

# Romanticising the Writer

Biopics and Authorship in *Finding Neverland* (2004)

and *Saving Mr Banks* (2013)



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### Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of authorship in two biographical films: *Saving Mr Banks* (2004) and *Finding Neverland* (2013). The starting point of this thesis was the question of how filmmakers capture the seemingly inaccessible process of a literary imagination at work. This concept was elaborated to incorporate the representation of authorship in more general terms. This thesis analyses *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks* to explore how these films represent authorship and visualise the writing process, but also how these films depict two famous authors of English children's literature: P.L. Travers as the author of *Mary Poppins* in *Saving Mr Banks*, and J.M. Barrie as the author of *Peter Pan* in *Finding Neverland*. The research question of this thesis is: how do *Finding Neverland* (2004) and *Saving Mr Banks* (2013) represent literary authorship through depicting the figure of the author and the creation of their work(s)? At the heart of this thesis is how these films are both a celebration of authorship and a subversion of it.

Keywords: Authorship, Biopics, Life Writing, Cultural afterlife, Film Adaptation, *Saving Mr Banks*, *Finding Neverland*.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Who first propounded the preposterous notion that writers' lives do not make for good biography? . . . That is like saying the life of the imagination has no story to tell. (Rollyson 51)

As writer J.M. Barrie – played by Johnny Depp – asserts in *Finding Neverland* (2004), “all writing starts with a good leather binding and a respectable title.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, even though this film is about the life of the famous writer of *Peter Pan* – and about the events that supposedly inspired him to write *Peter Pan* – he rarely writes throughout the course of the movie. Likewise, the film *Saving Mr Banks* (2013), about *Mary Poppins* writer P.L. Travers, is more concerned with what happened before and after she wrote her famous novel. The fact that in both films the characters are rarely seen while sitting at a desk, pen in hand or typing away at a typewriter is remarkable, considering that these films are about authors.<sup>2</sup> It is even more remarkable when compared to other films about authors' lives. Judith Buchanan lists many author biopics in which the act of writing and composing a written text are clearly present (5). However, if these two recent films do not make use of the basic images associated with writing, then how do they visualise the writing process or portray the figure of the author? In Buchanan's words, “how do filmmakers attempt to catch the teasingly inaccessible processes of a literary imagination at work?” (4). This thesis will take Buchanan's question as a point of departure to explore in more general terms how literary authorship is represented in two biographical films about authors: *Finding Neverland* (2004) and *Saving Mr Banks* (2013). These recent author biopics will be analysed to discover how these films represent authorship and the writing process, and the figure of two famous historical authors: P.L. Travers as the author of *Mary Poppins* in *Saving Mr Banks*, and J.M. Barrie as the author of *Peter Pan* in *Finding Neverland*. Therefore, the research question of this thesis is: how do *Finding Neverland* (2004) and *Saving Mr Banks* (2013) represent literary authorship through depicting the figure of the author and the creation of their work(s)?

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, quotes from the characters in the films *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks* will be quoted in this way, without the parenthetical references.

<sup>2</sup> When discussing the author as a general term, this thesis will use the pronouns he, him, and his, rather than specifying both genders in he/she, /him/her and his/her.

## 1.1 Relevance

The sheer number of biopics about authors shows that there is a kind of fascination with authors of popular literature and with imagining their lives on screen. This fascination has also been picked up by academics in the fields of biography and film studies. Many biographical films about authors have already been analysed, and the theories and ideas put forward in these case studies might apply to more recent films as well. *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks* have not yet been analysed in-depth, and since they are quite recent, they will offer some new insights in the genre of the author biopic. The way in which an author is portrayed in a film reflects how this author is perceived, and perhaps even how their works are evaluated. For example, Justine Picardie writes that in his biography of J.M. Barrie, Piers Dudgeon negatively portrays the author of *Peter Pan*, which is “entirely at odds with the Hollywood version, *Finding Neverland*, in which Johnny Depp portrayed the author as a charming hero, devoted to large dogs and small children” (par. 2). Films aim at a large audience, and will therefore have a bigger impact on the way these authors are perceived than the biographies written about them.

## 1.2 State of Current Research on the Biopic

The biopic has often been categorised as a form of historical film, and has thus often been treated as such in the critical debate. However, in recent years, the genre has been increasingly studied as a form of life writing – a term that includes all kinds of ways in which a life can be captured in writing, such as biographies, memoirs, and diaries. Through a re-evaluation of life writing, the biopic has emerged as a new object of study within this field. An increasing body of critical work has focused on the contributions to life writing in audiovisual media, and in particular in film. As a genre, the biopic balances between history, life writing, and film adaptation, and the biopic struggles with the same problems and questions that are inherent to these fields. This is what makes the biopic an interesting research object for film critics, historians, and researchers of life writing.

Moreover, much has been written in recent years about how authors are depicted in biopics, and in films in general. Researchers have developed certain theories and discovered tropes in how authorship is portrayed cinematically, often through a case study of author biopics. For example, analyses of films about writers have revealed some conventions in the way the writing process is portrayed. Yet, some critics reveal a change in these conventions in recent cinema. This thesis will highlight several of these theories, conventions, and tropes in relation to the two biopics about Barrie and Travers.

### 1.3 Background and Context

Judith Buchanan notes in her introduction of *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship* that the figure of the writer might not be the most interesting subject matter for a film, because literature-writing is an inward, reflexive activity in itself, and the imagination of the author is inaccessible to any outsider (3). As Richard Ellmann notes, “we cannot know completely the intricacies with which any mind negotiates with its surroundings to produce literature” (16). And yet, many films so far have attempted to visualise exactly that.

Laura Marcus argues that in recent films dealing with literary authorship “there has been a tendency to break down the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ worlds, so that ‘the author’ becomes part of, and subject to, the dimensions of the fictional world” (34). A similar issue is discussed by Jeremy Strong through the examples of the biopics *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Fleming: The Man Who Would Be Bond* (2014). He notes that these biopics are “less concerned with scrupulous fidelity to the author’s life story than with bending its basic materials” to align the author to his or her most famous fictional character (par. 6). He further notes that there is the expectation that an author biopic will stay true to the subject matter, i.e. the author’s life. Yet, at the same time “there is the less direct but equally powerful anticipation that the account will somehow connect with stories for which the author is already known” (par. 8).

This thesis will focus on the well-known literary works of two authors: Barrie and Travers. *Finding Neverland* tells the story of how J.M. Barrie met the Davies family, who inspired him to write *Peter Pan*. In *Saving Mr. Banks*, P.L. Travers reluctantly meets with Walt Disney to discuss the possibility of adapting her work *Mary Poppins* into a musical film. This meeting prompts Travers to reflect on her life and explores what inspired her to write *Mary Poppins*. Interestingly, both films discuss the authors’ lives in relation to (the creation of) one of their works. Also interesting to note is the fact that Disney Studios was the producing studio behind *Saving Mr Banks*. The same studio has been responsible for the well-known animated adaptations of both *Peter Pan* and *Mary Poppins*. As Buchanan notes, writers often constitute interesting subjects for directors because they hold “cultural allure” (5). Moreover, she writes that films about authors form “a sound market proposition for producers through the pre-sold character of certain sorts of cultural story for a defined market” (5). Both *Mary Poppins* and *Peter Pan* were well-known popular children’s stories, even well before Disney adapted both stories to the big screen and made them available to an even larger audience. The films about the authors of these “pre-sold” stories, then, are appealing to a large market, because many people are already familiar with their work(s).

