Retelling, Reliving:
Fiction as Biography in *The Happy Prince* (2018)

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Abstract:
Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince* (2018) is a neo-Victorian biofictional film that depicts Oscar Wilde's final years in exile within the narrative framework of his 1888 children's story of the same name. In the film, Wilde (portrayed by Everett) recounts excerpts from the story both as a narrator and onscreen character, which facilitates narrative time jumps from his deathbed to earlier points in his life, and illuminates different aspects of the author by comparing him to various characters from the fairytale. With a desire to invite viewers to relate to Oscar the man, rather than Wilde the icon, Everett fashions a rendering of the author that is intensely personal and based upon his own connection with this famous figure. This filmic biofiction is thus a curious blend of fiction and reality, literary work and life experience.

Keywords: autobiography, biofiction, Rupert Everett, fairytale, film, 'The Happy Prince' (1888), *The Happy Prince* (2018), neo-Victorian adaptation, Oscar Wilde.

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The voiceover that begins the film *The Happy Prince* (2018) consists of an audibly aged Oscar Wilde (played by the film's director and writer, Rupert Everett) reciting the first lines of the titular children's story: "High above the city on a tall column stood the statue of the Happy Prince […]. He was very much admired indeed" (Everett 2018: 00:01:07-00:01:19). Presently, his voice transitions to a younger, more powerful resonance, and the audience sees Wilde onscreen for the first time, recounting the story to his two young sons at bedtime. Within a few minutes, it is a much older and diminished Wilde who continues the narrative thread of the story while he sits at a table on the rainy streets of Paris. It becomes immediately clear to viewers that, although the title of the movie suggests an adaptation of the 1888 short story, this is instead a biopic of Wilde's final days as he reminisces about different periods and people of his life from his deathbed. However, unlike other

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biographical films about Wilde, Everett's movie uses 'The Happy Prince' story as a means to provide narrative cohesion.[1] While scenes in the movie skip forward and backward through Wilde's life quite freely, the fairytale is always told in a linear manner: the film begins with the first lines of the story and ends with the last lines. Furthermore, throughout the film, Wilde is compared to various characters in the story, from the Prince to the Swallow to the poor writer, as the fictional narrative facilitates the film's transitions from a dying Wilde to earlier episodes in his life. This article argues that, while all biopics are combinations of historical fact and artistic license, *The Happy Prince* furthers this amalgamation by weaving Wilde's own fiction into the film's narrative.

1. Everett's Take on the Biofictional Wilde

By framing Wilde's life within one of the writer's fictional literary works, Everett's film presents Wilde in a distinct manner from other biopics. Everett's twenty-first century retelling of Wilde's last days is therefore a fascinating convergence of neo-Victorian biofiction and nineteenth-century short story. The intermingling of historical fact, fictional story, and modern retelling creates an intriguing film that in some ways recreates how Victorian conceptions of Wilde were often formed through his characters and the notions that readers brought to his fiction. This latest revisitation of Wilde thus allows us to investigate the ways in which our contemporary understanding of his life is still inextricably intertwined with his renowned characters, as well as our own individual conceptions of the writer. As many Victorians once read Wilde into his writings, so does this latest neo-Victorian depiction immerse him in his fictional creations, fashioning a perception of the author that is a curious blend of fiction and reality, literary work and life experience. The film further illustrates the permeable boundary between fiction and reality through the parasocial-esque relationship between the biofiction's creator and subject. Such relationships are one-sided emotional attachments between a person and a figure (usually a celebrity, but sometimes a fictional character) who is oblivious to the other person's existence. While not always the case in biofiction, in this instance, Everett's intense identification with Wilde due to the two men's perceived similarities (gay artists relegated from social darlings to relative outcasts by their societies) constructs a filmic biofiction not only centered around Wilde, but also

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reflective of Everett, or at least how he chooses to present himself at this stage of his life and career.

While Everett's film can be considered a biopic, in that it is a biographical picture as the portmanteau word suggests, for neo-Victorian scholarship, it is also the latest biofictional rendition of Wilde in which a period of his life largely left unexplored is recreated onscreen.[2] Wilde has been the subject of various biofictions throughout the decades, and is thus a "crucial figure" to any discussion of the genre and its purposes (Lackey 2021: 15). Biofiction provides "a (fictional) glimpse into the author's private life," which Julia Novak and Sandra Mayer claim "caters to the voyeuristic gaze of the public and their obsession with recovering the (historical) author's 'true' and 'authentic' self" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 25). Indeed, one of the primary purposes of the movie is to retell the last years of Wilde's life, a period often overlooked in favour of his earlier literary works or the scandalous drama of the trials. As Everett states in an interview,

> I was partly inspired because the other movies take you up to this point and stop, and secondly, because I felt there was more to explain to people about Wilde. […] I thought the other films rather conveniently stop when it gets too awkward. (Everett qtd. in Enck 2018: n.p.)

What was the Wilde of 1897 to 1900 like, after everything contemporary audiences know him for had been stripped away? Everett's version of Wilde, as Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland notes, is one in which "there's both the intellectual and the emotional. But, at this stage of his life, he's living on what's left of his emotions" (Holland qtd. in Thorpe 2018: n.p.).

The emphasis on Wilde's emotionality is in keeping with the neo-Victorian biofictional tendency to heighten the sense of revelation about famous figures through an emphasis on "the salacious and traumatic aspects of the lives of participants in the long nineteenth century" (Kohlke 2013: 4). Certainly, this film brings to life the traumatic elements of Wilde's final years, tracing the exiled writer's path from London to Dieppe to Naples and ultimately to Paris, as he resumes his affair with Alfred Douglas, or 'Bosie' as Wilde referred to him, and falls into further disrepute. This is a Wilde completely unlike the dandified and luxurious aesthete so often pictured in the popular imagination. As "[n]eo-Victorian biofiction highlights tensions

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and discrepancies between public and private personas" (Kohlke 2013: 7), so does *The Happy Prince* viscerally depict Wilde in his final years, far from his physical and creative peak.

