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Television Documentary, Pop stardom and auto/biographical narratives
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One of the recent trends in the relationship between popular music and an increasingly serially produced television is the preponderance of one off biographical and autobiographical documentaries centred on the individual lives of pop stars. The titles of these programmes offer the promise of privileged insight into the life of the single star subjects concerned and an answer to the question of their identities, that is implied by the titles. Examples of this trend include: *Being Mick* (Channel 4, 2001), *Being Victoria Beckham* (ITV, 2002), *Being Brian Harvey* (BBC 2005) *Who the Fuck is Pete Doherty* (BBC, 2006), *Elton John: Me, Myself & I* (ITV, 2007), *Amy Winehouse: What really happened?* (Channel 4, 2008). This piece examines the evolution of this trend and aims to identify possible reasons for its emergence, including the emergence of reality television formats, intensified culture of celebrity, and the effect of narrowcasting and multi-channel television.

In each case except for *Amy Winehouse: What really Happened?*, the exposition of the self-disclosure is predicated on television delivering a rare degree of access to the lives of the stars. This access involves a variable mixture of private and public footage, or what could be more appropriately described as the private disclosed in the public. Such documentaries belong to the media culture of the perpetual quest for the essential life narratives of stardom that precedes this recent trend in television non-fiction. The cultural popularity of the celebrity auto/biography is most concentrated in book publishing, where as Ira B. Nadel suggests:

the reasons for the popularity of biography are multiple - from the interests

of human nature in people rather than events, to our fascination with the habits and personal details of “eminent men and women” - or with what our age confuses with celebrity¹

However, the visual media history of the auto/biographical narrative in popular music can be linked back to the direct cinema movement that emerged in north America during the 1960s. *Don't Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) exploits the behind the scenes access granted to Bob Dylan's tour to the United Kingdom in 1965, and this early example of direct cinema came out of the growth in photojournalism and the availability of lighter and more portable cameras. The continuation of the concert film is demonstrated by *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles, 1970) and currently termed the 'rockumentary', epitomised by *Shine a Light* (Martin Scorsese, 2008). The film genre of the biopic also finds productive subject matter in popular music.² This continuity of the relationship between pop music and documentary is established through the cinema and demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between auteur film directors and pop stars. What is less apparent and less researched is the manifestation of the connection between popular music and television documentary. John Hill traces the presence of popular music on British television during the 1950 and 1960s through live performance shows such as *Oh Boy* (ABC, 1958-59) and *Ready Steady Go!* (Associated-Rediffusion, 1963-66).³ (Hill 1991). These programmes sought to address a younger audience rather than a family audience. Early evidence of a concentration on the singular life of the pop star is provided by a distinctive episode of the current affairs series *World in Action* (Granada, 1963-1998)

¹ Nadel, Ira, B. 'Narrative and the Popularity of Biography', *Mosaic*, 20/4 (1987): pp. 131-141; pp.131.

² Inglis, Ian, 'Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic', *Popular Music History*, 2/1 (2007): pp. 77-93.

in 1967. This reveals a panel of representatives of the English establishment questioning the moral probity of the pop star Mick Jagger after his recent arrest for drug use.

More recently the growth of music video television in the shape of *MTV* and the contraction in live music performance programmes like the long running *Top of the Pops* (BBC 1964-2006) has opened up a space for different sort of popular music programming. The reality television formats of *Pop Idol* (ITV 2001-2003), *Fame Academy* (BBC 2002-2003) and *The X Factor* (ITV 2004-) have expanded during the shift that begins in the late 1980s to a much greater concern with the improvement and welfare of the self, with an attendant increase in what Jon Dovey terms *First Person Media*.⁴ It is within the space created by this shift in production priorities, underlined by the proliferation in cable and digital channels and changes in communication technology, that the autobiographical documentary has also grown. The discursive pressure of the media and popular music industry to identify and promote the raft of emerging pop stars is intimately bound up with these cultural and political developments.

