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The Many Faces of

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The Many Faces of Biopics

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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 Győri, explores biographical documentary cinema that investigates living people through interviews and other forms of interaction, which - as Győri argues - is a marginalised subgenre of biopics. The topic of Győri'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, Győri 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.

Ewa Mazierska

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Putting the Mockers On: The Rutles, The Beatles, Rock Biopics and Parody

Abstract

Many accounts of film genre reiterate a familiar narrative of growth to "classic" maturity and subsequent parody and/or deconstruction, and the biopic is no exception. However, rock music biopics have reversed this narrative, so that the genre begins in parody and only gets serious later. This is partly because rock and roll music began as parody, mainly by white people imitating African Americans, what is known as blackface minstrelsy, in which music and humour are necessarily (because of racism) mixed. In turn, the 60s rock counterculture took many of its cues from this untimely birth, appropriating African-American marginality in modes that were at once serious (concerns about authenticity) and ironic (mockery of Establishment values). This collision of opposites helps explain both the counterculture's preference for documentary, especially of live performance, over Hollywood fiction, and its predilection for mockery of both (for example, mockumentary). As the single most influential proto-rock act, whose inventive wit and comic antics, rendered in newsreel, direct cinema, cartoon, and on record, were keys to their commercial and critical success, 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, I have focused on key live performances from the Beatles' career, and how they are parodied in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978) henceforth *The Rutles,* which

doubles as the first filmic biography of the Beatles and the first rock mockumentary. The Beatles' later career saw their public image shift from intentional to unintentional comedy, a shift mapped in the *The Rutles,* which gradually moves from parody towards satire. It is argued that *The Rutles* is open to a range of audience identifications and readings: it is at once a text for "true fans", a playful deconstruction of their investments, but also one with real-world reverberations (some of its predictions came true). In this sense, it is a "media savvy", peculiarly contemporary text that questions the priority of reality over fiction.

Keywords:

Beatles, biopics, popular music films, mockumentary, comedy, The Rutles, parody.

"It was all pretty silly. It was just like the Rutles really." George Harrison, responding to a question about the Beatles' career. [1]

Introduction

Many accounts of film genre reiterate a familiar narrative of growth to "classic" maturity and subsequent parody and/or deconstruction (Metz 1975; Turner 1993). The biopic is no exception, having "gone from celebratory to warts-and-all to investigatory to postmodern and parodic" (Bingham 2010, 10). For biopic scholars like Bingham, conformity to this norm helps justify the biopic's credibility. I want to argue that rock music biopics have reversed this narrative, so that the genre begins in parody and only gets serious later. This is partly because rock and roll music began as parody, mainly by white people imitating African Americans, what is known as blackface minstrelsy, in which music and humour are necessarily (because of racism) mixed. In turn, the 60s rock counterculture took many of its cues from this untimely birth, appropriating African-American marginality in modes that were at once serious (concerns about authenticity) and ironic (mockery of Establishment values). This collision of opposites helps explain both the counterculture's preference for documentary, especially of live performance, over Hollywood fiction, and its predilection for mockery of both (for example, mockumentary). As the single most influential proto-rock act, whose inventive wit and comic antics, rendered in newsreel, direct cinema,

[1] "The Beatles talk about the Rutles." (n.d.). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVsmaNWn3zA

cartoon, and on record, were keys to their commercial and critical success, 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, I have focused on key live performances from the Beatles' career, and how they are parodied in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978) henceforth *The Rutles,* which doubles as the first filmic biography of the Beatles and the first rock mockumentary. The Beatles' later career saw their public image shift from intentional to unintentional comedy, a shift mapped in the *The Rutles,* which gradually moves from parody towards satire. It is argued that *The Rutles* is open to a range of audience identifications and readings: it is at once a text for "true fans", a playful deconstruction of their investments, but also one with real-world reverberations (some of its predictions came true). In this sense, it is a "media savvy", peculiarly contemporary text that questions the priority of reality over fiction.

The Rutles has a claim to being one of the first rock biopics. It is certainly the first Beatles' biopic, predating TV film, *Birth of the Beatles* [1979], *Backbeat* (1990) about the group's early days in Hamburg, and *Nowhere Boy,* a biographical film about John Lennon's adolescence (2007). The only other claimant, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), a quasi-documentary account of "a day in the life" of the group, is disqualified because the Beatles play themselves. This, their first feature film, along with *Help!* (1965), *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) and *Yellow Submarine* (1968) cover a wide range of filmic styles and genres, and became formative influences on how rock music was represented on screen (Neaverson 1997). Documentaries by or about the Beatles also significantly influenced fictional representations of the group. They begin with the Maysles Brothers' *What's Happening! The Beatles In The U.S.A.* (1964) (reissued on video in 1990 as *The Beatles: The First US Visit*), followed by *Let It Be* (1970), and the unreleased documentary by the band, *The Long and Winding Road. The Rutles'* makers had access to a rough cut of the latter, from which they lifted ideas and archival footage (it was finally released in 1995 as the *Beatles Anthology*, an eight-part "authorised" TV documentary) (Spitz 2013). *A Hard Day's Night r*ecycles much of *What's Happening!*, including the train, press conference, hotel room and nightclub settings and action, as well as now familiar Beatlemania tropes such as shooting inside a car surrounded by fans; and group members clowning on camera. Both films are organised around live performances (although only the documentary actually features live footage), and *A Hard Day's Night* also borrows its handheld, direct cinema style from the Maysles (Brockway 1969), simply transposing the setting from the US to

the UK and adding a thin plot about Paul McCartney's errant grandfather (Wilfred Brambell). Much of the latter film's comic zest derives from the documentary original.

Mockumentary

This combination of feature film and documentary precedents points towards the fact that *The Rutles* is a mockumentary, "a fictional audiovisual text, such as a feature film or television program, that looks and sounds like a documentary" (Hight 2014, 515). It could be objected that a mockumentary is not a biopic, but it is not clear in this case where the distinction lies: like a biopic, *The Rutles* dramatises real events to create a biographical narrative; it uses actors to play the personalities concerned; it mixes history and fiction. Many biopics use documentary techniques, especially when the subject is a contemporary celebrity. The Maysles' documentary profoundly influenced how the Beatles were represented on film, and documentary, in turn, became the filmic form with which rock culture was most associated. Indeed, *The Rutles* inaugurated its own sub-genre - the rock mockumentary, for example *Bad News Tour* (1983) and *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), suggesting the conventional association of rock music with documentary, as well as the possibility of it being a joke: "In the movies, even straight pop history is usually parody in spite of itself" (Marcus 1995, 135). There are other reasons why popular music based films and TV confuse reality and fiction, and documentary and comedy, Andrew Goodwin remarking how "pop songs are often performed through a direct and/or first-person mode of address, thus breaking with the illusionism of the 'fourth wall' of naturalistic cinema and television" (1993, 17). This device is also used in news programmes and filmic comedy (Seidman 1981). Both music and humour can be seen as types of "play" which suspend the rules of *bona fide* communication (Morreall 2011). Thus, it seems plausible to link them. Further evidence arises from the racial history of popular music.

Blackface

Why would the rock biopic begin as parody? Rock music began at least partly as a white imitation of African-American culture - blackface minstrelsy. According to African-American critic Armond White, "some form of darkie [sic] mimicking has been the strongest musical tradition in pluralized American culture" (White 1990, 21). Eric Lott states:

> in minstrelsy's cultural force, its racial crossings, and what the *New York Tribune* called its pleasing "insanity" (June 30, 1855), its emergence re-

> sembled that of early rock 'n' roll. Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return. For an index of popular white racial feeling in the United States, one could do worse than minstrelsy… The tone and format of the early minstrel show, with its knee-slapping musical numbers punctuated by comic dialogues, bad puns, and petit-bourgeois ribaldry, should seem familiar to anyone who has seen American television's "Hee Haw" (2013, 5).

Lott highlights how minstrel performances combined music and humour. Imitation of African-American culture could be seen as parody, partly because of racism, which made a straightforward acknowledgement of influence impossible:

> Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed— minstrelsy's mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation, what Homi Bhabha would call its "ambivalence"... and what my title loosely terms "love and theft" (Lott 2013, 6).

Blackface was appropriation, exaggeration and distortion of an ethnic original. Even white racists could discern the appeal of African-American music, but only laughter could render that insight acceptable. Many of blackface's stereotypes endured into the early reception of rock and roll music, and influenced both dissenting and approving narratives. Early rock critic Nik Cohn wrote about Little Richard, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley as 'a… flood of maniacs, wild men… laughing stocks in any earlier generation' (1996, 31). Forms like doo-wop, with its nonsense syllables, were particularly easy prey for parodists. According to rock critic Dave Marsh, the Diamonds' "Little Darlin'" (1957) parodied an original by the African-American Gladiolas. Marsh notes the all-white Diamonds "were hyped as college-educated" and that their versions "travestied R&B, which they viewed with dripping sophomoric contempt. But 'Little Darlin'' is so brutal that it transcends satire… the record's as unmistakably exciting as it is insincere… when the thrill's the thing, who gives a fuck about intentions?" (1999, 148). Marsh argues that not only was the record a hit, but that its teen audience didn't care if the version was satirical. "Squares never do get it. When they wanted to show their superiority to rock and roll… Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary chose 'Little Darlin'' as the target of their mockery. Of course, they didn't do the Gladiolas' version, they parodied the Diamonds' parody, a fitting tribute to the relative aesthetic suss of all concerned" (1999 148-9). The underlying point was that in rock and roll, teen audiences made the decisions about which music was cool, and maker's intentions, parodic

or not, were of secondary importance.[2] Thus, it made little sense to think of rock and roll as evolving in the same orderly manner as film genre.

With the growth of civil rights in 1960s US, blackface came to be regarded as shameful. By the 1970s it was a critical commonplace that, as music journalist Robert Christgau states, "rock is basically Afro-American music" (1973, 15). This convention is both acknowledged and mocked in *The Rutles*: reporter (Eric Idle) goes to New Orleans to discover "the black origins of Rutle music," only to be told by a local African-American musician named Blind Lemon Pye that "everything I learned, I learned from the Rutles". It is perhaps because the Rutles was originally a British project that they were able to get away with this joke, which surely would not have been acceptable from white Americans in the 1970s. This in turn suggests how white British musicians were extended license to "play" with topics and styles that were too charged for white America - they were also performing blackface, but once removed from the immediate climate of segregation, as noted by Simon Frith (1988). The Beatles were again paradigmatic in this respect.

African American influence was mediated into rock culture in complex ways, which may disguise the force of the original influence. Keir Keightley suggests: "rock historians have misinterpreted ... taste for African American music ... as overt "political" statements. Instead, white youth ... adopt this music as a sign of youth's own, privileged difference, expressing ... their refusal of the mainstream" (2001, 125). Appropriation of blackness functions as symbolic marginality, which allows white youth to imagine themselves as an oppressed minority. This symbolic refusal could take many forms, one of which was humour. The following sections will discuss 1960s counterculture, its ideas about authenticity, its relation to film and to humour, and the relation of humour to popular music, as exemplified by the Beatles. The Beatles' relation to UK comedy and comedy rock group the Bonzo Dog Band in turn led to the The Rutles. These points will help connect the earlier analysis of film genre and parody with more sustained engagement with the text of *The Rutles*, later in the essay.

The counterculture and authenticity

By the late 1960s, distinctive youth cultures associated with rock music were developing; one of the most influential being the West Coast counterculture (Roszak 1995). Growing up adjacent to Hollywood, the counterculture

[2] Similar to Umberto Eco's concept of aberrant decoding. (1972). "Towards a Semiotic Inquiry Into the Television Message." *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 3. trans. Paola Splendore. University of Birmingham: 103–21.

was suspicious of filmic representations of itself, and attacked their accuracy, countercultural bible *Rolling Stone* deriding early rock biopic *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978) for not sticking to the facts of Holly's life (Flippo 1978). In the UK, ex-Beatle Paul McCartney responded to the biopic with his 1987 documentary *The Real Buddy Holly Story*. But the counterculture's concept of truth was part of a broader concern with authenticity.

Keightley (2001) claims that rock authenticity derived from the US folk revival's romantic collectivism, originally identified with African-American culture, but becoming more modernist/individualist as emphasis shifted towards rock musicians as auteurs and rock music as "serious" art. Rock authenticity was less about "truth" than about differentiating rock from other forms of mass-mediated popular culture, whether pop music or Hollywood (Keightley 2001). By the 1970s, the US popular music and film industries were structurally similar and closely intertwined - both based in Los Angeles, both with a similar recent history of independent production companies innovating and then gradually being bought up by a few large media conglomerates (Mundy 1999). However, the counterculture distanced itself from Hollywood "exploitation" films about popular music and youth culture, starting with 50s jukebox musicals like *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), which juxtaposed images of African American musicians with bawdy innuendos about white actress Jayne Mansfield (Mundy 1999); to lurid 60s representations of the nascent counterculture like *The Trip* (1967), *Wild in the Streets* (1968) and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), culminating in the road movie *Easy Rider* (1970), the exception that proved the rule - Hollywood and hippies generally did not mix (Hoberman 2003). The received wisdom was that Hollywood simply aimed to exploit popular music as a fad for maximum profit (Mundy 1999). Ironically, this proved to be true, in the sense that films were usually made because of music, rather than the other way round, even in cases like the Beatles and the Rutles, where the films proved to be lasting. In both cases, US business interest was in the music first. For example, *A Hard Day's Night:*

> was initially envisaged by the American-owned company as little more than another low budget exploitation picture which would capitalize on the group's fleeting success with the teenage market and, more importantly, provide its record label with a lucrative tie-in soundtrack album. Indeed, as [producer, Walter] Shenson later revealed, the company was only interested in making a Beatles film "for the express purpose of having a soundtrack album" (Neaverson 1997, 40).

As we shall see, a similar logic played out in the case of *The Rutles*. Exploitation is not far removed from parody: the "impure" origins of rock films suggest that the genre operated by different rules to more "serious" genres.

Another alleged example of Hollywood inauthenticity was The Monkees. Modelled on the Beatles, the "manufactured" group fronted an eponymous TV series that debuted in late 1966 and became a huge hit with younger audiences. Once again, the music led the way, despite being viewed initially as an add-on - the TV show became popular on the back of record sales, not vice versa (Baker 1979). However, when the group revealed that they didn't actually play on their records, there was a huge backlash (Christgau 1973). The rock counterculture condemned the group for its inauthenticity, conveniently disregarding the many instances of session musicians recording backing tracks for rock bands like the Byrds (Christgau 1973). But the heart of the matter was that the Monkees were perceived as a pop group that appealed to teenyboppers, and therefore a "sell-out' (Baker 1979). Also relevant was the fact that the show was knockabout comedy, which, although modelled on the Beatles' films, was excuse enough to dismiss it. One of the many ironies of this situation was that *The Monkees'* originators, Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider, became key players in the New Hollywood and its attempted rapprochement with the counterculture. Another was that the Beatles were fans, Lennon comparing the show to the Marx Brothers (Baker 1979).

The counterculture preferred direct cinema, documentary representations of itself, which gave the appearance of being unmediated, for example Pennebaker's Bob Dylan tour chronicle, *Dont Look Back* (1967). A series of concert films, mostly independently financed and made, followed - *Monterey Pop* (1968); *Woodstock* (1970) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970). By the late 1970s, New Hollywood film auteurs and their musical counterparts were linking up, as in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz* (1978), another concert film. The primacy of the concert film related to authenticity - "live" musical performance constituted the essential countercultural experience, proof that the musicians could play the music that they had recorded (or not, in the Monkees' case) (Auslander 2023). A related idea was the counterculture's suspicion of visual popular culture, especially TV; in contrast, the aural/oral experience of music's "vibrations" was heard as more immediate and real (Willis 2014). This anti-visuality extended to many alternative 1980s artists eschewing music videos (at least for a while) (Goodwin 1993). But it perpetuates a Romantic view of music as authentic expression as opposed to the "mediation" of TV and film.

Humour and the counterculture

Although suspicious of Hollywood comedy (like *The Monkees*), the counterculture, from the guerilla theatre of the Yippies showering the New York Stock Exchange with dollar bills (Hoberman 2003), to Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, favoured the "put-on" as a test to sort out the "heads" from the "straights" ("The Beatles were masters of the 'Put-on'", notes Hoberman [2003, 94]). Even the UK hippie movement was characterised by:

> mockery of conventional modes of being. The carelessness, the openness, the androgynousness, the oddness of their actions, all highlighted the pomp and self-seriousness of the "straights". The "straights" could not penetrate appearances. They played out a cosmic joke seriously. They were like adolescents in a spiritual puberty, adopting the grave manners which they took to be those of maturity (Willis 2014, 129).

According to Theodore Roszak, a key countercultural insight concerned "madness in high places" (1995, xxxv), that is, the "insanity" of world leaders, and the techno-military-industrial worldview. Instead, the counterculture idealized fools, clowns and even children as figures who could reveal, intentionally or not, the machinations of the straight world (consider the Beatles' "Fool on the Hill" or their involvement with Dutch designers The Fool). Lawrence Grossberg states that 70s rock and roll culture was "serious" about "not being serious" - it characteristically balanced passionate commitment with studied, ironic indifference (1984, 233-4). Play was a countercultural characteristic - the hippie belief (derived from beatnik existentialism, which drew in turn from projections onto African-American culture like Mailer's "White Negro") was that life was a game played for kicks (in the Beatles' words - "nothing is real"). Process was valued over outcome, and humor as a form of play, of being in the moment, and as mockery of Establishment certainties. The Beatles pioneered this approach in their early press conferences, in which they continuously mocked what they considered obvious or "soft" questions: "Q: Why does your music excite people? Lennon: If we knew that, we'd form another group and be managers" (quoted from *What's Happening!*); "Q: Are you a mod or a rocker? Ringo Starr: Um, no, I'm a mocker" (quoted from *A Hard Day's Night*). In this sense, comedy possessed a potential for countercultural authenticity, although this was mediated by a number of factors, which included the relative positions of US and UK popular culture, and countercultural attitudes towards Hollywood.

The Beatles and comedy

In the UK, there was a history of linkages between comedy and popular music, exemplified by the Beatles, raised on the humour of *The Goon Show*, and whose producer, George Martin, had a background in recording comedy acts, which informed Beatles' tracks like "Yellow Submarine" (1966) (MacDonald 1994). The Beatles' impact in the US related to their "zany" British humour, which helped overcome US establishment snobbery about their music and hairstyles (Gendron 2002). This was epitomised in their films, especially *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), which combined direct cinema, UK kitchen sink realism with salty verbal humour (scriptwriter Alun Owen, although Lennon claimed that the group added quips of their own) (Wenner 1971). Surrealistic visual joke effects such as speeding up and reversing film came courtesy of director Richard Lester, who had directed former Goons in *The Running Jumping & Standing Still Film* (1959] and an innovative music film/comedy *It's Trad Dad* (1962) - pointing towards the fusion of realism and humour that eventually gave rise to rock mockumentary.

In turn, the Beatles harboured close connections with UK comedy; indeed popular music and humour were frequently linked to 1960s anti-establishment attitudes (MacDonald 1994). The 1967, skit-based TV comedy *Do Not Adjust Your Set* featured both future Monty Python members like Eric Idle and musical comedians the Bonzo Dog Band, including Neil Innes, the duo later originating the Rutles. The Beatles worked more closely with the Bonzo Dog Band than any other contemporary UK musical act (perhaps because, as a joke band, the Bonzos were not perceived as competitors). They were the only outside musical group to feature in a Beatles film (*Magical Mystery To*ur, where they performed their own composition "Death Cab For Cutie"). McCartney produced their UK hit, "I'm The Urban Spaceman" in 1968 (under the pseudonym Apollo C. Vermouth). The Bonzo Dog Band's own material, often comic or parodic, exemplifies how new styles of rock music begin as parodies - "Mr. Apollo" (1969), a song posing as an advertisement for bodybuilding, musically anticipated 70s glam rock, alternating between heavy metal riffing and Beatle-esque, acoustic-backed harmonies, extending to a lyrical spaceman allusion, the whole anticipating David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust. "Slush" (1972) with its sombre organ chords, plodding pace and repeated maniacal laughter is a clear anticipation of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973). Finally, "Tent"'s (1969) propulsive double-time drumming and rock and roll saxophone arpeggios recall early Roxy Music, although the lyrics, "I'm gonna get you in my tent, tent, tent, tent, tent / Where we can both experiment," were far removed from Bryan Ferry's chic decadence. An-

other point in common was the art school background of many UK musicians of this generation, resulting in a playful, experimental attitude, encouraging multimedia work (Frith and Horne 1987). The 60s British "US Invasion", although spearheaded by music, was continued and extended through edgy UK humour like Monty Python, which had a similar countercultural appeal to rock music.

The Rutles' transatlantic genesis

The Beatles continued to be involved in satirical, vaguely countercultural film projects throughout the late 1960s - Lennon appearing in Richard Lester's *How I Won The War* (1967), while Starr co-starred with Peter Sellers in *The Magic Christian* (1969) and with Frank Zappa in *200 Motels* (1971).[3] These were transatlantic collaborations - US money and cinematic expertise added to British music and stars, following the precedent of *A Hard Day's Night*. A stream of British acts followed the Beatles to the US, reintroducing America to its own (especially African-American) music, their exoticism and novelty giving them cultural and commercial cache. British comedy, like Monty Python, gained a foothold in the US though non-profit channel PBS and its irreverence and absurdity became especially popular with the counterculture. Gradually the US developed its own alternative TV comedy, *Saturday Night Live,* nurturing comedians like Bill Murray, John Belushi, Dan Akroyd and Gilda Radner, who would also appear in *The Rutles.*

Meanwhile, in the UK, Eric Idle pursued a solo project, *Rutland Weekend Television*, a skit series for BBC2 in 1975, with Neil Innes providing music. The show's budget was miniscule and Innes came up with a cheap idea - a pastiche of *A Hard Day's Night*, by a Beatle-like band, christened The Rutles, after the programme name (Cregan 2008). Innes had spent much of his later Bonzos career fashioning Beatles pastiches such as "Don't Get Me Wrong" and "Fresh Wound" (1972), and came up with "I Must Be In Love" for the skit. The programme aired in the UK to negligible response; however, once again music led the way, via a BBC Records compilation, *The Rutland Weekend Songbook* including the Rutles track, which was picked up by Marty Scott of Jem Records, who imported UK music to the US. "I was into Python. I was into the Bonzo Dog Band... anything coming from England went through Jem Records… it was something cool" (quoted in Womack 2019, 275). Idle did a US press tour to promote the record and appeared on *Saturday Night Live* amid a frenzy of speculation about a Beatles reunion. Innes comments: "Someone in America was offering… [the

[3] Zappa and the Beatles definitely affected each other - Zappa's 1967 album *We're Only In It For The Money* parodied *Sgt. Pepper*, and Zappa's combination of music and parody was the US equivalent of the Bonzo Dog Band.

Beatles] $20 million each for getting together for 20 minutes, and there were running gags… on *Saturday Night Live*" (Interview with Neil Innes, 2019). These gags included an offer of $3000 if the Beatles would appear on *SNL*. Innes says: "They used it an excuse as to why Eric was hosting the show one week, 'cos [Eric] said he could get the Beatles together" (Cregan 2008). The skit ran thus:

> Lorne Michaels (*SNL*): About two weeks ago I got a long-distance phone call from Eric Idle… saying that if I would let him come over and host the show he would bring the Beatles with him... I agreed and … sent him the... $3000… 20 mins ago the film arrived... only it's not the Beatles, it's the Rutles (Cregan 2008).

Innes comments: "So they showed the Rutles clip… and the mailbag was enormous, people were even sending albums with Beatles crossed out and Rutles instead" (Cregan 2008). Michaels then talked NBC into financing a programme on the Rutles, to be directed by *SNL*'s Gary Weis. Idle wrote the script: Innes played John Lennon (Ron Nasty), Idle Paul McCartney (Dirk McQuickly), while the parts of George Harrison (Stig O'Hara) and Ringo Starr (Barry Wom) were taken by Ricky Fataar and John Halsey. Meanwhile, Innes composed a series of musical parodies, based on the Beatles' musical development. These were recorded by a band that was relatively authentic to the film cast - only Idle's parts were performed by someone else (Ollie Halshall).

