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Authorial Histories

The Historical Film and the Literary Biopic

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Literary biographical films or literary biopics, dramatizations of the life of a writer, have become increasingly popular since the early 1990s. While literary biopics have always featured in cinematic history, it is only in recent times that they have boomed into a considerable cinematic trend. However, critical analysis of literary biopics as a distinct branch of historical film does not currently exist, nor is there any analysis of the manner in which the literary biopic forms a more experimental branch of the cinematic biopic. Instead, literary biopics have been examined simply as another example of cinematic biopics and costume or period dramas (often called "heritage" films), bypassing their important focus on the persona of the literary author and on the manner in which this focus contributes to the genre of historical film. Furthermore, the vast majority of literary biopics have been ignored by film critics, only a handful of analyses of specific films being currently available.[1]

This is baffling, as cinematic representations of authors' biographies have become a consistent screen trend and the number of films devoted to this theme is continually growing. A quick investigation reveals many films, such as *Shadowlands* (1993), *Tom and Viv* (1994), *Wilde* (1997), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Iris* (2001), *The Hours* (2002), *Sylvia* (2003), *Finding Neverland* (2004), *Miss Potter* (2006), *Becoming Jane* (2007), *The Edge of Love* (2008), *Bright Star* (2009) – and more. The task before me in this chapter is to provide an introductory critical response to the literary biopic rather than to engage with previous debates on this type of film, as such debates do not exist. However, the process of making an initial analysis of literary biopics requires an engagement with previous debates regarding screen biopics, written biography, and heritage cinema. The critical debates that have shaped these discourses need to be expanded upon in relation to the literary biopic.

Robert Rosenstone notes that there is a generally dismissive attitude toward the biopic (Rosenstone 2007: 11). One of the main causes for such an attitude is the notion that biopics are based on a conservative idea of history as a simplified model

A Companion to the Historical Film, First Edition. Edited by Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu.

of ''great'' individuals – a model providing ''a coherent version of life,'' identity and history (14). This is an issue that also pervades literary criticism on the genre of written biography, supporting Rosenstone's argument that ''written biography and the biographical film are less different than they may appear to be'' (ibid.). In a key collection of essays on literary biography, John Batchelor introduces the primary debates that shape the analysis of written biography through reference to the genre's assumed ''conservative'' status, which is seen to be ''immune'' to ''deconstruction'' (Batchelor 1995: 2). Indeed, one critic from the collection, Jürgen Schlaeger, writes:

> Compared with the images of our culture which post-modernism projects, biography is, in spite of its intertextual construction, fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of the inner self, into a personality-oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential. (Schlaeger 1995: 63)

In light of its privileging of western discourses of individuality, identity, and the inner self, it is easy to see why the genre has been aligned with a conservative politics of ''diffusion'' of postmodernism's subversive possibilities, which – conversely – highlight the inherent instability or ''fictionality'' of the concepts of the inner self and individual identity.

However, as much as these arguments are valid in their highlighting of the privileging of the self-contained individual within the mode of biography, they also over-generalize and fail to recognize the complex manner in which postmodernism is evident within more recent biographical outputs. At the heart of such arguments is also the problematic assumption that all biographies do essentially the same thing. As Rosenstone quite rightfully points out, it is important to consider the biographical mode as a varied genre that can be presented to an audience in both subversive and conservative ways, ranging from traditionally linear storylines of selfhood and history to more ''innovative'' productions, which present ''a life in the form of a fragmented [. . .] drama'' (Rosenstone 2007: 15).

For example, films such as *Shakespeare in Love*, *Bright Star*, and *The Hours* utilize ideologies of western selfhood only to subvert them through a postmodern self-consciousness of the cultural specificity of identity construction. It would be a sweeping generalization to assume that such films are ''conservative'' on the basis of their biographical content. In fact, the vast majority of literary biopics point to a new form of biography, in which, in his/her historical setting, the individual is a self-conscious example of the ''fictionality'' of the notion of a linear and stable identity and history. With their awareness of how the author's creation of fiction mirrors the fictional nature of historical representation, literary biopics in fact foreground and perform the work of postmodernist deconstruction.[2]

The charge of ''conservatism'' pervades the analysis of another mode of historical film with which the literary biopic is closely aligned: the heritage film. ''Heritage'' film refers primarily to British, but also European and American, period

or costume dramas made from the 1980s onwards. As Andrew Higson notes in his comprehensive study of the genre, heritage films are more commonly known as historical films that present historical figures and settings, a large proportion of them being biopics (Higson 2003: 20). The most commonly cited examples of such films are the popular Merchant Ivory productions *Howards End* (1992), *A Room with a View* (1985), and *The Remains of the Day* (1993).

