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***Lenny*: (Auto-)biography, Black-and-White, and Juxtapositional Montage in Bob Fosse's Hollywood Renaissance Biopic**

Abstract

Bob Fosse directed *Lenny* (1974), about the profane American comedian Lenny Bruce, who died in 1966, at a time when he had won complete artistic control over his films. As an intermedial artist, with equal facility for the stage and movies, Fosse approached film editing with the rhythmic intricacy of his dance style. He developed a film style that eschewed conventional chronology, aiming for an atemporal juxtapositional montage closer to poetry and the live performing arts than the narrative causality and temporality of Hollywood cinema. *Lenny* is an intermedial biographical collage that straddles divergent narrative strands, subjectivities, mid-twentieth-century periods. It contrasts modes of black-and-white cinematography, making them forms into themselves. It tells a story (rather than *the* story, as biopics conventionally insist) of Lenny Bruce, an irreverent, iconoclastic standup comedian who ran afoul of American obscenity laws in the last years before the cultural revolution of the late sixties, even as he helped to change them. Like Fosse's previous film, *Cabaret* (1972), *Lenny* juxtaposes cinematic and photographic realism with the heightened reality of the stage, where Bruce speaks to us, bursting the chronology of his own biography, and commenting on his own life story.

1 A Key Transition in the Evolution of Cinematic Life-Writing

In the New Hollywood, or 'Hollywood Renaissance' of the 1970s, film genres, such as the Western and the *film noir*, were revised and deconstructed. Meanwhile the biopic withered. One of the very few innovative American film biographies of the decade was *Lenny* (1974), which turned out to be influential, leading perhaps to the masterpiece of the New Hollywood at its very end, *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese 1980). A biopic of the profane, hip comedian Lenny Bruce (1925–1966), *Lenny* shows that one performing artist, in this instance dancer-choreographer-stage director-turned-film director Bob Fosse (1927–1987), can write in cinema the life of another performing artist, from yet another medium, standup comedy,

while expressing aspects of his own life experiences and preoccupations. *Lenny*, Fosse's first non-musical work in any medium and his only black-and-white film, cuts between Bruce's monologues and his personal life, rendering the frame story/flashback conventions of the biopic in dialectical juxtapositions. *Lenny* privileges the private realm, spending the first two-thirds of the film on the remembrances of Honey Bruce, whose six-year marriage to Bruce took place before Bruce became well-known. With this unusual approach the film explores Bruce the person before he began to belong to the public. The film twice plays out a pattern of infatuation, courtship, passion, infraction, decline, and disintegration: the first time between Lenny and Honey, and the second time between Lenny and the public. Drugs and deception conclude the cycle the first time. In the second sequence American puritanism in its last hurrah before the changes of the late sixties and seventies comes between Lenny and his fans. *Lenny* is a biographical collage that straddles divergent narrative strands, subjectivities, mid-twentieth-century periods, and contrasting modes of black-and-white cinematography. In terms of film genre, Fosse's film is a collision of innovation and biopic conventions. The biopic is possibly the most intermedial of genres, especially biographies of subjects of the past century and a half, from the eras of photography, audio recording, and cinema. Clichés, including newspaper headlines supplying narrative information, newsreels (for example, in *Wilson* 1944 or *Patton* 1970), the labels of spinning records (in *The Buddy Holly Story* 1978 or *La Môme*, aka *La Vie en Rose* 2007), sheet music (*Yankee Doodle Dandy* 1942), or theater marquees (*Yankee Doodle Dandy*) are among the allusions to other media that the biopic makes its own. While Fosse avoids most of these, it is the form of *Lenny* itself that draws from various media. Filming in black and white, with the cinematographer Bruce Surtees, Fosse uses three discrete modes of black-and-white photography. If it is possible to discuss various forms of photography as media, then *Lenny* suggests intermediality in its montage organized around three different modes of black-and-white filming. These are the present, with the interview subjects in Fosse's film shot in the gray, low-contrast documentary look of pre-color television news, circa 1950–1966—just when all of *Lenny* takes place; the past, in the shadowy look of forties and fifties *film noir*; and 'show-biz' (the stage, with brightly lit foreground figures surrounded in high-contrast by an inky black background). Moreover, the editing rhythms of *Lenny* draw from other media, many of which Fosse brings to filmmaking with him.

2 The Intermedial Bob Fosse

Just before Bob Fosse filmed *Lenny*, his first imprint on the biopic, he became the only person to win, or even to be nominated for, the ‘Triple Crown,’ as Fosse referred to it, that is, the Broadway theater’s Tony (for *Pippin*), the Hollywood film industry’s Academy Award (for *Cabaret*), and television’s Emmy (for *Liza with a Z*), all in the same season (1972–1973) (Wasson 2013: 344). Fosse was a dazzlingly intermedial director, ranking with very few others, such as Elia Kazan, Ingmar Bergman, Franco Zeffirelli, Julie Taymor, and Sam Mendes, as an artist who moved from stage to screen (of both kinds, in Fosse’s case) with great facility. Moreover, Fosse was a dancer-turned choreographer-turned-first-stage-and-then-movie director. Although few directors before or since have done as much as Fosse with the connections between dance and film editing, rhythm is the foundation of both. Thus it probably was inevitable that in the first film in which he had full artistic control, thanks to the ‘Triple Crown,’ this dancer-choreographer-director would design and execute a film with montage virtuosity.