These developments can also be situated in John Corner's summary of changes British documentary and non-fiction television:

British television documentary has passed from being 'a genre of inquiry and argument, of observation and illustration and, particularly in the last few years, of diversion and amusement. Within British television, a strong journalistic dimension

³ Hill, John, 'Television and Pop, The Case of the 1950s', in Corner John. ed. *Popular television in Britain : studies in cultural history*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1991).

⁴ Dovey, Jon, *Freakshow: first person media and factual television*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

to documentary emerged quite rapidly in the early 1950s, as the medium became a primary source of national news and public knowledge⁵

What is key here is the terms of the movement away from inquiry and argument towards diversion and amusement. The recent biographical focus of pop star documentaries on television offer much less of a report and more of an individualised mode of self-articulation that is symptomatic of the status of current non-fiction television culture.

The location of autobiographical criticism

Ownership of the critical discourse of autobiography and biography is traditionally located in literary criticism. However, the increased presence of this form of biographical/autobiographical cultural production outside of the literary field, prompts the question of how appropriate existing literary criticism is for such these more mediated texts? Critics such as Susanna Egan, Michael Renov and Jim Lane have produced significant work on visual autobiography that draws upon and extends the work of literary criticism.⁶

In 1980 Elizabeth Bruss cast doubt on the validity of autobiographical expression that is not written: 'the unity of subjectivity and subject matter - the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends - seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost

⁵ Corner, John, 'Sounds real: music and documentary', *Popular Music*, 21/3 (2002):pp. 357-366; 357-358.

⁶ Egan, Suzanne. 'Encounters in Camera. Autobiography as interaction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40/3 (1994): pp. 593-618, Renov, Michael, *The subject of documentary*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Lane, Jim, *The autobiographical documentary in America*, (Madison:

mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye)'.⁷ Egan also raised related questions 'about the subjectivity-in-representation of that life (because that which is manifest is the object of the camera eye and often of a photographer other than the apparently originating subject)'.⁸ (Egan 1994, 593). However, Egan also suggests that 'the use of film may enable autobiographers to define and present subjectivity not as singular or solipsistic but as multiple and as revealed in relationship'.⁹ One of the relationships where autobiographical subjectivity is located that with the camera itself. The proliferation of video-diary formats throughout non-fiction television support an increase in autobiographical expression captured by the increasingly intimate technologies of the camera.

More recently Lane's discussion of mostly independent film has also suggested that the autobiographical documentary 'presents an extraordinary site of subjective narration'.¹⁰ The self-narratives and relational subjectivities that occur through the vehicle of the television documentary do not offer as much formal complexity as independent cinema. These relational subjectivities of television are much more significantly mediated than the texts that constitute the critical objects within this body of criticism.

My focus lies with a populist mode of British television non-fiction programming that involves already intertextual subjectivities. One of the characteristics shared by these

University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

⁷ Bruss, Elizabeth, 'Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film' in Olney, James, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 297.

⁸ Egan, 'Encounters in Camera. Autobiography as interaction', pp. 593.

⁹ Ibid., pp.593.

¹⁰ Lane, *The autobiographical documentary in America*, p.25.

documentaries is not their relationship to literary antecedents or to the radical possibilities of independent film-making, but that together they demonstrate the connection between television and mainstream book publishing. This supports an understanding of television as a parasitic medium, through the often dependent, transmitting relationship it has with other media and forms of culture.¹¹

This takes place against a background of discussion of the diminishing role of 'the serious' within cultural production. Valerie Grove argues that the culture of celebrity is harming the serious biography: 'Hilary Spurling's life of Matisse which won the Costa Prize, had sold 12,000 copies, while *Being Jordan*, the ghost-written memoirs of the glamour model Katie Price, shifted 335,000. Not really surprising: what's bought and read in quantity reflects the state of the nation. It's like comparing audiences for MTV and Radio 3'.¹² Hugh Look points out how book publishing, like other areas of popular culture, has developed a dependence on the star system, the effects of which are criticised by Grove:

The rise of the "star" author and the cult of celebrity overwhelms publishing in the same way that it has movies and professional sports. Television creates the star system, agents nurture it. Publishers must find ways of surviving it. The Internet provides a means for star authors to reach their public without the intermediation of their publisher, but it is not yet a

¹¹ Hall, Stuart, 'Technics of the medium', in Corner, John and Harvey, Sylvia eds. *Television Times: A Reader*, (London: Arnold, 1996). pp. 3-10.

