



“Even the ghost was more than one person”: authorship and authorization in *I’m Not There*

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Abstract

“This is not a Bob Dylan movie” ran the headline of Robert Sullivan’s New York Times feature about *I’m Not There*, the 2007 Dylan biopic directed by Todd Haynes. In one sense, this is quite true: Dylan is depicted by six actors, between them portraying seven characters, yet none of these characters is named Bob Dylan. I argue, however, that *I’m Not There* is very much a Bob Dylan movie; contrary to the title, Bob Dylan is there. I frame my argument with reference to the notion of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), as well as theories of authorship (Foucault 1984, Barthes 1977) and the authorization of biography (Renders 2017). Although it focuses on a single film, my article feeds into broader discussions of identity construction in popular music biopics and the relationship between popular music biopics and other biographical texts.

KEYWORDS: authorization, authorship, biopic, Todd Haynes, heteroglossia, Bob Dylan

Introduction

When New York Times critic Robert Sullivan (2007) – or his subeditor – declared that *I’m Not There* (dir. Haynes, 2007) “is not a Bob Dylan movie,” the suggestion seemed to be that the film was more concerned with the Dylan myth than the ‘real’ Dylan. “Whoever else is ‘not there’ in the film,” as Scobie (2006) states, “one person who is certainly absent is the biographical Bob Dylan”. In that sense,

I'm Not There might appear congruent with the death of the author as proclaimed by Barthes (1977), and not only because it depicts the death, in a motorcycle accident, of Bob Dylan – perhaps popular music's ultimate author-god. *I'm Not There* could also be considered poststructuralist because, like Barthes (1977: 147), it calls attention to plurality, refusing "to impose a limit" on the text, "to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing". As Barthes insists in "The Death of the Author":

We now know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (1977: 146).

Depending on how we interpret his essay, Barthes sought either to move authority away from the author or to recognize that such a shift had already occurred. Either way, the intended result was to liberate the reader: the text could now be considered a site of "plurality of meaning", the author replaced by the decentred system of language (Bennett 2005: 13-16).

Todd Haynes, who directed *I'm Not There*, has acknowledged his debt to poststructuralist thought, and his films have been described as "blatant in their intention to refract and shatter traditional conceptions of unitary subjectivity, linear temporality and historical truth" (Darby 2013: 388). Plurality, multiplicity and fragmentation are fundamental to *I'm Not There*, which is inspired by "the music and many lives" of Bob Dylan (dir. Haynes, 2007: 4.25). Near the beginning of the film, as one version of Dylan lies in the morgue following the fatal motorcycle accident, we are shown the actors who represent these various lives and the personas they represent: "poet", "prophet", "outlaw", "fake", "star of electricity". "Even the ghost," we are informed by the film's narrator, "was more than one person" (dir. Haynes, 2007: 2.10).

The front cover of my 2007 DVD copy of *I'm Not There* announces that Christian Bale, Cate Blanchett, Marcus Carl Franklin, Richard Gere, Heath Ledger and Ben Whishaw "are all Bob Dylan". Yet, though the six actors portray, between them, seven characters, since Christian Bale doubles up, none of these characters is named Bob Dylan (or, indeed, Robert Zimmerman). In this sense, *I'm Not There* does not even qualify as a biopic as defined by Custen (1992), for whom the use of the subject's "real name" is critical. Instead, some of the characters represent Dylan's influences. "Woody", played by Marcus Carl Franklin, represents Woody Guthrie, and Dylan's early self-invention as a train-hopping troubadour in the Guthrie tradition, historically adrift between the 1930s and the late 1950s. The character of Woody is understood by Darby (2013: 342) as an example of "schizoanalysis": "The black child actor playing 'Woody' represents neither a re-telling of Woody Guthrie's story nor a re-telling of Bob

Dylan's. He represents both and neither". Also representing an important influence is the Arthur Rimbaud character portrayed by Ben Whishaw, apparently undergoing some form of interrogation. If the scenes featuring Franklin draw attention to multiplicity through the character's ambiguous historical location and what Darby regards as schizoanalysis, those featuring Whishaw do so by means of their different style: grainy, black-and-white footage.

