secretive male bonds. In each, the homosocial is rendered comedic, the fear of the wife and the gestures which signify male discomfort in domestic spaces evoke the 'henpecked' husband. The whispering and Logue's unease equally construct domestic spaces as prison-like structures for men that are dominated by women. These women connote the "domestic dragon" of British sitcom and "[i]t is no coincidence that the celebration of [male] eccentricity is often at its most vigorous in the absence of women" (Gray 1994: 83). Throughout the film, Logue consistently challenges the King's sovereign authority, addressing him by the nickname 'Bertie', normally reserved for members of the royal family and refusing to perform their sessions at the palace and insisting the king travels to Logue's own offices. The return of Myrtle, and Logue's instant transformation into uncertainty, signals a fear of Myrtle and a crumbling of that former confidence. The scene is rendered comedic by suggesting that Myrtle is the one authority Logue refuses to challenge. Both scenes in *The Damned United* and *The King's Speech* provide a comedic address in foregrounding the preference for homosocial attachments over heterosexual couplings, marriage and domesticity. These attachments are unrestrained, where men can be 'themselves' in freedom away from the authority of the controlling, dominating wife.

*The King's Speech* presents the possibility of recovery for Bertie only after the death of King George V when Bertie travels to Logue's offices. Again the focus of the conversation is Bertie's stammer but the physical distance between figures is

reduced which generates a sense of intimacy lacking in the earlier scene between father and son. The domineering King looms over Bertie as he practices his address, whereas both figures in this later scene sit and occupy the same frame as they converse. There is a difference between the father's and Logue's delivery: Logue gently presses Bertie for answers whereas King George demands a response. Equality between Logue and Bertie is established through the staging of the actors who turn to address one other, unlike the domineering father who stands facing Bertie directly. Bertie is depicted handling the model planes owned by Logue's children, commenting on how he was forced to follow his own father's hobby of stamp-collecting when he preferred model planes. Logue allows Bertie to continue building the plane while prompting him to describe his upbringing, being bullied by his domineering father who shouts at him to speak properly, an abusive nanny, and the death of his brother Prince John from epilepsy.

After Bertie tells Logue about his father's aggressive approach, the film depicts how this bond with a male peer recuperates Bertie from the father's influence. First, when preparing for Bertie's coronation at Westminster Abbey, Logue sits daringly on the throne in a deliberately provocative act to draw out Bertie's assertiveness in a reversal to the earlier sequence in which his father had berated him. Prior to the crucial war time speech, Logue instructs Bertie to disregard the special coin within his pocket which is also adorned with the image of George V. Logue tells Bertie "you don't have to carry him around in your pocket", an instruction that releases Bertie from the burden of the father and frees him to undergo the speech. He is only released from the bonds of the father through the support of the male peer.



*The King's Speech* received positive reviews and critics praised the film for how the filmic approach was both respectful and irreverent at different moments. The *Sight and Sound* review summarised it thus:

In its handling of royalty, *The King's Speech* neatly has it both ways. We're given the mystique of the king's figurehead position and the danger (especially at the outbreak of war) of this emblematic role being undermined by his crippling stammer ... At the same time, David Seidler's screenplay takes mischievous glee in exposing the absurdities of royal protocol ... This dual attitude – at once reverential and disrespectful – aligns Tom Hooper's film with John Madden's *Mrs Brown* (1997), which likewise featured a plainspoken, non-English outsider coming to the aid of a psychologically distressed royal. (Kemp 2011: 62)

The reviewer identifies the two approaches that have been adopted to representing British royalty throughout the history of British production. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) was irreverent whereas *Victoria the Great* (1937) was reverential. Though the review identifies *Mrs Brown* as a key precursor, the tendency to blend the two is more pervasive. *The Queen* was a recent example of these two attitudes to the monarchy being mixed successfully, in which Elizabeth II is depicted in crisis following the death of Princess Diana but the film depicts the monarch adapting to the needs of the populace (see Chapter Three). The unprecedented global success of *The King's Speech* led to a series of commentaries and blogs. Articles considered the film's 'national significance', the status of the contemporary monarchy, and the film's popularity in America. In the commentary pages of the *Guardian*, Jonathan Freedland argued:

*The King's Speech* suggests that in today's era the royals can best win our affections in the manner favoured by so many celebrities - by revealing their struggles against adversity. So we warm to "Bertie" when we learn of his cold, abusive childhood - beaten because he was lefthanded, starved by a malevolent nanny. Thus the film extends the Dianification of the monarchy back two generations, asking us to hail George VI not for his majesty, but for his vulnerability. (Freedland 2011: 29)

This places the representation of the monarchy within a contemporary celebrity culture in which traumatic subjectivity is central. The revelations of ‘hidden’ traumas are a key characteristic of celebrity memoirs, such as *Jordan: Pushed to the Limit* (2009), the memoir of glamour model Katie Price, and *Jade Goody: Story of a Survivor* (Simpson 2006), a biography of Big Brother contestant Jade Goody. *The King’s Speech* is mapped onto this discourse and this is reaffirmed in the reference to the ‘Dianification’ of royalty, connoting the period following the death of Princess Diana that was characterised by a collective mourning circulated through the media and that cemented Diana’s status as tragic victim and the royal family as a component of contemporary celebrity culture.

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Andrew Lowry considers the popularity of films such as *The Queen* and *The King’s Speech* and why they are successful both domestically and internationally:

The Windsors’ Thirties may be airbrushed, but in the contrasting figures of George V and Edward VIII, being Britain’s head of state looks at times to be little more than a vehicle of institutionalised emotional violence. Being a king is not suggested as a life of fantastic ease and privilege, but as a burden requiring superhuman stoicism. (Lowry 2011: 21)

The article proceeds to summarise how the film’s appeal is in the diversity of meanings it makes accessible to audiences:

*The King’s Speech* is a fantastically skillful piece, cleverly being all things to most people. We have the traumatised monarch who must reluctantly bear a nation on his shoulders when he’d rather be harrasing grouse - but we also have the noble and virtuous figurehead who articulates an Empire’s anxiety, with all his extended family’s less savoury elements swept under the carpet. Monarchists who want their divinely-appointed representative to deftly rise to the occasion are satisfied - but so too are those

who'd rather he suffered for his fame and luxury. Is it any wonder it's still selling out cinemas? (Lowry 2011: 21)

There was similarly a variety of responses expressed by the general public in letters and user reviews. A letter submitted to the *Western Gazette* said: "You really felt as if you were in a particular time and a particular place. What I also liked about it was the fact that it showed the whole royal family coming together. I will probably go and see it again because I enjoyed it so much" (Bareham 2011: 44). A Scottish *IMDb* user conveyed a similar perspective and this evokes the reaction to *Victoria the Great* discussed in Chapter Four, centring on how the images of the monarchy have the capacity to instil a sense of patriotism. The review states: "If it sweeps the award ceremonies it'll probably be down to the merit and even this republican film goer was swept up in the story. In fact it made me proud to be British" (Theo Robertson 2011).

User reviews emphasised the humanising approach and the depiction of traumatised subjectivity:

It is a very touching, and quite inspiring story about a man, psychologically scarred, and trapped in a situation from which he could have no escape and facing it with immense courage. It so happens that he was royal, and that was a large part of his problem - but the film isn't so much about royalty as a human story. (Colinrocks 2010)

American reviews expressed similar sentiments while foregrounding their own perplexity with the significance of monarchical traditions and institutions: "As an American I find the concept of a monarchy bewildering ... That being said, I do find the stories of those trapped in this anachronistic time warp fascinating at times ... This film is the intersection of great personal pain, international upheaval, and a family that is ceremoniously dysfunctional" (hughman55 2011). A further American viewer expressed their preference for royal spectacle over narrative: "I

would have liked to see a little more royal pomp and fanfare, for example, like the majesties donning crowns and scepters and parading through town” (OllieSuave-007 2015). As in the *New York Times* review of *Beau Brummell*, and the approach to the biopic by Herbert Wilcox and Hal Wallis, the stress on pageantry remains a pleasure for audiences and in particular Americans.

Some viewers debated the film’s aesthetics and drew on wider film practices and traditions. A UK reviewer wrote that the director, Tom Hooper:

has clearly tried to make a ‘quality film’ here by ticking all the boxes designed to please a sizable adult audience that understandably dislikes contemporary Hollywood movies aimed at teenage boys. The film is peppered with some English-weather-derived atmospheric exterior shots familiar from countless BBC period dramas. (Spiked! spike-online.com 2012)

This user review positions *The King’s Speech* within a distinctly British filmmaking tradition, the ‘quality’ film and middlebrow cinema characterised by literary adaptations. However, this is perceived negatively as an unadventurous replication of a filmmaking tradition. A different viewer, based in the UK, stresses the visual style and expresses that the close up camerawork is critical, a device discussed in the introduction to this thesis in reference to its democratising potential and capacity to foreground male vulnerability. The viewer identifies *The King’s Speech* as unusual in its privileging of masculine emotion and its avoidance of the pictorial aesthetic associated with heritage filmmaking:

What struck me almost instantly about the film was the unique visual style. Not unique to film in general but to a genre that usually loves to linger on pretty dresses rather than trying to conjure up emotions through clever camera-work. Cinematographer Danny Cohen seems to trap Albert in a tight box, shooting up close and watching Firth twitch every muscle in his face ... you get a feel of Albert’s inner struggle and the overbearing pressure that is quickly building up on top of him. (tomgillespie2002 2011)

This final review reiterates that a central source of pleasure for audiences was the image of a 'wounded' King's struggle and triumph over adversity. However, what is of equal importance is the sense of rehabilitation that characterises this biopic and *The Damned United* and *Nowhere Boy*. This chapter now examines the key sequence in each film where this rehabilitation is depicted.

### **Homosocial Recuperation**

The narrative trajectory of *Nowhere Boy*, *The Damned United* and *The King's Speech* is marked by the recuperative power invested in the male friend. Though *Beau Brummel* represents the rehabilitation of the Prince Regent through Brummel, it lacks the overt display of emotional intimacy and trauma which characterises contemporary representations of homosocial recoveries. In these biopics tears are used to underscore sincerity of emotion by a character who represses traumatic events. *Nowhere Boy* emphasises male emotionality between John Lennon and Paul McCartney as the tearful Lennon is supported and embraced by McCartney at his mother's wake. Having fled the wake, Lennon is pursued by McCartney, who is first hit in the face by Lennon, before being lifted onto his feet and the pair embrace closely, with the camera closely circling the pair who are both crying. This brief action conveys Lennon's transition from destructive, violent rebellion to emotional maturity. Lennon says "I was just getting to know her. She's never coming back" and McCartney replies "No. No she's not", the dialogue accompanied with a slowly building score. The sequence concludes with a long shot of the pair rocking as they embrace.

In *The King's Speech* the source of the outburst is tied to the pressure of replacing the father. Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, enters a palace room where 'Bertie' is

seated at a desk familiarising himself with state papers. He claims he cannot understand them and Elizabeth leans over the chair behind Bertie, rubbing his shoulder. Then, in a medium shot from the front which shows Bertie at the desk and Elizabeth leaning on him, the camera slowly moves in on the pair, as Bertie, overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being King and the public-speaking it entails, begins to cry. A piano score enters the soundtrack as he sobs and repeatedly states “I’m not a king”, the scene cutting from this image only when the pair fill the frame of the moving camera. Though Bertie’s tears and emotional outburst in the presence of Elizabeth indicate exteriorised expression, she concludes that the Duke has ‘mechanical problems’ whereas Logue recognises that they are psychological. The film depicts Logue enquiring into the Duke’s childhood, the teasing and traumatic memories and it is this which identifies Logue as a necessary agent in Bertie’s recuperation. Bertie visits Logue’s office following the death of his father, an event which, coupled with his brother Edward’s abdication, will see Bertie crowned the King. Rather than outbursts of anger, or dismissal, Logue probes Bertie’s memories and prompts him to discuss them. The scene articulates the ‘talking cure’ of psychoanalysis, in which the subject reveals the various traumas he suffered as a child. It is the sequence in which this trauma is verbally expressed to Logue which most clearly marks Bertie’s traumatised subjectivity, and the possibility of recovery.

These sequences adapt audio and visual conventions associated with the ‘feminised’ genre of melodrama to appeal to audience feeling, with an emphasis on human drama, emotionality and the affective appeal of a non-diegetic score to foreground each subject’s dilemma. In *The Damned United*, though Clough is not crying, the sequence in which he is reunited with Taylor, similarly evokes

melodrama. Clough has been sacked as manager of Leeds United after just forty-four days and travels to Taylor's house in Brighton where Taylor is outside, gardening. Taylor orders Clough to beg on his hands and knees and Clough does so, apologising to Taylor and requesting their reconciliation as a managerial partnership. Both Clough's and Bertie's crises are figured through the inability to replicate the male figure whom each subject will or has replaced and mark a shift in the narrative trajectory towards recuperation rather than victimisation.

Both *Nowhere Boy* and *The Damned United* allude in their endings to all-male 'marriages' – Lennon leaves Liverpool for Hamburg with McCartney and the Beatles, while the closing newsreel footage of *The Damned United* depicts the managerial 'marriage' shared by Clough and Taylor with the Nottingham Forest football team. These friendships form the support typically associated with family. However, here the normative familial dynamic of wife and children is dismissed in favour of homosocial couplings in the professional spheres of music production and football management. In the closing images of *The King's Speech*, George VI addresses the crowds at Buckingham Palace after Logue has successfully navigated him through the wartime speech. As he waves, accompanied by Elizabeth and his two daughters, the camera lingers on Logue who observes silently in the background, the sole recipient of the King's traumatic confession. It is through the 'revelation' scene dramatised in each film that each subject adopts a different type of masculinity from that of the male figure to whom they have compared themselves. In each scene it is the sincerity of each man which invites the audience's identification, and it is this exteriorised expression of male emotionality which most clearly resonates with the melodramatic address. The affective, confessional scenes across these contemporary films depict men seeking

exoneration through the revelation of a secret to a male listener. Men are separated from other characters and the revelation and support occur while the couple are alone.

