



New Women's Biopics: Performance and the Queering of Herstor/ies

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Abstract

This article revisits the debates about the postfeminist biopic in the 21st century through the films *Wild Nights with Emily* (Olnek, 2018), *Florence Foster Jenkins* (Frears, 2016), *The Favourite* (Lanthimos, 2018) and particularly *Colette* (Westmoreland, 2018) to examine the ways in which new women's biopics *queer* women's histories. The article examines the debates about representation concerning the female biopic (Bingham 2010, Polaschek 2013), especially the problematic conflation of a woman's body/sexuality with her body of work and proposes an analysis of screen biography as a filmic (that is, mediated) event open to non-normative identifications and desires. Biopics of women demand a shift in focus from representation to performance, both in relation to the actor's function as the cornerstone of the biographical fiction and in relation to the *performativity* of the genre itself. Drawing on Landsberg (2015), I argue that new women's biopics stage encounters between the spectator and the historical figure through different forms of mediation. In this respect, I examine the modalities of reflexive performance in connection with queer bodies and subjectivities in the first three films cited above, before moving on to a case study on *Colette*.

Colette largely plays in the mid-Atlantic idiom of the postfeminist biopic (Polaschek 2013), including a non-imitative star turn by Keira Knightley, whose star persona is briefly analysed, yet the film's queerness entertains a complex relationship with this postfeminist framework. While queer identities risk becoming diluted into the standard trajectory of female emancipation proposed by the film (a narrative invested with added urgency in the post-#MeToo moment), performance inflects this narrative

differently: the intermedial mise-en-scène (particularly photographic posing, theatre, and dance) makes *Colette* a biopic equally concerned with the retrieval of women’s histories as with the production of the queer female self against the backdrop of patriarchal cultural industries.

Keywords: performance, postfeminist biopic, metabiography, queer

Resumen

Este artículo revisa los debates sobre el llamado biopic postfeminista en el siglo XXI a través de los filmes *Wild Nights with Emily* (Olnek, 2018), *Florence Foster Jenkins* (Frears, 2016), *The Favourite* (Lanthimos, 2018) y en particular *Colette* (Westmoreland, 2018) en relación a la perspectiva *queer* sobre los relatos históricos femeninos en los nuevos biopics de mujeres. El artículo examina los debates sobre representación en el biopic femenino (Bingham 2010, Polaschek 2013) con especial atención al problema de la fusión entre el cuerpo/la sexualidad de la artista y su obra. Como respuesta crítica a este problema, el artículo propone un análisis de la biografía cinematográfica como un evento fílmico (es decir, mediatizado) que genera un espacio para deseos y formas de identificación no normativas. En este sentido, los biopics de mujeres exigen una mayor atención a sus aspectos performativos, tanto en el plano de la función del actor como piedra angular de la ficción biográfica, como en relación a la *performatividad* de este género cinematográfico. Citando la obra de Landsberg (2015), la hipótesis de este artículo es que los nuevos biopics de mujeres ponen en escena encuentros entre el espectador y la figura histórica que se constituyen a través de diversas formas de mediación creativa. El artículo procede a analizar, en primer lugar, la reflexividad que subyace a la interpretación de los cuerpos y subjetividades *queer* en los primeros tres filmes citados, y en segundo lugar elabora este argumento en relación al film *Colette* como estudio de caso.

Colette se contempla desde un acercamiento al estilo de producción anglo-norteamericano típico del biopic postfeminista (Polaschek 2013), incluyendo una interpretación no imitativa a cargo de Keira Knightley, cuya ‘star persona’ se analiza en estas páginas. Sobre esta base, el artículo examina la compleja relación entre la temática *queer* de la película y el contexto postfeminista en el que se enmarca. En *Colette*, las identidades *queer* corren el riesgo de quedar sometidas a la trayectoria convencional de emancipación femenina que propone el film, cuya narración adquiere un eco añadido al coincidir su estreno con el momento post-#MeToo. Sin embargo, la performatividad del biopic da un punto de inflexión distinto a la narración: la *mise-en-scène* intermedial (que integra el posado fotográfico, la representación teatral y la

danza) convierten a *Colette* en un biopic que no sólo recupera el relato histórico de la mujer artista, sino que también lo convierte en una investigación de cómo el yo femenino *queer* emerge históricamente en el contexto de las industrias culturales patriarcales.

Palabras clave: performatividad, biopic postfeminista, metabiografía, queer

The relationship between popular cinema and women’s life stories has been, at best, an uneasy one. From its inception, the entertainment industry picked up where other popular biographical forms left off. As film genres sought to exploit the narrative capabilities of sound, the celebration of the ‘Great Men of history’, plucked from national histories, both provided narrative tropes amenable to cinematic representation and turned cinema into a tool for, in George F. Custen’s formulation, the creation of public history.¹ The famous women of history also gained cinematic exposure, albeit on very different terms. Biopics fashioned historical change as driven by the agency of extraordinary men, whereas representation for women did not always mean *representativity* in the public sphere. Their stories were enfolded in the realm of the particular; of intimacy and emotions; their historical presence often diluted into star display. Screen biography has, to a certain extent, perpetuated a strange paradox for women: visibility divorced from historical agency.

In his early work on the biopic as a classic studio genre, Custen recognises gender as ‘one of the most powerful frames informing the construction of fame’.² In the following pages I look at the intersection of gender and sexuality by investigating the performative aspects that render screen biography a filmic (that is, mediated) event open to non-normative identifications and desires. This move, in turn, leads to the question of whether thinking about performance as a reflexive element in women’s biopics necessarily entails a *queering* of Her/stor(ies), a vector of meaning that is textually activated in *Colette* (Wash Westmoreland, 2018), which centres the latter part of my analysis. My use of *performance* in this context refers, on one level, to the actor’s function as the cornerstone of the fiction constructed by the biopic. The actor actualises past identities attached to the historical figure through the presentness of their body; equally, biopic performance plays in and around the gaps in meaning, helping cement narrative continuity out of the various fragments that make up a historical life adapted by cinema. It is in this sense that biopic performance can make queer deviations (as well as identities) visible as part of the *mise-en-scène* of history. On a second level, I refer to the *performativity* of the biopic, as a genre that stages an encounter between the

spectator and the historical figure through different forms of mediation. In this regard, my analysis draws on the work of visual culture historian Alison Landsberg, and particularly her book *Engaging the Past*, in which she proposes a cognitive analysis of narrative media (including fiction film, television drama, reality TV and interactive digital exhibitions) that provide experiential encounters with history. Landsberg argues that these media forms can position the viewer in both affective proximity and knowing reflection with regards to the spectacle of history, rather than absorbed by the processes of identification. This encounter with the past through mediated forms affords a range of affects which, though not free from contradiction, may work as a conduit for historical consciousness.³

