

Depicting a Life Less Ordinary: Fantasy as Evidence for Deconstruction in the Contemporary Film Biopic

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the utilisation of fantasy in the contemporary, mainstream biopic as evidence for deconstruction from the classical generic form. By using *Miss Potter* (2006) as an illustrative case study, this paper interrogates the inclusion of fantasy in relation to wider trends in the biopic's development. Drawing on James Walters' definition of 'interior fantasy', I examine the representation of 'real' animated characters in *Miss Potter* that the central protagonist both talks to and interacts with. Through a combination of narrative and production analysis, I explore how and why fantasy elements are included in a film which, in all other aspects, represents a realist, albeit dramatised, depiction of the well-known British author Beatrix Potter. Central to this is a consideration of whether the use of fantasy conflicts with historical accuracy and factual account in portraying the subject's 'real-life' story. It finds that the 'interior fantasy' as seen in *Miss Potter* ultimately represents an extension of the formal components typically associated with the biopic. More broadly, this article contributes to recent, revisionist critiques, by assessing the deconstructive tendencies of the modern mainstream biopic and re-considering its place within contemporary cinema.

KEYWORDS

Miss Potter, deconstruction, fantasy, historical accuracy, factual representation, biopic

Introduction

In a *Newsweek* article, published in February 2010 under the banner headline "Is the Biopic Dead?", the commentator announced the following:

Like popcorn and Milk Duds, the biopic has long been a Hollywood staple and often a big moneymaker [...] but in the last five years it has begun to feel as dusty and outdated as the set of Encyclopaedia Britannica in your parents' attic (Setoodeh, 2010).

This article, printed in a high-profile and popular weekly US news magazine, is clear in its accusations; the biopic is considered too staid and outmoded to appeal to modern audiences. Such opinion is typical of negative critical accusations levelled towards the biopic, leading some to claim that 'it may be the most maligned of all film genres' (Bingham, 2010: 11).

However, recent academic re-appraisals have endeavoured to challenge this assumption, arguing that the biopic has not only proliferated in the last few years but also, far from being static, exists in a constant state of creative flux. According to Dennis Bingham, the emergence of highly self-reflexive biopics, such as *Man on The Moon* (1999) and *I'm Not There* (2007), provide evidence of the genre's 'evolution from classicism to parody to contestation and critique' or 'deconstruction' (Bingham, 2010: 18). Bingham applies this term to describe films which attempt to provide alternative approaches in the representation

of biographical subjects portrayed on screen. The manifestation of this is evident in recent biopics such as *Man on the Moon*; a film that ‘subverts the genre by not insisting upon a reality for its subject, by not even insisting that their subject was “real”’ (Bingham, 2010: 7). This marks a departure from the classical generic form which is typically defined by its ‘official’ biographical depiction of a ‘real person whose real name is used’ (Custen, 1992: 5).

The following paper will illustrate this deconstructive process in action by applying this term to analyse the utilisation of fantasy in the modern, mainstream biopic. This study will focus on *Miss Potter* (2006) as a contemporary biopic that employs fantasy through the inclusion of imaginary, animated characters that the biographical subject, Beatrix Potter (Renee Zellweger), both talks to and interacts with. I contend that the presence of fantasy elements in *Miss Potter* provides evidence for deconstruction from the classical form. The aim of this paper is to evaluate how and why fantasy is utilised in *Miss Potter* and to consider how the film offers both a disruption and extension of narrative and aesthetic conventions traditionally associated with the biopic. In addition, I propose that the application of fantasy as seen in *Miss Potter* can also be evidenced in other recent biopics such as *Finding Neverland* (2004), *Beyond The Sea* (2004) and *Creation* (2009), providing an indication of wider trends.

