
Imitations of Life: From the Biopic to Self-Portraiture in Kevin Spacey's *Beyond the Sea*

Christian Viviani

Université Caen Normandie

For Jim

Introducing Bobby Darin

Beyond the Sea (UK/Germ/USA, 2004), a biopic focusing on the American singer and film star Bobby Darin (1936-73), is the second film directed by the American actor Kevin Spacey, following his directorial debut with *Albino Alligator* (USA, 1996). The film's title pays homage to the American adaptation by Jack Lawrence of Charles Trénet's song 'La Mer' (1945/6), a song popularised in the US by Darin, which can be heard in the film on several occasions (including the Trénet version). Spacey's film adopts the canonical genre of the musical biopic to relate the major events in the life of Darin, who died at the early age of 37. Nonetheless, as I will be suggesting in this article, beyond the apparent conventions of the genre the film may yet portray someone other than Darin. The singer was born Walden Robert Cassotto in East Harlem, New York. He was raised by Vivian, known as Polly, who had already a daughter, Nina. His father is thought to have been a small-time mobster who died in jail, leaving Polly on her own in charge of her two children. As a former vaudeville performer, it was she who instilled in young Walden Robert a love for singing and dancing.

The boy was however in poor health and was soon diagnosed with a serious heart murmur that would limit his life span, it was predicted, to the age of 16. Thanks to Polly's support, Walden Robert was nonetheless able to live a normal teenage life during which he nurtured his passion for the spectacle and developed his gifts for drama, singing and music writing, deciding to quit school and pursue a career in show business. In 1956, after unsuccessfully trying his luck as a cabaret singer, he was made to believe that his name was an impediment. Already nicknamed 'Bobby', he made up a surname after noticing the faulty neon sign of a Chinese restaurant: 'MAN' was turned off and only 'DARIN' was illuminated, an episode dramatised in Spacey's film.

This was the real starting point of the singer's career. Signing for Decca before moving to Atlantic, he wrote material for himself and for Connie Francis (another American of Italian descent) and other artistes, and, as teen-oriented 'pop' took hold, scored a notable early hit with 'Splish Splash' (1958). But Darin's own inclination led him towards swing, which his soft, crooner's voice and sense of rhythm fitted perfectly, even if he had to make compromises. He thus recorded the 1930s standard written by Harry Warren, 'I Found a Million Dollar Baby', which he spiced up with some rock'n roll style *à la* Presley, in vogue at the time. In 1959, Darin broke all sales records with 'Dream Lover'. A few months later, he released 'Mack the Knife (aka 'The Ballad of Mack the Knife'), a song he had recorded for his own pleasure; neither he nor his new record label Atlantic Records believed in its commercial prospects.

The song came from Brecht's and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), translated by Marc Blitzstein for the long-running 1954 Off-Broadway production, and Darin interpreted it in a high-spirited jazzy version. The song sold two million copies and won Darin a 1959 Grammy Award for 'Record of the Year', with Darin himself awarded as 'Best New Artist' of the year. Darin would go on to excel in this repertoire which he revamped through his cool and high-beat interpretations of standards such as Shelton Brooks' 'Some of These Days', first recorded by Sophie Tucker in 1911, and Harold Arlen's and Johnny Mercer's 1942 classic 'That Old Black Magic' - which Kevin Spacey, long before his Darin biopic, would perform in Clint Eastwood's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (USA, 1997). In the Sixties he ventured into country and folk (Tim Hardin's 'If I Were a Carpenter', a Top Ten hit for Darin in 1966) and songs of social commentary and protest (in 1969 he wrote Hardin's major hit, 'Simple Song of Freedom'). Altogether he recorded over 500 songs.