Landsberg’s conceptual framework accounts for the performativity of the contemporary biopic as one among many media objects that engage with the past, but it does not particularly address the specificity of the female biopic. As a form of historical re-enactment poised to put gender centre stage, especially considering the in/visibility of women in relation to the genre, this reflexive quality can be explored through the intermedial metaphors that biographical practices mobilise to reflect on the relationship between agent and subject of biography, storytelling and myth. This places us in the domain of metabiography. Edward Saunders cites Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s *Mozart* (1977) as an early example of metabiography; this work deploys images such as the restored fresco (a work of myriad painted layers that have solidified over time) or a musical score where the biographer must tease out the harmonies and discords between melody (work) and bass (life).⁴ Saunders notes that Hildesheimer seeks to effect a disentanglement of the layers of myth within the act of biography but *Mozart* in fact highlights the ‘difficulty of negotiating a life story without myth-making, and the impossibility of writing a life without doing so to some degree’.⁵ In her book-length study on this topic, Caitríona Ní Dhúill calls metabiography ‘a way of reading biography’⁶ in which the markers and assumptions of biographical practice are, themselves, subject to interpretation. Metabiographical practices bring to the fore biography’s case of ‘medial envy’,⁷ where the recurrent metaphor of the portrait and related pictorialist analogies create a tension in the ‘life as story’ model, which is ‘constantly undone by the spatiality and the visuality of the life to be represented’.⁸ If, following Ní Dhúill, we take this pre-eminence of the visual as the outer limit towards which biography is constantly reaching, we can begin to see all biography as haunted by visual media and, by extension, all screen biography as form(s) of metabiography. I take this broad hypothesis as starting point to look at how the biopic’s gendered optics constitutes a type of performance constantly negotiating myth.

Gender and Representation

Channelling the desire for women-centred narratives in global film cultures, biopics sift through a repertoire of gendered images trailing longer intertextual histories. From a US perspective, the post-studio period has seen the production of women’s screen biographies diversify under the cultural impact of (and the backlash against) the second and third waves of feminism. From *Julia* (Fred Zinneman, 1977) and *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (Michael Apted, 1980) to *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996), *Fur: The Diane Arbus Story* (Steven Shainberg, 2006), *I, Tonya* (Craig Gillespie, 2017) or *Harriet* (Kasi Lemmons, 2019), not only do contemporary women biopics cross over modes of production and genre settings, but they open up to subjects bearing specific markers of class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The contemporary biopic has also splintered into what Jonathan Lupo and Carolyn Anderson called at an early stage (with regards to independent films such as *I Shot Andy Warhol*) the ‘unfamiliar registers of irony and camp’.⁹ Extending Custen’s reflection, Dennis Bingham notes that after 1960 biopics were ‘more probing of their subjects, more interested in differing points of view, and more interested in demystification than were the biopics of earlier decades’.¹⁰ Yet, somewhat paradoxically, his volume *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* envisions women’s biopics as a segregated sub-genre underpinned by a downward narrative endlessly reproduced as melodrama: ‘female biopics dramatize, with proper Aristotelian pity and terror, the process of a woman’s degradation’.¹¹ A recurring narrative feature – the conflation of women’s success with conflict, even tragedy – becomes the telling ideological symptom of women’s trespass into the public realm, a place of non-belonging. Bingham notes that this narrative skews even the genre’s choice of subjects (victims are preferred to survivors, early deaths to long lives, traumatised subjects to empowered ones) and plots, with melodrama lacking the emphasis on triumph over obstacles that define the classical male biopic.¹² Variations on this theme – for example, the persistent association of female creativity with madness and trauma – recur in critical discussions of the numerous biopics of female writers¹³ produced in the 1990s-2000s as part of a transatlantic vogue for mid-budget prestige projects showcasing female stars; related media forms like the bio-documentary have registered the impact of this debate as well. *Amy* (Asif Kapadia, 2015) attracted criticism for collapsing female rebellion and pathology,¹⁴ with the familiar downward narrative serving as through line in the investigation of the negative celebrity discourses that surrounded Amy Winehouse’s fame, which in turn are explored through complex remediations of the archival image. Fragments of

Winehouse’s self-presentation as a performer function as index of authenticity played to the beats of a generic narrative of emotional misfortune, disfunction and loss.

Bingham signals that the genre can potentially break these patterns ‘only by deliberate efforts to rethink them and a definite desire to undo and rework them’.¹⁵ The second part of the volume traces a progression from ‘female’ to ‘feminist’ biopics through attention to counternarratives in films (such as *An Angel at my Table* (Jane Campion, 1990) or *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000)) where heroines resist, evolve and/or escape tragic destinies, or where the narrative itself is deconstructed through ironic distancing. Though a useful provocation in the face of the urgency of the politics of representation, this linear account risks locking the genre into a logic of rule versus exception, tasking the director’s biopic with the responsibility of ‘subverting’ a genre which, arising from dissimilar industrial practices and film traditions, comprises a vast repertoire of intermedial practices and cultural narratives.¹⁶ In this regard, though a focus on the negotiation of domestic spaces in recent female biopics (e.g. *A Quiet Passion*, Terence Davies, 2016), Victoria Pastor-González has shown how an analysis attentive to the visualisation of the private and public spheres through mise-en-scène and performance can yield a much more nuanced critical narrative of the shift from victimisation to empowerment in contemporary female biopics.¹⁷ Other critical responses reclaim women’s biopics as melodrama, drawing parallels with the historiographical bias against both genres. For example, Karen Hollinger compares the position of women’s biopics to the critical neglect originally suffered by the 1930s-1940s ‘woman’s film’,¹⁸ whereas Sonia Amalia Haiduc looks at the cross-cultural auteur biopic’s aesthetic rearticulation of the melodramatic mode in pursuit of a sense of emotional truth (in relation to *Les soeurs Brontë* (André Téchiné, 1979) and *Angel* (François Ozon, 2007)).¹⁹ These approaches further the debates on genre and narrative while looking for spaces of female agency outside a binary understanding of screen emplotment versus factual record. Instead, they direct their attention towards the material aspects of cinematic space and the layered ways in which films remediate what Roland Barthes called ‘biographemes’ or, units of biographical meaning, at the intersection between different cultural regimes of knowledge.²⁰ A closer look at historical re-enactment as part and parcel of the *gendering* of the biopic can illuminate the tensions between narrative and performative dimensions.

