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Singing One's Life: Biopics of Edith Piaf and Dalida

Abstract

This article compares two films about French singing stars: *La Môme* (*La Vie en Rose*, 2007), directed by Olivier Dahan and *Dalida* (2016), directed by Lisa Azuelos, respectively about Edith Piaf and Dalida. It argues that Dahan in *La Vie en Rose* attempted to make a feminist biopic, which recognises that a famous woman can live mostly for her art or even equate her life with 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. Piaf's talent for singing is also presented as a protection against external tragedies and as a source of meaning in her life. 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 chose a different profession, she could be happier.

Keywords

Biopic; Edith Piaf; Dalida; *La Môme* (*La Vie en Rose*); Olivier Dahan; Lisa Azuelos.

The upsurge of production in biopics in the last two decades or so is in a large part due to the increase of filmmakers' interest in two types of biopics: of musicians and women. The first phenomenon can be explained by the fact that a biopic of a musician, especially of a singing star, tends to be very spectacular, hence provides the viewer with a combined pleasure of watching a film and a concert, even if only in a surrogate form. This fact is of particular importance nowadays, when most films are easily available for home consumption. To make a viewer leave the comfort of their house, the film producers must offer them work whose reception on a wide screen feels superior to that on a television or computer screen. The upsurge of biopics of women, on the other hand, such as female artists, for example *Frida* (2002), directed by Julie Taymor, about Frida Kahlo and politicians, such as *The Iron Lady* (2011), directed by Phyllida Lloyd about Margaret Thatcher, can be explained by the growth of female directors and making up for the previous scarcity of films about real women (Bingham 2010; Hollinger 2020). Such films thus fill a gap in popular history. This is reflected in the titles of some of these biopics, which include words such as 'invisible', as in *The Invisible Woman* (2013), directed by Ralph Fiennes about Charles Dickens's secret mistress Nelly Ternan and *To Walk Invisible* (2016), directed by Sally Wainwright, about the Brontë sisters (Pastor-González 2020). The goal of filmmakers is to explain why previously their lives were hidden or invisible and make them visible. The production and popularity of films about female musicians confirms this trend.

In this article I focus on two films about singing stars: *La Môme* (*La Vie en Rose*, 2007), directed by Olivier Dahan and *Dalida* (2016), directed by Lisa Azuelos, respectively about Edith Piaf and Dalida. Both Piaf and Dalida have been some of the most visible women of their time, especially in their native country, France. It might thus seem inappropriate to discuss their lives in the context of women's invisibility. However, my purpose is to analyse how these two films explore the liminal area between visibility and invisibility, the star persona and the real woman, and how the 'construction of the visible' creates zones of invisibility, which the two films attempt to explore.

Much connects these two women. They both had difficult childhoods, turbulent love lives and died childless at a relatively young age. However, my argument is that each of the two films about their lives offer a different take on biopic. Dahan's film emphasises the professional side of Piaf's life and equates it with her private life. Azuleos' film, on the other hand, focuses on Dalida's romantic trials and tribulations and pits them against her professional successes. They also offer a different take on music in the film, with *La Vie en Rose* using it

more sparsely, while *Dalida* verging on being a musical. Before I move to discussing these two films' characters and narratives, let's look briefly at the specificity of biopics about women and the main people behind the productions of these two films.

Women's Biopics as Melodramas

Dennis Bingham begins his reflection on biopics about women by stating:

> Biography requires a protagonist who has done something noteworthy in the public world. Women historically have not been encouraged to become the subjects of discourse, at least not of any discourse that is taken seriously by a patriarchal society. Women cannot be consistently posed as the objects of male looks and language and also be the subjects of their own stories… Female biopics play on tensions between a woman's public achievements and women's traditional orientation to home, marriage, and motherhood. In consequence, female biopics often find suffering (and therefore) drama in a public woman's very inability to make her decisions and discover her own destiny. (Bingham 2010: 213; see also Hollinger 2020: 78-9)

Such an approach affects the choice of the characters and the way they are represented. As Bingham observes, often the minor characters are chosen over the greatest stars, when their lives come across as more unconventional and tragic. Moreover, biopics tend to downplay the happy periods in their lives to highlight the tragic moments. Drawing on Carolyn Heilbrun, Bingham also claims that when successful women write their autobiographies, they almost 'always downplay their ambition and initiative, traits unbecoming to women in our culture' (Bingham 2010: 214). These drives are usually transferred to male associates, making success appear to be a gift a woman never wanted for herself, or a happenstance that she fell onto by near-accident (ibid.: 23-26).

Bingham continues this line of reasoning by claiming that in contrast to Great Man films, female biopics overall 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 a nontraumatic personal life. Early deaths were preferable to long lives. Female biopics frequently depicted their subjects as certainly or possibly insane, made so by the cruelties of a victimizing world, or by the subject's insistence on having her own way in the world (ibid.: 217-18). Hence, the dominant structure of the female biography is that of a downward trajectory: a two-act rise and fall structure exemplified by *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972),

directed by Sidney J. Furie, *Frances* (1982), directed by Graeme Clifford, *Dance with a Stranger* (1985), directed by Mike Newell, *Camille Claudel* (1989), directed by Bruno Nuytten and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994), directed by Alan Rudolph or three-act structure: rise, fall, and rehabilitation (ibid.: 218). Therefore, the form which dominates in female biopics is that of melodrama, considered as a lower form than most genres.

