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**Biography**

Matthew Robinson received his PhD from the University of the West of England in 2016. His main research interest is the British biopic. His research has appeared in journals including the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* and the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. He has research forthcoming in *the Journal of British Cinema and Television* and *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. He is an associate lecturer in media at the University of Derby.

**‘A Unique Situation in the History of Cinema’: *Crowhurst* (2018), *The Mercy* (2018) and the Biopic Too Much**

Donald Crowhurst entered the 1968 *Sunday Times* boat race hoping to secure fame and fortune, but his voyage ended in disaster. His trimaran was found empty in the Atlantic Ocean, and his logbooks revealed that he had grossly exaggerated his progress to the media. There were two ‘Crowhursts’ in this race: an amateur out of his depth, and an alter ego he presented to the world. The two films about Crowhurst released in 2018 illustrated the phenomenon of ‘duelling’ biopics, while reflecting the two ‘Crowhursts’ at the mystery’s heart. StudioCanal purchased the distribution rights to the low-budget *Crowhurst* with the obligation to release it in cinemas shortly after *The Mercy*, their prestige production. The arrangement ensured that *The Mercy* would overshadow *Crowhurst*’s release and not vice-versa. These films approach Crowhurst’s life in very different ways: whereas *The Mercy* charts a formulaic route through the biopic’s generic waters, *Crowhurst* departs from convention by plunging the sailor into uncharted territory between biopic and horror. Hence the uncanniness of Crowhurst’s own fabricated double was reflected in the films which portray his life: each offers a different representation of Crowhurst’s race, a different set of generic coordinates to reflect Crowhurst’s own fabrications at sea.

*Crowhurst*; biopic; *The Mercy*; uncanny; horror

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The mystery surrounding Donald Crowhurst, the amateur sailor who competed in the 1968 *Sunday Times* boat race before vanishing from his vessel, has been the inspiration for poems (Donald Finkel’s *The Wake of the Electron,* 1987), operas (*Ravenshead*, 2000), novels (Robert Stone’s *Outerbridge Reach*, 1992), documentaries (*Deep Water*, 2006) and most recently, two films: *The Mercy* (2018), a prestige biopic dramatising Crowhurst’s disappearance, and a concurrent production, *Crowhurst* (2018), which initially premiered in 2017. When personnel at StudioCanal, the owner of *The Mercy*’s distribution rights, became aware of this low-budget rival they secured the distribution rights to *Crowhurst* on the condition that it too received a theatrical release (Dalton 2017). *The Mercy* was released in the UK on 9 February and *Crowhurst* on 23 March 2018. It was, according to *Crowhurst*’sdirector Simon Rumley, ‘a unique situation in the history of cinema’ (quoted in Barber 2018).

StudioCanal’s purchasing of *Crowhurst*’s distribution rights was rooted in fears that it would scupper *The Mercy*’s box office potential, a situation with parallels to those biopics produced about figures including Jean Harlow and Truman Capote. Though StudioCanal largely succeeded in sinking *Crowhurst* via a limited release and meagre promotion, the obligation to release *Crowhurst* ensured that its version of events could never be completely buried. Instead, the parallel public histories offered in *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* invest the Crowhurst mystery with additional uncertainty, consistent with notions of the uncanny. *Crowhurst* formed a double on the periphery, one which addressed the same story but in a fundamentally different way. This doubling takes on a further, eerie quality when the ‘doubling’ which characterised Crowhurst’s actual voyage is considered: in producing misleading log book records and fake reports which exaggerated his progress, Crowhurst himself constructed an alternative reality, which reflected the conflicting aspects of his own personality.

This study suggests that *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* extend the traditional understanding of the biopic’s uncanniness, which typically concerns the dramatisation of a real life and the complexities which that brings for the actor, through the unique circumstances surrounding the release of the two films and the parallels with the Crowhurst mystery itself. Furthermore, by drawing on the horror genre as well as the biopic’s generic structure, *Crowhurst* forms a hybrid which contrasts with *The Mercy*’s more familiar generic representation which relies on well-worn generic characteristics familiar from studio-era biopics, such as the supportive wife and trial-like settings in which figures are given the chance to express their beliefs orally to an audience. There were two ‘Crowhursts’ at sea, an amateur and his alter ego, and the two films address this duality in different ways. Considering each film in isolation undermines what is the story’s chief fascination: that there were different conceptions of Crowhurst, constructed in part by the sailor himself.

This study begins by describing the events surrounding Crowhurst’s disappearance, and goes on to suggest that ‘duelling’ biopics, films about the same figure released within a year of each other, are typically the product of straight forward cultural circumstance. The situation regarding *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* is different, and can usefully be examined through Freud’s concept of the uncanny, particularly as it relates to the notion of chance and repetition. Analysis of the films’ contrasting production histories illustrates how the uncanniness is magnified via their different approaches. For *Crowhurst* producer Michael Riley, his film’s modest budget granted the filmmakers freedom to deviate from the biopic’s generic norms: ‘ours is the less conservative version. We could afford to take risks’ (Riley, quoted in Williams 2018). This readiness to take risks, coupled with Rumley’s background in horror, contrasts with *The Mercy*’s formulaic approach which in part reflected director James Marsh’s earlier forays into the biopic genre. It also grants *Crowhurst* an uncanny character: it eschews conventional generic tendencies in favour of a visual style and generic character consistent with both the psychological thriller and that most uncanny of cinema’s film genres: horror.

Whereas *The Mercy* opts for calmer generic waters, *Crowhurst* sails through the choppier seas at the biopic’s generic boundaries and deliberately veers into the uncharted waters where horror and biopic meet. Such contrasting generic voyages parallel the different sailing routes in Crowhurst’s own story: an optimistic journey presented in log records and radio communications, and a grimmer reality characterised by deviation and fabrication. It is with the mysterious nature of Crowhurst’s disappearance that this study begins.

**‘not the real Donald’**

Crowhurst was an amateur sailor and businessman who invented the ‘Navicator,’ a radio direction finder for use on yachts, via his Bridgwater-based company Electron Utilisation Ltd. His participation in the 1968 Sunday Times Golden Globe Race, a single-handed, non-stop round-the-world boat race where the fastest competitor received £5,000, offered a means of promoting his invention and supporting his failing business. His participation was aided by publicist Rodney Hallworth, who drummed up sponsorship, chiefly by Stanley Best. Crowhurst became increasingly secretive about the challenges he faced (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 32). Difficulties began to mount regarding the construction of the trimaran; and such was Best’s investment that Crowhurst agreed to buy back the trimaran from Best should he drop out of the race, a situation which would mean selling the business and family home. In *Deep Water*, Crowhurst’s son Stephen suggests that Best insisted that this agreement was signed. Best was a particularly shrew operator, but claimed to have been swayed by Crowhurst’s persuasiveness and ‘there is no doubt that, at that time, Crowhurst really believed he could put the whole thing into effect’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 32).

From the beginning Crowhurst’s voyage was plagued by setbacks. He departed on 31 October 1968, the last day permitted, without much of the technical equipment which he had envisaged. His trimaran, the *Teignmouth Electron*, was ill-suited to a voyage through the Southern Ocean. As this became increasingly apparent, rather than returning to face humiliation and bankruptcy, Crowhurst remained in the Southern Atlantic Ocean (stopping once near Buenos Aires for repairs) while his competitors sailed into the Southern Ocean. He planned to re-join them once they rounded Cape Horn on their return. To maintain the deception, Crowhurst posted false coordinates, fabricated a log book and turned off his radio to conceal his real location.

