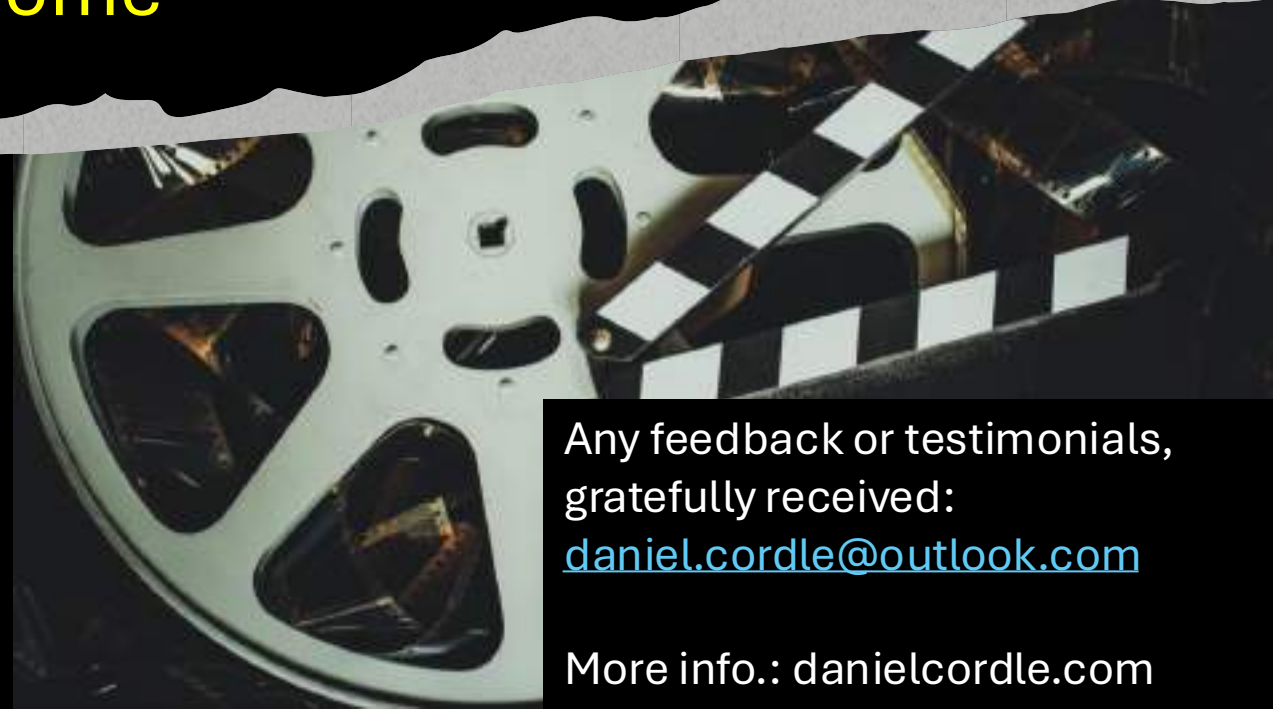


On Page and Screen: Adaptations of Literature in Recent Film

Session 6: A Complete Unknown / Dylan Goes Electric: Newport,
Seeger, Dylan, and the Night that Split the Sixties

Welcome



Any feedback or testimonials,
gratefully received:

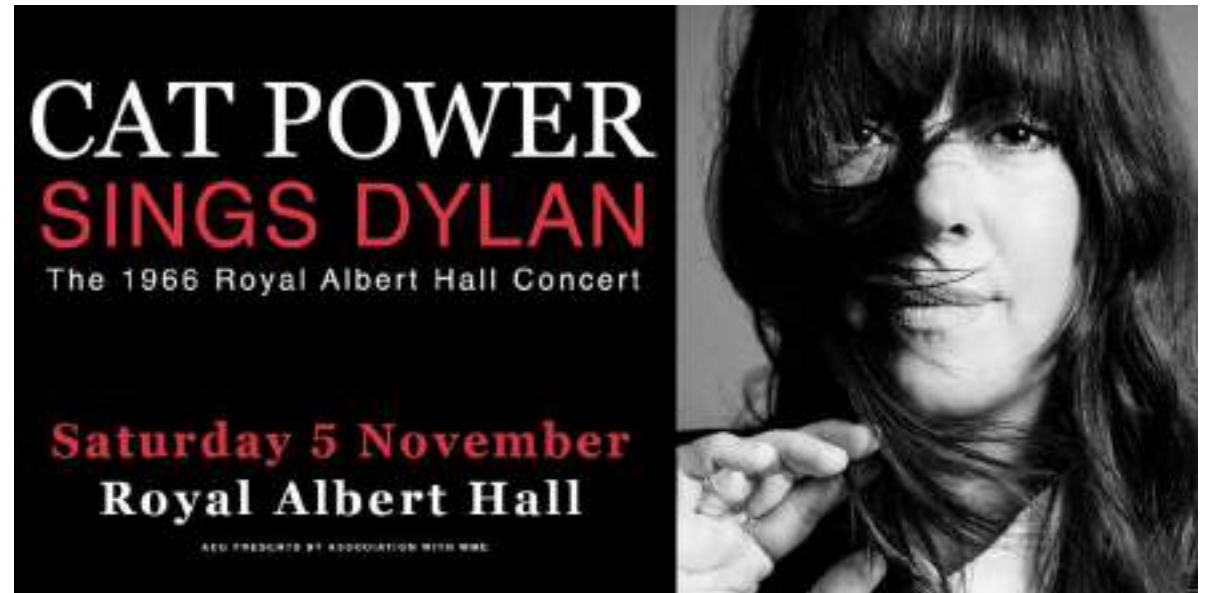
daniel.cordle@outlook.com

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Epigraph

I see history as a reliquary—a container where relics are kept and displayed for contemplation. So much has been written about the sixties that the more distant those years become, the more mythic the tales and the time seem to be. ... Hindsight meddles with memory, after all, so the best I can do in writing about those long-ago years is to try to make them recognizable.

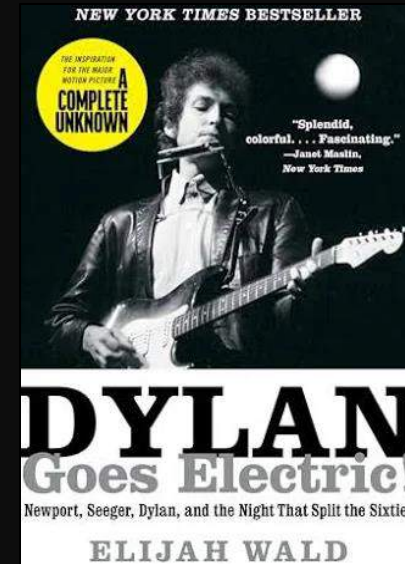
Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the 60s* (2008)



Singer Cat Power recreates Dylan's Manchester Free Trade Hall Concert (17 May, 1966) in 2022 (touring 2025)

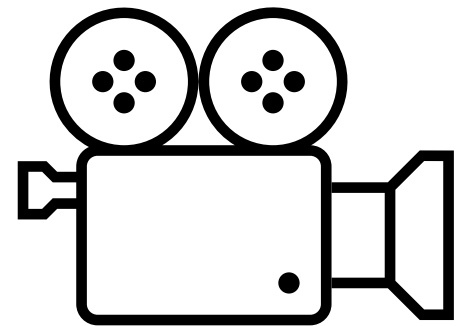
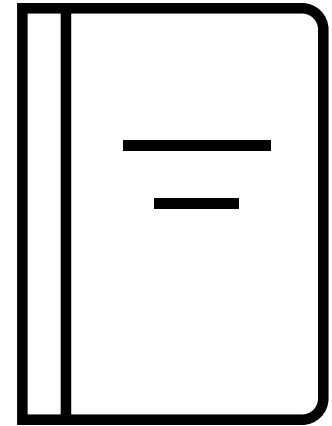
What did you think of this week's book and film?

- What interested you about the book and/or film?
- What did the film do differently to the book?
- What is gained in the translation from book to film and what is lost?
- What, for you, were the main issues in the book/film?
- What do you think of the artistic choices made by Elijah Wald and James Mangold?
- Were there any moments in book or film that struck you as particularly interesting?