Darin also became a star of film and television. He made his film debut in a supporting role to Rock Hudson and Gina Lollobrigida in Robert Mulligan's romantic comedy set in Italy, *Come September* (USA, 1961). In the course of production he met Sandra Dee, who became his first wife. Although he did not eschew blunt if profitable productions in which he co-starred with his young spouse (such as Henry Levin's *If a Man Answers*, USA, 1962), Darin nurtured other ambitions that were better served in the John Cassavetes' excellent *Too Late Blues* (USA, 1962), where, following an uncredited appearance in the same director's *Shadows* (USA, 1959), he plays a troubled jazz musician, Don Siegel's WWII drama *Hell Is for Heroes* (USA, 1962), where he appears as a soldier/hustler, and Hubert Cornfield's race drama *Pressure Point* (USA, 1964), where he plays a neo-Nazi prisoner assigned to a psychiatrist interpreted by Sidney Poitier. He was Oscar-nominated as 'Best Supporting Actor' for his role in David Miller's *Captain Newman, M.D.* (USA, 1963), and among his one dozen credited roles we might also mention *Gunfight at Abilene* (William Hale, USA, 1967) and *The Happy Ending* (Richard Brooks, USA, 1968).

His political commitment to pacifism, and his growing inclination for folk music, soon impacted negatively on his career. In his personal life, Darin suffered a number of hard blows: Robert Kennedy, for whom he had campaigned, was assassinated – Darin was at the Ambassador Hotel in L.A. on the night of the murder; his marriage with Sandra Dee ended in divorce; and he was devastated by a final revelation. At the time of Polly's death, he discovered that she was not his mother but his grandmother; his real mother was Nina, whom he had thought to be his sister. Although suffering from poor health, he did his best in concerts and in television shows that gave his career a new lease of life but wore him out. In 1973, after failing to take his prescribed antibiotics, he collapsed. He underwent open heart surgery but did not recover. The content of Spacey's film was closely supervised by Dodd, the son of Darin and Sandra Dee, and it was also endorsed by Sandra Dee and Steve Blauner, Darin's former manager turned film producer (*Easy Rider*, Dennis Hopper, 1968).¹

The Biopic

If historical figures, or characters just based on real life, appear in film as early as in the silent era, the idea of recounting someone's life or part of their lives really takes shape with the talkies that create its major codes. The reason is simple: biopics generally require flights of oratory that allow the main characters to convey their ideas or display their talents, something for which silent films were ill-suited. The first biopic with clear-cut features is perhaps Alfred E. Green's *Disraeli* (USA, 1929), for which the British actor George Arliss won one of the first Academy Awards for Best actor after enjoying tremendous success in the same role in London's West End in 1911, and then on Broadway, in the play written by Louis Napoleon Parker. The play had already been poorly adapted in 1916, without George Arliss. This infuriated the actor, who considered the part belonged to him; he promptly bought the rights. He would play the part again in the 1921 Hollywood version by actor-director Henry Kolker, created at a time when the biopic was not yet well-defined.

When 20th Century Pictures merged with Fox Studios in 1935, the fledgling 20th Century-Fox specialised in its turn in biopics – such as Henry King's *Lloyds of London* (USA, 1936), Irving Cummings' *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (USA, 1939), King's *Stanley and Livingstone* (USA, 1940) and *Wilson* (USA, 1945). The codes of the biopic, moreover, pervaded other genres produced by 20th Century-Fox, like the western (King's *Jesse James*, USA, 1939) or the musical (Cummings' *The Dolly Sisters*, USA, 1945). Arliss, who first worked for Warner Bros., then for the newly-born 20th Century Pictures that Darryl F. Zanuck had just created upon leaving Warner Bros., gained a reputation as a specialist in the genre. Within four years, he had acted in Adolphi's *Alexander Hamilton* (USA, 1931) and *Voltaire* (USA, 1933), Victor Saville's *The Iron Duke* (UK, 1934), Alfred Werker's *The House of Rothschild* (USA, 1934) and Rowland V. Lee's *Cardinal Richelieu* (USA, 1935).

¹ I am indebted to the biographical accounts offered by Dodd Darin and Maxine Paetro, *Dream Lovers: The Magnificent Shattered Lives of Bobby Darin and Sandra Dee*, New York: Warner Books, 1994, and David Evanier, *Roman Candle: the Life of Bobby Darin*, New York: SUNY Press, 2010. For detailed information on Darin's music, see Shane Brown, *Bobby Darin: Directions. A Listener's Guide*, 2nd. ed., Norwich: privately published, 2019.