As the popularity and production of these films developed alongside the rise of the Thatcher government in the UK, many critics have drawn a direct relationship between the Thatcher government's own conservative politics and what has been widely regarded as the "nostalgic" tone of many heritage films (Sadoff 2010: xi–xii, xvii). Higson writes that the initial critical analysis of heritage films was rooted in an investigation of how certain

> English costume dramas [. . .] seemed to articulate a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes, and how in doing so an England that no longer existed seemed to have been reinvented as something fondly remembered and desirable. (Higson 2003: 12)

While other critics – such as Claire Monk, Diane F. Sadoff, and Julianne Pidduck – have argued for a broader and more complex analysis of heritage films, which should take into account their varied nature, the debate regarding their "conservatism" continues to shape critical reception (Monk 1995a, 1995b; Sadoff 2010; Pidduck 2004). Indeed, despite innovative films such as Jane Campion's *The Piano* and Sally Potter's *Orlando*, heritage costume dramas are often generalized in the same manner as written biography and screen biopics, on the inherent assumption that they are monolithic examples of a conservative ideology of history, identity, and historical representation.

In her recent study, Sadoff calls for a more complex analysis of heritage films – that is, an analysis contextualized within the different modes of production of the films and within the different decades in which they were made (Sadoff 2010: xi). She argues that, rather than situating heritage films within the opposite categories of "conservative" and "subversive," it is perhaps more productive to "situate heritage films within a particular yet polyvalent history of historical consciousness, in different decades of heritage cultural production" (ibid.). The particular "historical consciousness" to which she refers is a complex and varied form of postmodern historical consciousness. It is here that the analysis of heritage cinema becomes particularly relevant to the study of literary biopics.

Sadoff distinguishes between the initial, arguably more conservative, heritage films of the 1980s and later variations, noting that more recent manifestations of costume and period films utilize complex postmodernist strategies, which challenge previous notions of historicity and seek to enact the historical recovery of marginalized histories belonging to women, gay and colonial cultures (xi–xii, 197–243). I argue that literary biopics follow heritage cinema's more recent developments through a new focus on the cultural persona of the author, which

is used as an avenue to explore recovered marginal histories and to challenge traditional forms of historical inquiry.

I shall return to this point of the persona of the author in more detail later on in this essay. It is perhaps more pertinent at this stage to expand upon the postmodern historical consciousness in relation to literary biopics. It is important to point out that I do not subscribe to the idea of postmodernism as an ahistorical phenomenon. Rather postmodernism is itself historically situated, stemming out of debates on the nature of history, reality, and identity in contemporary western culture. Postmodern historical consciousness is not, then, the denial of history, but rather the recognition that history is essentially discursive in nature and, to use John Kucich and Sadoff's words, ''a reflection on historical knowledge'' itself (Kucich and Sadoff 2000: xxviii). The discourse of postmodernism interrogates how we understand, represent, receive, and interpret history in the present. It is also a process of deconstruction of the idea of objective ''truth'' and data in historical inquiry in favor of the recovery of lost and untold histories, recognizing how history is itself a narrative informed by specific historical conditions.

Pidduck argues that part of the problem with assuming that heritage films are, inherently, politically conservative and nostalgic in tone lies in an inability to acknowledge their ''knowing sensibility, and persistent post/modern strategies of quotation, irony and parody'' (Pidduck 2004: 14). Another aspect of the problem is the lack of recognition of the modes of historical recovery that these films enact, telling histories that are yet to be told in mainstream historical inquiry. As David Ehrenstein has pointed out, a film like *Orlando*, for example, ''touches on such hot-button issues as feminism, imperialism, and gender and gay/lesbian politics, all the while seducing audiences that would be loathe to deal with such topics head-on'' (Ehrenstein 1993: 2). Part of the important historical work that such films perform is making hidden histories visible, providing the cinematic language to represent and talk about issues that have been marginalized in mainstream culture.

Many literary biopics enact the politics of postmodern historical recovery and interrogation that I have outlined above and expand upon it through their alignment of historical inquiry with the trope of the authorial persona. For example, a film like *Shakespeare in Love* utilizes the postmodern strategies of quotation and parody. The representation of Shakespeare in the film is not a realistic one, but rather a pastiche of various cultural stereotypes and historical time periods, presented in an amusingly self-conscious guise. The film does not aim to make us believe that this is what Shakespeare was really like; it rather reveals the manner in which history is itself a construction.

Other films – such as *Bright Star*, *Becoming Jane*, *The Edge of Love*, *The Hours*, and *Wilde* – seek to recover and invent lost histories via a particular focus on gender and sexuality. Most literary biopics are aware of their own fictionality and flaunt the fact that they have invented the ''truth'' through their process of recovering untold histories. What literary biopics in fact demonstrate is a sophisticated development

of heritage and historical films that takes as its primary focus the idea of history as subjective narrative, similar to the works created by the authors whom these films depict.

It should be clear by now that the type of methodological approach I am outlining here follows Rosenstone's discussion of postmodern historical film and postmodern history. Rosenstone writes that postmodern history "reeks with provisionality and undecidability, partisanship and even overt politics" and "does not aim at integration, synthesis, and totality," but rather deals "in fragments and collage" (Rosenstone 1995c: 201). Most importantly, postmodern history focuses on "the past experiences of the formerly excluded: women, ethnic minorities, gays, [. . .] regional and colonial peoples," seeking to "unravel texts, raise questions about meaning in the text, and invent micro-narratives as alternatives to history" (201–202).