A true fake

Although a mockumentary and a fiction, the success of *The Rutles* was predicated, ironically, on its authenticity. The parody was also a faithful and detailed recreation of the Beatles' career and music (Covach 1990). In this way, it remained "true" to its audience, while also being a joke. For Linda Hutcheon, postmodern parody can be read as "signaling ironic difference at the heart of similarity and as an authorized transgression of convention" (1988, x), similar to the "licenced transgression" of comedy (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 4). "Authenticity" is thus less a matter of factual accuracy than fidelity to style: "The mock-documentary form is used within this film… to recreate an audience's public experience of the group, to parody the mediation of the myth, rather than to uncover its origins" (Roscoe and Hight 2001, 102). They were helped in this regard by the Beatles themselves, George Harrison participating in the production (appearing as a reporter in one segment), and giving access to archival footage, which appears in the film, and is faithfully matched by Weis. Lennon also endorsed the film (Cregan 2008).

With the possible exception of Elvis Presley, The Beatles were the first popular music act whose career was extensively documented on film and much of the screentime of *The Rutles* is taken up with re-creation - for example, a Cavern appearance, filmed in black and white by Granada TV on 22 August 1962 (but not broadcast at the time). Famous as the earliest live footage of the Beatles, it consists mainly of front-on shots framing the entire group performing to camera, intercut with close-ups of the audience. The song is "Some Other Guy", a cover the Beatles did not release until 1995. Innes' pastiche, entitled "Goosestep Mama", recreates the energetic early Beatles' style, while sneaking in a reference to Nazism. This alludes to the Beatles' early career in Hamburg, as well as Lennon's habit of taunting audiences with Nazi salutes and verbal jibes, something he continued throughout the group's career (Baker 1982; Lewisohn 2013). It is carried through *The Rutles* via Chastity, Nasty's girlfriend, who fills Yoko Ono's role, which will be discussed below. Nazi parodies were also a staple for the Monty Python cast - John Cleese, in particular. A connecting point between comedy and the counterculture was that both could tackle taboo subjects by treating them ironically, a practice which reached its culmination in punk rock's use of the swastika, but which also opens both to charges of moral relativism, discussed below (Hebdige 1979).

"Live" performance

The Rutles apparently confirms its countercultural authenticity by referring continually to the Beatles' iconic live performances: the Cavern in 1962, the Royal Variety Club performance of 1963, the 1965 Shea Stadium concert (at the time, the largest live audience in history); the 1967 TV broadcast of "All You Need is Love"; and the 1969 *Let It Be* rooftop concert (*Let it Rot* in *The Rutles*). But given that many of these live performances were also originally TV appearances, they blend imperceptibly with non-synchronised footage such as the *Hard Day's Night*-style fast-motion antics of "I Must Be in Love", or the "I am the Walrus" pastiche "Piggy in the Middle" (based on the *Magical Mystery Tour*). These are more like music videos, but strike the audience as "real" because they are true to the style of the originals. Indeed it can be argued that music videos as a form (pioneered by the Beatles) are characterised by a blurring of the fiction/documentary distinction - combining non-fiction techniques such as direct address and documentary-style live performance footage with surreal cutaways and montage (Goodwin 1993). In this sense, mockumentary has its origins in *A Hard Day's Night,* which mixed documentary techniques (and, as we have seen, "real" settings and events) and synchronised live performance with music video style artifice, such as non-

narrative, montage sequences. An example is early in the film when the group perform "I Should Have Known Better' on a train. The set-up is that the group are playing cards; the music fades in, apparently non-diegetic for the first 30 seconds, at which point shots of the card game are replaced with synchronised, apparently diegetic shots of singing and playing. This freedom from narrative convention is also characteristic of film comedy, where narrative continuity can be suspended for comic effect - in this case, the transition has been signalled by the group's witty banter and slapstick, and by a surreal shot in which they appear outside the moving train window to taunt an uptight commuter.

The (televised) 1963 UK Variety Club performance was the occasion of Lennon's notorious incitement to the Establishment audience (including Princess Margaret and the Queen Mother) to "rattle your jewellery" (Norman 1981, 191). In *The Rutles*, the joke is more directly about the female Royals: "This song is dedicated to a very special lady: Barry's Mum." The Beatles' irreverence connects them to the early 1960s UK satire boom: their Northern accents and demeanour rub against Southern Establishment values (Ringo yells "Southerner" at a policeman in *A Hard Day's Night*), while also being a generic device (Liverpool was famous for its "Scouse humour" and comedians: Ken Dodd, Arthur Askey, Jimmy Tarbuck, The Scaffold, Tommy Handley).[4] The Shea stadium film, appended to Ron Howard's 2016 documentary *The Beatles: Eight Days a Week - The Touring Years,* is sent up in *The Rutles* as "Che" stadium, "named after the Cuban guerrilla leader, Che Stadium" and by Mick Jagger, who comments, "They were miles away, you couldn't see 'em… you couldn't hear anything." Jagger humorously casts doubt on the authenticity of the performance, "Is it really the Rutles? It might be somebody else." The sequence plays complexly on audience knowledge and expectations, alluding to countercultural hero, Che Guevara, and presenting a real rock star, Jagger, as a documentary participant. Given the much-publicised contrast between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones ("The Beatles want to hold your hand, the Stones want to burn down your town" [Tom Wolfe]), it is comically apt that Jagger should be casting aspersions on the Beatles' (Rutles') authenticity. The appearance of real rock stars throughout the film, playing themselves or fictional roles (Paul Simon, Ron Wood, George Harrison) adds cultural cache, further enhanced by them being "in" on the joke. Their presence can be understood both as sincere and ironic, emphasising how *The Rutles* has it both ways - both laughing at and with pop culture.

[4] Handley appears on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*.

The 1967 "All You Need Is Love" sequence is recreated fairly faithfully, the comedy arising from Innes' song "Love Life". The title plays on the contrast between the original's utopianism and the 1960s sexual revolution, identified with the "liberated" lifestyles of pop stars, sensationalised in the press (which initially targeted the more risqué Stones, though Lennon became a target via his adulterous relationship with Yoko Ono). The lyrics "Make up your mind, in your own time" mimic the ambiguity of the original's verses: "Nothin' you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time, it's easy" - Lennon's lyrics were becoming surrealistically non-committal if not nonsensical, which gave rise to misinterpretations both humorous and sinister. The Beatles' unprecedented fame, combined with countercultural questioning of Establishment values and the impact of hallucinogens on youth culture (and the Beatles themselves), was producing cultural confusion. Ian MacDonald argues that once the group stopped touring, a lackadaisical mood of "stoned sloppiness" started to pervade their work (1994, 206). This connected to the group's self-deprecating attitude to their own stardom - increasingly, they were sending themselves up, intentionally or not. An early example was *Magical Mystery Tour*, rendered in *The Rutles* as *Tragical History Tour*. The group presumptuously directed and edited the film themselves, producing what MacDonald claims was unconscious satire: "The Beatles' 'aimlessness' in this project was partly satirical, gently embarrassing the 'great British public' on its most bloated day of the year" (1994, 205). The film debuted in the UK on Boxing Day 1967, to widespread outrage. It marked a transition in the Beatles' career - they had always been comedians, but were now starting to become a laughing stock (partly a media backlash - press coverage up until 1967, in the UK at least, was entirely positive, no journalist wanting to upset the gravy train: "You were writing in self-defence" [Norman 1981, 185]). Harrison's sudden interest in Indian culture and Lennon's adultery were widely ridiculed in the popular press, which pandered to racist stereotypes (Norman 1981).

Many of Lennon and Ono's "events" such as the bed-in for world peace and their flirtation with Bagism (appearing in public in a bag) were regarded as jokes, Lennon stating, "we're willing to be the world's clowns," if it would help causes like world peace (Riley 2011, 455). Arguably, *The Rutles'* makers struggled to parody events that were already self-parody - Ono's 1967 film *No. 4*, which consists entirely of human bottoms, becomes "A Thousand Feet of Film", with the soundtrack being "You Need Feet" by Bernard Bresslaw, (a comic parody of Max Bygraves' "You Need Hands") a top 10 UK hit in 1958. The use of this novelty track could suggest that there were some aspects of Lennon and Ono's career that were beyond Innes' power of parody. Similarly, the representation of Yoko Ono as a Nazi suggests that the film's makers struggled to find a way to represent her,

given that she was subject to racist abuse - the character of Charity indirectly projects racism onto herself, a somewhat disingenuous strategy by the film's makers. But given that Nasty is also associated with Nazism (as was Lennon, who even terms Nazis Nasties in his book *In His Own Write* [1964]), it also suggests how the counterculture's willingness to go to extremes, and the Beatles' lackadaisical relativism, invited not only satirical response but real and tragic consequences:

> the Beatles made a substantial contribution of their own to amoral meaninglessness with the 'random' lyrics and effects which adorned their later work; and just as this backfired on them in the form of the 'Paul is dead' hysteria and Lennon's death at the hands of a demented fan in 1980, so the playful relativism of the 'flower power' summer of 1967 produced its own nemesis in 1968-9 in the shape of acid-crazed extremists like the Motherfuckers, the Manson Family, the Molotov Cocktail Party, and the Weathermen. The sad fact was that LSD could turn its users into anything from florally embellished peaceniks to gun-brandishing urban guerrillas (MacDonald 1994, 17).

There is a satirical bite in the latter sequences of *The Rutles* that is lacking in the first part of the film. It is aimed not only at the Beatles but at the counterculture generally, exemplified by the "Paul is dead" conspiracy theory, which is recycled in *The Rutles* as Stig (the quiet one) seeming to have been silenced permanently:

> Several so called "facts" helped the emergence of this rumour: One: he never said anything publicly. Even as the "quiet one", he'd not said a word since 1966. Two: on the cover of their latest album, "Shabby Road" he's wearing no trousers, an Italian way of indicating death. Three: Nasty supposedly sings "I buried Stig" on "I Am The Waitress"… Four: on the cover of the *Sgt. Rutter* album, Stig is leaning in the exact position of a dying Yeti, from the *Rutland Book of the Dead*. Five: if you sing the title of "Sgt. Rutter's Only Darts Club Band" backwards, it is supposed to sound very like, "Stig has been dead for ages, honestly." In fact, it sounds uncannily like "dnab bulc ylno srettur tnaegres," palpable nonsense (quoted from *The Rutles*).

Beatles' music and album covers were scanned by fans for evidence of McCartney's demise: his bare feet on the cover of *Abbey Road* were interpreted as a symbol of death, as was his turning his back on the rear cover of *Sgt. Pepper*; the fadeout of "Strawberry Fields Forever" was said to include Lennon saying "I buried Paul" and reversed vocals on the *Sgt. Pepper* inner groove were subject

to endless speculation (Norman 1981). The real world actions of fans and members of the counterculture, like those of the Beatles, were now the stuff of public ridicule - the counterculture, which had mocked the straight world, now found itself the butt of the joke, as did the Beatles. But the joke became real in 1980, when Lennon was murdered by a deluded fan - imparting to the "Stig is dead" sequence a mordant irony unintended by its makers. Even Greil Marcus, one of the leading rock critics, registered some alarm over The Rutles' skewering of the greatest idols of their age:

> Pop life comes to seem like a joke the postwar generation have played on themselves … The Rutles dropped themselves into every memorable incident in Beatle history, which meant that ten years of pop history were covered on the premise that the real thing had been ... a cosmic sham … My God, I thought, had I – and virtually everyone I knew - put so much of myself into so little? (Marcus 1995, 134-5).

Certainly, not all the Beatles were amused by the film - McCartney was stung by Idle's caricature of his eager-to-please public persona (Cregan 2008). As the most commercially successful Beatle, he was subject to regular put-downs in the 1970s rock press (Murray 1991). Idle's caricature reflected to some degree contemporary agendas in the popular music field, just as the film's satirising of the counterculture also reflects contemporary media attitudes towards hippies, who were widely lampooned. More broadly, parodying the Beatles had consequences for the Rutles' makers, many of which would have been funny if they had not been real. For example, Innes was sued by ATV Music for plagiarism - although the Beatles mostly enjoyed the film and even collaborated with Innes, they did not own their own publishing and could not control the publisher's actions ("Interview with Neil Innes" [2019]). This outcome is anticipated in *The Rutles*: "In 1970 Dirk sued Stig, Nasty and Barry; Barry sued Dirk, Nasty and Stig; Nasty sued Barry, Dirk and Stig, and Stig sued himself accidentally". As Hutcheon (1988) suggests, in postmodern parody, rather than art imitating life, life imitates art. Suing the Rutles provided a spectacle in which the Beatles appeared to be suing themselves.

But rather than insist on any one reading of the text being definitive, what is demonstrated here is how mockumentary allows many possible readings. It is a text that addresses a "media-savvy" audience, and it is certainly possible to argue that the kind of reflexivity that characterises mockumentary was anticipated in the counterculture, with its oscillation between passionate belief and ironic disengagement. Mark Andrejevic (2003) discusses how late (digital) capitalism is marked by a complex relationship between the promise of participatory inter-

activity and productive surveillance (how global capitalism harvests and sells the information from user interactions). The viewing subject is in a playful relation to the medium, aware that (s)he is being lied to by a medium that repeatedly reminds him/her of this fact: "To say 'I am lying' is to tell the truth about not telling the truth and is thus both true and untrue," which applies specifically to mockumentary and more generally to comedy (Bishop 2013, 81).

Conclusion

I have argued that the genesis of the rock biopic was a highly contested field, given countercultural perceptions of Hollywood "exploitation" of popular music and youth culture. But such attitudes were also attempts to position rock music outside the commercial mainstream. In fact, as both the cases of the Beatles and the Rutles prove, their music was indeed a commodity which US film producers aimed to exploit. But the critical success of these ventures meant that the films were perceived as authentic, regardless of their commercial nature. Paradoxically, the authenticity of the Rutles (and possibly even the Beatles) was premised at least partly on their status as parodies, an insight mediated by their shared Britishness. In other words, their playful but knowing approach to media and society endeared them to their audiences far more effectively than painstaking fidelity - a fidelity of style more than content. The Beatles repackaged African-American-inspired rock and roll for American audiences, a form of mimicry which was becoming untenable for white Americans. The Beatles' British status granted them liberty to perform a homage to African-American roots, underlined by their witty and irreverent personae which helped endear them to US audiences, while also echoing blackface parody in a more acceptable, apparently novel, because exotic, form. The thread of allusions to Nazism was one example of how rock's relation to racism was remediated in both The Rutles and in rock culture.

At the same time, documentary footage of the Beatles helped establish direct cinema as the preferred form of representation for rock culture, and performance as the preferred content, whether music or comedy (the two modes having much in common - both forms of play that flirt with fictive/real distinctions), and this combination of sincerity and mockery became characteristic of the counterculture, and predictive of the media-savvy audiences of late capitalism. *The Rutles* is a text that is true to the styles of mediation in which the Beatles were articulated and that arose from both groups' common background, which mixed comedy and music freely. But the realisation of *The Rutles*, as with the Beatles, depended on a broader context of reception - on US audiences and institutions whose readings of the texts (Beatles or Rutles) were instrumental to their critical

and commercial success, while also becoming subject matter for the parody itself, which is as much of the audience as of the group(s). It is possible then to read *The Rutles* both as a work of affection and even "nostalgia" (Womack 2019) while also recognising that for some audiences and in some respects, its satire of the counterculture and of credulous fans was quite incisive. And that, in postmodern fashion, some of the text's ironies - as in *The Rutles*, the Beatles did end up suing themselves - predicted real world events.

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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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Biopics of Female Hollywood Stars Speak to #MeToo Era: The Case of *Judy* (2019) and *Blonde* (2022)

Abstract

This article analyzes two recent biopics, *Judy* (2019, Rupert Goold) and *Blonde* (2022, Andrew Dominik), which reimagine the 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.

In terms of textual construction, both movies presumptively adopt a female perspective in portraying actresses' experiences of exploitation –such as sexual harassment, eating disorders, substance abuse, and more– under a male-dominated Hollywood studio system. Meanwhile, directors' articulated intentions, promotional campaigns, reviews, and film critiques seeking to convincingly place the films in the domain of public discussion around #MeToo.

Despite this 'feminist' assumption, this article will argue that these movies, while appearing to confront and re-address injustices in Hollywood through revisiting the mythical narratives of well-known female stars, fail to challenge the

melodramatic victimization plot familiar in traditional biopics about women. In doing so, it will explore how they reinforce a representation of the female Hollywood star after #MeToo as a mentally troubled woman struggling to survive in an exploitative film industry.

Key words:

Female biopics, Hollywood Golden Era, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Stardom, #MeToo.

Introducing female biopics and biopics of actresses

At first glance, one might say that over the last two decades of the 21st century, the production of biographical films has increased. In particular, after the success of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018, Bryan Singer), the genre has gained recognition and prestige among audiences and film institutions (Brown & Vidal, 2014, p. 2). However, it should be noted that this renewed interest is specifically focused on depicting the lives of popular women. Every year, a significant number of female biopics are made. Some of them are movies about scientists such as *Marie Curie* (2016, Marie Noëlle) or *Radioactive* (2019, Marjane Satrapi); writers like *Violette* (2013, Martin Provost), *Colette* (2018, Wash Westmoreland), or *Shirley* (2020, Josephine Decker); political figures like *Jackie* (2016, Pablo Larraín) or *Simone, le voyage du siècle* (2022, Olivier Dahan); and royalty icons, such as in *Spencer* (2021, Pablo Larraín) or *Corsage* (2022, Marie Kreutzer); while other portrayals focus on singers, philosophers, artists, and actresses.

Experts on the genre have previously pointed out the particularities of biopics about women, considering these as a specific subgenre. Dennis Bingham (2013) provides a theoretical distinction based on gender differentiating the biopics dedicated to great (white) men in history as epic and celebratory tales while women's biopics are "weighted down by myths of suffering, victimization, and failure perpetuated by a culture whose films reveal an acute fear of women in the public realm" (Bingham, 2013, p. 10). Considering the films mentioned above, both career and gender arise as sociocultural categories relevant to the biographical genre. As signaled by Custen, this genre considers men because of their talent while treating women based on their gender (1992, p. 106). This implies that women are first portrayed as women and, only then, as female artists, scientists, or politicians. An overview of the diverse biopics dedicated to historical actresses would allow us to infer the peculiarities of this

subgenre, its narratives and thematic elements, as well as the construction of what a female movie star is.

Actresses' lives emerged on the screen in the pessimistic context of the aftermath of World War II. Previously, biopics enjoyed a golden age encouraging hagiographic and heroic portrayals of royalty personalities, entrepreneurs, inventors, or politicians which conform to Leo Löwenthal's notion of pre-second world war 'idols of production' (Custen, 1992, p. 26). However, during the fifties, the subject of biopics shifted towards 'idols of consumption' –artists, singers, actors, or athletes–, all of them managing tumultuous and eccentric lives which were usually disclosed by gossip press in real-time.

Embracing the melodramatic code, the psycho-drama, and the social problem films altogether, movies like *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955, Charles Vidor) and *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955, Daniel Mann) are exemplary post-war warts-and-all entertainers' biopics (Bingham, 2010, p. 220). *I'll Cry Tomorrow* focuses on Lillian Roth's downward spiral through alcoholism, from which she would only gain public rehabilitation by intimately exposing herself on the TV misery show *This is Your Life* in 1953. In parallel, *Love Me or Leave Me* portrays Ruth Etting's life reduced to a romantic plot as she is trapped in an abusive marriage. Both movies describe the pitiful process of a woman's degradation as the main character, who once was at the peak of her success, loses everything and falls into hellish addiction and mad misadventures with exaggerated emotionalism. These characteristics link biopics about actresses to melodrama[1], with this alliance endorsing the deployment of victimization narratives along with a predilection for tragic female protagonists.

These early biopics appeared concurrently with stardom movies like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, Billy Wilder), *The Star* (1952, Stuart Heisler), and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962, Robert Aldrich). Since that time[2], both genres have consolidated the myth of the female Hollywood star through different tropes. Whether belonging to the historical or mythical realm, the Hollywood star was depicted as vain, alcoholic, mentally unstable, suicidal, lonely, behaving unruly and grotesquely, and holding complicated mother-daughter relationships. In addition, simulating the decay of the star system, biopics about stars shifted

[1] The influence of melodrama on women biopics is detailed by Dennis Bingham (2013, p. 218) and Sonia Amalia Haiduc (in Cartmell and Polascheck, 2020, pp. 23-44).

[2] According to McNally, the mythology displayed in stardom movies is incorporated into the biopic, particularly, in the context of the decline of the star system (2020, p. 92). However, the confusion between fact and fiction is always present in the portray of the star as certain stardom movies can be read as veiled biopics, as McNally argues (2020, p. 79-90).

from big screen to TV during the late sixties[3] (Cohan, 2019, p. 142). Aside from TV production, it was during that period that *Mommie Dearest* (1981, Frank Perry) appeared, based on Joan Crawford's daughter's memoirs, and portraying the star in a monstrous and ridiculous way as an abusive mother. The next year *Frances* (1982, Graeme Clifford) was released, recounting the trajectory of Frances Farmer from a rebellious socialist teenager to a madwoman who is finally rescued from the asylum by a heterosexual romance.

Considering the releases of biopics about actresses during the last two decades, the preference for tragic figures conjugated with the victimology fetish seems to prevail. Although the ostensible economy of empowerment regarding female figures is exploited in contemporary mainstream narratives, there have been no attempts to explore the sober, intelligent, mature, and non-problematic lives of actresses such as Lillian Gish, Katharine Hepburn, or Olivia de Havilland. Tragic destinies are described in *Film Stars don't Die in Liverpool* (2017, Paul McGuigan), where last days of Gloria Grahame suffering from breast cancer are depicted. Moreover, in *Seberg* (2019, Benedict Andrews), a childlike Jean Seberg is crucified and set on fire in Preminger's set, and because of her political involvement she's turned to paranoid under FBI persecution. Aside from the Hollywood environment, in *Three Days in Quiberon* (2018, Emily Atef), Romy Schneider confronts the adversities of her private life in an interview granted in a mental asylum where she is staying to give up alcohol.

This overview may lead to the conclusion that biopics about female movie stars align perfectly with Bingham's understanding of the film lives of women as a dramatization of women's suffering or, in drastic cases, as a spectacle of female degradation (Bingham, 2013, p. 220). At this juncture, Hollinger clarified that, despite the depiction of female entertainers:

> [...] as manipulated, even victimized by an exploitive movie industry, most often represented by producers, agents, stage mothers, and jealous husbands, the thematic emphasis is not so much on their victimization as on their ability to survive and even triumph over this victimization (Hollinger, 2020, p. 77).

Hollinger introduces a distinction in the actresses' downward trajectory previously articulated by Bingham: they are not mere victims because they struggle in a male industry in order to survive, that is, to succeed. These are tales about

[3] There is an abundance of television films and cable series dedicated to Hollywood stars produced by diverse networks like CBS, ABC, or HBO among others. Just to mention some examples: *The Jayne Mansfield Story* (Dirk Lowry, 1980), *Mae West* (1982, Lee Philips), and *Lucy and Desi: Before the Laughter* (1991, Charles Jarrot).

how a woman wielding mediatic and economic power, devoted to her professional ambition, defying the 'feminine' imperatives of marriage and motherhood, challenges female agency in front of a patriarchal institution like Hollywood. Following Hollinger's reading, which also considers the female audiences' appreciation, the sense of overcoming and confronting the abusive film industry prevails over the victimization in entertainers' biopics (Hollinger, 2020, p. 80). However, the main character is usually damaged on her way to succeed to perish at the end of the film prematurely and tragically.

