

*i'm not there*

transcendent thanatography

t w e l v e

j e s s e s c h l o t t e r b e c k

Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* (2007) is an unusually inventive and imaginative biographical film. It is, in the words of the opening credits, "Inspired by the music and many lives of Bob Dylan." Fitting the metaphorical announcement that it will cover "many lives," the film presents a living star subject who is absent, multiple, elusive and in the most daring portrayal, dead. *I'm Not There* reimagines Bob Dylan with six different actors. Each of the actors symbolically represent a different Dylan career-phase or interest: Marcus Carl Franklin plays Woody, an African American boy, who represents Dylan's little-known childhood, his interest in social politics, and the work of Woody Guthrie; Ben Whishaw is Arthur Rimbaud, a poet admired by Dylan, who shared his commitment to the ideal of individual artistic creation; Christian Bale appears as both Jack Rollins, an aspiring folk singer similar to the Dylan of the early 1960s, and later as Pastor John, evoking the born-again Dylan of the late 1970s and early 1980s; Heath Ledger plays Robbie, who divorces his wife in the late 1970s, much like Dylan, and voices his ambivalent relationship to stardom; Richard Gere is Billy the Kid, approximating a time of reclusion in the 1970s; and finally, Cate Blanchett

appears as Jude Quinn, the embodiment of Dylan I will focus on in this chapter. Quinn resembles the Dylan of the mid-1960s, when he produced his most legendary albums and appeared in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary, *Don't Look Back* (1967). Nearly as surprising as the appearance of Dylan in these remarkably different bodies, and just as central to Haynes's critical take on the genre, is the presentation of Dylan as a corpse at the beginning of the film.

Popular music stars have frequently lived self-destructively and died young, making their stories ideal subjects for biopics. The following feature or made-for-television films all depict musicians who suffered untimely deaths: *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978), *Elvis* (1979), *Sweet Dreams* (1985), *John and Yoko: A Love Story* (1985), *Sid and Nancy* (1986), *La Bamba* (1987), *The Karen Carpenter Story* (1989), *The Doors* (1991), *Selena* (1997), *Hendrix* (2000), and *Control* (2007). *I'm Not There* stands out as an exception in this genre. Because its subject is a musical star who was living at the time of the film's release, its treatment of Dylan's fictional death brazenly varies from the biopic's "putative connection to accuracy and truth."<sup>1</sup> Caroline Merz writes, "the contract of the biography is the promise to deliver up a life; a biographer's success or failure is judged on whether it creates a coherent personality."<sup>2</sup> *I'm Not There*, by contrast, portrays the star as fragmented and multiple instead of coherent. From the start, *I'm Not There* does away with the possibility of being "true" or coherent in any conventional sense. Instead, it is critical and imaginative. Haynes's film defamiliarizes the pop-star story and implicates the audience as part of a "devouring public" that wishes to consume another's identity. It makes a familiar story—in which a musical star seems to perform not only their work, but their life and death for an audience—strange.

Todd Haynes has done more to legitimize the musical biopic than any other director. All three of his musical films work with this genre as a vital and innovative form while also referencing and revising its more staid characteristics. Before the Dylan film, Haynes made the cult classic *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a thesis film made with Barbie Dolls, and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a film that borrows its structure from *Citizen Kane* (1941) to reconstruct the rock biographies of characters resembling Marc Bolan, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie.

Interviewed on the occasion of *I'm Not There*'s release, Haynes demonstrates his sensitivity to the biopic's typical "formula" and the way that this knowledge of the genre informs his work. While Haynes does not mention particular titles, his outline of the musical biopic capably describes the tendencies of the most popular films in the genre, such as *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005):

I do see that there is a kind of form that has become common to film [sic] that we now call the bio-pic, but I don't

know that it has any relationship to reality or anything literal or historical. It seems to be a construct of the narrative form that has to find beats in a person's life to dramatize events of the life that correspond to those moments of high and low and that have a relationship to their work. They are usually required to expose a certain amount of private history or conflict with drugs or philandering or something, and then show how that gets recovered or resolved. So to me, it's a formula, almost more nakedly so than other film genres because whatever the life is has to fit in this one package.<sup>3</sup>

Haynes consciously varies from the biopic "formula" that earned *Ray* over \$75 million at the box office and *Walk the Line* over \$119 million. *I'm Not There*, by contrast, would earn only \$4 million, but it is clear that Haynes's aim had less to do with profits and more to do with exploring the possibilities of the biopic.<sup>4</sup> As demonstrated in the above-cited interview, Haynes consciously wished to redress the tendency of musical biopics to render lives legible and easily explained. *I'm Not There* is consciously crafted as an answer to biopics that present a simplified compilation of a life's highlights and lowlights.

