

# Introduction

## Strategic Patriotic Memories

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Motion pictures are the most CONSPICUOUS of all American exports. They do not lose their identity. They betray their nationality and country of origin. They are easily recognized. They are all-pervasive. They color the minds of those who see them. They are demonstrably the single greatest factors in the Americanization of the world and as such fairly may be called the most important and significant of America's exported products.

—From a Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association internal memo, 1928



### Entry Points

**A** “LIFE-PICTURING” DISCURSIVE MODALITY which has only recently begun to receive intense and systematic study, the biopic is almost certainly the most familiar and most significant form of biographical narrative to emerge from modernity (Christie 2002, 288). This first extensive look at the biopic in SUNY Press’s “Horizons of Cinema” series enmeshes it with “American National Identity,” itself a large and complex topic which has recently received a lot of attention. Thus I am going to ask you to think of this introduction as providing a series of entry points:

to an important but somewhat neglected biographical subgenre, to a familiar if often vexing politico-cultural formation, and to two emergent academic fields. In a sense, of course, *all* Hollywood films (the primary focus of our inquiry here) are about American national identity: Hollywood, as we know, is an important American industry, one of the “main instrument[s] of the ideological super-structure” of the nation (*Cabiers* 1976, 499), a powerful and influential discursive formation habitually and more or less reflexively deployed for both internal consumption and global export.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, biographical narrative of whatever kind has traditionally been an ally of dominant structures of socioeconomic authority,<sup>2</sup> as have the film industry in general and the industrial, technical, and aesthetic practices of biopics in particular. I will return later to the generic history and poetics of biopics, but first a few words about some influential conceptual practices associated with “National Identity” and then a few more about how those practices have intersected cinema studies, especially where this conjuncture is concerned with film history and American national consciousness.

As I’ve already indicated, “National Identity/ies” is a burgeoning field of study, situated in and among political science, area studies, ethnic and multicultural studies, history, and social studies, a congeries of interests exemplified in the learned journal *National Identities* (founded 1999), which is published in London and tilted toward Europe, but with a transnational and postnational perspective (on, for example, globalization, identity formation, political institutions) and an eye on ethnic diversity, cultural geography, and postmodern theory, as well as such familiar topics as race, class, and gender and such recurring tropes as (among many others) “borders,” “authenticity,” “myth,” “multiculturalism,” “homeland,” “orientalism,” “memory,” “birth,” “integration,” “patriotism,” “landscape,” and “local(ity).” The most frequently cited founding figures in the field are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983; 2nd ed. 1991; rev. ed. 2006), and Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (1991). Here is Smith’s familiar formulation of “the fundamental features of national identity”:

- (1) an historic territory, or homeland; (2) common myths and historical memories; (3) a common, mass public culture; (4) common legal rights and duties for all members; (5) a common economy with territorial mobility for members (Smith 1993, 14).

Moreover, and crucially for us, Smith recognizes that “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual

selves in the world,” although “the quest for the national self and the individual’s relationship to it remains the most baffling element in the nationalist project” (ibid., 17).

Anderson explains how this baffling nationalist project could be mediated: as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 2006, 6), “inherently limited and sovereign” (ibid.), which, since the invention of the printing press, is constantly “re-presenting” (ibid., 25) itself through the languages people choose in order to engage in public discourse and through the various discursive formations with which they imagine the communities they inhabit. Over the course of the Long Eighteenth Century, these vehicles of transmission and formation were likely to be the novel and the newspaper (ibid.), or, after the 1820s, “the inner premises and conventions of modern biography and autobiography” (ibid., xiv), or, in the twentieth century, radio, cinema, and television, or, “in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa,” “the census, the map, and the museum” (ibid., 163). Obviously, this is only a partial listing of the many ways in which Anderson traces the history, indeed, histories, of the emergence, transformation, and proliferation of what he calls “national consciousness,” which, he is at pains to point out, happens in different places at different times for some of the same and different reasons. Most pertinently for our purposes, perhaps, the modern nation is imagined first (“*well before* [it is in] most of Europe”—ibid., 50; italics in original) in the Americas in the late 1700s and early 1800s, where it is characteristically instrumentalized as a movement of national independence led by “pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen” (think Benjamin Franklin) (ibid., 65).

Anderson concludes the later editions of his book with two meditations on biography: a chapter subtitled “On the Geo-biography of *Imagined Communities*” and a piquant and (for us) apposite section on “The Biography of Nations,” from which I now quote at some length:

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. . . . The photograph [and, one might add, the cinema], fine child[ren] of the age of mechanical reproduction, [are] only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence . . . which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it cannot be “remembered,” must be narrated. . . .