Biopics of movie stars as a critique of the Hollywood film industry

Biographies of actresses act as a gateway to the inner workings of Hollywood, providing the perfect pretext to delve into the realm of the behind-the-scenes. In the study *Hollywood by Hollywood: The Backstudio Picture and the Mystique of Making Movies*, Steven Cohan analyzes the ideological aspects of the film-in-film genre, attempting to mirror the Hollywood film industry. Over the decades, Cohan has identified various self-reflexive film discourses concerning the magic of movie making, but, as a rule, these discourses serve to promote a specific perspective on the Hollywood machinery:

The backstudio picture's history as a genre reveals the extent to which the Hollywood mystique not only determined how the old studio era imagined itself on screen *in the past* but still determines how the new Hollywood of giant multimedia conglomerated wants to think of itself *in the present* (Cohan, 2019, p. 17).

This quote allows us to inquire about Hollywood's current intentions regarding the depiction of historical actresses' lives. Following Cohan's assumptions, Hollywood has self-portrayed differently depending on the socio-cultural climate of the time, usually balancing criticism and nostalgia. At present, an undeniable seismic event has shaken the Hollywood film industry. In 2017, *The New York Times* journalists Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor published an article in which several actresses and other former employees of Miramax broke the prevailing pact of silence and publicly reported sexual harassment perpetrated by the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. This article will argue that the multiple accusations led by the media hashtag #MeToo have affected the Hollywood fairy tale and, furthermore, have triggered a crisis in the imagery surrounding female stardom.

The context of #MeToo has provided the conditions for reexamining the lives of historical actresses through a different lens. Nowadays, when sexual abuse is no longer an open secret, the private sphere of film personalities has become

a place from where to shed light on abusive experiences, beyond sexual harassment, that have never been addressed. While previous biopics showed actresses navigating a series of tragic misfortunes, now that some of these experiences are publicly framed as sexist abuses, how do these films take a stand regarding the biopic strategies traditionally devoted to female victimology? To address this question, the article presents an analysis of two biopics released after 2017 which production and reception established a public dialogue with the #MeToo movement: *Judy* and *Blonde*.

New abuses in the film industry: eating disorder, insomnia and substance abuse in *Judy*

The film *Judy* focuses on the last days of Judy Garland. When her glorious days are far behind, she is portrayed as a suffering, neglectful mother facing financial difficulties. Her career is no longer sustained by the film business, as there are no more Dorothy-like appearances and her 1950s successful comebacks –such as *Summer Stock* (1950, Charles Walters) and, most notably, *A Star is Born* (1954, George Cukor)– are already behind. For that reason, she is recycling her talent in music shows. While in the USA, she must perform with her children Lorna and Joey to survive economically and publicly, and she then receives an offer to perform in London. The scenes of her last concerts in 1968 are overlaid with sequences of her experiences during the set of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, Victor Fleming), when she was still a minor. These images constitute the site of trauma: on the one hand, they serve to expose the exploitative working condition for child stars in the Hollywood studio system and, on the other, they justify a decaying Judy Garland in the late sixties.

The presentation of the main character seems to align with Richard Dyer's definition of Garland's roles during the fifties[4]: the neurotic female performer mirroring the star's off-screen image for coetaneous audiences (Dyer in Gledhill, 1991, p. 142). Following Dyer, since her failed marriages, episodes of depression, the 1950 suicidal attempt, and other scandals, Garland has been perceived as neurotic, vulnerable, and suffering. Therefore, one might state that *A Star is Born* set the basis for Garland's biopics such as *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001, Robert Allan Ackerman) and *Judy*. Considering that Judy Garland's weak and neurotic side was of public domain during her lifetime, we should ask what *Judy* is updating in the context of #MeToo when depicting a series of abusive practices during her beginnings in film industry.

[4] In particular, musical films like *Easter Parade* (1948, Charles Walters), *Summer Stock*, and *A Star is Born* in which Garland embodied female artists in showbusiness.

First, the biopic reports the eating disorder she suffered during her entire life. During a set break with Mickey Rooney, after swallowing a French fry, a starving Judy aims to continue with her meal. Her manager, a figure of discipline present during all the child scenes, says out loud: "No hamburger. Mr. Mayer said very specifically you were not to eat the food". When Judy complains, her publicist hands her a pill, to which Judy answers: "No, I gotta sleep tonight". In turn, the publicist replies: "Halpert will give you something for that later". This scene shows the control of the studio over Garland's physical appearance, her weight, and, ultimately, her personal growth. The publicist, Louis B. Mayer's right-hand, corrects Judy's conduct and biological desires –eating and sleeping– by offering pills. As she takes them, this scene ends with her resentfully eating Mickey's burger. These flashbacks portray a disobedient teenager who is no longer a submissive puppet of the studio, while she is suffering from enormous pressure and constraint over her young life. Her rebellious attempts highlight awareness of her own oppression as a child star, although she is portrayed as powerless against the authority of the studio.

The consequences of drug habit led her to insomnia. The spectator witnesses multiple scenes where mature Judy is handling sleepless nights, that eventually drive her to alcoholism and substance abuse. The drug taking is contextualized in scenes from her childhood showing Judy being given amphetamines –also referred to as 'pep' pills or 'vitamin shots'– to improve her productivity on set, as well as sleeping pills to ensure her rest during a few hours. In the Hollywood Golden Era, when movie stars represented a significant investment for studios, administrating drugs was a common practice to sustain actors through extended workdays and, consequently, to guarantee their economic profitability (O'Hara, 2021, p. 48). In this context, as McLean has highlighted, the studio tried to manipulate Garland's non-standard teenage body to fit American beauty ideals, effectuating a series of corrections "with heavy corsets and harnesses as well as dieting and the destruction of her ego" (McLean, 2002, p. 8). Her body, gestures and movements (key elements for American film musical) were affected in perpetuity, providing arguments for judging her body as suffering and vulnerable. Drug dependence was a life problem for Garland, and it was this addiction that finally took her away prematurely. During her life, as portrayed in the film, this problem had an impact on her ability to perform and, ultimately, on her confidence regarding her talent.

Throughout the film, the figure of Louis B. Mayer is depicted as a metonymy of studio control over the actress' physical appearance, her productivity, as well as her rest. Various scenes portraying the relationship between Judy Garland and

Louis B. Mayer suggest an abusive liaison. After Garland's being rebellious on set, she confronts Mayer, stating: "I did 18 hours yesterday. I mean, I couldn't hardly remember my own name". Mayer quickly replies: "Your name is Frances Gumm (…) We like you loyal". By recalling her birth name, Mayer emphasizes 'Judy Garland' as his creation and investment. As Helen O'Hara explains, the Hollywood archetype of the male mentor is often read as a 'Svengali'[5]: a man exhibiting Pygmalion's syndrome[6], intending to sculpt his own creature for both economic and sexual profit (2021, p. 116). The end of this sequence suggests sexual abuse when Mayer says to Judy: "You sing from the heart, Judy. You know where the heart is? It's there." —all while approaching his hand over her breast and touching it. Even though this disturbing approach should elicit rage, a melodramatic musical arrangement instigates compassion in the spectator. After the girl defiantly challenges the control exerted by the studio, in the end she is portrayed as a pitiful victim totally manipulated by the Hollywood mogul who menacingly reminds her: "Don't ever hold up a film of mine". Despite her initial attempts at insurgence, under the influence of an imbalanced and toxic power relationship the young actress ultimately shows gratitude and loyalty to Mayer, dedicating all her efforts to conform to the demands of the show business. In doing so, the movie justifies her later suffering through the rhetoric of the 'price of fame' that she accepted to be a glorious star. In relation to this scene the screenwriter of the biopic, Tom Edge, declares being inspired by Judy Garland's own words, as reproduced in the biography *Get a Happy Life* by Gerald Clarke:

> Whenever he complimented her on her voice –she sang from the heart, he said– Mayer would invariably place his hand on her left breast to show just where her heart was. 'I often thought I was lucky,' observed Judy, 'that I didn't sing with another part of my anatomy' (Clarke, 2000, p. 69).

In Garland's handwritten notes, Clarke discovers the actress complaining about sexual misconduct during her first years at M.G.M., even affirming that Mayer "was one of the worst of the sexual predators" (*op. cit.*, p. 69). It is important to observe that literary biographies and autobiographies about actresses have been shedding light on sexual misconducts in the film industry for years, as exemplified in this case. However, as Karen Boyle emphasizes in *#MeToo, Weinstein, and Feminism* (2019), what is inherent to the #MeToo movement is less the speaking out, but "the extent to which some of these stories have been widely

[5] Svengali is a character from the novel *Trilby* (George du Maurier, 1894), exemplary in manipulating and exploiting her *protegée*.

[6] In Greek mythology, Pygmalion is a sculptor who falls in love with his own creation because it embodies his ideal of feminine beauty. The aspect of domination lies in the fact that he created her, thus possessing her, and in the myth, he ultimately marries the sculpture.

heard" (2019, p. 5). While this incident, along with other well-known tales of Garland being molested during the shooting of *The Wizard of Oz*, have been historically understood as mere anecdotes from the Hollywood studio era, after the #MeToo seism these experiences are reframed as abuses. We should draw attention to the fact that, even though the #MeToo movement emerged in response to allegations of sexual misconduct perpetrated by Weinstein, its impact extends far beyond the Weinstein affair[7]. The 2017 accusations not only brought attention to the issue of sexual abuse but also call for a re-evaluation of the hierarchical relationships that are intrinsic to the industry and sustain this abuse of power (whether sexual or otherwise, affecting the actors' bodies). In this regard, biopics of actresses in the #MeToo era do not merely address sexual exploitation but aim to re-examine the misogynist structure lying in Hollywood studio system, a system perpetuating multiple sexist abuses, as depicted in films like *Judy* and *Seberg*.

Although *Judy* acknowledges patriarchal abuse of power in the film industry, it fails to challenge the commonplace warts-and-all narrative found in biopics about women. By reproducing the same old victimology formula, the movie reduces a major movie star to a helpless victim during her teen star days, while in maturity she is portrayed like an alcoholic and drug addict, who is incapable of caring for her children, mentally unstable, and throwing herself into the arms of a young and charming, economically interested man. At this stage, it seems that *Judy* echoes the suffering and vulnerability in Garland's star image (as deployed on and off-screen) as a marker of authenticity as Dyer understands it (Dyer in Gledhill, 1991, p. 141): the ultimate truth is that she *really* suffered from the very beginning to the tragic end. However, the biopic neglects the 'positive' qualities, such as survival, passion, parody and strength, that also articulated Garland's star image by solely embracing the melodramatic tone in the portrayal of the abuses related to her body.

The reception of *Judy*, both through positive and disapproving film critiques, has framed the film in the public arena endorsed by the #MeToo movement. For example, one can read in the review published by *Variety*: "Steering away from lurid fallen-angel cliché, it recontextualizes Garland's story for a post-#MeToo audience mindful of women abused and disempowered by the industry" (Lodge, 2019). In the same way, the queer *Xtra Magazine* welcomes *Judy*'s recognition

[7] Throughout the history of cinema there have been multiple similar cases, such as those involving Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, Roman Polanski, and Woody Allen, among others. These cases were framed by the press as sexual scandals that, ultimately, did not challenge the power dynamics in the film industry.

of LGBT+ audiences[8], a community always faithful to Garland's icon, with the following summarizing title: "'Judy' biopic speaks to the #MeToo era. Starring Renée Zellweger as Judy Garland, the movie examines Hollywood abuse and exploitation" (Bowness, 2019). Negative critiques, on their part, are concerned about the impact on socio-cultural conceptions of abuse victims that *Judy* might induce. The review of *Screen Queens* argues that the movie, by revisiting Garland's press gossip and portraying a tortured mature woman, reproduces dynamics of victim-blaming with the commonplace of the 'price of fame'. This critique also highlights a new trend in this post-#MeToo era of confining female characters to victimhood while avoiding any exploration of survival tales.

Addressing Hollywood's open secret: the portrayal of the casting couch in *Blonde*

There is an excess of biographical content regarding Marilyn Monroe's persona. The popular fascination and the constant retelling of her life has elevated her to the status of a cultural myth, as noted by Cohan (2019, p. 211). Instances of the particular subgenre of Monroe-bio persona include the first veiled biopic made while she was alive, *The Goddess* (1958, John Cromwell), and subsequent TV productions like *The Sex Symbol* (1974, David Lowell), *The Year's Blonde* (1980, John Erman), *Goodnight, Sweet Marilyn* (1989, Larry Buchanan), *Norma Jean & Marilyn* (1996, Tim Fywell), *Blonde* (2001, Joyce Chopra), and *My Week with Marilyn* (2011, Simon Curtis), among others. Biopics about Monroe present a consistent narrative and reiterate certain thematic elements: a Dickensian childhood, three failed marriages, a desperate quest for love accompanied by sexual exploitation, multiple abortions, drug addiction, possible schizophrenia, and finally, her tragic and mysterious death. By delving into the vulnerable façade behind the sex symbol, these biographical films align with the inherent objective of biopics to unveil the dark side of a famous personality. Following Cohan's analysis, Monroe biopics commonly challenge the bombshell stereotype by offering a spectacle of the suffering beauty whose failure is due to her "own disturbed psyche and emotional instability, not patriarchal Hollywood and its sexist exploitation of women" (2019, p. 213).

In his analysis of Monroe, Dyer recognizes a 'biographical vulnerability' in the sex icon due to the conjunction of the life events previously enumerated, her premature death, and the articulation of female sexuality (2006, p. 46). While performing an open sexuality, innocent and childlike, uncomplicated and free of guilt, she appeared as totally exposed, desperately seeking love, attention and ap-

[8] This is particularly reflected in a scene where Judy spends a joyful evening with a couple of gay men fans. It is one of the few scenes portraying the actress happy, comfortable, and uninhibited.

proval. Besides the suffering caused by painful menstruation, various miscarriages, and the impossibility of becoming a loving wife and mother, Monroe seemed fragile as her fate as a sex object, constrained to Hollywood's dumb blonde, was to be publicly mocked with suspicion in every attempt she made to become a serious actress[9]. Her famous last words, "Please, don't make me a joke", was a plea to redeem her sex symbol condition from public scorn. Her vulnerability was the condition for being a global object of desire (Dyer, 2006, p. 43) but also to emerge as the perfect blonde victim, the Hollywood martyr par excellence. This conflict is the starting point for biopics about Monroe.

Among this biographical preference for victimhood and fatality, the fiction novel *Blonde* written by Joyce Carol Oates in 2000 introduces a shift in the portrayal of Hollywood as a patriarchal institution when the casting couch is addressed. The chapter titled 'Hummingbird' narrates the encounter with Mr. Z.[10] and the transformation from the girl-next-door Norma Jean to the bombshell Marilyn Monroe. Sexual abuse is the experience that consolidates this Cinderella transformation, and it's recounted in posttraumatic terms in Norma Jean's diary:

Mr Z pushed me toward a white fur rug saying *Get down Blondie* [...] & then up inside me like a beak plunging in *In, in* as far *in* as it will go I wouldnt remember how long was required for Mr Z to collapse like a swimmer upon the beach panting & moaning I was in terror the old man wld have a heart attack or a stroke (Oates, 2000, p. 214, spelling mistakes are from the original source).

At the end of the chapter, the character is reborn: "*My new life! My new life has begun! Today it began!* Telling myself *It's only now beginning, I am twenty-one years old & I am MARILYN MONROE*" (Oates, 2000, p. 218). This chapter constitutes the emergence of a new genealogy in stardom imagery: a star is born when she is sexually abused.

A year after the publication of the novel, *Blonde* (2001, Joyce Chopra) was adapted into a two-part miniseries. In this version, the casting couch is framed as a mandatory rite of passage to enter show business. During the first meeting with the studio chief, Norma Jean is suggested to recline on the white fur carpet; she

[9] After 1954, Monroe made a series of decisions to escape from the sex objectification perpetuated by Hollywood. She moved to New York to study acting with Lee Strasberg, married writer Arthur Miller, and founded Marilyn Monroe Productions with Milton Greene to gain control over her roles, movies, and salary. These events, emphasizing agency, control and empowerment, are often overshadowed by the more widespread Cinderella tale.

[10] Supposedly, Mr. Z. refers to Darryl F. Zanuck, an important studio executive and film producer. He met Monroe when he was the head of studio at 20th Century-Fox and is a recurring character in Monroe biopics. Historically, Zanuck was sceptic about the potential of Monroe's star image. Consequently, he labelled her as a pin-up and limited her roles to dumb-blonde characters.

understands, obeys, and starts to undress herself. In the 'real' audition, she gets the part without playing the lines, leaving her confused but eventually happy. This is one of the multiple scenes where she understands the (sexual) 'price of fame' she must pay to become a movie star. Similarly, other previous biopics like *Norma Jean & Marilyn* include dialogues about female stardom and the sexual element of working conditions: "Oh, you think girls get movie contracts because somebody respects their talent, Eddie? I'll tell you how girls get movie contracts, they f*** the right people, that's how. And that's exactly what I'm gonna do". Even documentaries about Monroe, like *The Mystery of Marilyn Monroe: The Untold Tapes* (2022, Emma Cooper), acknowledge the existence of a black book guiding casting directors to call actresses who "could be laid", in other words, actresses that were sexually available. And, supposedly, Monroe's name appeared in there.

At this point, as the casting couch is addressed in previous movies about Monroe, it might seem that the post-#MeToo version would not introduce anything new. While the song "Every baby needs a da da daddy"[11] plays, Norma Jean attends the rendezvous with the producer Mr. Z. where, after reading a few lines, she is *explicitly* sexually abused. Similarly, in the 'real' audition, she is told: "You don't have to read. You're cast. If your name is Marilyn Monroe."

The following scene serves to consolidate the connection between the actress fulfilling the desires of men in the film industry and the achievement of a star career. During the premiere of *All About Eve* (1950, Joseph L. Mankiewicz), the audience witnessed this sequence:

> Addison DeWitt (George Sanders): Do you see that man? That's Max Fabian, the producer. Now go and do yourself some good.
>
> Miss Casswell (Marilyn Monroe): Why do they always look like unhappy rabbits?
>
> Addison DeWitt: Because that's what they are. Now go and make him happy.

Meanwhile, among the audience, Mr. Shinn[12], Monroe's agent who facilitated the interview with Mr. Z., extends his hand over her leg in a Svengali manner: he has right over her, she owes her star status to him. Considering the previous examples addressing the institutionalized sexual harassment that structures the

[11] This is a famous song from *Ladies of the Chorus* (1948, Phil Karlson), one of the first Monroe appearances on screen. It is interesting to draw attention to the lyrics, which explain that a woman has to be linked to a man for protection and love, using the paternalistic metaphor of a baby needing a daddy. The lyrics also envisage a woman's capability to give love (read, sex) in exchange for economic support.

[12] This fictional character corresponds with Monroe's talent agent, Dan Butler.

film industry, the 2022 version of *Blonde* introduces a difference by portraying sexual violence on screen. Given the relocation of this scene to porn websites like *Forced cinema* under the title of "Ana de Armas being raped", we should ask if it was necessary to stage an explicit rape scene of the twentieth-century sexual icon.

By considering the narrative purposes of this sequence, one might state that the rape of the blonde icon has no consequences on the character's transformation or on the accounting of events. *Blonde* deviates from the rape and revenge genre by presenting a spectacular and non-narratological function of sexual violence on screen. Through the lens of feminist film analysis, Dominik's intentions can be compared to a certain European tradition of 'extreme' filmmakers who have previously raised ethical questions by portraying sexual violence, as seen in movies like *Last Tango in Paris* (1972, Bernardo Bertolucci), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1976, Pier Paolo Pasolini), *Dogville* (2003, Lars von Trier), and *Irréversible* (2002, Gaspar Noé). However, while these *cinema provocateurs* are defined by pushing the limits of what can be represented in film through extended and disturbing sequences (Russell, 2010, p. 4), Dominik's purpose is directed at exposing the 'raw truth' lying behind the figure of the Hollywood glamorous sex boom. In doing so, Dominik adheres to biopic principles, thus inquiring: "Do you want to see the warts-and-all version or do you want to see that sanitized version?" (Ebiri, 2022).

However, the exhibition of episodes of violence cannot ensure historical justice. According to post-feminist scholars, the economy of visibility does not guarantee a deep challenge of hegemonic power relations (Banet-Wieser, Rottenberg, and Gill, 2019). On the contrary, *Blonde* seems to adhere to the traditional elements of female biopic –the warts-and-all narrative, the victimology fetishism, the mentally unstable and desperate women in front of the corrupted and misogynist Hollywood– while reproducing the sexist violence on screen that can be consumed as pornography later on. Despite these problematic depictions of sexual violence, which the director has described as "situations that are ambiguous" (Ebiri, 2022), according to Dominik's statements in another interview, it appears that #MeToo provided the suitable conditions to address the injustices suffered by Monroe in the film industry:

> It was really #MeToo that allowed *Blonde* to happen. It was a gold moment where you had to believe a woman's perspective no matter what. Whereas before I think people were really uncomfortable with how *Blonde* portrayed certain American sacred cows. And then it became a gold moment where it didn't matter if they were sacred cows or not, and that's why it got made, what allowed it to happen in the end (Pérez, 2022).

Paraphrasing the expert on the historical film genre Robert Rosenstone, what defines the historical approach is not the interest in certain 'real' facts but the aim to reinterpret the meaning some events suggest in present times (1995, p. 10). In this sense, the intentions of *Blonde* to revisit what these male privileged positions masked in American culture are justified. This argument can also excuse the director's irritated reactions to NC-17 rating, labelling this Netflix measure as censorship. Similarly, what he identifies as "today's audience sensibility" (Ebiri, 2022) reinforces the commitment of the movie to unveil Hollywood's –and America's, by extend– bad practices perpetrated by the once sacred cows.

Nevertheless, when public and legal allegations issued from #MeToo have made an effort to contextualize sexual harassment in the film industry and other workplaces, the recent biopic of Marilyn Monroe seems to fail to consider the 'female point of view' of history. When Dominik is asked about sexual violence and female victimhood, he has little to say. In his opinion, sexual abuse "just happens, it's almost glossed over, and then the feeling follows her later. I guess in a way I don't see the film as essentially female. I see it as being about an unloved child" (Newland, 2022). At the end, according to Dominik, *Blonde* is interested in the weak, vulnerable, and suicidal Norma Jean (Newland, 2022). Finally, by reproducing the common formula of female biopics and contributing to the portrait of the star as a martyr of the Hollywood system, *Blonde* introduces a new sterile image for the #MeToo movement and women's rights: the rape of the most popular sexual icon of the twentieth century.

Conclusions

Considering the contributions of these two contemporary biopics about female movie stars, *Judy* and *Blonde*, one can notice that Hollywood sexist abuses, far from being disavowed, are addressed. This article aimed to analyze the way in which this historical exploitation was treated in terms of narrative and thematical properties traditionally fostered by biographical pictures. As previously exposed, both films perpetuate the victimology fetish common in biopics about women but, at this crossroad, gain another layer of complexity. On the one hand, these films are no longer dealing with a series of tragic misfortunes but with certain abusive practices perpetuated through film history and, at present, under public and legal scrutiny. On the other hand, as other contemporary biopics dedicated to women's lives, these are films attempting to restore Hollywood injustices and damages. In her article analyzing *Seberg* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019, Quentin Tarantino), Tincknell realizes the proliferation of 'exploitation narratives' in the post-#MeToo era as

a restorative way to cinematically conceal the discriminations, oppressions and multiple violence women have historically suffered:

> The temptation to believe that past injustices are only now coming to light because of contemporary campaigns or movements is deeply problematic. So too is the assumption that focusing on women's experience of exploitation is, by definition, a feminist project. (Tincknell, 2022, p. 14).

Considering these biopics, one can notice the current ideological interests of Hollywood in portraying the Golden Era with the aim of redeeming its own history through active *pink-washing*. However, it appears that these films merely recycle the lives of actresses by reproducing cautionary tales, reminiscent of previous biopics, which convey a warning message about the evil patriarchal threat to women's ambition in their professional environment. It seems that Hollywood's newfound self-awareness of its exploitative and abusive past is a convenient position, allowing it to superficially adhere to the popular feminist agenda without fundamentally challenging the film economy of representation.

