

The Lives and Times of the Biopic

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Film studies has been slow to embrace the biopic as a genre with its own conventions and historical stages of development, disintegration, and revival. Indeed, the American biopic has gone through a long series of discrete stages from the 1930s to the present. After the studio era ended, the number of biopics made and their commercial and cultural influence declined to the point where George Custen, in his foundational 1992 book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, could maintain that the genre largely left the cinema, retreating into television. However, things had been changing for more than a decade before Custen's book was published. The Academy Award ceremony for 1980, in which Best Actress and Best Actor went to performers who played living subjects present in the audience (Sissy Spacek as Loretta Lynn in *Coal Miner's Daughter* and Robert De Niro as Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*), marked a turning point. The new biopic deconstructed the heroism of the "great (white) man" and confronted the cultural tendency to conflate fame and greatness. Spurred by the 24/7 entertainment media and the fascination with celebrity, revisionist and deconstructionist biopics took off in the 1990s. The independent auteurist cinema was instrumental to their rise. The dramatic form also moved closer to the documentary, to the point where hybrid biopics nowadays often combine dramatic and documentary modes – as well as styles of other genres, such as comedy. This trend was followed in the 2000s by films that critique the subject while balancing a sympathetic or heroic viewpoint.

Repugnant Respectability

There's something about biopics that makes people rush to condemn them. In *Newsweek* in February 2010, in one of the most ignorant essays ever to run in a major publication, Ramin Setoodeh asked: "Are biopics history?" In the

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genre's heyday (whenever that was), this writer declares, "[y]ou took a celebrity (George C. Scott, Peter O'Toole, Sissy Spacek) playing an even bigger celebrity (Patton, T. E. Lawrence, Loretta Lynn), the story wrote itself, and the Oscars swallowed the bait." Setoodeh overlooks the fact that O'Toole was an unknown when he played Lawrence of Arabia, and that Scott and Spacek were not celebrities when the films were made; their career-peak, Oscar-winning performances as Patton and Lynn made them famous. Furthermore, it would come as news to Michael Wilson and Edmund H. North, whose scripts of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Patton* (1970), respectively, were rejected, and to Robert Bolt and Francis Ford Coppola, who were hastily hired to rescue the respective films, that "the story wrote itself." (*Lawrence* suffered one of the most troubled pre-productions in film history, as attested in Kevin Brownlow's (1996) masterly biography of David Lean and in Steven Caton's (1999) brilliant study of the film, and as proved by the multiple script drafts made by Wilson – a blacklisted writer working clandestinely for Lean – and by Bolt: these drafts are available for perusal at UCLA.) Even "Oscars taking the bait" was far from a sure thing. *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Patton* were two of just three biopics that won Best Picture in the *forty-five years* between *The Life of Emile Zola* in 1937 and *Gandhi* in 1982 (the third was *A Man for All Seasons*, 1966). Setoodeh's titular question was answered a flat "no" when the biopics *The Social Network*, *The King's Speech*, and *The Fighter* closed out 2010 atop the year's critical and commercial successes, and yes, Oscar winners (27 nominations and nine awards for the three collectively). Setoodeh's essay points up two persistent realities: (1) the ease with which the biopic presents a target for writers or editors looking to make some unearned and uncontested points; and (2) the genre's counter-balancing capacity for rendering reports of its death greatly exaggerated and for proving its critics inaccurate – inaccuracy being the charge that is leveled at the genre most consistently.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2010, the Anthology Film Archives (AFA) in New York programmed "Anti-biopics," a 20-title series of films in which, according to AFA's program notes, "the steady stream of bloated, big-budget, hare-brained films produced in Hollywood and elsewhere that delight in recruiting glamorous movie stars to impersonate various famous or infamous figures whose lives are shoehorned into a depressingly prefab, reductive mold" are countered by "a glorious alternative tradition of films that have experimented with more sophisticated, evocative, and visionary ways of conveying the essence of a human life." The program included such not obscure films as *Salvatore Giuliano* (Francesco Rosi, 1962), *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, 1968), movies I studied in class in my film-student past; also Roberto Rossellini's *Blaise Pascal* (1972) and *Cartesius* (1974); *Edvard Munch* (Peter Watkins, 1974); *Lisztomania* (1975), one of Ken Russell's infamous series of outrageous biographical phantasmagorias on artists and composers that were critically blasted in their day – see Pauline Kael's (1980, 1976) uproarious pans of *Lisztomania* and *Savage Messiah* (1972); *Fellini's Casanova* (1976), a big-budget, big-star production

in its time; and similar, celebrated films – including Robert Altman’s Nixon meditation, *Secret Honor* (1984); Paul Schrader’s *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1986); the César-winning *Thérèse* (1986); Alex Cox’s *Walker* (1987), a punk study of nineteenth-century American capitalist imperialism, with an understatedly satirical performance by Ed Harris; *Center Stage* (1992), Stanley Kwan’s revisionist exploration of the “tragic female” biopic; and Derek Jarman’s *Wittgenstein* (1993). These are not unknown, neglected films. Most of them have been written about by scholars and critics; I have shown many of them to my classes. Despite the claims of the AFA and its acolytes in the New York media (such as Dennis Lim 2010 and Armond White 2010), there is a word for these highly acclaimed, revisionist films. They are *biopics*, just as unorthodox musicals – say, *All That Jazz* (1979) or *Sweeney Todd* (2007) – are still musicals, really good ones. The fact that it’s so easy to come up with long lists of extraordinary biopics demonstrates that the biopic is a genre as rich and varied as any other. When one starts counting, there are more great biopics than there are, say, great musicals or westerns (and no more bad ones). Indeed there are many more titles that the AFA could have added: *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1993), *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *Gods and Monsters* (1998), *Before Night Falls* (2000), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), and *Ed Wood* (1994); but most are too well known to have met the AFA’s stated criteria. (And Lim 2011, who also dubbed Todd Haynes’s 2007 landmark *I’m Not There* an “anti-biopic,” seems to reserve that term for any film biography of which he approves.)