In assessing how the biopic functions as an ‘official’ portrayal of a ‘real’ person, it is clear a potent tension exists between the dual impulses of realist depiction and creative conjecture. This has led to a significant conflict of interest, with critical opposition levelled against the biopic as ‘tedious, pedestrian and fraudulent’ (Bingham, 2010: 11). There are two central issues raised here that will be addressed throughout this paper. Firstly, the notion that biopics are perceived as fraudulent requires close consideration of how the subject’s life is portrayed on screen. I will therefore examine *Miss Potter* in relation to documented accounts of Potter’s life and position this assessment against theoretical debates surrounding cinema, ideology and filmic representations of history. This will include an evaluation of fantastical elements used in the film and whether this particular aspect of *Miss Potter* conflicts with the presented ‘truth’ of the subject’s life story. A second issue, reiterated in the *Newsweek* article, is the claim that biopics are tedious, pedestrian and failing to adapt to changing audience interests. I will challenge this contention by evaluating *Miss Potter* as a contemporary biopic which offers appeal and interest to modern audiences through its deconstructive tendencies.

To achieve these objectives, this article will include close narrative analysis of *Miss Potter* alongside an assessment of the film’s production. In the context of this study, fantasy will be identified using James Walters’ definition of ‘interior fantasies’ whereby the ‘boundaries of the fictional world are expanded only in the minds of the characters’ (Walters, 2011: 5; 97). The initial section of this article will analyse how and why fantasy is utilised, in a narrative critique of relevant sequences from *Miss Potter*. This study will examine specific scenes which project elements of ‘interior fantasy’ and assess this as visual narrative, designed to ‘show up certain truths about [the subjects’] real lives [and] shed light upon what we understand those characters to be’ (Walters, 2008: 52). I will outline how *Miss Potter* portrays ‘interior fantasy’ through the employment of imaginary figures and consider how such sequences operate to ‘shed light’ upon certain aspects of Potter’s personality and character as presented within the film. This aspect of the study will also draw on the work of V. F Perkins in evaluating the designated function and role of the animated figures in the film. The second section will address critical claims of fraudulent representation by exploring documented accounts of Potter’s life and consider the process involved in adaptation to film. This will include an evaluation of how and why the film-makers decided to portray certain events from Potter’s life on screen and exclude others. In addition, this analysis will

interrogate why imaginary, animated characters were included in the film. The use of 'interior fantasy' will be positioned against academic arguments surrounding historical accuracy and realist depiction in the biopic. This study will question claims of fraudulence by examining the generic tendencies of the biopic and examine how *Miss Potter* provides an extension of aesthetic and narrative techniques typically associated with the classical form. This section will draw on works by Hayden White, Ira Nadel and Robert A. Rosenstone in an evaluation of *Miss Potter* as a postmodernist text. In this analysis, I propose that the film offers a (re)interpretation of pre-existing historical accounts which ultimately adds to on-going discourse surrounding Potter's life. In addition, I maintain that the inclusion of fantasy in *Miss Potter* demonstrates an application of deconstructive tendencies, as outlined by Bingham. Finally, I consider the predominance of this visual effect across other examples of recent biopics which utilise fantastical elements for similar purpose and intent.

This article aims to contribute to current critical writings on the biopic in the following ways. By analysing the deconstructive elements of *Miss Potter*, this paper provides a revisionist evaluation of a mainstream biopic. It is worth emphasising that the majority of academic studies to date have assessed the biopic largely in terms of historical accuracy, social representation by race, gender and nationality, or have considered the effects of auteurist influence (see Custen, 1992; Anderson and Lupo, 2002; Christie, 2002). The idea that biopics can be analysed in terms of their deconstructive tendencies represents a relatively new concept in the field of academic film studies (see Bingham, 2010: 11). As discussed, there have been more recent, concerted efforts to raise the critical profile of the biopic by re-assessing the genre's malleable aesthetic tendencies, particularly in the period since 2000. For example, a 2008 study by Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo identified a number of contemporary films which construct a 'more elastic concept' of the biopic through the use of 'unfamiliar registers' such as irony and camp (Anderson and Lupo, 2008: 102).