When asked about the historical accuracy of the sequence in which Lennon and McCartney embrace, Sam Taylor-Johnson stated:

The screenwriter [Matt Greenhalgh] had that in there because he really felt that he needed to pull John and Paul together at some point, so that was there was to try and create that whole scene of them recognizing both of them have been through this big loss. There are obviously scenes in there that are for dramatic purpose. (quoted in Handy 2010)

This suggests that the filmmakers wanted to foreground male bonding and intimacy as a response to traumatic memory and loss. Tom Hooper, who directed both *The Damned United* and *The King's Speech* spoke of the role these male friendships play in the films and his investment in this type of representation:

I seem to be persistently interested in making films about the power of collaboration ... You can be great only by opening yourself to the greatness of others. *The Damned United* is a hubristic narrative about Cloughie realising he's not great without Peter Taylor. In *The King's Speech*, it's about opening himself to the friendship of Lionel. (quoted in Shoard 2011).

*Scott of the Antarctic* was similarly concerned with collaboration between the homosocial unit of explorers led by Scott, and the comments from both Taylor-Johnson and Hooper reiterate a key characteristic of the British biopic: rather than stressing the individual, such as through the 'Great Man' approach, British biopics emphasise homosocial cultures and close male bonds. This sense of exteriorised male expression, of pulling together and "opening" up to another man, is important in all three films, and can be mapped onto further contemporary discourses that centre on the emergence of a 'therapeutic' culture.



## Contextualising the Therapeutic Dynamic

This proliferation of male tears in biopics is compatible with wider discourses of masculinity present within contemporary British popular culture. An enduring image of male emotion remains footballer Paul Gascoigne's tears in the 1990 World Cup semi-final match between England and Germany. Gascoigne cried on the pitch having received a yellow card which suspended him should England have reached the final. The sequence was widely circulated and debated in news media and parodied repeatedly in the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image* (ITV 1984-1996). The tearful 'Gazza' in the tabloid press illustrated how "a type of behaviour normally condemned as unmasculine – crying – was turned into an emblem of manhood and patriotism" (Horrocks 1995: 162). However, as the tears occurred in the competitive, hyper-masculine football sphere potential ambiguities were smoothed over because "[c]rying for your country, especially in the circumscribed area of competitive male team sports, is one of the few socially sanctioned public spaces for the expression of such emotions for men" (Carrington 2001: 107). Broadcast internationally in 1990, it became a watershed moment in which a competitive, aggressive masculinity was complicated through a sudden instance of fragility and emotional outburst. Sam Taylor-Johnson's *David* (2004), a video portrait of footballer David Beckham asleep following a training session, presented an intimate perspective that conveyed an intense vulnerability and intimacy with a globally recognised footballer and celebrity. Taylor-Johnson also released a series of photographic portraits of film actors including iconic British actors Daniel Craig, Michael Gambon and Jude Law entitled *Crying Men* (2004). Whereas Gascoigne's tears were largely lauded for their patriotism and also their authenticity, *Crying Men* complicates this discourse through the staging of 'authentic' moments of male

expression through renowned male actors who assume characters. Biopic representations display continuity with these instances and examples, but they differ from previous biopic representations of masculinity and emotion. James Chapman identifies that the open expression of emotion between men in *Scott of the Antarctic* would appear “unmanly” given the film’s “masculine ethos” (2005: 159). These contemporary examples suggest a shift. The male tears form the most explicit representation of the biopic subject as ‘wounded’. *Pierrepont* and *The Imitation Game* also feature tearful, emotional men, but in the examples considered in this chapter these wounds are healed.

These sequences synthesise patterns of victimisation and homosociality. Internalised male feelings and emotions are expressed externally and crucially they all happen in isolation and are only revealed to one other man. Whereas in *Pierrepont* and *Stoned* homosocial attachments are mediated via female characters or open homophobia, these scenes convey an intimacy that is, apparently, unmediated and transparent. The need to reveal emotion and confess to other male characters in order to perform successfully as King, manager or musician figures a ‘post-new man’ discourse of masculinity in which women are absent. Each foregrounds the reconstruction of masculine identity through another man. Male emotional lives are the central focus and these representations articulate homosocial melodramas of suffering males.

The emotional intimacy of the scenes described above, the confessions of weakness and the defining of men in opposition to an oppressive or absent father, are characteristic of the new-man discourse. However, a characteristic of that discourse is male familial relationships, child-rearing and nurturing, making this ‘new man’ “the man who appears to have engaged in a re-negotiation of domestic

involvements and who actively and publicly engages in child-care and child responsibilities” (Morgan 2001: 228). Such domestic, family-orientated males are not present in these films, where the males actively seek out alternative routes to express themselves. For these males to be recuperated professionally, to overcome their respective crises, they must be recuperated emotionally within the homosocial dynamic. The ‘new man’ and other such constructions emerged out of debates regarding males in crisis – generally written about as the loss of male dominance in various threads of society, from weakened patriarchal authority in the family to unemployment and women’s increased presence in the professional sphere. The contemporary biopic meshes with these debates by placing masculine crises and emotional expression at its thematic centre but the homosocial recuperation suggests an alternative route to recovery.

These biopics construct how the display of authenticity and vocal expression, a ‘talking cure’, must take place before recovery. In *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (2004), Frank Furedi considers the cultural phenomenon of therapy in western societies, arguing that therapeutic culture perceives people’s emotional state as both a problem and critical in defining individuals’ identity: “it is arguably the most important signifier of meaning for the everyday life of the individual” (2004: 22). That this verbal disclosure paves the way to rehabilitation for men is compatible with Furedi’s theorisation of ‘therapeutic culture’ and specifically the rise of the confession in talk shows, interviews and autobiographies: “Claims about the value of public disclosure of emotion have been so thoroughly assimilated into popular culture that its therapeutic significance is rarely contested. The very validation of individual

feeling requires that it should be disclosed, preferably in public. That is why feeling and emotion have lost so much of their private character” (ibid.: 40).

Furedi’s account of therapy into everyday culture is pessimistic, viewing it as a form of social control that designates acceptable emotional responses and manages human emotional behaviour (2004: 199). However, the importance of disclosure is a feature of contemporary biopic representations of masculinity and within these narratives disclosure is key to rehabilitation. A different example of how disclosure and ‘baring all’ is constructed as healing can be found in actor Hugh Grant’s actions following his arrest with prostitute Divine Brown in 1995. Amongst other strategies, Grant’s interviews on American television talk shows foregrounded mortification as a means of repairing his star persona (Benoit 1997: 257). This confession to feeling shame, accompanied with a public apology, occurred in interviews which simultaneously concerned the release of Grant’s upcoming film *Nine Months* (1995) and can be viewed as an attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ his own star-image. What Grant’s media appearances and these biopic representations have in common is that the ‘victim’ explicitly describes - in Grant’s case to a TV audience, in the films to another man - his ‘wound’, and this ‘confession’ is seen as key to rehabilitation. This sense of authenticity, and abasement, as key to recuperation is thus a feature of contemporary media culture. Each sequence foregrounds a heightened emotional experience between men. In each sequence the open, emotional admission of a need for help shifts the trajectories of the wounded men in these biopics, and this reiterates a central tenet of contemporary therapeutic culture: “Disclosure represents the point of departure in the act of seeking help – an act of virtue in therapeutic culture” (Furedi 2004: 42). Taken together, *Nowhere Boy*, *The Damned United* and *The King’s Speech* form a significant departure in the

biopic. They offer narrative conclusions that complicate existing formulations of the homosocial. They also represent a generic departure through their merging of homosocial relations and wounded masculinity.

## **Conclusion**

Chapters Seven and Eight have traced two discursive threads which are woven into the contemporary biopic: the ‘wounded’ man and homosociality. Both chapters examined the ideological work performed by marginalised female characters who act as guarantors of male heterosexuality within the homosocial. However, the staging and *mise-en-scène* frequently foreground the desirability of the same-sex bond. Certain biopics staged the homosocial through competitions, rivalries and triangulated structures as in *Stoned*. Others adopt strategies familiar from British sit-coms to differentiate the pleasures of close male bonding from the sombre authority of wives. Anxieties and paranoia characterise these films, and bonds are managed through consistent differentiation that stresses the homosocial as heterosexual men in a close relationship as opposed to a homosexual relationship. Instances of homophobia are depicted in *Pierrepont* and *The Imitation Game* and these films also depict wounded men. The murder of Tish in the former contributes to the hangman’s traumatised subjectivity and in *The Imitation Game* Alan Turing’s homosexual desire remains hidden until he is cruelly punished by homophobic legislation. *The Damned United*, *Nowhere Boy* and *The King’s Speech* show wounded men recuperated. These representations extend contemporary understandings of therapeutic culture in which self-disclosure and confession are invested with the power to rehabilitate. This chapter recognised how the representations of the wounded man and homosociality are interwoven in films between 2008 and 2010 and this offers an extension of existing theories of the

homosocial. This reaffirms that the biopic is a dynamic construction, and is subject to change, differentiation and evolution.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Conclusion**

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge through the construction of a definitive filmography and a detailed analysis of the British biopic. This analysis scrutinised the dominant subject types, the changing nature of what constitutes public history in the biopic, and the broader cultural shifts which have informed this. The thesis also examined the broader debates informing the genre, alongside a discussion of the conventions which distinguish British biopics from Hollywood ones and the biopic's contested reception. It also analysed the biopic's shifting production contexts, decade by decade. The depiction of masculinity in the genre was identified as an important feature that distinguished British biopics from the Hollywood version. In addition to the Great Man approach, the thesis proposed two further treatments: homosociality and wounded masculinity. This concluding chapter summarises the findings of this study, revisiting the key points of each chapter and the broader conclusions that can be gleaned from these.

The critical review in chapter two considered the different contexts and approaches that have guided discussion of the genre in secondary literature. Studies of British films have tended to overlook the biopic or to subsume it within other generic categories such as the 'historical' film or discursive categories such as 'heritage'. The 'hybridity' of many biopics has reinforced this tendency. The critical review contended that these larger constructs dilute or obscure the principal discursive characteristics of the biopic. Unlike the historical film, it was argued that the biopic focuses on an historical individual rather than an historical event or period, and the focus on the single figure raises the question of why that figure was chosen for

biopic treatment, what attitudes and values that figure is invested with within the film, what is this specific figure's relationship to wider culture in particular moments, and why he/she resonates with this culture. Unlike other films within the 'heritage' category, such as costume dramas, literary adaptations of canonised literature and novels, and fictional narratives set in the past, the chapter argued that biopics conventionally employ authenticating strategies to assert their factuality, and this is a further discursive feature which differentiates the biopic from other 'heritage' films.

As demonstrated in chapter two, studies which focus specifically on biopics have centred predominantly on Hollywood filmmaking and consequently have limited applicability to the British construction of the genre. This chapter contended that this was especially true of the construction of masculinity within biopics: the representation of homosociality and 'wounded' masculinity in the British version are distinct and cannot be assimilated into the Hollywood-centred paradigms put forward by Custen or Bingham. Whereas contemporary female-centred British biopics have been the subject of scholarly analysis, masculinity in the British genre has received less attention, although the overwhelming majority of biopics focus on men rather than women. Chapters three through five took up the issue of how the biopic's discursive characteristics are significant, whereas chapters six through eight were principally concerned with masculinity in the British genre. Together, these chapters demonstrated that the 'the British biopic' is a significant and necessary category to histories of British cinema.



Chapter three formed the foundation for the remainder of the thesis, providing a detailed historical overview of the genre between 1900 and 2014. Drawing on the filmography and accompanying statistical data provided in the appendix, the chapter charted the shifts in subject matter and the key motivations of producers engaged in making biopics. This showed that, unlike films which focus on fictional subjects and events, the biopic acts as a conduit of public history and that various producers, including Michael Balcon and Neil Jordan, perceived their films to be national projects that intervened and contributed to the formation of British and Irish national histories. The historical overview also identified particular films which exemplify the genre's ideological characteristics, how it foregrounds specific types of individual but marginalises others. For instance, *Cass* was notable for being a biopic about a Black British subject, while *Sylvia* addressed the marginalisation of female literary achievement in biopics in a period where the male poet was a recurring feature of production. Within the overview, significant films were identified which illustrated the perceived function and anxiety which accompany films that claim to construct the past and notable individuals within it. Films such as *Dawn*, *The Magic Box*, *Cry Freedom* and *Michael Collins* provoked a range of reactions, intervening in the discourse around certain figures whose legacies were insecure, controversial and contested. For instance, the reception to *The Magic Box* demonstrated the way in which the biopic's authenticating strategies, a feature that distinguishes the genre, can lead to hostility when they try to validate a particular image of a contested figure or are perceived to revise the past to secure a particular meaning and legacy for that figure.

This chapter also demonstrated that, since the genre's inception, and in particular in the films produced by Will Barker, the biopic has been invested with notions of prestige, a cultural investment in representing key figures of British history, and an attempt to intervene in the construction of public history, elevating certain individuals as emblematic. Biopics are often produced in ways that reflect their differentiation from other mainstream fare: the length of production, the effort and cost attached to research and authenticity of props and settings, the use of valid and reliable sources, and culturally prestigious actors. All these elements are used to establish the biopic as a 'quality' genre.