Similarly, reviewers and scholars alike, when praising a biopic, often compare their “good object” to a straw man, or movie. To see plentiful examples of this, one need only browse through the Rotten Tomatoes.com links for a highly praised film such as *Milk*, rated 94 percent “fresh” (*Milk* 2008):

As far as paint-by-numbers biopics go, *Milk* is unquestionably the best we’ve seen in years – maybe even the whole decade. Tim Brayton, *Antagonism and Ecstasy*

A film that doesn’t quite escape the clichés of the biopic genre but still finds its own beats, thanks in large part to the piercing performances. Pete Hammond, Hollywood.com

That rare, heartfelt biopic disinterested in egregious chronological compression or psychological reductiveness. Nick Schager, *Lessons in Darkness*

The film hits all the important marks but never feels like a typical biopic, a superficial, greatest-hits collection. Christy Lemire, Associated Press

How can a genre be so maligned and yet also so prolific and durable? Perhaps the prestige of the genre sets it up for a fall. Disposable horror movies open every other weekend in the 2000s and 2010s, make a quick buck, and are instantly forgotten; but after *Alexander* (2004), for example, Oliver Stone never quite recovered his footing as a major director. When reviewers favor a film, they find ways not

to consider it a biopic; but, if they find it wanting, the word “biopic” usually dominates the lede. This brings up another of the genre’s problems: it has no cinematic and visual style of its own, aside from clichés, which all genres have. Thus, for many, the biopic enjoys none of the glories of genre filmmaking, but it suffers all of the pitfalls.

The genre has been so poorly defined that some of the characteristics often associated with biopics actually apply to relatively few of them. For example, the majority of biopics don’t include childhood scenes and aren’t in fact birth-to-death chronicles. Biopics from all eras and phases of the genre’s development generally open just before the moment when the subject begins to make his/her impact on the world. Filmmakers take different approaches as to whether the film should limn the personality of the subject (the “portrait”) or chronicle the life – and actually most films want to do both.

There’s no denying that biopics have in common a certain destination. The classical genre ends by stressing the subject’s transcendence; the essence line of the entire genre might be the line of the writer Parvulesco in *À bout de souffle* (1960). When asked to name his grandest ambition, he replies: “to become immortal – and then to die.” This is why so many biopics end with some kind of tribute to the subject and vindication of his/her travails. This is true even of a disconnected, postmodern, non-dramatic biopic like the great *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*; parodies like *Ed Wood* send up this concept by treating Edward D. Wood Jr.’s election as the worst movie director of all times as if it were the awarding of the Nobel Prize.

Kinsey (2004; see Figure 12.1) is a good example of how a film’s subject matter can obscure a generic approach. Director Bill Condon and Liam Neeson, who plays sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, fall back on the Warner Bros. scientist biopics



Figure 12.1 In *Kinsey* (2004) the 1930s’ scientist biopic form tells the story of Alfred Kinsey, just your ordinary Midwestern sex researcher in puritanical America. With Laura Linney and Liam Neeson. Director: Bill Condon. Fox Searchlight Pictures. Digital frame enlargement

of the late 1930s. This is seen in Neeson's staccato delivery, in the obsessive tunnel vision of the subject, in the supportive spouse, in the emphasis on the subject's ordinariness (which, in Kinsey's case, is undeniably part of his mystique), even in the trope that the hero works himself too hard and suffers an (always public) breakdown. It's telling and ingenious of Condon that the film's final tribute comes privately, from a gay woman's testimony, rather than from some public forum. It is amusing to me when a film that appropriates so many characteristics of the classical genre is acclaimed by reviewers as some kind of aberrant exception to it – just because they approve of its theme.

“If it's a bad movie, it's a 'biopic,' but if it's doing something interesting or different, it's something else”: this is an almost universal attitude. And it's not just reviewers who evince this; the filmmakers themselves do it too, probably as a defensive reflex. Nobody wants to be caught making a biopic. One finds this throughout the 1990s and early 2000s especially; when Scorsese promotes *Kundun* (1997) or Michael Mann talks up *Ali* (2001) or Mike Leigh introduces *Topsy Turvy* (1999), they all deny, with very sophisticated rationalizations, that they've made biopics. A remarkable development of the early twenty-first century thus far has been the phenomenon of filmmakers actually owning the label “biopic,” and even reviewers using the term as an objective descriptor, not as an automatic pejorative, as they had for decades before.

Separate and Unequal: The Female Biopic

There are relatively few great female biopics. While women get the short end of most Hollywood genres, from the western to the film noir, from the action film and horror to science fiction and even melodrama, the female biopic is almost a contradiction in terms. A genre that concerns the public achievements of individuals naturally won'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. Thus the narrative thread of the female biopic is most often the downward trajectory, with female subjects victimized by their own ambition, or the limitations placed on them.

Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990) (which, in an outstanding example of the exception proving the rule, is actually a three-part mini-series for New Zealand TV that was edited into a three-hour feature in the US and in Europe) essentially defines the revisionist biopic of any sort. *I Want to Live!* (1958), despite telling the story of a woman who received the death penalty, manages to overturn many of the conventions and to stand as one of the most interesting and self-conscious meditations on the male gaze in film as well as on the contradictions inherent in the roles of women in American culture of the 1950s.

In a 1988 article on biopics – one of the few serious studies of the genre published before Custen's – Carolyn Anderson reports that films about women constitute

just 28 percent of the films made. Therefore, in a review of my 2010 book *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, Jesse Schlotterbeck expresses mild surprise that I would devote equal space and importance to female and male biopics (2010: 113). The point is that the genre displays patriarchal culture's discomfort with the presence of women in the public realm. Hence the fact that more than half the world's population gets a bit over a fourth of Hollywood's biopics speaks for itself. In their book on the filmed lives of queens, Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell lament film biographies about women that begin "the moment she meets 'the Man,' as if she had no life before him [. . .] Why can't we ever see them as children (as so many male biopics begin), or young adults, or women ruling a kingdom?" (2009: 150).

