

The Edge of Reality

*Remediation and the reenactment of historical music performances in
pop/rock biopic 'Elvis' (2022)*

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Abstract

The last decade saw a rise of the production and popularity of biographical music pictures. With box office successes like *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) and *Rocketman* (2019) the biopic is booming. However, academic research on this genre is limited. The available studies moreover tend to focus on the biopics' historic (in)accuracy. Yet, biopics are cinematic texts and should therefore be examined as such. An intriguing element of the music biopic, are the reenactments of historical music performances. This filmic practice allows the spectator to experience events from the past somatically and emotionally. To create a realistic experience for the spectator, reenactments started to rely upon the *remediation* of the (audio-visual) documents of historical performances. At the same time, they became interwoven into the films' story world. Within this dual function lies the main question of this thesis: "How do the reenactments of historical music events in *Elvis* simultaneously create an "realistic" experience for the viewer and contribute to the films' narrative?" This question will be answered through an in-depth audio-visual analysis of four historical music performance reenactments in biopic *Elvis* (2022). *Elvis* (dir. Baz Luhrmann) tells the (his)story of Elvis Presley through the eyes of his manager Tom Parker and relies upon the remediation of multiple historical media documents (e.g. photographs, television broadcasts, documentaries) making this a suitable case study. The analysis will 1) focus on the relationship between the old medium the reenactment is based on, and how this is translated into the new medium considering camerawork, editing, mise-en-scène, voice-over/dialogue and music and 2) consider the narrative connotations and associations that are established. Additionally, literature from film studies, musicology and performance studies will be combined, to give insight in the remediation and restructuring of history in the contemporary biopic as cinematic text and move beyond the limiting debate of historic accuracy.

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Introduction

Music performances have played an important role in film from the earliest experiments with synchronized sound onwards, which evolved into various film genres that highlighted music performance. In “the late 1970s/early 1980s British and American cinema fully began to consider the life stories of pop and rock musicians as plausible topics.”¹ It is since this time that the genre has flourished, with a “neo-classical” revival in the 2000s.² It can be argued that with the tremendous box-office successes of recent biopics *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Rocketman* (2019) and many music biopics set to be released in the (near) future, the genre is yet again, or still, booming.³

Research on the music biopic has however been limited in academic study and tends to focus on the tension between historic accuracy and the dramatic needs of narrative film, in an attempt to define the genre that moves between documentary, historical drama and the musical. However, as Ian Inglis argues, biopics are cinematic texts and “to complain because [they] fail to [present an accurate and thorough history] is to misunderstand the constraints, the objectives, and the experience of cinema.”⁴ George F. Custen in his book length study on the biopic in line argues that we should move beyond the debate of historical accuracy in our research of the biopic, because “all history is a mediation...and thus subject to some degree of restructuring.”⁵ This “representation of history and our thoughts about it in visual images and written discourse” is what Hayden White describes with the concept historiophoty.⁶ White points out that our (visual) representation of history is simultaneously an interpretation of that history. It is through this process of restructuring that these representations of history create new meanings for contemporary audiences to be experienced and interpreted within their own temporal and spatial context.⁷ An intriguing element of the music biopic that specifically touches upon this idea of historiophoty are the reenactments of historic music performance.

¹ Ian Inglis, “Popular Music History on Screen: the pop/rock Biopic,” *Popular Music History* 2, no. 1 (April 2007): 78. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=36029044&site=ehost-live>.

² Dennis Bingham, “Living Stories: Performance in the Contemporary Biopic,” in *Genre and Performance: Film and Television*, ed. Christine Cornea (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 90.

³ Martin Scorsese and Jonah Hill are working on a biopic about The Grateful Dead; Bradley Cooper is directing *Maestro*, a biopic about Leonard Bernstein; and John Logan is producing a biopic about Michael Jackson.

⁴ Inglis, “Popular Music History on Screen,” 91.

⁵ George F. Custen, *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 11.

⁶ Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1193. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1873534>.

⁷ Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 46.

These aim to audio-visually realistically represent a well-known historical performance/event to the spectator, while at the same time they play a role in the construction of the biopic's overarching narrative. This dual role creates a tension. Before this can be further explained, it is important to define a reenactment in film.

Reenactments in film

The term “to reenact,” meaning “to act or perform again; reproduce,” emerged in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ Megan Carrigy in *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture* argues that this definition developed in what Walter Benjamin described as the age of technological reproducibility: a period in which due to increasing mechanization of reproduction techniques the boundaries between a production and reproduction of an artwork started to blur.⁹ This has strongly connected the idea of a reenactment to “technical media.”¹⁰

When it comes to the medium film, reenactments were amongst one of its earliest genres (e.g. topical, period films) and focused on well-known news stories (actualities) and the reconstruction of (historical) battles. By the end of the 1910s however, due to the development of filmic communication techniques, the genre turned into a practice that foregrounded an event from the past and started to be “woven into the world of a film” to “work in relationship with other narrative strategies.”¹¹ This practice was employed into various film and television genres such as the documentary, the historical drama and the biopic to “allow the spectator to imagine they are ‘witnessing again’ events of the past”¹² and to “experience history somatically and emotionally, to know what it felt like.”¹³

⁸ Megan Carrigy, *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture: Performance, Mediation, Repetition* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 4.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room* 39 (2010): 13-14. <https://doi.org/10.1162/grey.2010.1.39.11>

¹⁰ Carrigy, *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture*, 5.

¹¹ Megan Carrigy. “Reenactments Make History” (Presentation at the ZDOK documentary conference, Zurich, May 19, 2016): 17.58-18.07. <https://blog.zhdok.ch/zdok/2016/reenactments-make-history/>.

¹² Robert Burgoyne, “The Balcony of History,” *Rethinking History* 11, no. 4 (December 2007): 552. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520701652061>.

¹³ Carrigy, *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture*, 4.

Remediation

This brings into question how the viewers' relationship to the reenactment is shaped by the filmic audio-visual language. An important element that has shaped the audio-visual language of contemporary biopic reenactments are the (in)direct references to other media documents of that historical performance (such as live recordings, concert registrations, documentaries, newspaper headlines and photographs) that, due to the growing accessibility of those mass-media (in the form of DVD's, on websites and streaming services) have intensified. Take for example Johnny Cash' 1968 performance at Falcom State Prison in biopic *Walk the Line* (2005) based on Johnny Cash' live album "At Falcom Prison" or Queens' set at Live Aid in biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) based on its original 1985 television broadcast.

This "representation of one medium into another" has been described by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin with the concept remediation.¹⁴ Inherent to this process of remediation however, there is a desire to erase "all traces of mediation" (immediacy).¹⁵ In other words, there is a tension between the strive for a realistic and immediate representation of the event to the viewer, while at the same time the direct references to other media documents and the technicalities of film (camerawork, editing, mise-en-scène, music, sound, dialogue) require to be made visible (hypermediacy) to establish that realistic representation of the event (double logic of re-remediation).¹⁶ Furthermore, the reenactments are interwoven into the biopic's narrative, in which the performances take on new associations and connotations for the spectator to decode.¹⁷

Elvis (2022)

In order to move beyond the discussion of historical accuracy in the music biopic this thesis will dive into this process of remediation through an analysis of biopic *Elvis* (2022): a biographical musical drama about the life of American singer, actor and cultural icon Elvis Presley (Austin Butler) told from the perspective of his manager Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks). *Elvis* heavily relies upon the remediation of various media documents into reenactments of multiple historical and memorable Elvis Presley performances.

¹⁴ J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, "Remediation," *Configurations* 4, no. 3 (1996): 339. doi:10.1353/con.1996.0018.

