

“No one listens to Springsteen anymore. He’s history!”

(Blinded by the Light):

Pop-rock Music and 2000s Cinema

An online symposium (Jan. 29th to Feb.26th 2021)

ABSTRACTS



<https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/best-music-biopics/>

SESSION 1

January 29, 2021 - 6-8 P.M. (Paris time, GMT + 1)

Blinded by the Light: Fan culture and transnational storytelling

- **Keynote address: "I Want to be a Writer...": Music Fandom and Identity in *Blinded By The Light* (Chadha, 2019) – (Mark Duffett)**
- **“Bruce is the direct line to all that’s true in this shitty world”: Music, Identity, and Hope in Gurinder Chadha’s Biographical Film *Blinded by the Light* (2019) – (Khaled Chouana)**

This presentation is concerned with examining the portrayal of the British Pakistani community of Luton, England during the 1980’s in Gurinder Chadha’s film *Blinded by the Light* (2019). It aims to investigate the different strategies adopted by the film director to link the teenagehood of British Pakistani journalist Sarfraz Manzoor as depicted in the motion picture to the music and life of American rock star Bruce Springsteen. I will show that there are parallels between the fictional character of Javed Khan, based on teenage Manzoor, and the music and career of Springsteen. The presentation argues that Chadha’s film can be considered as an unusual music biopic about Springsteen despite the fact it represents the struggle of a British Pakistani teenager who tries to find a meaning to his life. I will also suggest that the music biopic *Blinded by the Light* functions as a cathartic medium to Springsteen’s fans and offers a tribute to the music and career of the Boss.

Biography

Khaled Chouana holds a PhD in American studies from Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 University, France. As an assistant lecturer at Abbes Laghrour University of Khenchela, Algeria, Khaled teaches Anglo-American civilization. Khaled’s areas of interest revolve around protest music, grassroots movements and activism in Anglophone countries

SESSION 2

February 5, 2021 - 6-8 P.M. (Paris time, GMT + 1)

Challenging the Young Male rock Star Canon: Re-empowering Female Performers and Ageing Musicians

- **From Judy to Beyoncé: Fame, Performance and Narratives of Gendered Genius on Screen.**
(Kirsty Fairclough)

Whether biopics or fictional films based on musical performers, contemporary cinematic offerings such *A Star Is Born* (Bradley Cooper, 2018), *Vox Lux* (Brady Corbet 2018), *Teen Spirit* (Max Minghella 2018), *I Am Woman* (Unjoo Moon 2019), *Her Smell* (Alex Ross Perry 2018), *Wild Rose* (Tom Harper 2018) *Judy* (Rupert Goold, 2019) and even concert film *Homecoming: A Film* and visual album *Lemonade by Beyoncé* are concerned with female musical performers navigating their way through the complex machinations of fame.

For a variety of reasons, such films position audiences to empathise with the physical and psychological sacrifices their subjects have to endure in exchange for success and ultimately, fame. Such films have more heavily showcased the systemic struggles of women in the entertainment industry than in previous periods in mainstream film and visibly highlight the personal costs of sexual harassment, physical perfection and how a relentless performance schedule can create negative consequences, especially for working mothers.

This paper will examine these narratives with a focus on *Judy* and *Homecoming* as examples of how post-#MeToo, such stories reflect a cultural shift in how the notion of genius is gendered and most often coupled with ideas around dysfunction and ambition. Such films may represent a shift away from the more conventional cinematic position of women as muses, nurturers and caretakers centered around a male figure inscribed as genius and instead allows a space for the complex difficulties of contemporary music and stardom to coalesce on screen.

It will address how contemporary mainstream cinema represents women in music both actual and fictional, who have continually pushed boundaries and made substantive statements through their art from a feminist perspective in ways that illuminate how function to bring a multiplicity of female perspectives around notions of genius.

Biography

Dr Kirsty Fairclough is Reader in Screen Studies at the School of Digital Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK and Chair of Manchester Jazz Festival, Manchester's longest running music festival.