As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of “forgetting” the experience of this continuity . . . engenders the need for a narrative of “identity”. . . . Yet between narratives of person and nation there is a central difference of employment. In the secular story of the “person” there is a beginning and an end. . . . Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography cannot be written evangelically, “down time,” through a long procreative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it “up time”—towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archaeology casts its fitful gleam. This fashioning, however, is marked by deaths, which, in a curious inversion of conventional genealogy, start from an originary present. . . .

Yet the deaths that structure the nation’s biography are of a special kind. . . . [T]he deaths that matter are those myriad anonymous events, which, aggregated and averaged into secular mortality rates, permit [historians] to chart the slow-changing conditions of life for millions of anonymous human beings of whom the last question asked is their nationality.

From [the historians’] remorselessly accumulating cemeteries, however, the nation’s biography snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as “our own.” (Anderson 2006, 204–206)

As M. Lane Bruner observes, *pace* Anderson, in a 2005 *National Identities* article, “Rhetorical Theory and the Critique of National Identity Construction”: “The imaginary nature of collective identity has been thoroughly theorized” (Bruner 2005, 316); “*national identity is a politically consequential fiction based on a selective remembering and forgetting*” (ibid.; my italics); “human subjects are alienated from their actual material condition by discourses that obscure that material condition” (ibid.); “The presence of identity is merely a temporary discursive conjuncture in which certain discourses have stabilised their hegemonic forces upon the domain’” (Thongchai [1994], 173, as in Bruner 2005, 317); “The post-national critic seeks to investigate the suppressions involved in all unifying national fictions in order to determine their various characters, which in turn allows for a more reflexive understanding of the variety

of ways in which national identity constitutes both a sense of self and a sense of otherness” (ibid., 319–20). We also find such closely scrutinized “*strategic forgetfulness*” or “*strategic public memory*” (ibid., 316; my italics) in the work of film historians, critics, and theorists interested in “Cinema and Nation,” the title of a recent book of original articles edited by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (2000) as well as of two special issues of *Film History* (1996) edited by Mark Langer and Kristin Thompson.<sup>3</sup> In “National Cinema, National Imaginary,” the lead article in the first of these special issues, Michael Walsh argues that “[t]he critical use of national imaginaries is heavily based [on] the slides that can be made between Anderson’s imagined (a form of social epistemology), Lacan’s Imaginary (a mechanism for explaining the fixity of meaning around identificatory positions), and a more everyday form of the term imagination (as what an aesthetic philosopher like Kendall Walton might call a game of make believe)” (Walsh 1996, 7). Thus, despite its apparent sophistication, Walsh is indicating that the discourse of national imaginaries is a slippery critical practice lacking theoretical rigor, (contingent) historical and other contextualist framing, and (what in cinema studies, which has always been the most intensely theorized of academic fields, would be considered) a viable and necessary methodology “link[ing] formal devices to spectatorial positioning” (ibid., 14) and to “a description of their repetition and circulation” (ibid., 16)—what in literary studies, I might add, would be called “mediation” and associated with, as Walsh recognizes (ibid.), one or another mode of formalist criticism and reception aesthetic: the kind of methodology we aspire to practice here.

In “Birthing Nations,” the concluding essay in the *Cinema and Nation* collection, Jane M. Gaines reminds us of Ernest Renan’s remark in his well-known 1882 lecture “What Is a Nation?”: “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation” (Gaines 2000, 301)—a conceptual practice enabling, many observers have noted, the recent study of national identities. The silent picture Gaines wants to talk about in “Birthing Nations” is, of course, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), in many respects the founding film of American narrative cinema, which, she notes, revealing her debt not only to Renan but also to Anderson and his “Biography of Nations,” “advocates a nation that never was. Contrary to most interpretations of the film that stress the constitution of the American union, the nation that is ‘birthed’ in the film is really the impossible, ‘invisible’ nation that only exists in the minds of stalwart Southerners” (ibid., 299)—a classic example, indeed, perhaps, the classic American example of how strategic public forgetting and remembering give birth to nations that never were, and of how American movies, repeatedly circulating throughout the country and all over the world,