Robin Knox-Johnston completed the race on 22 April 1969, but Crowhurst’s later starting time (and false coordinates) meant that he could still secure the prize money. Pressure mounted after Sir Francis Chichester – whose journey inspired the competition – queried Crowhurst’s positions (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 24). Then Bernard Moitessier and Nigel Tetley abandoned the race, making it all the more likely that Crowhurst’s logs would be subject to intense scrutiny. Burdened by this pressure, from 24 June Crowhurst’s entries became increasingly peculiar, including announcements that he had lost the ‘cosmic game’ and ending on July 1 with: ‘I am what I am and I see the nature of my offence...It is finished - it is finished - IT IS THE MERCY.’ The abandoned trimaran, its log books and records, were discovered on 10 July (Bender 2013: 88). Crowhurst’s three logbooks indicated that for most of the journey, from at least December onwards, the majority of his radio messages gave fraudulent descriptions of his progress (Marovitz 2003: 58). Accounts of his voyage soon appeared, including Nicholas Tomalin’s and Ron Hall’s *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (1970), and films such as *Les quarantiems rugissants* (*The Roaring Forties*, 1982) were inspired by the story. The documentary *Deep Water* provided a thorough account of events, and included interviews with Crowhurst’s wife, Clare, and his son, Stephen, who reflect on the voyage and its aftermath. Interviews with Sir Robin Knox-Johnson provide context for the realities of the voyage, particularly the isolation and loneliness experienced, while Crowhurst’s own footage, filmed while he was at sea on a 16 millimetre camera given to him by the BBC, is included as well. One of the documentary’s producers, Jonny Persey, also served as an executive producer on *The Mercy*, which might explain certain similarities between both productions, particularly how they represent Hallworth and Crowhurst’s admiration for Chichester. However, the documentary also includes information which both biopics omit, relating to Crowhurst’s experience of destitution as a child and how this could have informed his decision not to abandon the race. The same year as *Deep Water* was released, it was clear that the ambiguities in the Crowhurst story continued to fascinate people.There were crackpot theories that Crowhurst faked his own death, with ‘sightings’ reported to his wife as recently as 2006 (Dawson 2006).

Tomalin’s and Hall’s account, which formed the basis for *The Mercy* and was constructed via analysis of Crowhurst’s logs and recordings and interviews with friends, suggested that Crowhurst’s life, before and during his final voyage, was marked by a dual personality. He experienced an unusual upbringing: born in India and moving to England around the time of Indian independence. There were ‘two conflicting aspects of his character that had been apparent throughout his adult life’ (1970: 168): his combination of foolhardy courage and intellectual curiosity suggested a ‘dual personality’ (Marovitz 2003: 60). That he played ‘many roles … to himself and the world’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 12) was evident in Clare’s comments when she dismissed the jovial recordings he made for the BBC while at sea: ‘They’re not the real Donald’ (1970: 81). There were thus two Crowhursts sailing: ‘Crowhurst the Hero,’ an optimistic front presented for the public, coupled with the real Crowhurst who appears in the log books and speaks with clarity about his failings (1970: 85-89). Later entries in the logs suggest a growing paranoia: reflecting on his deception, he took on the role of ‘misfit,’ a figure rejected by society (1970: 145). Influenced by his copy of Einstein’s *Relativity*, he ‘theorised for himself an escape from his unresolvable predicament’ (1970: 207). He had until June 28 maintained a ‘jovial’ tone in telegrams to Hallworth, which illustrates his role-playing abilities (1970: 221). There were two sides to Crowhurst which made such performances possible: moving between intellectual and boisterous while on shore, he later switched between hero and misfit while at sea. At its heart, the Crowhurst narrative is characterised by the uncanny: an amateur sailor and his imagined doppelgänger.

**The Biopic Too Much**

Further eeriness was added to Crowhurst’s story when two film versions of his life went into production at the same time, a situation which has been described as the ‘duelling’ biopic (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 98-101). In the past, filmmakers have sought to avoid this scenario: Stanley Kubrick’s project on the life of Napoleon was scuppered just weeks before production was due to start, despite Kubrick’s undertaking extensive pre-production research into the life of the military leader (Ford 2019: 38). Once personnel at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer realised that a rival production, *Waterloo* (1970 film), was going to be released (and with a $38.3 million budget, equivalent to $253.2 million today (Ford 2019: 40)), they were understandably concerned that a rival might hinder their own production’s box office potential. A more recent example is Baz Luhrmann’s *Alexander the Great*, whichwas in development from 2002. Backed by Universal and DreamWorks, the film had a $150 million budget in place and there was speculation of Leonardo DiCaprio taking the lead role. The project, however, was put on hold once Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* (2004) began shooting in mid-2003. It was completely abandoned when the latter received poor reviews following its release at the end of 2004 (Cook 2010: 32). In both cases, it is clear that investing heavily in a film which will be released ‘second’ is a risk not worth taking.

Whereas in these instances, a rival production scuppered the plans of another, there are times where the duel is fully realised. Comparing the Crowhurst films with earlier examples of ‘duelling’ biopics offers some insight into the peculiar nature of this phenomenon. Film such as *Prefontaine* (1997) and *Without Limits* (1998), biopics of runner Steve Prefontaine, are important precursors. In their different approaches and representations, particularly how they deal with the nature of Prefontaine’s death and his relationships with coaches, they ‘demonstrate how much biographical construction is fuelled by filmmakers’ resumes, production budgets, star-power and Hollywood Hubris’ (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 99). There are earlier examples: two films about film star Jean Harlow were released in 1965. Both were called *Harlow*, and one was produced by Bill Sargent and the other by Joseph E. Levine. Both producers entered into a very public spat with the other, with Levine even accusing Sargent of mimicking the promotion advertisements for his production. (Leff 1981: 27) Sargent’s was released first, and fared poorly with critics and failed to break even on its $1.5 million budget (Leff 1981: 27). Levine’s version was reviewed more positively, but made only $3.2 million which was considered a disappointment on a $2.5 budget (McKenna 2010: 42). While not a box-office bomb, Levine’s experience indicates the problems which can be associated with ‘finishing second.’ This phenomenon continues in more contemporary scenarios. *Capote* (2005) and *Infamous* (2006) dramatise the creation of Truman Capote’s book *In Cold Blood* (1966), and the former’sgarnering of awards and box office takings can be linked to its earlier release (Cheshire 2015: 16). Whereas *Infamous* could draw on the star power of Sandra Bullock and Gwyneth Paltrow, *Capote*’s $28.7 million box office – a significant return on a $7.5 million budget – was due in part to a strategic release which capitalised on the cultural kudos the film attained after Philip Seymour Hoffman was nominated (and then won) the Academy Award for Best Actor (McDonald 2017: 515–516). Of course, *Capote* was also released ahead of *Infamous*, and the eeriness of the situation was commented on by A.O. Scott in his review of the latter for the *New York Times*: ‘the arrival in close succession of two good movies that tell more or less identical stories, each one distinguished by real intelligence in conception and execution, is downright uncanny’ (Scott 2006). There are other examples as well. *Legend* and *The Rise of the Krays* (2015) both represent the Kray twins’ criminal careers in London’s East End. They contain significant differences, notably in their treatment of Reggie Krays’ complex relationship with wife Frances. Like the Prefontaine films, they illustrate that concurrent production does not mean a common representation (see Pettey 2018: 10-11).

The Crowhurst biopics share some similarity with these. Like the Prefontaine biopics, *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* featured directors with different backgrounds and contrasting budgets, which shaped their representation. The nature of *Capote*’s theatrical release, and how this overshadowed the subsequent release of *Infamous,* sheds light on StudioCanal’s decision to privilege *The Mercy*’s telling by ensuring it was screenedbefore *Crowhurst*. Furthermore, the production of the duelling Capote biopics in the mid-2000s can be explained by the broader contemporary cultural fascination with the ‘True Crime’ genre (Frus 2008: 54). Indeed, Crowhurst’s deception, and the subsequent investigation of his behaviour, has many characteristics of true crime, given the term is ‘usually used quite broadly to include any true accounts or case studies of real crime and its aftermath’ (Biressi 2004: 402). As in the Capote films, there were specific cultural contexts which likely informed the production of the Crowhurst biopics. Firstly, the release of *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* in 2018 coincided with the 50th anniversary of the *Sunday Times* race (Bird 2018: 3). Secondly, contemporary biopics were addressing similar subjects: *The Lost City of* Z (2016) dramatised Percy Fawcett’s mysterious disappearance while traveling in the Amazon jungle in 1925, whereas *The Programme* (2015) focused on cyclist Lance Armstrong’s secret use of performance enhancing drugs while competing in the *Tour de France*. This indicates that circumstances surrounding the Crowhurst films cannot be reduced to mere chance. Yet analysis of the particulars relating to Crowhurst’s preparation and journey, coupled with his contrasting personality traits and construction of an alter-ego, suggests degrees of uncanniness which existing discussions of duelling biopics cannot explain. To address this, it is necessary to return to psychoanalytic formulations of the uncanny and consider their close relationship to the biopic genre more broadly.