However, whilst important in its re-evaluation of aesthetic and narrative conventions, Anderson's and Lupo's work is confined to an assessment of what they define as 'off-Hollywood' biopics; films which portray the lives of people considered on the fringe of popular culture or society.¹ The lack of comparable critical revisionism directed towards the more mainstream or conventional biopic, such as *Miss Potter*, would suggest this is an area which provides lucrative ground for scrutiny and re-assessment. This article asserts the need to evaluate the mainstream biopic in a similar revisionist context and also re-consider its place within contemporary cinema. This leads to a further intention of this paper, which is to demonstrate that *Miss Potter* does not represent an isolated case but instead can be positioned amongst other recent, mainstream biopics which offer similar deconstructive appeal.

'Interior Fantasy' and Imaginary Friends

In aesthetic and stylistic comparison with many biopics, *Miss Potter* can be assessed in terms of its 'formal components' (Custen, 1992: 67-80). The film inclines towards sentimentality, incorporates 'a psychological approach to storytelling, with personal struggle as the nodal dramatic action', and also de-emphasises the full life story to focus on pivotal childhood experiences and 'peak adult incidents' (Anderson and Lupo, 2002: 92). *Miss Potter* focuses on two central narratives of Potter's documented 'life story': her ill-fated romance with Norman Warne (Ewan McGregor) and her eventual success as a distinguished children's author. However, as outlined, *Miss Potter* also includes an array of animated characters with whom the on-screen Potter interacts with throughout the film. By analysing their actions, we can evaluate the importance and significance of their designated roles within the film.

Miss Potter begins when the central protagonist is on the brink of publishing her first novel, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), before it charts her success as a children's author and later campaigner for the burgeoning Lake District National Park. In the film, Beatrix Potter is depicted as a bright, intelligent young woman from a wealthy background who feels constrained by family expectations and the social conventions of the period. Her only avenues of creative escape and expression lie in her stories and artwork. At the start of the film, when discussing where she derives ideas for her imaginative illustrations with her prospective publishers, she announces: 'I don't imagine them. They are quite real. They are my friends'. This emphasis on their 'real' qualities is subsequently realised as the animated characters she creates, including now familiar children's favourites such as Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddleduck and Jeremy Fisher, come to life on her sketchpad.

Despite their incapacity for speech, Potter finds emotional solace and support from talking to her illustrative companions as self-proclaimed 'friends'. In addition, the animated characters respond directly to her feelings, thoughts and emotions throughout the film. This is most apparent in a scene when she is mourning the loss of her fiancé and desperately trying to find comfort in her work. The animals she draws, clearly affected by her emotions, run away from her, skipping over the pages in fear. In another sequence, Potter draws the frog character of Jeremy Fisher, who is attacked on his lily-pad by a giant fish. With apparently no control over the actions of either animal, she reaches out her paintbrush in desperation to try and pull him to safety. Applying Walters' definition, such characters are indicative of 'interior fantasy', as only she can witness them moving and responding.

However, the film moves beyond merely depicting Potter's personal interaction with the animated figures, as they also appear to react and respond to each other. Such action prompts inevitable questions about their actual physical existence as presented on screen. To understand how such characters operate in *Miss Potter*, we can draw on V. F Perkins' argument that film establishes and maintains credibility through a distinct 'blend of actuality and fantasy' (Perkins, 1972: 62). In his analysis of Dusan Vukotic's *Play* (1962), Perkins argues that the children's drawings which magically come to life and engage in battle with each other are presented as real and existing on the same level of reality as the children, rather than as figments of their imagination. As a result, the 'boundaries between imaginary and real become dissolved, allowing the characters to interact with their creations not as *though* they were real but because they *are* real' (Walters, 2008: 26). This observation can be applied to *Miss Potter*, whose drawings visibly move, interact with each other and, as in the scene with Jeremy Fisher, almost jump off the page entirely.