Haynes's film portrays the process of representing a life as elusive and provisional. Its bewildering representation of biography veers precipitously close to Freud's take on the genre:

Whoever becomes a biographer takes on the obligation to lie, to cover up, to be hypocritical, to whitewash, and even to conceal his lack of understanding; for biographical truth cannot be had, and if one did have it, one could not use it.<sup>5</sup>

While it is tempting to read *I'm Not There* as pure postmodern playfulness or in the pessimistic terms of classical psychoanalysis (which often reduces human behavior to the fulfillment of similar drives and patterns of perception), I will argue, drawing on the psychoanalysis developed by Carl Jung, that the film celebrates a rare popular artist who confronts and accepts the impermanence of life. As such, *I'm Not There*, is not only interested in biography (writing life) but also in thanatography (writing death). Yet, the film is not somber or sentimental about death. Instead, it celebrates a heroic encounter with death and a popular artist's insistence on play and creativity because of it. Death as a creative catalyst is present in two ways, one literal (a nearly fatal motorcycle accident) and the other figurative (Dylan's willingness to explore and abandon artistic personas).

Haynes's film celebrates Dylan for his elusiveness, taking the viewer through the songwriter's major phases—from his interest in left-leaning politics, to romanticism, to evangelical Christianity. *I'm Not There* makes an

implicit argument that Dylan's continuous movement through various personas allowed him to transcend the conventional cycle of consumption. It suggests that the kind of popular star who is able to keep both body and artistic spirit alive eludes conventional understanding. The film suggests that the kind of subjectivity necessary to undergo such frequent transformations of character is so unusual that it is best represented as a series of deaths and rebirths.

I will draw on the insights of psychoanalysis to better understand both the phenomenon of self-destructive star consumption and the exceptionality of Dylan. Because Dylan follows a creative and fluid process of development, the work of Carl Jung is especially relevant. In contrast to the model of psychoanalysis we have inherited from Sigmund Freud, which positions the field as a practice for diagnosis and correction, for getting subjects to accept an ordinary life, Jung's is not only interested in returning subjects to health but in having them reach their full potential. He considers "personality" not just as something that we have by default, but also as something to be struggled for and won: "Personality is the supreme realization of the innate idiosyncrasy of a living being. It is an act of high courage flung into the face of life."<sup>6</sup> This description is befitting of the achievements of a popular artist such as Dylan, who was as much devoted to the 1960s project of sorting out vital ways to think and live as he was to mastering music genres such as folk and rock.

As such, even though Jung's ideas are not used frequently in academic film studies, they are vitally relevant to the study of films that portray talented popular artists. Although Jung's development of a practice of psychoanalysis that differed from Freud's led to a falling out between the two men, their different models can, in fact, be read as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis is helpful in elucidating the psychology of fandom, while Jungian psychoanalysis is more helpful in understanding a unique and enigmatic performer, as Haynes imagines Dylan. Before closely analyzing two scenes of *I'm Not There*, I will review a number of psychoanalytic concepts relevant to this study.

In his critical account of surrealist Michael Leiris, Sean Hand devises the term "thanatography," to account for Leiris's experimental approach to the biography genre. Hand argues that Leiris's biography demonstrates "the pleasure and the power . . . of [autobiographical] presence; but simultaneously . . . [its] enthusiastic proliferations and effacements [indicate] how autobiography depends on a drive to the death."<sup>7</sup> *I'm Not There* also consciously elaborates on the film biography as thanatography: the presentation of how stars die in addition to how they live. We are accustomed to this spectacular immolation because it delivers on the contradictory things we ask of our stars: simultaneously, we want them to live too much and to die for having done so.

Thanatography is an extension of Freud's concept of thanatos (or the death drive). In Freud's theory this potentially dangerous instinct can be positively harnessed for worldly achievements. He writes, "libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfills the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards . . . [to] the instinct for mastery, or the will to power."<sup>8</sup> The celebrity's work with thanatos is particularly unusual. The public performer creates a "self" known by many at the expense of an immediate kind of death—as the wholeness of the private being is sacrificed in service of public works and appearances—but is still mindful of eventual death, beyond which reputation and public works will live.

