BEYOND THE MYTH:
Screenwriting Approaches to Biographical Films

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Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2022

ABSTRACT

This PhD submission comprises an original screenplay on the relationship between African American activist Paul Robeson and the mining community of south Wales titled ***Robeson: They Can't Stop Us Singing***, and the accompanying exegesis. The aim is to explore, by academic study (gnosis) and creative practice (praxis), the previously overlooked field of writing biographical films, or *biopics*, and to acknowledge the role of the screenwriter in telling a person's life story on film. The script is the experiment; the exegesis is the analysis and methodology.

The role of the screenwriter is underrepresented across cinema studies, but no more so than in the discussion of biopics. My exegesis begins by exploring what academic and popular writing already exists on English-language biopics, highlighting that amidst *auteurist* approaches prevalent in cinema studies, little credit has been afforded to screenwriters. I seek to address this by examining how screenwriters have responded to historiographical and socio-political contexts while balancing the needs of the audience with factual integrity (or sometimes not), before using the case studies of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Lindbergh to explore how American hero figures have been represented on screen. How does a script written on Lincoln in 1939, for example, differ in terms of tone and political philosophy to one delivered in the 21st century?

Using historical approaches, the exegesis then examines the life of Paul Robeson and the Welsh miners he knew, to observe the meticulous choices required by the screenwriter researching and writing a biopic script. Using primary sources (interviews with living dramatic writers, including the BAFTA-nominated screenwriter of the biopic, *Good Vibrations*) and secondary sources (screenplays, films, audio, interviews, other academic writing), I question where and when to begin and end a biographical story, which parts of a

person's life to include or jettison, how to make a historical figure's events pertinent to a contemporary audience, and how to utilise fictionalised elements in a drama while adhering to a central truth.

My own screenplay on Robeson and Wales is the embodiment of this research. The script demonstrates the myriad artistic decisions that need to be made to present the qualities and flaws of the historical figure. It shows why fictionalised moments and composite characters contribute to an understanding of a real person's motives and feelings in a way documentary and historical writing cannot. And it stands as a record of the screenwriter's previously overlooked contribution to creating biographical films.

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: Nicholas Davies (candidate)

Date: 26/07/2022

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated.
Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed: Nicholas Davies (candidate)

Date: 26/07/2022

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed: Nicholas Davies(candidate)

Date: 26/07/2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

More than anyone, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor in the Department of English and Creative Writing, Prof. D.J. Britton, for his guidance and unflinching support throughout the past few years.

Thanks also to Dr Alan Bilton and my fellow PhD candidates for making this process of research and writing much more enjoyable and far less solitary than I presumed. Thanks to Glenn Patterson for agreeing to be interviewed and for his kind words and advice on my screenplay and exegesis.

Lastly, thanks to my family – Caitlin, Gruff, Menna, Betsan and Bowen. Diolch o'r galon.

A NOTE FROM THE PhD CANDIDATE

This exegesis is submitted to complement my screenplay, *Robeson: They Can't Stop Us Singing*. My script is for a biographical film about the singer, actor and activist, Paul Robeson, and the unlikely friendship he formed with coal miners from south Wales – a friendship that contributed to a mutual political awakening for the figures involved.

My screenplay is for a biographical film – a *biopic* – and so my exegesis seeks to explore this little-researched genre of cinema, specifically the craft of writing such a story in a way that is truthful but also original and artistically satisfying.

This exegesis will examine the academic writing that already exists on English-language biopics and the screenwriter's role (though, as you will read, such material is rare) as well as contemporary reviews and reflections on these films from when they were released. I intend to explore how American heroes like Robeson have been represented on screen in the past, with a contextual analysis and comparison of three different biopics about a single historical figure in Abraham Lincoln. What can the writers' and filmmakers' interpretations of the same subject reveal about how to write a successful biopic?

This exegesis will finish with a detailed explanation of how I have utilised my research of previous biopics and screenwriters' approaches to them, informed in part by interviews with other writers, in order to tell what I hope will be a relevant story about Paul Robeson and his connections to the working men and women of Wales.

Nicholas Davies, May 2022.

1. SCREENWRITING A BIOPIC: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Between 2010 and 2020, five of the Best Picture winners at the Oscars were biographical films: stories based on the lives of real historical figures.[1] Eight of the screenwriting Academy Awards in the same period – across both Original and Adapted Screenplay categories – went to biopics. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), based on the life of Queen lead singer Freddie Mercury, in 2019 became the first biopic to reach the one-billion-dollar figure at the box office.[2]

This recent renaissance in exploring the true events in a person's life through film – from the smoke-filled mahogany chambers in which the future of the world rests in the hands of one man in *Darkest Hour* (2017) to the sprawling self-styled 'true epic musical fantasy' of *Rocketman* (2019) – contrasts startlingly with the biopic's fate in the late-1950s, when the form was said to be 'entering a post-studio era of virtual extinction' (Custen, 1992: 211).

While the great men and women of history were liberally presented on screen throughout the Hollywood studio era of the 1920s to 1950s – the ideal star vehicles for each producing house's most bankable actors – biopics eventually slipped out of fashion. The turn of the millennium heralded a new wave of larger-budget, often reconstructed biographical films in American cinema – what Bingham called 'the neoclassical biopic revival of the 2000s, but with a warts-and-all (…) investigatory tinge' (2010: Kindle location 108). The well-crafted conventionality of *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) and *The Aviator* (2004) was balanced by the fourth-wall-breaking *Man on the Moon* (1999) about comic performer Andy Kaufman, and the subversion of Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007) in which six actors play

[1] *Moonlight* (2016) is included on this list, being based on a semi-autobiographical play.
[2] IMDB Bohemian Rhapsody - Cast | IMDbPro https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt1727824/boxoffice Worldwide box office receipts of $1,088,018,915, as of 14th April 2019. Accessed June 2020.

Bob Dylan, a film ‘consciously crafted to provide an answer to biopics that present a simplified compilation of a life’s highlights and lowlights’ (Schlotterbeck in Brown & Vidal, 2014: 229).

The past dozen years have also seen a surge in British-made biopics with *The King’s Speech* (2010) leading *The Theory of Everything, The Imitation Game* (both 2014) and *A United Kingdom* (2016) in reflecting the achievements of characters who find themselves both entrenched in and cursed by the responsibilities of duty. Then, in the last years of the 2010s, the spotlight switched to the lives of those with a rebellious disdain for a disapproving elite which is finally forced to accept them (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Darkest Hour*, *Rocketman*).

Despite its recent increasing popularity as a cinematic genre, there exists scant academic analysis of the biopic.

There is even less written on the craft of screenwriting for biographical films.

George F. Custen’s essential 1992 study, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History,* represented the first long-form investigation of the biopic and remains the touchstone for film academics since. And yet, throughout that book, with Custen’s research extending to nearly 300 films, there are only five mentions of screenwriters by name (though it should be noted that the screenwriter is underrepresented across much of twentieth century cinema studies).

Despite the near omission of the scriptwriter, Custen’s work rightly stands out as the seminal text for the study of biopics in the last century. *Bio/Pics*, however, reflects something that has been echoed many times since: few academic texts on biographical pictures begin without adopting a self-consciously apologetic tone, almost as if the scholar should be embarrassed by their subject.

While Custen treats with respect his material – biographical movies produced within the Hollywood studio system between 1927 and 1960 – he is quick to note their 'construction of a highly conventionalized view of fame.' He contests that they contain a shared narrative, 'selective in its attention to profession, differential in the role it assigns to gender, and limited in its historical settings' (3). He later refers to the canon's 'conservative and ultimately ritualistic content' (139).

This almost diffident respect for the biopic within cinema academia continues in further study. Belén Vidal commented in 2014 (Brown & Vidal, 2) that 'mired in its own sense of self-importance, the biopic commands as much critical derision as industrial visibility… perceived as a throwback to old-fashioned modes of storytelling – a sort of heavy armor that constrains filmmakers' creative movements' (though Vidal goes on to assert that 'the time is ripe for reconsideration of the biopic's significance,' notably outside the parameters of Hollywood studio fare). Oxford University Press's Oxford Bibliographies (author uncredited) remarks that 'As a quintessentially middlebrow genre, film studies and cinephile criticism long neglected the biopic. "Low"(er) genres such as the musical, western… and more highbrow "art" cinemas have been preferred over the highly conventional seriousness supposed of the biographical picture.'

Dennis Bingham defies academic convention by championing the biographical film in his book, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* (2010), regarded by many as the contemporary successor to Custen: 'The biopic is a genuine, dynamic genre and an important one,' he declares. Bingham, though, acknowledges the haughty response that biopics face, especially in academic circles: 'Not only has biography been left out of most genre studies of film, at least until very recently, but the term "biopic" is frequently used as a pejorative… spur[ring] an instantly negative reaction, […] so often thought of as tedious, pedestrian, and fraudulent.'

Custen in his 1992 book presents a genre weighed down by cliché. Critical observation of sometimes staid, conservative approaches is not uncommon within the study of American cinema (not just biographical films), particularly since David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson coined the term 'classical Hollywood style' (1985: 3), changing the way in which popular movies would be interrogated. Bordwell asserted that any discovery of 'a homogenous style [that] has dominated American studio filmmaking…' would be achieved only by '…critically examining a body of films' (3), and Custen follows suit in his enquiry of biographical films, by analysing 291 titles from his selected time period. And yet while film academics such as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson would go on to surmise that extraordinary art will emanate even from within a corporate studio system (or even that the institutionalised structure of Hollywood was, in fact, responsible for those flashes of genius), there is little to suggest that Custen's book is a celebration of the biopic form as much as it is an impressively rigorous and important study of it.

Mirroring Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, Custen references François Truffaut who famously stated that he and his intellectual contemporaries at the influential journal, *Cahiers du cinéma,* 'loved the American cinema because the films all resembled each other' (Bordwell, 4). Of course, Truffaut's tongue-in-cheek insouciance belied an admiration for the Hollywood style, or at least for the artists working within the constraints of the system, and the definition of these constraints could easily be extended to the specific tropes of biopics made during American cinema's golden era. Throughout his work, Custen seeks the elements of similarity, of shared style within biopics, rarely revealing the artistry that shines through the cracks of corporate constrictions.

It is when Custen veers from Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's formalist approach and instead considers the historiographical and socio-political contexts pertinent to biographical pictures, that *Bio/Pic*s becomes most revealing. Custen establishes what have

become the most important, and absorbing, areas of study for the biographical film. The most enduring of these is the exploration of what the choice of biopic subject tells us about the system of production and audiences at the time of making the film. For example, Custen asserts, Twentieth Century Fox's extensive contribution to the genre during Hollywood's *golden age* (1930-1960) tells us as much about producer and studio head Darryl F. Zanuck's personal and political tastes – and nose for a box office hit – as it does about any filmmaker's creative choices. For Zanuck, the biopic needed a 'rooting interest… No matter how alienating the character's actual life, it had to be told in terms congruent with audiences' own experiences and expectations about how the famous conducted their lives.' In Custen's study, he eschews the usual practice in cinema studies of lionizing the director by placing academic emphasis on the choices made by producers and studio bosses, over and above the motivations of any individual filmmaker. Whereas Truffaut and his *Cahiers du cinéma* colleagues – as well as most film theorists since – would strive to elevate the Canute-like powers of the *auteur* director holding out against the indomitable forces of commerce, Custen embraces the rigid realities of the studio system, when the producer micro-managed all areas of decision throughout production. And their personal wants and mores dominated. For the pro-Republican Zanuck and Twentieth Century Fox, the release of biopics on two American presidents plainly displayed that studio's political affiliations. As we will discover later, *Young Mr Lincoln* was hurried through production in 1939 in order for the film to be released directly before the presidential election of 1940. As the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* would note, Zanuck's Fox studio 'participated in its own way in the Republican offensive by producing a film on the legendary character Lincoln. Of all the Republican Presidents, he is not only the most famous, but on the whole the only one capable of attracting mass support' (1970: 784-787) (ironically, Lincoln's core principles were far removed from those of the Republican Party of 1939, more of which in Chapter Two of this exegesis, but this would

have mattered little to Zanuck). Then, in 1944 Fox released *Wilson*, this time a Democrat president, who led the U.S. through the First World War and helped create the League of Nations, therefore an apposite choice of character study as America (under its Democrat president, Franklin D. Roosevelt) and its allies launched their final offensives in Europe, Africa and Asia.

For Custen, in biopics the producer is king, and directors more peripheral, and he is aware that this runs counter to much of existing *auteurist* film theory:

> It is not my intention to create a parallel narrative of my own that explains biopics by extolling the great men of Hollywood [the producers and studio heads] as the ultimate authors of the lives of the famous. However, to overlook the data, in the form of production correspondence, or censorship and legal correspondence, which suggests the enormous leverage a Hal Wallis or Zanuck had on typical studio product, would be to overcompensate for the past sins, imagined and real, of the auteurists.
>
> (Custen 1992)

As for the films' screenwriters, they barely warrant a mention. In fact, when (on six occasions) excerpts of scripts are directly quoted by Custen, no screenwriter is even credited. Other than some revealing anecdotes about Lamar Trotti, a prolific writer of biopics, and one of the few people, it appears, able to appease Darryl F. Zanuck, Custen's references to dramatists are impersonal and reflect a subordinate position not just historically within the industry (no doubt truthful but less helpful when the screenwriters' own viewpoints are largely absent), but also common in academic film criticism. Custen writes on two occasions of (unnamed) writers being 'urged' by their producers into action (19, 82), as if they are mere

reactive pawns incapable of original thought themselves. A leading director of biopics for Warner Brothers, William Dieterle is quoted as saying: '"I believe that a picture's basic idea is more important than the story that is told. A story can be trivial" (Joseph, 1940:8)'. The actor George Arliss, who starred in six biopics, was permitted into script conferences to provide the best suggestions for his own cultivated Arliss persona, rather than for the character of Benjamin Disraeli or Cardinal Richelieu who he was playing – presumably a galling experience for the scriptwriters round the table. Perhaps most dismissive is a section on the role of the research departments at each studio in building a profile of a biopic subject: 'Although the research data accumulated by the in-house departments was a significant component of a film, […] the vision of a strong producer […] was the overriding factor' (142). It is a statement that suggests the telling of the story of a person's life is a purely mechanical process – *find out the facts, then film them!* – skipping over any elegance or artistry in the writing of a script. [NB. On the few occasions when the input of a screenwriter is discussed, it is especially enlightening. Custen documents the travails of writer Robert Buckner when scripting *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), a biopic of the musical theatre pioneer George M. Cohan. Buckner and his associate producer informed the film's producer Hal Wallis that Cohan's life was 'just not interesting enough' (160) and set about trying to persuade the still-alive and decidedly difficult Cohan to allow them to include a love interest in the story. Custen notes that Cohan later demurred to Buckner and allowed the introduction of a fictionalised 'stage-struck girl of eighteen… (who) venerates her husband, a fitting tribute, no doubt, that Cohan felt he deserved' (161). And this inclusion of a hetero-normative relationship – at the bequest of the screenwriter – expected by audiences back then no doubt helped the movie become Warner Brothers' highest-grossing film ever at the time (Sklar, 1992: 130).]

The importance of an audience's response to a screen adaptation of a historical figure's life is another area examined by Custen. 'Hollywood biographies,' he considers, 'are real not because they are believable. Rather, one must treat them as real because despite the obvious distortions […] Hollywood films are believed to be real by many viewers.' Custen cites the fact that, during the escalation of the Vietnam war in 1970 and in need of inspiration, President Nixon would watch *Patton*, the recently released biopic scripted by Francis Ford Coppola and Edmund H. North and directed by Franklin J. Schaffner. For Nixon presumably, the booming, gravelly-voiced version of General Patton's speech to the Third Army on the eve of D-Day, as performed by George C. Scott, was preferable to the real General Patton's rather nasal, high-pitched delivery. And for all the literature that existed on Patton's strategies for war, the sitting president preferred to watch the movie *Patton,* drawing from it 'a view of history that was congruent with his own.' Custen continues more broadly, asserting that 'in lieu of written materials, or first-hand exposure to events and persons, the biopic provided many viewers with the version of a life that they held to be the truth' (1992: 2). From an academic perspective, the biopic becomes as much a prism for historiography as it is for history or even cinema studies: 'The re-creation [of a person's life on film] becomes, de facto, the only version of history they will ever see' (1992: 17). As Richard Sandomir would write on Gary Cooper's portrayal of baseball player Lou Gehrig in *Pride of the Yankees* (1942): 'Gehrig's speech is more familiar to fans through *Pride* [*of the Yankees*] than through the few bits of surviving newsreel. His life, however fictionalized to suit the conventions of a Hollywood romance, is better known through *Pride* […] filtered through Cooper's and Teresa Wright's portrayals of well-matched sweethearts. Cooper became Gehrig. Gehrig slipped into Cooper's lanky body' (2017: 6).

Even a universally recognised historical figure, more famous than any actor hired to play them, is subject to filmmakers' whims and choices that will go on to strongly influence

contemporary public perception of their character. In Chapter Two of this exegesis, I will examine in detail different film versions of Abraham Lincoln, and the undeniable role of contemporary audiences – and the desires of directors, producers and writers – in shaping what is shown on screen.

Marta Frago of the University of Navarra in Spain discussed this subject – of the influence of the contemporary audience – at 2019's Screenwriting Research Network conference in Porto, utilising the example of two screen versions of Winston Churchill. Frago emphasises the differences between not only the film character of Winston Churchill portrayed in *Young Winston* (scr: Carl Foreman, dir: Richard Attenborough, 1972) and as an older man in *Darkest Hour* (scr: Anthony McCarten, dir: Joe Wright, 2017), but also the socio-political concerns of the audiences during their respective years of production. These surrounding factors are of equal interest to the content of the films themselves. 'Each of these films highlights other features of the character that coincide with rising specific social values at the time of film production,' Frago asserts. While *Young Winston*'s hero (Simon Ward) is young, rash, a product of the post-1968 countercultural revolution and the early seventies penchant for the anti-hero, *Darkest Hour*'s Churchill (Gary Oldman) is an antidote to the troubles that had befallen 21st century Europe and Britain, during a time in which, Frago asserts, 'the Brexit issue […] endangers […] stability. In this social atmosphere where instability, fear and nostalgia are present, the Winston Churchill character connecting with the contemporary audience is the one who guided […] a nation in wartime. The one who cried victory, thanks to his political vision.'

Another of Custen's major observations borrows extensively – with credit – from Leo Lowenthal of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Lowenthal, in his 1944 article on "Biographies in Popular Magazines", separated biographical subjects into 'Idols of Production' (politicians, royalty, scientists, industrialists) and 'Idols of Consumption'

(entertainers and sports stars). Custen notes that within biographical films a paradigm shift occurs at the outbreak of the Second World War. Whereas before America's entry into the war, Hollywood biographies were more likely to venerate leaders in science (*The Story of Louis Pasteur, Young Tom Edison*), politics (*Disraeli, Alexander Hamilton*), diplomacy (*The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex, Mary of Scotland*) and exploration (*Stanley and Livingstone, The Adventures of Marco Polo*), the post-war heroes were more likely to be artists/writers (nine films produced pre-War, compared to 34 films between 1941 and 1960), entertainers (ten produced pre-War, 45 from 1941-60) or athletes (two before 1940, compared to 16 up to 1960). Unsurprisingly, the only 'Idol of Production' whose representation increases after the attack on Pearl Harbor is the military figure, with 18 pictures made about real-life war heroes between 1940 and 1960, compared to just one before 1941. [It is curious to observe that the subject of my PhD by creative practice, Paul Robeson, straddles many of those professions, being at different times sportsman, artist, entertainer and political figure. An Idol of Consumption and Production.]