This pithily describes the limitations with which female biopics begin (literally and figuratively). Victims make better subjects than women with long fruitful careers and non-traumatic personal lives. Ambition is displaced onto men – managers, advisors, husbands. The downward spiral is the basic narrative structure of the female biopic. As Ford and Mitchell point out, taking up from Custen, queens dominated during the studio era, particularly in the thirties. The studios hoped that associations with royalty would rub off upon such "movie queens" as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Norma Shearer, and Katharine Hepburn. However, these actresses are no less queenly than the monarch-portrayers of later generations covered in the book, from Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson in the 1970s to Cate Blanchett and Helen Mirren in the 2000s.

Although female biopics may make up less than a third of all biopics, a statistic that holds up in the early twenty-first century, many of these are high-profile films, subjects, and performances. Between 2000 and 2010, seven out of the eleven recipients of the Academy Awards for Best Actress awards won for playing actual people in biopics. These included Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich* (2000), Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003), Reese Witherspoon in *Walk the Line* (2005), Helen Mirren in *The Queen* (2006), Sandra Bullock in *The Blind Side* (2009), and Marion Cotillard, who, as Edith Piaf in *La Môme* (2007; US title *La Vie en Rose*), became only the fourth actor to win an Oscar for a foreign language performance, and the first in French. Four of the eleven Best Supporting Actresses were in biopics, three of them about male subjects; these were Cate Blanchett, who played Katharine Hepburn in *The Aviator* (2004); Marcia Gay Harden, who played Lee Krasner, the wife of Jackson Pollock, in *Pollock* (2000); and Melissa Leo, who played Alice Ward, the mother of boxers Nick and Dick Eklund in *The Fighter* (2010). On the male side, six men won Best Actor for portraying real people, and three won Best Supporting Actor. Thus, among men, there was one less winner on each count, despite a 4–1 advantage for male biopics. Can we say, then, that, in the neo-classical biopic era, what female biopics there are tend to make more of an impression than male biopics?

In films of the late 2000s and early 2010s female directors continue to attempt to depict female subjects in ways that may subtly shift the feminine biopic in the direction of the minority appropriation. *The Runaways* (2010, directed by



Figure 12.2 *The Runaways* (2010). His way or her ways. Joan Jett (Kristin Stewart) (foreground, left) survives the exploitative ministrations of sleazy promoter Kim Fowley (Michael Shannon); Cherie Currie (Dakota Fanning) (far right) does not. Director Floria Sigismondi. Sony Pictures. Digital frame enlargement

Floria Sigismondi; see Figure 12.2) reteamed Kristen Stewart and Dakota Fanning, bankable after appearing in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009). Sigismondi's film portrays the formation, rise to fame, and breakup of the Runaways, a brazen rock group of the 1970s. The film presents the band, with its signature song, "Cherry Bomb," which many radio stations of the time refused to play, lending the group a notoriety that boosts its media coverage and its concert ticket and record sales. The concept of the band is shown as the twisted brainchild of a crass producer/promoter, Kim Fowley (Michael Shannon), who, upon learning that the lead singer, Cherie Currie, is only 15, rushes toward the camera and excitedly fist-pumps on the word "Jailbait!" The film functions as joint biopic of Joan Jett (Stewart) and of Currie (Fanning), who is robbed of her innocence by Fowley and the pop music hype machine. It portrays Jett as a determined rocker, who reappropriates Fowley's exploitative creation to smash the preconception that "girls don't play electric guitar," as a high school music tutor had insisted. The equal focus on Currie and Jett gives the film what Tom Long of *The Detroit News* called "a split personality" (Long 2010). Sent with the band on unsupervised roadtrips, Currie slides into heroin addiction. The casting of former child star Fanning, who, like her subject, is 15 years old, replicates the squirm effect of seeing an underage girl – the rest of the band members were over 18 – cast into the drug-addled glare of the rock world. The downward spiral of Currie contrasts with the ascending arc of Jett, who, with her apt stage name, parlayed her experience in the Runaways into a successful solo career that continues to this day. Sigismondi presents their stories as two sides of the same feminism, showing "how brutal and sexist rock and roll is," as Peter Bradshaw (2010) of *The Guardian* put it. Currie may be a victim, but Jett and the band are groundbreakers, making the young blonde frontwoman part of progress for women in rock and roll all the same. A moving final scene in which Jett, now on her own and promoting her music on

a Los Angeles radio call-in show, takes a call from Currie, who works in a diner, reconciles the film's dual trajectories.

In *Bright Star* (2009) director Jane Campion takes what could have been a tragic-artist story of John Keats (Ben Whishaw), who died at 25 in 1821, and transforms it into a romance centering on Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish), who gives the film its drive and power; as Jett in Sigismondi's film provides the story of the Runaways with its historical significance, so Brawne, who carries Keats's memory into posterity, supplies Campion's film with the transcendence that all biopics really must have.¹

Acting in the Biopic: "A Body Too Much"?

The most fruitful discussion of acting in historical films remains Jean-Louis Comolli's 1978 article "Historical fiction: A body too much." According to Comolli, the actor playing an actual person in a historical film drama becomes the only version of the subject we have as we watch the film. The two bodies – the body of the actor and the body of the actual person as the spectator knows him or her – compete for the spectator's belief: thus there is "a body too much." So, as we watch Anthony Hopkins as Pablo Picasso in *Surviving Picasso* (1996) or Salma Hayek in *Frida*, the strength of the performance lies in its ability to make us believe that this could be Picasso or Kahlo, while never letting us forget, either, that these are Hopkins and Hayek creating their art, interpreting, and, if we feel they succeed, becoming the person-as-character.

There have essentially been, as they have come down to the contemporary period, three categories of biopic performances: embodied impersonation, stylized suggestion, and the star performance. Examples of embodied impersonation are plentiful in the past three decades and account mostly for the number of Oscars in the genre. Such performances include those of Robert DeNiro in *Raging Bull* (1980), of Denzel Washington in *Malcolm X* (1992), of Jamie Foxx in *Ray* (2004), of Phillip Seymour Hoffman in *Capote* (2005), of Toby Jones (also playing Truman Capote) in *Infamous* (2006), and of Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003).