The figure of the author is a heavily loaded one in western culture, being associated with various cultural, political, ideological, and national concepts of identity and subjectivity. In England and North America in particular, the figure of the author has historically been linked with the rise of English studies as a distinct educational discipline that contributes to English and American cultural identities. For example, Terry Eagleton and Chris Baldick have examined in great detail the politicization and nationalization of the English author in the 1920s and 1930s – not only as a response to war, but also as an ideological construction of a cohesive and shared cultural heritage (Eagleton 1983: 17–53; Baldick 1983: 86–108, 134–161). In his study of the author in western culture, Andrew Bennett notes that one of the main reasons why the author has become central to modern concepts of identity and cultural inheritance is the fact that the development of the authorial persona is historically based on the development of the western subject (Bennett 2005: 8). The author, he argues, has become linked with "what it means to be human" (ibid.) and with the rise of liberalism (12), reaching his/her "apotheosis in the period now commonly characterized by the term 'Romanticism'" (55). Indeed, romanticized visions of the author populate most literary biopics, old or new, emphasizing "individuality," "uniqueness," "originality," and an autonomous subjectivity as sole creator of the artistic product (56–57). This is also the type of identity that has been continually deconstructed by means of postmodernist literary criticism, along with the postmodernist deconstruction of the modern subject and the concept of a linear history (17).

However, the author has not passed away; in fact, as this figure was being pronounced "dead" in literary criticism, he/she was being systematically "resurrected" on screen. This does not demonstrate a polarity between the literary biopic and literary criticism, but rather reveals the complex and contradictory manner in which the deconstruction of authorship manifests itself across different media. Literary biopics' investment in the idea of the Romantic author sits side by side with their interrogative postmodern strategies. In consequence, they mirror the manner in which literary criticism continually addresses the figure of the author as central

to debates regarding history, identity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality while at the same time deconstructing such a figure in the process. Because the figure of the author is central to our debates on identity and history, he/she continuously features in contemporary cinema. The emergence of a distinct branch of historical film demonstrates that the figure of the author is becoming an important medium for reflecting on contemporary historical consciousness. What I ultimately want to suggest in this essay is that the contemporary cinematic focus on the figure of the author is also a distinct branch of contemporary historical consciousness, and one that is worked out in often complex ways.

Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009) and John Maybury's *The Edge of Love* (2008) exemplify the postmodernist strategies of overt politics, the construction of micro-narratives as alternative histories and the recovery of untold histories through their engagement with one of the most commonly known tropes associated with the construction of the Romantic authorial persona: the feminine muse. I have chosen to analyze these two films because they highlight themes and tropes that run through many other literary biopics and they are, in a sense, representative of the genre.

Jane Campion's *Bright Star*: The history of Fanny Brawne

Jane Campion's *Bright Star* marks her return to filmmaking after a prolonged break. Campion describes how during this break she read Andrew Motion's 1997 biography of the Romantic English poet John Keats (1785–1821) and was inspired to make a film about his life, focusing on his short romance with his neighbor Fanny Brawne (Campion 2009). *Bright Star* charts their two-year relationship from 1818 on, culminating in Keats's death in Rome, which we never actually see. In fact there is a lot in Keats's life that we do not see on sceen, because the film is primarily told from Fanny's perspective.

This is a particularly telling approach to Keats's biography – one that signals how *Bright Star* follows from Campion's earlier explorations of female narratives and women's lives in *Sweetie* (1989), *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *The Piano* (1993), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), *Holy Smoke* (1999), and *In the Cut* (2003). In an interview on *The Piano*, Campion notes that, while her film borrows from the canonical English novel *Wuthering Heights*, it is not a direct transposition of it, because ''I'm not English. I belong to a colonial culture, and I had to invent my own fiction'' (Wexman 1999: 105). This is precisely what she does in her adaptation of Keats's life. *Bright Star* is the biography of John Keats (John is played by Ben Whishaw), told through a fictitious account of Fanny Brawne's own history (Fanny is played by Abbie Cornish) and from a knowing perspective, which recognizes the systems of power and gender that existed in nineteenth-century England. Campion's ''colonial'' perspective is a metaphor for the interrogative and revisionist politics of the film, which seeks to address a forgotten, silenced, and marginalized narrative – here, that of a woman in the shadows of a great man.

The trope of the narrative of the forgotten muse is quite similar to other, more mainstream literary biopics – such as *Shakespeare in Love, Becoming Jane*, *The Hours*, *Finding Neverland*, or, as we shall see, *The Edge of Love*. Campion's decision to focus on Fanny Brawne in Keats's screen biography has not gone unnoticed by critics.[3] The most famous example is arguably Christopher Ricks's scathing review, ''Undermining Keats,'' published in *The New York Review of Books* (Ricks 2009). Ricks is an eminent Keats scholar, and thus his words carried weight with other critics who reviewed *Bright Star*.[4] Ricks argues that, while the film's focus on Fanny Brawne demonstrates Campion's ''perception'' as a filmmaker, it ''does not respect John Keats.'' Ricks's attack on *Bright Star* is primarily concerned with how the film represents (or does not represent) Keats and his work. While *Bright Star* sensitively and favorably portrays Keats, it is not essentially his story, but Fanny's; and herein lies the problem. Reading Ricks's review of *Bright Star*, one has the distinct impression that his criticism of the film is based on what he perceives to be a lack of ''proper'' representation of the Romantic author. While *Bright Star* utilizes such a figure, it does not do so in an uncomplicated manner. Indeed, very few literary biopics utilize this persona in an uncomplicated manner, even if they ultimately endorse it or present it favorably.