Judith Buchanan's book about literary authorship will be used as a starting point for this thesis, and the ideas and theories put forward in this book will be applied to the two films. In addition to that, this research will be connected to the larger fields of authorship. The films address many different 'authors' and 'stories'. First of all, of course, it tells the story of the authors behind the famous stories of *Mary Poppins* and *Peter Pan*. And, in *Saving Mr Banks*, there is even an extra layer of authorship, as this film also explores the process of adapting P.L. Travers' novel *Mary Poppins* into film by Walt Disney Studios. This makes Walt Disney an extra 'author', as he adapts (and alters) Travers' story to the screen.

#### 1.4 Chapter Outline

In order to answer the research question, chapter 2 will trace the history of the biopic and its critical context. In this chapter, the existing theories about biopics – and in particular author biopics – will be explored. Many theories have been explained and exemplified through case studies of one or several films. This chapter will explore relevant case studies to reveal some of the tropes that are present in many author biopics and will examine the theories that have been used to analyse biopics.

Chapter 3 and 4 will comprise the analyses of both films. Chapter 3 deals with the visualisation of literary authorship in both *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks*. It will analyse the films in more detail concerning their portrayal of the writer. How are the acts of writing portrayed – if at all? The films will be compared to each other to find certain similarities and differences in their portrayal of the writer and the writing process. This chapter will focus on whether and how the films establish and subvert literary authorship. Chapter 4 will discuss the many ways in which the authors' lives as depicted in the films intertwine with their fictional work. These links between the author's life and his fiction can be made in various ways: by making the events in his life resemble the events in his work, by showing certain similarities between the author and his fictional characters, or through other intertextual references. Chapter 4 will discuss this theme and will analyse both films in how they blur life and fiction.

The conclusion will reflect on the themes discussed, and will connect the findings in the main chapters to reveal the film industry's attitude towards literature and literary authorship. And finally, it will answer the question of how *Finding Neverland* (2004) and *Saving Mr Banks* (2013) represent literary authorship through depicting the figure of the author and the creation of their work(s).

## Chapter 2

### The (Critical) Life of the Author Biopic

The biopic, or biographical film, is described by Belén Vidal in the introduction to his book *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (2014) as a fiction film that deals with a person that really exists or existed, “whose existence is documented in history, and whose claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story” (3). The biopic as a genre is a subcategory of the historical film, and holds a place at the intersection of fiction and history (3). The biopic differs from other film genres that balance on this intersection, such as the costume film, the epic, or the docudrama – though they may feature historical characters or events – because the biopic focuses on the story of an individual (3). According to Dennis Bingham, the aim of all biopics is to “reveal the ‘real person’ behind the public persona” (5).

In order to discover how *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks* ‘reveal the real person’ behind the famous authors Barrie and Travers – and how these films represent the figure of the author – the genre of the biopic must first be explored in more detail. This chapter will discuss the biopic as a subject of critical study at the intersection of the fields of film studies, intertextuality and life writing. The chapter consists of two parts. Section 2.1 will outline the history of the biopic as a genre and the history of the critical debate concerning biopics. In this section intertextuality will be discussed as well, as an important theme in the critical debate. Section 2.3 will focus more specifically on author biopics as a subcategory of biopics, and will highlight several important tropes and theories concerning films about authors.

#### 2.1 History of the Biopic and the Critical Debate

Vidal notes that the genre’s “generic, aesthetic, and cultural significance has remained underexplored” (1). Many books about the subject have attempted to fill that gap, including the aforementioned book by Vidal. Several critics have noted that the critical evaluation of the biopic genre started with George F. Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) (Bingham 4; Vidal 4). Since then, the biopic has become an appealing subject of study. There have been three large trends in the genre’s critical debate. Initially, biopics were treated as a form of historical writing. Yet, this thesis will focus in particular on theory in the fields of life writing and intertextuality, since these approaches to biopics have become more prominent in recent years.

### 2.2.1 Biopics as Historical Writing

The genre's categorization as a subgenre of the historical film has given rise to the idea that biopics are a form of historical writing. Vidal notes that the biographical film dates back to the earliest beginnings of cinema for commercial entertainment (4). In Hollywood's studio era, the biopic was known for its "celebration of the 'Great Man' as a motor of history" (4). This has laid the foundation for the genre's popularity in later years. It has also positioned the biopic as an interesting study object for historians, to explore how historical facts are presented in film, as these films are appropriations of the past. Vidal notes that "cinema-friendly historians have pondered over the ability of the historical film to function not just as a historical document, but as a form of historical writing" (4). For this reason, the term 'historiophoty' was coined by Hayden White as counterpart to written historiography, even though this term is rarely used by other critics. White defines it as "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" (1193). Even though the place of historical films within history studies is still an underexposed and hotly debated issue, Landy notes that in the current re-evaluation of history, an increasing body of critical work focuses on the influence of popular and mass culture (2).

### 2.2.2 Biopics as Life Writing

History is not the only field in which the role of film has only just recently been discovered. Mary Murphy summarises that "[t]he burgeoning interest in biography, within both popular culture and the academy, combines with the idea of film as a kind of literature to create a new body of texts which warrant study" (par. 1). Vidal notes that the biopic is more and more perceived as a form of 'life writing' in biographical studies (1). The concept of life writing was created in the 1970s "to acknowledge and connect biography, autobiography, memoirs, and other forms of life stories that could contribute towards the discovery and valuing of individual lives" (Vidal 10). In this respect, biopics can be seen as an 'other form of life stories'. Richard Holmes argues that there is a growing interest in biographies of groups, "of collective moments in art, literature or science" in contemporary biographical practice ("How to Write a Biography"). This development is also reflected in the biopic genre, which increasingly focuses on friendships, romances and meetings between two or more individuals.

And indeed, the biopic shows many similarities with the written biography. Vidal notes that the biopic always balances between "historical fact, previous representations, and contemporary pressures" (7). He writes that the biopic builds on mediated structures (secondary sources) and appropriations (interpretations of these sources), which are then

“brought together by an array of dramatizing strategies” (7). This shows many similarities with the way in which a written biography is composed, thus making the biopic, in Vidal’s words, “a fully fledged form of modern biography” (7). As Vidal eloquently expresses it, “Woolf’s characterization of biography as the “perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow,” that is, as a combination of hard fact and the work of the imagination, takes on new shades of meaning in the biopic” (10-1).

The relationship between the written story and the filmed story is further reinforced by the strong reciprocal influences between both media. Vidal writes that just like early cinema had an effect on modernist fiction, “a two-way exchange took place affecting the evolution of the modern biographical form” (8-9). Laura Marcus notes that biography writing adopted from film the “cinematic subversions of linear time and chronology” while film in turn “borrowed from biography the trajectory of a life as an appropriate cinematic theme and structuring principle” (“New Biography” 215). In a similar manner, Buchanan notices a certain reciprocity between the media of literature and cinema as a whole. She argues that cinema’s long-standing interest in the literary process reflects an urge to define itself alongside the literary tradition (6). The literary medium existed long before cinema came into existence, and has been a sister and rival medium for cinema ever since. Consequently, the film industry has had to explore what set them apart from literature. Buchanan explains that cinema has defined itself, in part, by offering a perspective on literary production. Thus, through a consideration of writers and literary production, cinema attempts to configure itself as a medium in its own right (6). In using the literary medium as a mirror, the film industry can reflect upon its own identity and its own methods and practices (Buchanan 6). Buchanan eloquently expresses this concept as “the gaze of one medium at another” (6). Geoffrey Wall perfectly summarises the film industry’s interest in literature when he writes that cinema “loves to dwell upon literary authorship precisely because writers represent an archaic mode of apparently unconstrained individual cultural production” (133).