In addition, the animated figures also react to other human characters in the film, as seen when Warne enquires about Potter's drawing of Jemima Puddleduck. Jemima physically responds to Warne's interest by flashing her eyelashes and wagging her tail in a flirtatious manner, causing Potter to exclaim: 'Stop that!'. The rational explanation for Jemima's actions is that they represent Potter's emotional state, reflecting her feelings towards Warne as a potential love interest. However, the diegetic logic of the film, in terms of the narrative world we are viewing, dictates that Jemima's reaction to Warne and interaction with Potter serves to position the 'real' or human characters on the same level as the animated drawing. Consequently, the fact that Jemima is portrayed in this way does not necessarily compromise the credibility and coherence of the cinematic world presented, providing it is supported by the film's diegetic logic. As Perkins contends:

cinematic credibility is no different from that which we demand of other story-telling forms. It depends upon the inner consistency of the created world. So long as this is maintained, the premises are beyond question [...] but the created world must obey its own logic (Perkins, 1972: 121).

Miss Potter creates a filmic world where animated characters actively engage with each other on paper, interact directly with Potter and visibly respond to others. In accordance with Perkins' theory, the film does not compromise its credibility by including events that appear inconsistent with its own internal logic. The animated animals thus stay bound to Potter as her own creations and do not attempt to run away into local parkland. This inner consistency is sustained throughout *Miss Potter* and 'as long as these features are motivated by the world that the film creates, we can have no difficulty in accepting them' (Walters, 2008: 26).

By forming a close relationship between the on-screen Potter and her illustrations, such characters also perform another important function within the context of the film. In his seminal work on the biopic, George Custen identifies the friend or mentor as a key figure whose primary role is to provide emotional support and guidance for the main protagonist or subject (Custen, 1992: 69-71). Such characters typically include the childhood friend who lived in the same neighbourhood, or the older figure who offers wisdom and advice. In *Miss Potter*, the notable absence of close human friends in Potter's life is reconciled by the inclusion of Peter Rabbit, Jeremy Fisher and Jemima Puddleduck. The animated characters in *Miss Potter* thus perform the same pre-requisite roles as friends and mentors, driving her self-belief by offering an empathetic outlet for emotional expression and support. This relationship is clearly important to Potter, as she asserts at the beginning of the film, the drawings are her 'friends'. In *Miss Potter*, diegetic credibility is sustained by the presence of such characters that remain 'real' friends to the central protagonist throughout the film.

To achieve this consistent level of credibility, the visual portrayal of the animated characters was considered paramount by the film-makers involved with *Miss Potter*. In interviews with the production crew, it appears that the main objective was to sustain a balance between live action sequences with real actors and the animated animals (see Noonan, 2007). In order to achieve this effect successfully, the production team used a combination of traditional, hand-drawn animation and digital visual compositing. The special effects company Passion Pictures, who had used similar techniques for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), were employed to create the desired visuals. Whilst special effects were considered vital in achieving the intended look for *Miss Potter*, this represents a relatively new approach in terms of biopic film production. In an extensive survey of biopics, conducted between 1990 to 2000, Anderson and Lupo concluded that 'the genre had minimal participation in the decade's embrace of special effects', citing *JFK* (1991) as a notable exception in its use of technical manipulation of images presented as real archive footage (Anderson and Lupo, 2002: 92). In contrast, *Miss Potter* is reliant on the use of visual effects to create successful interplay between the human actors and animated figures depicted on screen.ⁱⁱ

In addition, a major concern was to avoid overwhelm in the use of animated characters and instead project the psychological significance of their presence in a more understated way. Describing initial concept ideas for the script, *Miss Potter* director Chris Noonan claims the film originally:

had the characters [...] jumping off the page and coming into the world as 3-D characters that occupy human space in the world. They would sort of sit in a chair

opposite Beatrix and they would have conversations with each other (Noonan, 2007).

Noonan decided to abandon this idea, believing it would overpower the central story and detract viewers from dramatic and emotional involvement with the human actors. The decision to refrain from using 3-D characters was taken primarily because the film-makers were wary this 'might portray Beatrix as a bit crazy [...] that she imagines a rabbit jumping off the pages, standing next to her and she has a little conversation with it. Immediately, you think Beatrix is a little bit loopy' (Noonan, 2007). The final version uses animated characters to perform more subtle roles in the film in an attempt to maintain a greater level of credibility.