Other characters, meanwhile, represent aspects of Dylan's musical history. "Jude Quinn", played by Cate Blanchett, represents Dylan's mid-1960s electric period: visually androgynous and famously shocking to folk purists. Darby (2013: 334) sees Blanchett's casting as an example of "feminist, polysexual queering", and the scenes certainly embrace gender fluidity: at one point, for instance, we see Blanchett drawing a moustache on her upper lip. Pointing out that the character is referred to as both "her" and "him", and has a gender-neutral name, Asava depicts Jude as representative of a "bisexual attitude", even though, for Asava, Jude cannot ultimately be read as a queer challenge to essentialism since the character behaves as a "sexist man driven by power" (2010: 7).

The character of "Pastor John", played by Christian Bale, also represents an aspect of Dylan's musical history: the born-again Christian era that began with 1979's *Slow Train Coming*. Though these scenes are played relatively straight, the sense of multiplicity remains strong, since Bale, with only a change of wardrobe, also plays "Jack Rollins", described by Darby (2013: 337) as one of the "memes that Haynes has drawn out himself to better elucidate Dylan's place in American mythology". Rollins represents the folk protest singer of the early 1960s and here too Haynes shifts cinematic style, this time to PBS-style documentary. The other meme is "Mr B", played by Richard Gere. Mr B is a folk hero reminiscent of Billy the Kid and living in rural seclusion, an apparent allusion to Dylan hiding out in Woodstock in the late 1960s. The reference is also to Dylan's musical output at this time – albums such as *John Wesley Harding* (1967), *Nashville Skyline* (1969), *New Morning* (1970), *The Basement Tapes* (1975) – and to his soundtrack for, and minor role in, Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). Stylistically, too, the film shifts gear for these sequences, to the "washed out" tones of revisionist Westerns such as Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller* of 1971 (Smith 2010: 72). Finally, there is "Robbie", played by Heath Ledger. Footage of Robbie shooting a biopic of Jack Rollins appears within the PBS-style documentary, all contained, of course, within *I'm Not There*: a biopic, within a documentary, within a biopic (Darby 2013: 338). Robbie represents Dylan as rock celebrity and as husband: Claire, the character played by Charlotte Gainsbourg, can be considered an amalgam of Suze Rotolo, Dylan's girlfriend of the early 1960s, and Sara Lownds, Dylan's first wife.

We might say, then, that *I'm Not There* is less about Dylan than about "refractions of Bob Dylan" (Darby 2013: 337; see also Banauch 2015). Dylan's absence is, of course, suggested by the film's title, which derives from a Dylan

song [Columbia 2007] with its own history of absence: though recorded in 1967, “I’m Not There” was not officially released until it appeared on the film soundtrack. *I’m Not There* might also appear “not a Bob Dylan movie” in that Dylan claimed not to have been involved: “I don’t know anything about that movie,” he told Mikal Gilmore of Rolling Stone magazine in 2012. “All I know is they licensed about 30 of my songs for it”. What I want to suggest, however, is that the film is best understood as a Barthesian “tissue of quotations” – and that many of those quotations derive from Dylan himself. Dylan’s voice, I suggest, is “there” – in his songs, in his quotations and, finally, in his authorization of the film. First, however, I examine authorship, since a shift away from Romantic notions of solitary genius is central to my argument.

Authorship and the individual/collective couplet

Scholars including Foucault (1984), Rose (1995) and Woodmansee (1994) have argued that the modern notion of the author emerged only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The emergence of the author, in the modern sense, can be understood as linked to the development of copyright (Saunders 1992, Woodmansee 1994) and Romanticism’s emphasis on individual genius (Foucault 1984, Bennett 2005, Burke 1995). The Romantic “expressive theory of art” (Abrams 1953), which holds that the artist is the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which that product is to be judged, has been remarkably enduring. Romantic notions of authorship have endured in popular music (Moy 2015), arguably reinforced by a new style of music journalism that emerged in the 1960s (Toynbee 2000). Similarly, in film criticism, auteur theory, following the work of Astruc (1968; first published 1948), has been influential in its assertion that “a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director” (Caughie 1981: 9). As Negus and Pickering point out, “the habit persists of thinking that what truly makes or mars a film is the individual stamp of directorial identity... speaking of a Spielberg movie or an Alan Parker film is a feature of everyday evaluative discourse” (2004: 56).