This film is also a variant of what Marie-Luise Kohlke calls "autobiofiction" (Kohlke 2013: 6). While "biofiction re-imagines an historical Other's life in the third-person or via an omniscient narrator", Kohlke points out that "autobiofiction narrates the subject's life from her/his purported first-person point of view" (Kohlke 2013: 6). Since Wilde is both the narrator and subject of this film, the latter falls under the purview of autobiofiction in an intriguing manner. He is simultaneously first-person narrator and historical Other, the disembodied voice that continues his narration even after he has died onscreen, and the embodied character who is illumined by both his original dialogue and the regaling of his short story.

Biofiction often comes from a contemporary desire to somehow recover or reveal heretofore unknown aspects of the subject's life, and where details might be missing from the historical record, a certain amount of fictional liberty is taken. When the biofictional subject is an author, the author's own fictional creations are sometimes used to fill in the biographical blanks. For instance, neo-Victorian biofictional works about Emily Brontë often "aim to supply Emily's lost narrative", since "all of the unknowns in her personal history leave potentialities for rewriting her character" (Maier 2018: 297). The vagueness about Brontë's life and personality allows her to be "made to be her own characters in much of the neo-Victorian fiction that concerns her" (Maier 2018: 297). Wilde sits at the other end of the historical spectrum, in that we know quite minute details about his life and experience, which have been dramatised in various forms throughout the decades. However, despite the vast difference in available biographical information between the two authors, Wilde, like Brontë, has often been conflated with his characters. While Wilde famously argued in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891) that the artist "stands outside his subject" and should not be sought in his creations (Wilde qtd. in Jones 2011: 898), his literary productions are precisely where we often look for insight into Wilde and his personal character. Since Everett's film depicts Wilde at a period of his life that has often been marginalised in biofiction, this tendency to fill in the gaps of knowledge about precise details with fictional renderings informed by Wilde's own creations is even more marked.

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As "contemporary biofiction […] often relies on an author's work to evaluate his or her life" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 45), we see how Everett's use of 'The Happy Prince' in his film provides a way in which the audience can "evaluate" Wilde's declining years and view him as both a self-sabotaging and tragic figure. Everett freely admits in an interview about his approach to Wilde in this film that one of his goals was to show Wilde as a flawed human being on the decline, while still portraying him as a sympathetic figure (Everett qtd. in Enck 2018: n.p.). He has said that "this idea about a rock star on the skids ending up as the last great vagabond of the 19th century is romantic and exciting and for me very important" (Everett qtd. in Enck 2018: n.p.). This approach to Wilde's life illustrates an aspect of authorial biofiction in which contemporary creators seek to "enact a democratic rehabilitation of overlooked lives" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 1), in order to present their historical subjects "as flawed human beings with all their faults and short-comings" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 31). Mark Llewellyn reminds us that neo-Victorian creations often attempt to "re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance of that earlier text to the here and now" (Llewellyn 2008: 170-171). In the case of *The Happy Prince*, the filmic biofiction, somewhat ironically, serves to "re-fresh and re-vitalise" audiences' perception of Wilde by showing him when he was at his least fresh and vital. Everett underscores Wilde's significance, not as the literary and popular culture icon he has become, but as an ordinary man with strengths and failings.

Furthermore, Everett's choice to film *The Happy Prince* rather than to write it as a biofiction novel brings this rendition of Wilde into a medium more traditionally associated with popular culture rather than purely literary circles. Does this diminish his retelling of Wilde's life? While an argument can be made that a biofiction novel can express certain interiorities and first-person narratives that a film cannot, Everett's choice of a filmic medium allows for optical and oral nuances of presentation that a textual rendering could not convey. "Screen Victoriana", as Chris Louttit and Erin Louttit term it, has until recently been relegated to the margins of neo-Victorian considerations, especially when compared to the attention paid by scholars to "the dominant literary approach" (Louttit and Louttit 2018: 2). Nevertheless, as they contend, "screen neo-Victorian studies is of pivotal importance" to the field as a whole, as well as "to the fraught question of how far the neo-Victorian can and should be extended into the realms of popular culture and

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forms beyond the literary" (Louttit and Louttit 2018: 2). In visual media such as film, "the line between text, context, and intertext seems ever more blurred", thereby creating "dense interconnected constellations of texts and other cultural productions" (Louttit and Louttit 2018: 5). Undoubtedly, this biofiction becomes ever more interdimensional when viewers consider other cultural productions in concert with it, from Wilde's 1888 children's story to Everett's 2020 autobiography. *The Happy Prince* itself functions within a complex matrix of interrelated texts, all of which add texture to the audience's potential understanding of the biofiction, Wilde, and Everett.

By portraying Wilde as a creative genius but also a man with faults, and by reiterating in various interviews his own personal connection to the writer, Everett implicitly creates an image of himself with those same qualities, as reflected through his biofictional rendering of Wilde. Such a reflection illustrates biofiction as a genre through which the biofictional creator almost becomes as much the subject as does the original historical figure. Biofictional creations are thus perhaps uniquely suited to examinations of both the historical moment and current time, biographical subject and contemporary creator, fiction and reality.

