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**Jazz Legends:
Bessie Smith and Miles Davis
in Contemporary American Biopics**

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INTRODUCTION

Renowned German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche emerges as a pivotal figure from the 19th century, whose influence extended significantly into the arts beyond his philosophical contributions. Nietzsche fervently championed artistic practice, perceiving it as an integral element in the progression of civilized society. Consequently, his ideas left an indelible mark on diverse artistic and cultural domains, shaping perspectives, artistic creation, and modes of thought throughout subsequent centuries. In the societal evolution, art emerges as a profound catalyst, shaping the cultural fabric of communities. Within this intricate trajectory, jazz musicians hold a prominent position within the framework of American identity. Their musical prowess not only entertains but also acts as a transformative force, challenging societal norms and catalyzing cultural metamorphosis. Against the backdrop of a segregated society, these artists navigated adversities with resilience, contributing not only musically but also fostering unity and sparking dialogues on social justice. The exploration of their lives takes a contemporary turn in biopics, where the portrayal of their success and private struggles raises critical questions. Does the cinematic lens authentically capture the depth of their narratives, or are their names merely commodified for profit? This inquiry delves into the complex interplay between art, societal contributions, and the portrayal of jazz musicians in the modern cinematic landscape. The initial section of this thesis undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the biopic genre, meticulously dissecting its intricacies and tracing its historical evolution. Subsequently, the thesis transitions into a meticulous analysis, specifically centering on two contemporary jazz biopics released concurrently. This analytical endeavor leverages the latest scholarly works on biopics, providing a nuanced examination of the cinematic representation of jazz musicians within the genre. This thesis undertakes a comprehensive examination of the biopic genre, with a particular focus on two significant films released in 2016. The first, "Bessie," delves into the life of renowned blues singer Bessie Smith, often celebrated as the "Empress of the Blues." The second, "Miles Ahead," centers on the life of Miles Davis, an iconic figure in the realm of jazz, widely credited for making jazz "cool." These two films provide a compelling basis for analysis, offering insights into the cinematic portrayal of pivotal figures in music history. Through a meticulous exploration of these biopics, the thesis aims to unravel the complexities of cinematic representation, scrutinizing how the genre captures the essence of the artists' lives while navigating the intersection of artistic expression, societal contributions, and the commercial dimensions of filmmaking.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MUSICAL BIOPIC AS A CINEMATIC GENRE

1.1 Definition of Biopic

A biopic is a movie that documents the life of a real person. These films have gained a lot of recognition in the film industry and have become fairly successful in terms of both viewership and box office earnings. Numerous biopics were nominated for Academy Awards, particularly in the Best Picture category, beginning in 2000 and even earlier. This implies that these films have been continuously nominated for some of the most important film industry awards. These films include Erin Brockovich (2000), A Beautiful Mind (2001), The Pianist (2002), Finding Neverland (2004), Ray (2004), Capote (2005), Good Night and Good Luck (2005), Munich (2005), The Queen (2006), Frost/Nixon (2008), Milk (2008) and The Blind Side (2009), Bessie (2016), Miles Ahead (2016), The Rocketman (2019), Bohemian Rhapsody(2018)

The top 34 musical biopics, which are full-length motion pictures that are either based on or inspired by real musicians, have brought in over \$724 million at the box office since 1978. In terms of box office receipts, Walk the Line and Ray come in first and second, with over \$119 million and \$75 million, respectively. Musical biopics, or films that depict the lives of famous musicians, have grown in popularity since the 1960s. Pop, country, rock, blues, and other musical genres have all been represented in post-studio era musical biopics. The genre saw its pinnacle in the mid-2000s when Walk the Line (2005) and Ray (2004) became the highest earning films in the genre's history.¹ Custen places the release of the film-biography in the late 1890s, pointing out that the genre "was a known commodity almost from film's beginning" with films like The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots (1895). In its broadest sense, Custen defines the genre as a movie that depicts the life of a real person who goes by their name. Custen makes it apparent that the great range that this genre's past has allowed for is what led to the depth of his definition. "Other than this trait [of treating a true-life story], the definition of what counts as fame—and with it, what constitutes a biopic—shifts anew with each generation," the author continues.²

Similarly, the presence of biographical content is evident in the earliest stages of film history.

¹ Schlotterbeck, Jesse K. *The Popular Musical Biopic in the Post-Studio Era: Four Approaches to an Overlooked Film Genre (PhD Dissertation)*, University of Iowa, 2010, <https://iro.uiowa.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-popular-musical-biopic-in-the/9983776981702771>.

² Custen, George F. "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics 1961-1980." *The Biopic*, Vol. 23, no. 1, December 2000, pp 127-159, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23540206> Accessed 05 December 2023.

Historical films, specifically re-creations of real events from the past, likely constituted one of the earliest cinematic genres. For instance, as early as 1895, audiences could watch films like "The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots," and shortly thereafter, in 1898, witness a re-creation of J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith's "Battle of Manila Bay," possibly advertised as an authentic record of the event. Notable performances, such as Sarah Bernhardt's portrayal of Queen Elizabeth in 1912, contributed significantly. In Germany, directors Dimitri Buchowetski and Ernst Lubitsch directed early biopics on royalty, a focus that became a staple of the genre but evolved by the 1930s. Abel Gance, in France, began his film career with an early biopic on Molière in 1909, later directing the epic "Napoleon" in 1927. Sir Alexander Korda played a role in shaping a tabloid-inspired view of biography with films like "The Private Life of Helen of Troy" (1927) and the more prestigious "Private Life of Henry VIII" (1933). The biopic, then, was a recognized cinematic category almost from the beginning, displaying various forms such as hagiography, psychological biography, and autobiography. Like its literary counterparts, it became entangled in debates about truth, accuracy, and interpretation.

The genre of the biopic is defined as encompassing films that "depict the life of a historical person, past or present" and in which the central character's "real name is used". It is a genre whose traits "shift anew with each generation". This passage explains the genre of biopic (biographical picture) by stating that it includes films portraying the life of a historical person, whether from the past or present. A key characteristic is the use of the central character's real name in the film. The reference to Custen (5-6) suggests that these definitions are derived from a work by Custen. Additionally, the passage notes that the traits of the biopic genre evolve with each generation.³

In the context of defining a biopic, a biographical film is one that portrays the life of a historical person, whether from the past or present. The concept of biography is shaped through the use of symbol systems, and the cinematic representation of this mediation has roots older than the film industry or film technology itself. While people may have orally transmitted stories about ancestors or significant figures, the development of notation systems, such as written language and iconic representations, solidified biography into a more enduring form. Thus, biography can be considered foundational to early literary forms, as one of humanity's longstanding impulses is to document and record significant life narratives. Biopics, which is short for biographical pictures, are cinematic representations that dramatize the lives of actual individuals, typically focusing on historical figures or well-known personalities. These movies aim to capture the core of a person's life, showcasing their challenges, successes, and impact on society. Generally following a narrative structure, biopics

³ Quote from a source written by Ray Carney, referencing a work by Ray Broadus Browne. The specific work mentioned is "*American Biography: American Lives*" and the citation refers to page numbers 5-6 in George Frederick Custen's work.

depict the subject's life journey, starting from significant events in their early years and progressing through key milestones in their personal and professional accomplishments. The primary objective of a biopic is to provide audiences with a compelling and emotionally resonant portrayal of an individual's life story, often employing artistic interpretations to captivate viewers.

Documentaries, as non-fictional presentations, serve the critical purpose of informing, educating, and generating awareness about real-life events, individuals, or social issues. Utilizing diverse methods like interviews, archival footage, on-location filming, and expert analysis, documentaries strive for objectivity, aiming to present information as accurately as possible. Despite this commitment to accuracy, it's important to acknowledge that documentaries may still be influenced by the filmmaker's perspective or bias, underscoring the complexities of representing reality. In contrast, biopics, short for biographical pictures, take a more dramatic approach to depicting the lives of real individuals, often historical figures or well-known personalities. These films aim to encapsulate the essence of a person's life journey, incorporating fictionalized elements to create a compelling cinematic experience. This artistic license may involve altering the chronology of events, amalgamating characters, or employing creative liberties to heighten dramatic effect. Unlike documentaries, which emphasize objectivity, biopics embrace a more subjective approach, utilizing storytelling techniques to engage audiences emotionally while still drawing inspiration from actual life stories.

Biopics often incorporate fictionalized elements to enrich the narrative and provide a captivating cinematic experience. These adaptations may involve changes to the chronological order of events, merging characters, or employing creative liberties to intensify dramatic impact. On the other hand, documentaries have a primary focus on presenting factual information, evidence-based content, and a straightforward representation of real-world subjects. They cover a wide range of topics, including nature, history, social issues, and current events. Now, when considering musicals, particularly the subgenre of biopics within this category, they appear to deviate from the syntax typical of backstage musicals. In a musical biopic, a person creates music, gets it played and published, becomes famous, and then Hollywood produces their biography. This seems quite different from the love-arts syntax of Warner's backstage musicals.

While Altman suggests that the musical biopic retains characteristics from classical musicals, the author disagrees with dismissing this subgenre in favor of supposedly more worthy films. The enduring connection between the musical and the biopic is worth exploring further. When focusing on the musical genre, the legacy of musicals largely depends on the evolution of the musical biopic, which has largely displaced the classical-style musical in the post-studio era. Deciding where to commence and conclude a biopic poses one of the most challenging aspects in the writing process. Instead of attempting to cover an entire life span, acclaimed filmmaker Danny Boyle author of

Books such as: *HiBrow: Classic British Cinema* (2018), *The Filmmakers Filmlovers Survival Trivia Cookbook* (1984) suggests that effective biopics focus on specific phases or elements, thereby creating a more concentrated narrative. Writers must also contemplate the role their subject plays within the larger storytelling framework. Following the completion of the writing phase, a contentious aspect emerges: casting. Selecting actors for a biopic is intricate, as the audience often holds preconceived notions about the physical appearance and behavior of the public figure. Achieving a delicate balance between capturing the subject's likeness and demeanor without resorting to mere impersonation becomes paramount for both directors and actors. Similar to the writing process, shooting a biopic demands meticulous research and a delicate balance between factual accuracy and dramatic representation. Directors may opt for either artistic license or faithful documentation, influencing the overall aesthetic of the film. Notable examples like David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia" and Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" showcase how cinematic spectacle can elevate storytelling, creating a sense of grandeur in portraying historical figures. The richness of character details can be derived from extensive visual research. It is essential to recognize that there is no singular mold for a biopic; the genre can range from groundbreaking to formulaic, shaped both by the subject's life and the filmmaker's unique vision.⁴

⁴ "Are Biopics Good Cinema? A Guide to Writing and Directing Biopics." *YouTube*, uploaded by Studio Binder, 13 Nov. 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Uhw-O_QywA&ab_channel=StudioBinder. Accessed 02 November 2023.

1.2 Contemporary perspectives on biographical cinema: a survey of recent scholarly works

In the realm of scholarly exploration into the world of biopics, several eminent authors have paved the way for a nuanced understanding of this captivating genre. George F. Custen, a notable authority on film studies, has delved into the intricacies of biographical portrayals on the silver screen. His seminal work, "Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History", challenges us to reconsider the ways in which cinema shapes our collective understanding of real-life narratives. John C. Tibbetts, another distinguished scholar in the field, has contributed significantly to the discourse surrounding biopics. Through his insightful analyses and writings, such as "The American Theatrical Film: Stages in Development", Tibbetts offers a comprehensive examination of the evolution of biographical films and their cultural significance. Rick Altman, a respected figure in film and media studies, has added depth to the exploration of genres, including biopics. His work, "Film/Genre", provides a broader perspective on how genres, including biopics, are constructed and understood within the cinematic landscape. These scholars, among others, have offered invaluable insights into the complexities of biographical storytelling on both the academic and popular fronts. As we delve into this chapter, we will draw upon their contributions to shed light on the critical discussions surrounding biopics and the rich tapestry of literature and research dedicated to this fascinating genre.

During the Hollywood studio era from 1930 to 1960, many biopics were produced, shaping the public's understanding of important figures and historical events. Films became a significant source of information. The impact of movies on people's perspectives was profound, as exposure to filmic portrayals influenced their views over a lifetime. This cinematic influence, as suggested by Custen and Tibbetts, highlights the increasing dominance of visual histories, like those in film, TV, and print, over written discourse for historical representation. Tibbetts argues that these visual histories are becoming more influential. While biopics were marketed as accessible history, their primary role was entertainment, sparking interest and motivating audiences to delve deeper into research. Even though a number of "bio-features" were released in the silent era, during the studio era many Americans' "views of the world had been shaped, in part, by a lifetime (and not merely a single) exposure to filmic representations of powerful individuals and the roles they played in history", leading the biopic to play a powerful part in creating and sustaining public history. His quote suggests that during the Hollywood studio era (1930-1960), biopics played a significant role in shaping the perspectives and understanding of the American public. The statement emphasizes that people's views of the world were influenced not just by individual exposures but by a lifetime of encountering filmic representations of influential individuals and their roles in history. In essence, biopics were powerful tools in shaping and perpetuating public perceptions of historical events and

prominent figures.⁵

Sometimes obstacles to portraying a biopic life could come from forces outside the producing studio. This occurred with Fox's film on the life of Stephen Foster, *Swanee River*. After Fledda Hopper had suggested, in her column of 4 September 1939, published in the *Washington Post* and other papers carrying her by line, that the film would portray Foster as "inebriated in nearly every scene" letters lamenting this possible denigration of Foster poured into Fox from shocked educators and sundry Stephen Foster societies. Historical films, biopics, and written texts often undergo dramatization primarily for entertainment purposes and to maintain audience interest. The success of Hollywood's historical films like *Braveheart* (1995) and *Glory* (1989) is attributed to the incorporation of fabricated elements for entertainment value, as audiences tend to lose interest if the dramatic presentation lacks compelling elements. While biographical films aim for entertainment, they cannot deviate too far from the truth, as excessive creative liberties may draw criticism from critics, leading to the classification of the film as a 'biofantasy'. To appear accurate, a successful biopic must connect with other sources like magazines, television, the internet, or written accounts about the individual presented. Striking a balance between entertainment and realism is crucial for a biopic's success, as Freeman suggests that understanding history imaginatively is key to appreciating the genre. The musical biopic, a subtype of the backstage musical, focuses on entertainers' life stories, excluding those with fictional protagonists. Evaluations by Altman and Tibbetts vary regarding the classical musical biopic's value.⁶

Altman criticizes the tendency of the musical biopic to integrate the process of music-making into broader romantic narratives, often sacrificing the truthful portrayal of the entertainer's life. He notes how biographical events are sometimes overlooked to align with the conventions of the show musical, emphasizing that making music should not be reduced solely to a means of livelihood but should be seen as a form of artistic inspiration and expression. Despite this breezy approach to historical facts, some critics, including John C. Tibbetts, recognize the genre's value. Tibbetts cites the Chopin biopic "A Song to Remember" (1945) as an example, appreciating its effective drama even with distortions and exaggerations. He highlights a scene that provokes disagreement among viewers due to historical inaccuracies but also inspires others through its dynamic portrayal of perseverance and performance. The film's lackadaisical approach to historical and biographical

⁵ Spirou, Penelope. *The Musical Biopic: Representing the Lives of Music Artists in 21st Century Cinema* (PhD Dissertation), Macquarie University, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.25949/19432907.v1>.

⁶ Schlotterbeck, Jesse K. *The Popular Musical Biopic in the Post-Studio Era: Four Approaches to an Overlooked Film Genre* (PhD Dissertation), University of Iowa, 2010, <https://iro.uiowa.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-popular-musical-biopic-in-the/9983776981702771>.

accuracy stirred controversy among commentators. The penultimate sequence, portraying Chopin embarking on a suicidal concert tour to aid Polish freedom fighters, was particularly notorious for being wholly fabricated. This sequence depicted Chopin's disease-ravaged state, hunched over the piano, sweating profusely, and labouring on with increasing frenzy until a sudden spasm caused a spot of blood to splatter onto the keyboard. This Technicolor blood moment became memorable, earning the film a status of high kitsch. Tibbetts' chapter on the film addresses a common critique of musical biopics, emphasizing that these Hollywood films often prioritize conventional narratives over the essence of the music itself.⁷

Richard Nixon, the former U.S. president, expressed a preference for Hollywood movies, a sentiment conflicting with his past critique of media influence. As the Vietnam War escalated, Nixon, known for challenging media ideology, sought reassurance by watching the 1970 biopic "Patton" in the White House, highlighting a paradox in relying on mediated images.⁸

The creation of a highly conventionalized conception of fame is one way this integration takes place. These films establish a pattern of narrative that is constrained in its historical settings, selective in its attention to profession, and differentiating in the roles it assigns to gender. The strategic use of star images by the studios in crafting the biographies of famous people is another way in which the Hollywood view of history is integrated. Author examines these issues by examining the patterns produced by all Hollywood biopics made during the studio era, 1927–1960. In this part of the book author discusses how biographical films, commonly known as biopics, tend to present a particular, somewhat simplified perspective on historical events and individuals. It suggests that these films often weave together different episodes from selected individuals' lives, shaping a narrative that aligns with a conventionalized "Hollywood view of history." This view of history is characterized by selective attention to a person's profession, gender-based roles, and limited exploration of historical contexts.⁹

Drawing on the lengthy legacy of biographical writing, historical reenactments of the lives of notable public individuals have been used in film since the silent period to convey history. One could contend that, in comparison to professional historians documenting the subject's life work,

⁷ Schlotterbeck, Jesse K. *The Popular Musical Biopic in the Post-Studio Era: Four Approaches to an Overlooked Film Genre (PhD Dissertation)*, University of Iowa, 2010, <https://iro.uiowa.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-popular-musical-biopic-in-the/9983776981702771>.

⁸ Rosenthal, Alan. *Why Docudrama? Fast-Fiction on Film and TV*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

⁹ Rosenthal, Alan. *Why Docudrama? Fast-Fiction on Film and TV*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

film biographies are more intimate, vivid, and emotive. To elaborate, the medium in which a biography is understood and the audience it targets are both influenced by its form. According to Marcia Landy, the biopic is polyphonic because it incorporates knowledge that isn't entirely coherent. As a result, films are more readable by viewers to whom textual biographies are inaccessible. A two-hour dialogue-filled movie has only about ten to twenty single-spaced pages of paper, according to Robert B. Toplin, who argues that film cannot replace written history because of its lack of information. Film, therefore, is unable to match the length of historical records, which are frequently hundreds of pages. Additionally, Ian Inglis says that:

“However meticulously researched, the numerous and isolated events of a person’s life may not easily lend themselves to a two-hour treatment which follows a linear sense of time and presents a plausible sequence of events within an attractive and accessible framework.”

The biopic's popularity among audiences has prompted some historians to scrutinize cinema and question its reliability. Recent inquiries by historians delve into the accuracy of historical film portrayals due to their significant impact on audiences. In this academic discourse, Robert A. Rosenstone asserts that a transformation occurs in the understanding of the past when moving from written pages to the screen. Historian David Herlihy contends that films are illusions and cannot stand alone as independent statements about the past. Toplin adds that motion pictures lack the capacity for comprehensive, definitive studies and filmmakers recognize the impracticality of covering a topic's full scope. According to Herlihy and Toplin, films can only be considered statements about the past when aligned with or supported by written evidence. Although Herlihy acknowledges bias and flaws in historical films, he overlooks the parallel occurrence in written histories. It is essential to recognize that both films and written texts are shaped by the perspectives of their creators, who selectively include historical elements they find fitting or functional for their work. Herlihy's acknowledgment of bias in historical films does not extend to the acknowledgment that similar biases exist in written histories. Roland Barthes, who acknowledges inaccuracies in written historical texts, states that:

“Text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning... but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.”

Fabrication is a significant concern among historians when it comes to historical and biographical films. In written form, historians traditionally authored literature, but the advent of film allows virtually anyone with creative aspirations to produce biography and history through visual representation. This challenges the authority of historians. From another perspective, considering Barthes' theories on the "death of the author," historians may not wield authority over their text. Barthes argues that "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are

inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination". It is possible that Rosenstone and other historians do not acknowledge that understanding and interpreting the past based on a historical text is the task of the reader/viewer rather than the author/director. Hayden White, building on Barthes' ideas, recognizes that achieving the true recounting of history in any form is not feasible.¹⁰

Audiences perceive historical films as mirrors reflecting the broader community and cultural values prevalent during their creation. Consequently, the accuracy of the film should not be a primary concern for historians. Instead, emphasis should be placed on studying how audiences comprehend and interpret historical/biographical films, focusing on issues of spectatorship. It's worth noting that historians often adopt a moral perspective when approaching biopics, whereas this thesis delves into the aesthetic dimensions of these films.

The essay delves into the structure of popular movies and its impact on perception, cognition, and emotion. The author argues that storytelling holds cultural significance, and narrative formulas, honed over millennia, create a highly effective format for rapid processing of complex narratives. Through corpus analysis, the author identifies four acts in movies with optional subunits, turning points, and plot points. Twelve studies reveal normative aspects in shot durations, transitions, scale, motion, luminance, character introduction, and distributions of conversations, music, action shots, and scene transitions, reducing to five correlated stylistic dimensions. The conclusion asserts that movie narratives share a structure with narratives in other domains, while having unique runtime constraints, cadences, and constructions.

In his essay "Narrative theory and the dynamics of popular movies" James E. Cutting emphasizes that popular movies are essentially narratives. Narratology, the study of stories and their structure, affects perception, cognition, and emotion. Various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have explored narrative structure, including psychologists who have studied story grammars, discourse scripts, and schemata.