In psychoanalysis, a group of interrelated terms (the Real, *jouissance*, and the death drive) are associated with the most threatening aspects of being—things that the subject is so driven to avoid that they, like the head of Medusa, cannot be directly seen. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the "Real" constitutes an unknown aspect of consciousness that can never be directly accessed yet structures the "Imaginary" and "Symbolic." The "Real" exists "outside language and is inassimilable to symbolization."<sup>9</sup> The "Real" is not a sought-after territory that we wish to encounter, but the opposite, something that is scrupulously avoided by fantasy, returning us to the more comfortable realms of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Slavoj Žižek explains, "fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real."<sup>10</sup> The affect that accompanies encounters approaching the Real is *jouissance*. *Jouissance* means both enjoyment and a surplus of enjoyment that the subject experiences as a threat.<sup>11</sup> It is the pursuit of *jouissance* that motivates the death drive.

In Jung's work, we encounter a concept very close to Lacan's "Real," the "nigredo."<sup>12</sup> For Jung, this terrifying darkness is not equally experienced by all subjects. Whereas the "Real," for Lacan, remains universally inaccessible and terrifying for all subjects as something that exists outside language, for Jung the "nigredo" is the first stage of a potentially intense and creative psychological transformation. For those interested in and capable of such a journey—whether artistic, mystical, or psychological—the terrifying darkness is not to be feared, but seen, accepted, and worked through. While the structuring force of the "Real" is the deepest ontological truth for many psychoanalysts, for Jung the equivalent, "nigredo," is simply a default state of incoherence that, once experienced openly and accepted, the subject can move beyond for higher stages of development. Jung borrows these phases of psychological development from the seventeenth-century science of alchemy. In the alchemical ideal, the individual moves from the nigredo, a perception of outer-truth defined by chaos and arbitrariness, to realizations of inner-truth. Dylan, as portrayed by Haynes, represents such a figure; he is able to see the entirely social self as impersonal and best treated as a stepping stone. This potentially

dark recognition becomes, for Dylan, a catalyst for creation and self-realization.

Yet, the bare fact of the death drive or the “nigredo” is too much for most of us to face directly. The cultural valuation of “love-and-death pop idolatry” fulfills the social function of making the death drive, *jouissance*, and the Real partially visible and accessible.<sup>13</sup> While characterizations of *jouissance* and the death drive bear a remarkable resemblance to the pursuit of fame, these phenomena have rarely been considered together.

Joan Copjec’s definition of the death drive’s motivation—“making oneself heard or making oneself seen”—resembles the pursuit of fame.<sup>14</sup> In the celebrity condition, following the death drive can dangerously conflate public and personal understandings of the self: “the intimate core of our being, no longer sheltered by sense, ceases to be supposed and suddenly becomes exposed.”<sup>15</sup> *I’m Not There* portrays celebrity as a contradictory and chaotic state, which resembles the dilemmas of selfhood outlined by psychoanalysis. This is what Dylan, as portrayed by Haynes, accepts and artfully plays with. This biopic thematically complements Copjec’s redefinition of the filmic gaze, not as “an unrealizable ideal but . . . an impossible real.”<sup>16</sup> Because the Dylan of *I’m Not There* also recognizes the singular ego-identity as “unrealizable” and “impossible,” he is able to create freely under numerous personas and transcend the constitutive limits proposed by the pessimistic psychoanalysis of Lacan.

As an artist connected to beatnick poets, popular protest movements, and the hippie subculture, Dylan was well aware of alternate theories of selfhood espoused by these communities. Timothy Leary and Ram Drass, defectors from the Harvard Psychology Department, proposed different models of selfhood by drawing on psychedelic drug use and Eastern philosophy. Ralph Metzner, a colleague of Timothy Leary’s, summarizes the “transformational work” that attracted seekers of the 1960s:

when the ego personality “dies”, everything changes. The old self-image, the one we acquired from our parents and from society . . . all these have to be “killed”, that is, rendered completely lifeless within us . . . The new personality, the new sense of identity that results from the transformational work, is symbolized by the reborn child.<sup>17</sup>

It is this unfixed subjectivity that is imaginatively presented in *I’m Not There*. The decision to have six different actors play Dylan should be read figuratively, to suggest the stark differences between his artistic phases. The film suggests that this fluidity allows Dylan to flourish in what might otherwise be an overwhelming lifestyle.