2. Fairytale as Framing Narrative

By showing viewers Wilde's final years within the narrative framework of his famous fairytale, Everett employs the writer's own text as a scaffold in which to situate the biofictional film. Wilde is compared throughout the film to various characters in the story, with each of the comparisons elucidating a different aspect of the author – impoverished writer, all-seeing swallow outside of society, and a former princely darling of literary culture, reduced to nothing at the end. We can thereby further identify *The Happy Prince* as a reversal of the configuration Dídac Llorens-Cubedo puts forth when investigating the biofiction novel, *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009). While Charlotte Brontë's life is examined in this book, it is "always as a source of experiences that the text will eventually accommodate, repurpose, transform, and contain" (Llorens-Cubedo 2016: 192-193). Conversely, Everett's film keeps the focus on Wilde's life, with his short story used as a way to transform and contain the manner in which we view him.

As is sometimes the case in biofiction, the creator wants to humanise the historical figure in some way, usually by highlighting certain flaws or failings that might have been minimised or ignored over time.[3] While Wilde

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has certainly been the subject of both critical and pop cultural considerations throughout the years, Everett furthers the legacy of Wildean contemplations by adding his own personal reflections on the man behind the symbol of everything from gay rights to the *fin-de-siècle*. The director thus participates in this biofictional convention but does so not simply to criticise Wilde or judge him unfavourably, but to make him more relatable as an ordinary human being rather than an infallible icon. Such an approach is also well-suited to cinematic biofiction, as "many acts of [filmic] adaptation involve some element of critique, transformation, revision" (Bowler and Cox 2009: 2). Everett's adaptation of Wilde's final years seeks to transform or revise viewers' attitudes about the writer by accentuating the conflicting emotions and behaviours he exhibited during his European exile.

Authorial biofictions "lend themselves particularly well to self-projection", and so are "frequently tied to the biographers' own ideological concerns" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 26). Although this primarily concerns written biofictions, Everett's cinematic portrayal of Wilde also fits this formulation, particularly when we consider why Everett felt inspired to make this movie. In his evocatively titled memoir, *To the End of the World: Travels with Oscar Wilde* (2020), he writes about the strange place in which actors find themselves when their star is no longer on the ascendent, something which he has felt quite keenly in the last decade or so of his career. As Everett found himself unceremoniously banished from the Hollywood sphere, he felt that "Oscar Wilde in exile seemed to be the obvious choice" for a passion project (Everett 2020: 47). As he proclaims in his memoir, "If the only role I was permitted to play in world cinema was the gay best friend, then I would take it all the way back to the prototype" (Everett 2020: 47). In Wilde, Everett finds a camaraderie: two gay men whose careers (and in Wilde's case, life) ultimately suffer as a result of their sexual orientation. As Wilde asserted to the editor of the *Speaker* in 1891, it is "the spectator, and the mind of the spectator, as I pointed out in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that art really mirrors" (Wilde 1962: 299). In the case of this film, the art does not simply mirror Wilde or even the spectator, but also the creator of this biofiction.

The reflection between the two men continues in Everett's aforementioned memoir. In a fascinating echo of life mirroring art, Everett's book about his later years of celebritydom is thematically organised by his evolving relationship with the idea of Oscar Wilde throughout the years, and

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his ultimate obsession with making *The Happy Prince* film. Thus, much as Everett uses 'The Happy Prince' tale as a framework for presenting the last years of Wilde's life, so too does he use *The Happy Prince* movie as the structure for writing about the latest years of his own life.

Everett's film is the first Wildean biofiction to include a children's story, 'The Happy Prince', as a framing device and means of exploring hitherto unmapped elements of Wilde at the end of his life, but it is not the first to centre around the writer in his declining years. The focus of the film is heavily indebted to David Hare's 1998 stage play *The Judas Kiss*, and not coincidentally, Everett first portrayed this iteration of Wilde in the 2012 revival of the drama, reprising the role in the 2016 North American run of the play as well. Everett has said that he initially decided to star in the play because he needed funding for his film and thought this would be a way to "show to people that I've got an angle on Oscar" (Everett qtd. in Enck 2018: n.p.).

In her review of the play, *The Guardian*'s Alexis Soloski asks the pertinent question, "In Oscar Wilde's final years, did life imitate art?" (Soloski 2016: n.p.). Hare and Everett, based upon their Wildean biofictions, would undoubtedly argue that his final years did indeed replicate the tragic ends of some of his artistic works. Soloski notes one particular sentence from Hare's Wilde that encapsulates his depiction in the play, and even the subsequent film, "I am cast in a role. My story has already been written. How I choose to play it is a mere matter of taste" (Hare qtd. in Soloski 2016: n.p.). In this metafictional moment, Wilde's life is again represented as interwoven and almost indistinguishable from fictional works, particularly *his* fictional works, to the extent that he becomes a character himself.

The question of why Everett chose to use 'The Happy Prince' as the overarching narration for his biofiction is one he does not address in his memoir or interviews. Ostensibly, Everett feels a connection to this story as it was his first ever encounter with Wilde and his writing (Everett 2020: 1), but it is also a multifaceted and somewhat ambiguous tale that is arguably one of Wilde's lesser-known works. While the children's book was "well received" by critics at the time of its initial publication in 1888, it was not a commercial success (Mead 2014: 63). Only 1,000 copies of the first edition sold (when compared with 20,000 copies of Kate Greenaway's popular 1879 children's book, *Under the Window*), and the second edition sold "poorly" even with a reduction in price of almost a third (Mead 2014: 63). Beyond their

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commercial and critical reception, Wilde's children's stories, and 'The Happy Prince' in particular, have stymied scholars as to their possible moral or meaning.