Hollywood cinema's fundamental principle is to present a narrative chain that is easily followed by spectators. Its strength lies in enabling skilled scriptwriters, directors, and creators to weave an intricate web of character, event, time, and space that appears transparently obvious. The author analyses 150 movies spanning 75 years to explore their psychological impact. The questions posed start with structural analysis and extend to psychological implications: What characterizes the average film? How does its presentational structure influence us? Could this structure offer insights into our engagement? In conclusion, popular movies capture attention due to the cultural significance of storytelling. Refined narrative formulas are prevalent across various arts, and

¹⁰ Spirou, Penelope. *The Musical Biopic: Representing the Lives of Music Artists in 21st Century Cinema (PhD Dissertation)*, Macquarie University, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.25949/19432907.v1>.

narrative structure exploration spans disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Hollywood cinema's basic principle ensures easy spectator comprehension, and while movie narratives share a structure with other domains, they have unique runtime constraints inherent to the medium.¹¹

Charlotte Greenspan, in her article delves into the evolution and impact of biographical films, known as biopics, in Hollywood from 1927 to 1960. George F. Custen, the author, highlights the challenge of defining the genre and stresses the influential role of studios, producers, and directors in shaping biopics. Custen argues that historical research took a backseat, with more emphasis on ensuring visual accuracy rather than factual authenticity. The article explores the decision-making process in creating biopics, emphasizing the influence of the personas of stars under studio employment. It also examines the recurring patterns in narrative structure, such as the importance of a romantic interest, pivotal "big-break" scenes, and trial scenes. Custen's scholarly approach leans towards statistical and content analysis, focusing on the collective body of biopics rather than individual films. Despite Custen's interest in statistical analysis, the article points out inconsistencies in data interpretation, such as conflicting statements about the rarity of death in biopics. Additionally, a factual error is noted concerning biographical films where real individuals play themselves, with an example involving Audie Murphy. The article concludes with Custen's assertion that the glory days of film biography are past, suggesting a decline in the genre since the 1960s. However, the article challenges this perspective, noting that the biopic genre remains vibrant and relevant today, engaging talented filmmakers and sparking public discussion. Overall, Custen's work, titled "Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History," serves as a significant starting point for the study of biopics, with an expectation for further exploration of the genre review of Custen's book, made a summary of Custen's work and criticized some points.¹²

Simone Varriale in his article "Rocking the Jazz Biopic: Changing Images of African American Musicians in Hollywood Biographical Films" discusses the changing representation of African American musicians in Hollywood biographical films, from 1970s jazz biopics to more recent films on rock, hip hop, and rhythm 'n' blues acts. The author analyses how 1970s music biopics constructed a new narrative about race and popularity, while recent films like *Tina* (1993), *Ray* (2004), and *Notorious* (2009) have subtly modified racialized distinctions of former biopics. The shift from jazz to other music genres is related to significant changes in biopics' narratives and

¹¹ Cutting, James E. "Narrative Theory and the Dynamics of Popular Movies." *Psychon Bull*, 23 Dec. 2016, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27142769/>. Accessed 13 December 2023.

¹² Greenspan, Charlotte. "Review of 'Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History' by George F. Custen." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1994, pp. 47-49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688046>. Accessed 17 October 2023.

visual strategies. However, the author argues that music biopics still deal with a distinctive notion of "the popular," framing blackness as otherness and whiteness as just "human nature." The article examines music biopics as a peculiar kind of historical narrative about American popular music that constructs a certain image of "the popular." The author argues that such a narrative negotiates two different definitions of the popular: popular as mass, industrially produced culture, and popular as unmediated cultural expression of a "folk" community. The term negotiation is used to indicate that these definitions are blended together in a peculiar way by music biopics. The article also discusses how this narrative has historically been associated with white musicians and how it has been reshaped in films about black musicians. The author draws on Richard Dyer's study of "whiteness" to better understand this new narrative model. Additionally, the article shows the extent to which films produced since the 1990s problematize Krin Gabbard's distinction between "white" and "black" biopics. Such a classification might no longer be useful to understand the subtle ways in which more recent films construct a racialized narrative. Despite changes in representation over time, the author argues that music biopics still frame blackness as otherness within cinematic mythology historically reserved for white subjects.

1.3 The theoretical framework: theories used in the analysis of the two movies

Movies, as a popular form of entertainment, essentially present narratives — structured stories that significantly influence our perception, cognition, and emotions. The study of these narratives falls within the realm of narratology, delving into the analysis of story structure and its profound impact on our lived experiences. Everyday anecdotes shared amongst individuals serve as the reconstructed expressions of our encounters, evolving into the building blocks of our remembered lives. Furthermore, narratives, finely crafted, manifest as the primary content in various art forms such as theater, literature, film, poetry, art, and dance, with occasional presence in music. The comprehension of narrative structure extends its influence across diverse disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Psychologists, for instance, have delved into the exploration of story grammars (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975) and related concepts, including discourse (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978), scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977), and schemata (Brewer, 1985). The latter two concepts are particularly significant as they highlight that, as we mature and accumulate knowledge about the functioning of the social world, we form expectations about how events should unfold. These expectations, grounded in scripts and schemata, substantially ease comprehension in the face of a complex reality. Within the realm of movies, the archetypal form of these cognitive frameworks is represented by the concept of genre. The fabula encompasses the entirety of a story, encompassing its semantic, chronological, and causal intricacies. Contrary to prevailing film and literary theories, I posit the existence of two distinct fabulas. The initial fabula exists within the collective consciousness of the storytellers, scriptwriters, directors, actors, cinematographers, editors, and others. This first fabula forms a socially shared but not entirely homogenous complex network of ideas, distributed among the collaborative minds of the creative team. Upon the narrative's delivery, a condensed yet recognizable second fabula takes shape within the minds of the story consumers. For the creators, the initial fabula represents a multifaceted collective construct, while for the audience, the second fabula can be conceptualized as a mental model (Johnson-Laird, 1983) or, more aptly, as an interconnected network of situation models (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). Furthermore, its construction may involve the application of a structure-building framework (Gernsbacher, 1995) or various other methodologies (see McNamara & Magliano, 2009 for a comprehensive review). The initial fabula possesses dimensional complexity, to the extent that some might deem it shapeless (Pier, 2003, p. 86n). It undergoes extrusion through a temporal and sequential bottleneck of physical media to give rise to the syuzhet. However, the syuzhet does not necessarily follow a chronological order in presenting the narrative. Commonly found in both film and literature are techniques like flashbacks, flashes forward, and parallel action, where multiple narrative threads intertwine. According to Shklovsky (Schmid, 2010, p. 178), the essence of storytelling lies in the transformation of the fabula into the syuzhet. While

the fabula may hold potential interest, irony, or fantasy, it is inherently devoid of artistry.¹³ On her part, the observer constructs a second fabula, essentially engaging in confabulation, through the processing of the syuzhet. As suggested by Bordwell (1985, p. 52): "The syuzhet... is the dramaturgy of the fiction film, the organized set of cues prompting us to infer and assemble story information." The focus here is not on what the spectator constructs in their mind, as it will vary with each story and individual. Instead, the interest lies in the organization of the surface form of movies, their "artfulness," and how that may contribute to the spectator's comprehension and enhance their aesthetic experience. The syuzhet, or the narration, includes cues and prompts that manifest in a specific film style, which encompasses the filmmakers' choices of cinematic devices. Film style encompasses every facet of filmmaking craft, including editing, staging, lighting, sound, framing, focus, color, and various other elements. Cutting shares his thoughts on this matter and he writes this in his research:

"How movies are made, of course, involves millions of dollars, thousands of people, and some of the most advanced digital technology in the world—none of which is relevant in this context. I am interested in the general surface form of movies, not how they got that way. There is also a debate in the humanities literature about which comes first, the fabula or the syuzhet (Culler, 1981, pp. 170–172; Derrida, 1979). My view is that there are two fabulas, one that precedes the syuzhet (in the storyteller) and one that follows it (in the story consumer)".¹⁴

A crucial consideration involves determining the overall visual aesthetic of the film. This aesthetic is shaped through collaboration with the director, who provides a visual interpretation of the script. Input is also received through interactions with the production designer, set designers, and costume designers. Once a consensus is reached on the overall look, the cinematographer is tasked with implementing and interpreting these visual requirements from scene to scene.

A film's visual style draws from various external sources beyond the realm of film itself and is influenced by contemporary conventions and trends. For instance, movies like *Dick Tracy* unmistakably adopt the visual elements found in comic books. Paintings often serve as inspiration for the film's visual concept, as seen in the use of Edward Hopper's style in *Pennies from Heaven*, Caravaggio's chiaroscuro technique in the biographical film *Caravaggio*, or the emulation of van Gogh's aesthetic in Robert Altman's *Vincent and Theo*. Regarding film style conventions, the incorporation of film noir techniques and aesthetics in *Blade Runner* can be traced back to earlier

¹³ A useful distinction in this context is an old one to film. It comes from the Russian formalists (e.g., Shklovsky, 1925/1990) — the syuzhet and the fabula (see also Bal, 1985; Bordwell, 1985). These terms have numerous parallels.

¹⁴ Cutting, James E. "Narrative Theory and the Dynamics of Popular Movies." *Psychon Bull*, 23 Dec. 2016, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27142769/> Accessed 13 December 2023.

black-and-white noir films. However, the prevalence of backlit smoke in *Blade Runner* reflects a broader "smoke" trend during the late 1970s and 1980s, observable in films like *A Man Called Horse* and *Flashdance*, as well as numerous music videos. Mood is crafted by orchestrating the interplay of light and shadow, with control exerted through the manipulation of facial features and subject-to-background ratios. The cinematographer is responsible for shaping the mood and eliciting emotional responses through their imagery. This can be achieved both on a comprehensive level and tailored to the unique requirements of each scene, adapting to the specific needs of the production. The significance of lighting in a film extends to profound impacts on its thematic layers. Take, for instance, the scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* where the spaceship descends and the alien makes an appearance. The entire scene is enveloped in an ethereal glow and an aura of "otherworldliness," a crucial thematic element. Cinematographers, through deliberate lighting choices, can highlight characters, objects, and various details, thereby enriching the overall meaning of the film.¹⁵

The final chapter of "*The Biopic in the Contemporary Film Culture*"¹⁶ is specifically devoted to the musical biopic "Gainsbourg." Until recently, the utilization of puppets and mannequins in mainstream cinema was primarily confined to animatronics within the realms of fantasy and science fiction genres, notably exemplified by the creative works of Terry Gilliam, Tim Burton, and Guillermo del Toro. However, the incorporation of animatronic puppet figures in the musical biopic "*Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)* (2010)" marks a significant departure and innovation. This departure is a radical shift away from the genre's foundation in reenactment and realism, shedding light on the biopic's underground connections to performativity, masquerade, and metamorphosis.

Joann Sfar, the film's director, has emphasized puppetry as a primary interest and starting point. He expressed a desire to create a "disturbing" monster that, beyond inducing fear, could convey a range of emotions, dance with a woman, and express pain, longing, and desire. In contrast, the human character, Serge Gainsbourg, is depicted as unchanging and lacking a character arc, merely traversing through life until old age. The film introduces a fresh perspective on the concept of a heroic or monumental life, portraying key moments and defining episodes in Gainsbourg's life as performances prompted by his puppet avatar. The puppet and the human character, the avatar and the biographical figure, share equal dramatic significance. The film explores the tension between masquerade and authenticity, ventriloquism, and the inner voice of the character. The biographical character is presented as a kind of somnambulist activated by external energies. The subtitle "heroic

¹⁵ Viera, John D. and Viera, Maria. *Lighting for Film and Electronic Cinematography*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993.

¹⁶ Brown, Tom and Ben, Vidal. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*. Routledge, 2013.

life" in the French release thus ironically challenges the genre, contradicting the emphasis on apotheosis and fulfillment with the film's powerful assertion of the dualism and "otherness" of the artistic life. The film exposes the concept of the puppet as an emotionally charged and complex entity, representing a fragment of memory or an unfinished narrative. It unveils the puppet's profound connections to the character's childhood and, subsequently, to his intricate portrayal of self, nation, and ethnicity. The self-immolation of La Gueule, rich with historical echoes, encapsulates the themes of sacrifice and Promethean rebellion. This scene serves as a dramatic portrayal, highlighting the symbolic potency of fire as both a medium of creation and destruction. The ideas drawn from various literary sources, including books, articles, and research, serve as analytical tools in scrutinizing the selected biopics that constitute the focal point of my thesis discussion, namely "Bessie" and "Miles Ahead." Subsequent chapters will delve into a more comprehensive analysis, particularly concentrating on narrative style, visual elements, symbolism, and various other facets commonly shared among contemporary biopics.

CHAPTER TWO

BESSIE SMITH ON FILM: THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS

2.0 Introduction

Jazz, an art form celebrated for its remarkable fusion of improvisation and emotional depth, has consistently produced legendary musicians whose contributions transcend their own time. Among these illustrious figures, Bessie Smith stands as an *empress of the blues*, her soul-stirring voice resonating with audiences across the ages. Her indomitable spirit, combined with an unwavering dedication to her craft, not only left an indelible mark on the world of music but also became a beacon of inspiration. Bessie's legacy serves as a testament to her enduring influence on musicians and her role as a cultural icon. Beyond her vocal talents, she functioned as a mirror reflecting her era's profound social and cultural shifts. Through her songs, she encapsulated the struggles and triumphs of the African-American community in the early 20th century, making her an emblem of resilience and a compelling voice for a generation¹⁷. Although her actual birthday is still unknown, historical narratives and music specialists mostly indicate 1894. Bessie grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, surrounded by a rich tapestry of American gospel and folk music that had developed over two centuries. Bessie was raised in this cultural environment and grew up hearing the lively sounds of gospel music and old-time spirituals reverberating through the Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal churches in and around Chattanooga. Bessie's entry into the world of popular music developed within this musical milieu as a logical and natural continuation. All around her, thousands of Black people's lives were difficult and depressing due to poverty, broken relationships, and unemployment. However, like Rainey, Alberta Hunter, and Billie Holliday, Bessie made her artistic expression center around her experience of this broken world. Bessie gained recognition locally before being spotted by renowned pianist and composer Clarence Williams. She started recording some of the first blues standards over the course of the following few years. At times, she would detest using a microphone during live performances since she thought her lively demeanor and rich voice would be enough to convey her message over the footlights. She became an influential creative force at Columbia Records, where she recorded over a hundred songs still considered blues standards today. Furthermore, her performance in the 1929 short film *St. Louis Blues* was so raw and poignant that it was taken out of theaters nationwide by industry censors. Watchdogs in the film business were alarmed by Bessie's moving portrayal of a troubled singer at a

¹⁷ *National Museum of African American History & Culture*. "Bessie Smith c. 1895-1937.", <https://nmaahc.si.edu/lgbtq/bessie-smith>. Accessed 22 November 2023.

time when the terrible status of racial relations in America was taboo.¹⁸As the resonant echoes of her commanding voice persist in serenading successive generations, perpetuating an everlasting allure, we commence a compelling cinematic exploration. This expedition aims to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of Bessie Smith's life and artistry, presented through the mesmerizing lens of the film. "Bessie," a film directed by Dee Rees and produced by HBO Films, tells the story of Bessie Smith, the "Empress of the Blues," and her incredible journey. Queen Latifah gives an excellent performance in this film, capturing the unwavering spirit of the late blues artist.¹⁹The story takes the spectator to the vibrant blues scene of the 1920s when Bessie Smith's love of music catapults her from the depths of the unknown to the pinnacle of global fame. The HBO official synopsis aptly summarizes the movie's central theme: "In defiance of personal tribulations, Bessie Smith emerges as one of the most triumphant and influential musical artists of the 20th century."²⁰With captivating visuals and intimate moments, this film delves into the complexities of Bessie Smith's personal life, her experiences as a pioneering woman in the male-dominated music industry, and the profound impact of her music on the course of history. Through the lens of this film, viewers gain a unique and profound insight into the woman behind the legend. It provides an opportunity to deeply appreciate the lasting resonance of Bessie Smith's powerful voice and her pivotal role in shaping the dynamic landscape of jazz and blues. Her influence echoes through the corridors of time, reminding us of her remarkable contribution to the rich tapestry of American music, while challenging societal norms and leaving a legacy that continues to inspire generations. Bessie Smith's enduring legacy not only encompasses her musical prowess but also her significant contributions to social change. Her songs were more than melodies; they were anthems of empowerment, resonating with marginalized communities and pushing boundaries that ultimately helped pave the way for future generations of artists.

This chapter focuses on how the 2015 HBO production of Bessie Smith is portrayed in the movies. By offering a detailed examination of the film's complexities, paying close attention to its thematic components and subtle cinematic touches, and using a thorough analysis, dissecting the layers of creative expression and historical portrayal contained in the HBO adaptation of Bessie Smith's life and legacy. Released nearly a century after her prime, this film stands as both a homage to Bessie Smith's enduring legacy and a testament to the lasting power of jazz and the cinematic art of storytelling. As we traverse the rich cinematic landscape of these documentaries, our objective is to

¹⁸ Alexander, Amy L. *Fifty Black Women Who Changed America*. Carol Publishing Group, 1999.

¹⁹ *Rotten Tomatoes*. "Bessie (2015).", https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/bessie_2015. Accessed 18 November 2023.

²⁰ HBO. "Bessie.", <https://www.hbo.com/movies/bessie>. Accessed 07 October 2023.

meticulously dissect and explore the intricate tapestry of visual and auditory elements that converge to breathe life into Bessie Smith's remarkable story on the screen. Through critical analysis, we seek to unravel the nuances of narrative style, visual aesthetics, musical accompaniment, and the artistic interpretation that collectively shape our profound understanding of this influential artist. Beyond merely exploring the craftsmanship behind the documentaries, our journey delves deep into the cultural and historical significance embedded within these portrayals. We embark on a quest to understand how these documentaries navigate the complexities of race, gender, and the socio-cultural backdrop of Bessie Smith's era. These elements provide a lens through which we can better comprehend the challenges she faced and the hurdles she overcame, ultimately contributing to her enduring legacy. Furthermore, we ponder the contemporary relevance of these documentaries, as they continue to resonate with audiences today. These films not only transport us to the early 20th century but also act as mirrors reflecting the ongoing struggles and triumphs in our modern society. Exploring how Bessie Smith's story remains relevant and poignant in the 21st century adds an extra layer of depth to our cinematic and historical journey.

2.1 Narrative Style of the Film

The "*Bessie*" story is told through a subtle combination of flashbacks and linear storytelling. With this method, viewers can travel through Bessie's turbulent existence, from her formative years in a small Southern town to her rapid ascent in the music industry. The narrative approach of the movie keeps us interested by revealing key events that influenced her profession and personality. Occasionally, these flashbacks may break the narrative extensively and make it challenging to draw connections. In '*Bessie*,' the film employs a narrative technique that diverges from a conventional chronological order. As Schmid (2010) contends, various storytelling methods such as flashbacks, flashes forward, and parallel action are prevalent in both film and literature. The syuzhet of '*Bessie*' intricately weaves together multiple narrative threads, employing flashback sequences that deviate from a linear progression. This non-linear approach, as discussed by Shklovsky (Schmid, 2010, p. 178), challenges traditional storytelling conventions, offering a unique lens through which the audience experiences Bessie Smith's life. These deliberate narrative choices not only shape the cinematic structure of the biopic but also contribute to a nuanced portrayal of the complexities within Bessie Smith's narrative, allowing for a more profound exploration of her experiences and their impact on her legacy. Dee Rees who is the director of the film used a fresh technique to show Bessie Smith's inner world and personal perspective, taking cues from the motherless child character envisioned by Jamaica Kincaid in her book "*The Autobiography of My Mother*" (199). Bessie's many cravings are shown in the film as unstoppable, marked by an inability to end oneself, sporadic acts of self-destruction, and complex fulfillment. The origins of these insatiable cravings are periodically revealed in flashbacks that depict the lack of mother guidance and familial hardships of her early years, as represented by her accusing sister Viola (played by Khandi Alexander).²¹For most of "*Bessie*," the main character challenges authority figures, patriarchy, and the establishment of white men. We are repeatedly informed of a few things from the outset of "*Bessie*": Bessie's recollections of her mother, whom she lost when she was a youngster, plagued her throughout her life. Bessie engaged in lesbian liaisons. Director of the movie Dee Rees expressed her ideas of Bessie's sexuality in the movie and in the real life:

"I wanted to present her sexuality in a very matter-of-fact light," the artist explained. "You know, it's not scandalized; it's like she loves who she loves. If you look to her song lyrics, she has lyrics that refer to homosexuality. It's an unapologetic celebration of love in all its forms. If you delve into the verses, you'll find poignant expressions of a genuine experience."

The artist continued, drawing inspiration from legendary figures like Ma Rainey and Lucille Bogan.

²¹ Smith, Judith E. "Bessie Film Review.", *Journal of American History*, vol. 1013, No. 3, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav500>. Accessed 22 October 2023.

"If you look at Ma Rainey, she, too, has lyrics that resonate with the experiences of gay people. Similarly, [blues singer] Lucille Bogan's songs provide a raw and authentic glimpse into a diverse range of human connections. So, as an artist, I find solace in these women's lyrics, using them as a source of authenticity for the human experience."

"As an artist, you don't sing about things you don't see. You don't make things up completely. It's about capturing the essence of real life. These extraordinary women were not just performers; they were chroniclers of their time, writing what they saw and experienced, paving the way for a more inclusive and accepting narrative through their art."²²

Bessie enjoyed drinking. Bessie had an angry disposition. Bessie was fiercely independent, yet her unusual singing and how it got to be that way are the key aspects of her. Moreover, those are very occasionally discussed. She is an emancipated woman who can make money. Smith, referred to as the "Empress of the Blues" during her lifetime, was a fearless, extremely self-assured musician whose work frequently despised the use of a microphone and reflected the disappointments and aspirations of an entire generation of Black Americans²³. The movie does not shed enough light on this aspect and focuses more on showing us episodic subtractions of her life. In the opening scene, we see Bessie on the stage, and her audience looks pretty content with her performance. However, she cannot be in the moment, presumably she is hearing the haunting voices of her sister from her childhood memories, which we see a lot during the movie. Establishing a conflict that will drive the narrative forward. We see Bessie in a beautiful white costume with a white feather hat, typical of the 1920s. This gives us a perfect visual representation of the era. We also see the paparazzi following her with their big press cameras. All these small details, such as cameras or hats, set the tone for the visual setting and transport us to the 20s. She rushes to her car. The opening scene is significant for the movie as it sets the tone for the whole movie. In the first scene, we are immediately introduced to the musical world of Bessie, which can be a little clue for us about the movie's progression. This provides a strong foundation for understanding how the film engages viewers from the beginning and sets the stage for the following storytelling.

²² NPR. "In HBO's 'Bessie,' Queen Latifah Stars As Empress Of The Blues." 16 May 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/16/406453568/in-hbos-bessie-queen-latifah-stars-as-empress-of-the-blues>. Accessed on 05 November 2023.

²³ "Blues music." *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/blues-music>. Accessed 03 December 2023.