Why do these Idols of Consumption become more important than Idols of Production – for audiences, at least? And does this trend continue with the biopic making its triumphant return in this new millennium? There is even a case now for a new 'Idol of Promotion' category that 'blend[s] Lowenthal's predecessor types: they hail from the sphere of consumption, but get described – and describe themselves – in production terms' (Duffy and Pooley, *Journal of Communication*, 2019). Will these paragons of self-promotion – reality TV celebrities, influencers – become subjects of biopics eventually, an extension of what screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski (*Ed Wood*, *Man on the Moon*) called '"biopic[s] of someone who doesn't deserve one"' (Bingham, 2014)?

What of the tropes inherent within biopics? As mentioned previously, they have been accused before of being ‘conventional’, ‘old-fashioned’, and ‘pedestrian’, with the latter term scathingly used by *Sight and Sound* in its review of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. That review ends with this summary: ‘a cautious, tick-box movie that cuts against Mercury’s own declaration: “Do anything you want with my music, dear. But never make me boring”’ (Stables, 2019). The ‘tick-box’ accusation hangs heavily over the biopic screenplay.

What Dennis Bingham calls ‘The Great Man Biopic,’ (an extension of Custen’s ‘Stout-Hearted Men’ observed in studio-era pictures) harnesses these tropes most obviously. ‘Biopics celebrate groundbreaking individualists, not organization people,’ he asserts. The maverick qualities are what mark them as worthy of study and yet also render the themes of the stories similar. How different, after all, is *Lawrence of Arabia*’s story arc (a talented yet under-appreciated captain unites the Arab nations against the Turks by daringly blending British-imperialist strategy with north African fighting styles but, in the process, breaks down under the pressure of reverence) to Ray Charles’ arc in *Ray* (a talented yet under-appreciated pianist finds his audience by daringly blending together blues and Gospel but, in the process, breaks down under the pressure of fame and addiction)? Two enormously different films in subject and character, released forty years apart, and yet their resemblances are indisputable.

Bingham demonstrates how such resemblances resound with the approaches of biographer Lytton Strachey in his celebrated 1918 tome, *Eminent Victorians*. Strachey famously re-examined, occasionally with ironic, even mocking tone, the deeds of four players in (then) recent British imperial history: Thomas Arnold, General Gordon, Cardinal Manning and Florence Nightingale. For every ‘Great (White) Man’ in Strachey’s work, and Bingham’s study of Hollywood output, there comes the subject’s realisation of being ‘different from the prevailing norms.’ This discovery of being different will frighten both the subject and

surrounding society in these stories, even prompting the hero to deny or hide it initially. That is until Destiny enters…

Bingham singles out the subject's 'talent and their "calling",' likening the term to Strachey's quasi-spiritual description of 'mysterious promptings' that set the hero off on a different path to mere mortals. Bingham notes that Strachey and, later, Hollywood show the hero 'marching to (a) different drummer, and the ordinary world that goes on about its timetables and routines as if in a parallel universe so far as the subject is concerned.' The hero not only accepts their difference but pushes against the tide, rallying against seemingly insurmountable odds: in short, the staple of a biopic plot. That acceptance of Destiny – what Joseph Campbell in his *Hero's Journey* famously called 'the Acceptance of the Call' – will eventually and inevitably result in the championing of Progress. The antagonists in the narrative world of the biopic – the sceptics, the flat-earthers, the doubting townsfolk, the anti-abolitionists, the misguided generals – will only discover Progress once they see the error of their ways and come to accept and revere the hero.

I would assert that if the screenwriter were to take the existing how-to formulae for writing the archetypal Hollywood script, but apply them specifically to the writing of a biopic, then s/he could do worse than to change from this classic three-act structure as espoused by Syd Field (1984: 21):

SET-UP - CONFRONTATION - RESOLUTION

And instead use this biopic-specific paradigm for the three acts:

DISCOVERY OF DIFFERENCE - CALLING - PROGRESS

Of course, my main sources of study, over and above the writings of academic writers, will be the viewing of films and the reading of screenplays (although sadly, many studio-era scripts were not archived with only retro-fit screenplays available, written up by third parties after the films' release). What do the screenwriters of films as diverse as *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942, with baseball star Lou Gehrig the subject) and *Selma* (2014, about Martin Luther King Jr.) tell us about how to best construct a story of someone's life?

Then, using historical approaches, this exegesis will examine the life of Paul Robeson and the Welsh miners he knew (the subject of my accompanying screenplay), to observe the meticulous choices required by the screenwriter researching and writing a biopic script. Using primary sources (interviews with living dramatic writers, including the BAFTA-nominated screenwriter of the biopic, *Good Vibrations*) and secondary sources (screenplays, films, audio, interviews, other academic writing), I question where and when a screenwriter should begin and end a biographical story, which parts of a person's life to include or jettison, how to make a historical figure's events pertinent to a contemporary audience, and how to utilise fictionalised elements in a drama while adhering to a central truth.

My own screenplay on Robeson and Wales is the embodiment of this research. The script demonstrates the myriad artistic decisions that need to be made to present the qualities and flaws of the historical figure. It shows why fictionalised moments and composite characters contribute to an understanding of a real person's motives and feelings in a way documentary and historical writing cannot. With this exegesis, my work stands, I hope, as a record of the screenwriter's previously overlooked contribution to creating biographical films.

2. LINCOLN, LINDBERGH, AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN MYTH

'Any man can say things that are true of Abraham Lincoln, but no man can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln.'

- FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1876.

'Hindsight is always twenty-twenty.'

- BILLY WILDER, attributed, *Wit and Wisdom of the Moviemakers, ed. J.R. Colombo (Hamlyn, 1980).*

The first of the two quotes above was uttered by the abolitionist, writer and escaped slave Frederick Douglass, at the unveiling of a monument to Abraham Lincoln in 1876. Doris Kearns Goodwin opens her acclaimed 2005 study of Lincoln's latter years, *Team of Rivals*, with Douglass's words, acknowledging their circumspection, coming just eleven years after the death of the American president and yet equally relevant almost a century and a half later. Goodwin accepts Douglass's observation as a gauntlet thrown down to historians ever since, but it could equally be viewed as a challenge to the screenwriters and filmmakers who have attempted to create a biopic of Lincoln's life. Indeed, it is a challenge for dramatists of any biographical subject: *What can we say that is <u>new</u>?* It is a challenge magnified when the figure in the spotlight is someone whose own story has merged into myth. When the maker knows that the audience will arrive with preconceived ideas and strongly imprinted images of the main protagonist.

This chapter will examine the biopic's contribution to the creation and reaffirmation of the American hero-figure, focusing on the varied cinematic incarnations of two men – Abraham Lincoln, a man long dead before Hollywood placed him on the big screen, and Charles Lindbergh, who personally collaborated in the production of his own biopic. While

the chapter will observe how the United States of America views itself and its heroes, it will predominantly seek to explore the creative pitfalls for the filmmaker in rising to Frederick Douglass's challenge – in providing audiences with *something new* about a historical figure so ingrained in the cultural psyche of Americans and in people across the world.

There are few characters in American history who were more popularly revered at the apex of their achievements than Abraham Lincoln and Charles Lindbergh.

Lincoln's greatest accomplishment was, of course, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Unites States Constitution, a feat of political bargaining and fleet-footedness that resulted in the abolition of slavery and heralded the cessation of four years of fighting in the U.S. Civil War. Charles Lindbergh, meanwhile, shot to worldwide prominence in 1927 when, as a humble U.S. Postal Service pilot, he became the first man to fly an aeroplane solo non-stop across the Atlantic.

These are two American triumphs that would seem perfectly set up for cinematic retelling, so it is surprising that Hollywood took as long as it did to finally commit these moments to screen.

The Spirit of St Louis (1957), directed by Billy Wilder and co-written by Wilder and Wendell Mayes (Charles Lederer credited as 'adaptation by'), came thirty years after the real events of Lindbergh's solo flight. During that era, though, one would have expected such a visually arresting story as Lindbergh's to have been tackled sooner with other biopics of the period such as *The Jackie Robinson Story* (directed by Green; screenplay by Mann, Taylor, 1950), *The Glenn Miller Story* (Mann; Davies, Brodney, 1954) and *To Hell and Back* (Hibbs; Doud, 1955) all exploring events that had taken place more recently. It is an observation echoed by one of *The Spirit of St Louis*'s screenwriters, Wendell Mayes, who later said: 'I

think it was a picture that was made thirty years too late.' Mayes was intimating that public appetite for Lindbergh's heroic story had waned, especially among the young, going on to state that 'everyone seemed to think it was an old musical, and they didn't know what the Spirit of St. Louis [the name given Lindbergh's plane] was.'

When it comes to biographical films, though, one could argue that some distance from the subject is healthy. Indeed, Billy Wilder is quoted himself as saying, 'Hindsight is always twenty-twenty' (Colombo, 1980) and nowhere is this more evident than in biographical studies. The three films noted in the previous paragraph are all hagiographical tributes to American heroes, almost reverential in the presentation of their subjects. *To Hell and Back* was the story of Audie Murphy's exploits during World War II, starring the man himself, that achieved significant box office success but mixed reviews, including from The New Yorker whose critic lamented that, 'Maybe the spontaneity of actual heroism just can't be duplicated in the movies.' Similarly, baseball legend Jackie Robinson makes his acting debut in his own biopic, receiving better notices. *The Jackie Robinson Story* is an earnest film that explores his difficult route to becoming the first African American to play in the major leagues. The skill of the screenwriting team of Lawrence Taylor and Arthur Mann in creating a structure to accommodate Robinson's own appearance is evident. The New York Times noted at the time of release: 'The trick of arranging this achievement must chiefly be credited to the writers and director… In the first place, the notable distinction of Lawrence Taylor's and Arthur Mann's script is that it calls for a minimum of acting on Mr. Robinson's part. It is cleverly constructed in a series of biographical episodes which require nothing more than the simplest illumination by the title character.' Predictably, Robinson's character in the movie is unflawed, a decent man from humble beginnings defying the odds to achieve his sporting dream. Taylor and Mann's script is, as the New York Times review notes, well crafted, though there is very little in the way of nuance or subtext, meaning the story remains nothing

more than a comfortable watch for the audience, albeit shining a light on prejudices that were still commonplace at that time (NB. Ironically, in the context of this thesis, Jackie Robinson had, just a year before the release of his life story, testified in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee to speak out against Paul Robeson's controversial speech to the Paris Peace Congress and its alleged Communist undertones. Unsurprisingly, this is an event not included in Robinson's film).

The Glenn Miller Story (1954) was less burdened by the presence of its subject, Miller having died in an aircraft crash in 1944, but features an array of the musician's own friends and musical collaborators (Louis Armstrong, Ben Pollack, Gene Krupa, and Francis Langford, among them) contributing cameos to ensure the picture never steers far from eulogy. Valentine Davies and Oscar Brodney's script was nominated for the Best Screenplay Oscar but rarely transcends the romantic musical drama genre, choosing to focus on Miller's (James Stewart) sweet relationship with his wife Helen (June Allyson), alongside his determined pursuit to bring swing music to a wider audience. Critic David Parkinson called it 'a rose-tinted portrait' and asserts that Stewart in the lead role 'certainly made Miller more genial than many remembered.'

There is no doubt that the passing of time changes history, and this factor will influence the creative choices and the content of biographical pictures. This is hugely evident in the examples of *The Spirit of St Louis* and three of the most notable biopics on Lincoln.

While both Abraham Lincoln and Charles Lindbergh shared enormous contemporary popularity at the time of their greatest achievements, there is a marked difference in the way that history would eventually remember the two men. Lincoln remains a largely respected figure over 150 years after his death (Michael Burlingame, Professor Emeritus of History at Connecticut College, noted as recently as 2019 that 'the judgment of historians and the public

tells us that Abraham Lincoln was the nation's greatest President by every measure applied'), but Charles Lindbergh would see his stock dip exponentially in the decades following his triumphant landing in Paris, his life blighted by personal tragedy and by dubious political affiliations in which he promoted a right-wing agenda that led to accusations of Nazi sympathy. Lindbergh's is a life that is continually reappraised. [Philip Roth's 2004 alternative history novel *The Plot Against America* features Lindbergh as U.S. president in a fictional 1940s America, elected on an anti-Semitic agenda. An HBO television adaptation premiered in 2020.]

For films on Abraham Lincoln, the makers would be wholly unencumbered by anyone's own first-hand memories of the president, and thus free to create a story from a more objective standpoint (though this objectivity, even when dealing with distant history, can be argued). Billy Wilder and his writers on *The Spirit of St Louis* enjoyed no such artistic freedom, although much of that problem was of Wilder's own creation. Charles Lindbergh – still alive at the time of the film's production and release – was already a divisive public figure. One would not know that from the aviator's 1953 autobiography *Spirit of St Louis* (one of 15 self-penned books chronicling his personal achievements but the first to detail the planning and execution of the first non-stop Atlantic flight in such minute detail). That book – on which Wilder's film would be based – bears no mention of his known white supremacist views and alleged pro-Nazi leanings. Lindbergh was awarded the Third Reich's Commander Cross of the Order of the German Eagle in 1938 and refused to return it despite the urging of sections of the American press (though A. Scott Berg's 1998 biography claims that the receipt of this medal, received directly from Hermann Göring, Hitler's air chief, was barely noticed by the media until war began in Europe over a year later). Lindbergh expressed racially charged ideology in an article for the Reader's Digest in 1939, in which he stated: 'Aviation seems almost a gift from heaven to those Western nations who were already the

leaders of their era, strengthening their leadership, their confidence, their dominance over other peoples. It is a tool specially shaped for Western hands, a scientific art which others only copy in a mediocre fashion, another barrier between the teeming millions of Asia and the Grecian inheritance of Europe -- one of those priceless possessions which permit the White race to live at all in a pressing sea of Yellow, Black, and Brown.'

Lindbergh's 1953 book does not mention his position as a spokesman for the non-interventionist America First movement at the outbreak of the Second World War.

While Lindbergh later sought to distance himself from his quasi-fascistic pre-war rhetoric, his fame and status had plummeted thanks to his political beliefs. It was a situation that had culminated in President Franklin D. Roosevelt questioning his loyalty to America and Lindbergh resigning his commission from the U.S. Army Air Corps in protest before the war. [In contravention of his previous non-interventionist views, Lindbergh would go on to fly combat missions in the Pacific as a civilian pilot.]

The aviator does not repeat his anti-Semitic sentiments in the autobiography, though, by the fifties, they were certainly well known. His wartime diaries had warned against Jewish dominance: 'Whenever the Jewish percentage of total population becomes too high, a reaction seems to invariably occur.' And at an America First rally in Des Moines in 1941, Lindbergh declared in a speech against U.S. involvement in the war, that '[the Jewish people's…] greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government.'

Billy Wilder's decision, then, to make a film about Charles Lindbergh is an unlikely one. Wilder, an Austrian Jew, fled Berlin following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, and would later lose his mother, grandmother and stepfather during the Holocaust. Even more surprising was Wilder's decision to write and shoot a film so rigidly based on Lindbergh's own

carefully revised account of his life, framed squarely around that Atlantic flight, and eschewing the controversies that had haunted the pilot in the years since.

Not only did Wilder and Lindbergh make peculiar bedfellows but, extraordinarily, they became friends. In 2001, Wilder elaborated on his story choices – or, more pertinently, the limits to them – when he told fellow filmmaker, Cameron Crowe: 'I could not get in a little deeper, into Lindbergh's character. There was a wall there. We were friends, but there were many things I could not talk to him about.' Wilder's commitment to honouring his subject formed a barrier to the ambition of the movie.

As well as the political questions around Lindbergh's character, the event with which he had become most associated by the 1950s was – tragically – the kidnap and murder of his 20-month-old son, Charles Lindbergh Jr., that occurred in 1932 (Richard Hauptmann was eventually convicted and executed for the crime, the infant's body discovered two months after he was stolen from his crib). It would have been wholly unlikely that any filmmaker during that era would have attempted to dramatize such a gruesome tragedy. Although the omission of this part of Lindbergh's life would have been a straightforward decision for Wilder and any studio, it is indicative of the sensitivities inherent in the telling of any one person's biographical story, especially when they are alive. Nobody leads a one-dimensional existence. Decisions need to be made: not just *who* (the subject), or *what* (their achievements to be shown), but – critically – *when*. *When,* meaning the particular time period of a life to cover (few biopics are conventional cradle-to-grave stories), and also *when,* in the context of how much time has passed since a particular event, a factor that might influence our cultural perceptions of a character's life. The story of the infant Lindbergh's kidnapping was eventually dramatized in two television movies: *The Lindbergh Kidnapping Case* (Buzz Kulik; J.P. Miller, 1976) and an acclaimed 1996 HBO production, *Crime of the Century*, directed by Mark Rydell with a screenplay by William Nicholson. The incident also forms a

critical element in Clint Eastwood and writer Dustin Lance Black's biopic *J. Edgar* (2011). By the time of these later films, there would have been sufficient historical distance between the news story and the movies' respective releases, and public perceptions and tastes would have rendered the subject more palatable. But in 1955, when the film *The Spirit of St Louis* was being prepared, this was most definitely not the case.

It was a safe, conservative decision to focus on Lindbergh's life only up to and including his record-breaking flight. His early life was free of any controversy, and the Atlantic crossing – from New York to Paris – gave Wilder and his collaborators an exciting yarn with a suitably triumphant ending.

But there is something telling in the way the movie cuts abruptly at the end. Just moments after an exhausted Lindbergh (James Stewart) touches down at Le Bourget airfield – his crowning moment – Wilder cuts to a short insert (27 seconds, no more than a third of a page in the screenplay) of genuine news footage, with no commentary, showing the pilot's tickertape parade in New York, before the end title card appears. The New York Times, on the film's release, noted: '…the suddenness with which the film is ended after the landing of Lindbergh at Le Bourget and a brief news clip of his actual New York reception blanks all visioning of his place in history. This film treats his remarkable achievement as an adventure and little more.' It is as if Lindbergh's life is cut off at that very moment, never to be the same again beyond that famous landing.

Billy Wilder elaborates further in his conversation with Crowe: 'It was understood [between Lindbergh and Wilder] — the picture had to follow the book. The book was immaculate. It had to be about the flight only. Not about his family, […] the Hauptmann thing, what happened after the flight … just the flight itself.' Wilder was frustrated with the constrictions, lamenting the omission of a story told by one of the journalists on site the night

before Lindbergh set off on his fateful flight. To help Lindbergh to sleep, and assuming he was destined to die, it was said that the waiting newspapermen persuaded a pretty waitress to knock on his hotel door and to take his virginity. Wilder wanted to include this story in his film, and to then show a wholly fabricated scene at the end with that same waitress in the crowd at the tickertape homecoming in New York, waving for his attention – only for Lindbergh to ignore her: 'This alone would be… enough to make the picture… But I could not even suggest it to him.' Lindbergh's reticence on that idea would be understandable – the journalist's story was never confirmed, potentially embarrassing, and Wilder's rather downbeat and wholly fictitious pay-off would certainly not paint the aviator in a positive light – but it is demonstrative of the difficult relationship between artist and subject. Freedom of creative choice is curtailed.