Wilde himself seems to have considered them as writing exercises in "fanciful form" (Wilde 1962: 219). In an 1888 letter to G. H. Kersley, Wilde describes the stories in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* as "studies in prose, put for Romance's sake in a fanciful form: meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (Wilde 1962: 219). Today, some scholars assert that 'The Happy Prince' expresses Wilde's belief that "art could improve the condition of humanity by providing revolutionary alternatives to the structural violence of capital and poverty" (Ó Donghaile 2020: 122), while others feel it has no sociopolitical argument or even a clear moral objective. Justin Jones builds upon the idea that Wilde did not necessarily have a moral point to prove, and instead argues that the children's stories "resist the authority of shallow, bourgeois morality by flouting the conventions of the classical fairytale" (Jones 2011: 885). Wilde, he argues, "uses the concept of ugliness in his tales to illustrate the corrosive influence of such superficial morality on artistic beauty" (Jones 2011: 885). This statement appears to hold true, particularly when the story ends with the art professor declaring of the Prince's statue, "As he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful", and so the townspeople melt it down (Wilde 1997: 323). With such characteristic Wildean paradoxicality, most scholars deem the short story and its ending "ambiguous" at best (Youngs 2013: 173).

However this fairytale may be interpreted in literary and critical theory, Everett uses it as a framework through which to interpret Wilde's last few years of life and ultimate death, which is perhaps appropriate since death is a significant element of 'The Happy Prince' as well. Intriguingly, Soloski makes a similar connection between Wilde's fairytales and the end of the playwright's life, noting that "[s]everal plays might have predicted a jollier, tidier end to the man's life. But his fairytales and novel suggest a darker finish, in which beauty and pleasure yield to fates far crueler" (Soloski 2016: n.p.). It does seem that "Wilde uses death as an ironic reward for the moral characters in his tales", so that the Happy Prince, and even the Swallow, are condemned to death when they begin to act in an honourable manner, or at least with a "compulsive morality" imposed by societal standards (Jones 2011: 887, 898). In using this children's story as a context for his film, Everett

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seemingly replicates the story's narrative arc by comparing Wilde to these characters throughout different vignettes of his life and ending the film with his death, just as the Prince and the Swallow die at the end of their tale, leaving behind the flawed and corrupt world and entering into heaven.

Building upon this quasi-religious connection, Christopher Nassaar claims that spirituality permeates 'The Happy Prince', which leads characters such as the Prince and the Swallow to "make one sacrifice after the other until they lay down their lives in an ultimate, Christ-like sacrifice that destroys them on earth but opens the gates of paradise" (Nassaar 2014: 4). Everett himself sees Wilde as Christ-like, writing in his autobiography that he is "the Christ figure in my life", and that he hopes "the LGBTQ world […] would embrace the story of Wilde as a Christ-figure for the gay movement" (Everett 2020: 101, 326). Given these somewhat religious connotations, it is perhaps unsurprising that Everett uses this fairytale, with its complex morality and pious elements, to structure our perceptions of Wilde in this biofiction. Wilde is here presented as both an artist suffering from self-destructive tendencies and a martyr of the age's restrictive sexual notions, and it is this martyrdom that Everett underscores to lend his biofictional rendering of the Victorian author a semi-philosophical significance.

As Everett is the creative triumvirate of writer-director-principal actor behind *The Happy Prince*, it is to be expected that his own personal experience of Wilde directly informs the film, to the extent that it almost becomes a biofiction of himself as well. When Everett details finding a house in Naples where he wants to film scenes of Wilde's time with Bosie in Italy on location, he cannot help but feel that "Wilde is suddenly there"; in fact, Everett writes, "I feel him completely" (Everett 2020: 102). By invoking this spectral presence of Wilde, Everett both lends a metaphysical authority to his biofictional creation and emphasises the sense of fellowship he finds with this very particular version of Wilde after the peaks and troughs of his trials and celebrity. This connection is deepened due to Everett's claim that, though "over a century divides Oscar's visit from mine […] as far as this place is concerned, we both came at the end" (Everett 2020: 115). Everett finds a camaraderie with Wilde due to many overlapping characteristics he feels they both share, but at this point in Everett's life, he resonates most strongly with Wilde's feelings at the end of his career. For both men, their greatest celebrity and creations are behind them – they have reached the end of certain parts of their lives. Figures who are at the end of their lives is a pervasive theme in

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'The Happy Prince', and the comparison of these fictional characters with the biofictional figures of the film is emphasised from the opening scenes.

3. The Personified Prince: Oscar On-Screen

Within the first three minutes of the film, Wilde, other characters in the movie, and even the audience are implicitly and explicitly likened to characters from 'The Happy Prince'. As an offscreen Wilde narrates the first lines of the short story that describe the Prince in a reedy, weakened voice, on-screen, we see a view of London as a new day dawns. He continues, recounting the meeting of the Swallow and the Prince:

> Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow […]. You tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than this is the suffering of men and women. There is no mystery so great as suffering. Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there. (Everett 2018: 00:01:44-00:02:38)

Immediately, the tone is set for the biofiction: this is to be a story, not of the marvellous times of Wilde's existence when his life was golden (much like the Prince's statue), but of the suffering and hardship he faced.

When Wilde appears on screen for the first time, it is as a relatively young man in tailored evening clothes who continues the story in a much stronger, mellow voice. This Wilde is the one many people envision when they hear the author's name. In this scene, he sits in a chair reciting the tale to his two sons, who giggle in their bed, entranced by their father's storytelling. The camera angle is high from the room's ceiling, and so we view Wilde and his sons from above, much like the Swallow himself sees the figures of the story. From our viewing perspective, we have become a character in the tale, as well.

Narain Prasad Shukla notes that, at the time he wrote these fairy tales, "Wilde was at the height of his prestige and power […]. His conversation thrilled his hearers, and his writings had brought him fame and money" (Shukla 2009: 74). This ascendant Wilde continues entertaining his sons on screen: "So the Swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the white faces of starving children looked up listlessly at the black streets" (Everett 2018: 00:02:39-00:02:56). Wilde reaches up and spins a brass and red glass lamp hanging from the

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ceiling. As he does so, it swings in front of the camera as if hypnotising the audience, and the scene blurs and flashes forward to a cold, drizzly Parisian street at night. Here, rich patrons dine in lush restaurants, while poor children huddle against the buildings – the screen simulacra of the starving children in the short story.