A speaker, author and curator, Kirsty's current research areas centre on the intersections of popular culture, celebrity studies and popular music with an emphasis on the life and legacy of Prince. Kirsty has published widely on popular culture and is the co-editor of *Prince and Popular Culture*, *The Music Documentary: Acid Rock to Electropop*, *The Arena Concert: Music, Media and Mass Entertainment* and *Music/Video: Forms, Aesthetics, Media*. and co -editor of the forthcoming *Pop Stars on Film* (Bloomsbury) and author of the forthcoming *Beyoncé: Celebrity Feminism and Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury).

Kirsty's work has been published in *Senses of Cinema*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *SERIES* and *Celebrity Studies* journals and she is a regular commentator on popular culture featuring on BBC News, BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 6, and in *The Guardian* and *Creative Review* amongst others. She is the co-curator of film seasons including *Sound and Vision: Pop Stars on Film* and the curator of *In Her View: Women Documentary Filmmakers* film seasons at HOME, Manchester.

- **How Terribly Normal to be 70. (Richard Lee)**

Motion pictures such as *LaBamba*, *The Buddy Holly Story*, *The Doors*, *Rocketman* and *Bohemian Rhapsody* tell the stories of some of rock'n'roll's most influential artists. In these films and other rock'n'roll biopics, we see individuals growing into celebrity and coping with all that fame and fortune brings - the good and the bad. What we do not see are the issues entertainers confront when they grow old and struggle to remain successful and relevant in an industry whose biggest stars often are its youngest.

In my paper, I will focus on three films whose (fictional) protagonists are older musicians putting their lives and careers into context.

- ***Danny Collins***: The title character is a superstar with riches earned during the classic rock era, but he misses what money cannot buy, including a reconciliation with a son he never met.
- ***Crazy Heart***: Otis "Bad" Blake is a has-been country music star who struggles with alcoholism and is angry that a musician he once mentored has become a success and left him behind.
- ***Ricki and the Flash***: Ricki Rendazzo abandoned her family to follow her dreams of becoming a rock star, but ended up playing in small bars and supports herself by working in a supermarket.

My paper will explore how these films provide audiences with stronger connections to celebrities than the popular biopics, which offer glimpses of lives beyond the reach of most audience members. These three films show the human side of entertainers struggling with issues that confront the general public.

Biography

Richard Lee has worked in journalism, government and academia. He currently teaches journalism at St. Bonaventure University in New York State and serves as executive director of the Jandoli Institute, a research center he established at the university in 2019.

As a journalist, Rich held a variety of jobs ranging from political reporter to rock music critic. In government, he served in several communications positions, including Deputy Director of Communications for the Governor in New Jersey.

In addition to St. Bonaventure, Rich has taught at Rutgers University and Mercer County Community College, both in New Jersey. In the summer of 2010, he served as a visiting professor at John Cabot University in Rome. Since 2017, he has taught a graduate public relations seminar in St. Bonaventure's summer program at Oxford University's Trinity College in Great Britain.

Rich holds a B.A. in English from Saint Bonaventure, an M.A. in Public Media Arts from Montclair State University and a Ph.D. in Media Studies from Rutgers University. He is a graduate of St. Benedict's Prep in Newark, N.J

SESSION 3

February 12, 2021 - 6-8 P.M. (Paris time, GMT + 1)

Cinematic Space as the Site of Life-writing, Identity construction, and Intersubjectivity