became the privileged medium through which the imagined communities of the modern era were publicly memorialized. As Jenny Barrett reminds us in *Shooting the Civil War: Cinema, History and American National Identity* (2009), Griffith's controversial "epic melodrama" (Barrett 2009, 138) of the Civil War, the Reconstruction South, and the Ku Klux Klan is the story of the birth or rebirth of America as a "reunited white family." Barrett bases her approach on Anderson's contention in *Imagined Communities* "that there is an entire 'pedagogical industry' endeavouring to make Americans 'remember/forget the hostilities of 1861–65 as a great "civil war"'" that led to "a national reconciliation" (ibid., 9–10, citing Anderson), an "uptime genealogy" (Anderson 2006, 205) which was underwritten, in large part and well into the twentieth century, by the ideology of white supremacy, the disciplinary practices of the American historical profession (the sitting president in 1915 was a Southern academic, Woodrow Wilson, who famously "declar[ed] that the film was 'like history written with lightning'" [Barrett 2009, 129]), and the generic conventions and economic exigencies of the American film industry. Barrett also relies on two of Smith's insights in *National Identity*: that Griffith's structuring of the film around two American families, one Northern, one Southern, which "are reunited" "when white rule returns to the South" (Barrett 2009, 138), is a classic example of how "the metaphor of family is indispensable to nationalism" (ibid., 148, citing Smith); and that *Birth of a Nation's* "appeal to distant [Scottish] ancestors from Europe," a ritualistic distancing which "makes whiteness even purer," is an instance of "nationalism[']s characteristic] appeal to 'ancient beliefs and commitments to ancestral homelands and to the generations of one's forefathers'" (ibid., 148–49, citing Smith), an appeal even more famously instanced in the Irish ancestry behind *Gone With the Wind* (1939), another epic melodrama with many of the same plot elements and ideological assumptions that helped to establish the "South" as an imagined domestic-regional space of "internal orientalism." This is the term David R. Jansson deploys in a 2005 *National Identities* article on the film *Mississippi Burning* (1988), in which the South emerges as America's "primary regional other," "a receptacle for the country's shadow," "an internal colony of the United States" (Jansson 2005, 268), constructed as "racist, violent, xenophobic, intolerant, parochial and corrupt (as well as white)" (ibid., 271). "In contrast, 'America' is understood as standing for the opposite of these vices," and the film "reproduces an American national identity that stands for tolerance, justice, and peace" (ibid., 265; italics in original).

Here and elsewhere, for example, in Michael Coyne's *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (1997), film historians and critics have stressed how readily certain film genres, especially

those associated with the cultural geography of the United States, have accommodated the interpellation of American national identity. Perhaps this is because, as Rick Altman claims, “[w]ith regard to location, it is instructive to note just how closely the notion of genre parallels that of nation” (Altman 1999, 86, as in Gaines 2000, 304), a clever observation stressing how genre and nation are both imagined constructions with material histories which are crucial to individual and communal processes of interpretation. I said much the same thing in *Recognizing Biography* (1987) about what I called the generic recognition of (written) biographical narrative, which, I claimed, derives its authority in part from the dynamics of repetition that characterizes the discourse of genre, and which traverses or emplots generic space through various cognitive activities of generic encoding and decoding, such as (among others) those associated with “recognizing” the biographer, the biographical subject, the life-course, and (what I called) the “life-text” (the complex and slippery process by which so-called events in extra-discursive space-time become facts associated with an individualized life in a biographical narrative). As Mikhail Bakhtin remarks, “Genre lives in the present, but it always *remembers* the past, its beginnings.”<sup>4</sup> And, finally, as Roland Barthes observes, “meaning is a force: to name is to subject, and the more generic the nomination, the stronger the subjection” (Barthes 1974, 129–30).

All these concerns are as pertinent to biographical film as they are to biographical writing, and now, at long last, situated primarily in cinema studies and life-writing studies, a critical mass of intelligent informed work on the biopic has emerged, led by Dennis Bingham’s important recent (2010) book on the biopic as “a contemporary film genre” (see my summary below) and anticipated by Carolyn Anderson’s chapter-length generic history in 1988, George Custen’s pioneering book-length study on the biopic as “public history” in 1992, Eileen Karsten’s 1993 filmography, Robert Rosenstone’s continuing work on film and history beginning with *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (1995), special issues of the learned journals *Biography*, on “The Biopic” (2000) and “Self-Projection and Autobiography in Film” (2006), and *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2008), and interesting and useful articles and book chapters by (among others) Thomas Elsaesser (1986) on the studio style and film cycles of the 1930s Warner Brothers biopic, Chris Robé (2009) on the biopic, the historical costume drama, and 1930s Popular Front film criticism, Cynthia Hanson (1988) and Cynthia Rose (1993) on some crucial conventions of the rock (and musical) biopic, especially (*pace* Custen) the entertainer as talented and professionalized exception, Audrey Levasseur (2000) on “Film and Video Self-Biographies,” Lucy Fischer (2000) on “Modernity, Mortality, and the Biopic,” Ian Christie’s

(2002) survey of silent and early sound biographical films in Europe and America as agents of modernity, mass communication, psychology, nationalism, and the cult of personality, Carolyn Anderson and John Lupo's (2002, 2008) studies of Hollywood and "off-Hollywood" (ironic, camp) lives at the turn of the twenty-first century, James Chapman's *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (2005) and J. E. Smyth's *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema* (2006), the postmodern musings of Jason Sperb (2006) on "simulacrum as an autobiographical act" and Garrett Stewart (2006) on "vitagraphic time," and, of course, the Summer 2011 special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* upon which this book is, in part, based—all of it engaging, to a greater or lesser extent, with "the biopic and American national identity."<sup>5</sup>