The camera then tracks down the street to an older, less fashionable Wilde sitting slumped at a table with absinthe and a posy of violets, while the younger Wilde narrates what the Swallow saw in the Happy Prince's city: "At a table sat a broken man, a bunch of withered violets by his side. He was a writer, but he was too cold to finish his play" (Everett 2018: 00:02:58-00:03:14). This Wilde has had his final fall from public grace, unable and uninspired to write anything new, reduced to imploring friends to give him money. This is the Wilde that Everett desired to bring to life in his film, which most other biofictions deemed too awkward. Suddenly, the on-screen Wilde raises his head and stares directly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall and declaring, "It's a dream", before he vanishes into the night (Everett 2018: 00:03:15). Already, the audience has been obliquely placed in the position of the all-seeing Swallow, Wilde has been compared to the (un)Happy Prince as well as the impoverished writer, and even side characters such as the starving children in the story are given cinematic parallels.

These parallels are necessary for organising the film, given the complex visual and audial manner in which Everett evokes Wilde's life and memories. We hear the deathbed Wilde's voice before we ever see him, then see a younger Wilde as he picks up the narration, before the opening montage ends with a Wilde chronologically in-between these two versions. Given Everett's own history with film and television, it is perhaps unsurprising that he should choose to memorialise Wilde's final years in a visual medium. Yet, Everett could have chosen to create a textual biofiction in which he wrote the story of Wilde's exile and death, interlaced with excerpts from 'The Happy Prince'. However, Everett appears to have felt driven to physically inhabit the figure of Oscar Wilde in a way that writing him would not have accomplished. Instead, Everett weaves together textual and visual media, historical facts with artistic license, or what Kohlke calls "a certain degree of coherent invention" that is often present in celebrity or authorial biofiction (Kohlke 2013: 8).

One of the primary considerations of filmic recreations is the way in which audiences see and hear the characters. With such an (in)famous figure

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as Oscar Wilde, the physicality and vocality of any neo-Victorian screen representation is of particular import, as it constitutes an attempt to essentially bring him back to three-dimensional life. Helen Davies emphasises "the significance of voice in the cultural afterlife of Oscar Wilde" and audiences' "impossible desire to hear Wilde, to return to the original" (Davies 2011: 2). Everett's interpretation of Wilde on screen epitomises this phenomenon as it both highlights the inability to capture the original Wilde in perfect, factual record, and also provides Everett with varied opportunities to bring his own version of Wilde's voice to life – or rather, a commingled version of Wilde's and Everett's voices.

In the case of *The Happy Prince*, Everett quite literally lends his voice to Wilde, using his own twenty-first-century experience and speech to bring Wilde's nineteenth-century words and writing to life. Thus, Wilde's figurative voice and Everett's literal voice combine to form a new, interwoven adaptation of this famous figure. Wilde's "prowess as an oral storyteller" and "the aural impact that his mellifluous tones had upon his listening audience" are some of his most significant characteristics (Davies 2011: 5). While no recording of Wilde's voice exists, Everett imagines that it somehow lives on in Wilde's bloodline. When he recalls receiving a phone call from Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson and only surviving direct descendent, he claims that Holland's voice "was melodious, comfortable, strangely intimate, exactly how I imagined Oscar's to be" (Everett 2020: 138). This conversation, one of several Everett had with Holland, therefore provided him with a living pathway into Wilde's vocality that could then be recreated on screen.

Of course, "the original/authentic version remains imaginary, pure fiction" (Davies 2011: 7), and so Wilde's voice is often imagined based upon the lexicography and phraseology of his writing. In an interview for the film, Paulina Enck informs Everett that she was struck by how much his "script captured Oscar Wilde's distinctive voice and style", and she wonders how he managed to convey the spirit of Wilde in his screenplay (Enck 2018: n.p.). Everett responds by crediting his history "of having done lots of Wilde in theatre" so that he "got used to the phrases, the way they're constructed, the length of them, and the words and the humor" (Everett qtd. in Enck 2018: n.p.). Once again conflating Wilde with his fictional creations, Everett recounts how in a stage adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he previously played Lord Henry, who is "very like Oscar as a character", as well as playing Algernon in Oliver Parker's film *The Importance of Being*

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Earnest (2002), who "is like Oscar in a way as a character, too, so that was a very lucky learning curve" (Everett qtd. in Enck 2018: n.p.). Everett feels his experiences with these fictional characters give him insight into Wilde's personality and voice, not simply his writing style or phraseology. An intangible aspect of Wilde's being is somehow made tangible and accessible through his creations, which then allows Everett to resurrect the original creator in a filmic biofiction.

Furthermore, in Wilde's case, his "voice is constructed as a clue as to which version of Wilde's identity will be privileged – the gay Wilde, the Irish Wilde" (Davies 2011: 7). Rather than highlighting either of these two famous facets of Wilde's character, Everett instead foregrounds the *age* of the author's voice, often contrasting the exhausted, sickly deathbed voice with the younger, languid yet vibrant vocality of his flashbacks. This is most apparent when Wilde is reciting excerpts from 'The Happy Prince' throughout the film, and the audience is able to discern in what period a certain episode takes place simply from hearing Everett's vocal performance before ever seeing the character on screen.