2.2 Visual Aesthetics of the film and Lack of Archival Footage

In the HBO film "Bessie," the absence of any video or audio recordings of the artist herself presents a unique challenge. Despite this limitation, one striking element of the visual storytelling in the movie is the meticulous recreation of the artist's surroundings. Unlike many biographical films that rely on historical video footage, "Bessie" must capture the essence of an artist whose performances are legendary but only preserved in audio recordings and images. The film faces the particular challenge of depicting Bessie Smith's life without authentic voiceovers or footage. While it successfully represents her era, including the smoky jazz clubs of the 1920s and the vibrant atmosphere of her performances, it must also grapple with her absence. This artistic choice serves as a prime example of the narrative style's mastery of visual storytelling. Despite the absence of actual recordings, "Bessie" uses a remarkable vocal performance by Queen Latifah, who conveys the unfiltered emotion and power of Bessie's voice, providing viewers with a realistic audio experience. This decision goes beyond the constraints imposed by the lack of footage and successfully conveys the aesthetics and ambiance of Bessie Smith's era, allowing audiences to deeply connect with her music and legacy. The film's production team demonstrates exceptional attention to historical accuracy by meticulously recreating Bessie Smith's performance locations, costumes, and overall ambiance. This dedication to historical facts ensures that viewers are transported to the very heart of her era. A sensory experience, vital to the film's narrative style, is thoughtfully crafted through the vivid details. The glittering gowns adorning the performers, the thick and atmospheric smoky haze that envelops the stage, and the passionate reactions of the spectators all contribute to an immersive experience that captures the essence of the 1920s jazz scene. In the absence of actual audio recordings of Bessie Smith, the film relies on the outstanding vocal performance of Queen Latifah. Her singing not only compensates for the lack of authentic audio but also manages to convey the soul and spirit of Bessie Smith. Latifah's powerful rendition brings Bessie's music to life, resonating with unfiltered emotion and potency. In doing so, it provides viewers with a remarkably realistic audio experience, evoking the raw intensity that characterized Bessie's voice and her impact on her audience. The film's production team recreates Bessie Smith's performances' locations, outfits, and ambiance with great regard to historical facts. A sensory experience essential to the film's narrative style is created by the glittering gowns adorning the performers, the smoky haze covering the stage, and the fervent reactions of the spectators. The movie uses a spectacular vocal performance by Queen Latifah, who conveys the soul and spirit of Bessie Smith through her potent singing to make up for the lack of actual audio recordings. Despite the absence of the actual recordings, Latifah's interpretation captures the unfiltered emotion and power of Bessie's voice, giving viewers a realistic audio experience. In short, "*Bessie*" shows the capacity of visual narrative to transcend the constraints imposed by the lack of authentic audiovisual

content and convey the aesthetics and ambiance of a period. It demonstrates the filmmakers' commitment to faithfully portraying Bessie Smith's environment and enables audiences to identify with her music and legacy profoundly. It took more than 20 years to make this movie²⁴. Without actual footage, the film makes inventive use of visual storytelling techniques to immerse viewers in Bessie Smith's life and music and create a relationship that transcends temporal space and technological barriers. The absence of authentic video or recordings of Bessie Smith's voice in the HBO film "*Bessie*" provides a particular problem for the filmmakers. Bessie Smith made an uncommon cameo in the short film "*St. Louis Blues*". However, there is a significant omission in "*Bessie*" that the choice not to include this pre-existing footage in the plot. The existence of this footage prompts intriguing queries concerning the narrative decisions made by the producers. It serves as a reminder of the need for visual documentation of Bessie Smith and the difficulties in providing a thorough account of her life and artistic output. Despite these limitations, the lack of this video in the movie highlights the narrative style's dedication to creating an engaging and genuine visual narrative. The movie confirms its commitment to enveloping viewers in a meticulously created universe that evokes the spirit of Bessie Smith's era by choosing not to include the "*St. Louis Blues*" video. Instead of depending on this one piece of footage, the producers recreate the locations, outfits, and mood of Bessie's performances throughout the movie. This decision emphasizes the value of a seamless and immersive cinematic experience while showcasing the narrative style's skill in visual storytelling. "*Bessie*" immerses viewers in her world through compelling visual storytelling. It highlights how the narrative approach may link between the past and now in the lack of authentic audiovisual content, enabling people to have a solid connection to Bessie Smith's music and legacy.

In essence, "*Bessie*" is a cinematic tribute that honors both the immense artistic talent of Bessie Smith and the craft of cinematic storytelling. This film demonstrates its capacity to transcend historical boundaries, providing viewers with a profoundly intimate and evocative portrayal of a blues legend's life and music. By meticulously recreating the era and atmosphere, it invites the audience to step back in time and witness the brilliance of Bessie Smith in all her glory. The film artfully reconstructs the appearance and ambiance of the 1920s and 1930s, immersing viewers in an authentic experience through period-appropriate aesthetics. The camera work plays a pivotal role in this journey, seamlessly transporting viewers to Bessie Smith's age by adeptly capturing the aesthetic elements of that bygone era. From the era-specific clothing and architectural details to the carefully considered lighting and decor, every aspect is carefully crafted to recreate the time, allowing audiences to feel as if they are stepping into a historical photograph, witnessing the very

²⁴ Tallerico, Brian. "Review 'Bessie'." *RogerEbert.com*, 15 May 2015, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bessie-2015>. Accessed 13 October 2023.

essence of an era long past.

The cinematography uses dynamic camera angles throughout musical performances to put the viewer in the middle of the crowd or on the stage alongside Bessie. Close-ups of Queen Latifah as Bessie help the viewer experience the true power of her singing by capturing the intensity and emotion of her performances. The filmmakers expertly capture the mutually beneficial relationship between the artist and her audience, highlighting the viewers' significance to the story. Through the audience's emotions, the film successfully captures the emotional impact of Bessie Smith's music. The camera frequently sweeps across the faces of audience members throughout her live performances, exhibiting a range of emotions, from astonishment and appreciation to pure pleasure. These sincere reactions demonstrate the significant effect Bessie's music has had on her listeners. Close-ups and crowd shots are used in cinematography to entirely immerse viewers in the performance. By focusing on specific crowd members, the filmmakers help us relate to their reactions and feel we are part of the live audience. It's striking how often the story uses applause. The clapping in the film is cleverly timed to follow Bessie's victorious performances on stage. This serves as a visual and audible cue that connects the viewer's reaction with that of the live audience, increasing the emotional impact of her performances and their similarity. The audience's reactions operate as a reflection of Bessie's emotional journey. She feels her talent is validated, and her importance as a performer is reinforced when she receives resounding applause or sincere remarks. This dynamic emphasizes the performer and audience interaction, highlighting the mutually beneficial relationship at the core of live music. The audience's portrayal also captures Bessie Smith's day's social, political, and cultural milieu. Further enhancing the depiction of the time is the audience's diversity, attire, and relationships, which offer insights into the society standards and values of the 1920s and 1930s. In the crafting of the HBO film "Bessie," a pivotal element in overcoming the challenge of lacking authentic video or audio recordings of the legendary artist lies in the meticulous recreation of her surroundings. Collaborative efforts, led by the director's visual interpretation of the script, play a central role in determining the film's overall visual aesthetic. Input from production and costume designers further contributes to the authenticity, with a consensus reached on the era-specific look, including. Once the visual requirements are established, it becomes the cinematographer's task to implement and interpret these elements seamlessly from scene to scene. This collaborative process ensures a captivating visual narrative, transcending the constraints imposed by the absence of genuine audiovisual content. Noteworthy moments, such as Queen Latifah's remarkable vocal performance and the meticulous recreation of Bessie Smith's performance locations, underscore the film's commitment to creating an immersive experience that authentically captures the essence of her era. As illuminated in "Lighting for Film and Electronic Cinematography," all these elements collectively contribute to the film's overall visual aesthetics,

carefully curated through the director's intentional choices.

Overall, the film excels in capturing not only the audience's feelings, reactions, and participation but also the broader context of Bessie Smith's live concerts. The filmmakers skillfully immerse viewers in the world of this legendary artist by skillfully illustrating the symbiotic interaction between the artist and her observers. This representation goes beyond mere documentation; it serves as a compelling testament to the authenticity of her performances. Through skillful visual storytelling, the film magnificently showcases the enduring ability of Bessie's music to transcend temporal and geographical boundaries. It not only provides a glimpse into the artist's era but also underscores the timeless relevance and impact of her art. By transporting audiences to different moments in time and space, it reinforces the profound connection that exists between Bessie Smith's music and her listeners, solidifying her position as a truly iconic figure in the world of blues and jazz.

2.3 Intimate Moments of Bessie's Life

Another noteworthy aspect of the film is its ability to capture intimate moments in Bessie Smith's life. These scenes provide a window into her personal thoughts and feelings, including discussions about her earnings and her emotions with her girlfriend. One particular scene stands out in "Bessie" where Bessie Smith opts to use the phrase "I cares about you" instead of the more conventional "I love you." This artistic choice is laden with layers of significance that influence how Bessie's personality and connections are portrayed in the film. The decision to have Bessie Smith use the phrase "I cares about you" instead of the more typical "I love you" underscores the authenticity of her character. It aligns with the historical and cultural norms of her era, where displays of affection may have been more subdued or expressed differently. This choice sheds light on Bessie's nuanced character, hinting at a unique openness and closeness in her relationship, granting viewers deeper insight into her inner world. The use of this specific phrase maintains historical accuracy by reflecting the subtleties of same-sex relationships during that period, staying true to the historical context. In the early 20th century, professions of romantic love were often less overt, especially in relationships outside the conventional heterosexual framework. The filmmakers' commitment to this accurate portrayal adds depth and authenticity to the narrative. "I cares about you" may also resonate with contemporary audiences, evoking a sense of genuine emotion and devotion that transcends historical boundaries. This resonance makes Bessie's personality and relationships more relatable for modern viewers. "Bessie" thus presents a multifaceted portrait of Bessie Smith's character, her relationships, and the historical and cultural backdrop of her time by choosing the statement "I care about you" over "I love you." This scene enriches the emotional journey of the character, allowing the audience to engage with the complexities of her personal life and the authenticity of her persona.

Furthermore, the choice to use "I cares about you" instead of "I love you" in the film emphasizes the depth of Bessie Smith's character. It showcases her as a person of her time, a time when societal norms regarding relationships and expressions of love were distinct from modern standards. By adhering to these historical nuances, the film maintains its dedication to authenticity, and this choice goes a long way in portraying the complexities of her character. Bessie Smith's use of the phrase "I cares about you" within the context of her relationship offers a profound glimpse into her emotional world. It suggests a level of intimacy and emotional connection that may not be immediately apparent through more conventional expressions of love. It is as though she is inviting the viewer to explore the intricacies of her emotions and relationships, making her a more relatable and human character. This decision showcases the filmmakers' commitment to historical accuracy. It's a testament to their thorough research and attention to detail. The creators of "Bessie" strive to present an authentic representation of the past, which is particularly important when portraying a

historical figure like Bessie Smith. In this way, the film bridges the gap between the past and the present, making Bessie Smith and her relationships accessible and relatable to viewers of all backgrounds.

Additionally, the choice to use "I cares about you" reveals a fascinating of Bessie Smith's personality. It suggests that she was a person who marched to the beat of her own drum, unafraid to defy societal norms when it came to expressing her emotions. This unconventional choice of phrase underscores her individuality and highlights her unique way of relating to her girlfriend. It's important to note that Bessie Smith's use of "I cares about you" is not merely a linguistic peculiarity. It speaks volumes about her inner world, her emotional landscape, and her approach to relationships. This choice adds a layer of depth to her character, allowing viewers to connect with her on a more profound level. Moreover, the historical context of the early 20th century, when the film is set, is faithfully recreated by this choice. In an era where societal conventions and expectations shaped how individuals expressed their affections, Bessie Smith's unconventional phrase aligns with the period's authenticity. It offers a glimpse into the complexities of love and relationships in a time vastly different from today. The filmmakers' commitment to authenticity is commendable. They aim to provide viewers with an accurate portrayal of Bessie Smith's life and the world she inhabited. This dedication to historical accuracy enriches the storytelling and allows audiences to immerse themselves in the past, gaining a better understanding of the challenges and dynamics of Bessie's time.

In conclusion, the decision to use the phrase "I cares about you" in the film "Bessie" enriches the portrayal of Bessie Smith's character and her relationships. It aligns with historical accuracy, showcases her individuality, and bridges the past and present. This choice allows audiences to connect with her on a deeper level, emphasizing the enduring authenticity of her emotions and the timelessness of human connection. This particular scene in the film not only adds depth to Bessie's character but also serves as a poignant reminder of the universality of love and emotional expression. It speaks to the power of emotions that transcend time and culture, reminding us that the human experience of love remains a constant throughout history. In this way, "Bessie" manages to touch the hearts of both past and present audiences, connecting them through the language of genuine emotion and the enduring significance of human connections. The decision to use "I cares about you" becomes a symbol of the lasting impact of love and authenticity in storytelling and in life itself.

2.4 Symbolic Elements of the Movie

The blues genre, where trains frequently represent themes of longing, departure, and the restless pursuit of freedom or escape, strongly influences rail imagery²⁵. Bessie Smith is associated with the classic blues experience because of her deep ties to this imagery. The train takes on a symbolic meaning for the blues' emotional journey, reflecting Bessie's challenges, experiences, and yearning for authenticity in her music. The train takes on a symbolic meaning for the blues' emotional journey, reflecting Bessie's challenges, experiences, and yearning for authenticity in her music. The idea of freedom and independence is represented by trains. They stand for the capacity to escape the confines of one's surroundings and discover new worlds. This symbolism emphasizes Bessie's tenacity and yearning for independence in the context of her existence. The train motif can be seen as a representation of Bessie's rejection of social conventions and expectations, especially when it came to her pursuit of a musical profession that went against conventional gender roles. The film's use of railway images has a strong emotional impact. It is a potent reminder of the constant travel in Bessie's life, whether it is the distant sight of a train or the steady sound of wheels on tracks. Through the train imagery, viewers are encouraged to engage with the emotional undercurrent of Bessie's story and experience the bittersweet tension of departures and arrivals, much like the blues itself. In the film "*Bessie*," symbolic imagery, notably the association of Bessie Smith with trains, deepens and complicates the narrative.



Figure 1: *Bessie and her brother looking out from her train to black people cheering up for her.*

This visual metaphor enhances our comprehension of her life, her music, and the blues genre as a whole. It is a potent storytelling tool that emotionally connects with viewers and conveys the core

²⁵ Havers, Richard. "Train Songs, Freedom, The Blues, and Country Music." *UDiscoverMusic*, 28 Nov. 2015, <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/train-songs-freedom-the-blues-and-country-music/>. Accessed 11 December 2023.

of Bessie's adventures and lasting legacy. The photography expertly captures the ambiance of the venues when showcasing Bessie Smith's stage performances, capturing the smokey ambiance, low lighting, and the enthusiastic emotions of the audience. These pictures enhance the authenticity of the portrayal.

In the first scene, we see Bessie singing under the blue light. Using "blues light" or a blue-tinted visual aesthetic can have several symbolic implications supporting the movie's narrative. Usage of a blue-tinted visual aesthetic to instantly create a mood and ambiance associated with the blues genre. Blue is frequently utilized to portray feelings essential to blues music, such as melancholy, contemplation, and soulful expression. The use of blue light by the filmmakers to improve the movie's visual appeal can also be considered an artistic decision. A striking and memorable opening scene can be made using color and lighting. In the opening scenes, it might be an invitation for viewers to delve into her personal and emotional journey. Numerous clubs and venues have a blue atmosphere when hosting blues and jazz acts. It is possible that the "blues light" may transfer viewers to the ambiance of these clubs, where Bessie Smith frequently performed. At the movie's start, "blue light" can represent various feelings and ideas directly related to Bessie Smith's life, career, and the blues genre. It establishes the tone for the story and readies the audience for a journey through her universe and the breadth of her music's emotional range.²⁶



Figure 2: *Bessie singing under the blue lights symbolizing the blues genre.*

The cinematography in the film employs a specific visual aesthetic to differentiate between the past and the present, particularly in scenes involving flashbacks or recollections. Through the use of soft focus, sepia tones, and deliberate changes in lighting, the viewers are skillfully transported to earlier periods in Bessie's life. This can be seen in the movie when flashbacks depict Bessie's childhood,

²⁶ Smith, Judith E. "Bessie Film Review.", *Journal of American History*, vol. 1013, No. 3, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav500>. Accessed 22 October 2023.

with the camera work and visual effects expertly recreating the atmosphere of that bygone era.

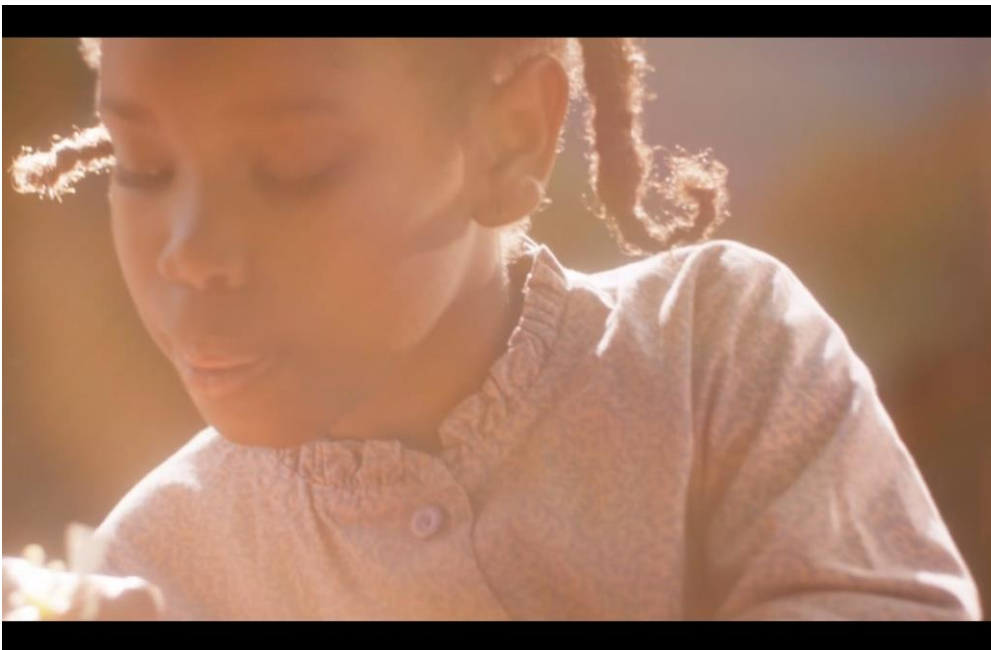


Figure 3: *Bessie's flashback to her childhood memories.*

The deliberate application of soft focus in these flashbacks serves to create a dream-like quality. It blurs the edges of the frame, subtly signaling to the audience that they are witnessing a memory or a reflection of the past. This visual technique not only enhances the narrative but also adds a layer of artistic sophistication to the storytelling. The introduction of sepia tones further enhances the nostalgic quality of these flashbacks. Sepia, a warm brownish hue often associated with vintage photographs, evokes a sense of history and timelessness. It transports the viewers to an earlier, more distant time, where Bessie's formative experiences unfolded. The alterations in lighting are yet another tool used to effectively communicate the temporal shift. The filmmakers meticulously adjust the lighting to convey the mood and era of the specific flashback. The warm, gentle glow of a bygone era is distinctly different from the harsh, contemporary lighting used in present-day scenes, aiding the audience in distinguishing between the past and the present. This nuanced approach to cinematography not only adds visual richness to the film but also assists in elucidating the complexities of Bessie Smith's life journey. By immersing the audience in her memories and experiences through these visual cues, the film underscores the significant role her past played in shaping her artistry and identity. In conclusion, the cinematography's use of soft focus, sepia tones, and lighting changes creates a vivid and emotionally resonant experience for the viewers. These visual techniques effectively transport the audience back in time, providing a deeper understanding of the key moments and influences in Bessie Smith's life. Through this careful manipulation of the

visual language, "*Bessie*" ensures that the past is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative, enriching the overall storytelling. The importance of lighting in a film reaches beyond its basic function, influencing profound thematic layers. Consider, for example, the pivotal scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where the spaceship descends and the alien emerges. The scene is bathed in an ethereal glow, creating an ambiance of "otherworldliness," a critical thematic element. Cinematographers, by making intentional lighting decisions, possess the ability to accentuate characters, objects, and intricate details, thereby enhancing the film's overall significance. (John David Viera, Maria Viera, "Lighting for Film and Electronic Cinematography" (1993), Wadsworth Publishing Company).

2.5 Historical and Cultural Context in *Bessie*

There is an abundance of historical and cultural context to explore within the film about Bessie Smith. Her life and career, spanning from 1912 to 1937, were deeply intertwined with the social and cultural dynamics of that era. During this period, Bessie Smith rose to become a highly renowned and successful artist, celebrated for her incredibly powerful voice. It's worth noting that despite the availability of microphones, Bessie Smith often refused to use one during her performances, a testament to the sheer strength and resonance of her vocal abilities. She was a force to be reckoned with on stage. However, it's crucial to consider the broader historical backdrop against which Bessie Smith's career unfolded. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, life for Black people, particularly Black female singers, was far from easy. The era was marked by the enduring impact of the Jim Crow laws, which mandated the strict separation of whites from "persons of color" in various aspects of public life, including public transportation and schools. This segregation extended to parks, cemeteries, theaters, and restaurants, with the explicit aim of preventing any interaction between Black and white individuals as equals. Moreover, it is a well-documented fact that Black individuals were consistently paid less than their white counterparts. This wage disparity was a stark reflection of the broader systemic racism prevalent in society. Bessie Smith's career unfolded within this challenging context, and her success serves as a testament to her immense talent and unwavering determination. The historical and cultural intricacies of this era are vital for comprehending the challenges and triumphs of Bessie Smith's remarkable journey. To fully appreciate Bessie Smith's film, one must delve into the rich historical and cultural tapestry of the time. The years encompassing 1912 to 1937 were characterized by significant social, political, and cultural changes. Bessie Smith, during this period, emerged as an iconic figure whose life and career intersected with these transformative forces. One noteworthy aspect of her career was her remarkable vocal prowess. Bessie Smith's voice was known for its exceptional power and resonance, to the extent that she often declined to use a microphone during her performances, a clear testament to her vocal strength. Her success was a result of both her immense talent and her determination to break through barriers. Nonetheless, it's essential to recognize that the historical context in which Bessie Smith operated was far from ideal, particularly for Black artists. Despite being legally prohibited from being owned by white people after emancipation, a significant number of black people in rural southern communities continued to live in substandard conditions due to their economic reliance on white farm owners.²⁷ The South was subject to Jim Crow regulations in every aspect of daily life. While specific public spaces were rigidly segregated based on race, many were only restricted to Black people. For example, restaurants, cemeteries, hospitals, jails, lunch counters, and waiting rooms were separated. Theaters featured two distinct entrances: an

²⁷ George, Charles. *Life under the Jim Crow Laws*. Lucent Books, 1999.

appealing and brightly illuminated front door for white patrons and a doorway leading out onto the alley for African American patrons. Drinking fountains and restrooms were divided everywhere. A lot of places, such as tennis courts, roller rinks, bowling alleys, and amusement parks, were exclusive to white people. States and cities mandated that the two races have their own regions for fishing and boating. Workplace segregation was also a common practice. The majority of companies controlled by white people declined to hire any African Americans at all. When they did, African Americans were prohibited from using the same elevators, staircases, or entrances as White people. Black employees were not permitted to use the same tools as their white counterparts. A lot of factory owners prohibited black workers from interacting with white workers and had them work in different parts of the building. ²⁸Black people, including talented artists like Bessie Smith, consistently earned less than their white counterparts. This disparity reflected the deeply ingrained systemic racism that prevailed in the United States during this time. In the face of such challenges, Bessie Smith's career serves as a powerful example of resilience and determination, making her an enduring symbol of artistic achievement within a complex and often oppressive historical and cultural milieu". ²⁹

In one scene, Lucille tells Bessie that at least she earns money, and Bessie answers by saying, "I know washwoman who gets more". Economic gaps were substantial at the beginning of the 20th century, notably in the African-American population. The fact that Bessie's somewhat successful blues singing career did not ensure financial security may be highlighted by her reaction. It highlights the financial hardships experienced by many people, including accomplished artists like Bessie and the differences in pay between different professions. The limited options and expectations put on women, especially women of color, at the time, may be reflected in Bessie's answer. She might suggest that women can make more money than themselves or other artists or performers, even in low-paying or traditionally female-dominated jobs like washing clothes. Bessie's remark also represents her self-respect and the value of following her passions. She might put more importance on her love of music and her artistic career than on making more money in another line of work, underscoring the importance of personal fulfillment.