A good example wherein the star performance meets the stylization is Morgan Freeman playing Nelson Mandela in *Invictus* (2009). Freeman doesn't attempt a full-fledged impersonation and doesn't master Mandela's accent. But Freeman, who has played God and several fictional presidents of the United States and has provided omniscient voice-over narration for numerous films, may be the only actor with the aura of authority and experience sufficient for playing Mandela. Mandela's highly publicized remark, upon meeting Freeman in the 1990s, that he would be his choice to play him in a movie confers its own weight and legitimacy. If the film had done better at the box office, there might have been – and might still be – the hazard that Mandela would become known as Morgan Freeman in the public memory, as in the old joke that "Don Ameche invented the telephone," because he starred in *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939).

Case Study: *The Aviator*

Leonardo DiCaprio gave star performances in *Catch Me if You Can* and *The Aviator* (see Figure 12.3), playing, in the former, a young fugitive from justice and, in the latter, a man all the more famous for not having been seen in public for the last 25 years of his life: Howard Hughes. Under Martin Scorsese's direction, Leonardo DiCaprio plays Hughes as a nervous dynamo whose Oedipal obsession with cleanliness – rooted in childhood – slowly and helplessly undermines him. Hughes's proclivities and prejudices – his “harems” of young girls barely of age, his virulent racism, which was surpassed only by his McCarthy/HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee)-era anti-communism, both of which reportedly were weirdly wrapped up with his germ-phobia – are white-washed. The film avoids much of the ugliness of Hughes's later life – including his foolish destruction of a movie studio, RKO Radio, which he bought in 1947, just after the film ends. With DiCaprio, the emphasis is less on Hughes's recklessness and bravado, and more on his restless drive and creeping mental illness. This allows Scorsese to use every point-of-view device to get us on Hughes's side. *The Aviator* is an idol of production story, as Custen defined it; “the aviator” broke records and built airlines. But, above all, he was the most famous eccentric of the twentieth century. He makes the perfect subject for an early twenty-first-century neo-classical biopic, blending the celebratory, the warts-and-all, and the investigatory *Citizen Kane* biopic styles.

DiCaprio struck what is to date a five-film collaboration with Scorsese, a director twice his age. Scorsese gives DiCaprio seriousness and legitimacy; the young actor “keeps the director current” (LoBrutto 2007). The film's climactic Senate hearings sequence recalls the public Hughes that has come down through newsreels and



Figure 12.3 In *The Aviator* (2004) Scorsese and DiCaprio build excitement and sympathy around the hard-to-like eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes. Can the mentally frail Hughes get through the 1947 Senate investigation of his war contracts with the government? Director Martin Scorsese. Warner Bros. Pictures/Miramax Films. Digital frame enlargement

newspaper and magazine photos – a severe man with slicked-back hair parted down the middle, movie star handsome with a deadly earnest expression, marked by a cocked eyebrow. More than Howard Hughes, though, DiCaprio resembles a figure even more iconic: James Dean in his final film, *Giant*. Scorsese may have decided to solve the possibly perceived lack of gravitas in his barely 30-year-old star by making DiCaprio's Texas drill bit scion a pastiche of Dean's Texas tycoon Jett Rink. The image of the young wildcatter Hughes may have been behind the Dean portrayal in George Stevens's film, with the "Howard Hughes moustache" applied to give a sense of the character. Scorsese's film finds its authenticity in film history overall, with its well-publicized color scheme resembling early 1930s two-strip Technicolor in its inability to capture the color spectrum beyond blue and red, ripening by means of digital color alteration to lush three-strip saturation for the later thirties, after the process came into use. Thus it would make sense to Scorsese that the upstart Hughes, maturing into his forties, would resemble not only the 24-year-old Dean playing a middle-aged millionaire, but also the 25-year-old Orson Welles thespianizing beyond his years in *Citizen Kane* – a film that Scorsese also has in mind here, besides its status as a paradigm for the investigatory, psychological biopic.

In the studio period, the mandate to showcase stars more or less as the public expected to see them outweighed any need to present a biographical subject with accuracy. When Gary Cooper played Lou Gehrig in *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942) or Alvin York in *Sergeant York* (1941), those characters did not look or act appreciably different from the actor best known as Capra's Mr. Deeds and John Doe. Gehrig and York suited Cooper far more than Cooper suited them. When James Cagney assayed the Broadway song-and-dance man George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), he not only harnessed the breathlessly energetic aggressiveness familiar from Cagney's many tough-guy performances, but even his dancing style was not much changed from the hoofing that the star had done in the musical *Footlight Parade* (1933).

Only rarely in the studio era – and even years later – would producers signal a project's seriousness by avoiding stars. For his patriotic end-of-the-war election-year special, the 154-minute Technicolor *Wilson* (1944), Darryl F. Zanuck cast a little-known character actor from Canada, Alexander Knox, as President Woodrow Wilson. Knox gave a steely, dignified gloss to the portrait – crafted by Zanuck, screenwriter Lamar Trotti (*Young Mr. Lincoln*), and director Henry King – of Wilson as a noble martyr for world peace. (Despite the one-dimensional depiction of Wilson, it's still a glorious film for its over-produced excesses; where else can one see a reenactment of the 1910 Princeton–Yale football game, or a 20-minute restaging, in almost documentary detail, of the 1912 Democratic National Convention?) Knox, however, gives a performance that could have been given by Paul Muni, the actor most identified with biopics in the studio era (he also looks something like Muni); the actorish Muni might have suggested more of the unyielding inflexibility that made Wilson's uncompromising efforts for the League

of Nations so self-defeating. One senses, however, that in 1944 casting Muni in a biopic would look as passé as, say, casting Gregory Peck as General Douglas MacArthur was in 1977. Thus, in terms of acting, Zanuck wanted a Muni-style performance, but without the typecast baggage that came with Muni himself.

Only character actors were permitted to encase themselves in makeup and prosthetics. Charles Laughton became the first performer to win an Academy Award for a non-Hollywood film, Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), in which he appeared a startling likeness of the Tudor King familiar from the Holbein paintings, perhaps making Laughton too much of an image rather than a body too much— which is also at issue in Comolli's discussion of Pierre Renoir's *Louis XVI*. Laughton also appeared to have stepped out of the self-portraits of Rembrandt van Rijn in Korda's *Rembrandt* (1936; see Figure 12.4). American character actors such as Fredric March and Muni, who became more typecast as figures of the past than any actor until Charlton Heston, had a fairly free hand to transform themselves into, for instance, Benito Juárez or Mark Twain, respectively.