In this regard, it is instructive to revisit the controversy around the artist biopic *Artemisia* (Agnès Merlet, 1997), a film now largely forgotten but which brought to the fore, in a very public manner, the troubles attached to women’s historical representation. Scripted by Christine Miller and Agnès Merlet, and directed by the

latter, the film focusses on the Roman Renaissance artist Artemisia Gentileschi (Valentina Cervi), credited as the first woman painter known by name in Western history, her beginnings in her father’s studio and her sexual liaison with the older Agostino Tassi (Miki Manojlovic), a male tutor hired to teach her to draw perspective. The plot culminates in a trial where Artemisia is subjected to torture to extract the truth of her involvement with Tassi, but refuses to accuse him. Though a relatively low-key European co-production shot in French with no international stars, the film’s impact was amplified when Miramax (through its specialty label Miramax Zoë) picked it for release in the US in 1998, where it sparked a great deal of controversy among feminist activists and art historians. A manifesto-like ‘fact sheet’ circulated by Mary D. Garrard and Gloria Steinem at the film’s release sought to counteract what they claimed was the film’s perversion of archival records – its presentation of rape as romance²¹ – and demanded that Miramax withdrew the publicity claim that the film was ‘based on a true story’, which the Weinstein brothers’ company eventually did. Garrard, the author of the first full-length study of Gentileschi in English (*Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, from 1989) also published a detailed account of the controversy, where she vigorously indicts the film as an inversion of the facts that obfuscates the female artist’s creative achievement through a focus on her sex.²²

Despite its largely female creative team, *Artemisia* rekindled far-reaching debates about the sexualisation of the woman artist.²³ Retrospectively, the film’s reception is symptomatic of a broader postfeminist sensibility in the cultural horizon that informs screen biographies and biofiction – a sensibility that builds on the gains of feminist counter-narratives while reverting to pre-feminist themes and forms.²⁴ Scenes like the film’s opening, which shows a young and semi-naked Artemisia clandestinely drawing her own body for practice produce a sense of *visual identification* between the body of the artist and the body of work; it is this closeness that troubles female artists and scholars. Citing Carolee Schneemann, Sarah E. Webb asks ‘Why does the body, specifically the female body, overwhelm the body of work?’²⁵ While Webb cites the reflexive use of physicality and self as *medium* in the autobiographical work of artists such as Francesca Woodman, Ana Mendieta or Frida Kahlo,²⁶ the biopic entangles body and work, creativity and sexuality in moments of re-enactment. This conflation is most visible in a key sequence in *Artemisia* that presents the painter’s conception of one of her most recognisable works, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1610). The scene prominently features a landscape drawing grid, a prop that is both narrative and intertextual, evoking the historical period through its dominant regime of vision. While Artemisia stands behind it, on the side of the seer, she places Tassi as *model* on

the other side of the grid. An over-the-shoulder shot of Cervi/Artemisia allows the spectator to look through the grid *with* her. Then Artemisia crosses over to the other side, stepping into the imagined painting composition in the role of Judith, towering over the recumbent body of Holofernes/Tassi and using her arms to pin him down. This eroticised scenario, in which the female/student and male/tutor roles are reversed for a brief moment, works both narratively as a prelude leading up to the sexual encounter, but also performatively, acknowledging the viewer’s position in the staged scene. The long shot fixes the spectator’s gaze in the original ‘seer’ position while Artemisia now stands on the side of the spectacle as the powerful Judith to Tassi’s helpless Holofernes. The bodies of the two actors remain in full view, blocked in a composition that alludes to the celebrated canvas without mimicking it. This re-enactment is mediated through the presence of the perspectival painting grid in the *mise-en-scène*, creating a second frame that refers to the *outer* cinematic frame. The double-framing of the image in three out of the nine shots that structure this brief scene directs the spectator’s gaze at the *medium* and brings to the fore the historical dimension to Artemisia’s subversive gesture, her adopting a position of control both behind the perspectival grid and *in* the fictional scenario staged by the painting (visibly troubled, Tassi abruptly leaves the performance). This scene encourages reflexive proximity (rather than straight identification with the main character) in the manner discussed by Landsberg.²⁷ Yet, simultaneously, the *mise-en-scène* performs the myth of the female artist: a historical technology of vision becomes literally aligned with cinema as a technology of gender (as per Teresa de Lauretis’s formulation).²⁸

Released at the time in which academic discourse was beginning to take stock of postfeminist media culture in the 1990s,²⁹ and pre-figuring other international prestige biopics that highlighted intermedial elements (writing and the literary imagination in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002); autobiography and painting in *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002)), *Artemisia* is emblematic of contemporary screen media’s desire to capitalise on women’s life stories – and its discontents. The woman artist both projects her creativity and is projected in turn into the film/canvas; as her subjectivity is narratively asserted, *she* becomes the visual object of investigation in ways that foreclose the autonomy of her work, as Garrard laments.³⁰ Susan Felleman notes that, under the guise of subverting the usual subject/object positions (the woman artist taking the ‘master’ as model), the eroticised scenario of creation reverts to a patriarchal myth of origins in which the artwork is ‘the progeny of sexual passion... the child of artist-parents.’³¹ Griselda Pollock, in turn, concludes that this ‘repeated dislocation of woman as eye and woman as seen... undoes the potential covenant between Gentileschi’s historical negotiation of regimes of representation and contemporary

feminist interventions in cultural languages. Merlet’s narrative imagination is not matched by a critical semiotic practice in cinematic terms’.³²

The uneasiness that became manifest in the (contemporary and retrospective) responses by art historians and other feminist scholars to *Artemisia* is symptomatic of the trouble with situating the woman artist’s biopic within shifting notions of (women’s) public history. Such tension, which transpires in the anxieties elicited by the ‘scene of painting’, is nevertheless suggestive of the ways in which the biographical image can function in *metabiographical* ways, *not* tasking the spectator with decoding the meanings of the work of art but positioning them in relation to artistic production as a mode of cinematic *performance*. Ní Dhúill’s theorisation is once more remarkably adaptable to the performativity of biographical cinema; following Hermione Lee’s pointed description of biography as ‘the story of a person *told by someone else*’, Ní Dhúill notes that biography is ‘located in the intersubjective space that it opens up between the subject, biographer, and the reader, a space analogous to the *interfacial* relation a portrait creates between portraitist, sitter, and viewer’.³³