The movie vividly portrays the narrative that suggests Bessie Smith's path to success and fame was significantly influenced by her encounter with Ma Rainey. In one pivotal scene in the film, Bessie takes a daring leap by jumping onto Ma Rainey's train, passionately asking for a chance to be part

²⁸ Sharp, Anne W. *A Dream Deferred: The Jim Crow Era*. Lucent Books, 2005.

²⁹ Bubar, Joe. "The Jim Crow North." *Upfront*. *The New York Times*, 9 Mar. 2020, <https://upfront.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/030920/the-jim-crow-north.html?language=english#1300L>. Accessed 30 October 2023.

of her show. It's a moment charged with ambition and determination, signifying the turning point in her career. However, when we delve into the real history of Bessie Smith's journey, we find that her introduction to Ma Rainey occurred through a slightly different avenue. In reality, Bessie Smith's initial meeting with Ma Rainey took place when she was a mere 14 years old. This encounter transpired when she joined the Moses Stokes traveling show. Her brother, Clarence, who was an employee of the company, played a pivotal role in helping her secure an audition. During this audition, Bessie Smith's undeniable talent and captivating presence caught Ma Rainey's attention. The seasoned blues artist recognized the raw potential in the young Bessie and took her under her wing. Ma Rainey became not just a colleague but a mentor and a guiding force in Bessie's career. This subtle difference in the portrayal of their meeting in the movie reflects the artistic liberties often taken in biographical films to create more dramatic or compelling storytelling. In both versions, what remains consistent is the profound impact Ma Rainey had on Bessie Smith's career. The movie's portrayal, while not entirely factual, serves to emphasize the significance of this relationship in shaping Bessie Smith's extraordinary journey from obscurity to legendary status. This dynamic relationship between Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith is a testament to the power of mentorship and the influence of experienced artists on emerging talents. It highlights the significance of personal connections and opportunities in the world of music, where often, one encounter can change the course of an artist's life forever. When "queen of rhythm, the mother of the Blues" and popular vaudeville performer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey arrives on film, it highlights the importance of female musical collaboration amidst the vibrant entertainment of black vaudeville for Bessie Smith's performance trajectory. Ma Rainey's role, according to director Dee Rees, was supposed to teach Bessie how to confront audiences directly, demand for better conditions, and enjoy herself to the fullest with women. A striking high point occurs in a later scene in which Ma Rainey puts on a man's tuxedo instead of her sequined dress, much to the delight of Bessie and a mixed-race black cabaret audience as she performs "Prove It on Me Blues," a song that generations would celebrate to come as a rare and potent lyrical statement of explicit and defiant lesbian desire that has been largely erased from the annals of musical history. The movie portrays a rivalry between the two ladies to encourage Bessie to quit the show and go it alone. However, it also highlights Ma Rainey's satisfaction with Bessie's final recording success and features a beautiful scene in which their mutual history as legendary performers encourages them both.³⁰

There is a scene where Ma Rainey talks about her salary per show for the Theater Owners Booking

³⁰ Smith, Judith E. "Bessie Film Review.", *Journal of American History*, vol. 1013, No. 3, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav500>. Accessed 22 October 2023.

Association (TOBA)³¹. Ma Rainey's comments about her pay reveal the importance of TOBA as a booking organization for Black entertainers. It provided a stage for Black performers to display their talent, but it also had difficulties, such as problems with pay. Ma Rainey's insistence on getting what she deserves can be seen as advocacy for equitable treatment for Black artists and herself. The scene represents the difficulties black musicians faced in the early 20th century. It represents the more significant struggle for equality and fair treatment within the music business and entertainment sector. While some musicians found success and popularity, they frequently faced racial discrimination regarding compensation, royalties, and access to chances.

Viewers are allowed to consider the issues of racial and economic disparity, creative integrity, female empowerment, and the difficulties Black musicians experienced in the early 20th century in this instance. It emphasizes Ma Rainey's significance as an advocate for fair treatment in the music industry while deepening the historical and cultural backdrop of the movie. In this pivotal scene within the movie, the subtle but impactful presence of the "colored only" sign in the train station waiting room is a poignant representation of the deeply entrenched racial segregation of the time. It is worth noting that, while this sign may not be at the forefront of the narrative, its placement as a background detail is an astute artistic choice, as it accurately reflects the reality of everyday life for Black individuals during that era. For the people of that time, particularly Black Americans, such signs and the stark division between "white" and "colored" spaces were distressingly commonplace, accepted as a matter of fact. The pervasive nature of segregation had become normalized in their daily lives. However, for modern-day viewers, this seemingly inconspicuous detail carries profound implications, serving as a reminder of the horrors of Jim Crow laws and the enduring legacy of racial discrimination in the United States. This scene, although seemingly unobtrusive, is one of the most significant in the film. It underscores the broader theme that permeates the narrative, illustrating that even individuals as successful and influential as the characters in the story could not escape the pervasive grip of segregation. This artistic choice speaks to the enduring impact of systemic racism and its profound influence on the lives of Black individuals during that era, offering contemporary viewers a glimpse into the lived experiences of those who navigated the challenges of Jim Crow America. However, this topic is not central focus of the film.

In conclusion, the unobtrusive yet evocative presence of the "colored only" sign in the train station waiting room holds a profound significance in the portrayal of racial segregation. This seemingly innocuous sign becomes a powerful representation of the enduring impact of systemic racism. Its inclusion in the scene serves a dual purpose: it effectively conveys the stark normalcy of segregation in the daily lives of Black individuals during that era while also eliciting a visceral

³¹ Scott, Michelle R. *T.O.B.A. Time: Black Vaudeville and the Theater Owners' Booking Association in Jazz-Age America*. University of Illinois Press, 2023.

reaction from modern audiences who bear witness to the injustices of the past through this subtle but poignant detail. The "colored only" sign, while a physical object, symbolizes the deeply entrenched racial hierarchy and discrimination that characterized the early 20th century in the United States. It serves as a stark reminder of the systemic segregation that marginalized Black individuals and restricted their access to public spaces, transportation, and basic rights. Its presence in the train station waiting room is a reflection of the pervasive racial norms that dictated the separation of Black and white individuals in almost every facet of life. Moreover, the subtle but deliberate inclusion of this sign in the scene highlights the filmmakers' commitment to historical accuracy and authenticity. It is a testament to their dedication to providing viewers with an unvarnished look into the lived experiences of Black people during that time. For modern audiences, witnessing the "colored only" sign evokes a potent emotional response. It serves as a poignant reminder of the not-so-distant past when racial segregation was a painful reality. The sign prompts reflection on the progress that has been made in the fight for civil rights while also acknowledging the work that remains to be done to achieve true equality. The unobtrusive yet haunting presence of the "colored only" sign stands as a quiet but forceful condemnation of the racial injustices of the past. It compels viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths of history and consider the ongoing struggle for racial equality. In this way, the inclusion of this detail enriches the storytelling, making it a powerful tool for educating and enlightening audiences about the enduring legacy of racial segregation.



Figure 4: *Colored only room in the train station.*

Throughout the film, there is a noteworthy and deliberate emphasis on the dialect and accent utilized by the African-American characters. This linguistic focus effectively immerses the audience into the heart of the Black community, providing an authentic and unfiltered glimpse into their experiences. The linguistic nuances and distinctive speech patterns exhibited by the characters serve as a powerful narrative tool, allowing viewers to sense the resilience and fortitude of African Americans. This portrayal is consistently woven into each scene, affording us a profound understanding of the challenges and triumphs of the characters. It is a testament to the notion that language, in its rich and nuanced form, inherently reflects its people's unique cultural and historical experiences.

The film's portrayal of an entirely Black team working for Bessie offers a poignant depiction of a segregated community, vividly allowing the audience to visualize the harsh realities of the era. The striking absence of white individuals on Bessie's team serves as a powerful reminder of the pervasive segregation that defined the time. Opportunities for Black people were often constrained to roles within their own communities, and the film captures this limitation with precision. The absence of white individuals in her team underscores the systemic barriers Black people faced during this era, where racial segregation extended to all aspects of life. The film provides an unflinching glimpse into the challenges and restrictions imposed on Black individuals, even in the realm of entertainment. This portrayal also underscores the self-sufficiency and resilience of Black communities during a time when they had to create their own opportunities and support networks. Bessie's all-black team represents a community united by a common purpose and a shared struggle, challenging the discriminatory norms of their time. The film's commitment to this portrayal aligns with the broader aim of historical accuracy, emphasizing the lived experiences of Black individuals during that period. It is a testament to the filmmakers' dedication to presenting an authentic and unfiltered narrative. In conclusion, the film's depiction of Bessie's all-black team offers a stark portrayal of the segregated community, showcasing the limitations and resilience of Black individuals in an era marked by systemic racism. This representation serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring legacy of segregation and the strength of Black communities in the face of adversity.

The scene in which Bessie auditions dancers for her show and declares that they must excel not only in dance but also in singing and humor highlights the multifaceted and frequently demanding nature of life for Black performers during that era. It serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges they faced. Many African-American artists were expected to be versatile, often taking on multiple roles to secure employment in the entertainment industry. This scene effectively underscores the harsh realities of the time when talent alone was not always sufficient; one had to possess a wide range of skills to thrive. This audition scene provides a window into the complex and often

unforgiving world that Black performers navigated. They were not only required to excel in their primary artistic discipline but also to be competent in multiple areas. This demand reflected the systemic prejudice of the time, where Black artists had to prove themselves doubly as competent to secure opportunities. Moreover, the scene illuminates the remarkable resilience and adaptability of Black artists during that period. In the face of adversity, they embraced the challenge of mastering various aspects of their craft. This adaptability was not just a testament to their talent but also to their unwavering determination and ambition. The filmmakers' choice to include this scene aligns with their commitment to historical accuracy and authenticity. It showcases the relentless pursuit of excellence that characterized Black performers, even in the face of racial discrimination. In conclusion, the scene featuring Bessie's audition of dancers sheds light on the multifaceted and demanding nature of Black performers' lives during that era. It underscores the necessity for versatility and the unique challenges they faced in the entertainment industry. This portrayal serves as a testament to their resilience and determination, showcasing the multifaceted talents that characterized their pursuit of success despite systemic prejudice. However, the moment in which Bessie tests the dancers' skin color with a brown paper bag is a poignant and uncomfortable reminder of colorism within the Black community. This practice, often used to discriminate against individuals with darker skin tones, reflects a painful aspect of the African-American experience. Bessie's actions can be interpreted as an attempt to ensure that her team reflects a certain standard of complexion, potentially perpetuating colorist attitudes within the community. This complex portrayal underscores the broader issues of internalized racism and colorism within the Black community at the time. While likely motivated by her own experiences and societal pressures, Bessie's actions can be seen as contributing to the more significant issues of segregation and racism within the community. The film thus provides an opportunity for contemporary audiences to engage with these challenging aspects of history and encourages reflection on the complex dynamics within marginalized communities during that era.

In several scenes throughout the film, Bessie Smith's commitment to the Black community is displayed prominently. A notable example is the sequence in which Bessie auditions for “*Black Swan Records*”, an endeavor she embarked upon due to her profound appreciation for the label's ethos and contributions. Bessie was particularly drawn to “*Black Swan Records*” because of their dedication to working with what she called “real blacks.” She saw their commitment to representing and empowering the Black community as a profound virtue. However, the day of the audition unfolds with an inevitable discord. Bessie's behavior appears to deviate from the expected decorum, and there are hints of her dissatisfaction with the racial background of “*Black Swan Records*” staff, whom she perceives as being of mixed racial heritage. As reported by the BBC, this discord culminated in “*Black Swan Records*” decision to decline collaboration with her, citing her actions

during the encounter³². This narrative is notable for illustrating the complexities of Bessie's aspirations and the layers of her commitment to the Black community. While she initially expressed great enthusiasm for affiliating with a Black recording company, her interactions during the audition reflect her expectations and the complexity of her values and ideals. It raises questions about the intricacies of racial identity and the factors influencing her actions, underscoring the nuanced dynamics within the Black community during that era.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Bessie's conduct during the audition was marked by her desire for gin, a beverage that was illegal during the Prohibition era. While the consumption of alcohol, especially in places like underground jazz clubs, was not uncommon, it was an activity that defied the legal framework of the time. Although more acceptable in some artistic and informal settings, this choice was not in keeping with the expected decorum of a formal meeting. It further underscores the complex interplay of Bessie's personal preferences, societal norms, and the values she held dear in her commitment to the Black community. This scenario serves as a reminder of the multifaceted nature of historical and cultural contexts, shedding light on the complexities of the racial dynamics of the time and the diversity of perspectives within the Black community. Bessie's interactions with *Black Swan Records* exemplify the intricacies of her commitment, echoing the broader social and cultural forces shaping her decisions.



Figure 5: Bessie, her husband Jack Gee, and her brother Clarence in the meeting with "Black Swan Records". Where she wanted to drink alcohol and her husband suggests adding it to her drink.

³² Lynskey, Dorian. "The Forgotten Story of America's First Black Superstars." *BBC Culture*, 17 Feb. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210216-the-forgotten-story-of-americas-first-black-superstars>. Accessed 30 October 2023.

2.6 Media Representation and Record Deals in the Film

In the film, Bessie Smith's fame and success are conspicuously portrayed through the lens of the media. The cinematic narrative aptly showcases the substantial recognition and prominence she achieved, particularly emphasizing her media presence. Bessie Smith's ascendancy to fame is vividly depicted, and the movie effectively conveys her status as a central figure in the public eye. The film artfully captures the way in which newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasts of the time celebrated her talent and contributions to the world of music. It masterfully delves into the influence of the media in shaping her image and how she harnessed it to her advantage. The camera angles and visual storytelling techniques used in the film highlight the power and reach of the press and media, underlining the magnitude of her fame.



Figure 6: *Crowd of her fans and media cheering up for Bessie.*

Furthermore, the movie takes us behind the scenes, giving us a glimpse into the intense scrutiny and attention that Bessie Smith faced from the paparazzi and journalists, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and triumphs she encountered on her journey to stardom. All in all, the film paints a rich and multi-dimensional picture of Bessie Smith's relationship with the media, portraying it as a driving force behind her remarkable rise to prominence, and as an integral part of her enduring legacy. The film illustrates a pivotal juncture in her career where significant newspapers and radio broadcasts, including venerable institutions like the “*Chicago Defender*”, “*Boston Guardian*”, and “*New York Amsterdam News*”, were dedicated

to extolling her achievements. Media coverage consistently highlighted her sold-out performances, portraying her as a phenomenal talent whose popularity and acclaim rivaled those of her contemporaries, notably Ma Rainey. Notably, the Boston Guardian went on record, boldly declaring that Bessie Smith was "the biggest since Ma Rainey." This unequivocal statement reinforced her position as a colossal figure in music and entertainment. This facet of the film underscores the extent to which media outlets played a pivotal role in shaping and amplifying her image, thus elevating her to unparalleled prominence within the entertainment world. Bessie Smith's portrayal in the media is a compelling reflection of her unparalleled significance and enduring legacy within the annals of music history.

In the film, the most important parts of Bessie Smith's life closely match what happened in history. However, there are some differences, one of which is about how she got a deal with Columbia Records. In the movie, they show her husband, Jack Gee, as a key person in making her first contract with Columbia Records happen. But in Albertson's book, which looks at historical records, the story is a bit different. According to this account, Gee acknowledges that a record store owner named Charlie Carson played a role in helping Smith start her career in the recording industry. In the film, the most important parts of Bessie Smith's life closely match what happened in history. However, there are some differences, one of which is about how she got a deal with Columbia Records. In the movie, they show her husband, Jack Gee, as a key person in making her first contract with Columbia Records happen. But in Albertson's book, which looks at historical records, the story is a bit different. According to this account, Gee acknowledges that a record store owner named Charlie Carson played a role in helping Smith start her career in the recording industry. This version adds the detail that Gee bought a new dress for her recording session. So, there's a bit of a difference between the film and the historical account when it comes to how Bessie Smith got her start in the music business. This version adds the detail that Gee bought a new dress for her recording session. Hence, there exists a notable disparity between the cinematic representation and the historical account regarding the manner in which Bessie Smith commenced her journey in the music industry. The film further portrays Gee's proposal to Smith and the subsequent announcement of their impending wedding. This deviation from historical accuracy contrasts with the reality of her career's early stages, wherein her brother played a pivotal role in facilitating her initial recording contract. The significance of this divergence is underscored by the fact that her collaboration with Columbia Records proved to be a transformative juncture in her career. She agreed to work with the label for their "*race records*," recordings explicitly targeting the African-American audience. Before the rise of the record industry in America, the cost of phonographs often prohibited most African Americans from listening to recorded music. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, the cost of listening to music declined, making records more affordable for a broader spectrum of

the American population³³. “*Columbia Records*” primarily aimed to promote the sale of phonographs, which were most frequently distributed in furniture stores³⁴. However, due to the prevailing segregation during that era, white and Black people frequented separate stores, and the type of music accessible to each demographic varied significantly.



Figure 7: *Bessie recording for Columbia Records with other musicians including white musicians.*

One intriguing aspect of the film is its portrayal of how the music industry promoted "race recordings" during that era. The movie reveals that these recordings were advertised in newspapers using blackface imagery, a practice that deeply bothered Bessie Smith. This detail is crucial because it sheds light on the prevalent racism and racial stereotypes that permeated the music industry at that time. It vividly illustrates the challenges and complexities that artists like Bessie Smith had to grapple with as they navigated an industry that often propagated demeaning and dehumanizing images. The use of blackface in advertising not only reflects the deeply entrenched racism of the period but also the exploitative tactics employed by record companies to appeal to a wider, and often racially biased, audience. This portrayal in the film serves as a stark reminder of the hurdles

³³ Augustyn, Adam. "Race Records." *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/race-record>. Accessed 16 October 2023.

³⁴ Brooks, Tim. "Columbia Corporate History: Introduction." *Columbia Master Book*, Vol. 1, <https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/resources/detail/97>. Accessed 21 October 2023.

and injustices faced by African-American artists in an industry that frequently reduced their artistry to harmful caricatures. Bessie Smith's resistance to such marketing strategies highlights her determination to maintain her authenticity and dignity as a performer. It is a testament to her strength in the face of adversity and her contribution to the eventual dismantling of these harmful stereotypes within the music industry. In essence, the film provides a valuable glimpse into the broader societal issues of the time, and how individuals like Bessie Smith played a role in challenging these stereotypes, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable music industry.

2.7 Bessie Smith's Encounter with the KKK

Historical records provide compelling evidence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and other white supremacist groups occasionally targeting events and venues associated with Black artists, including concerts and live performances. Bessie Smith, a prominent figure of her time, was not immune to such threats and hostilities. Indeed, the factual account of her life, corroborated by the film "*Bessie*," attests to an incident in Concord, North Carolina, on a fateful July night in 1927³⁵.



Figure 8: KKK attacking one of Bessie's shows.

It is worth noting, however, that while the evidence supports the occurrence of this targeted attack, there is no conclusive proof that Bessie Smith wielded a hatchet in pursuit of her assailants. The choice to depict Bessie as taking such assertive action in the film serves multiple narrative purposes. Firstly, it bolsters the portrayal of her character as an indomitable force. Bessie Smith was renowned for her unwavering determination and resilience in the face of numerous challenges punctuating her career. Her resolute spirit and audacity were emblematic of her personal strength and the collective fortitude exhibited by many Black artists of her era. The frequent adversity that Black artists confronted during their careers only served to accentuate their resolve, and Bessie Smith embodied this unwavering spirit. In this manner, the film "*Bessie*" not only sheds light on the remarkable strength of its titular character but also underscores the collective resilience of Black

³⁵ Albertson, Chris. *Bessie. Revised and Extended Edition*, Yale University Press, 2005.

communities during a profoundly challenging period in American history. Bessie Smith's story becomes a microcosm of the larger struggle faced by Black individuals and communities in a racially segregated and discriminatory society. Her journey serves as a symbol of the countless African Americans who fought against adversity, not only in the entertainment industry but also in everyday life. The film captures the spirit of the era when Black artists were pioneering change and pushing boundaries, contributing to the broader cultural and social shifts of the Harlem Renaissance. It portrays the interconnectedness of these artists, highlighting how they supported one another, shared experiences, and confronted systemic injustices. Bessie Smith's success, in this context, becomes a source of inspiration for those who faced oppression and bigotry, reminding them that it was possible to break through barriers and achieve greatness. Moreover, the film's portrayal of Bessie Smith's resilience in the face of adversity serves as a poignant reminder of the lasting impact of her legacy on future generations. Her determination, in the midst of the racial turmoil of her time, continues to inspire individuals striving for equality and recognition. The film thus not only pays tribute to a legendary artist but also contributes to a broader narrative of resilience, strength, and the enduring fight for justice and equality, which remains relevant and significant today. Bessie's life story, as depicted in the film, reveals the complex intersection of art, race, and social change. It highlights how her journey was inextricably linked to the broader struggle for civil rights and racial equality. The film portrays her as an emblematic figure, representing the resilience and tenacity of Black individuals and communities throughout American history, and how they used their art and voices to challenge the status quo and drive change. Bessie Smith's legacy endures as a testament to the power of the arts to inspire social progress and as a tribute to those who courageously paved the way for a more just and equitable society.

