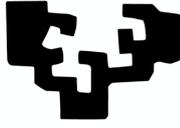


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The Dylans They Are A-Changing:  
Representing Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes'  
*I'm Not There* (2007)



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Degree in English Studies

Academic Year 2019/2020

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the representation of Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes' film *I'm Not There* (2007). Bob Dylan is regarded as one of the most important musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He rose to fame in early 1960s during the Folk Song Revival, and since then, the media and the public have attempted uncover the enigma surrounding his public personas. Many have divided Dylan's life and art into different social identities and biographical stages: folk singer, rock star, poet, prophet, media trickster, outlaw and many more. Thus, it is a challenging task to encapsulate Dylan's identity into a single word. Accordingly, it is even more demanding turning him into a biopic's subject. However, Todd Haynes endeavoured to make a Bob Dylan biopic in his seventh feature film, *I'm Not There* (2007). Yet, the movie is far from being traditional. Haynes' film was groundbreaking in terms of its use of postmodernism to depart from the conventions of the biopic genre. This paper explores how the director employed six different actors to portray the various Dylan's personalities by using distinctive cinematic styles to match the historical background of the musician's most prolific creative period. For this purpose, I will dwell on the biopic genre, and how *I'm Not There* deviates from conventions of biographical movies in order to capture Dylan's constantly changing identity. Moreover, I will provide a cultural insight into the singer-songwriter that will serve as the basis to explore how the singer's different stage personas are portrayed in the film. In sum, this paper will aim at relating biographical and cultural events to each character to appreciate how Haynes' has re-interpreted standards of the biopic genre in an effort to imitate Dylan's chameleonic essence.

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, Todd Haynes, cinema, biopic, American studies, Film studies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bob Dylan is regarded as probably the most prolific and influential songwriters of all-times. Accordingly, since he rose to fame in the first half of the 1960s, the media and the public have attempted to unwrap the great mystery surrounding his public persona. From his beginnings as a promising young folk singer, to be considered “the voice of a generation”, Dylan’s almost 60-year long career has been clouded by his chameleonic creative personality. Music and film critic Robert Shelton, who helped to launch the singer’s career, wrote in his book *No Direction Home* (1986) that:

The quest of Bob Dylan is riddled with ironies and contradictions, shadowed with seven types of ambiguity [...] Dylan wore a score of masks, assumed a legion of personas, invented a galaxy of characters we recognize as friends and foes. (26)

Bob Dylan has been labelled as a folk singer, rock star, poet, prophet, media trickster, and an outlaw. The majority of these personas have many times overlapped or existed simultaneously. To constrain the singer’s life and art to a particular epithet is to deny that what has made Dylan and his music successful is his adeptness to evolve both personally and artistically. If encapsulating Dylan’s identity into a single word is already a challenging task, it is even more demanding turning him into a biopic’s subject.

Todd Haynes endeavoured to make a Bob Dylan biopic in his seventh feature film, *I’m Not There* (2007). The movie, however, is far from being conventional. Instead of focusing on telling a linear narrative of the singer-songwriter’s life—like in James Mangold’s *Walk The Line* (2005) or Bryan Singer’s *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018)—the director opted for employing Dylan’s multiple personas to explore the myth that the singer, the media and the public have fabricated, rather than trying to give an accurate portrayal of the singer. By not making a sequential plot line and casting six different actors to portray Dylan, Haynes’ attempts to replicate Dylan’s ever-changing persona with his film.

Precisely, the purpose of this paper is to examine how Bob Dylan’s different public personas are represented in *I’m Not There* (2007) by Todd Haynes.

Appropriately, I will divide this paper into five sections. Firstly, I will begin with a brief introduction to the historical background of 1960s America. Secondly, I will deal with the different periods of Bob Dylan's career that the movie covers. Thirdly, I will dwell on the biopic genre, and how *I'm Not There* Haynes deviates from conventions of the genre. Together, these three sections will provide a cultural and theoretical insight into the singer-songwriter's life and music, that will serve as the basis to analyse how the singer's different personas are portrayed in Todd Haynes' film.

## 2. THE 1960S AND THE FOLK SONG REVIVAL

In order to have a better understanding of the film, I must first elaborate on the historical and musical background of 1960s America, the songwriter's most prolific era.

The US was going through a radical transformation in the 1960s: the Cold War was at its height, the Civil Rights movement had taken the Washington streets and American troops were sent from one war—Korea—to another—Vietnam. According to Serena Tarascio, from the University of Eastern Piedmont, the 1960s were a period of time in which art and politics went hand in hand (3). Those years were characterized by a radical dissent, especially among young people. According to John Dean,

The Counterculture meant the mainstream, middle-class life-style-changed young people who came from a 50s conservative consensus background to a less restrictive way of life; such as couples living together before marriage, womens' liberation, racial blending, freer use of "recreational substances" (i.e., drugs of all sorts). They were called "hippies." The Movement meant politically active young people—a fragile alliance with the Counterculture—who militated against long-held US customs of segregation or the new power of the USA's "Military-Industrial Establishment." They thus fought for new Civil Rights' laws and against the Vietnam War (1961-1973). (37)

The Red Scare began to fade in the late 1950s but the conservative notion that folk music was a subversive tool of communist propaganda did not. While 1950s rock and roll became more mainstream, the folk genre became the substitute to denounce the

political stir of the 1960s. As remarked by Tarascio, folk singers took songs from the tradition as a way to speak for other people, and report the events that were making an impact on young generations, which had a social significance. (4) As Jerome L. Rodnitzk puts it, “the 1960s brought events that called folk guitarists to arms and the civil rights movement was the catalyst” (105). Nevertheless, after John F. Kennedy’s assassination and President Lyndon Johnson’s decision to send more troops to Vietnam, protest songs “no longer reached the top of charts or general audio audiences after 1965” (111).

Another reason for the decline of the folk era is the emergence of soft rock. This was due largely to the new sound of the “British Invasion”, brought by bands such as The Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Dylan himself marked the beginning of the new music era in his 1965 Newport Festival performance, when he switched his acoustic guitar for an electric one. Rock music replaced the folk music as the instrument to denounce the social revolts. It was the genre by which artists expressed their discontent with institutions and society. The late 1960s became characterised by a more radical approach to the injustices. Dylan describes the era in his book *Chronicles Vol.1.* as,

The new worldview was changing society and everything was changing society and everything was moving fast—lickety-split. [...] Students trying to seize control of national universities, anti-war activists forcing bitter exchanges, Maoists, Marxists, Castroites—leftists kids who read Che Guevara instruction booklets were out to topple the economy. [...] If you saw the news, you’d think that the whole nation was on fire. It seemed like every day there was a new riot in another city, everything on the edge of danger and change—the jungles of America being cleared away. Things that had used to be in traditional black and white were now exploding in full, sunny color. (114)

For example, the Black Panthers was a revolutionary group that was founded as a response to the policy brutality suffered by African-Americans, or the Stonewall riots against a police raid. The issues of Civil Rights made black artists such as Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens use their platforms to give voice to the oppressed (Tarascio 9).