The result of creating an account of events authorised by the central figure, as already demonstrated in *To Hell and Back* and *The Jackie Robinson Story*, is a bland, idealised version of history. The ever-affable James Stewart plays Lindbergh as America originally viewed him at the time of his pioneering flight – a diffident farm boy from the Midwest with a grand dream. In reality, Lindbergh's grandfather had been a member of the Swedish parliament and secretary to the king, while his father Charles A. Lindbergh was a lawyer and congressman. While he needed to raise the majority of the finance required to build an aircraft suitable for the job of crossing the Atlantic from external financiers, Lindbergh invested two thousand dollars of his own money in the project (worth just under $30,000 in 2020), a sizeable sum for a 25-year-old air mail pilot (Lindbergh, 1953: 25, 31).

Wilder and Mayes' script opts for a more predictable, pleasing underdog story, though much of the stronger scenes remain truthful to events, such as Lindbergh's early days as a circus barn-stormer flier and the very genuine perils of transporting mail inter-state in flimsy aeroplanes.

Despite a certain traditionality to the tale, the construction of *Spirit*'s story was innovative in its time, with Wilder and Mayes interspersing the central narrative of Lindbergh's Atlantic crossing with non-chronological flashbacks to earlier periods in his life. It has become a well-worn device in biopics since, but *Spirit*'s screenplay is one of the first examples of this technique within Hollywood cinema. What has certainly not been repeated was the writers' curious decision for Lindbergh to talk to a fly that was stuck in his cockpit (Goldman, 2000: 327). It displays a lack of certainty in the early flashback construction that Stewart's Lindbergh needed a companion to whom he could justify his reminiscences.

Wilder and Mayes' flashbacks gradually accumulate to paint a picture of a hero instantly recognisable in American films: a plucky trier eager to grasp opportunities, but one with decent values and a commitment to getting the job done (when Lindbergh's mail plane crashes, he completes the delivery by train, and later in the film he trains a priest how to fly, seemingly out of charity). This drive is a cornerstone of biopics, especially evident with American figures. Bingham notes this: 'Obsession is the hobgoblin of the classical biopic, the trait that controls the subject's drive and makes him exceptional but that must be held in check lest the protagonist look like […] "a freak." In the classical films the character's obsession – the pursuit of his goal in disregard of all else – helps portray him as noble and heroic' (2010: Kindle location 870).

Ultimately, though, despite the makers' efforts to vary the story through separate narratives, *Spirit* fails to tell us anything new about Lindbergh's character. In fact, the most interesting, if darker, facets of his personality are consciously eschewed. His fascistic beliefs, his troublesome relationship with the fame that the 1927 flight brought him, and his distaste for publicity following the murder of his son, all came after the endpoint of *The Spirit of St Louis*' story. Wilder's abrupt, distinctly un-Hollywood ending suddenly feels very deliberate.

As New York Times critic Bosley Crowther stated in his review at the time: '[…] after all these years of waiting, it would be interesting if we could see what it was about the fellow that made him uniquely destined for his historic role.' Equally, events which informed Lindbergh's life, views and personality *after* landing in Paris would be worthy of further exploration in a biographical film: a public figure whose politics railed against American involvement in the war on fascism, and whose own very American version of fame led to his family becoming the victims of the so-called 'crime of the century' (the kidnap and murder of Lindbergh's son was allegedly fuelled by Hauptmann's quest for media attention). Instead, with Charles Lindbergh as a collaborator on the development of the script, Wilder and Mayes opt for a stirring, yet wholly sanitised, yarn of an innocent young man triumphing over adversity: the very epitome of the American dream. A very American biopic.

In 1930, D.W. Griffith directed and co-wrote *Abraham Lincoln*. It was the second time Griffith had featured Lincoln in his films, with the president's assassination a famous scene in his flawed masterpiece, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The framing and cutting of Griffith's two representations of the murder of Lincoln are strikingly similar in construction and yet, conversely, markedly different in visceral energy: *The Birth of a Nation*'s silent version is frenetic with panic and urgency, but the later attempt – despite the addition of sound, a gunshot and screams – is peculiarly listless.

In the 15 years between Griffith's pictures, there had been an estimated forty-four films released featuring Lincoln (Thompson, 1999: 194-204) but this would be the first feature-length sound biopic. America's most recognisable historical figure immortalised in a film by a director as revered as Griffith, *Abraham Lincoln* would have seemed destined to become a classic. Yet its box office performance was 'uneven' (Stokes, 2007: 267) and, in

the decades that followed, it is rarely recalled positively by critics or film historians – in fact, in 1978, critic Michael Medved et al included it in their cult book as one of *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time*.

The choices made in developing the script contribute heavily to the film's blandness, with few risks taken with the narrative, which is 'a rare instance of the chronological "cradle to grave" life chronicle' (Vidal, 2014: 6). It is rare to find any film that is quite so literal in presenting a figure's birth through to his eventual death.

Curiously, a superior cut of the film exists with a stunning two-minute opening that precedes baby Abraham's birth, in which the audience is transported onto a storm-blasted slave vessel rocking its way through choppy seas. Scores of exhausted Black slaves chained to beams in the ship's hull struggle to stay upright, while one of them is carried lifeless above deck before being thrown into the churn of water below. Griffith's choice to shoot this grotesque scene in glimpses between rafters and cracks in the deck, the camera swaying nauseatingly with the sea, makes it the strongest part of the film by some distance. We are unwilling voyeurs, both curious and disgusted. Its searing brutality demonstrates the horror of slavery without any dialogue – the soundtrack of creaking timber and crashing seas drowns out the cries of the men. It is an extraordinary scene that would not look out of place in a contemporary film (the opening of Steven Spielberg's 1997 slave drama *Amistad* emulates it, and Griffith's version is no less powerful). With this prologue included, Lincoln's later struggle to abolish slavery becomes all the more pertinent. And yet this opening is absent from most prints, meaning that, for most, the film simply opens with Lincoln's birth in a Kentucky log cabin.

Stephen Vincent Benét – still in his late twenties when approached by Griffith – was a bold choice to write the screenplay, this being his first ever film script following the

remarkable success of his epic Civil War poem, *John Brown's Body*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1929. The liberal leanings evident in Benét's poem (about an abolitionist martyr) would have jarred heavily with Griffith's politics displayed most famously in *The Birth of a Nation* in which the Confederate army and the Ku Klux Klan are heroized in a manner controversial even on its release [which also makes Griffith's harrowing representation of slavery in *Abraham Lincoln*'s cut prologue more surprising].

Benét was hired only after Griffith's first choice, Carl Sandburg (a poet by reputation but also a historian who had recently written the first two volumes of a sprawling historical biography on Lincoln that would later win a Pulitzer Prize), demanded more money than studio United Artists could afford. Benét's original draft focused on specific parts of Lincoln's life: the death of his first love, Ann Rutledge, and the pardoning of a Union soldier wrongly accused of cowardice (Reinhart, 2009: 32). Benét, though, was fired from the project by the studio – one presumes with auteur Griffith's backing though no evidence exists of this – and the director's favourite screenwriting partner, Gerrit Lloyd, brought on board to complete the script (credited with 'continuity and dialogue').

Producer John W. Considine Jr. also claims a credit as Story and Production Adviser. Stokes writes of 'a nightmarish war between Benét and Griffith on the one hand [implying their relationship was at one time amicable] and […] John Considine Jr. on the other,' which eventually led to Griffith leaving post-production in the producer's hands (2007: 267).

It is apparent that the development of the script, and the type of narrative required to best represent Abraham Lincoln on screen, was fraught with creative differences.

From the perspective of analysing approaches to biographical storytelling on film, it is fascinating to consider Benét the poet's vision of a biopic – preferring to explore smaller moments that both shape the development and reflect the growth of the subject's character –

and then compare it to the final product built first by a biographer's (Sandburg) contribution, then Griffith's and his preferred writing partner Lloyd, and finally the studio producer's stolid approach. One perceives a certain politeness in the writing, a very civil stand-off of ideals. There is very little examination of the human condition, nor is there any critical interpretation of history from either side of the Blue/Grey Civil War divide.

The final product is a screenplay written by committee – with producer Considine as chairman. It is a dogmatic rendering of events from birth through to the president's assassination with little sense of emotional or dramatic investment. While biopics – especially of figures as ubiquitous as Lincoln – are forced to contend with the audience's knowledge of events meaning dramatic jeopardy is more difficult to present, they still require the cornerstones of a story that compel the viewer to question the motives of the subject, or to at least empathise with their struggle. Walter Huston plays the role of Lincoln with a commendable blend of gravitas and good humour and yet the script bestows almost preternatural powers on him, meaning moments of elucidation are arrived at as if gifts from a higher power rather than through philosophical struggle. When the Union army is defeated at Richmond and with Washington now under threat, Huston's Lincoln becomes suddenly steeled, declaring to his wife, 'From now on, Mary, I'm going to run this war.' Soon after, he is struck by another idea from nowhere – to promote Grant to become his main general – with no previous mention of the man's presence in the story. From here, the tide of war turns suddenly in his favour, as if by divine intervention. This deification of the 'Honest Abe' postage stamp figure serves only to further detach the audience from the subject, all dramatic tension instantly eliminated. Huston's Abe succeeds not through bloody-minded effort or strategic knowledge – instead, he succeeds *because* he is Abraham Lincoln, fully packaged with trimmed beard and stovepipe hat. Griffith very purposely presents a man who seems as aware of his place in history as the audience, his greatness seemingly inevitable. For a

biographical story – even of the Stracheyan ‘Great Man’ canon – the viewer’s interest still demands a level of struggle with which they can identify. Otherwise, the figure becomes a stereotype.

Despite the history-by-tick-box method, Lincoln’s greatest legacy – the abolition of slavery – is barely mentioned in the finished film [the omission of the original slave-ship prologue from most prints feels more profound in this context]. Lincoln’s sole priority, it seems, is to ‘Preserve the union’ (a phrase repeated solemnly four times by Huston, once directly to camera in a strange fourth-wall-breaking moment), defying the slave states and their yearning for secession. Griffith seems more comfortable with this conflict than with any more direct debate on slavery. It is a strange decision that feels more deliberate when one considers the treatment of the near-defeated confederate General Lee towards the end of the film, who is presented in a deeply sympathetic light. Echoing Lincoln’s pardon of a Union deserter earlier in the film, Lee orders that a Union spy be spared seeing as there are no more secrets to preserve. ‘I am unwilling that there should be a single life lost unnecessarily,’ utters the general (whose ambition had been to win a war that would have extended slavery in America). From Stephen Benét’s other work which features a strong anti-oppression agenda, it seems unlikely this heroizing of Lee would have been his decision and would more likely have come from Griffith or producer Considine. Fifteen years on from *The Birth of a Nation* and the racial controversy which continues to cast a shadow on his reputation to this day, Griffith was still unable to grapple with the subject of racial history in the United States at any nuanced level.

D.W. Griffith’s *Abraham Lincoln* opens with the title card: “The story of a man begins.” Yet ironically Griffith’s film is less a story of a man, than a caricature from schoolbooks, no more animated than the Lincoln Memorial monument on which the director chooses to close his film.

Nine years later, another film on the president was released ending almost identically to Griffith's picture: the Lincoln Memorial bathed in heavenly light, Battle Hymn of the Republic – 'Glory, glory, hallelujah!' – sung behind it. Besides that, the narrative approaches are distinctly different. But then, importantly, so was the world in which the picture was released.

Young Mr Lincoln (1939) was directed by John Ford with a screenplay by Lamar Trotti. It was produced by Twentieth Century Fox under the dictatorial stewardship of Darryl F. Zanuck. Zanuck's involvement is especially important in the context of the study of biographical films, with George F. Custen asserting in his *Bio/Pics* book that the studio head 'exercised an unbelievably thorough control over every aspect of production,' and how 'in memo after memo on a score of biopics, Zanuck drives home the related points of motivation and rooting interest' (1992: 20-21). This attitude of Zanuck's – geared wholly towards the audience's expectations and desires from a biopic – resulted in a string of successful biographical pictures made at Fox: *The House of Rothschild* (1934), *The Mighty Barnum* (1934), *Cardinal Richelieu* (1935), *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939), *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939).

Zanuck was especially conscious of how the timing of telling a specific story would play with contemporary audiences. As mentioned in chapter one of this exegesis, quoting an observation made by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* in their 1970 analysis of the film, the conservative Zanuck was plainly aware that *Young Mr Lincoln,* a portrait of the most celebrated president since the founding fathers, would benefit the Republican campaign at the 1940 election. With Roosevelt's New Deal having pulled the United States away from the worst conditions of the Great Depression in 1933, the end of the decade then saw another dip

in employment and domestic wealth. The contemporary Republican party fought staunchly for an agenda of protectionism of the country's financial institutions and so the youthful version of Abraham Lincoln, played with diffident wisdom by Henry Fonda, is introduced in his first scene – a speech to a group of farmers – not by establishing Lincoln's morality nor his sense of equality, but by asserting his belief in the National Bank. As noted by *Cahiers* in 1970: 'this is meant not only for the spectators in the film but also to involve the spectator of the movie, brought into the cinematic space' (793). While Lincoln's political philosophy would bear scant relation to the Republican party of the time, Zanuck would care little so long as enough subliminal connections were made between 'Honest Abe' and the Republican candidates for the presidency (the election eventually saw businessman Wendell Willkie defeated by the Democrat, Roosevelt).

Aside from politics, Zanuck also read the societal temperature, discerning what an exhausted, impoverished generation of Americans wanted from their biopics – and that was what Bingham calls, 'examples of visionaries who made the world better, heroes from the past whose determination was meant as a tonic for audiences during the Great Depression and World War II' (2007).

Zanuck was also keen to avoid the pitfalls of D.W. Griffith's picture from a decade before and so committed his filmmakers to finding the 'rooting interest' in Lincoln's story. Custen tells a cautionary tale of the script development of *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939) in which screenwriter Roy Harris strives for historical accuracy but is shouted down and ultimately fired by Zanuck. The studio head's notes on a draft are quoted: 'Lost all punch because it is so loaded with boring scientific babble […] Get to the human story and the comedy.' This last statement could just as easily have been levelled at Griffith's Lincoln film (historico-political babble replacing scientific), so for *Young Mr Lincoln*, Zanuck turned to dependable screenwriter Lamar Trotti who he had also hired to rewrite the Bell project,

along with the acclaimed director John Ford, already an Oscar winner for *The Informer* (1935) and at that time preparing what would become regarded as his first true masterpiece, *Stagecoach* (1939).

The decision to tell the story of *young* Abraham Lincoln is pertinent in 1939. Firstly, there is the economic climate of the time with America having come through its greatest modern recession but now facing the question of its role in the world with Europe on the verge of war. The rise in living conditions, especially in the suburbs and middle America, led to a young adult generation with not only more capital, but also an attitude that was perhaps more carefree than their parents' who were often first- or second-generation immigrants. Youth began to gain more cultural capital; to be young was to be excused of the appalling events that befell ordinary Americans from Black Tuesday in 1929 until Roosevelt's New Deal policies dragged the country from its slump. During the thirties, cinema audiences in America increased significantly, largely due to the increase in smaller neighbourhood movie theatres financed by studios and distributors (Butsch, 2001). By the end of the decade, sixty percent of the U.S. population attended cinemas each week with young adult audiences (16-30 years) among the keenest moviegoers. Zanuck would have recognised that this demographic would have had little interest in a film about a middle-aged president's already well-documented political achievements. He, Ford and Trotti conjured up a way of presenting a biographical story while also providing the audience with a handsome leading man in Henry Fonda and the prospect of a coyly sexual romance with which they could identify: they would show the figure as a young man.

Cahiers du cinéma's editors are fixated by this narrative choice, focusing more on the filmmakers' ideological reasonings than on the studio's commercial prospecting. What does an exploration of a figure's youth allow the maker that a more conventional biopic like Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln* does not? *Cahiers* asserts that by showing us '"Lincoln's youth"

[editors' quotation marks emphasising that it is a largely fictitious version of it] as if they were taking place for the first time under our eyes, [then] it is the reformulation of the historical figure of Lincoln on the level of the myth and the eternal.' The audience, consciously aware of the famous figure, needs to be brought into the confidence of the storyteller(s), urged to recognise tropes we know will come to be associated with Lincoln, while simultaneously denying our own knowledge of the man in order to affect drama. *Cahiers* explains this discourse more eloquently, specifically in terms of a poem quoted onscreen at the film's beginning, but relevant to the entire story. The chosen poem, *Nancy Hanks*, was written in 1933 by Rosemary Benét, wife of Stephen Vincent Benét – perhaps the makers' riposte to D.W. Griffith's troubled version? – and is as follows:

If Nancy Hanks came back as a ghost; Seeking news of what she loved most; She'd ask first; "Where's my son? What's happened to Abe? What's he done? You wouldn't know about my son? Did he grow tall? Did he have fun? Did he learn to read? Did he get to town? Do you know his name? Did he get on?"

Cahiers explains the poem's almost meta significance:

> [The] main function of the poem, which pretends that the questions posed therein haven't yet been answered (whereas they are only the simulation of questions since they presume the spectator's knowledge of Lincoln's historical character), is to set up the dualist nature of film and to initiate the process of a double reading. By inviting the spectator to ask himself "questions" to which he already has the answers, the poem induces him to look at history—something which, for him, has already happened—as if it were "still to happen."
>
> (*Cahiers*, eds. 1970)

Writer Lamar Trotti creates a fictional court case in which two brothers are accused of killing a man, basing it on a separate trial the screenwriter covered as a young journalist some years earlier. Fonda's Abe, a young lawyer starting out in Springfield, takes on the brothers' seemingly hopeless case at the bequest of their mother. It is one of many moments in which Lincoln's path is guided by a mother's love (he accepts the case without appearing interested by the details or whether her boys are indeed innocent), with *Cahiers* asserting that, following the death of his first love Ann Rutledge early in the film, Abe represses his own sexuality (eventual wife Mary Todd later appears, but Abe denies himself any relationship for the time being), instead preferring a more wholesome call. At one point, Lincoln says to Mrs Clay, mother of the accused brothers: 'My mother would be just about your age if she were alive, you know she used to look a lot like you.' In the film's first scene he offers store credit to a poor family of settlers and in return the mother gives him his first Blackstone's Commentaries book on law, leading him on a greater path. This commitment to the all-American symbol of Momma's apple pie is demonstrated almost literally by Ford and Trotti in a later comic moment in which eligible bachelor Abe is unable (or unwilling) to decide between two finalists in the town fair's pie-making competition. Instead of offending either amateur cook (both American mother figures), Lincoln the young man heartily devours both delicious offerings in a display of decent-hearted diplomacy we unconsciously associate with Lincoln the statesman. Ford cuts from the contest without showing us the resolution. *Cahiers* notes that 'by abandoning the scene, [the makers] censor the moment of choice and [do] not show Lincoln making an impossible choice, both for the sake of the scene and for that of the myth.' A prime example of the duality in the viewer's reading of the film.

This duality is more confused, though, on the subject of slavery. *Young Mr Lincoln*, like Griffith's film of a decade earlier, largely swerves the topic – in fact, when briefly

mentioned, it becomes an economic problem of the impoverished white man more than a problem for the African American: ‘With all the slaves coming in, white folks just had a hard time making a living,’ Lincoln says when placing himself in the shoes of the nomadic Clay family. A dualist reading of this scene conjures up our perceptions of Lincoln’s famed empathy as he identifies with the Clays’ struggle here – Abe ever the defender of the oppressed – and yet our (and the 1930s audience’s) knowledge of his abolitionist principles are betrayed. For Zanuck, the image of a Republican espousing his commitment to honest, hard-working – and white – folk like the Clays, was more pertinent to the upcoming 1940 presidential election than the rights of the Black population (and continues to echo in American politics today).