¹² Grove, Valerie, 'Celebrity culture is killing the serious biography', *The Times*, September 5th (2008).

medium in which stars are born¹³

The television channels producing these pop star documentaries which include BBC3 and Channel 4, are part of the climate that Grove describes confirming that public service broadcasting is no longer synonymous with the promotion of cultural distinction.¹⁴

The auto/biographical television documentary

The sample of programmes that I have selected from the last decade include a range of pop stars at different stages in the process of stardom. On this basis I have identified the following typology to structure my discussion of the documentaries:

i) the pop star as rebel, (Winehouse, Doherty, Harvey) ii) the pop star as global icon (Beckham) and finally what Robert Strachan calls - iii) the canonized rock stars (Elton John, Jagger).¹⁵ The difference between the pop star as global icon and the canonized rock star lies in the relationship between critical acclaim for musical achievement and a stardom that is more dependent on the commercial and promotional activity of celebrity. These categories are clearly overlapping, as well as gendered, but I will show that they are borne out by the documentaries.

i) the pop star as rebel

¹³ Look, Hugh, 'The Author as Star', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Fall (1999): pp. 12-29; pp.12.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre, translated by Richard Nice, *Distinction : a social critique of the judgement of taste*, (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984).

In *Amy Winehouse: What really Happened* Jacques Peretti narrates the current life as story of the relatively new but troubled pop star:

Amy and Blake are the most compelling, self-destructive and publicly hounded couple of our time. But what is the truth about their relationship? Is Amy really fatally in thrall to Blake's control? Did it really all go wrong for her when she met him. Called the poster girl for drug abuse, her life appears to be in freefall. My name is Jacques Peretti and I want to find out the truth about Amy. Who really pulls the strings in this modern day soap opera of sex, drugs and obsessive love?

The celebrity exposé promised by Peretti's voice over accompanies assembled footage of Winehouse and partner Blake Fielder in public space being pursued by the media. There is no input from Winehouse herself to this expositional documentary. Peretti's claim is not exceptional but it does underline the extent to which this degree of salacious curiosity about life stories is a journalistic orthodoxy of contemporary culture that now includes British television's fourth channel. The narrative of the public rise and fall of the subject is not explained by Winehouse but is instead approximated through the assembled sources of Peretti's commentary, testimony from family, and musical selections such as the poignant Johnny Cash song – *Hurt*.

“What's fascinating to us, compelling to us, is that Amy and Blake seem to loathe the attention and crave it simultaneously...Willing or not they have turned themselves into a horror movie”.

Peretti willingly assumes the role of the public enquirer into the personal history of

¹⁵ Strachan, Robert, 'Where do I begin the story?': Collective memory, biographical authority and the rock biography', *Popular Music History*, 3/1 (2008): pp. 65-80; pp. 68.

the star and this is justified and rendered free of any guilt or ethical ambiguity by the well established and legitimised desire of the public to know. This is an example of a documentary where the intermediary/narrator has no access to the pop star subject of the programme. What is offered in place is an attempted biographical explanation and promised truth of the life narrative that is summarised by the opening questions. The rhetoric of the narration – seeks to convince the viewer that this person is in a position to discover the answers to the questions promised by the title and the opening of the programme without the input and agreed self-exposure of the star concerned. Winehouse’s status of rebel is assumed by the co-existence of her distinctive confessional song-writing style and the accompanying tabloid headlines for drug and alcohol consumption. Peretti’s description of this narrative as a soap opera is a testament to the biographical story of Winehouse being an ongoing and open narrative, but also a familiar part of pop mythology that is reinforced by the programme.¹⁶

Who the Fuck is Pete Doherty? adopts a more serious stance towards a similar star subject who is also at a consonant position to Winehouse in the process of fame. The documentary was made possible by the more directly investigative endeavours of the television and video promo director Roger Pomphrey who spent ten months following his subject. The result of this access to the life of the star is an attempt to demystify the rebellious and notorious subject of the documentary.

