The Problem of the Literary BioPic

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THE BURGEONING interest in biography, within both popular culture and the academy, combines with the idea of film as a kind of literature to create a new body of texts which warrant study. At issue is the efficacy of film as a medium for telling literary lives, as opposed to other, more public, lives. The literary biopic may be ultimately unsatisfying because the time constraints of film make it inadequate to the demands of thoroughness a literary biography makes. Political lives, or public lives of any kind, lend themselves more easily to a medium which is so public and episodic in its nature but print is an intimate medium. Years of experiences, knowledge, and maturation, which a writer compresses into an art with a built-in slowness to it, perhaps cannot be developed with any fullness through filmable episodes skimmed from the life. As Jack Kerouac said, "Walking on water wasn't made in a day" (Miles 324). Certainly, film is story telling; but it is not capable of the same kind of depth or breadth of treatment as print. Print can take all the time it wants; film cannot. The question is whether film is capable of overcoming this inherent disadvantage and producing a so-called accurate rendering of a literary life; perhaps it only requires filmmakers with a literary sensibility.

Whoever one day makes The Dennis Rodman Story, as one day someone surely will do, will not dream of leaving out basketball and tattoos; no one would make a musician's life without concert scenes or recording sessions; a politician's life would be incomplete without a representation of the campaign; filmed lives of Charlie Chaplin and Ed Wood without film would be inconceivable. These sorts of scenes provide the opportunity to see these people do what they do; and what they do is what brings us to their lives in the first place. Books are what bring an audience to a writer's life in the first instance; but while basketball footage can be fast paced with a running commentary from the sportscaster, there is no crew standing nearby with microphones when a writer writes. No one seeks to convey the tension of the moment to a listening audience as the pen hovers above the page; no one bursts forth with a he-shoots-he-scores kind of exclamation when the pen confidently smacks a period right there at the end of a sentence. Yet it is a mistake to suppose there is no drama in the act of writing, that it is a snore of monumental proportions. It is a mistake to take the writer away from the writing, because that is where writers and readers, of print and film both, meet. Biography and biographical films share the fundamental problem of the filmed novel: they all are adaptations from a source. The required selectivity, necessitated by the time constraints of film, means much must be discarded however reluctantly. And if we find that filmmakers often have a hard time getting a single work right, it seems unfair to expect that they get an entire life right. But sometimes they do; and those that do, have one thing in common.

The key to a successful and satisfying filmed portrayal of a writer's life is an acknowledgement of the writing life. Filmmakers are only just discovering the literary life as a potentially fruitful source field; partially, this is an echo of the burgeoning interest in biography presently at work in popular culture and the academy. The writer's life has surfaced in film during the last decade; generically, it is in its very early childhood. And as we all know, early childhood is a crucial time of intellectual and emotional development. I do not advocate some sort of fool-proof, structuralist formula for filming authorial experience. There can be many ways to accomplish an end; writers do not all practice the same habits anyway. And it is their writing habits that, without exception, have to be shown to an audience; these habits can help to explicate other behaviours in life but, most importantly, if you take the writer out of the writing life, there is nothing left. The world is full of assorted maniacs and drunks and clever wits and broken hearts; putting a pen in the hand of that madness and addiction and brilliance and loss makes all the difference. That is what makes *Ulysses* out of James Joyce. That is what makes a *Junky* and a *Queer* out of Bill Burroughs. That is what gets Anne Sexton *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. And it is what gets "A Telephone Call" out of Dorothy Parker. Writing is the threshold, the way of approach and meeting, between reader and writer; if a literary biographical film is to be intellectually and emotionally satisfying, it has to stand on that threshold. The literary biopic has to show, not only the life itself, but how the life gets into the work. It has to show process.

What will film do with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, for example. There exists the dreadful possibility that a film will be so consumed with a need to show Sylvia biting Ted's cheek at their first meeting that it will forget to show her obsession with being published or the two of them taking turns using a friend's apartment as writing space, that it will concentrate on a prolonged treatment of her last hours, spent setting milk by the children's beds, taping the door shut to protect them, and placing a towel for her head in the oven, that it will neglect the way she rose before dawn so she could write each day without interruption before the babies woke up. I cannot imagine a film of Anne Sexton's life that does not show her hunched over her pages, using writing, as she did, to keep her demons at bay. I admit that I am relieved to learn, with no disrespect intended for the acting talents of Ms. Love, that the admittedly fictionalized film biography of Bill Burroughs is on hold for a time; the shock value of Burroughs' mid-party shooting of his wife is too tempting not to receive more than its fair share of footage. Some day, a colleague and I plan to write a screenplay biography of Charlotte Brontë, and I assure you there will be a scene with the three surviving Brontë sisters walking around and around the darkened dining room in the evening, earnestly discussing their work.