The norm was that Tom Edison became first Mickey Rooney, and then Spencer Tracy (in MGM films of 1939 and 1940) – not the other way around. Edison may have invented the apparatus that beamed the likenesses of these stars onto cinema screens, but it was Rooney and Tracy who paid the light bills in Culver City; thus it was their images that the studio felt the need to protect. The utmost importance of the star persona meant that Rosalind Russell played the Australian missionary without a trace of an Australian accent, a lapse that would be unpardonable after 1980, in the era of Meryl Streep, whose gallery of accents in biopics – among them Texan in *Silkwood* (1983), Danish in *Out of Africa* (1985), Julia Child's unique voice



Figure 12.4 Crowds line up for the Charles Laughton–Alexander Korda biopic *Rembrandt* at the Loew's State in Indianapolis early in 1937. Source: Bass Photo Co. Collection, Indiana Historical Society

in *Julie and Julia* (2009), and Margaret Thatcher's in *The Iron Lady* (2011) – set the standard for biographical embodiment for a generation. In 1946, however, Russell's American-inflected Sister Kenny was good enough for an Oscar nomination. The convention of the subject-as-star, however, was one of the factors responsible for the low repute of the biopic.

Subjects and Stars: Sinatra in *The Joker Is Wild* (1957)

Consider this plot: In 1920s Chicago a cocky young singer quits his gig at a speakeasy, taking an engagement at a swankier place uptown, where he is a success, and this leads to his first recording contract. He blithely ignores threats from the gangsters who own the club that he left. One day his apartment is invaded by thugs who beat him within the proverbial inch of his life, cutting his face and slashing his throat and vocal cords. His career ruined, the singer disappears. Friends find him eight years later in New York, where he is reduced to performing tired slapstick routines as a baggy pants comic in a burlesque house (just like Bugs Bunny in a 7-minute "biopic," *What's Up, Doc*, 1950). His best friend and piano accompanist arranges for him to perform at a benefit with such big names as Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, and Sophie Tucker. He is pulled out on stage, still in his burlesque costume, by Tucker, who plays herself. She introduces him as a courageous man who defied gangsters (even though he had looked more foolish than brave). The former singer stands there, stunned, while audience members call out song requests. He catches sight of the pianist, his old friend Austin Mack (Eddie Albert). Smiling at him from the orchestra pit, Mack fulfills the role, frequently seen in biopics, of the mentor, friend, and sidekick. This role is often a fictional composite character, or an actual person in whom the traits and roles of several others in the subject's life have been combined. Here, though, Austin Mack actually was the best friend of the film's subject, and also his piano accompanist throughout his career. The man misses the first cue from the pianist, and he chokes trying to sing. But something happens besides. Beginning haltingly, he makes jokes about his failure, turns his discomfort and potential embarrassment into a string of one-liners, and soon has the audience rocking with laughter. What could have been a melodramatic moment becomes comedic and presents the jokester, Joe E. Lewis (1902–1971), with a whole new career, albeit one that Lewis will later self-destructively abuse by drinking to excess and by insulting his audiences in night club scenes that anticipate Jake's dissipation in *Raging Bull*.

This scene from *The Joker Is Wild*, a key entry in the warts-and-all biopic subtype that grew out of the trend toward anti-heroes in American films of the 1950s, encapsulates many of the pleasures of biopics for those who enjoy them, and of their pitfalls for those who do not. This film was directed by the Hungarian-born Charles Vidor, who had just made *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955) – a film that historian Drew Casper calls a "trailblazer," crediting it with launching the warts-and-all sub-genre as well as with injecting it into the musical biopic, which had been little more

than a biographical revue up until then. “Warts-and-all” films depicted “celebrity and showbiz as a hell on earth. No longer heroically admirable, protagonists were ambivalent, sometimes downright unsympathetic. More, they were given an inner life” (Casper 2007: 283, 284).

The scene I am describing presents the subject’s breakthrough as a naturalistic, spontaneous occurrence, almost an accident. Beginning 36 minutes into the film, this nearly five-minute scene marks the first indication of natural comic talent on the part of Joe Lewis. The delivery is not snappy and wise-cracking, as one expects from a stand-up comedian, but slow and halting at first. The comic seems to surprise himself at how funny he is; as he grows in confidence, the routine builds. Afterwards, however, he skulks off the stage, thinking that he has just taken another blow in a life of degradation. For the film’s audience, the scene is one of discovery, as we see Lewis come into his own all at once, with no work or coaching. Surprisingly clever plays on words – “They [the mobsters] didn’t fool around in those days. It was, well, a different kind of show business. If they didn’t like you, they didn’t throw you out of the show. They threw you out of a speeding car.” The audience doesn’t instantly fall on the floor with laughter; some of the jokes get tentative responses, as if people aren’t sure if it’s okay to laugh at such violence and pain, making clear that this brand of comedy was new in the mid-1930s when the scene takes place, and outside the mainstream even 20 years later. While one can be sure that Joe E. Lewis didn’t burst on the scene all at once as a newly minted comedian, one of the keys to the biopic genre is the pleasure of seeing a talent or a discovery or a well-known breakthrough take place before our eyes, dramatically but naturalistically.

Star persona is another important element of this scene. Joe Lewis is played by Frank Sinatra, whose presence has an incalculable effect on the film. Imagine: Sinatra with his vocal cords sliced, permanently unable to sing. The thought of Sinatra robbed of his voice gives the character a vulnerability it could not have had with any other actor (see Figure 12.5). A scene in which Frank Sinatra, wearing a cheap, ill-fitting suit, with trademark fedora, sits behind a stage cyclorama (or “cyc” – sounds like “psych” – in its suggestive abbreviation) and watches the shadow of his real-life rival (and sometime costar), Bing Crosby, sing to an adoring throng at the post-benefit party might just qualify as a high point in self-pitying postwar male masochism.