### Generic Plots

Now, the premise of this book is that the phrase "American national identity" describes a well-travelled pathway through the generic history and poetics of the biographical film—a *generic plot*, if you will, by which the biopic traverses American lives. Before describing the general outline of this generic plot, how it has already been noted in cinema studies, how the contributors to this book are helping to sophisticate it, and how we might use (what I will call) a generic gesture of *strategic patriotic memory* to track its distribution between and among filmmakers and films, formal devices and spectatorial positions, and the reception and circulation of mainstream American cinema over (post)modern(ist) time and space, I want to pause a moment to consider another much more complicated generic plot—Dennis Bingham's elaborate articulation of "the biopic as contemporary film genre." Bingham's generic plot evolves and devolves through what he calls "developmental stages, emerging from . . . historical cycles . . . that continue to be available to filmmakers working in the form": briefly, "the classical, celebratory" melodramatic biopic; the "warts-and-all" melodramatic/realistic biopic; "the transition [from] a producer's genre to an auteurist director's genre"; "critical investigation and atomization of the subject"; "parody"; "minority appropriation"; and "since 2000, the neoclassical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these" (Bingham 2010, 17–18). Bingham pursues this agenda over the course of *two* books, each strongly inflected by gender and race, each contained within the covers of *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, each nine chapters and roughly two hundred pages long: "The Great (White) Man Biopic and Its Discontents" and "A Woman's Life Is Never Done: Female Biopics." Let me try to give you some idea of the scope of this nearly epic production.



The first book begins with a brief glance at literary modernism and how Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) anticipates "the canny spectator positioning that made Hollywood films so successful" (Bingham 2010, 38), then how *Rembrandt* (1936, starring Charles Laughton) "epitomizes the centrality of star performances in showing the [unusual, virtually nonassimilable] life of a 'Great Man'" (ibid., 42). In a crucial, intelligently rendered chapter on *Citizen Kane* (1941), Bingham analyzes this famous film as "the central, genre-changing event in the history of the biopic" (51), for it "exposes the fact that the Great Man biopic is about nothing more than the vindication of the ego" (66) and induces the "relentless curiosity, unknowability, and lack of self-recognition [that] would reanimate the biopic in decades to come" (70). *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) "breaks through the boundaries of the biopic" (72), becomes "a Brechtian biopic . . . about the effects of power, fame, and adulation" (78) in which "Stracheyan irony" (75) and an imperial "subject steeped in ambivalence" (76) demystify, for "American audiences in the civil rights-aware year of 1963" (81), "one of the central myths of biography"—"that self-determination and destiny absolutely do go together" (78). In his chapters on Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995), Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994), and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), Bingham positions the biopic at the end of the American century in a late capitalist, post-Cold War, culturally diverse, deconstructed world: the "biopic protagonist" is now either "a postmodernist hollow man" (102) or the parodic "undeserving" subject of an "anti-Great Man biopic" (146, 151) or an overdetermined "enigma" (183) of "a new [neoclassical] tradition . . . of films that reappropriate the classical biopic form . . . to tell the stories of figures who were by definition outside the mainstream culture" (176).

The second book, on the female biopic, begins where the first book ends—with "breaking past the limitations of the patriarchal form to find a genre that tells the woman's story in a female voice" (Bingham 2010, 222), and with the director Todd Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a forty-two-minute graduate student's film made on a tiny budget deploying dolls and toys to interrogate anorexia, consumer culture, and "the genre of the melodramatic Hollywood female biopic" (ibid., 224–25), and to reveal how an "ideology of beauty, happiness, consumerism, heterosexuality, and middle-class respectability" (237) determines "'What happens all the time?'" in American culture" (224). This second book also concludes with a Todd Haynes film. *I'm Not There* (2007), a full-length relatively well-financed independent film by a now-established director, is "seven characters in search of [a biographical] subject" (382), a reimagining of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) as Bob Dylan, never actually named, 'embodied' by male and female actors