Of the films I discuss here, some fail to connect the life and the work; rather, they make a misguided attempt to separate or excerpt the life behind the work. While this can still be a viable and valuable filmic product, it is not a literary life. *Wilde* (Gilbert 1998) mentions only *Salome* of Oscar Wilde's works by name; *Dorian Gray* is mentioned in a conversation between Wilde's wife and mother but not by name. We see the genesis moment of the book in a portrait gallery episode but that is hardly a treatment of process; in fact, the opportunity is sublimated to the film's more central purpose as a meeting between Oscar and one of his "boys." Fifty minutes into the movie Wilde is shown sitting at a desk writing for the first time; unfortunately, the desk's presence is included only in order to precipitate a domestic scene and rupture between the volatile Bosie and Wilde. We see the opening night of *Lady Windermere's Fan* without, apparently, its ever having been written; two other plays are written and playing - during Bosie's absence - yet these oddly remain unnamed. We get to see the opening night of *Earnest*, and later, the marquee for *An Ideal Husband* being painted over after Wilde's public disgrace ruins his career. Ironically, there is no trace whatsoever of *A Woman of No Importance*. All of this demonstrates a remarkable lack of respect for the biographical subject's work and a scandalous waste of material tailor-made for the nominal purpose of the film. Robbie Ross later speaks to Oscar about the fact that Oscar has not written a thing since Bosie's return. Julian Mitchell's screenplay looks this gift horse squarely in the mouth and never does a thing with it.

Although not nearly so sensational as watching Oscar watching Bosie have sex with someone else, the rhetorical force of Oscar feverishly working, as a mask to his loneliness for Bosie, nevertheless could have been used to powerful effect. It is only near the end of the film, during Wilde's imprisonment, that his biographers are by force made to allow him to write; these are the strongest moments in the film, in my opinion - the portrayals of Lord Alfred Douglas and Robbie Ross notwithstanding. Wilde is allowed to pause and his tedious prison labour, as represented by the endlessness of physically propelling a mill wheel, approximates the churning and grinding of life's raw material into literary art. Wilde is shown deprived of the physical materials of his art in a fleeting scene when a guard removes paper, pen, and ink, from the cell; the cruelest deprivation for the writer, he cannot choose when to write but must be disciplined externally rather than internally. That this is the most successful segment of the film is no accident: it is only here that we see Oscar Wilde as a writer engaged in the writing process.

Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle (Rudolph 1994) has the same problem. The film is so preoccupied with making Parker as jaded and bitter as possible - even though she's so often shown in writing places - that she barely writes a thing. There is one scene where she strikes about sixteen keys on the typewriter and then trades chairs with Robert Benchley but that is not exactly writing, especially since the clicking appears to be for the purpose of making a telephone caller think actual work is going on in the office. We get to know she wrote theatre reviews first, screenplays later, and fiction in between with a stage play thrown in; we just never see her do any of it. Instead, her character recites her acidic poems between scenes, a kind of dramatic interval device in black-and-white which tries to substitute performance for process. The Alan Rudolph-Randy Sue Coburn screenplay is about Parker as a legendary drunken depressive wit who writes but it never integrates its subject; it shows us the grist but never takes it to the mill. Instead there are ample opportunities to eavesdrop as the sparkling Circle lunches and speaks in quotations. One of Parker's lovers

remarks that he has "read more about [her], what Dorothy Parker thinks or does, than [her] actual writing." Sadly, this film does little to ameliorate that lamentable absence. Once, and only very briefly, do we see a frustrated Parker crumpling papers and tossing them aside in the stereotypical act of the blocked writer. It appears that every time the danger of Parker actually writing something rears its ugly head, she is saved by the dinner bell. The editing is choppy but Parker still is clearly situated in time, with Prohibition and World War I making cameo appearances; there are also tiny true-life details observed, such as the unfortunate fact that her omnipresent dogs defecated on the carpets with impunity. But in the end, the film is so busy playing to the consumer demand for stories of unrequited and unconsummated love, that Parker remains most famous for meeting with her friends at lunch.

Happily, there are examples of wonderful accomplishment to be considered as well. *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden 1998) does not try to know Shakespeare's unknowable reality but elects instead a tongue-in-cheek mimetic possibility of his process; Tom Stoppard is a playwright and knows what he's about. He and Marc Norman take the microcosmic approach and create their story hypothetically around the writing of *Romeo and Juliet*, (in fact it secretly may be an adaptation) with nods to many other of the Bard's plays and to the many theories about Shakespeare's life and work. The barroom consultation between Christoper Marlowe and Shakespeare serves to acknowledge the argument that Marlowe actually wrote Shakespeare's plays, at the same time that it shows how writers can critique and assist each other; it's a little bit of Elizabethan writer's workshop. The contention that Shakespeare was gay finds its place in the attraction of the playwright to the cross-dressed Thomas Kent and the very juicy kiss they share in the boat.