Moreover, the public was familiar with Sinatra’s history over the previous eight years of *his* life, and with a time in the early fifties when the singer nearly lost his voice, was thrown out of a studio, if not out of a speeding car, and was rejected by his fans. As scholar Roger Gilbert tells it, Sinatra’s own

transition from the forties to the fifties was both harrowing and transformative. By the end of the forties, his popularity was in freefall, his private life a shambles, and his voice a wreck. Sinatra’s comeback in the early fifties, after being considered “washed up” by the press and Hollywood, is the stuff of legend. (Gilbert 1998: 41)



Figure 12.5 *The Joker Is Wild* (1957). The height of warts-and-all male masochism. Frank Sinatra as the ruined singer-turned-comic Joe E. Lewis watches Bing Crosby croon his way into listeners' hearts from behind a cyclorama. Dir. Charles Vidor. Paramount Pictures

Gilbert runs down “the familiar facts”: Sinatra “divorces Nancy, marries Ava [Gardner]; record sales decline; fired by MGM; voice fails; throat hemorrhages; divorces Ava; attempts suicide; plays Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*; wins Oscar; moves from Columbia to Capitol Records; teams up with [music arranger and orchestrator] Nelson Riddle [. . .]” (ibid.).

In short, Lewis’s comeback echoes Sinatra’s; the burlesque comic’s clown makeup, baggy pants, hangdog expression, and dejected posture express, like Kabuki theater, the Sinatra of his 1949–1953 “down” period, the onscreen events rhyming with what the spectator knows of the star’s career trajectory. For example, the massive publicity surrounding Sinatra’s stormy courtship, short-lived marriage, and breakup with Ava Gardner resonates in the comic’s dramatized inability to trust and to sustain relationships with women. In a climactic scene Letty (Jeanne Crain), the love of Joe’s life (Joe’s neglect of her finally causes her to marry another man), comes to one of his shows. Seeing her in the audience prompts him, drunkenly, to make up self-pitying lyrics to “All the Way,” the song that weaves its way through the film, serving as a touchstone for the turning points in Joe’s life (it is also the number he attempts to sing at the benefit). Sinatra had lost the role of Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (1954) to Marlon Brando, and he had to take second billing to Brando in order to be cast in the film version of the Broadway hit *Guys and Dolls* (1955). Like many old school Hollywood types, he liked to mock Brando and the Method; nonetheless, Sinatra showed himself just as capable as any Method actor of using emotions from his own life for a scene. These resonances

make the character poignant and render him vulnerable and passive, but they also make understandable his self-loathing and the self-destructive refuge he takes in alcohol and gambling.

Reports of mob connections trailed Sinatra (accurately) throughout his career; showing a Sinatra character brutally victimized by gangsters might mitigate that reputation a bit. A past (and present) with the mob is among the things Sinatra had in common with Lewis, who, as publicity and reviews pointed out, was a close friend of Sinatra's. Lewis, recounts a Sinatra biography, "went to Sinatra family celebrations, traveled abroad with Sinatra, shared a hotel suite with him, and drank with him in the company of mob chieftain Santo Trafficante. Sinatra performed in Lewis's place when he was sick, cared for him personally, and paid his medical bills" (Summers and Swan 2005: 413n). Sinatra's portrayal of Lewis, however, has limits; Lewis performed in his second career as a comic with "a voice described as sounding like two pieces of sandpaper being rubbed together" (44). The golden-throated Sinatra had to suggest Lewis's cracked voice without actually sounding like it. *The Joker Is Wild* exemplifies star casting in biopics – those instances when the real-life subject and the persona and screen presence of the actor who plays him or her are in close consonance – times when "the body too much" scarcely shows. *The Joker Is Wild*, whose "All the Way" by James Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn won the Academy Award for Best Song, has never been on video in any form and can be seen publicly in the United States only in very occasional showings on the Turner Classic Movies channel. An obvious precursor of *Raging Bull*, it deserves to be much better known than it is.

History, Fiction, Biography: An Evolution

As historical film, the biopic occupies a liminal space – closer to actuality than fiction, more focused on individuals, to the point where they become characters – to be what we understand as history. To be specific, the biopic, a compound word for "biographical picture," is the dramatization of a life. In the formulation that I've laid out in *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, "biopic" carries the widest possible meaning. Denoting drama rather than documentary, biopics almost inevitably overlap with other genres, which is one reason for the form's longtime lack of recognition as a genre in its own right. There are musical biopics, sports biopics, gangster biopics, biopic thrillers, literary biopics, artist biopics, and historical biopics. Thus historians may be naturally more interested in, say, *Schindler's List* (1993) or *W.* (2008) than in *The Fighter* or *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (1993). A film about a boxer or a pop singer, however, is no less a biopic than one about an American president or a hero of the Holocaust. Yet much of the confusion about the genre has come out of these overlaps. On its release, *Schindler's List* was praised or attacked as a film "about" the Holocaust, when, as Robert Burgoyne found many years later, it may be best understood as a film about Oskar Schindler

and his relationship to the Holocaust – as a biopic. Indeed *Schindler* might best be seen as two films in one – a wrenching and affecting staging of the death camps and the Nazi mentality, and a considerably more problematic narrative about a “good German.” Some have insisted, furthermore, that there are other kinds of film biographies; and then there are biopics. The term “biopic,” moreover, has by now picked up quite a history of its own. Although the precise origin of the term is not known, it sounds like *Variety*-speak, reflecting the willingness of the “show business bible” to shorten industry terms to snappy single syllables. Understood for many years as a pejorative term, “biopic” also connotes the cycles of celebratory biographies made by Hollywood during the peak of the studio era, in the 1930s and 1940s. Those who are interested in the biopic, however, and who believe it has a lot to tell us about the contribution, for good or ill, of individuals – with their motivations and personal peccadilloes – to history and culture, reappropriate the term “biopic” simply as a descriptor of dramatic biography.