¹⁵ Bolter and Grusin, "Remediation," 313.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Inke Arns, "Narrative," in *The Routledge of Reenactment Studies*, ed. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (London: Routledge, 2019), 152.

Plot

Elvis tells the story of Elvis Presley and the mysterious relationship with his manager Colonel Tom Parker. On his death bed Parker (Andreas van Kuijk) reflects on his years as Elvis' manager. He claims that, although people in the news state that he betrayed, financially disadvantaged and eventually became responsible for Presley's death, he is innocent. Through the narrational voice of Parker the biopic chronologically follows Elvis' career: from his first Louisiana Hayride performance, to his controversial television appearances, his years in the army, his Hollywood career and comeback as a singer, followed by his successful final years at the International Hotel in Las Vegas. The narrative focusses on the tension between "the show" (Elvis as a musician) and "the bizz" (the Colonel) and shows how the decisions of his manager and Elvis' trust in him determined the trajectory of his career. At the end of the biopic, Parker claims his innocence once more by saying that it was "the love for his fans" that eventually caused Elvis' tragic, early death.

Method

This thesis will focus on the reenactments of four historical performances from various stages of Elvis' career (see below). These four reenactments have been selected for three main reasons: 1) they all present an important narrative turn and/or development, that shows the tension between Elvis' (the musician, the show) and Parker (the manager, the bizz) the biopic revolves around; 2) these four reenactments foreground the historical musical performance as a musical moment through an on-screen, diegetic performance of one or more songs; 3) the selected scenes reenact performances of Presley that have often been referred to and (re)mediated, which shows an interesting relationship to the conventions of those media documents. The scenes that will be discussed are as follows:

- 1) Presley's first appearance at country music show the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport on October 15, 1954 based on a radio broadcast and photographs.
- 2) Presley's headline performance at a benefit concert at Russwood Park in Memphis on July 4, 1956 based on photographs.
- 3) The *Singer Presents...Elvis* NBC television special (more commonly referred to as the '68 *Comeback Special*) that was broadcasted on December 3, 1968 based on the original broadcasted television show and a deluxe edition DVD released in 2004 including outtakes.
- 4) Presley's Dinner Show at the International Hotel in Las Vegas on August 11, 1970 based on the documentary *Elvis: That's the Way It Is* (1970).

On the one hand the in depth-visual analysis focusses on the relationship between the original document (“old” medium) and the reenactment (“new” medium), considering the relationship between camerawork (shot-type, duration, angle), framing, editing, mise-en-scène, voice-over/dialogue and music (lyrics, musical parameters, production). On the other hand, the analysis considers the connotations and associations between the reenactment and the broader narrative of the biopic that are created within this remediation process, to answer the main question: “How do the reenactments of historic music events in *Elvis* simultaneously create an “realistic” experience for the viewer and contribute to the films’ narrative?” In doing so, this thesis will necessarily combine literature from film studies, musicology and performance studies.

Baz Luhrmann

The film is directed by Baz Luhrmann. Luhrmann, known for his distinctive editing style which can be referred to as “MTV-aesthetic” can be regarded as an *auteur*. His cinematic language regularly remediates other media, to which he tends to call attention by making the old medium visible (*hypermediacy*).¹⁸ Moreover, Luhrmann’s idiosyncratic style is apparent in his employment of music and sound. The director carefully selects the music and uses musical parameters, melodies and lyrics as important story-telling elements, that can moreover evoke broader cultural and social connotations.¹⁹

¹⁸ Barbara Straumann, “Adaption – Remediation - Transmediality,” in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. Gabriele Rippl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 265.

¹⁹ Ann van der Merwe, “Music, the Musical and Postmodernism in Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge*,” *Music and the Moving Image* 3, no. 3 (2010): 31. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.5406/musimoviimag.3.3.0031>.

Case Study

There are two points of departure from which the filmmaker has approached the reenactments and that have shaped how the reenactments on the one hand created a sense of “realism” (authentication) and on the other hand contribute to the construction of the biopics’ narrative. Therefore, the discussion of the four reenactments are divided into two chapters. The first chapter will discuss the reenactment of Presley’s performance at the Louisiana Hayride and his performance at Russwood Park. They rely upon photographs, audio-recordings, (newspaper)articles and written stories and combine multiple happenings into one performance that has been taken as focal point. The second chapter will discuss the reenactments of Elvis’ *'68 Comeback Special* and Presley’s’ Dinner Show at the International Hotel, that in contrast are rely upon audio-visual documents of the events, that are taken as point of departure.

Chapter 1: “Fantasy” sequences

This first chapter will examine Presley’s first performance at the Louisiana Hayride in 1954 and Presley’s headline performance at a benefit concert at Russwood Park in 1956. Both rely upon photographs, audio-recordings, (newspaper)articles and written stories and combine multiple happenings into one performance that has been taken as focal point. To what extent do the reenactments of these historic performances rely upon both the old media, as well as the new medium (film) to reconstruct these events into an audio-visual medium and simultaneously create a “realistic” experience for the viewer and contribute to the narrative of the biopic?

1.1. Elvis Presleys’ first performance at the Louisiana Hayride

Presley’s’ first performance (and live national radiobroadcast) at country music program the Louisiana Hayride happened on October 16, 1954.²⁰ The reenactment refers to the original radio broadcast, photographs and written stories of the event, but to remediate it into an audio-visual medium it employs various filmic devices (camerawork (gaze), editing, music and voice-over) to not only tell the story of how Elvis was introduced as a musician and discovered by his manager at the Hayride, but also re-create how the audiences’ in the 1950s experienced the event to the spectator.

1.1.1. Voice-over and audience’s perspective

Our collective memory of what artists sound, act and look like is described by Vidal with the term “icon memory” referring to the fact that “make-up and hair, costume and especially voice and gesture need to meet a set of expectations shaped not only by an audience’s knowledge and emotional response to the person portrayed, but also...by a history of previous representations.”²¹ The first part of this reenactment specifically points out to the physical features of Presley to the spectator.

²⁰ Presley regularly appeared on the Hayride throughout 1954 and 1955.

²¹ Bélen Vidal, “Introduction: The Biopic and Its Critical Contexts,” in *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, ed. Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2013), 11. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.4324/9780203384572>.

We see a long shot of Elvis that has walked onto the stage. Presenter Frank Page starts a conversation with Elvis, that is then interpolated with a voice-over by Parker: “greasy hair, girly make up, I cannot overstate how strange he looked,”²² while we see a close up of Elvis’ face (fig.1). Presley experimented with makeup, hair color and clothing to create a fluid style that crossed genre boundaries, which “challenged established norms of



Figure 1: Close-up of Elvis' face while we hear the voice-over of the Colonel [00:13:59].

masculinity.”²³ When the performance starts, this “strangeness” to the audience at the Hayride is pointed out musically too. There is a moment of silence in which we only hear Elvis’ fast breathing into the microphone. This is followed by a pan shot that captures the seated audience from Elvis’ point of view, looking straight into the camera and staring at him in silence. Elvis stutters: “it...it goes somethin’ like this.” In the original recording of the broadcast however, Elvis does not stutter and immediately starts singing instead of pausing. When Elvis starts singing he sounds hesitant, the timing is off and the bass and electric guitar as accompaniment come in too late and keep lagging behind. Moreover, we hear a high beep tone that signals technical issues, after which the performance pauses. We see a shot of a young man sitting in the audience that shouts: “get a haircut fairy.” Referring to him as a “fairy” (slang used as disparagement towards gay people) points out again to Presley’s unconventional physical appearance.²⁴ The interplay between the Colonels’ narration, mise-en-scène (black eyeliner, dyed hair, pink suit), camerawork (close-ups, pan-shots), dialogue (audience response) and the performance (stuttering, unsynchronized accompaniment) guides the viewers’ perspective to give a sense of how the audience at the Hayride experienced it when they first encountered Elvis.