This spatial mapping equally underpins the spectator’s affective engagement with the biographical narrative, in the manner proposed by Landsberg.³⁴ Landsberg’s approach is particularly apposite to the ontology of visual media, as long as we take on board that this experiential encounter is subject to the inconsistencies between regimes of historical knowledge, which are particularly salient in the case of discontinuous, delayed or incomplete narratives of marginal gendered and sexual subjects. The biographical image, no matter how banal (i.e. geared to legibility), retains a residual ambiguity within and beyond cinema’s narrative capabilities which, I argue, reflects what Marcia Landy calls its *palimpsestic* quality. In a study shortly published after Custen’s foundational 1992 volume, Landy revises his definition, arguing that the biopic supplements its potential as public history with its function as *popular* history, revealing ‘not one form of history at work, but “sheets of history”’.³⁵ Landy demonstrates this thesis through a detailed analysis of the Josef von Sternberg/Marlene Dietrich pre-code *The Scarlet Empress* (Josef von Sternberg, 1934), a film where ‘sheets’ of Hollywood folklore, conflicting production histories, and star meanings densely layer the biographical image.³⁶ This analysis, significantly focused on a woman’s biopic critically maligned as public history, suggests the limitations of linear narrative readings of the biopic in contrast with the semiotic density of the biographical image’s performance of history; Landy’s classic case study thus anticipates contemporary readings of newer women’s biopics³⁷ such as *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006) in terms of the layered (baroque) image, not least to ascertain their re-mediation of aesthetic histories, including genre histories.³⁸

Queering Performance

When performance is re-centred as an event in the film’s story world, it can articulate a different relationship between the viewer and the biographical image, ‘unlocking’ metabiographical elements and potentially *queering* women’s histories. Noting that the most recurrent professions in women’s film biographies of the classic studio era are entertainer, paramour and royalty, Custen concludes: ‘in fact, if the three most popular categories for women are combined, it is apparent that “performer” is a metaphor for the image in which women have been constructed’.³⁹ Post-classical iterations of these figures engage in metabiographical explorations of this metaphor. Films such as *Florence Foster Jenkins* (Stephen Frears, 2016), *The Favourite* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2018) and *Wild Nights with Emily* (Madeleine Olnek, 2018) build on familiar biopic ‘types’ (the queen; the literary writer; the singer) but play on varying registers of performance, such as the theatrical and the anachronistic, which bring the female body centre frame but also trouble gender readings.

In *The Favourite*, Queen Anne’s (Olivia Colman) decaying, unruly body, reprises an alternative lineage of queer royal bodies – we may think of Quentin Crisp as Queen Elizabeth I in *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992). In *Florence Foster Jenkins*, Meryl Streep gives a controlled comic performance in the titular role: a 1930s New York society hostess and amateur soprano who, in denial of her ostensive lack of vocal ability, pursues singing with zealous commitment. Streep’s take on Foster Jenkins is unremittingly camp, but her campness is framed historically, as emanating from the patterns of gender and taste attributed to her class. Her musical scenes in particular revel in ‘failed seriousness’⁴⁰ (through her excessively ornamental visual self-presentation and out-of-tune coloratura) to such a bold extent that her performance makes success and failure undistinguishable, parodying biopic tropes such as the unveiling of the singer’s ‘talent’, or the momentous opening night. Both films feature triangulated sexual relations: Queen Anne is tended by two women who, in fierce competition with each other, double as her lovers, whereas Florence, a long-term syphilis sufferer, develops a sexless emotional dependency on both her doting but unfaithful husband, and her accompanying pianist (who is coded as gay). These elements accrue meaning through performances that turn socially privileged (white, wealthy and Western) historical subjects into queer bodies. Following Jack Halberstam, we could say that these are stylised performances of *queer failure*⁴¹ against the grain of the narratives of agency and achievement valued by the biopic.

The characters’ disabled bodies masquerade failing femininities (failure to reproduce and to rule, in the case of Queen Anne, and failure to reproduce and to

create art, in the case of Florence) through sheer emotional excess, whether in the form of sex and food ingestion in one case, or love for music in the other. Biopic performance here posits an aesthetic mode of gender deviance that bends the generic themes of political power and courtly intrigue in the royal biopic, and success through communion with an audience in the musical biopic. Taking the rules of the latter to an extreme but logical conclusion, *Florence Foster Jenkins* has the titular protagonist’s triumphal (or, catastrophic) last concert at Carnegie Hall hyperbolically culminate on her death (by a bad review).

Whereas *The Favourite* and *Florence Foster Jenkins* zero in on life stories that offer the required exceptionality in their subjects’ distinctive lack of fit with biopic expectations (their spectacular failure to be or become ‘great’), the Emily Dickinson biopic *Wild Nights with Emily* knowingly tackles the challenge of ‘doing’ the poet anew for each generation of readers, as Marianne Noble points out.⁴² Television comedy actor Molly Shannon plays Dickinson without subtext: in the opening, pre-title scene Emily and her sister-in-law, Susan (Susan Ziegler) hold hands and kiss sisterly, then passionately, and then they roll on the floor. The two women’s shared affection, in both their salad days and mature years plays out centre frame, and it is the blindness to their attachment exhibited by Emily’s brother Austin, his mistress Mabel and other adult members of the household which, in a neatly queer reversal of historical readings, becomes the stuff of comedy. The film satirizes Mabel Loomis Todd (Amy Seimetz), first editor of Dickinson’s poetry and, as pointedly presented in the film, the first hand to distort the historical record with regards to Dickinson’s creativity and sexuality. Seimetz delivers Mabel’s self-aggrandising perspective in a voiceover brimming with pomposity. Each of her claims and anecdotes about Dickinson (‘the myth’; ‘the recluse poet’; the ‘special poet who wrote her words in secret and didn’t show them to a soul’) is thickly laid out in the soundtrack, and visually re-enacted in comedic scenes that pull the rug from under the feet of Mabel’s unreliable narration. As the mature Dickinson, Shannon gives a performance punctuated by reaction comedy shots, timed to register her disbelief, and occasionally her anger and despair through rolling eyes, deadpan stares and askew judgemental glances.

Wild Nights With Emily diligently puts in practice the notion, as pointed out by Ní Dhuíll, that to disprove an incident from the subject’s life that has become a ‘hardened discursive trace’ through cultural iteration, the contested biographeme must be ‘repeated in order to be discredited’.⁴³ Olnek’s film takes the route of parodic repetition; rather than a narration with a sense of progression, the film builds as a cumulative portrait in an explicitly revisionist vein. In so doing, *Wild Nights With Emily* produces an embodied ‘Emily Dickinson’ that explicitly addresses the affective

demands of queer and feminist publics (cited by Noble as one of the key reasons for the reignited interest in Dickinson in the twenty-first century).⁴⁴ At the same time, the film carefully separates the artist from the work’s material existence through citation of the poems, both orally and via written titles on the screen, the visualisation of the Dickinson Amherst College archives in the closing titles and the acknowledgement of the scholarship (by Martha Nell Smith) that led to the technological reconstruction of Dickinson’s original letters. These acts of mediation include the closing shot, a split-screen take (a visual device associated with film comedy) where Susan is shown tending to Emily’s dead body on the left-hand side of the screen, whilst Mabel’s fastidiously erases Susan’s name from Emily’s letters on the right-hand side of the screen. Mabel’s gesture is amplified in the soundtrack, which isolates the sound of the eraser rubbing against paper lasting well beyond the cut to the final intertitles. *Wild Nights With Emily* engages in the production of historical knowledge through self-reflexive performance at the level of form *and* narrative. Dismantling the Dickinson myths and recasting the poet’s life into unexpected affective registers (comedy), Olnek experiments with the possibility of producing a woman’s biopic about queer identities which is also a *queer biopic*.

