Sylvia Plath is hardly present

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Sylvia, directed by Christine Jeffs, screenplay by John Brownlow

Sylvia is a film about a young American woman, an aspiring writer, living in England in the early 1960s. Her marriage to another writer, which has produced two children, runs into difficulty. Whether the source of the problem lies in her own emotional instability or in her husband's philandering, or how precisely these two processes are bound up, is not entirely clear. In any event, during the course of a particularly bleak winter, alone and feeling abandoned, the young woman tragically puts an end to her life.

The film is intended as a biography, no doubt a tribute as well, to the poet and novelist Sylvia Plath (1932-63), author of *Ariel*, *The Bell Jar* and other works. It is competently, even sensitively made. The images are clear and distinct. Gwyneth Paltrow is fine in the lead role, as is Daniel Craig as husband and poet Ted Hughes. However, the film tells us next to nothing about the writer Sylvia Plath.

A consideration of *Sylvia* brings to mind a comment made by the German filmmaker R.W. Fassbinder when discussing with an interviewer his version of the novel *Effi Briest* by Theodor Fontane: "I kept close to the novel ... not to the story it tells, but to Fontane's attitude to the story. Of course you could make a lively film just telling the story (a young girl marries an older man, is unfaithful to him, and so on), but if you're just telling a story like that there's no real need to film Fontane's novel. You might as well find a similar story yourself."

To paraphrase Fassbinder: there was no real need to film Plath's life, the producers might as well have found find a similar story themselves. If one eliminated the external trappings from *Sylvia*, costumes, hairstyles, sets, etc., and changed the names of the characters, this could be the story of "Jane Brown" of Toledo, Ohio in 2003. One would only have had to open the newspaper, find a report of a young married woman's suicide and work up the details. Films could be made from every such sad episode. Even Plath's well-known morbidity and depressive state hardly single her out as unique. The film is almost entirely lacking in a specific quality that might be termed Sylvia Plath*ness*.

The extent to which a serious look at Plath would result in a positive verdict on her art is another matter. I don't care for her work in general (or Hughes's, for that matter). First of all, it is highly, deliberately self-absorbed. This is bound up with Plath's personality and background, but also the epoch in which she wrote. During the 1950s many left and liberal intellectuals, as one commentator suggested, gave up "Marxism," so to speak, for psychoanalysis (or the Catholic Church). There was the notorious "rush inward" in art. The results were poor, by and large.

Plath's earlier work has that anemic, academic quality ("Flintlike, her feet struck/Such a racket of echoes from the steely street...") of so much American and British postwar verse, as poetry was comfortably settling down into insignificance, when poets began chiefly writing for each other in university-sponsored journals.

Her last work, while far more direct and lively, is hard to accept for different reasons. If she was not composing hymns to death ("Dying/Is an art like everything else./I do it exceptionally well," "The woman is perfected./Her dead/body wears the smile of accomplishment"), she was blaming her father and ex-husband for most of her sufferings. However one interprets "Daddy"—as a diatribe, a private joke or a cry for help—it makes distasteful reading. This is the poem with the famous lines, "Every woman adores a Fascist,/The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you," and which concludes with "Daddy, daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

Plath's father was a German-born scientist and sociologist (her mother's heritage was Austrian) who died when Sylvia was eight years old. He may have been the "autocrat" she "adored and despised," as she told a friend, but turning her father in "Daddy" into a Nazi ("Your Aryan eye, bright blue/Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You") and comparing herself to a Jew ("Chuffing me off like a Jew./A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen"), ironically intended or not, suggests at the very least the collapse of any sense of psychological and historical proportion (apparently her parents were appalled by Hitler and followed the news from Europe attentively). Desperate works like "Daddy" made Plath a heroine to a generation of feminists who exploited her misery for their own purposes.

In any event, these issues fall outside the scope of this comment because the film does not rise to the level of considering them.

It seems reasonable as a first principle that a film about a writer should treat the subject of writing and a film about a specific writer should treat the specific subject of his or her writing. The refusal of the Plath-Hughes estate to grant the filmmakers the rights to Plath's poetry was certainly an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. There is still the matter of her themes (the sole reference to which I will discuss below) and the overall content of her poetry, as well as broader questions: what were the thoughts and feelings that went into her work and what were the social and psychological roots of those thoughts and feelings? What did she think about other writers? How did she view poetry and art in the middle of the 20th century? She was a bright woman, an intellectual, she had opinions. The two poets, Plath and Hughes, lived together for seven years. They must have exchanged some

ideas, about art, about politics, about love, about something of substance. We hear next to none of them.