In a specific scene within the film, a narrator's voice declares that "the Negro is in ascending." This powerful declaration sets the stage for a pivotal event, a turning point in Bessie Smith's journey. In this moment, she is invited to a luxurious hotel, where she is not only welcomed with profound reverence but is also directed to the prestigious fourth floor to meet with the esteemed Mr. Van Vechten. This gathering holds immense significance, as it encapsulates the shifting dynamics of race and culture during the vibrant and transformative Harlem Renaissance. This scene symbolizes a broader awakening in American society, where Black artists and intellectuals were gaining recognition and influence. The assertion that "the Negro is in ascending" reflects the burgeoning acknowledgment of the contributions of African Americans to the cultural and artistic landscape. Bessie Smith's presence on the fourth floor represents her own ascent in the world of music and her growing importance in American culture. The film's portrayal of this event not only celebrates Bessie Smith's personal triumph but also serves as a testament to the larger movement for racial equality and artistic expression during this remarkable period in history. It underscores how the

Harlem Renaissance was a crucible of artistic and social change, where African American artists played a pivotal role in reshaping the nation's cultural identity, challenging stereotypes, and paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

2.8 Scenes with White Audience

As the narrative unfolds, two white gentlemen converse about blues music, foreseeing its potential appreciation by white audiences. This conversation is emblematic of the evolving cultural landscape, where African-American artistic expressions like blues and jazz were garnering interest beyond Black communities. During the event, Carl Van Vechten, a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance, hails Langston Hughes as "the greatest Negro poet of our time." Bessie Smith, in response, delivers a mocking inquiry, questioning the need for the distinction of "Negro" greatness instead of simply acknowledging greatness universally. Her retort reveals a critical awareness of the prevalent racial categorization during the era. Before her performance in front of a predominantly white audience, Langston Hughes attempts to offer a warning or advice to Bessie. However, she dismisses his words, interrupting his sentence with laughter. This interaction illustrates the complexities of race and identity during the Harlem Renaissance. Bessie's laughter could signify her defiance against conventional norms and expectations. As Bessie begins to sing, the contrasting reactions of the white and Black audiences become evident. The Black audience, perhaps more intimately connected to the roots of the blues, displays a heightened emotional response. In contrast, the white audience's reception lacks the same emotional engagement depth. The scene underscores the challenge of cross-cultural understanding and the differing connections that various audiences had with the blues, reflecting the cultural shifts and evolving racial dynamics of the Harlem Renaissance. Subsequently, Mr. Van Vechten, an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance, compliments Bessie Smith, praising the soulfulness of her performance. He expresses his delight at encountering her presence, noting that he is working on a new book called "*Nigger Heaven*". However, this exchange takes a dramatic turn when Bessie reacts to an inappropriate comment from Van Vechten. In a gesture laden with meaning, Bessie unceremoniously tosses her drink into Van Vechten's face. This act serves as a palpable indication that he has overstepped the boundaries of propriety. Bessie's response is not one of mere petulance but rather a deliberate and calculated act of defiance in the face of a man who may have exhibited presumptuousness. In a well-articulated rejoinder, Bessie proceeds to educate Van Vechten on the nuanced differences between the North and South racial dynamics. When Bessie Smith responded to Carl Van Vechten with the statement, "The difference between white folks in the North and in the South is that white folks do not care how close you get as long as you do not get too big, and white folks in the north do not care how big you get as long as you do not get too close," she was conveying a nuanced perspective on racial dynamics in different regions of the United States. When Bessie Smith responded to Carl Van Vechten with the statement, "the difference between white folks in the north and in the south is that white folks do not care how close you get as long as you do not get too big, and white folks in the north do not care how big you get as long as you do not get too close," she was conveying a

nuanced perspective on racial dynamics in different regions of the United States. "White folks in the south do not care how close you get as long as you do not get too big." This part suggests that there may be a degree of social and cultural intimacy between Black and white individuals in the Southern United States. Sometimes, there might be more interpersonal interactions or closeness between individuals from different racial backgrounds. However, there is an unspoken boundary or limit on how far a Black person can progress or achieve social status. Getting "too big" in this context means becoming too successful, influential, or consequential, which might be perceived as a threat to the existing racial order. "White folks in the north do not care how big you get as long as you don't get too close." In contrast, in the Northern United States, the statement suggests that there might be more opportunities for Black individuals to achieve success and recognition. They can become "big" in terms of their accomplishments and achievements. However, there is a social distance or a reluctance for white individuals to get too close on a personal or intimate level. In other words, while there may be professional or public acceptance of Black success, there can still be social and cultural distance or segregation.

During the Great Depression, poverty loomed over the entirety of the United States, and challenges beyond financial hardship further complicated Bessie Smith's life. While the movie does not explicitly illustrate how she lost her fortune, it becomes evident that the economic turmoil of the Great Depression greatly affected her career. People could no longer afford to attend shows or purchase records, making it a trying period for artists, especially for one of Bessie Smith's stature. In one of the culminating scenes of the film, we witness Bessie's determined journey to rebuild her life and career. Within this context, she encounters John Hammond, a pivotal figure who shares news of the first integrated coffee society. This meeting marks a significant turning point in Bessie's life, as it signifies a reawakening of her artistic potential. The subsequent recording session, featuring a racially diverse band comprised of both Black and white musicians, notably including the legendary Benny Goodman³⁶, underscores the evolution of the blues into a more inclusive and multiracial musical genre. Bessie's collaboration with these accomplished artists reflects not only her triumph but also a broader societal shift—a transformation of the music industry and a growing recognition of the talent and artistry of Black women. This moment becomes emblematic of the era's changing social dynamics and the growing acceptance of multiracial collaboration in the arts. It symbolizes an opening of doors in the music industry and the broader cultural landscape, demonstrating that talent knows no racial bounds. Even in the face of adversity, individuals like Bessie Smith can rise to new heights, inspiring audiences to recognize and celebrate the success and

³⁶ Evans, Alissa. "Benny Goodman Tribute Concert Celebrates Racial Integration, Evolution of Jazz." *Dailybruin*, 30 May 2018, <https://dailybruin.com/2018/05/30/benny-goodman-tribute-concert-celebrates-racial-integration-evolution-of-jazz>. Accessed 01 November 2023.

talent of Black women.

The portrayal of events in the movie often leaves significant gaps, and specific crucial episodes remain incomplete, mirroring the approach taken toward depicting Bessie Smith's life and, notably, her death. The film, rather notably, refrains from presenting her demise, choosing to end the narrative without addressing the circumstances following her reunion with Richard Morgan.

2.9 Last Scene and Portrayal of Her Death

In the closing scene, we witness a poignant conversation between Bessie and her partner, Richard Morgan, where she expresses her desire to explore what lies ahead on the road. When one recognizes that the road ahead leads to her eventual passing, these words become somber and significant.



Figure 9: *Bessie and Richard Morgan talking about what lies ahead on the road which presumably leads to her death.*

The filmmakers' choice to omit her death from the narrative could be interpreted as a deliberate decision to preserve Bessie's memory, primarily as a highly accomplished singer. Perhaps they wished to prevent her tragic end from overshadowing her exceptional career, as her death garnered significant attention and controversy. It is worth noting that the tragic nature of Bessie's death drew substantial media coverage, and she received more recognition from white audiences posthumously than during her lifetime. While thousands of fans were mourning her death, her estate faced financial challenges. Bessie Smith was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in a Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania cemetery. In 1970, singer Janis Joplin and NAACP leader Juanita Green Smith took the initiative to fund the installation of her tombstone³⁷. The inscription on the tombstone reads, "The greatest blues singer in the world will never stop singing." This epilogue to her life reflects the

³⁷ Albertson, Chris. *Bessie. Revised and Extended Edition*, Yale University Press, 2005.

enduring impact of her artistry and the posthumous recognition she received.

The film on Bessie Smith left a lasting impact, both with audiences and critics. It succeeded in reigniting interest in her music and legacy, shedding new light on the life of this iconic blues artist. The film garnered critical acclaim for its cinematic style, narrative approach, and powerful portrayal of Bessie Smith's life and artistry. Critics hailed it as a compelling exploration of her multifaceted career, delving into the nuances of her impact on the blues and popular music world. Audiences also responded positively to the film, contributing significantly to a renewed fascination with Bessie Smith's music. Her timeless blues resonated with a new generation of listeners, and her story became a source of inspiration for contemporary artists. The film celebrated her extraordinary talent and provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges she confronted as a Black woman in the music industry during her era. One of the most liked aspects of the movie was the exceptional acting and meticulous production, which lent an authentic and immersive quality to the narrative. The performances and attention to detail in recreating the era garnered praise from audiences and critics. The film served as a testament to Bessie Smith's enduring legacy, allowing viewers to appreciate her artistry and contributions to the music world. This resurgence of interest and recognition served as a testament to her work's enduring impact and significance in the history of American music. The film portrays the evolution of blues music into a more multiracial and inclusive genre. This reflects the ongoing push for diversity and inclusivity in the arts and society, as modern audiences increasingly recognize the value of collaboration among artists from different backgrounds. Bessie Smith's story exemplifies resilience and empowerment in the face of adversity. Her life symbolizes strength and determination, resonating with contemporary discussions about empowerment, self-expression, and the breaking of societal barriers. In these ways, "*Bessie*" connects the themes and struggles of Bessie Smith's era to issues and discussions pertinent to contemporary society. It serves as a bridge between the past and the present, offering valuable insights and inspiration to modern audiences. Director of the film Dee Rees conveyed a great wish to investigate the intricacies in Bessie Smith's life. Bessie Smith was a complex woman who made discussions about her difficult. There was clearly disagreement among people over her identity and nature, with several viewpoints being held. Unable to come up with a clear "how" to describe her, she turned his attention to figuring out "why." Understanding the inner workings of Bessie's personality was the goal. In order to accomplish this, the director started the investigation by delving into her song lyrics, using them as a means of obtaining authentic understanding of her position as an artist.³⁸ In one of the interview Dee Rees expressed what she wants audience to take

³⁸ NPR. "In HBO's 'Bessie,' Queen Latifah Stars As Empress Of The Blues." 16 May 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/16/406453568/in-hbos-bessie-queen-latifah-stars-as-empress-of-the-blues>. Accessed on 05 November 2023.

from the film. The film's central theme is a moving tribute to the blues' timeless appeal, particularly when heard in the strong female voices that have shaped the genre's history. The movie invites viewers to view the blues as an uninterrupted line of music, with each generation of musicians from Ma Rainey to Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday to Nina Simon playing a crucial part in handing down the tradition and molding the story. The movie dispels the myth that the blues is a dying language by highlighting its vibrant life. Rather, it highlights the blues' vitality and attributes its continued significance to its inherent status as a mode of social and political protest. It emphasizes the blues' enduring influence, which continues to reverberate across modern culture. Bessie Smith's live performance of the song "All my life I've been making it/ All my life white folks have been taking it" serves as an excellent example. KRS-One, a contemporary artist, inverted the idea with the line "Manhattan keeps on making it/ Brooklyn keeps on taking it." This comparison draws attention to the ongoing conversation that exists within the blues, showing how every aspect of this musical style maintains a constant line of contact with its history and present in order to promote a vibrant, ever-changing form of cultural expression.³⁹

³⁹ HBO. "Bessie Interview with Dee Rees." 22 Oct. 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211022040538/https://www.hbo.com/movies/bessie/interview-with-dee-rees>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

CHAPTER THREE

MILES AHEAD: UNDERSTANDING THE ARTISTIC DEPICTION OF MILES DAVIS

3.0 Introduction

Miles Davis once advised us to 'play what is not there and look for the space between the sounds,' a metaphor for the deep silences he felt were interspersed throughout his life⁴⁰. Davis created from the spaces he sensed in the world around him as he relentlessly pursued musical innovation. His life story presents a contradiction as 'Miles Ahead' deftly blends real-world events with fantastical ideas. We see the echoes of Davis's life in this fusion, the creative moments among the enormous distances that shaped him. Interestingly, he and Frances had a happy marriage during the height of his success. The movie presents a complex picture of Davis's life by deftly alternating between real-life events and made-up stories. Don Cheadle skillfully crafts a heroic fictional version of Miles Davis in "Miles Ahead," capturing the essence of the musical prodigy as he navigates the challenges of his personal and professional lives. Davis's resilience, creative creativity, and cultural significance are highlighted in Cheadle's nuanced performance, creating a cinematic narrative beyond biographical limitations. The film not only celebrates Davis's contributions to music but also delves into the harsh realities of police violence faced by a black member of the community, grounding the narrative in a stark socio-cultural context. In this way, 'Miles Ahead' is a compelling exploration of the intersection between artistic expression, personal heroism, and the broader challenges marginalized communities confront. In addition to capturing the spirit of Miles Davis, the movie purposefully portrays him as a highly fictitious character, highlighting his significance distinctively. The film takes a more creative approach to depicting Davis than a purely biographical one, which takes Davis beyond reality and highlights his cultural significance and lasting influence on the music industry. The deliberate choice to represent the renowned musician as a fictional figure implies that his effect goes beyond complex data and statistics. It conveys a more comprehensive message about the significant influence that artists such as Miles Davis have on our collective awareness, enabling a more creative and nuanced appreciation of their significance. By opting for fiction instead of a traditional biopic, the movie honors Davis's legacy while encouraging viewers to consider the more profound and symbolic aspects of his contributions to culture. After meeting the actual Frances, the actress playing her in the movie shares an intimate revelation about the times when Davis played only for her. These private musical serenade moments provide a

⁴⁰ Schnee, Daniel. "How To Play The Silence Between The Notes: (沈黙 = 音楽)." *Daniel Paul Schnee*, 30 Sep. 2014, <https://danielpaulschnee.wordpress.com/2014/09/30/how-to-play-the-silence-between-the-notes-%e6%b2%88%e9%bb%99-%e9%9f%b3%e6%a5%bd/>. Accessed 11 November 2023.

unique viewpoint on the man behind the music while revealing the facets of Davis's complexity. When reflecting on the filming of "Miles Ahead", Emayatzi Corinealdi, who played Frances, remembers a particularly moving scene in a bar with nostalgia. She points out:

“Yeah, it was this scene in the club where everyone is cleared out, and he is playing just to her. It was just a special moment for me, both in character and as Amy. I am a fan of Don Cheadle, and watching him up on that stage, you know, playing the trumpet, to me, you know, as a fan, which is really beautiful. And then in character because Frances would tell me that is something he would do often”.⁴¹

Emayatzi Corinealdi, who performed Frances in ‘Miles Ahead,’ expresses her deep respect for Don Cheadle by highlighting the extraordinary skill she saw in him play live. Witnessing Cheadle capture the essence of Miles Davis, she felt that Cheadle’s performance struck a deep chord with all those working on the movie, lending a degree of realism to the story. This specific scene, which Frances plays as well, becomes a moving example of Davis’s preference for close-quarters trumpet playing. This technique is interwoven throughout the narrative of the film. Corinealdi’s expression of respect for Cheadle underscores his dedication to the role and emphasizes the collaborative effort that breathed life into the intricate details of Davis’s character. In this way, the film transcends traditional biopic boundaries, capturing not only Davis’s musical genius but also the nuanced moments that defined his persona, as witnessed through the lens of those who contributed to its creation.

“Miles Ahead” is Cheadle’s directorial debut. For the first time, Cheadle undertakes both the director’s chair and the starring role of Miles Dewey Davis III, the jazz pianist, bandleader, and composer who changed the course of American music and is still regarded as one of its biggest influences.⁴² The movie’s title comes from a 1957 album that featured legendary trumpet player Miles Davis working with arranger Gil Evans for the first time after the “Birth of the Cool” sessions. The film is set in New York in 1979, a critical year in Miles Davis’s career as he was coming to the end of a five-year silent period,’ working with an Ewan McGregor-portrayed Rolling Stone reporter to launch a career comeback. The story also explores his deep relationship with Frances Taylor, the character portrayed by Emayatzy Corinealdi, whom he considers to be his true love. These investigations provide insight into Davis’s personal and professional life, illuminating

⁴¹ “Interview with the Cast of 'Miles Ahead'." *YouTube*, uploaded by JustSeenItReviews, 8 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTbr8kSmhPI&ab>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

⁴² Baughan, Nikki. "AWFJ Movie of the Week, March 28-April 3: Miles Ahead." *Alliance of Women Film Journalists*, 28 Mar. 2016, <https://awfj.org/blog/2016/03/28/awfj-movie-of-the-week-march-28-april-3-miles-ahead/>. Accessed 20 October 2023.

the complexities of his artistic renaissance and the relationships that profoundly influenced his legacy.⁴³ Don Cheadle has stated in several interviews that “Miles Ahead” breaks the mold of a typical biopic in cinematic style. The thorough physical makeover of Don Cheadle is indicative of his effort to capturing the spirit of Miles Davis in 'Miles Ahead'. With a lot of Miles's original recordings on the soundtrack, Cheadle really immerses himself in Davis's soundscape and lets it influence his performance.⁴⁴ Notably, Cheadle defies stereotypes as an actor by diligently learning to play the trumpet in addition to duplicating Davis's voice. This devotion goes beyond just a performance on TV; it's evidence of Cheadle's deep regard for the legendary artist. Through taking on the difficult challenge of learning an instrument associated with Davis's brilliance, Cheadle exhibits a degree of dedication that goes beyond what is typically seen in biopics. His portrayal of Davis transcends beyond mere performance to become a moving ode to the artist and an indication of the amount of work required to bring the narrative to life on screen. In an interview, Don Cheadle talked about the intense commitment he made to playing Miles Davis in "Miles Ahead." He stressed how important it was to fully immerse himself in Davis's musical nuances, saying:

“It was important to me to get on the path, you know, and really understand what making an embouchure is and understand what the breath is like and understand the construction of those solos.” Cheadle's commitment extended to transcribing all of Davis's solos, a laborious process that involved meticulously writing out every note in his hotel room. I actually sat in my hotel room and wrote out every note of the solos that I was playing and learned the solos. We are not using my sound in the movie; we are using Miles when it is Miles, obviously, but I am using all those solos. I'm playing them.”⁴⁵

This disclosure highlights the extent of Cheadle's dedication, as he transcends the conventional actor-role, turning into a conduit that brings Miles Davis's notes and essence to life on film. The video explores unexplored areas of Miles Davis's life, particularly the period of artistic inactivity from 1975 to the early 1980s. It is not limited by the requirements of an accurate chronology. Rather, it plays out like a cinematic improvisation, much like the jazz that Davis himself helped to

⁴³ McNary, Dave. "Don Cheadle's 'Miles Ahead' to Close New York Film Festival." *Variety*, 22 Jul. 2015, <https://variety.com/2015/film/news/miles-ahead-new-york-film-festival-don-cheadle-1201545792/>. Accessed 12 November 2023.

⁴⁴ White, Armond. "Miles Ahead and Miles Behind." *National Review*, 1 Apr. 2016, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/04/miles-ahead-don-cheadles-bold-complex-new-movie/amp/>. Accessed 12 December 2023.

⁴⁵ "Don Cheadle Learned Miles Davis Solos for 'Miles Ahead' // SiriusXM // Real Jazz." *YouTube*, uploaded by SiriusXM, 1 Apr 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSqZulAwh_Q&t=142s&ab_channel=SiriusXM.

pioneer. Like the ambiguous notes of an improvised jazz composition, the film threads its way across the uncharted territories of Davis's creative absence. This work of fiction weaves together a tapestry of made-up settings and real-world events while embracing abstract interpretation. *Miles Ahead* aims to portray the spirit of Davis's life through these artistic pauses, going beyond the parameters of a conventional biographical movie. Cheadle's unique fusion of fact, fiction, and hallucinations is intended to convey the spirit of Miles Davis rather than the lives and times of the musician, as he has often emphasized in interviews that he had no interest in the typical "cradle-to-grave" biopic. Throughout this surreal trip of a film that plays more like an impressionistic painting than a portrait, there are guns, drugs, music, girls, and art. Miles Davis is portrayed in the film "*Miles Ahead*" in a way that goes beyond a simple biography and makes the jazz great into a hero. The movie depicts Davis as an artistic hero whose inventive energy and revolutionary approach to jazz composition radically changed the genre, acknowledging his enormous influence on the music industry. The story, which traces Davis's ascent to legendary status from the crucial years of 1975 to the early 1980s a time of creative silence unfolds like an epic tale.

Agharta's what we start within the movie. Our point of departure is the silent period, the five years in which Miles did not really play '75 to '79. I believe his music got to a place where he pushed it as far as he could.⁴⁶ He had been so prolific and had followed that muse wherever it went. I know he was exhausted at that point. Not just musically but physically and emotionally. If you are on that sort of train where, you have got to keep coming up with the next thing. I can imagine how exhausting that can be. When I talked to his nephew, I said, 'Why didn't he play?' He said Miles would say, 'I do not know what to say now. As soon as I know what to say, I will come back and say it.'⁴⁷

Miles was in a retiring state by the time these albums, "*Agharta*" in 1975 and *Pangaea* the following year, were released.⁴⁸ It then takes a lot of intestinal fortitude, energy, commitment, and resolve to start it again until you are ready to come back. His fantastic musical accomplishments and unwavering quest for invention are potent metaphors for his artistic heroism. The movie presents him as a cultural journey whose influence goes well beyond the borders of the music business by

⁴⁶ *Miles Davis Official Website*. *Agharta*, 1975, <https://www.milesdavis.com/albums/agharta/>. Accessed 16 November 2023.

⁴⁷ Rolling Stone. "Don Cheadle on 5 Miles Davis Albums." *Rolling Stones*, 12 Jun. 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/don-cheadle-on-5-miles-davis-albums-10613>. Accessed 13 November 2023.