The exposition of the documentary combines voice over by Pomphrey, self-disclosure direct to camera by Doherty, with witness testimony from fellow band members,

¹⁶ Barthes, Roland, selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers, *Mythologies*, (London:

friends, pop critic Paul Morley, tabloid headlines and concert footage. Pomphrey's opening description of his subject states that:

Peter Doherty is the product of a comfortable middle class couple, the son of an army major and a public school matron. From a very early age he showed a talent for rhyme, verse and a love of literature. Gained four A levels and a place at Oxford University to read English

This introduction is delivered over footage of Doherty's band performing on *Later* (BBC 1992-) and the documentary proceeds through recursive attempts to find sources of autobiographical exposition and biographical explanation that are appreciative of the creativity of the pop songwriter.

A fellow member of Doherty's band *Babyshambles* states: "He's been responsible for bringing a lot of soul back into music I think....he's the most real person out there at the moment, musically"

And the agent to the band Matt Bates argues for the subjects critical importance:

the lyrics generally have got the strength to hold him in the high category of the greatest, ya Dylan's ya Lennon and McCartney's, ya Joe Strummer's. He's probably the nearest thing we've got to a genius at the moment

These eulogising and mythologizing declarations of Doherty's creative status are juxtaposed with a montage of tabloid headlines detailing his drug taking exploits against a background of Doherty's songs. In *Who the Fuck is Pete Doherty?* music is

Cape, 1972).

not used as a means to secure and guarantee the continuity of a pop persona, but as part of the hermeneutic of the pop rebel that is prompted by the title of the documentary.

Pomphrey is sympathetic towards Doherty's need to be able to maintain the balance between the input of drugs and the creative expression that is required to maintain the written output of regular pop songs. The fragility of this balance and the impossibility of its long term security is fundamental to the prospect of answering the question that the title of the documentary poses. The reporting of this narrative of non-conformity and its evaluation, is summarised by the journalist and critic Paul Morley:

The problem with Pete Doherty is that it all happens too quickly now because we're all so self-conscious about it. So even before the Doherty's of the world have had a chance to develop their art, if you wanna call it that, their entertainment, their personality, their history, make a few albums, a few songs in the margins, that create a kind of solid myth, their plucked now, too quick almost, out of the NME world if you like, into the tabloid world, and the glare of the *News of the World*, and the *News of the World* has found its victim, found its target and it starts to hound and persecute. We don't really know the truth, we don't really know what he's like, we're only told when he's gone into a George Best moment or an Oliver Reed moment, we're not told anything else, we're only told the sordid bits of the story, so we're losing our real sense

of judgment on it, and therefore from an intelligent point of view your slightly mistrusting him

The status of Morley and what Bill Nichols describes as ‘the voice of documentary’ are deployed to supplement and counter the tabloid account of the Doherty persona.¹⁷

The assembled views into the subject are all given by men. Doherty’s then partner Kate Moss is referred to by some contributors, but offers no view herself.

When apparently pressed on his dependency on drugs Doherty is candid and admits to a relational self: “It depends who it is that I’m being. If its Peter someone who takes drugs, then yes I need drugs. If I’m being Peter who doesn’t take drugs then no I don’t”. This scene takes place in a small room against a background of walls covered in enlarged copies of hand written notes. The discourse of the pop star as writer is frequently interwoven with the problems and possibilities of drug dependency that has also resulted in an addiction to heroin.