Some observations on how the film works with the material from Wald's *Dylan Goes Electric*

- Dylan's girlfriend Suze Rotolo becomes Sylvie Russo in the film, facilitating changes to the story of their relationship
- Some events are conflated in the interests of concision, coherence and artistic vision
 - E.g. The film seems to move Dylan guesting on Baez's acoustic set at Newport in 1964 to the 1965 festival.
 - E.g. the famous cry of 'Judas' from the crowd, that happened in Dylan's Manchester Free Trade Hall concert (17 May, 1966) is integrated into the Newport 1965 performance that is the culmination of the film.
- Other incidents are subtly altered to bring key issues into sharper focus
 - E.g. When he's sentenced for Contempt of Congress, Pete Seeger asks to sing Woody Guthrie's iconic, much covered and more familiar song 'This Land is Your Land' in the film, instead of 'Wasn't That A Time.'
 - In the film Dylan closes Newport with a single acoustic song ('It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'); the performance of 'Mr Tambourine Man' is omitted.
- The film's preoccupation with the relation between identity and performance finds expression in the many shots of people watching performances from the wings



Some topics we might address

Newport
25th July 1965



Dylan on film



Cinematic
language of *A
Complete
Unknown*



Opening:
Greenwich
Village



Ending:
Farewell
Woody Guthrie



Pete Seeger



Suze Rotolo
(Sylvie
Russo) &
Joan Baez



On Page and
Screen: Closing
Thoughts



Newport
25th July 1965

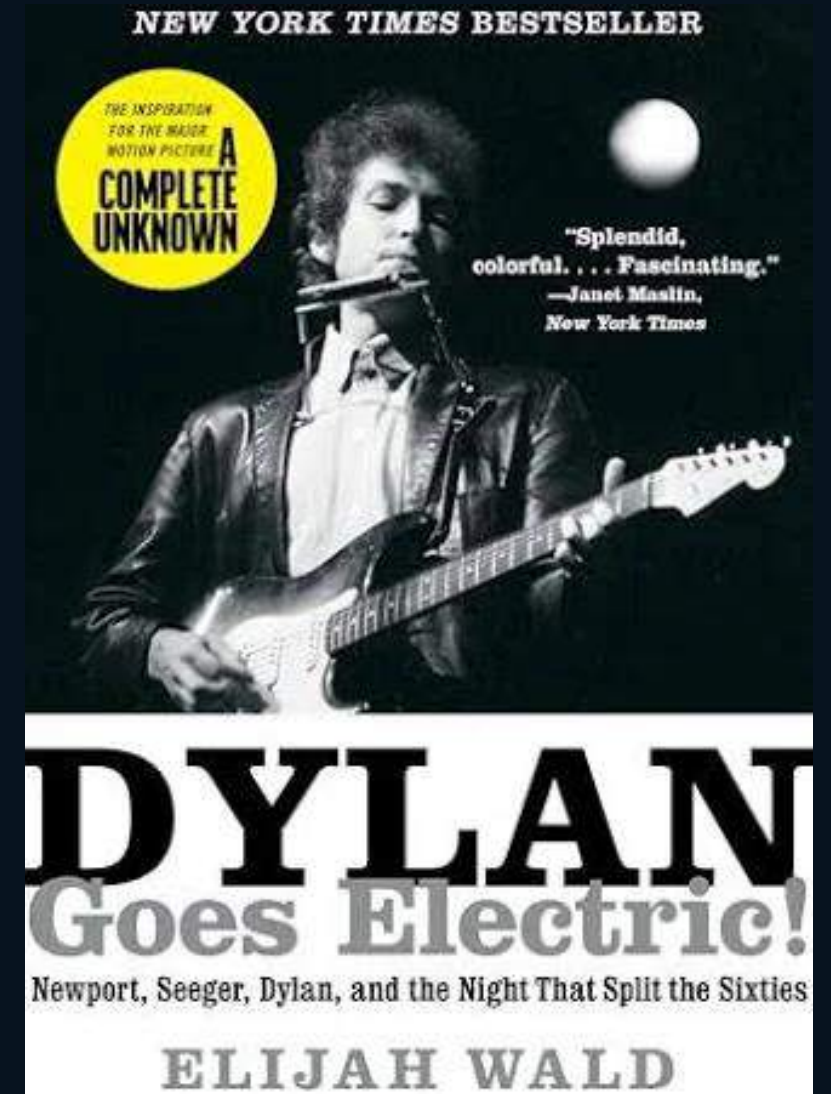


Opening to Wald's book (1 of 2)

On the evening of July 25, 1965, Bob Dylan took the stage at the Newport Folk Festival in black jeans, black boots, and a black leather jacket, carrying a Fender Stratocaster in place of his familiar acoustic guitar. The crowd shifted restlessly as he tested his tuning and was joined by a quintet of backing musicians. Then the band crashed into a raw Chicago boogie and, straining to be heard over the loudest music ever to hit Newport, he snarled his opening line: "I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more!"

What happened next is obscured by a maelstrom of conflicting impressions: The New York Times reported that Dylan "was roundly booed by folk-song purists, who considered this innovation the worst sort of heresy." In some stories Pete Seeger, the gentle giant of the folk scene, tried to cut the sound cables with an axe. Some people were dancing, some were crying, many were dismayed and angry, many were cheering, many were overwhelmed by the ferocious shock of the music or astounded by the negative reactions.

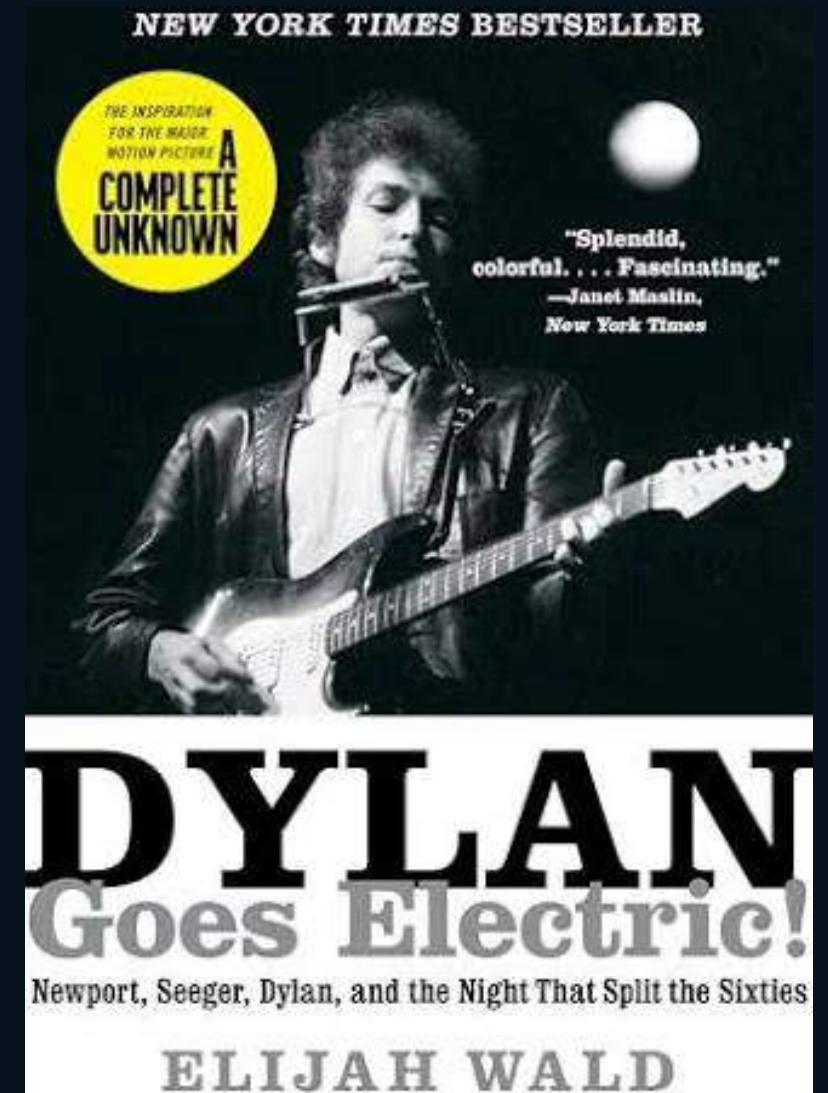
As if challenging the doubters, Dylan roared into "Like a Rolling Stone," his new radio hit, each chorus confronting them with the question: "How does it feel?" The audience roared back its mixed feelings, and after only three songs he left the stage. The crowd was screaming louder than ever—some with anger at Dylan's betrayal, thousands more because they had come to see their idol and he had barely performed. Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul, and Mary, tried to quiet them, but it was impossible. Finally, Dylan reappeared with a borrowed acoustic guitar and bid Newport a stark farewell: "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue."



Opening to Wald's book (2 of 2)

That is the legend of Dylan at Newport, and much of it is true. Seeger did not have an axe, but that story became so widespread that eventually even he found a way to fit it into his remembrances, saying he shouted, "If I had an axe, I'd chop the mike cable." Some people certainly booed, many applauded, and later fans have pored over film clips of the concert trying to sort out the crowd's reactions—a fruitless exercise, since most clips have been doctored to fit the legend, splicing the anguished shouts after Dylan left the stage into other parts of his performance to create the illusion that the mythic confrontation was captured on tape.

Why did that matter? Why does what one musician played on one evening continue to resonate half a century later?