It is a regrettable misstep in a film that, conversely, through the examination of an entirely fictive situation in which our protagonist is placed, presents the audience with a more complicated version of a historical figure than had been presented in other biopics up to that point. The New York Times recently called *Young Mr Lincoln* ‘a prime example of American mythmaking’ (Hoberman, 2018). The word *myth* is especially important here, as it is different to the telling of history and yet, in a dramatic sense, it is equally or even more revealing. By placing us at a time before the man becomes a myth, the events presented feel more current and the outcome more precarious. The first-time viewer does not know what’s going to happen and so, consequently, the young Abraham Lincoln becomes more vulnerable, more human. The *Cahiers* editors note: ‘It is the universal knowledge of Lincoln's fate which allows, while restating it, the omission of parts of it. For the problem here is not to build a myth, but to negotiate its realisation and even more to rid it of its historical roots in order to liberate its universal and eternal meaning.’ Trotti’s decision to make a courtroom drama of Lincoln’s early adult life allows both he as the writer and Ford as director to stray from the

creative straitjacket of the biopic, and – in an allusion to Frederick Douglass's words at the beginning of this chapter – allow for the audience to engage with him in a way that is new.

It took over seventy years for Hollywood's awkward omission of Lincoln's passage of the Thirteenth Amendment and the abolition of slavery to be put right. Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), written by Tony Kushner, focuses almost entirely on a single month when the president's persuasion, wit and bargaining powers secured the required support to abolish slavery before the end of the Civil War.

Following the birth-to-death formula of D.W. Griffith and his writers, then the specificity of Trotti's fictional episode in Ford's version of Lincoln's early adulthood, Kushner and Spielberg wisely adopt a different approach, seeking to deeply examine the man's personality while telling the story of an epic moment in history.

Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals*, was the main source material for the screenplay (credited as 'based in part on…'), and she worked with Spielberg and later Kushner on the project for a decade before production began. In her foreword to Kushner's published script, Goodwin writes of the collaborators' struggle to encapsulate what they felt was special about Lincoln and his achievements within a palatable-length feature film: 'I saw perhaps a half dozen drafts [one was 500 pages], each one compressing the time frame more and more, until the brilliant decision was made to focus on the single month of January 1865, to make the congressional fight […] the core of the film – a thriller of a story that has a beginning, middle and end' (2013: viii).

That creative decision to place a metaphorical ticking clock within a biopic – a race against time to create a more liberal version of a free United States of America – ensures genuine tension even though most viewers will know the outcome. Once a biopic becomes a

thriller rather than an animated history book, then the audience is finally invited to experience genuine peril in watching. The Rolling Stone's critic extols the script's urgency: 'Kushner blows the dust off history by investing it with flesh, blood and churning purpose' (Travers, 2012).

Lincoln's visceral opening, in a flooded Arkansas battlefield, is described in short, brutal bursts in Kushner's screenplay – 'Heavy gray skies; cannons and carts, half-submerged […] yoked to dead and dying horses; Negro Union and Confederate soldiers, knee-deep in the water; no discipline or strategy…'

A break in the fighting allows Lincoln to visit another scene of battle where he is deep in conversation with two Black soldiers. Within a minute of the film beginning, the active contribution of African Americans in the creation of the modern version of the United States is apparent. The soldiers, Green and Clark, lament inequalities in Black and white soldiers' salaries and voting rights, setting the tone for this particular Lincoln (played superbly by Daniel Day-Lewis) to stubbornly push for the Thirteenth Amendment.

Vidal observes that this, our first introduction to the 2012 version of Lincoln, is a conscious reference to both the Lincoln Memorial and its appearance as the final image of *Young Mr Lincoln* (an ending identical to Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln*), with Day-Lewis 'seated on an elevated wooden structure, visually recall[ing] the famous statue […], posture and camera angle reinforcing the image of the "great leader".' It appears a construct of Spielberg's more than the writer's, as Kushner's screenplay simply states: 'Abraham Lincoln sits on a bench' (4). But Vidal asserts that this pose, as well as the fact that he is placed in a moment in which he talks to African American soldiers, 'reframes the great man's view of history within a specific political project' (Vidal, 2014: 7).

The 2012 audience was, of course, substantially different to that of 1930 or 1939 and the Lincoln films we have already examined. Custen notes that 'Different modes of depiction of the same life constitute different tales' (1992: 79). When it comes to historical figures who have been the subject of more than one biopic, Custen continues, it is clear that 'The stories they tell, while sharing certain elements in common, are (…) notable for their differences.' Nothing is more markedly different than a film's place in time. On *Lincoln*'s release, Barack Obama had just been elected for his second term and the values of Spielberg's Hollywood (Spielberg was an ardent supporter of Obama) had become distinctly liberal in comparison to Griffith's, Zanuck's, and the moguls of the classical studio system's time. That said, the ripples of the 2008 global recession were still keenly felt and so Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and Wall Street reforms such as the Dodd–Frank package, as well as burgeoning healthcare reforms, were likened to Roosevelt's New Deal propositions of the 1930s (Grunwald, 2012). If *Young Mr Lincoln* appeared at the tail-end of the Great Depression, a figure of reactionary change (he wins the court case for the Clay brothers more through theatrics, his emotional engagement with a fickle jury, and by appealing to the room's recognition of the power of a mother's love), 2012's *Lincoln* is a force of fierce intelligence and circumspection, every action considered in the round before decision is made. It is in this atmosphere of contemporary American liberalism that Kushner and Spielberg forge their story; their version of Lincoln. Day-Lewis plays him as both steely negotiator and avuncular presence, almost a kindly professor. His propensity for reason over retribution is exemplified in a scene in which he dictates a message to General Grant, then interrupts himself to speak to the low-ranking telegraph operators: 'Are we fitted to the times we're born into?' Lincoln asks, an allusion to the figure's relevance both then and now – while the real Abraham Lincoln surely fitted most surely into the nineteenth century, Kushner's *Lincoln* is a gift to contemporary audiences, his ideals a gift to modern America.

Continuing in that same scene, Kushner skilfully writes a line that feels wholly natural, and yet best sums up this Lincoln, the very image of self-taught intelligence, humour, humility, but with an unerring sense of justice:

> I never had much of schooling, but I read Euclid, in an old book I borrowed. Little enough ever found its way in here ---(touching his cranium)--- but once learnt it stayed learnt. Euclid's first common notion is this: "Things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other."
>
> Kushner (2013: 99)

With the majority of the film's drama taking place in meeting rooms and debating chambers – cinematographer Janusz Kamiński imbues each scene with a cold, grey light, rejecting the warm, folksy Americana of previous Lincoln biopics – the brutality of slavery is shown in a way that is subtle yet affecting. Abraham finds his ten-year-old son Tad sleeping on a mess of military maps and memos, but also photographic plates of young Black slaves for sale: *ABNER, AGE 12 - $500, TWO YOUNG BOYS, 10 AND 14 - $700*.

The sickening reality of slavery is amplified when seen through the eyes of a young boy, similar in age to the victims, and yet it also presents a problem to the viewer, in that it could be argued that, just like in *Young Mr Lincoln*, it shows slavery solely from the perspective of white observers. We are stunned as much by the horrors Tad has witnessed before falling asleep, as we are by the fates of Abner and the other boys in the photographs. It

is strange that the most affecting image of slavery within a film on Lincoln should remain D.W. Griffith's discarded slave-ship prologue from 1930.

Disappointingly, the liberal view in *Lincoln* also largely avoids the ambiguity in the president's views towards the rights of America's Black population, even once slaves were freed. This quote from Lincoln comes from the fourth of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858: 'I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, […] I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes…' (Zilversmit, 1980: 27). While Lincoln's actions inarguably advanced the rights of Black men and women in the United States, the image of the man presented here in 2012 is of the Great Emancipator, despite this title being strongly challenged by some African American historians (Bennett Jr. 1968: 35-39).

Kushner's screenplay is honest enough to reference a modicum of hesitancy around freedoms for all people. Defending a speech to his confidantes in which he called for suffrage for sections of the Black population, this Lincoln says: 'I did say *some* colored men, the intelligent, the educated, and veterans, I qualified it' (159).

In terms of the biopic and the postmodern construction of a history already familiar to its audience, the ending is as revealing as the film's opening discussed earlier (the image of Lincoln adopting the posture of his famous Washington, D.C. Memorial in a nod to both history and to Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*). The picture's ending best presents the filmmakers' engagement with an audience that will know how the story plays out, as inevitable as the Titanic striking an iceberg. Slavery ended and the war won, Lincoln leaves with his wife Mary for Ford's Theater… As an audience, we are primed for tragedy, the ticking clock of the film reset. We are transported to a theatre where we await John Wilkes Booth's

appearance. Which is when the theatre manager steps out before the curtain and informs the theatre crowd – Lincoln's son Tad among them in the balcony – that the president has been shot down the road. We are in a different playhouse with the president's son watching *Aladdin*! Spielberg and Kushner have us witnessing history by, paradoxically, not witnessing it. At the film's close, we go from voyeur to consumer of news, as if the makers are preparing us for our readjustment back into 21st century life.

This artful piece of cinematic sleight-of-hand reminds us that though we have been complicit in the filmmakers' storytelling for 150 minutes, we still remain in their thrall, our expectations of the Lincoln we already knew continually satisfied and yet also twisted. What is more disturbing? Witnessing an assassination, or witnessing a young son hearing of his father's assassination?

This is history but presented in a way we have never seen, creating an internalised drama for the viewer even when we think we know the outcome. It provides the student and the writer of biopics with a benchmark for examining a known character on screen, in a way that is both familiar and shocking – but also dramatically satisfying.

Most importantly, it is presented in a way that is less myth, and more human.

3. FINDING THE STORY BEHIND THE MYTH – AN EXEGESIS

'Y'see, Thompson, it isn't enough to tell us what a man did, you've got to tell us who he was.'

- HERMAN J. MANKIEWICZ and ORSON WELLES, *Citizen Kane* screenplay, 1941.

'You cannot capture a man's entire life in two hours. All you can hope is to leave the impression of one.'

- JACK FINCHER, *Mank* screenplay, 2020.

In a study of something as knowingly postmodern as the biopic, it is apposite that the two quotations, above, consciously mirror one another. The first line, from *Citizen Kane* – a news editor urging his reporters to get to the heart of the title character's personality – is echoed eight decades later in a biographical film about *Citizen Kane*'s real-life co-writer. That second statement, from Jack Fincher's script for *Mank* (2020) is the very encapsulation of any screenwriter or filmmaker's struggle to tell the life story of a real figure, however fictive the author's approach. Coming from a biographical film about a screenwriter struggling to write a biopic, it is pop culture folded in on itself. *Mank*, directed by David Fincher using his late father's screenplay, profiles Herman J. Mankiewicz (Gary Oldman) who is virtually captive in a ranch house on the edge of the Californian desert until he completes a draft of *Citizen Kane*. He blurts the line when pressed on how he can possibly contemplate creating a narrative around a figure as complex as William Randolph Hearst – albeit a thinly disguised version of Hearst represented in the fictional Charles Foster Kane. [Though *Citizen Kane* is not technically a biopic, exploring as it does a fictionalised figure, scholars consistently advocate its inclusion in the history of the biographical film. Bingham asserts that 'In its disguised satire of Hearst, *Citizen Kane* fragments, objectifies, and, so to speak, psychoanalyzes the prototypical biopic subject' (2010: Kindle Locations 686-687), and

describes it as '…the central, genre-changing event in the history of the biopic' (Kindle Location 677). In the volume of essays, *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (eds. Brown and Vidal, 2014), Vidal (19), Dwyer (71) and Schlotterbeck (228) all signal *Kane*'s influence on later biographical films.]

The impression of a life…

As someone attempting to write a biographical picture, Fincher Senior's burst of dialogue could barely be more relevant to this doctoral research and creative practice. How can one truly capture anyone's life in 120 pages of screenplay, especially with a figure whose story is as rich, eventful and controversial as Paul Robeson's?

Paul Robeson: The Impression of a Life

"The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."

Paul Robeson uttered these words at the Royal Albert Hall in 1937, during a rally in aid of Basque refugee children fleeing the Spanish Civil War. The words are inscribed on his grave. It is a short statement encapsulating both Robeson's *occupation* as a performing artist, and his *vocation* as an advocate for civil rights and equality for all people. And yet they only reveal a small part of who he was as a person.

Paul Leroy Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1898 and, in his 77 years, achieved acclaim as a scholar, an American football star [twice an All-American selection and described by his coach George Foster Sanford as '…the best football player in the country today' (*The Crisis*, March 1918: 230)], and a lawyer, before becoming best known as a singer and actor. The term 'Renaissance man' is often used within scholarly discourse on

Robeson's life, attesting to his extraordinary breadth of talents – Paul Von Blum, Senior Lecturer in African American Studies at UCLA, described Robeson as 'America's greatest Renaissance person' as recently as 2013 (Swindall, 2013 / 2015). Harold D. Weaver wrote that 'He had just about as good a mind, body, will, and voice — all in one person — as functioned in the first half of the twentieth century' (1973: 24).

Robeson would become one of the biggest acting and recording stars in the English-speaking world, and in many other places too. His stand-out performance as Joe the stevedore in the London production of Hammerstein and Kern's *Show Boat* – and his signature song, *Ol' Man River* – made the show the Theatre Royal's most profitable ever (Boyle & Bunie, 2005) and ensured he was the natural choice for the role in the hit film version of 1936. Recording success and a film career blossomed. His stage career arguably reached its apex with a production of *Othello* in 1943 at New York's Shubert Theater, in which he was the first ever Black actor to take the eponymous lead among a mixed cast on Broadway, in a show that would go on to be the longest run of a Shakespeare play in the city's history (Perucci, 2009: 19). As a singer, Robeson's recordings of *Deep River, Joe Hill, John Brown's Body (Battle Hymn of the Republic)* and *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* confirmed his status as the world's foremost singer of Black spirituals and folk music.

But the above list of fields in which Robeson excelled omits the area that interests me – and most Robeson academics – the most, and which is the impetus for the biopic I have attempted to write: his role as political activist.

While Robeson rose to prominence within an entertainment industry run exclusively by whites, he knew he was an exception, a novelty even. He admitted that in his early career as a performer, he 'shared what was then the prevailing attitude of Negro performers – that the content and form of a play or film scenario was of little or no importance to us. What

mattered was the opportunity […] and for a Negro actor to be offered a *starring* role- well, that was a rare stroke of fortune indeed!' (Robeson, 1957: 31). Much later in his life, and after six years blacklisted and banned from leaving the United States, Robeson told a HUAC hearing, in response to the suggestion there was no longer colour prejudice in America and that Robeson's own success was evidence of that: 'This is something that I challenge very deeply, and very sincerely: that the success of a few Negroes, including myself or Jackie Robinson can make up for [the struggle of] …thousands of Negro families in the South.'

Robeson's early ideological awakening came in the twenties, and by 1934, he was studying African languages and culture at the London School for Oriental Languages, writing on the subject for *The Spectator*: 'It is my first concern to dispel the regrettable and abysmal ignorance of the value of its own heritage in the Negro race itself…' This statement squarely demonstrates Robeson's belief that the study and promotion of Africa would empower Black people of all nationalities. He wrote on the same subject for *The New Statesman* and *Nation* during this period, resulting in a caution from British Intelligence over views that could potentially inspire colonial revolt (Robeson: 35). Reflecting on Robeson's African studies, Harold D. Weaver asserted in *The Black Scholar* that 'Robeson linked the liberation struggle of his people in America with the same struggle of his people in Africa' (1973: 24-32).

Robeson's protest at this time came in a softer form – of focusing on Black spirituals in concerts and refusing acting roles that further cemented stereotypical images of Black people. He became especially galvanised following his appearance in the 1935 British film *Sanders of the River* (directed by Zoltán Korda), playing a Nigerian chief in what he was quoted as saying during filming would be a "faithfully accurate" depiction of colonial struggle, and would "do a lot towards the better understanding of Negro culture and customs" (Duberman, 1989: 179). The finished film turned out to be a pro-colonial celebration of the

necessity for the white man to bring order to Africa, that was both infuriating and humiliating for Robeson (Swindall, 2013/2015: 69-70).

This interest in Africa, Robeson claimed, led directly to his fascination with the socialist system of the Soviet Union, attracted initially by perceived connections between the Yakut and Uzbek nations and the tribal structures of East Africa (Robeson, 1957: 33-34). By the end of 1934, he was visiting the USSR for the first time at the request of film director Sergei Eisenstein, and, by the end of that trip, his affiliation with Soviet principles and communist ideology was established, culminating in a speech to the Moscow press in which he declared: 'Here I am not a Negro but a human being… Here, for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity' (Seton, 1958: 94-95).

Duberman notes that on his return from Russia, he told a journalist that his interest in the USSR 'was, and is, completely non-political' (1989: 190) and, in a separate interview in the same year, he stated that 'I am more interested in cultures than in politics' (175). Nonetheless, Robeson was already developing unfashionable anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist views.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) served as a watershed for Robeson – he dubbed a visit to the battlefields of Spain in 1938 'a major turning point in my life' (Robeson, 1957: 53) – when he became exercised to extol his firm beliefs in a socialist, anti-fascist democracy. There was no denying his politicisation anymore, with his opinions becoming significantly more muscular. Impassioned speeches in support of the labour movement, firstly in Britain and then in America on returning to his country of birth in 1940, made him a marked man in terms of MI5 and FBI surveillance, but would his audience remain loyal?

While celebrities are now very consciously associated with liberal *causes célèbres*, Robeson remained a curiosity in 1940s America. His enthusiasm to publicly present his

fiercely left-wing views was courageous and potentially career-ending, given the deep-rooted right-wing ideologies prevalent in the entertainment industry at the time. However, his record-breaking run playing Othello in the early forties, along with the extraordinary success of 1939's *Ballad for Americans* on CBS Radio – a ten-minute patriotic cantata that proved so popular it was repeated regularly throughout the war years and released as a record that was, uniquely, played before Republican, Democrat and Communist Party conventions in 1940 (Barg, 2008) – saw his popularity multiply. But his ideological standpoint was attracting the attention of reactionary arms of the American establishment.

The Dies Committee – the precursor to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that would become the cornerstone of the McCarthy witch-trials to come – was already monitoring Robeson by 1941, their concerns piqued by his continued association with both the Soviet Union (his son, Paul Jr., had already been through school in Russia) and with communist thinkers and party members closer to home (Duberman, 1989: 239). Martin Dies Jr., the congressman for Texas who led the committee, lay in wait for any inkling of information or any action from Robeson that would reveal him as a communist – an accusation that would, in Dies' eyes, make him indisputably *un-American*.

In his 1957 autobiography, *Here I Stand*, Robeson plainly emphasises the mantra by which he lived his life, in the foreword: 'I speak as an American Negro whose life is dedicated, first and foremost, to winning full freedom, and nothing less than full freedom, for my people in America' (3). He later adds: 'I […] care – and deeply – about the America of the common people I have met across this land… the working men and women whose picket-lines I have joined,' those labourers of all colours who he later describes by quoting directly from *Ballad for Americans*, 'the Etceteras and the And-so-forths, that do the work' (4). Firstly, it is the rights of the African American population that is Robeson's priority, followed close behind by the interests in equality for working classes of all races. Paul Robeson Jr.

wrote that his father once said to him: '"I'm a human being first," he said, "a Negro second and a Marxist third. But all three of those levels are inseparably connected."' (2010: 56). For Robeson, real emancipation could only truly be accomplished through socialism. Such a sentiment would be enough for Dies and his ilk to be ruffled. Their quarry had become more than just an actor and singer; he had become a genuine political figure of considerable force, a danger to the establishment both sides of the Atlantic. As Goodman notes, 'There has never been a popular entertainer with so much political impact' (2013: xii).