In the wake of Arliss's success, which were soon followed by those of the duo of actor Paul Muni and director William Dieterle at Warner Bros. (*The Story of Louis Pasteur*, 1936; *The Life of Emile Zola*, 1937; *Juarez*, 1939), the biopic became a profitable commercial formula and, for some critics, a source of prestige.

The basis for the musical biopic in particular was established in 1936 with Robert Z. Leonard's lavish production of *The Great Ziegfeld*, which proved a huge commercial and artistic success and won several Awards. It was promptly followed, at the same MGM studios, by a biopic of Johann Strauss the Younger, Julien Duvivier's *The Great Waltz* (USA, 1938). The choice of a personality from the recent past – and hence still alive in most people's memory - and the then well-established formula of the historical biopic paved the way for the advent of the variant (to which adheres *Beyond the Sea*) whereby an individual ahead of his time does not hesitate to defy convention. The film does not, however, aim for a libertarian discourse since the main protagonist eventually settles down in society; he may challenge the established order in the name of progress, but remains one of its pillars.

Struggling artists remain an oddity in the Hollywood form of the genre. Thus the rather conservative Ziegfeld succeeds in imposing 'his' formula for musical shows that are inspired by the Parisian Follies and which eventually become the new norm. Another crucial point is upward mobility. Ziegfeld starts working as a carnival barker and ends up an American institution. Likewise in Spacey's film, Darin is doomed in his teenage years but survives until the age of 37; he comes from an impoverished background and becomes a star. Last but not least, the progressive dimension of the artist also makes itself felt: Darin begins performing soppy teenage songs but eventually manages to impose both his style, that of a sophisticated jazzy swing, and his political views in support of the Democrats.

Like all cinema, the musical biopic often struggles with issues of realism and verisimilitude. One prime example can be found in the casting of Betty Grable and June Haver, two famous blondes under contract to 20th Century-Fox, to incarnate the renowned brunette Dolly Sisters in *The Dolly Sisters* (Irving Cummings, USA, 1945), but the period boasts other notable examples. When Warner Bros. produced Michael Curtiz's *Night and Day* (USA, 1946) dedicated to the life of Broadway composer Cole Porter, who was still alive at the time, the first deceit lay in the actor chosen to embody him: Cary Grant, whose imposing presence and elegance are unmistakable but nowhere near the physique of Porter (following a riding accident, which is toned down in the film, he becomes disabled and has to have a leg amputated). The second misrepresentation concerns Cole Porter's self-proclaimed homosexuality and his unconsummated marriage to a devoted wife, which the film completely ignores in order to recount a conventionally heterosexual love story. Only the happy few could appreciate the allusion in the casting of Cary Grant, whose bisexuality was then well-known in Hollywood. One might note that, while mentioning Porter's sexual orientation, a second, more recent biopic hardly deals with this theme (*De-Lovely*, Irwin Winkler, USA, 2004).

Some more venal untruths involve disrespect for the chronology of works and of events. But *Night and Day* also claims some authenticity, for example by featuring some of Cole Porter's acquaintances playing themselves (the actor and stage director Monty Woolley) and by faithfully recreating certain musical numbers: 'My Heart Belongs to Daddy', sung by Mary Martin, repeats the

original performance that the singer gave in the Broadway musical *Leave It to Me* (1938) and in Mark Sandrich's film *Love Thy Neighbor* (USA, 1940). This procedure had been followed in Irving Rapper's Gershwin biopic *Rhapsody in Blue*, produced by the same studio in 1945, where Oscar Levant, Paul Whiteman, George White, Hazel Scott and Al Jolson played themselves. *Beyond the Sea* follows suit by seeking the endorsement of Bobby Darin's son Dodd. However, no matter how pleasant it is to listen to some of Cole Porter's magnificent compositions, one must admit that the story that *Night and Day* tells is awfully dull. The same reproach can be levelled against Norman Taurog's *Words and Music* (USA, 1948) which evokes the partnership between composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Lorenz Hart.