Editing, the cinematic element that is unique to film, and the only element that had not existed in painting or theater or ballet or fiction or poetry, nevertheless can enable cinema to take on the movement, the form, the sequentiality, and juxtaposition of other media. When Sergei Eisenstein in 1944 wrote of “Walt Whitman’s huge montage conception” and “the Whitman *montage tradition*,” he was speaking in terms that readers of Whitman’s own time probably would not have comprehended (Eisenstein 1949: 231; emphasis in original). However, Eisenstein recognizes that in the long catalogues in “Song of Myself” the poet audaciously juxtaposes dozens of types of people in America, some respectable and revered, others barely or rarely acknowledged in polite society.¹ Moreover, research by film scholar Ben Singer found that Dziga Vertov, who started as a poet of the Futurist school, originally designed *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (*The Man with a Movie Camera* 1929) as a Soviet “Song of Myself,” celebrating for the cinema all the claims that Whitman made for American poetry. Therefore, like the Soviet montage filmmakers although without their ideological agenda, Fosse sought to liberate cinematic form from the cause-and-effect temporality of narrative moviemaking. In recent years, his efforts have been recognized. In 2012, when the Motion Picture Editors Guild asked its members to vote for the 75 best-edited films of all time, *All That Jazz* ranked fourth. *Cabaret*, came in 30th. Although *Lenny* did not rank on this list, the experiments in life-writing form that Fosse undertakes in his first biopic are important to an

¹ For example, see Chapter 15.

understanding of the development of the biopic into its modernist, investigatory, and finally, the neo-classical form in which it resides at present (Bingham 2010: 17–18).

When we discuss editing we move, almost involuntarily, to terminology that comes from music – rhythm, tempo, tone, overtone: the terms that Eisenstein applied in identifying the various types of editing (Eisenstein 1949: 72–81). Editing of silent Soviet Montage was conceived in opposition to the linear continuity editing that had been developed in America by D.W. Griffith and others for storytelling (Eisenstein 1949: 200–201). Thus Fossean editing seemingly owes more to dance and to the musical concepts Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov used in the Soviet Union in the 1920s than to Western continuity editing. It works on theme and variation, on psychological editing (another concept of Eisenstein's), counterpoint, contradiction, and collision, rather than on the linear continuity editing of the Classical Hollywood Cinema.

3 Cut (to) the Comedy

Fosse finds rhythm, contrast, and variety in the monologues of a stand-up comedian. The corrosive and profane beatnik comic Lenny Bruce was an object of fascination in the 1970s. The years from roughly 1956 to 1965, when Bruce, the fearless, disturbing night club comedian, plied his trade, already looked in the mid-1970s like a distant age, and a Dark Age, at that. The monologues that Bruce (played by Dustin Hoffman) performs in Fosse's film give the film spectator a sampling of the language and the irreverent wit that got the actual comedian arrested for obscenity multiple times. It was not only American authorities who considered Bruce objectionable; he was banned from Australia in 1962 and turned back from Heathrow Airport in London in 1963. Bruce died at the age of 40, found naked in the bathroom of his foreclosed-upon Hollywood mansion on August 3, 1966, one of the first of many counterculture celebrity drug overdoses in years to come. Bruce, all the rage in the hip culture of the Beat Generation, to which Bob Fosse also belonged, burned out after fewer than five years of white-hot night club and concert fame; Bruce was far past his peak at the time of his demise. He went from on-fire to untouchable after losing a months-long New York obscenity trial in 1964. Ten months before his death, he was declared legally bankrupt, a pauper. During the last two years of his life, he played all of two nightclub engagements (Goldman 1991; Collins and Skover 2002).

Lenny Bruce was both a victim of the speed of change that marked the era, and a visionary who helped make the change happen. *Lenny*, Pauline Kael's review begins, "is conceived for

well-meaning innocents who never saw Lenny Bruce and who can listen to Dustin Hoffman delivering bits of Bruce's routines and think, 'people just didn't understand him then—he isn't shocking at all'" (1976: 371). Shock is a relative notion. Some of Bruce's jokes, especially those about gay people, are much more offensive now than they were in the 1970s, much less in the early 1960s when the comedian made them. The issue of what one era finds "shocking" and why can be an instructive one to confront. Lenny Bruce launched the practice by comedians of riding the third rails of a culture, of unmasking its prejudices and exposing its hypocrisies. "Irony, irony, all is irony," wrote Clive Barnes, paraphrasing the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, in his May 1971 review of Julian Barry's play on which the film is based. "What Bruce got busted for in private nightclubs is here being displayed in Broadway theater just five years after his death" (Barnes 1971).

Lenny Bruce was a seminal figure. As I found with Woody Guthrie, another pioneering folk hero with a New Hollywood biopic, *Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby 1976), the media that might have carried his work to the public in his time did not exactly exist yet. Bruce's true medium was the nightclub stage; the only way to hear what he was like in performance is in uncensored recordings that were made of Bruce 'in concert,' itself a novel application of a term from high culture to a show-business entertainment. These were not released until years after his death.² The albums made of Bruce's act in his lifetime were sanitized; his very few appearances on highly regulated late-fifties television only hint at his freeform brilliance (see *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*).

Fosse's specific medium was the 'New Freedom of the Screen' in the New Hollywood cinema that had just overcome its own highly censorial limits six years earlier, in 1968, when the Production Code was at long last replaced by the still-extant Motion Picture Rating System. The portable through bulky reel-to-reel tape recorders that take down the interviews in Fosse's film are similar to the instruments that intrigued Bruce, as the untutored though brilliantly verbal comic unwisely undertook his own legal defense, confident the laws of show business and his popularity with his small but fervent fan base would carry the day for

² See or, more correctly, hear: *Lenny Bruce Live at the Curran Theater*. 1971. Liner Notes by Ralph J. Gleason. Recorded live on 19 November 1961. Berkeley, Calif.: Fantasy Records, 1999. CD. ; *Lenny Bruce – The Carnegie Hall Concert*. 1972. Liner Notes by Albert Goldman. Recorded live on 4 February 1961. Hollywood, Calif: Capitol Records, 1995. CD.

him in court. Fosse well understood such laws. Lowdown dives, strip joints, dance hall parlors – the underside of showbiz – lured him again and again as the settings of his shows and films. Fosse’s film stages and examines Bruce’s life as if it were an artifact of an extinct civilization. Fosse makes scenes of Lenny Bruce’s life and routines dance through his movie, while Bruce Surtees’s coldly beautiful cinematography makes the late-1950s/early-1960s world of strip joints and night clubs vibrate with pastness.