In Freud’s essay (1919), the uncanny is situated in relation to the familiar: ‘the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’ (1919: 124). He traced the shifting meanings of das *Heimlich* (‘homely’) in German dictionaries to suggest how its meaning – familiar, intimate – takes on contradictory meanings relating to that which is kept hidden (1919: 132). Feelings of unease emerge because what is uncanny (*unheimlich*) is also familiar (*heimlich*): ‘this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed’ (1919: 148). That the biopic can be viewed as ‘a deeply uncanny form, a project dedicated to ventriloquizing the life of another, inhabiting the skin of another’ (Burgoyne 2014: 267), evokes the ‘double’ or ‘doppelgänger,’ which forms one manifestation of the uncanny. Drawing on Otto Rank’s essay *The Double* (1914), Freud describes how the double originally served as ‘an insurance against the extinction of the self’ (Freud 1919: 142) and offered means of expressing the soul’s continuation once life ends: ‘it seems likely that the ‘immortal’ soul was the first double of the body’ (1919: 142). But where the double once served as a coping strategy, it can take on very different associations: ‘having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death’ (1919: 142). Such ghostly, frightening connotations are evident in different analyses of biopic performance. In Daniel Day-Lewis’s portrayal of Abraham Lincoln in *Lincoln* (2012), ‘the power of impersonation is such that his voice, his posture, and his gestures carry an uncanny aspect of reincarnation’ (Burgoyne and Trafton 2015: 528). *Ray* (2004) illustrates that ‘[b]iopics are uncanny: we see Ray Charles but we don’t see him. We see his spectre, channelled through a medium. Rather than enabling the subject to live on screen, the biopic affirms their death’ (Marshall and Kongsgaard 2015: 358). This contradiction goes right to the heart of biopic performance as explored in Jean-Louis Comolli’s essay ‘Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much:’

[i]f the imaginary person, even in a historical fiction, has no other body than that of the actor playing him, the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much. (Comolli 1978: 44)

This double creates uncertainly: ‘we are summoned to the delicate exercise of a double game: it is him and it is not, always and at the same time’ (ibid.: 48). The performances of Colin Firth in *The Mercy* and Justin Salinger in *Crowhurst* continue this tendency to some extent, though Crowhurst is not a ‘known’ figure in a way comparable to Lincoln or Ray Charles. Certainly in *The Mercy*’s case, the casting of Firth forms an attempt to manage the ‘body too much,’ as the role forms ‘an ideal fit for an actor who has long specialized in a kind of wounded, compromised heroism’ (Lodge 2018); but in other ways these films are inescapably uncanny, not least when events which occurred before and during the competition are considered.

The uncanniness of *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* – the *biopic* too much – also aligns with Freud’s discussion of involuntary repetition, an act which ‘forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and inescapable, when we should normally speak of “chance”’ (1919: 142). The scenario offered is one in which a person receives a cloakroom ticket with the number 62, before encountering that number in subsequent situations such as addresses and hotel-room numbers: ‘anyone who is not steeled against the lure of superstition will be inclined to accord a secret significance to the persistent recurrence of this one number – to see it, for instance, as a pointer to his allotted life-span’ (1919: 145). As discussed, duelling biopics usually have obvious explanations: the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ voyage could explain the proximity of the 1992 films *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* and *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 98). However, aspects of the Crowhurst story already suggest a ‘secret significance:’ the champagne bottle’s failure to break over the trimaran’s bow (Clare noted the connotations of this in *Deep Water*), and a burn Crowhurst suffered before the race which scorched his palm’s ‘lifeline’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 47, 50). Crowhurst himself cursed the ‘sinister significance’ that his electricity generator failed on 13 November, while the number 243 was a ‘coincidental recurrence,’ in the number of days’ worth of methylated spirit he possessed and the number of days of his actual voyage (1970: 84, 181). The trimaran’s discovery offered ‘an uncanny repetition of the famous mystery of the Mary Celeste’ (1970: xiv). Of course, the subsequent discovery of Crowhurst’s logbooks revealed that there were also two ‘Crowhursts’ at sea, a physical entity on board the trimaran and a ghostly fabrication which inhabited his communications with the outside world. Analysing *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* simply as examples of duelling biopics could not account for the uncanniness which pervades the Crowhurst story and how this relates to the concepts Freud explored in his original essay: the films are both ‘duelling’ and ‘uncanny’ in equal measure. Considering these films’ production contexts reveals a further manifestation of the uncanny, one which relates to each production’s respective scale and the attitudes of their respective personnel.

**‘We could afford to take risks’**

Though *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* dramatize the same story, their approaches and releases differed dramatically. The former was produced by Blueprint Pictures, BBC Films and StudioCanal. *Crowhurst* was produced by Splash Page Media and Sterling Pictures. Both were in production at the same time; Rumley was aware of *The Mercy* in 2014, when discussions concerning *Crowhurst* began (Jerome 2018), and *The Mercy* officially entered production once Firth and Marsh became attached in 2015 (Winterton 2018). Michael Riley, the producer of *Crowhurst*, never felt the other project would get off the ground – ‘[i]t had been knocking around for years … various A-list actors had come and gone’ – but by 2015 he and Rumley had invested considerable energies into their own film and were reluctant to back out (Barber 2018).*The Mercy* had a £20 million budget, whereas *Crowhurst* had approximately £500,000 (Bird 2018: 3). *The Mercy* was filmed in the Mediterranean Sea near Malta, with extravagant computer-generated storm sequences constructed by British visual effects companies Outpost VFX and Union Visual Effects (Bird 2018: 3). By contrast, plans to film *Crowhurst* in Malta or South Africa were dropped and exterior footage was filmed in the Bristol Channel, with cabin scenes filmed in Bristol harbour (Jerome 2018). Rumley revised the script to make *Crowhurst* ‘more about Donald’s psychological as well as physical journey so that, actually, we could spend much of the film in the cabin’ (quoted in Jerome 2018)**.** Given that the story of Crowhurst was recognised as one of ‘deep psychological complexity’ from the moment it was first reported in the *Sunday Times* in July 1969 (Tomalin and Hall 1970: xi), Rumley’s decision was largely consistent with contemporaneous perceptions of these events. Indeed, the case has clear similarities with the psychological crime thriller, a genre ‘dominated by the psychological motivations and emotional relationships of characters affected by a crime’ and one where the issue of ‘whodunit’ is less important than the focus on characterisation (Rubin 1999: 203). It was such similarities which Rumley sought to exploit in his version of the Crowhurst story.

Both productions strove for authenticity, illustrating how concerns regarding accuracy and ‘historical scrutiny’ are managed during the filming process. *Crowhurst* was filmed in the sailor’s former home in Bridgwater, whereas *The Mercy* was filmed in Teignmouth, the seaside resort where Crowhurst sailed, and a professional boat builder created a replica of the Teignmouth Electron (Turner 2018). The approaches also differed. Marsh described *The Mercy* as a ‘haunting tale of a man going to sea and the family he leaves behind’ (quoted in Rosser 2015), indicating a scope which included the family’s perspective. Marsh sought to make the unconventional figure of Crowhurst relatable, and praised Scott Z. Burns’s script for approaching the story ‘in a sympathetic and humane way’ (quoted in Rosser 2015). Similarly *The Theory of Everything* (2014), Marsh’s biopic about theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, ‘seeks to make disability life narratives more legible and relatable through a more popular theme of romance’ (Joubin 2020: 270); adapted from Jane Hawking’s memoir, the film stresses her support as his motor neurone disease worsens, and presents Hawking from the perspective of his wife. Marsh’s focus on Clare’s perspective in *The Mercy* was one way to make the lonely, isolated Crowhurst more relatable.