Bright Star rescues Fanny from being the subject of an untold history and makes her life central to the process of Keats's literary work and to the way in which we think about the literary author. But, more importantly, it turns her into an artist in her own right, whose creative artistry competes with Keats's. In doing so, Campion not only recuperates a marginal narrative but, as we shall see, also subverts the persona of the Romantic author through a critical revision of that author's muse.

In their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that the discourse of gender that positions women as muses constructs them as ''nullities, vacancies – existing merely [. . .] to increase male 'Numbers' (either poems or persons) by pleasuring either men's bodies or their minds, their penises or their pens'' (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 9). A muse is a being born to serve: the function of a muse is to be empty, so the artist can occupy her and build from that empty space with his mind, imagination, pen, body, and identity. Thus ,when an artist looks into his muse's eyes, he will see his own creation, as well as his own identity and mind, reflected back to him, because being emptiness and a lack, the muse can only reflect, not create, can only mirror a self, not own one. Furthermore, the artist's contemplation of his muse is a fundamentally self-affirming act whereby his identity as an artist is validated through his meditation on a being whom he has constructed and who reflects his creative abilities.

Gilbert and Gubar explain that the reason why the muse is traditionally female, particularly in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and North America, is that, during these periods, women were

> defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power [. . .] In the metaphysical emptiness their ''purity'' signifies they are, of course, *self-less*, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 21)

Figure 10.1 Fanny's (Abbie Cornish) contemplative sewing. *Bright Star* (2009). Directed by Jane Campion. Pathé, Screen Australia, BBC Films

Such a perception of gender comes, of course, with a complementary set of assumptions: that men are wholly active, filled with ''generative power,'' and owners of a complex inner self that can contemplate, ponder, interpret, and create.

In Campion's *Bright Star*, the muse becomes an artist and occupies the authorial persona reserved for men. While Fanny is often depicted as the source of Keats's ''inspiration,'' the contemplative, creative, and generative inner self of the artist/author is depicted through Fanny's rather than Keats's eyes, so that it is almost as if she embodies the Romantic authorial hero – but in a complex and gendered way. This is primarily enacted via the theme of sewing, through which Fanny is turned from a ''mere'' seamstress into a feminine artist. The opening scene of *Bright Star* alerts us to her primary status in the film. The very first image is an extreme close-up of a needle and thread being pulled in and out with careful precision. As the camera slowly pulls out from the close-up, we see Fanny sewing in a silent reverie, framed by the window behind her, providing a contemplative image of the artist at work (see Figure 10.1).

The sewing draws us into Fanny's world. Sewing is typically associated with women and regarded as a banal domestic chore, but in this opening scene and throughout the film Campion turns it into a site of personal and artistic development. Lifted from being simply another women's chore, sewing mediates the audience's encounter with the creative process and the inner world of the artist.

This contrasts with the representation of Keats's creative identity in the film. As Kirsten Krauth notes:

> Elizabeth Cook comments that ''to an unusual degree Keats writes in active and conscious relationship with others'' and Campion stresses this. The men's work, and the writing, is collaborative: they prance through meadows, they read aloud to each

> other, they lie dramatically awaiting inspiration; [in contrast,] Fanny's art is done behind closed doors, alone, dreaming, embraced by the body [. . .] Campion prefers to focus on women's work, the seamless stitching, beautiful threads, so precise and delicate they might go unnoticed. (Krauth 2010: 18)

Almost every important scene in the film is punctuated by Fanny's work, her internal and creative world of sewing: when Keats's brother dies, she painstakingly works on a masterpiece pillowcase for his coffin; when she first reads Keats's poetry, she is also creating her own original artwork, her dress; and in the last scene, when Keats dies, Fanny's interior struggle and grief manifests itself through an immediate response to create something, to sew. The entire film revolves around her generative effort, with smaller glimpses of Keats's own creative process in the periphery.[5]

And this "generative" effort also indicates sexual energy, with which the development of the Romantic authorial identity is so closely linked in the nineteenth century, and which is indeed central to the development of an interior, individual, and desiring subjectivity in western culture.[6] Fanny is undeniably the desiring life-force of the film. In one memorable scene, we see her casting her desiring gaze at Keats, as she watches him lie on the grass from the elevated position of her bedroom window, standing above. She is here wholly active, casting a traditionally masculine gaze upon her beloved "other," while Keats, in a submissive position, is wholly passive. Such a scene of female desiring subjectivity is continually repeated throughout the film in Fanny's contemplative and creative moments behind closed doors.