Since a good portion of the film depicts Wilde on his deathbed, particular attention is paid to the sound of his breathing as he slowly loses control of the voice for which he was so noted. Everett writes in his memoir about the post-production process of finding the perfect raspy, rattling breath track to superimpose over his own breathing as Wilde lays dying. As Everett listened to the audio track, he was "dumbstruck. Oscar has become almost too real, he's oozing through the screen into the room – a tubercular ghost" (Everett 2020: 303). In this instance, the recreation of Wilde's probable sound has gone too far and become an uncanny representation of his final state of being. Ultimately, Everett made the decision to temper and soften Wilde's death rattle because he deemed it too unsettling for audiences to hear.

Although Wilde's voice remains tantalisingly unknown, he is arguably one of the most visually recognisable authors, even to those who have never read any of his literary works. Regarding the visual representations of Oscar Wilde's ghost in biofiction, Eleanor Dobson asserts that there is a "conformity" of his image to the "style of aestheticism" (Dobson 2016: 36). She highlights Laurence Dumortier's claim that Wilde's visual depictions almost always mimic the "limited iconography" of his "dandified guise", most famously preserved in the 1882 photographs taken of Wilde by Napoleon Sarony in New York City (Dobson 2016: 42). While this

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is Wilde's most recognisable appearance, the languorous aesthete with long hair and luxurious clothes, Dobson suggests that another reason neo-Victorian representations of Wilde (even ones of his ghost) often take this visage is "the desire to remember the dead not as they were immediately before their passing, but how they were at the height of their success and happiness" (Dobson 2016: 42). This desire is another way in which Everett's film is an unusual biofictional approach to Wilde: not only does it consider Wilde's final years rather than his early life or successful literary career, but (aside from some interspersed flashbacks to earlier times) the film foregrounds the writer on his deathbed, looking vastly different from the Sarony photographs and the image of Wilde in the popular imagination. Everett's goal to present Wilde with all of his humanity and failings, rather than in the guise of the literary icon, is thus also visually represented through his shabby clothes and physical decline.

Aside from the screen Wilde's physiognomy, and in parallel to the fascination with his vocality, biofictions also commonly evince "an insistence on the reproduction of his characteristic epigrammatic wit" that audiences love about the author (Dobson 2016: 36). Dobson affirms that Wilde's famous quote from his death-bed, "The wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do," is often repeated in an effort to assure modern audiences "of his continuing flippancy up until his final breath" (Dobson 2016: 36). Intriguingly, "one of the most significant features" of neo-Victorian recreations of Wilde is that he generally has few new things to say, instead "quoting himself *ad nauseum*" (Dobson 2016: 36). In "putting [Wilde's] own words into a fictionalised mouth, these biofictions represent a most topical example of what it signifies to (re-)tell a life in retrospect" (Joris 2013: 32). Yet, Everett's film puts not only Wilde's own nonfictional words into his biofictional portrayal, but also Wilde's fictional words from 'The Happy Prince', another way in which the film blends fiction and reality. This intertwining of fictional characters and real subjects in the film once again makes overt the porous nature of the liminal space in which biofiction operates, and foregrounds how this genre both enhances and complicates biography with fiction.

Everett often has his Wilde speak in aphorisms and Wildean paraphrases rather than direct sayings, making proclamations such as "The natural habitat of the hypocrite is England", which sounds quite like something he would have said, but is not an actual attributable quote (Everett

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2018: 00:33:02). Even Everett's utterance of Wilde's famous deathbed statement is not verbatim. The filmic Wilde declares to his friend and former lover Robbie Ross (Edwin Thomas), "I'm in mortal combat with this wallpaper, Robbie, one of us has to go" (Everett 2018: 00:18:58-00:19:02). Yet, Everett interposes these reinterpretations of Wilde's language with direct quotes from his letters to Ross and others. For instance, Everett narrates the moment when Wilde absconds with Bosie (Colin Morgan) to Italy with a quote lifted from one of Wilde's letters: "I know what I am doing is fatal. I love him as I always did. With a sense of tragedy and ruin" (Everett 2018: 00:49:42-00:49:50). As these examples suggest, without researching many of Wilde's lines in the film, it would be difficult for the audience to determine which dialogue is a direct quote, a literary excerpt, or a completely new composition. Thus, the interweaving of factual quotes (whether from Wilde's writings or his life) and fictional reworkings of dialogue throughout the film is yet another way the biofictional genre and its unique blend of historical fact and creative fiction shapes Everett's rendering of Wilde. Such dynamic intermingling provides the audience with an autobiofictional narration from the "purported first-person point of view" of the subject (Kohlke 2013: 6) that attempts to do the impossible: reveal the inner thoughts of a man through another's reimagining of his life and works. It is clear that Everett has painstakingly constructed a biofiction of Wilde that fuses Wilde's myriad writings and sayings, his biographical data, and the parasocial rapport Everett feels with the Victorian writer.

4. Wilde and Everett, Icon and Man, Fiction and Biography

The relationship between the two men takes centre stage in Everett's memoir as he recounts the ways in which Wilde has been present in both his personal and professional life. Everett reveals how his relationship with Oscar Wilde began when he was a small child, waned in drama school when he felt Wilde "was incredibly old-fashioned and staid" (Everett qtd. in Radish 2018: n.p.), and then ultimately reignited as a deep connection with the writer in his later years. As the subheading of the book suggests – *Travels with Oscar Wilde* – Wilde and his life serve as the guiding principle for Everett's third memoir, much as Wilde's fairytale provides the framing device for Everett's film. In the first chapter of the book, Everett describes the first time he ever encountered Wilde. At five years old, Everett's mother reads him 'The Happy

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Prince' as a bedtime story, and so, this memoir begins the same way the film does, with a parent reading this story to their children.