In 1949, the political right-wing found its opportunity to strike – an opportunity presented not by rigorous surveillance work by government agents, or any significant misstep by Robeson, but instead by a poorly written press report…

Paul Robeson attended the Congress of the World Partisans for Peace in Paris in April 1949, a left-leaning group of two thousand members from fifty nations. Robeson sang standards, and then uttered some remarks to the audience. According to the printed transcript of a speech by Robeson and in the account in *L'Humanité*, he said the following words (Duberman, 1989: 342; Goodman, 2013: 46-50):

'The wealth of America has been built on the backs of the white workers from Europe… and on the backs of millions of blacks… And we are resolved to share it equally among our children. And we shall not put up with any hysterical raving that urges us to make war on anyone. Our will to fight for peace is strong. (APPLAUSE) We shall not make war on anyone. (SHOUTS) We shall not make war on the Soviet Union. (NEW SHOUTS)'

The Associated Press's version of the speech was dispatched across news sources in the United States and the United Kingdom without being checked for accuracy, and deviates to such an extent from the formal transcript that it is difficult to imagine the distortions and

tonal shift in emphasis were anything but deliberate. The A.P. report filed by Joseph Dynan stated that Robeson's speech went as follows:

'We colonial peoples have contributed to the building of the United States and are determined to share in its wealth. We denounce the policy of the United States government, which is similar to that of Hitler and Goebbels… It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.'

The (presumably) doctored version of the speech made national headlines across the U.S., framing Robeson's words as anti-American.

The decline in his status as a darling of stage and recording audiences was immediate. Robeson's son, Paul Robeson, Jr., reflected on this dramatic change to his father's reputation following the Paris speech when interviewed by a U.S. Government official many years later: 'Dad's status in America in the 1940s, especially the middle forties, is important to understand […] He was a unique black figure, in the sense that he was a dominant cultural figure and […] he had established himself as one of the leaders of the American stage, the concert stage, […] movie industries…' Robeson Jr. continues on events following the Paris speech, which he says, 'made him from everybody's all-American into, by 1949… America's sort of enemy-number-one. America's number one dissident, you might say' (National Security Archive (United States), 1960, roll 10114).

The attack on Robeson from the reactionary right reached a crescendo at an outdoor concert he was due to perform at Peekskill, fifty miles from New York City, in late August 1949. Before Robeson had even arrived, a mob of anti-Communist protesters, including various chapters of the American Legion, attacked members of the audience as they arrived.

Gerald Horne quotes reports by the American Civil Liberties Union: '"Behind the anti-Communist sentiments marshaled by [military] veterans [was…] prejudice against Negroes and Jews", egged on by "provocation of the local press", aided by "the mob spirit of youthful hoodlums"' (2016: 122). In the interest of public safety, the concert was called off, an outcome hailed as a victory by Legion leaders.

A second date was swiftly arranged, 4th September. Distrusting of the police whose response had been minimal at the initial event, hundreds of volunteers from unions such as the Fur and Leather Workers and Longshoremen created a ring of defence around the Cortlandt Manor estate where the event was to take place, enabling concertgoers and performers inside largely unscathed.

This time, Robeson was able to perform, along with other left-leaning artists like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, but the ordeal was far from over. After the concert, thousands of anti-Robeson protesters flanked the cars and buses that left the venue, their numbers estimated to be up to 8,000 in some reports (Duberman, 1989: 368), with the 'car carrying Robeson […] targeted for special attention, as even the police joined in smashing the windows of his vehicle before it escaped with desperation' (Horne, 123). Crosses were burned and an effigy of Robeson was hanged from a tree before being set alight. Four years after America had played its part in crushing fascism in Europe, the racist overtones closer to home were as evident as any anti-socialist agenda. Duberman writes of veterans of the Second World War 'yelling anti-Semitic and anti-black remarks and taunting [concertgoers] with threats: "We'll kill you!"' (369). Goodman notes that: 'According to the *New York Herald Tribune*, more than 200 people were injured, six of them seriously' (2013: 128). Lindsey R. Swindall writes that 'those on the left viewed Peekskill as a harbinger of the extent to which anti-Communist hysteria had seized the nation' (2013: 125). Robeson's

America had become much changed and it was certain that the turbulence in his political situation would soon come to a head.

In 1950, Robeson's passport was revoked by the State Department.

Despite rumblings from government since his words in Paris a year earlier, and then following Peekskill, it was a speech Robeson made at an event sponsored by the Civil Rights Congress in Madison Square Garden, New York, that prompted the decision to confiscate his passport. Robeson railed against the U.S. Government's decision to enter the Korean War – a battle against the communist, Soviet-backed North Korea – and warned that this could lead to America invading other nations and continents, including Africa. Swindall reports that 'Robeson reminded Black America that the place for them to fight was for their full freedom back home' (130-131).

In the aftermath of the New York speech, and with the State Department increasingly worried by Robeson accepting an invitation to what it termed "a Communist meeting" in Rome (Goodman, 2013: 198) [actually a meeting of the Italian National Council of Peace Partisans], stop notices were sent to seaports and airports. The State and FBI were concerned Robeson would flee the country before they could complete the required paperwork of cancelling his documents.

He was now unable to travel outside of the United States, even into Canada which, according to peacetime law, did not even warrant Americans to carry a passport.

For most A-list entertainers at that time, entire careers could be easily sustained in the United States – but, for Robeson, still intrinsically linked with Europe, especially Britain where he remained very much in demand, such a ban was fatal to his celebrity and his concert touring. Worse still was the fact it would now be impossible for Robeson to attend congresses

and meetings in other nations, and so his influence on international peace and labour movements would gradually wane.

It was a crushing blow from which he would never truly recover.

The reasons for the revocation were given at various times as Robeson's affiliations with the USSR and his refusal to submit a non-Communist affidavit, at other times due to his advocacy for the independence of colonised nations in Africa, and finally because of his protracted criticism of the treatment of Black people in America (Robeson, 1957: 64; Duberman, 1989: 389).

Six years into the ban, Robeson famously attended a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing in Washington D.C. For the first time, a reason for the revocation was given publicly. Chairman Francis Walter began HUAC proceedings (on 12th June 1956) with: "This morning, the Committee resumes its series of hearings on the vital issue of the use of American passports as travel documents in furtherance of the objectives of the Communist conspiracy." While the State Department's reasons had largely been kept vague previously, the anti-Communist agenda, and Robeson's suggestion that Black Americans might be unwilling to take up arms against Soviet forces, had by then taken precedent.

For eight years in total, Paul Robeson and his wife, Eslanda, and son, Paul Jr. (his family were not spared, with officials concerned they would spread Paul's message if they were allowed to travel themselves), were interned in the United States, with Paul blacklisted.

Saul J. Turrell's 1979 documentary film, *Robeson: Tribute to an Artist*, narrated by Sidney Poitier, tells of some of the pettiness in Robeson's scratching from history: 'Concerts were cancelled, Robeson records were withdrawn from stores. Unbelievably, even his selection, years before, as All-American end for Rutgers was wiped from the record. The 1917-1918 College Football Hall of Fame listed the only ten-man All-American team in

history. The eleventh man, Paul Robeson, was eliminated – erased from the record books' (an injustice only corrected with his inclusion in the College Football Hall of Fame in 1995 (Armour, 1995)).

In the wake of Paul Robeson's treatment, a protest movement soon emerged in Britain. The 'Let Robeson Sing' campaign was conceived in Scotland, gained traction in Manchester, before word reached Wales… (Duberman, 1989: 424-425)

Paul Robeson finds himself positioned historically between two key periods in the history of the struggle for Black equality in the United States. He lived long after the abolition of slavery (though Robeson's own father, William Drew Robeson, was an escaped slave ensuring this was still a very present cultural memory), but his most active period was in the years before the emergence of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the turbulent 1960s. Writers have noted how Robeson bridged this temporal gap in the history of American Black politics. Robeson's personal biographer Lloyd Brown quotes the Chicago *Crusader* magazine's editorial on Paul from 1958: 'There are times in our struggle for full equality when stalwart men like Robeson, carved in the heroic mould of [… Frederick] Douglass […] are needed for the physical example [of Black protest]' (Robeson, 1971 edition: 30). While historian Gerald Horne more recently described Robeson as '…a forerunner of the likes of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, one cannot begin to understand the lives and trajectories of those two men without considering Robeson' (2016: 1). Robeson and other prominent African American figures from the early-to-mid-twentieth century – notably his friend W.E.B. Du Bois – have come to see their contributions overlooked, sandwiched as they were between two explosive periods in American history: the Great Depression and World War Two, and then the civil rights movement of the sixties.

But such an accident of chronology is, of course, not the chief reason for Robeson's presence in the public cultural psyche becoming diminished. In 2016, Robeson scholar Mark Rhodes described him as, 'one of the greatest yet most unknown figures of the 20th century' (2016: 235). In 2017, acclaimed actor David Harewood said: 'I was just amazed that I'd never heard of this person before (…) I was amazed that this man was not celebrated, shouted from the rooftops.' By some distance, the most significant reason for his semi-omission from Black history is much more sinister than the timing of his career, and that is his deliberate exclusion from the public record, driven by right-wing politicians and a compliant media, a reactionary action that resounds even today.

One of my own personal triggers for choosing to explore and write about Paul Robeson's contribution to the cause of Black rights came in 2017 when, on a research trip to Madrid (where Robeson spent time during the Spanish Civil War), I spoke to an African American undergraduate majoring in history. She had never heard of Paul Robeson and questioned why I should be researching someone so anonymous. Momentarily, my confidence in the subject was rocked; though this exchange would eventually steel me to persevere, a first-hand example of how Robeson's political contribution has been, to some degree, scrubbed from history, especially in America, and why my ambition to write a biographical film about him is especially apposite.

But why should I, a white writer, consider myself qualified to tell the story – *or, at least, a fictive version of the story* – of a Black American activist?

A Shared Struggle – Robeson and the mining communities of Wales

The screenplay I am attempting to write is not solely about Paul Robeson. It is about Paul Robeson and his abiding relationship with the miners of Wales.

In 1929, Robeson was performing in *Show Boat* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, when, following a matinee, he heard a choir singing, distant at first. He chased what his son, Paul Robeson Jr., would later describe as 'the rich sound' (2008: 156) until he came across a group of Welsh miners who had marched from the Rhondda to Downing Street to petition the government to increase workers' wages. Robeson Jr continues: 'One of their signs said they had walked all the way from Wales to petition the government for help. But what Paul instantly seized upon was their spirit and their suffering as human beings. Without hesitation, he joined the group, walking the streets with them and humming along. When they reached one of the large downtown buildings, Paul climbed the front steps and sang "Ol' Man River," ballads, and spirituals to his new friends' (156). The image of Robeson searching the streets for the source of those harmonies, and then sharing an impromptu improvised concert, is gloriously cinematic.

This chance meeting led to a bond that would last decades, beginning with Paul paying for those marching miners to return home on a train with an additional car arranged to carry food and clothing for the men and their families. 'That year he contributed the proceeds of one of his concerts to the Welsh miners' relief fund and visited the Rhondda Valley in person to sing for the mining communities and talk with the people,' Robeson Jr. recalls, before emphasising: 'This was the beginning of a lifetime of ardent friendship between Paul and the people of South Wales' (156).

Robeson would go on to perform regularly across Wales and to forge an understanding that resonated with both parties. He recalled, specifically about the struggle against fascism in the Spanish Civil War but relevant throughout their relationship, that, 'The Welsh miners […] made it clear that there was a closer bond between us than the general struggle to preserve democracy […] They pointed out [that] although I was famous and wealthy, the fact was I came from a working-class people like themselves and therefore, they

said, my place was with them' (Robeson, 1958: 54). Boyle & Bunie concur: 'Robeson's contact with Welsh miners solidified his growing conviction that at heart the racial question was a class question and that the oppression of any people limited the freedom for all' (2001: 403).

Later, Robeson would write of the trans-Atlantic concert in 1957 (with Robeson banned from leaving America, he had been invited to perform over telephone to the Miners' Eisteddfod in Porthcawl): '…here was an audience that had adopted me as kin and though they were unseen by me I never felt closer to them' (1958: 56).

Robeson would tell the gathered crowd at the National Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale in 1958, on his return to Wales following his internment in the United States: "Back in the twenties, I was… building a career. I went to South Wales to sing and the Welsh miners took me, Paul Robeson, to their hearts. I went again and again and once I carried a banner in their unemployed march. That was the turning point in my life, around 1930. For the first time I had white people who made me a true friend" (Horne, 2016: 169-170).

Wales's union politics would make an important impression on Robeson. It would be wholly disingenuous to suggest he had not been politically motivated before meeting those miners marching in London, but his connection with the unions and communities of Wales ignited a spark. 'His frequent visits to mining towns in Wales were part of that newfound political orientation,' Sparrow states (2017: Kindle location 2023). Siân Williams, curator at the South Wales Miners' Library, emphasised the influence on Robeson in 2010: "Wales represents just a small fraction of Paul Robeson's international work in confronting injustice, but you could make an argument that it was that revelation with the south Wales miners which started it all" (Prior, 2010).

But it was not simply a case of the miners politicising Robeson; the relationship worked both ways. Uzo Iwobe, then chief executive of Race Council Cymru, spoke in 2019 of Robeson's effect on the people of Wales, and the contribution he made to their lives: "How much impact could the miners have made in their cause without his [Robeson's] support?... The key point of his legacy is he drew the world's gaze to the miners' plight in Wales. He was such a big persona and a world class singer and actor, the fact he championed the cause of the miners having faced such disadvantage himself is poignant. The legacy he has made has had a remarkable impact and obviously coming from an enslaved background, you're seeing how that negative thing was turned around to be a positive in Wales" (Dewey, 2019).

This legacy, and the adulation he inspired among his Welsh friends, resounds. Broadcaster Beverley Humphries, who helped to collate the 'Let Paul Robeson Sing!' exhibition that first toured Welsh museums in 2001, explains: "Men and women who had only been in his presence for two minutes, who had been at a concert and heard him sing and then afterwards spoke to him. He would look at them and, in those two minutes, make them feel that they were the most important person in the world. […] There was something about him that held people, that immediately made this very strong connection — and they just never forgot. […] I've never known anything like it; I've never known someone to have such an effect after so many years" (Sparrow, 2017: Kindle location 2041).

This wholly reciprocal friendship would create tremors in both Wales and America, with Robeson becoming a subversive political agitator, shaped in part by the miners and their communities. "It's from the miners in Wales," Robeson declared, "[that] I first understood the struggle of Negro and white together" (Dewey, 2019; Sparrow: Kindle location 2155). It is this declaration, above any other, that inspires and shapes my screenplay.

I am conscious that, as a white writer, I am not necessarily well placed to tell a story of a Black figure. However, I believe that, being a Welsh writer, I am well placed to write a screenplay that focuses on the relationship between Paul Robeson and the people of Wales. My story is a love story, of a mutual adoration that would transcend hardship, oppression, racism, war and fascism.

In 2020, I interviewed D.J. Britton who wrote the 2011 biographical play, *The Wizard, the Goat and the Man Who Won the War* about British prime minister – and proud Welshman – David Lloyd George. Britton spoke of the crucial distinction in writing a historical character, and the mantra by which he developed the drama as both writer and director: "I said all along that this is not Lloyd George, this is *our* [version of] Lloyd George". I instantly identified with this when researching Robeson and the Welsh miners: this is not the definitive version of that relationship, it is merely my fictive, filmic reading of that relationship and the events that shaped it. I declare emphatically that this is not *the* biopic of Paul Robeson's life, but it is my creative rendition of the power of a friendship bound by a shared socialist ideology. I believe I possess the right to tell that story. Although a writer will not always receive such input, I would – if this film were ever to go into production – campaign for a Black director to provide a sense of cultural balance. I would not want this to remain a story told only by white creatives.

I am keen to avoid the controversy that surrounded the development and production of *Selma* (2014), in which the events of the Selma to Montgomery protest march in 1965 are followed from the perspective of Martin Luther King. Although limited to the months leading up to and including the Selma protest, the picture is a biographical character study of King (played by David Oyelowo), thus fitting within the frame of my research. Paul Webb – a

white Briton – is the film's sole credited screenwriter, though director Ava DuVernay – an African American – claimed in the Boston Globe after its release that she had extensively rewritten the screenplay to avoid it turning into "a traditional bio-pic," and, more critically, a "white savior movie." DuVernay said: "We've grown up as a country and cinema should be able to reflect what's true. And what's true is that black people are the center of their own lives and should tell their own stories from their own perspectives" (Loren King, 2015).

DuVernay's greatest criticism was reserved for the film's pivotal relationship between Dr King and President Lyndon B. Johnson. In Webb's original screenplay, DuVernay claimed it was "much more slanted towards Johnson." Webb refuted this at the time: "Dr King has about 650 lines in my original script and Johnson has just over 400. That gives you some idea: it's Dr King's story," he told the BBC (Dowd, 2015). Webb admitted that his first idea had been to explore Johnson's contribution to expanding voting rights in 1965, but while researching the project, he discovered that "the man who had made it necessary to pass the legislation so urgently was Martin Luther King. The story which needed telling was the Selma voting rights campaign, in which he was central." Sam Tanenhaus, a white columnist in *The New Yorker*, contends that Webb's script is accurate in how King and Johnson's negotiations played out historically, and that it 'captures this collaborative aspect in its complexity. His L.B.J. and M.L.K. circle each other warily, at once antagonists and allies, competitors and comrades.' Tanenhaus argues that DuVernay's interpretation owes more to cinematic cliché than it does to political history: 'DuVernay has reverted to the old formula. L.B.J., like so many before him, has fulfilled the time-honored role of the white man in American race movies—he has at last seen the light' [earlier in his article, Tanenhaus references films such as *The Defiant Ones* and *In the Heat of the Night* in which white man and Black join forces, with the white hero enlightened by his Black mentor figure].

Kevin Delin argues that DuVernay's version of the Selma story may not be as beholden to historical accuracy per se, but she includes narrative elements that help the audience better understand the common struggle in a way Webb's script does not: 'DuVernay accurately depicts a fragmented black community, including the split between the Southern Leadership Christian Conference (King's organizational base) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who had been the boots-on-the-ground effort in Selma before King showed up. Here, DuVernay truly makes history vibrant' (2015). Delin contends that an artistic retelling of history, though not one hundred percent fact, is more effective in finding the truth.

The difficulties in bringing *Selma* to screen, and the suggestions of white saviour bias, serve as a cautionary note in the creation of my Robeson story.

A happier collaboration occurred more recently between writer-director Steve McQueen and screenwriter Alastair Siddons who together scripted three of McQueen's *Small Axe* (2020) series of films for the BBC, all based on real-life events in late-20th century Black British history. [Coincidentally, McQueen, the first Black filmmaker to win the Academy Award for Best Picture (for a biopic, *12 Years a Slave*), has mooted the possibility of a Paul Robeson film for some years, and created the art-film installation, *End Credits*, initially in 2010 but further developed since, which played hours of FBI reports on their surveillance of Robeson (Johnson, 2016).] In conversation about one of the *Small Axe* films, *Mangrove*, Siddons discusses his involvement and "the pressure of being a white man writing this story" alongside McQueen (Moser, 2020). Siddons' process was to ensure his research was rigorous and beyond reproach: "I have a documentary background and I think he [McQueen] recognised that." Siddons forensically researched newspaper reports, solicitors' notes and old 16mm film stock, and interviewed some of the key players in the events surrounding the Mangrove Nine (Black activists accused of inciting violence against the Metropolitan Police,

whose names were eventually cleared in a court case in which institutional racism within the police force was first formally acknowledged). Through becoming as expert as possible in the events surrounding the Mangrove Nine, it seems Siddons' credentials – and skin colour – were never questioned, even if he remained conscious of the tightrope he walked: "…because I had done so much research on the court case, by the time we started writing the beginning of Mangrove I felt like I knew a lot by that point, which helped when trying to put words in the mouths of [the actors]."