- **It's Only Rock 'n' Roll: Self-Myth and Springsteen on Film. (Marian Jago)**

Since the publication of his auto-biography *Born to Run* (2016), Bruce Springsteen has invested himself in a protracted process of life-writing which cuts across media forms from the literary to the recorded (*Chapter and Verse*, 2016); and from stage (*Springsteen on Broadway*, 2017-2018) to screen (*Springsteen on Broadway*, 2018; *Western Stars*, 2019; *Letter to You*, 2020). While Springsteen is no stranger to rockumentaries, having released *Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run* (2005), *The Promise: The Making of Darkness of the Edge of Town* (2010), and *The Ties that Bind* (2014), as well as the strikingly cinematic video for 'I Am A Hunter of Invisible Game' (2014), these most recent three films seem different, or at least more urgent, in their use of cinematic processes to secure particular narratives around aspects of Springsteen's legacy. This presentation will consider the ways in which Springsteen, often in collaboration with director Thom Zimmy, uses the intimacy of cinematic space – both on-screen and in the theatre auditorium itself – to both edit and highlight aspects of the live concert experience for which he (and the E-Street Band) are so well-known. What might Springsteen's choices as both a director and producer of these film projects tell us about identity curation, myth-making, life-writing across live and fixed performance platforms, and the relationship of these activities to the perceived cultural value of rock music?

Biography

Dr. Marian Jago is currently Lecturer in Popular Music & Jazz Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include music as cultural practice, musical genre, traditions/memory within music scenes, the jazz practices of Lee Konitz, and the music of Bruce Springsteen. She is the Editor of *Jazz Perspectives*, sits on the Board of Directors for the Scottish Jazz Archive, and chairs the University of Edinburgh's Jazz & Popular Music Study Group. Her work has been featured on CBC Radio Canada, BBC Radio Scotland and published by Routledge, *Jazz Perspectives*, *Jazz Research Journal*, the *Journal of Jazz Studies*, Bloomsbury, and the University of British Columbia Press.

- **A Different Kind of Success: Exploring the Intersubjective Roots of the Artist, Audience and Authenticity. (Joe Albert)**

Ricoeur suggests “inscriptions fix meaning.” These inscriptions may take the form of stories that resonate with an audience. As stories are shared in performances over time, an audience may find itself and its own stories intertwined with those of the artist. These intersubjective processes can surface a collective identity. Highlighting musical biographies provides a sample of the intersubjective reality of artist, audience and story. This presentation explores the process of artist and audience interaction, forming a loosely tied community and crafting a joint, emergent narrative of visibility, self-recognition and often personal transformation. Gurinder Chadha’s musical biopic *Blinded by the Light* serves as an affirmation of artists’ influence on fans and an exemplar of the attitudes, feelings and behaviors common among Springsteen followers. Chadha’s film also provides an example of the reflexive process involved in great performance art that transports both audience and performer to a renewed sense of personal authenticity.

Not every artist achieves great financial or commercial success. Even fewer artists succeed in the creation of a community of passionate, persistent fans who openly talk about their fan based community. When asked by a young performing artist for guidance on how to build a fan base, Bruce Springsteen advised, “When you look out at the audience, you should see yourself in them, just as they should see themselves in you.” This inquiry, relying on analytic lenses of intersubjectivity theory, social identity and narrative therapy, reveals key dimensions of artist/audience interactive success.

SESSION 4

February 19, 2021 - 6-8 P.M. (Paris time, GMT + 1)

Heroic tales of the Saints and the Damned

- **Art, Capitalism and the Devil: rock'n'roll, Stardom and Modern Sainthood in Biopics.**
(Justin Wadlow)

In 1905 Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; and then, in 1979, Julian Temple directed *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. Both share in common an analysis of the nature of capitalism in a puritan society, but where Max Weber insisted on frugality, hard work and predestination, Julian Temple and Malcolm McLaren mapped out a cynical road to fame and fortune through the exploitation of filth and furry.

From the original Elvis to the scandalous Sex Pistols, rock'n'roll therefore embodies the complex links between art, money and the devil. But where the romantic figure of the *artiste maudit* meant dying for one's creation in poverty, world-wide pop culture gives way to the rock stars, allowed, as before them Prometheus or Icarus, to defy the Gods. Although now offered a scandalous fortune instead of death and remorse.

