

Poeopics: The Movies and the Lives of Poets

Poetry doesn't belong to those who write it but those who need it.

Mario Ruppolo in *Il Postino* (1994)

From its inception as an art form the movies have been compared/contrasted to poetry. Early French film theory, especially that of Jean Epstein and Germaine Dullac, poet Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Photoplay* (1915), the ingenious dialogues of poetry and cinema in the writings of filmmakers like Maya Deren (1917-1963) and later Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), Jason Shinder's anthology *Lights, Camera, Poetry: American Movie Poems, The First Hundred Years* (1996) and Laurence Goldstein's study *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History* (1994)—all document a possibly innate reciprocity between the two forms.

Throughout its history film has likewise found the biopic a versatile, resourceful, and almost natural template, offering, with varying degrees of success, the filmed lives of real people from politicians to scientists to artists to (autobiographically) filmmakers themselves. But can the movies tell the lives of poets? What theoretical and narratological problems does the medium face in taking on the life stories of poetry's makers?

Literature and Film (and Poetry)

A variety of films might, if time permitted, be considered here. A comprehensive discussion of what I have awkwardly named "poeopics" would certainly examine Jean Cocteau's autobiographical first film *Blood of a Poet* (1930), Robert Enders' *Stevie* (1978), in which Glenda Jackson plays British poet Stevie Smith, Barbet Schroeder's *Barfly* (1987), a chapter in the life of skid-row poet and fiction writer Charles Bukowski, Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*, a life of New Zealand novelist and poet Janet Frame, John Kent Harrison's *Beautiful Dreamer* (1990), whose Walt Whitman is played by Rip Torn, Scott Calvert's adaptation of poet Jim Carroll's autobiography *Basketball Diaries* (1995), Marcos Zurinaga's examination of the fatal clash between politics and poetry *The Disappearance of Garcia Lorca* (1997), Leon Ichaso's *Piñero* (2001), with Benjamin Bratt doing Nuyorican poet/playwright Miguel Piñero, and, to get look into the future, the in-production life of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, *The Beekeeper's Daughter*, supposedly to star Russell Crowe and Gwyneth Paltrow. I will limit myself, however, to three recent films at our test cases: Brian Gilbert's *Tom and Viv* (1994), Agnieszka Holland's *Total Eclipse* (1995), and Mike Radford's *Il Postino* (1994).

Revisionary Biography: *Tom & Viv*

As is fairly well known, despite his own efforts to the contrary, T. S. Eliot was a man much concerned about his reputation and fiercely determined to control access by biographers to his life. That sound you might have heard in The Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey back in '94 might well have been Eliot rolling over in his grave at the release of *Tom & Viv*. Willem Dafoe, having already played the Christ-like Sgt. Elias in *Platoon* (1986) and Christ himself in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), plays an anything-but-Christ-like Eliot in Brian Gilbert's film version of a revisionist 1984 play by Michael Hastings. *Tom & Viv* is a kind of outing, not because it brings into the open clandestine homosexuality (though Eliot may well have needed such outing as well, as some biographers have argued) but because it disinters an unseemly skeleton to be found in the closet of one of the century's greatest critics and poets.

"At some point in their marriage," Eliot acquaintance and fellow poet Edith Sitwell would later mordantly observe, in what might well be taken as *Tom & Viv's* thesis statement, "Tom went mad, and promptly certified his wife." Its method is reductionistic, perhaps to a fault. Brilliantly played by Miranda Richardson, Vivienne Eliot's disintegration on screen—we see her threaten Virginia Woolf with a table knife, pour melted chocolate into the mail slot at Faber and Faber, deliberately cause and auto accident, to name only three of her most aberrant episodes—we are given to believe, is at one and the same time the result of Eliot's cold aestheticism and the real releaser for major developments in her husband's intellectual and emotional life. After a particularly ugly clash we hear Eliot reading from "Traditional and the Individual Talent":

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

If we draw the conclusion that this essential plank in Eliot's poetics should be understood as the product of extreme cognitive dissonance and not critical insight, well the filmmakers would not endeavor to dissuade us. When, after another ugly scene with Vivian, we witness Eliot converting to the Anglican church, we are encouraged to assume that Eliot's newfound religion may not be devoid of self-interest.

That Vivienne Eliot's mental disturbance may have been simply the result of a now-easily treated hormone imbalance has been suggested by recent biographers and by the film itself. In a late scene, Viv, committed to the mental hospital where she would spend eleven years, eventually dying there of a heart attack, is visited by two men, one from the Tavistock Institute, investigating the legitimacy of her incarceration, but they find her uncooperative and unwilling, suffering as she is from literary Stockholm syndrome, to doubt the motives of her poet husband.

Show Clip (about three minutes)

Once again, we are led to believe, reductionistically, that Eliot's poetry, like his criticism and his religion, are really just sublimation, ways of forgetting/repressing his horrid treatment of his troubled wife.