By surveying biopic production across different decades, the historical overview demonstrated that the biopic is a dynamic construct; producers foregrounded different figures in different periods, reflecting wider social attitudes which have in turn influenced the genre's development. Attitudes towards wider social shifts, such as Britain's move from an imperial power to a post-imperial nation, were reflected in the shift from celebrating individuals who were constructed as embodying the moral imperative of colonial conquest towards figures used to signify its various corruptions. More generally, biopics have reflected the increasing distrust of the traditional 'Great Man' model of history. The growth of popular culture in television, radio and press since the Second World War was matched by declining numbers of biopic subjects from 'the Establishment', pioneers of business and military, such as Cecil Rhodes and Captain Scott in *Rhodes of Africa* and *Scott of the Antarctic*, in favour of subjects with working class backgrounds, whose achievements lay in fields which reflected the wider popular culture, including actors, sportsmen, fashion designers and musicians.

*Lawrence of Arabia* was identified as pioneering in these respects, exemplifying a critique of the Great Man approach and a significant shift in the depiction of British imperialism and the Establishment.

As demonstrated in chapter three, the biopic is a flexible production category for producers. Producers displayed different motivations for producing such films: generating prestige for themselves and their production companies, using them as star vehicles, and exploiting their popularity in the UK and abroad. Producers used their close association with particular actors to produce biopics which were focused on subjects compatible with their particular star-image, such as the relationship between Herbert Wilcox and Anna Neagle. Crucially, as a commercial venture, the biopic has been a significant genre for producers working within the British film industry. *Henry VIII* and *Sixty Years a Queen* were significant commercial successes in the 1910s, and the British biopic's appeal in America was secured with *Nell Gwyn* in the 1920s, and especially, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* in the early 1930s. *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Gandhi*, *The Queen*, *The King's Speech* and *The Imitation Game* were critically and commercially successful and illustrate the ongoing commercial appeal of the genre in the USA and elsewhere.

*The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *Becket* both instigated cycles of royal biopics, indicating the wide popularity of the genre at different historical moments and producers' desire to exploit that. Films such as *The Tommy Steele Story* combined the conventions of the musical with those of the biopic; whereas *Elizabeth* blended thriller elements into its biographical narrative, and *Cass* traced the life of an actual historical person through the conventions of the hooligan film. These examples,

drawn on in chapter three, illustrate how the problems of generic definition in the biopic are, partially at least, the result of filmmakers' tapping into other genres and contemporary interests. Although many productions reflected commercial concerns or attempts to garner prestige, some producers used the biopic to address their own ideologies. For instance, Balcon and Attenborough used biopics to inform and educate, but were also guided by their own patriotism or the liberal desire to address racial and colonial injustice. There is thus a cultural as well as economic significance attached to the biopic for some producers. For instance, films such as *Rembrandt*, *Scott of the Antarctic*, *Michael Collins*, *Sylvia* and the various composer biopics of Ken Russell, demonstrated producers' ambitions to intervene in historical understanding and elevate individuals in whom they themselves were personally interested. This could be because of a feminist perspective, a desire to highlight colonial injustice, or to celebrate specific subjects as emblematic of the British character.

The historical overview further demonstrated that producing biopics about figures who do not reflect the wider consensus of what constitutes a key figure is a struggle, hence films about subjects such as Gandhi or monarchs are generally successful and appeal to wider familiarity, whereas films including *Stevie* and *Anne Devlin* (significantly, both about women) received limited distribution. Such films require certain stars (Jackson in *Stevie*, Firth in *The Railway Man*), or their producers and directors must build a reputation that gives them the necessary autonomy to pursue subjects of their choice (Steve McQueen), or failing that, they themselves must invest in the films (Ken Russell).

It was shown that the British biopic can be clearly distinguished from the American version as proposed by Custen. Both British and Hollywood biopics feature a post-war shift to subjects from popular culture, but the British version has a different trajectory because of the continuing preoccupation with royalty. This is partly commercially driven, as the royal biopic has proved successful since Barker's films in the 1910s, and became increasingly successful in America after the release of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. Hence the movement from establishment figures to those from popular culture is by no means straightforward or wholesale. Royalty remains a popular subject but the treatment has changed fundamentally from *Sixty Years a Queen* and *Victoria the Great* to *The Queen* and *The King's Speech*. Rather than the reverence of earlier years the monarchy is subjected to the close psychologising associated with the New Biography.

Overall, the historical overview demonstrated that the biopic is a necessary category because producers have significant, and diverse, investments in the figures selected. Though catalogues such as Gifford and numerous studies of the historical film group biopics under the 'historical' label, the comments of producers illustrate that they were heavily invested in *figures* and what they embody, therefore that they were actively making biopics rather than historical films. This chapter suggested that the genre is distinctive and dynamic, but also heavily contested. This issue was then taken up in chapter four.

Chapter four moved from the viewpoint of the producer to the reviewer and cinemagoer to examine their responses to the British biopic. Through analysing these across different publications and platforms, chapter four determined that there

have been different discourses of reception, prompting debate about particular biopics and the function of the genre as a whole, and demonstrating the polysemous nature of the biopic. Letters from professional historians, reviewers, fans and viewers who positioned themselves as more articulate, reflective cinemagoers, all suggested different viewing positions. Viewers and reviewers took issue when the representations were not consistent with their own understanding of history, especially when a director such as Attenborough was seen as constructing figures in ways that reflected his own liberal perspective. A further noteworthy difference between British and Hollywood biopics lies in popular opinion in Britain and the USA. Academics whose research centres on the Hollywood biopic identify that the Hollywood biopic is generally dismissed or scorned. British biopics on the other hand are seen as a genre which Britain excels and which can compete with Hollywood; their representations were frequently considered more authentic. Analysing the reception of biopics revealed that reviewers and cinemagoers applied distinctive criteria when assessing biopics, and that biopics stirred debate because people emotionally invest in particular figures. This chapter determined that the contested function of the biopic is a significant feature; biopics mean different things to different people, there is no consensus regarding their function, some use them to learn about history while others are dismissive of the biopic's ability to offer valid historical lessons.

The distinctiveness of the 'British' biopic from the American version was highlighted further in chapter five, which examined the conventions and themes present in British biopics released between 1933 and 2010. It analysed conventional approaches to casting, while also expanding upon the genre's

discursive characteristic: the authenticating strategies which project truth claims within the film text. This chapter determined that, though they are similar in various respects, the conventions of the British biopic are marked by key differences from their Hollywood counterparts. For instance, Custen identified a theme of the studio biopic as the subject encountering opposition in the local community to their beliefs and ideas, and the need of that individual to overturn pessimistic or hostile community judgements. Though this was present in many British biopics, the British version also depicted subjects as unable to overturn the views of the community, and British films frequently represented historical figures as persecuted by wider cultures. Identifying the legacy of this construction was critical, as various contemporary biopics, the focus of chapters seven and eight, continued to develop this theme by showing the male figure as a vulnerable victim persecuted by society. From this observation, the 'British' biopic is a necessary category because specific conventions operate differently in the British version from the American one.

Chapter five determined that the use of conventions changes and that they serve a variety of functions. The lack of clear, stable semantic elements offers an explanation of why the genre is easily appropriated by other categories. However, the chapter showed that the authenticating strategies which form the claims to truth are distinguishing features of the biopic. Truth claims, manifested through such conventions as opening captions, the use of quotations and archival footage, were frequently used in biopics, but the function and use of conventions shift in different periods. This chapter stressed that the use of these authenticating strategies was never neutral, and, using films including *Pierrepont* and *The Damned United* as

examples, the chapter showed how these authenticating strategies are employed selectively in order to project specific meanings onto the historical figure. In surveying how the use of conventions changes across the history of the biopic, this chapter displayed that any account of conventions must recognise that these are unstable and shifting; *24 Hour Party People*, a film which foregrounds certain generic features of the biopic to parody the genre, was discussed as a key example. The flashback was shown to be a significant biopic convention; the flashback was a recurring feature across a variety of films and was used increasingly since the 1970s to represent traumatised subjectivity. This chapter also showed that Custen's account of the 'close friend' in the Hollywood studio biopic could not adequately explain the close, emotional bonds between men that lie at the heart of many British biopics. This important development was examined in chapters six, seven and eight.

Having considered the general nature of the biopic, the authenticating strategies it employs, its dominant types and its status as a conduit of public history, chapters six, seven and eight focused on the depiction of masculinity. Chapter six introduced this topic by drawing on key examples including *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Becket*, *Backbeat* and *Mahler*, to show that two treatments of masculinity, the 'wounded' man and homosociality, have extensive generic lineages. The inter-chapter demonstrated that these patterns of representations could not be incorporated into the existing generic paradigms which privileged Hollywood production. The depiction of masculinity in British biopics offers a key distinguishing feature of the British version of the genre. The preponderance of homosocial bonds in British texts means that existing definitions, which distinguish the biopic as a film



focusing on a single historical figure, must be revised when exploring films in the British context. Chapter six contended that Sedgwick's account of homosociality, though highly productive for considering instances of homosocial panic and the mediation of male homosocial desire through women, had limited applicability to contemporary British texts that emphasised the recuperative potential of the homosocial bond.

Chapter seven traced the two patterns of representation, homosociality and 'wounded' masculinity, through an analysis of *Pierrepoint*, *Stoned*, *The Railway Man* and *The Imitation Game*. Informed by Sedgwick's account of homosociality, the chapter showed that ways in which the bonds between men were motivated by hatred, obsession and jealousy and frequently ended destructively, with no possibility of recuperating the wounded man through homosocial support. In addition, and continuing the arguments made in chapters three and four, this chapter demonstrated how these biopics contributed to public history and how they were shaped by contemporaneous discourses and wider debates. The representations of figures such as Albert Pierrepoint, Alan Turing and Eric Lomax were informed by wider discourses of capital punishment, the legacy of homophobic legislation and the legacy of the Second World War and international reconciliation, while *Stoned* reflected the wider prevailing movement in biopic production towards figures from popular culture. The reception of these films reinforced the conclusion made in chapter four that reviewers and cinemagoers are rarely neutral about biopics. Though the films foregrounded figures whose achievements differ dramatically and occur in different professional fields, their grouping reflected the contemporary biopic shift from Great Men towards figures

whose relationship to the Establishment is problematic, and they frequently depict the male subject as betrayed by the state. It was shown that the origins of this approach can also be found in earlier films. For instance, the representation of T.E. Lawrence, himself an outsider with a problematic relationship to the senior figures of the British military, offered an earlier example and reinforced how the representation of wounded masculinity and a victimised male subject is a persistent and on-going construction within the British genre.

Through analysis of *The Damned United*, *Nowhere Boy* and *The King's Speech*, chapter eight demonstrated that these two representations of masculinity, the 'wounded' man and homosociality, have evolved in contemporary films where the 'wounded' man is healed through a supportive homosocial bond. This shift demonstrates the dynamism of the British biopic: the representation of men in biopics is shaped by contemporary discourses and understandings of masculinity, including the emergence of a therapeutic culture which privileges self-disclosure and emotional expression. Taken together, chapters six, seven and eight demonstrated that the representations of 'homosocial' bonds and 'wounded' masculinity represent a distinctive trend in British biopics which differentiates them sharply from generic paradigms formulated through analysis of Hollywood films, limiting the applicability of Hollywood-focussed studies.

This study has laid a foundation for further research by providing an extensive mapping of the different films produced and their subject matter. Because the filmography of two hundred and seventy three films presents a broad timeline of biopics released from 1900 through to 2014, while also detailing each film by

subject matter, gender and time period depicted, it makes possible further research about specific biopic sub-genres in greater detail. For instance, the crime biopic has only been explored briefly here but its enduring appeal for producers marks it as a feature of the genre comparable to the royal biopic. Further lines of enquiry could include a sustained analysis of stardom in the British biopic. Though I considered approaches to casting and the star persona of specific actors in chapter five, the dynamic between the actor's 'star-image' and the biopic subject merits extended study due to the recurrence of certain actors working within the genre. For instance, the timeline identifies that Anna Neagle, Glenda Jackson, Helen Mirren, Peter O'Toole, Timothy Spall, Michael Sheen are actors that appear in multiple biopics, and greater space could be afforded to how their respective star-images inflect the meaning of the subject in question. Though this study has considered feature films, a comprehensive account of the television manifestations of the genre is also needed in order to provide a fuller account of British traditions of biography across different media. This study hopefully will inform these enquires and stimulate further research into the genre.