I hope that through my own research, confidence in my subject and a sensitive approach to writing this story of interracial collaboration, *Robeson: They Can't Stop Us Singing* will avoid any negative accusations.

Which Life Should I Tell?

"Everything in the film is true to the spirit of him."

- Glenn Patterson, co-writer of *Good Vibrations* (2013). Interview, 15th January 2021.

When writing a fictive biopic of a renaissance figure, there are myriad choices over which story to tell. No one life contains just one linear narrative, and Robeson's remarkably eclectic talents, as well as key events that span a number of decades, immediately presented me with a problem over which elements would be integral to the drama within my screenplay.

Screenwriter Craig Mazin said in 2014 that "I like biopics, but they live or die on the strength of the events of that person's life" (Scriptnotes podcast, ep.24), which, if it were true, would imply that a film about Robeson – whose life was rich in achievement and controversy

– would be relatively simple to construct. And yet, I would attest that this richness of experience poses a monumental challenge. People's lives, however extraordinary, never follow neatly packaged narratives arcs. Ellen Cheshire quotes *The Sydney Morning Herald*: 'You need a better storyteller for biopics than for fiction. The truth is a huge handicap to storytelling: real life doesn't come in three act structures' (2015: 12). While Anthony McCarten, prolific writer of biopics including *Darkest Hour, The Theory of Everything* and *Bohemian Rhapsody,* commented ruefully in 2017: "History is a lousy filmmaker." The process of telling a true story, even with some conscious dramatic licence, still necessitates the creation of a strong arc, only one that is framed by historical events and characters, meticulously researched. Careful structural planning of the screenplay is required, with every choice as conscious as those of a writer creating an original imagined story.

In January 2021 I interviewed Glenn Patterson, who, with Colin Carberry, co-wrote *Good Vibrations* (2013), earning a BAFTA nomination for best screenplay. The film – directed by Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn – is a biopic about Terri Hooley, a Belfast record shop owner who was moved by a vibrant underground punk scene to create his own record label at the height of the Troubles in the 1970s. It is both surreal and gritty, a vibrant, joyful tragicomedy about a niche public figure who created a glorious movement in the direst of circumstances – and yet continually failed to make a living for himself or his family. It is a biopic very much in the British and Irish tradition, far removed from the Stracheyan Great Man biopics of classical Hollywood and falling more in line with Alexander and Karaszewski's ironically styled 'biopic[s] of someone who doesn't deserve one,' cited earlier in this exegesis. Patterson and Carberry insert a title card at the beginning of the film: 'Based on the true stories of Terri Hooley,' which Patterson says he and Carberry used as "a marker for ourselves," while writing. Recollections and different perceptions are pluralistic. Biopics should be no different. Patterson quotes his author's note from his own novel, *Gull* (2016),

about John DeLorean's infamous sports car, which he said could be true of most biographical stories: 'I made this all up, apart from the bits you just couldn't.'

Patterson spoke of the challenge in constructing a strong cinematic story from the sprawling canvas of a person's life: "They [biopics] are ninety minutes or two hours – that's it. Instantly it has to be less, it has to be selective, it has to compress, to tell any portion of it. You need to accept that as an audience and as a writer, or as the subject if you're still alive – that's what you're working within." He added: "Thereafter, it's how gratuitously you depart from historical record and why you should do it."

The choice of *what* and *when* to feature in a biopic is guided, of course, by story. So, how does one decide on which specific story to tell? Blake Snyder writes in *Save the Cat!* about the importance of a logline (2005: 4-19, 63) in formulating your story (as well as selling your script). Many screenwriters will write their logline – their one-line pitch – after completing their screenplay, a necessary evil required to attract a producer or studio. For me, I need a logline <u>before</u> beginning to write. For any film based on anyone's life or on real events, then certain elements are immoveable – the main character and what happens to him/her – and yet this one line should still encapsulate a story. It still needs conflict, a strong character, a problem to solve. Snyder writes of four elements required in an effective logline and, largely, I agree with them: a sense of irony, a compelling mental picture, appreciation of your audience, and a strong title. The irony in the logline arises from a mundane or more familiar situation being twisted. Snyder cites *Die Hard*'s logline: 'A cop comes to L.A. to visit his estranged wife and her office building is taken over by terrorists' (6) that turns a small human drama about a husband seeking reconciliation into an action-thriller. Like a good joke, it reconfigures our expectations in a sentence's second sub-clause. It could also refer to a lead character who is successful (the comfortable situation), but then that success is thrown into turmoil by a sudden shift.

If one were to put the presence of the Welsh miners to one side for a moment, and were to write a pitch for a hypothetical Paul Robeson Story to a producer, it would probably go something like this:

"Singer Paul Robeson is the most famous African American in the world, but his fight for Black freedom means the State wants him silenced."

Our protagonist is established, as well as a clear villain, and jeopardy introduced. There is irony in Robeson being "the most famous African American in the world" and so presumably comfortable, not wishing this circumstance to change. The second half of the pitch, though, introduces that change. There is a clear sense of drama, even in such abbreviated form – the sense that Robeson is at the top of his game so, by nature, has much to lose. And there is an antagonist – the State – that is as powerful a threat as we could imagine in a true-life story.

But my version of Robeson's story is dependent on his close relationship with the mining community of Wales. It is a story of friendship, of mutual struggle, and so the pitch for my Robeson film needs to reflect this. My chosen subheading in the film's title, 'They Can't Stop Us Singing', consciously uses the plural first-person pronoun, referring to a joint struggle, as well as referencing a line from *Proud Valley*'s opening song ('You Can't Stop Us Singing') that was interpolated into the folk melody, *Ar Hyd y Nos*. [Boyle and Bunie fixate on this choice of lyric, asserting that it is representative of how, in the film, 'choral singing became one way of suggesting solidarity and, by implication, union solidarity' (2001: 418)] Immediately, the narrative becomes more nuanced, and a pitch potentially more convoluted. However, following Snyder, I am certain that to tell a story of worth, the shorthand synopsis needs to be muscular and unapologetic.

“One of the most famous singers in the world. A community struggling to survive… Only together can they defeat the governments who want them silenced.”

It is unashamedly Hollywood, reading like a strapline on a poster as much as a synopsis but, I hope, it captures the spirit of the story I aim to tell. Most importantly, it reminds me of the story that I am telling. The high stakes – of Robeson having his fame and success to preserve – remain, but now with the addition of a community whose members’ livelihoods are in peril. “Only together…”, in the final sentence, incorporates the collaborative struggle Robeson and the miners will face, though I concede that “the governments” does not carry the same threat as “the State” with the latter’s threatening, paranoia-inducing connotations. A singular villain is stronger – however, with Robeson and the miners facing threats from different States, it felt dishonest to use “the State” as an umbrella term. I considered using “powers” in place of “governments” but reasoned it sounded too vague, too abstract, and less immediate.

For me, creating a logline allows me to focus on a script that is purposeful and strident. Without it, it is easy for the story to drift, especially in a biographical film, becoming nothing more than a series of events.

Then, which parts of Paul Robeson’s life should be included in my screenplay, and which parts will create the most enthralling possible story in keeping with the logline? There lies a temptation to include all his achievements – for example, his exploits on the American football gridiron and his retrospective removal from All-American selections would warrant a movie on their own – and yet, in the context of a film about not only Robeson but also his connection with the coal miners of Wales, I needed to focus on only the most relevant moments.

A chronological list of the most crucial events in Robeson and the miners' story would be this:

1929	Robeson meets a group of miners in London on a hunger march. A connection forged. He is not a political man.
1929	Robeson first visits Wales.
1934	Robeson researches African culture, monitored by MI5.
1934	Robeson visits the Soviet Union.
1936-38	Spanish Civil War. Welsh miners joining the International Brigade.
1937	Speech at Albert Hall: "Every artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery…"
1938	Robeson goes to Spain. Returns to Mountain Ash memorial.
1939	*Proud Valley* is made at Ealing Studios and Llantrisant. Second World War.
1940	Robeson and his family return to the U.S.
1940-49	Robeson's American successes. Dies Committee (HUAC) and FBI stalking him.
1949	Robeson's Paris speech; Peekskill.
1950	Revocation of Robeson's passport. Blacklisted.
1950-58	Robeson's (justified) paranoia. Welsh miners' crusade to 'Let Robeson Sing!'
1956	HUAC hearing. Robeson: "You are the un-Americans!"
1957	Robeson performs at Miners' Eisteddfod over trans-Atlantic phone line.
1958	Passport returned. Robeson attends Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale.

A quick glance of these seemingly essential moments immediately highlights a major concern: from Robeson first chancing upon the miners in London, attracted by their harmonies, to his triumphant return to Wales after his passport is returned, the story spans almost 30 years. With three decades to cover, the writer – and, more pertinently, the production team – is faced with the problem of either compressing events to imply they

happened closer together chronologically; using two actors to play each major role (a younger Paul and Essie, then an older Paul and Essie), a technique used credibly in many films such as *The Jolson Story* (1946), *Walk the Line* (2005) and *The Iron Lady* (2011); or artificially ageing the same actors using make-up (an expensive and often hopeless task, as evidenced in *J. Edgar*'s (2011) ghoulish prosthetics used to show Leonardo Di Caprio and Armie Hammer in different time periods) (Borrelli, 2012).

Patterson and Carberry, during their decade-long development of *Good Vibrations*, continually refined the script, losing major segments to tighten the action into a shorter unit of time. Glenn Patterson explained to me: "In the making of the film, there are at least three other films that we never got to make. The script had a big 1960s section when Terri was a member of the student movement without actually being a student (…) but it went, as we didn't need it – we needed to get the 1970s story quicker."

I wrote earlier in this paper of Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *Team of Rivals*, the book on which Kushner and Spielberg's 2013 film *Lincoln* was partly based, and how she recalled that '…the brilliant decision was made to focus on the single month [to create…] a thriller of a story that has a beginning, middle and end.' The ingredients of a strong driving narrative are still essential for a biopic script. But does time need to be condensed in order to achieve this?

For Robeson and the miners of Wales, it would be difficult to exclude either their first meeting in London, or their reunion in 1958 – two extraordinarily cinematic moments, the first event leading inexorably towards the latter. There is a case for compressing that time period – to suggest, perhaps, that only a decade passed between those two moments. Simon Beaufoy's script for *Battle of the Sexes* (2017, directed by Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton) did this, collapsing a three-year story into one in order to sustain urgency in the

narrative, and little is spoiled for the watcher. However, Robeson and the miners' stories are so entwined in well-known history that it would seem disingenuous to place these specific events into different time periods. The miners marched on Downing Street in 1929 as a direct response to British government action that had boiled away since the General Strike of 1926. Then, Robeson's confrontations with HUAC and the American establishment are mired so wholly in the Cold War paranoia of the late-1940s and 1950s, it would seem incongruous if presented as having happened in a different time-period.

Determined not to force a director to either utilise prosthetic make-up, or to employ younger and older actors to play the principal characters, I took a different approach which was simply not to refer to exact years. In my first draft, we first meet Robeson as he sings *Ol' Man River* in the West End. In that initial script, a caption appeared on screen: 'THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE - LONDON, 1929.' By simply removing this caption's precise reference to the year, the viewer is not asked to consider the chronology in any real detail. The way the characters in the film are dressed, and then – when outside the theatre in the next scene, following Will Paynter and his comrades marching through the London streets – the sight of 1920s cars, buses and tram cars, will signal to the viewer that this is early-to-mid-twentieth century without asking them to consider timelines too deeply. As the film progresses, and leaps are made to the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and then to the 1950s McCarthy witch-hunts, they will happen without stopping to consider the passing of time. For those viewers aware of dates, no lie is made, while others will simply accept these events as seemingly happening one after the other within the narrative. Characters may age slightly with a few flecks of white hair and simple ageing make-up, but wholesale prosthetic makeovers can be avoided. In fact, it is surprising how little the real Paul and Essie Robeson changed visibly during that period, other than perhaps when Paul finally returned to Wales and ill health was beginning to take hold. This moment, in 1958, is marked in the

script when Billy Baresi sets eyes on Paul and Essie as they step off the train in Cardiff:

Billy's surprised how much older they look.

The sense of when a life story should begin and end presents the filmmaker with a difficult choice. It is rare that we see a cradle-to-grave biopic. We have seen that D.W. Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln* is a notable – and less successful – exception, as well as 1951's *The Great Caruso* (screenplay by Sonya Levien and William Ludwig, directed by Richard Thorpe), which Custen suggests, attempts to demonstrate 'that the gift that would bring the hero fame was present in some embryonic form at life's debut' (67). But such films are uncommon, especially since the end of the classical Hollywood system, with the central figure's legacy more likely determined by accumulated experience or by catharsis that comes later in life.

As observed when discussing the choices made by Wilder and Mayes in writing Charles Lindbergh's story in *The Spirit of St Louis* (avoiding the grisly incidents surrounding the murder of Lindbergh's son), the decision of when one's film-story stops and starts will drastically change the tone of the picture. Beginning and ending the film with the rare occurrences when Robeson and the miners came face to face ensures, I believe, a strong filmic Campbellian arc, two episodes mirroring one another in ways that are complementary, achieved with few stage tricks.

Certainly, in more recent biopics, the choice of time-period has become more abstract, flitting unapologetically between time periods. *The Iron Lady*'s (2011) screenwriter Abi Morgan splices time in her skilfully composed analysis of Margaret Thatcher's life, beginning in the present and cutting frequently from the 1950s to the subject's time as prime minister (1979-90) and to the contemporary dementia-struck aftermath of husband Denis's death in the present day [or, as Morgan notes at the start of her screenplay: '**Author's Note:**

References to "PRESENT" mean the undifferentiated years of the recent past (not 2011).'] In fact, there are 61 non-chronological cuts to different time periods in Morgan's 96-page script, and yet it reads clearly, the relevant year marked in each scene heading, and the final film directed by Phyllida Lloyd, utilising two actors as Thatcher, is very successful, with superb performances from Meryl Streep and Alexandra Roach.

Rocketman (2019), written by Lee Hall, while more linear than *The Iron Lady*, fuses different time periods together, sometimes in a consciously theatrical style, as present-day Elton John (present, in the sense of when the film's story is anchored, though actually 1990 according to the screenplay) occasionally finds himself face to face with his junior alter ego, Reggie Dwight. It is a device that works effectively within the flamboyant, musical-theatre mis-en-scene. In Hall's script (April 2014 draft) the date is rarely referenced, with even Reggie's graduation from boy to man, necessitating a change in actor, written with little explicit signposting. In fact, the character of Reggie turns into Elton on page 21 without fanfare, his name changed in the script directions the moment another character in the film suggests the stage name, Elton John.

In *Robeson*, I have implemented temporal cross-cutting techniques to some extent, though less liberally than the examples above, beginning the script by alluding to his mother Maria's death in a house fire that happened in 1904 when Paul was five years old: `Fire rages inside a simple WOODEN HOUSE… images flicker like the flames that consume the timber structure, dreamlike flashes of an unstoppable inferno.` The scene is deliberately abstract, not showing the victim initially with the action only playing out more fully as the film progresses, the same incident shown again four more times in the script, until Paul eventually describes to Billy, in the screenplay's penultimate scene, how bereft he was at losing his mother so young. One of Paul's more famous songs, *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, plays over these

scenes, suggesting the profundity of his mother's absence, possibly explaining some of his behaviours in adult life, especially around women. It is a conscious nod to *Citizen Kane* and the title character's final word – *"Rosebud"* – alluding to the sledge from Kane's childhood, his only remaining link with a lost innocence. In my script, I further emphasise Robeson's maternal loss later in the picture with lines from his lover, Yolande ["How many women have you known, Paul - and yet you don't know us at all, do you? No better than a child without a mother"] , and later Paul himself arguing with Essie, their relationship at rock bottom ["Jesus, Eslanda, is that what you think?! You think I'm some helpless child and you're the mother, scolding me all the time..."] . It is an infinite void in his life, sequestered just beneath the surface.

After that opening image of the fire, I retain the abstractness, with the screen turning black and only voices heard. American, Welsh, from different time periods. The audience will not know it yet, but the Welsh voice is Will Paynter's, president at the time of the South Wales Miners' Federation, speaking over the Trans-Atlantic telephone line which enabled Paul to perform at the Miners' Eisteddfod in Porthcawl in 1957. The American voices are at first the engineers in New York, setting up the link, but then in comes the pompous, senatorial tones of Francis Walter ("Would the witness please state his name?") at the commencement of the HUAC hearings in 1956 that provide the turning point in the story's final act – the last chance Paul has to turn back, to place his career ahead of his beliefs. At this moment, a microphone comes into shot, but the starting point is still not clear – not yet.

Acknowledging the history of biopics, I wanted to suggest in the script that the choice of when a life-story should begin is seemingly arbitrary, teasing the audience into seeing where the needle will drop. I thought of Joseph Stefano's screenplay not for a biopic, but for

Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) that begins by describing a camera hovering over a city and its teeming buildings, each with many windows behind which hides a story:

> We fly lower and faster now, as if seeking out a specific location […] We move forward with purposefulness and-toward a certain window. The sash is raised as high as it can go, but the shade is pulled down to three or four inches of the inside sill, as if the occupants of the room within wanted privacy but needed air'
>
> (Stefano, 1959)

Nothing written is arbitrary, of course, but just as Stefano seemingly stumbles into the life of Marion Crane in *Psycho,* our film settling eventually on Robeson performing a matinee of *Show Boat* is the moment that for me is the perfect opening of our story, the performance that leads to his meeting with Welsh miners. Robeson's voice is conspicuous by its absence in the opening moments of the film, silenced in a frenzy of fire and overlapping voices. It is only now, when we flash back from the fifties to 1929 that we finally see and hear the subject of the film – Paul Robeson singing *Ol' Man River*, his smooth, distinctive baritone cutting through the noise. Our choice is made, not just of the *who*, or the *what*, but also the *when*. Custen sums up the choices behind the making of biographical films most pithily when he states: 'Once upon a time, in film [specifically biopics], means once upon a carefully selected moment' (1992: 184).

Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis

Screenwriter Craig Mazin in 2020 (*Scriptnotes* podcast, ep. 403) argued that a screenplay arc does not need to be created in the traditional three-act structure presented by most screenwriting manuals [though Syd Field (1994: 90) and Robert McKee (1998: 218) are far more nuanced in their approaches than Mazin suggests, mapping individual dramatic beats and considerable flexibility within each of those acts]. Mazin contends that arcs (three acts or otherwise) will form naturally from telling a good story, and to achieve this, one should follow instead the Hegelian Dialectic that is constructed around the cycle of *thesis-antithesis-synthesis*. This sees the story's hero established within their own stasis, the thesis, or what Mazin calls the *anti-theme*, that over the course of the movie must evolve through the character's actions – challenged continually by antitheses or *the argument* – until they are converted to the *theme* of the film, or synthesis. The hero must be relentlessly tortured by the storyteller, pulled away from their comfortable (if imperfect) existence at the start, but continually tempted back to the status quo even when arguments are made against it – only to find within themselves and by interacting with the story, that there is an alternative way that is challenging but better. For Robeson in my script, he begins as a broadly apolitical figure, as was the case in the 1920s (we have already seen how he told journalists: 'I am more interested in cultures than in politics'). Essie is the one who wants him to do more, to use his influence to excite political change which I incorporate in an early restaurant scene:

ESSIE

Good God, Paul. Do you know the power you have? That voice- that effortless, irritating, God-given voice? What you could use that for-

Continuing the Hegelian philosophy that focuses squarely on the rational, my version of Robeson is a rational being wholly able to see the value in what Essie is extolling. He is a supremely intelligent man, but he is also content with his affluent life and professional success. There is no great need for him to change. Robeson's thesis, or anti-theme, is that he enjoys a well-rewarded existence as a Black man who has risen in spite of all obstacles. That, for him, is a political statement in and of itself. He is happy to offer his services to 'small-p' political causes if required, but he is not the politically proactive figure he would eventually become. If he agrees to perform at a benefit event, then it is because it is the right thing by Essie and his own broadest principles, but he will not lead or facilitate this change himself.

