Biopics of British Celebrities (2010s): Introduction

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This thematic issue of *Textus* aims to explore the on-screen recreation of the lives of renowned British people in the last decade (2010-2019) during which the so called 'celebrity culture' has fully developed and matured, thus offering itself as the most appropriate context for narratives of fame[1]. After a long period of academic neglect, the biopic – from bio-graphical pic-ture – was critically rescued as a film genre by George Custen's ground-breaking monograph in 1992, which was followed, almost twenty years later, by Dennis Bingham's in 2010. From then on, perhaps also due to an increased production of biographical films for the big and the small screens, a number of studies have been published that contributed in various ways and from diverse perspectives to the debate around the many interdisciplinary and intermedial issues that the biopic addresses

[1] A tentative and incomplete list of the (English-language) biopics of renowned "Brits" which were produced in the period under consideration (2010-2019) is here itemised for the sake of those who might be enticed to further research the field. It includes biopics on heads of state and royalty, literary authors, performing artists, scientists, painters, pop stars, politicians, opinion makers: *The Iron Lady* (2011), *William and Kate* (2011), *Christopher and His Kind* (2011), *My Week with Marylin* (2011), *Hitchcock* (2012), *Belle* (2013), *Burton and Taylor* (2013), *Saving Mr Banks* (2014), *Effie Gray* (2014), *Mr Turner* (2014), *The Imitation Game* (2014), *The Theory of Everything* (2014), *By Our Selves* (2015), *Suffragette* (2015), *Queen of the Desert* (2015), *Victoria and Abdul* (2016), *Upstart Crow* (2016-2018), *Victoria* (2016-2019), *The Crown* (2016-2019), *The Lost City of Z* (2016), *The Darkest Hour* (2017), *Churchill* (2017), *Christopher Robin* (2017), *Mary Shelley* (2017), *Edison* (2017), *The Happy Prince* (2018), *Mary Queen of Scots* (2018), *The Favourite* (2018), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Rocketman* (2019), *Vita and Virginia* (2019), *All Is True* (2018), *The Professor and the Madman* (2019), *Tolkien* (2019).

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(Brown, Vidal, 2014; Minier, Pennacchia 2014; Pettey, Palmer 2018; Cartmell, Polasek, 2020).

Biopics are concerned with the life of real individuals of renown, therefore they participate in the wider domain of historical narratives, which means that they should be based on a fair amount of research and investigation. Even though facts are absolutely necessary to represent the life of a real person, creativity is also involved in the fashioning of an historical character, as Hayden White convincingly argued many years ago when writing about the similarities between historiography and historiophoty (1988). Making sense of a life in the biopic genre – considering that the average duration of a feature film is about 2-hours – means selecting a number of facts, gathered from different sources and media, and putting them into a coherent story capable of giving the viewer an overall take on that life. Since the biopic is often considered a "middlebrow" genre by the film industry, insofar as it addresses a wide and variegated audience, its guiding principle has often been that viewers do not only want to be simply informed but also and mostly entertained, or in other words that the audience does not want mere facts – what happened – but they want to know details on how these facts happened, which involves, for film-makers, entering the realm of anecdotal information and even utter speculation, and above all arranging them according to a specific narrative pattern, like, for instance, what Custen has described as the formulaic life-plot of the Hollywood classic biopic (1992: 148-76). In other words – and risking again to state the obvious – since its very inception the biopic has always been characterised by a necessary mixing of fact and fiction. Consequently, accuracy and authenticity have been pointed out as the genre's more evident pitfalls. While the degree of accuracy can perhaps be ascertained (and criticised) by measuring the quantity of actual historical documents film-makers have (overtly or covertly) consulted and used in their biopics – either written materials like letters, autobiographies and academic biographies or audiovisual materials such as photographs, portraits and file and stock footage – authenticity remains a more elusive concept and seems to call for scrutiny of the quality of those documents. Fake news and alternative facts are always at hand for the unscrupulous ones. But as Timothy Corrigan, in the wake of Agamben's notion of "gesture", bravely contends,

cinema should point towards a reality that cannot but always be mediated as soon as it is adapted to any communication system; it is only through the constant foregrounding of mediality that the "illusion of representational authenticity, coherent identities and subjectivities" can be challenged precisely as an "illusion"; the "real" must be questioned again and again in ethical terms (Corrigan, 2020: 16).