This childhood experience begins Everett's longstanding fascination with Wilde, with the author claiming that Wilde has "been following me ever since" (Everett 2020: 8). Indeed, as the book progresses, and as Everett becomes more and more invested in bringing this biopic to life, he notes that his "feeling for Wilde deepens with each day" to the extent that he often feels as though he is channelling the Victorian author in an almost mediumistic manner (Everett 2020: 113). By the time he starred in *The Judas Kiss* (2012-2013 and 2016), Everett recalls seeing Wilde as he looks at himself in his dressing room mirror, writing, "Oscar winks at me in the mirror" (Everett 2020: 39). Thus, over the course of the book, we read how the two men become almost indistinguishable in Everett's mind. After the play, and before he secures funding for the film, Everett writes that he is "haunted by Oscar", or rather "I am haunting him", as Everett travels to Europe to meet with producers and stays in France, tracing Wilde's steps (Everett 2020: 75). Later in the memoir, he even declares (only partially in jest), "I AM Oscar Wilde" (Everett 2020: 107), as if he has been possessed by Wilde's spirit. Everett's relationship with the subject of his biofiction can only ever be one-sided, yet he depicts it as a reciprocal loop of interaction where periods of his life are characterized by either Wilde (or rather Everett's idea of him) haunting him or Everett chasing his image of Wilde across various artistic mediums in an attempt to recreate the author through his own body. Of course, Everett cannot ever fully recreate or reanimate Wilde, and his assertion that both men are haunting the other underscores that Wilde has been dead for over a hundred years and will never know Everett, just as Everett will never be able to meet Wilde. The choice to describe their interactions as spectral and ephemeral not only provides readers with insight into Everett's psychology and perception of Wilde, but also emphasises a poignant element of neo-Victorian biofiction – it is impossible for the creator to ever truly resurrect their subject; he or she can only reimagine and recreate a hybrid version of subject and creator.

To Everett, Wilde is both a deceased subject and immortal icon, a person and a character, a fact and a fiction. Particularly since Everett has played Wilde on both stage and screen, the real man has become interwoven with the fictional one Everett has portrayed and infused with his own sense of self and history. When describing his movie to readers, Everett alludes to this fusion of fact and fiction as he explains a scene in which Wilde reveals

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to Robbie Ross that he is reuniting with Bosie. Everett writes, "Robbie is furious. I can't remember if this is true or if I made it up" (Everett 2020: 231), epitomising the fact that, as captured in its very name, the genre of neo-Victorian biofiction is one of historical fact and artistic fiction.

Everett himself acknowledges, to a certain extent, the peculiar space biofiction occupies in the sphere of retelling another's past story by reliving it in the present: "It was a strange feeling to be walking in the footsteps of one's subject" (Everett 2020: 238). As he recreates episodes detailed in Wilde's letters from his time in France, such as walking up the seaside hill in Berneval-le-Grand, he feels ever more connected to and able to convey Wilde and his feelings. He is able to read "between the lines" of Wilde's letters to his friends from his exile, almost as if Everett has an extrasensory connection to the author, and he feels he can see Wilde "very vividly" the more time he spends reconstructing the writer's journey (Everett 2020: 238). As Kohlke affirms, "[b]iofictional subjects thus partake of an uneasy liminal existence, an inter-subjective half-life between self and Other, fact and fiction, embodiment and textualisation" (Kohlke 2014: 4-5). This existence on the edge between so many opposing forces is what creates such a compelling figure and narrative in *The Happy Prince*. Describing one of the clashes he had with prospective producers of the film, Everett notes that they "wanted to create a sympathetic hero", while he "wanted to recreate a historical character" (Everett 2020: 126). Here, Everett's language emphasises the difference between creating a purely fictional figure and recreating a historical personage by using the oxymoron "historical character", a phrase that applies quite well to the liminal area of biofiction.

Further obfuscating the distinction between past and present, fact and fabrication, are Everett's multiple roles in front of and behind the camera. He oscillates between his job overseeing the whole production – "I am the director. I must be there" (Everett 2020: 239) – and his role as Wilde in each scene: "But now I'm Oscar walking down to the sea, and going into my little bathing tent" (Everett 2020: 239). As Everett notes about filming the deathbed scene, "I lie on the bed lurching from a death rattle to screaming at whoever is talking in the corridor outside. From Oscar Wilde to Orson Welles and back again […] it's gone to my head. Possibly" (Everett 2020: 254). He ultimately concludes, "It's my own mad world and it's electrifying", even going so far as to ponder for "a weird 3D moment" if "maybe I am Wilde dying in the bed" (Everett 2020: 254, 255). This veering between director and character,

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real life and film continues throughout the shoot, and brings to the movie a sense of intermingled fact and fiction, reality and acting, that would have been missing if it had not been the same man directing, writing, and playing Wilde in the film. Not only does Everett bring his own understanding of Wilde to the role, including the personal way in which he relates to the writer at the end of his career, but he also brings a deeper investment to the movie and its success through the ways in which he writes Wilde's dialogue, scouts for locations, chooses which scenes to shoot, and ultimately plays the part on screen. Everett thus brings to life a triplicate view of Wilde: the way in which he as a man relates to Wilde, the manner in which he chooses to write and direct his version of Wilde, and his portrayal of Wilde as an "historical character", particularly the interiority of Wilde that he imagines and recreates in the film.