²² This was an actual quote by a journalist, here employed into the Colonels’ voice-over.

²³ Mathias Haeussler, *Inventing Elvis: An American Icon in a Cold War World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 30.

²⁴ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, “Fairy,” accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fairy>.

1.1.2. Female gaze and MTV-aesthetic

Though the Louisiana Hayride mainly attracted an audience of thirty years or older, program director Horace Logan recalls how Elvis quickly gained popularity and attracted a young, female audience to Shreveport:

Nothing like this had ever happened in American public entertainment. Young females in the audience exploded with excitement. They screamed themselves into hysteria.²⁵

In the reenactment two interesting filmic devices are employed to present this revolutionary character and the excitement of the female audiences of Elvis' performances at the Hayride: the female gaze and the "MTV-aesthetic."

We see a close-up of Elvis' leg moving in his pink trousers. The voice-over of Parker speaks "...I watched that skinny boy in the pink suit transform into a superhero." A close-up of Elvis' face shows how he takes a deep breath, squints his eyes and starts singing. Unlike the first part of the song his voice sounds powerful and the instruments are immediately in synch and up to speed with the vocals. Elvis starts shaking his legs, shoulders and head to the rhythm of the song. Simulated by the introduction of the female gaze, this shifts the relationship between Elvis and his female audience. As Matt Shedd describes "female sexuality was given room to be expressed publicly in those concerts, and Elvis knew exactly how to draw it out of teenage girls."²⁶ Film theorist Laura Mulvey has described how the camera in classical Hollywood cinema often makes the female the object of the viewers' gaze, by adapting the viewpoint of the male characters and is "central to the construction of sexuality" in audio-visual media.²⁷ Here the male gaze is reversed and the camera is adapting to the female perspective to construct Elvis' body as the object of sexual desire.

²⁵ Horace Logan, *Elvis, Hank, and Me: Making Musical History on the Louisiana Hayride* (New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2015), 139.

²⁶ Matt Shedd, "Unapologetically Improper and Unkempt: Elvis's Style of Sex Appeal in 1954 and 1955," *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design* 1, no. 1 (April 2011): 51.

²⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 62-63; David R. Shumway, *Rock Star: The Making of Musical Icons From Elvis to Springsteen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 31. <https://search-ebshost-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=777999&site=ehost-live>.

After the first verse, multiple shot-reverse-shots between Elvis' shaking legs (panning up and down from his crotch to his feet) and the facial expression of a girl in the audience (her eyes similarly moving up and down) build up to a shot of Elvis' crotch in slow motion (fig. 2), after we see the girl who lets out a scream (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Slow motion shot of Elvis' wiggling hips [00:15:30].



Figure 2: Reaction of the girl who lets out a scream [00:15:32].

This visual pattern then continues to capture screaming girls in shot-reverse-shots with Elvis' shaking, legs, crotch and hips (fig. 4, 5, 7 and 7). This female gaze directly presents the spectator with the girls' sexual experience of Elvis' performing body.



Figure 5: Medium shot of Elvis' twisting legs [00:16:00].

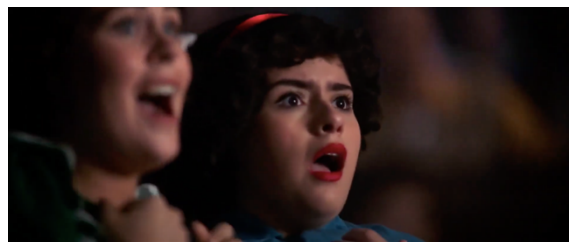


Figure 4: Reaction of a girl in the crowd [00:16:32].



Figure 6: Medium shot of Elvis' shaking legs [00:16:21].



Figure 7: Group of girls screaming in the crowd [00:16:13].

What adds to this is screaming of the internal female audience. Voice actresses trained to scream “with lust and hunger” were recorded and audibly transfer this sense of excitement and sexuality to the spectator.²⁸ Moreover, this revolutionary energy of girls expressing their sexuality in American public entertainment for the first time, is expressed through the “MTV-aesthetic.”

²⁸ Filmmaker U, “‘Elvis’ Re-recording Mixer, Sound Designer & Supervising Sound Editor Wayne Pashley Joins Film U!,” YouTube video, 16:46-16:52, July 29, 2022. <https://youtu.be/-J8xCA7YzA4>.

This entails an editing style that follows musical parameters, which derived from the music video and became “a new language for youth” from the 1980s onwards, that “distinguishe[d] them from a parent culture...”²⁹ The employment of the “MTV-aesthetic” that is so closely related to teenage culture, in this reenactment not only points out how the openly expression of female sexuality at Elvis’ concerts distinguished the youth from the elder generation (that regarded this as a taboo), but it moreover directly addresses the (young) external audience.

1.1.3. Adapting and enriching the music

Considering the song that is performed in the reenactment, it is striking that “Baby, Let’s Play House” was not performed by Elvis during his first Louisiana Hayride appearance. The choice of Luhrmann to employ this particular song, can be explained through an examination of its lyrics. The final phrase of the chorus (“come back baby, I wanna play house with you”) suggestively expresses the desire of a man to take a girl home to sleep with her, as the expression “playing house” (used to describe a couple living together without the commitment of marriage) in the 1950s (connected to the idea of having sex before marriage), was regarded a taboo. The lyrics of the song then characteristically directly points out the narrative theme. This is enhanced by the vocal performance style with stuttering and hiccupping vocals, that Elvis added to his rockabilly cover version (“b-b-b-baby”). It characteristically “convey[ed] sexual innuendo” and “simulated bursts of lust.”³⁰

Something that adds to this, is the musical enriching of “Baby, Let’s Play House.” Corbella argues that modern production techniques are often employed in reenacted performances to address contemporary audiences.³¹ After the second verse a sample of “Come Together” by Gary Clark Jr. and Junkie XL is implemented into the instrumental break.³² The punk-like, shredding electric guitar riff not only “...underline[s] what [an Elvis performance] felt like for the young crowd at that time,” but it moreover creates a musical build-up through its gradually rising tempo, supported by drum kicks and rhythmic-editing, that musically simulates the girls’ growing excitement.³³

²⁹ Kay Dickinson, “Pop, Speed, Teenager and the ‘MTV-aesthetic,’” *Scope, an online journal of film studies* (June 2001), 7. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2001/june-2001/dickinson.pdf>.

³⁰ Kathryn Hill, “To f-f-f-ade away?": The Blues Influence in Pete Townshend’s Search for an Authentic Voice in ‘My Generation,’” *Popular Music History* 9, no.2 (August 2014): 124. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=112597964&site=ehost-live>.

³¹ Corbella, “Live to Tell, 31.

³² Gary Clark Jr. also played the role of Arthur Crudup in *Elvis*.

³³ Joe Leydon, “Baz Luhrmann’s biopic dramatizes The King’s breakout performance at the Shreveport country music mecca,” *Cowboys & Indians*, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.cowboysindians.com/2022/06/elvis-rocks-the-louisiana-hayride/>.

1.1.4. *The fantastical gap*

After the instrumental break discussed in the previous paragraph, the music “moves” into the “fantastical gap” (the grey area between diegetic and non-diegetic that signifies important narrative or symbolic moments).³⁴ The vocals are slowed down and sound distorted. We cut to the Colonel, followed by a shot of a girl sitting in the audience and hear Parker’s voice: “...she was having feelings she wasn’t sure she should enjoy. He was a taste of forbidden fruit.” Underscored by mysterious synthesizer chords, screaming vocals and a muted, pulsating guitar chord Elvis disappears behind the curtains. This alteration in the “the state of the filmic moment” through the voice-over and music, changes the “observers’ relationship to it.”³⁵ The sinister underscore that contrasts with the previous excitement and the return of Parkers’ narration “reminds” the viewer that the Colonel is telling this story and emphasizes the ominous relationship between Elvis and his manager.