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## General Filmography

### Films

*12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen 2013) USA/UK

*A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard 2001) USA

*The Actress* (George Cukor 1953) USA

*Al Capone* (Richard Wilson 1959) USA

*Another Country* (Marek Kaniévská 1984) UK

*Atonement* (Joe Wright 2007) UK/France/USA

*The Black Swan* (Henry King 1942) USA

*Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen 1947) USA

*Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967) USA

*Braveheart* (Mel Gibson 1995) USA

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean 1957) UK/USA

*Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire 2001) UK/France/USA/Ireland

*Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Beeban Kidron 2004)

UK/France/Germany/USA/Ireland

*The Dam Busters* (Michael Anderson 1955) UK

*The Day They Robbed the Bank of England* (John Guillermin 1960) UK

*The Devils* (Ken Russell 1971) UK

*Capote* (Bennett Miller 2005) Canada/USA

*The Captive Heart* (Basil Dearden 1946) UK

*Chapter 27* (J.P. Schaefer 2007) USA/Canada

*The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Tony Richardson 1968) UK

*Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles 1941) USA

*The Colditz Story* (Guy Hamilton 1955) UK

*The Criminal* (Joseph Losey 1960) UK

*Disraeli* (Alfred E. Green 1929) USA

*Ed Wood* (Tim Burton 1994) USA

*The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz 1939) USA

*Enigma* (Michael Apted 2001) UK/USA/Germany/Netherlands

*Fire Over England* (William K. Howard 1937) UK

*Frida* (Julie Taymor 2002) USA/Canada/Mexico

*Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard 2008) USA/UK/France

*Great Expectations* (David Lean 1946) UK

*The Great Ziegfeld* (Robert Z. Leonard 1936) USA

*A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester 1964) UK

*Hawking* (Stephen Finnigan 2013) UK

*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais 1957) France/Japan

*The House of Mirth* (Terence Davies 2000) UK/USA/France/Germany

*Howards End* (James Ivory 1992) UK/Japan/USA

*Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco 1946) USA

*I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg 2009) USA

*Infamous* (Douglas McGrath 2006) USA

*Jobs* (Joshua Michael Stern 2013) USA/Switzerland

*King of Kings* (Nicholas Ray 1961) USA

*Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow 2007) USA

*Lady Hamilton* (Alexander Korda 1941) USA/UK (released in America as *That Hamilton Woman*)

*The League of Gentlemen* (Basil Dearden 1960) UK

*The Life of David Gale* (Alan Parker 2003) USA/Germany/UK

*The Life of Emile Zola* (William Dieterle 1937) USA

*Madam Du Barry* (William Dieterle 1934) USA

*The Magnificent Yankee* (John Sturges 1950) USA

*Marie Curie* (Mervyn LeRoy 1943) USA

*Maytime in Mayfair* (Herbert Wilcox 1949) UK

*Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster 2001) USA

*A Month in the Country* (Pat O'Connor 1987) UK

*Napoleon* (Abel Gance 1927) France

*Night and Day* (Michael Curtiz 1946) USA

*Nine Months* (Chris Columbus 1995) USA

*Nixon* (Oliver Stone 1995) USA

*The Notorious Bettie Page* (Mary Harron 2006) USA

*Onegin* (Martha Fiennes 1999) UK/USA

*Patton* (Franklin J. Schaffner 1970) USA

*The Power and the Glory* (William K. Howard 1933) USA

*The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet 1965) USA

*Performance* (Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg 1970) UK

*Ray* (Taylor Hackford 2004) USA

*The Reader* (Stephen Daldry 2008) USA/Germany

*Reds* (Warren Beatty 1981) USA

*The Remains of the Day* (James Ivory 1993) UK/USA

*A Room with a View* (James Ivory 1985) UK

*Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg 1993) USA

*The Servant* (Joseph Losey 1963) UK

*Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee 1995) USA/UK

*The Social Network* (David Fincher 2010) USA

*The Star Maker* (Roy Del Ruth 1939) USA

*Steve Jobs* (Danny Boyle 2015) USA/UK

*Superbad* (Greg Mottola 2007) USA

*A Town Like Alice* (Jack Lee 1958) UK

*Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle 1995) UK

*Vera Drake* (Mike Leigh 2004) UK/France

*Whoopie!* (Thornton Freeland 1930) USA

*The Wicked Lady* (Leslie Arliss 1945) UK

*Yankee Doodle Dandy* (Michael Curtiz 1942) USA

*Zulu* (Cy Endfield 1964) UK

### **Television**

*Bertie and Elizabeth* (Giles Foster 2002) ITV, UK

*Building Burma's Death Railway: Moving Half the Mountain* (Helen Langridge 2014) BBC, UK

*Clouds of Glory* (Ken Russell 1978) Granada, UK

*Codebreaker* (Clare Beavan and Nic Stacey 2011) Channel Four, UK

*The Deal* (Stephen Frears 2003) Channel Four, UK

*Fantabulosa!* (Andy De Emmony 2006) BBC, UK

*Masters of Sex* (Michelle Ashford 2013 –) Showtime, USA

*On The Ball*, part of *World of Sport* (1965-1985) ITV, UK

*Pride and Prejudice* (Simon Langton 1995) BBC, UK

*Prisoners in Time* (Stephen Walker 1995) BBC, UK

*The Simpsons* (Matt Groening 1989 –) Fox, USA

*Spitting Image* (Peter Fluck, Roger Law and Martin Lambie-Nairn 1984-1996)  
ITV, UK

*Sunday Night at the London Palladium* (Val Parnell 1955-1965) ITV, UK

*Sybil* (Daniel Petrie 1977) NBC, USA



## Appendix One: Timeline of the British Biopic 1900-2014

This timeline is divided into decades and the films are arranged chronologically in order of their release and exhibition date. The name of the director and the year of production are included after each film's title. The film producer or production company are listed on the second line. Where available, the third line provides details of the actor's name and the historical figure he or she played. The fourth line details the gender of the figure, their professional field and the century in which the film is set. The professional field may feature both a 'primary' and 'secondary' category in order to foreground the difficulty of assigning figures to specific fields or subject types. For example, *Odette* (1950) is listed as 'military/spy'. It is the primary 'military' category which has been used to compile the subsequent tables and pie charts in Appendix Two and Three in order to recognise the prominence of the military-themed biopic across the history of biopic production.

### 1900-1909

*The Hair-Breadth Escape of Jack Shepard* (Walter Booth 1900)

R.W. Paul

Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*English Nell* (William Dickson 1900)

Mutoscope and Biograph

Marie Tempest (Nell Gwynne)

Female; royal mistress; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Sweet Nell of Old Drury* (William Dickson 1900)

Mutoscope and Biograph

Julia Neilson (Nell Gwynne)

Female; royal mistress; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Life of Charles Peace* (William Haggar 1905)

Haggar and sons

Charles Peace (Walter Haggar)

Male; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Life of Charles Peace* (Frank Mottershaw 1905)

Sheffield Photo Co.

Male; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Dick Turpin's Last Ride to York* (Charles Raymond 1906)

Warwick Trading Co.

Dick Turpin (Fred Ginnett)

Male' criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Dick Turpin's Ride to York* (Lewin Fitzhamon 1906)

Hepworth

Dick Turpin (Lewin Fitzhamon)

Male' criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Jane Shore* (1908)

Gaumont

Female; royal mistress; 15<sup>th</sup> century

## 1910-1919

*Henry VIII* (Louis N. Parker 1911)

Barker

Henry VIII (Arthur Bouchier)

Male; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century;

*Jane Shore* (Frank Powell 1911)

Britannia (Pathé)

Jane Shore (Florence Barker)

Female; royal mistress; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*Nell Gwynn the Orange Girl* (Theo Bouwmeester 1911)

Natural Colour Kinematograph Co.

Female; royal mistress; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Drake's Love Story* (Hay Plumb 1913)

Hepworth

Francis Drake (Hay Plumb)

Male; military; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Dick Turpin's Ride to York* (Charles Raymond 1913)

British and Colonial Kinematograph Company

Dick Turpin (Percy Moran)

Male' criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Sixty Years a Queen* (Bert Haldane 1913)

Barker

Queen Victoria (Blanche Forsyth)

Female; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life of Shakespeare* (J.B. McDowell and Frank R. Growcott 1914)

British and Colonial Kinematograph Company

William Shakespeare (Albert Ward)

Male; playwright; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Charles Peace, King of Criminals* (Ernest G. Batley 1914)

British and Colonial Kinematograph Company  
Charles peace (Jeff Barlow)  
Male; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life of Lord Roberts VC* (George Pearson 1914)  
Samuelson  
Frederick Roberts (Hugh Nicholson)  
Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Florence Nightingale* (Maurice Elvey 1915)  
British and Colonial Kinematograph Company  
Florence Nightingale (Elizabeth Risdon)  
Female; nurse; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Jane Shore* (Bert Haldane, F. Martin Thornton 1915)  
Barker (Walturdaw)  
Jane Shore (Blanche Forsyth)  
Female; royal mistress; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*Disraeli* (Charles Calvert, Percy Nash 1916)  
NB Films  
Benjamin Disraeli (Dennis Eadie)  
Male; politician; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Masks and Faces* (Fred Paul 1917)  
Ideal  
Peg Woffington (Irene Vanbrugh)  
Female; actor; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life of Lord Kitchener* (Rex Wilson and Dane Stanton 1917)  
Windsor  
Lord Kitchener  
Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Nelson* (Maurice Elvey 1918)  
Master/International Exclusives  
Horatio Nelson (Donald Calthrope)  
Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life Story of David Lloyd George* (Maurice Elvey 1918)  
Ideal  
David Lloyd George (Norman Page)  
Male; politician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

## **1920-1929**

*A Prince of Lovers* (Charles Calvert 1922)  
G-B Screencraft  
Lord Byron (Howard Gaye)

Male; poet; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Dick Turpin's Ride to York* (Maurice Elvey 1922)

Stoll

Dick Turpin (Matheson Lang)

Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Rob Roy* (W.P. Kellino 1922)

Gaumont/Westminster

Rob Roy (David Hawthorne)

Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The Virgin Queen* (J.Stuart Blackton 1923)

J. Stuart Blackton

Queen Elizabeth (Lady Diana Manners)

Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Guy Fawkes* (Maurice Elvey 1923)

Stoll

Guy Fawkes (Matheson Lang)

Male; criminal; 17<sup>th</sup> Century

*Becket* (George Ridgwell 1923)

Stoll

Thomas à Becket (Sir Frank Benson)

Male; religious; 12<sup>th</sup> century

*The Loves of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Denison Clift 1923)

Ideal

Mary Stuart (Fay Compton)

Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Bonnie Prince Charlie* (Charles Calvert 1923)

G-B Screencraft

Prince Charles Stuart (Ivor Novello)

Male; royal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Livingstone* (M.A. Wetherell 1925)

Hero

David Livingstone (M.A. Wetherell)

Male; explorer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Nelson* (Walter Summers 1926)

British Instructional Films

Horatio Nelson (Cedrick Hardwicke)

Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life of Robert Burns* (Maurice Sandground 1926)

Scottish Film Academy

Robert Burns (Wal Croft)

Male; poet; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (Maurice Sandground 1926)  
Scottish Film Academy  
Walter Scott (George Campbell)  
Male; writer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Nell Gwyn* (Herbert Wilcox 1926)  
British and Dominions Film Corporation  
Nell Gwyn (Dorothy Gish)  
Female; royal mistress; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Boadicea* (Sinclair Hill 1928)  
British Instructional Films  
Boadicea (Phyllis Neilson-Terry)  
Female; royal; 1<sup>st</sup> century

*Dawn* (Herbert Wilcox 1928)  
British and Dominions Film Corporation  
Edith Cavell (Sybil Thorndike)  
Female; nurse; 20<sup>th</sup> century

### **1930-1939**

*The Loves of Robert Burns* (Herbert Wilcox 1930)  
British and Dominions Film Corporation  
Robert Burns (Joseph Hislop)  
Male; poet; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Dreyfus* (F.W. Kraemer, Milton Rosmer 1931)  
British International Pictures  
Alfred Dreyfus (Cedric Hardwicke)  
Male; crime; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda 1933)  
London Films  
Henry VIII (Charles Laughton)  
Male; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Dick Turpin* (Victor Hanbury and John Stafford 1933)  
Stoll/Stafford  
Dick Turpin (Victor McLaglen)  
Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Colonel Blood* (W.P Lipscomb 1934)  
Sound City  
Colonel Blood (Frank Cellier)  
Male; criminal; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Catherine the Great* (Paul Czinner 1934)

London Films

Catherine II (Elisabeth Bergner)

Female; royal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Unfinished Symphony* (Willi Forst and Anthony Asquith 1934)

Cine-Allianz

Franz Schubert (Hans Yaray)

Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Nell Gwyn* (Herbert Wilcox 1934)

British and Dominions Film Corporation

Nell Gwyn (Anna Neagle)

Female; royal mistress; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Jew Süß* (Lothar Mendes 1934)

Gaumont

Joseph Oppenheimer (Conrad Veidt)

Male; banker; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The Iron Duke* (Victor Saville 1935)

Gaumont

Duke of Wellington (George Arliss)

Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Dictator* (Victor Saville and Alfred Santell 1935)

Toeplitz

Dr Struensee (Clive Brook)

Male: royal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Drake of England* (Arthur B. Woods 1935)

British International Pictures

Francis Drake (Matheson Lang)

Male; military; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Peg of Old Drury* (Herbert Wilcox 1935)

British and Dominions Film Corporation

Peg Woffington (Anna Neagle)

Female: actor; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Rhodes of Africa* (Berthold Viertel 1936)

Gaumont

Cecil Rhodes (Walter Huston)

Male; politician/businessman; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Cardinal* (Sinclair Hill 1936)

Grosvenor

Cardinal de Medici (Matheson Lang)

Male; Religious; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Tudor Rose* (Robert Stevenson 1936)  
Gainsborough  
Lady Jane Grey (Nova Pilbeam)  
Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*David Livingstone* (James A Fitzpatrick 1936)  
Fitzpatrick Pictures  
David Livingstone (Percy Marmont)  
Male; explorer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Rembrandt* (Alexander Korda 1936)  
London Films  
Rembrandt Von Rijn (Charles Laughton)  
Male; artist; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Auld Lang Syne* (James A. FitzPatrick 1937)  
Fitzpatrick Pictures  
Robert Burns (Andrew Cruickshank)  
Male; poet; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Victoria the Great* (Herbert Wilcox 1937)  
Imperator  
Queen Victoria (Anna Neagle)  
Female; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Sixty Glorious Years* (Herbert Wilcox 1938)  
Imperator  
Queen Victoria (Anna Neagle)  
Female; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*A Royal Divorce* (Jack Raymond 1938)  
Imperator  
Napoléon Bonaparte (Pierre Blanchar)  
Male; military; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The Crown of Righteousness* (Norman Walker 1938)  
Gregory, Hake and Walker Productions  
St Paul (Neal Arden)  
Male; religious; 1<sup>st</sup> century