Dylan represents the rare triumph of the star-artist over the public ideal of the easily evaluated, short-lived (in fame if not life) celebrity. Instead of submitting to the judgment of popular media or fans, Dylan productively

destroys his personas again and again. Musical styles (folk, country, rock, blues) and social values (activism, autobiographical expression, artistic integrity, religious rebirth) are freely channeled, then abandoned as the chameleonic artist explores the energy of these genres and values but never insists on their one-to-one correspondence with a stable, personal identity. By so freely moving through different artistic personas, Dylan makes himself immune to the conventional life-cycle of media coverage and popular reception.

In *The Exile of Britney Spears*, Christopher R. Smit studies a cycle of popular consumption that is the negative image of Dylan’s story. Smit positions the consumption of this more typical pop star as emblematic of the exchanges ritually enacted by twenty-first century celebrities and fans. Smit pushes us to recognize that the trajectory of Spears’s popular image from “innocent” teen star to derided tabloid fodder should not “be seen as a simple cultural inevitability.”<sup>18</sup> He writes that, “it was our energy [as eager and unselfconscious consumers] that initiated [her eventual] exile.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, the very institutions—the popular media, in particular—that facilitate the mass ritual of consumption and abandonment naively disavowed any active role in her demise. Smit continues, “like all things consumed, Britney was digested and eliminated. . . . Left to be what *Rolling Stone* called an American Tragedy, forgetting that they started the whole thing.”<sup>20</sup> Dylan is such a powerful and enduring star because he effectively turns this kind of consumption cycle on its head. He slips out of conventional understanding, moving effortlessly from protest songs (“The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”) to insistence on individual growth as the ultimate goal (“My Back Pages”); from indictments of contemporary Christianity (“With God on Our Side”) to his own evangelical rebirth (“Every Grain of Sand”). Dylan’s shape-shifting, defiant individuality eludes understanding. He cannot simply be comprehended, judged, and rejected (like Spears) because his astonishingly diverse repertoire, full of opposing expressions, seems to anticipate and respond to potential critiques. His canon is its own universe—diverse, enigmatic, and irreducible. It is this ego-transcending multiplicity that Haynes captures in *I’m Not There*.

The film opens with a first-person point of view shot. This long take, in grainy black and white, aligns us with the perspective of an unseen music star. Roadies direct the implied subject behind the first-person point of view shot through backstage corridors as we hear crowd noise and musicians tuning their instruments. The glare of the stage spotlights blinds our view, and the film suddenly cuts to another time and place. A motorcyclist starts his bike in two extreme close-ups before riding across the frame in a long shot long take. Dylan fans will recognize this three-shot scene as an allusion to the singer’s motorcycle accident in 1966. Had Dylan died in this wreck, his cult status would have been solidified with a James Dean-like ending. Instead, exactly the opposite happened: few details of the accident or the

extent of his injuries were ever known, and the singer recovered and withdrew from public life for a few years. Dylan did not tour for eight years, and his musical output from 1967 to 2012—with occasional exceptions such as the albums *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), *Time Out of Mind* (1997), and *Tempest* (2012)—was less acclaimed. *I'm Not There* asks us to consider an alternative to this more mundane outcome: what if Dylan tragically died just after producing three of his strongest records, *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)? The following scene stages an anachronistic autopsy.

The film cuts to Dylan (Cate Blanchett) being examined by morticians then placed in a casket. In this scene, a medical lamp flashes on, filling the screen and suggesting a connection between this deathly white light and the glare of the stage lights or the flashbulbs of press photographers. A philosophic voiceover muses, "There he lies, a devouring public can now share the remains of his sickness." Next, the narrator (Kris Kristofferson) introduces us to *I'm Not There's* primary conceit—that six actors (none of whom bear a strong resemblance to Dylan or to the other five actors who play him) will appear as the singer. Each character is introduced with a terse past tense description and a full-frame close-up that emphasizes their stark differences: "There he lay, poet, prophet, outlaw, fake, star of electricity." Voiceovers by Kristofferson, Blanchett (Jude), and Ben Whishaw (Arthur) point to the elusive quality of Dylan's personas and work. Blanchett says, "A poem is like a naked person," and Kristofferson's voiceover adds, "Even the ghost was more than one person." We return to all six characters in an additional set of close-ups: cuts between them are abruptly paired with a gun shot. Whishaw adds, "But a song is something that walks by itself." This series of comments is dynamic and bewildering in equal measure, producing a strange effect of presence and nonpresence.<sup>21</sup>