³⁴ Ronald Rodman, “The Popular Song as Leitmotif in 1990s Film,” in *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film*, ed. Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (London: Routledge, 2017), 200.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

1.2. Elvis Presley at Russwood Park

The second reenactment is Elvis' performance at a benefit concert at Russwood Park on July 4, 1956. It happened a few days after Elvis' body movements at The Milton Berle Show had caused controversy and Allen made Presley sing to a basset hound to take the attention away from his controversial dancing at The Steve Allen Show. As Luhrmann has pointed out this reenactment is based upon multiple historical events that revolved around this controversy, with the Russwood Park concert as focal point.³⁶ To remediate these events into an audio-visual medium filmic devices (camerawork, visual-effects, editing and music) are employed to not only tell the story of how Elvis' expression of the "real-self" was suppressed by his manager and tied to broader cultural issues, but it also to transfer the rebellious character of this Elvis performance to the spectator.

1.2.1. *The pro-segregation speech*

The first element that plays a role in the remediation of this reenactment, is the interpolation of a pro-segregation speech held by Senator James Eastland (Nicholas Bell) at a segregationist rally, on the same date. The speech was re-recorded by a voice actor and through camerawork and editing connects Elvis' controversial body movements to broader cultural issues of 1950s America. During Elvis' speech prior to his performance, we in low fidelity (as if through loudspeakers) hear snippets of a voice. A shot of Elvis from a high standpoint follows, while he looks up to the sky as if he is hearing the voice too (fig. 8). We then cut to the image of Eastland behind a lectern. He speaks: "he may induce those forces to prevent the racial immigrations of schools..." We then cut back to a close-up of Elvis that is still looking up to the sky and continues his speech: "a lot of people are saying a lot of things, of course you've gotta listen to the people you love...but in the end you've gotta listen to yourself. These New York people ain't gonna change me none."

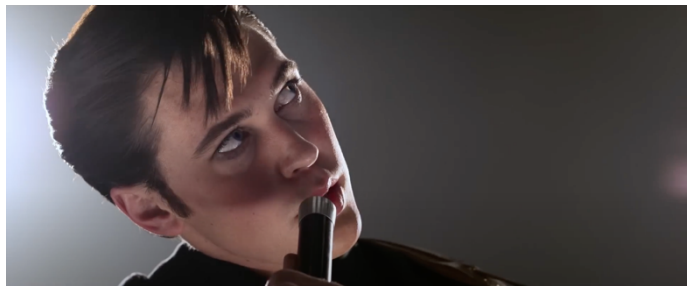


Figure 6: *Elvis looking up to the sky as if he is hearing the voice of the senator [00:51:38].*

³⁶ Daniel Dercksen, "Elvis – an epic, big-screen spectacle that explores the life and music of Elvis Presley," The Writing Studio, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://writingstudio.co.za/elvis-an-epic-big-screen-spectacle-that-explores-the-life-and-music-of-elvis-presley/>.

The final phrase is a line that Elvis famously spoke during this Russwood Park performance, referring to the television hosts that had tried to change or censor his performance style. This is followed again by the senator that now is speaking with anger about how the entertainment industry is “determined to spread Africanized culture...” Then the senator looks up to the sky (fig. 9) as if he is interrupted by a shouting Elvis: “I am gonna show you what the real Elvis is like tonight!” (fig. 10). Through framing these two speeches as if Elvis and the senator are hearing each other, a dialogue is created that connects the two historic events. The remediation of these actual quotations then, not only tell the story of how Elvis is suppressed to express his real-self as a performer, but moreover shows the broader cultural issues that underlie this controversy.



Figure 7: Senator looks up as if his speech is interrupted by a shouting Elvis [00:53:07].

1.2.2. *Black-and-white (freeze) frames*

Our collective idea of how an artist sounds, acts and looks like has been shaped by previous representations of him/her in the media. This is especially interesting when it comes to Presley, because his suggestive movements were widely discussed and disapproved upon by the media. This is in line with two major cultural developments in the 1950s revolving around: 1) the advent of the new dominant visual medium of television and 2) an “explosion of body-centered performance art.”³⁷ Television as medium made it able to “convey the visual excitement of rock & roll performances.”³⁸ The medium not only made Presley familiar to a national audience as “the first rock icon,” but the ways in which his body was presented in these visual media played a crucial role in the construction of his icon image: “Elvis’s was a spectacular, rhythmic body...offered for consumption...to millions of visually fixated and physically responsive postwar teens.”³⁹ This ambiguous relationship between Elvis and the media is remediated through the use of black-and-white (freeze) frames.

³⁷ Erika Lee Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, & Image* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 6.

³⁸ Shumway, *Rock Star*, 24.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 25; *Ibid*, 9.

Before Elvis steps onto the stage, he is told multiple times that he is not allowed to “wobble” and is being monitored by the Vice Squad. However, Elvis is determined to “show the real Elvis.” After a few minor suggestive movements, Elvis starts twisting his left leg. He then slowly thrusts his hips forward, stands on his toes for a few seconds before he falls onto his knees in front of the ecstatic crowd. This extended move clearly disobeys the orders, is shown in low fidelity black-and-white. Framed as a film role, it suggests that Elvis is being captured through the eyes of the media (fig. 11 and 12). From this moment on his hip thrusts, leg shakes and crawling on the ground are all captured in this visual effect (fig. 13). Some of these black-and-white images are moreover freeze-framed (while we see photographers in the crowd) creating a specific moment of visual authentication that refers to the photographs taken by Alfred Wertheimer (known for his intimate photographs of Elvis during this era) (fig. 14).



Figure 8: Elvis captured through the Vice Squad camera (1) [00:53:25].



Figure 9: Elvis captured through the Vice Squad camera (2) [00:53:28].



Figure 10: Elvis captured through the Vice Squad camera (3) [00:54:02].

This visual representation builds upon media conventions of television and rock photography that in the past have shaped the “icon memory” of Elvis, in which his controversial body movements were presented through visual (black-and-white) media. Simultaneously, this visual-effect emphasizes the conflict between Elvis’ expression of his “real self” and the people that disapprove upon this (his manager, the senator, the police, media critics).



Figure 11: Photograph of Elvis at the Russwood Park concert by Alfred Wertheimer (source: Heritage Auctions, HA.com).

1.2.3. *Songs as expression of the main character*

Similar to the first reenactment, the music plays an important role to establish the narrative and reach the spectator. As Jesse Schlotterbeck argues, music performances in the contemporary biopic are often integrated with the narrative and/or presented as “immediate expressions of the lead character’s emotions.”⁴⁰ Like “Baby, Let’s Play House” Elvis did not originally perform “Trouble” at Russwood Park. It is interesting then, that in the reenactment (through dialogue) it is foregrounded that Elvis himself specifically decides to perform this song. In a conversation with his manager before Elvis goes on stage, Presley tells him that he has not decided upon the song he will perform yet. Though, after his speech he walks up to his guitarist and says: “Trouble,” before singing the first line of the song. The lyrics of this song then creates connotations with the narrative and express Elvis’ anger, resistance and determination to show his “real self.” The lyrics “I was born standing up, and talking back,” “I don’t take no orders, from no kind of man” and “don’t you mess around with me” can be interpreted as expressions of Elvis’ thoughts and emotions.