That said, Bingham himself chooses for his analysis films which do not conform to this norm, such as *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) by Todd Haynes, which diverts from the conventions of a melodrama or even any traditional film. Moreover, since Bingham published his book, several biopics were made which, even when dealing with famous women who had difficult lives, present them in a different fashion. For example, the previously mentioned biography of the Brontë sisters by Sally Wainwright focuses on the pleasure they drew from orderly, everyday existence and casts as a tragic character not any of the sisters, but their brother, who is portrayed as being 'used' by his female lover (Pastor-González 2020: 63). Similarly, *A Quiet Passion* (2016), Emily Dickinson's biopic, directed by Terence Davis, presents the female poet as her own persona and privileges her working over romantic life (ibid.: 64-7).

Piaf and Dalida, from the perspective of the dominant way of representing female characters, which Hollinger describes as the victimology-fetish biopic (Hollinger 2020: 80), come across as a perfect choice, because their lives significantly diverted from the 'women's traditional orientation to home, marriage, and motherhood'. They were also marked by tragedy from early on, as previously mentioned. Thanks to being singers, their professional success relied largely on support of such people like managers and songwriters, who were typically men. For this reason, it is relatively easy to transfer their ambition to these men, rather than creators of their own destiny. The question which interests me is whether and to what extent these two films follow the traditional pattern of a female melodrama.

Production and reception of *La Vie en Rose and Dalida*

Both *La Vie en Rose* and *Dalida* can be regarded as French films, on account of being produced by French companies, directed by French directors and using French as their principal language. Olivier Dahan, who directed *La Vie en Rose*, before embarking on this project, directed many music videos and made his name by making biopics about women. After *La Vie en Rose* he also made a film about Grace Kelly, an actress who became Princess Grace of Monaco, titled *Grace of Monaco* (2014) and politician and human rights campaigner Si-

mone Veil, titled *Simone, le voyage du siècle* (*Simone Veil, a Woman of the Century*, 2021). The choice of these characters is meaningful, because they can be seen as powerful figures, who shaped their own fate. This is expressed by the English subtitle of Veil's biopic: *a Woman of the Century*. His other films, such as *Ghost River* (2002) and *My Own Love Song* (2010) also concern women who manage to overcome enormous obstacles, be it political obstacles or those resulting from their social position, or disability. In this respect, Dahan can be described as feminist, who, figuratively speaking, tries to free women from the clutches of patriarchy. He attempts to avoid the danger of depicting an ambitious woman as antipathetic by choosing women, who are determined and yet able to sacrifice their ambitions for a greater cause. For example, Grace Kelly's marriage to the Prince of Monaco can be regarded both as a manifestation of her desire to become something more than a popular actress or a proof of her willingness to abandon her professional ambitions for love. In line with such feminist writers as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, Dahan presents performance (in film or on the political arena) as a feminist strategy.

Dahan typically casts stars in his films, such as Isabelle Huppert and Nicole Kidman. and *La Vie en Rose* is not an exception. The main role is played by Marion Cotillard, who by the time was a well-known actress in France. However, he claimed that he chose Cotillard even before meeting her, due to the similarity of her eyes to those of Piaf ('Piaf star Cotillard's career blooms with Oscar nom for La Vie En Rose' 2008). The film proved a commercial and artistic success. In France alone it had more than 5 million admissions and made $ 86 million dollars worldwide on a $ 25 million dollar budget. During the film's premiere at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival, Cotillard, who was in attendance, received a 15-minute standing ovation. The film immensely helped in Cotillard's international career, as demonstrated by her being cast in films such as *Public Enemies* (2009), directed by Michael Mann, *Inception* (2010), directed by Christopher Nolan and *Midnight in Paris* (2011) by Woody Allen. Judging on the films' reviews, the success of *La Vie en Rose* was based largely on the stunning performance of Cotillard (Ebert 2007; Edelstein 2007), who convincingly portrayed Piaf both at the peak of her youth and physical allure, and when she was wrinkled, practically bald and disfigured. As Karen Hollinger observes, in biopics about entertainers authenticity

> primarily involves how much the actress playing the star actually looks and acts like that star. This involves both physical likeness and what is promoted as an 'accurate' interpretation of the star's life story. Creating a sense of authenticity involves very delicate negotiation. It can involve

> extensive research, diet, prosthetics, make-up, physical training, and vocal coaching. There is also the issue of a performance that tries so hard to capture the look of the star subject that it calls too much attention to itself as an impersonation. In this case, the act of imitation becomes alienating and can be perceived as descending into caricature. As James Naremore puts it, what is needed is a combination of mimicry and realistic acting to create an 'overt creative impersonation' rather than 'a virtuoso imitation' The issue of imitation is tricky, however, because the star subject should be recognizable in the performance but not so much so as to obscure the aura of the actor, whose presence also needs to be prominent to attract an audience. (Hollinger 2020: 78).

It can be argued that Cotillard achieved the balance. However, one should also mention other factors which most likely helped the film to achieve popularity, particularly outside the borders of France. One is that after Paris, its main location is New York. Piaf is shown performing there, even singing one song in English and some dialogue is conducted in English. There she also meets the love of her life and pronounces her love for this city. New York is presented in a flattering way, at night, with the lights illuminating its skyscrapers.