Each part of the opening sequence works in this manner to portray the star as both multiply constituted and unstable. The opening shot, which

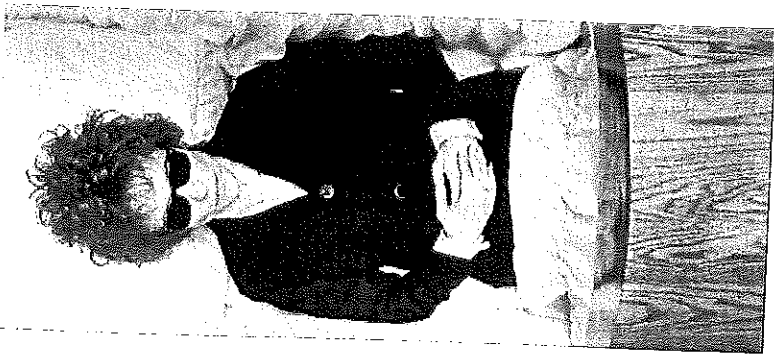


Figure 12.1 *I'm Not There's* (2007) opening sequence: Cate Blanchett appears as Dylan in an anachronistic autopsy.

aligns us with a star taking the stage, suggests presence (this character is the center of the scene, fussed over by his numerous handlers and cheered on by the crowd) and absence (we never see the character's face or hear his music). Here, the star is an empty signifier that can be filled in by an infinite variety of personas and performance styles. The motorcycle scene taunts the spectator with the possibility that Dylan's legend would be greater and more cinematic if he had died at that moment. Instead, he "dies" a much slower and more complicated "death" through six different guises. What are we to make of such a bizarre representational strategy? This is not mere postmodern experimentation or nonsense. Instead, it is a celebration of Dylan's triumph over the star-making-and-destroying apparatus. He achieves this by passing through a series of persona phases, portrayed in *I'm Not There* as a series of bodily incarnations.

Haynes's sensitive engagement with the biopic genre is also matched by Dylan's management of his celebrity status. Celebrityhood is a negotiated state that Dylan understands and controls. A close reading of "Ballad of a Thin Man" from the 1967 album *Highway 61 Revisited* offers a good illustration of Dylan's management of his star image. I will attend to the relationship of this song to Dylan's work and persona in the late 1960s, before analyzing how Haynes uses "Ballad of a Thin Man" in *I'm Not There*. In this song, Dylan taunts a critic's effort to understand his craft, ("You walk into the room / with a pencil in your hand . . . You try so hard but you don't understand"). These opening lines subvert the usual power dynamic between the critic and the popular musician. Typically, the entertainer must (as an implicit part of the show-business contract) offer himself up for public judgment—with newspaper and magazine critics figuring as the default arbiters of popular taste. However, in actual exchanges with the press, Dylan famously attempted to redefine this relationship, positioning himself in opposition to the popular critic's discourse.

Dylan's stance was clearly established in two charged interactions with the press in the 1960s. In 1963, a *Newsweek* exposé revealed that much of Dylan's past was either mythical or a lie. This piece could have done significant damage to Dylan if his star image had been defined by fact and authenticity. Instead, following the *Newsweek* piece, he openly argued for his intensely individual relationship to his music. Understanding himself as a romantic artist, Dylan refused to engage in middlebrow conversations about musical genres, influences, and his popular reception. Loren Glass situates Dylan's response to this magazine piece as a turning point in his balanced construction of his status as celebrity and artist. He writes, "After Dylan's lies about his past were exposed . . . he began to build a wall of semi-private and allusive language around himself, implying that his persona required not factual reportage, but literary interpretation."<sup>22</sup> A literary equivalent to "Ballad of a Thin Man" can be found in the "!! Outlined Epitaphs" of the album liner notes of *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. There,

in a note addressed to “Mr. Magazine,” Dylan’s self-presentation is markedly different from the journalistic model. He writes that:

[T]he town I was born in holds no memories . . . mine is of another story for I do not care to be made an oddball bouncing past reporter’s pens co-operating with questions aimed at eyes that want to see . . . I don’t like to be stuck in print staring out at cavity minds who gobble chocolate candy bars.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Dylan positions himself outside the default relationship with the press. Rather than offer himself fully for consumption and judgment, Dylan rejects the validity of journalistic assessments and the neutrality of the consumer economy.