1.2.4. *Echo and spatialization of the music*

Finally, the music production techniques play a role in addressing the spectator and transfer to them the experience of rebellion that this performance of “Trouble” evoked. Similar to the Hayride reenactment “Trouble” was performed live by Butler and the musicians during shoot, creating a high-fidelity recording. Refurbished original recording equipment (microphones, tape-delay, preamps) and instruments were used to create an “authentic” sound.⁴¹

A striking element that arises from this is the echo on Butlers’ voice. The remediation of Elvis’ voice plays an important role in the process of authentication through 1) re-creating how his voice evolved through the years and 2) remediating the ways in which Elvis’ voice was mediatized. Elvis had an interesting relationship with recording technologies, as the new magnetic recording tape made it possible to develop the music in the recording studio, through a process of recording, playback, analysis and rendition.

⁴⁰ Jesse, Schlotterbeck, “‘Trying to find a Heartbeat:’ Narrative Music in the Pop Performer Biopic,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (August 2010): 83 <https://doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.36.2.82-90>.

⁴¹ Christopher Holder, “Sound for Elvis,” *AudioTechnology*, accessed December 12, 2022. <https://www.audiotechnology.com/features/sound-for-elvis>.

Sam Philips (owner of Elvis' first label Sun Records) extensively used studio techniques (e.g. echo and reverb) and the recording room (e.g. the echo-chamber) to create a specific "studio sound" that could not be re-created in any live situation.⁴² This sound of Elvis' early recordings made him sound "larger than life" and was essential to the establishment of his familiar vocal sound.⁴³ The echo that is audible on Butlers' vocals then, should not only be interpreted as resulting from the acoustics of the Russwood stadium. More importantly they contribute to making him sound "larger than life" to the spectator. This connects to the idea that the controversy around Elvis' body movements became a vehicle to address broader cultural issues of 1950s America. Finally, Elvis'



Figure 12: Elvis on stage with a camera position from within the audience [00:52:26].

performance causes chaos amongst his audience that explode with excitement and start rioting against the police. Two audible elements contribute to transferring this sense of chaos (rebellion) to the viewer. Firstly, when the frame freezes the audio becomes muted as well. We only hear a beep tone and the sound of a flashing camera. This audibly interrupts the performance of the song for the viewer. Moreover, we are presented with an unsteady camera positioned from within the crowd (fig. 15 and 16) and hear a shifting spatialization of the music from high (nearby) to low (far away) when the crowd starts rioting. The manipulation of the music plays with the spectators' perception and musically simulates the chaos that is caused by Elvis' rebellious performance.



Figure 13: Camera position from within the rioting crowd [00:54:18].

⁴² Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetic of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 15-16.

⁴³ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 89.

Chapter 2: “Trainspotting” sequences

The reenactments that will be discussed in this second chapter in contrast to the first chapter rely upon already mediatized audio-visual performances. The first one is *Singer Presents...Elvis* that was broadcasted on television on December 3, 1968 and released on DVD (including outtakes) in 2004. In 2018 a 50th anniversary edition was released that included all rehearsal takes. The second one is Elvis’ Dinner Show on August 11, 1970 at the International Hotel in Las Vegas captured in documentary film *Elvis: That’s the Way It Is* (1970) and as live album. As argued in the introduction these reenactments “exists in constant reference to models presented by the mass media.”⁴⁴ Therefore, this chapter will examine to what extent the reenactments of these mediatized historical performances in *Elvis* rely upon the media conventions of the original document to simultaneously create a “realistic” experience for the viewer and contribute to the narrative of the biopic.

2.1. The ’68 Comeback Special

Singer Presents...Elvis (commonly referred to as the *’68 Comeback Special*) was directed by Steve Binder, who (against the odds of Parker) aimed to relaunch Presley’s musical career after he had not performed for seven years. The special featured an opening and closing sequence, two choreographed production numbers and two live segments on a stage surrounded by a live audience (one intimate seated section and one stand-up section). The reenactment in *Elvis* focused on the stand-up section that shows Elvis on stage on his own, accompanied by an off-screen orchestra. Through camerawork and editing (direct address), music and the implementation of vocal stems the reenactment shows to have employed various media conventions that in relationship to the original audio-visual document (through either directly referring to it or departing from it) creates a “realistic” experience for the spectator and contributes to the narrative of the film.

⁴⁴ Paul Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 9. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.4324/9780203078518>.

2.1.1. Visual authentication and immediacy through hypermediacy

Firstly, the reenactment of the '68 *Comeback Special* directly refers to the original media document through a careful recreation of shot type, duration and angles to appear “unmediated” to the spectator:

There were a couple of very specific performances that we looked at that Baz wanted to reproduce exactly. He called those “trainspotting” sequences. One of them was the 1968 NBC special, and the other was a documentary of Elvis when he first went to Vegas called *That's the Way It Is*.⁴⁵

In these shots Butler is copying the movement and facial expression of Elvis, creating moments of synchronization between the original media document and the reenactment. An example of this occurs at the start of the *Comeback Special*, where we see Elvis standing on the iconic squared stage, surrounded by the audience in a long shot (fig. 17 and 18):



Figure 15: Elvis Presley at the '68 *Comeback Special* [07:48].



Figure 14: Austin Butler in 'Elvis' [0 1:16:05].

These shots create moments of visual authentication and immediacy for the spectator, by relying upon direct references to the well-known media document of the historical event.

Immediacy is also created through another visual element, that however rather departs from the original document. Right before Elvis starts singing the camera zooms in on the screen of one of the cameras in the studio (fig. 19), through which we see a pixelated black-and-white image of Elvis (fig. 20). When he starts singing, the screen turns to color again (fig. 21).

⁴⁵ Matt Mulcahey, “‘Elvis’s Eyes Were Very Special’: DP Mandy Walker on *Elvis*,” *Filmmakers Magazine*, accessed December 8, 2022. https://filmmakermagazine.com/115265-interview-cinematographer-mandy-walker-elvis/#.Y1jmdC9m_BI.

The visual effect suggests that we as spectator have moved “through” the camera, into the studio, after which we are presented with the “unmediated” version of the Comeback Special (the taping of the special in the studio) and not the television broadcast.

This is highlighted by the fact that, unlike in the original media document, we in the reenactment see shots in which the orchestra is visible. These additional shots and camera angles (that diverge from the original document) are justified because the spectator is made aware that we are watching the taping of the event (not the broadcast). The same can be argued for the addition of the song “Blue Suede Shoes,” that was not featured in television special, but can however be found in the outtakes on the DVD. The reenactment therefore, plays with

this visual element of “moving through” the camera to give a sense to the spectator that the performance is experienced from behind-the-scenes, while at the same time it recreates specific shots to refer to the original document and establish visual authentication.

2.1.2. Intimate performer-audience relationship and direct address

Through these additional camera angles and shots, the reenactment moreover shows a different mode of address that influences the spectator’s relationship to the reenactment. As argued above, the original broadcast of the Comeback Special focusses on Elvis as performer. This mainly shows through 1) the employment of close-ups that show Elvis’ emotional investment in the songs; 2) long-shots that focus on Elvis’ iconic body movement; 3) showing the audiences’ responses through intimate camera angles from close-ups, to shots from within the crowd and 4) the decision not to show the orchestra, but to solely focus on Elvis.



Figure 16: Zooming in onto the camera in the studio [01:15:56].



Figure 17: Pixelated image of Elvis on the camera screen [01:15:58].



Figure 18: Image turning from black-and-white to color [01:15:59].