*Nurse Edith Cavell* (Herbert Wilcox 1939)  
Imperadio Pictures  
Edith Cavell (Anna Neagle)  
Female; nurse; 20<sup>th</sup> century

## **1940-1949**

*The Prime Minister* (Thorold Dickinson 1941)

Warner Brothers-First National  
Benjamin Disraeli (John Gielgud)  
Male; politician; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Penn of Pennsylvania* (Lance Comfort 1941)  
British National  
William Penn (Clifford Evans)  
Male; religious; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*They Flew Alone* (Herbert Wilcox 1942)  
Imperator  
Amy Johnson (Anna Neagle)  
Female; aviator/military; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Young Mr Pitt* (Carol Reed 1942)  
20<sup>th</sup> Century Productions  
William Pitt (Robert Donat)  
Male; politician; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The First of the Few* (Leslie Howard 1942)  
Misbourne-British Aviation Pictures  
Reginald Mitchell (Leslie Howard)  
Male; inventor; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Great Mr. Handel* (Norman Walker 1942)  
Gregory, Hake and Walker Productions  
George Frederick Handel (Wilfrid Lawson)  
Male; composer; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Henry V* (Laurence Olivier 1944)  
Two Cities  
Henry V Laurence Olivier  
Male; royal; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*Mrs Fitzherbert* (Montgomery Tully 1947)  
British National  
Maria Fitzherbert (Joyce Howard)  
Female; royal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*The First Gentleman* (Alberto Cavalcanti 1948)  
Columbia British  
Prince Regent (Cecil Parker)  
Male; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Bonnie Prince Charlie* (Anthony Kimmens 1948)  
London/British Lion Production Assets  
Prince Charles Stewart (David Niven)  
Male; royal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Scott of the Antarctic* (Charles Frennd 1948)



Ealing  
Captain Robert Falcon Scott (John Mills)  
Male; explorer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Bad Lord Byron* (David Macdonald 1949)  
Triton  
Lord Byron (Dennis Price)  
Male; poet; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Case of Charles Peace* (Norman Lee 1949)  
Argyle  
Charles Peace (Michael Martin-Harvey)  
Male; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Christopher Columbus* (David Macdonald 1949)  
Gainsborough  
Christopher Columbus (Fredric March)  
Male; explorer; 15<sup>th</sup> century

### **1950-1959**

*Madeleine* (David Lean 1950)  
Pinewood/Cineguild  
Madeleine Smith (Ann Todd)  
Female; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Mr H.C. Andersen* (Ronald Haines 1950)  
British Foundation  
Hans Christian Anderson (Ashley Glynne)  
Male; writer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Odette* (Herbert Wilcox 1950)  
Imperadio  
Odette Samson (Anna Neagle)  
Female; military/spy; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Magic Box* (John Boulting 1951)  
Festival  
William Friese-Greene (Robert Donat)  
Male; inventor; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Lady with a Lamp* (Herbert Wilcox 1951)  
Imperadio  
Florence Nightingale (Anna Neagle)  
Female; nurse; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Murder in the Cathedral* (George Hoellering 1952)  
Film Traders  
Thomas à Becket (Father John Groser)

Male; religious; 12<sup>th</sup> century

*Moulin Rouge* (John Huston 1953)

Romulus/Moulin

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (José Ferrer)

Male; artist; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (Sidney Gilliat 1953)

London/British Lion Production Assets/Lopert

W.S. Gilbert (Robert Morley) and Arthur Sullivan (Maurice Evans)

Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Melba* (Lewis Milestone 1953)

Horizon

Nellie Melba (Patrice Munsel)

Female; singer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Rob Roy the Highland Rogue* (Harold French and Alex Bryce 1953)

Walt Disney

Rob Roy MacGregor (Richard Todd)

Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*John Wesley* (Norman Walker 1954)

Gregory, Hake and Walker Productions

John Wesley (Leonard Sachs)

Male; religious; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Beau Brummell* (Curtis Bernhardt 1954)

MGM British

George Brummell (Stewart Granger)

Male; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Richard III* (Laurence Olivier 1955)

London/Big Ben

Richard III (Laurence Olivier)

Male; royal; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*Reach for the Sky* (Lewis Gilbert 1956)

Pinnacle

Douglas Bader (Kenneth More)

Male; military; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (Sidney Franklin 1957)

MGM British

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Jennifer Jones)

Female; poet; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Tommy Steele Story* (Gerald Bryant 1957)

Insignia

Tommy Steele (playing himself)

Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Saint Joan* (Otto Preminger 1957)

Wheel

Joan (Jean Seberg)

Female; religious; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*After the Ball* (Compton Bennett 1957)

Beaconsfield/Romulus

Vesta Tilley (Pat Kirkwood)

Female; actor/performer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Carve Her Name with Pride* (Lewis Gilbert 1958)

Keyboard

Violet Bushell (Virginia McKenna)

Female; military/spy; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*I Accuse!* (José Ferrer 1958)

MGM British/Loew's Inc.

Alfred Dreyfus (José Ferrer)

Male; crime; 19<sup>th</sup> century

## **1960-1969**

*Oscar Wilde* (Gregory Ratoff 1960)

Vantage

Oscar Wilde (Robert Morley)

Male; writer/playwright; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (Ken Hughes 1960)

Viceroy/Warwick

Oscar Wilde (Peter Finch)

Male; writer/playwright; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Password Is Courage* (Andrew L. Stone 1962)

MGM British

Charles Coward (Dirk Bogarde)

Male; military; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean 1962)

Horizon

T.E. Lawrence (Peter O'Toole)

Male; military/imperial; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Dr Crippen* (Robert Lynn 1962)

Torchlight

Dr Crippen (Donald Pleasence)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Becket* (Peter Glenville 1964)  
Keep/Paramount  
Thomas à Becket (Richard Burton)  
Male; religious; 12<sup>th</sup> century

*Young Cassidy* (Jack Cardiff 1965)  
Sextant  
Seán O'Casey/Johnny Cassidy (Rod Taylor)  
Male; playwright; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Khartoum* (Basil Dearden 1966)  
Julian Blaustein  
General Charles Gordon (Charlton Heston)  
Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*A Man for All Seasons* (Fred Zinnemann 1966)  
Highroad  
Sir Thomas More (Paul Scofield)  
Male; religious; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Mayerling* (Terence Young 1968)  
Coroner/Winchester  
Crown Prince Rudolf (Omar Sharif)  
Male; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Lion in Winter* (Anthony Harvey 1968)  
Haworth  
Henry II (Peter O'Toole)  
Male; royal; 12<sup>th</sup> century

*Isadora* (Karel Reisz 1969)  
Universal  
Isadora Duncan (Vanessa Redgrave)  
Female; dancer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Where's Jack?* (James Clavell 1969)  
Heathfield/Oakhurst  
Jack Sheppard (Tommy Steele)  
Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Alfred the Great* (Clive Donner 1969)  
Bernard Smith/MGM British  
Alfred (David Hemmings)  
Male; royal; 9<sup>th</sup> century

*Anne of the Thousand Days* (Charles Jarrot 1969)  
Universal  
Anne Boleyn (Genevieve Bujold)  
Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

## 1970-1979

*Julius Caesar* (Stuart Burge 1970)

Folio Films

Julius Caesar (John Gielgud)

Male; political; 100 BC – 44BC

*Cromwell* (Ken Hughes 1970)

Irving Allen

Oliver Cromwell (Richard Harris)

Male; political; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Ned Kelly* (Tony Richardson 1970)

Woodfall

Ned Kelly (Mick Jagger)

Male; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*10 Rillington Place* (Richard Fleischer 1971)

Genesis/Filmways/Columbia

John Christie (Richard Attenborough)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Music Lovers* (Ken Russell 1970)

Russfilms

Tchaikovsky (Richard Chamberlain)

Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Mary Queen of Scots* (Charles Jarrot 1972)

Universal

Queen Mary (Vanessa Redgrave)

Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*The Darwin Adventure* (Jack Couffer 1972)

Brightwater/Palomar

Charles Darwin (Nicholas Clay)

Male; scientist; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Henry VIII and His Six Wives* (Waris Hussein 1972)

Anglo-EMI

Henry VIII (Keith Michell)

Male; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Young Winston* (Richard Attenborough 1972)

Open Road

Winston Churchill (Simon Ward)

Male; politician; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Savage Messiah* (Ken Russell 1972)

Russ-Arts

Henry Gaudier (Scott Antony)  
Male; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Assassination of Trotsky* (Joseph Losey 1972)  
Dino De Laurentiis/Cinetel/CIAC/Shafrel  
Leon Trotsky (Richard Burton)  
Male; politician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Lady Caroline Lamb* (Robert Bolt 1973)  
Pulsar/GEC/Vides Cinematografica  
Lady Caroline Lamb (Sarah Miles)  
Female; aristocrat; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Bequest to the Nation* (James Cellan Jones 1973)  
Universal  
Lady Hamilton (Glenda Jackson) and British Admiral Lord Nelson (Peter Finch)  
Male; military; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Hitler: The Last Ten Days* (Ennio De Concini 1973)  
Reinhardt/West  
Adolf Hitler (Alex Guinness)  
Male; politician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mahler* (Ken Russell 1974)  
Goodtimes  
Gustav Mahler (Robert Powell)  
Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Lisztomania* (Ken Russell 1975)  
Goodtimes/Visual Program Systems  
Franz Liszt (Roger Daltrey)  
Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Luther* (Guy Green 1976)  
American Express/Ely Landau/Cinevision  
Martin Luther (Stacy Keach)  
Male; religious; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Galileo* (Joseph Losey 1976)  
Ely Landau/Cinevision/American Film Theatre  
Galileo Galilei (Chaim Topol)  
Male; scientist; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Sebastiane* (Derek Jarman/Paul Humfress 1976)  
Disctac/Megalovision  
Sebastiane (Leonardo Treviglio)  
Male; religious; 4<sup>th</sup> century

*The Incredible Sarah* (Richard Fleischer 1976)  
Reader's Digest

Sarah Bernhardt (Glenda Jackson)  
Female; actor; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Valentino* (Ken Russell 1977)  
Aperture  
Rudolph Valentino (Rudolf Nureyev)  
Male; actor; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Midnight Express* (Alan Parker 1978)  
Casablanca Filmworks  
Billy Hayes (Brad Davis)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Stevie* (Robert Enders 1978)  
Bowden/First Artists/Grand Metropolitan  
Stevie Smith (Glenda Jackson)  
Female; poet; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Agatha* (Michael Apted 1979)  
Sweetwall/Casablanca Filmworks/First Artists  
Agatha Christie (Vanessa Redgrave)  
Female; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Birth of the Beatles* (Richard Marquand 1979)  
Vumba/Clark  
John Lennon (Stephen MacKenna), Paul McCartney (Rod Culbertson), George Harrison (John Altman), Ringo Starr (Ray Ashcroft)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

## **1980-1989**

*McVicar* (Tom Clegg 1980)  
The Who Films  
John McVicar (Roger Daltry)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Elephant Man* (David Lynch 1980)  
Brooksfilms  
Joseph Merrick (John Hurt)  
Male; disability; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* (Sharad Patel 1981)  
Intermedia/Film Corporation of Kenya  
Idi Amin (Jospeth Olita)  
Male; politician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson 1981)  
Enigma/Allied Stars  
Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) and Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson)

Male; sport; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mark Gertler: Fragments of a Biography* (Phil Mulloy 1981)

Mediac/Arts Council

Mark Gertler (Antony Sher)

Male; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Priest of Love* (Christopher Miles 1981)

Milesian/Ronceval

D.H. Lawrence (Ian McKellen)

Male; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Chanel Solitaire* (George Kaczender 1981)

Gardenia/Todcrest

Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel (Marie-France Pisier)

Female; fashion designer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Give Us This Day* (Phil Mulloy 1982)

Spectre/Arts Council

Robert Noonan (Frank Grimes)

Male; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough 1982)

Indo-British Films/Goldcrest International

Mahatma Gandhi (Ben Kingsley)

Male; politician/imperial; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Wagner* (Tony Palmer 1983)

London cultural Trust/Richard Wagner/Ladbroke/Hungarofilm/MTV/Magyar

Rádío és Televisió

Richard Wagner (Richard Burton)

Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Space Riders* (Joe Massot 1984)

Condor

Barry Sheane (Barry Sheane)

Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Champions* (John Irvin 1984)

Archerwest/Embassy/Ladbroke/United British Artists

Bob Champion (John Hurt)

Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffé 1984)

Enigma/First Casualty/Goldcrest

Dith Pran (Haing S. Ngor)

Male; journalist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy 1984)

Aeon/Irish Film Board/Radion Telefís Éireann



Anne Devlin (Bríd Brennan)  
Female; political; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Dance with a Stranger* (Mike Newell 1985)  
First Film/Goldcrest/Film Four International/Shooting Lodge  
Ruth Ellis (Miranda Richardson)  
Female; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Anna Pavlova: A Woman for All Time* (Emil Loteanu 1985)  
Poseidon/Mosfilm/Sovinfilm  
Anna Pavlova (Galina Beliaeva)  
Female; dancer; Russian; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mata Hari* (Curtis Harrington 1985)  
Cannon  
Mata Hari (Sylvia Kristel)  
Female; spy; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Zina* (Ken McMullen 1985)  
Looseyard/TSI/Palan/Film Four International/Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen  
Zina Bronstein (Domiziana Giordano)  
Female; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Lady Jane* (Trevor Nunn 1986)  
Paramount  
Lady Jane Grey (Helena Bonham Carter)  
Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman 1986)  
BFI/Channel 4  
Michelangelo Caravaggio (Nigel Terry)  
Male; artist; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Sid and Nancy* (Alex Cox 1986)  
Zenith/Initial/Goldcrest/Embassy  
Sid Vicious (Gary Oldman) and Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Castaway* (Nicolas Roeg 1986)  
Castaway/United British Artists/Cannon  
Gerald Kingsland (Oliver Reed)  
Male; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephan Frears 1987)  
Civilhand/Zenith/British Screen/Film Four  
Joe Orton (Gary Oldman)  
Male; playwright; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Cry Freedom* (Richard Attenborough 1987)  
Marble Arch