Dylan confronted the mainstream media again in the cinema vérité documentary *Don’t Look Back* (1967). In one of the film’s most famous scenes, he antagonizes an interviewer from *Time* magazine. Instead of earnestly responding, Dylan questions the validity of *Time* as an objective source, and turns the focus to the interviewer. He argues that, in short, the reporter is merely a functionary in a ritualistic exchange. *Don’t Look Back* is a broad-ranging film, in which Dylan’s clash with this reporter figures as the most concise and coherent dramatic conflict. *I’m Not There*, as I will outline shortly, could be described in a similar way.

Dylan also positions the singer and his song above the critic in his performance of “Ballad of a Thin Man.” Beyond the clarity of his intentions expressed in the lyrics cited above, his performance of the song on the album *Highway 61 Revisited* supports its rhetorical project. Dylan does this by skillfully performing crucial lines of the song: he laughs slightly while singing, “you *try* so hard but you don’t understand.” He slows to a condescending crawl for last four words of every chorus—“Something is happening here but you don’t know what it is, *do you, Mister Jones?*” Here, Dylan taunts Mister Jones with a slowness that does not make the critic’s job any easier or clearer. Musically, “Ballad of a Thin Man” strikes a balance between ponderous and playful. Played in a minor key, the piano, the dominant instrument in the song, is severe, mimicking the critic’s seriousness. Dylan effectively says, “Even when I put something *on your level*, you still can’t get it at all.” In contrast to the somber piano, the organ riff in a higher key that accompanies the end of each line of the song is light, and sounds almost improvisational. Dylan’s vocal delivery, which is both commanding and casual, indicates his ability to masterfully hold both of these modes in dual focus. He fully understands and can play around with the idea that a star-persona or a song can be deliberate and self-evidently meaningful, but ultimately rejects this possibility, favoring instead a mode of expression and self-understanding that remains elusive and ungraspable. Given such a similar thematic interest, “Ballad of a Thin Man” is, logically,

featured in *I’m Not There*. It is the only song to receive a sequence akin to a music video.

Bruce Greenwood plays a character who combines characteristics of both “Mister Jones” and the *Time* magazine reporter Dylan clashed with in *Don’t Look Back*. In an elaborate two-part sequence, Dylan (played by Blanchett in this portion) clashes with “Mister Jones” during an attempted interview, then performs “Ballad of a Thin Man” at a concert that this critic attends. In the first half of this sequence, Jones attempts to conduct a conventional journalistic interview with Dylan, but finds him to be an unusually frustrating and slippery subject. Dylan persistently refuses to enact a conventional interview. Instead, he repeatedly denies any personal investment in his own work or the social world. When the interviewer asks Dylan to take a coherent stance of contemporary political movements, he refuses, saying, “I’m just a storyteller man, that’s all I am.” Dylan poses the heretical possibility that his folk-music phase could be nothing more than “jumping into a scene” and “[doing] it better than anyone else.” Dylan presents a version of himself and his work that is obviously false. Such insouciant responses refute journalistic discourses that would reduce Dylan’s work to a musical genre or a social cause.

Dylan effectively gains control over this exchange, limiting Mister Jones by providing quotes that cannot be assimilated into a reductive reading of his art. To underscore this point, Haynes inserts Dylan song lyrics for Jones’s attempted retorts. When Jones protests Dylan’s supposed lack of social concern, his response is drawn from the lyrics of a song from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*: “I don’t believe you, you act as though—” Jones tries to hold to the conventions of journalistic discourse. He claims that Dylan’s refusal to give him a straight answer reflects a lack of sincerity. Dylan retorts that he is, “No more sincere than you are. You just want me to say what you want me to say,” and effectively turns the questions to the interviewer. He asks Jones, “What do you care, if I care or don’t care, what’s it to you?” Dylan has broken down Jones’s confidence. In a revealing edit, a reverse-shot of the interviewer is held for a relatively long period of time. Jones’s penetrating gaze is interrupted and he casts his glance askew—feeling the grip of the typical interviewer’s position slipping.

The “Ballad of a Thin Man” video, which follows this tense and failed interview, illustrates the overturning of the usual critic–celebrity dynamic. A cover of the song by Pavement’s Stephen Malkmus forgoes the teasing and subtle qualities of the original for a more raucous version, and accompanies a surreal sequence. The critic, Mister Jones, walks into a restroom and is startled to encounter multiple versions of himself—the stability of his subject-position apparently unsettled by Dylan’s rebuke. He then walks into a performance space and is confronted with a nightmarish sequence of events that undermine his smug sense of authority. Dylan is replaced on stage by a caged circus performer, “Eeka the Geek,” before the

critic has a chance to digest this replacement; he, himself, is in the cage and Dylan extends a microphone towards him (Figure 12.2).