Therefore, the intention of the film-makers was to create a realistic representation of the actual Beatrix Potter and 'what she is going through as a person' (Noonan, 2007) first and foremost, before using the animated characters as visual guides to explore her emotional state of mind. In addition, where fantasy elements are utilised, this is determined specifically by the context of Potter's documented life story. Consequently, the animated figures are not randomly selected but instead instantly recognisable characters which defined her literary career. This approach is reinforced by the need to maintain a sustained level of credibility, as shown by Noonan's decision to abandon using 3-D animation for the film. This focus on context and style returns to earlier observations concerning 'inner consistency' and, by adopting Perkins' argument, the inclusion of fantasy characters becomes rationalised, even normalised, within the context of the cinematic world presented on screen.

However, whilst proving useful for exploring how illusion and fantasy can achieve credibility in film, Perkins' theory is limited to analysis of what he defines as the 'fiction movie'. In contrast, the biopic, generically identified by its 'official' portrayal of the life story of a 'real' person, is subject to frequent criticism regarding historical account, factual accuracy and realist depiction. Jonathan Rosenbaum highlights this issue in his analysis of Tim Burton's biopic *Ed Wood* (1994), where he evaluates the final scene in which the infamous director Wood attends the première of his film *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. In reality, the event never actually took place and Rosenbaum contends that the fact this sequence was fantasised:

would never occur to most viewers - especially those who know little about 1959 or Wood - but even more amazing is that Burton can claim with such confidence that he knows the inside of Ed Wood's head (Rosenbaum, 1994).

Rosenbaum raises the pertinent question of how film-makers can confidently know what a person actually thought or felt during their life. In addition, he criticises the inclusion of not only fictionalised but imaginary sequences and their friction with realistic representation. Concerns surrounding legitimacy have led some critics, such as Rosenbaum, to denounce the biopic's embrace of 'tainted realism' (Maio, 1994). This contention could certainly be applied to *Miss Potter*, a film which employs an array of imaginary characters for dramatic visual effect. In addition, there are issues concerning how the film-makers constructed the on-screen representation of Beatrix Potter from historical sources which are themselves subject to misinterpretation or potential fallacy. Consequently, to address claims of fraudulence, we need to consider *Miss Potter* in relation to issues and debates concerning factual representation, historical accuracy and the biopic.

Historical Accuracy, Factual Representation and Postmodern Appeal

Following Rosenbaum's critique, we can attempt to assess *Miss Potter* in terms of its portrayal of events and incidents derived from historical accounts about Beatrix Potter's life.

For example, the film depicts ‘actual’ family holidays to the Lake District, where she gained inspiration for her art and writing (see Taylor, 1987). In addition, it is documented that, from a young age, Potter held a deep fascination and interest for animals and the natural world, which is also shown in the film (see Law, 2007; Hoberman, 1993; Taylor, 1987). As *Miss Potter* animation director Alyson Hamilton states: ‘she studied from life constantly, drawing animals over and over until she really understood their anatomy and their personalities’ (Hamilton, 2007). In literary biographies about her life, Potter is also frequently described as finding comfort amongst her animals. In a passage taken from *Beatrix Potter 1866 – 1943: The Artist and Her World*, it is noted that her pet rabbit Peter: ‘was a source of amusement and a considerable friend to her, for though she was nearing thirty, she was alone for much of the time’ (Taylor, 1987: 19). This aspect of her life is explored at length in *Miss Potter*, as the on-screen protagonist finds creative expression and emotional fulfilment amongst her animals and in her illustrative art. As previously discussed, the film portrays this through her interactions with animated characters which occur within a private sphere, or ‘interior fantasy’, where only she can see and talk to them. This visual approach is designed to emphasise the close bond the real-life Potter formed with her animated illustrations.

However, it is also well-documented that Beatrix Potter was a committed naturalist who adopted a much less whimsical attitude towards her animals than portrayed in *Miss Potter*:

her playful imaginative world was also a repository of shadowy emotion: when Beatrix’s pets died, she boiled down the carcasses so that she could study their anatomy more closely. Anthropomorphism allowed her to treat death and savagery briskly and without sentiment (Jays, 2007: 65-66).