What we typically expect to see in a film about an author is the stereotypical imagery of the author at work, in a removed setting: that is, the idea of the distanced solitary genius, creating within private confines, and being admired by the camera and his diegetic supporters. In *Bright Star* this stereotype – or "cliché," as Brian McFarlane puts it (McFarlane 2010: 114) – is transferred to the feminine muse. In Campion's film the muse asserts her own identity and colonizes the familiar ideology of the desiring, creative, and solitary Romantic authorial persona, removing herself from her previously passive and "self-less" position. Keats is therefore cast in a role similar to that of the traditional feminine muse, who reacts according to the subjectivity of the artist. While Keats is not presented as entirely passive in Campion's film and indeed creates his own art, his creativity and subjectivity are overshadowed by Fanny's, as he often draws from her energy rather than his own.

What this role reversal reminds us of is that, while the figure of the Romantic author and the subjectivity it represents may be familiar in the masculine guise, they are actually a novelty in the feminine guise. When Roland Barthes declared the death of the author, he was envisioning a *male* author (Barthes 1995). This is an important point because, historically, women have rarely enjoyed the privileges of authorship.

What Campion is actually undertaking in her representation of Fanny and Keats in *Bright Star* is a lucid engagement with feminist discourse regarding authorial identity. And here, as elsewhere in this chapter, we must of course understand ''authorial identity'' to refer to a whole discourse of subjectivity and agency rather than simply to someone who writes. Bennett notes that, for a feminist critic such as Nancy K. Miller,

> the death of the author threatened to ''prematurely foreclose the question of agency'' for women and since women had never been coded as possessing the kind of authoritative status claimed by male writers, the theory of the death of the author simply doesn't apply to them. [. . .] In other words, the deconstruction of the author can be seen, in effect, as the deconstruction of the masculine author [. . .] and far from constituting an oppressive authority in need of dismantling or deconstruction, the female author was seen as needing to be constructed [. . .] to be given an identity. (Bennett 2005: 84–85)

Campion undertakes precisely this process of giving the female ''author'' or artist an identity, and in the process she reminds us that the postmodern strategies of recovery and promotion of alternative histories do not simply involve deconstruction, but also construction.

Yet, while sewing represents artistic or metaphorical ''authorial'' identity, it is also coded in a feminine silence. As Fanny sews alone within the confines of domestic enclosures, we are reminded of the nineteenth-century discourse on gender, which positioned women within the home and thereby denied them access to the outside world and to historical presence. Campion herself notes that, while Fanny's sewing symbolizes power and artistry, it is also ''a metaphor for women's lives: nobody gives a damn'' (Thomas 2010: 10). However, she does not make the viewer choose one type of meaning over the other: Fanny's sewing is both a construction of an artistic identity and an expression of the powerless silence in which many women's lives go unnoticed.

From this perspective, *Bright Star* mirrors Campion's previous film, *The Piano*, in which the silent lives of women literally manifest themselves through a mute heroine, Ada, who only ''speaks'' through her piano; and yet, as she tells us in her introductory voice-over, ''I don't think of myself as silent.'' Gail Jones points out that silence is ''traditionally regarded as disempowerment,'' but in *The Piano* it is something altogether more complex; that is, a type of contemplation of the various meanings and possibilities of silence for women (Jones 2007: 34). This is expanded upon in *Bright Star*, in which Campion uses silent contemplation as both an expression of gendered powerlessness and the impetus for the construction of an artistic identity, born from such powerlessness. The two films ''speak'' to each other in significant ways, and nowhere is this more evident than in their endings.

In *The Piano*, the domestic ''happy'' ending is shadowed by the gloomy imagery of Ada attached to her piano at the bottom of the sea, as her voice-over reveals both

Figure 10.2 Fanny (Abbie Cornish) recites Keats's poetry. *Bright Star* (2009). Directed by Jane Campion. Pathé, Screen Australia, BBC Films

the silence that this represents and her ability to relish in the unique "voice" this silence gives her. Similarly, the last scene of *Bright Star* depicts a mourning Fanny walking the landscape while she recites Keats's poetry by heart (see Figure 10.2). She is speaking words that are not her own, and yet she is not silent. She is entering Keats's artistic realm rather than her own, yet the narrative of the film still privileges her identity at this final moment. Each ending suggests multiple readings of the heroine's world of silence. Campion is content to leave her audiences with questions rather than settled meanings. Ultimately it is up to the viewer to continue the process of rethinking, via gender, the idea of authorship and, by extrapolation, of the modern self and of its construction in historical texts.

Analyzing the film *Walker* (1987),[7] Rosenstone writes:

> the literal reconstruction of the past is not at stake in this (or perhaps in any other) project of historical understanding. What should matter, the film suggests, is the seriousness with which we ask and answer, in whatever form of address or medium, questions about the meaning of the past. (Rosenstone 1995b: 213)

I argue that *Bright Star* suggests precisely the same things through its gender politics and construction of Fanny's personal history in the biography of John Keats. Campion's revisionist history is an exercise in how we understand and receive historical knowledge. That is, the focus on Fanny rather than on Keats implicitly poses these questions: Who gets to tell history? Who is the focus of history, and who is left out? Through Fanny, Campion compels her audience to consider the process of biographical reconstruction as a subjective, politicized, present-informed enterprise. *Bright Star*'s utilization, deconstruction, transference, and construction

of authorial identity signifies a contemporary historical consciousness that is neither stable nor objective but is subjective, uncertain, interrogative, and constructed, like a piece of art.