of various ages and races, in a biopic that explores “self-identification and self-invention” (378) as it rejects familiar and conventional notions of coherence, unity, presence, embodiment, representation, and meaning. In between these two defining projects, Bingham looks intensely at ’40s and ’50s melodramas of female victimization which explored criminality, celebrity, and gender construction and featured (most tellingly) Susan Hayward, who starred in four such films, all with first-person titles, of which *I Want to Live!* (1958, six Oscar nominations) is the most celebrated and provides “early evidence that with awareness and effort male filmmakers can tell a female protagonist’s story without forcing it into the [common] formulas of victimization and . . . downward trajectory” (258). *Funny Girl* and *Star!* (both 1968), “two hard-ticket roadshow musicals” (259) with transcendent female stars (Barbra Streisand, Julie Andrews), “deal with ambition, the dialectic of public and private, the meaning of celebrity, motherhood, the successful woman in the world, and the nature of stardom” (260–61). The ’80s “resurgence of female biopics” (290) reinforces how “[m]adness, hysteria, sexual dependency, the male gaze and a patriarchal authorship” continued to characterize “the classic female biopic” and poses the question, “Is there a way to tell the lives of women while critiquing, revising, and redirecting all these conventional tendencies?” (310)—a question answered by the following chapters on Jane Campion’s *An Angel at My Table* (1991), Steven Soderbergh’s *Erin Brockovich* (2000), Mary Harron’s *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2006), and Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), all “movies [which] reappropriate the male gaze directed at women” while “posit[ing] an iconic female exhibitionist inside a very patriarchal order” (349) and “examin[ing] the nature of female celebrity and subjectivity in the early twenty-first century” (350).

Distributed throughout Bingham’s “developmental stages,” the generic plot I am calling “The Biopic and American National Identity” comes to life with *The Birth of a Nation* and the emergence of narrative film itself in the formative years of the silent era. In “A Life on Film,” Christie remarks how, as the talkies replaced silent movies in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “[f]rom America to Russia, across all the national cinemas of Europe now able and required to speak in their own languages, there seemed to be a concerted project of ‘national biography’ through cinema. . . . In every national cinema, and especially in the supranational Hollywood cinema, ‘life-stories’ became a major genre” (Christie 2002, 292, 290). Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* takes up the story from here: during the classical, studio era (c. 1930–1960), the dominant and dominating corporate culture of Hollywood (as represented and enacted by its studio heads, departments,

and “styles”) characteristically induced and produced biographical films as if they were civics lessons in traditional American values, even (or especially) when the biographical subjects and targeted audiences of these films were not American.<sup>6</sup> “Idols of production and/or consumption,” these inventors, scientists, explorers, politicians, sovereigns, warriors, artists, and entertainers are depicted as “extraordinary,” “abnormal” figures whose threatening difference must be recognized and celebrated before being reintegrated into the community, which, against a background of global depression and the rise of fascism and communism, is understood at this time (the ’30s and then, in a sense, the residual legacy of the ’30s during the war years and the first phase of the Cold War) as small town, democratic, capitalist, and American. Both Custen and Christie see this newly emergent genre as “preoccup[ied] with the nature of modern fame” and the star system, with “[t]he apparatus of modern mass communications” and the standardized consumption of “mass culture,” with “a commitment to popular education and ‘uplift,’” with the “ambivalent prospect of ‘total’ representation,” and with the problematics of truth, narrative, and “‘life picturing’” (Christie 2002, 283, 288, 291; Custen 1992, 6, 45–47, 87–89, 111, 149, 202–205, and *passim*).

### Strategic Patriotic Memories

The classic film here is perhaps John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939)—which is almost wholly “fictional” in its various interwoven and invented stories about Lincoln’s lost love for Ann Rutledge, his adoption of law and then politics as a career, his first encounters with Mary Todd and Stephen Douglas, his immersion in frontier customs and values, his canny defense of an accused murderer—about which the great Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein wrote, “[O]f all American films made up to now [1945] this is the film that I would wish, most of all, to have made,” because, despite its factual inaccuracy, it captures the “popular and national spirit . . . [t]hrough the image of [its] historical protagonist, . . . a living embodiment of the positive ideals of freedom and justice for future generations of America” (Eisenstein 1968, 140, 141, 144).<sup>7</sup> This claim is examined in a famous 1970 film studies article on *Young Mr. Lincoln* by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, who chose this film as the first in a “series of [what would come to be called postmodern] studies” offering a “re-scansion” of classic films in order to “make them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid” (*Cahiers* 1976, 494, 496). While barely acknowledging the biopic as a contemporary film genre (their only mention a mere nod to the film’s producer as “the man responsible [at Fox] for historical biographies which constitute[d]

the core of the company's productions"—*ibid.*, 500), the *Cahiers* editors remind us nonetheless that, as in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, traditional (written and filmed) biographical narrative of well-known, culturally received figures is a structure of "*specific repetition*," "of the future contained in the past" (506), of the reader/spectator's "universal knowledge" of the biographical subject's "fate" (507), and of a particular kind of memorializing and remythologizing "feedback loop" (my term) which this genre characteristically induces its readers/viewers to traverse. Indeed, it is worth remembering here how melodramatically commemorative and earnest, as well as how in(con)sistently accurate and authentic<sup>8</sup> these movies on (among many others) Lincoln and Wilson, Edison and Bell, Pasteur and Madame Curie, Queen Elizabeth and Catherine the Great, Zola and the Brontes, Lou Gehrig and Knute Rockne, Rembrandt and van Gogh, Annie Oakley and Wyatt Earp, Lindbergh and Daniel Boone, Chopin and Glenn Miller were (in)famous for being.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, I want to use a bit of the *Cahiers* editors' "re-scansion" of the end of this classic film to point to one of the ways in which the biopic characteristically interpellates American national identity.