Notwithstanding, rock was not all about radicalization; many artists longed for freedom and to escape from reality. One way to achieve this was drugs. Many people

resorted to illegal substances in order to free their minds, “inventing new worlds” (11) or as Dylan wrote “acid was giving people the right attitude” (114). The amalgamation of drugs and rock led to the rise of a psychedelic subgenre. The American band Jefferson Airplane, and the Beatles—with their album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967)—can be regarded as the best representatives of that drug-induced 1967 Summer of Love. Two years later, the Woodstock Festival was held in a small town in the state of New York. It was the highpoint of the countercultural movement. After this event, psychedelic rock declined in popularity after the deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison of The Doors.

### 3. IN SEARCH OF BOB DYLAN

#### 3.1. BECOMING BOB DYLAN: ROBERT ALLEN ZIMMERMAN (1941-1960)

Robert Allen Zimmerman, later known as Bob Dylan, was born on May 24, 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota. At the age of seven, he and his family were forced to move to the town of Hibbing in the same state. As a teenager, he admired Elvis Presley, Johnny Ray, Hank Williams, and Little Richard, and taught himself to play guitar. (Guesdon and Margotin 6). In his teen years, Dylan, “along with two classmates, LeRoy Hoikkala on drums and Monte Edwardson on guitar, [he] formed his first band, the Golden Chords” (6). From his beginnings as a musician, Bob Dylan has always tried to shape how others view him even before he rose to fame:

By this time, the young Bob, who took the stage name of Zimbo, sang and played guitar and piano pretty well. In addition, he had a motorcycle like two of his idols—James Dean and Marlon Brando. At this point, he could envision himself as a rock star. (7)

In September 1959, Dylan moved from Hibbing to Minneapolis and enrolled in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Minnesota. He spent most of his time in Dinkytown, the bohemian district of the city. His encounters there led him to discover the Beats and opened him up to the culture of the folk music revival. By then, young Zimmerman had already changed his name—apparently after Welsh poet Dylan Thomas—and had discovered Woody Guthrie through a young actress called Flo Caster (Shelton 55). Such was Dylan’s fascination with Guthrie that when he was 19 years old

he dropped out of college and left in search of his idol, to visit him in Greystone Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey. Furthermore, he had adopted some of Guthrie's mannerisms; he mumbled when he talked and when he sang, spoke with a twang and wore workman's clothes (including a corduroy cap). At first, Dylan seemed to identify more with Guthrie, the loner bohemian artist, than with Guthrie, the radical activist. After visiting his hero, he went to New York with his guitar and harmonica, specifically to Greenwich Village, where he discovered the vibrant artistic life of the neighbourhood. He soon became a familiar figure performing in various folk clubs (Guesdon and Margotin 8) and finally, one of the most important folk singers in American history, just as Guthrie had been before him.

### 3.2. THE FOLK SINGER (1961-1964)

As professor Peter Deier remarks, many historians and journalists have named Dylan as the quintessential "protest" singer (1), even when his career as a folk singer only lasted for three years. Dylan emerged on the music scene in 1961, playing in Greenwich Village coffeehouses after the folk music revival was already underway, and released his first album the next year. The singer wrote about two dozen politically oriented songs whose creative lyrics and imagery reflected the changing mood of the post-war baby-boom generation and the urgency of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements (Guesdon and Margotin 66). At a time when the chill of McCarthyism was still in the air, Dylan also showed that songs with leftist political messages could be commercially successful—like 'Blowin' in the Wind' (1963) and 'The Times Are A-Changing' (1963). According to Guesdon and Margotin, Dylan "wrote chronicles of America in the early sixties, which offered hope to part of the world, but was also a showcase of troublesome paradoxes" (75). Dylan expressed in his autobiography that

Folk music was a reality of a more brilliant dimension. It exceeded all human understanding, and if it called out to you, you could disappear and be sucked into it. I felt right at home in this mythical realm made up not with individuals so much as archetypes, vividly drawn archetypes of humanity, metaphysical in shape, each rugged soul filled with natural knowing and inner wisdom. [...] It was so real, so more true to life than life itself. It was life magnified. Folk music was all I needed to exist. [...] I had no other cares or interests besides folk

music. I scheduled my life around it. I had little in common with anyone not like-minded. (236)

He was influenced by his then girlfriend Suze Rotolo, and he himself inspired many other folk singers of the period such as Joan Baez, Mahalia Jackson, and the trio Peter, Paul and Mary.

Dylan was involved with the student protest environment that fought for the rights of minorities. Three months after his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) came out, he participated in the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King delivered his famous speech "I Have a Dream". The songwriter was "the voice of his generation", however, this label would soon feel "constraining" (Guesdon and Margotin 67).

### 3.3. THE ELECTRIC YEARS (1965-1966)

In 1965, Dylan was booked to perform at the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island. He had previously performed at the festival in 1963 and 1964 with folk singer Joan Baez. The crowd was expecting to see Dylan perform his old folk songs; however, a new Bob Dylan appeared on stage. As Shelton describes, "all [Dylan] did was play three songs with a rock backing yet he unleashed a storm" (437). On Sunday night, July 25, Dylan walked to the stage, backed by musicians with whom he had played a month earlier in the recording session for 'Like a Rolling Stone' (1965). Immediately after, Dylan and his band emerged "with a cry of 'let's go'" (Marshall 5), he started shouting rather than singing the words of his song 'Maggie's Farm' (1965). Guesdon and Margotin describe the event in their book *Bob Dylan: All The Songs*:

Within minutes the crowd was booing. Dylan and his band continued their performance, ignoring the disapproval of the audience [...] They then performed "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Phantom Engineer" (the first version of "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry"), but were then forced to leave the stage because of the booing. (305-306)

The yelling from the audience grew loud enough nearly to drown out the sound of Dylan and his band. There is no recording evidence of the performance, but it has been stated by some who witnessed the performance that some of the yelling from the audience that night was about the terrible sound quality of the performance. According to scholar Lee Marshall, the fans were booing “because the sound was so awful and no one could hear what Dylan was singing” (4). Another theory is that the crowd shouted because the set was exceptionally short— just under sixteen minutes (1). Notwithstanding, what prompted the outright booing was a sense of dismay and betrayal on the part of an audience unprepared for the singer’s new artistic direction. Musically speaking, the set was ordinary, yet “transgressed key facets of authenticity that were deeply held within the folk movement” (5). As mentioned before, he felt constrained by the folk movement and the need to be authentic, to be representative of the people. As Marshall remarks “the folk movement was founded upon the importance of the collective —the folk, the ‘people’— rather than the individual” (10). In his autobiography *Chronicles Vol. I*, Dylan wrote that “[he] wasn’t too concerned about people, their motives. I didn’t feel the need to examine every stranger that approached” (56). The more personal and poetic his song became, the more he distanced himself from the folk movement’s canon, and he began to search for “the individual experience, of feeling, of subjectivity” (10) in the rock genre. As he recalls “[...] when I played ‘Maggie’s Farm’ electric at Newport that was something I would have done years before. They thought I didn’t know what I was doing and that I’d slipped over the edge [...]” (qtd. in Guesdon and Margorin 436-437). Nevertheless, what the audience did not know was that Dylan had already been influenced by pioneers of rock ‘n’ roll such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard before he discovered Woody Guthrie (6). Therefore, it was a matter of time he rejected being imprisoned by the folk tradition and evolved artistically into the rock genre.