John Maybury's *The Edge of Love*: Dylan Thomas's forgotten muses

The Edge of Love adapts the biography of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) and has a focus similar to that of *Bright Star*, on the fictional history of the poet's two muses. The idea for *The Edge of Love* initially came from its producer, Rebekah Gilbertson, who wanted to explore the relationship between her grandmother, Vera Philips, and Dylan Thomas (Capitol Films and BBC Films 2007: n.p.). In scriptwriter Sharman Macdonald's hands, the biography of Thomas (played by Matthew Rhys) became the cradle of an untold fictional story of the friendship between two women during World War II: Vera Philips, Thomas's childhood friend (played by Keira Knightley) and Caitlin Macnamara, Thomas's wife (played by Sienna Miller). It is their friendship and their role as muses that is the focus of the film and the reason why Maybury was initially attracted to the screenplay (ibid.).

Maybury argues that the "story is actually about a love affair, not a sexual love affair, but an emotional love affair between two women. Actually, the way that women, particularly in this period, but I think it's still true today, sacrifice their intimate friendships with each other for the men in their lives" (ibid.). It is doubtful whether the real Vera Philips and Caitlin Macnamara were actually friends, or whether such an intimate relationship developed between them. But, just like Campion, Maybury and Macdonald were not concerned with "facts" and historical data when making the film; as Gilbertson notes, "we wanted to find the dramatic truth about the characters. The actual truth was scarce" (quoted in Byrnes 2008). This is similar to Campion's own comment about *Bright Star*, in which "it was up to me to invent whatever I wanted" (quoted in James 2009: 36). Both films' focus on forgotten muses, invented "truths," and revisionist approaches to the biography of the author they examine highlight Rosenstone's argument that the study of the past in the present "does not depend entirely upon data for the way it asserts truths or engages the ongoing discourse of history" (Rosenstone 1995a: 13). *The Edge of Love* engages with the discourse of history in significant ways, through its own invented history of two women's friendship.

Maybury is known for exploring complex and difficult themes in his experimental videos and films; such themes include gender politics, AIDS, anti-consumerism, and imperialism (Morris 2009). It is not surprising therefore that a film that focuses on forgotten muses and the position of women would appeal to his sensibility. Yet *The Edge of Love* is not divorced from the mainstream, and, like Campion's *Bright Star*, it is not an anomaly in the variety of literary biopics that have been made. In its combination of well-known lead actors who appeal to mainstream cinema and

revisionist politics, it is similar to many other literary biopics – including *Sylvia*, *Becoming Jane*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Wilde*, *Finding Neverland*, and *The Hours*.

While Maybury adopts an approach similar to Campion's in his focus on the muse, the way in which it is developed in *The Edge of Love* is different from that of *Bright Star*. This theme is worked out not only through the close friendship between Vera and Caitlin, but also through a bolder evocation of the limitation of their lives as muses. While *Bright Star* seeks to construct a feminine artistic identity, *The Edge of Love* is primarily concerned with exposing the position of women like Vera and Caitlin, who are limited and frustrated by their status (to quote the same passage from Gilbert and Gubar once again) as "nullities, vacancies – existing merely [. . .] to increase male 'Numbers' (either poems or persons) by pleasuring either men's bodies or their minds, their penises or their pens" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 9). In one of their first bonding sessions, when they begin to develop their friendship by comparing their lovers, a frustrated Caitlin tells Vera: "I'm as good as he [Dylan Thomas] is. [. . .] He thinks that I'm put on this earth to nurture his talent. Cook for him, have his children and clean for him, that's all I'm here for. Who's nurturing my bloody talent?!" There could not be a more clear statement of the muse's awareness of her limited position. It is almost like viewing feminist criticism of women's traditionally passive and "self-less" position directly transcribed on screen. When Caitlin asks Vera whether the man whom she is dating, William, will nurture her talent, Vera comments: "I will nurture my own." Of course, in the context of the times in which they live, neither woman can nurture her own talent; both end up instead conforming to their socially prescribed roles of wife, mother, and muse, and being consumed by the desires of men.

This conversation occurs in the bed which Dylan and Caitlin share in Vera's apartment (see Figure 10.3). Cocooned together under the covers, Vera and Caitlin represent the same intimate, private inner space in which Fanny undertakes her

Figure 10.3 Caitlin's (Sienna Miller) and Vera's (Keira Knightley) intimate friendship. *The Edge of Love* (2008). Directed by John Maybury. BBC Films, Capitol Films

artistry in *Bright Star*; only in this film, the female artists do not have access to their art but are constantly reminded of the cultural and ideological forces that position them in the shadows of ''great'' men. This intimate bonding scene closes with the bomb sirens echoing through the bedroom, so that the audience is reminded of the wider historical context in which such personal and individual narratives of women's forgotten lives take place.

Scenes such as this one abound in *The Edge of Love*, and the constant movement between the narrative of these two forgotten women and the wider historical setting in which their personal histories are played out is a primary feature of the film. Maybury has remarked that he is interested in the individual lives of those caught up in war and history (Capitol Films and BBC Films 2007). It seems that the movement from personal history to ''official'' history in the film deeply politicizes Vera's and Caitlin's friendship: it is not simply an expression of women's position, but also a revisionist historical perspective that looks beyond the facts and the statistics of war, to those intimate narratives that are often overlooked. In fact, Maybury visually and ideologically links the personal struggles of these women to the struggle of war.