This account presents conflict not only by offering an alternative source of information which was omitted within the film but also by raising questions around biographical representation. This omission in *Miss Potter* provides evidence of a shift away from objective depiction and a move towards subjective interpretation. As highlighted by Rosenbaum, this approach is problematic because it creates notable tension between creative conjecture and actuality. However, in contrast with this position, Custen maintains that the interpretation of ‘real’, documented events is not fixed but instead influenced and shaped by developments in social and cultural discourse over time (Custen, 1992: 79-80). In particular, postmodernist critique offers useful insight into how this interpretative process might operate, which can be applied to the biopic in general and more specifically to analysis of *Miss Potter*.

For example, Hayden White argues that, as a fundamental human construct, narrative discourse is inherently inflected with fictionalised qualities. As a result, ‘far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes [discourse] is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality’ (White, 1987: ix). White questions narrative texts which purport to offer accurate, objective accounts of historical events. He claims that by using literary methods to construct written accounts, this always denotes a fictional element. White pursues this idea further in his defence of the historical film which, he argues, challenges convention by raising questions, deconstructing texts, re-interpreting events and offering alternative points of view, all of which add to on-going discourse. By extension, this can be applied to *Miss Potter* as a film which interrogates the private realm of Potter’s mind, asking questions about how she *might* have responded to pivotal moments or events in her life, of which we have no record.

In this context, historical narratives offer ‘a set of discursive practices encoded in a time and

often a place removed from their actual occurrence and are thus subject to some degree of re-structuring' (Custen, 1992: 11). When applied to the biopic, this re-structuring process is perhaps even more relevant. In relation to *Miss Potter*, the subject is no longer alive and so, in the absence of living family and friends, the production team referred to existing historical texts and documents. As Noonan contends, adapting Beatrix Potter's life to film required:

piecing things together from anecdotes and bits of writing that you found. When you start talking about people's deep psychological motivations, that's a very hard thing to conjure up when you look into the past. So you inevitably invent. You look at the evidence and you say, "Now, what would it be that would be motivating her to do this?" and you invent something that would fulfil that necessity in her life (Noonan, 2007).

The creation of *Miss Potter* thus required close analysis of historical accounts and anecdotes which are all subject to varying degrees of (re)interpretation and (re)invention. Transposing documented facts and events on to film also requires a certain amount of re-structuring. As Robert A. Rosenstone asserts, 'the imposed fiction of a story, the creative use of fact [and] the translation necessary to make a life comprehensible and interesting' are all prerequisite features of the biopic (Rosenstone in Francaviglia and Rodnitzky, 2007: 14). Such features can be identified in *Miss Potter*, as the film translates certain aspects of Potter's documented life experiences from the historical evidence researched as part of the film-making process.

In addition, the psychological approach to narrative adopted by *Miss Potter* represents a fundamental formal component typically associated with the biopic. Ira Nadel offers insight for where this popular narrative technique may have originated, in her study of the literary biography. Nadel charts significant developments in structure, form and content of the biography over time, highlighting new experimental writing formats that proliferated during the twentieth century. The shift away from impersonal, fact-based texts coincided with the emergence of the 'psychobiography', designed to 'emphasise not the facts, but the "trends" in a subject's life; not the record, but interpretative moments that define the psychological truth of the subject' (Nadel, 1984: 186). Nadel suggests this new psychological approach to biographical writing was spurred on by increased public demand for the creation of 'intimacy' between reader and subject.

In *Miss Potter*, this psychological approach is evidenced by attempts to explore and reveal the subject's state of mind at various points throughout the film. The utilisation of 'interior fantasy' offers an effective vehicle to realise this, as the animated characters adopt the prominent roles of observer and mirror to Potter's inner thoughts, feelings and emotions. According to Noonan, the inclusion of animated characters provided a useful technique to project Potter's state of mind 'without having to resort to clumsier cinematic devices, like having a voice-over saying, "I was feeling very depressed at that" or "This made me very happy" [which] tend to produce corny results' (Noonan, 2007). By taking the aesthetic decision to abandon the 'clumsier' voice-over, the imaginary animals become the visual guides to Potter's inner psyche. As a result, the peril facing Jeremy Fisher on his lily-pad reflects Potter's anger and upset at that particular moment in the film. In similarity with the 'psychobiography', the intimacy *Miss Potter* projects is thus principally designed to evoke audience empathy and understanding with the subject.