Although the performance did not single-handedly change the course of music history, it is regarded as iconic by many music experts because it represented the political and social transformation in the mid 1960s. As scholar John Dean remarks that

[...] when Dylan did ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ as an electric rock’ roll song it was a moment of death and rebirth. The sentimental sweetness and light of early 60s,

folkie 60s, gave way to the mud and drugs, violence and chaos, lack-of-direction-with-no-direction-home of late 60s. (352)

In other words, the peaceful demonstrations of the first half of the 1960s transformed into a more politically involved anti-war and Civil Rights movement.

After the Newport festival, the booing did not cease. It continued sporadically at Dylan's world tour until late spring 1966. As Robert Shelton notes,

The year beginning July 1965 was, for Dylan, ridden with personal stress. He was lionized now by the pop world as he was being rejected by many folkniks who had once deified him. He was imitated, castigated, emulated, berated, upbraided, and celebrated. All he really wanted to do was write and sing. (448)

In the summer of 1966, Dylan was exhausted from concerts and recording sessions. In late July 1966, he was driving around Woodstock where "he crashed his Triumph 500 at high speed and he was thrown violently to the ground" (Guesdon and Margotin 483). Dylan took the opportunity and he withdrew from public and, apart from a few appearances, did not tour again for almost eight years.

### 3.4. SECLUSION (1967-1973)

At the peak of his career, in late July 1966 Bob Dylan crashed his motorcycle near his Woodstock home in upstate New York. Still nowadays, the extent of his injuries has never been fully unveiled. Many journalists speculated that the consequences were terrible: he broke his neck and was reduced to a vegetative state. Robert Shelton asserts that "his mishap saved his life" and the event "allowed him to slow down" (538). Consistently, after the accident, Dylan did not appear in public and saw only a few close friends, which only amplified rumours. Later on, Dylan would confess that he had broken vertebrae and had a concussion. Notwithstanding, he looked at the bright side of the situation and he devoted much of his time to his rapidly growing family. Nevertheless, he still found time to record the "Basement Tapes"—a collection of over 100 songs recorder with his then backing group, The Band— and a series of eclectic albums that were the polar opposite of the ambitious psychedelic rock that topped the

charts in that era. The first album titled *John Wesley Harding* (1967) was inspired by the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. While recovering from the accident, Dylan was “was transformed both spiritually and artistically” (Guesdon and Margotin 542). Dylan was no longer pressured by the media and the public, and he felt more relaxed and free to write about anything he wanted. During the second album *Nashville Skyline* (1969) Dylan did a stylistic turnaround: he recorded a country album. He did not write complex songs, there were “no more allusions, parables, metaphors, or philosophical reflections; Dylan wanted to simply sing love songs” (594). In 1970, he published *Self Portrait*, in which he reinvented himself. Once again, critics were not happy with the new album and many thought his record seemed “like the work of an artist they did not know, who had betrayed the ideals of the counterculture to sink into the delights of mainstream music with syrupy and conventional arrangements” (636). In his book *Chronicles Vol.1*, Dylan wrote

Journalists began asking in print, ‘Whatever happened to the old him?’ They could go to hell, too. Stories were printed about me trying to find myself, that I was on some eternal search, that I was suffering some kind of internal torment. It all sounded good to me. I released one album (a double one) where I just threw everything I could think of at the wall and whatever stuck, released it, and then went back and scooped up everything that didn’t stick and released that, too. (122)

In 1972, Dylan worked with Sam Peckinpah in the western film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*: he composed and recorded the soundtrack, which included the main theme song and its variations. Moreover, he debuted as an actor playing the character ‘Alias’. Despite the film's failure at the box office, the song ‘Knockin' on Heaven's Door’ became one of Dylan's most covered songs. In 1973, his Columbia contract ended, and so did his reclusion years.

### 3.5. BACK ON TOUR (1974-1978)

In 1973 Columbia Records rushed to release an album before Christmas without Dylan’s consent. Since Dylan had let his Columbia contract run out, they attempted to take some of unreleased takes off his last two albums, which critics described as

“corporate dirty pool” (Shelton 785). The bad reviews speculated that Dylan’s musical career was ending. After moving to Malibu with his family, he contemplated going on tour again with The Band in order to promote his new album *Planet Waves* (1973) with his new record label Asylum Records, in order to win the public and the critics back. While his career seemed to be rising, his private life went through rough times: Dylan and his wife became estranged. After publishing a live record with Asylum, he returned to Columbia and started writing what has been described by many critics as Dylan’s best work *Blood On The Tracks* (1975). The album was inspired by “Dylan’s breakup with his wife, which resulted in deep emotional turmoil and inner torment” (Guesdon and Margotin 823). According to Shelton, with this album:

Dylan finally admitted that although “being settled” may result in personal happiness, the romantic agony of loss and search are goads to greater art, even if he had to turn his own life into discord. (805)

When he hit the road again in late 1975, he decided to do the exact opposite of the previous tour. In his Rolling Thunder Revue tour, he opted to travel with various artists throughout the USA in a caravan and play small halls. This particular concert tour is one of the most remembered as in typical Dylan fashion, he reinvented himself as he used “painted masks [...] as an allusion to the Italian theatre tradition” (Wilkins 5) and he wore whiteface make-up at many of the shows. While on tour, Dylan reunited with *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid* director Sam Peckinpah, and the result was the film *Renaldo and Clara* (1978) which “like Dylan’s persona and Haynes’ film, centers on ‘masks, disguises, assumed names, and shifting identities” (5).

Whilst on tour, Dylan and his wife got divorced on 1977, which also led to his separation from his children. After the tour ended, Dylan not only had changed his style but also his religion.