### 2.2.3 Intertextuality

Section 2.2.2 has hinted at the importance of previous representations in biopics. As Vidal has noted, biopics depend on previous representations and (interpretations) of secondary sources relating to the author. Since biopics generally deal with the life of a famous (historical) person, people are likely to be familiar with the person depicted in these films, either by first-hand accounts seen in the news or on television, or – in the case of famous individuals living before the age of mass media – through images such as photos, paintings, or statues. Biopics

rely for a large part on the audience's recollection of the person portrayed, and will therefore often contain references to representations of that person in other media. If the depiction is too far off, the biopic will fail. Therefore, all external characteristics of the person portrayed, such as hair, make-up and costume, posture, voice and gesture have to "meet a set of expectations shaped not only by an audience's knowledge and emotional response to the person portrayed but also, more often than not, by a history of previous representations – what could be called a collective social memory or even 'icon' memory" (Vidal 11). Thus, intertextuality is a vital element of biopics, even more so when the biopic depicts the life of an author. In the case of author biopics, references and allusions to the works of the author can be expected as well. Marina Cano López and Rosa María García-Periago note another kind of intertextuality, through the actors that star in the film. They argue that the connections between *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane* are further intensified by the choice of cast and actors, as many actors have played in both Shakespeare and Austen adaptations (par. 14). Audiences familiar with an actor's previous work might thus draw parallels between two or several films.

In addition to references to representations in the cultural domain, author biopics also frequently refer to the works of the author himself. Even origin stories, which tend to only explore the creation of a single work, might also include references to other works by the same author or allusions to widespread (mis)conceptions about the author. As Murphy writes, *Shakespeare in Love* hypothetically creates Shakespeare's life-story "around the writing of *Romeo and Juliet*, (in fact it secretly may be an adaptation) with nods to many other of the Bard's plays and to the many theories about Shakespeare's life and work" (Murphy par. 8). López and García-Periago argue that the Shakespeare and Austen biopics suggest that all works by these authors "are partly autobiographical; they have an origin in life" (par. 6). The relation between the author's life and his work will be dealt with in more detail in section 2.3.2 below.

López and García-Periago connect their theories to Roland Barthes' theorising of intertextuality. Barthes claims that "the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas" ("From Work to Text" 160). According to López and García-Periago, "[m]eaning thus comes from the intertextual quality of language. In *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane*, the 'already read' becomes the 'already watched'" (par. 3). Kamilla Elliot even claims that author biopics – or her preferred term "screened writers" – show a kind of intertextuality in their attitude towards authorship: "[f]ew films subscribe to a single theory of authorship; most support, contest, undermine, and parody various theories simultaneously" ("Screened Writers").

### 2.3 Theories and Tropes concerning Literary Biopics

In her article “The Problem of the Literary Biopic,” Murphy writes that filmmakers’ recent interest in ‘the literary life’ is an echo of the developing importance of biography in both popular culture and academia (par. 3). However, the author biopic has only come to the surface during the last decade (par. 3). Still, much has been written about author biopics already, and the focus in this thesis will be on adaptation and intertextuality, and in particular on the connection between the author’s life and his/her work. Moreover, this section will explain some of the significant tropes that are connected to author biopics and that have been found to recur in many of these films.

#### 2.3.1 Adaptation and Intertextuality

Murphy observes that “biography and biographical films share the fundamental problem of the filmed novel: they all are adaptations from a source” (par. 2). In this respect, the biopic is an even more troubled form of adaptation than the traditional adaptation of a literary work, as an entire life is even harder to translate into film than a single novel or play. Author biopics tend to use intertextuality as described in 2.3 to strengthen the link between the subject/author and the literary works for which they are known. In some cases, the subject’s life is altered in such a way that his story somehow aligns with the story of the character(s) he created. In their evaluation of *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane*, López and García-Periago summarise the major connections between both films as follows: “just as Shakespeare is imagined as the hero of his own play, Jane Austen becomes the heroine of her own novel” (par. 3).

Marcus notes that “we are indeed seeing new ways of representing the encounters between literature and film, including a radical reformulation of the concept of ‘adaptation’ as a mode of ‘remediation’, in which works of art are refashioned in other media forms” (Marcus 47).

#### 2.3.2 The Author’s Life and His Work

In author biopics, the author’s life and work are often connected in several ways. Intertextual references to the author’s literary work strengthen an audience’s familiarity with the author. The literary biopic thus needs to highlight the connection between the life and the literary work. Murphy aptly describes that “[t]he literary biopic has to show, not only the life itself, but how the life gets into the work. It has to show process” (par. 3). Thus, in Murphy’s view, the author biopic has to explore how the experiences and events in the author’s life found their way into his work. Murphy further notes that many literary biopics fail in that aspect, and thus fail in the attempt to portray an author’s life: “some fail to connect the life and the

work; rather, they make a misguided attempt to separate or excerpt the life behind the work. While this can still be a viable and valuable filmic product, it is not a literary life” (Murphy par. 5). Thus, in order to ‘successfully’ represent the life of a writer, the author biopic has to not only depict the writing life, but also how the life influences the work. Linking the author’s life and his work is therefore necessary to establish familiarity with the subject, but also to do justice to the literariness of the life of the writer. The connection between life and work is at the heart of the author biopic.

In this sense, Roland Barthes’ theory that the author is dead is strongly rejected by the author biopic. In his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” Barthes redefined the way in which meaning is constructed from a text. Buchanan argues that by proclaiming ‘the death of the author’, Barthes put forward a new way of understanding an author’s text, one which empowered the readers to distil their own meaning from a text, rather than trying to discover what the author intended (17). Barthes’ theory thus completely separates the author from his work, because upon publication, the author loses his authority over the text (Barthes 142-3). However much the author might have written about his own experiences and opinions and as much as his life might have inspired his writing, the author is disengaged from his work as soon as it is published. Yet, as Buchanan notes, this theory has not sufficiently satisfied some critics. Many critics after Barthes, including Buchanan, have argued instead that all works have an origin, because they cannot “emerge from vacuums” (Buchanan 18). The process as put forward by Barthes is inverted, as readers often attempt to trace the work back to the author. Buchanan explains this line from readers to writers in three simple steps: a reader reads a book, the reader wonders how and why the book has become what it is, and then the reader imagines his version of the origin(s) of a text (18-9). Contrary to Barthes, Buchanan asserts that a reader of a literary work does often seek the figure of the author in a text in order to come full circle with that text (19). This way, author biopics partly satisfy the reader’s need to find the author and the origin of a story, as the author biopic offers one possible version of how the literary work was conceived by the author. Andrew Higgs even suggests that the author biopic has gone beyond the death of the author, to his reincarnation (106). It is true that author biopics are often only made after the death of a certain author. Higgs’ term ‘reincarnation’ is fitting, as the author is brought back to life on the screen. This generally also sparks a renewed appreciation of, or interest in, his work. The author is thus not only reincarnated in the film, but he is also brought back into the critical debate.