***Colette* and the Contradictions of the Queer (Postfeminist) Biopic**

The queering of women’s histories is also at work textually rather than subtextually in another 2018 film, *Colette*. *Colette* focuses on the early years of Belle Époque writer and celebrity Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette (Keira Knightley), during her marriage of choice to literary impresario Henry Gauthier-Villars, pen-named ‘Willy’ (Dominic West). Colette is encouraged by Willy to ghost-write a series of novels on ‘Claudine’, an invented character drawing on her youth memories of growing up in Burgundy, and her exodus to Paris. The *Claudine* books (a sort of autofiction) are published under the name of Willy and met with unprecedented success, which in turn makes Willy exploit Colette’s writing abilities to keep the ‘Claudine business’ going. As their (open) marriage starts to founder, Colette’s growing aspirations to sexual and economic emancipation are enabled by her encounter with cross-dressing aristocrat Mathilde de Morny, the Marquise de Belbeuf, known as Missy (Denise Gough), with whom Colette initiates a more egalitarian relationship, and starts learning pantomime. Colette finally reclaims the authorship of the novels from a bankrupt Willy and takes to the stage, reinventing herself as a touring performer.

Colette benefitted from an advantageous launching pad at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, where queer film historian and critic B. Ruby Rich described it as ‘a guilty

pleasure far from the pressures of the moment... downright delicious, sexy, full of verve and libido, and even believable'.⁴⁵ The promotion accompanying the international release carefully targeted different audiences and taste groups. The film was presented as a labour of love by director Wash Westmoreland, who conceived the project with his real-life partner and co-director Richard Glatzer but developed the script with Rebecca Lenkiewicz after Glatzer passed away from illness. The LGBT identities and diversity allegiances of the creative team were firmly on the forefront of the publicity surrounding the release, vindicating the portrayal of the female artist as a suppressed piece of queer history,⁴⁶ stressing her success rather than the more sombre elements of the story, and extending its diversity-positive message to pre-production conditions.⁴⁷ At the same time, this mid-budget US/UK co-production rewrites Colette’s story through biographemes of gender constraints and the emergence of a contemporary feminine subjectivity, in tune with the mid-Atlantic idiom of the postfeminist biopic.⁴⁸ The release of *Colette* in the wake of the cultural break provoked by the #MeToo movement all but gave it additional timeliness,⁴⁹ since the film re-assembles themes of authenticity and creativity through a historical plot of what today may be read as male appropriation of a woman’s artistic production. Rather than projecting the image of the work as an extension of the life of the artist (Claudine *as* Colette), intertextual motifs highlight the construction of a modern iteration of femininity and its commodification by a nascent (patriarchal) media industry. A montage sequence presents Knightley/Colette posing, dressed up in Claudine’s schoolgirl garb and replicating actress Polaire’s (Aiysha Hart) impersonation of the character, alongside Willy. This re-enactment of Colette’s historical self-presentation in photographs, advertisement posters, mass-produced cards and other publicity materials is a nod to her documented persona as an early twentieth-century media celebrity.⁵⁰ In this sequence, the shots of the photographic session are intercut with other dynamic inserts of numerous ‘Claudine’ ancillary products (not only the books, but candies, hand fans, toiletries, lingerie and hair styles) being avidly consumed by anonymous ‘followers’. Through the transparent language of the classic montage, the sequence performs the horizontal spreading of a consumer industry that feeds on the iconographic merging of the Claudine and Colette personas, rendering this history comparable to the processes of contemporary celebrity-formation. Yet this sequence, which frames Colette as goods fit for consumption in front of the photographic camera, but not as an initiator of the process of production, refrains from reading Colette’s public visibility as a ‘true’ manifestation of her agency. Instead, Colette’s posing is presented as an extension of Willy’s capitalist exploitation of Colette’s anonymous creative labour, which insidiously extends to the couple’s

intimacy: in a later scene, Willy has Colette disguise herself as Claudine as foreplay to sexual intercourse, before he replaces his wife with a younger and more docile version of the character, played by solicitous live-in lover Meg (Shannon Tarbet).

If the fusing of ‘work’ and ‘life’ has become a staple in the postmodern biopic (for example, in *Becoming Jane*, Julian Jarrold, 2007 the rendering of Jane Austen’s early years adopts the visual style of the millennial film adaptations of her novels), in *Colette* the construction of the woman writer’s identity through the motif of the theatrical *performance* takes the semiotic place of the artistic work. In the first of two scenes set in a theatrical space, Colette watches Polaire’s debut on stage in the role of Claudine. Not only is the stage adaptation designed to monetise the character, but Willy also insists on Colette to cut her hair into a girl’s short bob as a publicity gimmick, in order to parade Colette as the double of Polaire (‘the Claudine twins’, he boasts). This erotic triangulation of the two female bodies controlled by the literary impresario is used by the film to distance Colette from her creation: first, Colette visually encounters Polaire as Claudine (her ‘other’ self) on stage: this act of watching at a remove does not prompt identification, but estrangement. In the next scene, the extravagant post-opening night party, Colette remains a bemused observer of her husband’s excesses and of society’s infatuation with her literary creature. Her removed attitude will lead to her eventual revolt against the exploitation of her creativity by Willy. When Willy asks her to sit on his lap alongside Polaire for a publicity photograph, the self-effacing Colette is visibly resistant. Willy, in contrast, underlines his exhibitionist gesture with a theatrical flourish: ‘Behold the Claudine Trinity! The father, the mother and the daughter!’ The patriarchal myth of origins – the alleged birth of the work of art through the sexual passion of the artist ‘parents’, as noted by Felleman in relation to *Artemisia*⁵¹ – is here dissembled and reassembled as a camp display of voracious masculinity. The perversity of this ‘family photo’ underscores the cannibalisation of women’s creativity by the lusty male, captured with relish by the capitalist and bodily excess of West’s fulsome performance as Willy, versus Knightley’s low-key playing of the scene.