Fosse’s film aesthetic pushes against cinema’s drive toward chronological, sequential time. His own film production team referred to this approach to cinematic temporality as “Fosse Time,” with editing that is thematic and motif-driven, more like music and dance than cause-and-effect narrative (Wasson 2013: 374). For these reasons, *Lenny* cannot be fully understood in any of the conventional definitions of the biopic.

4 New Hollywood/Biopic: ‘Warts and All’ at an Impasse

I have written elsewhere of how the 1970s, the Hollywood Renaissance, was the most fallow of all decades for the biopic (Bingham 2011). The biopic missed out on the revisionism that transformed genres such as the western, *film noir*, and the gangster film amid what has been called ‘Hollywood’s Last Golden Age’ (Kirshner 2012). The biopic in the 1970s found few paths away from the psychological realism of warts and all, which took over the biopic in the 1950s, as the genre moved predominantly from statesmen, scientists, and authors to entertainers, athletes, and controversial political and military figures. *Lenny* does not exactly qualify for this subgenre, however.

Biopics in the 1950s balanced audience desire to know the private lives of famous people with the genre’s enduring impulse to dramatize great accomplishments, the definition of which changed, as the Hollywood genre shifted from celebratory biopics to ‘warts and all.’ The former highlighted what Custen, citing Frankfurt School critic Leo Lowenthal, called “idols of production” (1992: 32–33). Such films were staples of the prewar and wartime years of the Studio Era and often depicted scientists, inventors, artists, and war heroes. After World

War II, Custen found, the genre largely shifted to “idols of consumption,” mostly entertainers and athletes. A number of factors, including a darker, more adult mood after the war, the influence of Italian Neo-Realism, the erosion of the Production Code self-censorship, and Hollywood’s need to give audiences what they could not see at home on television, brought on the new biopics that purported to take an ‘honest’ look at the subject. These films set out to show the protagonist’s bad qualities as well as the good, or ‘warts and all,’ a phrase traced to an instruction from Oliver Cromwell to his portrait painter (Kennedy 2013).

Warts-and-all biopics placed new emphasis on the private lives of famous people; the subjects chosen, moreover, tended to be those with dramatic, even sensational stories. Some of these films followed their protagonists down the road to alcoholism – and, after the 1956 liberalization of the Production Code permitted it – drug addiction. The subgenre also went along with the general drive in the 1950s toward realism, anti-heroes, and the new Method Acting style. It remained the dominant biopic mode through the 1960s and 1970s. The staleness of the mode by the 1970s partly accounts for the small number of biopics in that decade; it also moved Custen to claim that the biopic largely went to television after 1960 (1992: 214–232). The failure to innovate beyond ‘warts and all’ continued, although the uncompromising *Raging Bull* can be seen as its apotheosis, taking it to its most honest and even spiritual extreme. In the 1990s, revisionism, parody, and the investigatory mode finally hit the biopic, followed after 2000 by the neo-classical style, which unites all four earlier modes, in the 2000s and 2010s.

Molly Haskell titled her 1975 review of the film, “Lenny Sings the Blues,” after the execrable 1972 biopic *Lady Sings the Blues*, which presented the great Billie Holiday (played by Diana Ross) as a pathetic junkie in need of salvation from her husband, Louis McKay (played by Billy Dee Williams), who survived to tell the tale and control the rights to it, and that is what *Lenny* could have become. There is, however, a competing Bruce biopic narrative: the Bruce who is brought down by a censorious Establishment, a culture war in its death throes. In this storyline, the one that Barry and Fosse adopt, drawing upon the mythology that had grown up around Bruce since his death, district attorneys and judges determine to put a stop to the ‘declining morals’ of the culture, and draw the line on obscenity and public decency at Lenny Bruce (Collins and Skover 2002: 192). At least by emphasizing Lenny Bruce the First Amendment prophet over Lenny Bruce the once-funny victim of his own excesses, the film shows what was significant about Lenny Bruce and why people listened to him.

5 Lenny Bruce: A Bob Fosse Film

Fosse's film juxtaposes documentary-style interviews with Bruce's nightclub monologues, as well as the pre-1967-style serious black-and-white movie with the *Cabaret* director's still-evolving montage-driven style. Alan Heim, his editor on *Lenny*, *All That Jazz*, and *Star 80*, has encouraged the notion that the non-linear structure of *Lenny* arose from a kind of re-choreographing of the shots and sound. After "an early, linear cut of *Lenny* played a tad sluggishly, Fosse encouraged Mr. Heim to dice the film into a collage, to compress the story and permit surprising juxtapositions" (Seitz 2009). This developing mythology was encouraged by Fosse's autobiographical film *All That Jazz* (1979), a movie that ironically has become much better known than *Lenny*. In it the theater-and-film director Joe Gideon (played by Roy Scheider in Fossean goatee and black garb) and his editor (Heim himself) are shown in an editing room where they endlessly cut and recut a soon-to-open film entitled "The Standup," about a comedian played by Cliff Gorman, who played Lenny in the original 1971 Broadway production. Despite the legend, *Lenny* hews mostly to the structure provided in the shooting script on file at the Library of Congress (Barry 1974).