Barthes (1977), however, insisted that the explanation of a work is not to be sought in the person who produced it. In locating the significance of cultural artefacts not in the personality and intentions of an all-powerful author but in texts alone, “The Death of the Author” can be understood as “author-icidal” (Toynbee 2000: xiii). My own view, in line with Toynbee (2000) and Burke (1995, 2008), is that anti-authorialism goes too far. Yet the significance of Barthes’s essay lies not in the fact that it dethroned the author but in that it “called attention, albeit antithetically, to the extent to which the history of our thoughts is bound up with conceptions of what it means to author a text” (Burke 1995: x). Poststructuralism has also served to problematize the notion of a single author generating meaning,

in defiance of Romantic notions of individual genius. In terms of on-screen depictions of popular music, we might think of *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (2002), *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013) and *Muscle Shoals* (2013), all of which concern backing singers and session musicians rather than featured artists. Such documentaries can be understood as part of a broader trend for group lives (Lee 2009; Booth 2015; Marcus 1994) but also constitute a move away from the Romantic lone genius and towards the location of creativity in systems (Bilton 2007, Hartley et al. 2015, John-Steiner 2006, Littleton and Miell 2004, Paulus and Nijstad 2003, Peterson 1976, Sawyer 2003).

To an auteurist critic, Haynes is unproblematically the author of *I'm Not There* (Bingham 2010: 20). Yet auteur theory has been convincingly challenged, and not only by Barthes. Karpis (1992) has questioned the auteurist determination to assign authorship to a single individual, while Stillinger (1991: 174) argues that, in a collaborative medium such as film, authorship is in fact shared between so many as to become "unassignable". In the case of *I'm Not There* we might think, for instance, of the contributions of the actors – not least, the seven more or less equal "lead" roles – but also of the various producers, of screenwriter Oren Moverman, editor Jay Rabinowitz, cinematographer Edward Lachman and so on. Haynes is not the film's sole author.

Easier to justify is the claim that Haynes carries out the "author function" (Foucault 1984). The author function "is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations" (Foucault 1984: 113). "[T]he author' of a text is categorically distinct from the historical individual who wrote that text, for all that the two bear—or seem to bear—the same name" (Wilson 2004: 350). For Foucault (1984: 106-110), the author's name "performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function". Authorship "does not develop spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual. It is, rather, the result of a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call 'author'". Further, the author function "does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals" (Foucault 1984: 113).

It is not my intention to diminish the contribution of Haynes, who is credited with the "story" of *I'm Not There* and who co-wrote the screenplay as well as directing the film. Yet it is clear from Foucault's essay that authorship, even in a relatively individualist medium such as literature, involves a process more complex than the simple and spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer. For film, which is collaborative, the process of authorship is even more complex. While Haynes may carry out the "classificatory" author function for *I'm Not There*, he is best considered not the film's sole author but, rather, one of its authors. This leaves space for Dylan to be more present than we might expect

from the film’s title – as authorizer and even as co-author. I examine his co-authorship first.

A tissue of quotations: Dylan as co-author of *I’m Not There*

Having established that authorship can be considered collective, rather than individual, I wish now to suggest that texts do not simply express the voice of a single author. A text “is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation” (Barthes 1977: 148). There is no definitive reading. Texts can be considered “heteroglot” (Bakhtin 1981). Heteroglossia is defined by Bakhtin as follows:

Heteroglossia... *is another’s speech in another’s language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions (Bakhtin 1981: 324; emphasis in original).