In this case it is hardly surprising that the figure of the conservative Rodgers should be reduced to banality; his personal, uneventful life was of little dramatic interest. Hart, however, who died a few years before, had a complex and tragic personality that would readily fly in the face of conventions; as in *Night and Day*, homosexuality was still a taboo subject. As a marginal character, tormented by his unsightly physique (he was very short and almost hunchbacked), suffering from bouts of depression and alcoholism, Hart was the complete antithesis of his partner, Rodgers. Hart was the one responsible for the eruption of bitter, wistful or disconsolate lyrics within Rodgers' flawless melodies: 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered', 'I'm so Glad to be Unhappy', 'Like a Ship Without a Sail'. Even if Hart's homosexuality could not possibly be broached, there was ample matter for a powerful drama – but the film ignores the opportunity. The only 'true' detail lies in the short stature of the actor Mickey Rooney in his role as Hart.

In his comprehensive study of Hollywood genres, Steve Neale recalls Darryl F. Zanuck's decisive part in incorporating some compulsory tropes: "[...] *he was constantly aware of the need to tailor the events they [the biopics] depicted and the stories they told so as to conform to what he saw as Hollywood's aesthetic values. Hence his constant appeals to 'rooting interest', to finding ways of aligning audiences with biographical protagonists and involving them in their struggles. [...] Hence his oft-cited memo on 'The Story of Alexander Graham Bell'; 'The drama of the story does not lie in the invention of the telephone any more than the drama of Zola's life was in his writing. Our main drama lies in Bell's fight against the world to convince them he has something great'. It is within these contexts that the inaccuracies and anomalies for which biopics are well known need to be placed and understood.*"²

Generic codes die hard. Zanuck's principles, for example, still pervade Bryan Singer's recent *Bohemian Rhapsody* (USA, 2018). Granted, the Asian origins of Freddie Mercury, and his choice to live in the margins of society, fits the traditional motifs of the lonely struggling artist who had a rocky start. But in spite of Rami Malek's contrivance to resemble Freddie Mercury, and despite a contemporary permissiveness that allows for more openness about sexuality, the film, as specialists and fans have well noted, takes liberties with the facts, toning down the sexual dimension and

² Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 61-62.

altering both the chronology and the impact of the final concert, which wrongly appears as an apotheosis. *Beyond the Sea* is governed by the same principles. Nonetheless, if the film sits squarely within the genre of the musical biopic, Spacey plays with its obligatory tropes, lays them bare in order to foreground them, bending them not so much to reveal Bobby Darin's personality as what Bobby Darin's character allows him to disclose of himself and his ambitions. All of this, surreptitiously, turns *Beyond the Sea* into a covert self-portrait. In other words, behind its conventional appearance, the film is more deeply personal where the actor/director himself is concerned.

Spacey's Darin

A biopic based on the life of Bobby Darin was planned as early as 1987. A dozen producers succeeded one another, as did numerous screenwriters (James Toback among others) and actors. In 1987 Bruce Willis was approached for the part and in 2000 Leonardo DiCaprio relinquished it to act in Danny Boyle's *The Beach*. The most advanced project was that of Barry Levinson, with Johnny Depp in the title role. Having put himself forward to Levinson in 1994, Kevin Spacey, a great fan of Darin's work, thought that the project could provide the perfect opportunity to direct his second film, the musical genre offering a striking contrast with his first feature, the hostage drama *Albino Alligator*, in which he did not play. In opposition to the rather plain cinematography of the first film, *Beyond the Sea* offers the vivid illumination and crystalline definition produced by cinematographer Eduardo Serra, expressive of a desire to distance itself from reality.

This is particularly prominent in the scenes in *Beyond the Sea* dealing with the shooting of *Come September* in Italy, in which Spacey and Serra humorously reconstitute the colour palette of the Universal productions of the 1960s. The true challenge, however, lay elsewhere: the director has taken over both the storyline and the central role, cashing in an acting career which was on the rise. At one point, Tom Cruise was reportedly under consideration to play Darin. When Cruise turned down the part, Kevin Spacey again suggested that he himself take on the title role - on the face of it a preposterous idea, since Spacey was already 44 years old, faced with the challenge of impersonating Darin between the ages of 18 and 37. The challenge facing the director was now coupled with the one also faced by the actor.