The identity of the subject constructed by *Who the Fuck is Pete Doherty?* is a discursively interwoven combination of rebellious, drug dependent, white male pop songwriter, who is admired by those close to him, and incompletely represented by the constant attention of the tabloid press. There is a mythical dimension of the necessarily rebellious pop *writer* to this narrative, but it is a more thorough investigation than that offered by *Amy Winehouse: What really Happened?*

Being Brian Harvey offers a document of the current life of the former member of

¹⁷ Nichols, Bill, ‘The Voice of Documentary’, *Film Quarterly*, 36/3 (1983): pp.17-30.

successful boy band *East 17*. In contrast to the figures of Winehouse and Doherty Harvey is at a more advanced stage of declined pop stardom. The documentary is formed out of the recorded interaction between the subject, his partner Emma B. and the director Clio David, rather than Harvey addressing the camera directly. This observational combination strives to provide an explanation for Harvey's sacking from the band and like the other documentaries assumes an interstitial relationship with the subsequent "chain of tabloid stories involving decline through drugs and depression". In contrast to the opportunistic approach and tone of Peretti, David's documentary, which formed part of the *One Life* strand of BBC documentary carries a rhetoric of feminine concern for a troubled star searching for the means to revive his career. In *Being Brian Harvey* the version of the self that is articulated involves a physical struggle to recover from serious injuries and a psychological struggle for self-expression that reflects a condition of rapidly diminishing fame, in contrast to other star subjects who are able to draw upon the legitimacy of fame to explain the course of their lives and the actions through which they are made by the media .

Diane Negra argues that:

‘the recent saturation coverage of female stars in crisis contrasts dramatically with the journalistic restraint often exhibited in relation to male stars. Current media invite us to root against such toxic celebrities as Jade Goody and Amy Winehouse, but it is taken for granted that we root for their troubled male counterparts¹⁸

In *Who the Fuck is Pete Doherty?* the subjects drug fuelled antics are justified as both symptom of, and support for, his creativity and status, that combines the figure of the rebel and the pop poet. The roll call of associates and critics who are called upon to

contribute the answer to the question posed by the title function to collectively value Doherty as a figure of errant genius against a background of tabloid notoriety. By contrast Amy Winehouse is positioned as a seemingly willing vulnerable and seemingly willing victim of drugs. Rather than complimenting or enabling her musical talent, the dependence of this female star on drugs and her partnership with Brent, threaten to postpone her musical career while she undergoes rehabilitation from the effects of hard drugs.

As Negra argues this contrast ‘reminds us that fame is still understood to use up women while it energises men’.¹⁹ However, the case of Brian Harvey demonstrates that the self as commodified self that becomes post *East 17* “used up”, has an attendant economic life cycle that does not necessarily respect the patterns of gender. The history of pop music provides prior figures to underline this parable of stardom.

There are exceptions to the cycle of fame that consumes stars and there are numerous examples of stars who are careful to ensure that their fame endures beyond the phase of rebellion. This can be achieved through a unapologetically commercial strategy and the cultivation of an image that conforms to social norms in order to maximise media exposure. It is here that the figure of Victoria Beckham serves as a useful example.

ii) the pop star as global icon

The continuity announcer for ITV underlines the promise that the programme will offer the viewer the opportunity to “*discover* what its like *Being Victoria Beckham*”.

¹⁸ Negra, Diane. ‘The feminisation of crisis celebrity’, *The Guardian*, July 9th (2008).

This documentary was produced from the results of six months spent following the subject, typically promises an inside view of a star, who ensures that the timing of the profile is commercially advantageous to the Victoria Beckham brand. The documentary attracted an audience of 8.83 million for ITV1 (BARB) and prior to this the star also featured in *Victoria's Secrets* (Channel 4, 2000), which involved Beckham in dialogue with other British celebrities. The availability of this type of production demonstrates how the post *Spice Girls* Beckham is aware of the need to actively intervene in her relationship with the media.

Victoria Beckham also represents an unusual kind of star subject because she is famous for being married to the football star David Beckham, as well as being a member of the band the *Spice Girls* in the 1990s. It is indicative that Beckham chooses to grant the filmmaker greater access to her life precisely at the moment in her career where the future is relatively uncertain following the decision taken in 2001, that the *Spice Girls* would be pursuing solo careers rather than maintaining the group, following the departure of Geri Halliwell (Ginger Spice) in 1998.