Bakhtin argues that the novel, for example, is unstable, full of competing voices; it is “multiform in style and variform in speech and voice”, offering “several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls” (1981: 261). The point, for Toynbee (2000: 43), is that “the play of distinct language genres against one another ‘unmasks’ their limited and particular quality – idioms take on a piquancy and social significance by way of contrast and the dialogue between them”. Toynbee also points out Bakhtin’s insights are relevant to popular music authorship, setting out his argument with reference to Barthes:

[The author] becomes a selector and combiner of voices. Sometimes this involves placing particular languages in the mouths of particular characters. But the author may also present them nondirectly, as when the narrative proper, that official voice of the novel, takes on a particular dialect or inflection. Thus, even when discourse is apparently neutral (not inside quotation marks), citation can occur. This suggests not so much Barthes’ frequently invoked “death of the author” as a new role for her: editor and parodist replaces transcendental spirit (Toynbee 2000: 43).

Hence we can understand all narrative as dialogical; a text will always resist the kind of closure that a narrational voice might attempt to achieve (Cobley 2014: 203). Toynbee (2000: 43) applies the notion of the author as “selector and

combiner of voices”, for instance, to popular music: “the multiple languages woven together by the author are analogous to the possibilities selected and shaped by musicians”. The notion of heteroglossia is also relevant to the biopic: if anything, the biopic may have even greater heteroglossic potential than the novel, since a film is a more collective endeavour. The director may serve as the selector and combiner of voices, but those voices are multiple – and only partially under the director’s control.

For Scobie (2015: 196), *I’m Not There* is “a movie made up of quotations”, and the sense of heteroglossia is evident in the numerous lines lifted from either Dylan’s lyrics (Darby 2013: 342) or his interviews (Coley 2015: 83). One early scene, for instance, takes place in a boxcar occupied by Woody and two other hobos. Woody’s lines include “it takes about a fountain pen to get yourself robbed” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 5.20), presumably an allusion to “Talkin’ New York” (Columbia 1962), and a shaggy dog story about losing his one true love and waking up in a pool hall (dir. Haynes, 2007: 7.50), lifted from an interview Dylan gave to Nat Hentoff, published in *Playboy* in 1966. Also in the film’s opening minutes, another line from the 1966 *Playboy* interview, about a “fatalistic farmer” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 9.30), is delivered not by Franklin as Woody but by Ben Whishaw’s Rimbaud character. Blanchett/Jude’s “a poem is like a naked person” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 2.05), meanwhile, is a reference to the liner notes of 1965’s *Bringing It All Back Home*.

The script is saturated in Dylan quotes – I cite here only a few representative examples. When David Cross, playing Allen Ginsberg, utters the line “perhaps you sold out to god” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 1.01.30), he is quoting Ginsberg’s defence of Dylan for “going electric” (Gair 2007: 169-173). Whishaw’s Rimbaud character speaks lines – “I’m a trapeze artist” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 19.45) – lifted from a 1965 Ephron and Edmiston interview as well as those from *Playboy*. The line “love and sex are things that really hang everybody up” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 1.36.10) is lifted from Shelton’s *No Direction Home* (2011: 245). Lines taken from Dylan songs – for example, “your kisses are nothing like his” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 59.30), a reference to “Most Likely You Go Your Way and I’ll Go Mine” (Columbia, 1966) – are woven into the dialogue. The section in which Jude Quinn, played by Blanchett, faces reporters in a press conference, also draws on the *Playboy* interview, in lines such as: “saying ‘cause of peace’ is just like saying ‘hunk of butter’” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 49.05). Yet the scene also borrows from a 1965 press conference (Hughes 2013), only slightly adapted:

Reporter: *How many people who labour in the same musical vineyards in which you toil...*

Quinn: *Oh, that’s very pretty.*

Reporter: *How many would you say are protest singers today? That is,*

people who protest against the social state we live in?