Constantly, the life is shown getting into the work. There is the splendid little moment when Shakespeare rushes past the religious reformer preaching in the street and hears him declaim "a plague on both your houses"; he mentally files it and provides a delightful example of "found lines." We also get to see how a writer can revise events as witnessed by the wall-climbing scene when the proto-Romeo reaches the balcony and comes face-to-screaming-face with the over-dressed nurse instead of a luscious Juliet ready to be plucked from the top of the vine. The physical writing space and the physical act of writing are included in this film to great effect: John Madden focusses on a dramatist sharpening quills into pens, pouring sand on still-wet parchment to set the ink, hurriedly scratching the nib across the page (with inky fingers black as a journeyman mechanic's) before the lines are lost, and just generally putting the lie to writing as a sedentary pastime. And because all this is done hard on the heels of the inspiration, the proposition that writing is autobiographical is pointedly made. In the words of Ira Nadel, who is both a theoretician and biographer, "an arresting image replaces tedious detail" (*Biography* 163). *Shakespeare in Love* has far more to commend it than Joseph Fiennes' coal-powered eyes and Gwyneth Paltrow's heaving breasts.

Likewise, although not in the least as lightheartedly, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud get the literary touch of the playwright in Christopher Hampton's *Total Eclipse* (Holland 1995). Rimbaud gets the benefit of a fine portrayal from Leonardo DiCaprio before he became Leonardo DiCaprio, and they all get the benefit of skilled direction from Agnieszka Holland. Collectively - which is a factor crucial to a great film - they do not miss a step. And, this film is about writing process from the first minute. Soon after his arrival in Paris, Rimbaud is expelled from Verlaine's father-in-law's house; it is late at night in the pouring rain and he sits on a bench writing, exposed to the elements. DiCaprio's Rimbaud says that "the only thing that matters is the writing itself - the rest is literature." Given that philosophy, process has to be central to a handling of Rimbaud's life. Undoubtedly, Hampton's research was meticulous; I have studied his screen work before, and he takes great care to let his biographical characters speak for themselves. Each life takes its own form, according to Leon Edel (*Writing Lives* 30), and it is the responsibility of the biographer to find the ideal form for the telling. In this case, Hampton does not prosaically announce to an audience that Rimbaud was a Romantic; instead, he and Holland show Rimbaud doing what he says is necessary to him: "to experience everything in [his] own body." Two scenes, in particular, successfully dramatize the show-don't-tell strategy; early in the film, Rimbaud stands in front of a mirror, holding a Chinese ceramic dog against his face and mimics perfectly the grimace and snarl of the dog. Later, he gets Verlaine to join him on hands-and-knees grazing and bleating with the goats on a Belgian hillside. The audience is thus thoroughly prepared experientially when Rimbaud finally announces his decision to "reject Romanticism."

There are two scenes where Rimbaud prepares his writing space by arranging a table in the sunlight: once in a bare apartment in Paris and once in the barn at his family home in the provinces. The overarching

perception is that surroundings are immaterial to him so long as there are writing materials and the sun. He makes utterly selfish use of Paul Verlaine, admits that he "always knew what to say, [Verlaine] knew how to say it." Having learned what he needed to learn, he abandons Verlaine. The film satisfies E. D. Hirsch's two criteria that "in biography, interpretation means understanding a [...] life as it was lived and experienced, while criticism corresponds to the placing of that life in a larger system of relationships" (*Validity* 141). In spite of the fact that we have seen Rimbaud ridicule and humiliate him, drive a knife through his hand, and then Verlaine wildly shoot through Rimbaud's hand, at the end, Verlaine is allowed to take the editorial liberty he wants with his own past by remarking, "we were always happy. I remember."

To close, I recommend the potential of literary-biographical film as a social instrument. Writers use their work as testimony of "what [they] have heard, what [they] have seen with [their] eyes, what [they] have beheld and [their] hands handled" (1 Jn 1:1), as the New Testament puts it. Consider the rhetorical power of the life of George Seremba, who was executed by firing squad in Uganda - except he wasn't, and now describes himself "a bearer of witness" (*Beauty*). Consider Taslima Nasrin who stands accused of religious transgression in Bangladesh and lives in exile because of her book *Shame*. Consider Ken Saro Wiwa, the Nigerian playwright hanged for his so-called political subversion. Consider also those writers who tell the tales of oppression which occur in relative freedom. The literature of witness has been and is being written by gifted and articulate observers who artistically make moral use of their gifts. These people know that "what you write can bring you trouble" (*Lorca*). You don't have to be political; you just have to tell the truth. It is a powerful thing to put their own words in their mouths, to have filmmakers as purveyors of human rights in a way that neither compromises the integrity of the source nor neglects the need to create filmic art. Watch the first fifteen minutes of *The Disappearance of Garcia Lorca* (Zurinaga 1997). Five o'clock in the afternoon will never be the same.

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