As we have previously explained, the figures of Garland and Monroe emphasized vulnerability in their on and off-screen images. Despite suffering sexist exploitation in film industry, they were also women devoted to career, exerting public influence and achieving economic independence in a context where female ambitions were relegated to domesticity. Current memories might tend to see them as victims of abuses they didn't (or couldn't) report, but these narratives shouldn't forget that they were exemplary women challenging passive feminine roles and embodying strength and empowerment. Moreover, we shouldn't forget that both were aware of the exploitation they were suffering. As mentioned, Garland identified Mayer as a harasser, and Monroe, aside from her efforts to not become a sex object, she explained the rules of Hollywood game in the article «Wolves I Have Known» published in *Motion Picture* (1953) and in conversations with Jaik Rosenstein in 1960 where she admitted: "You know that when a producer calls an actress into his office to discuss a script, that isn't all he has in mind" (Barris and Steinem, 1986: p. 69). To contemplate the actress' self-awareness might endorse narratives of overcoming, promoting what Hollinger fingered (2020, p. 77), while will defy the fruitless portray of the star as a passive female victim.

Considering that these statements were already recorded in pre-#MeToo biographies, we should inquire about the intentions of contemporary biopics in exploring sexual harassment and their alignment with the #MeToo movement as a 'feminist' campaign. In this respect, Cartmell and Polascheck's evaluation of

'progressive' or 'feminist' biopics about women ultimately concludes that there are no 'feminist' themes or attributes in a film (2020, p. 20). Regarding *Judy* and *Blonde*, one might argue that these biopics are 'feminists' because they address gendered abuses perpetuated by Hollywood. Similarly, their production and reception discourses are placed in the #MeToo public debate. However, perhaps the 'feminist' aspect of these films, as well as of contemporary biopics about women at large, lies in audience demands. Acknowledging the popular expectations for these biopics –which were publicly pressured to deal with the abuses massively denounced since 2017–, and recognizing the wish of the global fans of Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe to witness the revival of their movie icons through the #MeToo lens, allows us to assert that, while these films reproduce the same old victimology formula, society is demanding new ways of representing social issues such as sexual harassment in the film industry.

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The Paradox of Documentary Fiction or Fictional Documentary in a Biopic Film Compilation About a Film Actor

Abstract

This study focuses mainly on the genre of biographical compilation in the context of development of the compilation film form in Slovakia after 1989. The author analyses current creative approaches in creating biographical compilations or compilations with biographical motifs. His main interest is the application of film collage techniques by those documentary directors who work with appropriated audiovisual and archival materials. He explores the crossing of authenticity and fiction based on the case study of the biographical compilation film *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch* (*Odpočítavanie - posledný film Ivana Palúcha*, dir. Martin Palúch, 2022). This feature film is a unique example of a biopic about the career and life of a film actor.

Keywords

film compilation, biographical film, Slovak film, documentary, film actor, Ivan Palúch

The Context of Film Compilations in Slovakia after 1989

After the fall of communism in 1989 and with the ongoing change in the political orientation of Czechoslovakia, as well as the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993, it was only a matter of time before film compilations started to appear in this region that would aim to re-interpret the period of the First Slovak Republic (1939-1945), the Slovak National Uprising (1944), or the period of communism (1948-1989). These efforts were related to the declassification of archives and the revision of research in the field of history and historiography. Similar processes were taking place in parallel in other post-socialist cinemas. The primary intent of these initiatives was to arrange period film materials more "objectively" or "critically" so that, from the subjective perspectives of the filmmakers, the original footage would be freed from the false appearance of ideological interpretation caused by the producer's earlier interpretations. From 1939 until 1989, their only commissioner was the totalitarian regime of the time in the role of state producer. Other changes were closely related to the transformation of production relations in domestic cinema, most importantly the emergence of private production companies, and the transition to new digital formats at the level of recording, post-production and distribution. Both domestically and internationally, the availability of archive materials has increased considerably thanks to digitalisation.

The initiative to bring new perspectives on the interpretation of historical facts came from the filmmakers themselves. They wanted to express their view of the past events in an unbiased way, freed from political pressure or ideological order. The thematic range of these, often critically attuned works, was wide. Dušan Hanák (*Paper Heads*, *Papierové hlavy*, 1995) explored repressions during the communist totalitarianism. The residues of national ideology in contemporary society and the role of Slovakia's first president, Jozef Tiso, were dealt with by Dušan Trančík (*Tiso's Shadows*, *Tisove tiene*, 1998). The activities of the Hlinka Guard during WWII by Ivan Ostrochovský and Pavol Pekarčík (*The Guard, Garda*, 2015), the Slovak National Uprising by Vladimír Štric (*The Slovak National Uprising 1939-1945*, *Slovenské národné povstanie 1939-1945*, 2013) and also by Alois Ditrich - in a hybrid portrait of the governor of the National Bank, Imrich Karvaš (*I Financed the Slovak National Uprising*, *Financoval som Slovenské národné povstanie*, 2004).

The director Alois Ditrich made a biopic with elements that re-interpret the past. In doing so, he uses a combination of several modes of documentary film representation: interpretive, observational, participatory and reflective. Among the methods of realisation, we can mention compilation, found footage, stag-

ing, reportage or on-camera witness statements in the form of talking heads. In the film, we find combinations of excerpts from feature films and archival news footage. The commentary is subjective, delivered by the performer in first-person singular. It mainly describes the lived experience of the main character Imrich Karvas, which exists written in diaries and police interrogations. It is an original television portrait that formally surpasses all the other compilations on history mentioned above. This biography, however, is not formally a pure film compilation.

Most of the above-mentioned film reinterpretations of history after 2000 have been focused on the treatment of specific myths that were previously fed by the ideology of the time and that emerged during the existence of both totalitarian regimes. Apart from Dušan Hanák's *Paper Heads* in the mid-1990s, the remaining four titles revise or reinterpret predominantly the events from the period of World War II and the First Slovak Republic (1939-1945). The question remains, what is a biographical compilation?

Examples of Film Compilations with Biographical Motifs in the Documentary Tradition after 1989

The intertwining of the great and significant historical events of the 20th century and their impact on the personal destinies of individuals is, in various formal variations, another part of our post-1989 documentary tradition. These are not, however, the conventional films that we normally encounter in compilations about the past on the television screen. Nor do they resemble the popularising compilation formats known as historytainment. These are mostly biographical formats pieced together from official and private family archives or amateur film footage.

The genre of biographical compilation is another way of interpreting the past linked to the life of a particular person. Compared to historical reinterpretations of the past, the shift is in the use of off-screen commentary. It becomes no longer authoritatively omniscient and declamatory, but rather intimate and narrated in first-person singular. In each case, these are documentary biographies made in the style of compilation or found footage film. Their form is influenced by the previous work of Hungarian filmmaker Péter Forgács or Austrian filmmaker Gustav Deutsch.

In addition, the Czech documentary filmmaker Jan Šikl prefers a counterpoint between commentary and footage from private domestic archives in his compilation portraits as a personal testimony of someone related to the protago-

nist of the film in the past. The content of the voice-over is often family traumas. The verbalized testimony is in direct or partial contrast with the visual content of the domestic footage. Indeed, the home archives mainly capture mundane and undisturbed family moments — leisure time, birthday celebrations or joyful gatherings of relatives. Such a concept can be seen, for example, in Šikl's films *The Statue of Grandfather Vindy* (*Sousoší dědečka Vindy*, 2004) or *Low Flight* (*Nízky let*, 2006). The advantage of such compilations is the fact that the central character of the film is shown directly in the image. On the other hand, in his latest film, *Reconstructing the Occupation* (*Rekonstrukce okupace*, 2021), Šikl ingeniously plays with the archival effect, presenting viewers with an imaginary compendium of creative approaches to found footage filmmaking in general. *Reconstructing the Occupation*, however, is first and foremost a found footage portrait of a historical event: the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. It is a collective portrait of the citizens' revolt against the occupation.

Another type of biography is an archival collage entitled *Good Old Czechs* (*Let domov*, 2022) by Czech documentary filmmaker Tomáš Bojar. This example of a biographical compilation uses a concentrated form composed only of official archival materials sourced from the world's film archives. It interprets the historical events of World War II as seen from the perspective of two direct witnesses. Although the visual component is based on recycled newsreel material from official institutional collections, the author does not primarily create a historically faithful reconstruction of the course of the fighting. In this case, history is subordinated to biography. Through selected archival documents, Bojar attempts to conceptually grasp an engaged and subjectively rendered view of two pilots' personal experiences with war. Bojar, thus, goes beyond popularisation by replacing the classic off-screen commentary of an "omniscient" narrator with a subjective perspective woven solely from the authentic testimonies of two specific individuals. The commentary, presented in the first person, interprets only the personal experiences of direct participants in the fighting who were part of the anti-Hitler coalition. The perspective of the verbal description of the events subsequently affects the resulting shape of the montage, which is a more visual and musical background illustrating subjective memories, and a less faithful rendering of historical facts. Biographical context is superior to history. Such a method of interpretation enables the author to create unexpected editing connections and to compose shot sequences from often contrasting segments or from temporally and spatially incompatible content.

The theme and content of the film *Good Old Czechs* presents the wartime experiences of two Czechoslovak pilots who served in the British RAF - fighter pi-

lot František Fajtl and bomber crew member Filip Jánský. In terms of originality, this is not a conceptually new approach. Among the most interesting examples of the revival of archival materials in conjunction with personal testimonies of direct participants, we can include the film *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) by New Zealand director Peter Jackson, which thematises World War I.

A fundamental shortcoming of the above-mentioned compilations is the problem of the viewer's emotional identification with the stories. In the case of Šikl, Bojar and Jackson's heroes, this is mainly due to the absence of narrators in the visual field. Perhaps this is why compilation films about dictators and historical figures are attractive, because they fill this gap and bridge the discrepancy between the spoken and visual presence of specific figures in the realm of the archival image, for example, in the film compilation *Hitler in Colour* (dir. by David Batty, 2005).

The difficulty of identification is formally solved by the genre of docudrama. Actors portray authentic personalities in staged stories based on real events. This degree of dramatisation and stylisation of facts through fictional techniques is particularly attractive in terms of the audience's identification with the protagonists. For example, in the docudrama *The Conference* (*Die Wanseekonferenz*, dir. by Matti Geschonneck, 2022). Some television biographical docudramas may contain archival material.

The way of working with archives in the compilation films of director Sergei Loznitsa is characterized by a different type of approach. Usually, for example in the film *Blockade* (2005), he does not use any off-screen commentary. The archive material is additionally echoed with real sounds and sophisticated sound design, sometimes using authentic period speeches or emotionally impressive music. His films have both a logical and an emotional construction, and the main protagonist of the stories is mostly an anonymous collective, or a non-individualized mass of participants. In this context, two of his last films - *The Kiev Trial* (2022) and *The Ordinary History of Destruction* (*Luftkrieg - Die Naturgeschichte der Zerstörung*, 2022) were made. The first is an authentic account of the post-war trial of wartime Nazis in Ukraine, resulting in a public execution by hanging in front of a crowd of onlookers. The second, almost without words, only with the inclusion of realistic sounds, music and a few authentic speeches, thematizes the suffering of the German population, which is confronted with the carpet raids of the Allies on the cities located in the interior of Nazi Germany.

Unlike Loznitsa, who avoids adding commentaries, the performers' voices reading the commentaries cover the silent archival footage with informative con-

tent. On the other hand, they fail to adequately cover the illustrative nature of archival news or amateur footage. Most situations captured by war cameramen from battles, conflicts, revolutions or disasters have such shortcomings. Each of Šikl, Bojar and Jackson, but in a different way, add the missing subjective-individual dimension to archival reportage footage through the annotated accounts of direct participants. On the other hand, oral history genres usually avoid the use of archival footage precisely because of its illustrative inconclusiveness[1].

In terms of biographical compilation, the film *Diego Maradona* (2019) by director Asif Kapadia became an exceptional work. The documentary portrait of the famous Argentinian soccer player had everything a quality biographical compilation should contain. Rich archival material - reportage and random records of a football player, from his professional career and behind the scenes, numerous interviews and amateur footage, material from football broadcasts and the like. We hear voice-over off-screen about the footballer's career without the archival footage being disturbed by even one of the talking heads of an expert who mentions Maradona. The pure form of the documentary biographical compilation is attractive, mainly due to the constant presence of the protagonist in the picture. Archives in this case do not illustrate memories. They are chosen to confirm the personal story of the main character and to support the biographical facts captured in the archives.

A different approach to the biographical film can be found in the case of the documentary *Doomed Beauty* (*Zkáza krásou*, 2016) by Helena Třeštíková and Jakub Hejna. It is a biographical story told by actress Lída Baarová based on her personal memories. The directors combine her on-camera testimony with unique archival footage from several European archives with excerpts from feature films in which Lída Baarová acted during her lifetime. The young girl quickly became the biggest Czechoslovak film star. However, her relationship with Reich Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels turned her into a national enemy and traitor.

Biographical Film Compilation About the Film Actor - The Paradox of Documentary Fiction or Fictional Documentary

In this subsection, we will look at the blending of fictional and documentary conventions. In other words, we will look at the use of fictional materials in order to create a non-fictional discourse in a compilation film biography about a film actor.

[1] For example, in the film Shoah (1985) by Claude Lanzmann.

André Bazin's ontological realism, which concerns the blending of cinematic representation with reality, is explained by Francesco Casetti as follows: "...between cinema and reality there is an existential relationship, a deep continuity, and they belong to each other at an ontological level." (Casetti 1999, p. 32) ... "The principle that cinema obeys becomes explicit in all those situations that we may call circular, in which the tight connection between reality and images allows them to trigger one another. The two poles interact freely, without having to move in a predefined direction" (Casetti 1999, p. 32).

In the concept of the compilation film *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch* the main character maintains a Bazinian flow and lavishes on both poles - imagery and reality. Palúch's film acting is authentic and natural. He had no problem blending in with professionals and non-actors, which was especially appreciated by important directors such as František Vláčil, Aleksandar Petrović, Volker Schlöndorff and Eduard Grečner. The actor's career had a fundamental influence on the protagonist's actual and real fate in his personal life and vice versa. We have tried to make creative use of this fusion and circular structure on the axis of reality and film representation.

Another inspiration was the polemical assertions of Carl Plantinda, who, in his study *Documentary*, in a section devoted to statements about ubiquitous fictionality and ubiquitous documentary (Plantinga 2009, p. 495), polemizes with the assertions: "...that all films are fiction films, and conversely, that all films are documentaries" (Plantinga 2009, p. 495). In the first case, it is based on the opinion of the director Fred Wiseman, a representative of direct cinema, who referred to his documentaries as "reality fictions". In the second, from Bill Nichols, who refers to *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. by Victor Fleming and King Vidor, 1939) as a kind of anthropological documentary that offers a key to understanding Hollywood production of the 1930s and American culture of the period. Plantinga belongs to the cognitive stream of film philosophers who, at the turn of the millennium, sought to characterize documentary film and thus defend it against the views of postmodernists who argued that there was no difference between fiction and documentary.

Gregory Currie has also commented on the clarification of the paradox that interests us. He proves his point with a simple example, where the image of Cary Grant in the fictional *North by Northwest Line* (dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) is a literal trace of Cary Grant, but at the same time it carries an additional function by representing the fictional character of Roger Thornhill. The documentary, by contrast, is deficient in such additional features. Photographic images, by their very nature, signify only what they signify. Currie's comparison of fiction

and documentary film is also interesting in terms of the distribution of meanings found in the narrative. He argues that in the case of documentary film, the cinematic image brings meanings into the narrative, whereas in the case of fiction film, meanings are extracted from the narrative (Plantinga 2009, p. 497). Currie demonstrates his claims with another example: "So let us distinguish between a cinematic image contributing meaning to a narrative, and such an image obtaining meaning from a narrative. The images of Flint, Michigan in *Roger and Me* contribute to the meaning of that film's narrative in virtue of representing Flint. The images of Chico, California used in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* obtain, from the narrative of that film, the property of representing Sherwood Forest. In the first case the content that concerns us is photographic content, in the second case it is narrative content" (Currie 2006, p. 146).

In this context, it should be added that *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch* as a hybrid compilation documentary combines both of the above-mentioned methods, which emphasize the viewer's attention by contributing meanings into the narrative on the one hand and obtaining them from it on the other. It is collage at the level of audio-visual representation and editing practices that enables this hybrid cycle of meanings. In this way, the paradox of fiction and documentary is methodologically the essence of the construction of the narrative about the real life personality of the actor Ivan Palúch.

A Case Study of Compilation Biopic: *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*

This case study is based on my experience with practical film directing during the realization of the feature compilation film titled *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*. For me, it's a very personal story about my father. Formally, it is an experimental work in the form of a biographical film - intended for cinemas - which biographically interprets the circumstances and contexts of the life and work of an important personality of Slovak film acting. The hybrid character of the audiovisual work in the result enhances the crossing of the boundaries between fiction and documentary film.

The narrative in the film is edited into an original film compilation. The plot relates to authentic events from the personal life of the protagonist, Ivan Palúch, but the narrative about him consists mostly of archival segments taken from previously made fiction films. Palúch acted in them during his lifetime and portrayed fictional characters. The excerpts used in the biopic were mainly made during his professional career as a film actor between 1960 and 2015. But when combined with the protagonist's personal testimonies or the authentic memories/

testimonies of his colleagues, the resulting film resembles an audiovisual collage that conveys biographical facts in the form of a fiction film. In the audience's reception, the footage taken from the fiction films evoke biographical connotations that refer to real events in the life of Palúch, who died in 2015.

This paradox of documentary fiction, or fictional documentary, should be clarified by the following theoretical justification. If the central protagonist were not a film actor, and in real life worked in a different profession, the natural interchangeability of authenticity and fiction on the protagonist-character axis would not be functional. From the perspective of the viewer, there would be no purposeful psychological identification with the protagonist based on his direct performance on the cinema screen.

The plot of the biopic is told in reverse sequence. From a historical point of view, we follow first the consequences and later the causes that led to them. First we see an ageing and forgotten actor at the end of his life and professional career - from 1989 to 2015. Then the period of socialism and normalisation - from the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 to the Velvet Revolution in 1989. And finally, the golden sixties, the most successful part of the actor's life - from 1960 to 1969. At that time, the young aspiring actor was starring in European films. In a single year, 1969, he had no less than three films screened at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival.

The film compilation is equally original in the way it reflects the historical turning points key to the development of Central Europe, which have been reflected in the works of feature film directors. It reveals the relationship between East and West. And last but not least, it captures the history of Czech and Slovak cinema between 1960 and 2015.

The viewer perceives the freedom of creation and artistic ambitions of the authors of the 1960s, the dependence on the pro-Soviet ideology and normalizing aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s, and finally the birth of transformed cinema, adapted after 1989 to the conditions of emerging capitalism. History, the development of national cinema and the fate of the individual are combined here into a coherent whole, forming a critically tuned collage.

The plot of the biopic consists of a re-constructed narrative composed of archival audiovisual traces. The basic concept of the viewer's identification with the plot derives from the protagonist's distinctive character, who vividly portrays his own life story. The essence of the narrative is the interchangeability of authenticity and fiction on both the visual and audio level at the same time. This is illustrated at several points directly in the film.

If one of the actor's colleagues remember his collaboration with Palúch, we hear his authentic statement - a personal voice testimony. At the same time, we also see this actor in a specific visual excerpt from the fiction film together with the main character to whom the memory is addressed. The audiovisual collage is accompanied by a caption that is placed on the fictional character. This caption shows the real name of the actor along with his profession underneath - actor. This method of labelling fictional characters with real actor's names, who talk about Palúch, is used for a number of acting personalities. On the one hand, they appear as fictional characters in excerpts from appropriated films, but on the other hand, we perceive these memories as authentic statements interpreted using voice-over. This approach is used by actors and actress such as Karol Čálik, Andy Hryc, František Velecký, Annie Girardot, Eva Ras and Magda Vášáryová.

The creative approach described above could not always be applied in all circumstances, for example, during the statements of directors Volker Schlöndorff and Eduard Grečner, as well as DOP Jan Ďuriš or 1st AC Viktor Fančović. In such cases, the caption showed only their real names and profession, but they do not appear in person in the footage as a visualized character on the screen. In the eyes of a less focused viewer, it could sound confusing if he did not notice the profession listed under the caption of the narrating voice speaking via voice-over off-screen. The crossing of fiction and authenticity is based on the functional connection between the visual track - from a fictional film, and the authentic auditory track - a real testimony via voice-over.

The overall difficulty of this method for creating an audiovisual collage was based on the assumption that, from the director's point of view, it is necessary to avoid techniques taken from the television environment, which overuse talking heads for clarity of communication on the artwork-audience axis. This method was unacceptable to us, because it would significantly disrupt the flow of the narrative and make it difficult to build the plot, which was intended for the big screen in the cinema. In the end, the chosen compromise turned out to be sufficiently functional, even though it placed higher demands on the editing composition and the audience's attention, as well as on the audience's willingness to connect the narrator's voice with the performer, who always appeared on the screen in the case of actors, but may not have appeared in the case of other film professions. In this respect, the graphic representation of the profession by the subtitle under the name was a fundamental identifier of the specific voice of the narrator in the film through voice-over.

A completely different directorial solution was used, for example, in the editing sequence, where shots from the film *The Ear* (*Ucho*, dir. by Karel Kachyňa, 1970) were combined with shots from the film fairy tale *Prince Bajaja* (*Princ Bajaja*, dir. by Antonín Kachlík, 1971). The described juxtaposition of shots is located in the middle of the film, when the viewer already understands very well the way the film is constructed and understands the principle of interchangeability of fiction and authenticity at the level of audiovisual collage.

The sequence begins with the arrival of Radoslav Brzobohatý and Jiřina Bohdalová, the title couple of the film *The Ear*, at a banquet of political representation from the communist period. As she gets out of the car, Bohdalová's handbag falls out of her hands. Palúch, as a police officer, picks it up and hands it to her. Through an off-screen voice-over, we hear Palúch's authentic testimony about his politically motivated ban from performing in theatres throughout Czechoslovakia, with the addition that as an actor he could only play episodic roles in the film. The informational content of the memoir is visually illustrated by Palúch's fleeting entrance into the shot with the dropped handbag, which on a visual level symbolically confirms his new status as a marginal episodic actor.

To depict the arrival of the characters at the party, director Kachyňa uses a subjective camera view that evokes the perspective seen by the arriving character. Then the subjective camera view floats in between the party-goers, with no one standing around noticing it, as if it were invisible. This shot, thus, imaginatively constructs the testimony of the ban. Visually demonstrating Palúch's new social status as an undesirable person for the regime and the surroundings. The voice-over outside the image then confirms this with another authentic memory, in which Palúch claims that suddenly nobody knew him and his friends began to turn their backs on him.

The subjective shot of the wandering camera ends with a hand, belonging to the body under its gaze, appearing in subjective perspective and a tap on the shoulder of one of the guests present. The latter responds with a surprised look straight into the camera. At this point, we hear his line directly from the film *The Ear*. Informatively picking up on the assertions Palúch made earlier through an off-screen voice-over. The visibly startled guest addresses the subjective camera directly: "Hello, Bedrich. Are you here? I thought... I thought you were outside. That you left Prague. Now when..."[2] It's obvious he's not happy about the encounter, and the forced conversation makes him uncomfortable. In terms of factual information, everything fits. After the invasion of

[2] Quoted from the film.

Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, the political situation changed. At the beginning of normalisation in the 1970s, Palúch was banned from acting in theatre and film. He really left Prague despite living in the city centre, being married and famous. However, his wife and daughter soon emmigrated to Austria. Palúch left Prague due to the ban and lack of job opportunities and moved to his hometown in Slovakia.

At this point, the first cut occurs in Kachyna's subjective shot, and in the original film we should see a shot of the character played by Radoslav Brzobohatý. In our collage, we have replaced the original shot from the film *The Ear* with another, taken from the film fairy tale *Prince Bajaja*. Palúch portraying a prince stands still and looks straight ahead. The juxtaposition of these shots in the editing gives the impression that Prince Bajaja is listening to the words of the protagonist from the previous shot. Factually, this is again fitting, because both films were made at the beginning of normalisation in the 1970s, while *The Ear* was banned for nineteen years due to its politically undesirable content. In this meaning the film *The Ear,* thus, received the same imaginary stop sign as the film actor Ivan Palúch. A knowledge of the history of Czechoslovak cinema helps to decode the content of the cut sequence[3].