The disavowal of Colette’s active participation in the stunts orchestrated by Willy, and the silence around her potentially owning up to her eroticised image⁵² is indicative of the biopic’s negotiation of various layers of discourse, all of which underpin the body of the actor as well as the body of the film as a sensual re-enactment of history. The focus of the film’s third act falls on Colette’s training as a dancer, and her performance in a musical pantomime on the stage of the Moulin Rouge.⁵³ Her turn to acting is as significant as her prior reluctance to ‘perform’ for Willy. In this second scene set in a theatrical space, Colette performs a dance disguised as a Sphinx-like

figure in the act *Le rêve d’Egypte*, alongside her lover Missy, in the guise of a masculine explorer. This sequence uses reflexive pastiche of the fin-de-siècle vogue for orientalist aesthetics (and its reproduction in early cinema) as a literal stage on which to present an ‘empowered’ (in contemporary terms) Colette. The writer swaps the written word (hijacked by her husband) for theatrical performance to take control of her body and her sexuality.⁵⁴ This theatrical moment serves a spectacular coming out gesture, with a centre-stage kiss between the two women in front of an outraged male audience.

Although this gesture is further cemented by a sex scene between Colette and Missy (presenting intimacy between the two lovers as tender and committed, as opposed to Colette’s prior sexual liaison with an American heiress with whom Willy is also having an affair, unbeknownst to Colette) these are nevertheless fleeting moments of calculated risk in the film’s juggling with its double (feminist and queer) agenda. Colette and Missy’s attachment is paradoxically riddled with the pitfalls of both visibility *and* invisibility. While the film avoids fetishizing lesbian sex as a mark of identity and grants Colette and Missy a ‘happy ending’ (omitting the transient nature of their relationship and Colette’s second marriage to Henry de Jouvenel at the end of her period with the touring theatrical company), Colette’s sexual fluidity is both celebrated and contained, if not erased, as a mere step in the road to emancipation. The reviewers sensed this; the overall positive review in *Sight and Sound* concludes that the film ‘wants to have it both ways’, ‘skirting the tasteful boundaries of heritage drama’ while remaining ‘demure’ and ‘a little staid’ in its approach to sexuality;⁵⁵ whereas the reviewer in *Film Comment* laments that ‘the sex scenes are bloodless, all ringlets and collarbones, which is especially disappointing from director Wash Westmoreland, who got his start in gay porn.’⁵⁶ Devoid of the playful rudeness of *The Favourite*, also released in late 2018, or the aesthetic reflectiveness of (the fictional) *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019) a year later, *Colette* soon started to look old-fashioned and ‘safe’ in comparison.

The star casting of British actor Keira Knightley in this US-led production reinforces the film’s lack of specificity. Without the constraints of mimicry or the French language, the star fit between character and actor dominates her incarnation of the young Colette. In other words, Knightley is not required to imitate Colette’s gestures or speech; rather, the character is made to resemble Knightley. Knightley’s star persona is narrowly associated with the so-called British heritage film (after roles in *Pride and Prejudice* (Joe Wright, 2005); *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007); *The Duchess* (Saul Dibb, 2008), or *Anna Karenina* (Joe Wright, 2012)), but these past performances have played an active part in giving the genre a contemporary feel. Knightley’s slender and angular physique, her characteristic flat tones and rapid vocal delivery, and her non-

classical diction⁵⁷ (features that reappear in her performance as Colette) constitute anachronisms naturalised by Knightley’s star persona. *Colette* draws on Knightley’s sculpted facial features and large eyes in close-up to suggest pensiveness and introspection, which stress the character’s evolving sense of self. At the same time, Knightley’s ability to adapt to bodily images of both hyper-femininity and androgyny⁵⁸ is capitalised on in a role where the thirty-two-year-old actor (at the time of production) has to play a country teen tomboy, compose a sophisticated socialite, and assertively cross-dress at different moments of the film. Enabled by her transformative encounter with Missy, in the third act the visual point of interest switches from Knightley’s face to her slim, androgynous body, as she trains in dancing and pantomime and exercises in the company of Missy as a prelude to sex. Her new identity not only presupposes bodily liberation but a refashioning of self, free from association with Willy’s spurious ‘paternity’. The part allows the actor to retrieve the athleticism of her breakthrough role in *Bend it like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002), a film that, as Katharina Lindner has aptly demonstrated, renders lesbian desires visible by signalling the alignment of women looking at each other, excluding a potential male love interest.⁵⁹ Knightley’s turn as Colette fulfils the potential for queer identifications hinted at by her role as a football player in the earlier rom-com. In *Colette*, the coming-of-age story is rendered as coming out. The part allows Knightley to phase out her ‘girl’ image, while at the same time naturalising the more disruptive queer aspects of Colette’s image as part of her star persona. The film’s association of Colette’s becoming a performer with leaving Willy’s publicity machine behind and achieving independence (also as a writer) feeds into Knightley’s own public journey from ‘celebrity’ to serious ‘actor’.⁶⁰ Thus, Missy’s words to Colette, ‘you’ve done something important – you’ve created a type. You’ve given voice to all those girls between girlhood and adulthood’ not only cement the biopic effect (asserting the historical durability of the subject) but also rewrite the ephemeral aspects of Colette’s/Knightley’s celebrity into (politically) meaningful stardom.

Colette can be seen in continuity with what Ben Walters called, in 2014, the *positive* ‘backward’ turn in LGBT cinema to refer to the success of period films with gay themes, ‘now entrenched as mainstream producers’ preferred mode for presenting gay stories’.⁶¹ Nevertheless, reclaiming author Colette as part of the diachronic tracing of lesbian histories via the postfeminist biopic also means fixing these lesbian histories into categories of identity and desire immediately readable to mainstream culture, as the film’s critical reception suggests. While expanding the frame of historical representability, queer biopics stumble over the very visibility of queer subjects in the terms prescribed by straight cinema. And yet, the overidentification between the

artist’s body and their body of work, as well as women’s simultaneous visibility and invisibility in the public sphere may be counteracted by the queer biopic’s potential to foster spaces for self-reflexive encounters with history, in the terms explored by Landsberg. To illustrate this point, I would like to go back to the scene of the opening night of *Claudine à l’école* – the stage play. Colette is sitting in her theatre box, next to Willy; her eyes are fixed on the stage. Polaire walks onto the stage and starts to recite the famous opening lines: ‘My name is Claudine. I live in Montigny. I was born there in 1884. I shall probably *not* die there’. A slow pan closes in on Colette’s face, and the camera captures her facial features tensing with mild anxiety. Her identification with her imagined literary creature is momentarily troubled by this visual encounter with the sexually ambiguous girl-woman played by Polaire, a ‘type’ poised between memories of girlhood, assertive New Woman, and incestuous male fantasy – an image of *herself*. In terms of the film’s structure, this is also the turning point in which creator and creature will start to part ways. The encounter is ambiguous: it produces a *frisson*. We could call it a momentary ‘rubbing’ with the historical real in which Colette (the archetypical woman artist), looks at her experiences being appropriated (turned into myth) at the hands of a powerful culture industry. At this moment Colette is caught between her past and her future. This Janus-faced motif is also conventionally signalled in a conversation between Willy and Colette about Missy, in which Willy, confused about their relationship, ponders that ‘there’s no word for Missy’. While the scene articulates a heteronormative worldview, it also connects past and future by pointing at the very limitations of historical re-enactment to produce a queer imaginary. If, as Saunders notes, metabiographies ‘do not only take myths apart, they also show how they are put together’⁶² the biopic may work at its best when dramatizing such myths, and projecting women’s lives into the future rather than pinning them to the past.