For Riley, who produced *Crowhurst*, ‘[i]t’s about a guy who cheats and goes mental and basically kills himself … [i]t’s not a commercial proposition. So I’d say that ours is the less conservative version. We could afford to take risks’ (Riley quoted in Williams 2018). Risk-taking is perfectly in keeping with the accident-prone Crowhurst, who repeatedly crashed his car and frequently fell overboard while sailing (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 15, 57). Rumley, the director, said ‘the self-imposed isolation and loneliness and the emotional peaks and troughs of the story all fit in very well with themes that I've explored in my previous films’ (quoted in Ramachandran 2015). Such films include *The Living and the Dead* (2006), described as ‘[a] refined, atmospheric chiller much like a Hammer psychodrama’ (Rothkopf, *Time Out*, 2007) and ‘a striking study of madness that skirts horror territory’ (Harvey, *Variety*, 2007). The biopic is ‘generally considered to be quite formulaic from both a storytelling standpoint and an aesthetic standpoint’ (Polasek 2020: 325) and the *Crowhurst* team sought to exploit their low-key status to buck this generic trend. They did so by adhering to the characteristics of the psychological thriller, and by including characteristics and imagery familiar from horror cinema. Freud ‘unreservedly links the uncanny to what is frightening, specifically to things or events that arouse dread and horror’ so it is unsurprising the concept ‘can be directly linked to modes of affect produced by images of cinematic horror’ (Cherry 2009: 102). Horror’s uncanniness stretches to gothic writers inspired by centuries-old buildings and ruins, while the double is a familiar generic trope (Benshof 2014: 210; Dumas 2014: 29). Given the uncanny nature of these films’ release, and Crowhurst’s own fabrication of a double, it is fitting that Rumley’s film should bear generic traces of a genre more typically associated with uncanniness, in contrast to *The Mercy*’s more generic formulation of the Crowhurst story.

Both directors contextualised Crowhurst’s story by reference to shifting understandings of British national identity: ‘at first glance, he is that English archetype we’ve always celebrated, the heroic failure. Then you see that his failure becomes not comic or heroic in any conventional sense – but almost diabolical” (Marsh, quoted in Leigh 2018: 13). Stephanie Barczewski has argued that heroic failure is wedded to an imperial ideology which characterised the British Empire as grounded in liberty: ‘the British were not comfortable seeing themselves as conquerors. By presenting alternative visions of empire via heroic failure, they maintained the pretence that the British Empire was about things other than power, force and domination’ (Barczewski 2016: 12-13). Such attitudes can be seen in the story of Captain Scott and his team who in 1912 were beaten to the South Pole by Roald Amundsen’s Norwegian team and died on the return journey. Scott’s journals, unlike Crowhurst’s logbooks, offered a particular heroism, one in which stoic grace trumped victory: ‘[s]uccess mattered less than the calm acceptance of death; the stiff upper lip was valued primarily as an indication of a sacrifice that proved the moral character of its protagonist’ (Barczewski 2011: 137). The view that Crowhurst’s actions were ‘diabolical’ was shared to some extent by Rumley. For him, the story represented ‘the flip-side of the British Empire - a tale about adventure and exploration that was never proudly taught in history lessons’ (quoted in Ramachandran 2015). Thus the public history offered in *Crowhurst* was one which was perceived to counter popular mythology. The perplexing nature of Crowhurst’s logs hints at a darker aspect of British masculinity, and Rumley’s desire to capture the Empire’s ‘flip-side’ is reflected in his portrayal of Crowhurst’s journey as one devoid of heroic failure. Rumley’s vision, expressed through the use of generic characteristics associated with the psychological thriller and horror film, is one of ‘horrific’ failure and mental breakdown. In different ways, Marsh and Rumley sought to interrogate the discourse of heroic failure in their depictions of Crowhurst’s quest.

*Crowhurst* premiered on 15 September 2017 at the Oldenburg Film Festival (anon. 2018: pp.12 –13). *The Mercy*’s proposed 2017 release was delayed. Danny Perkins, chief executive of the UK arm of StudioCanal, admitted reshoots were necessary: ‘It’s a tough story. But we’ve given it time, we’ve kept spending money’ (quoted in Ritman 2018). Though the release of the film in 2018 coincided with the 50th anniversary of the actual race, promotion and scheduling issues were significant issues which delayed *The Mercy*’s 2017 release plan. Firth was busy promoting *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017) while another film directed by Marsh – the StudioCanal-financed film *The King of Thieves* (2018) – was in post-production (Ritman 2017). Finding an appropriate time to release the film was also complicated by *Crowhurst*’s premiere. To manage this, StudioCanal purchased *Crowhurst*’s distribution rights. Perkins explained:

*The Mercy* has been five years in the making. When we knew another film was around we thought that if we took the rights we could control the way they were released to work for both, rather than work in conflict. (quoted in Bird 2018: 3)

In practice this meant ensuring that *Crowhurst* was released in cinemas after *The Mercy* and not before. Ensuring that *The Mercy* was a Capote, and not an *Infamous*, was evidently at the forefront of Perkins’ mind when, referring to *Crowhurst*, he remarked ‘We worked out a deal to pick it up so we could control *it*’ (quoted in Ritman 2017, emphasis added). There was the very real danger that *Crowhurst* would pip *The Mercy* to the finish line, as Sargent had previously done to Levine.

StudioCanal’s investment in *The Mercy*, five years in the making and subject to reshoots and scheduling problems, made delaying *Crowhurst* an absolute priority. There was a clear conflict of interest, and while a number of distributors were reportedly enthusiastic about the film, it was StudioCanal’s ‘generous’ offer for the film’s distribution rights which swayed *Crowhurst*’s financiers (Barber 2018). The conflict was found within the *Crowhurst* team, as Rumley hoped that his film would be released on the same day as *The Mercy* and was disappointed to learn of StudioCanal’s involvement (Baughan 2018).

Some members of the *Crowhurst* team played up the potential: ‘StudioCanal assured us that they see it as a companion piece’ said Riley, ‘and not as a competitor they want to bury in the deepest possible hole’ (quoted in Barber 2018). The screenwriter Andy Briggs felt that the unique nature of the situation could aid *Crowhurst*’s promotion: ‘it’s almost impossible to talk about [*The Mercy*] without advertising our [film]’ (quoted in Ritman 2017). A contractual stipulation also guaranteed that *Crowhurst* would be released in theatres shortly after *The Mercy*, which premiered in London on 6 February 2018, ahead of general release on 9 February (Dalton 2017). Sure enough, *Crowhurst* was released on 23 March, but the *Crowhurst* team felt that StudioCanal restricted their film’s potential: ‘they haven’t wanted to do a poster for us and they haven’t wanted to do a trailer, so that suggests how much their heart is in promoting our film’ (Rumley, quoted in Winterton 2018). Furthermore, *Crowhurst* received a ‘limited’ release:

There was a contractual obligation that they did have to give it a theatrical release, but it didn’t stipulate whether that was wide or limited … they have done the minimum that they are contractually obliged to do. (Rumley, quoted in Baughan 2018)

*The Mercy*, by contrast, received a theatrical release in various European countries. It was also exhibited in North America after Screen Media negotiated with StudioCanal and secured the rights to distribute the film in the U.S. (Brooks 2018). The film was launched in Village East in New York on Friday 30 November, followed by a series of one-night screenings in over one hundred cities throughout the country on 6 December. This ‘eventized’ distribution strategy was considered a suitable way of giving cinemagoers a way to watch the film while also keeping distribution costs to a minimum (Brooks 2018). Mike Messina of Screen Media recognised this as an “economically efficient way to create some scope for the movie and put it in enough theaters for people who want to see it on the big screen”, and generate some publicity for the film ahead of a March 2019 home entertainment release.