After first meeting Will Paynter and the Welsh miners in the film, and especially once Robeson sees conditions in the Welsh coalfields for himself, hearing from Billy and Johnny Moscow about the Senghennydd pit disaster, then he is ready to question his stasis. Perhaps it is time to use his talent for a bigger cause, he muses. Perhaps the most vaunted of all screenwriting theorists, Syd Field, quotes Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* and its assessment of what happens to a story's hero in making this change at the end of the first act (which Field, unlike Mazin, utilises): '[the hero…] moves not into outer space but into inward space, to the place from which all being comes, into the consciousness that is the source of all things, the kingdom of heaven within. The images are outward, but their reflection is inward' (Field, 1984, revised 2005: 46). This is the impact on Robeson when learning of the Senghennydd tragedy of 1913 and the meagre compensation that totalled just one shilling, one and a quarter pence for every life lost. Inwardly, Robeson realises that their struggle is now his struggle.

Throughout the film's middle act and then deep into the final conflict in Washington, there are many moments where Paul could readily turn back from this new path: the *argument* or *antithesis*. The first temptation comes before he has even left Senghennydd, with

his epiphany still fresh, when Yolande Jackson arrives to pick him up in her Bentley. Just as Robeson seems ready to blaze a political trail inspired by his interaction with Billy, Teleri and their comrades, he is immediately seduced back in a different direction, failing his first challenge within the story – much to Billy and Teleri's disappointment.

And there will come other moments when he is tempted back to the stasis – in Spain during the Civil War when he has the option not to go into Madrid where bombs fall, or when his fame is at its apex in America in the 1940s but pressure mounts from the Dies Committee. Perhaps most significantly, Robeson knows that if he were to liaise co-operatively with HUAC (culminating in the Congress hearing in 1956), his passport, and his lucrative touring career, will be instantly returned, and yet he fully embraces his new state of being and attacks the Washington committee, even with the knowledge that this will only deepen their determination to stop him: "You are the un-Americans!" he accuses them.

He could stop his crusade at any moment, to preserve his career and his comfortable life, but he makes the choice to plough on in spite of the dangers and the sacrifice.

The character of Yolande Jackson is especially fascinating in both Robeson's life and her function in the screenplay. A white aristocratic English woman, daughter of a high court judge, and the only woman besides Essie for whom Robeson publicly professed his love, telling reporters in New York in 1932 that Essie had filed for divorce and he would return to London to an unnamed woman of high society: 'While I was in London last we were seen together much of the time and made no bones about our attachment,' he said, and was preparing to marry (Boyle & Bunie, 2001: 258).

I have altered timescales and certain details in order to compress events without overcomplicating the screen story, with Yolande never known to have come to Wales (as she does in the script), and, in reality, Paul and Essie were actually separated at the time when he

left to flee with Yolande, while I have them residing in the same London flat which was the case for much of the affair.

Yolande represents in my script the many affairs Robeson conducted throughout his and Essie's marriage. Among Paul's many lovers were actresses Peggy Ashcroft and Uta Hagen (both of them played Desdemona to Robeson's Othello, hence references in my screenplay form both Essie and aspiring actress Yolande who quotes the role when she challenges Robeson to love her) and industrial designer Freda Diamond who he also asked to marry (Robeson Jr., 2010: 120). There were numerous shorter dalliances too. Yolande, though, was the lover who resonated most with Paul, confessing this to future lovers like Hagen: 'He did talk to her [Hagen] often about how much he had loved Yolande Jackson' (Duberman, 1989: 286).

For Robeson, Yolande represented not only heartbreak but also humiliation when she rejected him after mutual overtures of marriage. Boyle and Bunie quote Robeson's dresser, Joe Andrews. He recalled that Yolande was warned '"that marriage to a black man would never work. In the beginning, she fought, defending Paul to her parents… But in the end, they won out and Paul lost. When it came right down to the hard reality of actually going through with the marriage and living with the consequences [of an interracial marriage], she just couldn't do it"' (262).

Again, I compress chronology so that Yolande's rejection is immediately followed by Paul taking on a more political role. The breakdown of their relationship happened in 1932, but I have moved the event back to 1936-37 in order to juxtapose Robeson's despair with a call to political action, delivering his rallying speech at the Royal Albert Hall's benefit for Spanish refugees. While timelines are altered in my script, the effect of the doomed affair on Robeson is not. He 'underwent [a…] dramatic transformation. For the first time Paul began

talking about what he wanted to do, rather than what British [high] society thought he should do' (Boyle and Bunie, 267). He and Essie soon reconciled. 'The Robeson marriage had lost its spark, and reconciliation would be […] amicable but not passionate' (268), and this is reflected in my script.

Robeson and his relationships with women

Paul's wife, Essie, forms an integral part of the story's argument but in an affirmative role, the provider of moral guidance and encouragement. Her marriage to Paul was not a happy one. For so long his business manager, and very successful at that, Essie was cheated on by Paul regularly. A protracted episode in 1930 best exemplifies the torment she faced, when, while refurbishing her and Paul's newly purchased apartment in Buckingham Street, London, she chanced upon a love letter to her husband from his co-star in *Othello*, Peggy Ashcroft. Already aware of Paul's long-term affair with Yolande, this revelation proved too much, and she underwent a breakdown, losing feeling on one side of her face. Paul, touring, wrote to her, his tone jarringly callous:

'I am very sorry, of course, you read that letter. You will do those things. You evidently don't believe your own creed—that what you don't know won't hurt you. […] *It must be quite evident that I'm likely to go on thusly for a long while here and there—perhaps not. I'm certain I don't know, but the past augurs the future.* […] *I am in a period of transition—where I shall finally finish is of little consequence to me. I would like to get on with my work. To do that I need to be as far as possible absolutely free'* (quoted in Robeson Jr., 2008: 179).

With their marriage seemingly irreparable, and Paul committed to Yolande (he ended his relationship with Ashcroft soon after this episode), the pair agreed to divorce, only for Essie to then procrastinate, as much to frustrate Paul and Yolande than anything else. Curiously, after

Yolande's rejection of Paul, 'What actually unfolded […] was the convoluted but dedicated effort by two complex and conflicted marriage partners [Essie and Paul] to save at least part of a relationship that was vital to both of them' (Robeson Jr., 181).

Essie would remain the central female figure in his life, and yet their partnership would be at times business-like, and at other times cruel. I strived in my writing to convey some of the complexities in their relationship, both beholden to the other, and yet ensnared by bitterness and regret. I was determined that Essie would not become a peripheral figure. She was a supremely intelligent, confident person from before she met Paul with a degree in chemistry from Columbia (where they would eventually meet). As Umoren writes, studies of Eslanda 'have tended to focus on her stage-managing her husband's career, minimizing her decision to go to Africa as an outcome of the breakdown of their marriage. Yet after the 1945 publication of [her book] *African Journey* [Essie] Robeson became a household name among African American intellectuals, famous for her shrewd analyses of race and empire in the emerging Cold War' (2021: 93-112).

Glenn Patterson said to me, when discussing his script for *Good Vibrations*, that he and co-writer Colin Carberry were determined that Terri Hooley's wife, Ruth, would be a strong character: "I wanted to make sure she was not going to be what Colin called 'the astronaut's wife'. She wasn't just there sitting around while Terri was off doing things." I empathised with this when writing Essie. I wanted her torment, and some of Paul's cruelty towards her, to be evident – but I also wanted to show that she was a significant catalyst in both her husband's success as a performer and as an activist; a woman of courage and extraordinary stoicism. Not just an astronaut's wife.

Patterson discussed his own research and his conversations with Ruth Carr, Terri's wife during the Good Vibrations era (she would be played by Jodie Whittaker in the film)

who went on to become an acclaimed poet and activist. Her position in the screen story bears parallels with Essie Robeson's in that, despite her love for her husband, she is repeatedly overlooked by him, disappointed or rejected. But she's wiser than Terri. "You're everything to me," Terri declares in the screenplay early on in their relationship; "I'll settle for the most important," Ruth replies, a statement that is both profound and pragmatic, and almost a prophecy of how she will eventually slide down his list of priorities. *Good Vibrations* has recently been developed into a stage play and Glenn Patterson described how the theatre cast, talking to the real Ruth, were keen to draw her out on how poorly she was treated by Terri at the time. "She said that you have to understand that it was the 1970s and this was how it was," explained Patterson. "This is Ruth Carr – feminist activist – but she was trying to be true to who she was and how she saw things at the time." Patterson respected her bravery and her candour: "I admired Ruth's ability to say she may have put up with certain things at the time, at that age, which she wouldn't put up with now. That didn't make her any less of a feminist. It just means we were in a different historical moment."

For Jane Hawking, ex-wife of Stephen Hawking, her experience of being part of a biopic story – 2014's *The Theory of Everything*, screenplay by Anthony McCarten, partly based on her own memoir – was sullied by a sense that her contribution was underplayed: "I knew if there were mistakes in the film that they were going to be immortalised, which they have been [… None of] the organising, packing for a family with a severely disabled member, transporting them, driving them, as well as the usual day-to-day care – really appears" (Shoard, 2018). While the logistics involved in Jane and Stephen Hawking's life were complex, I can understand the filmmakers' reticence in showing such moments with limited screen time. Jane Hawking's frustrations, though, are relevant insomuch as she sacrificed her own career and much of her own life for her husband to pursue his passions,

and yet she felt this was not sufficiently reflected in the film. I hope that Essie's sacrifices are represented fairly in my screenplay.

Paul Robeson's treatment of Essie aside, accounts of his relationships with women make uncomfortable reading, especially with modern sensibilities and in the wake of the #MeToo movement. While my research found no evidence or testimony to suggest that Robeson abused anyone, some of his behaviour is less than palatable, particularly in the context of today's accepted values. Uta Hagen, who played Desdemona opposite Robeson's Othello in the 1943 Broadway production (and whose husband José Ferrer was playing Iago in the same play), tells the story of how she had viewed Paul "as a fabulous older friend" (Duberman, 1989: 286) with him being twenty years her senior. That is until, one night, while standing in the wings in full costume, Robeson without warning suddenly placed his hand between her legs. "I was being assaulted in the most phenomenal way," she recalled, "and I thought, What the hell […] Afterwards I looked at him with totally different eyes. He suddenly became a sex object" (Duberman, 1989). While this incident led to a consensual affair, it was a brazen move from Robeson on an actress in her early twenties.

For the first time while researching Robeson, I began to expect less of him than I hoped. But I also knew that without evidence to the contrary, I should respect his achievements and the better parts of his character while still exposing his flaws. I recalled the advice of Glenn Patterson, speaking about *Good Vibrations*, who warned, "that feeling that your biopic, especially if set in a different historical period, has to be in some ways corrective, is a danger […] You don't write the thing to be the answer."

Will Paynter and Billy Baresi

In spite of Robeson's undoubted bond with Welsh miners and their communities, there is little record of any sustained connection with any one individual from Wales. Aneurin Bevan, Member of Parliament for Ebbw Vale and, most famously, the health minister responsible for the foundation of the NHS, featured occasionally in Robeson's life, including accompanying him to the Eisteddfod in his home constituency in 1958. While Bevan was a politician who had emerged from humble beginnings in Tredegar, he was firmly entrenched in party politics by the time Robeson met the miners. From a storytelling perspective, Robeson befriending a politician who inspires him to act more politically felt too specific, too on the nose. I wanted Robeson's illumination to come from contact with normal working people, a kind of folk socialism – by the time the American met Bevan, the latter was already something of a celebrity in the Labour movement.

Will Paynter met Robeson on more than one occasion and was, at different times, president of the South Wales Miners' Federation and general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers for the whole of Britain. But he was merely a local union leader when Robeson first connected with the miners. I became interested in Paynter as a potential character in the film after reading his autobiography, *My Generation* (1972). Paynter would have been just 25 years old when Robeson first met the hunger marchers in London but was already leader of the union at the Cymmer colliery. While there is no evidence that Paynter was on the hunger march which Robeson met on that fateful afternoon in 1929, he was an active participant in other marches including in 1932 and 1936, and by the time of the latter he had become temporary organiser for the Communist Party in Wales.

Frequently imprisoned for leading strikes and protests, Paynter was once even arrested and brutally beaten while trying to attend court after receiving a summons for

another offence at an anti-imperialist meeting in Porth: '[The police eventually] took me into the courtroom to face the charges for the Empire Day meeting and I tried to put up some kind of defence. But without teeth and with lacerated gums, I was unable to make myself understood' (1972: 40).

He would later go to Spain representing the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, as an emissary whose job it was to deliver messages and attend to any problems among the anti-fascist battalion's British contingent. His writings on his experience would guide some of the material in my script about that war: 'The real picture [of war] is seen more in the drab scenes […] To see twenty or thirty children in a small peaceful railway station, fatherless and motherless, awaiting transportation to a centre where they can be better cared for, is to get a picture of misery' (68). I used this image when writing of Paul's engagement with an orphaned girl on the streets of Madrid, the quiet agony of conflict.

In 1957, as president of the South Wales Miners' Federation, Paynter was the host for Paul Robeson's famous trans-Atlantic concert, with Robeson in New York and an audience of 5,000 at the Miners' Eisteddfod in Porthcawl. Hearing Will's voice on that recording – clipped, formal, slightly awkward – brought the historical figure to life. Most poignant for me was a small moment in Will and Paul's exchange, at the end of the telephone call, that I have utilised in my script:

The audience and choir sing!

It's powerful, stirring, a call from the heart.

When it ends-

ROBESON

Until we meet, Will.

WILL

Until we meet, Paul.

The shared phrase: *"Until we meet."* I was moved by the personal connection, albeit brief, between the two men, a sense of familiarity made more poignant by the fact neither of them truly knew when they might possibly meet one another again, with Robeson still trapped in the United States. "Until we meet" became a motif in my screenplay, the two men uttering it not only at the Porthcawl event, as is fact, but also imagined after their first meeting in London, then again in Spain:

WILL

I said 'until we meet'. Didn't think

it'd be here!

Another detail that piqued my interest in Will Paynter's memoir was a short paragraph in which he spoke of his fear of public speaking. As a vocal union leader and agitator, this detail surprised me, and immediately projected more vulnerability onto his scrappy socialist persona. 'I have been described in recent years as a 'powerful speaker' and even an 'orator',' Paynter writes, before telling of a meeting in 1930: 'I got to the front of the platform but when I started to express my thanks I became completely tongue-tied. […] On another occasion […] all I was expected to do was introduce the candidate, a very good friend of mine, but I failed to even start and the candidate had to introduce himself. I was petrified…'. He goes on to write that, 'learning to speak in public was a long and painful exercise' (42).

I was moved by this admission, and speculated on the relationship between Paynter and Robeson, and the contrast between their natural abilities as orators. Robeson's

mellifluous, easy speaking style against Paynter who was stifling hidden anxiety. Perhaps this explained Paynter's formal, rehearsed speech in the Porthcawl broadcast. What, I wondered, could I incorporate about this difference between the two men in my script, and could Robeson – possessor of one of the twentieth century's great voices – have been an influence on Will finding his own words? While there is no record of Paul aiding Will with theatrical breathing techniques, I felt there was enough connection with reality to include a scene where the two men bond in this way, immediately making these two historical figures more relatable, and binding their personal stories together.

For all Robeson and Paynter's possible connections, there are only two mentions in *My Generation* of their friendship, discussing the trans-Atlantic concert and then Paul's return to Wales and the National Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale a year later, Will recalling: 'When his passport was returned to him some time later he came to us in South Wales, meeting in person the people who had sung to him across the Atlantic Ocean and who had tried to help in restoring his freedom to travel and sing outside the Americas' (128).

While my script gently embellishes the two men's friendship when, in truth, it was perhaps more of a political acquaintance, I decided early on to make Will a 'B' character in the film. The reason for this was that as I began to research Robeson's life and personality more, I knew I wanted my biopic to explore his flaws – those elements that made him more human than icon – specifically some of the behaviours he displayed towards women, and his treatment of Essie. For Will to be privy to these shortcomings, I would have felt obligated to have him provide opinions and guidance on some of Robeson's life decisions, or even to compromise his own morals. To speculate on a real person like Paynter's responses to some of these behaviours could imply certain personal values, and I have no real knowledge of what these were other than what Paynter presents in his autobiography, so any representation could prove false. I recalled the celebrated screenwriter William Goldman and his experience

of writing *A Bridge Too Far* (1977) when he was summoned to a meeting with one of the real-life heroes of the Allied raid on Arnhem Bridge featured in the movie. General John Frost was mortified that Goldman had given his character a line and moment of bravery that was, in real life, the actions of one of Frost's comrades. '"Your script will destroy me [Frost said…] *People will think I was trying to make too much of myself*"'(author's italics; 2000: 294). [Frost also told filmmakers that Anthony Hopkins, playing him in the film, ran too quickly in a scene when he was under constant sniper fire: '"You would never run that fast. You have to show the Germans and your own men your contempt for danger"' (1983: 291).] Goldman writes emphatically in bold font, '**I will never do another movie when the people are alive**' (2000: 295). To avoid complaints or even potential legal action from surviving family (Paynter died in 1984), and also to free myself creatively, I chose to introduce another character to represent the miners Robeson would have known – a fictional figure, a composite of the miners and union officials active at that time.

Bingham observes that, 'The composite character, whether real (…) or invented, as is usually the case, is a feature that few biopics of any type or era have done without' (2010: Kindle location 85-86). 1945's *A Song to Remember* provides young piano prodigy Frédéric Chopin with a professor and mentor, Joseph Elsner (Paul Muni), who first identifies the boy's talents, and then encourages him to take his music to Paris and world recognition. Elsner, though, was the creation of screenwriters Marischka and Buchman and came to represent Chopin's patriotic conscience in a film made during the Second World War, prompting Custen to write: 'his presence allows the Polish liberation theme to be showcased at a time when Poland was under Nazi oppression' (1992: 69). Perhaps most famously, Omar Sharif's character Sherif Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, screenplay by Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson, directed by David Lean) is a composite creation based on several prominent Arab figures including Hashemite leader Sharif Hussein bin Ali and Sharif Nassir who led the

Harith forces. Bolt (writer of the later drafts and Lean's main collaborator through to production) maintained that a composite character would be the most effective device for propelling Lawrence's story forward without the necessity of introducing even more characters to an already inflated ensemble. [One must acknowledge, though, that the splicing of a number of Arab characters into a single individual was perhaps a product of unconscious racial prejudice with the value of those figures' achievements diminished by a western writer and production team.] Lean himself would praise such creative choices of Bolt's and herald his contribution to *Lawrence of Arabia*'s success, saying, "Most so-called script writers are adapters and "added dialogue" writers. The movies don't possess a dramatist. For that reason this film of ours has knocked the top film-makers sideways" (Turner, 1998: 215). Evidence, if any were needed, of the importance of dramaturgical forethought – something Bolt would have routinely employed in his successful stage work – in the creation of a biopic.