### 2.3.3 Tropes in Author Biopics

López and García-Periago compare *Shakespeare in Love* to *Becoming Jane* and in doing so, they highlight some of the tropes frequently used in biopics. They note that both films have similar beginnings, starting in medias res, showing both Shakespeare and Austen suffering from writer's block (par. 4-5). Bingham describes the in medias res opening as "beginning the story at the moment just before the subject begins to make his/her mark on the world" (5). The writer's block is a recurring trope in author biopics. Murphy also describes this trope in her discussion of the film *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994), as in one scene Mrs Parker is "crumpling papers and tossing them aside in the stereotypical act of the blocked writer" (Murphy par. 7). In *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane*, the writer's block is overcome by love. Both Austen and Shakespeare find renewed inspiration in their love for Tom Lefroy and Viola de Lesseps, respectively, who function as muses (par. 6). The mentor is a character similar to the muse. The mentor is a significant trope, especially in biopics of artists and authors. In the case of the author biopic, the mentor contributes to the writing process. Although the mentor is different from the lover, both influence the work(s) of the writer. In *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane*, the mentors are fellow writers (Christopher Marlowe for Shakespeare and Ann Radcliffe for Jane Austen) who either (unknowingly) suggest ideas for works to the writer or who encourage them to write. (López and García-Periago par. 8).

Another important trope within the biopic genre is the flashback. Since author biopics aim to show "how the life gets into the work," flashbacks can be used to show certain memories that are outside the period of time depicted (Murphy par. 3). In the biopic, the subject's life is "often constructed at the end point through the framing structure of the flashback" (Vidal 5). According to Vidal, this model emphasises the greatness and achievement of the film's subject (5). Memories pertaining to the author's childhood are significant in particular, as they are often used to explain why the author is who he is. Vidal notes that flashbacks are used even in the earliest biopics, and "[c]hildhood as a site of character-shaping trauma had become a recurring trope that the contemporary biopic finds hard to escape" (Vidal 9).

In her article, Murphy implies that author biopics fail when they do not visualise the writing process. She writes that "[t]he key to a successful and satisfying filmed portrayal of a writer's life is an acknowledgement of the writing life" (Murphy par. 3). Murphy argues that the author biopic has to contain scenes in which the author can be seen writing, or at least composing an idea for a story in their head, because these scenes "provide the opportunity to

see these people do what they do; and what they do is what brings us to their lives in the first place” (par. 2). In *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane* the authors are seen scribbling down sentences on paper, with quill on parchment or pen on paper (López and García-Periago par. 5). In other films, the typewriter is the main emblem of the act of writing. Marcus notes that “typewriting comes to embody fixity – that which cannot be undone” (Marcus 43). Buchanan notes that these writing scenes have become a convention in depicting writers, as these images have recurred across films (6). They have become widespread and familiar, and thus instantly recognisable to an audience familiar with the genre (Buchanan 6). These conventions pertain in particular to early cinema. Moreover, after establishing the author’s writing, a transition often followed to depict the result of his writing, for instance the characters or settings (Marcus 35). In her discussion of the 1924 film *Dickens’ London*, Marcus observes that “the representation of ‘thoughts taking life’ is inaugurated through images of the writing hand. We see Dickens writing at his desk, representing the composition of characters who then ‘come to life’ on the page/screen” (Marcus 36). Thus, the identity of characters is constructed somewhere between the page and the screen. In these cases there is usually a clear transition to represent “the move from the authorial mind/hand to his or her created world” (Marcus 35).

In contrast to the conventional ways of visually establishing authorship and depicting the writing process, recent films dealing with authors tend to intertwine “the visual and the verbal, the graphic and the aural” (Marcus 47). Whereas in early cinema the distinction between the author’s own physical world and the fictional world he created is very clear, this transition is less obvious in the more recent films. The boundaries between these worlds often blur, as the distinction between what is real and what is imagined by the author becomes less apparent. Marcus summarises this effect as breaking down “the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ worlds, so that ‘the author’ becomes part of, and subject to, the dimensions of the fictional world” (Marcus 35). In Marcus’ view, this even implies that “cinematic/visual imaging may be closer to the dreams and imaginings of authors than writing/language could ever be” (Marcus 36).

## 2.4 Conclusion

The biopic emerged as a separate genre of film at the intersection of life writing and cinema. The biographical film is a new form of life stories and a genre that has only recently been accepted as a separate genre. Moreover, the biopic is slowly emerging as a subject that warrants critical study. As an appropriation of a life, the biopic has some characteristics in

common with adaptations, and in the case of author biopics it often also features references to the works of the author depicted. It has been argued that – in the case of author biopics – the life story has to acknowledge the writing life as well. It could therefore be suggested that an author biopic will always depict the author in the act of writing, or imagining a story in their head. However, as becomes clear in section 2.3.3, in recent biopics the *act* of writing has often been replaced by a visual representation of the author's mind at work, placing him or her within the fictional world he or she created – rather than depicting him or her *writing* about that world.

## Chapter 3

### Screened Writers

In this chapter, the figure of the author as a character will be examined in more detail with regard to how *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks* visualise and, more importantly, reflect on literary authorship. After all, in order to discuss how these films represent the figure of the author, both these themes are essential. The films' attitude towards authorship is just as important as the way in which the films (visually) depict the authors in order to explore the representation of authorship. Therefore, section 3.1 will focus in particular on the character of the author, the acts of writing, and the development of the story as portrayed in the films. In doing so, it will also touch upon the role of imagination and inspiration in the writing process. This section is subdivided into 'The Writer' and 'The Writing'. Section 3.2 will discuss how the films reflect on literary authorship by analysing how the films establish literary authorship – but also how they subvert it.

### 3.1 Representing the Writer and the Writing Process

#### 3.1.1 The Writer

Both films start out with the author having difficulties in his author career. *Finding Neverland* starts with the opening night of Barrie's latest play, which is not well-received by its theatre audience. This opening matches the traditional opening often attributed to biopics described by Bingham, as the story starts "just before the subject begins to make his/her mark on the world" (5). Barrie is suffering from a writer's block as his last produced play failed miserably in the theatres, but since the theatre is booked for a longer period of time Barrie needs to come up with a new play soon. This beginning is similar to the ones in *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane* as described by López and García-Periago. In *Saving Mr Banks*, Travers, on the other hand, suffers from other monetary problems. At the beginning of the film, she has already written her *Mary Poppins* novels, but after their short-lived though large success, she now finds herself in need of money. Though this beginning is different from *Finding Neverland*, both films suggest that a writer's crisis always precedes the creation of a work.

As López and García-Periago argue, the author needs to find a muse to relieve himself of his writer's block (par. 6). The muse is often the love interest of the author, and the love between the author and the muse helps the author to overcome his block. In *Finding Neverland*, this function is fulfilled by Sylvia Llewelyn Davies and her four boys. They offer Barrie renewed inspiration for writing his new play. Sylvia is in this case also the love

interest. In *Saving Mr Banks*, the muse is a little harder to distinguish because Travers appears to be inspired by events and experiences in her life rather than people. First of all, in her childhood, Travers was encouraged to use her imagination to escape the harsh realities of her life, and this could be seen as a factor that has contributed much to her authorship in her later life. Furthermore, it could be said that the entire trip to Los Angeles has triggered her to start writing again, because back in England she starts writing a new book with the provisional title: “Mary Poppins in the Kitchen”. However, in contrast to *Finding Neverland*, the muse is not a single character but rather an experience that inspires her to write again, and there is no hint of a love interest for Mrs Travers. The muse is often a vital element in the writing process, because the muse offers the necessary inspiration, without which the story cannot exist. Both *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks* imply that the author cannot write without the character of the muse, which would entail that they are largely dependent on the people in their environment for their writing. Their creative genius is thus limited, because they can only write under the right circumstances and with the right people to inspire them.