Spacey was so enthusiastic that he took ownership of the project even further. He became its co-producer, no small task since American funders began to show less and less interest in the enterprise. The actor-turned-director-producer-screenwriter eventually found the necessary funding in Great-Britain - his adoptive country, where he was Director of the prestigious Old Vic Theatre from 2004 until 2015 - and in Germany, with the film being almost entirely shot in Berlin. Along with Spacey, Kate Bosworth (Sandra Dee), Caroline Aaron (Nina) and John Goodman (Steve Blauer), British actors make up a prestigious casting: Brenda Blethyn (Polly), Greta Scacchi (Sandra Dee's mother), and Bob Hoskins (Nina's husband). Spacey himself undertook a complete re-writing of Lewis Colick's original script. It seems that twenty screenwriters or so worked on different versions during the 17 years of the project's gestation. In compliance with the union employment laws, only Lewis Colick, the author of the first version, is credited - along with Spacey, who wrote the final draft.

Spacey then had the idea of using a Fellini-style approach that would partly solve the problem of his age by confronting the adult Darin with the sickly child Walden Robert Cassotto (William Ullrich) through the production of an imaginary biopic in which Darin would play himself. This *mise-en-abîme* allows the film to start on an ironic note: in the very first minutes Darin/Spacey is criticised for being too old for the part he is supposed to play. Apart from a very discreet nasal prosthesis, Spacey remains perfectly recognisable as Kevin Spacey: the building of credibility focusses on the performing *persona* of Darin. All the songs are sung by Spacey himself, who recreates Darin's distinctive timbre, tempo and phrasing so well that some film producers thought he was using Darin's recordings in playback; for the promotion of the film, Spacey even performed in nightclubs where he sang numbers linked to Darin. The work on his body language is equally impressive, as testifies his showmanship on stage and his ability to imperceptibly move into choreography.

As both actor and director, Spacey tackles with great panache two major musical scenes that were not required for the sake of credibility but which firmly locate *Beyond the Sea* within the genre of the musical. The first scene dramatises Darin's departure from East Harlem with Hoagy Carmichael's and Sidney Arodin's classic 1930 number 'Lazy River', the choreography for which starts inside Polly's home, spreads out to the couples in the street and expands, thanks to ample camera movements, to the whole neighbourhood and Darin himself. This exhilarating crescendo is a staple of the genre, from 'Born in a Trunk' in Cukor's *A Star is Born* (USA, 1954), to 'Don't Rain on My Parade' in Wyler's *Funny Girl* (USA, 1968).

The second significant number, which is even more daring and stylised, occurs near the end, more precisely after Bobby's death on the operating table. Bobby is seen, with his youthful *alter ego* Walden Robert, in a film studio, just as at the beginning of the film, turning off the lights in farewell before he is reproved by his younger self: "That's not the end. Let me tell you how it goes. [He gives a rapid, grown-up overview of Darin's complex family background.] No, not you, *l'm* the one who goes. Don't you get it? Bobby Darin doesn't die. [He continues in spite of Darin's puzzled interruption.] Don't you remember? Memories are like moonbeams. We do with them what we want."

The dialogue between the two characters, dominated by the child, evolves into the song 'As Long I Am Singing' (lyrics and music by Darin), which the child also leads before they embark upon a duet, with the "I" becoming "we". The characters are spotlit and in the shadows we can see a darkened stage, set for Darin's band, facing a nightclub set-up of empty tables. The 'two' Darins dance their way down a staircase into a street setting, with the studio artifice still apparent, and a sign indicating the Copacabana club. We switch to a dancefloor setting, with shades of black-and-white against a steely-grey floor, peopled by a multiplicity of male dancers all dressed in tuxedos to replicate Walden and Bobby as the two figures dance amongst them.