From the portrait of the prince, we return again to the figure of the surprised guest and observe his subsequent reaction. With the words "I am looking for Mary. Haven't you seen Mary?", he turns away from the subjective camera, from Prince Bajaja's perspective, and heads away from it into the space between the other guests. With this sequence, Palúch's new social status is definitively confirmed. His general exclusion and career ignorance. The formal content is enhanced by the rock-like structure of the interiors in the background of the fictional characters in the shots from both films - *The Ear* and *Prince Bajaja*.

The viewer accepts the interchangeability of roles naturally. He understands the way the narrative is constructed and at the same time does not problematise his understanding of the plot. It is up to the viewer's mindfulness how much authentic information can be read directly from the plot, made up of feature films and authentic memories. Any extra-filmic knowledge will only add to the mosaic of multiplied meanings present and implied in the resulting montage. But the composition of the narrative is primarily constructed in such a way that the main axis of the narrative can be understood even by a viewer unfamiliar with the history of cinema or the facts about Palúch's life.

[3] Paradoxically, Prince Bajaja is one of the actor's most famous film characters in Czechoslovakia.

On the other hand, it is more engaging for the audience's perception to watch a narrative constructed in this way than to watch a purely documentary film that would convey factual information only through the talking heads of memoirists, experts or film historians.

The above described principle of crossing authenticity and fiction is used in many places in *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*. Through voice-over, we hear authentic testimonies, their meaning being emphasized:

1. Directly through an excerpt from an appropriated feature film
2. Through informational and / or formal content
3. Through the juxtaposition of the shots and the situational position of the protagonist in the footage from different films.

The only directorial constraint was that all the excerpts used had to come from the main character's filmography. For this reason, the realisation phase was preceded by meticulous research, which resulted in the final selection of suitable archive footage as well as suitable archive testimonies. Some of them, especially the memories of personalities - actors, directors, etc., were filmed/recorded afterwards. Subsequently, the main phase of the film's realisation took place in the editing room.

In the compilation biographical film *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*, the paradox of documentary fiction or fictional documentary is used creatively. It is also a practical response to several theoretical concepts. To André Bazin's Ontological Realism. To Carl Plantinga's polemic on ubiquitous fictionality and ubiquitous documentary. And also to Gregory Currie's claims about the differences between documentary and fiction. For him, documentary is an indexical record of traces. In fiction film, the indexical qualities are enriched by other additional features, resulting in narrative content. And of course there is an influence of Jamie Baron's archive effect and Katherine Russel's archiveology theories.

Conclusion

The production of the subgenre of biographical compilation intended for cinemas, as we could see in the examples mentioned above, requires filmmakers to find creative solutions to eliminate problems on multiple levels in the process-

ing of archival materials. Every single one of the creative approaches we talked about had to deal with numerous limitations imposed on the director making films made from appropriated archival materials - both fictional and documentary. One of the biggest limitations at the level of reception is the thoughtful work with the audience's identification with the protagonist of the biographical story. The realisation of the compilation biography *Countdown - The Last Film of Ivan Palúch* tried to deal with this issue creatively. It was a biographical compilation about the film actor that provided a unique space for working with archive material, which consisted of a collage of authentic memories and samples taken from feature films. Thanks to this combination, the result was an emotionally strong collage, which built its persuasive expression on the constant presence of the main character in the image field. Crossing the boundaries between fiction and documentary in the case of a biographical film compilation thus fulfilled the basic characteristics of ontological realism by André Bazin. It also managed to follow up on polemical views about the ubiquitous fiction and ubiquitous documentary in film in general. A biographical film compilation in the form of a feature film will be a real and exciting challenge in the future for any of the new filmmakers who choose this way of storytelling.

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Steve Jobs (2015): Art, The Man, The Machine

Abstract

The second film in what one might call Aaron Sorkin's 'Asshole Diptych' (following 2010's *The Social Network*) *Steve Jobs* engages with Apple's controversial founder: a man whose legacy, as Sorkin's screenplay voices, had more to do with building beautiful machines than being a beautiful person. This article argues that Sorkin's innovative biopic 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 classical biopic's 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*. In the script's various progressions and parallelisms, this article shows, *Steve Jobs* offers a self-consciously aesthetic rendition of a life seemingly 'fixed'. Recognising that art is more perfect than its subject, Sorkin's film encapsulates and potentially obviates the contradictions at play in Jobs - not unlike the 'beautiful products' for which Jobs is himself recognised.

Keywords

Steve Jobs, Aaron Sorkin, Apple, biopic, performance, screenplay

WOZ

When people used to ask me what the difference was between me and Steve Jobs I'd say Steve was the big picture guy and I liked a solid workbench. When people ask me what the difference is now I just say Steve's an asshole. Your products are better than you are, brother.

STEVE

That's the *idea*, brother.

(From "Steve Jobs", screenplay by Aaron Sorkin)

Released just four years after his death at the age of fifty-six, *Steve Jobs* covers some of the key events in the onetime Apple CEO's professional journey: from his early success as a 1980s computer entrepreneur, to the rejection from the company he co-founded, and then to his successful return to the Apple helm in the 1990s. Looked at from the viewpoint even of this brief life summary, Jobs' career offers to the biopic filmmaker a satisfying dramatic arc: from initial triumph (Apple's rising stock and excitement around the new Macintosh computer), to hubristic over-reach and adversity (the Macintosh's commercial failure, followed by exile from his own company), and finally, towards gilded triumph. Towards the end of Danny Boyle's film, Joanna Hoffman (Kate Winslet), Apple's head of marketing, tells Steve (Michael Fassbender) that his longstanding entrepreneurial dreams and visions for the world of home computing are about to come true: the new iMac is about to become an industry sensation, making Apple the dominant company in the field and Steve the industry leader.[1] And as perhaps any viewer retrospectively knows, not long after the year at which the film concludes - 1998 - Jobs would cement his place in the Silicon Valley pantheon with the ensuing decade of iPods, iPhones and iPads.

As the above dialogue from Aaron Sorkin's screenplay nevertheless hints, the filmmaker's task in *Steve Jobs* is to negotiate the complexity of its titular subject: in particular, the disparity between the products with which he is associated, and his apparent attitude and behaviour towards those with whom he worked, and even with whom he was nominally close. Jobs was well known to take a binary approach to the people around him, praising his heroes, but often calling those who did not fit that label a "shithead" (Isaacson, 2011, p. 561). Yet in the eyes of

[1] Throughout this article, when referring to events in the film, I follow the screenplay's choice to refer to characters either by their first names (Steve, Joanna) or more familiar names (Woz). In the unique case of John Sculley, I again follow the screenplay's lead by referring to him by his surname.

many - including many of his admirers - Jobs himself fell into the latter category. Walter Isaacson, on whose authorised 2011 biography Sorkin's screenplay is officially based, abruptly describes his subject from the outset as "not a model boss or human being" (ibid, p. xix). Nearly 600 pages later, Isaacson, like many of the long-enduring Apple employees he interviews, is still asking why the man could be so ugly to those around him: "The nasty edge to his personality," Isaacson concludes, "was not necessary" (ibid., p. 565).

It is hardly a requirement of the biographical film, of course, that it should deal exclusively with 'model human beings': indeed, much could be said for the notion that it is precisely the complexity and shortcomings of the subject that is the source of the biopic's dramatic value. *Steve Jobs* could be seen to belong to a longer tradition of 'inventor' biopics depicting uncompromising and difficult figures, extending at least as far back as 1940's *Edison, The Man* (dir. Clarence Brown) and seen more recently in films such as *The Aviator* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2004), about Howard Hughes, and *The Founder* (dir. John Lee Hancock, 2016), about the McDonald's restaurant owner Ray Kroc. *Steve Jobs* also appeared on the back of several films, all made following the US stock market crash and recessions of 2008, which did not refrain from depicting the uglier side of the high-stakes finance and tech sectors, all from a biographical perspective; most notably *The Wolf of Wall Street* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2013), *The Big Short* (dir. Adam McKay, 2015), and *The Social Network* (dir. David Fincher, 2010).

Steve Jobs, then, is hardly unique in its concerns with a deeply flawed central subject. The film's innovation within the biopic form, I argue in this article, is to in effect validate this same subject, though not necessarily through narrative strategies that would seek to redeem him, or even to give the lie to Woz's character assessment - an assessment that Steve, notably, does not actually challenge. Rather, the film exploits instead the particular structural properties of film narrative form - what I describe here as *hyper-classical* form - in constructing a portrait of Steve Jobs that embraces the subject's contradictions, ultimately creating something other than a biographical 'life story'. As I discuss, it is in *Steve Jobs*' intricate, balanced and conspicuous assemblage of its various parts that it resembles a kind of machine: a beautiful *product*, in fact, that at once explains and stands in for Steve Jobs himself - a realised film that, like Apple's creations, is intentionally more perfect that the creator. In following this line of argument, I finally make a case for the centrality of design within twenty-first century capitalism, with Apple as the exemplary Silicon Valley company of the last three decades; identifying in turn *Steve Jobs*' own role in reflecting, and even fostering this same idea.

While I will engage with some of Boyle's specific directorial choices at points in this article, my main focus will be on the work of Sorkin's screenplay, in terms both of its structural ploys and uses of dialogue. While not intending to downplay Boyle's contribution to the film, a screenwriter-centred approach is justified here for several reasons. Despite Boyle being an Oscar-winning director at the time of *Steve Jobs*' release (for 2008's *Slumdog Millionaire*), Sorkin's name, unusually, figures last in the promotional material for the film: specifically, on the UK and US posters, the film is identified as being 'from director danny boyle and screenwriter aaron sorkin' (*sic*). The prominence here of the screenwriter's name reflects the level of celebrity attributable to Sorkin based on his previous work: primarily, as the creator and (for its first four seasons) near-exclusive writer of the Warner Bros. television show *The West Wing* (1999-2006). But it also recognises his more recent work as the writer of the widely acclaimed *The Social Network*, for which Sorkin won his own Academy Award.

But there is also a very concrete sense in which *Steve Jobs* forms part of a continuum with Sorkin's earlier film work; to which extent, my claims here for *Steve Jobs*' innovative dimensions centre in part on the distinctive contribution of the writer and an emerging authorial vision. As I discuss later, there are some structural congruencies between *Steve Jobs* and Sorkin's 2011 script (co-written with Steve Zaillian) for *Moneyball* (dir. Bennet Miller). This latter film, like *Steve Jobs*, focuses on another tech-minded disruptor; in this case Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland A's baseball team, who used data-analytic methods to revolutionise the evaluation of players. Yet more obviously, *Steve Jobs* is a companion piece to *The Social Network*, about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Like the later film, *The Social Network* does not spare its younger subject a similar piece of character assassination as that offered, in *Steve Jobs*, by fellow Apple-founder Steve 'Woz' Wozniak (Seth Rogen). As Mark's now ex-girlfriend tells him in *The Social Network*'s very first scene, as a parting line: 'You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole'.

Given this echo across both screenplays, one might think of *The Social Network* and *Steve Jobs* as Sorkin's 'Asshole Diptych' - though not in a way that is meant facetiously. In a society influenced more than ever - culturally, commercially, politically - by Silicon Valley tech, the claim for both films as compromised kinds of *devotional* work might not be so far-fetched. For all his many detractors, indeed, Jobs' relatively early death was accompanied by a show of public grief

and pilgrimage more normally reserved for religious figures or popular music stars. Ed Catmull of Pixar, Jobs' other, slightly lesser-known business home for almost two decades, even includes in his otherwise level-headed memoir a photograph of a rainbow (taken with an iPhone, naturally) that "appeared over Pixar headquarters" - officially, the Steve Jobs Building - "shortly after the announcement of [Jobs'] death" (Catmull, 2013, np). Quite how one makes sense of such a response involves reconciling an awareness of the man and his well-known deficiencies, with an understanding that what Steve says to Woz in the film might be true: that he is the sum not of those many personal failings, but of his *products*.

Yet even if *Steve Jobs* chooses to value the work over the man, or perhaps equate the work *with* the man, this is not a straightforward task either. Whether or not Mark in *The Social Network* is an asshole, and whether or not he breached intellectual property law in bringing his social media site online, the real Mark Zuckerberg *did* actually write the code that produced Facebook. In Boyle and Sorkin's film, Woz's final jab at Steve in the sequence quoted above refers to the returning CEO's criticism of the Newton: Apple's early, unsuccessful effort at a hand-held device, produced in the *interregnum* before Job's rehiring, and which Steve in the film calls a 'little box of garbage'. As Woz reminds Steve, this is still 'one little box of garbage more than you've made in your life'.

At this stage in the film, Sorkin does not give Steve a riposte. Yet an earlier, similar exchange between the two allows the title character to make his own spin on these creative and intellectual shortcomings, when he claims that, while he has no expertise in any individual skill, what he does is to 'play the orchestra': a reference to something Steve claims was told him by the conductor Sheiji Ozawa.[2] Unlike Woz - 'a good musician' who is 'the best in [his] row' - it is Jobs, the lesser musician but greater orchestrator, and the one who tells everyone else what to do, who gets talked about.

Steve Jobs, then, as this initial summary suggests, does not avoid considering its subject's own profound shortcomings as a man, nor the showmanship that made the charismatic Jobs the abiding face of Apple, over and above those who, like Wozniak, had the technological proficiency Jobs lacked. As I consider now though this article, this same idea of *orchestration*, and of creating a *symphonic* work - of synthesizing disparate elements into a harmonious whole, of creating something that is more than the sum of its parts - comes to embody Steve Jobs in Boyle and Sorkin's cinematic portrait. What is ultimately *produced*, in the world of both Steve Jobs and *Steve Jobs*, matters more than its producer, ultimately replacing them.

[2] I have been unable to find out whether this is something Jobs actually said, or whether it is Sorkin's invention; though for the purposes of my overall argument, the latter is preferable.

The Computer and Artistic Form

My focus here will be on what I see as the *design* qualities of *Steve Jobs* as a film; its pursuit of an aesthetic form that, in itself, says as much about Steve Jobs as any biographical 'claims' the film might seek to make. As such, *Steve Jobs* can be seen not simply as a reflection on Silicon Valley celebrity, but on the cultural and historical value of that which Silicon Valley produces. In this particular case, it engages with the encroachment of technological commodities into the realm of art - and specifically, the central role of Jobs as among the highest profile advocates both of industrial design, and of the interrelationship between technology and the humanities (Isaacson, 2011, pp. 526-7).

In the film, a reiterated dialogue motif has Steve claiming, to Woz's disagreement, that a computer is like a painting. Indeed, for the actual Jobs, there would be no conflict between the instrumentality of a machine and its aesthetic sense. "Design", Jobs told *Fortune* magazine in 2000, was not simply "veneer" but rather "the fundamental soul of a man-made creation… expressing itself in successive outer layers" (quoted in Isaacson, 2011, p. 343). For Jobs, the computer should be an object of beauty from end to end, from its internal workings, to the casing that, rather than merely a shell, should itself harmonise with the user in their interaction with the machine. "For you to sleep well at night," Jobs explained elsewhere, "the aesthetic… has to be carried all the way through" (in Kahney, 2013, p. 106).

The decision to bookend the film with the launches, respectively, of 1984's Macintosh and the 1998 iMac, frames the film with two defining Apple products that embodied this design philosophy. As touched on in Boyle and Sorkin's film, the idea for the original Macintosh to say 'Hello' was in part to distinguish its approachable and user-centred design from the more intimidating kinds of machines produced (at the time) by companies like IBM, or those fearful ones imagined in numerous science fiction films, such as the sinister HAL-900 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The Macintosh, with its floppy-disc slot designed to evoke a goofy grin, introduced consumers to the possibility that computers could look friendly (Kahney, 2013, p. 107). Following this, the later iMac's unprecedented use of a candy-coloured, "unashamedly plastic" egg-shaped body was a renewed attempt to convince home computer buyers that such technology was neither "alienat[ing]" nor "terrifying" (iMac designer Jony Ive, in ibid, p. 123). The iMac casing's transparency, moreover, meant that Jobs' philosophy of 'end to end' aesthetics had to be true to its word, as the inner workings of the machine itself were now part of its visible design. This same notion of a machine that both exposes its complex inner workings, and at the same

time sublimates these within an overall elegance of form, is one through which, I suggest, we should also view *Steve Jobs*. The film, ultimately, embraces the complexities of its subject without significantly attempting to vindicate him through anything he might actually do in the course of the film's action. The vindication, as I go on to show, lies in the film's - and, by inference, Jobs' - sense of artistry.

The Biopic and Artifice

In some respect this work on the part of the film is to acknowledge the limitations of the biographical film as a form. Like any biopic, *Steve Jobs* cannot claim to describe 'a life' as such: how is this possible within the space of a couple of hours? As a biographical *film*, then, *Steve Jobs* is a fictional construct operating within specific, and in this instance highly foregrounded aesthetic bounds. Sorkin says as much when he describes his own adaptive relationship to Isaacson's (very large) book, highlighting his role and aim as a screenwriter in specific terms of artistic work, rather than journalism.[3]

Biographies such as Isaacson's, it must be said, also contain their own sense of artifice. Something as apparently 'natural' as relating an individual life's events in a linear sequence from childhood to death, as is the case in Isaacson's book, can impose its own sense of structure and narrative, of cause, effect and inference. In the time-based medium of the feature film, however, any predisposition in the biographical form to build a narrative from the flow of incident is likely to become even more prominent: a tendency shaped not only by certain inherited generic norms, but also the fairly inflexible set of structural expectations built into Hollywood screenplay blueprint since the feature film's development. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson have shown in their broad study of classical Hollywood film, causality, consequence and the overcoming of obstacles on the part of one or more protagonists has long been this type of film's foundational narrative basis (Bordwell et al, 1985, p. 13). Applied in turn to the Hollywood *biopic*, as George Custen has argued, this framework brings with it certain problems and necessarily creative solutions. Most notably, not only does the genre frequently reduce often "alienating" stories to something "congruent with the audience's own experiences and expectations" (Custen, 1992, pp. 18-19); it also tends to "isolat[e] a single life from the flow of history" (ibid, p. 9) - erasing or smoothing out complexities and contexts that interfere with the genre's basis in narrating the *exceptional* life, which is arguably the biopic's very point as a form.

[3] As stated in the extras to the Legendary/Universal DVD of *Steve Jobs*.

One way Sorkin highlighted this same generic construction in *The Social Network*, and in turn called it into question, was to avoid straightforward linear storytelling, and as such draw attention to the *act* of narration in itself. Sorkin adopts in this earlier film a flashback schema, with events effectively recounted via the 'present-day' legal hearings taking place between Mark and his numerous litigants. By technically framing most incidents as recounted, the screenplay allows for the possibility of unreliable narration: most notably, the first actual words of Mark (Jesse Eisenberg) in the film's 'present', following an initial extended sequence drawn from his ex-girlfriend's testimony, is 'That's not how it happened'. *Steve Jobs*, similarly, also makes use of intermittent flashbacks to incorporate a number of key story elements that together hint at the longer life story: Steve's work in the garage with Woz, in the 1970s, building the first Apple computer; his original meeting with John Sculley, who became Apple's CEO in the 1980s; the later board meeting, chaired by Sculley, at which Steve is fired. In this respect the film shares certain narrative similarities with the slightly earlier *Jobs* (dir. Joshua Michael Stern, 2013), starring Ashton Kutcher in the title role, which ranges across a number of key events in the entrepreneur's life and career. Yet in distinction to this other iteration, Boyle and Sorkin's film tells its story of Steve Jobs within an unusually compressed framework that isolates not so much the 'single life from the flow of history', but rather three single *events*, none of them longer than forty minutes, from the vastly longer flow of a life: here, the launch of the original Macintosh in 1984, at the Flint Center in Cupertino; the 1988 launch of Steve's follow-up computer, NeXT, at San Francisco's Opera House; and the unveiling of the iMac, in 1998, at the nearby Davies Symphony Hall.

Like *The Social Network*, *Steve Jobs* centres on another protagonist with a questionable approach to truth, and the purveyor of a 'reality distortion field' (as Joanna describes it in the film) employed to bend facts to suit a preferred view. But whereas the earlier film's motif is the lack of transparency (much of the action takes place in university dorms; Mark is described by his ex-girlfriend as 'writ[ing] snide bullshit from a dark room'), in "Steve Jobs", the focus is more on *hyper-visibility* and self-presentational showmanship. Steve's aforementioned comparison of himself to a great conductor, indeed, takes place within the Opera House's orchestra pit; a piece of overly explanatory staging that, I suspect, underlines *Steve Jobs*' own awareness of shaping a biographical story around *performances*.

Louis Bayman has discussed what he terms 'performance anxiety' in a number of recent fictional and biographical Hollywood films, seeing this predomi-

nantly as an embodiment of the neoliberal subject's alienation: a trope he briefly suggests might be extended to *Steve Jobs* (Bayman, 2019, p. 280). I will return to this motif at a later point; for now, though, I wish to emphasise mainly the extent to which performance in Boyle and Sorkin's film is emblematic of its deliberate emphasis on artifice and construction. Based as it is around the three highly concentrated real-time episodes, the film mostly restricts itself, in fact, to those often-visible contexts which for many already constitute the limited public viewer of the Apple co-founder. Moreover, these episodes also play out in stringent respect of Aristotle's dramatic unities - effectively, in real time, and in one place. Here, what Shakespeare called 'the two-hour's traffic' of the dramatic play, now the two-hour's duration of the feature-length film, renders little more than two hours of a whole life - with most of it, in this instance, taking place on or around an actual stage.

Engineering the Screenplay

This same tripartite structure, in particular, its concentration of attention, and its astringency with regards to setting and action, serve as a means for *Steve Jobs* to foreground its self-awareness, or its hyper-sensibility, of classical screenplay structural form. While theorists might debate as to the number of 'acts' identifiable in a film, especially in the 'new' Hollywood of deferred endings, complexity and codas (see Thompson, 1999; Bordwell, 2006), much of the discussion around the classical screenplay starts from the notion of an underpinning three-act structure: an idea upheld most prominently by screenwriting theorist Syd Field, author of the books *Screenplay* and *The Screenwriter's Workbook*. Adopting in his surveys of films a similarly analytical approach to that of Aristotle in his *Poetics*, Field came to base his structural model around Aristotle's observation that "every narrative must have a beginning, a middle and an end" (Kallas, 2010, p. 18). On face value, this might seem a bit of a truism. Yet behind its obviousness lies Field's more incisive observation that these three main phases of screenplay action, generated by particular moments of conflict and reaction, usually occur at similar points in the action across many films: points that make organic sense within the screenplay's overall trajectory of cause, effect and consequence.

An early 'inciting incident', for example, disrupts the equilibrium existing, or at least appearing to exist, within initial narrative contexts (Field, 2005, pp. 129-131). This disruption then leads to a first 'plot point' consisting of a decisive act or choice; an action which turns the story in a different direction, and ends 'Act One'. 'Act Two', the longest part of the screenplay, covers the ground taken by the protagonist(s) to confront the conflict initiated in the first act, often piv-

oting around a significant event at the mid-point, and building up to the story's moment of greatest precarity: a second 'plot point' which has the protagonist(s) taking decisive, fateful action. 'Act Three' then covers the impact of this action on the narrative world, bringing the story to its resolution either in positive or tragic ways (Field, 2005, pp. 143-157). The classical screenplay's debt to Aristotelian principles therefore lies in its shared recognition that the phases of beginning, middle and end contain their own "internal unity": "The beginning causes something to happen, sets a chain of events in motion; the middle is caused by the beginning, and causes something else in turn; and the end is produced 'by necessity or as a rule" (Potolsky, 2006, p. 39).