While Dahan excels in making films about real people, Lisa Azuelos, the director of the second film discussed here, is a writer and scriptwriter with a versatile career in directing fiction films, documentaries and music videos. Her interest in music can be linked to being a daughter of the well-known French singer and actress - Marie Laforet, who was six years younger than Dalida and whose popularity in the 1960s and the 1970s overlapped with that of Dalida. It is likely that making a film about Dalida allowed Azuelos to explore the period when her mother was famous and perhaps to learn something from Laforet about the state of popular music business, when both she and Dalida were at the top of their careers. That said, neither Laforet nor any other singer from Dalida's generation is present in the film.

For the role of the main character Azuelos invited Sveva Alviti, an actress and former model, with significantly less acting experience than Cotillard. No doubt the main reason behind such a casting decision was Alviti's physical similarity to Dalida. One reviewer described her as a 'dead ringer for the dead star' who features 'not quite a performance but an uncanny impression' of Dalida (van Hoeij 2017), another as an 'uncanny lookalike' (Kiang 2017). Hence, it can be argued that Alviti's performance 'obscured the aura of the actor', to use Hollinger's phrase; her performance did not tease out her own personality. That said, this could be as much the consequence of Alviti's at-

titude to her role and her lack of experience, as the way the film was scripted, as I will argue in due course.

Alviti was rather praised than criticised for her portrayal of Dalida (van Hoeij 2017; Kiang 2017), but this role did not affect her career in a major way. One factor could be that *Dalida* was a significantly less successful film than *La Vie en Rose*, commercially and critically. It made only $5,6 million on the budget of 15 million Euro, hence failing to repay the costs. I will list several reasons for this failure. One concerns the relative lack of knowledge about Dalida outside Europe and the Middle East, in contrast to Piaf, who is much better known in the United States. Moreover, unlike Dahan, Azuelos did little in her film to present Dalida as an international star. There are episodes, showing Dalida performing in Egypt and the United States, but they are short and marginal to the overall story. There was no attempt to woo Egyptian audience by playing up Dalida's connection to this country, most importantly by singing in Arabic. Some Egyptian fans of the singer and critics even complained that very little was made of the fact that she remained very popular in Egypt and that Egypt merely serves as a decoration (Moheb 2017).

Another reason why the film fared worse than could be expected is that the script relied heavily on the account of Dalida's brother Bruno, known professionally as Orlando. This resulted not only in presenting him in a positive light, but also not probing deeper into Dalida's life and the film being regarded as 'superficial' and disjointed (Kiang 2017).

La Vie en Rose: the power of performance

Édith Piaf (born Édith Giovanna Gassion, 1915 - 1963) is regarded as France's greatest popular singer, celebrated for her raw, authentic performance of cabaret and chanson songs. Piaf is also remembered for her unconventional and tragic life. She was born into poverty, was marred by poor health and drug additions; her only child died in infancy due to meningitis and a man whom she regarded as a love of her life, died in a plane crash.

La Vie en Rose begins at the scene of Piaf's collapsing during her performance in New York in 1959, which results in her being rushed to the hospital. We hear Piaf's voice of prayer, confessing that she doesn't want to die. Since then, the film moves back in time, taking us to 1918, when the future star was merely three years old. Such a flashback structure is often used in biopics, because it affords the story told a sense of fatalism. We are to believe that what was meant to happen, happened. The price of it is reducing suspense, as we know what will hap-

pen next. However, in biopics this price is relatively low, as we know the basics of the narrative anyway - they can be provided by Wikipedia.

In the first flashback we see the future star in rags, running with some children during crowded streets, among homeless people, warming themselves with fire burning in barrels. This is an image of wartime chaos and poverty, which left everybody vulnerable, and especially children. The little Edith sits alone on a step, crying. When a woman asks her where her mother is, she points to a woman singing a mournful song some distance from her. This scene resonates with the tradition of 'chanson réaliste', that tells the sad stories and struggles of poor, working class people, prostitutes and gangsters, mainly sung by women (Burke 2011: XII). Many of these singers, for example Fréhel, who was also an actress (1891-1951) had lives which had similarities with the stories that these songs told. Piaf's mother, we are made to believe, also belongs to this category.

Dahan shows that the girl's mother puts her career, or rather her dream about having a career as a singer, over the welfare of her daughter and neglects her to such an extent that the child is dirty and sick. When Edith's father, a circus performer, returns from the war, he takes her away from her mother and brings her to his own mother, who runs a brothel. There the girl witnesses abuse of prostitutes by their clients and temporarily loses her sight, due to severe keratitis. Not all, however, is bad at this stage of girl's life, as she befriends a good-hearted prostitute, Titine, who loves her as if she was her own child, looks after her when Edith is sick and instils in the girl a deep religiosity, which becomes a source of solace for Piaf.

Edith's father takes Edith from the brothel to accompany him in his street acts. It is there that her singing talent blossoms, eventually taking her to the most prestigious venues in the world. Dahan, however, shows that Piaf's road to success was far from straightforward. The man who discovered Edith singing on a Paris street corner and gave her the artistic pseudonym La Môme Piaf (The Little Sparrow), which provided the title of the film[1], a club owner Louis Leplée, was murdered in his apartment in 1936, leading to Piaf being questioned by the police and part of the public holding her responsible for Leplée's death. The next stage of her career is turning to Raymond Asso, a songwriter and a singing coach. He proves to be a harsh and authoritarian teacher, almost a sadist. He tells Piaf to abandon her natural expression and use her hands when singing. He also teaches her to be not merely a singer, but a performer, who does not sing about her own life, but impersonates a certain character. This advice works, as next we see Piaf

[1] The term 'La Môme' is not widely known in the English-speaking countries or associated with Piaf, which is the likely reason why the French title is not used there.

making broad gestures on stage and the audience laughing, as if she was a stand-up comedian. Under Asso's tutelage Piaf does not lose her authenticity nor her powerful voice, but gains performing skills.