Of course, we cannot know whether the actual Beatrix Potter spoke to her drawings, or witnessed them responding. However, by accepting that *Miss Potter* constitutes a re-

interpreted account of her life story, conjecture becomes an essential requirement when attempting to explore her psychological motivations, unknown and undocumented. A direct consequence of this approach is the merging of creativity and factuality, producing subjective interpretations of historical events, rather than objective or rationalised accounts. This returns to White's earlier observation as 'the imagination rather than the record takes precedence' (White, 1987: 191). In attempting to embrace viewer intimacy, *Miss Potter* presents a version of historical reality based largely on the imagined 'psychological truth' of the subject, rather than objective actuality. This aesthetic approach allows film-makers the creativity to interpret, fictionalise and symbolise thoughts or emotions which cannot be directly extracted from written accounts and documents. The principal difference is the *dramatisation*, as opposed to *presentation*, of historical events.

Miss Potter deviates from recorded historical accounts in a number of specific ways. This includes the omission of certain facts and events alongside the inclusion of fantasised visions, of which there is no documented evidence to suggest Beatrix Potter ever experienced. If we accept Rosenbaum's critical opinion that the biopic should strive to provide an objective and factual account of a person's life, the accusation of fraudulence could certainly be applied. However, this assessment serves to position the biopic within a restrictive aesthetic style which would appear to be at significant odds with its formative characteristics as discussed. The creation of characters, plotline and dramatic development are all established prerequisites which underpin the principal formal components of the biopic. In addition, *Miss Potter* adopts a subtle postmodernist approach, which can be seen in the deliberate selection of documented accounts used to re-structure Potter's life story as filmic narrative. By using fantastical elements to deconstruct Potter's character and explore her state of mind, the film offers a revised (re)interpretation of a well-known historical figure.

Furthermore, *Miss Potter*'s fantasised portrayal of the intimate, 'psychological truth' of its subject, whilst clearly based on conjecture as opposed to documented 'fact', is indicative of the biopic's normative approach to narrative and storytelling. By accepting that creative dramatisation performs a central function, the exploration of psychological motivation through use of 'interior fantasy' becomes apposite within this aesthetic context. In contrast to Rosenbaum's position, by allowing licence for greater diversity of style, content and form, the inclusion of fantasy characters and events 'may occur to [viewers] if the biopic stopped being thought of as strictly factual and became more commonly understood as a genre with [...] licence to invent creatively' (Bingham, 2010: 155). In regard to claims of fraudulence, these findings provide a clear altercation, as *Miss Potter* does not portray *actual* thoughts or feelings which would be impossible to determine but instead offers subjective interpretation. As a result, the use of 'interior fantasy' in *Miss Potter* ultimately offers an extension of aesthetic and narrative components typically associated with the classical form.

Conclusion and Evidence of Wider Trends

As previous sections have demonstrated, *Miss Potter* adopts a deconstructive approach to the psychological narration of Beatrix Potter's life through the utilisation of 'interior fantasy' as defined by Walters (Walters, 2008: 52). However, there are other examples of recent mainstream biopics which use aspects of 'interior fantasy' for similar purpose and intent. For example, in *Finding Neverland* (2004), J.M Barrie (Johnny Depp) has frequent lapses into fantasy; sequences designed to project Barrie's vivid imagination and authorial creativity. *Creation* (2009) also uses fantasy elements through scenes which reflect Charles Darwin's (Paul Bettany) tormented state of mind, such as when the collected specimens of dead birds

and insects come alive and start to move around his office. In each instance, in similarity with *Miss Potter*, the boundaries of the fictional world are expanded only in the minds of the biographical subjects depicted, providing compelling evidence for use of 'interior fantasy'.