Both productions were clearly different in size and scope, but neither achieved a level of commercial success which reflected the respective investment: *The Mercy* recorded £300,541 from 254 sites in its opening weekend, which paled in comparison with Marsh’s Academy Award-winning *The Theory of Everything* which opened with £3.75m in 2015 (Grater 2018). Reports indicate a disappointing worldwide gross of $4,230,143 (*Box Office Mojo*, 2018). Yet it is worth remembering that Crowhurst lacks the cultural significance of a figure such as Hawking who overcame nearly impossible odds to live for another fifty five years after being diagnosed with motor neurone disease at the age of twenty-one (Rees 2018: 444). The film had a genuine ‘underdog’ story at its heart, helped by the casting of the likable Eddie Redmayne as Hawking soon after featuring in *Les Miserables* (2012) (Mitchell 2015), a film which grossed over $400 million worldwide (McLintock 2013). Furthermore, the scheduling problems which delayed *The Mercy*’s release were particularly difficult for a ‘prestige’ production of this nature: February was not an ideal release time and Perkins recognised that *The Mercy* would have benefited from the publicity that accompanies films which are screened in festivals in August and September: ‘There’s no point doing festivals without the cast there’ (quoted in Ritman 2018). For instance, *The Theory of Everything* premiered to acclaim at the Toronto International Film Festival on 7 September 2014, before a limited release in the United States on 7 November was expanded towards the end of the month as the film received positive word of mouth publicity (Brooks 2014). It was the type of release strategy which could have improved *The Mercy*’s chances, but then generating publicity for a film about Hawking would have been more straightforward than one about Crowhurst, given the former’s iconic status.

Given it received a limited release, without screenings in Europe or North America, it is unsurprising that *Crowhurst* fared poorly: reports indicate the film took $456 from two showings in its UK opening weekend (*The Numbers* 2018). Though it was exhibited in cinemas after its UK opening (including *Watershed Media Centre*, Bristol, in June 2018), *Crowhurst* did not receive the wider release which can accompany films initially screened on a limited basis. It was subsequently made available via video-on-demand platforms, as Rumley hoped that *Amazon Prime* users would watch both versions in order to ‘compare and contrast’ their respective treatments (quoted in Winterton 2018). Indeed, *Crowhurst* certainly shaped attitudes towards *The Mercy* and the comparisons sometimes favoured the former: ‘where Marsh’s film is a stuffily conventional biopic, Rumley‘s spikier, more challenging work tracks the fragmentation of Crowhurst’s storm-tossed mind with a gamut of in-camera effects’ (Bitel, *Sight and Sound*, 2018: 63) – precisely the situation those at StudioCanal sought to avoid.

For StudioCanal, prioritising *The Mercy*’s release provided means of limiting *Crowhurst*’s impact. The distribution deal was, then, problematic for the *Crowhurst* production team: as an independent production, *Crowhurst* needed a distribution deal and StudioCanal’s offer was the most attractive to the film’s financiers. However, this deal ensured that *The Mercy* release was privileged over *Crowhurst*’s. Yet the release stipulation ensured that two very different ‘Crowhursts’ were presented simultaneously for a brief period: *The Mercy*’s formulaic telling adheres to biopic convention whereas *Crowhurst* renders that story unfamiliar in its employment of experimental techniques and horror characteristics. Comparing these representations reveals other reasons why *Crowhurst* might have made Perkins and those at StudioCanal so nervous.

**‘Hillary has scaled the heights, Scott has braved the pole.’**

*The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* differ significantly in their depiction of Crowhurst’s motivation for participation. In *The Mercy*’s sympathetic construction Crowhurst’s journey is motivated by the desire to replicate heroic explorers, whereas *Crowhurst* is more critical in its foregrounding of his debts and business failings. These contrasting takes reflect the ‘dual’ personality Crowhurst was perceived to possess, and *Crowhurst*’s representation challenges the ‘romantic’ motivations offered in *The Mercy*.

*The Mercy*’s opening frames Crowhurst’s pursuit in relation to the ‘Great Man’ tradition, suggesting the sailor was driven by a romantic perception of adventure. An opening long shot of the sea, one very similar to those images which appear at the start of *Deep Water*, invests the space with the capacity to transform, supported by comments from mountaineer Sir Edmond Hilary which Firth’s Crowhurst delivers in voice-over: ‘People do not decide to become extraordinary. They decide to accomplish extraordinary things.’ In his logs Crowhurst acknowledged he was an ‘incurable romantic’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 55), one who wanted to leave a ‘permanent mark’ on the world (1970: 23), but the long shot also hints at his folly: filmed from a boat, the dark sea occupies a shifting proportion of the unsteady frame, threatening to absorb the sky above. Subsequent scenes are more tranquil, and depict a sailing trip in Teignmouth, visualised via smooth shots of the Crowhurst family gliding through calmer waters. Crowhurst’s son, James (Kit Connor), suggests he will use the Navicator to discover islands, and cultivate the self-reliance invested in Harvey Cheyne Jr. from Kipling’s *Captains Courageous* (1897). In that novel a spoilt son from a wealthy American family goes overboard during a transatlantic crossing and gains a maturity once he is rescued by fisherman:‘[y]et his change is not really a transformation so much as it is an emerging of what was in him all the time’ (Dillingham 2005: 193).Crowhurst similarly perceives a self-reliant masculinity which can be ‘awakened’ but this is framed within a lamentation: ‘[t]he entire planet’s been handled … Hilary has scaled the heights, Scott has braved the pole.’ His subsequent entry into the race is explained as a desire to use this challenge to exhibit the British qualities reflected in the comments he quotes. Yet the scene also emphasises the folly of this ambition by presenting Crowhurst as, in a term also used in *Deep Water* by Hallworth’s deputy Ted Hynds, a ‘weekend sailor’: against a rural backdrop of lush fields and bright sky, the family’s boat travels through calm waters, a stark contrast to the opening long-shot and the voyages of Hilary and Scott.

The claustrophobic opening of *Crowhurst* on the other hand suggests entrapment. The scene opens with close-up images of the ‘investment contract’ signed with Best, accompanied by the sound of a clock ticking, before focusing on the sailor’s distraught face within the trimaran’s cabin as he learns via radio transmission from a jubilant Hallworth that his competitors have forfeited and, in doing so, placed him in the spotlight. This more properly reflects the voyage’s reality: measuring just nine feet long and eight feet wide, with a low roof, the cabin was ‘a tiny place to contemplate living for eight months’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 73). The opening is also in keeping with the generic features of the psychological crime thriller in which the criminal’s identity is typically evident early on, allowing for ‘a more open and detailed treatment of the emotional pressures experienced by the criminal, by those characters threatened by the criminal, and by those characters close to the criminal or victim’ (Rubin 1999: 203). Subsequent scenes centre on the pre-race period: Crowhurst is depicted at home listening via radio to the exploits of Francis Chichester, but the film emphasises that he enters the race to support his failing business. A series of shots of various businessmen’s informing Crowhurst of the public’s lukewarm reception to the Navicator reaffirms that it was not ‘outstandingly original’ (Tomalin and Hall 1070: 12). These scenes sit uneasily with the film’s final captions, which generously assert that sailors now use a variation of Crowhurst’s design, an inclusion possibly presented to temper the film’s tragic ending.

It is only after a scene in which a bank manager refuses to loan Crowhurst money that the latter notices the Golden Globe race in a newspaper. ‘Imagine what we could do with 5000 pounds’ he remarks to his family, a sharp contrast to *The Mercy*’s romantic quotation but one which does have some basis in truth: Clare remarks in *Deep Water* how the family, though happy, were ‘skint.’ Further sequences present his participation as folly, suggesting that Crowhurst’s financial desperation clouds his judgement: a lawyer advises him explicitly not to sign an agreement with Stanley Best (Glyn Dilley) which will leave Crowhurst bankrupt if he falls short. In case Crowhurst’s absurdity is unclear, the seriousness is also visualised via a wall-mounted rifle in the office’s background, directing to Crowhurst’s head (later shots when he is at sea frame the sailor as stood behind the trimaran’s various cords and ropes, suggestive of a noose). This marks a departure from biopic representations of the relationship between inventions and financial gain. For example, in *The Magic Box* (1951) early cinema pioneer William Friese-Greene receives little recognition or monetary gain for his innovations but the film is sympathetic in its representation of his ‘craving for recognition, but at the same time his possession of the English virtues of modesty, restraint and dignity” (Easen 2003: 59). *Crowhurst*’s subject lacks these virtues, being characterised instead by foolhardiness. His journey is motivated by financial desperation and lacks Friese-Greene’s dignity and restraint.