Quinn: *How many?*

Reporter: *Yes, are there many?*

Quinn: *I think there's about a hundred and thirty-six.* (dir. Haynes, 2007: 47.55-48.20)

As well as these and many other specific lines that reference Dylan interviews and songs, there are also allusions of other types: to album covers in the Jack Rollins sections; to the poetry of Rimbaud (Darby 2013); and to the “old, weird America” identified by Greil Marcus (1997) in the scenes set in the town of Riddle. Marcus’s contention that Dylan’s songs populate two warring townships seems to have inspired Haynes’ creation of the “old, weird” town of Riddle, and this is presumably why Marcus receives a “special thanks” in the film’s credits. There are also stylistic references, not only to Robert Altman and PBS-style documentary but also to Federico Fellini in the Jude Quinn scenes (Smith 2010, Clover 2008) and to D. A. Pennebaker’s 1967 documentary, *Don’t Look Back*, and Dylan’s own *Eat The Document* (1972). D’Cruz and D’Cruz (2013) suggest that the opening scene of *I’m Not There* (dir. Haynes, 2007: from 0.55), a backstage, cinéma vérité section that culminates with the unseen artist walking onto a stage, can be understood as a jump cut from *Don’t Look Back* to *Eat The Document*, all within twenty seconds.

I’m Not There, then, is nothing if not intertextual. When the character “Alice Fabian”, played by Julianne Moore and clearly modelled on Joan Baez, quotes Jack Rollins as saying that “folk music was fat people” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 18.35), we are presented with a veritable hall of mirrors: Moore, playing Fabian, representing Baez, quoting Rollins, representing Dylan (the line comes from the 1966 Nat Hentoff Playboy interview), all within a documentary that is itself enclosed within Haynes’ biopic. The viewer of *I’m Not There* has to bring her own knowledge to the film to an unusual degree, since Haynes often alludes to events and observations rather than presenting them or explaining them in the style of a traditional biopic. As Bingham (2010: 382) observes, *I’m Not There* “feels no need to prove Dylan’s worth or to establish his mythology; instead, Haynes assumes that the spectator already knows about Dylan’s importance. Therefore, he can set about at once to dissect his myth and meaning”. The film also draws to an unusual extent on the accumulated archive of texts by rock critics and biographers for its structure and content, making the authorship even more collective and collaborative.

Even the line “even the ghost was more than one person” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 2.10-2.14), on which hangs the whole premise of *I’m Not There*, is a reference to Dylan’s own *Tarantula*:

boy Dylan – killed by a discarded Oedipus
 who turned
 around
 to investigate a ghost
 & discovered that
 the ghost too
 was more than one person (Dylan 1971: 120).

Dylan does not go on, in *Tarantula*, to outline precisely how his ghost might be subdivided; it is Haynes who has come up with such personas as “poet”, “prophet”, “outlaw”, “fake” and “star of electricity”. Yet these words, spoken by Kristofferson in his role as narrator, could be heard as yet another intertextual reference. As Elliott (2015) points out, these are words used by Kristofferson in his song “The Pilgrim – Chapter 33”, written about Johnny Cash and others. Custen (1992) points out one important aspect of biopics, as opposed to auto/biographies: “in movies, the actor portraying the eminent figure has an actual, corporeal existence outside the narrative frame of a particular biographical life” (1992: 34). In other words, events “outside” the film interact with our responses to the actor “inside” the film, with the result that meaning becomes “multivalent and interactive” (Custen 1992: 45). Haynes is well aware of this sense of intertextuality, and has stated that he cast Gere as Mr B, for instance, specifically because the actor represented “a mini-history of American cinema” (Smith 2010: 73). The viewer, Haynes hoped, would recall Gere’s previous roles when watching him in *I’m Not There*. Apart from, perhaps, the relatively unknown Marcus Carl Franklin, the same could be said of all the actors in *I’m Not There*. It is also true of Kristofferson, whose appearance alludes not only to “The Pilgrim” but also to his role, as Billy, in Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* – which also featured Dylan.

I’m Not There, then, is deeply heteroglot, a true “tissue of quotations”, and Dylan is integral to that tissue, since quotes from his lyrics and interviews feature prominently in the script, and the soundtrack is full of performances by him. In that sense, he could be considered to have co-authored *I’m Not There*. I go on to ask whether Dylan can also be considered to have authorized the film.