In a similar manner, the character of the mentor is also a contributing factor to the writing process, as explained in chapter 2, and has certain characteristics in common with the muse. Yet, the mentor is different from the muse in the sense that there is no hint of a love interest in the relation between the author and the mentor. In both films, the mentor is a father-like figure, and both Mr Frohman (in *Finding Neverland*) and Mr Russell (in *Saving Mr Banks*) are publishers, and are thus important for the writer. In *Saving Mr Banks*, Travers’ agent urges her to go to LA to discuss the adaptation of her books and in doing so he sets in motion the action of the film. In a similar way, Mr Frohman urges Barrie to write a new play and thus sets in motion the creation of Peter Pan. These people thus both contribute to the writing process. Yet, a much more important mentor for Travers is her father. Travers’ father inspires her to use her imagination to escape the reality of their lives, just as Barrie inspires the Davies family to have imaginative everyday adventures. Barrie further urges Peter to start writing, and Peter indeed writes a short play, performed during their stay at the summer cottage. In both films the mentors are father-like figures, and they inspire a child to use their imagination to escape their realities. However, whereas the inspired child in *Saving Mr Banks* is Travers herself, in *Finding Neverland* Barrie functions as the mentor to inspire the children.

Closely connected to the figure of the muse and the mentor are the themes of imagination and inspiration, which are two important factors in composing a story. After the harsh criticism of his play, Barrie goes to the park to read the newspaper. The housekeeper has cut out an article in the paper concerning Barrie’s failed play. As he looks through the

hole it left, he sees Mrs Llewelyn Davies and her sons. This sequence symbolises how the failed play gives way to new inspiration. As he receives inspiration from them as his muses, he functions as a mentor himself when he inspires Peter to start writing and to use his imagination:

J.M. Barrie: Write about anything. Write about your family. Write about the talking whale.

Peter Llewelyn Davies: What talking whale?

J.M. Barrie: The one that's trapped in your imagination and desperate to get out.

Likewise, in *Saving Mr Banks*, Travers' father urges her to use her imagination and reminds her that she can escape her circumstances: "This world... It's just an illusion, Ginty. As long as we hold that thought, it can't break us. It can't make us endure their reality." The imaginative and playful attitude of her father may have contributed much to her wanting to be a storyteller and a writer.

### 3.1.2 The Writing

In *Finding Neverland*, there are several scenes in which Barrie can be seen writing. These writing scenes often take place outside, in the park, signalling a romantic idea of nature as a place of inspiration for the writer. He makes notes in a notebook of his experiences with the Davies, and some of those experiences have later found their way into the play of Peter Pan. In one scene, Barrie and the Davies go out to fly a kite. Afterwards, he can be seen scribbling notes in his notebook. Peter asks whether he is writing about the kite, but Barrie does not really confirm that. Later, during the performance of Peter Pan, there is a scene with a kite, indicating that he was indeed writing about the kite. This shows that the notes he makes during his days in the park are important for his writing. There are several instances where his experiences with the Davies children can in some way be seen in the eventual play performed towards the end. However, chapter 4 will elaborate more on this theme.

Besides these basic visualisations of the act of writing, the film also uses other techniques to represent the creation of a story. Several scenes in *Finding Neverland* visually depict the author's mind at work. Barrie is an imaginative man, and the plays he and the children come up with when they are playing in the garden, pretending to be pirates or Indians and cowboys, are intercut with imaginative shots in which they are actually on a pirate ship or in a western town. Barrie and the children are thus placed within the fictional world they created. Through the intercuts of the imaginative shots, the distinction between what is real

and what is imagined blurs. This phenomenon is what Marcus described as the author becoming “part of, and subject to, the dimensions of the fictional world” (35). This concept will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4. However, through breaking down the distinctions between real and imagined worlds, the film can directly show how the story takes shape inside the author’s mind.

In contrast to *Barrie*, Travers is rarely seen writing. In the scene in which Travers first appears, her authorship is instantly demonstrated as she is seated behind a desk, with a neatly arranged row of books in front of her. However, in much of what follows, the only times she can be seen writing anything is when she writes remarks and crosses out words in the script for the film. Yet, this already implies that the film script has now taken the place of the narrative she has written. While Travers does not write anything for a large part of the film, Disney’s team constantly comes up with new material for the adaptation of *Mary Poppins*. They write songs and create illustrations for the characters and scenery, and they make changes to the narrative. In a way, this establishes Disney and his team as the new writers. However, towards the end, Travers is back in England and has started typing a new story about *Mary Poppins*. She is seated behind her desk – echoing the opening scene – only this time she is typing away on a typewriter. The room is bright and the speed at which she is writing suggests that she has found new inspiration.

The fact that *Saving Mr Banks* rarely depicts Travers while she is writing and that *Finding Neverland* uses visual representations of Barrie’s imagination alongside the standard ways of depicting the act of writing indicates that these standard depictions of authorship have made way for more creative and visually pleasing representations of the act of writing. Even though the basic writing scenes might establish them as authors, those scenes are not as interesting to watch and do not show how a story is shaped in the author’s mind or how a certain idea is imagined. This confirms Marcus’ suggestion that “cinematic/visual imaging may be closer to the dreams and imaginings of authors than writing/language could ever be” (36).

### 3.2 Authorship: Celebrated or Contested?

As can be seen in 3.1, the films have depicted authorship in quite different ways. However, the attitudes of both films towards authorship are also an important aspect to explore in relation to the representation of authorship. Kamilla Elliot has written that “[f]ew films subscribe to a single theory of authorship; most support, contest, undermine, and parody various theories simultaneously” (“Screened Writers”). Both films elevate *and* subvert the

position of the author at the same time. On the one hand, both *Saving Mr Banks* and *Finding Neverland* celebrate and challenge authorship by showing the author's creative powers and authority over a story. On the other hand, both suggest that their works are the result of a combination of factors, not of creative genius, and that many people can have an effect on or challenge their authorship.

Naturally, an obvious way to visually establish authorship is to depict the author in the act of writing, be it with pen and paper or a typewriter, or even simply imagining a certain idea in his head. It is implied in Murphy's article that a biopic about the life of an author fails when there are no scenes in which the author is seen writing: an author cannot be depicted truthfully without an acknowledgement of the writing life (par. 3). As noted in section 3.1, *Finding Neverland* contains many instances in which Barrie is writing and imagining scenes, thus continually establishing him as a writer and reminding the audience of his authorship. Travers' authorship, however, is challenged by the team of writers at Walt Disney Studios, and she has to defend her vision and position as an authority on the story.

In *Finding Neverland*, Barrie appears in the first scene while he nervously paces behind the scenes. Mrs Barrie is looking for him and she asks an usher: "Would you find Mr Barrie and remind him that they're doing *his* play this evening?" This establishes the fact that he is the writer of the play they are performing, and posits him as the single creator. There are many instances where the audience is reminded of Barrie's authorship, not only through the many scenes in which Barrie can be seen writing, but also because he often talks about writing, especially to Peter. When he first meets Mrs Davies and her four children, his authorship is immediately established upon their meeting:

Barrie:	J.M. Barrie.
Sylvia:	J.M. Barrie <i>the author</i> ? Pleasure. Sylvia Llewelyn Davies.
Jack:	Are you a writer?
Barrie:	I am.
Sylvia:	He's a playwright, Jack. Quite a famous one at that. I apologise. I imagine you're writing.

It is striking that Sylvia instantly assumes that he is writing something and that she is interrupting his writing process, while in truth he was just reading a newspaper. This scene not only establishes Barrie as a famous playwright, but also underlines his authorship by assuming that a writer is always writing. This reflects how authorship is perceived as well, because it confirms the stereotypical image of the writer who is always working. In this way, the writer thus becomes inseparable from the writing life, thus confirming his authorship.