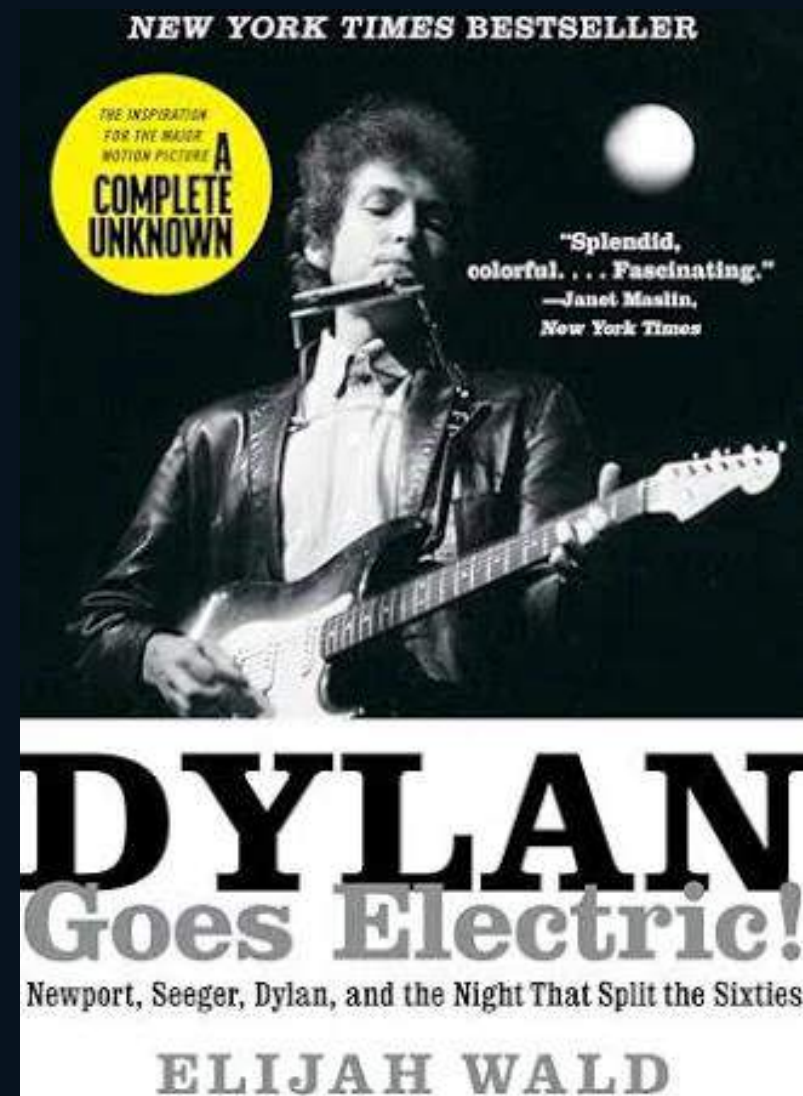


Opening to Wald's book (2 of 2)

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Why (for the book and film, at least) does it matter?



3 of Wald's answers to that question

Personal: it's a moment of change in Dylan's life and career

- 'One answer is that Dylan was the iconic voice of a decade famed for rebellion and Newport was the epochal break of the young rocker with the old society that would not accept him.'

Cultural: Newport 1965 crystallises larger shifts in contemporary music (and beyond)

- 'What happened at Newport in 1965 was not just a musical disagreement or a single artist breaking with his past. It marked the end of the folk revival as a mass movement and the birth of rock as the mature artistic voice of a generation, and in their respective halves of the decade both folk and rock symbolized much more than music.'

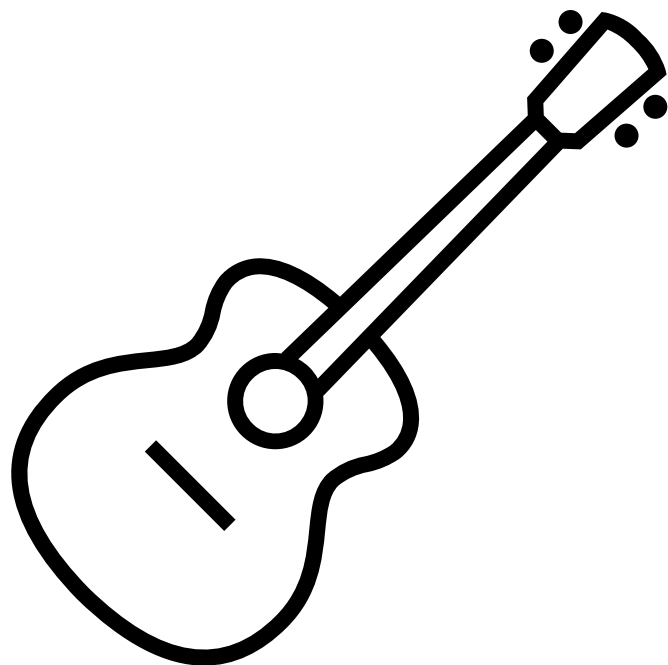
Socio-historical: it's a prism through which to view the 1960s

- 'Pat though it may be to divide history into neat decimal segments, the 1960s were a period of dramatic upheaval, and 1965 marked a significant divide.'

‘Like a Rolling Stone’



The 'axe'

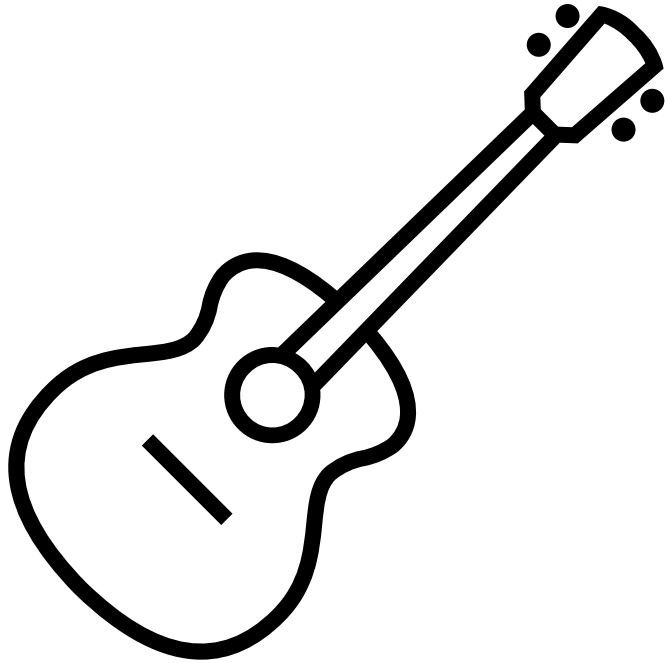


At roughly the same moment, on the microphone [after Dylan has gone offstage after performing his 'electric' set], Yarrow is trying to reassure the audience and says, referring to Dylan rather than Seeger, but **using a jazz musician's term for the guitar**, which some audience members clearly misconstrued: **"He's gonna get his axe."**

The crowd meanwhile has begun a rhythmic change: 'We want Dylan! We want Dylan!.' Yarrow responds: 'He's coming,' then, as the chanting continues, 'He's gotta get an *acoustic* guitar.'

Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric!*

The 'axe'



That is **how legends form**: Yarrow told seventeen thousand people, “He’s gonna get his axe,” and it was easy for the question “Is he talking about Pete?” to evolve into “Did you hear about Pete Seeger going for an axe?” Soon some people improved the story, saying they or a friend saw him wielding the weapon; others chimed in to explain where it came from; and eventually even Seeger found a way to fit it into his recollections. He was often asked about that night, and **by the 1990s he had come up with an explanation of how the axe became part of the legend**:

I was furious that the sound was so distorted you could not understand a word that he was singing. He was singing a great song, ‘Maggie’s Farm,’ a great song, but you couldn’t understand it. And I ran over to the sound man, said, ‘Fix the sound so you can understand him.’ And they hollered back, ‘No, this is the way they want it!’ . . . I was so mad I said, ‘Damn, if I had an axe I’d cut the cable right now.’

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of that memory, just as there is no reason to doubt that Rothchild sincerely remembered Seeger wielding an axe, or that some audience members remember Dylan playing the greatest rock ‘n’ roll they ever heard while others recall the set as a disaster.

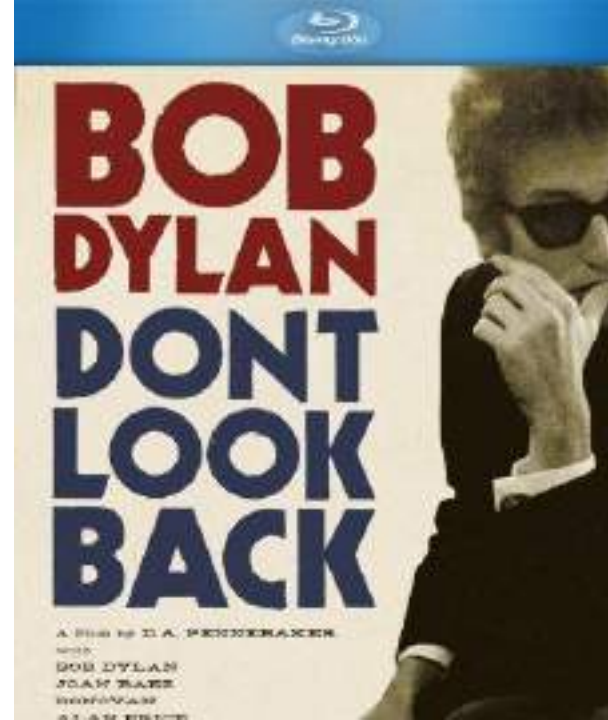
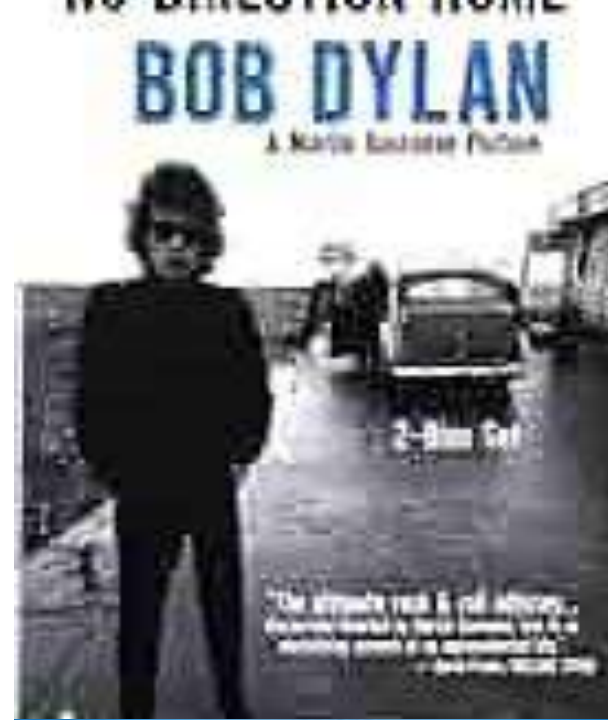
Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric!*