Between hagiography and hatchet job: Dylan as authorizer

Dylan claimed not to know anything about *I’m Not There*, other than the fact some of his music was licensed for the film. How, then, could Dylan be understood to have authorized the film? The answer lies in an interview Haynes conducted with Allyssa Lee of Entertainment Weekly in 2007. Haynes is discussing depicting Dylan as a series of shifting personas, and Lee asks how Haynes began to turn this concept into an actual film. Haynes replies:

We took this concept to Dylan through his manager [Jeff Rosen], who suggested I write it down. I had very little expectation that I’d ever get this approved, because he’d always said no to any movie about his life. And I wrote it down, like on a one-sheet thing, and sent him my movies, and by the end of that first year — this was in 2000 — he basically said “all right, let’s give this guy the rights”. So for the first time a dramatic film was given the full music and life rights (Lee 2007).

To be clear, Haynes goes on to state that he never had any direct contact with Dylan. Yet he also states that he could have gained access to Dylan, had he wanted to, via Rosen “who’s been really close to the production” (Lee 2007). Rosen, we should note, is given “our very deepest thanks” (dir. Haynes, 2007: 2.08.45) in the film’s credits. Lee goes on to ask Haynes how important it was to secure Dylan’s approval, and Haynes responds as follows:

It was essential. I wouldn’t have even ventured otherwise. I made a film about the glam rock era called *Velvet Goldmine* [where we] requested some songs from David Bowie — the film was a fictionalised version of Bowie’s influence in the early ’70s — and we didn’t get that permission, and I ended up using other artists’ songs and some original songs in the place of [Bowie’s] songs. There was no way to do that with this project (Lee 2007).

While the “biographical Bob Dylan” can be considered absent from *I’m Not There* as subject, Dylan can hardly be considered absent from the film’s production process. Haynes’ experience of the impact of copyright law started with his first film, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), which is no longer available because of legal action by copyright holders. The many cover versions on the soundtrack, by Sonic Youth, Iggy and the Stooges, Yo La Tengo, Anthony and the Johnsons, Calexico, Tom Verlaine, Eddie Vedder and Stephen Malkmus could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid having to request permission to use Dylan’s recordings. In fact, however, filmmakers still require permission to use the songwriting copyright. In any case, *I’m Not There* features many of Dylan’s own recordings, not least the title track (Columbia 2007). The inclusion of these tracks, we must presume, was authorized by Dylan. Compulsory mechanical licensing applies only to recordings for sale as opposed to being used in films, and does not apply to songs that have not been previously released. Various music biopics, including *Jimi: All Is By My Side*, starring André Benjamin, include no tracks by the subject, having been denied permission by the subject or the subject’s estate. While it could be argued that it is the publisher that authorizes the sync license rather than the artist, Dylan’s stature, the fact that he has his own publishing company and the inclusion of an unreleased song all support the suggestion that he would have been consulted about Haynes’ film. Dylan, and

his manager Jeff Rosen, are also known to be unusually willing to clear songs for use in films (See Chagollan 2015; Harrison 2011: 123-4).

Dylan's authorization of *I'm Not There* has been neglected in the academic literature. Bingham (2010: 379) notes that Haynes "obtained the 'music rights and life rights' to make an authorized biopic of the singer-songwriter", but the comment is made almost in passing. Dylan's authorization was picked up, however, in media reports. A Time Out preview mentioned that "Dylan gave the director his blessing to do the project" (Anderson 2007), as does an article in The Guardian (O'Hagan 2007). Robert Sullivan's New York Times feature, cited at the start of this article, examines Dylan's involvement in some depth, Sullivan presenting Rosen's words – and those of Jesse Dylan – as paraphrased by Christine Vachon, the film's producer:

Vachon recalls: "What he [Jesse] did was say: 'Look, this [Jeff Rosen] is the guy you have to talk to. He is my father's right hand.'" In a few minutes, Jeff Rosen, Bob Dylan's longtime representative, was on speakerphone... Vachon remembers that Rosen was immediately interested (both he and Dylan declined to be interviewed for this article). "He was like: 'You know, that sounds really cool. We're always thinking about a way, something that, you know, kind of collects the music.'" (Sullivan 2007).