⁴⁸ *Miles Davis Official Website*. *Agharta*, 1975, <https://www.milesdavis.com/albums/agharta/>. Accessed 16 November 2023.

showcasing his ability to break down barriers and push the frontiers of jazz. By fitting Davis into the heroic archetype, the film honors his accomplishments and gives the legend a human face by exploring his vulnerabilities and emotional troubles. This multifaceted performance gives his epic journey more depth and humanizes him for viewers, similar to the jazz notes he skillfully arranged over his distinguished career. Cheadle was initially intrigued by the project and wanted to investigate the creative process behind Miles Davis's multi-year compositional style. At the film's Sundance Film Festival premiere, Cheadle stated that the goal of the project was not to make a biopic but rather to construct believable, if mostly fictional, snapshots of Davis's life that conveyed the method Davis employed to compose music. In response to the interviewer's accusations that the film is not a biopic, he made this comment:

"No, it is not, and I never wanted it to be. It was something that I thought, especially with Miles Davis, has to feel like composition; it has to feel like a piece of music. It has to be something that we feel like walking around inside, his creativity. That was the pitch I made to the family, and, you know, clearly, them understanding who he was and what he was about and the kinds of lessons that he laid out there for the way people should approach their art, and they were down."⁴⁹

Though they may not seem appropriate, the car chases, and gunfights portray a man driven by narcotics and temporarily losing his creative brilliance. It is irrelevant, however. *Miles Ahead* is less of a biographical film and more of an exploration of the mindset and character of the legendary Miles Davis. The film glides around the racial tensions that existed in America at the time and does not get too deeply into the domestic violence between the two lovers that made news in the early 1960s. People who were not familiar with Miles Davis may have wished to know about his current status or what happened to Frances Taylor following their breakup. After the film, a brief synopsis highlighting Miles' nine Grammy Awards would have been refreshingly informative. Although 'Miles Ahead' presents Miles Davis as a jazz hero, it does not hold back when presenting the nuanced aspects of his persona, including scenes that may give rise to doubts about the great artist. Scenes that focus on Davis's interactions with the media are exciting. Davis is shown in the movie being upfront with a reporter during the dispute when he loses his cool and starts to hurt people. Viewers are forced to confront the darker aspects of Davis's psyche as a result of this unvarnished, unfiltered act of assault, which casts doubt on the heroic picture of him. As highlighted by Tom Brown & Ben Vidal in "The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture" (December 17, 2013), Routledge, a similar approach to redefining the conventional notions of a heroic or monumental life is evident in the analysis of the musical biopic "Gainbourg." This film introduces a unique perspective by portraying pivotal moments in Serge Gainsbourg's life as performances prompted by

⁴⁹ "Don Cheadle Exclusive Interview - Miles Ahead." *YouTube*, uploaded by HeyuGuys, 18 Apr. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgGg9Hozwp4&ab_channel=HeyUGuys

his puppet avatar. The interplay between the puppet and the human character challenges the traditional narrative, emphasizing the equal dramatic significance of both. This exploration delves into themes of masquerade, authenticity, ventriloquism, and the character's inner voice. The presentation of the biographical character as a somnambulist activated by external energies adds a layer of complexity. Notably, a similar approach has been observed in the film "Miles Ahead," where the portrayal of Miles Davis's life challenges traditional biopic norms by emphasizing dualism and "otherness" within the artistic journey. The movie also includes a pivotal early interview in which Davis is shown as condescending and ignorant, highlighting the day's racial and cultural conflicts. 'Miles Ahead' allows fans to interact critically with the nuanced aspects of Davis's persona by presenting his imperfections, which eventually cultivates a more nuanced and authentic picture of the man behind the music. Although 'Miles Ahead' provides a distinct perspective on Miles Davis's life, it deviates from the traditional biographical story. The movie focuses more on examining Davis's shortcomings and difficulties than on going into great detail about his achievements and shortcomings. Although Davis was a complicated and challenging person, the film prefers to highlight his flaws rather than his musical brilliance and cultural influence. Focusing on his flaws can shift away the emphasis from a more impartial representation, resulting in a lost chance to make a genuinely fantastic movie on this iconic musician. It begs the issue of whether a more balanced portrayal of Davis's virtues and faults could have resulted in a more complex and poignant picture of the actor. Some viewers may find that the film's emphasis on Davis's darker sides overshadows the story of his revolutionary impact on jazz and American music, leaving an unrealized opportunity for a more thorough examination of his life and legacy. Although 'Miles Ahead' skillfully navigates the difficult seas of Miles Davis's life, it sometimes overlooks essential aspects, including his ties with his family, particularly his children. Even though the movie explores Davis's creative genius and turbulent personal life, it tends to focus more on his image's 'gangster-like' aspects. The story may have benefited from more depth from Davis's family's complex dynamics, especially his complicated connections with his kids. This absence highlights the movie's tendency toward a narrowly focused investigation of Davis's shortcomings instead of a thorough analysis of his life. Still, 'Miles Ahead' is a cultural landmark that guarantees that even people unfamiliar with jazz will come across the famed yet mysterious Miles Davis. A new generation is introduced to the magnificence and destructiveness that marked Davis through Don Cheadle's portrayal in this semi-fictional biopic, providing a window into the enduring legacy of a musical hero.

Rolling Stone reporter Dave Braden arrives to interview the reclusive Davis and becomes his accomplice in a frantic search for the tape of Miles's covert recording session. The tape has been taken by a dishonest record company executive who wishes to release new Miles music. However,

none of that took place in real life. In one of the interviews, the actor who plays Dave Braden confirms that his character is fictional and not based on someone in real life. Ewan McGregor is one of the most renowned performers of his generation, having reached the pinnacles of the film business throughout a 25-year career.⁵⁰ Scottish actor McGregor, who possesses extraordinary skill, has successfully negotiated the complicated world of film, demonstrating a range of roles that bear witness to his adaptability. Notably, he irrevocably altered popular culture by playing the legendary Obi-Wan Kenobi in the first three Star Wars episodes. Despite the flash and glamour of Hollywood, McGregor's talent is evident in his delicate performances, characterized by a profundity that connects deeply with viewers.

“Ewan McGregor: No, he was entirely invented, I think. I mean, I'm sure Don must have had maybe some people in mind when he was writing. I don't know. We sort of invented him, I guess. It wasn't based, as far as I know, on anyone in particular. He's not really a Rolling Stone journalist as he claims to be, so I don't think he's based as far as I know on anyone”⁵¹.

Not only was Braden not associated with Rolling Stone, but he and the effort to recover the secret tapes were nonexistent. However, one or two tape recordings were taken from Davis, according to *The New Yorker*. Regarding the above-mentioned recording, the one that an agent seeking favor with Columbia was prepared to murder (in "Miles Ahead"), there were, two from 1978. The recording bears some indirect credit to Eleana Steinberg, the songwriter. While Davis was a visitor at her Connecticut home for several months, an inspiration for music came to her suddenly and unintentionally. After recording a cassette tape in Connecticut with Larry Coryell and other musicians, Davis decided to bring the spontaneous ensemble to Manhattan to record at Columbia's studio. Executives from the corporation were there, and at the time, the meeting was extensively covered in the media. Davis offered Coryell the Connecticut recording, but Coryell chose not to release the music performed there, despite the fact that it was allegedly recorded in numerous takes of a single piece and never published commercially. Steinberg and two other players, the bassist T. M. Stevens and the keyboardist George Pavlis, have talked about how the tale of those two sessions

⁵⁰ IMDB. “*Mini biography of Ewan McGregor.*”, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000191/bio/?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm#mini_bio Accessed 06 December 2023.

⁵¹ Kaye, Don. "Ewan McGregor Talks Miles Ahead & Obi-Wan Kenobi Spinoff Film." *ScreenRant*, 5 Apr. 2016, <https://screenrant.com/miles-ahead-ewan-mcgregor-interview/>. Accessed 09 November 2023.

could make a fantastic film on its own.⁵² One of the more peculiar features of *Miles Ahead* is its structure, which Cheadle designed to resemble a freeform jazz piece by Davis rather than a conventional “he was born, he did this and that, he died” biopic. Ewan McGregor portrays the Rolling Stone reporter as Miles Davis’s cinematic counterpoint. This character contrasts with Davis’s innovative and unorthodox approach to jazz, representing the primarily white mainstream perception. The relationship between the two characters highlights the difficulties and conflicts that Davis encountered navigating a predominantly white music industry and adds levels of depth to the story. The Rolling Stone reporter’s persona also serves as an expositional narrative technique. The audience learns about Davis’s life, work, and challenges through the exchanges between Davis and the reporter. The audience is given a platform to explore the intricacies of the jazz legend’s world as the reporter acts as a conduit for revealing Davis’s many facets. One could see Cheadle’s choice to introduce a white Rolling Stone reporter as a critique of racial representation in Hollywood. By purposefully including a character who follows conventional wisdom, Cheadle might draw attention to the industry’s past tendency to follow predetermined conventions. The character’s existence gives the film’s examination of racial dynamics in the music business during Davis’s period an additional level of subtext. It is also possible to view the Rolling Stone reporter as a metaphor for Davis’s dealings with the media in general. The movie might examine Davis’s complicated relationship with reporters and their efforts to describe and classify his music through this character. The conflict that arises between Davis and the reporter turns into a tiny example of the more considerable challenges Davis encountered in preserving his creative independence and defying classification.⁵³ Miles Davis had a close companion throughout his years of isolation from the media and music industry a journalist as mentioned in multiple articles. This person is recognized as jazz historian and editor Eric Nisenson, who is best known for writing three biographies of Miles Davis. It seems that Dave Barden's portrayal of Davis's years of solitude may have drawn influence from Nisenson's involvement in Davis's life.⁵⁴

⁵² Brody, Richard. "Kind of Clichéd: How the Miles Davis Movie Could Have Been Better." *The New Yorker*, 31 Mar. 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/kind-of-cliched-how-the-miles-davis-movie-could-have-been-better>. Accessed 12 November 2023.

⁵³ Ebiri, Bilge. "Every Ewan McGregor Movie Role, Ranked Worst to Best." *Rolling Stone*, 8 Nov. 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-lists/ewan-mcgregor-movies-best-to-worst-707467/>. Accessed 19 November 2023

⁵⁴ Nisenson, Eric. "Author of *Open Sky: Sonny Rollins and His World of Improvisation*." *Jerry Jazz Musician*, 29 Nov. 2001, <https://www.jerryjazzmusician.com/eric-nisenson-author-of-open-sky-sonny-rollins-and-his-world-of-improvisation/>. Accessed 22 November 2023.

3.1 Narrative style of the movie

“Miles Ahead” offers a distinctive examination of jazz great Miles Davis within the context of cinematic tributes to musical idols. The film, helmed by Don Cheadle and stars him, deviates from traditional biopics by adopting a narrative structure reflecting Davis’s music’s spontaneous spirit. When we examine the subtleties of the film’s narrative, it becomes clear that “Miles Ahead” is a dynamic and rhythmic depiction that reflects the complex and always-changing aspects of Davis’s artistic vision rather than a straightforward account of the musician’s life. “Take an attitude when telling a story if you are going to do it.” A cliché from Don Cheadle’s reinvented Miles Davis serves as his guide to finishing a movie on the iconoclast’s turbulent existence. White lies and half-truths dominate the imaginary story, but when the dust settles and the music turns up, the artwork and the artist behind it are all that count. Cheadle’s directorial debut, arguably the first impressionist biopic, abstracts life instead of tediously checking boxes on a timeline.⁵⁵ “Miles Ahead” stands out for breaking away from the conventional cradle-to-grave biographical format. The movie chooses a non-linear narrative over a chronological timeline, focusing on some thematically significant episodes in Davis’s life. This structural decision translates Davis’s innovative storytelling technique and is consistent with his proclivity for shattering musical conventions⁵⁶. The viewer is urged to feel Davis’s life’s good and bad moments with an immersive sharpness as they follow the film’s temporal shifts. In musical hero biopics, “Miles Ahead” exemplifies creativity and genuineness. The film skillfully creates a vivid and authentic image of the renowned Miles Davis, presenting to the audience every known facet of his life, even if it adopts a highly fictitious narrative structure. The incredible acting talent of Don Cheadle, who experiences a physical metamorphosis that transforms him into a renowned jazz musician, is essential to the film’s success. Every element of Cheadle’s performance, from the precisely reconstructed clothes to the skillfully done hair, demonstrates his attention to detail. However, the most noticeable change is in the subtleties of his voice. We are not just watching Cheadle as viewers but experiencing Miles Davis firsthand and sensing his essence on television. In the film, Davis, renowned for his unmatched cool style and persona, is brought back to life with a gangster-like demeanor that never detracts from his incredible musical ability. The film deftly handles the difficult task of condensing Davis’s enormous life into a limited amount of cinematic space. Without the limitations of a cradle-to-grave biopic, the film’s focus on a particular era lets viewers delve deeply into Davis’s character. This purposeful decision conveys the full scope of Davis’s brilliance and recognizes that no film could

⁵⁵ Brooks, Jordan. "Review: Don Cheadle’s ‘Miles Ahead’." *Vague Visages*, 27 Apr. 2016, <https://vaguevisages.com/2016/04/27/review-don-cheadles-miles-ahead/>. Accessed 9 November 2023.

encompass all of his skills and accomplishments. Documentaries on him are available for anyone who wishes to learn more about him or seeks factual information. Immersed in “Miles Ahead,” we are encouraged to observe the meeting point of creativity and authenticity, where fact and fiction work together to create an assemblage of a film that honors a legendary musician. Like Davis’s improvised compositions, the movie pushes the envelope and leaves a lasting impression on how artistic brilliance is portrayed in biographical filmmaking. “Even the sky ain’t the limit” is an inspiring remark that perfectly captures the essence of Miles Davis and is uttered as the film starts. Don Cheadle, a gifted actor, not only impersonates Davis physically but also perfectly catches the spirit of his vocal presence, delivering these powerful and prophetic lines in Davis’s voice. This moving preface establishes the tone for an immersive movie experience that breaks down barriers and questions stereotypes. The movie puts us into an interview scene where Davis is seated, and his trademark red trumpet is by his side. Davis uses the interview as a canvas to express his aggressive, rebellious attitude. Every inquiry is greeted with a pointed stare and an almost impolite directness. This facet of Davis’s character is subtly shown in the story, highlighting his unrepentant attitude. The interviewer refers to Davis’s music as jazz, a term that Davis fiercely opposes, in one particularly striking moment. Davis corrects him sharply, saying,

“Do not call it jazz. It is some made-up words trying to box somebody in. Do not call my music jazz.”



Figure 10: Miles Davis giving in his iconic fashion style and red trumpet which resembles the original interview very precisely.

This defiance of accepted categorization turns into an intense statement of artistic individuality. In this interview, Davis, renowned for his inventiveness and contempt for classification, challenges the

terminology that attempts to limit his art and himself. "Miles Ahead" creates a compelling first impression of Davis's persona in this first scene by portraying him as a rebellious musician unafraid to challenge conventional norms. The movie allows us to see the depth of Davis's character, as the boldness of his speech and the tones of his trumpet combine to create a cinematic symphony that is both elegant and rebellious. The film "Miles Ahead" sets the tone for an engrossing journey right from the start with the inspirational remark, "Even the sky ain't the limit," uttered by Miles Davis himself. The movie deftly moves from this inspirational statement into an interview scene, where Don Cheadle's rawly intense portrayal of Davis answers questions with a defiance that establishes the tone for the subsequent cinematic examination. The movie immediately plunges the viewer into a suspenseful vehicle chase scene that appears to transcend conventional narrative conventions after leaving the private setting of the interview. Here, Davis is negotiating the curves in the road and, in a symbolic sense, striving to keep his music alive. The sudden change in tone from the reflective conversation to the fast-paced chaos of the automobile chase might represent the turbulent path of Davis's music career during the five years he did not release any music. In the interview, Davis's character admits, "I did not have anything to say." This acknowledgment becomes a crucial lens through which we see the story as it develops. The abrupt change to the scene where Davis is chasing a car can be seen as a metaphor for his inner turmoil and his never-ending quest for inspiration to produce new music and preserve his artistic identity. The automobile chase's haste parallels Davis's psyche, where he struggles to find his voice again after those five years of silence. The mysterious fusion of action and interview in "Miles Ahead" skillfully conveys the ups and downs of Davis's artistic development. With its masterful blending of the opposing notes of contemplation and instability, the movie transforms into a cinematic symphony that invites viewers to see the complex interplay between an artist's solitude and the outside obstacles that determine his fate. As we set out on this cinematic journey, the movie goes beyond traditional narrative structure, reflecting the improvisational nature of Miles Davis.

3.2 Addiction and solitude

In addition to honoring Miles Davis's unmatched musical brilliance, "Miles Ahead" examines the musician's imperfections, including his health problems and turbulent relationships. With skill, the narrative lifts the veil from Davis's life and illuminates the dark side of his quick ascent to prominence in the jazz world. One central focus of the film is Davis's battle with drug addiction and other health issues, a stark reminder of the often tumultuous journey that accompanies artistic brilliance. The narrative does not shy away from portraying the impact of these struggles, illustrating how the influence of drugs alters Davis's behavior, especially in his relationship with his wife, the highly successful black dancer Frances. Frances becomes a pivotal character in Davis's life, a source of encouragement and motivation. However, as the movie goes on, we see an excruciating change. Under the influence of drugs, Davis starts mistreating Frances, which is a sharp contrast to how important she is to him. The terrible effects of substance misuse on relationships and, more generally, on the people involved are highlighted by this choice of narrative. By keeping a close eye on reality, the movie becomes a warning about another gifted person falling to the devastation of narcotics. We watch as Davis's once-famous career slowly comes apart as he gradually slips into a pattern of abuse and rudeness. The image of Davis alone in a large home is a moving metaphor that emphasizes the loneliness and isolation that come with following his disastrous course.



Figure 11: *Miles Davis alone in his big house.*

"Miles Ahead" is more than just a celebration of musical ability in examining Davis's struggles; it is a narrative tapestry that ties the highs and lows of brilliance and tragedy together. The film presents a nuanced and raw portrait of a musical icon battling the pinnacles of triumph and the depths of

personal sorrow, forcing us to confront the emotional cost of artistic brilliance. As they leave the Columbia Studios, Miles hides in silence and refuses to interact with Barden. Miles's issues with addiction are further explored in a scenario that is especially poignant and heartbreaking. At this moment, he can be seen taking cocaine straight off the cover of one of his albums, which features an image of Frances. This moment has powerful visual symbolism that serves as a sobering reminder of the happiness that may have been experienced with Frances. It turns into a threatening depiction of the decisions addiction drives people to make, showing how the devastating influence of narcotics may corrupt and overshadow seemingly innocent moments of happiness. The turning point occurs when Barden discloses the availability of cocaine to break through Miles's seclusion. This tense scenario highlights the strong hold that addiction has over a person, serving as a microcosm of Miles's struggles within. In a later scene, Miles and Barden's search for cocaine turns into a dreadful evaluation of the extremes to which addiction can push a person. The movie creates a moving scene when Miles, turning down the dealer's offer to autograph one of his records, realizes that his music has more intrinsic value than transient narcotics. The movie presents the harsh reality of addiction's power. However, The significance of these scenes resides in their capacity to accurately depict the challenges encountered by people who are suffering from addiction, regardless of the particular characters or performers who are included. "Miles Ahead" challenges audiences to consider the larger story of the human cost of substance usage, especially concerning artistic genius, by concentrating on these emotional moments. The movie becomes a compelling examination of the vulnerabilities of genius and the difficulties in overcoming addiction's alluring pull. In the end, Miles gives in to the pull of cocaine and exchanges his signature for narcotics.

3.3 The Unjust Police Incident in “Miles Ahead”

“Miles Ahead” a film that skillfully combines fictionalized scenarios with peeks into the most memorable and successful moments of the renowned Miles Davis, creates a stunning cinematic tapestry. Between his quintet’s music comes a powerful illustration of the hard reality that Black people in the United States face, based on a terrifying police encounter that is reminiscent of a real-life event that is forever recorded in history. After one of his shows, he assists one white woman in getting to the taxi. However, when a New York City police officer approaches, this seemingly routine event turns sinister. As Davis takes a cigarette break and declares his right to be in this area, the conversation becomes disturbing. In a terrifying discussion, a confident Miles Davis says, “I am Miles Davis,” a statement that would garner respect and recognition. Nevertheless, the cop’s disrespectful answer exposes the commonly held racial prejudices of the day. He responds, “I don’t care who you are, you have to move,” a powerful reminder that even an influential person like Davis is not protected from the humiliating experiences that Black people go through.



Figure 12: Arrestment of Miles Davis in the police station after police officers beat him up .

The scene quickly and brutally escalates. Miles Davis is beaten and arrested by a police officer whom other white detectives support after threats of arrest turn violent. This horrific event, which occurred in 1959 amid the powerful currents of segregation in American society, was not the product of the imagination of a film; it made headlines and was captured in pictures showing Davis’s arrest and bloody garments. A few days before the August 25 tragedy, he released a new

album titled “Kind of Blue,” and it was going to be the best-selling jazz album ever.⁵⁷ The cruelty displayed in this scenario is a stark critique of the institutionalized racism that pervaded law enforcement in that period. Davis’s talent and notoriety are no defense against the unbridled power of racial prejudice. The moving portrayal of an actual police incident in “Miles Ahead” acts as a microcosm of the more significant challenges Black people confront in an inequitable society. The video powerfully demonstrates how racial prejudice can overshadow one’s humanity, even in the face of artistic brilliance and cultural significance. The sequence proves the film’s dedication to presenting the brutal truths of institutional racism without mercy, standing in sharp contrast to the musical genius that characterizes a large portion of Davis’s life. By applying this perspective, “Miles Ahead” transforms from a biopic into a potent reflection on the relationship between race, identity, and the quest for artistic expression in a divided American society. Miles Davis narrates the events of this story in the film “American Masters Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool,” directed by Stanley Nelson.

“I just looked at his face real straight and hard, and I did not move. From out of nowhere, and this white detective runs in and bam! Hits me on the head. I never saw him coming.” Miles Davis was taken to the police station with a bloodied face. “I would have expected this kind of *** back in East St. Louis but not here in New York City, which is supposed to be the slickest, hippest city in the world.”⁵⁸

Although the historical record can provide valuable insights into the professional background of the police officer implicated in the Miles Davis incident, it can be difficult to delve into the officer’s inner motives or emotions. Articles celebrating the officer’s career might emphasize the good points, possibly omitting or underreporting information about unpleasant interactions. The situation quickly and brutally escalates. Miles Davis is beaten and arrested by a police officer whom other white detectives join after threats of arrest turn violent. The brutality displayed in this scene is a stark critique of the institutionalized racism that pervaded law enforcement at that time. Davis’s talent and notoriety are no defense against the unbridled power of racial prejudice. The lack of specific information about the officer’s motivations in more recent articles may indicate an overall tendency in that era to minimize or leave out uncomfortable parts of interactions between law enforcement. Furthermore, it’s possible that the officer’s personal opinions have not been widely reported or discussed in public. We must approach these historical events with a knowledge of the institutionalized racism that characterized 1950s American culture. Examining the officer’s

⁵⁷ Schewe, Eric. "Why Miles Davis's 'Kind of Blue' Is So Beloved." *Daily JSTOR*, 21 Apr. 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/why-miles-daviss-kind-of-blue-is-so-beloved/>. Accessed 17 November 2023.