### 3.6. BORN-AGAIN SINGER (1978-1984)

In 1978, Dylan converted to Evangelical Christianity. In a concert in New York City, he told the audience that:

Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘Bob, why are you resisting me?’ I said, ‘I’m not resisting you!’ He said, ‘You gonna follow me?’ I said, ‘I’ve never thought about that before!’ He said, ‘When you’re not following me, you’re resisting me. (qtd. in Guesdon and Margotin 929)

He published three religious albums, *Slow Train Coming* (1978) being the first one of the trilogy. As Guesdon and Margotin reflect, the albums were:

[...] heavily inspired by biblical texts, whether the book of Genesis, the book of Joshua, or the Gospels according to John and Matthew. Dylan expresses his hopes and fears and sings of the struggle between good and evil, the apocalypse, and redemption. (931)

While on tour in 1970 and 1980, he refused to play his all songs, and in the middle of the shows he used to deliver speeches about Christianity and Jesus. For Dylan, “[t]he three-leg tour was an opportunity for him to express his newfound faith, appearing at each concert with a pilgrim’s staff (969). Nonetheless, while still influenced by the Bible, in the last album from the trilogy *Shot of Love* (1981), “Dylan’s writing changed, or rather returned, to the allusive poetry of the 1960s [...] [was] strongly influenced by the mystical poetry of William Blake” (996).

#### 4. *I’M NOT THERE* (2007)

*I’m Not There* (2007) is a Bob Dylan biopic directed by Todd Haynes, an American independent filmmaker. He made his directional debut with a controversial short-film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) which narrates the life of American singer and drummer Karen Carpenter using Barbie dolls. When first released, the short was not promoted and hit limited theatres. Nonetheless, it became a cult classic due to a copyright violation that obligated all copies to be destroyed. Nonetheless, some copies were saved, and the film can still be watched on YouTube. Haynes’ first feature movie was the science horror movie *Poison* (1991) which attracted attention due to its queer-themed narrative. Due to the success of the movie, many scholars —such as Helen Darby— believe that Haynes “[...] originate[d] [...] the experimental and independent scene of the 1990s ‘New Queer Cinema’” (334). In his fifth feature film, *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), he portrayed the glam rock of the 1970s. In addition, he introduced

his characteristic non-linear storytelling, and he “[...] pioneer[ed] the *bricolage* technique he will use so predominantly in *I’m Not There* (where much of the dialogue is lifted from Dylan’s lyrics and Arthur Rimbaud’s writings)” (336). After the success of *Far From Heaven* (2005), Haynes’ started filming Dylan’s biopic. According to the director, who started writing the script at the beginning of the 2000, he was inspired to keep working on the project after rediscovering Dylan’s catalogue and watching *Eat The Document* (Haynes). In an interview with the Rolling Stone Magazine, he affirmed that

[...] finding collections of all of [Dylan’s] interviews from ’65, ’66, intensely dramatic, like transcripts of performance art – radical, creative, but lived performances, that, to me, just screamed to be performed again. I wanted to hear them be performed aloud, I wanted to fill them with flesh again, and that also triggered kind of a creative urge. With all of the stuff brimming my head, the ideas of the film emerged. (Haynes)

With *I’m Not There* (2007), Haynes —being a transgressive director— aimed at “find[ing] a narrative and cinematic parallel to what Dylan did to popular music in his era – not that it’s ended and not that it’s a singular term [...]” (Haynes). Consequently, Dylan’s biopic is far from being a traditional one.

#### 4.1. THE BIOPIC AND THE SEARCH OF THE SUBJECT

The biopic or biographical film is cinematic genre which tries to represent the life history of a real person. As academic Penny Spirou notes, “[b]iopics are often marketed as being ‘inspired by’ or ‘based on’ the lives of famous people including entertainers, royalty, scientists and even criminals” (78). Todd Haynes’ movie was in fact promoted as a film “inspired by the music and many lives of Bob Dylan” (Wilkins 3) rather than a biopic film.

Another characteristic of biographical movies is that, unlike documentaries or historical ones, they are not accurate in the majority of cases as a result of dramatization of the real-life events. In addition, the filmmakers only take into account the most important events of the subject’s life in order to make the movie more entertaining. As

film expert Kim Wilkins observes, “the appeal of the biopic genre is the visualization and narrativization of a real person’s private life into a film for public consumption” (2). Therefore, the subject becomes a character that exists inside the film only, and the biopic becomes a space “between actuality and fiction” (qtd. in Wilkins 2).

Another characteristic of the biopic, according to scholar David Muldoon is that

[The] power lies in the fact that if produced after the death of the artist, a biopic can seal the historical memory of a generation or generations through the use of a nostalgic intimacy, using the blurry lines of fact and fiction to fix an artist in time. (54)

In the case of *I’m Not There*, Haynes ‘kills’ Bob Dylan in the first minutes of the film; the audience sees that one Dylan incarnation is presumably declared dead (see. Fig 1).



**Figure 1.** Jude Quinn, an incarnation of Bob Dylan, lies in a hospital bed. *I’m Not There* (2007)

Notwithstanding, Bob Dylan is still alive and thus, it is understood that the director’s aim is not to make a traditional biopic. He prepares the viewers “for the autopsy of the character” (3) rather than the dissection of an actual person, as it is impossible to “access the ‘real’ Bob Dylan” (D’Cruz and D’Cruz 317). Hence, by killing Dylan, Haynes is free to apply the postmodernist theory of the “self as fragmentary and unfixed” (Asava 2) by casting six different actors, of different gender and ethnic features, to play variations of the singer-songwriter as different characters, in a non-linear plotline. Furthermore, the director employs various cinematic styles to match the subject’s

shifting styles. Thereby, the director reflects how Dylan's personae has evolved throughout his career by "[...] celebrating, mimicking and foregrounding Dylan's stylistic transformations and different personae while both observing and unsettling the genre's conventions" (D'Cruz and D'Cruz 323).

Many would argue that biopics are similar to literary adaptations, but rather than adapting a novel or a play, filmmakers take the subject's life and adjust it to a film's parameter. According to film expert Louis Giannetti, screen adaptations generally fall on the spectrum of three basic types: literal, faithful, and loose. Speaking of the last, he writes: "[g]enerally, only an idea, a situation, or a character is taken from a literary source, then developed independently [...]" (406). On the surface, it seems that *I'm Not There* deviates from his subject's life since Haynes takes the Dylan's persona and modifies many historical events such as his youth or even his 'death'. Wilkins explains, "[...] images and instances [...] are removed from original contexts and placed overlapping cinematic recyclability" (6). Moreover, the audience is never introduced to the incarnations of Bob Dylan with his proper name, only as "poet, prophet, outlaw, fake, star of electricity" (00:01:44-00:01:51). Yet, as Tia M. Osborne mentions, "all these Dylans exist separately, while simultaneously allowing them to recognize that the multiple Dylans are in fact 'all Bob Dylan'" (6). In reality, the film faithfully encapsulates the subject's essence by making him "literally not be there" (D. Smith 2). In a way, Haynes is recreating his source in filmic terms, keeping close to Dylan's spirit; by departing from standard biopics, Haynes is imitating his subject's need to fight against tradition and labels. As scholars Carolyn D'Cruz and Glenn D'Cruz assert,

The film refuses to pin down Dylan, or provide any definitive 'truth' about Dylan or his art, yet remains remarkably faithful to what we might call [...] the spirit of Dylan's work. (327)

In the following lines, I will analyse how Todd Haynes' film *I'm Not There* portrays Bob Dylan's personas. Taking into account that the film has a non-linear storyline, the study of the characters will attempt to be ordered chronologically for the sake of clarity with the biographical accuracy. The cinematic style and the actors employed will be observed in order to observe how Haynes' has striven to match his film to Dylan's style variations. Also, the characters will be examined by their language

and costume design to ascertain if the actors resemble Dylan physically and emotionally.