Dylan on film



A few examples of Dylan on film

- ***Don't Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967)**
 - Documentary about Dylan's 1965 tour in the UK
- ***No Direction Home* (Martin Scorsese, 2005)**
 - Documentary about Dylan's early career
 - Centrepiece is new footage of the 'Judas' incident at the Manchester Free Trade Hall
- ***I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007)**
 - Experimental biography: 6 actors play characters embodying different facets of Dylan
 - Cate Blanchett's 'Jude Quinn' (a folk singer who outrages fans by performing with a full electric band) is the one closest to the Dylan of *A Complete Unknown*.
- ***Inside Llewyn Davis* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2013)**
 - Comedy about the 1961 New York folk scene, focusing on a struggling singer rather than Dylan
 - In the striking closing scene, as the protagonist gives up on folk, we see someone resembling Dylan take the stage behind him.



Inside Llwyn Davis (2007)

A struggling singer gives his last performance and finally gives up on the folk scene. In the background, Bob Dylan takes to the stage soon after his arrival in New York ...



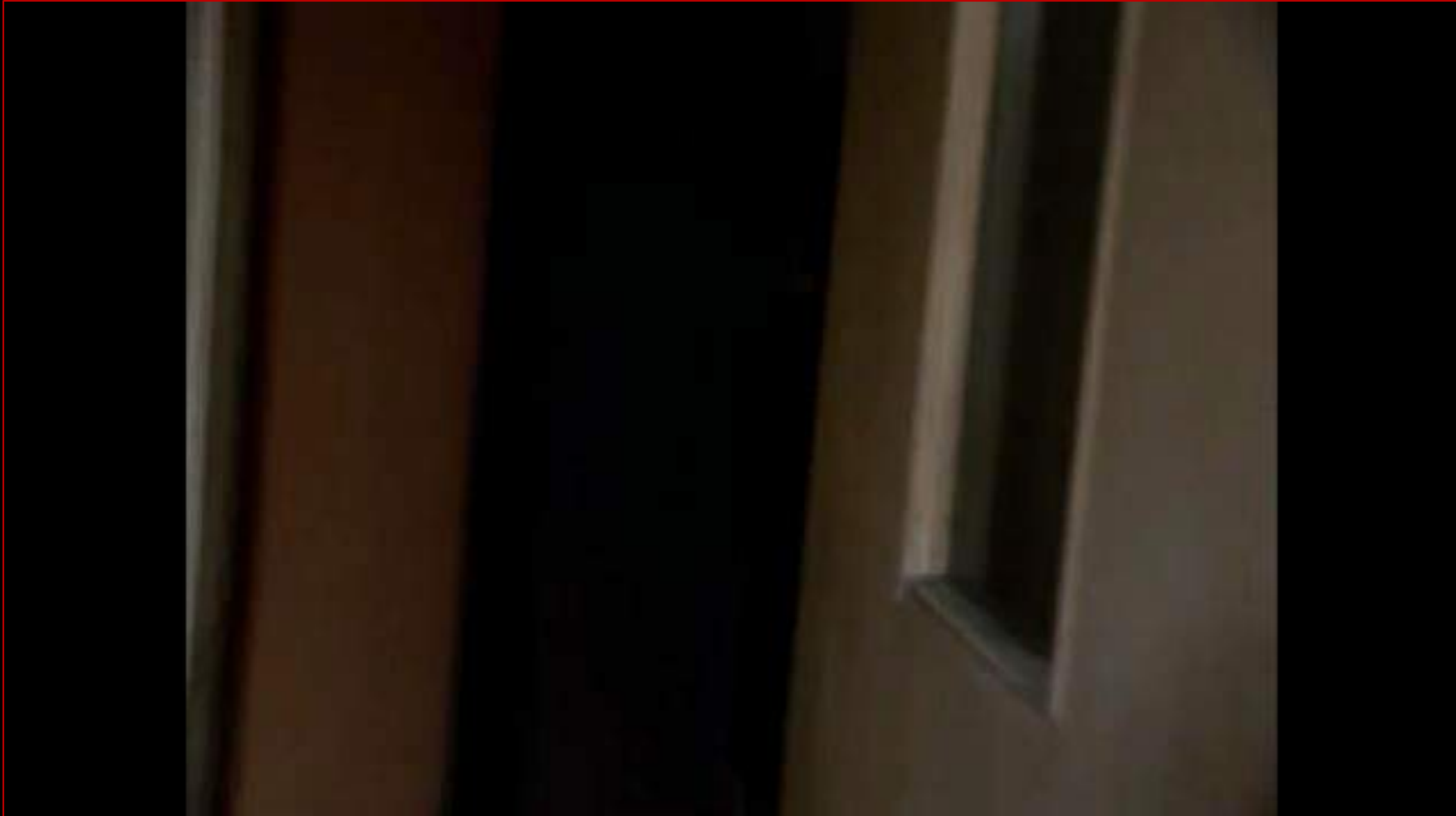
I'm Not There (2013)

'Jude Quinn,' played by Cate Blanchett, 'goes electric' and alienates his/her fanbase at the 'New England Jazz & Folk Festival'



No Direction Home (2005)

The end of Scorsese's documentary culminates with newly found footage of Dylan's reaction when he is called 'Judas' at the Manchester Free Trade Hall. This iconic moment is integrated into the Newport Festival performance for the purposes of *A Complete Unknown*.



Cinematic language of *A Complete Unknown*

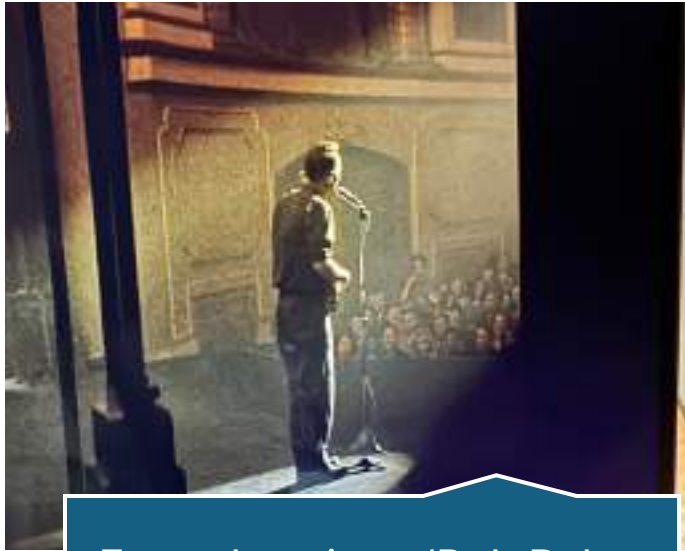




Identity and performance

Huck Finn cap / acoustic guitar / leather jacket / sunglasses / Triumph motorcycle / Fender Stratocaster

Watching: repeated shots that take us between the stage and the wings



From the wings (Bob Dylan watches Pete Seeger)



In Silhouette (Pete and Albert Grossman watch Bob)



Reverse shot toward wings (Bob watches Johnny Cash)



Watching from the wings (1 of 4)
Sylvie, Bob and Joan at Newport 1965

Bobby Neuwirth watches Sylvie,
watches Bob, watches Joan



Watching from the wings (1 of 4)
Sylvie, Bob and Joan at Newport 1965

Bobby Neuwirth watches Sylvie,
watches Bob, watches Joan



Watching from the wings (2 of 4)

Sylvie, Bob and Joan at Newport 1965

Sylvie (in silhouette) watches Bob
and Joan



Watching from the wings (3 of 4)

Sylvie, Bob and Joan at Newport 1965

Close-up of Bob and Joan with
Sylvie in the background



Watching from the wings (4 of 4)