Robert Rosenstone, a champion of historical drama in film, understands the process by which remote and unfamiliar people and events can be introduced and elaborated upon for the public via the art form of film. He wrote that, in a visual medium, history “must be fictional in order to be true” (1995: 70). In speaking of “fiction,” Rosenstone refers to the Latin noun *factura*: “a forming, or fashioning” (and also a “disguise”). But Rosenstone doesn’t rule out “the more modern sense of ‘an imaginative creation’” (2007: 13). I myself tend to avoid the word “fiction” when discussing the biopic, fearing that listeners may think of fiction as something made up, something that “didn’t happen.” I prefer forms of the word “drama,” the recreating of figures of the past and present, the acting out of the actual personage as character. Rosenstone’s concepts are helpful in understanding the form of the biopic as a genre that has evolved through at least seven film-historical periods:

1 The early 1930s’ films, whether about royalty (*Queen Christina*, 1933, *Affairs of Cellini*, 1934, *The Scarlet Empress*, 1934), or “ripped from the headlines” affairs (like *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, 1932), were usually colored by the pessimism of pre-Code, pre-New Deal Hollywood.

2 In the idealistic classical–celebratory period, from 1936 through World War II, films celebrated men (mostly) of vision and perseverance, such as Louis Pasteur, Thomas Edison, Marie Curie, Alexander Graham Bell, and Abraham Lincoln, who created the modern world that (from the films’ viewpoints) the spectator had the good fortune to be living in and, in the war years, to be fighting for. The “musical biopic,” exemplified by *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), also took hold in those years. The classical period films also have the redeeming irreverence that revolutionized biography after the appearance of Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Strachey’s anti-Victorian bohemianism converted nicely in the Hollywood of the 1930s into a streak of American populism that leavened even the most respectful classical biopic. Film historian Richard B. Jewell, moreover, describes “the overriding stylistic approach” of Hollywood films of the studio

era as “‘romantic,’ referencing the broadest meaning of the term” (Jewell 2007: 168). “The majority of filmmakers of the era” in which the studio biopics were made “‘fervently embraced [the] ‘larger than life’ approach, employing a style that magnified the idealistic nature of their stories” (169).

3 The *Citizen Kane* effect: as Nigel Hamilton (2007) notes, *Kane*, with its satirical attitude toward the 1936–1940 “great man” cycle, turned biography into a multi-perspective, non-linear investigation of an enigma (183). It would take years for the effect of *Kane* to be felt fully in the biopic; one sees it first in some films made after the 1956 reissue of Welles’s film, but it thoroughly affects the revisionist period of the 1990s.

4 The realism of the postwar period brought warts-and-all biopics, another genre, like the much more noted westerns and family melodramas of the 1950s, which expressed the fears and tensions of the atomic age and the anti-communist hysteria, in this case by taking them into the past and into the worlds of art, showbiz, and criminality. These biopics included *I’ll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), *Love Me or Leave Me*, *Lust for Life* (1956), *The Joker Is Wild*, and *I Want to Live!*. It also needs to be said that the female biopic was always in a different category, indicative of the culture’s discomfort with the idea of women playing public roles. These films are marked by objectification, juvenilizing, suffering, and the implicit sense that female ambition is punished.

5 In *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, George F. Custen (1992) maintained that biography went into television after 1960. Theatrical biopics continued to be made in the 1970s and 1980s, lurching uncertainly between the warts-and-all mode – with films that barely seemed even to like their subjects (*Lady Sings the Blues*, 1972; *Star 80*, 1976; *Gorillas in the Mist*, 1988; and many others) – and celebratory films like *Gandhi*. The modernist, often improvisatory style of American films in the 1970s deliberately worked against the melodrama of the biopic form, without offering much in its place. *Bound for Glory* (1976), Hal Ashby’s biopic of Woody Guthrie based on Guthrie’s autobiographical prose poem and written when the singer/songwriter was not yet 30, tried to rhyme the thirties with the seventies, the way *Bonnie and Clyde* had done with the sixties. It merely demonstrated that intervening events – including the waning New Hollywood itself – had choked the energy and enthusiasm out of the movement, just as Ashby’s previous film *Shampoo* (1975) used self-involved Angelenos on Election Night 1968 to show the meaning and consequences of the phrase “political apathy.” Just before the New Hollywood, which had been declining since 1976, finally succumbed to the twin forces of the film industry’s blockbuster mentality and the political conservatism of the Reagan–Thatcher years, the biopic gave the period its enduring masterwork, *Raging Bull*. It was in this long period of the 1970s and 1980s, when genre studies were otherwise being strongly established, that the biopic cemented its reputation as a turgid, indigestible genre, mired, if not in the Warner Bros.–Twentieth Century-Fox paradigm of the 1930s, then in the 1950s’ warts and all.

6 In the 1990s revisionism on several fronts began to break the genre wide open. This resulted in revisionist, investigatory films, clearly acknowledging *Citizen Kane*'s influence (Nixon, 1995; *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*); feminist revisions, especially Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*; African American appropriations of the classical genre (*Malcolm X*); queer appropriations of "warts and all" (*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1987; *Gods and Monsters*; *Boys Don't Cry*, 1999); and parody in the form of a new strain, the "biopic of somebody who doesn't deserve one" – so termed by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, the screenwriters responsible for a number of these films: *Ed Wood*, *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), *Man on the Moon* (1999), *Auto Focus* (2002), which the two produced, and similarly veined films by others: *Catch Me if You Can* (2002), *American Splendor* (2003), *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2006). More and more, films in the 1990s came to integrate images from the documentary; the first biopics to do this were *Europa Europa* (directed by Agnieszka Holland, 1990) and *Malcolm X* (1992), which ended with the character played by Denzel Washington dead and the actual Malcolm resurrected, as it were, in photographs and news film as present-day Ossie Davis read, in voice-over, the eulogy that he had actually read at Malcolm X's funeral. Films no longer seemed afraid of threatening their own historical diegesis and the believability of their actors by bringing in shots of their actual subject at the end; in fact it has become practically *de rigueur* to do this. The practice reinforces the continued importance, indeed transcendence of the subject.

7 Since 2000 a neo-classical revival has emerged in which many films take on elements of the three primary modes – classical, warts-and-all, and investigatory–revisionist. The genre had been moving from a producer's genre, of which Custen wrote, to more of a director's form, in which auteurs such as Scorsese, Lee, Alex Cox, Jane Campion, Tim Burton, Julian Schnabel, David Fincher, Todd Haynes, and Steven Spielberg found much fertility. The genre also becomes a mainstay of the indie film – the postmodern version of "prestige" – more than of the conformist rhetoric of the studio period, in which it still seems based in the minds of many.