As discussed above, the fact that Travers is rarely seen writing in the film does not draw attention to her authorship – unlike Barrie in *Finding Neverland*. The scene in which Barrie meets Davies is rather different from the scene in *Saving Mr Banks* in which Travers first meets Disney’s team of writers:

- Don DaGradi: I’m Don DaGradi, the scriptwriter.
- Pamela Travers: Co-script writer. I shall certainly be having my say, Mr DaGradi.
- Don DaGradi: Wonderful. I welcome your input.
- Pamela Travers: If indeed we have a sign off on the script.
- Don DaGradi: Right. This is the rest of your team. This is Dick and Bob Sherman, music and lyrics. Boys, this the one and only Mrs P.L. Travers, the creator of our beloved Mary.
- Pamela Travers: Poppins.
- Don DaGradi: Who else?
- Pamela Travers: Mary Poppins. Never ever just Mary.  
Pleasure to meet you. Though we shan’t be acquainted for very long.
- Bob Sherman: And why is that?
- Pamela Travers: Because these books simply do not lend themselves to chirping and prancing. No. Certainly not a musical. Now where is Mr Disney? I should so much like to get this started and finished as briskly as is humanly possible. Perhaps someone could point me in his direction.

Not only does this scene capture Travers’ reluctance to sign away the rights of her *Mary Poppins* books, but also the power struggles that come with such a collaboration on the adaptation of her novels. This brings questions of authorship to the fore, as the literary author is no longer the single creator of a work, but in fact one of the co-script writers. Yet, at the same time, Travers is still seen as an authority as “the creator of our beloved Mary”, but it is a position she has to defend. Throughout the film, she is forced to compromise as they discuss the script and come up with songs for the film, even though she had insisted that there would be no singing. As they go through the script, the music and lyrics, and the artwork designed for the film, Travers rejects nearly all the new ideas, insisting upon doing it her way and how she imagined the story, and at all times reminding them of the fact that if she does not grant the rights, they cannot make the film.

Confronted with these ‘new authors’ who try to tarnish her story, Travers is forced to constantly (re)claim her authority over the story. In the scene where they first read the film script written by Mr DaGradi, both Travers and DaGradi read the text out loud, and in doing so they both claim authorship over the story. Again, Travers asserts her authority:

- Pamela Travers: I’m so sorry Mr DaGradi, but do you feel that you should...
- DaGradi: O please, be my guest.
- Pamela Travers: I do think it’s best. I’ve the most practice. Readings of my books, you know?

The collaboration between Travers and Walt Disney Studios exposes the problem of authorship when a novel is adapted into a film, and Travers realises that by granting the rights, she loses a part of the authority over her story. The friction between her and the co-writers is the result of her unwillingness to let go of that authority. However, she does hold one advantage: she ultimately has the authority over what happens to her story. This is illustrated by her conversation with her agent Russell, who tries to convince her to go to Los Angeles to meet with Mr Disney:

- Pamela Travers: I have final say. And if I don’t like what they’re doing to her...
- Russell: Then you don’t sign the papers. They can’t make the film unless you grant the rights.

Even though she has the final say and it is her decision to grant the rights or not, she knows many compromises have to be made on her side. The sole reason to make these compromises to her stories appears to be her financial situation. Likewise, financial circumstances determine the plays that Barrie writes. In the beginning of *Finding Neverland*, Barrie is forced by Mr Frohman to write a new play to be performed at the theatre. This suggests that Barrie is not free to write whatever he pleases, but that he is limited by the wishes and expectations of the audience, the producers, and the actors.

### 3.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, while *Finding Neverland* generally suggests a celebration of literary authorship – through the writing scenes and certain dialogues that acknowledge Barrie as the creator of a work – the film also suggests that his authorship is limited. *Finding Neverland* implies that an author is always dependent on external factors to be able to write a good story. This notion is perfectly summarised by Barrie’s wife Mary, who tells him after she has seen *Peter Pan*: “Without that family you could never have written anything like this. You need them.” This implies that without characters like muses and mentors to offer the author inspiration, the

author cannot write – or at least, be successful at writing. In *Saving Mr Banks*, Travers' authority over her own work is constantly undermined and subverted by the men at the Disney Studio. In the adaptation process of *Mary Poppins*, she has to make compromises in order to meet the expectations and desires of the studio. As they alter her original story, she loses part of authority and the scriptwriters become the new authors of the story. Yet, on the other hand, *Saving Mr Banks* ultimately confirms the position of Travers as the superior creator of the story. In the last scene, Travers shows up at the LA premiere of *Mary Poppins*. As she prepares herself to face the red carpet, Ralph, her chauffeur, confirms her authority when he reminds her: “this is your night. None of this would be possible without you.”

## Chapter 4

### Blurring Life and Fiction

This chapter will explore the many intricate ways in which the life of the author as depicted in the films intertwines with and connects to the fictional work discussed in the films. It will also discuss the concept described by Marcus – of breaking down the distinction between real and imagined worlds – in relation to both films, as well as how experiences in their lives (as portrayed in the film) inspire and find their way into the work, and whether the authors show similarities with some of their fictional characters. Furthermore, it will examine the intertextual links within the film in order to show not only how the films connect the author and the literary work, but also how they strengthen the link to the literary tradition and the cultural and – in particular - cinematic afterlife of the authors' works. It is important to note that the authors' 'real' lives will not be brought into discussion, only the literary work and any possible film adaptations.

#### 4.1 Linking the Author to Fictional Characters

On the DVD cover and the commercial poster for *Saving Mr. Banks*, Walt Disney and P.L. Travers are depicted walking side by side. This image can be found in appendix A. Their shadows have the shape of Mickey Mouse and Mary Poppins, respectively. Both their shadows are depictions of the characters for which they are known best. They are directly identified with their most famous creations, and through this imagery they are instantly recognisable. This connects to the idea put forward by Jeremy Strong that author biopics tend to bring the author in line with his or her most famous fictional character (par. 6), or, in a broader sense, to chiefly link the creator to his or her most famous creation. In a similar manner, in *Finding Neverland*, J.M. Barrie is pointed out as being Peter Pan by Peter Davies, after Peter denies being the inspiration for Peter Pan:

Barrie:	No, thank <i>you</i> . Thank you, Peter.
Woman 1:	This is Peter Pan! How wonderful.
Man	You're Peter Pan? Why, you must be quite a little adventurer.
Woman 2:	Look, it's true. He has no shadow.
Peter:	But I'm not Peter Pan. <i>He</i> is.

This prompts the audience to look for similarities between Peter Pan and Barrie. The connection appears to be that Barrie teaches the Davies boys the power of imagination, and in doing so he takes them to imaginary worlds, just as Peter Pan takes the Darling children to

Neverland. Yet, whereas Barrie shows similarities with the character of Peter Pan in a metaphorical way, Travers can be seen as having more similarities with Mary Poppins in appearance and personality. Both are stern, self-controlled, and independent women, and both favour order and discipline. Moreover, Travers carries around a large carpet bag, and Mary Poppins is described to do the same.

However, even though the films establish some links between the author and the fictional character, they do not go as far as making the authors' life stories a reflection of the character's story, as López and García-Periago argue for Shakespeare and Austen. Barrie and Travers do not become the hero and heroine of their own literary work, as their life as depicted does not correspond to their fiction, as in the case of *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane*.