This faith in show business becomes a metaphor for Darin's death (which Spacey does not show) and is a traditional trope in musical biopics: at the end of the seminal *The Great Ziegfeld*, the protagonist dies while evoking ghostly memories of his shows, in the twilight of his bedroom. But the scene also recalls Liberace's ascension in *Behind the Candelabra* (Steven Soderbergh, USA, 2013) and the finale in the operating theatre in *All that Jazz* (Bob Fosse, USA, 1979). The child relinquishes the scene to his adult self, and the scene moves to a nightclub performance in which Darin/Spacey continues and concludes the song in the first person. While foregoing the gory dimension that

imbues the musical number in *All That Jazz*, Spacey merely suggests a passage into the hereafter through the exuberant choreography and Darin's participation in it, as if his iconic status has superseded the man once and for all.

A Self-Portrait?

My interest in *Beyond the Sea* was first triggered by an article by James Naremore (to whom, in turn, this article is dedicated). Although Naremore is willing to admit that the film has some qualities, he remains doubtful about the issue of mimicry: "*The whole purpose of the film*", he writes, "*is to celebrate Darin's talent which was doomed from the start because of a childhood illness; unfortunately, though, it feels more like a vanity project in celebration of Spacey's talent for mimicry.*"³ If the actor's performance is stunning in terms of voice and gesture, the film is caught in a grey zone where the suspension of disbelief cannot operate: because of his age, one is almost always aware of Kevin Spacey *performing* as Bobby Darin.

Because they consider the age discrepancy between the character and the actor playing him to be implausible, the diehard fans of Bobby Darin have been far from enthusiastic about the actor-director's work. As for me, because I do not know Bobby Darin's work as well as my American friends I find that this grey zone is precisely what makes the film interesting. Certainly, no viewer can believe that Kevin Spacey is Bobby Darin; however, we can share the pleasure and enthusiasm of Kevin Spacey as he *impersonates* Bobby Darin. And this may very well be what singles the film out, this "*vanity project*", as Naremore aptly calls it.

Beyond the age disparity on which naysayers have focussed, *Beyond the Sea* is full of divergences, of deliberate infidelities, even of errors with respect to the central character. Some can be explained in terms of the conventions of the genre, others on account of Bobby Darin's son, who worked as technical consultant and no doubt wanted to make sure some intimate details were kept hidden. The most obvious example involves Sandra Dee who, after her divorce, spiralled into alcoholism while in the film she remains close to Darin and is even seen lying next to him at the hospital when he dies (in reality she was not there but was found at home, stupefied by alcohol).

The consequence of this departure from the truth is the complete omission of Darin's re-marriage and the presence, which is attested, of his second wife, Andrea Yeager, at the hospital. The management/elision of other concerns – in particular concerning Bobby's relationships with his 'mother' Polly and especially his 'sister' Nina, which most certainly were more strained than what is shown in the film; the personality of his absent father (or rather grandfather); and his direct involvement in the Democratic politics of Robert Kennedy – can all be ascribed to Spacey's re-writing of the script, and are no doubt in line with the deliberate stylisation of the narrative and the anti-realistic drive of the two major musical scenes already discussed.

³ James Naremore, *An Invention Without a Future, Essays on cinema*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014, p. 70.

In short, Spacey glamourises Bobby Darin's life, in utter contrast to the naturalistic approach that characterised *Albino Alligator*. One cannot help but draw a parallel between the modest veil that the film draws over some details of Darin's life, and Spacey's reluctance to expose his own private life before the 2016 scandals hit the headlines. In 1999, when *Esquire Magazine* came to the conclusion that he must be gay, Spacey refuted it in the *Sunday Times* and justified his answer as follows: "I chose for a long time not to answer these questions because of the manner in which they were asked, and because I was never talking to someone I trusted, so why should I? Recently I chose to participate because it's a little hard on the people I love."⁴ Since then, information about Spacey's tough childhood and troubled teenage years, involving a violent father and the fact that he severed all ties with his own brothers, has given rise to many speculative psychological theories to account for the serious charges of sexual abuse that have been laid against him.