Everett ends the biofiction with the same temporal complexity as it begins, and the time jumps are once again facilitated by Wilde's recitation of the fairytale. As Wilde reposes on his deathbed, he is visited by two young Parisian brothers he befriended earlier in the film. The younger brother demands that Wilde finish retelling 'The Happy Prince', with which he had been entertaining the brothers before he fell ill. Wilde obliges, resuming the tale in the faint voice audiences heard at the beginning of the film. The camera pans around his room, showing the two brothers and Wilde's longtime friend, Reggie Turner (played by Everett's longtime friend, Colin Firth). As the narrative reaches the point of the Swallow's death, the scene switches back to the beginning of the film, with the brothers sitting on the bed suddenly replaced by Wilde's two young sons. The younger Wilde continues the story in a much stronger voice: "He had just enough strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. 'Goodbye, dear Prince,' he murmured" (Everett 2018: 01:24:46-01:24:56). In another abrupt switch, simulating Wilde's deteriorating state of mind, the shot ends and we are back to Wilde on his deathbed, with everyone in the room asleep, aside from the younger brother. Wilde faintly continues and recounts the Swallow's final actions as "he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet" (Everett 2018: 01:24:58-01:25-41). Wilde then falls in and out of consciousness, flashes of the past commingling with hallucinations in the present. His sons and their absence weigh heavily on his mind, indicating that at least part of the diegetic reason for the fairytale's significance is due to Wilde's reminiscences about telling the tale to his sons.

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On his final day, a weak and delusional Wilde looks at a portrait of Queen Victoria on his bedside table and imagines she is sitting in his room with a large audience of people behind her. They all stare intently at Wilde, and she urges him to go on with the story. This is the last we see of the failing Wilde, as his death scene is not depicted on screen. Instead, he finishes the tale in voiceover, with the camera focusing on the faces of his hallucinated audience. He softly intones:

> So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. "As he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful," said the art professor at the university. And they melted the statue in the furnace. "What a strange thing," said the overseer of the workmen at the foundry, "This broken lead heart will not melt. We must throw it away." So they threw it in a dust heap, where the dead Swallow was also lying. (Everett 2018: 01:31:56-01:32:36)

The 'death' of the Happy Prince's statue becomes a substitute for Wilde's death – once more tacitly linking him to one of his characters. The room fades away, and in the next scene the camera is perched atop Wilde's coffin as it is carried in the rain to his grave outside of Paris, with only a few of Wilde's friends as mourners. As the Prince was ignominiously discarded at the end of his life, so Wilde is woefully abandoned by the world and buried in exile, not to be memorialised by his recognisable tomb (commissioned by Ross) until almost ten years later.

5. Conclusion: Everett on Wilde's Afterlife

Wilde's death is not the end of the film, however. After the funeral, we return to the younger, happier Wilde from the beginning, now tucking in his two sons. He caresses their heads as they sleep, and then blows out the night lamp as he finishes the tale with God's pronouncement, "For in my garden of paradise, this little bird shall sing forever, and in my city of gold, the Happy Prince shall praise me" (Everett 2018: 01:34:46-01:34:59). These are the final lines of the short story and the last lines of dialogue in the screen biofiction, neatly bringing both interwoven pieces to a close. The concluding images of the film show Wilde entertaining the crowd onstage one night in Paris before he fell sick. Wilde blows kisses to both the nineteenth-century crowd and then

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the twenty-first-century audience as he directly faces the camera and breaks the fourth wall once more, before his image fades to be replaced by the words, *The Happy Prince*, in burnished gold (Everett 2018: 01:36:20-01:36:33). Everett thus makes the stylistic choice that is somewhat rare in contemporary cinema to end the film with a title card, rather than placing it at the beginning or omitting it completely. By having Wilde's image transition directly to the film and fairytale title, we have one last, and most overt, acknowledgment of the direct connection Everett makes between Wilde and his fictional character.

Perhaps the most concise description of the film and its depiction of Wilde can be found in the conclusion of Everett's memoir. In a statement that has shades of Basil Hallward in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Everett contends that in this biofiction, "I wanted to paint a portrait of Wilde, one that added a new dimension to the debate. I painted him as I felt him to be …" (Everett 2020: 328, original ellipses). Everett's personal feelings and intuitions about Wilde, as well as his directorial choices, such as encapsulating the filmic narrative within 'The Happy Prince' text, uniquely shape this authorial biofiction and ultimately successfully contribute another dimension to our twenty-first-century understanding of Wilde. His dedication to creating this cinematic biofiction also left Everett with an even deeper connection to Wilde and strengthened his feeling that, through their perceived shared experiences as gay artists and writers, he both channels and is possessed by "My Oscar" (Everett 2020: 328). Neo-Victorian biofiction is "ripe for re-imagining intimate interchanges between (our)selves and historical Others" (Kohlke 2014: 16), and in the case of this film, such a statement applies to both Everett, as the creative force behind Wilde's reimagining, and viewers, who are encouraged to further their own relationships with Oscar the man, not Wilde the icon, through this biofiction.

Notes:

1. For other films about Oscar Wilde, see Gregory Ratoff's *Oscar Wilde* (1960) starring Robert Morley as Wilde, Ken Hughes's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) starring Peter Finch as Wilde, and Brian Gilbert's *Wilde* (1997) starring Stephen Fry as Wilde. For a consideration of Wilde's portrayal across other media in the twentieth century, consult Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis, and Julie

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Hibbard's edited collection, *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde During the Last Hundred Years* (2002).

2. Notable exceptions include Peter Ackroyd's 1983 novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, in which he depicts events from Wilde's life through the creation of a fictionalised diary written by Wilde in 1900 during his final months in Paris, David Hare's 1998 stage play *The Judas Kiss*, which is discussed further below, and John Vanderslice's *The Last Days of Oscar Wilde* (2018).
3. In an interview with *Collider*'s Christina Radish, Everett emphasises his desire to depict Wilde in a manner that addresses his faults and culpability in the events of his life:

> One of the things that's most important for me was this fact that he's an ordinary human being. In other words, he has all the bad traits of a human being, which are snobbery, greed, vanity and egomania. All of those things are what bring him down. I think we all have them, but he brought himself down, as a result. […] The fact that it happened because of him being so crazy is wonderful because I adore him. (Everett in Radish 2018: n.p.)

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