#### 4.2 Linking Life and Fiction

Barrie and Travers' lives do show connections with their fiction, but not through a narrative of their life that is similar to the narratives of *Peter Pan* or *Mary Poppins*. Rather, the films portray more complex ways in which the life intermingles with the literary work. The films focus more on what Murphy has described as "how the life gets into the work" (par. 3), or in López and García-Periago's words, how the works "have an origin in life" (par. 6).

As discussed in chapter 3, the scene in which Barrie and the Davies fly a kite is later echoed in the performance of the *Peter Pan* play in the theatres, where Peter and Wendy are saved by a kite. Chapter 3 propounds that this example underlines Barrie's authorship, as the notes he made of the kite flying were necessary for his writing. However, it also strengthens the link between Barrie's life as portrayed in the film and the fictional work of *Peter Pan*, showing that events in his life find their way into his work. Several scenes from the play performed towards the end directly refer back to scenes earlier in the film. For example, in the scene in which the Davies boys are sent to bed, Michael says: "I won't go to bed, I won't, I won't." This sentence is repeated in the final play, in which one of the Darling children refuses to go to bed as well. The dialogue in the play is taken directly from the original novel, and no alterations have been made (Barrie 10). And, the film makes it seem like some sentences are taken directly from people in the author's life. In the same scene, the boys are jumping on their beds, as Barrie imagines them taking flight and flying out of the window. This scene is later echoed in the play, when the Darling children learn how to fly, assisted by Peter Pan. The chosen scenes from the play performed at the end closely tie the events in Barrie's life to the play. Another example is a scene with Madame DuMarier – in this film

suggested to be the inspiration for the iconic character of Captain Hook. Barrie sees her as she is lecturing the Davies children, with a coat hanger in her hand. This is followed by a shot of Barrie as he observes her and the children. The camera shifts back to DuMarier, who is suddenly wearing a captain's jabot and has a hook for a hand.

For Barrie, the interaction with the Davies family offers direct inspiration for his writing. But for Travers, the inspiration for *Mary Poppins* comes from her childhood, and the links between the life and the fiction are not as clear-cut as in *Finding Neverland*. Through flashbacks, the story of her difficult childhood is told. Her father, Travers Goff, is a charming but alcoholic banker, and her mother – unable to cope with the situation – calls for the help of their aunt, who arrives shortly after Travers Goff died. Indirectly, the inspiration for the characters of Mr Banks, Mrs Banks, and Mary Poppins appear to be her father, mother, and aunt, respectively. As Travers notes in the film, “Poppins and the Bankses, they're family to me.” Vidal identifies the flashback – and in particular flashbacks to childhood memories – as a significant trope in biopics. Yet, the childhood memories do not directly explain the *Mary Poppins* books. They explain why she throws away the pears in the fruit basket that Disney sent her, for example, and why she is so determined to protect her characters. However, the flashbacks do not account for Travers' fictional narratives. The childhood flashbacks in the film show why Travers is who she is, rather than why her work is what it is – implying that childhood is “*character-shaping*” (Vidal 9 – italics mine) rather than fiction-shaping. In one pivotal scene, Travers' childhood memory merges with the action in the present day. In the studio, the Sherman brothers want to play her a new song, written for Mr Banks about investing money in the bank, which brings her back to a moment in her childhood, when her father, Travers Goff, gives a speech at a local agricultural fair about bank investments. As he is giving his speech, the scene shifts between Pamela Travers, DaGradi, and the Sherman brothers in the Disney studio at the piano, and her father giving the speech to the crowd at the fair. The song by the Sherman brothers merges with the speech by Goff, who at one point is also singing the lyrics to the song.

#### 4.3 Real and Imagined Worlds

In *Finding Neverland*, the connections between life and fiction are further visualised by breaking down the distinction between what is real and what is imagined. In several scenes, Barrie and the children are playing make-belief games, and the settings slowly evolve into portrayals of the worlds they imagine. One example is the scene in which the Davies children are imagined flying, as discussed above. In another scene, Barrie and the children are dressed

up as pirates, and playing in the gardens around the cottage. When Barrie says “off to the ship with ye,” the action of the scene shifts to an imaginative visualisation of a ship at sea. The camera zooms in on the people on deck, and the four children are tied to the mast of the ship, now fully dressed as pirates. When Michael interrupts, the scene shifts back to the garden for a brief moment, but then the play is resumed. In all these cases, Barrie and the children are placed within the fictional world of their role-playing games.

Yet another scene opens with the setting of a deserted, western town, where the children, dressed as cowboys and Indians, are involved in a gun fight. The western setting is suddenly intercut to reveal that they are actually playing in the backyard of their home. The setting shifts several times between the garden and the town. By shifting between the actual setting and the setting they imagine, the distinction between the two worlds becomes blurred. Thus, Barrie becomes “part of, and subject to the dimensions of the fictional world” (Marcus 35). Moreover, the imaginative worlds of these games are also linked to the fictional work of *Peter Pan*, as the world of Neverland is inhabited by pirates and Indians. The role-playing games have inspired Barrie to create an entire world revolving around these characters.

#### 4.4 Intertextual links

As described in chapter 2, author biopics use intertextuality to strengthen the link between the authors and their literary works, and this has been explained above. However, in both *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks*, the intertextuality is extended to include references to the broader cultural afterlife and literary tradition of their works. In *Finding Neverland*, Barrie connects himself to the tradition of children’s literature when he says “Kipling would swallow his own ear for a title like that.” In *Saving Mr Banks*, the same literary aspect is underlined by references to other authors of children’s literature, including Barrie. When Travers sees a giant stuffed animal Winnie the Pooh, she exclaims: “Poor A.A. Milne.” By naming the author of *Winnie the Pooh*, she emphasises her own place in the tradition of children’s literature. However, she feels sorry for Milne, because Disney has adapted his story and wants to do the same to her own creation. Likewise, when Travers sees a commercial on television by Walt Disney, another literary work is seen to have suffered the same faith. As Walt Disney says: “if you’re familiar with our story of Peter Pan, you know a little sprinkling of Tinkerbell’s fairy dust can make you fly.” It is interesting that he says ‘our’ story of Peter Pan: it places the emphasis on the filmic version of *Peter Pan*, rather than the literary narrative. The examples of *Winnie the Pooh* and *Peter Pan* show that many works by other

authors of children's literature have been adapted by Disney, but they also indicate that the Disney versions have overruled or replaced the literary original.

Moreover, references to the filmic versions of a story reinforce the filmic aspect rather than the literary aspect. When Travers explains how she drinks her tea, she says: "Milk in first please. Then the tea. And a spoonful of sugar." Viewers who are familiar with Disney's version of *Mary Poppins* will recognise the phrase "a spoonful of sugar" as a reference to the song in the *Mary Poppins* film. However, this phrase does not appear in the *Mary Poppins* novels. Thus, this phrase underlines the link to the adaptation by Disney, rather than the original work by Travers. Interestingly, it does not link the author to his own work, but to the adaptation made by someone else. In addition, the references to *Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh* show that cinematic versions of all these stories are bound to be more known than the literary original.