Though ‘[e]very biopic is supposed to have a basis in reality’ (Bingham 2010: 7) these films offer conflicting motivations for Crowhurst’s quest: *The Mercy*’s romantic, sympathetic telling contrasts with *Crowhurst*’s narrative of debt, desperation and despair. *The Mercy* adheres most closely to *Deep Water*’s telling, emphasising how Crowhurst wanted to achieve something worthwhile, inspired by Chichester’s success. But *Deep Water* also offers a different perspective to both films: Clare details how Crowhurst’s return to Britain as a child, his father’s heart-attack and the experience of financial destitution which accompanied it, were significant childhood experiences. Indeed, Stephen suggests that it was this traumatic experience, and the desire not to have his family live through their own version, which could have motivated Crowhurst to continue in the race despite the odds. Such important context is lacking in both the biopics about his father. These take differing approaches to Crowhurst’s ‘dual’ personality: whereas *The Mercy* invests its sailor with a ‘strong intellectual curiosity’ via references to his desire for expedition, *Crowhurst* suggests his ‘foolhardy courage’ in its retelling of the sailor’s life as one dominated by mounting debts.

**‘Come Home’**

The films’ differing dramatisations of Crowhurst’s journey reflect their different attitudes to their subject, and also to biopic conventions. *The Mercy* incorporates alternative perspectives on the race, most notably Clare’s (Rachel Weisz), in keeping with the generic convention of the loving wife who humanises the subject in question. Yet in failing to develop her character beyond this relationship, *The Mercy* recalls problematic biopic representations which locate women in terms of victimhood. By contrast, *Crowhurst* remains with the sailor, including extended sequences which offer an account of his daily routines and visualising his psychological deterioration in a manner recalling the films of Nicholas Roeg (an executive producer on *Crowhurst*) and those of horror cinema.

*The Mercy* suggests that Crowhurst’s experience at sea is unlike his jaunts in Teignmouth, particularly in those computer-generated scenes depicting the trimaran’s battling large waves. Including Clare’s perspective recalls how American studio biopics generally began *in media res* and provided romance as a ‘stabilising influence’ (Custen 1992: 161). It provided a family perspective, without which figures would seem ‘inhuman, and ultimately unlovable’ (Custen 1992: 159). Clare ‘stabilises’ Crowhurst as his mental health deteriorates during the voyage. Scenes depict Crowhurst hearing his children’s voices and seeing visions of a horse on board the trimaran, while Clare appears as an apparition in the cabin. Crowhurst did invent conversations with Clare in his logs to illustrate a point (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 209), but the film depicts Crowhurst’s writing lines in his diary which would later explain his mental deterioration, ‘I am what I am. And I see the nature of my offence,’ and he does so while addressing Clare and asking for forgiveness. As if accepting his decision the ghost lets go of his hand and disappears, before Crowhurst speaks the logbook’s final lines in voice-over from the trimaran’s edge, the sun shining down upon his face: ‘it’s finished. IT IS THE MERCY.’ Clare’s appearance is consistent with the ghosts populating other biopics: in *Creation* (2009) Charles Darwin’s daughter appears to the naturalist while he writes *On the Origin of* Species (1859), their interactions ‘function as a catalyst for the expression of his emotion’ (Pietrzak-Franger, 2012: 74). Here the ghost stabilises Crowhurst in his final moments, reaffirming his status as loving husband and supporting Marsh’s ambition for a sympathetic depiction.

*The Mercy*’s offering of Clare’s perspective constructs a ‘dual trajectory,’ consistent with *The Theory of Everything*. In that film, as Hawking’s condition worsens the film switches emphasis to his wife Jane: a trajectory combining elements of the Great Man (Hawking becomes a leading scientist despite his prognosis) and the female biopic: Jane sacrifices her ambitions for the sake of her husband (Kennedy‐Karpat 2020: 407). However, Clare’s role is limited to that of victim of Crowhurst’s circumstances, reduced to brief sequences of her queuing uneasily in dole offices and appearing awkward during photography shoots with other competitor’s wives. Even the apparition is mostly silent*,* only uttering ‘come home,’ serving mainly as a platform for her husband’s inner feelings. Clare’s portrayal is in keeping with female biopics which ‘found conflict and tragedy in a woman’s success. A victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and non-traumatic personal life’ (Bingham 2010: 217). In *Deep Water*,Clare Crowhurst is given greater space to present her story: it includes her ‘present’ reflections on events as well as archival footage which suggests her feelings at the time, giving Clare’s voice a complexity lacking in both *The Mercy* and *Crowhurst* and illustrating her desire not to have her experience shaped by others. The inclusion of the adult Stephen Crowhurst, reflecting on events involving his father, reaffirms that Clare’s role went beyond that of wife. It also makes *The Mercy*’s representation of three Crowhurst children (there are four) insensitive, especially given the nature of their father’s disappearance. This perhaps indicates that, while the family was important to Marsh, it was important for a particular purpose and not one necessarily related to authenticity.

Whereas *The Mercy* sticks, problematically, to the biopic’s generic centre, *Crowhurst* blends the biopic with the psychological thriller and horror to convey Crowhurst’s fragile mentality. Rumley highlighted Roeg’s influence: ‘we were quite experimental in what we did in the breakdown … re-watching some of Nic’s films like *Walkabout* [1971] where he rewinds scenes that have just played out was directly influential on what we did’ (quoted in Nickolds 2018). Scenes depicting a buffalo being shot by hunters in reverse are clear inspiration for *Crowhurst*’srepresentation of mental breakdown, including those scenes of a fish appearing to move backwards across the cabin floor. The film includes numerous instances where Crowhurst discusses his deception with the camera directly, sometimes with the sound of his voice modified to conjure a sense of possession, in a sharp contrast to *The Mercy*’s more gentle depiction of Crowhurst talking to the apparition of Clare. Split screens of Crowhurst discussing Knox Johnson’s success, the frame carved into uncomfortable close-ups of his mouth and eyes, and those of his warped face screaming in bold colour, have a hallucinogenic quality while forming an eerie departure from the biopic’s formulaic aesthetic. Such scenes are reminiscent of the psychological thriller. The British film studio Hammer produced a series of films in this mould, among them *Taste of Fear* (1960) and *Paranoiac (*1963). As the titles so clearly suggest, such films were characterised by an attention to themes such as paranoia, fear, isolation and claustrophobia (Huckvale 2014: 2), themes evident in Rumley’s approach to the Crowhurst story, which built on his earlier works such as *The Living and the Dead*.

Various shots evoke horror’s iconic images: the extreme close-ups of water disappearing down the cabin sinkhole recalls the shower sequence in *Psycho* (1960). The shots in which the camera is positioned outside the family home as Crowhurst and Clare (Amy Loughton) dance in their living room implicate the viewer in the voyeurism present in the opening of *Halloween* (1978) in which Michael Myers hunts his sister. Such imagery reflects the horror embedded in Crowhurst’s records: the imagined sighs heard on silent radio stations and his fear an ocean monster lurks beneath the boat (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 128-129). The recurring motif of a fish out of water takes on increasing importance: after witnessing a fish dying on board the trimaran Crowhurst later wakes and, bathed in a deep blue light, suffers hallucinations of being covered in dying fish. Later a fish appears when one of his kitchen tins begins to shake, and then Crowhurst is depicted cradling a dying fish as he discusses being a ‘cosmic being’ in direct address. The fish’s shifting meaning and context, ‘simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar’ (Cherry 2009: 104), locate it as an embodiment of the tension embedded in uncanny experience: the wild sea intruding into the cabin’s domestic space in what is a productive, and cost-effective, alternative to *The Mercy*’s elaborate CGI.