But such material rewards come at a high cost for both the artist and his art, as depicted in the lives of Jerry Lee Lewis, Ray Charles, Jim Morrison, Tina Turner, Johnny Cash, Ian Curtis and others, in which the suffering body of the artist gives shape to the many contradictions of modern capitalism: self-promotion versus the sense of decency and community; art, rebellion and poetry turned financial assets, profit versus temptation and immorality.

Each biopic therefore deals with the rise of rock stars as modern pilgrims fighting their way through temptation, art and capitalism: often starting in poverty and rising to stardom in a hostile environment, relying above all on self-confidence but eventually trapped in isolation, sin, and decay. Only to find salvation by a return to the true values of family and religion. Broadly speaking, these lives can fall into five categories, each one depicting a hero, an entrepreneur and a devil: the rebel against law and order, the shaman bringing fire upon himself, the fallen angel driven to desperation, the moral sinner and finally (the most American of them all) the entertainer turned successful business man.

To understand fully the nature of these biopics our paper will draw on sociology, economics as well as music history and movie esthetics.

Justin Wadlow belongs to the *Centre de Recherche en Arts et Esthétique* (CRAE) at Université de Picardie Jules Verne (France)

- **The Last Days of Grunge?: Gus Van Sant's 2005 Film as an Alternative History of a Music Genre (Guillaume Mouleux)**

The last part of Gus Van Sant's "Death Trilogy", *Last Days* (2005) has been analyzed by Charles Fairchild as a play on the narrative conventions of the musician biopic genre, alternating realistic references to Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain with deliberately unrealistic elements that "[short circuit] any credible correspondence to the events and people the film appears to reveal to us" (Fairchild 2013). But beyond its implicit evocation of Cobain, the film also seems to depict the grunge rock genre itself in a similarly twisted manner.

All along the movie, musical references starkly contrast with (if not occult entirely) the role of punk in shaping 1990s alternative rock (Azerrad 1995; Lyons 2004): while it takes the shape of "an experiential event" (Lobrutto 2010), *Last Days* also conveys a toned-down vision of the grunge experience as an "aesthetic of disorder" (Danto 2007) while arguably overemphasizing the influence of the hippie subculture over it. Another contrast is provided through the dysfunctional onscreen small community that surrounds Blake, whereas community has been documented as an essential part in the flourishing of the Seattle music scene (Prato 2009; Yarm 2011). The natural setting of the film also significantly alienates the characters from the urban environment of downtown Seattle, where the movement bloomed in the early 1990s, with ties to Jim Jarmusch's 1995 *Dead Man* (and its soundtrack by "Godfather of grunge" Neil Young) also to be explored.

But is this all part of a deliberate misrepresentation, or of an onscreen discussion on the reasons why "grunge is dead" focusing both on its recuperation through consumerism and on its failure to keep up with its roots? Possibly as much an autopsy of the grunge genre and subculture as the advertised exploration of the fall of its unwilling figurehead (with both appearing less burning out than fading away), the movie questions the role of iconicity and authenticity in their respective disintegrations.

Filmography

Dead Man. Dir. Jim Jarmusch. Written by Jim Jarmusch. With Johnny Depp, Gary Farmer, Lance Henriksen. Demetra McBride/Miramax Films, 1995.

Last Days. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Written by Gus Van Sant. With Michael Pitt, Lukas Haas, Asia Argento, Scott Patrick Green, Kim Gordon. HBO Films, 2005.

Biography

Guillaume Mouleux holds a PhD in Language and Cultures of the Anglophone World from Université Sorbonne-Paris-Cité, France. His research focuses on popular culture, image and communication in the society, history and arts of the United States of America. His teaching experience includes Université Paris-Diderot, Université Paris-Nanterre, Université Gustave-Eiffel and CY Cergy Paris Université

SESSION 5

February 26, 2021 - 6-8 P.M. (Paris time)

Experimenting with Alternative Identities

- **A Nightmare in the Daylight / Assembling Lady Jaye Breyer P-Orridge through Marie Losier's *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye* (2011)- Christophe Becker.**

In 2011, French director Marie Losier released *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye*. The documentary follows the life of Industrial Music artist and performer Genesis P-Orridge (born Neil Megson, February 22, 1950 in Manchester) who, alongside his wife Lady Jaye Breyer P'Orridge (born Jacqueline Mary Breyer, July 1, 1969 in New York), investigated the creation of a new personality: Genesis Breyer P-Orridge.