Visually, Haynes conveys the frustration that Dylan expresses in the relationship between popular artists and critics—their interest in speaking for and explaining artists (“Here is your throat back, thanks for the loan”) and their deadline-bound rush to demand clear meaning from popular artists: “You’re a cow, give me some milk or else go home!” The ability of art to thrive in such an exchange is so curtailed that Dylan fantasizes about the banishment of critics from mediating the relationship between fans and performers: “There oughta be a law against you coming around. You should be made to wear earphones.”

What is at stake in the antagonistic relationship between Dylan and the press? “Ballad of a Thin Man” and the passage it inspired in *I’m Not There* present arguments through negation. A series of negatively stated positions emerge from this sequence of the film: Dylan does not want to be reduced to a commercial product. He does not want the media to set a limit in determining the meaning of his life or songs. He does not want to be bound by discourse that strictly associates facts with truth—but what is suggested in its place? *I’m Not There* portrays the very difficulty of imagining ways of being and meaning outside the norm. Subjectivity in *I’m Not There* is flexible and fluid. To understand oneself in terms that significantly vary from the dominant modes is difficult and shattering. It is a kind of death, but also liberating.

In Jungian psychoanalysis, in which the unconsciousness is also the source of positive and sustaining ideas, the subject is encouraged to enter this realm in order to conceive of himself beyond the categories available to him by default, based on context. Jung writes, “if we can successfully develop that function which I have called transcendent, the disharmony ceases and we can then enjoy the favorable side of the unconscious. The unconscious then gives us all the encouragement and help.”<sup>24</sup> In *I’m Not*



Figure 12.2 In a surrealistic sequence accompanying “Ballad of a Thin Man,” Dylan (Blanchett) extends a microphone to a caged critic.

*There*, we have the example of a figure profoundly in touch with a multi-dimensional, creative personality. It is to Haynes’s credit that such an accomplished popular artist’s life should not simply be dramatized or analyzed, but also artistically reimagined and celebrated. As represented in *I’m Not There*, by moving through different personas, Dylan is able to transcend the usual cycle of consumption and exist for himself as much as for an audience.

Understood in the context of the death drive, the popularity of the doomed rock star narrative and its opposite—Dylan’s fluidity and survival—makes considerably more sense. Atkinson concisely describes the pop biopic in terms that are readily adaptable to a psychoanalytic interpretation:

All modern pop biopics are by nature hagiographic, but, haunted by the ghost of Elvis, they are also inevitably tempted by the forces of darkness. The bitter destiny balances the music’s natural élan. And without the buoyancy of youthful privilege, the crashes, the ODs and asphyxiations would have no resonance.<sup>25</sup>

Atkinson clarifies, however, that the fan’s imagination of Elvis is contrary to the sobering facts of his demise:

Even if it took more than twenty years for the crush of iconolatriy, wealth, and drug abuse to boomerang back at him, the classic trajectory of Elvis’ life is still clung to popularly as modern tragedy—as if he was *meant* to die sometime before getting fat, middle-aged and campy, didn’t, and we’ll just pretend he did.<sup>26</sup>

By this, Atkinson is emphasizing not just the wish of the popular audience to destroy young idols, but for their death to be a kind of apotheosis. How much more satisfying is the forever-young image of James Dean versus the aged image of Elvis that Atkinson invokes? So much more that we vaguely imagine Elvis as triumphant and transcendent, forever youthful.

The fluid and multiple iterations of Dylan presented in *I’m Not There* dramatize the fulfillment of the promise of Elvis—the transcendent popular artist. Though Dylan was alive and well when *I’m Not There* was made, this biopic remains “haunted by the ghost of Elvis” because the kind of subjectivity that the transcendent artist embodies is incredibly difficult for the fan to imagine. An artist like Dylan willfully invites a process of deaths and rebirths, in the forms of performing personas. The willful invitation of lack and the refusal to identify with a persona consistently coherent to others is not only difficult for music or film fans to imagine, it also challenges the classical model of semiotic psychoanalysis often used

in film studies. Contemporary psychologists still working in the tradition of psychoanalysis, such as Mari Ruti, see a link between lack and creativity. Ruti posits:

A direct link between lack and creativity, between our alienation on the one hand and our capacity to engender imaginative ways of coping with this alienation on the other. This suggests that our ability to dwell within our lack without seeking to close it—our ability to tarry with the negative . . . is indispensable for our psychic aliveness.<sup>27</sup>

Psychoanalytic critics, cited with greater frequency by academic film studies, are more pessimistic about our creative capacity to transcend the confines of default psychological and cultural limits. Žižek, following Lacan, would have us believe that we are limited universally by lack and the limitations of language. Ruti, like Jung, would say that the exceptionally actualized or creative individual can consciously value self-understanding over social identity. For someone like Dylan, the recognition of our finitude, or lack, is not confining at all; rather it is a necessary point on the path toward authentic self-knowledge and expression. The exciting and bewildering range of personas that appear in *I'm Not There* suggest a very different kind of subjectivity than that typically sought in everyday life, star representations, and the popular media. Eschewing externally defined ideals of coherence and stability that exist outside of time, Haynes's Dylan is able to survive the vicissitudes of the celebrity lifestyle because he accepts the temporal and ephemeral quality of life, which leads inevitably to death. Emboldened by this recognition, Dylan's fluid and playful artistic personas are defiantly individual, always a step ahead of the fan, popular critic, and academic account: "There's something happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mister Jones?"

#### notes

1. George F. Custen, "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961–1980," in "The Biopic," ed. Glenn Feldman, special issue, *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 139.
2. Caroline Merz, "An Examination of Biography in Film and Television," (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 1981), as cited in Mary Joannou and Steve McIntyre, "Lust for Lives: Report from a Conference on the Biopic," *Screen* 24, no. 4–5 (1983): 146.
3. Sean Axmaker, "Todd Haynes and a Whole Slew of Dylans" (includes an interview with Todd Haynes), *Green Cine*, May 6, 2008, accessed August 1, 2012, <https://www.greencine.com/central/todddhaynes>.
4. "Biopic—Music Movies at the Box Office," *Boxoffice Mojo.com*, accessed April 23, 2012, [www.boxoffice Mojo.com/genres/chart/?id=musicbio.htm](http://www.boxoffice Mojo.com/genres/chart/?id=musicbio.htm).
5. Freud quoted in Walter Kaufman, *Freud, Adler, and Jung: Discovering the Mind*. Volume 3 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 178.

6. Carl Jung, *The Development of Personality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 171.
7. Sean Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 186.
8. Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 418.
9. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 159.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 57.
11. Žižek describes *jouissance* as "a violent intrusion that brings more pain than pleasure"; *How to Read Lacan*, 79. Stephen Heath defines *jouissance* as "a radically violent pleasure which shatters—dissipates, looses—that cultural identity, that ego." Heath contrasts *jouissance* with Roland Barthes's related concept of *plaisir* in *Image, Music, Text*, defined as "linked to cultural enjoyment and identity, to the cultural enjoyment of identity, to a homogenizing movement of the ego," in other words, the lighter, less threatening side of *jouissance*. Stephen Heath, "Translator's Note" in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 9.
12. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 271–275.
13. Michael Atkinson, "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics," in *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and Movies Since the 1950s*, eds. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 21.
14. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 190.
15. *Ibid.*, 190.
16. *Ibid.*, 34.
17. Ralph Metzner, *Opening to Inner Light: The Transformation of Human Nature and Consciousness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 155.
18. Christopher R. Smit, *The Exile of Britney Spears: A Tale of 21st Century Consumption* (Chicago, IL: Intellect, 2011), 21.
19. *Ibid.*, 20.
20. *Ibid.*, 21.
21. Greil Marcus noted a similar effect at work in his analysis of the first bars of the 1965 Dylan song "Like a Rolling Stone":

There is that stick coming down hard on the drum and the foot hitting the kick drum at the same time, this particular rifle going off not in the third act, but as the curtain goes up. . . . Then for an expanding instant there is nothing. The first sound is so stark and surprising, every time you hear it, that the empty split-second that follows calls up the image of a house tumbling over a cliff; it calls up a void.

Greil Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2006), 94–95.

22. Loren Glass, "Buying In, Selling Out: From Literary to Musical Celebrity in the United States," *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 1 (2005): 32.
23. Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, Columbia CS 8905, 1964, LP, "Liner Notes" as cited in Glass, "Buying In, Selling Out," 32.



24. Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 116.
25. Atkinson, "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics," 27.
26. *Ibid.*, 24.
27. Mari Ruti, *A World of Fragile Things: Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 49.