The women artist biopics that have focused my discussion (particularly *Artemisia* and *Colette*) rebuke the patriarchal control of the female body but equivocally intertwine the labour of artistic production and the production of self. The same-sex themes of Colette are weaved into the film’s liberal investment in a narrative of sexual growth, which characterises the postfeminist biopic. While eschewing the ‘downward narrative’ in a queer-positive way, the travails of Colette and the fate of her creation Claudine could well be considered an allegory of the precarious place that women’s life stories hold in the patriarchal spaces for production and consumption of screen biography. Colette’s lesbian identity may be lost at the point of reclaiming: reinforced by the familiar casting of Knightley, the biopic makes it visible only as it projects it into a ‘universal’ trajectory of feminine emancipation. However, the film’s active

mobilisation of intermedial devices (photography, theatre, dance) also opens up the potential of the biographical image as performance, making *Colette* a biopic equally concerned with the retrieval of women’s histories as with the material production of contemporary sexual identities.

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Notes

¹ Custen, George F. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992 (1-31). For an early international account of this phenomenon see Ian Christie, ‘A Life on Film.’ In: Peter France and William St Clair (eds.), *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 (283–301).

² Custen, George F. *Bio/Pics*, 1992 (102).

³ Landsberg, Alison. *Engaging the Past. Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015 (3-11).

⁴ Saunders, Edward, ‘Defining Metabiography in Historical Perspective: Between Biomyths and Documentary.’ *Biography* 38.3 (2015): 325-42, 330-332, 339.

⁵ Saunders, Edward, ‘Defining Metabiography in Historical Perspective’, 331.

⁶ Ní Dhúill, Caitriona, *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020 (4).

⁷ Idem (8).

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Lupo, Jonathan and Carolyn Anderson, ‘Off-Hollywood Lives. Irony and Its Discontents in the Contemporary Biopic.’ *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36.2 (2008): 102-11, 102.

¹⁰ Bingham, Dennis, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010 (240).

¹¹ Idem (220).

¹² Idem (217-218).

¹³ See Dolan, Josie, Suzy Gordon, and Estella Tincknell, ‘The “Postfeminist” Biopic: Re-telling the Past in *The Hours*, *Sylvia* and *Iris*.’ Ed. Rachel Carroll. *Adaptations in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*. London and New York: Continuum, 2009. 174-84; Shahar, Hila, *Screening the Author. The Literary Biopic*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019 (99-128).

¹⁴ See critiques by film and television biography scholars Hannah Andrews, ‘From Unwilling Celebrity to Authored Icon: Reading *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015)’ *Celebrity Studies* 8.2 (2017): 351-4; and Bronwyn Polaschek, ‘The Dissonant Personas of a Female Celebrity: *Amy* and the Public Self of Amy Winehouse.’ *Celebrity Studies* 9.1 (2018): 17-33.

¹⁵ Bingham, Dennis, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* (222).

¹⁶ For further elaboration of this argument, see Vidal, Belén, ‘Introduction: The Biopic in Critical Contexts.’ Eds. Tom Brown and Belén Vidal. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture. New York and London: Routledge*, 2014, 1-32.

¹⁷ Pastor González, Victoria. ‘Resist, Redefine, Appropriate: Negotiating the Domestic Space in Contemporary Female Biopics.’ Eds. Stefano Baschiera, and Miriam de Rosa. *Film and Domestic Space: Architectures, Representations, Dispositif*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 56-71.

¹⁸ Hollinger, Karen, *Feminist Film Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2012 (162).

¹⁹ Haiduc, Sonia Amalia, ‘Biopics and the Melodramatic Mode’ Eds. Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek. *A Companion to the Biopic*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020. 23-44.

²⁰ I am referring to Ní Dhúill’s citation of Roland Barthes’s *Sade Fourier Loyola* (1989) in her claim that metabiographical studies show the mediation of biographemes into a cumulative biographical discourse that evolves across time. Ní Dhúill, Caitríona, *Metabiography* (22-23).

²¹ The fact sheet cites archival evidence of the trial, in which Gentileschi vocally accused her tutor of rape, contrary to the representation of the trial in the film. The content of the original flyer by Garrard and Steinem has been archived on the Humanities and Social Sciences Online blog as ‘Historical Inaccuracies in Artemisia’, available at <https://networks.h-net.org/node/24029/pages/31480/historical-inaccuracies-artemisia>.

²² Garrard, Mary D. ‘Artemisia’s Trial by Cinema’ originally appeared in *Art in America* in 1998. It has been reprinted in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, edited by Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 21-9 (22-24).

²³ Miramax’s distribution of international historical films not developed by the company (such as *Artemisia* or *The Piano*, Jane Campion 1993) tended to sensationalise their content in their aggressive promotion of international fare in the US market. The troubled production history of another female biopic developed by a female producer-director team, *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002) on account of Harvey Weinstein’s harassment of star and producer Salma Hayek and his attempt to edit the film’s content adds another layer of historical contingency that has become legible in a post-#MeToo moment, with long-term implications for the analysis of the films of this period, and for new women’s biopics to come. See Salma Hayek’s op-ed ‘Harvey Weinstein Is My Monster Too’, *The New York Times*, 12 December 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/13/opinion/contributors/salma-hayek-harvey-weinstein.html>

²⁴ For an extended theoretical discussion of the postfeminist turn in the woman artist’s biopic see Polaschek, Bronwyn, *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (9-59). On biographical fictions, see Julia Novak, ‘From Feminist to Postfeminist. Contemporary biofictions by and about women artists’, *Angelaki*, 22.1 (2017), 223-230. I have examined these debates in *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012 (140-146).

²⁵ Webb, Sarah E. ‘Epilogue: Mark Making, Writing, and Erasure’ Eds. Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb. *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 238-50 (243).

²⁶ Idem (241-243).

²⁷ Landsberg, Alison. *Engaging the Past*, 2015 (33).