Sylvie, Bob and Joan at Newport 1965

Reaction shot: close-up of Sylvie

Opening: Greenwich Village



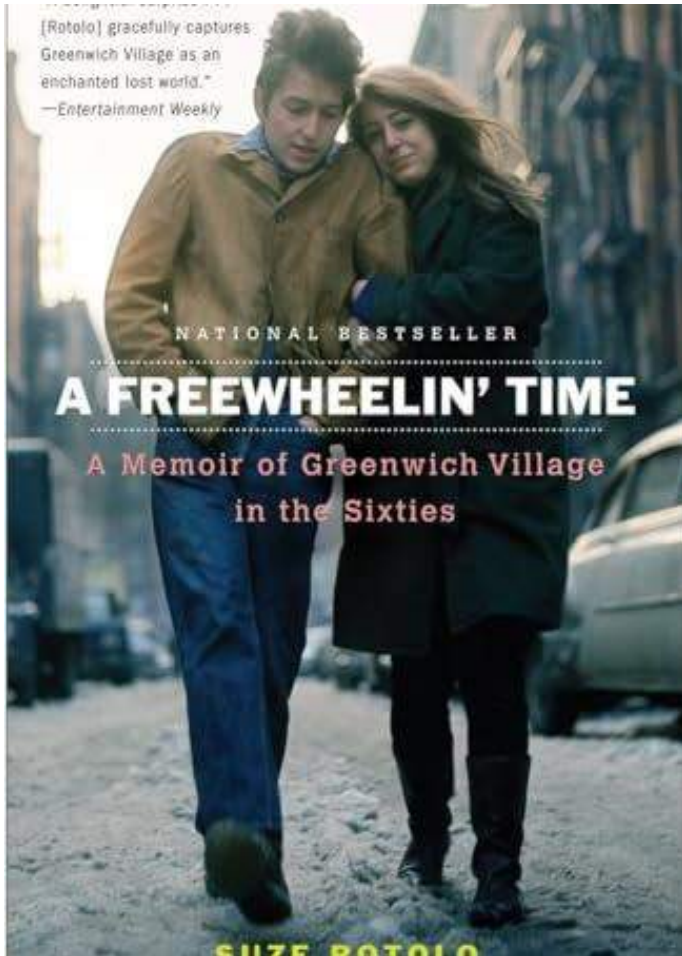
Opening scene

Dylan's arrival in Greenwich village establishes period, place and several of the concerns that run through Wald's book and *A Complete Unknown*



This clip, released by Searchlight Pictures, differs in minor ways from the final edit

Suze Rotolo on Greenwich Village in the 60s



The unique qualities of a time or an era are discovered after it has passed. What puts a place on the map is connected to what happened there that was special. Greenwich Village became a destination because of its bohemian history, which encompassed rebellious politics as well as revolutionary art, music, poetry, and prose. It was a community of people and ideas that soldered and welded itself together into odd structures pointing every which way yet maintaining a solid base with common beliefs in the validity of the voices of the outsider and the underdog.

Some denizens went on to fame in their time and beyond, like Edna St. Vincent Millay, e. e. cummings, Willem de Kooning, Allen Ginsberg, and Bob Dylan, who changed music the way Jackson Pollock had changed painting.

Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time* (2008)

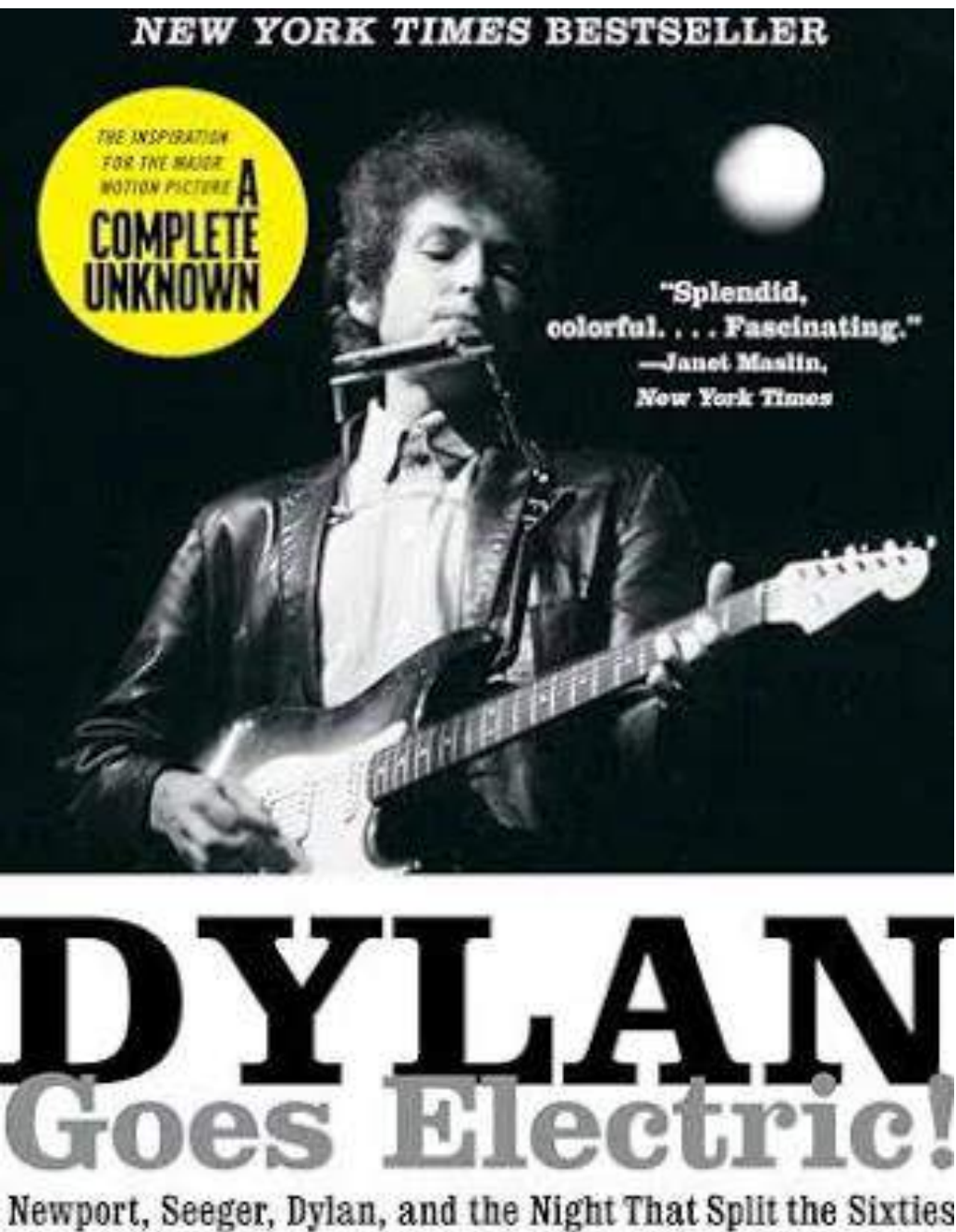
Ending: Farewell Woody Guthrie



Closing scene

Dylan visits Woody Guthrie before leaving





Woody Guthrie

- Dylan was thrilled to have a direct connection with Guthrie and fired off a postcard to friends in Minneapolis: ‘**I know Woody. . . . I know him and met him and saw him and sang to him. . . . Goddamn.**’
- For a lot of young fans, Guthrie’s most influential writing was not the songs but his memoir, *Bound for Glory*, and his music was inextricably connected to his life—or more accurately, since the book is highly fictionalized, to **his legend**. The Guthrie of *Bound for Glory* is a drifting hobo folksinger, picking up songs wherever he goes, sometimes improvising a lyric to suit a particular situation, but in general singing the familiar songs of ordinary working people.
- Friends remember [Dylan] **adopting the older singer’s voice, mannerisms, and at times even his identity.**
- Seeger [said]: ‘He didn’t mould himself upon Woody Guthrie. He was influenced by him. But **he was influenced by a lot of people. He was his own man, always.**’

Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric!* (2015)



Pete Seeger





Seeger and Dylan: telling the story

It is always tempting to simplify a story, to give characters particular attributes or have them represent particular viewpoints. In stories about Bob Dylan, the youth culture of the 1960s, and the rise of rock, Seeger is often given the role of conservative gatekeeper, stuck in the past, upholding old rules and ideals that were perhaps noble but certainly outdated. There is some truth in that simplification, just as there is some truth in the simplification that Dylan was a cynical careerist, but both obscure more interesting stories.

Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric!* (2015)