The case studies in this issue include the biopics of two stateswomen, Margaret Thatcher (*The Iron Lady*, 2011) and Mary Stuart (*Mary Queen of Scots*, 2018), literary people like the poet of rural England, John Clare (*By Our Selves*, 2015), and the inventor of fantasy sagas J.R.R. Tolkien (*Tolkien*, 2019), people in the entertainment business, first and foremost, Shakespeare (*Upstart Crow*, 2016-2018 and *All Is True*, 2018) but also directors and actors like Laurence Olivier and Richard Burton (*My Week with Marilyn*, 2011, and *Burton and Taylor*, 2013). Are these people, and the biographical films that depict their lives, particularly representative of 'Britishness'? Probably not in absolute terms. However, the fact that the chosen biopics have been customised for an international audience should not be underestimated – for they indeed project an 'impression' of Britishness outside the UK; at the same time, it is essential to bear in mind that the essays here presented are part of a special issue of the journal of the Italian Association of English Studies (AIA). The specific Italian take on the topic even explains the debatable use of such a controversial word as 'Britishness' in the title, at a time when Brexit, after the 2016 referendum, is being finally accomplished and internal claims to independence by the nations that form the UK strengthen. Interestingly, R. Barton Palmer and Homer B. Pettey openly contend that since the UK, "the nation that proves difficult to name", lacks a *récit national* similar to those of other modern European nation-states, when in need of constructing a national image it relied "on images of the great and notable whose virtues and actions can be said to have formed the national character" (2018: xix). The predilection for biography is illustrative of this inclination and is shown, for instance, in the original creation of impressive institutions like the *Dictionary of National Biography*, later to be imitated by other nations. The same inclination is exemplified in the production (and international consumption) of biopics of British men and women of renown.

The authors of the essays in this collection are well acquainted with the English language and culture, but undoubtedly their observation deck is positioned at a distance within the interrelated system of world languages and cultures. Their choice is even more interesting, however, precisely for what they perceive as 'British' in these biopics. The emotional image, or 'impression', of Britishness that the biopics under investigation seem to spark in non-British people might perhaps further be explained by pondering the OED definition of the word "ethos", i.e. "character". The OED presents two entries for the word, two meanings which are cognate but slightly different, a semantic accident which was created by the well-known conflation of two Greek words, éthos (with an epsilon) and êthos (with an eta), into the Latin transliteration, *ēthos*. One meaning refers to "the character of an individual as represented by his or her values and beliefs; the moral or practical code by which a person lives" while the other to "the characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations; the prevailing character of an institution or system". The way in which an individual's "values and beliefs" are represented *in relation* to the "attitudes and aspirations of a people, community, culture" in which s/he participates fashions the impression of that individual *as representative* of that "people, community, culture".

The individuals portrayed in the biopic and carrying with themselves the attitudes and aspirations of their community also turn from being the bearers of 'historical content' to becoming the producers of a 'call for response' to the "impression" they raise via sympathy, i.e. the natural way human beings have to affectively relate to each other. David Hume, one of the foremost British philosophers, makes much of the concept of sympathy, famously stating that "the minds of men are mirrors to one another" (1739: 365). The condition of feeling together, or *sym-pathos*, is to Hume the foundation of any ethical behaviour and can be considered what Lou Agosta well describes as "the glue that affectively binds others to oneself and, by implication, binds a community of ethical individuals together" (2011: 2). It is certainly no coincidence if Hume became famous in his time firstly and mostly as an historian: his *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* in five volumes (1754-1762) is considered to be the first accomplished product of

British historiography, and an important step in the process of national identity formation. Of course, Hume's historical account made the most of the actions of great men and as Anthony Brundage and Richard A. Cosgrove remark:

> [history] allowed Hume to deploy to great effect his ability to convey a sense of immediacy and identity with the major players of the nation's past. In short, it brought the powerful tool of sympathy into his arsenal. In Humean terms, this meant the communication of sentiments between an individual and others, and was one of the fundamental bases of our knowledge of the world and the operations of society. (2014: 15)

In biopics the role of the actor who impersonates the historical character is crucial in activating the sympathetic process. His or her facial expressions affect the emotions of the spectators: pleasure, pain or anger are shared and that emotional experience, the co-feeling, can become the ground to build further cognitive activities.

The biopic is an actor's film in which performance dominates. A review of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018, directed by Bryan Singer) sums up most contemporary attitudes to the genre: "[…] the film is full of the genre's clichés, but it also contains rousing music, faithful recreations of concerts and a captivating lead performance. So who cares if this is his real life or if it's just fantasy?".

The biopic has come a long way since its emergence in the early 20th century. It was despised by film critics, historians and even directors. In the first 20 years of sound cinema biopics were generally producers' films which exploited the star system and adhered to a marketable formula. Casting was the key consideration. The life of the actor and the part played merged, shamelessly responding to fans' obsessions with Hollywood celebrities. MGM's *Queen Christina* (1933, directed by Rouben Mamoulian), explicitly designed as a star vehicle for Greta Garbo, capitalised on drawing overt associations between its star and the Swedish queen, even employing the actress's alleged lover and former co-star, John Gilbert, as Christina's doomed love interest. *The Scarlet Empress* (1934, directed by Josef von Sternberg), likewise, cast Marlene Dietrich in the part of Catherine the Great whose story mirrors the life of the actress. In the film, Catherine

is transported from her home to the Russian court, where she is forced to undergo a complete make-over, including a change of name and image, in order to conform to the hedonistic society in which she is placed, a world whose parallels to Hollywood are hard to miss. Similarly, Norma Shearer, shortly after the death of her husband, the powerful MGM producer, Irving Thalberg, played the part of Marie Antoinette (1939, directed by W.S. Van Dyke), a part which mirrored the former "Queen of the Studio's" rise and fall: from a woman who is transformed into a megastar in the decadent French court and then humbled, like Shearer herself, through family tragedy.

Biopics have been seen by film critics and historians as toxic mixtures of celebrity culture, misinformation and a blatant disregard of experts, a legacy which can still be felt in receptions of contemporary biopics. As in the review of *Bohemian Rhapsody* above, there is almost an obligatory need for reviewers to mention that the genre is markedly clichéd or formulaic. Rick Altman (1998) argues that the biopic has its roots in Anglophilia and he cites Warner Brothers' *Disraeli* (1929, directed by Alfred E. Green), starring George Arliss, who became associated with the biographical film, a precurser to what has become known as the "biopic" (40). More than *Disraeli*, however, Hollywood's love/hate relationship with British culture is consolidated with the formative biographical film, or biopic, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933, directed Alexander Korda), with Charles Laughton gaining an Oscar for playing what the popular press referred to as "the marrying Monarch", alluding to a certain resemblance between the megalomaniac English king and Hollywood stars, notorious for their divorces. The film's allusions to Hollywood, its fetishisation and demonisation of Britishness, its exploration of the private life of a public figure (the film begins with a shot of Hampton Court, immediately followed by a scene in the king's bedroom where Henry's still warm bed is being made ready for his new queen) and its marketing strategy focussing on historical authenticity are features of many biopics which follow.

In latter day biopics, however, on the whole, we marvel not at how the biographical subject is translated into a Hollywood heartthrob, such as in the quintessential "biopic", MGM's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934, directed by Sidney Franklin), where the poet,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is "made-over" into the glamorous Norma Shearer, but how the actor is transmuted into the subject – such as Meryl Streep transforming herself into Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* (2011, directed by Phyllida Lloyd) or Daniel Day Lewis becoming Abraham Lincoln, in *Lincoln* (2012, directed by Steven Spielberg). A legacy of the early biopics, nonetheless, is the Hollywood make-over of the subject as alluded to in the title of the biopic of Jane Austen, *Becoming Jane* (2007, directed by Julian Jarrold) where we see the novelist, often known as "plain Jane", transformed into the glamorous Hollywood star, Anne Hathaway. The film's title calls attention to the genre itself which was renowned for making its historical subject more "becoming".