In the reenactment however, the camerawork and editing foregrounds the performer-audience relationship. For example, at the end of his “Jailhouse Rock” performance Elvis twists his right leg while he growls. In the original recording this is captured in a long shot, where we see Elvis standing in the middle of the stage (fig. 22). In the reenactment however, this moment is presented in a shot-reverse-shot from within the audience. We first see a medium long shot of Elvis from a lower perspective and the back of a girls’ head, as if the spectator is standing in the crowd behind this girl (fig. 23). Elvis twists his right leg while looking down, followed by a shot of the girls’ smiling face (fig. 24). This shot-reverse-shot from a perspective within the crowd highlights Elvis’ interaction with the audience to the spectator.



Figure 19: Elvis Presley twisting his leg during "Jailhouse Rock" captured in a long shot [15:16].



Figure 20: Butler twisting his leg during "Jailhouse Rock" captured in a shot-reverse-shot (1) [01:18:29].



Figure 21: Butler twisting his leg during "Jailhouse Rock" captured in a shot-reverse-shot (2) [01:18:32].

To underline this interaction, the external audience is addressed during the performance of “Heartbreak Hotel” too. While in the television broadcast Elvis at a certain point is captured from behind in a still shot (fig. 25), in the reenactment we first see Butler in a long shot from within the crowd. As he leans back however, a panning camera to the left causes him to directly address the spectator by looking straight into the camera (fig. 26).



Figure 22: Elvis leaning back during "Heartbreak Hotel" captured in a long shot from behind [08:11].



Figure 23: Butler leaning back "Heartbreak Hotel" captured in a medium shot, directly addressing the audience [01:16:27].

This direct mode of address is characteristic to the music video, where we “often see the cameras, and band members address us routinely” to create a sense of intimacy.⁴⁶ In the reenactment this moment similarly creates intimacy for the external audience as they are (like the internal audience) directly addressed and acknowledged by the performer.

Lucy Fife Donaldson argues how “the editing decisions and those concerning camera placement and movement [in biopics’ music performances] become less about presenting the detail of the performance and more about placing the performer within the context of the space of the club and his audience.”⁴⁷ These intimate moments between both the internal and external audience created through the editing and camerawork in this scene then, puts a focus on the emotional responses of the audience to create a sense of immediacy, intimacy and “spatial liveness” (the idea of being there).⁴⁸

2.1.3. Medley of the hit-sequence

Musically the reenactment of the '68 *Comeback Special* stand-up section, as opposed to the previously discussed reenactments presents four songs (“Heartbreak Hotel” (1956), “Hound Dog” (1956), “Blue Suede Shoes” (1956) and “Jailhouse Rock” (1957)) that are remixed into a three minute medley. This not only directly refers to the original television broadcast in which Elvis performed various medleys of songs throughout (audible authentication), but the cutting and remixing of the songs into a medley can also be interpreted as a device to give the spectator a sense of “real-time duration.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 57, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/stable/10.7312/vern11798>.

⁴⁷ Lucy Fife Donaldson, “Performing Performers: Embodiment and Intertextuality in the Contemporary Biopic,” in *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, edited by Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2013), 108. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.4324/9780203384572>.

⁴⁸ Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music*, 11.

⁴⁹ Corbella, *Live to Tell*, 36.

Additionally, the songs that are featured in this medley (and similarly in the original stand-up section) are all hits of Elvis that derive from the 1950s. Through this medley the reenactment is musically playing tribute to an era of Elvis' career, which contributes to the experience of the viewer and the narrative, that *Singer Presents...Elvis* had indeed been Elvis' big comeback.

2.1.4. Vocal stem isolation and corporeal liveness

Unlike the reenactments discussed in chapter one, in the reenactment of the Comeback Special multi-track recordings were available. This made it possible to isolate and use vocal stems from the original live recordings. Interesting is that the spectator in the first part of the biopic has heard "young Elvis" perform (some of) these songs that are featured in the Comeback Special reenactment: sung by Butler. For example, his television performance of "Hound Dog," his recording of "Heartbreak Hotel" at RCA records or his performance of "Blue Suede Shoes" on his first tour. Through the employment of the vocal stem technique in this reenactment, the evolution of Elvis' voice as he has grown older is made audible and creates a sense of "realism" for the spectator as, compared to the earlier performances, Elvis' voice is sounding more matured now.

Butler however still performed these sections live. This made it possible to edit his breathing (nervous breathing, breathing of exhaustion), growls, sounds of his body movements and dialogue into the soundtrack. Through morphing Butlers' performance with the original recordings, "corporeal liveness" is created: a sense of live performance through "a perceptible connection to an acoustic sounding body."⁵⁰ This is particularly interesting because the voice of Elvis was directly influenced by his body movements. The vocal stem technique therefore takes on a dual role. They were not only used to create a "realistic" representation of Elvis' voice in the reenactments, but also to analyze how Elvis' body movements impacted his voice and how Butler could take on this aspect in his performances:

We could hear where [Elvis] was breathing, we could hear where he was changing what was happening in his body... Austin got that technique down to the point where he could...forget about what he was doing.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music*, 11.

⁵¹ Alice Gustafson, "Elliot Wheeler on Scoring Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* and Austin Butler's Transformation," *Headliner*, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://headlinermagazine.net/elliott-wheeler-scoring-baz-luhrmann-elvis-austin-butler-transformation.html>.

2.2. Elvis' Dinner Show at the International Hotel

The final paragraph of this thesis will discuss the reenactment of Elvis' Dinner Show on August 11, 1970. It features performances of "That's All Right," "Suspicious Minds" and "Can't Help Falling in Love."⁵² Like the Comeback Special this reenactment relies upon an audio-visual document of the historical event that has been mediatized, now in the form a documentary film (*Elvis: That's The Way It Is*) and live album. The documentary was directed by Denis Sanders and gives an insight into Elvis' return to live performances. It features footage of six Elvis shows at the International Hotel and the rehearsals for these shows. Through visual-effects, editing and music the reenactment shows to have employed various media conventions that in relationship to the original audio-visual document creates a "realistic" experience for the spectator and establish new associations and connotations that contribute to the narrative.

2.2.1. Using footage of the original document

Similar to the Comeback Special this reenactment relies upon direct visual references to the original document to create a sense of "realism" for the viewer. This is not only established through the exact re-creation of shots and mise-en-scène, but moreover through the remediation of the actual documentary footage in the reenactment. In the documentary short montage-sequences containing fast-forward footage from people standing in line at the International Hotel, the dinner room being prepared for the concert and the audience taking their seats, interpolate the various rehearsal takes. Snippets of these sequences are taken from the original document and interpolated into the reenactment (fig. 27 and 28).



Figure 24: Still from documentary footage of 'Elvis: That's the Way It Is' [00:34:32] used in 'Elvis' (1) [01:39:32].

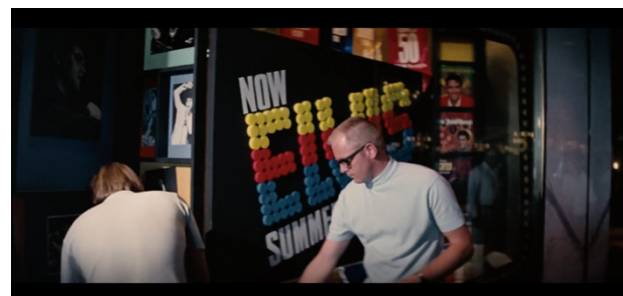


Figure 25: Still from documentary footage 'Elvis: That's the Way It Is' [00:31:54] used in 'Elvis' (2) [01:39:29].

⁵² These are the opening song and two closing songs of the night and make up three out of the sixteen songs Elvis originally performed during this show.

What contributes to this is the repetitive orchestral introduction sequence of opening song “That’s All Right” that both in the original document and reenactment underscores these montage-sequences.

2.2.2. Split-screen and multiple song versions

Apart from these direct visual references, in the reenactment the visual style of the split-screen is employed. This style departs from the original document, but however remediates another documentary: *Elvis on Tour* (1972) in which the extensive use of split-screens showed the multi-perspective star image of Presley. In the reenactment the split-screen creates interesting new connotations and associations for the spectator.