In due course, Asso disappears from Piaf's life and is not replaced by men of similar power; nobody bosses Piaf anymore. Instead, she makes her own choices and often acts like a capricious and unpredictable diva. For example, she demands to drive a car, when going through a desert in the United States, resulting in crashing the vehicle. Like a diva, she is also accompanied by a large entourage, who try to fulfil her every whim. Most of these people are women. Dahan pays particular attention to Piaf's friendships with strange looking women with an ambiguous gender identity. She feels at ease in their company and they insulate her against men's power.

Piaf is known for having a tumultuous love life. She was twice married, to a fellow singer Jacques Pills and hairdresser Théophanis Lamboukas, who was gay and 20 years Piaf's junior, at a moment when 'her romanticism won over her sense of the ridiculous' (Allen 2011). She also had many affairs, including to composer Norbert Glanzburg, actor Yves Montand, movie star John Garfield, performer Eddie Constantine, bicycle champion André Pousse, singer Jacques Pills, lyricist and singer Georges Moustaki, many of whom were married (Allen 2011).

However, despite the wealth of romantic lovers, the scriptwriters and director chose just one, apparently the greatest love of Piaf's life, the boxing champion Marcel Cerdan, editing out her husbands and other lovers. In this relationship Piaf is shown as childish and assertive at the same time. On their first date, in New York, when Cerdan invites her to a low-key café, where she is served a meat sandwich, she refuses to eat it and asks him to go to a higher-class venue. She says that she accepts the fact that he is married with children and that his principal allegiance is to his family, but at the same time asks him to visit her and she herself attends his matches. Their affair is presented largely as a union of two performers, who accept and enjoy the fact that they live in the limelight. Piaf is shown as utterly heartbroken, when Cerdan dies in a plane crash, on a way to meet her in New York.

Popular artists are often presented as cash cows, enriching their managers and family members who want them carry on working, even when their health is ailing. In the case of Piaf, as presented in the film, the opposite is the case. Her manager Louis Barrier and her entourage want her to stop singing, after she collapsed on stage, but she wants to return, begging her manager: 'Take me back on

stage, I must sing. I have no choice.' It is one of several scenes when she equates singing with living. In another one, when interviewed by a female journalist, she says: 'If I could no longer sing, I could no longer live.' These are not empty words, as they are supported by the way Piaf is presented in the film. Off-stage she is just a short, prematurely aged woman with a strange facial expression, as if being permanently embarrassed or surprised. She also has a difficult, capricious character, often uttering nonsense. When she goes on stage, she straightens herself up and her powerful voice as well as the stage lights make her look much taller and stronger than she is in reality, and the profound lyrics render her wise and courageous, rather than reckless. When she is too sick to perform, she looks like a living corpse: bent, pale and disfigured.

The importance of being on stage is also conveyed in Dahan's film by the representation of space. Most scenes are set in public and semi-public spaces: on stage, in back rooms, during the parties, restaurants and hotel rooms and, finally, a sanatorium, where Piaf spends the last years of her life. Initially, marginalising the private space in Piaf's life can be explained by a simple fact that she lacked such a space: she lived on the street, in other people's places and rooms adjoined to cabarets where she performed. However, even when she became a star, her private space is shown rarely and when it happens, it is used like a public space, as there she discusses her singing or auditions people who want to sell her their songs. In some imaginary scenes private space transforms into public space. This happens, most conspicuously, when the singer learns about her lover's death. On this occasion Piaf wanders through what can be her apartment or a large hotel suite and then moves from there to the stage, to perform in front of an imaginary audience. This might be interpreted as a sign that in the moment of tragedy she needs to communicate with the audience, to share and alleviate her pain. By and large, it shows that the singer transforms all spaces where she moves, into a space of performance, in her words, of life

Dahan condensed Piaf's life to such an extent that at times the film loses continuity and important moments are edited out of Piaf's life. Most reviewers noted with dismay that the Second World War practically disappeared from the narrative (Bradshaw 2007; Scott 2007). As I mentioned earlier, all Piaf's lovers, with an exception of Cerdan, also disappeared. The loss of her only child is referenced in a brief scene presenting the last night in the singer's life, when her entire life is 'played' in front of her eyes, as it was a film. We learn thus that the daughter was taken to the hospital, when Piaf was performing in a cabaret, and it was the girl's father who had to inform Piaf about her daughter's condition. This tragedy appears as merely an afterthought, both for Piaf, when she recollects it

when she is about to cross the line between life and death and for Dahan, who perhaps added this scene to avoid an accusation of deleting such a tragedy from Piaf's screen biography. Yet, this short scene also shows that Piaf mimicked her mother, who was also neglectful towards her daughter. At the same time, marginalising Piaf's experience as a mother underscores the fact that she challenged societal traditional expectations for women, without being punished for that, unlike Dalida, as I will discuss later.