⁵⁸ Nelson Jr, Stanley. “Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool.” *PBS American Masters television series*, 2019.

motivations necessitates navigating the intricate interactions between societal norms, institutional biases, and personal viewpoints all of which played a role in the regrettable event involving Miles Davis. The lack of specific information about the officer's motivations in more recent articles may indicate a more significant trend in that era to minimize or leave out uncomfortable parts of interactions between law enforcement. Furthermore, it is possible that the officer's personal opinions have not been widely reported or discussed in public. The arresting police incident involving Miles Davis is depicted in "Miles Ahead" not only as a snapshot of a bygone era but also as a lasting testament to the ongoing threat of systemic oppression and police brutality. In NPR article Andrew Lapin compares Miles Ahead movie to another jazz movie Born To Blue . He mentions that Miles Ahead is a great companion piece to Born to be Blue, the very recent adventurous and, at times, equally negligent Chet Baker sort of biopic. In Miles Ahead movie in a graphic (and factual) scene, we witness club star Davis being attacked and detained on the sidewalk after leading a white woman outside. In Blue, we saw Ethan Hawke's Baker resurrect his career onstage at the New York club Birdland. He also adds that " Truly, this is a golden age for jazz films".⁵⁹

The remark made by jazz trumpeter Christian Scott a Tunde Adjuah during an NPR Tiny Desk session, which draws parallels to modern experiences, rings hauntingly true. His composition effectively captures his personal experience of an extrajudicial police attack, illuminating the unsettling continuity of a story that artists such as Davis, Hendrix, Mingus, and Coltrane struggled with a story marked with the ominous threat of authority. Based in the streets of New Orleans, Scott's horrific story reflects the injustices that Davis endured decades prior.⁶⁰The familiarity of these stories highlights a depressing reality: the ghost of police brutality that haunted jazz heroes lives on, an unwavering force that lives on beyond time. Through the shadow of oppression, these musical greats achieved unmatched greatness, their melodies resounding with defiance in the face of institutional injustice. Furthermore, this alarming story is further complicated by the officers' lack of accountability for Davis's arrest. The years-long echoes of impunity serve as a sobering reminder that justice is still elusive and that the structural problems that made such incidents possible still exist. The connection between music and social struggle is made clear in the notes that close this subchapter. Miles Davis, renowned for his musical brilliance, rises above the status of a mere artistic icon to become a symbol of perseverance in the face of prejudice. We must recognize

⁵⁹ Lapin, Andrew. "When is Biopic Not A Biopic?When Don Cheadle Meets Miles Davis." *NPR*, 1 Apr. 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/01/472258524/when-is-a-biopic-not-a-biopic-when-don-cheadle-meets-miles-davis>. Accessed 10 December 2023.

⁶⁰ "The Legacy of Miles Davis's Arrest." *YouTube*, uploaded by Neely, Adam, 4 Jun. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sapc6BSxIRI&ab_channel=AdamNeely.

the enduring resonance of these narratives and the pressing need for societal introspection and change as we consider how Davis's encounter with law enforcement was portrayed in the film. Even though they have reached melodic transcendence, jazz heroes constantly remind us that the fight against oppression still needs our attention and combined strength. In its subtle depiction of Miles Davis's life, "Miles Ahead" expertly focuses on an essential but frequently overlooked aspect: the enduring threat of racial injustice. Even though the movie purposefully chooses a selective narrative, leaving out several factual details from Davis's life, it does an excellent job of depicting the terrifying police incident. The cinematographic replication of this scene demonstrates the film's commitment to emotional resonance and historical accuracy. The scene has a haunting authenticity because of the painstaking attention to detail, which includes the period-specific setting and the unvarnished and intense performances. Through their decision to shed light on this significant chapter, the filmmakers can leave a lasting impression on Miles Davis's biography, forcing viewers to face the complex realities entwined with his artistic journey.

3.4 Visual Aesthetics

The movie effectively staples together an ensemble of temporal aesthetics and takes viewers through Miles Davis's life at various times. The trip started in 1975; the story deftly reveals different points in Davis's colorful past by teasing apart the strands of time. What shows up is a complex combination of memory and reality, reflecting the disorientation that Davis frequently felt when high.



Figure 13: *Davis sees flashback of Frances in during the boxing match.*

The boundaries between reality and memory are blurred in flashbacks, especially those that feature Frances, because they move so fluidly between the real and the imagined. Like Davis, the audience is submerged in this temporal tension and is left to question the accuracy of each scene. The movie delicately captures the musical moments in Davis's life amid this temporal odyssey, from private practice sessions with his band to the electrifying intensity of legendary performances. The film's success is primarily due to its mastery of timing and accurate portrayal of Miles Davis's voice and mannerisms, consistently producing a convincing embodiment of the jazz legend's signature aura. By carefully arranging the temporal and musical elements, the movie allows viewers to walk through Davis's memory maze, making it difficult to distinguish between the real world and the ghosts of a bygone era. The film's opening sequences demonstrate diligent attention to historical aesthetics as Miles Davis, as he is portrayed in 1975, strikes a convincing pose in an iconic look. The visual authenticity is noteworthy, from the delicately replicated Davis's fashion choices to the well-coiffed hair. The story explores Davis's inner world and clarifies his desire for original music.

This wish is realized in a sincere appeal to a radio host for the switching music "Solea" from the well-known "Sketches of Spain" album. The radio host answers with unwavering politeness despite Davis's blunt manner, a subtle acknowledgment of the great respect that is shown to Davis and his musical legacy⁶¹. These seemingly insignificant details give the character portrayal a realistic depth by acting as profound strokes of paint. Among the fascinating aspects of Miles Davis's character are his association with boxing and the late champion Sugar Ray Robinson's impact on his life and adversities. Throughout his final ten years, Davis kept up a strict exercise regimen with the help of a personal trainer, going to boxing gyms like Silverman's in Harlem and Gleason's in the Bronx. When considering Davis's journey, the symbolic meaning of these locations where the legendary Sugar Ray Robinson refined his skills becomes profoundly evident. In Davis's own words, the impact is eloquently conveyed as he credits Sugar Ray with inspiring him to overcome his heroin addiction. "In 1954 it was the most important thing in my life besides music. I found myself even acting like him, you know, everything. Even taking on his arrogant attitude." Sugar Ray was "sharp as a tack," but when in the ring "he was serious, all business."⁶²



Figure 14: Miles Davis and Dave Barden doing box in the basement of Davis's house.

⁶¹ Richardson, Mark. "Album 'Sketches of Spain': Legacy Edition." *Pitchfork*, 5 Jun. 2009, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13088-sketches-of-spain-legacy-edition/>. Accessed 12 October 2023.

⁶² *The Albion Beatnik Bookstore*. "Miles, Boxing & Jack Johnson." 31 Jul. 2016, <https://www.albionbeatnik.co.uk/2016/07/31/miles-and-jack-johnson/>. Accessed 20 November 2023.

Beyond just physical training, the parallels continue; Davis discovered that he was adopting Robinson's mannerisms and outlook, underscoring the champion's impact on his exercise routine and overall outlook on life. Davis's distinctions are deeply metaphorically represented by Sugar Ray's sharpness outside the ring and his unwavering seriousness within, highlighting the complex relationship between inspiration, personal struggles, and the pursuit of artistic greatness. Filmmakers draw inspiration from paintings to shape the visual language of their films, evident in instances like the incorporation of Edward Hopper's style in "Pennies from Heaven," Caravaggio's chiaroscuro technique in the biopic "Caravaggio," and the emulation of van Gogh's aesthetic in Robert Altman's "Vincent and Theo." However, in the biopic of Miles Davis, there appears to be an additional layer, suggesting an attempt to showcase Miles not only as a successful musician but also as a skilled painter. His paintings, often influenced by African American cultural aesthetics, become a noteworthy aspect explored by filmmakers in portraying his multifaceted artistic identity. (Source: Tom Brown & Ben Vidal, "The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture," Routledge, December 17, 2013) Painting reveals a lesser-known aspect of Davis's creative expression, and boxing engagements hint at the subtleties hidden beneath the surface. When Miles Davis was well into his fifties, he started painting and sketching as a different artistic expression to pass the time when he was not performing in the early 1980s. As can be seen above, the artwork he produced exhibits a unique style that is reminiscent of African tribal art as well as the geometric, vibrant aesthetic used by artists such as Pablo Picasso and Kandinsky.

"It keeps my mind occupied with something positive when not playing music. I get obsessed with painting just like with music and everything else I care about."

— The Autobiography of Miles Davis (1989)

Because so few of Miles Davis's works were shown during his lifetime, even with their distinct visual style and individuality, his artwork went unnoticed for a while. The Miles Davis Estate has collaborated with galleries, museums, and individual purchasers to compile an exhaustive collection of the artist's creations since his passing in 1991⁶³. Every visual element, the way he applies paint and the intensity of his gaze during a match, adds to the complex portrayal of a musical prodigy reflecting. Combining meticulously recreated historical aesthetics with factually based details, this movie takes viewers into Miles Davis's life's nooks and crannies, illuminating the intersection of his genuineness and artistry in a visually compelling story.

⁶³ "Did you know Miles Davis was also a painter?." *American Master*, 25 Feb. 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/did-you-know-miles-davis-was-also-a-painter/13526/>. Accessed 02 December 2023.



Figure 15: Scene from the movie where Davis is painting.

Richard Brody mentions in his review of Miles Ahead movie that it is not correct to pay too much attention to facts in the movie what is important is the story telling what or how director tells the story. He mentions:

“Fact checking a movie that’s based on a real and famous person and a true story is only one and not the most significant way to criticize it. The truth may often be stranger than fiction, but the point is usually less clear, and a movie director with insight into character and a comprehensive worldview can transform true stories into better ones—albeit not without risk. One of the revelations of interviewing artists about their activities is the discovery that their transformative powers often carry over into their own versions of their lives. A tale told by an accomplished writer or filmmaker is likely to shear off many piquant details and bend some lines to make them meet up in meaningful ways. When the same incident is described by a participant of more modest narrative talents, it’s usually filled with a range of details and a spray of loose ends that may pique the imagination but don’t bear much dramatic shape or make a sharpened intellectual or moral point”⁶⁴.

The cinematic finesse in the lift scene at Columbia Studios in “Miles Ahead” demonstrates the director’s ability to create a sensory journey through time. The scene switches to a stage softly lit by spotlights as Davis stands in the lift. Davis’s contemplation is expertly captured through visual storytelling, making the audience feel as though they are part of his ambivalence, thanks to the camera’s fluidity. The teleportation to a memory that follows, in which Davis appears on stage

⁶⁴ Brody, Richard. "Kind of Clichéd: How the Miles Davis Movie Could Have Been Better." *The New Yorker*, 31 Mar. 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/kind-of-cliched-how-the-miles-davis-movie-could-have-been-better> Accessed 12 November 2023.

wearing a suit, builds to a stunning visual finale. The audience is submerged in the unique atmosphere of a bygone era thanks to the diligent attention to lighting and scene quality. In addition to adding to the aesthetic appeal, the subtle play of light also acts as a temporal bridge, bringing viewers back in time. This thoughtful arranging of lighting effects becomes a storytelling tool that fosters nostalgia and makes it possible to connect with the historical setting on a deeper level. In addition to capturing the spirit of the time, the film allows viewers to identify with Davis as he makes his way through the unknowns of his own story by coordinating the visual components with his journey. This nuanced visual interplay highlights the film's dedication to accurately depicting Miles Davis's nuanced and moving journey through time while also enhancing the storytelling and emotional engagement of the audience.

3.5 Cinematography and Artistic Interpretation

“Miles Ahead” is a visual adventure that not only brings jazz music back to life but also uses a visual language that deftly interweaves itself into the story of Miles Davis. The artistic interpretation and cinematography work together like paintbrush strokes on a canvas, bringing to life the historical events, the subtleties of Davis’s mental state, and the poignant rhythm of his music. A heading visual metaphor for Miles Davis introspective journey through the highs and lows of his musical career is created in the scene in the lift where he looks at the album covers on the walls. His hit albums, “Sketches of Spain” and “Someday My Prince Will Come,” combined with those of other legendary musicians like Bob Dylan, weave a tapestry of success in the music business⁶⁵.



Figure 16: *Davis in the elevator of Columbia studios.*

Davis released “Someday My Prince Will Come” on December 11, 1961. The record is a genuine, profound, and beautiful expression of the artist’s love for his former wife, the actress and dancer Frances Taylor Davis. It is named after its opening, titular composition, a performance of the well-known song from Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Davis started asking Columbia Records to feature Black women as the main characters on his album cover with the release of “Someday My Prince Will Come.” According to Davis’s autobiography,

⁶⁵ Kohn, Eric. "NYFF Review: Don Cheadle’s ‘Miles Ahead’ Isn’t Really a Miles Davis Biopic." *Indiewire*, 10 Oct. 2015, <https://www.indiewire.com/criticism/culture/nyff-review-don-cheadles-miles-ahead-isnt-really-a-miles-davis-biopic-56803/>. Accessed 02 November 2023.

I started demanding that Columbia use Black women on my album covers on “Someday My Prince Will Come.” So, I was able to put Frances on “Someday My Prince Will Come.” It was my album, and I was Frances’ prince⁶⁶.

Miles Davis made a significant and lasting statement when he asked to have a photo of his wife, Frances, on the album cover. Beyond personal portrayal, Davis was actively advocating for Black women by using his platform to use music to project their beauty. This thoughtful selection becomes a potent form of social commentary that goes beyond the traditional bounds of album artwork. In a society where Black women’s representation was frequently marginalized, Davis fought against conventional wisdom. He promoted a narrative that emphasized the value and beauty of Black women by prominently featuring Frances. Davis made an artistic choice that made his albums uniquely his own, adding to a more significant cultural dialogue about diversity, representation, and appreciating beauty in all things. Davis looks at these covers with a melancholy contemplation that seems almost nostalgic. The cover adds a further level of complexity, which features his former wife, Frances, as a symbol of his personal life and the connections between his relationships and creative pursuits. In contrast to the scene at the film’s beginning, which shows him as creatively dormant, the wistful expression suggests that he is aware of the happiness and success he once enjoyed. This scene serves as a reminder of the losses and sacrifices that Davis has made in addition to his musical achievements, and it also becomes a visual commentary on his ability to carve out a niche for himself among legendary artists. It skillfully conveys the complexity of Davis’s emotional terrain and the complex relationship between his prior successes and the creative void he is currently navigating. The change from the lift to the stage visually represents Miles Davis’s inner journey and deep bond with his music. The unpredictability of Davis’s movements as he pushes open the lift door is a metaphor for the complexity of his relationship with his creative work. The door hesitating at opening represents his cautious forays into the unknown and the difficulties he encountered stepping back into the spotlight following a period of artistic inactivity. Davis’s hesitant approach to the door in this transition scene turns into a doorway, symbolizing his inner struggles and uncertainties. The stage to which he is carried with such ease is a real place and a metaphorical arena where his identity and musical abilities are revealed. The way the unsure door opens, and the change to the stage are juxtaposed, highlighting how his journey has transformed him, taking him from uncertainty and hesitation to the meaningful and expressive performance stage. With visual storytelling, Davis’s inner conflicts are brought to life, allowing his complex feelings to be seen as he considers returning to the music industry. The smooth transition

⁶⁶ Bianchi, Giulia. "Miles Davis’s ‘Someday My Prince Will Come’ Turns 60. Anniversary Retrospective." *Albumism*, 10 Dec. 2021, <https://albumism.com/features/miles-davis-someday-my-prince-will-come-turns-60-anniversary-retrospective>. Accessed 19 October 2023

becomes a potent cinematic tool, allowing viewers to partake in Davis's artistic comeback's transformative and emotional elements. The audience's applause and Miles Davis's assured performance on stage highlight a crucial scene in the movie. The graphic representation of Davis's early years shows a clear evolution in his style and presentation as the story moves fluidly back in time. Davis is shown in this retrospective view sporting a sharply tailored blue suit, a fashion statement that fits in with the formal and classical aesthetics of the time. Davis made a conscious effort to project an air of significance and importance, as evidenced by the thoughtful attention to detail, including the formal haircut and elegant clothing. This painstaking visual depiction demonstrates the filmmakers' dedication to authenticity as it blends in seamlessly with old photos of Davis from that era. Davis's shrewd and refined look turns into a visual language that expresses the seriousness and weight of his music and approach to it. The film documents the development of Davis's aesthetic. It offers a visual commentary on the fluidity of his artistic identity by contrasting his self-assured and modern stage performance with his earlier, more formal, and classical style. This subtle depiction highlights the relationship between Davis's visual presentation and the development of his musical expression, providing the audience with a thorough understanding of the complex character of the renowned trumpet player. Miles Davis's story is intricately woven in "Miles Ahead" through flashbacks, which combine poignant memories, particularly those involving Frances and his musical journey. One such evocative flashback unfolds amid the fictionalized scenes where Davis embarks on a mission to safeguard his records in a boxing match. In this flashback, the spectator is taken to a compelling and intensely emotional time in Davis and Frances's relationship. The main focus of the scene is Davis's violent jealousy, which is created by his misgivings about Frances's dating someone else. Holding her hand, Davis requests Frances to tell him where this alleged rival is. His violent intent emphasizes how deeply troubled he is emotionally. As the tension builds, Frances, who is terrified, leaves the scene, leaving Davis by himself with his intense suspicion that there is an intruder.

Viewers are given a multi-layered understanding of Davis's struggles through the interplay between the fictionalized narrative and these intense flashbacks, which combine elements of love, jealousy, and the psychological effects of substance abuse. Through the poignant use of memories, the audience is given access to the legendary musician's complex psyche, revealing the highs and lows of his musical career and the nuanced details of his personal life. These "Miles Ahead" flashbacks are moving windows into the complex layers of Miles Davis's life, providing a nuanced examination of his musical career and the emotional environment he traversed through his relationships, most notably with Frances. By contrasting these intensely personal memories with fictionalized scenes, the creator crafts a compelling narrative that enables readers to understand the complexity of Davis's experiences. These flashbacks give Davis's decisions and actions context by

serving as emotional anchors. They act as poignant reminders of his life's real, human dimensions amid the chaotic fictionalized elements. The presence of Frances in these recollections underscores the lasting influence of their relationship on Davis's psychological welfare by adding a level of closeness. "Miles Ahead" honors the complex tapestry of Davis's personal life and celebrates his musical brilliance through the deft weaving of memories with the main story. The audience is allowed to observe a renowned artist's complex and multifaceted journey, complete with passion, suffering, and the enduring impact of interpersonal relationships, thanks to flashbacks as a narrative device beyond simple storytelling. These flashbacks give Davis's decisions and actions context by serving as emotional anchors. They act as poignant reminders of the real, human dimensions of his life amid the chaotic fictionalized elements. The presence of Frances in these recollections underscores the lasting influence of their relationship on Davis's psychological welfare by adding a level of closeness. "Miles Ahead" honors the complex variety of Davis's personal life and celebrates his musical brilliance through the deft weaving of memories with the main story. The audience is allowed to observe a renowned artist's complex and multifaceted journey, complete with passion, suffering, and the enduring impact of interpersonal relationships, thanks to flashbacks as a narrative device beyond simple storytelling.

3.6 Music in Miles Ahead

In fact, “Miles Ahead” seamlessly integrates the story with Miles Davis’s musical career, guaranteeing that his life and music are inextricably linked throughout the movie. A moving visual metaphor for the restricted space where Davis’s musical creativity thrived is the basement where his recording studio is shown. An intense connection to Davis’s artistic core is made possible by the recurrent scenes of him rehearsing with his band in the basement studio. The enigma of his collaborative process, his spirit of improvisation, and his commitment to creating his groundbreaking sound are all on display for the audience to see in these moments. Davis’s discussion with Braden about the piano and classical music gives his character more depth. It demonstrates his extensive knowledge of music and his openness to experimenting with other genres. This conversation opened a window into Davis’s creative and intellectual curiosity, driving his ongoing development as a musician. Additionally, Davis turns the basement studio into an oasis where he can retreat from outside stresses and focus solely on making music. The film’s focus on these particulars shows that it is dedicated to capturing not only the public aspects of Davis’s life but also the inner workings of his creative process. How the movie depicts Davis’s musical surroundings adds to a complete picture of the man who composed the songs. It captures the essence of his creativity in the private domain where his musical genius emerged, transcending stage performances. Famous tracks like “Gone,” “Blue in Green,” and “Miles Ahead” are included on the soundtrack of the film “Miles Ahead,” which honors Miles Davis’s prominent discography while also acting as a moving musical motif that runs throughout the story. These songs transform from being simple background music to essential parts of the narrative, weaving a sonic weaving that captures the highs and lows of Davis’s life. The audience is taken to the historical period in which these compositions were first written and into the emotional terrain Davis traveled as each well-known note reverberates. Davis’s music’s emotional resonance is enhanced by the deliberate placement of these compositions throughout the film’s scenes, adding layers of meaning and elevating the visual storytelling. Essentially, the inclusion of Davis’s well-known compositions on the soundtrack turns them into a potent storytelling tool that lets viewers experience the movie through the timeless language of his music and the lens of cinematography. It is evidence of Davis’s lasting influence and capacity to transcend space and time, connecting with ardent followers and those unfamiliar with his discography.