The opening of the documentary gives an indication of the directness of its voice, and unlike the previous documentaries discussed there is no clear sign of the presence of the producer Caroline Mendall narrating or interacting with the subject. In the opening to the documentary a head and shoulders shot shows Beckham declaring straight to the camera that “when I was a little girl I always wanted to be famous, but I had no idea what it would be like being Victoria Beckham”. The relationship between Beckham’s life narrative and her career in music is much more clearly influenced by

¹⁹ Negra, ‘The feminisation of crisis celebrity’.

the management and exploitation of fame than is evident in the previous documentaries discussed. This declarative opening also reveals that Beckham considers the pursuit of fame to be a legitimate pursuit in itself.

The opening sequence continues with an assembly of sources including the testimony of husband David, immediate members of her family and the opening song *Not such an Innocent Girl* from her recently released first solo album *Victoria Beckham*. This is combined with footage of domestic life where the couple discuss the appeal of other stars such as Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie. The self-consciousness in the presence of the camera and the carefully selected view of Beckham family life predictably attracted the derision of certain sections of the press.²⁰ But it also serves as evidence of the extent to which Beckham seeks control over the parameters of the image that she wants to disclose to the audience. This exercise of control is in stark contrast to the prior film *Geri* (Channel 4, 1999) made by the documentary film-maker Molly Dineen which managed to probe further into the life of the more vulnerable and single former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell.

Despite this clearly measured disclosure, Beckham does intimate a supposed naivety in respect of her image that is interspersed public appearances and a commitment to her roles as mother and wife. This is demonstrated when in a sequence from a talk show she says that: “I think it's actually quite unbelievable, you don't actually realise until you actually stop and take a look at yourself - how everybody else sees you”. This is juxtaposed with the subject's mother declaring “if you don't like her as a person I'd say - well how do you know her”. The documentary goes on to reveal the

²⁰ Flett, Kathryn. ‘Nights with the Laydeez’, *The Observer*, Sunday 10th March (2002).

degree to which the subject of the documentary is aware of and sensitive to negative press commentary. David seeks to supplement the public image of his wife when he suggests that there are “two personalities – one in the media, and the one at home where she is laughing and joking – the best side of what no one sees”. The strategy of using the television production as an opportunity to launch a public corrective to the negative portrayal of the subject by certain sections of the media, is articulated as a necessary and ongoing part of *being* a global star.

Being Victoria Beckham narrates the biographical and autobiographical story of Victoria’s rise to fame and in the process offers the audience a position on the pursuit and exploitation of fame. The role of pop music within this narrative of the Beckham life as story is the most peripheral within this sample of documentaries, as music in the wake of *The Spice Girls* is one of the vehicles through which Victoria Beckham maintains her public profile.

Beckham recounts how she found her early career motivation in the form of the film *Fame* (Alan Parker, USA, 1980), a narrative fiction forerunner of the formats that have recently proliferated on non-fiction television.

In *Being Victoria Beckham* the pursuit and acquisition of fame is articulated from inside the Beckham/Adams family in primarily domestic terms. This ensures that the audience are granted a view of the star subject in the roles of wife, mother and daughter. As Jo Littler points out ‘seeing celebrities outside of the traditional places and spaces in which it is acceptable to inhabit celebrity hood - in either ordinary or extraordinary contexts - has been a key part of the appeal of the spate of many recent

celebrity reality TV programmes'.²¹ Beckham has clearly not surrendered herself to the producers of reality television but she has agreed to a documentary production that is informed by the developments identified by Littler. There are clearly agreed limits to the private exposure and disclosure but in comparison to the other documentaries examined here it does mean that this documentary provides a more comprehensive if conventional autobiographical narrative.