Poet Maudit: Total Eclipse

If the T. S. Eliot of *Tom & Viv* is repellent he is at least proper. Agnieszka Holland's *Total Eclipse*, on the other hand, offers not one but two repellent, highly improper *poet maudits*. The tradition of the *poet maudit* is an old one, stretching back to the Greeks and Romans and even manifesting itself, decadence free, in indigenous cultures as well. The French Symbolist version raised the bar for mad poets everywhere. In "You're Gonna' Make Me Lonesome When You Go," we hear Dylan proclaim:

Situations have ended sad,
Relationships have all been bad.
Mine've been like Verlaine's and Rimbaud.

The relationship of fellow Symbolist poets Verlaine (1844-1896) and Rimbaud (1854-1891) did, after all, come to a bad end when the love-sick older poet twice attempted to shoot Rimbaud, on the second occasion wounding him seriously. After that, Verlaine went into steep decline and Rimbaud abandoned poetry for a reckless brief life that included gun running in Africa and Abyssinian, dying at thirty seven in a hospital in Marseille.

Screenwriter Christopher Hampton and director Holland tell their story in cut up fashion, beginning with the arrival in Paris in 1871 of Rimbaud (played by Leonardo DiCaprio), already famous at 17 for his *The Drunken Boat*, to meet Verlaine (played by David Thewlis), a married man with a pregnant trophy wife, then moving to the movie's present tense—in a bar in which, after Rimbaud's death, Verlaine meet the late poet's sister to discuss his legacy. "The young understand him now," Verlaine explains. "He is the voice of the future."

And so he would be, inspiring, with his poetics of conscious, willed hallucination and derangement, and his life of excess Jim Morrison, Patty Smith, the beats, which probably explains why Holland's film bears a striking resemblance to such rock-and-roll biopics as Oliver Stone's *The Doors* (1991). *Total Eclipse* does no hard drugs, but the absinthe flows freely. No lizard king exposes himself before a Miami audience, but Rimbaud will relieve himself on a banquet table and strip naked on a Paris rooftop. No groupies are injured in the making of the film, but Verlaine's wife, who becomes Rimbaud's rival for her husband's sexual affections, is subjected to a great deal of abuse, battered while pregnant and her hair set on fire in two excruciating scenes. Under the influence of absinthe, Verlaine will later reject Rimbaud's suggestion that he abuses his wife. "I haven't set fire to her since Thursday!" he responds with narcotic, absurd humor.

Play clip, about 1 minute 20 seconds

Deciding to be a genius, deciding to have negative capability, to encompass all human beings, all human experience, does not, needless to say, entail becoming a human being as well. If we are to believe the testimony of *Total Eclipse*, the beautiful ambition, only briefly achieved, of Rimbaud is inseparable from the lesser aspiration to be a son of a bitch, and we would all be better off if we never met poets such as these.

Ars Poetica: *Il Postino*

Neither of the poeopics I have discussed so far could itself be described as poetic. Only Michael Radford's *Il Postino* practices what it preaches. Not as biopic as *Tom & Viv* or *Eclipse*, its eponymous hero is an ordinary Italian mailman (Massimo Troisi) who learns to become a poet because of his developing friendship with the Nobel Prize winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (Philippe Noiret), who has come to Mario Ruoppolo's beautiful island exiled by the tyrannical rule of Augusto Pinochet.

Having taken a part time job as a mailman with the poet on his route, Ruoppolo's motives in his dealings with Neruda are at first purely selfish. Having seen a newsreel that showed Neruda greatly admired by women, Ruoppolo hopes that some of his sex appeal will rub off on him, but he is disappointed that he does not personalize his autograph on his mailman's copy of a book of his poetry. But soon he has begun to ask Neruda basic questions about his craft. In one touching scene he inquires about the nature of metaphor and is pleased to learn that, despite its complicated name, it is not as obscure as it sounds. Beside, Neruda informs him, understanding poetry is not nearly so important as "the experience of feelings that poetry can reveal to a nature open enough to understand it."

Ruoppolo, played poignantly by Massimo Troisi, who was very ill during shooting and died soon after completion of the film, directed by his close friend Michael Radford, makes poetry part of his equipment for living.

Show clip of Mario and Pablo by the sea, Mario accidentally making a metaphor: 3 minutes 10 seconds.

It was the career thesis of the film theory of William R. Robinson, now Professor Emeritus at the University of Florida, that the movies as a narrative art form are the final battleground for the millennia long conflict between word and image. In the poeopic two literary forms, poetry and biography seek to inhabit a new imagistic medium. Judging by *Tom & Viv* and *Total Eclipse*, the poeopic will do little to bring peace to the war. In each, the poets-of-record, Eliot, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, are exposed as deeply flawed, if not reprehensible beings, capable, perhaps of authoring great poetry but incapable of exhibiting

much humanity. As pœopic narratives their lives are the “old story”; they tell of the old defeating the new, keeping it from breaking on through in a completely successful creation. Only the fictional Mario Ruoppolo’s story is new: a tale of poetry’s transformation of life, about the development of a highly moral imagination, a narrative in which the new frees itself from the old, the kind of story the movies were born to tell.

David Lavery

Middle Tennessee State University

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