In conclusion, the employment of 'interior fantasy', identified in *Miss Potter* and highlighted in other examples, presents an aesthetic approach which has not yet been fully considered in existing academic studies on the biopic. In addition, the findings would appear to offer a significant intervention to Custen's original definition, embedded within his summation of the biopic's formal components (Custen, 1992: 69-71). In *Miss Potter*, 'interior fantasy' is expressed specifically by the depiction of imaginary, animated characters and their presence performs two distinct functions within the film. Firstly, they act as a visual guide to the protagonist's understanding and perception of her own personal reality; and second they serve to create intimacy with audiences, aiding comprehension and provoking empathy with the subject's inner thoughts, feelings and actions. As a result, such characters perform central roles as close friends or mentors to the subject. However, Custen's definition does not include any reference to *imaginary* figures which, as the findings from this study show, assume corresponding roles throughout *Miss Potter*. Consequently, I would propose that the utilisation of imaginary characters as close friends and mentors in *Miss Potter* provides a notable extension of the biopic's formal components, as outlined by Custen.

Furthermore, there are other examples of recent, mainstream biopics which use imaginary characters in a comparable way to *Miss Potter*. In *Beyond the Sea* (2004), the American singer Bobby Darin (Kevin Spacey) interacts with a childhood version of himself, who offers advice and guidance to help provide perspective on his fraught path to fame and stardom. In *De-Lovely* (2004), the Angel Gabriel (Jonathan Pryce) provides reflective reassurance to Cole Porter (Kevin Kline) as he approaches the end of his life, which is re-counted in flashback sequences throughout the film. *Creation* offers another example where Darwin exchanges conversation and seeks advice from his deceased eldest daughter, Annie. In each instance, such imaginary figures command unique positions; acting not only as visual narrative guides, but also serving as close friends or mentors to the subjects depicted on screen. This particular utilisation of 'interior fantasy', evaluated in *Miss Potter* and outlined in other recent, mainstream biopics, perhaps provides the most viable and compelling evidence for deconstruction from the classical form, with an indication of wider cinematic trends.

In summary, the biopic clearly remains a disputed ground for critical and popular debate and a lucrative topic for further investigation. Although not exhaustive in its remit, the conclusions drawn from this study would certainly support more recent re-appraisals of the biopic as constituting an elastic and malleable genre, open to a variety of expressive styles. In the period since Custen's seminal work on the biopic was originally published, the genre has clearly undergone significant development. This transition is outlined in studies by Bingham (2010) and Anderson and Lupo (2008), amongst others. However, as discussed, such academic re-assessment has largely focused attention on the 'off-Hollywood' biopic. This paper provides a revisionist account of *Miss Potter* as a mainstream biopic and outlines how the film operates in terms of its deconstructive characteristics. This creative tendency allows for a level of poeticism and caprice to deconstruct, alter and invent incident which, as demonstrated, can also be extended to include elements of fantasy. In *Miss Potter*, 'interior fantasy' performs a central function, as it disrupts and extends the narrative and aesthetic components typically associated with the classical generic form. Claims that the contemporary biopic is 'dusty', 'outdated' and 'tedious' may well be contestable in light of this evidence. *Miss Potter* provides an illustration of how mainstream biopics can adopt

creative licence by its employment of fantasy elements and the apparent predominance of this effect, outlined in other recent examples, would certainly point to trends going forward.

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ⁱ Anderson and Lupo include analysis of *Ed Wood* (1994), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), *Man on the Moon* (1999) and *American Splendor* (2003) to demonstrate this approach in 'Off-Hollywood Lives: Irony and Its Discontents in the Contemporary Biopic', *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, Vol.36, Issue 2, 2008: 102-111.

ⁱⁱ This article was not intended to analyse special effects technology in detail however the findings provide a

clear advancement of Anderson's and Lupo's original study. The developments in visual effects, production techniques and the biopic in the period since 2000 would provide a lucrative area for further research.