David Furnish, friend to the Beckhams, and partner to Elton John, summarises the life story that is offered to the audience: “she is living a dream, living a fantasy for other people, it is what a lot of young women, young girls I think, in today’s society aspire to”. The opinion of Furnish does confirm the extent to which the pursuit of fame has increased and the desire to ‘want to be a celebrity’ as an end in itself been naturalized under an intensification of individualism (Couldry 2003).

A corollary of these developments is the celebrity press that exists to both legitimate and subject celebrity figures to irreverent and salacious imagery and commentary. In *Being Victoria Beckham* the subject demonstrates an awareness of and sensitivity to comments and stories that are not always within her control stating that: “most people have a price – which is a bit sad really”. There are suggestions of vulnerability to the process of fame that has effected the likes of Brian Harvey more severely than Victoria Beckham. This is a subject who declares that “I love being famous” and this documentary reveals how, after *The Spice Girls* embodied the desire of the ‘Wannabe’ through the vehicle of pop music, Victoria Beckham has managed to retain and maintain her fame without the singular concentration on pop music.

²¹ Littler, Jo, ‘Making fame ordinary. Intimacy, reflexivity, and ‘keeping it real’, *Mediactive* 2 (2004):

Me, Myself, I

Elton John is the type of pop star who through a sustained combination of record sales and critical acclaim can accordingly be termed what Strachan has called a canonized rock star.²² The difference between the stardom of Elton John and Victoria Beckham is indicated by the greater emphasis given to the role and process of making popular music in *Me, Myself, I*. The documentary is also given a more distinctive visual form through the use of studio as the setting for the subjects narration and the general use of visual effects which combine to affirm the pop star's status and investment in elaborate spectacle.

The opening to the documentary shows an animated rocket superimposed onto footage of from Las Vegas where the subject is performing the song *Rocketman* as part of a concert. Once Elton John is shown piloting the rocket this signals the literal beginning of a journey back into and through his past represented by images and figures from his past and the simulated inside of the subject's body. The visual excess and attention to artifice that is signalled in this opening is supplemented by a voiceover that promises the viewer "here in this space contains sixty years of treasured memories of a real rock legend". The title of the documentary and its lavish opening signal an awareness of the process and grammar of self-narration in a single documentary for ITV.

The effects are continued as Elton emerges from the rocket into the all white studio

pp. 8-25; pp. 19.

space where he will narrate his autobiographical account. The neutral background of the studio is digitally filled by footage and images from his past. The story proceeds through Elton John's responses to unheard questions from an unseen questioner. This device of a prompted journey of a subject "meeting himself in the past" creates the space for the subject to recount without interruption, major events from his life. The framework for this narration is the requirement to explain the route to pop stardom taken by the subject. A key contributor to this status is song writing partner Bernie Taupin whose contribution as a lyricist is acknowledged without ever threatening the singularity of focus on Reginald Dwight who is successfully renamed and promoted as Elton John.

The combination of the blank studio setting, and the digital manipulation of imagery break up the verisimilitude and sobriety of the documentary space. This flaunting of artifice is counterbalanced by the musical referents of Elton John's vast catalogue of songs and the voice over of television actress Sian Reeves.

Exposition on the stages of emergence as a single artist and the process of making and producing pop songs is key to the self that is offered to the viewer in *Me Myself I*. The emphasis on song-writing in combination with the multiple selves suggested by visual surface and the private life of the pop star forms the voice of this documentary. The impersonal, if not estranging, setting of the studio location and the degree of visual manipulation undermines a reading of this production as another celebrity exposé

This documentary makes use of newspaper & magazine extracts that confirm the

²² Strachan, 'Where do I begin the story?': Collective memory, biographical authority and the rock

status of the subject at different parts of his career. A review by the Los Angeles Times from 1970 declaring “Elton John New Rock Talent” is mounted in an ornate picture frame for the rostrum camera and typically these sources of evidence are cut into the narration so that pace of the rise to stardom is confirmed when the voice over states that “in the early 70s Elton John was the biggest selling pop superstar in the world with a record seven number one albums in a row”. The acquisition of pop stardom through critical and commercial success is constructed as unproblematic and inevitable. In a typical manipulation of the image the older Elton John looks back on to footage of a younger Elton and retrospectively states “I always knew I’d be famous”. The manipulation of space and time through visual effects disrupts the televisual convention of a talking head in a studio and confirms the documentary as an autobiographical/biographical celebration made in the flamboyant style that is typical of the subject.