For example, in a harrowing scene in which Vera gives birth to William's son while William himself is fighting in the war, images of her screaming in enormous pain are interspersed with images of William watching a man screaming in the trenches as his arm is hacked off. Vera's midwife tells her to be quiet, as Caitlin indignantly tells the midwife ''shut your mouth'' and Vera ''scream if you want to.'' Caitlin could just as well be talking to the unnamed soldier in the trenches, and the silent implication is clear: both the unknown soldier and women like Vera and Caitlin are victims of war and history, and both are ultimately forgotten amidst the ''heroes'' of such a history. Campion's form of feminine silence manifests itself in multiple meanings, but in *The Edge of Love* feminine silence clearly represents the silence of history's oppressed, who scream, unheard, from the depths of their trauma.

One critic, Manohla Dargis, has taken affront to this particular scene, noting that the sequence in which Maybury ''cuts back and forth between a woman giving birth and a soldier having a limb hacked off suggests that he doesn't have much use for those slabs of meat called human beings'' (Dargis 2009). This highly fraught statement seems to miss the point of such a scene, in which Maybury depicts the unknown and forgotten individual's plight in the face of historical events and circumstances. Coming away from such brutal scenes, the audience is in fact alerted to Maybury's scathing criticism of the consequences of history and of what is left out of official historical representation, which is strikingly similar to Laurie Vickroy's analysis of trauma and history in contemporary fiction. Indeed, one of Vickroy's main arguments in her analysis of the theme of trauma in contemporary fiction is that such a theme is often the expression of a forgotten history. Maybury approaches trauma in similar fashion.

Vickroy writes that each of the contemporary writers whom she examines ''uses similar narrative approaches to explore traumatic history. Social conflicts are

enacted in characters' personal conflicts, where historical trauma is personalized by exploring its effects in bodily violations and wounds'' (Vickroy 2002: 168). Maybury employs the same narrative techniques through visual sequencing in *The Edge of Love*. As with the contemporary fiction Vickroy analyzes, Maybury's similar narrative techniques raise ''the question of what history is, who is represented and by whom, recognizing that much of traumatic history, particularly that which affects the socially marginal, has remained repressed, unwritten'' (167). Maybury uses the friendship that develops between the two ''muses'' and the intimate perspective on their personal lives that such a friendship affords, to comment upon a whole system of historical representation. His visual sequencing and focus on the two women's lives are a critique of the biases evident in traditional written history, which insists on the ''fiction'' of objective historical inquiry and presents history through the accumulation of linear facts, statistics, and grand narratives rather than through personal experiences. Furthermore, they are also a critique of the masculine bias of such a system of historical representation, which tends to focus on the deeds of men rather than on the lives of women. Maybury links both together, in a striking visual exploration of what is left out from traditional historical inquiry and what needs to be voiced in the contemporary one through a subjective historical consciousness.

The manner in which *The Edge of Love* highlights Vera and Caitlin's ''self-less'' position as women and muses through their alignment with the brutality of war is reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's use of Holocaust and war symbolism in her poetry to articulate a sense of frustrated identity.[8] From this perspective, *The Edge of Love* is similar to the literary biopic that explores Plath's own biography, *Sylvia*, in which a poem that utilizes the theme of the Holocaust is the central focus and turning point of the film's narrative.[9] Using such overt brutalities in order to emphasize the difficult position of women in history and historical representation may look like an extreme metaphor, yet *The Edge of Love* highlights that the personal sacrifices that the feminine muses must make are equally brutal in their ''murdering'' of these women's identities. One disappointed critic, Cosmo Landesman, aptly points out that, despite Vera and Caitlin's obvious talents, they are not afforded an individual sense of self but are clumped together with ''babies and men'' (Landesman 2008). I would argue that, rather than this being a flaw in the film, it seems to be precisely the point that Maybury is trying to convey. There is no doubt that, while the Romantic authorial persona is heavily critiqued and deconstructed by the highlighting of the muse's position, it is still very much present in Dylan himself in the film. Vera and Caitlin, unlike Fanny, are not the artists of the film.

The fact that Dylan's artistic consciousness informs, and is addressed by, the film is evident from the beginning. We are introduced to Vera and Caitlin through Dylan's poetry. As Dylan reads out his poetry in a voice-over, we view a stylized image of him fervently writing against the backdrop of devastation (see Figure 10.4). This image of Dylan is interspersed with images of Vera singing and Caitlin flirting

Figure 10.4 Dylan (Matthew Rhys) writing amidst the destruction of war. *The Edge of Love* (2008). Directed by John Maybury. BBC Films, Capitol Films

with soldiers, and with static photographic snapshots of the war in a kitschy, aged sepia tone: bombs, frightened children, injured victims, gas masks, soldiers, ruined buildings, and so on. Like the image of Dylan himself, which is a self-conscious construction of an idealized authorial cliché, these aged photographic images snap before our eyes in what seems to be a mocking replication of historical ''accuracy,'' statistics, and data. This opening sequence suggests an awareness of one's own artistry and of the process of artistic representation in the construction of historical discourse. Maybury is showing his audience from the outset that his film is aware that it is as much a ''fictional'' and subjective representation of history as Dylan's own poetry is – and historical representation in general.