## 4.2. DYLAN RE-INTERPRETED

### 4.2.1. WOODY GUTHRIE

The first character is based on Dylan’s hero—folk singer Woody Guthrie. As mentioned before, Guthrie’s influence on the young Bob Dylan is obvious; his first album was inspired by blues and folk but mostly it was Dylan paying tribute to his hero. Nonetheless, Haynes’ Guthrie is not played by a young white performer, instead, Marcus Carl Franklin, a young African-American actor acts the part of the young Dylan (see Fig. 2). As Kim Wilkins notes, “Woody Guthrie is not the Depression era folksinger that inspired Dylan in his early years as a musician, but rather an eleven-year-old African American boy living in 1959” (4).



**Figure 2.** Marcus Carl Franklin as Woody Guthrie. *I'm Not There* (2007)

The use of a black characters to portray the young Dylan suggests that Haynes’ attempted to present the songwriter as a universal artist that everyone —despite their ethnicity— could relate to. It is a well-known fact that the song ‘Blowing in the Wind’ became one of the 1960s anthem for equality, and many black artists covered the song. For instance, the musician Sam Cooke was so inspired by Dylan’s song that he wrote ‘A Change is Gonna Come’, which would become an anthem for the Civil Rights movement as well. Moreover, as scholar Zelig Asava indicates, the casting of an African-American could be the director’s attempt to reflect an inclusive casting that tries to represent America’s racial diversity and “[a]s a white man who supported equal rights for all, he symbolized a new America (3). Notwithstanding, by excluding Woody

Guthrie from his ethnic background and giving him someone else's life story, Haynes' first Dylan incarnation succumbs to "an African-American stereotype, a travelling hobo storyteller with a guitar" (3). The Guthrie character becomes a mix of Huckleberry Finn and his companion Jim; he is the main character for a while, just like Huck, yet his purpose is to highlight the good deeds of her white counterpart. As Asava notes, Woody is removed from the "vagaries of inequality, institutional racism, lynching and so on" (4) and therefore, does not truly represent "the lived experiences of black people or indeed black homeless, jobless artists in the segregated, war-torn, anxious America of Dylan's youth" (5).

Haynes' Woody, like the real Guthrie, plays a guitar painted with the slogan "this machine kills fascists" (see Fig. 3) and has the folk singer's speech pattern. Moreover, he plays a travelling folk storyteller and explains his experiences, just as Guthrie did.



**Figure 3.** Guthrie's guitar. *I'm Not There* (2007)

In the initial scene of the movie, Guthrie tells the other passengers in the train how he started playing music:

Truth is, my mind got mixed with ramblin' when I was, oh, so young. I reckon it was Arvella Gray, the blind protest singer from Chicago. She first taught me the blues four... about five years back. That's also when I first started writin' songs on my own. I've written some hillbilly songs. (00:06:47-00:07:07)

Just as Dylan, Guthrie is pretending to be someone else; he is constructing his identity based on a person he does not know. He claims that he learned blues from a blind singer and that he comes from a fictional town called "Riddle". There is a scene in Martin

Scorsese's *No Direction Home* (2005), in which Dylan explains he invented a story to try to sell his image to a music producer, which is the same Guthrie tells his travelling companions in the train.

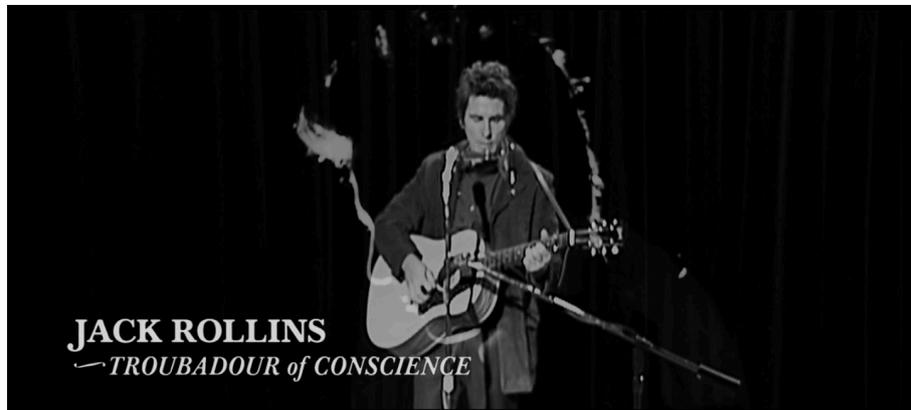
The scenes of the young Dylan in *I'm Not There* are effective at portraying the hobo life that Guthrie lived and perhaps Dylan wished he could have experienced. Haynes' Woody shows everything that Dylan wanted to be: a troubadour, a singer, tale-teller, poet and prophet-singer, all at the same time. Unfortunately, he could not be all those simultaneously. Guthrie tells the people on the train that he found purpose again when he joined the Union cause—events that he, eleven in 1959, could not possibly have experienced because as one character notices “[w]e done unionized 20 years ago” (00:09:21-00:09:24). At one point, a character suggests to young Dylan to “live [his] own time, child” (00:12:20-00:12:22). After Woody is exposed and caught in his own lies, he is transformed into the folk singer, Jack Rollins. This sequence parallels Bob Dylan's shift into a more poetic era: he would still sing about the labour and union movement and hardships of the poor, songs championing a cause or protesting an injustice of some kind, but his songs eventually turned more figurative and personal.

Woody's scenes are some of the least “accurate” from a biographical point of view. It is true that Haynes shows young Guthrie visiting his idol at the hospital, just as Dylan did when he first moved to New York. The style of Guthrie scene could be taken out of any conventional Hollywood biopic (D. Smith 4) because, as previously mentioned, one of the characteristics of biographical films is that they dramatize actual facts. Yet, Franklin's scenes faithfully represent how Dylan started his career by role-playing Guthrie and fictionalizing his own life in order to be accepted in the folk scene. This first character best reflects how “Guthrie remained an indelible stamp upon Dylan's personality” (Shelton 168) throughout all his musical career.