Fosse turns passages of the script – Bruce's monologues, which are inserted into diegetic scenes in the comedian's life – into dialectical montage sequences. These were not necessarily cutting-room thunderbolts. A script's scenes have to be shot; they can be edited differently later. When a Hollywood film departs from the principles of temporal continuity and the editing begins to resemble Eisensteinian dialectical montage, what is the narrative destination? Bruce's art provides the dramatic conflict. The flashback frame common to many biopics – here, the interviews – is *Lenny's* chief storytelling element. The classical straight-line narrative film is deprived of a conclusion. *Lenny's* ending might seem rapid and abrupt. But then, Bruce's life, as shown in the film, appears that way, too. Fosse enfolds his curiosity – his sense of himself as an artist – into the film. The soft male voice of an interviewer amiably questions Bruce's ex-wife, Honey (played by Valerie Perrine); his mother, Sally Marr (played by Jan Miner); and his manager, Artie (played by Stanley Beck), a composite character who becomes a knowledgeable, sympathetic, but ultimately dispassionate participant in the twists and turns of Bruce's rise, decline, and legal travails. The interviewer is Fosse. His voice is heard addressing questions to the three people who knew Bruce well

and who can give insight into him, or at least tell what they knew; this film suggests that insight might be too much to ask of our fellow human beings.

Fosse, in *Cabaret*, had proved himself adept as a montage director. In a montage sequence, the Tiller Girls perform a horrifying parody of goose-stepping Nazis; the Emcee in drag is cross-cut with the killing of the dog of a Jewish heiress by a gang of anti-Semitic goons. This was Soviet-style montage applied to the American musical, with Fosse manipulating footage like a Broadway/New Hollywood Eisenstein, using colliding ‘attractions’ (Eisenstein’s term) to create a meaning that could not emerge from either image by itself, and thus to elicit both a psychological and physical/emotional response (See Bordwell 1993: 115–120). *Lenny* was shot in Florida during the winter season of 1974 to audiences recruited locally. Fosse reportedly hurled insults at audience members, with the camera on them, in order to capture a shocked reaction that could be cut in anywhere, a modification of the Soviet Montage principle that editing creates reality (Wasson 2013: 362).

Because of the film’s interview structure, reviewers have seen resemblances to *Citizen Kane* in *Lenny* (Ebert 1974; Westal 2007). As with *Kane*’s ‘Rosebud’ lips, the screen-filling lips of Honey Bruce are the first human feature we see in the film. Indeed they are *Lenny*’s first image of any kind. “I’d say he was busted nine or ten times – three or four times for narcotics, and two or three times for obscenity,” she says, but her three or four and two or three times do not add up to nine or ten. This suggests that the ‘talking head’ interviews in the film will be less than reliable. How can the interviewer learn anything, if what he is told is based on memory and subjectivity? As Fosse explained, journalist Lawrence Schiller conducted interviews in 1968 and 1969 with “people who knew Bruce, girl friends [sic], attorneys, other comics, etc.” Schiller emerged as a major source of most of the works about Lenny Bruce that came out in the 1970s, including the play and film entitled *Lenny*, as well as Albert Goldman’s massive book, *Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce*, which was first published earlier in 1974 (Hornstein 1975: 31). *Lenny* sticks so scrupulously to the transcripts of these interviews that something as seemingly offhand as Honey crunching on a potato chip as she talks to the interviewer turns out to have come from Schiller. The spectator of *Lenny* does not know what the interviewer will do with all the impressions and memories he gathers. Fosse turns the film’s spectator into *Citizen Kane*’s Mr. Thompson, the reporter who goes home at the end of the film not having made sense, he thinks, of all the information he has found (figure 1).

Before we can see an establishing shot of the speaker beyond her gigantic lips, the film cuts as an off-screen announcer incants the then familiar phrase, “Ladies and gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!” The camera, from the upstage position, looks out onto a darkened nightclub. A slouching man leans on a microphone stand with one elbow and holds the mike with the other hand. The spotlight swings to the left, dramatically backlighting him. We can make out that he wears Levi’s and a leather jacket, as if James Dean had come back to life as a hip comedian stand-up rebel, this one with a cause (figure 2).

Lenny does not present itself as the reenactment of times and places, with subtitles announcing cities and dates. The opening credit sequence sets out a thesis. As the opening credits run in white-on-black lettering, Hoffman-as-Bruce performs in voiceover a comedy monologue – *sans* audience laughter – attributing the spread of venereal disease to the fact that “nobody talks about it.” Why? “Because talking about it” – as the credit “Directed by Bob Fosse” appears on the screen – “makes you the worst person in the community.”

The film will show Lenny Bruce “talking about it” and getting ostracized as “the worst person” in “communities” from San Francisco to Chicago to New York. In other words, Lenny Bruce was shut down by ‘us.’ Bruce himself once told an audience, as police officers ringed the stage, poised to arrest him, “It’s *your* fault I’m being busted [...] It’s up to you to change the law” (Collins and Skover 2002: 135). In the shooting script of *Lenny* in the Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon Collection at the Library of Congress, Lenny makes a similar speech (Barry 1974, scene 155, p. 102). It was possibly among the three minutes that Alan Heim reported were cut in the very last days of editing, when Fosse might just have taken too much out of his film (Wasson 2013: 386). Perhaps Fosse was concerned that his audience in the 1970s would feel that Lenny is speaking to them; indeed it is not so much that laws were changed but that they were reinterpreted, and that standards changed. Bruce, after all, was never charged with anything more serious than a misdemeanor.