By its own nature such structural form, though organic in its appeal to the physics of force and reaction, may seem inherently mechanistic and schematic once seen to apply across vast numbers of films. Indeed, Fields' model for screenplay structure is sometimes referred to as his 'paradigm', and as any quick internet search attests, is visually readable as a symmetrically balanced blueprint or diagram. As a form that risks becoming schematic, like any other genre in evolution, audience familiarity might incline the biopic to adapt, moving beyond its 'classical' phase and towards experimentation, self-reflexivity or even parody (for a summary of these ideas, see Altman, 1999, pp. 21-22). Twenty-first-century examples of the biopic, for instance, have explored forms of highly self-reflexive approach, with characters speaking directly to camera, sometimes in a 'mockumentary' fashion (*I, Tonya* [dir. Craig Gillespie, 2017]), or telling the 'life' story through a multiple-protagonist series of characters and alternate histories (the 'Bob Dylan' biopic *I'm Not There* [dir. Todd Haynes, 2007]), or by taking a fragmentary, enigmatic approach, as in *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (dir. François Girard, 1993). The latter film is in fact an interesting point of comparison to *Steve Jobs*, insofar as it hints, similarly, at the idea that the 'life' of a complex human subject is subordinate to, or at least impossible to separate from their work(s): the 'thirty two short films' standing in here for J.S. Bach's thirty-two Goldberg Variations, the piano piece Gould recorded at the beginning and end of his playing career. By contrast though both to the latter, and to those other films' experimentations, *Steve Jobs* may seem exaggeratedly *classical*. Yet it negotiates this potential regression - and achieves its own particular level of self-reflexivity - through its specific emphasis on mechanism and schemata at the surface level of narrative motif. If it is a 'paradigm', in other words, it is one that is entirely exposed through the screenplay's workings.

The film's opening has Steve, Joanna and lead technician Andy Herzfeld (Michael Stuhlbarg) congregated around the Macintosh demo model. It turns

out there is a crisis: against Steve's wishes, the computer is not saying 'Hello', therefore threatening to ruin his planned presentation. Steve's insistence that Andy fix the problem is met by Andy's wry response - one Steve is forced to acknowledge - that getting into the Macintosh's inner workings is not so easy. In a move informed as much by Steve's aesthetic sensibilities as his contempt for hobbyists making add-ons to his machines, the new computer has been built to Steve's 'closed system' specifications. The result is that no one, not even Andy, can open up the computer's shell without the 'special tools' they do not presently have to hand.

Sorkin's introduction to the film by way of this incident (one not appearing in Isaacson's book, but apparently described to Sorkin by Hertzfeld [Keegan, 2015]), nods to a concern on Sorkin's part with Jobs' obsessive concern with form, but also with form's inflexibility. As a screenwriting choice, it also sets up a number of narrative circuits, as it were, leading in particular directions throughout the film, and in this case - like the circuit board in the later, transparent iMac - these circuits are entirely visible. On the one hand, the scene clearly establishes Steve's disregard both for the opinions of those around him and for time constraints, as well as setting up the film's dramatic structural obsession with countdowns. Yet more figuratively, Steve's fixation with closed systems embodies this obsession with *control* - a motif that recurs throughout the film (the phrase 'end to end control' itself appears three times). Here, the professional is seen to elide with the personal: a later dialogue between Steve and Sculley, for instance, focusing on Steve's insecurities as an adopted child, associates this emotional legacy with this same mania for order (Sculley: 'You said that being adopted meant you didn't have control').

As an opening gambit for the film's intentions, the incident around the Macintosh and its 'closed system' also establishes an image and analogy for the screenplay's own work in creating a beautiful *structure*; the sense that the film is *itself* a kind of box, a two-hour container for schemata that create the *illusion* of balance and order. The film's choice, furthermore, to open and end with two respective Mac launches - symmetrically balancing these two Apple events either side of the interlude with NeXT - reiterates this notion that the film itself also resembles the Macs' machinic 'closed systems' and balanced design sensibility.

Rather than confuse the otherwise concentrated unities of time and place at work in the film, the flashback technique employed by Sorkin is another element of this visible construction. In film-structural terms, notably, the division of *Steve Jobs* into three locations and three units of action, while it evokes the *theatrical* conventions of act-divisions, does not itself equate to or necessarily

imply three *cinematic* 'acts', since these latter are not temporal as such (that is, few films actually separate their constituent parts in such a foregrounded way). While they do tend to occur at similar temporal points, screenplay acts are principally constituted by those aforementioned dramatic turns in the action and decisive moments: those same specific 'plot points' which, screenplay theorists suggest, give the action and development of the story sufficient dramatic interest and turn over the course of the two-hours of action.

Indeed, despite the unusually literal separation of *Steve Jobs* into three separate acts, this approach actually creates specific structural *challenges*. Principal amongst these would be establishing the aforementioned 'midpoint', the critical central moment in the centre of the long second act, often the point of greatest narrative stake and possibility. In the broader *narrative* offered in *Steve Jobs* - in terms, that is, of the full extent of story knowledge, assembled and then set out in chronological, linear order - this crisis point would be Jobs' ousting from Apple in 1985. Not only, though, is this moment quite early within the film's narrative timeframe (1984 to 1998), but it also lies outside of its specific narrated events, coming in chronological terms very soon after the first product launch, but a whole three years before the next one. In *Steve Jobs*, then, the real-life story does not fit with the demands of screenplay form. Consequently, and to use a deliberately machinic metaphor, for it to fit within the expectations of classical narrative form, the dramatic flow of the life story needs to be *engineered* via moments of non-linearity.

Situating Jobs' sacking by the Apple board as a flashback within the second act therefore creates a midpoint crisis that is in effect a more strictly *diagrammatic* one, since in narrative terms it has already happened. To support the flashback's inclusion at the midpoint, Sorkin engineers in the middle of the same act another, this time confrontational meeting between Steve and Sculley, in which the details of Steve's dismissal are properly recounted. Without this scene and the flashback, in fact, the act would lack an obvious climactic point; and what is more, the flashback here also helps explain this second act in a manner more likely to ensure dramatic interest across its duration. The background to Steve's dismissal, after all, even though the event itself took place three years prior to the start of the film's second act, remains unclear within the film's terms. But then, so too do the motivations behind Steve's construction of the NeXT computer, an expensively designed and somewhat enigmatic black cube that, as of its presentation in 1988, does not actually do anything. As Steve, prior to this flashback, has admitted to Joel (Pforzheimer), the *GQ* reporter shadowing Steve at all three event launches, the computer about to be demoed at the Opera House is itself

being run on 'a demo program'; a 'great car', in Steve's words, operated by 'a golf car battery' in place of the 'engine' they have yet to build. As Joel in turn notes, in reality, a *black cube* is all they have built. 'Yes,' Steve concurs, 'but isn't it the coolest black cube you've ever seen?'

The cool black cube acts therefore as a kind of ruse, given that it literally contains nothing at all. At another earlier point in the same act, during their heated conversation in the orchestra pit, Woz tells Steve that this 'perfect cube that does nothing is about to be the single biggest failure in the history of personal computing' - a barb to which Steve calmly ripostes: 'Tell me something else I don't know.' *Since*, though, the viewer is at this moment not yet privy to any more insight, Steve's verbal shrug appears to go along with the impression of self-destructive hubris and wasteful perfectionism that characterises the NeXT project. *Until*, that is, the conclusion to this second part of the film reveals what Steve apparently has known all this time. Planted slightly earlier in the script is a parody press release from a MacWorld writer, saying Apple is intending to buy NeXT's superior operating system and buy back the ousted co-founder along with it. Steve pockets the cutting, which is then forgotten until, seconds before he is due on stage, Steve is confronted by Joanna:

JOANNA: This [guy] in MacWorld. He accidentally got it right, didn't he? You've been dragging your feet on the NeXT OS until you can figure out what Apple's gonna need.

To which Steve, after some further pressing, comes clean:

STEVE: I really wanted to build a computer for colleges… But then Apple stopped innovating and I saw something better. I know schools aren't gonna buy a $13,000 dictionary with good speakers, you know I know that. But *Apple* will 'cause [we're] gonna build them exactly the OS they need. And they're gonna have to buy me too…

In this same interchange, Joanna performs her own bit of in-script commentary, by interpreting her boss's actions and also prompting the viewer's own potential queries: 'When', Joanna asks, 'did you change your mind and start building the Steve Jobs Revenge Machine?' The real answer - at least in the *film's* terms - would presumably be some time shortly after the end of the first act, about forty minutes of screen time earlier. Had the viewer known this prior to the second part of the film, though, not only would the act lose its particular intrigue and reveals (and therefore, as noted previously, be dramatically inert), but the urgency of the midpoint flashback would also lose its force. Even though it has already 'taken place', within the logic of the film and the extent of viewer

knowledge, as the film moves into its second act, Steve's firing remains both a source of mystery (*why was he fired*?) but also a source of tension (*what will he do next - or rather, NeXT*?). In the precise intricacy of the film's construction, then, the building of the 'Steve Jobs Revenge Machine' comes only *right now*; as a sequential response to what happens in the flashback. The film here, in other words, aligns with classical narrative's demands for causality and effect, yet in a mostly illusory sense, existing only in the film's cinematic timeline, rather than that of real life itself.

A Beautifully-Made Machine

To take Joanna's second act-ending words at face value, we are now watching the 'Steve Jobs Revenge Machine' in action; yet if this is the case, the third act might prove a disappointment. Just like the firing that precedes the beginning of the NeXT episode, by the time we get to the iMac launch, this 'revenge' - Steve's return as CEO - has *already happened*, summarised in the *entr'acte* montage that precedes the third launch. If there remains any doubt, Joanna confirms the full facts quite early in this final section - about thirty minutes and fifty whole pages of screenplay from the end of the film, in fact, when she shows Steve the huge projected sales figures for the iMac. 'It's over,' she tells him: 'You're going to win.'

As Bordwell has noted, mainly with regard to millennial US film, the plots of many such films typically offer a "*pair* of conflicts" that are at once "external" and "internal", but also mutually influencing (Bordwell, 2006, p. 63, emphasis added). In films about business or the financial worlds above all, where the winner often takes all in a brutal zero-sum game, the presence of the 'internal' conflict can act as a moral counterweight to the protagonist's material ambitions, ensuring that whatever gains (or losses) the protagonist makes by the film's end are balanced (or redeemed) by more humane values on the other side: those same values obscured precisely by the pursuit of success, wealth or revenge. In the main example offered by Bordwell - Cameron Crowe's screenplay for *Jerry Maguire* (1996) - we see how two goals are held in balance, each one seeming to obstruct successful resolution of the other: on the one hand, Jerry's bid to rebuild his sports-agent career following his being fired and cold-shouldered by prospective clients and former colleagues; and on the other, his desire to commit to his wife, Dorothy, and her young son. Jerry is lucky enough to succeed in both ventures, but only, in the end, by applying the same principles of personal commitment and loyalty to both fields. To borrow terms suggested by John Yorke, this tension to which Bordwell alludes in Crowe's film stems from the "relationship between what a character wants and their outer façade, between what they need

and their inner vulnerabilities" - a relationship "inevitably linked to dramatic structure" (Yorke, 2013, p. 136). Yorke's point here is that it is precisely the gap between what a protagonist *thinks* they desire and what actually completes them as a person that sustains the complexities and conflicts of dramatic form, since it allows for so many false routes and missteps before arriving at a point unforeseen, if not always by the viewer, then at least by the protagonist.

In *Steve Jobs*, it is notable that the fractured relationship with Sculley appears no longer to concern Steve by the third act, suggesting that Steve's paternal issues might even have been resolved by his successful return to Apple. The desire for 'end to end control', in other words, even if associated in the film with feelings of paternal abandonment, seems fulfilled solely by his control of the company at this point in time. But in its characteristically balanced way, the film at this same moment then shifts the question of parental responsibility away from Steve's unreliable father-figures and towards the film's *other* absent father: Steve himself.

Early in its first section, the film introduces the dispute between Steve and his former girlfriend Crisann Brennan, relating to his alleged paternity of Crisann's young daughter Lisa. In this first part, Steve repeatedly denies being Lisa's father, despite the fairly conclusive evidence of a paternity test he has publicly spun as fraudulent. Towards the conclusion of this first section, though, Steve's denial of responsibility towards Crisann is mollified by the sight of Lisa using an application on the Macintosh to draw an abstract picture ('You used MacPaint…', Fassbender's Steve utters, mouth slightly agape). In turn, by the final section of the film, Steve's paternity of Lisa is now acknowledged. Nevertheless, evidence suggests he is still neglecting both his financial and emotional obligations to his daughter, failing to cover college tuition fees and general maintenance, while also being oblivious to Lisa's mental health issues. Taking these contexts into consideration, it is notable that, immediately after telling Steve he is 'going to win' due to the iMac's projected sales figures, Joanna's next instruction is that he 'make things alright with Lisa'.

Sorkin's earlier co-written script for *Moneyball* follows a similar line. By the concluding act of the film, Billy Beane has similarly 'won', inasmuch as his experiment in metrically-driven team selection has borne fruit, bringing his team unprecedented success. The film's coda nevertheless allows for the mostly solitary and emotionally distant Beane (who never even watches his own team's games) to reclaim some closeness with his slightly estranged daughter from a former marriage. Here, then, as with the comparative story-thread in *Steve Jobs*, the narrative is bent into line with the millennial 'classical' screenplay's dual-track

expectations, highlighting implicitly what might Beane might 'need' over what he thinks he 'wants'.

In distinction to the later film, however, Beane's relationship to his daughter (in both a biological and emotional sense) is never questioned; Beane's failings in this respect are, simply, that he spends a bit too much time wrapped up with work. One might argue that the tying up of this mostly undeveloped plotline in *Moneyball* (one that never features, notably, in the 2003 book on which the film is based) serves mostly to conform, in a superficial fashion, to contemporary screenwriting expectations, or purely to add a more 'human' dimension to what is basically a story about economics and algorithms. In *Steve Jobs*, by contrast, not only does the unresolved Lisa plotline run equally through each act, mirroring and illuminating the parallel paternity struggle between Sculley and Steve; there is also an entirely *formal* precision to the way, at this precise point in the film's final act, the plotline is resolved. Steve, rebuffing Joanna's demands that he 'make things right', complains that Lisa allowed her mother to sell the expensive house he had bought for them both. Joanna retorts:

JOANNA: I don't care if she put a pipe bomb in the water heater, you're gonna fix it now.

STEVE: She's been acting weird for months, She's turned on me.

JOANNA: Fix it.

STEVE: What the - ?

JOANNA: Fix it, Steve.

STEVE: Take it easy.

JOANNA: Fix it or I quit…

If this sounds familiar to the film's viewers, it should do. While, in actual terms, this was said *fourteen years* earlier, prior to the launch of the 1984 Macintosh, in the narrative timeframe of *Steve Jobs* we heard it just ninety minutes previously, in the film's opening scene:

STEVE: We need [the computer] to say "Hello."

ANDY: You're not hearing me, it's not gonna -

STEVE: Fix it.

ANDY: Fix it?

STEVE: Yeah.

ANDY: In forty minutes.

STEVE: Fix it.

Sorkin's screenplay therefore echoes the motif of reparation across its narrational space and time, offering what is in real-life terms an unlikely symmetry (as if Joanna somehow 'recalls' this previous conversation from way back in 1984). It is also a tidy means of flipping the story's focus via a subtle reconfiguration of terms, with the need to fix a technical problem becoming the need to fix a *parental* one: an elision of the machinic and the personal which Sorkin eventually extends to Steve, in his ultimate recognition to Lisa of his flaws: 'I'm poorly made'.

As a summation of Steve's own failings, *Steve Jobs* here alludes to a potentially *tragic* dimension in its construction, in terms of its protagonist's 'fatal flaw'. To return to Bayman's discussion of 'performance anxiety' in recent Hollywood films, he notes how often the latter depict their characters through an aesthetics of "abandonment", in which choices of camera angle and mise-en-scène situate the protagonist as "a lonely figure at the center of an alienating environment" (Bayman, 2019, 282). At points, Boyle's direction leans towards a similar depiction of Steve, framing Fassbender as a solitary figure, dislocated from his surroundings and others. In the opening 1984 section, a heated exchange between Steve and Andy in front of the assembled Macintosh team, culminating with Steve's demands that Andy make the computer say 'Hello' or be called out for his failure, ends with a shot of Steve miming a gun to his forehead, framed between elevator doors (Fig. 1). While in immediate narrative terms the gesture of execution seems targeted towards Andy, it is notably towards Steve's *own* head that the imaginary bullet is headed, as much a gesture of his own suicidal exasperation and isolation - the doors close on him as he makes the gesture - as it is a threat to his chief designer. The film's second section, meanwhile, opens with an unusual shot of Steve's head, seen only fractionally at the extreme left of the image, isolated against an unclear background; a shot that is also lacking any diegetic sound, covered here by the voiceover recounting Jobs' expulsion from Apple and his new project with the NeXT computer (Fig. 2). The lack of obvious context or motivation for this shot hints at the enigmatic conditions for this whole sequence of the film, as discussed above. But it also serves, fleetingly, as the film's glimpse into the central character's solipsism, and ultimately his sense of exclusion and dislocation. (And notably, when we see a reverse-angle shot that reveals the contexts for this enigmatic image, we discover that he is onstage, rehearsing).

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Where I think *Steve Jobs* fits less easily with Bayman's particular focus (in a way, perhaps, that suggests the film's more ambivalent relationship with neo-liberal ideas) is in the sense that this 'alienation' on Steve's part - his failure or resistance to connect, his notion of himself as a faulty machine - is one that is both acknowledged but to a certain extent *willed*. This makes Steve at once a tragic character but also (as befits the film's operatic settings) a *heroic*, even romantic figure of sorts within his own terms. It is of note that this same admission of being poorly made, in the film's concluding scene, is also an avoidance of Steve's own moral agency, deferred here to some kind of fault in his genetic wiring (the tacit acknowledgement, once again, that he really *is* an asshole). Indeed, Steve's final admission of his faulty composition is prompted by the confession to his daughter that the pre-Macintosh LISA computer - which he had previously claimed stood for 'Local Integrated System Architecture' - had 'of course' been named after his daughter, though at the very same time that he was denying paternity. Steve's admission to Lisa, allied to the earlier exchange with Woz, points

to Steve's own acceptance that *he*, perhaps, cannot be fixed - but then again, he is only human. It is in the *product*, by contrast, that the desire for perfection lies; and it is only, ultimately, in the film's tacit recognition that this might just be the case - that being an asshole might, sometimes, be the sacrifice for creating beautiful things, and that the sacrifice is worth the effort - that it validates its subject's behaviour and actions.

Boyle and Sorkin's film, appropriately, foregrounds this focus on beautiful surfaces over actual, messier truths, tensions and contradictions right at its end. In the film's final scene, Steve gives to Lisa a folded-up printout he carries in his pocket: as Lisa opens it, we see it is the abstract she created on the Macintosh, eighty cinematic minutes and fourteen real years previously. As Lisa watches her father take the stage from the wings of the Symphony Hall (Fig. 3), Boyle allows the subsequent point-of-view shot to transform from a clear image of Steve (Fig. 4), to one that blurs in the dazzling haze of camera flashes (Fig. 5). The film therefore concludes with a final impression of indecipherability, perhaps inviting the viewer to question whether we have just seen an actual person, a mirage, or merely an ephemeral idea. Or perhaps, in the end, *Steve Jobs* acknowledges that its subject must remain irresolvable, and that its attempt to bring this same subject to life must remain no more than a dazzling machine: as beautiful, harmoniously balanced and yet as superficial as a black cube - or indeed, the shell of a friendly-looking computer that, in actuality, can't really say 'Hello'.

Fig.3

Fig. 4

Fig.5

Conclusions

Whatever form it might take, in its efforts to tell the story of 'a life', the biopic form is by its own nature one of *selection*: what any viewer might ultimately 'know' about its subject is in turn exclusively the result of the biopic's structural ploys, the particular *version* of the life it seeks to narrate. As I suggested at the start, with *Steve Jobs*, the added complication within this process is its subject's difficult, often controversial legacy, the seeming contradictions between the man's work and what he helped produce. In trying to narrate the life of someone like Jobs, moreover, *Steve Jobs* raises further questions regarding the very nature of its biographical subject, given its focus on the creation of beautiful *commodities*, of machines *described* as works of art, yet produced and sold for consumption, to the greater benefit of Steve Jobs, Apple and its shareholders.

As I have argued here, the hyper-classical approach to screenplay construction Sorkin takes in *Steve Jobs* serves as its own conspicuous reflection on the limitations of the classical biopic as a form of history; but it is also reflects on its *possi-*

bilities, and in particular, on its elegance as a piece of cinematic narration. In the precise, balanced nature of its construction (in its allegiance to classical three-act structure, its use of motif and repetition, and its elegant symmetry, even within its broader time-hopping framework) as well as its self-reflective allusions (to the operatic, to orchestration, to classical tragedy) *Steve Jobs* approaches a purification and intensification of the biopic's classical principles. In doing so, the film makes its own formal intricacy and ingenuity its main pleasure, even if this means calling into question the film's own veracity as a document, at least with regard to its notional subject.

This lack of historical accuracy, though, but also its possible evasion of moral judgement, may be part of the point. The film appears to literalise its biographical task by being called *Steve Jobs*, yet this name remains framed by its own quotation marks, inviting us to reflect on the correlation, as much as any exists, between the film's Steve (Jobs) - a character written by Sorkin and played by Fassbender - and the real, late Steve Jobs. In seeming to offer the trajectory and journey of a life, yet in also limiting the action of the film to what are in effect short excerpts, *Steve Jobs* restricts its claims to the 'truth', even if this means overlooking the murkier ethical terrain of its (real) subject's life - in favour, in this instance, of a depiction that foregrounds the film's beautiful *design*.

Obviating capitalist production contexts by emphasising the beauty of design is, of course, what Apple consistently strived to do under Jobs' tenure. In the late twentieth– and early twenty-first century era of 'cool' capitalism (see McGuigan, 2009) shaped in large part by companies like Apple itself, the aesthetic matters as much as function or necessity. Apple's advertisements sell computers not by showing the hardware but by associating it with radical stances and poetic gestures, as in the company's late-1990s invocation to 'Think Different', coinciding with the launch of the iMac (Archer, 2022, p. 82). Buying and appreciating the hardware itself also becomes an act of sophistication and connoisseurship, whether one is browsing in one of the chic Apple stores built to Jobs' specifications (with their imported Florentine stone paving), or taking a new iPhone out of its snow-white box, and feeling the soft brush of its oxidised-metal surfaces. The conquest of both the market and the wider culture on the part of Jobs' company lies in this appropriation, on the part of the commodity, of spaces and discourses hitherto held by the artwork.

In short, what the product *looks* and *feels* like matters more than the contexts of its construction, or its status as a mass-produced object. Similarly, Boyle and Sorkin's *Steve Jobs* is a beautifully-made machine, almost certainly a much more beautiful and balanced one than the 'poorly made' Jobs himself. The man, his

character and legacy have been subsumed in the film with the stylish and cherished products he helped make. But as Jobs himself may well have said: 'That's the *idea*, brother.'

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The Politics of a Portrait: Biopics, Slavery and Contemporary Racial Politics in the United States

Abstract

The article examines the connection between the past and the present, and between the personal and the political, in three recent biographical pictures directed by filmmakers of color: *The Birth of a Nation* (2016, dir. Nate Parker), *Harriet* (2018, dir. Kasi Lemmons), and *Emancipation* (2022, dir. Antoine Fuqua). By addressing the history of American slavery, the films not only come into a dialogue with the preexisting representations of slavery in music, photography and cinema, but also reflect on current racial politics and antiracist activism in the United States. They offer a commentary on changing attitudes towards the issue of race in America, and engage with the collective memory of slavery - a past trauma, which has shaped the African American identity.

Keywords

African American cinema, slavery, racism, minority representation

> The past depends less on "what happened then" than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn.
>
> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007, 100)

As recent years have shown, Hollywood is becoming more diverse and exhibits greater interest in broadcasting minority voices and stories. Filmmakers of color now have the unique opportunity to challenge existing racial bias and established modes of minority representation in American cinema. When minorities get to create their own image through film, they often address issues that have been overlooked or misrepresented in the past, which can now reach mainstream audiences. Black filmmakers have eagerly revisited the topic of slavery and focused on the lives and achievements of Black historical figures in a number of recent biopics. Their films question previous depictions of slavery and highlight the connection between new cultural production and historically established tropes and discursive practices. They offer a commentary on changing attitudes towards the issue of race and engage with the collective memory of slavery - a past trauma, which has shaped the African American identity.