Donald Woods (Kevin Kline) and Steve Biko (Denzel Washington)  
Male; political; 20<sup>th</sup> Century

*Testimony* (Tony Palmer 1987)  
Isolde/Mandemar/ORF/Channel Four  
Dmitri Shostakovich (Ben Kingsley)  
Male; composer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Buster* (David Green 1988)  
Buster/NFH  
Buster Edwards (Phil Collins)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Scandal* (Michael Caton-Jones 1989)  
Palace/Miramax/British Screen  
Christine Keeler (Joanne Whalley-Kilmer)  
Female; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan 1989)  
Ferndale/Granada/ Radion Telefis Éireann  
Christy Brown (Daniel Day-Lewis)  
Male; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh 1989)  
Renaissance/BBC  
Henry V (Kenneth Branagh)  
Male; royal; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*Impromptu* (James Lapine 1989)  
Sovereign/Governor/Ariane  
George Sand (Judy Davis)  
Female; writer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

## **1990-1999**

*Silent Scream* (David Hayman 1990)  
Antonine/Scottish Film Production Fund/BFI/Film Four  
Larry Winters (Iain Glen)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Krays* (Peter Medak 1990)  
Fugitive Features  
Ronald Kray (Gary Kemp) and Reggie Kray (Martin Kemp)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Vincent and Theo* (Robert Altman 1990)  
Belbo/Central/Arena/La Sept/Telepool/Radion Televisione Italiana  
Vincent Van Gogh (Tim Roth) and Theo Van Gogh (Paul Rhys)

Male; artist; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Let Him Have It* (Peter Medak 1991)  
Vivid/Canal +/Film Trustees/British Screen  
Derek Bentley (Christopher Eccleston)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Edward II* (Derek Jarman 1991)  
Edward II/Working Title/British Screen/BBC  
Edward II (Steven Waddington)  
Male; royal; 14<sup>th</sup> century

*1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Ridley Scott 1992)  
Percy Main/Légende  
Christopher Columbus (Gérard Depardieu)  
Male; explorer; 15<sup>th</sup> century

*Chaplin* (Richard Attenborough 1992)  
Lambeth/Carolco/Canal +  
Charlie Chaplin (Robert Downey Jr)  
Male; actor; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Hedd Wyn* (Paul Turner 1992)  
Pendefig Ty Cefn  
Hedd Wyn (Huw Garmon)  
Male; poet; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Wittgenstein* (Derek Jarman 1993)  
Uplink/Bandung/BFI/Channel Four  
Ludwig Wittgenstein (Karl Johnson)  
Male; philosopher; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan 1993)  
Hell's Kitchen/Universal/Byrne  
Gerry Conlon (Daniel Day-Lewis)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Shadowlands* (Richard Attenborough 1993)  
Shadowlands/Spelling/Price/Savoy  
C.S. Lewis (Anthony Hopkins)  
Male; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Backbeat* (Iain Softley 1994)  
Polygram/Scala/Channel Four/Royal  
Stuart Sutcliffe (Stephen Dorff) and John Lennon (Ian Hart)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Tom and Viv* (Brian Gilbert 1994)  
Samuelson/New Era/IRS/British Screen  
Tom Eliot (Willem Dafoe) and Vivienne Haigh-Wood (Miranda Richardson)

Male; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner 1994)

Close Call/Channel Four/Goldwyn

George III (Nigel Hawthorne)

Male; royal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Immortal Beloved* (Bernard Rose 1994)

Icon/Majestic

Ludwig van Beethoven (Gary Oldman)

Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Richard III* (Richard Loncraine 1995)

Bayly/Paré Productions/United Artists/ First Look/Red Rooster/Mayfair

Entertainment/ International/British Screen

Richard III (Ian McKellen)

Male; royal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Young Poisoner's Handbook* (Benjamin Ross 1995)

Mass Productions/ Sam Taylor/Kinowelt Filmverleih/Haut et Court/British Screen

Graham Young (Hugh O'Connor)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Carrington* (Christopher Hampton 1995)

Dora Productions/PolyGram Filmed Entertainment/Freeway Films/Cinéa/Orsans

Productions Studio Canal+/Euston Films/European Co-Production Fund

Dora Carrington (Emma Thompson) and Lytton Strachey (Jonathan Pryce)

Female; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Total Eclipse* (Agnieszka Holland 1995)

FIT Productions/Portman Productions/Société Française de Production/K2

SA/Capitol Films/Eurimages/European Co-production Fund/Canal+

Arthur Rimbaud (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Paul Verlaine (David Thewlis)

Male; poet; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Bruce* (Bob Carruthers and David McWhinnie 1996)

Cromwell Productions Ltd/Lamancha Productions

Robert the Bruce (Sandy Welch)

Male; royal; 14<sup>th</sup> century

*Michael Collins* (Neil Jordan 1996)

Warner Bros/Geffen Pictures/Stephen Woolley

Michael Collins (Liam Neeson)

Male; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Surviving Picasso* (James Ivory 1996)

Merchant Ivory Productions /David L. Wolper Productions/Warner Bros.

Pablo Picasso (Anthony Hopkins)

Male; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mrs Brown* (John Madden 1997)  
Ecosse Films/BBC Films/WGBH /Mobil Masterpiece Theatre/Irish Screen  
Queen Victoria (Judi Dench) and John Brown (Billy Connolly)  
Female; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Wilde* (Brian Gilbert 1997)  
BBC/Capitol Films/Dove International/NDF International/Pandora Filmproduktion  
Pony Canyon/Samuelson Productions  
Oscar Wilde (Stephen Fry)  
Male; writer/playwright; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Gambler* (Károly Makk 1997)  
Channel 4 Films/Trendraise Company/Gambler Productions/Hungry Eye Pictures  
Objektiv Filmstúdió/KRO/Eurimages  
Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Michael Gambon)  
Male; writer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The General* (John Boorman 1998)  
Merlin Films/J&M Entertainment/Kieran Corrigan/Irish Film Board  
Martin Cahill (Brendan Gleeson)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Grey Owl* (Richard Attenborough 1998)  
Beaver Productions Ltd/Ajawaan Productions Inc./Largo Entertainment/Allied  
Film-makers/Transfilm  
Archibald S. Belaney/'Grey Owl' (Pierce Brosnan)  
Male; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Love Is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (John Maybury 1998)  
BBC Films/Première Heure/BFI Production Board  
Francis Bacon (Derek Jacobi)  
Male; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur 1998)  
Polygram Filmed Entertainment /Working Title/Channel Four  
Elizabeth I (Cate Blanchett)  
Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Gods and Monsters* (Bill Condon 1998)  
Spike Productions/Regent Entertainment/BBC Films/Flashpoint  
James Whale (Ian McKellen)  
Male; film director; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Jinnah* (Jamil Dehlavi 1998)  
Dehlavi Films/Quaid Project Ltd/Petra Films  
Mohammed Ali Jinnah (Christopher Lee)  
Male; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Hilary and Jackie* (Anand Tucker 1998)

Oxford Film Company/Channel Four/InterMedia Films/British Screen/Arts Council of England/BBC

Jacqueline du Pré (Emily Watson) and Hilary du Pré (Rachel Griffiths)  
Female; musician/classical; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Plunkett and Macleane* (Jake Scott 1999)

PolyGram/ Filmed Entertainment/Working Title/Arts Council of England  
Will Plunkett (Robert Carlyle) and James Macleane (Jonny Lee Miller)  
Male; criminal; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Rogue Trader* (James Dearden 1999)

Granada Film Productions/Newmarket Capital Group  
Nick Leeson (Ewan McGregor)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Topsy Turvy* (Mike Leigh 1999)

Untitled 98//Thin Man Films/The Greenlight Fund/Newmarket Capital Group/Arts Council of England  
W.S. Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) and Arthur Sullivan (Allan Corduner)  
Male; composers; 19<sup>th</sup> century

## **2000-2009**

*Best* (Mary McGuckian 2000)

Best Films Ltd/IAC Film/Isle of Man Film Commission/Pembridge Pictures/Sky Pictures/Smoke and Mirrors Film Productions  
George Best (John Lynch)  
Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Nora* (Pat Murphy 2000)

Natural Nylon Entertainment/IAC Holdings/Volta Films/Road Movies  
Produktion/GAM/ Metropolitan Films/Bord Scannán na hÉireann/FilmFörderung Hamburg/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali/Radio-Telefís Éireann  
Nora Barnacle (Susan Lynch)  
Female; muse; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Pandaemonium* (Julien Temple 2000)

Mariner Films/ BBC/Film Council/Arts Council of England/Moonstone Entertainment  
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Linus Roache) and William Wordsworth (John Hannah)  
Male; poet; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Bride of the Wind* (Bruce Beresford 2001)

Alma UK Limited/ApolloMedia/Firelight Films/Kolar-Levy/Terra Film Produktion/Total Films  
Alma Mahler (Sarah Wynter)  
Female; composer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Iris* (Richard Eyre 2001)

Fox Iris Productions/BBC/Intermedia Films/Mirage Enterprises/Miramax Films  
Iris Murdoch (Judi Dench) and John Bayley (Jim Broadbent)  
Female; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*24 Hour Party People* (Michael Winterbottom 2002)  
24 Hour Films Limited/The Film Consortium/United Artists Films/Film  
Council/FilmFour/Revolution Films/Baby Cow Productions  
Tony Wilson (Steve Coogan)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Hours* (Stephen Daldry 2002)  
Paramount Pictures/Miramax Films/Scott Rudin Productions  
Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman)  
Female; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*To Kill a King* (Mike Barker 2003)  
Fairfax Films Limited/FilmFour/HanWay Films Ltd/Rockwood Edge/Future Film  
Financing/Natural NYlon Entertainment/Screenland Movieworld/IAC  
Holdings/Corsan Productions  
Oliver Cromwell (Tim Roth) and Lord General Thomas Fairfax (Dougray Scott)  
Male; royal; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Veronica Guerin* (Joel Schumacher 2003)  
Touchstone Pictures/Jerry Bruckheimer Films/Persevere Productions/World 2000  
Entertainment/Merrion Film Productions  
Veronica Guerin (Cate Blanchett)  
Female; journalist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Sylvia* (Christine Jeffs 2003)  
Ariel Films Limited/UK Film Council/BBC Films/Capitol Films/Focus  
Features/Ruby Films  
Sylvia Plath (Gwyneth Paltrow)  
Female; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Peter Webber 2003)  
Archer Street Productions/Delux Productions/Pathé Pictures International  
Film Fund Luxembourg/Inside Track/Intermedia/Film Four/Ingenious Media/UK  
Film Council/Wild Bear Films/Lions Gate Films  
Johannes Vermeer (Colin Firth) and Griet (Scarlett Johansson)  
Male; artist; 17<sup>th</sup> Century

*King Arthur* (Antoine Fuqua 2004)  
Touchstone Pictures/Jerry Bruckheimer Films/World 2000 Entertainment/Green  
Hills Productions/ Walt Disney Productions  
King Arthur (Clive Owen)  
Male; royal; 5<sup>th</sup> century

*The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (Stephan Hopkins 2004)  
HBO Films/BBC Films/Company Pictures/De Mann Entertainment/HD Vision  
Studios/Labrador Films

Peter Sellers (Geoffrey Rush)  
Male; actor; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Libertine* (Lawrence Dumore 2004)  
Mr. Mudd/The Isle of Man Film Commission/Samuelson Productions  
John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (Johnny Depp)  
Male; poet; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Pierrepont* (Adrian Shergold 2005)  
Granada Television /UK Film Council/Capitol Films/Masterpiece Theatre  
Albert Pierrepont (Timothy Spall)  
Male; hangman; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Colour Me Kubrick* (Brian Cook 2005)  
Colour Me K/EuropaCorp/Isle of Man Film/First Choice Films/Canal+/TPS Star  
Alan Conway (John Malkovich)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Stoned* (Stephen Woolley 2005)  
Audley Films LLP/Number 9 Films//Finola Dwyer Productions/Scala  
Productions/The Film Consortium/UK Film Council/Intandem  
Brian Jones (Leo Gregory) Frank Thorogood (Paddy Considine)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mrs Henderson Presents* (Stephen Frears 2005)  
Heyman-Hoskins Productions/Pathé Pictures/BBC Films/Future Films /Micro  
Fusion /The Weinstein Company/UK Film Council  
Mrs Laura Henderson (Judi Dench)  
Female; business; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Flying Scotsman* (Douglas Mackinnon 2006)  
Doosra Productions Limited/Flying Scotsman Films/ContentFilm  
International/Zero West/FreeWheel International/Filmstiftung NRW/Scion  
Films/Scottish Screen/DNC Entertainment/BBC Scotland/Specialized  
Graeme Obree (Jonny Lee Miller)  
Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Queen* (Stephan Frears 2006)  
Granada/Pathé Renn Productions/ /BIM Distribuzione /France 3 Cinéma /Canal+  
/Pathé Pictures International/Firststep Productions/ Scott Rudin Productions  
Queen Elizabeth II (Helen Mirren)  
Female; royal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Last King of Scotland* (Kevin Macdonald 2006)  
DNA Films/FilmFour/Cowboy Films/Slate Films/TATfilm/UK Film  
Council/Scottish Screen/Fox Searchlight Pictures  
Idi Amin (Forest Whitaker)  
Male; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Miss Potter* (Chris Noonan 2006)