An auteurist reading finds that like the Emcee in *Cabaret*, Lenny Bruce traffics in outrageous humor, standing on a stage saying the unsayable. The Emcee gets in no trouble for this (except in the revisionist Sam Mendes-Alan Cumming London and New York stage productions of 1993, 1998, and 2014). Lenny is destroyed for uttering on the stages of

nightclubs, in ‘mixed company,’ the language of barracks, locker rooms, and factory floors. Bruce offends well-organized and powerful municipalities controlled by the very interests that Bruce mercilessly ridicules. These include white male patriarchy and organized religion, especially the Catholic Church. During Bruce’s obscenity trial in Chicago, during which Ash Wednesday happened to fall in 1963, the judge and the entire jury came into the courtroom with ashes on their foreheads (Collins and Skover 2002: 168). This underlines the outsider status of the anti-assimilationist Bruce, one of whose hobby horses, as the film makes clear, was the mythology of America as a ‘Christian nation.’ In a period when a Bishop, Fulton J. Sheen, had a top-rated prime-time television show, and Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York could cripple the run of a film by an Academy Award-winning director (Elia Kazan’s *Baby Doll* 1956) by denouncing it from the pulpit, the Catholic Church saw it as its right and duty to help stamp out public indecency wherever it saw it. Not for nothing was a pamphlet of Bruce’s collections of stories entitled “Stamp Help Out” (Goldman 1968: 46).

Among the facets of the conventional biopic that *Lenny* lacks is the *in medias res* opening, which the film takes up just before the revelation of events that make the subject significant and known to the public (Custen 1992: 51). Bruce’s public ascent in this film, on the other hand, begins approximately at the film’s midway point. The first half, dominated by Honey’s narration, has to do with their marriage, which ended before Bruce went on to stardom. This is why, with the divorce, the story is told by Bruce in his monologues, and by the interviews with Artie and Sally, who play the sidekick and mentor roles. Fosse omits some of the scenes in the script that show Bruce’s characteristic bits. Thus again, while entertainer biopics usually place heavy stress on the creation of the works for which the subject is popularly known, Fosse does not weigh down the film with these, causing some reviewers to complain that the film omits most of Bruce’s best-known bits (Kael 1976: 374). The ‘ladder of success’ images basic to idol-of-consumption entertainer stories are dealt with in a brief, punchy montage. A voiceover of Lenny’s “I am totally corrupt” monologue – “Whatever they give, I’ll grab” – provides the soundtrack for shots that present signs of Bruce’s new wealth – Bruce’s boxy house in the Hollywood Hills, his Filipino manservant, and his MG sports car.

In another example of Fosse’s juxtapositions of private and public Lenny, Bruce sets up his wife in a *ménage-à-trois* with another woman, then afterwards reproaches her because “you

didn't tell me you were gonna love it so much." Hoffman, at his most subtle, jealously but quietly unloads on Honey while insisting none of it bothers him. Although contemporary reviewers asserted that the film sanctified Lenny, scenes like this show him to be a passive-aggressive manipulator in his personal relationships. The *ménage* scene ends with Lenny half in light, half in shadow. This lighting strategy on Lenny continues in the aftermath scene. Lenny insists, "You obviously dig it [...] so that's cool," standing before us as a divided figure. In one shot, Lenny, from behind, momentarily catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror, knowing the torture he is inflicting on his wife, but steaming ahead with it. "You son of a bitch!" she screams after him. "Why do you have to be so fucking hip?" He wants to be "hip" and progressive, but cannot do it (figure 3).

The after-scene is intercut with rhythmic bits of a long monologue:

INT: NIGHTCLUB — NIGHT

Lenny, bearded:

LENNY

(rather charmingly)

And now, a word about dikes.

I like dikes. That's what Will Rogers once said, "I never met a dike I didn't like." If you notice, comics will do endless fag jokes but never dike jokes and the reason for that, I figure, is that dikes'll really punch the shit outta ya. oh, yeah. It's hard to spot dikes. *Why?* 'cause sometimes we're married

to them . . . (Barry 1974: Scenes 82, 83, p. 47–48)

The script, for production logistics, has Lenny deliver this monologue *en bloc*. Fosse shoots the monologue rhythmically, with Hoffman sitting at the drum set, punctuating his routine

like a jazz riff. The monologue is filmed in three different camera setups, with the punch line delivered as we look up at Lenny, from an extreme low angle. Then Fosse cuts from Lenny and Honey's dialogue to the "dikes" act five times, breaking the rhythm of Lenny's snappy monologue with the tawdry real-life scene, which concludes by contradicting it. Thus, this sequence shows Lenny in effect using his art to lie to himself, drawing a conclusion in his monologue that comes from his unfair treatment of Honey. The routine ends, "Sometimes we're married to 'em." But only in Lenny's fantasy (figure 4).

Wasson implicitly criticizes Fosse for imprinting his own preoccupations onto his subject (as if auteur directors were not celebrated for doing just that) (2013: 359). Fosse was also working through in *Lenny* his own fascinations. There is no evidence that Bruce was married to a "dike," and the film does not suggest that he was. Fosse uses the threesome as a metaphor for the 'hipness' to which Bruce aspired but was not ready for. Perhaps no one was. Making the film in the era of *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969), when sexual liberality was referred to as 'open' rather than 'hip,' Fosse questions whether men and women can ever be 'cool' about non-monogamous relationships.

6 Not Simply the Absence of Color

Lenny is not a 1970s biopic, like *Bound for Glory*, which defamiliarizes the past. The interview sequences defamiliarize the present in that, like all of *Lenny*, they are shot in black-and-white, a format which, Richard Misek asserts, was after 1966 used mainly to suggest the past (2010: 108). Fosse's post-1966 black-and-white is considerably more complex.