After the first verse of “That’s All Right” the reenactment “moves away” from the performance. We are presented with “Big Boy” Crudup (Gary Clark Jr.) that is singing and playing “That’s All Right Mama” in a shed (an image we have seen at the start of the film). He then sings the next four lines of the song, captured in a shot-reverse-shot, with young Elvis who is peeking through a hole to see Crudup perform. For the chorus of the song that follows, we cut to an image of Elvis in his late teens, singing the next phrases in the Suns’ recording studio (“That’s All Right” was released as his successful debut single). The camera then zooms in on the guitar and makes a 360 degree turn, while it morphs into Elvis’ hand strumming his guitar on stage at the International Hotel again. We have made an outing to two defining moments in Elvis’ life linked to this song. The connection between the three fragments is made clearer when they appear again, now in split-screen with Elvis in the studio (sung by Butler) on the left, Elvis on-stage in Vegas (mix of Butlers’ voice and the live recording of Elvis) in the middle and “Big Boy Crudup” (sung by Gary Clark Jr.) on the right of the screen (fig. 29). The split-screen is a film technique that offers the possibility for multiple narratives to be presented simultaneously and was a popular visual style of (documentary) film and television in the 1970s, that has been associated with Presley’s documentaries specifically.⁵³ This reenactment therefore also draws upon earlier



Figure 26: Split-screen during the performance of “Suspicious Minds” in *Elvis* [01:41:32].

⁵³ Susannah Edelbaum, ““Elvis’ Editors Jonathan Redmond & Matt Villa on Keeping the King’s Story Rocking Along,” *The Credits – Motion Picture Associations*, accessed December 20, 2022. <https://www.motionpictures.org/2022/07/elvis-editors-on-keeping-the-kings-story-rocking-along/>.

images of the film that trigger the memory of the spectator and invest him/her into the trajectory of Elvis' career.⁵⁴

The song "That's All Right" similarly contributes to this investment of the spectator into Elvis' career trajectory. Through its reoccurring appearance in different narrative moments in the film (e.g. during his childhood, before Elvis' first performance at the Hayride, as rehearsal for his Vegas shows and during the Dinner Show) and different versions (e.g. traditional blues by Crudup, the rockabilly version by young Elvis and the orchestral version by Elvis in his thirties) the diegetic performance of this song at the Dinner Show musically tells the story of Elvis' career (e.g. where/who he was inspired and influenced by) and how his music derived from blues, gospel and country music.

2.2.4. *Ambi-diegetic song employment*

The reenactment of Elvis' Dinner Show also features the performance of "Suspicious Minds." The alternation between Elvis' diegetic performance of the song and images of the Colonel who is signing a deal with Meyer Kohn to book him at the International Hotel for five years, without Elvis' consent, creates associations/connotations with the lyrics of the song. Morris Holbrook has described this with the concept "ambi-diegetic" in which a song is performed by the character on-screen, but at the same time elaborates on themes that are explored in the films' narrative and add "depth to the character and/or create symbolic identifications."⁵⁵

To explain how these narrative connotations are established, it is important to discuss the appearance of "Suspicious Minds" at the start of the film, where snippets of the song are employed into a remix that underscore a montage-sequence. This montage-sequence starts with the image of the Colonel lying in a hospital bed. We then see flashy images of Las Vegas, while the voice-over of Parker explains how he "gave the world Elvis Presley," yet people try to make him "the villain of this history." A classical score with quick arpeggiated violins and bombastic trumpets is then interrupted with an echoing vocal snippet of "Suspicious Minds:" "we can't go on together, with suspicious minds." This is followed by images of a billboard saying "Elvis 1973: Fourth Great Year."

⁵⁴ Jill Daniels, "Blurred Boundaries: remediation of found footage in experimental autobiographical documentary filmmaking," *Journal of Media Practice* 18, no. 1 (2017): 77, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1080/14682753.2017.1306338>.

⁵⁵ Matthew Caley and Steve Lannin, *Pop Fiction: The Song in Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005), 48. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=283033>.



Figure 27: Stills from the billboards saying “Elvis 1973: Fourth Great Year” [00:01:56], “Liar” [00:01:58] and “Conman.”[00:02:01].

Then on these same billboards we see the words “liar,” “cheat,” and “conman” (fig. 30), while the voice of a news reporter is talking about Tom Parker’s fraud and mismanagement that had recently come to light. Again, we hear the echoing voice of Elvis: “we’re caught in a trap, I can’t walk out.” Then a flash forward of Elvis back stage at the International Hotel appears. In split-screen we see images of Elvis’ fans, while we hear “because I love you too much baby.”

On the right side of the split-screen we see Elvis fainting (fig. 31). Later we learn that this is a moment Elvis is forced to go on stage by his manager, even though he is exhausted. The voice of the news reporter continues telling about how the Colonel betrayed Elvis, ripped him financially and is now hold responsible



Figure 28: Split-screen with on the left side footage from 'Elvis: That's the Way It Is' of fans standing in line for the concert; on the right side Elvis (Butler) fainting [00:02:11].

for his death, while we hear the words “why can’t you see, what you’re doing to me.”

After this implementation of snippets of echoing vocals of the chorus of “Suspicious Minds” into the opening sequence, that introduces Parker as a fraud and shows a flash forward to the final stage of Elvis’ career in which he was forced by Parker to go on stage even though he was exhausted, the song “Suspicious Minds” returns in the reenactment of the Dinner Show. Through alternating the performance of the song with images of the Colonel signing the deal, the lyrics “we’re caught in a trap, I can’t walk out,” takes on new connotations that refer to the relationship between Elvis and the Colonel.

Moreover, after the deal has been written down on a napkin, the point of audition changes to that of Parker and Kohn, as Parker speaks: “...now what are you going to pay me?”

Then the bridge of the song that is characterized by a change in key and time signature, highlights this defining narrative moment in which Elvis literally gets trapped and betrayed by his manager, through the fantastical gap. We again hear the echo on Elvis' voice, that is reminiscent of what we heard at start of the film. The instrumentation is enriched with strings that play quick arpeggios and a low drone tone that builds up to a musical climax. A woman's choir now singing the line "we're caught in a trap, I can't walk out" moreover emphasizes this important lyric: the Colonel through making this deal literally traps Elvis into the International Hotel. Moreover, during the outro of the performance Elvis repeatedly sings this line. Due to his dance movements his voice gradually begins to sound exhausted and symbolizes the exploitation of Elvis.

The interplay between the dialogue between Kohn and Parker, the moment of suspension of the performance, the initial appearance of the song at the start of the film and the emphasis in the performance on the line "we're caught in a trap, I can't walk out" creates narrative/symbolic connotations that specifically point out to exploitation of Elvis by his manager.

2.2.4. Narration voice

The following performance of "Can't Help Falling in Love" however can also be interpreted through Parkers' eyes. Throughout the film the narration of the Colonel speaks directly to the spectator and in doing so attempts to convince them that it was not him, but the "love for his fans" that caused Elvis' death. Additionally, after the performance of "Suspicious Minds" Elvis walks into the audience to kiss his fans. We see the face of Priscilla watching this unfold, as we hear Parkers' voice: "She could never compete with the love he felt from you." Elvis then sings the final chorus of "Can't Help Falling in Love:" "take my hand, take my whole life too, for I can't help falling in love with you." These lyrics now imply that it was the love for his fans that killed Elvis, not his manager.