To perform its critique, *The Edge of Love* necessarily relies on Dylan's subjectivity. There are numerous scenes in which he is self-consciously paraded as a solitary genius, struck by bouts of inner contemplation, and framed by the familiar images of the author writing furiously by the window, in a visual representation of inner contemplation and artistry. And, as the first scene demonstrates, Dylan is also the subjectivity that creates, interprets, and records what he sees around him: he is in a way the ''author'' of the war around him and of the women in his life – which harks back to Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous assertion that ''poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'' (Shelley 2000: 802).

The film invests heavily in the idea of the romanticized authorial self, and yet this idea is complicated by the focus on the two muses – and indeed by the film's own reluctance to allow for straightforward representation. Because of the film's self-conscious and at times brutal awareness of power inequalities and of its own fictionality, Dylan's embodiment of the idealized author reads simply as reinforcing the point made through the focus on the women's friendship: that history, like his own identity, is a subjective artifice, constructed by those who have a voice and the right gender. Dylan therefore becomes the thread that ties all

the film's critique together, through the use of his artistry and representation of his authorial identity as an overarching frame for the narrative of the film.

Ultimately, Dylan's authorial identity suggests ways of knowing and understanding history through what is lost, recovered, invented, and personalized, evidencing a highly self-conscious historical representation. In the last scene of *The Edge of Love*, before they say goodbye forever, Vera asks Caitlin to write. Caitlin's response is a typically knowing one: ''I'll leave that to Dylan.'' Vera however, asks Caitlin to write to *her*, not to the world. As they part, Dylan's poetry can be heard in the background as the last words of the film, framing these women's narrative. This is a fitting last metaphor for the cultural work of deconstruction that the film performs through the representation of Dylan's authorial identity. Beneath his well-known poetry lie hidden personal words written between two women, who know that their voice is not heard and is best left to great men like Dylan. The author is, ironically, the bearer of this critique and, as such, the emblem of a complex historical consciousness for a contemporary audience that must contend with a history that is no longer straightforward, innocently objective, or even factually ''true.'' Rather, like the film itself, the ending suggests another realm of historical truth, one that is produced narratively and subjectively. *The Edge of Love* reminds us that the author is a power construct, which, here as in many other literary biopics, speaks for those without a historical voice.

Notes

1 Literary biopics tend to be discussed within works on heritage cinema or costume films, receiving very brief mentions at best. For example, Dianne F. Sadoff briefly discusses *Becoming Jane* and *Wilde* in *Victorian Vogue* (Sadoff 2010: 200–205, 245–249, 251, 252), while Andrew Higson only lists literary biopics within the ''Filmography'' section of his *English Heritage, English Cinema* (Higson 2003: 262–267). So far, Brian McFarlane's article ''*Bright Star* and poets on film'' is the only critical source I have found that attempts to theorize or discuss the subject of adapting authors' biographies on screen (McFarlane 2010).

2 In the case of a film like *The Hours*, which adapts the biography of the modernist author Virginia Woolf, the modernist fictional theme of the dissolution of the self becomes a postmodernist strategy. Modernist authors tended to deconstruct the social self in order to find an internal ''nature,'' while postmodernism is suspicious of ''nature'' and more concerned with deconstructing the self to highlight how we are the products of shifting culture. Like postmodernist theory, *The Hours* deconstructs the self through a focus on biography in different cultural and historical contexts and on how such contexts define who we are.

3 While there has been no published critical analysis of the film in books or journals yet, the release of *Bright Star* was greeted with a bevy of film reviews.

4 Ricks's review of Campion's *Bright Star* tends to feature in many other reviews of the film. For example, see McFarlane (2010: 115); Thomas (2010: 13); Carmon (2009: n.p.); and Krauth (2010: 18).

5 It is important to point out that, while Fanny dominates the film, the latter is still made and marketed as a literary biopic of Keats's life. Campion is careful not to abandon the frame of Keats's biography, as the film's central meaning lies in the relationship between Fanny's untold story and Keats's well-known biography. The events of the film still follow those of Keats's life rather than Fanny's, but the focus of such events is shifted from Keats to Fanny. To a large extent, Campion requires the frame of Keats's biography to perform her recovery of Fanny's own forgotten history and artistic identity.

6 The relationship between sexual desire, inner subjectivity, and authorial identity in western culture is explored in more detail throughout Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which should be referred to for a more detailed analysis (in particular, see Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 1–44).

7 Directed by Alex Cox, *Walker* is based on the biography of the Nashville-born (1824) physician, attorney, and adventurer who organized several military expeditions to Latin America and became the president of the Republic of Nicaragua in 1856.

8 For example, see Plath's poems "Daddy" (Plath 1981a), "Fever 103" (Plath 1981b), and "Lady Lazarus" (Plath 1981c).

9 The poem that is read out in *Sylvia* is "Daddy."

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