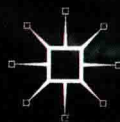


The Writer on Film

Screening Literary Authorship



edited by
Judith Buchanan



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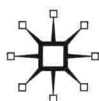
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The Writer on Film

*for M and D,
with love*

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In March 2010, the Film and Literature programme at the University of York hosted an international conference entitled 'The Writer on Film'. This edited collection grew out of that conference. The York Film and Literature postgraduates who helped to run it and the broader conference community who participated in it are to be warmly thanked for a terrific event.

As the resulting volume has evolved, exchanges with contributors have proved the occasion for many entertaining and illuminating discussions, both on- and (better yet) off-subject. I thank them for their graciousness, patience and good humour about the process as well as for their stimulating contributions to the end product.

The editing of this volume has, in the way of these things, needed to be fitted in around the day job. The acute professionalism and keen sense of team endeavour of the University of York's excellent Humanities Research Centre staff – Helen Jacobs, Sarah Burton and Philip Morris – have made more things possible than ought to have been the case and I thank them all for a communal professional life that always combines the productive with the cheering. The University of York's Department of English and Related Literature remains not only an intensely stimulating environment in which to work, but also a significantly supportive one. It is a privilege to be part of both communities.

Epigraph quotations on p. xv are taken from Carol Rollyson, *Reading Biography* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004), p. 51; John Worthen, 'The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer' in John Batchelor (ed.), *The Art of Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 227–44 (231); and Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 114. The cover image shows Helena Bonham Carter in *Enid* (Carnival Film: dir. James Hawes, 2009). All appear with permission.

Hugh Haughton generously read, and gave discerning feedback on, the Introduction for which I am very grateful. Felicity Plester at Palgrave-Macmillan has been a model of supportive patience and Catherine Oakley an editorial assistant *extraordinaire* through the latter stages of this project. I am indebted to her for her discernment, clarity and company – excellent in each respect. I could not have wished for better: thank you Cat.

And I thank Kostja, Dougie and Freddie – bringers of delight and, as ever, more generously understanding than they should need to be – for cutting me sufficient slack to see this one through, and for much more besides.

Who first propounded the preposterous notion that writers' lives do not make for good biography? ... That is like saying the life of the imagination has no story to tell.

Carl Rollyson

[B]iographies suggest that things as difficult as human lives can – for all their obvious complexity – be summed up, known, comprehended: they reassure us ...

John Worthen

When a young man came up to him in Zurich and said, 'May I kiss the hand that wrote Ulysses?' Joyce replied, somewhat like King Lear, 'No, it did lots of other things too.'

Richard Ellmann

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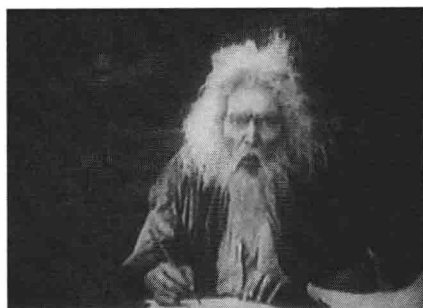
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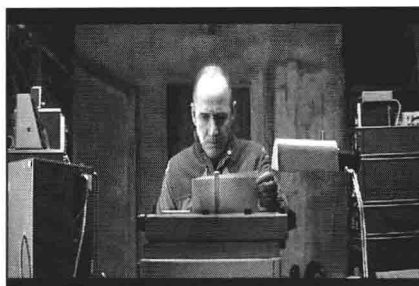
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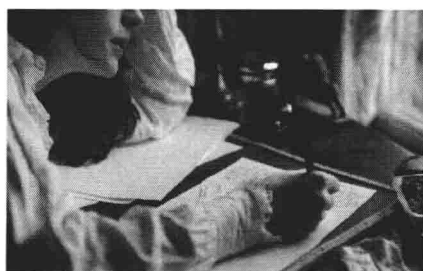
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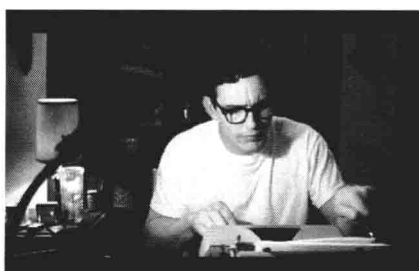
(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

Figure 1.1 A century of cinematic images of writers: (a) *A Tale of Two Cities* (dir. Frank Lloyd, 1917); (b) *Julia* (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1977); (c) *Prospero's Books* (dir. Peter Greenaway, 1991); (d) *The Lives of Others* (dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006); (e) *Becoming Jane* (dir. Julian Jarrold, 2007); (f) *Howl* (dirs Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 2010).

Introduction

Image, story, desire: the writer on film

Judith Buchanan

A writer might seem unpromising subject matter for a film. A life of reflection, observation, composition and self-abstracting *literariness* does not self-evidently offer the sort of cinematic dynamism and narrative pulse usually considered the staple fare of the movies. 'If Mr Keats and I are strolling in the meadow, lounging on the sofa or staring into the wall, do not presume we are not working', announces Keats' friend, Charles Brown, in the literary biopic *Bright Star* (dir. Jane Campion, 2009). 'Doing nothing,' he continues loftily, 'is the musing of the poet'. The trailed, even celebrated 'nothing' being 'done' by Keats and Brown in the outer world is directly on offer here as a badge of poetic legitimacy. And it is clearly implied that these vaunted nothings mask a depth of enticing, but unseen, 'somethings' of a richly reflective and creative character.

For all their self-aggrandizing pomposity, Brown's words speak acutely to his off-screen as well as his on-screen audience. Through them, *Bright Star* explicitly draws attention to the significance of the unseen and inaccessible realms of a literary imagination, where the film's central (in)action is located. And in doing so, it illustrates the potentially self-thwarting nature of the project to make a literary biopic at all. Certainly acts of literary composition viewed purely from the perspective of an observing and non-intrusive camera would be hard pressed to yield momentum, trajectory and visual drama. '[W]e cannot know completely the intricacies with which any mind negotiates with its surroundings to produce literature', writes Richard Ellmann: 'The controlled seething out of which great works come is not likely to yield all its secrets.'¹ Since a dramatically fraught seething in the inner world may be made manifest in the outer only minimally (if at all), locating the dramatic action for a film about literary process can prove a challenge.

There are, however, few contexts in which an inability to 'know completely' has inhibited a desire to know in part. Moreover, at the point in mapping the emergence of a literary work where knowledge runs out, the curious, the creative and the commercially minded among filmmakers have rarely fought shy of reaching for conjecture as an appealing (and saleable)