FIGURE 1. *Young Mr. Lincoln* (Dir. John Ford, 1939). Lap dissolve to the final shot.

Final scene: Lincoln takes leave of his companion . . . by telling him “I think I might go on apiece . . . maybe to the top of that hill.” . . . A storm threatens. Lincoln is slowly climbing the hill. A last shot shows him facing the camera, with a vacant look, while threatening clouds cross the background and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” begins to be heard. Lincoln leaves the frame. Rain begins to fall violently and continues into the final shot of the film (his statue at the Capitol) while music intensifies. (*Cabiers* 1976, 524)

What the *Cabiers* editors call here “the excesses of Ford’s writing,” which, “by overlaying all the clichés, underlines the monstrous character of the figure of Lincoln” (ibid.), is a wonderful example of specific repetition, of the future contained in the past, of the viewer’s universal knowledge of the biographical subject’s fate, culminating in one of the great commemorative icons of American national identity—the Lincoln Memorial—and in the enduring abolitionist hymn written during and forever associated with the Civil War and the renationalized Union to which (the story goes) Lincoln gave his life.<sup>10</sup> This is a familiar move, a *gesture of strategic patriotic memory*, if you will, in the script of this generic plot we are tracking: a visual or aural reference to something unmistakably identified with the United States of America, most often, of course, instanced by the American flag or the national anthem, but occasionally by a well-known monument, landmark, or cartographic feature or by a popular or folk song or an evocative piece of instrumental music.

Let’s briefly pursue this gesture through two other landmark films, *Citizen Kane* (screenplay, Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles; director, Welles) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (screenplay, Robert Benton and David Newman; producer, Warren Beatty; director, Arthur Penn), both of which are often said to have utterly changed the way Hollywood films were made and American national identity conceived. As we’ve seen, Bingham has made the fundamental case for Welles’s film: “an essential work of modernism” (Bingham 2010, 68), “the central, genre-changing event in the history of the biopic” (ibid., 51), “*Citizen Kane* fragments, objectifies, and, so to speak, psychoanalyzes the prototypical biopic subject of the 1930s” (ibid.). A satirical, mock-generic interrogation (emplotted through, for example, the *pastiche* newsreel with which the film opens, the journalistic search for the “real” Kane and then Rosebud, the remorseless and reflexive attention to the process of gathering, sorting, and interpreting fragmentary, confusing, and often contradictory biographical information) which “exposes the fact that the Great Man biopic is about nothing more than the vindication of the ego” (66), and which induces

the “relentless curiosity, unknowability, and lack of self-recognition [that] would reanimate the biopic in decades to come” (70), “*Kane* makes contact with the touchstones and archetypes of American myth, but does so in a way that reappropriates them” (57), a “‘narrative strategy [that] comes across as anti-heroic and anti-Hollywood’” (Mulvey 1992, 22, as in Bingham 2010, 70), that “alienates the ordinary spectator[,] and [that] turns the biopic from a majority [“mass entertainment”] genre to a[n] [“auterist”] minority one” (Bingham 2010, 70–71). In a sense, *Bonnie and Clyde* reverses this “alienation effect,” turning an arthouse/European script into a mass-market American phenomenon, “the most popular and influential biographical film of the 1960s,” which “tapped pools of discontent in audiences throughout the country” (Anderson 1988, 335) and which inaugurated a brief era of auteurist, experimental, antiestablishment, independent, and yet mainstream (Wall Street–financed, popular, award-winning) filmmaking that transformed the American film industry.

To use the language and plot points of the film and several of the intersecting movie genres it coopts, in *Bonnie and Clyde* the “outlaws” have become the “in-laws”: in one sense, of course, the outlaws are the public and generic identities Bonnie and Clyde assume in the movie and in popular culture, while the in-laws are the visiting Barrows (Clyde’s brother and sister-in-law, who also become outlaws) and the visited Parkers (Bonnie’s mother and family) and, conversely in relation to them, Bonnie and Clyde themselves. In another sense, the movie’s remarkable success and influence induce what Jerome Christensen calls a postmodern “putting-on” of iconic branding, corporate auterism, and American national identity. As we’ve already seen (and this is not exactly Christensen’s point), this “put-on” also has something to do with Hollywood corporate history—like the outlaw and gangster genres, the biopic emerged during the ’30s as a studio-driven film cycle, a more or less bankable genre that, in fact, was often appropriated by the outlaw and gangster genres, although, for a prestige genre most often identified with the received heroic figures of established structures of authority, the biopic was somewhat embarrassed when this was the company it was seen to be keeping. But *Bonnie and Clyde* changed all that: what was once “the shame of the nation” (the subtitle of the 1932 *Scarface*, based on the life of Al Capone) was now (despite the real-life C. W. Moss’s 1968 lawsuit against the studio claiming that the movie “brought [him] shame and disrepute”)<sup>11</sup> the generic appropriation that saved the American film industry and pointed the way to a new mode of postindustrial capitalism that would midwife yet another “birth of the nation.” An “outlaw” film Warner didn’t want to make or, once made, support, and in which corporate capitalism is represented as the class enemy of