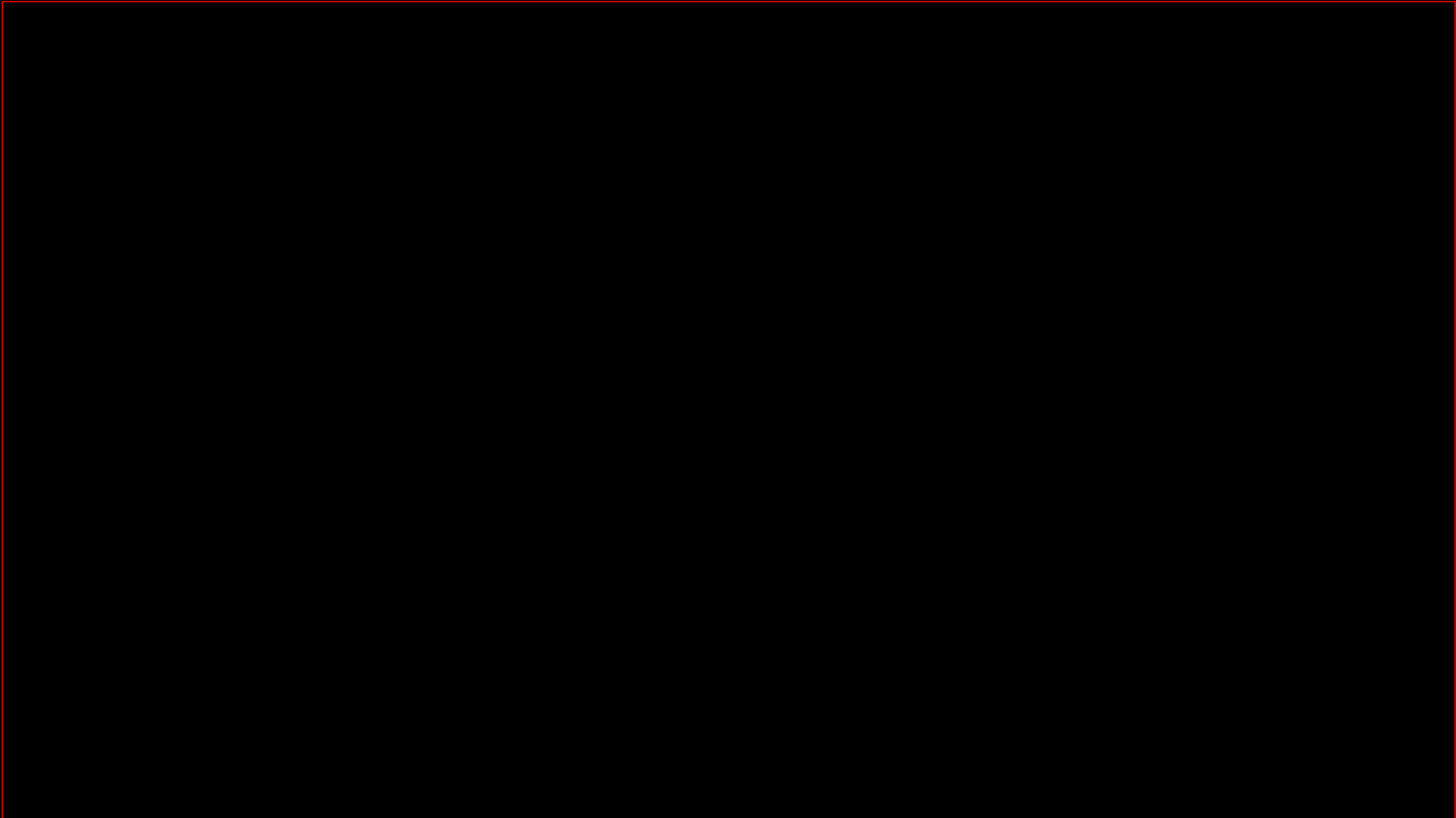
Seeger and Dylan as symbolic figures



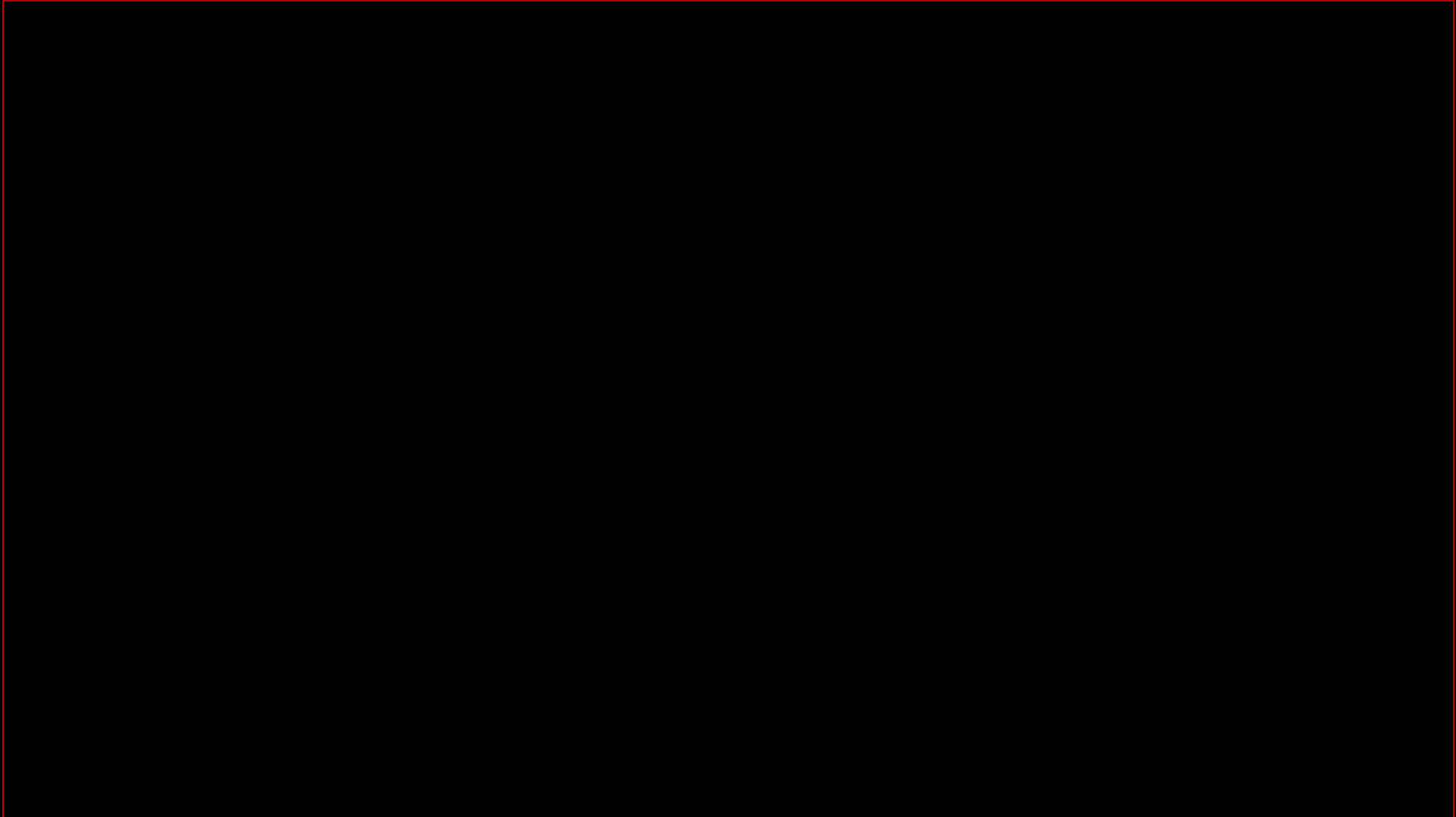
Seeger is a central figure in this narrative, because **the story of Dylan at Newport is also the story of what Seeger built**, what Newport meant to him, and the lights that dimmed when the amplifiers sucked up the power. It is **about what was lost as well as what was gained**, about intertwining ideals and dreams that never quite fit together, and about people who tried to make them fit and kept believing they might. In a simple formulation, **Seeger and Dylan can stand for the two defining American ideals: Seeger for the ideal of democracy**, of people working together, helping each other, living and believing and treating each other as members of an optimistic society of equals; **Dylan for the ideal of the rugged individualist**, carving a life out of the wilderness, dependent on no one and nothing but himself. In those terms, **they can also stand for the two halves of the 1960s**: In the first half, folk music was associated with the civil rights movement, with singing together in the spirit of integration, not only of black and white but of old and young and the present with the past, the old Left, the labor movement, the working class, “Everybody might just be one big soul,” “We Shall Overcome.” In the second half, rock was the soundtrack of the counterculture, the New Left, the youth movement, expanding our consciousness, “Fuck the System!,” “Turn on, tune in, drop out,” “Free your mind and your ass will follow.”


Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric!* (2015)

