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The “Biographical Narrative in Film and Television” Postgraduate Seminar Series University of Southampton, May and June 2010

A Conference Report by Victoria Kearley, Seminar Series Organiser and PhD Candidate in Film Studies, University of Southampton

Introduction

This seminar series considered the screen genre commonly known as the “biopic”, which at its most basic level can be defined as a film or television programme with a narrative that focuses on the life of a historical person or persons. Its intention was to provoke discussion within this largely neglected area of academic film and television studies which, despite its status as one of the most commercially and critically successful film and television forms of the twenty-first century, the biopic, and its recent resurgence, has received relatively little scholarly attention. Carolyn Anderson and John Lupo, in the introduction to the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*’s special issue on biopics, describe the form as an “overlooked, underappreciated genre whose ... manifestations deserve new and rigorous scrutiny” (Anderson and Lupo 51). The “Biographical Narratives Postgraduate Seminar Series” aimed to address this call for a reconsideration of the biopic, inviting postgraduate students from across the UK and Ireland to present short papers on this theme and engage in a discussion of the genre with a focus primarily on contemporary manifestations of this form.

The Seminar Series

The seminar series confirmed the status of the biopic as a fascinating area of study, both as a cinematic enterprise and in terms of the cultural work it performs within society, co-opting the personas of historical and pop-cultural figures to reaffirm contemporary ideals of national, ethnic and gendered identity. The approach taken to biopics was interdisciplinary, encouraging postgraduate researchers in film and television studies, but also those in history, art-history and regional or cultural studies, more broadly, to take part in the event. It also aimed at considering the diversity of the genre across different national television and cinematic cultures, and its relationship to issues of individual yet national and international identities and histories.

In total, seven papers were presented, considering biographical texts from a range of national and generic traditions. I opened the event with a paper on the HBO made-for-television film biopic *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself...* (2003), featuring Antonio Banderas as the eponymous revolutionary. This paper discussed the way in which Banderas’s star persona as a macho Hispanic action hero was synthesised with the historical image of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa within the film’s action scenes, in addition to the way in

which *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself...* self-reflexively comments on the perceived authenticity of biopics by portraying the production of a film about Villa within its narrative. Emilia Cheng (University of Sussex) in her fascinating paper, “Kung-Fu and Nationalism: The Construction of the Male Body in *Ip Man*” also considered the performance of national and masculine identity in relation to the biographical subject. Cheng’s analysis of the film *Ip Man* (2008), the story of which is based on the life of Bruce Lee’s Kung Fu master, discussed the way in which the bodies of the yip man, Bruce Lee and actor Donnie Yen are compounded in the film’s performance of nationalism as kung fu. In engaging with these two papers within the forum of the seminar series, it was illuminating to discover such apparent continuities in terms of the way in which star personas are employed in the representation of the male biographical subject across national contexts.

While myself and Emilia focused on the role of star personas in biopics, other papers were equally insightful in their discussion of authorship within the genre. Jill Moriarty (University College Cork) in her paper entitled “Post-Punk Princesses and French Pastries: An Exploration of Sofia Coppola’s Auteurism in *Marie Antoinette*” examined the way in which Coppola aligns the history of Marie Antoinette with her own auteurial preoccupations, re-appropriating the story of a young queen in eighteenth-century France to a modern context. In considering *Marie Antoinette* in comparison with character motivations, themes and aesthetic style of her previous works, Moriarty facilitated an understanding of Coppola’s biopic as a translation of national history through the personal history of its director. Daniel Hickin (University of Southampton) in his paper on “Reflexivity in the Documentaries of Werner Herzog” also explored the idea of the director as auto-biographer, arguing that many of Herzog’s films act as a prism for his own preoccupations. Presenting *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1998), *My Best Fiend* (1999) and *Grizzly Man* (2005) as examples, Hickin explored the way in which each of these films act to reveal more about their director than their subjects, each of whom act metonymically for Herzog’s maverick persona.

Other papers offered differing perspectives on the function of the biographical narrative in film and television within contemporary Western societies. One such viewpoint was provided by Oliver Gruner (University of East Anglia) who presented a thought-provoking paper entitled “You’re Only as Good as Your Last Game: Civil Rights in the 21st Century Team Sports Biopic”. This paper combined textual analysis and reception studies in an examination of biographical sports films that present themselves as social medium for the retelling of civil rights in 1960s America. Gruner’s discussion of these films focused on the way in which they are championed domestically by the US print media for the cultural work they perform, encouraging audiences to participate in the narratives’ triumph over racism. Furthermore, the paper reconsidered the role of the biopic in cited notable instances in which the films were screened in schools, acting as socio-historical education for the American youth. Valentina Cucca (University of Bergamo, Italy) in her paper “The Postmodern Biopic as Expression of Nostalgia” postulated that contemporary biopics can be characterised not as contemporary myths, but rather as a manifestation of the way in which postmodern societies commodify their past. Cucca argues that the biopic has experienced a resurgence in the last decade as a product of the nostalgia that typifies postmodern cultural production, personalising history in narratives that self-consciously blend fact and fiction.

Reflecting On the Event

On reflection, and as the organiser, I feel that the seminar series was largely successful in achieving its aims. The papers presented were enjoyable and academically engaging, and while the scale of the series was small, the ideas discussed were much grander than the forum. These seminars posed questions about the definition of the biopic as a screen form, as the texts considered were diverse—action films, documentaries, romance and sports films—yet all indisputably biographical. As expected the ever-present question of the authenticity of these texts and whether this is the same as historical accuracy was also raised, provoking a discussion of how possible or desirable a historically accurate biopic is for the researcher. Beyond this, there was also a broader debate on the place of the biopic in contemporary society and the way in which the biopic performs the important societal function of mythologising histories, acting as a tool of socialisation and cultural education. It was postulated that, upon scrutiny, these texts reflect more about the cultural time and place in which they were created than the historical figures and periods they portray within their narratives.

The arguments and ideas presented and formulated at this seminar series are certainly worthy of greater consideration and discussion. I myself was lucky enough to have the opportunity to discuss these issues further when I was invited to take part in a workshop on the biopic at the University of Bristol in December 2010, as a result of organising these seminars, presenting a paper on my own research and reporting on the “Biographical Narrative Seminar Series”. I would like to thank Dr. Josie Dolan from UWE for inviting me to attend this workshop, the School of Humanities at the University of Southampton for supporting my organisation of theses and all the postgraduates who participated in the series. I hope that this report will provoke further consideration of the fascinating topic that is the biopic, and inspire other postgraduates to organise their own seminars by acting as a testimony that small-scale events can facilitate the discussion of big ideas.

Works Cited

Anderson, Carolyn and Jonathan Lupo. “Introduction to the Special Issue” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36:2 (Summer 2008). Print.

Victoria Kearley has been studying for a PhD in Film, part-time at the University of Southampton since October 2008. The representation of Hispanic masculinity in contemporary Hollywood cinema is the subject of her doctoral thesis, which considers how popular genre conventions can reconfigure traditional conceptions of race, gender and sexuality.