Considerations

This thesis aimed to show how the reenactments of historical music performances in contemporary biopic *Elvis* rely upon remediation, to simultaneously create a “realistic” representation of a well-known event for the spectator and contribute to the narrative of the biopic. In *Elvis* this has been established through the remediation of filmic and other media conventions to create new interpretations and connotations for the spectator to be experienced in their own temporal and spatial context. Firstly, camerawork and editing guide the spectators’ perspective. The female gaze in the Hayride reenactment directly presents the spectator with the internal audiences’ experience of Elvis’ performing body as object of sexual desire. The excitement that this entailed is conveyed through the rhythmic-editing. In the Russwood Park reenactment the chaos that Elvis’ performance causes is presented to the spectator through an unsteady camera perspective from within the audience. Finally, in the Comeback Special reenactment shot-reverse-shots and direct address establish an intimate audience-performer relationship to highlight Elvis’ comeback.

Secondly, (in)direct references to the original documents and other media play a role in both creating a sense of “realism” and telling the narrative. In the Russwood Park reenactment the interpolation of the pro-segregation speech deepens the narrative theme of the suppression of Elvis’ artistic expression and imbeds the story around Elvis’ controversial body movements into broader cultural issues. Additionally, the references to television and photography through the black-and-white (freeze) frames create visual authentication and visualize how these media played a major role in the controversy around Elvis’ body. In the second chapter the reenactments create a sense of “realism” by recreating specific shots from the audio-visual document they are based upon. In the Dinner Show reenactment, original footage of the documentary is even remediated into a montage-sequence to create this immediacy. Finally, the split-screen that refers to a common 1970s visual style (of Elvis documentaries) deepens the narrative of Elvis’ (musical) journey.

Apart from these visual elements the music also contributes to a “realistic” representation for the viewer and to the narrative. Firstly, the reenactments in chapter one include songs that are different compared to the original performance. Though in relationship with the images, voice-over and dialogue the lyrics of the performed song creates narrative and symbolic associations and connotations and/or become direct expressions of the characters’ emotions for the spectator to decode and experience. In the Dinner Show reenactment, the lyrics of the performed songs that refer to the opening sequence take on the

function of ambi-diegetic and specifically deepens the narrative of the ominous relationship between Presley and Parker.

Furthermore, the remixing, adaptation and spatialization of the music plays a role. In the Hayride reenactment a modern guitar riff is implemented to convey the revolutionary energy and the girls' excitement of this performance to the spectator. Furthermore, the end of the song is remixed into an underscore with a sinister character that, together with a return of Parkers' voice-over emphasizes the ominous relationship between Elvis and Parker. In the Russwood Park reenactment the echo refers to Presley's early recordings and symbolically signifies how the controversy around Elvis' body addressed broader cultural issues. The shifting spatialization and muting of the music at the end of the scene, moreover conveys the chaos of the rioting crowd to the spectator. In the Comeback Special reenactment, the medley remix brings a sense of real-time duration and, by playing tribute to Elvis' 1950s hits, contributes to the narrative of Elvis' comeback. Finally, through the vocal stem technique the evolution of Elvis' voice is made audible to the spectator and creates "realism." Additionally, by mixing the live performances of Butler and thus his breathing, growls, dialogue and other body sounds with these vocal stems, a sense of corporeal liveness is conveyed to the spectator and creates immediacy.

Finally, the voice-over plays a defining role. It guides the spectator's perspective, though at the same time, we as a viewer are made aware that the voice of the man who is telling this (his)story is claimed to be a fraud, liar and conman. The voice-over in relationship to the images and music play with the perspective of the spectator and their interpretation of the narrative. Although we during the performances often depart from Parkers' point of view (e.g. female gaze, camera perspectives from within the audience, direct address) we at the end of the performances return to his narration voice that aims to convince the spectator that it was the love for his fans that caused Elvis' death. The combination of the performed songs' lyrics and voice-over moreover have shown to refer to the conflict between "the show" (Elvis) and "the bizz" (the Colonel) that lies at the heart of the biopics' narrative.

These elements have all shown to have worked in a complex relationship between image, sound and music. We should therefore start to focus on the process of remediation and consider the technical elements (camerawork, visual effects, musical parameters, lyrics, voice-over) in relationship to the original documents, to further examine how reenactments in music biopics restructure history and re-create historical events, both to be experienced for a new, contemporary audience and to tell a (his)story. In doing so, we can move beyond the limiting debate of historical accuracy in biopic studies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: “Baby, Let’s Play House”

Oh, baby, baby, baby, baby baby
Baby, baby baby, be-be-be-be-be baby baby, baby
Baby baby baby
Come back, baby, I want to play house with you
Well, you may go to college
You may go to school
You may have a pink Cadillac
But don't you be nobody's fool
Now baby come back, baby, come
Come back, baby, come
Come back, baby I want to play house with you

Now listen and I'll tell you baby
What I'm talking about
Come on back to me, little girl
So we can play some house
Now baby come back, baby, come
Come back, baby, come
Come back, baby
I want to play house with you (oh let's play house, baby)

Now this is one thing, baby
That I want you to know
Come on back and let's play a little house
And we can act like we did before
Well, baby come back, baby, come
Come back, baby, come
Come back, baby I want to play house with you (hit it)

Now listen to me, baby
Try to understand
I'd rather see you dead, little girl
Than to be with another man
Now baby come back, baby, come
Come back, baby, come
Come back, baby, I want to play house with you
Oh, baby baby baby
Baby baby baby be-be-be-be-be baby baby baby
Baby baby baby
Come back, baby, I want to play house with you

Appendix 2: “Trouble”

If you're lookin' for trouble
You came to the right place
If you're lookin' for trouble
Just look right in my face
I was born standin' up
And talkin' back
My daddy was a green-eyed mountain jack

Because I'm evil
My middle name is misery, yeah, yeah
Well, I'm evil
So don't you mess around with me

I never looked for trouble
But I never ran
I don't take no orders
From no kind of man
I'm only made out
Of flesh, blood and bone
But if you're gonna start a rumble, don't you try it all alone

Because I'm evil
My middle name is misery, yeah
Well, I'm evil
So don't you mess around with me

I'm evil, evil, evil as can be
I'm evil, evil, evil as can be
So don't mess around, don't mess around
Don't mess around with me

I'm evil, I'm evil, evil, evil
So don't mess around, don't mess around with me
I'm evil, I'll tell you how I'm evil
So don't mess around with me

Appendix 3: "Suspicious Minds"

We're caught in a trap

I can't walk out
Because I love you too much, baby
Why can't you see
What you're doing to me
When you don't believe a word I say?

We can't go on together
With suspicious minds (suspicious minds)
And we can't build our dreams
On suspicious minds

So, if an old friend I know
Stops by to say hello
Would I still see suspicion in your eyes?
Here we go again
Asking where I've been
You can't see the tears are real, I'm crying
(Yes I'm crying)

We can't go on together
With suspicious minds (suspicious minds)
And we can't build our dreams
On suspicious minds

Oh, let our love survive
I'll dry the tears from your eyes
Let's don't let a good thing die
When honey, you know I've never lied to you

We're caught in a trap
I can't walk out
Because I love you too much, baby
Why can't you see
What you're doing to me
When you don't believe a word I say?

Well, don't you know I'm caught in a trap?
I can't walk out
Because I love you too much, baby (7x)

Appendix 4: "Can't Help Falling in Love"

Wise men say
Only fools rush in

But I can't help falling in love with you

Shall I stay?

Would it be a sin

If I can't help falling in love with you?

Like a river flows

Surely to the sea

Darling, so it goes

Some things are meant to be

Take my hand

Take my whole life, too

For I can't help falling in love with you

Like a river flows

Surely to the sea

Darling, so it goes

Some things are meant to be

Take my hand

Take my whole life, too

For I can't help falling in love with you

For I can't help falling in love with you