Dahan shows that men did not fulfil their ambitions through Piaf and genuinely helped her in her career. Piaf's success was thus the result of her own talent and resolve. However, the singer is not shown as particularly ambitious or strategic about her career. Her career comes across as a result of not being able to do anything else than perform. Roger Ebert compares her from this perspective to Judy Garland, writing

> Garland lived for the adulation of the audience, and Piaf lived to do her duty as a singer. From her earliest days, from the prostitutes, her father and her managers, she learned that when you're paid, you perform. (Ebert 2007)[2]

Indeed, given her humble background, singing for recognition was practically Piaf's only option.

In a way typical of biographies of singers, which have much in common with musicals, the film shows how different events from Piaf's past affected her songs. One such example is 'Milord', a song about a young prostitute, working in a port town, who falls in love with an upper-class British man, the eponymous Milord, who initially ignores her. The film suggests that the song refers to Titine, who was unhappy about her life, yearning for romantic fulfilment. Titine herself liked to sing, possibly inspiring in this way the future star.

Another important song in the film is 'Non, je ne regrette rien', released in 1960, which finishes the film. This song shows tenacity of the singer, who - despite her many tragedies - regarded her life as fulfilling. The song also encourages one to discard the past and concentrate on the present day, which seemed to be the way Piaf lived her life. This is an unusual song in Piaf's career, as in it she does not adopt a persona, but appears to sing about her own life.

The film uses Piaf's songs sparingly and only fragments of them. Often we do not hear Piaf's voice, only look at her singing. Such representation gives more

[2] Piaf's biographer, Carolyn Burke, also compares Piaf to Judy Garland, as well as to Billie Holiday (Burke 2011: xii).

credibility to Cotillard's performance, as it does not link it to the voice which does not belong to her. Typically, we see Piaf singing on stage. On occasions, her songs also act as diegetic music. Although today Piaf is known mostly from her recordings, on no occasion we see her recording her songs in a studio or performing on television. Such a choice underscores the idea that Piaf was a live performer, who blossomed when having a live audience in front of her. However, this omission renders Piaf more archaic and one-dimensional than she was in reality, given that she also appeared in many films. Likewise, the film fails to present Piaf's career against the backdrop of the changes in French and international popular music, despite the fact that the 1950s and early 1960s saw the emergence of many stars coming from France with an international following, such as Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, Charles Aznavour and later Dalida, who is the heroine of the next film discussed in this essay. Piaf's successes in the 1940s and 1950s coincided with the dominance of chanson and cabaret songs in France. In this genre Piaf had few female competitors and those who appeared at some stage, such as Juliette Gréco, were significantly younger than her. In the 1960s, however, not only did the Beatles become a global phenomenon, but a new genre started to dominate French popular music: the French version of rock music, known as ye ye. Had Piaf lived longer, she most likely would have been regarded as an anachronism. Hence, her early death at the age of forty-eight saved her from losing her privileged position in French popular music.

Singer's voice as a surrogate voice

The protagonist of Azuelos film, actual name Iolanda Cristina Gigliotti, professionally known as Dalida, was born in 1933 in Egypt and died in 1987 in France. She was thus one generation younger than Piaf. While the deprivations, caused by the First World War, affected Piaf in a major way, the Second World War was a crucial experience in Dalida's childhood. In a sense, the future star lost her father during this time, because as an Italian living in Egypt, he was arrested and when he returned home after the war, he became a violent man. Duringher childhood, Dalida, not unlike Piaf, also suffered from an eye illness and temporarily lost her sight. She lived in Cairo till she won the Miss Egypt competition and moved to France, first to purse a career in cinema and later in singing, which made her a big star in France, Europe and the Middle East.

Azuleos, like Dahan, does not tell the story of the singer from the beginning to the end, but like him, starts at one of the most dramatic moments of her life: her attempted suicide in 1967. Since then, the action moves backwards and forwards, zigzagging between Dalida's childhood, the period which led her to

her first suicide attempt and to her finishing her life, also by suicide. However, the representation of these events differ to those in Piaf's biopic. In Dahan's film, after Piaf left childhood and morphed into a young woman, played by Cotillard, she became the main teller of her story, confessing her views to her female friends, voicing opinions on songs which were offered to her and giving interviews. In Azuelos' film, on the other hand, Dalida is mainly spoken about, as if she was a patient or a child, rather than speaking for herself. When she says something, it is usually a laconic response to somebody else's utterance. Instead, her actions are a subject of comments by the media and other people, which suggests that her voice is drowned by other people's voices. When she expresses herself, it is through her music, rather than in conversations. This brings to mind Jane Campion's film, *The Piano*. Bennett Roth states that 'the piano, a replica of the English Broadwood, is for Ada her voice, a transitional or fetish object, and, eventually and unexpectedly, her seductive siren' (Roth 2000: 405) Superficially, the situation of Dalida is different from Ada who is mute, as she has even a double voice, so to speak, being able both to talk and express herself through her singing. However, it is the second voice - the voice in the song, which is privileged in the film.