I examine three films by Black directors that touch upon the history and memory of slavery: *The Birth of a Nation* (2016, dir. Nate Parker), *Harriet* (2018, dir. Kasi Lemmons) and *Emancipation* (2022, dir. Antoine Fuqua). Although each takes a different approach to its depiction, they all come into dialogue with preexisting representations of slavery in American photography, cinema and music, while also addressing the current dominant racial rhetoric in the United States. The stories of Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman and the slave Peter, whose suffering was immortalized in *The Scourged Back* photograph, have been circulated in American culture for decades, as part of various literary and visual narratives. The biopics show just a sliver of their lives, and create a cinematic portrait that is "one painting out of many that could have been drawn over the years" (Fleming Jr., 2012) of their subjects' activity. Historically, African Americans had limited access to the tools of mainstream cultural production and had little opportunity to tell their own stories. The lives of Turner, Tubman and Peter were mediated by others, in accordance with the dominant, racist discourse of their era. Contemporary Black filmmakers turn to the biopic genre to reclaim their stories, and give a proper account of their achievements and legacy. Due to their focus on the lives of real Black abolitionists and revolutionaries, these biopics partake in a "cinema of historical revision" (Smoliński, 2015) by offering a nuanced

portrayal of events and historical figures previously omitted by the mainstream media. They face the difficult task of "reconcil[ing] the divergent imperatives of commercial feature film and the complex politics of slave autobiography" (Kelley, 2019, 172-173). The resulting vision of the past is a product of the filmmakers' distinct formal and ideological choices. Their own experiences have been shaped by the realities of contemporary racial relations in the United States, and the still-ongoing public debate about systemic racism, police brutality, and the repercussions of slavery, in "the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe, 2016, n.p.).

The article highlights how the three films refer to early visual politics and narratives of slavery, and to Hollywood's own racist history. The analytical framework draws from trauma and memory studies - two fields uniquely suited to address the question of slavery and its remembrance - to examine how cinematic reconstructions of historical events participate in the current sociopolitical discourse and are used to facilitate the process of collective identity-formation.

Remembering Slavery: Cultural Trauma, Prosthetic Memory and Cinema

Slavery had been initially documented through oral tradition, in stories passed on between generations, and later through literary slave narratives. Its legacy remains one of the central issues in understanding American racism, while the continued circulation of images and stories about slavery may amount to a transgenerational transfer of trauma. Ron Eyerman observes that "slavery has meant different things for different generations of black Americans, but it was always there as a referent" (Eyerman, 2003, 18) and forms the foundation of the collective African American identity. Slavery has to be understood as a cultural trauma, which "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander et al., 2004, 1). For trauma to be processed and recognized as a formative experience by the whole community, it must be communicated through a new master narrative. Eyerman points to the "intellectuals" as the ones with sufficient cultural capital to create it. Professionals, such as filmmakers or community organizers, "mediate between the cultural and political spheres that characterize modern societies, not so much representing and giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but rather articulating ideas to and for others" (Eyerman, 2003, 3). Individuals behind the mediation of collective trauma have relative influence over the process of identity-formation for the

community, although they too can be subject to external ideological influences. Those who have been overlooked in, or actively prohibited from, narrating their own traumas, are now gaining access to media production tools. The purpose of historical revision in cinema is to offer a new perspective on historical figures and events, and to revisit and challenge previous standards of their representation. Few filmmakers are as bold as Quentin Tarantino, who asserted that his film, *Django Unchained* (2012), was "responsible for people talking about slavery in America in a way they have not in 30 years" (Bates, 2014), but they are nonetheless very conscious of their position in shaping and renewing the discourse.

Films about slavery can also be understood through the framework of prosthetic memory, which "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum" (Landsberg, 2004, 2). It allows individuals to build a deep connection to a larger historical narrative, especially when the continuance between generations has been damaged due to external factors, and when a community has been forcibly prohibited from establishing frameworks for remembering traumatic events. In such circumstances, the descendants have to rely on media narratives to forge a connection with the past and to "suture" themselves back into their community's history. When Black filmmakers set out to depict the times of slavery, they reach a new generation of viewers, who get to build that connection with the past. The continued mediated circulation of these events contributes to their remembrance, shapes the way we think about the past, and, in turn, how we understand the present social and political condition.

Both frameworks point to the crucial role of cultural production in establishing an identification with the past, and the formation of a collective identity on the basis of traumatic experience. They also highlight the importance of challenging stereotypical, definitive portrayals of the past, especially in relation to minority groups who have been unable to share in their creation. The way slavery is depicted in American culture has significantly changed over time, but for the most part it has privileged the white perspective of events, from Southern apologism of slavery in the late 19th century to the popularity of the "white savior" trope in the 20th (Jordan and Brooms, 2018). Due to Hollywood's long history of racism and prejudice against various minorities, mainstream cinema's attempts to comment on the work of systemic racism and slavery should raise "questions about the longstanding relationship between cinema and history, and the former's capacity to relate African American stories within a medium that has its own troubled representational past as a birthright" (Massood, 2017, 19). Although the American film industry has been complicit in upholding the social

status quo for most of its history, Ed Guerrero saw an alternative path forward in "the production of black and other independent features that artfully historicize and politicize the issue in a way that not only reveals slavery's past but at the same time, by allegory, allusion, or otherwise, communicates its relevance to all Americans today." (1993, 35) There has been no shortage of films that address the issue of slavery in the years since Guerrero's suggestion, but only a handful, such as *12 Years a Slave* (dir. Steven McQueen, 2013) and *Nightjohn* (dir. Charles Burnett, 1996), have been crafted by Black directors. Other films set in the antebellum period have often distanced themselves from the horrors of slavery by favoring an outsider perspective. Although often sympathetic to the struggle of the enslaved, the central white characters in films like Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) and *Lincoln* (2012) are the ones who shape the historical record and social understanding of slavery in their era by speaking for and over its actual victims.

In the past two decades, the topic of slavery has remained popular in American cinema, leading writer Kara Brown to state that she was "so damn tired of slave movies" (2016). She voiced her disenchantment with the state of depictions of slavery in American cinema, observing that "it's clear by 2016 that films about slavery do not help us become a more tolerant or understanding society" (Brown, 2016). The publication of Brown's widely shared opinion piece coincided with the Sundance premiere of Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*, after which she suggested retiring the genre. Instead of fading into obscurity, it continues to garner attention and critical acclaim. The most recent "slave movies" differ from some of the older works on the subject in their unflinching focus on Black characters, and their critical approach to the politics and memory of slavery. *The Birth of a Nation*, *Harriet*, and *Emancipation* belong to the current trend of exploring Black history, concerned with uncovering events and figures, whose influence on American history has thus far been downplayed or omitted. The three films are based on limited source material and focus on individual stories, emblematic of the African American experience under slavery. As biopics, they draw from the "minority appropriation" stage of the genre's development, identified by Dennis Bingham as the moment when minorities got to "own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them" (2010, 18). In the hands of minority filmmakers, unlike in classic Hollywood, the biopic genre is no longer "a vehicle for a pre-determined vision of history" (Vidal, 2014, 5), but rather a tool for interrogation of the hegemonic historical narrative.

Harriet: A Sorrow Song

Before Kasi Lemmons' *Harriet* eventually premiered in 2019, a Harriet Tubman biopic had been long in the making. Gregory Allen Howard, the screenwriter behind *Remember the Titans* (dir. Boaz Yakin, 2000), had been fighting to bring her story to the screen since the 1990s. He recalls that at the time, a studio executive suggested casting Julia Roberts as the Black abolitionist, saying: "It was so long ago. No one is going to know the difference" (Focus News, 2019). Howards credits *12 Years a Slave* and *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018) with paving the way for Tubman's biopic by proving that audiences are interested in seeing Black heroes on the screen. The biopic genre has historically centered on stories of great (usually white) men, and as Dennis Bingham argues "naturally [wouldn't] have much use for the half of the population that traditionally has been discouraged, when not outright barred, from playing significant roles in public lives" (2013, 237). Biopics credit their male subjects with driving historical and social change, while relegating women to the background, limiting their activity to the personal and emotional sphere, or casting them as supporting characters in men's stories. Nonetheless, Belén Vidal observes that within the American context, women's biopics have recently become more diverse, as "they open up to subjects bearing specific markers of class, ethnicity and sexual orientation" (2021, 21). The achievements of third wave Black feminism, and in particular of the intersectional framework, have impacted American cultural consciousness and set the scene for a Black biopic heroine like Tubman to appear on the big screen.

The first narrative of Tubman's life, *Scenes from the Life of Harriet Tubman*[1], was published by Sarah Hopkins Bradford in 1868. The author stated that she aimed to "give a plain and unvarnished account of some scenes and adventures in the life of a woman who, though one of earth's lowly ones, and of dark-hued skin, has shown an amount of heroism in her character rarely possessed by those of any station in life" (Bradford, 1869, 1). Bradford's book, although criticized since its publication, provided the earliest account of Tubman's life, and collected written proof of her activities in the 1860s. Since then, Tubman's character has continued to inspire writers and filmmakers. She has been portrayed in a TV film (*The Quest for Freedom*, dir. Fred Holmes, 1992) and a miniseries (*A Woman Called Moses*, dir. Paul Wendkos, 1978), but prior to 2019 she had never been the subject of a high-profile feature film, centered entirely on her achievements. Dennis Bingham observes that very often "biopics of women (…) are weighted down by myths of suffering, victimization, and

[1] A revised version was published in 1886 as *Harriet, the Moses of her People*

failure perpetuated by a culture whose films reveal an acute fear of women in the public realm" (2010, 10). In a reversal of this trope, although set against a tragic historical backdrop, *Harriet* is not a story of degradation, but of remarkable tenacity and success. By giving the creative reins of Tubman's story to a Black woman, the film manages to avoid many of the pitfalls of the "typical" women's biopic. The film challenges the white-, male-centric genre formula, and uncovers a Black female folk hero for a new generation of viewers, building a renewed cultural awareness of Tubman's story. The film is a part of a broader turn in American mainstream cinema: as Hollywood strives for diversity, it often revisits Black American history, particularly its episodes related to anti-racist action, and introduces them to the screen.

Lemmons' film follows Tubman's (Cynthia Erivo) escape from slavery, her life in Philadelphia and the subsequent return South to rescue her family from slavery. She becomes a conductor for the Underground Railroad, and is surrounded by Northern abolitionists - mostly based on historical figures, such as Frederick Douglass and William Still. The film briefly mentions Tubman's involvement in the Civil War as a spy for the Union forces, and shows her leading the Combahee River Raid, but entirely omits her later participation in the suffrage movement. Andrea Schmidt rightly calls *Harriet* "a fantastic genre-mash up of biographical, super-hero, action, and dramatic film that remains hauntingly relevant to today's political climate in the States" (Schmidt and Fucile, 2019, 58). The character emerges as a spirited, courageous all-American hero who retains her humanity and faith throughout the most challenging of circumstances, and her biopic does not bend to the "patriarchal culture's discomfort with the presence of women in the public realm" (Bingham 2014, 238). The multifaceted portrayal of Tubman in Lemmons' film offers "a counternarrative to the simplistic, distorted visions of nineteenth-century black womanhood provided in previous screen portraits" (Clinton, 2020, 256), present even in such lauded films as *12 Years a Slave* (see Stevenson, 2014).

Harriet revisits the life of a Black historical figure, and uses elements of genre cinema to make her story appealing to the modern audience, which results in the creation of a cinematic site for remembrance about slavery and those who fought against it. The film itself comments on the value of archive-keeping. William Still (Leslie Odom Jr.), one of the Underground Railroad conductors, meticulously records facts about each slave who makes it to Philadelphia: he catalogues all signs of physical abuse, writes down oral narratives of slavery, and takes Tubman to have her photograph taken. In doing so, he creates invaluable resources for future generations.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Lemmons' depiction of Tubman is the role music and religion play in her life, and in the wider abolitionist effort. Throughout her life, Tubman had suffered "spells", during which she lost consciousness and had visions. She believed them to be a sign from God, showing her the path to freedom. The film shows her seeing brief flashes of future events. In one of the final scenes, she is shown to have anticipated the events of the Civil War - she hears the sounds of a battlefield and shouts to her former master: "God has shown me the future, and my people are free. My people are free!". In another reference to Christian religious imagery, her experience is linked to that of Joan of Arc, in a nod to Bradford's early narrative that also makes such a comparison. Tubman's former owner tries to convince a mob of aggravated slaveholders to burn her like Joan of Arc, inadvertently suggesting making Tubman a martyr for the abolitionist cause.

Tubman's daring slave rescues gained her the "Moses" moniker, which related not only to the Biblical leader, but also to one of the most popular African American spirituals. The song *Go Down Moses* was a plea for deliverance from tyrannical rule and slavery, and linked African American suffering to that of the Jews in Egypt. During slavery, music has been an important tool of community building and communication for the enslaved, and features prominently in Bradford's narrative of Tubman's life. Termed "sorrow songs" by W.E.B. du Bois, they were "the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they [told] of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways" (du Bois, 2007 [1903], 169). *Go Down Moses* was also one of the code songs used by the Underground Railroad conductors to inconspicuously reach out to the slaves. A choice on Lemmons' part that helps to bridge the past and the present is the decision to use Nina Simone's version of one of the spirituals, *Sinnerman*. All other songs are performed by Cynthia Erivo, the Broadway star cast as Tubman, which makes Simone's cover stand out even more and makes it instantly recognizable. By using this version of the song, Lemmons links Tubman's struggle against the inhumane institution of slavery to more recent instances of anti-Black racism in the United States. Simone's voice, linked so heavily with protest songs of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, signifies a struggle against the oppressive system. Lemmons' choice of soundtrack suggests a connection between different historical periods and events, and reaches beyond the times of slavery.

Tubman's biopic does not seek to shock viewers, and when compared to other films set in the slavery era, it seems tame in its depictions of violence. In its most explicit display, Marie Buchanon, a Black abolitionist, is beaten to death

by a slavecatcher, who comes to her looking for Tubman. The audience observes the scene from Tubman's point of view - blurred, from a distance, and partially obscured by a doorframe. The scene focuses on defiance in the face of violence, not on the brutality itself. Throughout the film, Lemmons is not after a vicarious traumatization of the viewer, but instead contributes to the memory of an exceptional Black woman, whose achievements should still be celebrated today. Tubman has been at the center of a petty scuffle over remembrance for over a decade now - her likeness is supposed to replace Andrew Jackson on the 20 dollar bill, but the effort has been stalled by the Trump administration's "petty, crassly partisan, and blatantly racist decision" (Schmidt and Fucile, 2019, 60). Lemmons' film shows that Tubman deserves better, and that her work towards building a just, equal American society matters, although it is still a work in progress.

Emancipation: Visual Testimony of Slavery

Antoine Fuqua's *Emancipation* tells a very different story of fleeing to freedom. The film is based on the experiences of an escaped slave, immortalized in an early photograph that would become one of the most damning pieces of evidence against slavery. The film utilizes a muted, desaturated color palette, similar to that of 19th-century photography, to further signify its concern with the medium. Peter (Will Smith) is an enslaved Black man who labors at a Southern plantation with his wife and children. When the Civil War breaks out, he is taken away by Confederate soldiers and forced to build a railroad to aid their war effort. He remains distanced and determined through degradation and abuse, insisting that it is "just work", but when an opportunity presents itself, he orchestrates an escape from the camp. For most of its run, the film focuses on Peter's escape, giving a graphic account of the many dangers people fleeing slavery had to face. He follows the sound of Lincoln's cannons, driven by the knowledge that the president has signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which should grant him freedom once he reaches the frontline. Upon his arrival at the Union encampment near Baton Rouge, he is faced with the stark reality of wartime failure to secure the safety of runaway slaves - he is treated as "contraband" and "stolen property". The film comments on how legislative action does not always produce an immediate effect, even in such dire circumstances.

Peter is encouraged to join the U.S. Colored Troops, but before he dons the Union uniform, he has his photo taken. As the photographers explain when they position him facing away from the camera, its purpose is "to make sure every person in the world knows exactly what slavery truly looks like". When photography became a readily available medium, both slaveholders and abolitionists

alike began to rely on it to further their political goals. Depending on the buyer, these early pictures would either show that slaves were treated well, or that they were brutalized. Matthew Fox-Amato explains that "as photography sparked and shaped debates over racial identity and community, slavery generated a modern form of social struggle with photography at the center: it gave rise to a modern visual politics" (2019, 10). He outlines various uses of photography in the antebellum South and during the Civil War, highlighting how slaves, abolitionists, and proslavery advocates understood the new visual medium and exploited it to suit their needs. The photographs taken during that period ranged from "black Madonnas", dehumanizing and emasculating army camp photos, to "atrocity" photography, depicting bodily harm done to the slaves.

The photograph that *Emancipation* carefully reconstructs falls into the latter category and is known as *The Scourged Back*. It depicts a man's back, marred by clearly visible, deep scars - the effect of repeated, brutal whippings. It is a direct visual testimony of the inhumane treatment enslaved people received at the hands of slaveholders. The photographers in the film are a stand-in for the many abolitionists who "gave rise to the capacity of the photograph to publicize violations of the body and to serve as a social witness" (Fox-Amato, 2019, 11). Frederick Douglass advocated for using photography to aid the abolitionist cause, noticing its considerable social and political potential, and pictures' ability of "reaching and swaying the heart by the eye" (Douglass, 2015 [1861], n.p.). When *The Scourged Back* was published as a part of the *Typical Negro* triptych in "Harper's Weekly" in 1863, its purpose was to attest to the brutality of slavery by providing photographic evidence. This particularly graphic depiction was showcased as representative of African Americans' daily treatment. Scholars have since challenged the circulation of such graphic images of anti-Black violence. As Saidiya Hartman explains, "only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible" (Hartman, 2022, 2). Nevertheless, when contemporary directors depict the times of slavery, they often include scenes of extreme violence - beatings, whippings, and lynchings - that border on gratuitous. Filmmakers should question the necessity of such depictions, because "in using graphic violence to illuminate the realities of plantation slavery, they risk blurring the lines between authenticity and spectacle" (Plath, 2019, 72).

In a different form, atrocity photography exists to this day - we see examples of it every time the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter inevitably begins to trend on social media. Although today's visual testimonies of anti-Black violence are re-

corded on smartphones, they echo the sentiment from the earlier era. Witnesses of racist abuse record videos and take photos, as proof and insurance, and share them online. They serve a political purpose, just as they did in the early days of the medium, and their consumption should not be mindless. Alissa Richardson echoes Hartman's earlier statement by suggesting that "cellphone videos of vigilante violence and fatal police encounters should be viewed like lynching photographs - with solemn reserve and careful circulation" (2020). Fuqua's film shows a "typical" story of a fugitive slave, but in doing so, it also comments on the shortcomings of the legislative protections of minority groups, and shows how visual testimony aids our remembrance of traumatic events.

The Birth of a Nation: Challenging Hollywood's Racist Past

Nat Turner, the man behind the deadliest slave revolt in American history, is an elusive character. A documentary about his life, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (dir. Charles Burnett, 2003), observes that "each author possesses Nat Turner, transforming his identity and the meaning of his revolt". Although Turner was literate, he never got to write his own story. William Styron attempted to deal with Turner's legacy in his contentious novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), based on Thomas R. Gray's account of Turner's life, recorded while the latter was imprisoned in the aftermath of the revolt. Styron's book proved highly controversial for its depiction of Turner and prompted a critical response from a group of Black writers (Clarke, 1968). Nate Parker admitted that he wanted his own take on Turner to "create inside all of us a desire to heal through honest conversation" (Kinser, 2016), particularly needed in the United States at a time of high racial tensions.

The film takes inspiration from Gray's narrative and immediately establishes Turner (Nate Parker) as an exceptional man, "intended for some great purpose" (Gray, 1832, 5). In the opening scene, a spiritual leader conducts a traditional African ritual, explaining that despite his young age, Turner possesses wisdom, courage and vision, and proclaims: "He is a leader. He is a prophet. We should listen to him." Later, when Turner learns how to read and write, he becomes a preacher. His master, Samuel Turner (Armie Hammer), orders him to visit nearby plantations and preach to the enslaved, using the scripture to convince them that no matter how frightful the conditions and how brutal the abuse, they should remain obedient to their masters. Turner witnesses unspeakable violence and deplorable conditions, and lets it radicalize him. It is an outcome unforeseen by his master, who believes himself to be a "good" slaveholder - yet, his wealth and social standing are entirely dependent on the number of people he "owns".

The Birth of a Nation offers not only a rich portrayal of the slaves' experience, but also shows entire generations of slaveholders as complicit in and benefiting from their inhumane treatment under a racist system. The other factor that contributes to Turner's radicalization is the repeated sexual abuse of enslaved women; Turner's own wife becomes a victim of violent gang rape. He seeks guidance in the Bible, and finds passages that inspire him and others to take a stand against slavery.

The aftermath of the short-lived revolt is bloody, and white supremacy is restored through disproportionate, indiscriminate violence. In one of the most haunting scenes of the film, Parker shows bodies of lynched rebels, many of them kids, hanging from the trees and swinging in the wind. The image is accompanied by Nina Simone's 1965 rendition of *Strange Fruit*, a song originally recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. The lyrics document instances of lynching that continued in the South long after slavery was abolished. Lynchings "became public theater, a participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle" (Litwack, 2023, 13), with images of mob violence and brutalized Black bodies produced and circulated as late as the 1930s. Ersula Ore links the historical practice of lynching with contemporary anti-Black violence and police brutality, observing that "lynching as both a material practice and a rhetorical performance has exhibited an ideological belief regarding black inferiority, white superiority, and the need to keep blacks in their racially prescribed place" (2019, n.p.). Parker's choice of song for the poignant scene is far from accidental - Holiday's anthem was used in staging an anti-lynching exhibition, *Without Sanctuary*, where it "invoked a sense of impending doom that followed visitors", and helped to establish the exhibition as "a site of mourning and remembrance" (Ore, 2019, n.p.). The song describes the "pastoral scene of the gallant South", where the smell of magnolias combines with that of burnt flesh, and creates a multisensory depiction of lynching - Parker adds the visual layer to make an impactful statement about anti-Black violence across the centuries.

The title of Parker's film also invokes the history of American cinema, and is a "cinematic riposte" (Sinha, 2017, 17) to its namesake, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Over the past century, the 1915 epic has become the epitome of Hollywood's complicity in racism. The film is not remembered for its factual quality, or for capturing the *zeitgeist* of a post-war reckoning, but rather for being an "egregious distortion of history whose purpose is (…) to socially, culturally, ideologically and historically legitimize and valorize a racial hierarchy rooted in the presumption of white superiority" (Martin and Wall, 2013, 446). Instead of a nuanced portrayal of a historical period fraught with

tension, Griffith chose a binary approach and focused on the internal, allegedly irreconcilable, differences that ran along "the color line". The inflammatory piece invoked nostalgia for the Old South, criticized the Reconstruction as a failed attempt at national reconciliation and strengthened racial animosities, playing into the racist ideology behind segregation laws in force at the time. *The Birth of a Nation* had measurable political outcomes, including the reemergence of the modern Ku Klux Klan (see Simcovitch, 1972). By referencing Griffith's film, Parker challenges the vision of America it presented, and shows the strength and persistence of the oppressed.

Parker looks at the events that led up to the outbreak of the Civil War, which were the ideological foundation for Griffith's film: the institution of slavery, the violence and disenfranchisement of African Americans, the harmful stereotypes. Although the events of Parker's film play out almost entirely in the 1830s, it still references the Civil War as a moment of self-determination for African Americans. A young boy, who had previously betrayed the rebels, witnesses Turner's execution and joins the Union forces as an adult. In the final scene, he fights the war alongside white soldiers, with the express purpose of gaining personal freedom and bringing about the end of slavery. Parker explained that he wanted his film "to create a strong sense of identity of who we were and what we were and why that has implications that are still affecting us today" (Kinser, 2016). The film highlights how the enslaved fought against their condition, and reaches out to the contemporary viewer, to inspire a similar attitude in the continued struggle against racism.