*Crowhurst* also utilises horror to critique the discourse of heroic failure by indicating that his outwardly stoic behaviour does not reflect his internal psychological state. A sequence presents a typical day on board the boat: waking, washing, and eating meals at intervals, in keeping with themes covered in single-handed sailing accounts and the ‘comfort given in solitude by the domestic routines’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 80). This sequence is presented in silence, just a creaking boat and the repetition of actions like washing plates and brushing teeth which marks the day’s beginning and conclusion. The film then moves through this same sequence again, showing each image for a second time but in rapid succession, to suggest that conventional understandings of time passing have been upended during the voyage. Attempts to alleviate the crippling repetitiveness include playing chess alone against an imagined double (‘Good game, Donald’ he remarks) or flicking baked beans off the boat’s edge. A long shot then depicts the *Teignmouth Electron* sailing through the South Atlantic surrounded by blue seas and a bright sky. However, this calmness is upended by the sudden cut to a close-up of Crowhurst screaming directly into the camera, followed by an extreme-close up of his open mouth and subsequent shots of Hallworth and the Crowhurst family screaming. The suddenness evokes horror’s ‘jump scare,’ while the extreme close-up recalls horror’s close associations with this technique (such as the rotting flesh in the opening to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) (see Cherry 2009: 88)). The scream addresses the viewer directly, granting it a significance consistent with direct address which can ‘express something internal to the character’s fictional world (that is, their own personal thoughts and feelings), it is often a gesture of open and “honest” expression’ (Brown 2016: 15). In the sequence outlined, there are two Crowhursts, one characterised by calm and another by fear, a visualisation of‘Crowhurst the Hero’ and ‘Crowhurst the suffering man’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 81). Whereas the emotional management in Scott’s diaries was used to illustrate English heroic failure, *Crowhurst*’s borrowing of horror’s generic structures represents a ‘horrific’ failure characterised by emotional breakdown.

*The Mercy* sticks with the biopic’s gender-inflected generic formulae. Doing so suggests an attempt to humanise Crowhurst by locating him as loving husband but it also reproduces the biopic’s tendency to frame women in relation to discourses of victimhood. By contrast, *Crowhurst* works at the biopic’s generic edges, utilising techniques associated with horror and Roeg to critique notions of heroic failure. *The Mercy* stabilises its subject whereas *Crowhurst* fractures him, splicing Crowhurst via split screen and warped imagery. Such aesthetic departures, in what is often considered a formulaic genre, invest *Crowhurst* with a sense of uncanniness: a familiar story told in an unfamiliar way.

**‘he was pushed’**

Both films also differ in how they relate their subject’s behaviour and actions to larger forces and ideologies: *The Mercy* frames Crowhurst as a victim of manipulative journalism via an impassioned speech from Clare in the film’s conclusion, whereas *Crowhurst* includes fabricated sequences where various characters sing patriotic songs, suggesting that Crowhurst’s inability to admit defeat is rooted in Britain’s post-imperial decline. Invention is a characteristic of all biopics, but it can take different forms:

since historical fiction stems from the desire to see biographical and historical figures living before us, there are instances where the filmmakers see the need to “complete” history, to fill in what didn’t happen with what a viewer might wish to see happen. (Bingham 2010: 8)

The need to ‘complete’ is an important aspect of the biopic’s ideological significance, since it offers one obvious way in which representations of the past are shaped by the filmmaking team’s values and attitudes. *The Mercy*’s inventions relate to its depiction of press ethics and Hallworth’s role in Crowhurst’s demise. Whereas *Crowhurst* features Hallworth (Christopher Hale) only briefly, and Crowhurst himself described him as a ‘fringe’ figure with less importance than Best (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 90), in *The Mercy*’s telling Hallworth (played by David Thewlis) actively cultivates a fake Crowhurst narrative. Such a framing strategy grants the sailor a sympathy lacking in *Crowhurst*, which opts to present its subject as trapped in an outdated mind-set of British capability reflecting a bygone era of British imperial power.

*The Mercy’s* Hallworth exploits Crowhurst to further his own career, describing him as ‘a part of England that’s been lost’ and ‘a story of daring-do waiting to be told.’ It is his packaging of Crowhurst which will be fed to the media. The depiction of Hallworth in *The Mercy*’s telling is consistent with that provided in *Deep Water*, which emphasises his embellishment of Crowhurst’s false coordinates, and his attempts to put an entertaining spin on events: Kerr suggested that he ‘never let the facts get in the way of a good story’ and an archival interview of Best depicts him telling an interviewee how stories are often ‘dull’ and that ‘you’ve got to dress it up.’ It also has some consistency with earlier films written by Burns, not least *Contagion* (2011), which represents a world plagued by a virus and which took on new significance at the end of the decade following the emergence of COVID-19 (McGuire 2021: 54). The film features Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), a ‘self-serving anti-vaxxer profiting from conspiracy theories about Big Pharma to sell his own “natural” alternative’ (McGuire 2021: 54), and Hallworth is similarly adept at exploiting circumstances for his personal gain. The casting of Thewlis, known for his roles as villains such as V. M. Varga in the third season of *Fargo* (2017), only serves to strengthen the association of Hallworth with villainy.

The representation of Hallworth in *Crowhurst* takes a very different route: Hale’s bulkier stature makes him a stronger physical fit for a man who was, in Tomalin’s and Hall’s words, ‘a large man, with a large face’ (1970: 40). Yet that film fails to capture the extent to which the real Hallworth was adept at transforming Crowhurst’s incoherent messages into a dramatic account for audiences on land (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 40). This quality is explored more thoroughly in *The Mercy*’s sympathetic portrayal, where Crowhurst is portrayed as a victim of Hallworth’s fabrications and pressure tactics: a sequence in a local pub includes a medium shot framing Crowhurst sandwiched between Best (Ken Stott) and Hallworth, the camera slowly moves in as the latter cites the financial ‘consequences’ of abandoning the race after the sailor has raised doubts. This framing strategy is repeated in the Teignmouth harbour, as Crowhurst is photographed with Hallworth and Best for the local paper, again sandwiched between the pair. These images and their connotations conflict with Best’s account, which suggested that Crowhurst never attempted to back out. Indeed, Tomalin and Hall speculate that Crowhurst was instead ‘numbed into inefficiency’ (1970: 60). Yet in *Deep Water*, Donald Kerr, who was following Crowhurst’s preparation for the BBC, indicated that Crowhurst had indeed lost focus during the trimaran’s construction, but that both Hallworth and Best pressured him to proceed with the race. It would appear *The Mercy*’s sympathetic telling is not completely unfounded. Further scenes with Ron Hall (Mark Gatiss), renowned for his role in the *Sunday Times*’ ‘Insight’ investigative unit (and joint author of the authoritative Crowhurst account), indicate the film’s interest in the media’s role in constructing Crowhurst’s story. Hall is depicted reading Hallworth’s commentaries on Crowhurst’s progress and determining that they should be covered by the country’s national press. Hall’s ground-breaking investigative approach contrasts with Hallworth who, *The Mercy* suggests, was an early exponent of ‘fake news.’ Hallworth did make ‘optimistic interpretations’ (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 97), partly due to the limited position information he received, but *The Mercy* seeks to make this a commentary on contemporary news approaches:‘I’d be lying if I said *The Mercy* wasn’t inspired by the fake news culture’ (Burns, quoted in Franklin 2018). The film emphasises the collaboration behind Crowhurst’s deception: Hallworth types at his typewriter in his Teignmouth office and his voice-over – ‘the porpoises are left breathless by his speed’ – is layered over images of Crowhurst studying maps to fabricate further positions. Later, as he listens to radio coverage of Hallworth suggesting Crowhurst has passed Cape Horn, an irate Crowhurst begins manufacturing coordinates to match *Hallworth’s* story.