Particularly important from this perspective are the early scenes. In one we see the singer at the airport, bidding farewell to two people who tell her not to go alone. This fact suggests that they treat her not as an independent person, responsible for her deeds, but as somebody who constantly needs support. The mood of the scene is sombre, although we do not know why. Following the departure of the two men Dalida puts on dark glasses and covers her head with a scarf, suggesting that she would like to become invisible. Her movements are slowed down, which adds them weight. The main means used to create the sombre mood is music - Dalida's cover version of 'Nights in White Satin'. Cover versions are not faithful translations of originals, but their reworkings. This is also the case with 'Nights in White Satin'. The original song, performed by the Moody Blues, conveyed nostalgia for unfulfilled love, while Dalida's version is more dramatic. It feels like for her, love is a matter of life or death. When one loses love, one also loses the will to live. What we see next - information about Dalida's suicide attempt, following the suicide of her lover, Luigi Tenco, confirms this interpretation.

Dalida's recuperation in a hospital and then sanatorium is accompanied by flashbacks, presenting memories of her from other people. One of them is Dalida's ex-husband and manager, Lucien Morisse, who reminisces on their first encounter, in 1956. At this time, when performing at the competition for new

talent in the Olympia Hall, a famous music club in Paris, owned and managed by Bruno Coquatrix, where Piaf also performed with a great success, Dalida caught the attention of Morisse, who was the artistic director of a radio station called Europe 1. The song which Dalida performed included the lines:

> Without you I'm but the lonely child
>
> Love me I need you so much

It seems that Morisse regarded these words not as banalities filling romantic ballads, but as a true description of the singer's emotional state and the desire of a beautiful, but lonely woman, to have Someone love her and take care of her. He answers her request, introducing the young singer to Eddie Barclay, who was the owner of the largest recording house. Morisse also becomes her manager, lover and, finally, husband. With Morisse's help, Dalida releases her first big hit, 'Bambino', in October 1956. The film draws attention to the fact that it was a 'media hit'. People fell in love not only with the song, but also the singer, whose beauty they admired on the television screen and on covers of fashion magazines, as opposed to only seeing her perform live. We even see Morisse's wife catching her husband watching Dalida on television and probably realising that by this point, their marriage is over. Being a media star renders Dalida more contemporary than Piaf, who communicated with her audience largely through live performance and the radio, rather than television.

'Bambino' is in many ways a typical song by Dalida, as it plays on her multicultural heritage - the song is sung in French, but its title is in Italian and the song tells a story of an Italian mandolin player whose music is compared to the Italian sky. It also concerns unrequited love and jealousy: themes which also feature prominently in Dalida's later songs. On this occasion, however, this theme is presented in a light-hearted way.

'Bambino' is followed by Dalida's next hit, 'Come Prima' (Like Before), whose protagonist confesses that 'I will love you like before'. We can regard this song as prophetic, given that each of Dalida's affairs (at least according to Azuelos' film) was like before –intense, but short-lived. The song plays over a montage of Dalida's romantic encounters with Morisse, which include kissing and playing scrabble, emphasising the playful character of their affair. Soon, however, the first conflict erupts, about Morisse and Dalida having different plans and aspirations. Dalida says that she wants to get married and have a child, while her lover and manager claims that arranging a wedding is difficult due to her constant touring and pronounces that 'stars don't have children', because 'children ruin their myth'. In this union, as in the scheme described by Bingham, the ambi-

tion to succeed is transferred from Dalida to Morisse, with Dalida acting like an old-fashioned woman, craving for domesticity. To avoid any ambiguity about her dreams and aspirations, she tells her husband-to-be that she would like to live 'like a normal woman' and cook dinner for him, to which he responds 'Normal women dream about being like you'.

This dialogue can be interpreted in different, even contradictory ways. It can be seen as Morisse's attempt to instil in Dalida the desire to be a modern woman, who rejects stereotypical feminine roles or a way to convince her to work for herself, but also to his benefit. Dalida, who expresses a wish to live like a traditional woman, yet who nevertheless chooses to be a star can be seen as a secular saint who must abandon her personal desires to give herself, and her voice to the public, as well as a hypocrite or a confused woman, who does not know what she wants or how to reconcile her different desires.

Despite their disagreements, Morisse and Dalida get married, but the marriage does not last long due to Dalida falling in love with a young actor and painter, Jean Sobieski, whom she meets at the Cannes Film Festival. It is with Sobieski when we see Dalida for the first time in a domestic setting, in her apartment in Paris, with a view on the Eiffel Tower. The scene is brief, giving us no insight into the way Dalida enjoys (or fails to enjoy) her private life. The conversation she has there with Sobieski does not concern their shared life, but rather the advantage of living in the building where another apartment can be used for Sobieski's studio. As for somebody who craves for domesticity, there is little shown of Dalida's enjoyment of home. Moreover, it appears that soon after meeting Sobieski, Dalida splits with him because, as he argues, she still loves her ex-husband, and is torn between her two personas: private and professional: Yolanda and Dalida.

Dalida's subsequent life is presented as led almost exclusively outside her home. She meets friends after concerts and conducts her romantic affairs in hotels, which affords them an aura of short-termism and secrecy. This is especially the case of her affair with the Italian singer Luigi Tenco, whom she coached for his performance at the Sanremo Music Festival. This reminds one of life of Piaf, but unlike Dalida, Piaf did not crave domesticity, but enjoyed her public life and did not mind the blurred division between her private and public existence. By contrast, for Dalida, work equals sacrificing her private life. The only extended scene taking place in the singer's apartment is during the Christmas Eve, which she celebrates with her siblings and their families. This occasion leads, however, to discord, because she accepts a visit of a young man, whom her family does not know, while her brother wants it to be a family occasion.