Hopping Mad Productions/Phoenix Pictures /UK Film Council/Grosvenor Park Media/BBC Films/Isle of Man Film/BBC/Momentum  
Beatrix Potter (Renée Zellweger)  
Female; writer; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Becoming Jane* (Julian Jarrold 2007)  
Ecosse Films/Blueprint Pictures/Scion Films/Octagon Films /UK Film Council/Miramax/HanWay Films/Bórd Scannán na hÉireann/2 Entertain/BBC Films/Irish Film Board  
Jane Austen (Anne Hathaway)  
Female; writer; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Amazing Grace* (Michael Apted 2007)  
Walden Media/Sunflower Productions LLC/Bristol Bay Productions/Ingenious Film Partners/ Roadside Attractions/Samuel Goldwyn Films  
William Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd)  
Male; political; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Rise of the Footsoldier* (Julian Gilbey 2007)  
Carnaby International/Flakjacket Films/Hanover Films  
Carlton Leach (Ricci Harnett)  
Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Copying Beethoven* (Agnieszka Holland 2007)  
Film & Entertainment VIP Medienfonds 2 GmbH & Co. /Copying Beethoven LTD. /Eurofilm Stúdió/Michael Taylor/Sidney Kimmel Entertainment  
Ludwig von Beethoven (Ed Harris)  
Male; composer; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Control* (Anton Corbijn 2007)  
Northsee Limited/EM Media/Warner Music UK/IFF/CINV/3 Dogs and a Pony/Dendy Films  
Ian Curtis (Sam Riley)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur 2007)  
Universal/Motion Picture Zeta Produktions Gesellschaft mbH/StudioCanal/  
Working Title  
Queen Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett)  
Female; royal; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Nightwatching* (Peter Greenaway 2007)  
Nightwatching Productions/Wales Creative IP Fund/Polish Film Institute/Gremi Film Production /Netherlands Film Fund/Rotterdam Film Fund/Media Plus/Government of Canada/Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit Program/British Columbia Film/Film Finances Ltd/UK Film Council/ContentFilm International/No Equal Entertainment /Odeon Films/Yeti Films/Kasander Film Company  
Rembrandt van Rijn (Martin Freeman)  
Male; artist; 17<sup>th</sup> century

*The Killing of John Lennon* (Andrew Piddington 2007)

Picture Players Productions

Mark David Chapman (Jonas Ball)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick 2008)

Columbia Pictures/Universal City Studio/GH Three LLC/Ruby Films/Scott Rudin Productions/Focus Features/BBC Films/Relativity Media/UK Film Council

Mary Boleyn (Scarlett Johansson)

Female; royal mistress; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*The Edge of Love* (John Maybury 2008)

Reely Good Times Limited/Rainy Day Films/Premier PR/Capitol Films/BBC

Films/Wales Creative IP Fund

Dylan Thomas (Matthew Rhys)

Male; poet; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Cass* (Jon S. Baird 2008)

Cass Films/Goldcrest Independent

Cass Pennant (Nonso Anozie)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Duchess* (Saul Dibb 2008)

The Duchess Movie Limited/Pathé Renn Productions/BIM Distribuzione/Qwerty Films/Magnolia Mae Films/Paramount Vantage /Pathé/BBC Films

Georgiana Spencer, Duchess of Devonshire (Keira Knightley)

Female; aristocrat; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Bronson* (Nicolas Winding Refn 2008)

Red Mist Distribution Limited/Vertigo Films/4DH Films/Aramid

Entertainment/Str8jacket Creations/EM Media/Scanbox/Perfume Films

Charles Bronson/Michael Peterson (Tom Hardy)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Little Ashes* (Paul Morrison 2008)

Factotum Barcelona S.L /Little Ashes Limited/Aria Films/Met Film/APT Films/Regent Entertainment

Federico García Lorca (Javier Beltrán) and Salvador Dalí (Robert Pattinson)

Male; poet; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Telstar: The Joe Meek Story* (Nick Moran 2008)

Aspiration Films

Joe Meek (Con O'Neill)

Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Hunger* (Steve McQueen 2008)

Blast! Films/Hunger Ltd/Film4/Northern Ireland Screen/Wales Creative IP Fund

Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender)

Male; political; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée 2009)

GK Films

Queen Victoria (Emily Blunt)

Female; royal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*The Damned United* (Tom Hooper 2009)

The Damned United Ltd/Left Bank Pictures/Columbia Pictures/BBC Films/Screen Yorkshire

Brian Clough (Michael Sheen)

Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Bright Star* (Jane Campion 2009)

Pathé/Screen Australia/BBC Films/UK Film Council/New South Wales Film & Television Office/Jan Chapman Productions/Hopscotch

Australian Film Finance Corporation (AFFC)

Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and John Keats (Ben Whishaw)

Male; poet; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Creation* (Jon Amiel 2009)

HanWay Films/Ocean Pictures/Recorded Picture Company/BBC Films/UK Film Council

Charles Darwin (Paul Bettany)

Male; scientist; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Nowhere Boy* (Sam Taylor-Johnston 2009)

Ecosse Films/Film4/UK Film Council/North West Vision/Lipsync Productions

John Lennon (Aaron Johnson)

Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

## **2010-2014**

*Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll* (Mat Whitecross 2010)

UK Film Council/New Boots and Panties Ltd/DJ Films/104Films/Prescience/Aegis Film Fund/Lipsync Productions

Ian Dury (Andy Serkis)

Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mr Nice* (Bernard Rose 2010)

Independent/KanZaman/Prescience/Omni Films/Wales Creative IP Fund/Lipsync Productions

Howard Marks (Rhys Ifans)

Male; criminal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Risen* (Neil Jones 2010)

Burn Hand Film Productions/Templeheart Films

Howard Winstone (Stuart Brennan)

Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper 2010)  
See-Saw Films/Bedlam Productions/UK Film Council/Momentum Pictures/Aegis  
Film Fund/Molinare Investment/FilmNation Entertainment  
King George VI (Colin Firth)  
Male; royal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Arbor* (Clio Barnard 2010)  
Artangel Media/UK Film Council  
Andrea Dunbar (Manjinder Virk)  
Female; playwright; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The First Grader* (Justin Chadwick 2010)  
BBC Films/UK Film Council/Videovision Entertainment/Lipsync/Sixth  
Sense/Origin Pictures/Arte France Cinéma  
Kimani N'gan'ga Maruge (Oliver Litondo)  
Male; education; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Burke and Hare* (John Landis 2010)  
Fragile Films/Aegis Film Fund/Prescience/Quickfire Films/Altus Productions/UK  
Film Council/Ealing Studios/ Entertainment Film Distributors Ltd  
William Burke (Simon Pegg) and William Hare (Andy Serkis)  
Male; criminal; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*My Week with Marilyn* (Simon Curtis 2011)  
Trademark Films/The Weinstein Company/BBC Films/Lipsync Productions/UK  
Film Council  
Marilyn Monroe (Michelle Williams)  
Female; actor; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd 2011)  
DJ Films/Pathé/Film 4/Goldcrest Film Finance LLP/UK Film Council  
Margaret Thatcher (Meryl Streep)  
Female; politics; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Good Vibrations* (Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn 2013)  
Canderblinks Film and Music/Revolution Films/Treasure Entertainment/Matador  
Pictures/Cinema One/Regent Capital/Northern Ireland Screen/Irish Film  
Board/Immaculate Conception Films/BBC Films  
Terri Hooley (Richard Dormer)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Look of Love* (Michael Winterbottom 2013)  
Revolution Films/Baby Cow Films/StudioCanal Limited/Film4/Anton Capital  
Entertainment/LipSync Productions  
Paul Raymond (Steve Coogan)  
Male; businessman; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Belle* (Amma Asante 2013)

DJ Films/Isle of Man Film/British Film Institute (BFI)/Metrol  
Technology/Pinewood Studios  
Dido Elizabeth Belle (Gugu Mbatha-Raw)  
Female; aristocrat; 18<sup>th</sup> century

*Summer in February* (Chris Menaul 2013)  
CrossDay Productions/Apart Films/Marwood Pictures  
Alfred Munnings (Dominic Cooper)  
Male; artist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Philomena* (Stephen Frears 2013)  
Baby Cow/Magnolia Mae/Pathé/BBC Films/BFI/Canal+/Ciné+  
Philomena Lee (Judi Dench)  
Female; nurse; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Rush* (Ron Howard 2013)  
Revolution Films/Working Title Films/Imagine Entertainment/Double  
Negative/Exclusive Media Group/Cross Creek Pictures  
Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) and James Hunt (Chris Hemsworth)  
Male; sports; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Railway Man* (Jonathan Teplitzky 2013)  
Pictures in Paradise/Trinifold Management/Davis Films/Latitude Media/DeLuxe  
Australia/Screen Queensland /Screen Australia/Silver Reel/Creative  
Scotland/Screen NSW/Fulcrum Media Finance/Lionsgate UK  
Eric Lomax (Colin Firth)  
Male; military; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*One Chance* (David Frankel 2013)  
Relevant Entertainment/Syco Television  
Paul Potts (James Corden)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Diana* (Oliver Hirschbiegel 2013)  
Ecosse Films/Scope Pictures/Le Pacte/Film i Väst/Filmgate Films  
Diana, Princess of Wales (Naomi Watts)  
Female; royal; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Invisible Woman* (Ralph Fiennes 2013)  
Headline Pictures/Magnolia Mae/Lonely Dragon/BFI /BBC Films/West End  
Films/Taeoo Entertainment  
Nelly Ternan (Felicity Jones)  
Female; royal mistress; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*All Is by My Side* (John Ridley 2013)  
Darko Entertainment /Freeman Film/Matador Pictures/Subotica Entertainment  
Ltd/Irish Film Board  
Jimi Hendrix (André Benjamin)  
Male; musician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (Justin Chadwick 2014)  
Videovision Entertainment/Industrial Development Corporation of South  
Africa/Distant Horizon/Origin Pictures/Long Walk to Freedom/Pathé  
Nelson Mandela (Idris Elba)  
Male; politician; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum 2014)  
Black Bear Pictures/Bristol Automotive  
Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch)  
Male; scientist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Mr Turner* (Mike Leigh 2014)  
Diaphana Films/Xofa Productions/ France 3 Cinéma/Lipsync Productions Thin  
Man Films/BFI/Film4/Untitled 13/Focus Features/Sunray Films  
J.M.W. Turner (Timothy Spall)  
Male; artist; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Effie Gray* (Richard Laxton 2014)  
Sovereign Films/Venezia Opportunità/High Line Productions  
Effie Gray (Dakota Fanning)  
Female; muse; 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Set Fire to the Stars* (Andy Goddard 2014)  
Mad As Birds/YJB Films/Masnomis/Ffilm Cymru Wales  
Dylan Thomas (Celyn Jones) and John M. Brinnin (Elijah Wood)  
Male; poet; 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Goltzius and the Pelican Company* (Peter Greenaway 2014)  
Film and Music Entertainment/MP Film/Catherine Dussart Productions/Kasander  
Film Company /Head Gear Films/Metrol Technology  
Hendrik Goltzius (Ramsey Nasr)  
Male; artist; 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Testament of Youth* (James Kent 2014)  
BBC Films/BFI/Heyday Films/Screen Yorkshire  
Vera Brittain (Alicia Vikander)  
Female; nurse; 20<sup>th</sup> century

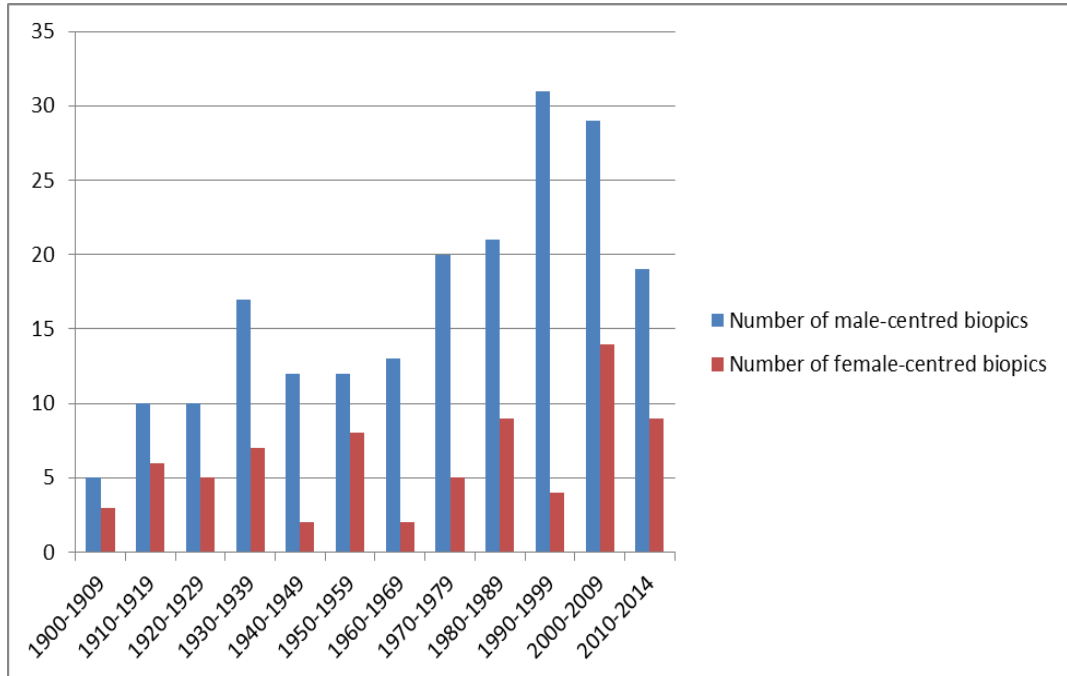
*The Theory of Everything* (James Marsh 2014)  
Working Title Films/Focus Features  
Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne)  
Male; scientist; 20<sup>th</sup> century