In *The Mercy*’s conclusion Clare criticises the media, in what serves as a commentary on the unscrupulous nature of contemporary press coverage. In keeping with the dual trajectory which the film cultivates, the sequence is shot from Clare’s perspective: the camera is positioned behind her as she opens the front door of her house and is met by journalists asking her questions about Crowhurst’s disappearance, consistent with the ‘prying journalists’ she became ‘hardened’ to (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 248). With Rodney visible further back, Clare admonishes the press’s contribution to her husband’s death – ‘if he did jump, he was pushed’ – and criticises the press’s cyclical nature. Marsh admitted the scene was fabricated – ‘[i]t's inevitable in any adaptation of a real-life story that you will need to dramatise’ (quoted in Dawson 2018). Similar to Krumwiede, who ends up ‘vilified and exposed’ (McGuire 2021: 54) by the end of *Contagion*, it is clear that Hallworth is the focus of Clare’s ire in this sequence. In *Deep Water,* Clare explains how Hallworth callously told her that her husband had committed suicide, and then proceeded to sell his logbooks to a London newspaper, a ‘self-serving’ action in keeping with Krumwiede. While invention is a necessarycondition of filmmaking, without which ‘the historical would not be dramatic, but a loose, sprawling form far less able to make the past interesting, comprehensible, and meaningful’ (Rosenstone 2006: 38), Marsh’s justification for ‘dramatising’ Crowhurst’s story omits mention of Burns’ desire to mould the story into a commentary on press ethics: the latter described the public’s interest in ‘seedy’ stories as ‘something that the press is keenly aware of and certainly profits off’ (quoted in Clark 2018). The film again manages this by falling back onto the biopic’s generic formulae, particularly those of the studio biopic’s ‘trial’ sequences. These offered means of presenting speeches for public judgement, permitting ‘heroes to address the community with impassioned pleas for whatever it is they hold dear to their hearts’ (Custen 1992: 186-187). *The Mercy* borrows this construction and Clare’s ‘impassioned plea,’ that once the press have moved on ‘[m]y children will still need a father, and I will still need a husband,’ frames Crowhurst as a victim of a wave of press coverage he was unable to sail against.

*Crowhurst*’s inventions borrow from overtly ‘fictional’ filmmaking, particularly in its framing of the sailor’s worldview in national terms. Rumley took inspiration from *Magnolia* (1999), a film in which various characters based in different locations in San Fernando valley sing Aimee Mann’s ‘Wise Up’ in unison (Dillman 2005: 145). In *Crowhurst*, the characters are depicted singing songs such as *Land of Hope and Glory*: ‘every so often we cut to various members of the cast, including Donald, singing these things as morale boosters, and as memories of the British Empire’ (Rumley, quoted in Williams 2018). However, the accompanying images serve to question the patriotic values behind the songs. For instance, after Crowhurst complains to Hallworth about the delays in building the boat he, Hallworth, Best and members of the Crowhurst family are depicted singing *Jerusalem*. The accompanying images include a worried Crowhurst sitting in a pub biting his nails and tearfully embracing his wife (a contrast to the images which accompany *Jerusalem* in *Chariots of Fire* (1982) when Harold Abrahams returns to England after his triumph at the 1924 Olympic Games). While these images have some factual basis – Clare described Crowhurst’s crying the night before his departure (Tomalin and Hall 1970: 66) – other scenes are more obviously fabricated. In Argentina he attempts to telephone Clare and admit to the journey’s grim reality, but is unable to do so after hearing Clare singing *I Vow to Thee My Country* as he lifts the receiver. Later, shortly before his disappearance, a long take frames him on the *Teignmouth Electron*’s edge in shirt and tie singing the National Anthem. The camera moves further away as he proceeds through the verses.

Donald Kerr suggested Crowhurst ‘clearly didn’t want to go … but he could never quite bring himself to say so’ (1970: 64) and *Crowhurst* frames this inability in relation to conceptions of imperial masculinity.The images accompanying the songs indicate moments where Crowhurst has the opportunity to express his inability to compete, investing the songs with an outdated perception of national identity:

it’s set at the absolute end of the British Empire – by 1968 when it’s pretty much totally over – we have the Falkland Islands, Hong Kong and a few other tiny places, so the nationalism I depict and all the ‘for Queen and country’ stuff seems almost absurd. (Rumley, quoted in Winterton 2018)

The decade began with Harold Macmillan’s ‘wind of change’ speech in February 1960; his admission that ‘[t]he wind of change is blowing through this continent’ stressed the inevitability of decolonisation. The 1956 Suez Crisis had become a symbol of Britain’s changing status: ‘[w]hat Suez demonstrated with brutal frankness was that Britain was no longer in the great-power league, was no longer capable of playing by its rules, and simply looked absurd when it tried to cheat’ (Clark 2004: 263). Such words could describe the absurdity of Crowhurst’s situation in the film’s telling: an amateur sailor unable to obey the rules and desperately out of depth in unknown waters, clinging to a flimsy vessel and unable to let go. His inability to confront reality mirrors Britain’s national delusions in the period depicted.

**Conclusion**

The actions of StudioCanal personnel illustrate the lengths to which biopic producers will go in order to ensure that their film is not threatened by a rival. The familiar situation in which ‘duelling’ biopics were released was given an uncanny quality because of Crowhurst’s own deceptions. However, these deceptions were handled differently by each film. *The Mercy* renders the Crowhurst story in a formulaic fashion familiar from Marsh’s previous biopics, humanising its subject via a duel trajectory which encompasses Clare and which sympathetically relates Crowhurst’s motivations to the legacy of English explorers. By utilising the biopic’s trial dynamic in its portrayal of Crowhurst as the victim of a manipulative media, *The Mercy* displaces Crowhurst from the centre of this story and shifts focus to Hallworth’s fabrications. This exemplifies *The Mercy*’s sympathetic approach, its broadening of the Crowhurst narrative to encompass ‘exterior’ viewpoints. *Crowhurst*, by contrast, is marked by an ‘interior’ approach which deviates from the biopic’s generic formula. In place of a trial sequence and a loving wife, *Crowhurst* offers various manifestations of the uncanny through its use of horror imagery. Inspired by *Walkabout* and *Magnolia*, *Crowhurst* adopts an experimental approach to convey Crowhurst’s mental decline and uses patriotic songs to root Crowhurst’s quest in Britain’s imperial decline. These risks, which manifest textually as eerie departures from the biopic’s usual generic terrain, represent perhaps the clearest attempt to resemble the perilous nature of the subject. Crowhurst himself was driven by an intellectual curiosity but also a foolhardiness, both of which led to his tragic downfall. Tomalin and Hall noted how the inability to call on Crowhurst for testimony ensured their investigation had the qualities of a ‘detective story’ (1970: 94), making Rumley’s employment of the generic tendencies typical of the psychological thriller all the more fitting.

These films are more than an instance of ‘duelling’ biopics: they form a further uncanny event in a series of uncanny events surrounding Crowhurst. This ‘uncanny’ quality is reflected in their respective representations of his life: one favours the tried-and-tested biopic formula and seeks to render the subject sympathetic, the other forms a generic hybrid which captures the inherent eeriness in the Crowhurst mystery. *Crowhurst* made *The Mercy*’s conventional approach all the more apparent, whereas the story on which both were based was anything but. *Crowhurst*’s small budget created opportunities to defy biopic convention in a manner reminiscent of the sailor himself. *The Mercy* was to some extent at the mercy of its own production scale: with a significant budget to recoup, the filmmakers sought to replicate previous successes.

Crowhurst himself comprised two characters: on shore he was an intellectual and curious boffin, but also foolhardy and boisterous. At sea he was jovial in his correspondence with Hallworth and in his BBC recordings, but driven to despair by his simultaneous desire both to come clean and to continue his duplicity. These films capture different sides of his complex, uncanny character: duelling biopics certainly, but of a *dual* subject. In their contrasting production scenarios and conflicting representations, the films offer their own coordinates and navigation records through which to decipher the Crowhurst mystery. This ambiguity serves as suitable testimony to a man whose death remains mysterious and whose final actions will never be conclusively determined.

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