Tenco, who is closest to the 'love of her life' type character, is presented as a bad-tempered young man, unhappy about the way he is treated by other guests at the festival, who quits it in the middle of his performance. Soon after he commits suicide, in protest of the 'ignorant public'. She tries to take Dalida with him, figuratively, as the star also tries to commit suicide upon finding out what happened to her lover, but is rescued, as previously mentioned. The suicide is, again, marked by Dalida's song. On this occasion it is a cover version of 'Bang, Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)', originally performed by Cher. As with 'Nights in White Satin', we see how Dalida makes a cover song her own, not only through her interpretation, which renders it less rock and more a pop ballad, but also through connecting it to events from her life.

The next man in Dalida's life is a young student, whom she meets first in Italy, a kind of stand-in for Tenco, given that he attracts her attention thanks to gifting her with Tenco's book of poetry and declaring himself as a fan of his music. Dalida's affair with him is, again, marked by a song, 'Il venait d'avoir 18 ans' (He had just turned 18). The song, recorded in 1973, was a success and has become one of Dalida's signature tracks. She also, fittingly, recorded it in Italian, as if to acknowledge the nationality of her lover, who got her pregnant. We might expect that for a woman who yearns to have a child, living in a time after the sexual revolution and in France, where attitudes to extramarital sex were historically more liberal than elsewhere in Europe, it would be a cause for celebration. Dalida's siblings are happy about it and dismiss their sister's concern about the 12-years old age gap between herself and her lover. They also mention that they would help her raising the child. Yet, she decides to have an abortion. The contradiction between the singer's explicit yearning for a child and this decision is not explained. We can only conjecture that, at least in this particular moment, the singer prioritised her career and reputation over the bliss of motherhood.

However, Azuleos does not want to acknowledge Dalida's ambition, most likely not to undermine the idea that Dalida 's private happiness was denied by external forces rather than her own decisions. Azuleos edits Dalida's abortion, which makes her scream from pain, with praying in a church and singing in a white dress, in soft focus, which gives her face a kind of halo. The song she is singing, pronounces that 'the face of a child always warms my heart'. Hence, the overall connotation of Dalida's abortion is that it rendered her a saint and a martyr. This is the highest moment of the hagiography of 'Saint Dalida', as presented by Azuelos. The image of Dalida here is ambivalent. We can interpret it as a proof that Dalida the 'woman' (as a good housewife and mother) had to be sacrificed, so that the star shown as a secular saint could be born. Or, we can read

it as a sign of Dalida's hypocrisy due to pronouncing to strive to achieve domestic bliss, while in practice always prioritising professional success. Afterwards, we also see her ex-lover receiving a cheque and a letter encouraging him to use this gift to pay for his studies. This seems like a noble gesture from Dalida, showing her desire to help the young man and not to mess with his life. Such action can be also interpreted less sympathetically, as a way of getting rid of a lover with whom she got bored and a way to prevent him from going to the media and talking about their affair, risking a scandal and a drops in record sales.

By this point, we can conjecture that the film, indeed, constructs two Dalidas. One is pragmatic, focused on her career and sexually promiscuous; the other romantic and following the precepts of Catholicism, a faith in which the singer was brought up with its focus on maternity and domesticity. The first pertained to the life the singer actually lived; the second to the life she imagined. The film wants us to believe that the second was more important to her and the ultimate reason to her continuous unhappiness.

Following the abortion, Dalida's life is in a downward spiral, punctuated by numerous attempts to break the cycle of unhappiness, for example by joining a group engaged in meditation and yoga. During her conversation with the yoga instructor, Dalida confesses that she would like to stop singing, because music thwarts her, denying her a sense of an (independent) identity. She says: 'When I sing, I become one with my music'. This is also what the film suggests by identifying her mental state with messages conveyed by her songs. The yoga teacher, however, uses her words to persuade her to carry on performing. He tells her, 'Your mission in life is to sing. This is how you help others.' Such pronouncement, on one hand, exonerates Dalida from prioritising her career, which she always does, by presenting it as a selfless pursuit, motivated by a desire to bring joy to her listeners. Such representation of Dalida contrasts with that of Piaf, because in Dalida's case the word 'mission' infers a fate, while Piaf was shown as somebody who constructed herself through working on her expression and choosing appropriate songs.

Following Tenco, the second important man in Dalida's life commits suicide: Lucien Morisse, in 1970. The film alludes to the fact that the cause of his death might be debts caused by gambling, but he shoots himself in the head after watching Dalida's performance, which suggests that the real cause of his death was his unrequited love to the singer. Despite the profound impact of this death on Dalida, her career does not suffer, although the film suggests that following this tragic event she remade her image as a singer of even more personal, autobiographical songs. The most important of those was 'Je suis malade', which is in

part a song about unrequited love, which was always Dalida's specialism, and in part about the 'illness of the soul', namely depression. Simultaneously, she took greater control of her career (with a help of and on an insistence of her brother) by hiring venues for her performances. This strategy paid off, according to the film, as the singer increased her record sales and embarked on a successful tour in the United States.