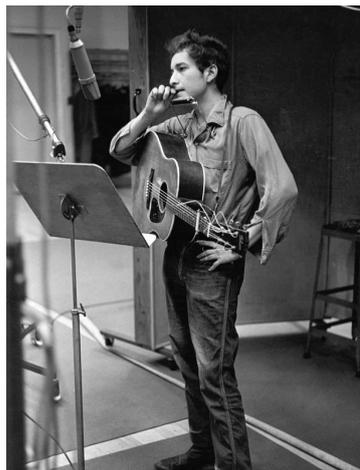
#### 4.2.2. JACK ROLLINS/FATHER JOHN

The audience is introduced to the next character, who is a white adult character—unlike Woody Guthrie—played by the British actor Christian Bale. The character's first phase is derived from Dylan's folk era persona. The costumes resemble those worn by the Dylan in the early 60s: short, tousled hair, dressed in plain clothes,

work shirts and blue jeans, in leather jackets, always with his acoustic guitar and a harmonica around his neck (see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). Moreover, Bale talks in an Okie accent, not totally letting go of Woody Guthrie's persona.



**Figure 4.** Jack Rollins is introduced as the Troubadour of Conscience. *I'm Not There* (2007)



**Figure 5.** Dylan in the studio recording *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, with his Gibson J-50. *No Direction Home* (2005)

Unlike Guthrie's scenes—which seemed retrieved from a conventional biopic—Jack Rollins' are filmed as if they were from a documentary. In all likelihood, the style of Bale's passages is influenced by Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* (2005), in which the Italian-American director focuses on the period between Dylan's beginnings and his 'retirement' from touring following his motorcycle accident in July 1966. In the documentary, many artists who had been acquainted with Dylan at some point describe the songwriter via interviews, and attempt to decipher the singer's enigmatic personality. Similarly, in *I'm Not There*, secondary characters such as producers and journalists, give details of the protest singer's folk era, in which he was praised due to

his progressive and politically engaged songwriting. He is defined as “a young individual who both writes and performs some of his era's finest tunes, and hailed by the New York Times as folk music's Troubadour of Conscience” (00:13:19-00:13:29). As previously mentioned, in his early career, the singer wrote songs that were politically left oriented, whose creative lyrics and imagery reflected the tumultuous early 1960s. The media started calling him “the voice of his generation”. Nonetheless, the pressure to live up to the high expectations from the media and the prohibition to experiment outside the folk scene led Dylan to feel detached from his own music. Rollins’ scenes accurately capture the singer’s discomfort with being put on a pedestal by his own peers and the labels appointed to him. At one point, Julianne Moore’s character Alicia — inspired in folk singer Joan Baez— tells the interviewer that Rollins “[felt] like the Establishment, you know, and he always fought the Establishment” (00:19:14-00:19:19). In other words, Rollins’ refusal to imprison himself into tradition is due to “Jack’s disillusionment with the appropriation of folk music by big business” (Darby 338). In reality, Dylan was not against the status quo or the discographies that ruled the music industry; he was just “unhappy to belong to anything, not for its intrinsic content, but out of horror of belonging to anything in principle” (338). After Kennedy’s assassination, Jack Rollins put into words why he feels alienated:

All they see is the cause and how they use people for their cause. And now they're trying to use me for something. They want me to... want me to carry a picket sign [...] It's a fierce, heavy feeling, thinking that something's expected of you, but you don't know exactly what it is. Brings forth a weird kind of guilt. (00:43:00-00:00:43:42)

In his memoir, Dylan wrote that he did not feel the “spokesman for anything or anybody and that [he] was only a musician.” (119). Therefore, after dissociating himself from the Folk movement, the singer decided his whole artistic persona to revolve around refusing to be a sign of anything. To do so, he created a collection of identities to push the media and the public to focus on his song’s lyrics rather than the message itself. In this manner, his audience would finally comprehend his words were only a sign of his artistry and did not convey a deeper meaning related to the prevalent political or social movements.

In the film, on the other hand, when Jack cannot longer please the people around him, he transforms into Pastor John, based on Dylan's Christian phase. As I have mentioned before, in the late 1970s, Dylan converted to Evangelical Christianity, and recorded three religious albums. In the film, Christian Bale's character goes into hiding after his existential crisis and finds himself in a bible study course in California where soon "the one-time '60s folk hero [becomes] a fully ordained member of the Gateway Ministry and an active figure in the state's evangelical community" (01:28:28-01:28:44). Father John, as he calls himself, refuses talking about his past self. While Jack Rollins rejected being the spokesperson of anything, Pastor John assumes the responsibility of becoming the mouthpiece of God.

#### 4.2.3. JUDE QUINN

One of the most controversial transformations in Dylan's evolution occurred in 1965, when in Newport Festival, he decided to play the electric guitar with a little band, moving from folk songwriter to rock star. To best display the songwriter's dramatic change, Haynes' cast Cate Blanchett to portray Dylan's electric years. The decision to cast the Australian actress was taken because Haynes saw 1965's Dylan as a "strangely anxious dandified hyperactive creature" (qtd. in Muldoon 68) which matched Blanchett's style. Her Dylan performance was acclaimed by the film critics. For instance, Anthony DeCurtis said in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that

[H]er performance is a wonder, and not simply because, as Jude Quinn, she inhabits the twitchy, amphetamine fired Dylan of 1965-66 with unnerving accuracy. Casting a woman in this role reveals a dimension to the acerbic Dylan of this era that has rarely been noted. Even as she perfectly mimics every jitter, sneer, and caustic put-down, Blanchett's translucent skin, delicate fingers, slight build, and pleading eyes all suggest the previously invisible vulnerability and fear that fueled Dylan's lacerating anger. It's hard to imagine that any male actor, or any less-gifted female actor for that matter, could have lent such rich texture to the role. (qtd. in Muldoon 67-68)

Despite the fact that Blanchett is a woman, her Dylan incarnation is the most familiar image of the singer depicted in the film: messy hair, with a pair of classic Ray-Ban

sunglasses with a Fender electric guitar that gave him a sense of effortless confidence (see Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). Certainly, Blanchett perfected Dylan’s persona, image, and voice. Additionally, she was given his most memorable lines. For instance, when asked if he was surprised by the booing of some of the audience, he replied “I figure there’s a little boo in all of us” (Cott 77), same line Blanchett uses to respond to the same question in the movie (00:49:04-00:49:06). Yet, the change of gender allows Haynes to put some distance from the literal truth, allowing him to manifest that “the film’s subject is literally ‘not there’” (Wilkins 3) and that none of the characters presented are in any way Bob Dylan.