Pete Seeger as folk Pied Piper: Wimoweh scene

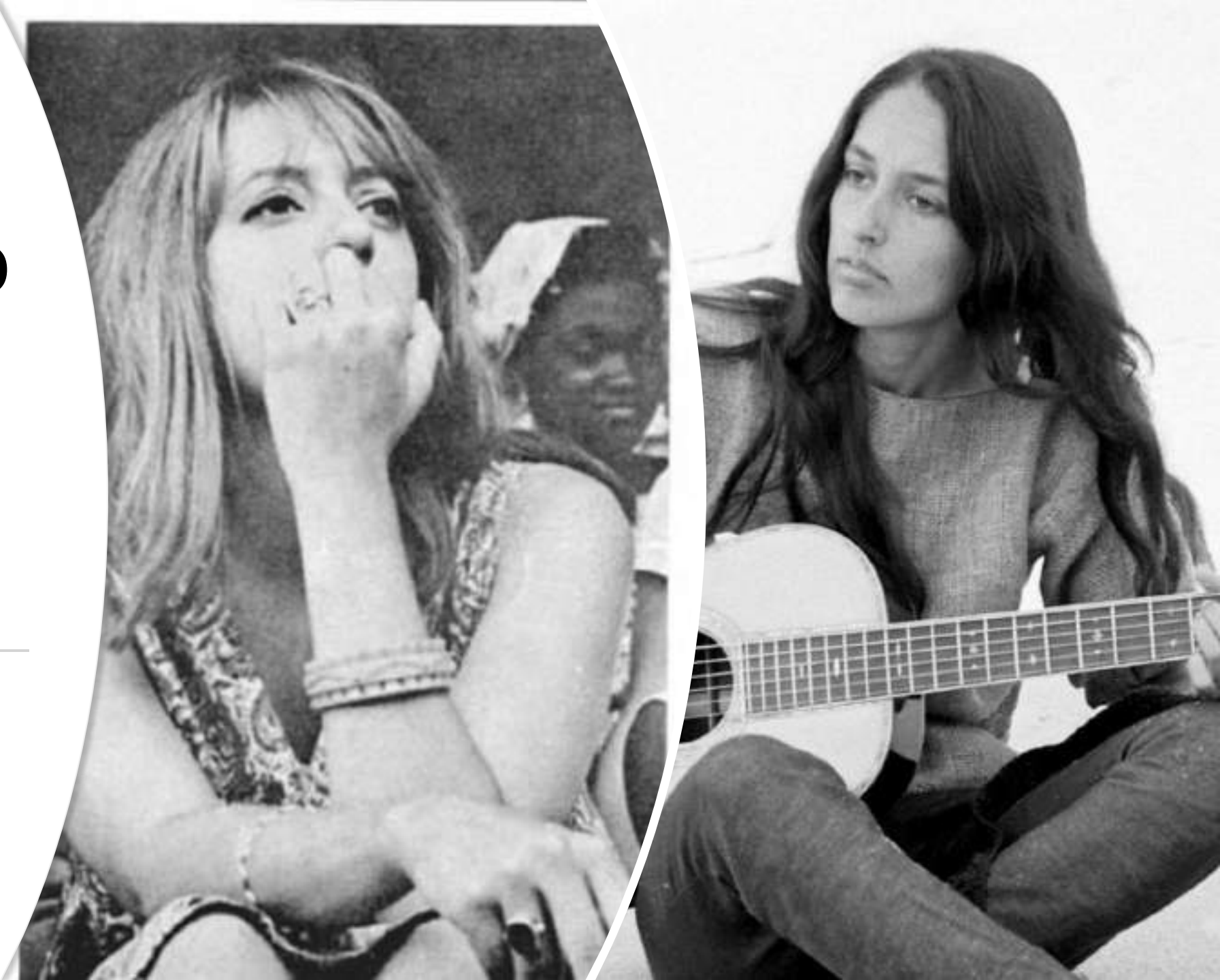


Pete Seeger's court scene





Suze Rotolo (Sylvie Russo) & Joan Baez



Suze Rotolo on attitudes toward women in the 60s music scene

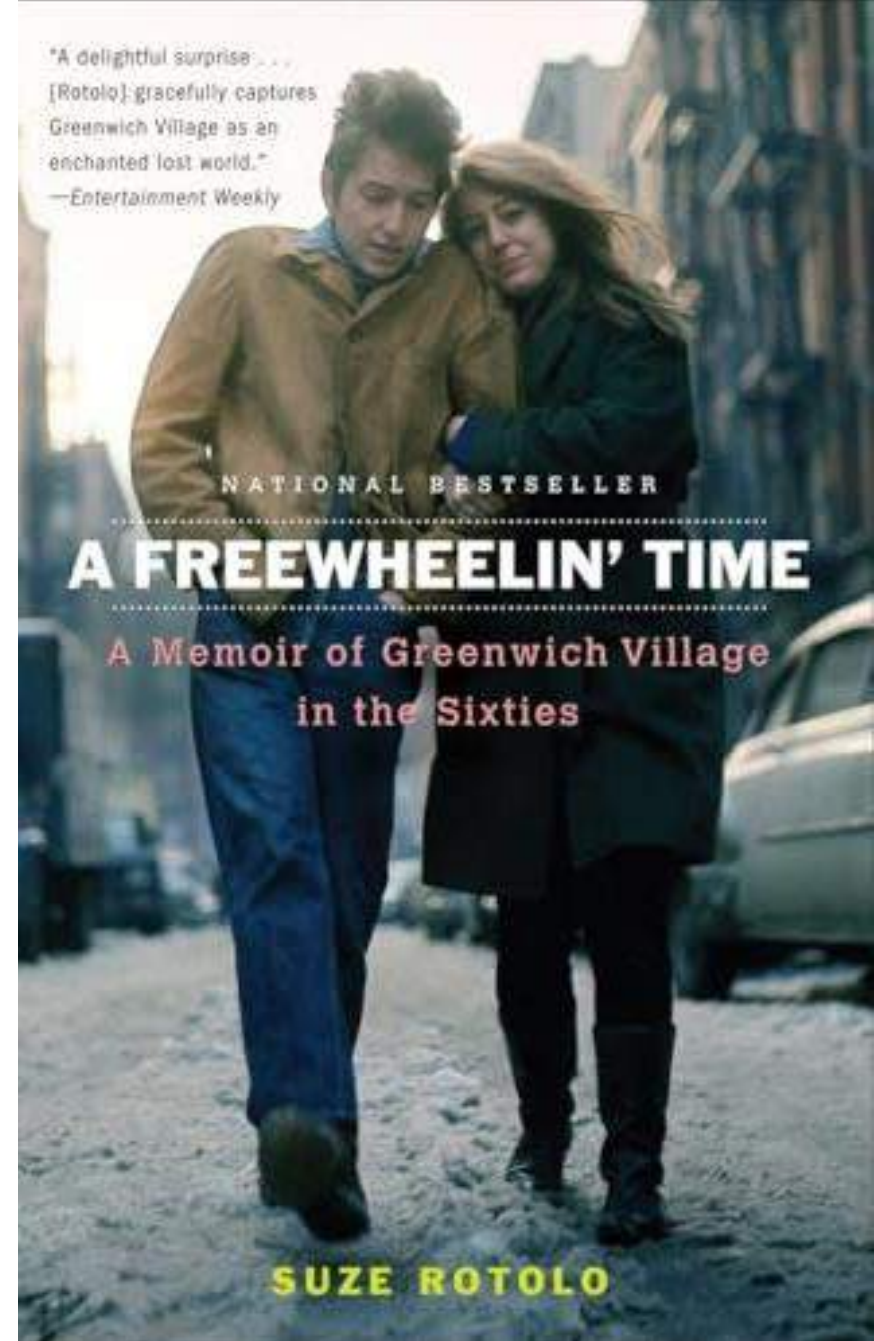
- There was an attitude toward musicians' girlfriends – 'chicks,' as we were called, or 'old lady,' if a wife – that I couldn't tolerate. Since this was before there was a feminist vocabulary, I had no framework for those feelings yet they were very strong. I couldn't define it, but the word chick made me feel as if I weren't a whole being. **I was a possession of this person, Bob, who was the center of attention** – that was supposed to be my validation.

...

I couldn't find my way with anyone, really. Everything was centered on folk music, which was fine, because music was a big part of my life, but it wasn't my life's work. ... **I was very young, I was still forming myself, but I did know I wasn't a musician, nor was I a musician's 'chick.'** And you could bet the neck of a Gibson I had no desire to graduate to "old lady."

- **I did not want to be a string on Bob Dylan's Guitar.**

Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time* (2008)





Baez at the March on Washington (Aug, 1963)
Photo credit: Rowland Scherman

Joan Baez and the folk movement

Though few reviews mentioned her, Wein recalled Baez as ‘not only the great discovery, but also **the living symbol, of the first Newport Folk Festival.**’


Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric!*
(2015)

‘It Ain’t Me Babe’: Dylan, Baez, Rotolo/Russo



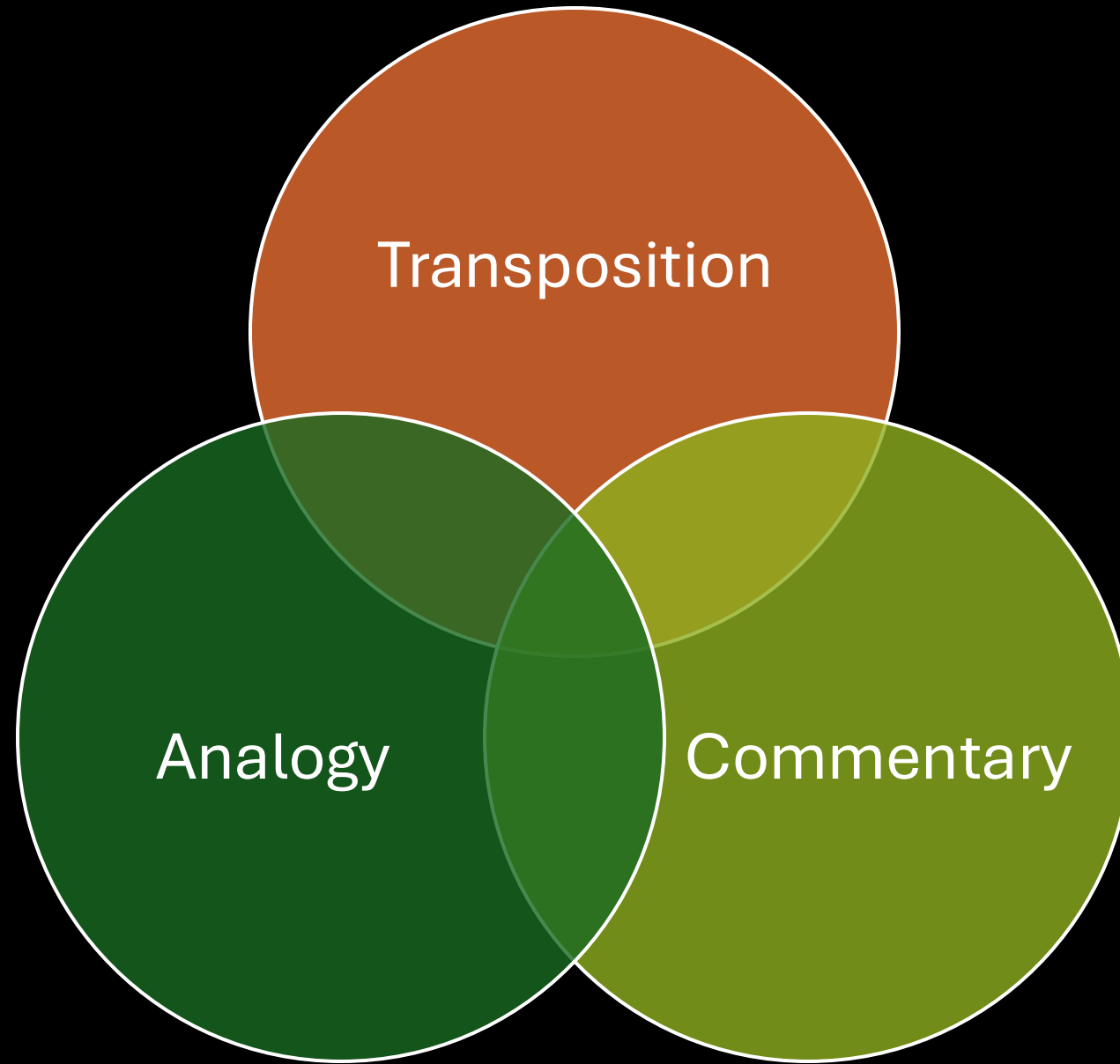
'It Ain't Me Babe': Bob Dylan and Joan Baez at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964