This special issue explores how contemporary British biopics both depart from their earlier features and return to the genre's roots. In "Mary Queen of Scots: Reflection, selection, deflection", Davide Del Bello considers Josie Rourke's 2018 *Mary Queen of Scots* in relation to Kenneth Burke's reflections on the paradoxical relation of history and drama and history as story. Burke's scope of reduction, "reflection, selection and deflection", is used to unpack the process of translating – or symbolically reducing – John Guy's biography *My heart is my own* (2004) into the 2018 film.

Films such as *The Iron Lady* (2011) and *Tolkien* (2019), discussed next in this issue, to a certain extent, display the legacy of the early 20th century biopic. Chiara Battisti notes how Phyllida Lloyd, director of *The Iron Lady*, refused to classify the movie as a biopic, insinuating that the film's association with the genre would degrade it. Francesca Guidotti considers how *Tolkien*'s director, Dome Karukoski, follows the convention of artists' biopics in which the life of the artist necessarily informs the art, so that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is itself read as a response to the author's life. In the next chapter, Saverio Tomaiuolo surveys biographies of the poet, John Clare, concluding with an analysis of Andrew Kötting's, *By Our Selves* (2015) which departs entirely from biopic conventions. Considered as an anti-heritage movie, Tomaiuolo relates how Clare is reimagined as our contemporary in a film which seemingly eschews generic conventions.

In the following essay, Michela Compagnoni notes how the Shakespeare biopic, *All Is True* (2018, directed by Kenneth Branagh), revives a biopic tradition of merging star with subject,

this time Shakespeare with Kenneth Branagh, who has become a stand-in for Shakespeare through his career on stage and screen. What is identified as a "mock biopic", *Upstart Crow*, the television series starring David Mitchell as William Shakespeare, is seen by Alessandra Petrina to be fundamentally backward looking and reassuring due to its subject matter, William Shakespeare, the most sacred of all national treasures. Biopic tropes initiated in the first half of the 20th century are unmistakably present in the show-biz biopics of the early 21st century, *My Week with Marilyn* (2011, directed by Simon Curtis) and *Burton and Taylor* (2013, directed by Richard Laxton), as noted by Maddalena Pennacchia in the final essay of this special issue. These films which confront Hollywood's past also invoke features that dominate the production and reception of British biopics of the early 20th century: film versus theatre; American versus British; public versus private and the merging of the part played with the actress.

The contemporary biopic departs from its earliest forms both in its self-consciousness, self-reflexivity and in its recognition within film criticism, as this issue testifies, but, most of the biopics explored here do not let go of long-established generic traits and remain fundamentally conservative, nostalgically looking back to a British past in an attempt to merge then with now. However, the biopics here under investigation are also able to enhance popular awareness, as well as a precious empathic responsiveness, about crucial contemporary issues; this is also due to the positive communicative strength of celebrities who vehicle with their bodies the life story of the historical figures they portray. Themes like the almost heroic difficulty in managing and accepting ageing (*All Is True, The Iron Lady, My Week with Marilyn*), the irresistible need to resort to alternative spaces, either existent or utterly imagined, in order to cope with the pressing demands of everyday urban society (*By Our Selves* and *Tolkien*), and the exigency to enfranchise women from their subordinate position in history in order to support and encourage female agency (*Mary Queen of Scots, The Iron Lady, My Week with Marylin, Burton and Taylor*, and even *Upstart Crow*), are just examples of the relevant questions that even these (mainly) mainstream biopics are capable of raising. A capacity due to the extraordinarily effective meaning-making mechanisms that this compelling genre has invented and reinvented since its birth.

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