**Figure 6.** Cate Blanchett as Jude Quinn.  
*I’m Not There* (2007)



**Figure 7.** Bob Dylan in 1966.  
*Jan Persson/Redferns*

Regarding the style in which Jude’s scenes are filmed, Haynes opted for imitating D.A. Pennebaker’s documentary *Don’t Look Back* (1967) which covers Dylan’s British tour in 1965. As Kim Wilkins states, “Pennebaker’s direct cinema style provides the illusion of unfettered access to the ‘star’ of Dylan” (7), just as Haynes’ movie does. The documentary’s goal was one of demystification, to shoot intimate scenes in which Dylan was either playing backstage or making jokes, to make it look as if the performer was a “typical, ordinary young man” (Bouquerel 157). Nonetheless, according to Robert Shelton, Pennebaker once told him that “[p]eople want to know about [Dylan] and they’re never going to. His whole interest is his charisma, the mystery.” (555). Instead of bringing to light Dylan’s true self, *Don’t Look Back*

contributed to perpetuate the Dylan myth (Wilkins 7). In other words, as stated before, Blanchett's performance is a reflection of an image produced by the documentary, and not Bob Dylan per se. Furthermore, Todd Haynes employs black and white, a fact that reminds the audience of Federico Fellini's poetic realism. By intermingling dream and reality when Quinn is floating in the sky as a human balloon (see Fig. 8), Haynes is making a reference to the surrealism of Fellini's *8 1/2*. The blurred line between fact and fiction superbly encapsulates Bob Dylan's myth.



**Figure 8.** Jude Quinn floating like a human balloon. *I'm Not There* (2007)

Jude's storyline shows the singer's existential crisis, caused by his need to avoid being caught in anyone's agenda. To portray Dylan's betrayal to folk music in the Newport Festival, Jude Quinn and his band shoot the public that attend the concert (see Fig 9).



**Figure 9.** Quinn and his band shooting the audience. *I'm Not There* (2007)

In the initial scene, Haynes' shows Jude lying in an open coffin, as the narrator says "even the ghost was more than one person." (00:02:03-00:02:05). Shortly after Dylan played at Newport Festival, he became an artist with multiple identities which were hard to trace. As David L. Smith remarks, during the singer's post-folk era, his

only objective was to create all these identities and wear them as masks, so as to appear to be “his identity at any given moment is [was] anything more than provisional” (8). In *Don't Look Back*, there is a famous scene where Dylan refuses to play the role of a celebrity and “creates a sense of disquiet in pointing out the absurdity of the questions asked on him” (Bouquerel 158), to the point that he inverts the roles of interviewer and interviewee” (158). Concerning *I'm Not There*, Quinn superciliously answers a journalist's questions as well. His need to evade labels leads him to “deny that he feels common emotions and avoids anything that might make him vulnerable” (D. Smith 9). This drives him to take drugs to dodge the insufferable existential crisis of having no identity. The sense of alienation is shown when he attends a party: “[a]lone and anesthetized by barbiturates, Quinn collapses as a large tarantula is projected onto the walls around him” (Wilkins 7) and as he reaches a limit, he transforms into another character.

#### 4.2.4 ROBBIE CLARK

The next character is Robbie Clark, an actor who becomes a celebrity by playing Jack Rollins (Christian Bale's character) in a meta-film titled *A Grain of Sand*—title taken from a 1981 Dylan song. This new incarnation of the singer is based on Dylan's public persona and is portrayed by the late Australian actor Heath Ledger. According to Todd Haynes, Ledger was cast because “Dylan was completely inspired by James Dean, and Heath [had] a little bit of James Dean in him, even physically, a kind of precocious seriousness [...]” (Ledger).

The director attempts to approach Dylan's private life through Clark's scenes. To capture the essence of the songwriter's reclusion years, Ledger's outfits were inspired by late 1960s Dylan, specifically from “[...] photographs of Dylan [...] with dark-rimmed eyeglasses and [...] in the classic Godardian striped crew-necked shirt” (Ledger) (see Fig. 10 and Fig. 11).



**Figure 10.** Heath Ledger as Robbie Clark. *I'm Not There* (2007)

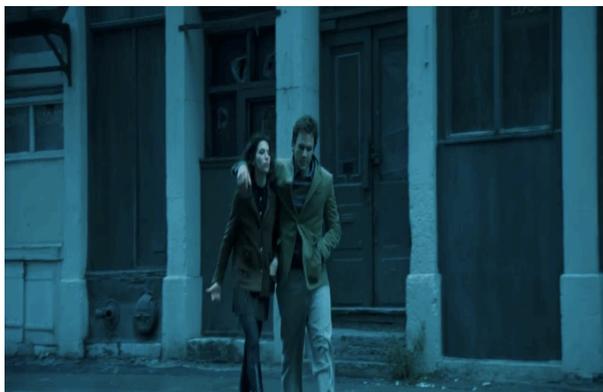


**Figure 11.** Bob Dylan arriving at an airport with his first wife Sara in 1969.  
*Evening Standard/Getty Images*

It is not a coincidence that Ledger's scenes summon the spirit of the French director Jean Luc-Godard's films of the mid-1960s; in the DVD audio commentary of the movie Haynes cites *Masculin féminin* (1966) and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1966) as great influences when filming this section. In the movie, Robbie meets a French artist named Claire—a character based on Suze Rotolo and Dylan's first wife Sara—in a Greenwich Village café in the 1960s. During this first encounter, Haynes visually alludes to the French director, “with scenes and dialogues directly quoted from *Masculin Fémenin* (1966) (Wilkins 7). Furthermore, the director uses “Goddard-esque intertitles accompanied by the sound of gunshots” (8) with the aim of reminding the audience that the romance is taking place during the Vietnam war. In a New York Times interview, Haynes affirmed that Robbie and Clare's “relationship is doomed to a long

stubborn protraction (not unlike Vietnam, which it parallels)” (Sullivan). The couple meet shortly after then President of the United States, John F. Kennedy is assassinated; the relationship begins to deteriorate after President Nixon is shown to announce an agreement to end the War in Vietnam on TV.

Dylan’s professional career launched after his reclusion years, yet his personal life sank as he and his first wife separated. The collapse of the singer’s marriage is shown and as Wilkins remarks it “presents the most conventional narrative of the film” (7) as Haynes’ transforms “a real person’s private life into a film for public consumption” (2). Robbie Clark is the character whose private life is most explored, Haynes even “incorporate[s] a falling-in-love montage” (Wilkins 7) in which the cover of *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963) is represented (see Fig 12. and Fig.13). In addition, the singer’s retirement years are reflected through Robbie’s sequence, since he is the character with most scenes inside a house.



**Figure 12.** Robbie and Claire walking down the streets of Greenwich Village. *I'm Not There* (2007)



**Figure 13.** *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) album cover featuring Dylan and then girlfriend Suze Rotolo. *Blank Archives/Archive Photos/Getty Images*

The goal of the film-within-a-film *A Grain of Sand* is to bring the audience closer to the real Jack Rollins. Notwithstanding, “the images on the screen seemed out of date” (00:34:44) and only show Dylan’s disinterest and a lack of commitment to late 1960s historical events through Clark’s character. While Robbie is away working in his new film, Claire is the only one who watches the news on the TV to keep herself informed

of the latest events, and expresses the horrors of Vietnam through her art. Considering that unveiling details about Dylan's marriage and his seclusion years was an impossible task, Haynes employed this section to show the tumult of the 1960s through the public perception of Dylan's love life.