Similar to the way Fosse took the big sweeping choreography of Broadway and created movies that were small, downward, constricted, disciplined, and beautiful, in *Lenny* he evokes his protagonist with the absence of color. I remember how startling and breathtakingly vivid *Lenny*'s black-and-white cinematography, together with the rapid cutting, looked on the big screen when I first saw it in March 1975. It was backward-looking and forward-moving at once, a demonstration of Christian Metz's "imaginary signifier" (1982), cinema's capacity for simultaneously projecting absence – a world that does not exist as we look at it – and overwhelming presence. Accordingly, the interview sequences discuss a past that seems somewhat canceled out by the present. Honey and Sally have let themselves be forever defined by Lenny. The agent is the embodiment of show business insincerity, a Bob Fosse constant. With his silk shirt, tinted aviator glasses, and trendy early-1970s argot ("Right on,

right on”), Artie emphasizes almost cruelly the swiftness with which his former client has been consigned to the past.

When Honey talks to the interviewer, everything about her and her environment is non-descript. The apparently clean former junkie lives in the past; her life with Lenny and her days as a great beauty are far behind her, but the memories of both appear to keep her going. The low-contrast lighting of Honey’s interviews, the type of black-and-white that Wheeler Winston Dixon calls “drab,” stands out from the 1950s melodramatic *noir* of her flashbacks to her day-to-day life with Lenny (2015: 18). Different yet again are the high-contrast eye-popping black blacks and white whites of Lenny’s stage world, a world that Lenny appears to control, making him a fourth narrator, speaking for himself in his art.

Therefore, Fosse makes of the three distinct black-and-white registers in his film an intermedial heteroglossia, a much more subtle interplay of chromatic perception than if he used black-and-white and color to stand for separate states of being, as Wim Wenders did in *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire* 1987) to signify the point of view of eternity, in black-and-white, as distinct from the reality of the mortal world, filmed in color. *Cabaret* cut from a stage world to a real world, but here the real worlds divide into past (a realm of the interviewees’ memories, which may not be reliable) and present. Moreover, the present here is confined to the places where Honey, Sally, and Artie speak to the interviewers, making the present a kind of stage. Only in the past do we see a cinematic narrative that moves with the action. Significantly, once we move with Lenny’s progress as a big-name comic, his monologues become part of the story, which Artie mostly tells, not as counterpoint to interviews, mostly Honey’s (figure 5).

Fosse cuts more from Honey’s remembered scenes and her interviews to Lenny’s stage routines because they provide the most telling contrasts among the three modes of black-and-white. As in *Cabaret*, the off-stage life of the characters takes place in the realm of cinematic realism. However, it is 1950s realism as defined in social problem dramas like *I Want to Live!*

(1958) and *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), with the starker *noir* cinematography of *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) blended in.

The year of Bruce's death, 1966, was the final year in which the Academy Awards gave separate color and black-and-white awards for Cinematography, Art Direction, and Costume Design. American television converted to all-color in Fall 1965, and the film industry followed. As in most of the very few films made in black and white after 1966, the use of black and white makes a statement. *Lenny's* Oscar-nominated cinematography, in its exceptionalism, is practically a character in itself. Unlike other major black-and-white films made in the early 1970s, *Lenny* does not quote specific film styles from Hollywood's past, as Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and *Paper Moon* (1973) had, and as Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* later in 1974 would. As it cuts from scenes in Lenny Bruce's life to interviews conducted in the present, it is clearly not out to evoke the past so much as it is to freeze Bruce within it.

7 Honey's Blues

Bruce's lingering ex-wife seems as much on the scene at the time of his death as she was before they were divorced in 1957. Fosse, however, valued a woman's perspective on his male protagonist. Almost alone among the Hollywood Renaissance directors, whose films tended to be male-oriented, he upheld the studio-era institution of the female star. Honey is far more important to the film than in Barry's play, however; indeed Valerie Perrine, who received a Best Actress Academy Award nomination for her performance, occupies as much screen time as Hoffman. Fosse considerably built up Honey's character, even after shooting began. For example, he gave her, rather than Lenny, as in the script, the answer to the repeated question from Aunt Mema (played by Rashel Novikoff) about how long Lenny and Honey knew each other before they got married, "About half an hour [...]," so that she keeps up with the two comics in the room, earning the mother's approval: "She's a terrific girl." The script's following line, "Look at that face," is dropped. Honey becomes more than a pretty face. Fosse magnifies the importance of Honey to Lenny's story beyond what it may have been in life. Also, "the fact that Fosse got along well with Perrine" clearly influenced his decision to cut numerous references in the script to her ignorance: "I wanted to win on the First Amendment," Lenny tells her. "Do you know what that is?" "No." Only the first sentence of that exchange is in the film (Barry 1974: scene 151, p. 94). Also gone are her

infidelities, and (in the diegetic scenes) the fact that she never accepted the divorce (Westal 2007). This Honey, pathetic junkie though she may have been, is granted her dignity, and not just because Fosse needed her permission to portray her (which Barry did not have for the play, in which she is named Rusty).

Despite all this, Honey's importance in the film is as a signifier of drug addiction; she is the stand-in for the overbearing drug habit that the film will not portray as Bruce's own. Sally blames Honey for the drugs. "He was just fine before you had to be schlepped back into it," Sally complains to Honey at a climactic moment. Because Fosse wanted to highlight the censorship Bruce suffered, the film greatly downplays his drug addiction. Sally asks Lenny about the pills he is popping, and he answers: "M & Ms." The line is tossed off, nearly inaudible. From the start of the second act, Lenny's drug addiction is mostly displaced onto Honey, another reason why she plays such a large part in the film. Fosse knew well that there was probably no way to portray the subject of a biopic as a drug addict without taking a moral position on the addiction, and causing it to become the point of the character and the film, as it had in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Moreover, from Goldman in the 1970s to Collins & Skover in the 2000s, Bruce's biographers portray him as having been brought down by a complex combination of the law's persecution, his own obsessive-compulsive responses, his refusal to be helped by a public campaign on his behalf, and the drugs.

