

Editorial

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The politics and aesthetics of biopics

This issue of *Panoptikum* is devoted to biopics. This is due to the fact that the last two decades or so saw a surge in their production and box office success, as exemplified by *Walk the Line* (2005), directed by James Mangold, *La Vie en Rose* (2007), directed by Olivier Dahan, *I'm Not There* (2007), directed by Todd Haynes, *The Social Network* (2010), directed by David Fincher, *Steve Jobs* (2015), directed by Danny Boyle, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), directed by Bryan Singer and *Oppenheimer* (2023), directed by Christopher Nolan. Many of them are directed by well-known directors, like Boyle and Nolan, who specialise in the production of popular auteurist cinema. We can attribute this surge in biopics to several factors. One, prompted by postmodernism, consists of an increased interest in and legitimisation of micro-histories, histories from below, providing details of the life of a particular individual and offering their insights into a wider political or social situation. Such histories complement the grand histories, in which there is little space for detail and which need to harmonise the perspectives of many individuals, ultimately privileging that of an external observer, assessing a given situation with the hindsight of a broader historical knowledge. Not surprisingly, the increase in the number of biopics coincides with publications of large numbers of biographies and memoirs of famous people, especially those who gained fame thanks to the media, such as musicians, actors and celebrities. These days they dominate the bookshelves in bookshops, usurping places previously occupied by fiction books. Another factor why nowadays there are so many biopics, in comparison with other types of fiction films, is that many of them tend to be spectacular, hence suitable for theatrical distribution. This is especially the case of biopics of musicians, which often combine the

qualities of a film and a concert, as is the case with *Bohemian Rhapsody* or *Back to Black* (2024), directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson. Production of such films is very important in an age where cinema has to compete with other types of film distribution, especially streaming, proving that there are distinct advantages of experiencing film on a large screen. Biopics of actors, on the other hand, play on viewers nostalgia for the cinema which has long disappeared. Finally, biopics allow filmmakers to explore the boundary between fiction and documentary, as they draw on the lives of real people, yet typically played by fictional characters and are embellished with episodes which are added to increase their dramatic effect. Hence, biopics, on occasions, fall into such categories as mockumentaries or parodies. The majority of authors who contribute to this issue recognise the importance of biopics in contemporary film culture by focusing on recent biopics. A large proportion of them also concern people who gained popularity or notoriety thanks to the media, such as musicians, actors and, in one case, an inventor and entrepreneur.

The issue begins with an essay by Matthew Bannister, titled 'Putting the Mockers On: *The Rutles*, The Beatles, Rock Biopics and Parody'. Its author argues that in contrast to the dominant narrative about the trajectory of genre cinema of growth to 'classic' maturity and subsequent parody or deconstruction, rock music biopics have reversed this narrative, so that the genre begins in parody and only gets serious later. The Beatles were the perfect subjects for such ironic canonisation. Their filmic career highlights the intersection of documentary and comedy, as well as reality and fiction, via musical performance, a mode which can problematise documentary/comedy, and reality/fiction distinctions. In line with this argument, Bannister focuses on key live performances from the Beatles' career, and how they are parodied in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978), directed by Eric Idle and Gary Weis, which doubles as the first filmic biography of the Beatles and the first rock mockumentary.

The next article, authored by Ewa Mazierska, concerns French singing stars, Edith Piaf and Dalida, presented respectively in *La Môme (La Vie en Rose)*, 2007, directed by Olivier Dahan and *Dalida* (2016), directed by Lisa Azuelos. It argues that Dahan attempted to make a feminist biopic, which recognises that a famous woman can live mostly for her art. This does not necessarily mean that such a woman, Piaf in this case, is unable to love passionately, but rather that there is no competition between her romantic and professional personas. By contrast, Azuelos, in a more traditional fashion, plays up the contrast between the successful professional life of Dalida and her unhappy personal life, suggesting that if Dalida had chosen a different profession, she could have been happier.

From films about singers we move to films about actors. Elisenda Díaz discusses two recent biopics, *Judy* (2019), directed by Rupert Goold and *Blonde* (2022), directed by Andrew Dominik, which reimagine icons from the Hollywood Golden Era, Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe respectively, under the prism of the #MeToo movement. By examining the way in which these movies treat abusive experiences within the film industry, along with their placement in the public arena, this paper exposes how contemporary biopics dedicated to female movie stars face the consequences of #MeToo in Hollywood. She also argues that their directors' articulated intentions, promotional campaigns and reviews, and film critiques seek to convincingly place the films in the domain of public discussion around #MeToo.

The essay which follows concerns the biographical compilation film *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch* (2022) about the popular Slovak actor Ivan Palúch, directed by Martin Palúch, who also wrote the essay published in this special issue. In his study, Martin Palúch situates his film in the context of the development of the compilation film form in Slovakia after 1989, especially from the perspective of the use of collage techniques of various directors when working with appropriated audio-visual and archival materials. At the same time, he asks the question of what his film adds to our understanding of the life and career of the popular Slovak actor, who also appeared in foreign films.

The subsequent three essays engage with different subjects. Neil Archer examines *Steve Jobs* (2015), directed by Danny Boyle and scripted by Aaron Sorkin, which constitutes the second part of Sorkin's 'Asshole Diptych', following *The Social Network* (2010). Archer argues that Sorkin's innovative biopic of Apple's controversial founder approaches its complex subject (both Jobs and Silicon Valley) via the artifice and intricacy of its own screenplay form: the portrait of an imperfect man, as a perfect cinematic machine. Departing from the classical biopic focus on the narrative of a 'life', *Steve Jobs*' three-part structure - focusing on three public product releases - aligns with the structural expectations of the classical screenplay, as well as acknowledging its theatrical setting and influence: the idea of Jobs as a performance.

Małgorzata Mączko discusses the use of three biopics, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), directed by Nate Parker, *Harriet* (2018), directed by Kasi Lemmons and *Emancipation* (2022), directed by Antoine Fuqua, in a discussion of the history of American slavery. Mączko argues that these films not only come into a dialogue with the preexisting visual representations of slavery in music, photography and cinema, utilising the motif of a portrait, but also reflect on current racial politics and antiracist activism in the United States.

The last article in this issue, by Zsolt Gyóri, explores biographical documentary cinema that investigates living people through interviews and other forms of interaction, which - as Gyóri argues - is a marginalised subgenre of biopics. The topic of Gyóri's investigation is the work of Gyula Gulyás, a Hungarian director of documentaries with directing experience extending five decades. To account for the challenges, methods and human dynamics shaping talking heads documentaries, Gyóri Gyori interviews Gulyás. His work thus constitutes a perfect match between the form of his investigation and its topic.

The seven essays included in this special issue only refer to a small number of famous people immortalised on screen and touch on a handful of problems pertaining to production of biopics. However, they show the great variety of aesthetic means and uses of biopics, especially in relation to wider politics, especially gender and racial politics. Together, they also show the great appetite of the cinema audience to find out the truth about real people, even if they are aware that biopics, at best, can only provide a partial truth.

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