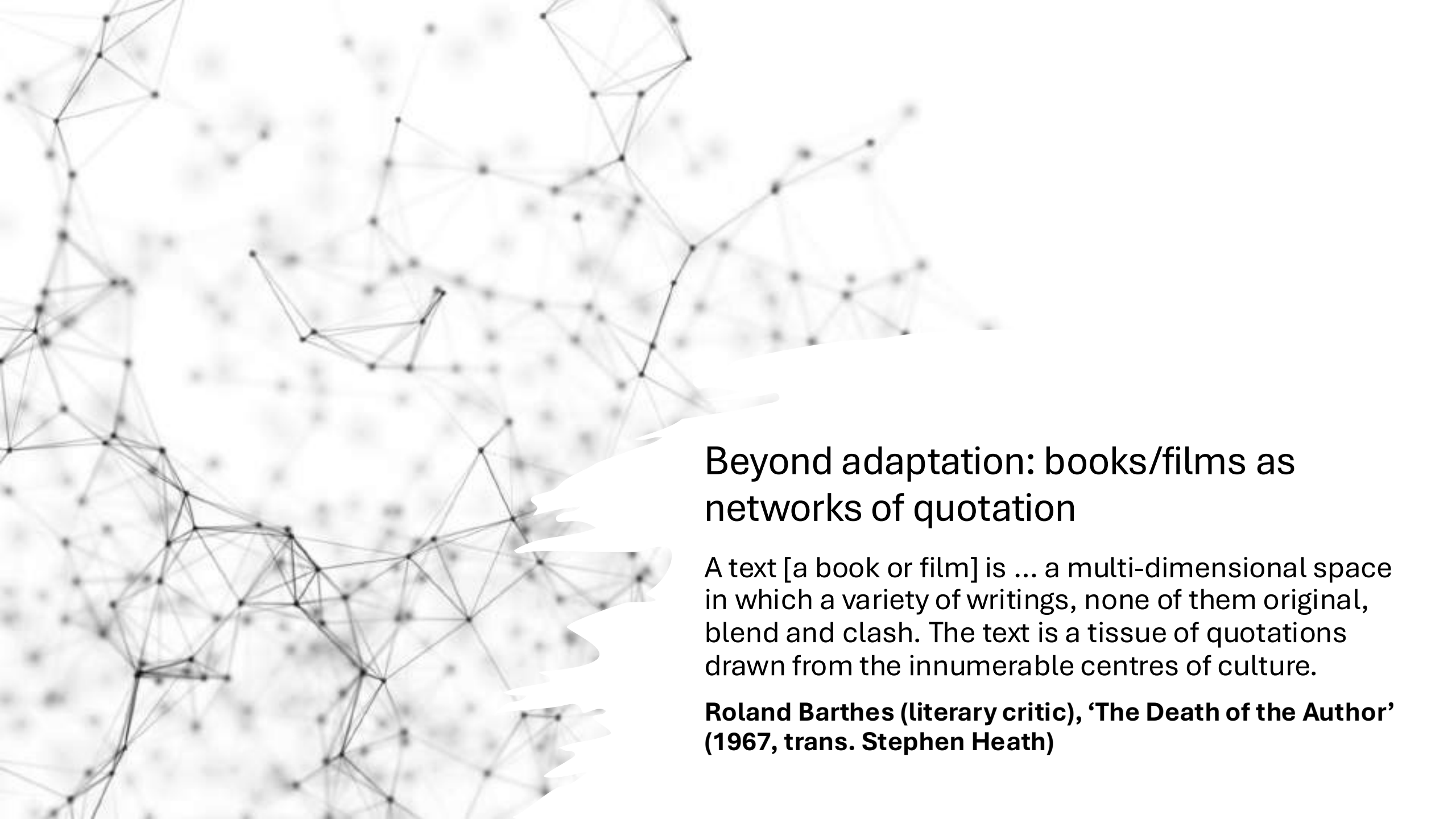




On Page and Screen: Closing Thoughts







Beyond adaptation: books/films as networks of quotation

A text [a book or film] is ... a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.

Roland Barthes (literary critic), 'The Death of the Author' (1967, trans. Stephen Heath)

When something goes from book to film it's a campfire opportunity: it's when the story should grow and evolve.

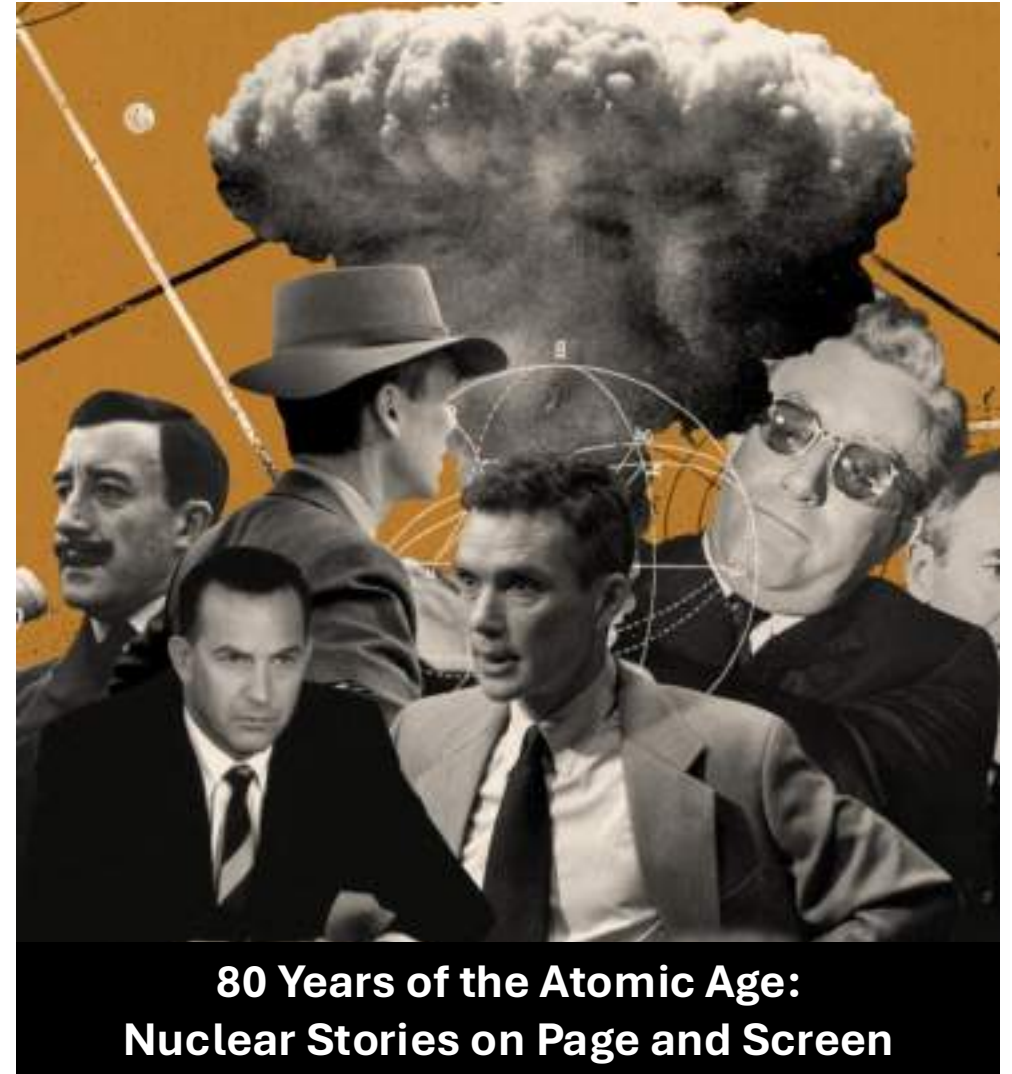
Kazuo Ishiguro (May, 2025)



And finally ...

- **Feedback**
 - Please respond to Broadway's request for feedback if they ask about the course
 - Comments, suggestions, testimonials, etc. can be sent direct to me at daniel.cordle@outlook.com
- **Further info. on my work:**
www.danielcordle.com

In case you're interested:



Afternoon course (1pm-5.30pm), Sat 2 Aug