The problems that accompany fame are included in the narrative - “being on stage was very comfortable, being off stage was very uncomfortable”. Elton develops a dependence on drugs that he staves off and also gives a frank account of his marriage and sexuality. However, the form of the documentary withholds intimacy and the potential transition to a confessional register. There is no indication that the act of revisiting these past events unsettle the self control of the subject. The consistency of tone and chronologically directed narrative underlines the maintenance of control that is representative of the canonic male pop star.

In *Being Mick* the intimate observational style of director Kevin MacDonald offers

biography’, pp. 68.

access to the life of its rock star subject Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones including footage of the recording of the solo album *Goddess in the Doorway*. *Being Mick* follows the subject around the fluctuating public and domestic locations visited by the star. This documentary offers no biographical past and includes little self narration by Jagger and serves as a clear testament to the deliberate relationship of comfort that Jagger enjoys with fame and the wealth that he has accumulated from his long musical career. Unlike the other documentaries discussed there is no attempt to interrogate the past life of the subject or to challenge the control that Jagger exercises over the production, which extends to the company involved in its making - Jagged Films. The degree of control exercised within the production of these documentaries and in the careers of the two senior male pop stars is a direct consequence of their canonic status and as such their status is verified by these documentaries and influences their investigate terms.

This sample of documentaries offer a combination of biographical and autobiographical registers. The presence of interlocutions, while varied, remains evident in all of them. This indicates that these guiding figures and their production colleagues have some idea of which areas of the biographical narrative titles such as *Being Brian Harvey* or *Being Victoria Beckham* should include. The realisation of these investigative directions is influenced by the degree of control that the star is able to wield over the production and also the intertexts connected to the star subjects that precede the documentaries.

The constitution of the self that is represented by these documentaries confirms the scepticism of the literary critics of autobiography. For Bruss the unity of subjectivity

and subject matter is problematized by film, and similarly for Egan there is uncertainty over the apparently originating subject.²³

In the documentaries it is less a subjectivity that is articulated by the genre than a document of a subject in dialogue with an interlocutor and to varying degrees their preceding intertexts. This produces a relational and partial self that is also symptomatic of the proliferating production of biography and autobiography that the competing television channels have annexed through the effects of reality formats on the amended co-ordinates of documentary production within what Christopher Lasch has termed 'the culture of narcissism'.²⁴

David Marshall argues 'the celebrity is an embodiment of a discursive battleground on the norms of individuality and personality within a culture'.²⁵ These documentaries reveal that the integrity of the means through which the media set out this battleground and its attendant norms, is by no means straightforward. The role of popular music is key here. For Paul Morley the non-conformity of Pete Doherty is essential to the creative potential of his song writing but for the tabloid press this is more than outweighed by the consequences of his often excessive drug taking. Victoria Beckham appears to use music and the documentary to attempt to reinforce her embodiment of feminine norms while the tabloid media's relationship to her celebrity fluctuates between admiration and derision that is much less to do with her

²³ Bruss, 'Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film', Egan, 'Encounters in Camera. Autobiography as interaction'

²⁴ Lasch, Christopher, *The culture of narcissism : American life in an age of diminishing expectations*, (New York: Norton, 1978). Corner, John, 'Documentary in a Post-Documentary Culture? A Note on Forms and their Functions'.

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/changing.media/John%20Corner%20paper.htm>

²⁵ Marshall David, P. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.65.

music than it is pathological. Brian Harvey is attempting to recapture the popularity he attained through music in order to occupy the position that Doherty and Beckham have not yet surrendered. Seemingly, the canonic male stars who are most past the beginning of this process occupy this normative ground most comfortably and it is the relationship between popular music, television documentary that reveals these culturally contested parameters of stardom and the cycle of fame.

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