#### 4.2.5. BILLY THE KID

The name of the fifth character is a clear reference to Dylan's involvement in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid* (1973) in which the musician played the character 'Alias'. To portray Dylan's outlaw persona, Haynes cast American actor Richard Gere. Out of all the performances, Gere's was the less successful with critics. For example, the late American film critic Roger Ebert wrote that "Richard Gere cowboy sequence, [...] doesn't seem to know its purpose".

Seemingly, Haynes' objective was to turn Dylan's music into a cinematic place; the director told an interviewer that "[he] thought it was important to have the sense of a man on the run in there, a man haunted by the ghosts of his previous life" (qtd. in J. Smith). To do so, Gere's Dylan gave life and shape to the stories told in the lyrics of Dylan's 'Basement Tapes' period, when the mercurial singer mined what Greil Marcus has called 'old, weird America'"(71). Accordingly, the cinematic sequence echoes revisionist westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s since Haynes reconstructs the Old West while incorporating visions of the Vietnam war and even "using the same palette as Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)" (Wilkins 5). Unlike Robbie Clark, Billy is tormented by the memories of Vietnam, past mistakes, "the guilt of repeatedly failing to meet people' expectations and sadness for not being 'there' for others" (Smith 9). He hides far away from the town of Riddle—in imitation to what Dylan did in Woodstock during his seclusion—and refuses to overcome his trauma. When he finally decides to approach the town, he is greeted by individuals who are dressed up in carnival costumes. Moreover, they hide behind masks and white make-up which allude Dylan's famous Rolling Thunder Revue (see Fig. 14 and Fig. 15) along with his experimental film *Renaldo and Clara* (1978)



**Figure 14.** One member of the town’s singing. *I’m Not There* (2007)



**Figure 15.** A photo of Bob Dylan during the Rolling Thunder Revue. *A Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story* (2019)

The fictional town gathers characters from Dylan’s Basement Tapes as well as the film’s other incarnations—such as Woody. In other words, Riddle reflects the multifaceted albums Dylan recorded during his seclusion years, which were looked on as the musician’s attempt to escape from conventions. The inclusion of Woody Guthrie into the town of Riddle exhibits that regardless of how hard Dylan strove to leave his past behind, he could never erase the impact that he had on American popular music. Following the pattern of the musician, Gere’s wears a mask to town as in Riddle “who a fellow really was never really mattered” (01:25:42-01:25:44) since in this particular town it is permanently Halloween. As Wilkins detects, “[t]he Halloween setting recalls a statement made by Dylan during a New York concert on October 31, 1964 ‘It’s Halloween, I have my Bob Dylan mask on. I’m mask-erading (5). However, when Billy’s identity is revealed by the sheriff Pat Garrett—a man from his past—he is forced to leave the territory and move to another place. Billy gives up his outlaw identity and transforms into a new man.

#### 4.2.6. ARTHUR RIMBAUD

The last character originated from one of Dylan’s great influences, 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet Arthur Rimbaud. Nonetheless, Haynes’ Rimbaud is not the writer per se, he is a fictional character who resembles the French poet (see Fig. 16 and Fig. 17), and quotes Bob Dylan’s lyrics as well as his namesake’s poetry. Hence, Haynes’s Rimbaud is the incarnation of the musician’s poetic side. The poet is played by British actor Ben Whishaw, who also acted as the romantic poet John Keats in the 2009 film *Bright Star*. In a *Wonderland* magazine interview, the actor affirmed that “Todd Haynes gave him gave me an audiotape of the San Francisco 65-66 interviews”. Thus, it is not surprising

to find that Rimbaud's sequences are filmed as if they were televised press conferences that resemble those interviews.



**Figure 16.** Ben Whishaw as Arthur Rimbaud. *I'm Not There* (2007)



**Figure 17.** A portrait of Arthur Rimbaud when he was 18.  
*Étienne Carjat*

It is a well-known fact that Arthur Rimbaud's poetry and persona made a big impression on Dylan. As claimed by Mark Polizzotti, Rimbaud was a role model for Dylan due to the fact that singer's lyrics are similar to the French poet's works, because they "create a powerful suggestive ambient landscape, while the poet's famous 'derangement of all the senses' is a fair description of Dylan's lifestyle at this time". In his memoir, Dylan wrote that

[...] [T]he poetry of French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud [...] was a big deal  
[...] I came across one of his letters called "Je est un autre," which translates

into “I is someone else” When I read these words the bells went off. It made perfect sense. I wish someone would have mentioned that to me earlier. (288)

Haynes’ Rimbaud’s only purpose is to comment on other characters’ actions as he is questioned by police interrogators. Notwithstanding, his answers are oblique, and the audience is kept wondering what Rimbaud means by his statements, in a similar way journalists tried to apprehend Dylan’s answers in the San Francisco conference. The fundamental idea of *I’m Not There* is that as a postmodern movie, the concept of the self is seen as fragmentary and unfixed (Asava 2). In consequence, the only way to get a glimpse of Dylan is by seeing him through others, a literal interpretation of Rimbaud’s “I is another”. Nevertheless, by making Ben Whishaw’s character the default narrator of the film, Haynes suggests that not even Rimbaud has the answers to decipher his other selves’ true nature, perfectly capturing Dylan’s famous quote in an interview with Newsweek magazine: “I don’t even know who I am most of the time”.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to reveal how Todd Haynes has tried to adapt Bob Dylan’s different public personas into a film. *I’m Not There* does not follow the conventional elements of biopics. In fact, the director diverges from the standards of the genre to condense Dylan’s ever-changing creative spirit into a cinematic mold. In order to do so, the director had to resort to postmodernism to divide Dylan’s identity into a variety of characters; instead of giving us a single actor to portray the musician, Haynes had to cast six different actors to cover his subject’s most prolific era. Furthermore, to help the audience differentiate between the singer’s various identities, the director turned to the use of distinct visual styles which were representative of 1960s cinema—such as Godard’s or Fellini’s.

This paper has proved that Haynes has attempted to gather the highlights of Dylan’s career—the folk singer, the rock star, the outlaw and many more. Yet, the director insists that his film is inspired by the life and music of the singer, and thus, it has never striven to give an accurate portrayal of the singer. Rather than deconstructing the myth surrounding the musician, Haynes opted for a faithful depiction of Dylan’s metamorphic creative work; the director based his characters on biographical and cultural events, but his Dylan portrait resembles more a cubist painting than a realist

one. Accordingly, it would be erroneous to classify *I'm Not There* as fact-based biopic. Instead, Haynes' movie is founded on imitating the singer's versatile life and art through the use of the aforementioned postmodern techniques.

The director's innovations in the biopic genre might fully open the way for different approaches to future biographical movies. The upcoming new Bob Dylan biopic *Going Electric* (TBA) directed by American director James Mangold might take into account Haynes' experimental techniques. If not, future studies could fruitfully explore further the different methods to adapt the musician to the screen by conducting a comparative study of both films.

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