Sullivan goes on to state that Haynes was instructed to type up a one-page treatment for the film, which he sent off in the summer of 2000. "That fall, he heard that Dylan had said yes" (Sullivan 2007). To be clear, I am not arguing that we should necessarily consider *I'm Not There* a fully authorized biopic: there is no suggestion that Dylan's "blessing" applied to anything beyond that initial one-page treatment. Yet the division between the authorized and unauthorized life story, sometimes perceived in stereotypical terms as that between hagiography and hatchet job, is in fact much more complex. This is clear from an examination of authorized biography (and Inglis [2007] has noted the similarity between the biography and the biopic). Authorized biographies have been dismissed by Renders (2017) as "autobiographies in disguise", and Miles' *Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now* (1998), for instance, has been criticized as a hagiography by Rolling Stone (Sheffield 2012). Yet some authorized biographies display considerable critical distance between biographer and subject, those on novelist V. S. Naipaul and Steve Jobs for example (Cole 2012; French 2008; Isaacson 2011). Authorization, then, is not necessarily clear-cut (Gillies 2009: 49-50) and neither is it necessarily permanent: biographies can be "de-authorized" if subject and biographer fall out. Indeed, a falling out between subject and publisher can even result in that apparent contradiction in terms the "unauthorized autobiography", as was the case for Julian Assange (2011; see also Davies 1995).

Authorization, then, is not an either/or. Dylan’s position vis-à-vis *I’m Not There* has something in common with David Bowie – another protean popular music auteur whose life has been depicted by Haynes – in relation to the David Bowie is exhibition. As Paul Morley describes, Bowie’s involvement in the exhibition, which was staged at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in 2013, was ambiguous in the extreme:

As the exhibition was planned, commissioned, designed, debated and built, there was no sign of him, no communication, but he was always on and in the minds of everyone involved, and the exhibition was both nothing to do with him, and everything to do with him, another remaking of the idea of Bowie, based on what others think, which in the end is what matters most as long as that thinking is based on his reasoning... The exhibition was something he deemed not to be involved with even as it worked on his demanding terms – how to make something that by its very nature was nostalgic still seem to be about new possibilities and the creation of a future – which were never clearly stated and certainly never written down (Morley 2016: 397-8).

Bowie remained removed from the exhibition and from Morley’s biography (2016), which began when Morley was writer in residence at the exhibition. This challenges the binary division of depictions of a life into authorized and unauthorized. Renders (2017: 159) states that a biography is authorized “if the subject of the biography has read the text and declared the facts revealed within to be correct”. Yet this over-simplification neglects the question of who is doing the authorizing – it might not be the subject but, for instance, the subject’s estate (Benton 2015) – as well as the issue of precisely what is being authorized, since the scenario Renders outlines sounds more like checking for factual accuracy than full-blooded copy approval. Dylan’s authorization of *I’m Not There* does not imply that he declared its depiction of the “facts” to be “correct”; the film is concerned with dissecting the Dylan myth, not in the “biographical” Dylan. It presents Pete Seeger attempting to sabotage Dylan’s electric performance at Newport 1965 by cutting the cable with an axe; a cornerstone story of Dylan mythology, regardless of the fact that it did not actually happen. In other words, *I’m Not There* is concerned with Dylan’s “star-image”, a term employed by Marshall (2007: 7) to refer to “everything – true and false – that is publicly known” about a particular star, including “inaccuracies, urban legends, malicious lies, images and distorted facts”.

Dylan’s insistence to Rolling Stone that he did not know anything about *I’m Not There*, then, might be read as an attempt to distance himself from the film, as a refusal to carry out the film’s author function. In conceding that he licensed a number of his songs to the film, however, Dylan was in fact acknowledging his role as authorizer – albeit at arm’s length. Dylan can also be understood to have

authorized the treatment for *I'm Not There*, and the choice of Haynes as director, if not the final film.