ordinary folk who can't beat the system and are doomed to (one form or another of) violent death (foreclosure and starvation, a life of crime and punishment, the collapse of the grand political narratives, interminable hot and cold war), "*Bonnie and Clyde* [Christensen explains] undertook to save the motion picture industry by demonstrating how a declining major [movie company] anchored to a failing business model could be rebranded as a cultural icon of substantial value to corporate managers who understood their financial success to be bonded with their cultural and political role; the Taira-Hiller [Beatty's production company] motion picture prefigures a new Hollywood, and, in doing so, a new model of citizenship, which . . . [Christensen dubs] corporate populism, as an alternative to the lapsed consensus that liberals esteemed or the participatory democracy of which radicals dreamed" (Christensen 2012, 275).

There are, of course, many examples after *Bonnie and Clyde* of the discursive distribution of this "corporate populism" across American cinematic culture in general and the biographical film in particular. Consider Michael Apted's *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), which, like country music itself, has often been treated as a traditional "repository of white, working-class authenticity" and "a conservative force affirming traditional American values" (Brackett 2001; Brost 2008), even though, remarkably, it does not overtly deploy the traditional generic gestures of strategic patriotic memory we've been tracing. Nevertheless, in the *Cabiers* spirit of "mak[ing] them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid" (*Cabiers* 1976, 496), we recognize that this gesturing has power even if it's not there—in this instance, I believe, because its British director was absorbed with portraying country singer Loretta Lynn's hillbilly background and apparently unaware or (more likely) unmindful of the Hollywood convention of employing such images. This lack is retrospectively filled, if you will, by two of the special features on the twenty-fifth anniversary DVD of the film (which, in the interim, had itself become a classic of Americana): the Loretta Lynn interview and President George H. W. Bush's September 1989 speech at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the federally funded American Film Institute (AFI). The Lynn interview is shot at Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter* museum, a much-visited tourist destination located inside the movie's replica of the house she was raised in: a brief special-features tour of the museum highlights various displays in which the American flag is prominently featured and in which Lynn's life and this movie of it have become closely associated with the Appalachian border South, with certain traditional rural values and customs, and with the commercialization of "hillbilly" music mediated by "Nashville," all these associations poignantly, aggressively, and patriotically glossed by the word *country*. This political reading

is reinforced by the DVD's replaying of Bush's AFI speech, in which the president recalls the founding of the institute during Lyndon Johnson's administration, acknowledges his friends and chastises his enemies in the movie industry, and celebrates film as "the mirror of America" and "also, in a sense, the conscience of America." He then goes on to mention *Coal Miner's Daughter* as an illustration of "the human spirit vanquishing poverty," thanks filmmakers for joining the war on drugs, and, in turn, assures film producers that in his administration their "property rights [will be] respected" and "American films [will] have unfettered access to foreign markets." Bush concludes this compact and yet comprehensive iteration of Hollywood as a political player in the ideological superstructure, as an instrument of hegemonic power and American national identity, by asserting, "[T]o understand the heart of America just look at the American film."

Let's conclude with Bob Fosse's *Lenny* (1974), another post-*Bonnie and Clyde*, corporate-auteurist "put-on," and yet another entertainer biopic that makes no traditionally overt visual or aural patriotic gestures: situated in very different regions of the American heart(land), it recuperates its "lack" diegetically by deploying language brutally and nakedly in an effort to speak truth to the very power structures Bush instances and symbolizes. This is a hermetic film, taking place entirely within the overlapping show business milieu of comics and strippers, from which the Jewish, childlike, career-destroying Lenny Bruce emerges, briefly and chaotically, as a spokesperson of his generation, jazzy, hip, "cool," intensely political, the quintessential "sick" comedian who articulates and analyzes the "obscenities" of contemporary American life, most famously perhaps in his "auction" routine, in which various ethnic and racial slurs are named, inventoried, and "sold American" (echoing a line from mid-century Lucky Strike ads). This comic style is laced with scatological language and intended, as a clergyman witness for the defense explains at one of Bruce's many obscenity trials (exemplifying and parodying the mostly invented trial scenes through which many traditional biopics vindicate their subjects), "to hold up and expose American society so they can really see themselves," thus providing, as Bruce cries out at the end in yet another trial scene, "the information [that] keeps the country straight. You need the deviant."<sup>12</sup> This poignant last phrase is a rearticulation in a somewhat different register of a discursive convention crucial to the generic employment of the biopic: as Custen, Bingham, and others observe, most traditional biopic figures are, in one way or another, eccentric, resisting "genius[es]" with extraordinary talents—deviants—who, "in the canny spectator positioning that made Hollywood films so successful," are transformed into sympathetic characters whom audiences root