Other intertextual links are created through the choice of actors, as López and García-Periago have also argued in their article. Viewers who are familiar with an actor's previous work might bring that knowledge into their view of these films. Dustin Hoffman plays Mr Frohman in *Finding Neverland*, but he has also played Captain Hook in the film *Hook* (1991). Likewise, Emma Thompson, who plays Travers in *Saving Mr Banks*, has played in and written the script for the *Nanny McPhee* films (2005 and 2010), which show many similarities with *Mary Poppins*. These connections to other related films also emphasise the cinematic afterlife of the stories rather than the literary background.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Since *Saving Mr Banks* revolves around bringing a novel to the screen, it is perhaps only natural that this film focuses more on the cinematic aspect of this process rather than on the literary origin in Travers' mind. In contrast, *Finding Neverland* explains how the story developed through Barrie's imaginative plays with the Davies children. It even visualises the conception of the story of *Peter Pan* in various scenes. This way, the film celebrates literary authorship. Yet, *Saving Mr Banks* values the film adaptation over the literary product, and by referring to many other films through intertextual links it is ultimately a celebration of cinema rather than literary authorship. *Finding Neverland*, on the other hand, includes references to Barrie's own work and to other writers, which emphasises the literary background. Still, the reference to *Peter Pan* by Mr Disney in *Saving Mr Banks* shows that the cinematic afterlife ultimately prevails.

## Chapter 5

## Conclusion

In depicting the author and the writing process, both films adopt quite different approaches. In *Finding Neverland*, several scenes depict Barrie writing in a notebook and imagining certain scenes for *Peter Pan* through the inspiration of the Davies family. Travers in *Saving Mr Banks* is never seen writing. It appears that the act of writing in itself is rather tedious to depict in a film, and Barrie's creative imaginings and Travers' problems and issues in cooperating with the film studio are more interesting as a narrative – and easier to visualise, too. For *Finding Neverland*, how the story is conceived in Barrie's mind has become equal to the actual act of writing. The visualisation of the conception has – in part – replaced the acts of writing in this film. This confirms Marcus' theory that the cinematic visualisations of the author's imagination at work are closer to the imaginings of the author than language or writing (36).

The conflict between Travers and the Disney studio offers another interesting aspect to the theme of authorship, as the producers variously confirm and contest her authorship and authority. However, Barrie's authorship in *Finding Neverland* is constantly emphasised through scenes in which he is seen writing and imagining the story of Peter Pan in his head, but also through dialogues concerning his authorship. Yet, the film suggests that Barrie is dependent on other people for the inspiration for his story. In a similar way, *Mary Poppins* appears to be inspired by events and people in Travers' childhood. Both films show that the author's fiction emerges from the author's experiences. This goes against the theory of Roland Barthes – as summarized by Buchanan – that the explanation of an author's work should not be sought in the life of the author (Buchanan 17).

The connection between Barrie's life and his fiction is strengthened through the theatre performance of the *Peter Pan* play performed at the end, which shows echoes of certain events in his life from the first part of the film. Moreover, by having the play performed at the end, with the original dialogue left intact, *Finding Neverland* underlines the literary aspect of Barrie's life. In doing so, the film confirms what Buchanan has argued about the author biopic – that it “retrospectively advertises the authoring act, and, by implication, the authorial presence that lies behind the adapted work then enacted” (23). *Saving Mr Banks* has a similar way of portraying the resulting story by showing parts of the *Mary Poppins* film at the premiere at the end of *Saving Mr Banks*. Yet, in this case, it does not underline her authorial presence, but rather Disney's appropriation of her story.

It may be interesting to explore the gender issues at work in this film, and how Travers is depicted as a *female* author, entering the male-dominated Disney studio. As she is asserting her authorship, she is perhaps asserting her authority as a woman as well. And, since *Saving Mr Banks* is produced by Disney, the same company that had such trouble attaining the rights to her work, Travers is perhaps depicted unfavourably. This brings up interesting questions of how author biopics evaluate the authors. Such films might shed a new light on the author's works and how a work came into being, and might therefore change how the works are evaluated. Buchanan has argued that the release of a literary biopic is often followed by new editions of the author's work, as well as a renewed critical interest in those works (22). Research might discover whether this is also the case for the works of Barrie and Travers after the release of *Finding Neverland* and *Saving Mr Banks*.

*Saving Mr Banks* constantly contests the authorship of Travers; first of all because she is not depicted as a writer. Moreover, the film studio undermines her status as an author by changing and adapting her novel, and going against her wishes. But it goes even further than that, by emphasising the cinematic aspect through constant references to the film adaptation of *Mary Poppins* rather than the original book series, as well as by preferring the Disney versions of *Winnie the Pooh* and *Peter Pan* over their literary counterparts. By focusing on the adaptation process of *Mary Poppins*, and not on the conception of the story – as in *Finding Neverland* – the emphasis lies on the cinematic afterlife of the literary work, rather than the origin of the literary work. In many ways, *Finding Neverland* can be seen as a celebration of the literary author. In contrast, *Saving Mr Banks* is a celebration of cinematic authorship, implying that cinema ultimately prevails over a literary work; in the end, the author is relegated to the sidelines by the cinematic afterlife of his work.

Interestingly, the differences between the films' attitudes towards authorship are brought about by two opposite cinematic characteristics. *Finding Neverland* tells the origin story of *Peter Pan* and establishes authorship mostly through images, whereas *Saving Mr Banks* contests literary authorship through a lack of such images, and highlights the friction between film and literature through dialogue. Buchanan has noted that cinema attempts to define itself through depicting its rival medium (i.e. literature) in order to establish its own distinctiveness (6). The films' attitudes towards authorship thus reveal how cinema defines itself and how it evaluates literature. Considering this, *Finding Neverland* seems to value literature, as it engages with literary culture in various ways. At least, it marks literature as an important precursor to cinema. It also appreciates the author as the single creator of a literary work. This ties in with Geoffrey Wall's hypothesis that the film industry is interested in

depicting literary authorship because writers embody the simple, single genius (133). However, this idea is subverted by the most recent film: *Saving Mr Banks*. As it depicts the adaptation process of *Mary Poppins*, it highlights the collective efforts between the writer and the film maker. In this way, it celebrates the cooperation of a group, rather than ‘the single genius’. Moreover, by engaging with the cinematic afterlife rather than the literary traditions, this film represents literary authorship as inferior to cinema. This implies that *Saving Mr Banks* values film over literary authorship. Possibly, this signals that cinema is slowly breaking free from its ties to literature and is beginning to configure itself as a medium in its own right.

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Appendix A

EMMA THOMPSON  
TOM HANKS  
PAUL GIAMATTI  
JASON SCHWARTZMAN  
AND COLIN FARRELL



Disney  
**SAVING MR. BANKS**

WHERE HER BOOK ENDED, THEIR STORY BEGAN.

DISNEY PRESENTS IN ASSOCIATION WITH BBC FILMS EMMA THOMPSON TOM HANKS "SAVING MR. BANKS" A HUBBY FILMS/ESSENTIAL MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH HOPSCOTCH FEATURES  
A JOHN LEE HANCOCK FILM PAUL GIAMATTI JASON SCHWARTZMAN BRADLEY WHITFORD AND COLIN FARRELL COSTUME DESIGNER MATT SULLIVAN MUSIC BY THOMAS NEWMAN EDITOR DANIEL O'LEANDY EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARK LIVOKSI, A.C.E.  
PRODUCED BY MICHAEL COHENBLUTH EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JOHN SCHWARTZMAN, A.S.C. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PAUL TRUBITS CHRISTINE LANGAN ANDREW MASON TROY LUM PRODUCED BY ALISON OWEN PRODUCED BY IAN COLLIE PHILIP STEUER  
WRITTEN BY KELLY MARCEL AND SUE SMITH COMING SOON DIRECTED BY JOHN LEE HANCOCK PRESENTED BY DISNEY  
[Facebook.com/SavingMrBanks](http://Facebook.com/SavingMrBanks)

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