²⁸ De Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. 1-30. See my extended analysis of the film in *Figuring the Past* (146-153).

²⁹ For a retrospective summary, see Gill, Rosalind, ‘The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On.’ *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20:6 (2017): 606-26.

³⁰ Garrard, ‘Artemisia’s Trial by Cinema’, 27.

³¹ Felleman, *Art in the Cinematic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006 (140).

³² Pollock, Griselda, ‘Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem.’ Ed. Mieke Bal *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 169–206 (200).

³³ Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography* (13).

³⁴ Landsberg, Alison. *Engaging the Past* (3-11).

³⁵ Landy, Marcia, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 (153).

³⁶ *Idem* (151-190).

³⁷ Polaschek’s return to Landy’s approach in her study of the postfeminist biopic is a significant move in this regard. Polaschek, Bronwyn, *The Postfeminist Biopic* (49-51).

³⁸ See Saige Walton in relation to baroque aesthetics (*Cinema’s Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016) and Mary Harrod on *Marie Antoinette* as an example of heightened genre related to women filmmakers’ production in *Heightened Genre and Women’s Filmmaking in Hollywood. The Rise of the Cine-fille*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021 (210-221).

³⁹ Custen, George F., *Bio/Pics* (103).

⁴⁰ Sontag, Susan. ‘Notes on “Camp”’. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966. 275-292 (283).

⁴¹ Halberstam, Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011 (87-121). Following Heather Love, Halberstam elaborates on the psychoanalytic notion of queer bodies as ‘bearers of the failure of all desire... the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfilment, and success(ion) (94).

⁴² Noble, Marianne, ‘Emily Dickinson in the Twenty-First Century’, *American Literature*, 93.2 (2021), 283-305 (283).

⁴³ I am paraphrasing Ní Dhúill, who in this section elaborates on concepts by William Epstein and Roland Barthes, *Metabiography* (177-178).

⁴⁴ Noble, Marianne, ‘Emily Dickinson in the Twenty-First Century’, 285.

⁴⁵ B. Ruby Rich, ‘The Scales of Justice: Sundance 2018’, *Film Quarterly* 71.4 (2018): 71-9 (78).

⁴⁶ Nickolai, Nate. ‘Colette Director Says History’s Queer People Have “Relevance”: “This Is Their Story”’. *Variety* 15 Sep. 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/scene/news/colette-director-wash-westmoreland-queer-people-1202943151/>.

⁴⁷ Although the two leads are straight actors, Keira Knightley was presented as an LGBTQ ally. In interviews, Westmoreland notes the sexuality-blind casting of trans actors Rebecca Root and Jake Graf in supporting cis roles and gay actor Fiona Shaw as Sido, Colette’s progressive mother. Westmoreland also notes the colour-blind casting of black actor Johnny K Palmer as Paul Héon and British-Asian actor Aiysha Hart in the white role of Polaire. Corner, Lewis, ‘Colette Director Wash Westmoreland on the Invisible Revolution’ in his Queer Period Drama.’ *Gay Times*. No date <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/colette-wash-westmoreland-interview/>.

⁴⁸ *Colette* was co-produced by US company Killer Films, and UK company Number 9 Films and largely shot in locations in Hungary and Oxford passing for French settings, a common practice since the 1990s. The film was the 2nd English-language biopic to tackle the figure of Colette after the forgotten Euro-putting *Becoming Colette* (Danny Huston 1991), which does not feature the character of Missy and shows Colette in a three-side affair with Polaire and Willy, staging a sexual fantasy that the later film *Colette* pointedly rejects. For a comparison the two films and the French miniseries directed by Nadine Trintignant (*Colette, une femme libre*, 2004), see Brangé, Mireille. ‘Devenir Colette.’ *lendemains* 174-175 (2019): 90-101.

⁴⁹ According to the review in *The Hollywood Reporter*, in an opportunistic move the press kit for the film included the hashtag #COLETTE TOO. See THR Staff. ‘Colette: Film Review | Sundance 2018’ *The Hollywood Reporter*, 20 Jan. 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/colette-review-1076450/>. Knightley engaged with the topic in the press at the time of the film’s release; See Pulver, Andrew, ‘Keira Knightley Criticises Rape Culture in Modern Cinema’ *The Guardian* 17 Jan. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/17/keira-knightley-female-characters-rape-metoo-hollywood>.

⁵⁰ Schuh, Julien, ‘Colette et son double. La construction d’une image de presse’ *lendemains* 174-175 (2019): 80-9 (84).

⁵¹ Felleman, Susan. *Art in the Cinematic Imagination* (140).

⁵² Schuh has noted Colette’s active cultivation of her media image for advertising other consumer products (whether Perrier sparkling water or Philips home appliances), as well as her use of journalistic writing to draw attention to her persona as much as the event being reported. Schuh, Julien. ‘Colette et son double. La construction d’une image de presse.’, 86-87.

⁵³ In the film, the preferred focus on the writer’s touring with a theatre company between 1906 and 1912 (an experience that inspired her novel *La vagabonde*, 1910) significantly omits the publication of her first book under her own name, *Dialogues de bêtes*, 1904.

⁵⁴ Zurlo-Truche, Corentin. ‘Colette et le théâtre’ *lendemains* 174-175 (2019): 38-47 (39).

⁵⁵ Wheatley, Catherine, ‘Colette’, *Sight and Sound* 29.1-2 (2019), 88-89 (89).

⁵⁶ Kaminisky, Lauren, ‘Short Take. Colette’, *Film Comment*, September-October 2018: 70.

⁵⁷ Geraghty, Christine, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008 (38).

⁵⁸ Gilligan, Sarah. ‘Heaving Cleavages and Fantastic Frock Coats: Gender Fluidity, Celebrity and Tactile Transmediality in Contemporary Costume Cinema.’ *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 1.1 (2012): 7–38 (18).

⁵⁹ Lindner, Katharina, ‘“There is a Reason Why Sporty Spice is the Only One of Them Without a Fella...”: The “Lesbian Potential” of *Bend it Like Beckham*.’ *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9.2 (2011): 204-23.

⁶⁰ Once described as ‘possibly the epitome of the celebrity-who-acts, the cover girl, of fashion magazines who also happens to play leading roles on the screen’, Pamela Church Gibson (2011), cited in Gilligan, Sarah, ‘Heaving Cleavages and Fantastic Frock Coats’, 18.

⁶¹ Walters, Ben, ‘Out of the past. Gay cinema and nostalgia’, *The Guardian*, 3 July 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jul/03/out-of-past-gay-cinema-nostalgia-lgbt>.

⁶² Saunders, Edward, ‘Defining Metabiography in Historical Perspective’ (339).