Conclusions

The three films discussed in this article share a number of similarities in how they portray the era of slavery. They all point to religion as an important space for preservation of the slaves' identity and community. The films review events from a bygone era from a new perspective, shedding light on historical figures, whose lives have been devoted to fighting for their communities' freedom, and who can inspire a new generation in facing systemic racism. Slavery remains a central issue in the discussion on American racism, and emerges "as the past that is not past", which "reappears, always, to rupture the present" (Sharpe, 2016, n.p.). By referencing songs, photographs and films from later decades, the analyzed films highlight the continuity of the anti-racist struggle and build a connection between the past and the present. In addressing the lasting effects of the trauma of slavery, they contribute to the current understanding and formation of a common African American identity.

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"If two people say you are drunk, you better go to bed": Interview with Gyula Gyulyás

Abstract

This article explores bio documentary cinema, an often overlooked biographic genre that, unlike its "big brother," the biopic focusing on the lives, achievements, and legacy of people from the past, prefers to investigate living people through interviews and other forms of interaction. In order to understand the challenges, methods and human dynamic shaping talking heads documentaries, the article prioritizes the first-hand experience of the filmmaker, more specifically, that of Gyula Gulyás, a Hungarian director of documentaries for over five decades. After a general introduction to his career path, preferred topics and shared interests with local and regional documentary filmmakers, the interview covers areas relevant to the biographic documentary such as generic labels, professional standards and the usefulness of cinematic portraits for academic research, choice of subject, methods of interviewing and structuring recorded material, moral responsibility and intimacy as a well as general and specific questions about financing and distributing biographic documentaries, their reception, and the struggle with political and non-political censorship.

Keywords

Gyula Gulyás, biographic documentary, interview film, cinematic portrait, Hungarian cinema,

Gyula Gulyás (b. 1944) started making films in the early-1960s with his brother János Gulyás (as cinematographer) and over four decades completed over 20 documentaries. He played a seminal role in the popularization in Hungary of the feature-length documentary format that merged cinematic sociography, oral history, anthropology and biographic documentary. Due to his dissident political views and officially unwelcomed films about communist political terror and other controversial aspects of the era - such as rural poverty, the failed reforms in the agricultural and the education sectors, the unfair treatment of war veterans –, Gulyás existed on the periphery of the state socialist film industry and faced constant lack of funding. As an active member of innovative semi-independent studios such as Balázs Béla Studio and Társulás Studio, he was an outspoken advocate of amateur and documentary cinema, an activity he continued to pursue after the post socialist transition in his capacity of associate fellow at the Foundation for Hungarian Historical Cinema. Also in the late 1990s, he parted ways with his brother concluding their long-time professional association and began to pursue individual film projects. Between 1993 and 2007, he taught visual anthropology at the University of Miskolc. Apart from being the recipient of prestigious industry and national awards, Gulyás is the regular member of the Hungarian Academy of Arts. This January, the Gulyás brothers received the Budapest International Documentary Festival Lifetime Achievement Award.

Official acknowledgement hardly translated into more funding opportunities for Gulyás. In fact, he still exists on the cinematic periphery and is little known director internationally, one reason for which is the insufficient visibility of documentary film in both the national and Eastern European canons of cinema. While Gulyás was awarded four times at the prestigious Hungarian Film Week in different categories and received several excellence awards of television, on the international festival circuit, the only success came at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1989, where *Without Breaking the Law* (*Törvénysértés nélkül*, 1988) received the Silver Plaque Award. Outside competition, selected titles by the brothers was screened at the Cinéma du Réel Festival in Paris and the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. Also, special screening were held at the Hungarian Institute in Warsaw, in Los Angeles, Cairo, Calcutta, Bucharest and various Transylvanian cities.

The Gulyás' most prominent films include oral history documentary-series *Hungarians and WWI* (*A magyarok és az I. világháború*, 1987-1997) and feature-length documentaries, like the three-hour long *Without Breaking the Law*

(*Törvénysértés nélkül*, 1988) about survivors of forced labour camps operational in the early-1950s and *Málenkij Robot* (1987–1989) featuring elderly members of a small village community who were deported to the USSR after World War II and spent years in various Gulag camps. Talking head historical documentaries about the victims of communism were in great demand from the 1980s to the mid-1990s mobilizing other Hungarian filmmakers, such as Sándor Sára, Judit Ember, Tamás Almási, Gyula Gazdag, Pál Schiffer, Géza Böszörményi, and Lívia Gyarmathy to make similar films. Gulyás continued to tackle historical topics and his epic 12-episode long documentary, *Confrontation* (1996–2016), about the pogrom against Hungarians in the Transylvanian town of Târgu Mureș in March 1990, is an essential source for historians and other researchers.

The Hungarian diaspora of Transylvania, especially its rich folklore served as enduring inspiration for Gulyás whose *Slow Dance from Szék* (*Széki lassú*, 1969–1992) documented the transformation of peasant traditions through three generations. Made over two decades in this rich cultural milieu, *Man Grows Out of Tales* (*Kinő az ember a meséből,* 1969–1993) stands as a unique portrait of female storyteller Klára Győri while *Film of Ballads* (*Balladák filmje*, 1983–1989) features folklorist Kallós Zoltán who guides the filmmakers through the complexities of traditional Transylvanian life-styles, cultural customs and rituals.

Another area Gulyás largely contributed to was sociographic documentary cinema. With like-minded contemporaries, like Judit Elek, Márta Mészáros, István Dárday, Gyöngyi Szalay above already mentioned documentary filmmakers, the brothers happily exercised social critique beyond the confines of official ideology. This is evinced by *There are Changes* (*Vannak változások*, 1968–1978), a film about rural poverty and *Ne sápadj!* (*Don't Pale*, 1981), a character-study of a farmer with a turbulent life behind him.

Even such a brief introduction to this burgeoning oeuvre brings to light certain factors that may explain why Gulyás remained peripheral and less accessible for general audiences. Unlike fellow Hungarian and in Eastern European filmmakers, he did not move between documentary and narrative cinema or adopt a mixture of the two - docufiction, documentary drama - as did representatives of the so-called Budapest School: Tarr, Ember, Dárday-Szalay, Schiffer, and Elek. Apart from two fictional films, Gulyás' preferred choice remained the feature-length sociographic and anthropological film favouring lengthy interviews some viewers might find too slow, traditional, and unappealing. The issue of length is particularly striking when his films are compared with those of

notable documentary filmmakers from the Soviet Block like the Polish Marcel Łoziński, Tomasz Zygadło, Marek Piwowski, and the early Krzysztof Kieślowski (all between 10 and 20 minutes), the Slovakian Dušan Hanák, or the Czech Helena Třeštíková. With reference to the longitudinal shooting method, Gulyás can be set aside both Třeštíková whose modus operandi was following ordinary people's lives for years and GDR filmmaker Volker Koepp who, for the past five decades, has kept returning to the town of Wittstock to film the lives of women he first met in 1974.

Gulyás also shares a common experience with many of the previously mentioned Eastern European filmmakers, whose work was censored either for portraying the disillusionment of common people in the communist regime, or for presenting parts of history sentenced for obscurity. One of these supressed documentarists was the Serbian Želimir Žilnik, a prolific member of the Yugoslav Black Wave and a creator of many documentaries and docudramas that approach both ordinary people and those on the fringes of society to tell their unique stories. Similar to Žilnik, Gyulyás also found television as a suitable medium for distributing completed films even though strict limitations regarding to length results in a form of commercial censorship as damaging to artistic autonomy as political expurgation.

Portraying historical injustices, politically stigmatized communities, Hungarian ethnic minorities living in Transylvania, and interethnic conflicts in the same region, Gulyás' films have put much emphasis on biographic detail and the exercise of verbalizing narratives of the self. For this filmmaker, national history and personal history are interwoven, one does not exist without the other. By the same token, his biographic films are cross-fertilized by cinematic sociography and visual anthropology. Not that genres are especially important for Gulyás whose method of long interviewing periods, extended observation, filming in the spirit of mutual trust, impartiality, and an emphasis on self-reflection has become his signature throughout the decades. The following interview draws up certain elements of this method with special attention to finance, choice of subjects, structuring material, distribution, reception and struggle with censorship.

Q: There are a number of concepts to think about, like the long biographic documentary, the documentary portrait film, the interview film. Do you prefer one over the other?

A: I am not sure what you mean by the long biographic documentary, if it refers to the chronological documentation of one's life, then it is a life-documentation and will not work well as a film. The documentary portrait is more relevant in my case. Here, the ultimate goal is to generate interest by selecting between key events of one's life. But unless these peaks and praises of character are not balanced by a certain degree of criticism or references to missteps, the portrait will be one sided, an idealized image. As opposed to many of my colleagues who treat their subject with velveteen gloves, I do not believe in rosy retrospection or that you live your life like hot knife running through butter, without ever stumbling. I think such an assumption is absurd.

Biographies can be regarded both an artistic and an academic exercise. In the latter case, there is little room for commemoration and the declared aim is to produce a critical biography of strict scientific standards. Can cinema achieve that?

I tend to think that "a critical biography of strict scientific standards" and cinema are largely incompatible. Cinema has little to do with scientific standards! Popular science documentaries where standards are not so strict is a different case. Cinema can be an illustration or tool of scholarly argumentation at best. I do not think people should expect rigorous academic standards from documentaries, however, credibility is a different thing in that it requires both the filmmaker and the interviewed subject to exercise certain level of self-criticism when constructing a life-story.

What do you regard as the greatest challenges and shortcomings while making a biographic portrait?

What attracts me in cinematic portraits is the opportunity to listen to a person on consecutive occasions at different locations and synthetize an image that might carry novelties even for someone familiar with the subject's life. My films require of audiences active associative and reflective skills and, hopefully, offer more than a brief moment of enlightenment. I hope people remember and revisit my films to explore them from different perspectives. To my mind, there is more depth to this approach than in the classical and prevalent version of biographic documentaries where all you need is two talking heads filmed with two cameras and illustrated with old photos or archival film footage. This is still the prevailing form

because in the short term it easily satisfies the administrative requirements set down by funding bodies who do not really care if a film is self-reflective, whether it develops an inner dialogue, or regards memories as something open to revision. They are fine with life-narratives that keep repeating impeccable statements that have already appeared in the press, in radio and television interviews dozens of times. Films of this kind are painfully didactic, you feel like a punch bag as they keep hitting you with banalities and already halfway through you know exactly how the story will conclude. This is the death of any cinema.

In your experience, does biographic documentary cinema enjoy a solid status in Hungary today?

In the past decade, the Hungarian Academy of Arts solicited dozens of artist portraits and interview films each year about members of the organization. I also made a handful of films under this initiative. We now have a remarkable number of portraits and yet they fly under the critical radar, no one ever evaluated them. If I were the Academy, I would set up an independent "jury" composed of five external members representing different fields (art history, film aesthetics, film history, film criticism, sociology or other branch of social science) to evaluate the films at a debate session open to the public every year. I also believe that it is extremely unfortunate to make these films freely available for television broadcast as part of a barter deal. This means that th Academy provides the films free of charge to compensate for the unrealistically high price of stock footage, the rights of which are held by television. I regard this practice disadvantageous because while films get distribution, there is not much critical feedback, since they are being aired either at night or Sunday lunchtime. Also, in this system, documentaries get shorter, at present, length is maximized in 50 minutes. I wonder if this is a way of making room for the endless stream of idiotic ads.

So to answer your question, the status of bio-documentaries is unstable. This is part of a wider problem. There is limited room to hold discussion forums about documentary cinema, sociological and anthropological film. Each of the artist documentaries I made for the Academy has a self-financed "director's cut" version that reflects better my own personal taste, and also incorporates the insights of others. This follows from the tradition we established in the heydays of Béla Balázs Studio, when dozens of people came together at the compulsory screening of a film's working

copy to share their sentiments, voice critical or supportive opinion. I learnt a very important lesson there. Based on the feedback and often with an aching heart, sometimes a director needs to get back to the drawing table and rethink the structure of a film. I think there is a lot of truth to the advice a character in one of our films once said: if two people say you are drunk, you better go to bed. During the exhausting editing stage there is much room to make mistakes and lose sight of the bigger picture.

Is there, do you think, a documentary subgenre we might term as biographic period portrait, a form of documentary that explores both a life story and the reality of the age when this person lived. Your film *The Valley of Blows* about László Papp, three times Olympic champion boxer, seems to be the portrait of a man who is struggling to create his own image and defy the image the communist system created for him.

I regard documentary cinema and its subcategories, the sociographic and the anthropological documentary a method rather than a genre. After all, it is method and not genre that determines the quality of a work, isn't it? Values are born through creation and not categorisation. *The Valley of Blows and Don't Pale* tend towards sociographic cinema and, thus, are predecessors of anthropological film. It is hard to recall what these films meant to us back then. In previous years we had a lot of setbacks. When my brother and I started working with Papp, we just wanted to make a film that would finally not be censored. Already as amateur filmmakers, we were desperate to make longer, more thoughtful, multifaceted and reflective films. Based on a sociographic account written by Antal Végh we shot a short documentary in the poverty-stricken village of Penészlek and a decade later returned there to make the film called *There are Changes* (Vannak változások, 1976-78). Our next film was *The Valley of Blows*, a portrait of an Olympic champion and the political dimension of sport in communist Eastern-Europe. It was important for us to explore the issue from multiple perspectives so we contacted and interviewed the boxers who had defeated Papp in the Eastern Block before his winning streak of almost 30 matches before he retired. We travelled from Berlin to Moscow and also to Bielsko-Białá, the home of the legendary Tadeusz Pietrzykowski. Thanks to our Polish translator and local members of the crew, we also learnt a lot about the Solidarity Movement that was spreading its wings exactly in that period.

> While in Poland we could film whatever we deemed important and found interesting, things were quite different in the Soviet Union where we visited Boris Tishin. He lived in an apartment block and as our hosts were preparing a real feast including fish, crab, caviar and exotic fruit, the aging master invited us to his favourite pub. It was there that our assistant filming with an 8mm camera was apprehended by two undercover agents and thrown into a Pobeda you see in cold-war spy films.

Don't Pale opens a window onto the life and times of Alfonz Medve, a peasant living in a backward developed village on the border with Czechoslovakia. What attracted you to this person?

> Alfonz Medve was featured in a previous sociological documentary with six feature-lengths episodes by the title *Among the Hills of Domaháza (Domaházi hegyek között)*. His personality, temperament, verbal excellence, excessive vitality and love of culture stood out from his environment. Due to instincts and dexterity, he was able to reorganize the decrepit cooperative of the village where he lived, for which, instead of acknowledgements, he was stigmatized and condemned in a humiliating show trial. As we later learnt, vilifying people with good business skills and autonomous incentives was a general practice at the time and took many victims all over the country. The larger than life personality of our protagonist repeatedly denied the Marxist dogma, according to which there is no room for epic figures in history. Our film wanted to document the indestructible personal integrity that helped this man to rebuild a successful private farm after his name was cleared of past accusations. Our films proved him to be the bearer of the best elements of peasant culture, like the way he managed the land and handled animals humanely even as he was taking them to the slaughterhouse.

Addressing the human misery brought about by contradictory agricultural policies and a suppressive political system, did the film suffer in production and distribution?

> Symptomatic of the contemporary state of affairs, the local mini-Stalins managed to ban public screenings of the film in the county it was made. We even took an executive from the national censorship office but that didn't matter either. We also had our differences with our co-production partners, the Hungarian Television. In its original form, the film ended

with the scene of the protagonist visiting relatives in Upper Hungary, now a part of Czechoslovakia, where he got into a heated debate about individual courage and growth. Vigilant censors, who always know better what is best for the audience, had us cut this approximately 15 minute-long scene. In response, we had our names removed from the credits.

Censorship did not end there. Members of the folk music ensemble of Domaháza visited Auschwitz. For some reason we were not allowed to join them on the trip. Anyway, during our next visit to the village people shared their experience including a visit to the prison cell of Maximilian Kolbe (whom they did not know by name), the Polish priest who died as a martyr in the death camp. This part of the interview was also cut out, I guess some narrow-minded censor safeguarding the internal security of the regime though that we were attempting to spread clerical propaganda.

Your chosen documentary method is observational cinema that follows characters and events through an extended period of time in order to capture life as being lived. Your bio-documentary about the elderly lady Mámo took a decade to be completed in the 1990s, more recently your portrait of the recently deceased philosopher Mihály Vajda, likewise. Did you find these two people similar in any way?

The observational method that aspires to preserve the continuity of events was widespread in Hungarian documentary cinema. We advanced this practice of filmmaking by screening working copies to interviewed subjects and recorded their reactions. This allowed them to revisit former testimonies, to reflect upon or question these. It also made viewers aware of the fact that the film's final structure is not preconceived but is a shared creation. We used this strategy in films made well before the one featuring Mámo from the Transylvanian village of Parajd, and the film about Vajda. As a result of their dissimilar socialization, these people had very different outlooks on the world and yet they share a lot in terms of integrity and a strong spiritual community with their past choices, some of which prove their vulnerability. What made both life-narratives extremely captivating for me was these admirable people who never shied away from openly addressing past missteps and blunders. Actually, neither of them wanted to change anything in the films or modify their structures.

The method of observational and cinema direct filmmaking allows for a more intimate, less constrained relationship between filmmaker and filmed. How does intimacy come to be formed in the case of biographic documentaries?

> Intimacy requires two people and must be mutual. Empathy is a good start and I always urge my subjects to ask question and loosen up which is never easy given the many inconveniences and stress-factors presented by the technical-logistical aspects of filming. I prefer neither to use studios with lots of lighting equipment and alienating props, nor ask questions that have been discussed and approved beforehand. Shooting in environments interviewees are familiar with, in their homes or at their workplaces, in intimate and varied locations helps viewers to better imagine how subjects live their ordinary lives. Apart from the spaces that form a part of one's identity and life-story, intimacy is created by nonverbal elements of communication which, I cannot emphasize enough, is a precious secondary language of documentary cinema.

Many of your films are portraits of artists. Do you think that these films need to pay attention to the wider art and literary contexts?

> Only to the degree the interviewees find such contexts important. I don't think the filmmaker should take the role of the scholar-investigator and force an external perspective onto their subjects. What filmmakers can do is to stay patient, conduct as many interviews as possible and hope for the subject to open up about the broader dimensions of their work. I do not like when, for instance, a photographer makes reference to the critical reception of her their work as authentic biographic detail. On the other hand, when someone, as in the case of photographer Török László, uses his camera inspired by poetry, that is totally acceptable. The same is true for cases when a subject presents authentic documents, correspondence, official documents, drawings, photos, etc. and builds these into the self-narration, but I want secondary materials to offer more than simple illustration or self-justification, and serve as a spring-board to delve into murky memories.

Some have suggested that portrait artists often seek out in their model the unique aura they also believe to possess. Is this the situation in your case?

> I always sought out qualities in interviewed subjects I myself lacked but wished to have. What really interests me is, for instance, visual skills that

> fail me. If I only pursued to show what is already part of me, the compassion of understanding and the desire to present something unique, would altogether be lost, I guess.

Many of your cinematic portraits have poetic titles, like *Little Angry Old Man* (*Kicsi mérges öregúr*) about sculptor Rezső Berczeller, *Man Grows Out of Tales* (*Kinő az ember a meséből*) about story-teller Klára Győri, *Man Sometimes Turns into Image* (*Az ember néha képpé válik*) about anthropologist Ernő Kunt, *He is a Stone-Lover* (Ő ilyen kőszerelmes) about stone-carver artist István Török, *Unwinding* (*Kifutás)* about poet Árpád Galgóczy. How did you come up with these titles?

> These poetic titles, as you call them, are the subjects' own verbal creations or lapsus linguae. I decided to use them as titles because they carry additional meanings in Hungarian and often contain polysemantic words. As such, they voice a messages on different levels, in multiple contexts.

The same pattern prevails in your films about members of the photography department of the Hungarian Academy of Arts. *Change of Scale* (*Léptékváltás*) about László Haris and András Bán, *I regard Myself a Documentarist* (*Dokumentaristának vallom magam*) about Edit Molnár, *I Don't like when they Strike an Attitude: A Portait of Török László* (*Nem szeretem, ha bepózolnak - Török László portré*), *Living Man - Normantas Paulius* (Élő ember - Normantas Paulius). Were these institutional assignments?

> The photography and the cinema departments are closely aligned within the Academy. As you might know, I am a member of the cinema department and have known many of these people for a long time. I would not call these "institutional assignments", but my own projects founded by the Academy. The film about Normantas Paulius, a Lithuaninan photographer who lived in Hungary, could only be completed because I started working with him years before funding was approved. If I am not mistaken, there had been no recorded interviews featuring him.

In the early 1980s, György Spiró, Hungarian novelist and essayist, described the method of the Gulyás brothers as follows: "If anything new comes up during shooting that does not fit the concept outlined by previously recorded material, these filmmakers drop the concept and not the truth. An honest method and human honesty serve as the aesthetic foundation of their film." Is this your preferred method when making cinematic portraits?

> This quote from Spiró reflects on our practice and not something we set in stone right at the beginning of our career. In those days there were so many, so called creative documentaries that were pathetic and relied heavily on the visual style and devices of feature films. With my brother I choose the alternative path and still tread this unconventional path in my solo biographic documentaries.

Is the moral responsibility of the filmmaker relevant in the case of bio-documentaries?

> Moral responsibility is the sine qua non of any filmmaker's integrity. I never push the verbal or visual situation beyond a certain level that may lead us to the terrain of jovial gossiping, which makes me sick. I follow a simple rule and always ask myself during the process of interviewing: would I feel comfortable had we switched roles? Likewise, I do not want to pose in the role of an all-knowing, wise-cracking director-interviewer boasting with self-confidence. I always cut my questions during editing, whenever the answer makes sense on its own. I like to wait - with watchful eyes in ambush - for the answer, preferably a confession to be heard. Often this is followed by a nonverbal signal, as precious as gold that reinterprets and reframes what has been said.

Are you working on any bio-documentaries at the moment?

> Up until now we have been discussing documentaries about living people and said nothing about creating the portrait of historical figures living in a period when photography did not yet exist. To be more specific, recently I managed to make my teenager dream partially come true and finish a film about János Bolyai, the famous Hungarian mathematician and his father. This is a popular science documentary about their professional achievements intertwined with little known details of the many hardships and tragedies that befell on them. We have received funding from various sources but were offered disadvantageous and non-negotiable terms by the television broadcasters, who were only interested in a documentary with less than an hour of running time. We had much more material and needed more time to present the research in a well-rounded manner, so I decided on using private finance to complete a second episode. Meanwhile, we realized that in the original funding application the budget for archival copyright material was seriously underestimated. As it

turned out, the achievements of the Bolyais have never been portrayed in such a comprehensive manner and available material relevant to our film was extensive. At present we are in the preparation stage of the final third episode and are applying for further grants.

Apart from the interview with Pietrzykowski featured in *The Valley of Blows*, does your work have other Polish connections?

In my years as an amateur filmmaker, I made a road movie while hitch-hiking across Poland and hope to have it digitalized this year. I also had a film project that was rejected by funding bodies on numerous occasions, its working title is "Solidarity in Hungary" and would be on the so called Polish markets (A.K.A. Comecom markets, flea markets), places where you could buy counterfeit products of inferior quality that bore the names of western brands. I remember the time when everyone - from the media to taxi drivers, from cabaret performers to the postman - had something to say on this kind of bootlegging. Yet, there isn't a single documentary on this topic in Hungary. I haven't given up on making it.

Varia

Biographical entries

Neil Archer is Senior Lecturer in Film at Keele University, UK, and the author of nine monographs. His most recent books are *The Social Network: Youth Film 2.0* (Routledge, 2022) and *Sport, Film, and the Modern World* (Peter Lang, 2024)

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