The discreet silence of the film on these matters is entirely in keeping with a recent trend. Writing about *Wonder Boys* (2000), a film about a fictional novelist Grady Tripp, I noted: "At no time, however, is there a single reference to the content of either work or the problems or themes that Tripp addresses. We learn nothing about his art or his artistry.... Is it likely that a novelist would go about his daily life—much less undergo moments of great stress—without once indicating what was impelling him, at great cost, to devote his life to putting words on paper?"

Iris (2002) dealt with the life, illness and death of British writer Iris Murdoch. A similar comment seemed appropriate: "Unhappily, upon the conclusion of the film the spectator knows next to nothing about the essential facts of Murdoch's life, about her writing, about her ideas, about the character of her relationship with [husband John] Bayley, nor about British society and artistic life during the years in question." And in regard to the depiction of novelist Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (2003), I wrote that "not a word is seriously paid to the writer's fiction or her and her husband's ideas (socialism, feminism, pacifism, etc.), much less to the character of the epoch."

Why are contemporary filmmakers unable to portray seriously the concrete circumstances of a writer's thought and activity (along with that of other artists)? One obstacle to such treatment is its complexity.

Scenarist John Brownlow, writing in the *Guardian*, explains his mental process: "I find it helpful to have another film in mind when I start writing, even though the finished project may not resemble it in any way. In this case, my model was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, where a couple who love one another rip themselves to pieces as others become unwitting victims in their co-dependent psychodrama. I imagined the parts in my movie being played by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. I even called it, in my own head, Who's Afraid of Sylvia Plath?"

This rather banal approach helps explain the film's generic character. Brownlow is pleased with his "model," but what does it have to do with the mid-20th century American writer Sylvia Plath?

In the same spirit Brownlow acknowledges that he invented a final reunion and (sex) scene between Plath and Hughes "mainly because I am absolutely certain that something like that happened, but also because we needed a moment of happiness and resolution before the final, fatal act. We also needed to feel the final door close on Sylvia." This revelation is not particularly encouraging.

Art is too complex or troubling a subject for most modern filmmakers to examine in any depth. Consciously or not, he or she tends to view it in the most limited manner, merely as a career or at best a means of "self-expression." That art is one of the means—through images, not the axioms or laws of science—by which human beings collectively find their bearings in the world, that the artist is forcefully called upon to probe reality deeply and critically ... these are foreign concepts in the film world today.

Moreover, contemporary filmmakers have difficulty reproducing any historical subject accurately, artistic or otherwise. There is the general assumption that the screenwriter's or director's concerns and motives simply need to be extended backward in time and the problem of "history" is solved. Or present-day vulgarized psychologizing guides the filmmakers. So the Plath-Hughes relationship becomes simply another "co-dependent psychodrama."

Historical accuracy was never a stock in trade of the biographical films—biopics—produced by the American and British film industries. It has been noted that the only accurate detail in Raoul Walsh's energetic and moving *They Died With Their Boots On* (1942), an ostensible account of the life of General George Custer, is that Custer did indeed die at the Little Big Horn.

In a 1936 memo Twentieth Century-Fox executive David Zanuck nonchalantly remarked that historical inaccuracies in biopics did not "cause any trouble." Zanuck explained that in his film *Rothschild* he had "made Rothschild an English Baron and there never was a Rothschild Baron." Zanuck added that he "had the King of England give [Rothschild] ... the honor, and that at this time there was no King of England as the king was in the insane asylum."

Nonetheless, it has to be said that there was an attempt by the classic Hollywood biographical film on one level or another to deal with the facts of a life or an epoch (or to invent a new set). *The Life of Emile Zola*, *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and *Viva Villa!* (Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa) are all in their own particular ways inadequate films, but they have quite distinct identities and make an effort to confront the specific arenas in which their protagonists operated. A spectator could be forgiven, on the other hand, for permitting the memory of *A Beautiful Mind* (about mathematician John Nash), *Frida* (about painter Frida Kahlo) and *Sylvia* to blend into a single cautionary tale about the follies and hazards of dysfunctional love relationships.

The sole reference to a theme in Plath's work in *Sylvia* occurs in a scene when she and Hughes are out at sea in a rowboat. Sylvia expresses frustration with the progress of her writing. I don't have a subject, she complains. He replies that of course she does, "Your subject is you." He tells her to stop beating around the bush, more or less, and get down to the task of writing about herself. The subsequent course of the film suggests that she takes this piece of advice. I have no idea whether the conversation has any basis in fact or not. One must say, however, that it reflects all too accurately, if simplistically, the general trajectory of her work.

The filmmakers presumably take for granted that an artist may fruitfully adopt herself as the sole or principal subject of her life's work. Oddly enough, they include another sequence that in its own way contradicts the solipsistic boat ride advice. After the birth of their first child, Hughes stands at the window holding the infant in his arms. "The world," he says simply to the baby girl, introducing her to the universe on the other side of the glass. To make an artist of the child, following the film's own logic, one would think he might more profitably have held up a mirror.