The last stage of Dalida's personal and professional life is linked to two turns. One is her meeting Richard Chanfray, a handsome Parisian playboy and fantasist without a proper occupation, who presented himself as Prince of Saint-Germain, who was 17,000 years old and met Dalida in their earlier incarnations. With him, Dalida had her longest relationship, lasting from 1972 till 1981. It encompassed the time when the singer recorded her most enduring song, 'Paroles, paroles' and her turn to disco in the second half of the 1970s, when she learnt to dance and recorded a disco song, 'Monday Tuesday... Laissez Moi Danser' (Monday, Tuesday, Let Me Dance Tonight).

Dalida recorded 'Paroles, paroles' in duet with Alain Delon, who, however, does not feature in the film, perhaps because of a difficulty of finding a suitable actor, given that most fans of European cinema and music remember how Delon looked like in different stages of his life, unlike Tenco, Sobieski or Chanfray, whose faces are unfamiliar to them. 'Paroles, paroles' is thus played only in the background, when the singer makes love to Chanfray, suggesting - as we might guess - that Chanfray is a charlatan, who charms Dalida with sweet words, rather than good deeds. Such 'downplaying' of this song is unfortunate, because it does not afford it the status it deserves, being her most popular song, and links it to Chanfray at the beginning of their relationship, raising the question why she stayed with him for so long.

The choice of Delon as Dalida's partner is meaningful, as at this stage Delon was regarded as an icon of male beauty and style in France and Europe at large. He epitomised a man who used his charm to woo beautiful women, only to betray them, when another attractive woman appeared on the horizon. 'Paroles, paroles' reveals how men like Delon try to charm women: mostly by telling them repeatedly how beautiful they are. By choosing Dalida as a partner in this duet Dalida is assigned the position of a mature woman, who knows that male compliments are merely 'paroles, paroles', which she dismisses as falling on her lips, as opposed to reaching her heart. However, in real life, despite her romantic disappointments, at this stage Dalida is still investing in love, as Azuelos wants us to believe, albeit with diminishing returns, as each of her new lovers treats her worse than the previous one and hence her relationships appear to become

shorter. The romantic problems are reflected and exacerbated with Dalida's worry about her body. She is shown suffering from bulimia and loss of hair, which she hides by wearing a cap, resulting in her lover mocking her which adds to her insecurity. However, the negative changes in her body are only mentioned rather than shown. Throughout the entire film Dalida remains young and beautiful - in contrast to Piaf in Dahan's film, who ages immensely and becomes disfigured. The way Azuelos represents Dalida's affairs contrasts with that of Dahan also in the sense that Piaf figuratively grows through her love of Cerdan, while Dalida is diminished by her affairs, both in her private life and professionally. The latter is demonstrated in her recording a song with Chanfray, who appears to have no talent for singing and no other recognisable talent. Inevitably, the song is a flop.

'Monday Tuesday... Laissez Moi Danser' marks Dalida's successful transformation into a disco star, which required not only singing more dynamic songs, but also dancing. As with other professional decisions, this one also appears to be made not by the singer herself, but somebody in her entourage - her manager brother, who gets the idea when they visit a nightclub. Subsequently, we see Dalida training to perform this song, which pronounces that dancing is an antidote to an unhappy love. Nevertheless, it turns out to be only a temporary refuge, because the next stage in her life includes another suicide attempt, this time successful. The film alludes to Dalida's final romantic relationship, somebody called Michel, but the man is not shown in the film. In reality, the last of Dalida's romantic partners was a married doctor, François Naudy, who refused to divorce his wife, to be with a singer.

In common with *La Vie en Rose*, *Dalida* includes the motif of eyes. We learn that as a baby Dalida suffered from an eye disease and got temporarily blind, like Piaf. Also, as with Piaf, this heightened her sense of hearing and helped her to develop her musicality. However, for Piaf it was a temporary problem, while for Dalida it was a persistent one. Especially during the later stage of her career, stage lights were hurting her. This real problem can be interpreted metaphorically, as reflecting Dalida's persistent difficulty to see people properly and, consequently, to make right decisions about them, especially men. The hurting of her eyes being caused by stage light, can also be regarded as reflecting her desire to withdraw from performing and hide from the public view.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I suggest that Dahan in *La Vie en Rose* attempted to make a feminist biopic, which recognises that a famous woman can live mostly for her art or even equate her life with 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. Piaf's talent for singing is also presented as a protection against external tragedies and as a source of meaning in her life. 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 chose a different profession, she could be happier.

Another difference concerns the 'voice' of the singer. Piaf is presented as a strongheaded character, who always makes her own decisions, both those related to her private and professional life. She overpowers those around her: her managers, songwriters and friends. Dalida, by contrast, comes across as a weak character, who makes wrong choices about men and tries to please them, usually at the expense of her own pleasure. In her professional life, the choices are good, but in a large part, they are not her own choices, but those of men surrounding her: her husband and brother. When she makes her own choices, collaborating with Tenco or recording a duet with Chanfray, they prove to be flops. She is also presented as unable to express herself properly when communicating with her family and lovers. She makes up for this lack of 'voice' by singing.

The fact that a male director embarked on such a feminist film, while the female director opted for a more traditional biopic points to a need to be cautious about assigning ideological positions to filmmakers according to their gender. It shall also be mentioned that neither film is 'truer' by the virtue or vice of presenting their protagonists in a specific way. For me, they are both true as they reflect well on the way I perceive these two artists. It is likely that Azuelos would fail by rendering Dalida feminist and Dahan would fail by making Piaf a romantic.

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