More recently, Peter Morgan and Jeremy Brock used a composite character in *The Last King of Scotland* (2006, directed by Kevin Macdonald): a Scottish doctor who finds himself a part of Ugandan president Idi Amin's inner circle, and the prism through whom we witness historical events unfolding. The character, Nicholas Garrigan (played by James McAvoy), was actually created by Giles Foden for his novel on which the film is based, and becomes the first-person narrator, a fictional fish-out-of-water providing conscience within the exploration of a real-life despot.

Jared Leto won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as transgender AIDS patient Rayon in *Dallas Buyers' Club* (2013). Screenwriter Melisa Wallack said that she and co-writer Craig Borten placed this fictional composite character in the film after interviewing several transgender AIDS survivors. They wanted a counterpoint to central character Ron Woodroof's initial homophobia and transphobia: "We wanted a character that put everything that Ron was afraid of in his face. So we just thought, 'Oh, if it

was a gay man you can look away, but if it's Rayon [as a trans person], you really can't look away'" (Gettell, 2014).

Billy Baresi was created early in the writing process. In discussion with Prof. D.J. Britton, it was agreed that he should be an impressionable, callow character, eager to find a place in the world; an enlightened person but with little direction, for whom meeting Robeson provides a turning point in his life. We also felt he should be an outsider of sorts, different to his peers, in order for him to identify with Robeson's place in wider American and British society. Thinking of south Wales's rich Italian heritage, it felt conceivable that our Welsh hero would be from the Valleys *Bracchi* community, accepted but different.

I also decided that Billy should be excluded from working in the coalmines by asthma, again detaching him from those around him, including his brothers who make their living in the local pit. Instead of working underground, he plans to study at the School of Mines; instead of playing cricket, he umpires the match, a bastion of fair play but also a degree removed from those around him. Only when he first meets Teleri, and then Robeson, does Billy find his calling.

The decision to make Billy a resident of Senghennydd was firstly a personal one, with it being home to my family on my father's side. The town is best known for the Universal Colliery disaster of 1913 in which 440 men and boys were killed, making it the worst mining accident in British history. My great-grandfather worked as a miner at that colliery but was on the opposite shift when the explosion happened. He took his place in the search party to find any comrades, though in the end discovered only their dead bodies. I incorporate into the screenplay a story he passed down to my *Tadcu* and then onto my father, of him finding a chamber in which a group of men lay resting, consumed by poisonous gas, and a young boy in his teens with his head rested on his father's lap. What struck my great-grandfather the

most was that the men and boys had taken their boots off, resigned to dying so deciding to make themselves as comfortable as possible as their lives drifted inexorably away.

Although Billy would have been too young to remember the disaster well, the scars would have still been raw in 1929 when we first meet him, a place defined by the event. Robeson's early exploration of Wales and its mining communities, were it to have happened in Senghennydd, would have soon encountered the story of the treacherous conditions and corporate neglect that led to the deadly explosion – as well as the paltry compensation that resulted in a total fine of around £24, or one shilling, one a quarter pence per victim. The importance of miners' unions, relief funds and, most strikingly, the stoicism of the local community left behind would have been very evident in the late twenties and early thirties, providing the impetus for the Paul Robeson in my story – *my* Robeson – to reconsider his priorities.

There were settlers from many nations in Senghennydd at that time, migrants attracted to the coalfields or, at least, to the economy of a mining town. Many of these were Italian like Billy and his family. Michael Lieven writes in his history of Senghennydd of Charlie Anzani – a catholic whose family originated in Milan – arriving in Senghennydd as a violinist in a three-man band playing at the town's Park Hall cinema. On meeting Ethel, sixteen-year-old daughter of successful business owner and non-conformist deacon, William Marshall, Charlie stayed in Senghennydd. Despite Charlie and Ethel's resulting marriage causing 'a major scandal in the village where almost the only roman catholics were Irish labourers,' William accepted them wholeheartedly and the Anzanis lived next door to the Marshall family home (1994: 326). Lieven observes that 'the growth of the [Marshall-Anzani] family and the web of relationships which it created mirrored that of most families [in Senghennydd] and tells us a great deal about the changes that occurred between 1900 and 1930' (323).

Another composite character from the Senghennydd section of the story is Johnny Moscow who is loosely based on a well-known local figure in street politics from the mid-twentieth century, nicknamed Jack Russia. He seemed a perfect character to promote communist ideals to Robeson and to the viewer in an uncompromising and unapologetic way.

Billy's main role within my biopic is not just to represent the Welsh side of what became a special relationship, but also to enable the audience to get closer to Robeson's real personality, to become a figure in whom Robeson confides. Robeson, unsurprisingly, spoke little of his affairs when interviewed and projected the public image of a happily married family man. I deliberately designed Billy to first be in awe of Paul Robeson, for him to then consider what makes a great person. Should Billy's eventual surprise at Robeson's weaknesses and misdemeanours cloud his perception of his hero's moral courage and talent as a performer and activist? The audience is challenged to answer the same question as they view events from Billy's perspective.

In conversation with D.J. Britton about his 2011 play on David Lloyd George, *The Wizard, the Goat and the Man Who Won the War*, he discussed his use of a confidante, or a sounding board, for the main character. "I was very interested in the idea of the self-delusion required to keep going as a major public figure," he told me, "and therefore I took the line that Lloyd George is an unreliable narrator because he needs self-justification for everything he does. So, I came up with the device of him talking to someone, or some*thing*, where he can be very honest, and so he talks to the sea, where there's some anonymity and there's no consequence to its judgement of him." Lloyd George can talk of his affairs, his regrets, the paralysing grief of losing a beloved daughter, without concern over his historical legacy. Although the ocean represents a more lyrical, theatrical choice, Billy in my film serves a similar purpose. Being a fictional character frees him up as a friend who Robeson trusts implicitly and to whom he can confess without fear or judgement. His wife, his son, his

lovers, his friends – one would expect them all to arrive with certain agendas which Robeson would want to please or appease, but Billy is as pure to Paul as a priest taking confession.

I thought of *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) about a young assistant on a film set, Colin Clark, tasked with looking after a vulnerable and erratic Marilyn Monroe for seven days during a film shoot. The movie's writer Adrian Hodges said at the time of release that: "Anybody could identify with that fascination with Hollywood and the extraordinary strangeness of becoming close to someone so famous, who patently did need him – at least for a moment or two. I really love all the showbiz stuff (…) But there's only so much you can do before the general audience says, fine, but give us a story. That's where Colin (…) comes in. That's the heart and soul of the film" (Gritten, 2011). Although Clark is not a composite character (*My Week with Marilyn* is based on his published diaries), his wide-eyed naivety makes him the perfect foil amidst the glamour and tumult of a superstar's life, with Monroe behaving with him not like a star but as a vulnerable young woman. Colin is just like Billy in my screenplay, seeing extraordinary events from the audience's point of view.

I did not want Billy to become merely a listener or conduit for the viewer, though, and carved much of the story around him, as he represents the Welsh mining community through that historical period. It is Billy who fights in the Spanish Civil War as a member of the International Brigade where, physically and mentally scarred by his involvement in events near Jarama and then Gandesa (real battles involving Welsh volunteers), he is reunited with Robeson. Billy later leads his own local union, taking a pivotal role in the Welsh section of the 'Let Robeson Sing' movement. And the relationship with Robeson becomes two-sided, with Paul offloading to Billy, but Billy also learning from Paul.

A difficult decision that changed through different drafts involved whether Billy, returned from Spain and now adviser on the set of *Proud Valley*, should sleep with a society

woman, Helen, who turns out to be a spy for MI5. I had become committed to Billy remaining a vessel of purity for some time, but eventually decided that he should succumb to the same temptations as Robeson regularly did. Firstly, it made Billy a more complex character, surprising himself with his infidelity that leads to his fiancée Teleri leaving him. His unfaithfulness is an act of selfish self-destruction wholly in contrast to the moral fortitude displayed up to that point, and yet plausible in the moment. Secondly, his action shows that Robeson is not some uniquely adulterous presence in the story, the only character incapable of fidelity. Although Robeson's weaknesses in this area are well documented, I was very aware that the early drafts of the script could be accused of showing only a Black man straying while the white hero remains incorruptible, and this would be a dangerous perception to perpetuate.

The final fictionalised character of note is Teleri Phillips. She becomes Billy's fiancée until his betrayal of her with the MI5 mole Helen. To borrow again from Patterson and Carberry, I wished – as with Essie Robeson's character – to avoid her being an "astronaut's wife," standing back from the precipice of adventure. It is Teleri who seduces the shy, virginal Billy early on, and who persuades him to become active in politics. It is Teleri who catalyses the ideological relationship with Robeson. She is a strong-willed woman at a time when female independence was rare, eager to subvert any expected role as homemaker in order to study at Swansea University (a university with a commendable record in accepting women and, in the 1920s, the first institution to appoint a female Chair at a British university in Professor Mary Williams), and then to work for the Labour Party.

I briefly contemplated making Teleri Paul's conscience in my story in place of Billy. I felt the film needed another strong female presence aside from Essie. This version, though, would have raised a problem in that Robeson would be less able to be honest about his relationships with women with Teleri than he would with a male counterpart – and,

historically, many of the women he confided in were his lovers. Also, with Essie already playing the role of the angel on Paul's shoulder, at least in terms of political ambition, then Teleri would be at risk of duplicating what has already been said in other scenes. Instead, Teleri would become a character who retains her ambition and integrity without wavering, unerring in her commitment to her political beliefs, and unwilling to be cuckolded by any man [again, another important decision that changed in the writing was that she would not take Billy back after he strays, though to her credit she is willing to forgive him in later years].

The Order of Things

As observed on my timeline of the order of historical events in Robeson and the miners' stories that are essential to my screenplay, the film's 1950s section comprises the following:

1950	Revocation of Robeson's passport. Blacklisted.
1950-58	Robeson's (justified) paranoia. Welsh miners' crusade to 'Let Robeson Sing!'
1956	HUAC hearing. Robeson: "You are the un-Americans!"
1957	Robeson performs at Miners' Eisteddfod over trans-Atlantic phone line.
1958	Passport returned. Robeson attends Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale.

There are two pay-off moments in the real narrative when Robeson and his Welsh friends are reunited, albeit virtually on the first occasion when, on 5th October 1957 over a trans-Atlantic telephone line, Paul, from a studio in New York, sang with the choirs and audience at the Miners' Eisteddfod in Porthcawl. Almost a year later, on 3rd August 1958, he returned to Wales and the National Eisteddfod in person. Both events are profoundly moving, especially

for a film audience that would have just witnessed the enforced separation of Paul and the miners while his passport was revoked.

Paul Robeson Jr was in the American studio in 1957 from where his father performed to the assembled crowd 3,000 miles away in Porthcawl and recalls: ‘As we were engulfed by the wave of affection surging from the voices of the choir, joined by those thousands of people from the mining valleys of South Wales, there wasn’t a dry eye in the New York studio’ (2010: 267). Susan Robeson, Paul’s granddaughter, was just an infant that day and yet the impression was indelible: “One of my earliest memories is going with my grandfather to a recording studio in New York, and hearing him sing for the miners in Wales […] I must only have been four or five, so I didn't really understand anything about the travel ban, but even at the time I remember thinking there was something amazing about the fact that they could stop his body leaving America, but they couldn't contain his voice and spirit” (Prior, 2010).

Robeson’s return to Wales, as a guest at the National Eisteddfod accompanied by Aneurin Bevan, was an equally triumphant occasion, the miners and Paul physically reunited at long last. Robeson hailed the Eisteddfod audience with a message to the whole of Wales – “We stand together. You have helped shape my struggle” –, a moment that provides a cathartic ending to my screenplay.

For a writer, these two events presented a problem. In essence, they are too similar in tone, and to incorporate them both in the chronology in which they took place would mean two climaxes one after the other. And yet both moments are essential for different reasons. The trans-Atlantic concert-by-telephone was the culmination and very epitome of the ‘Let Robeson Sing!’ campaign, with neither the miners nor Paul willing to be silenced by the passport ban. But nothing is more affirming than Paul finally returning in person, and so it would seem strange to omit the Ebbw Vale concert that provides such a perfect resolution.

I elected to rearrange history in order to better serve the drama. The main down-beat of the story came just before these two victories, when Robeson appeared before a HUAC hearing in Washington, D.C. in 1956. In what became a famous session led by congressman Francis Walter, Robeson was continually prevented from making a plea for his passport to be returned on account of his perceived communist beliefs, with Robeson claiming the Fifth Amendment that barred the enforced declaration of anyone's political convictions. The transcript of the hearing exists with Robeson facing an array of accusations, jibes and disarming non-sequiturs from his interrogators. Robeson volleys back responses to the panel, but they are unrepentant, unwilling to accept Paul's repeated Fifth Amendment plea. One senses in Paul's tone a degree of relish in finding holes in his opponents' unconstitutional methods and precarious arguments, but one also recognises that it is all in vain with regard to Robeson claiming back his passport. Perhaps it was the helplessness of his position that empowered Robeson to retort so strongly, climaxing with an impassioned but eloquent rant in which he tells Walter and his congressmen cronies that it is <u>they</u> who are the un-Americans.

To make my screenplay more effective, I simply changed history and placed the HUAC event between the Porthcawl and Ebbw Vale concerts. Now, we have the promise of hope in that trans-Atlantic connection, followed by the realisation that Robeson's position is entirely in the gift of white men in Washington, and so seemingly futile. The HUAC hearing in the Caucus Room of the Old House represents what Snyder calls the 'All is lost' section of a screen story (2005: 86) around three quarters of the way through the film, when there seems no way out. Now, we have that pivotal dramatic beat which should make the final reunion all the more exhilarating.

Ol' Man River

I end the film with Robeson singing his own alternative words to the song that was his signature, *Ol' Man River*. Paul Robeson Jr. wrote in 2008 of his father's performance at the Royal Albert Hall in 1937, the first known changing of Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics: 'Then, as Paul sang his signature song, "Ol' Man River," he changed the lyrics at the end: "I gets weary and sick of tryin'; I'm tired of livin' and scared of dyin'" became "I keeps laughin' instead of cryin'; I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'." The impact on the audience was electric. Here was the prophet in full cry' (2008: 293). Robeson's revisionist version of these words emphasises his recognition of his own responsibility as a performer and as an activist: the original song's resigned, apathetic lament replaced by something that is defiant, strident and proactive. It perfectly reflects the change in Robeson from 1929 through to 1958.

Craig Mazin, utilising Hegelian Dialectic (*thesis-antithesis-synthesis*, or *anti-theme, argument* then *theme*), asserts: "If you remove everything from the story except the introduction of your hero and the last scene of your hero, there should really be only one fundamental difference […] The hero in the beginning acts in accordance with the anti-theme and the hero at the end acts in accordance with the theme." I heard Mazin's words after writing my first few drafts, and yet, happily, my script reflects this position. In *Robeson*, we first meet Paul singing the original words to *Ol' Man River*, with its lyrics that are like a shrug of the shoulders, almost accepting that life is unfair, but there's only so much one can do… The character of Joe in *Show Boat*'s apathetic philosophy, to some degree, reflects how 30-year-old Robeson was at the time: *the anti-theme*. Then, the very last scene of my film sees Paul (not as Joe the stevedore but as himself) singing the revised lyrics – courageous, unyielding: *the theme*. The theme which Robeson now wholly and proudly embraces.

For me, it is the perfect endpoint for *my* Robeson. He would go on to live almost another two decades, but this moment, the manipulation of his most famous song into a hymn of defiance, sung to the working people of Wales who had played such a critical part in awakening his political consciousness, acts as both a thank-you and a call to arms. As Paul Robeson Jr declared, it is the prophet in full cry!

4. CONCLUSION

What can a biopic screenplay tell us about a person that one cannot find in a biography, a history book, or a documentary? I would never argue that Martin Bauml Duberman's almost-800-page biography is anything but the seminal account of Paul Robeson's life. Nor would I claim that my screenplay will tell us more about history than the myriad other texts on Paul Robeson's rich contribution to twentieth century protest and culture. My argument for writing a biopic is precisely that it is a work of creativity, an exploration of the human condition, more than it is a historical document. Robert McKee writes that biography 'must never become a simple chronicle. That someone lived, died, and did interesting things in between is of scholarly interest and no more.' The writer needs to 'interpret facts as if they are fiction, find the meaning of the subject's life' (1998: 84). The biopic script must consciously provide something different from a historical essay: something more empathetic, something more imaginative.

Peter Morgan, writer of biopics such as *The Queen*, *The Damned United*, *Rush* and *The Last King of Scotland*, suggested in 2020 when discussing his television series, *The Crown*, that "Working out what [the Royal family] thought and felt is something [where] we have to use our imaginations. And that's hopefully what an audience wants from us. To make sense of history, you sometimes need to use fiction, imagination, and acts of creativity" (Miyamoto, 2020). It is not so much the documentation or the chronology of facts that is most important in a biographical film (though a degree of accuracy is, of course, essential in gaining the confidence of your audience), but the artistic freedom to make suppositions about moments in a subject's life and relationships. D.J. Britton spoke to me about the role of a dramatist in comparison to that of a journalist: "Fiction does some things better, and actually gets to the internal 'why?' in a situation, whereas journalism obviously does the 'what?'" The chances for a writer to consider the 'why' arise mainly in moments of privacy or intimacy, in

unheard conversations or unuttered thoughts, moments in a life that will forever remain undocumented. Moments that can only be unlocked by a creative writer.

Dennis Bingham wrote of Todd Haynes' pleasingly subversive biopic about Bob Dylan, *I'm Not There* (2007), co-written with Oren Moverman, that, 'Haynes understands that in the life of a legendary person fiction might get closer to the truth of the person than do the so-called facts. Probing the literal facts of someone who made himself as much a creation as his music might be as naive and fruitless as trying to explicate his songs' (2010: Kindle Locations 5131-5133).

Imagination, when paired with rigorous research, will lead, very legitimately, to supposition. And, from an artistic perspective, this is essential. To return to D.W. Griffith's pedestrian *Abraham Lincoln* movie of 1930 (written, tellingly, by an awkward committee of writers), purely showing incident after incident from birth through to death, reveals little of the historical figure's character or flaws. We are left with nothing more interesting than the face on a five-dollar bill.

Even in the telling of our own lives, we instinctively create narratives which are at once misleading but infinitely more revealing of our own desires and motives. In our interview, Glenn Patterson fondly recalled his conversations with the real Terri Hooley, subject of his film *Good Vibrations*: "I love the way he would seamlessly incorporate something that was not true of himself within the narrative of himself, if it would improve the story." While Patterson speaks of a person's deconstruction of his own history, the same could be said of any screenwriter's role in the creation of a biopic. Patterson validates the combination of fact and imagination within his script: "I think it is a truthful portrayal that occasionally uses fiction to arrive at the truth." I sincerely hope that this is a definition that can be ascribed to my screenplay about Paul Robeson and the Welsh miners.

The screenwriter should always understand this fact. They are not historians or documentarians. But the dramatist understands that fiction can be used to elucidate truths which written history would find difficult to articulate.

The screenwriter cannot present the definitive story of a historical figure’s existence. The screenwriter can only present the impression of a life.

Part Two: ROBESON: THEY CAN'T STOP US SINGING screenplay:

Please refer to PDF document.

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