for by being “play[ed] . . . against” various “sorts of rigid bureaucracies, greedy self-interests, warped value systems, and unimaginatively opposed families” (Custen 1992, 17, 121–39; Bingham 2010, 38). Of course, as before, the biopic’s characteristic structure of “*specific repetition*,” “of the future contained in the past,” of the spectator’s “universal knowledge” of the biographical subject’s “fate” (*Cabiers* 1976, 506–507), enables this deviant to be “normalize[d]” throughout the course of the film into a “well-adjusted, successful biopic hero” (Custen 1992, 17), the vehicle through which change has occurred and the world made whole again.

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes

The chapter epigraph is cited and quoted in whole or in part in Rosenbaum, 217, and Vasey, 43.

1. A routine observation. E.g., see Hayward (2000, 92): “Dudley Andrews states that ‘from the standpoint of economies, there is but one viable national cinema—Hollywood—and the world is its nation’ . . . and . . . *Le Monde* reiterates this idea by declaring ‘that there is no European cinema only American cinema.’” See also Hedetoft (2000, 281): “‘Hollywood,’ as a rule, produces national cinema, if by this concept we understand film whose thematic ‘aboutness[.]’ . . . interpretive framing, and sets of ideas and values are rooted in American perceptions of man, nature, society, and the world.” See also Custen, “The World Is an American Stage,” 90–93.

2. “The cultural activities of reading and writing the biographical subject have *histories*, marked by (among other things) a tradition of being allied with dominant structures of cultural, political, social, and economic authority,” Epstein, “(Post)Modern Lives,” 221–22. See also Custen (1992, 190): “Biopics are conservative because so many of the public institutions endowed with power shared and sustained a similar view of the world.”

3. See also the essays in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Williams, which is devoted primarily to theorizing and analyzing features of “national cinema,” not quite our topic, and the Nationalism Project Website, which describes itself as “a clearinghouse of scholarly nationalism information including: leading definitions of nationalism, book reviews, web links, subject bibliographies, a bibliography of more than 2,000 journal articles, and much more.”

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1963), as in Todorov, 84.

5. Three books not yet available at this writing also seem likely to engage the topic of this book and are yet another indication of the continuing emergence of sophisticated scholarly and critical work on the biopic: Bronwyn Polaschek, *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kablo, Woolf, and Austen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Doris Berger, *Projected Art History: Biopics, Celebrity Culture, and the Popularizing of American Art (International Texts in Critical Media Aesthetics)* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); and Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, eds., *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture (AFI Film Readers)* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

6. See also Elsaesser, who provides specifics about Warners in the '30s, and C. Anderson, "Biographical Film," 332.

7. See also Christie 2002, 297–98.

8. "What gritty realism was to the topical picture became *authenticity* to the bio-pic: the trademark for a genre," Elsaesser 1986, 23; stress added. As Custen demonstrates (passim, but esp. 34–45, 111–18), "authenticity" should be understood primarily as a sales technique highlighting the efforts of the studio's research department to faithfully reproduce period and other kinds of *mise-en-scène* detail. See also Robé (2009, 72) on 1930s leftist film criticism of the biopic as "historical spectacle" ("reactionary idealization of the past") and "costume drama" ("the empty affect of the *mise-en-scène*'s surface details").

9. See Custen's various appendices, esp. his "Purposive Sample of Biopics" and "Biopics by Profession."

10. See also Smyth, "The Lives and Deaths of Abraham Lincoln," 167–94, who sees "the Abraham Lincoln articulated in *Young Mr. Lincoln*" as "a response to trends in contemporary Lincoln historiography, the relativist exploration of historical alternatives, and the vicissitudes of historiography" (187).

11. "The fictional C. W. Moss [was] a composite of gang members W. D. Jones and Henry Methvin. Jones sued Warner Bros for \$175,000. . . . He didn't see a penny" (Tunzelmann 2009).

12. David Mamet's 2013 HBO biopic *Phil Spector*, also dealing with an outrageous and self-destructive artist, alludes to Bruce and/or *Lenny* several times.

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