Figure 17: *Davis is playing piano and talks about classical music with Dave.*

Miles Davis's conversation with Braden about classical music in "Miles Ahead" provides a fascinating glimpse into the depth of his musical knowledge and the intellectual underpinnings of his artistry. Davis's assertion that he studied classical music and broke down compositions reveals not only his proficiency in jazz but also his comprehensive understanding of the theoretical foundations of music. Davis positions himself as a boundary-pushing artist who understands the value of improvisation even within classical compositions by showcasing the revolutionary and inventive nature of musicians pushing against classical standards. This explanation of his musical philosophies bridges the gap between jazz and classical traditions and demonstrates his interdisciplinary approach to music. His admission that improvisation is at the heart of classical music challenges the widespread belief that these works are inflexible and preset. Davis's conviction in the flexibility and adaptability of musical expression is further supported by his realization that classical masters like Bach and Chopin are fundamentally improvisational. The movie obliquely suggests that Davis's distinctive musical voice was influenced by his formal music education, including his university studies. His ability to incorporate classical elements into his jazz compositions without problems shows a sophisticated and genre-defying approach to music. In 'Birth of the Cool,' Miles Davis's reflections on his musical education offer a moving commentary on the difficulties he encountered as a Black musician in a largely white field. It is clear from Davis's statement that: "a lot of the old guys thought that if you went to school, it would make you play like you were White"

formal music education was viewed with racial biases during his time. The idea that theoretical knowledge could undermine one's genuine "feeling" in performance is indicative of the deeply embedded biases and stereotypes that Black musicians had to deal with. Davis's resolve to dismantle racial barriers in the music industry is evident in his choice to actively seek knowledge from numerous renowned composers, despite the stereotypes surrounding him. His trip to the library to check out different composers' scores indicates his curiosity and desire to learn more about the wider field of music. By exploring various musical traditions' works, Davis overcame racialized stereotypes and adopted a more inclusive and wide-ranging approach to his artistic endeavors. This story illuminates Davis's journey while generalizing the relationships between race, education, and artistic expression. It supports the notion that Davis was a visionary and pioneer prepared to confront prejudices and push the bounds of musical conventions to develop a more diverse and inclusive musical landscape. This discussion highlights Davis's multifaceted genius by highlighting his mastery of improvisation and his intellectual curiosity about music theory. It deepens our knowledge of Davis as an innovative musician who broke conventional genre barriers. Miles Davis's fashion choices and musical style have evolved together in an intricately linked way, creating a visual narrative that reflects the evolution of his sound. His creative development throughout a lifetime is dynamically reflected in the relationship between his music and wardrobe. Davis's approach to style changed significantly along with his musical trajectory. Davis's fashion choices became a visual representation of his sonic experimentation, moving from the sharp, formal ensembles of his early years, which mirrored the cool jazz era, to the more avant-garde and experimental clothing of his later years.⁶⁷ During his later years, when he became deeply involved in electronic music, Davis's dressing style became increasingly avant-garde and eclectic. His use of electronic elements in his music and clothes signaled a break from conventional jazz norms and a daring embrace of the modern and experimental. Davis's shifting wardrobe is an obvious indicator of his stylistic development for those who are not as knowledgeable about the nuances of musical evolution. It becomes a concrete illustration of his readiness to push limits and challenge genre conventions in music and other forms of artistic expression. The documentary "Miles Electric," which was made in 2004, offers a more thorough examination that delves deeper into this facet of Davis's musical development by illuminating the connections between his electronic experimentation and the corresponding changes in his fashion sensibilities.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Bauer, Pat. "Cool Jazz Music." *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/cool-jazz> Accessed 02 November 2023.

⁶⁸ Lerner, Murray (Director). (2004) *Miles Electric: A Different Kind of Blue* [Documentary], Paramount Pictures.



Figure 18: *Miles Davis in his “Electric” period.*

In “Miles Ahead”, Keith Stanfield’s portrayal of Junior offers a nuanced look into Miles Davis’s complex relationship with his musical history. The title “Junior,” which Miles hated when he was a young musician, has historical resonance because of his encounters with greats like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. The way Don Cheadle plays Junior in the movie and Miles’s contempt for the name is revealed, which enhances his importance. In one of his interviews, Don Cheadle shared his thoughts about Junior’s character in the “Miles Ahead” movie.

The audio tape he loses in the “present” scenes also represents the loss of a relationship, the relationship to his music. Even the character of Junior (Keith Stanfield), the talented young trumpet player he meets, echoes his complex relationship with the past. As a young musician, Miles was called “Junior” by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, a nickname he hated, by the way⁶⁹.

Junior’s persona symbolizes Miles’s ties to his musical heritage and his ability to inspire aspiring musicians, especially the newer generation trying to carve out a career in music. Miles and Junior play together at the piano in the reconciliation scene, symbolizing a peaceful conclusion and showing that Miles’s music has a long-term impact that endures over time. The advice Miles gives Junior is a symbolic act highlighting Miles’s function as a mentor and inspiration to up-and-coming talent. This vibrant partnership enhances the film’s story and serves as further proof of Miles Davis’s lasting impact on the jazz community.

⁶⁹ "Q&A with Don Cheadle on the making of 'Miles Ahead'." *Live Talks*.
<https://livetalksla.org/blog/qawithdoncheadle/>. Accessed 05 November 2023.

Indie Wire's review of the "Miles Ahead" movie also mentions the parts about the Junior character and other aspects of the movie. Some of the ideas can be summarized in a few sentences. One of the aspects that was criticized was the metaphor for Junior. The film makes a noticeable attempt to explore various aspects of Davis's legacy, providing audiences with a comprehensive viewpoint. Davis's own recollections of his early tenacity are filtered through Stanfield's portrayal of Junior, who deftly incorporates one of Davis's nicknames, "Junior". The audience is left with a sense of disjointed symbolism due to the metaphorical layers attributed to the character not fully coming together despite this attempt. The film also features uncomfortable interactions between super fans who, approach Davis and offer praise. Sadly, these exchanges seem superficial and lack the nuance required to convey Davis's nuanced personality fully. These interactions become less meaningful because they are repeated so often and do not offer a complex examination of the artist's relationship with his fans. The plot's integrated crime element is not satisfactorily resolved along with these character dynamics. Although the story seems to build suspense for this part, it eventually cannot provide an engaging resolution. The unresolved criminal subplot leaves viewers with unanswered questions, adding to Davis's legacy's overall narrative and creating a sense of unrealized potential.

The Miles Ahead Movie thoroughly examines Miles Davis's elaborate musical career as it is portrayed in the movie. The film deftly interweaves the strands of Miles's musical legacy, from his beloved basement studio a haven for creative expression and teamwork to the minute flashbacks that reveal his musical development. In addition to providing insight into Miles's classical education, the interview with the Rolling Stone reporter highlights his openness to a wide range of musical genres, demonstrating the range of his musical knowledge. The film's portrayal of Junior is a potent metaphor, demonstrating how Miles Davis continues to inspire up-and-coming musicians. As the story progresses, we are able to observe the dynamic shifts in Miles's musical style, which are evident in both his compositions and his changing wardrobe choices. The documentary "Miles Electric," which features electric music, offers another perspective to examining Davis's revolutionary contributions to jazz.⁷⁰ Essentially, the film deftly conveys the essence of Miles Davis's musical genius, enabling audiences to explore the nuances of his compositional process, the development of his sound, and his impact on the following generation of musicians. The film's intricate musical portrayal dramatically aids in developing a complex understanding of Miles Davis's enormous influence on the jazz community and beyond.

⁷⁰ IMDB. "Miles Electric: A Different Kind of Blue.", <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0427541/> Accessed 20 November 2023.

3.7 Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis in the jazz world.

The spirit of Miles Davis is captured in the movie “Miles Ahead” in a way that is strikingly true to his real-life persona. The film skillfully conveys the subtleties of Davis’s style, music, and other distinctive features, highlighting both his calm exterior and the more mysterious, almost gangster-like aspects of his character. Despite not being a biopic, the movie does a good job of capturing the spirit of Davis’s life and character, giving audiences an understanding of why he was so important to the American jazz scene. Like any cinematic depiction of a well-known person, “Miles Ahead” is not long enough to cover all of Davis’s accomplishments and life story. However, the film does a good job of capturing Davis’s significance to the American jazz scene as well as his deep influence on the black community. Although the story doesn’t directly address racial issues, it quietly emphasizes how important they are, as seen in scenes like Davis’s arrest.⁷¹ Because biopics usually feature a significant and well-known person, they are more easily criticized, which is why they are frequently met with negative criticism. In biopics, it is simpler to identify a weak point or omission. Nonetheless, these films frequently win major awards like Oscars. Nevertheless, they are criticized for being monotonous or repetitive in their genre of film. Miles Ahead is not a typical biopic, as the film’s director and producer, Don Cheadle, has declared.⁷² Despite differing views, the film “Miles Ahead” succeeds in delivering its intended message and is a highly successful production. There are also scenes in the movie where Davis is shown performing and rehearsing with his band (see Figure 19). These incidents serve as a reminder of his extensive musical knowledge and stylistic development. Despite being a fictionalized account, Davis’s significance as a legendary musician who struggled with racism and drug addiction is untouched.

⁷¹ Lisi, Jon. “Enough with the Biopic: A Re-examination of Cinema’s Least Interesting Genre.” *Pop Matters*, 5 Jan. 2015, <https://www.popmatters.com/189475-enough-with-the-biopic-a-re-examination-of-cinemas-least-interesting-2495573655.html>. Accessed 29 October 2023.

⁷² Graham, David A. “Birth of the Uncool.” *The Atlantic*, 31 Mar. 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/miles-ahead-don-cheadle-miles-davis-biopic/475560/>. Accessed 15 November 2023.



Figure 19: *Miles Davis practicing with his band in his studio.*

In contrast, the film brings to mind other notable figures from the jazz world, like Louis Armstrong, who had a significant impact on the music scene of the 20th century. Regarded as one of the world's most significant black musicians, Armstrong first became well-known for his trumpet playing before pursuing a prosperous singing career. Davis's respect for Armstrong's trumpeting abilities demonstrates the mutual regard between the two legendary jazz musicians. He expressed his appreciation for Louis Armstrong's music with his well-known quotation.

"You can't play nothing on the trumpet that doesn't come from him, not even modern ... I can't remember when he sounded bad playing the trumpet. Never."⁷³

Thoughts about Louis Armstrong's character are still contentious, especially in light of his alleged silence on racial matters. Regarded as a "smiley face" and a white men's musician, Armstrong's easygoing personality contrasts with Miles Davis's image, which is more often described as refined, calm, and unquestionably manly. These intricacies give the story depth and provoke contemplation on these jazz icons' complex personalities and differing viewpoints regarding their cultural and artistic contributions. Two legendary figures in jazz come to light; their unique personalities are evident in their innovative music and public personas. In jazz history, two contrasting giants stand out: Miles Davis, the embodiment of relaxed sophistication, and Louis Armstrong, known for his

⁷³ Shipton, Alyn. "Louis Armstrong: 50 Years On And Still On Song." *JazzWise*, Jun 18, 2021, <https://www.jazzwise.com/features/article/louis-armstrong-50-years-on-and-still-on-song>. Accessed 16 December 2023.

contagious smile. Loved by many as “Satchmo,” Louis Armstrong was a constant source of happiness on and off the stage. Along with his trumpet playing, his signature ear-to-ear smile gained legendary status. Armstrong’s radiant smile was evidence of his enduring optimism and musical ability. He has a song called “Smiling.” This is essentially a song that highlights the strength of optimism despite hardship. It inspires people to maintain a positive outlook and find comfort in grinning. Through its lyrics, the song serves as a reminder that even in the face of adversity, a smile can serve as a source of strength, hope, and the knowledge that we can overcome obstacles. In an era of social unrest, his beaming smile broke down barriers between races and brought happiness.⁷⁴ He took the role of a musical hero and all the extravagance a white star would have otherwise been reserved for. However, that does not change the fact that he was still a Black man living in a racially discriminatory nation. Tragically, a man so comfortable in his skin that his people began to write him off as a fake, a fallout from his origins. All acknowledge Armstrong’s mastery, but his significance is frequently overlooked. That could be because there are two Armstrong’s: the delightful guy who sings “Hello, Dolly” on TV and the trumpeter who took to fame in the 1920s and is widely regarded as the creator of jazz.⁷⁵ In his autobiography, Miles expressed his dislike for Louis’s habit of grinning and acting like a clown for his white audience while on stage. Beboppers, whose demeanor during performances was characterized as “cool,” criticized this.⁷⁶

Jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and composer Miles Dewey Davis hails from the United States. He is regarded as one of the most important and well-liked individuals in jazz and 20th-century music history. Throughout his roughly five-decade career, Davis took many different musical paths, keeping him at the forefront of many significant jazz stylistic developments. Throughout his career, he has always maintained a cool persona in music and life.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Slaughter, Beth. “The Meaning Behind the Song: ‘Smiling’ by Louis Armstrong.” *Old Time Music*, 5 Oct. 2023, <https://oldtimemusic.com/the-meaning-behind-the-song-smiling-by-louis-armstrong/>. Accessed 19 November 2023.

⁷⁵ McWhorter, John. “The Entertainer Louis Armstrong’s Underrated Legacy.” *The New Yorker*, 6 Dec. 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/12/14/the-entertainer>. Accessed 16 November 2023.

⁷⁶ Burks, Arnold. “Louis Armstrong, White Women, and Uncle Toms.” *Medium*, 22 May 2018, <https://medium.com/@ArnoldBurks/louis-armstrong-white-women-and-uncle-toms-916fd1981fad>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

⁷⁷ Ruhlmann, William. “Miles Davis Biography.” *AllMusic*, 16 Jun. 2016, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/miles-davis-mn0000423829#biography>. Accessed 08 December 2023.

“1969 was the year jazz seemed to be withering on the vine,” Davis said in his official biography. “We played to a lot of half-empty clubs. That told me something. I started realizing that most rock musicians did not know anything about music. I figured if they could sell all those records without knowing what they were doing, I could too – only better.” “That period was very volatile,” McLaughlin said. “The Vietnam war was happening, the whole black-white thing in America ... Things were moving very quickly.”⁷⁸

Events happened quickly, covering the civil rights movements and critical historical moments such as Neil Armstrong's moon landing, the Beatles' farewell tour, and many more notable events."

As much as Louis Armstrong loved, he always seemed like "Uncle Tom" while Miles Davis always seemed as sophisticated or more manly. Louis Armstrong was widely criticized during the Civil Rights Movement, with many calling him an Uncle Tom. Many black comedians, writers, and musicians publicly voiced their disapproval of his alleged lack of response on racial issues. A common belief that Armstrong's musical taste had changed to suit white America's tastes further fueled the controversy. His unwillingness to accept the more modern Bebop jazz confirmed this impression even more.⁷⁹ Through his own experiences, Louis Armstrong developed a sharp awareness of the harsh realities of racism. When he was younger, he was arrested on the grounds that he "looked suspicious." This was a discriminatory incident that he will never forget. He experienced more injustice even as an adult when he was detained for the technically innocent act of sitting next to the white wife of his manager. These moving meetings demonstrated Armstrong's deep awareness of the widespread racial prejudices of his era.⁸⁰ He achieved a degree of musical brilliance and notoriety that was typically only afforded to white celebrities. However, it is essential to recognize that this did not lessen the significant obstacles he had to overcome as a Black man living in a racist society. Even though he was praised as a critical player in the evolution of jazz, Armstrong faced much backlash from the African-American community. Many considered him a "sell-out" or, worse, an "Uncle Tom." Apart from representing the archetype of the cunning 'Uncle Tom' in the past, Armstrong was criticized for his seeming unwillingness to participate in racial

⁷⁸ Farber, Jim. " 'It sounded like the future': behind Miles Davis's greatest album." *The Guardian*, 24 Feb. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/feb/24/miles-davis-bitches-brew-50th-anniversary-film>. Accessed 03 December 2023.

⁷⁹ Burks, Arnold. "Louis Armstrong, White Women, and Uncle Toms." *Medium*, 22 May 2018, <https://medium.com/@ArnoldBurks/louis-armstrong-white-women-and-uncle-toms-916fd1981fad>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

⁸⁰ Schwartz, Ben. "What Louis Armstrong really thinks." *The New Yorker*, 25 Feb. 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-louis-armstrong-really-thinks>. Accessed 04 December 2023.

politics, especially in the early stages of the Civil Rights movement. It would be inaccurate to assert that Louis Armstrong made no contributions to the Civil Rights Movement or the Black community. Despite his recognized genius and profound influence on jazz, he is often remembered for his perceived silence on racial issues and for being associated primarily with entertaining white audiences. In contrast, Miles Davis is often hailed as a symbol of masculinity and a significant figure within the Black community, attributed to his unreserved expression in sharp language on race matters. The differing legacies of Armstrong and Davis highlight the complexity of perceptions surrounding their roles in shaping not only jazz but also their engagement with societal issues.⁸¹

Indeed, Louis Armstrong did demonstrate that he was not entirely silent on social and political issues. One noteworthy instance was his cancellation of a tour to the Soviet Union, organized by the State Department, in protest of President Eisenhower's actions. Armstrong, in a bold statement, declared, "The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell." This decision underscored the prominence of his position and conveyed his principled stance against governmental actions conflicting with the welfare of his community. Armstrong emphasized the inherent contradiction in representing a government that was at odds with its citizens, particularly regarding the treatment of Black individuals in the Southern United States.⁸²

With Don Cheadle at the forefront and a standout performance, the movie daringly deviates from the formulas of conventional biopics by adopting a narrative structure that reflects the impromptu nature of Davis's music. The dynamic and rhythmic portrayal that "Miles Ahead" presents forgoes a straightforward biography of the musician to highlight Davis's artistic vision's complex and constantly changing aspects. Choosing a non-linear storyline, the film cautiously picks moments from Davis's life that are thematically relevant, echoing his inventive storytelling methods and fitting with his tendency to defy musical conventions. The audience is taken into Davis's highs and lows through temporal shifts, feeling the sharpness of these moments with unmatched intensity. Within the genre of biopics about musical heroes, "Miles Ahead" is an example of originality and sincerity. The movie proficiently sets up an interview scene with Davis sitting beside his famous red trumpet. Davis uses this environment as a blank canvas to convey his aggressive, rebellious attitude, quietly revealing his unrepentant personality. When the interviewer interprets Davis's music as jazz,

⁸¹ Early, Gerald L. "On Miles Davis, Vince Lombardi & the Crisis of Masculinity in Mid-Century America." *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 131, no. 1, 2002, pp. 154-59.

⁸² Starkey, Arun. "Louis Armstrong and his complex relationship with race." *Far Out Magazine*, 1 Feb. 2022, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/louis-armstrong-complex-relationship-with-race/>. Accessed 11 November 2023.

he fiercely objects. The film defies conventional narrative conventions by switching seamlessly between this contemplative conversation and a thrilling car chase. Here, Davis navigates the path's curves, figuratively attempting to preserve his music. The abrupt change in tone from the dreary conversation to the frantic dash of the chase reflects the bumpy road Davis's musical career took during the five years of silence. The chase's urgency effectively captures the highs and lows of Davis's creative journey, mirroring his inner battle to find his voice again. "Miles Ahead" skillfully combines notes of instability and reflection to create a cinematic symphony that allows listeners to observe the complex interaction between an artist's isolation and outside challenges that influence their fate. As we set out on this cinematic adventure, the picture goes beyond conventional storylines, reflecting Miles Davis's own improvisational style.

In summary, "Miles Ahead" defies the conventions of the biopic genre by expertly combining a historical perspective with various storytelling ideologies. By fusing fact and fiction, the movie mimics Miles Davis's artistic vision and embodies the free-form nature of his music. The examination of Davis's battles with addiction and isolation gives his persona more nuance and highlights the price of his musical brilliance. The moving portrayal of his lost happiness with Frances highlights his turbulent life's toll on him personally. The movie also explores critical social themes, illuminating the hardships that Black people endured during the era of racial segregation and police brutality. The way that the police incident is portrayed, along with the subtle way that systemic problems are shown, speaks to the struggles that marginalized communities still face today. Viewers are taken on a musical and visual tour of Davis's life through a seamless blending of realities and flashbacks. Painting and boxing are two of his interests and pastimes that provide windows into this legendary musician's complex personality. In the end, "Miles Ahead" successfully highlights Miles Davis's musical brilliance, depicts the nuances of his life, and encourages viewers to consider the relationship between art, personal hardships, and social issues. The film honors the legendary musician with a blend of stirring performances, visually striking imagery, and a gripping story that will linger with viewers long after watching it.

CONCLUSION

"Bessie" is an overall successful film; however, certain aspects of the movie leave a sense of incompleteness. From the first scene, Bessie is portrayed as the empress of the blues, yet the film falls short in revealing the journey of how she earned this title. Some memories or stories from her life are only presented in a fragmented manner, especially regarding her relationship with her son. The film places a significant emphasis on her sexuality and rough side but fails to adequately explore the reasons behind her toughness or strength. In my opinion, the movie lacks in sufficiently portraying her musical contributions and successful career. Nevertheless, it still provides a commendable representation of her, showcasing Bessie as the empress of the blues from the outset, even if the narrative doesn't delve into the nuances of her ascent to that esteemed position.

"In my assessment, 'Miles Ahead' proves to be a more successful film. Despite the relative ease in evaluating a movie about Miles Davis due to his fame and extensive media documentation, the infusion of fiction adds an intriguing dimension to the narrative. Don Cheadle's remarkable performance, effectively impersonating Davis, enhances the cinematic experience. The film adequately emphasizes Davis's musical prowess, showcasing his genius and significant contributions to American music and society."

In conclusion, "Miles Ahead" redefines the biopic genre through a dynamic portrayal of Miles Davis's life, employing a non-linear narrative structure that mirrors his innovative musical approach. By seamlessly blending fact and fiction, the film captures the complexities of Davis's battles with addiction, isolation, and the societal challenges of racial segregation and police brutality. It explores critical social themes, shedding light on the hardships faced by Black communities during a tumultuous era. The movie transcends conventional storylines, offering a unique blend of realities and flashbacks that take viewers on a captivating journey through Davis's life. Through engaging storytelling, the film delves into Davis's interests in painting and boxing, providing glimpses into the multifaceted personality of this legendary musician.

Turning our attention to "Bessie," the film not only reignites interest in Bessie Smith's music but also serves as a compelling exploration of her impact on blues and popular music. The movie received acclaim for its cinematic style, narrative approach, and powerful portrayal of Smith's life and artistry. It stands as a testament to her enduring legacy, drawing contemporary audiences into the rich history of blues music. Director Dee Rees' meticulous investigation into Bessie Smith's life through song lyrics adds authenticity to the film, unraveling the complexities of her identity. Furthermore, "Bessie" connects the struggles of Smith's era to current discussions about empowerment, self-expression, and breaking societal barriers.

In summary, both "Miles Ahead" and "Bessie" offer more than traditional biopics; they are cinematic journeys that explore the intricate lives of musical legends, transcending the boundaries of their respective genres. Each film, in its unique way, invites viewers to reflect on the broader themes of art, societal challenges, and the enduring impact of these iconic musicians.

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