For my part, I will retain the general notion of childhood trauma that may explain a predilection for playing secretive characters, the recurrent use of innuendoes that characterises Frank Underwood in the series *House of Cards*, and perhaps even the decision to take on the role played by Cary Grant, another actor leading a double life, in a production of Philip Barry's famous 1939 comedy *The Philadelphia Story* at London's Old Vic Theatre in 2005. And with regard to *Beyond the Sea*, it not only reveals Spacey's desire to impersonate a showman whose songs informed his childhood - Spacey was born in 1959, when Darin was beginning to be famous and successful, and dedicates the film to "Mother" - but also his desire to create an ideal *alter ego* leading an ideal life, who, while misrepresenting some major events in Darin's life, shapes up the perfect simulacrum for the director. It is also an actor's dream: the magnitude and flamboyant drive of the two musical numbers conjure up the assumption, with an almost childish candour, of a professional triumph that the actor will never achieve.

Imitation has always been a gift to Spacey, who may well have secretly yearned to be someone else. During a memorable performance on James Lipton's television show *Inside the Actor's Studio* on 2 July 2000, he enthralled the audience by mimicking, among others, James Stewart, Clint Eastwood, Al Pacino, John Gielgud, Katharine Hepburn and even his mentor, Jack Lemmon. No doubt *Beyond the Sea* was conceived as the ultimate vehicle for a supreme imitation, making up for the age discrepancy through the *brío* of his vocal and gestural performance, and, in the broader diegetic environment, sustaining the illusion by re-enacting Darin's cabaret numbers while on tour promoting the film in several major American cities. Imitation, which could easily be considered as a facile actorial technique, deserves some further thought for several reasons. The first is the undeniable pleasure of viewers in identifying in one actor a specific trait that has struck them in others, or marveling at the perfect mimicry achieved in certain roles (to name but three examples: Cate Blanchett playing Katharine Hepburn in *The Aviator* (Scorsese, Germ/USA, 2004) and Bob Dylan in *I'm not There* (Haynes, Germ/Can/USA, 2007), or Kenneth Branagh as Laurence Olivier in *My Week with Marilyn* (Curtis, UK/USA, 2011).

⁴ Spacey in Lesley White, 'Spacey's Odyssey', *Sunday Times Magazine*, 19 December 1999, pp. 34-8.

The second is the appropriation - conscious or unconscious, spontaneous or deliberate - of some significant details from the actor who created the part. For instance, the way Bette Davis settles in a sofa with her arms outstretched on the seatback in *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, USA, 1941) is an exact repetition of the same gesture, performed by Tallulah Bankhead, in the same role in 1938, at the premiere of Lillian Hellman's play. Wyler wanted Davis to draw her inspiration from Bankhead, which Davis would categorically refuse - but unwittingly or otherwise she did it all the same. Another example involves Glenn Close in Trevor Nunn's 1993 version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage-musical version of *Sunset Boulevard*: in the role of the faded star of the silent era Norma Desmond, she takes on the same intonation that Gloria Swanson used in Billy Wilder's film (USA, 1950) when she pronounces the famous line "*We had faces!*", and even reproduces Swanson's gesture when, after clenching her hand, she opens it like a poisonous flower precisely at the moment when she utters the final word of this assertion.

Concluding his essay, Naremore proposes an interesting line of study: "*The various forms of imitation [...] the copying of conventional gestures and accents, the rote repetition of predetermined gestures and movements, the development of model character types, the repeated performance of personal eccentricities and the impersonation of historical characters – may not be the most valued aspect of what actors do, but they are sources of pleasure for the audience. They contribute to the system of genres and styles [...] and more generally to the rhetoric of characterization and the formation of personality on the screen. In a more subtle and general sense, they complicate our ideas of personal autonomy and individuality; they make us at least potentially aware of the imitative aspects of our lives in the real world, as both personalities and social beings.*"⁵ In the context of Naremore's subtle analysis, *Beyond the Sea* can be seen as a perfect case study for analysing the phenomenon of 'imitation' in the work of film actors. More profoundly, though, the film is a self-portrait in disguise, where actor and director merge with each other. To cite the title of Sirk's famous melodrama – the cast of which included Sandra Dee – it might be seen as a particular kind of 'imitation of life'.

⁵ Naremore, *An Invention Without a Future*, p. 76.