After Lenny accepts an offer to work the 'hip' clubs for roughly eight times what he had been making, he announces to a strip club audience that "I'm leaving this toilet to go off and become a big star." Cut to a side close-up of a judge, with a giant wart on his neck, blowing his nose. As the film now threatens to become Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), with its ugly inquisitors, we are introduced to the milieu of American courtrooms where the film will spend much of its final third. Instantly, Fosse makes the association between Bruce's stardom and his legal troubles; however, the judge actually presides over Honey's narcotics case in Hawaii. The home life with Honey is replaced, for contrast, with the sterile, unfeeling American courtroom. Most of the diegetic scenes with Honey take place in prison, making Lenny's relationships those with his audiences and with judges and lawyers.

One of the purposes of the interviews seems to be to slip the addiction out of the dramatic action and couch it in the interviewees' narration. "Lenny was really deep into drugs himself, wasn't he," the interviewer asks Honey, remarkably late in the film. "You're really cute,

aren't you," she tells him. "You want me to say it." Of course, Fosse does not want to say "it." In actuality Lenny was a virtuoso at managing his drug habit (Goldman 1991: 35–37). The film avoids the downward trajectory of the addiction narrative; it is not "Lenny Sings the Blues," after all.

Fosse wanted to avoid the clichés of the drug-addicted-celebrity biopic, but in so doing he gives the impression that the portrait of Bruce has been softened, whereas that might not even have been the intent. Furthermore, the last year of Lenny's life, which the film elides, was a sad anti-climax. The spark was gone; the old comic was gone. He turned forty, but he might as well have been a hundred. Whether the State destroyed Lenny or whether he destroyed himself, there was little of 'Lenny Bruce' left in the final year. In his "House on the Hill" (Goldman 1991: 315) in Laurel Canyon, Bruce dallied with girlfriends, imagined a comeback – in the legal system, not on the stage – and took drugs. He was a hipster-junkie Charles Foster Kane (albeit an impoverished one), dithering away his remaining time in his box-like Xanadu (Goldman 1991: 585).

Numerous critics of both Barry's play and the film found fault with *Lenny* for blaming Bruce's decline entirely on the puritanical 'establishment' and hardly at all on Bruce himself. In actuality, Bruce continued to fight an all-out war he could not win with a still censorious culture, bankrupted himself with attorneys' fees "when the American Civil Liberties Union was offering to handle his legal defense" and abused his body and mind on an epic scale with heroin (Collins and Skover 2002: 134–135). In Goldman's book, the index entries on "Bruce, Lenny: drugs used by" run to thirteen lines, far more than for any other item (Goldman 1991: 650). Bruce himself refused to play the victim; "none of that wounded-bird stuff for me," he told an interviewer in 1963, "none of [those] Help Save Lenny Bruce Clubs that embarrass me" (Collins and Skover 2002: 135).

8 No Life after Death, Only Media Imagery

Lenny is, to my knowledge, the only biopic of any period or national cinema that offers no validation of the subject, no sense of his enduring legacy, and no sign that his significance transcends his mortal being. Nobody shows up to testify about how Bruce has influenced other comics or reinforced the value of the First Amendment. Missing is the sense that the subject leaves a legacy, that he transcends his body and subsequently lives on in the hearts of those he leaves behind. In *All That Jazz* the Lenny Bruce figure's monologue takes off on

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grieving from her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Survivors of Hoffman's Lenny never make it to even the first phase. Perhaps *Lenny* was made too close to Lenny Bruce's times for enough distance and perspective to have jelled. No one could know that Bruce would be pardoned by the governor of New York—in 2003 (Kifner 2003).

The film disregards validation in favor of intermedial iconography. For example, the Lenny of many of the nightclub monologues is bearded. The actual Bruce was first seen publicly in a beard less than six weeks before his death, on posters for the concerts put on at the Fillmore in San Francisco by rock promoter Phil Graham on 24 and 25 June 1966, which turned out to be Bruce's final gigs (Collins and Skover 2002: 337). Bruce had the beard when he died; thus these shots in Fosse's film represent Lenny in life less than they refer to images circulated after his death. Nearly all of Bruce's appearances were made clean-shaven; Fosse's Lenny appears bearded or clean-shaven seemingly without regard for temporality. In the 21 January script, eighteen separate 'scenes,' or excerpts from monologues, indicate that Lenny is "bearded" (Barry 1974). Other biopics would use changes in appearance to mark documented stages in the subject's life. Here the beard means that the scenes are from Bruce's period as a 'force,' a cultural icon. This makes Fosse's Lenny an intermedial one, the Lenny circulated in photos, posters, and on book and album covers, not the one experienced in actuality. This is the iconographic Lenny Bruce, the image disseminated in the years leading up to Fosse's film and after. Indeed a search in Google or Getty Images for 'Bearded Lenny Bruce' brings up many more shots of Dustin Hoffman in the film than of Bruce himself.

The film ends in a reenactment of the day Bruce was found dead, as his naked corpse, of which photographers snapped pictures when the Los Angeles Police allowed them in two at a time, appears on the screen from toe to head. Hoffman, in voiceover, mutters the last words anyone heard Bruce speak: "in the shithouse for good" (Goldman 1991: 641). *Lenny's* ending makes for an abrupt and cruel way to conclude a biopic; Fosse refuses to digest, in any sense of that word, Lenny Bruce for the spectator.