Conclusion

Why would Dylan author(ize) a film in which he is a “structuring absence” (Bingham 2010: 381)? The answer, I believe, is that the “Dylan doughnut” – the life story with an apparent hole at its centre – suits Dylan down to the ground. Here again it is instructive to turn to literature about auto/biography. One motivation for writing such texts may be economic: the memoir offers an additional income stream. Yet Swiss (2005: 288) points out that autobiographies may also represent an attempt “to seize narrative authority”. Though the authorized biography and the ghostwritten autobiography both offer such an opportunity, there is an important difference in terms of perception: the authorized biography appears more objective and detached. Paradoxically, this makes it better suited for serving the subject’s vanity. Renders (2017: 162) points out that a subject may opt for an authorized biography because “a biography has more status [than an autobiography] precisely because it is not a selfie”. The trick, then, is to make sure that there appears to be sufficient critical distance between biographer and subject.

For Foucault, the construction of the author is an attempt to impose limits: “the author is... the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (1984: 119). Authorizing at a distance seems to have afforded Bowie some measure of influence on the *David Bowie is* exhibition, while also allowing meaning to proliferate. Morley (2016: 395) suggests that Bowie was keen for the V&A exhibition not to be “too Hard Rock Café in the way it presented items... too Wikipedia in how it covered the story”. In other words, Bowie wanted the exhibition to be about his “star image” rather than the “real” or “biographical” David Bowie. Haynes’ film is, if anything, even further from the “Wikipedia” approach than the *David Bowie is* exhibition, and Haynes seems to have understood Dylan’s attitude towards the film as akin to that of Bowie towards the exhibition:

I think it was because it was so unorthodox that he [Dylan] liked it. It was certainly not going to be like the traditional biopic. It was going to expand who he is, as opposed to reduce who he is. I bet that was one of the reasons (Lee 2007).

Dylan is, after all, uninterested in “the truth”: as he writes in *Chronicles*, “If you told the truth, that was all well and good and if you told the un-truth, well, that’s still well and good. Folk songs had taught me that” (2004: 35).

If identity and star-image are constructed discursively, then authorizing – and even co-authoring – *I'm Not There* allowed Dylan to contribute to that process of construction, while the authorial ambiguity allowed meaning to proliferate. By refusing to carry out the author function, Dylan leaves the responsibility for the film squarely with Haynes. Yet he maintains an element of influence. There is a risk in such an open form of authorship, as it entails ceding control. Yet there is plenty to be gained from such an open approach, not least the avoidance of accusations of hagiography. The gain, in other words, relates to authenticity. There is a clear sense, in Dylan, of an artist anointed with authenticity at the outset of his career yet who seemed aware both of the extent of artifice in his work, and of himself as divided and fragmented, rather than the unified individual of Romantic conception. Perhaps the greatest paradox is that Dylan has managed to be, in Haynes' terms, in part a “fake”, whilst also being perceived as deeply authentic. For Leeder (2012: 185), “one obvious paradox is the way Dylan cultivates the aura of a benign trickster while simultaneously being obsessed with authenticity. Dylan operates behind innumerable guises and pseudonyms – even his real name is a false one”. Or as the critic Lester Bangs (1996: 227) put it, in typically forthright style: “Dylan faked his whole career, the only difference is that he used to be good at it and now he sucks.... rock ‘n’ roll is an arena in which you recreate yourself, and all this blathering about authenticity is just a bunch of crap”.

To suggest that Dylan is partial authorizer and at least an author of *I'm Not There* is to suggest that Dylan has agency. Through his manipulation of the media, Marshall (2007: 10) notes, “Dylan has actively negotiated his star-image; in song, in public appearances and performances, in interviews and, recently, in autobiography”. As Marshall (2007) notes, Dylan is not some powerless individual entirely at the whim of social forces. He authorized the treatment for *I'm Not There* and can even be considered to have co-authored the film, both because he licensed his music and because his lyrics and interview quotes pepper the script. Denial has always been key to Dylan's persona, right back to “It Ain't Me Babe” (Columbia 1964), but this can be considered disingenuous; even in the song that gave the film its title, Dylan sings about being absent when, of course, he is anything but. While Haynes may carry out the author function for *I'm Not There*, Dylan is also evident in the film's Barthesian tissue of quotations. As Burke (2008: xvi) asserts, “the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead”.

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