As the two performers go through various surgical procedures, whose results are largely documented by Losier, it appears to the viewer that *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye* is not only a biopic that serves to better understand the influence of Genesis P-Orridge on Industrial Culture and/or popular music (from bands such as Throbbing Gristle to Psychic Tv), but to document a series of social and artistic experiments.

As Genesis P-Orridge and his wife go under the scalpel to “create cutups of identity and character” after William S. Burroughs’ programmatic texts, and ultimately resemble each other as one redefined identity, Losier films two artists at work, trying to break social and sexual boundaries in order to “dematerialize identity.”

We will study the new, “updated” programmatic texts thus developed by Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Lady Jaye Breyer P'Orridge (identity as an imaginary construct and as mythmaking), focusing on the role taken up by Marie Losier whose input to the creation of Genesis Breyer P-Orridge has, thus far, been largely minimized. We will also study the role of the documentary/biopic on identity construction and concept generation.

Biography

Christophe Becker, a member of ANR PIND and Association Stella Incognita holds a PhD entitled *L'Influence de William S. Burroughs dans l'œuvre de William Gibson et de Genesis P-Orridge (The influence of William S Burroughs in the works of William Gibson and Genesis P-Orridge)* from Université Paris 8, France.

Christophe's research focuses on Burrough's legacy in the fields of literature and music, but also on corporeality as a subject of artistic experience, and on popular culture in general.

He is a founding member of l'Association En fait, des Objets (an association) that aims to publish, support, promote, develop, organise, and coordinate the creation of textual, artistic and cultural productions.

- **The “Fictional” and the “Real” in Kirill Serebrennikov's *Leto* (Russia, 2018) – (Ira Osterberg)**

Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov's film *Leto* (*Summer*) is a semi-fictional account of one crucial summer in the lives of two Soviet era rock legends, Maik Naumenko (1955-1991) and Viktor Tsoi (1962-1990). In the early 1980s, the already established underground rocker Naumenko met the young and talented Tsoi and helped him into stardom. Through this famous encounter the film captures an important moment in the development of Soviet rock, which simultaneously represents an important moment in the whole society – the transition from stagnation period into the era of perestroika and freedom.

Stylistically *Leto* mixes elements of biopic drama, film-musicals and extrafictional self-referentiality into innovative and even avantgarde explorations of music-image combinations. My narratological analysis of the use of the music in the film seeks to identify and categorize different levels of “fiction” and “reality” in the film's structure. The juxtaposition of these levels becomes particularly interesting in the depiction of Viktor Tsoi, the ultimate Soviet rock hero whose life tragically ended a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rather than being a real character, *Leto's* Tsoi is an artificial construction of elements from different actors that result in almost an “empty slate” where any significance can be placed upon. In the end, the message seems to be that Tsoi's significance in Russian collective imaginary is so great that no fictional representation can truly capture it - nothing can fulfill the yearning for the return of the lost hero.

Biography

Ira Österberg is a post-doctoral researcher of Russian culture and cinema. Her PhD thesis “What Is That Song? Aleksej Balabanov's *Brother* and Rock as Film Music in Russian Cinema” (2018) presented a narratological view on the cinematic development of the rock idiom in the Soviet Russian context. Her recent work includes an article on the development of sound film technology “An early sound film pioneer: Eric M. C. Tigerstedt's patents and patent applications 1912–1920” (2020) and a monograph on one of the most influential Russian films of the 1990s, “Aleksei Balabanov: *Brother*” (forthcoming 2021). She is currently working as the Research coordinator at the Finnish Centre for Russian and East European Studies, Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, Finland.