9 Downward Trajectory in One Take

Avoiding the downward trajectory paradigm for biopics, especially those about victims and addicts, Fosse compresses Lenny's professional downfall into a five-minute-fifty-one-second take toward the film's end. Shot from the balcony of a theater, the scene takes the point of

view of a nightclub patron watching a drug-zonked Lenny ‘die’ on stage. This shot represents more than a directorial stunt. By cutting to such a long, static take in a film whose average shot length (ASL) is 5.20 seconds, far below average for a Hollywood film in the mid-seventies, Fosse creates a mood of foreboding (Salt). In *Lenny*, cutting is a way of evading unpleasant reality, much as the characters do, and of confronting life with standup comedy, as Lenny does by turning his problems into art. A moving camera approaches something new, which in this film always feels dreadful, even deathly. The long take without movement is even worse, suggesting a fate from which there is no escape. Thus Fosse and Hoffman show a Lenny who has lost his timing, his spark, the spontaneity of the standup comic. From such a high angle, Lenny looks small and stranded. While the giant lips that open the film trap us in a character’s subjective memory, Fosse employs open space, distance from his protagonist, and no-contrast, non-theatrical lighting – even though the setting is a stage – in order to show a Lenny who is small, stranded, and out of ideas. Bruce scrambles his greatest hits, as Fosse condenses the comedian’s sad and pathetic final couple of years, in which he appeared before the few audiences whom he did entertain, disheveled and “not funny” (figure 6).

This scene of a diminished-looking comic shows Bruce’s decline, which was nearly as steep and abrupt as Lenny’s sudden dissipation in the film. From 1963, when Bruce suffered his first conviction for obscenity, in the Gate of Horn case in Chicago, to December 1964, the opening of the New York Café-au-Go-Go trial, which took over six months from start to final sentencing, Bruce went to rack and ruin as a comedian, as a person, and as a professional performer. By the end of the New York case, he was overweight and unkempt. A comic who once did his act in sharp black suits and Italian shoes now often appeared on stage in an outlet store car coat. The 5¾-minute shot ends with the line, delivered in a dejected tone, “I’m not funny. I’m not a comedian.”

In actuality, however, when Bruce’s court appearances became more frequent than his nightclub acts, he did not drop this line on stage but instead rounded it out: “I’m not a comedian. I’m Lenny Bruce” (Goldman 1991: 383). In the script the long take ends this way (Barry 1974: scene 178, p. 119). The full sentence, however, is not heard in the film. Could Fosse be trying to insist that Bruce is being silenced, as in his last courtroom scene when he pleads with the judge, “Don’t take away my words.” Ironically, Fosse does the same thing; like a judge, he disallows Bruce’s speech when it is out of order. “I’m not a comedian. I’m

Lenny Bruce” is the statement of an artist who comes to see himself as more of an ongoing legal battle – the cause he refused to allow others to make of him – than an entertainer. The apparent cold feet that caused Fosse to cut one of the script’s most definitive lines, as well as its very climax, show that the biopic was not ready to evolve into the multi-faceted investigative genre it took another twenty years and films such as *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993), *Nixon* (1995), *I’m Not There* (2007), and *The Social Network* (2010), to become. Ebert charged that the film had copied *Citizen Kane*, but the irony is that Fosse had not followed its example enough. *Kane* dares to expose its subject as a truly contradictory and self-defeating figure. Indeed *Kane* is a fully intermedial work, bringing in Welles’s experience in radio and theatre, cultural forms such as the rags-to-riches Horatio Alger novel and the Dickensian *Bildungsroman* about a young man’s progress in the world, along with discrete film forms such as the newsreel, the newspaper saga, and the biopic itself (Bingham 2010, 50–71).

Lenny brings together Eisensteinian juxtaposition, Fossean dance, and interviews familiar from documentary forms of the 1950s and early 1960s, such as Edward R. Murrow’s *See It Now* series. Fosse also dramatizes Schiller’s interviews, which were used by Goldman’s biography and Barry’s play. More exactly, Fosse has made a film version of Schiller’s interviews, intercutting them to Bruce’s own comedy. This is a truly innovative approach, and one that no one else in the past forty years has tried. Fosse could have based a dramatic narrative film on Schiller’s material. Goldman, who wrote his Bruce biography based upon the same interviews, bills them as ‘journalism.’ Again, like *Citizen Kane*, which followed a heard but not seen journalist as he interviewed those who knew Kane, *Lenny* mixes media. The difference is that *Lenny* is about a performer who delivers his medium, standup comedy, to us, often in dialectical opposition to what is being said about him. The montage of three divergent black-and-white media – the dazzling show business night club stage; the drab, gray style of black-and-white television news in the period, roughly 1950-1966, coinciding with Bruce’s performing career; and the high-contrast films noirs of the 1940s and 1950s – combines with Fosse’s own intermediality to create a biopic that is mostly independent of narrative temporality.

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Figures



Figure 1: The gigantic mouth of the mundane middle-aged Honey, survivor of her life with Lenny. Digital frame enlargement. Source: *Lenny* 2002: 0:30:00.



Figure 2: In contrast, the mythological Lenny, literally larger than life, including his own. Digital frame enlargement. Source: *Lenny* 2002: 0:46:00.



Figure 3.: Half in shadow throughout the post-*ménage* scene with Honey. Fosse and Surtees compose and light the marital scenes like 1950s realistic noir, with a touch of Welles. Digital frame enlargement. Source: *Lenny* 2002: 0:44:53.



Figure 4: Contrast again, this time with “I like dikes.” While the film displaces Bruce’s drug habit onto Honey, Lenny in his nightclub act displaces his (fictional) desire for threesomes onto his wife, imagining that “sometimes, we’re married to ‘em.” Digital frame enlargement. Source: *Lenny* 2002: 0:45:09.



Figure 5: One of the three visual modes: “Drab” black and white in present-day. Honey describes her marriage to the interviewer, played by Bob Fosse, his ever-present cigarette in hand. Digital frame enlargement. Source: *Lenny* 2002: 0:51:12.



Figure 6: Fosse stops the show with a nearly six-minute take of Lenny in decline. The static shot makes Bruce's two-to-three-year downfall so sudden and drastic that it constitutes no less a compression than the rapid montage of most of the film. Digital frame enlargement.
Source: *Lenny* 2002: 1:33:20.