

POPULAR CULTURE WORKSHOP

Historical destinies as the foundation of legitimacy: the biographical genre in pop cultural studies

Between 2000 and 2021, out of the twenty-one winners of the Oscar for Best Actor, eleven were rewarded for playing the part of a historical figure. Seven of the movies they appeared in were clearly identified as biographical pictures. Over the same period, thirty-three out of the one hundred and fifty Oscar for Best Picture nominees – and four of the movies that were awarded the prized statuette – were biopics. Since 2017, the Netflix biographical series *The Crown* has been nominated four times for both the Golden Globe and the Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series, and it has brought home four of these awards.

The biographical genre has place of pride in Hollywood and in popular culture in general, understandably so: it brings together the pseudo-legitimacy of the period film and the widespread appetite for tales of remarkable destinies. Biographies can be found in films and series of course, and in traditional or graphic novels (too many to name), but also in music (Bob Dylan’s songs “Hurricane” and “Joey”, or Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind” for example), stage musicals (such as *Evita*, *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, or more recently, *Hamilton*), and even video games (Ryan Green’s *That Dragon, Cancer*, and Nina Freeman’s games *Cibele*, *How Do You Do It* and *We Met in May*, explore universal themes even though they are based on the lives of their programmers).

Rewriting and romanticizing are cornerstones of the genre. They are a way for biographical fictions to turn historical facts into narratives that will be both accessible to the general public and bankable. It has the same popularizing tone as historical fiction, but because it focuses on a single character, it fosters the process of identification, and makes it possible for the audience to get emotionally involved in the story that it unfolds. This raises the question: who is pictured and, to some extent, mythologized, in biographical fiction? The major – or sometimes a bit obscure – historical figures that the genre sheds light on come from a variety of backgrounds (politicians, artists, scientists...), and are transformed into heroic figures through the narrative. Biographical fiction explores and (re)shapes past events in order to explain how and why these people became so well-known and/or important. And in doing so, they sometimes explore the dark side of American society, telling tales of serial killers for example (Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Aileen Wuornos...), or of other famous criminals – through increasingly popular (and numerous) “true crime” novels, television shows and podcasts, a genre that finds its more celebrated examples in Netflix series such as *Narcos* or *Mindhunter*. How can we make sense of a genre that thrives in the representation of both somber individuals who threaten the very fabric of society, and role-models who often feed into the myth of the American self-made-(wo)man? Conversely, why are there so few biopics that revolve around big scientific figures, and why are so many of these people represented as mad or lonely scientists?

The issue of the lack of representation also comes to mind: are there any categories of people whose biographies are not fictionalized, or have only become an object of fiction recently? Are women, for instance, represented as often and in the same way as men (an issue tackled by Raphaëlle Moine in *Vies héroïques : biopics masculins, biopics féminins*)? What about other minorities? In the past few years, there has been a surge of representations of black women in Hollywood biopics with movies such as *Hidden Figures*, *Nina* or *Harriet*, which focus specifically on women who fought, in some way, against racist discriminations. Although they offer better representation to a part of the American society that is rarely pictured in leading roles, it would seem justified to wonder whether these movies are merely a way for Hollywood to push aside the criticisms of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, while limiting this representation to safe, widely recognized figures. This question could be broadened to the representation of African-American figures, indeed most of the biographical fictions about them focus on figures of athletes or musicians whom the general public already knows and loves. The limited representation of other minorities, such as Asian-Americans or LGBTQI+ people, could be similarly questioned.

Finally, the strong link between literature and the moving picture is made particularly clear in biographical fiction: biographical narratives are often adapted from the page onto the screen, or focus on

¹ (The French Association of American Studies)

major literary figures, usually trying to shed light on the way in which their personal lives inspired their most famous works (an idea that Hilda Shachar worked on in *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic*). Most such adaptations are biographical novels turned into biopics, but the source can also be a graphic novel or a comic (*American Splendor*, *My Friend Dahmer*). The literary roots of the genre could be a way for it to claim its own legitimacy, to base itself on foundations that seem solid and more worthy of respect than other media, and which could grant an appearance of “seriousness” to the narrative. But in that case, what is the canon that biographical fiction follows? How does the genre set aside historical truth in order to conform to the codes of the different media it appears in? Are some aspects of history systematically erased when the biographical narrative is being constructed, and why? Is the modification of facts as big a deal as *Time Out* film critic Dave Calhoun seemed to believe when he wrote that *Bohemian Rhapsody* was “an act of brazen myth-making. Facts and chronology are tossed aside in favor of a messianic storyline...”, thus highlighting the complex relationship between biographical fiction and its own codes?

Papers can deal with, but are not limited to:

- The forms of biographical fictions, and the ways in which it adapts to the codes of various media.
- The idea of authoritative figures: are the heroes of biographical fiction already leading figures in their field, or does the genre create new objects of fame by enabling the audience to identify to them through popular fiction?
- The relationship between biographical fiction and historical facts, as a potential way for popular culture to claim its own legitimacy. The issue of time and the chronological reorganization, or even rewriting, of facts in order to turn biographies into myths.
- Conversely, the question of the evolution of biographical fiction through time, and the changes in its form, but also in the figures it chooses to focus on. Are there any “forgotten” biopics, which focus on figures now considered to be dangerous for the American society?
- The connection between the biography of an artist and artistic creation itself, a topic that seems particularly relevant in the case of jukebox musicals such as *Beautiful: A Carol King Musical* or *Rocketman*.
- The compatibility between biographical fiction and video games: why are there so few biographical video games, and why are so many of them autobiographies? To what extent can the gameplay allow players to be fully involved in a narrative that entirely belongs to someone else?
- More generally, the integration of biographical fiction into other forms of games (RPGs, LARPDs...).
- The representation of minorities in biographical fictions: are they a way to make scarcely visible social groups more widely represented, or a means, specifically for Hollywood studios, to pretend to be inclusive while carefully selecting safe, consensual figures?
- What about fictional biographies, fictions that revolve around a figure who has only existed in fictional worlds?

In a transdisciplinary perspective, the workshop is open to all approaches which may further the exploration of these questions.

Paper proposals (300-500 words approximately) may put forward different fields of study and theoretical frameworks and approaches. They are to be sent, along with a short biography, to Jeanne Ferrier (ferrierjeanne@gmail.com) and Danièle André (daniele.andre.univ.larochelle@gmail.com) **by January 17th, 2022.**

Please note that to present a paper, it is necessary to be a member of the AFEA (*The French Association of American Studies*, for which the membership fees are about 60 euros) and to register for the symposium (the register fees are about 60 euros as well).