## Appendix Two: Distribution of Gender and Professional Field in the British Biopic 1900-2014

Types	1900 - 1909		1910 - 1919		1920 - 1929		1930 - 1939		1940 - 1949		1950 - 1959		1960 - 1969		1970 - 1979		1980 - 1989		1990 - 1999		2000 - 2009		2010 - 2014		Totals	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
Actor				1				1				1			1	1			1		1			1	8	
Aristocrat																1							1		1	3
Artist							1				1				1		3		3	1	2		3		15	
Aviator									1																1	
Banker							1																		1	
Business																						1	1		2	
Composer							1		1		1				3		2		2		1	1			12	
Criminal	5		2		3		3		1		2	1	2		3		2	1	8		5		2		40	
Dancer														1				1							2	
Disability																	1								1	
Education																							1		1	
Explorer					1		1		2										1						5	
Fashion																	1								1	
Film Director																		1							1	
Hangman																					1				1	
Inventor									1		1														2	
Journalist																	1						1		2	
Military			4		1		3				1	2	3		1								1		16	
Mistress		3		3		1		1														1		1	10	
Musician											1				1		1		1	1	5		4		14	
Nurse				1		1		1				1												2	6	
Philosopher																			1						1	
Playwright			1														1							1	3	
Poet					2		2		1			1				1			2		5		1		15	
Muse																						1		1	2	
Political			2				1		2						5		3	3	3		3		1	1	24	
Religion					1		2		1		2	1	2		2										11	
Royal			1	1	1	3	2	4	3	1	2		3	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	2	3	1	1	39	
Scientist															2							1		2	5	
Singer											1														1	
Sports																	3					3		2	8	
Spy																		1							1	
Writer					1						1		3			1	3	1	4			5			19	
Total by Gender	5	3	10	6	10	5	17	7	12	2	12	8	13	2	20	5	21	9	31	4	29	14	19	9	M:199 F:74	
Total	8		16		15		24		14		20		15		25		30		35		43		28		273	

## Appendix Three: Column and Pie Charts of Gender and Profession Distribution in British Biopics

### Section 1: Column chart of male and female-centred biopics released 1900-2014

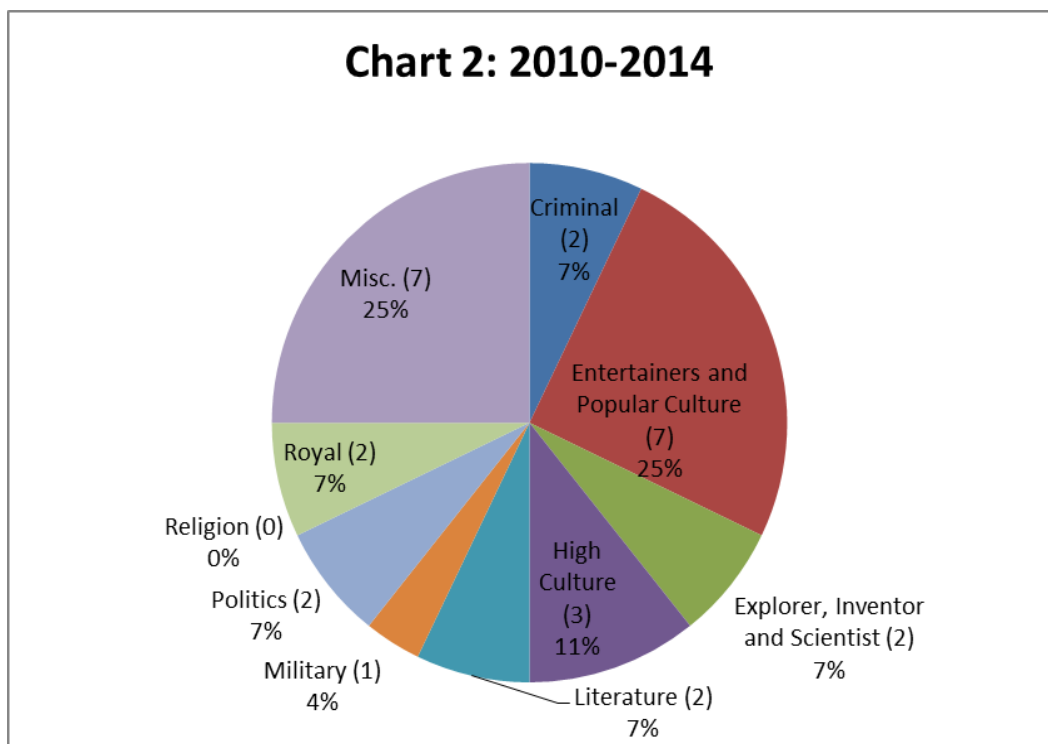
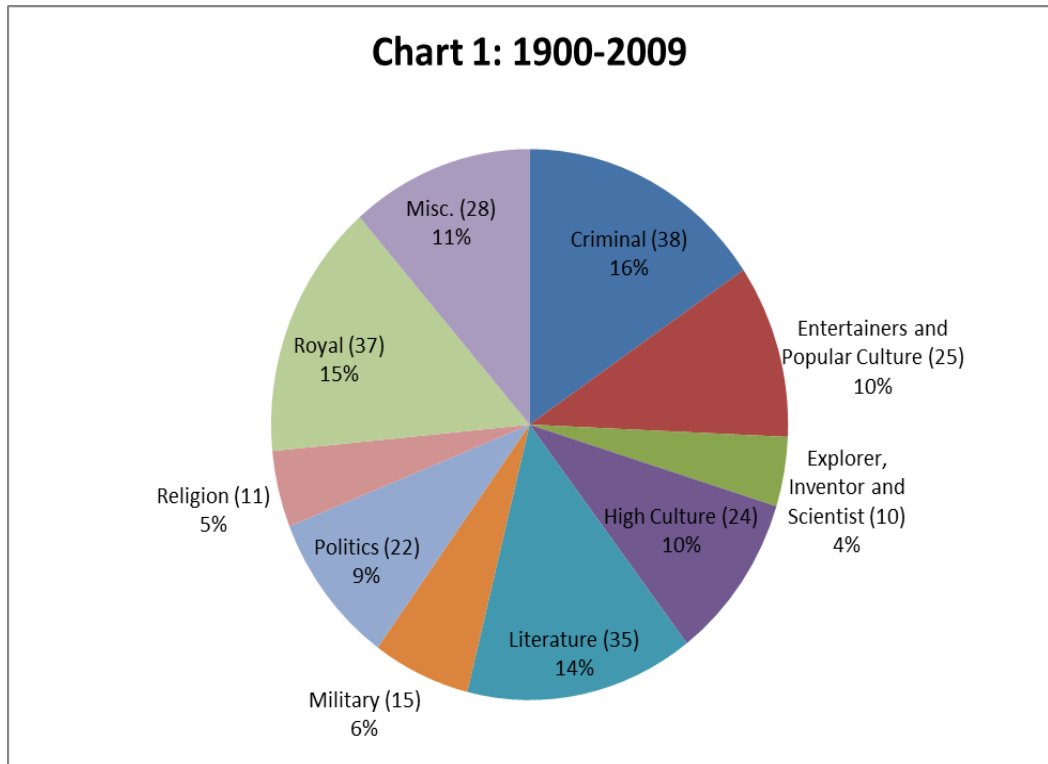


### Section 2: Pie charts detailing the distribution of biopic profession fields and subject types

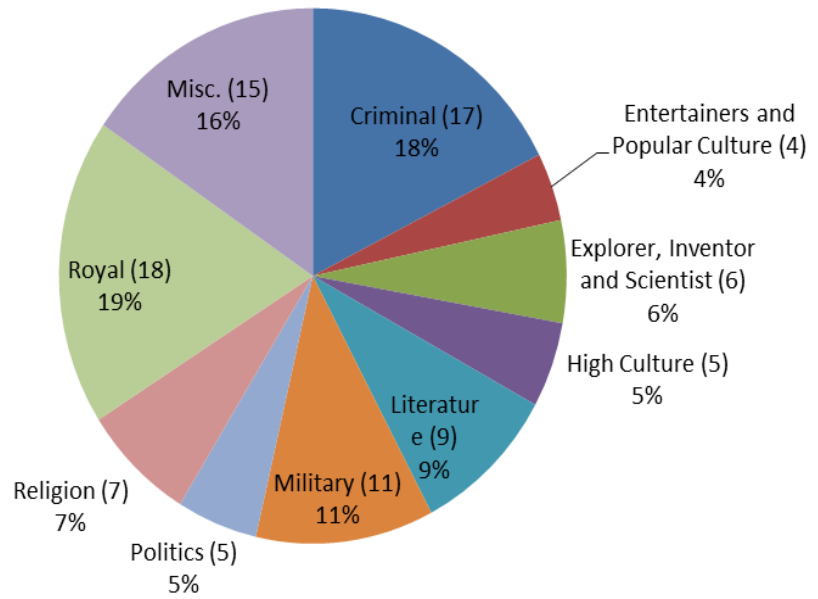
Chart 1 details the distribution of biopic subject types for the period 1900-2009 and shows the dominance of royal, literary and crime biopics. Chart 2 shows this distribution for the period 2010-2014, and the dominance of biopics focusing on popular culture. Charts 3 and 4 show how the subject matter and type of historical figure chosen for biopics shifts after 1960, the decline of military and religious figures and the increasing emphasis on figures from literary fields and from entertainment, popular music and sport. However, it also shows how other types, such as the royal and criminal biopic, are enduring while the ‘high culture’ biopic (composers and artists) and politicians/political-themed biopics increase after 1960. Note: The ‘Entertainers and Popular Culture’ category includes the actor, fashion designer, film director, musician and sports biopic. The ‘Explorer, Inventor and Scientist’ category groups traditional ‘Great Man’ types about expanding knowledge. The ‘High Culture’ category includes artists and composer biopics. The ‘Literature’ category includes the playwright, poet and writer biopic. The



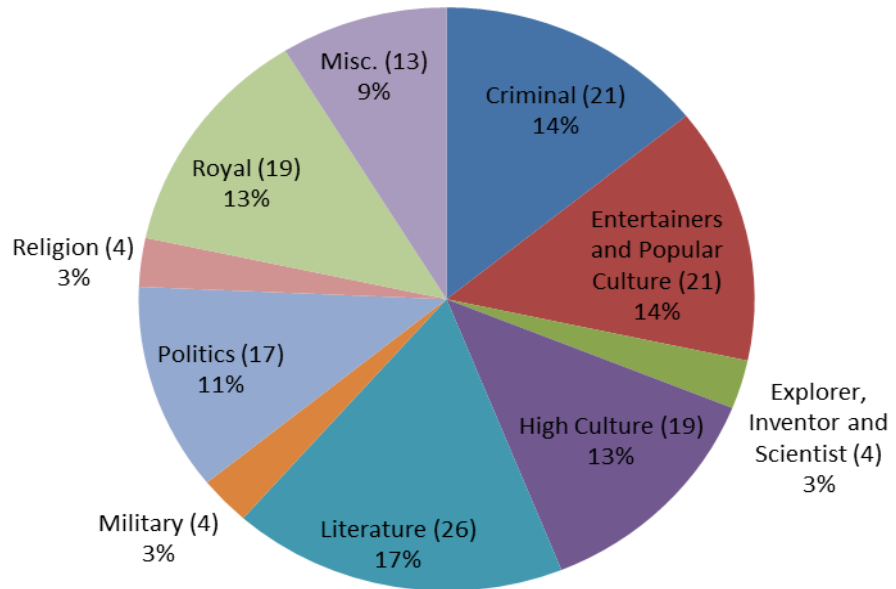
'Miscellaneous' ('Misc.') category includes the aristocrat, aviator, banker, business, dancer, disability, education, hangman, journalist, nurse, philosopher, muse, royal mistress, singer and spy biopic.



**Chart 3: 1900-1959**



**Chart 4: 1960-2009**



#### Appendix Four: Biopic Production as Proportion of Total UK Film Production

Decade	Number of Biopics Produced in the UK	Number of Films Produced in the UK	Biopics as a Proportion of Films Produced in UK
1900 – 1909	8	2073	0.4%
1910 – 1919	16	4207	0.4%
1920 – 1929	15	794	1.9%
1930 – 1939	24	1289	1.9%
1940 – 1949	14	530	2.6%
1950 – 1959	20	1243	1.6%
1960 – 1969	15	999	1.5%
1970 – 1979	25	810	3.1%
1980 – 1989	30	427	7%
1990 – 1999	35	827	4.2%
2000 – 2009	43	1981	2.2%
2010 – 2014	28	1635	1.7%
Total Across Period 1900 – 2014	273	16815	1.6%

The total number of UK feature film produced for the period 1900-1919 was gathered from *The British Film Catalogue Volume 1: Fiction Film 1895-1994* (Gifford 2000: 13-83, 84-255). For the period 1920-1999 this was gathered from the *Screenonline* website and for 2000-2014 from the *BFI* website.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See 'Facts: UK Feature Films Produced 1912-2003'. *BFI Screenonline*. Available from: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/facts/fact2.html> [Accessed 13 April 2016]. BFI Research and Statistics (2015) *Film and Other Screen Sector Production in 2014*. BFI: London, p. 5. Available from: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-film-and-other-screen-sector-production-in-2014-2015-07-09.pdf> [Accessed 13 April 2016].

### **Previously Published Material**

The journal article included here was originally published in *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*.

Robinson, M. (2011) "Please Baby, Take Me Back" Homo-social Bonds in the Contemporary British Biopic. *Networking Knowledge*. 4 (1).