As a genre that dates back nearly to the beginning of narrative cinema, the biopic has gone through developmental stages; thus particular modes emerged from certain historical periods, while they remain available to filmmakers working in the genre. Here they are, along with films that represent early, middle, and late peaks (note that many films overlap categories):

- the classical, celebratory form (melodrama) (*The Story of Louis Pasteur*, 1936; *Yankee Doodle Dandy*; *The Glenn Miller Story*, 1954);
- warts-and-all (melodrama/realism) (*Love Me or Leave Me*; *Patton*; *Raging Bull*);
- transition of the former producer's genre to an auteurist director's genre (Bob Fosse: *Lenny*, 1974; *All That Jazz*; *Star 80*, 1983; Martin Scorsese: *Raging Bull*, 1980; *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988; *Goodfellas*, 1990; *Casino*, 1995; *Kundun*,

- 1997; *The Aviator*, 2004; Spike Lee: *Malcolm X*; Oliver Stone: *Heaven and Earth*, 1993; *Nixon*; W., 2008; Mary Harron: *I Shot Andy Warhol*, 1996; *The Notorious Bettie Page*; Julian Schnabel: *Basquiat*, 1996; *Before Night Falls*, 2000; *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007; many others);
- critical investigation and atomization of the subject, or the *Citizen Kane* mode (*Lawrence of Arabia*, 1962; *Lenny*; *Therèse*, 1986; *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*; *Nixon*; *I'm Not There*);
 - parody – in terms of choice of a biographical subject: what Alexander and Karaszewski (1999: viii) call the “anti-biopic – a movie about somebody who doesn’t deserve one,” mocking the very notions of heroes and fame in a culture based on consumerism and celebrity rather than on high culture values;
 - minority appropriation – as in queer, feminist, African American, or Third World films, whereby minorities control the narrative and the classical form that formerly would have spoken their stories and images (for instance *An Angel at My Table*, *Malcolm X*, *Milk*, *Gods and Monsters*, etc.);
 - since 2000, the neo-classical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these (*Erin Brockovich*, 2000; *Ray*; *The Aviator*; *Invictus*; *La Môme*, aka *La Vie en Rose*; *The Social Network*; *The Fighter*; *Gainsbourg*, 2010; many others).

In a 2010 article, French film genre critic Raphaëlle Moine remarks that only after the great success of *La Môme* (released in most English-speaking markets as *La Vie en Rose*) was the term “biopic” introduced into French film culture in a context other than one pertaining to Hollywood. Moine traces the genre in French film history and finds a trajectory similar to that of American biopics: “Les biopics classiques: La célébration des grands hommes et le spectacle des femmes scandaleuses” (2010: 273). This category compares to the Hollywood studio period films; Moine devotes much of this section of her article to contrasting the iconic Warner Bros. biopic, *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, with *Pasteur* (1935) by the French actor/director Sacha Guitry. “Les biopics contemporains,” similarly, begin for Moine after 1980, just as we tend to see the American genre’s contemporary era launched by *Raging Bull* and *Coal Miner’s Daughter* in the same year, however much these may depend on the warts-and-all mode of the previous quarter-century (Moine 2010: 279). Like most English-language critics, however, Moine charts the biopic beginning with the sound era, thus inadvertently leaving out perhaps the greatest progenitor of the biopic in any language, *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* (1927). The omission of Gance’s spectacular celebratory treatment of Napoleon points out the tendency of biopics to get lost amid other genres, with which they share what Rick Altman (1999) calls both semantic and syntactic qualities. In this case, Gance’s *Napoléon* may appear to be more a historical epic than a biography, although Moine does not neglect to include Guitry’s 1954 rendering of the Gallic conqueror in her helpful appendix, which lists the major French biopics from 1932 to 2010.

As Moine notes, moreover, success begets not just success, but more films. Anderson and Lupo (2002) found that, out of 61 biopics made in the US between 1990 and 2000, only four studio films – *Schindler's List*, *Patch Adams* (1998), *Remember the Titans* (2000), and *Erin Brockovich* – could be considered commercial hits. The authors add to the profit circle an independent film, *Boys Don't Cry*, featuring Hilary Swank's Oscar-winning turn as the murdered transsexual Brandon Teena (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 101–102). In the following decade biopics met with more success. Seven studio films – *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Catch Me if You Can* (2002), *Walk the Line*, *Julie and Julia*, *The Blind Side*, *The Social Network*, and *The Fighter* – and six independent films – *Frida*, *The Pianist* (2002), *Ray*, *The Queen*, *Milk*, and *The King's Speech* – reached the box-office benchmark of profitability, grossing well over two-and-a-half times their production costs (www.boxofficemojo.com). While the biopic is, to be sure, still a commercially risky genre, it continues to attract auteur directors, A-list actors, and production companies.

Conclusion: The Continued Life of Biopics

The resounding international success of *La Vie en Rose*, about the iconic songstress Edith Piaf, encouraged production in France of biopics about icons of twentieth-century French entertainment and culture, such as the singer/songwriter Serge Gainsbourg (*Gainsbourg: Vie heroique*, 2010) and Coco Chanel. The latter became the subject of two biopics: *Coco et Igor* (2009), which embellishes long-standing stories about a romance between Chanel and Stravinsky, and *Coco avant Chanel* (2009). Reaching further back in French history and culture, Marie Antoinette, who had gotten a postmodern American indie film treatment in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), loses her head once more on Gallic screens in *Les Adieux à la reine* (2012).

Looking again at reviews of *Milk*, furthermore, we see how the biopic has come to be accepted as a legitimate genre in the decade of the 2000s. Marcy Dermansky of About.com essentially defines *Milk* as a minority appropriation, calling it “a traditional bio-pic about historic figure Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to public office in this country” (*Milk* 2008). The genre has entered a holistic, neo-classical period, when biopics have excelled in a widening variety of formats, with HBO films that are hard to differentiate from theatrical features (*The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, 2004; *Temple Grandin*, 2009; *You Don't Know Jack*, 2010; *Cinéma Verité*, 2011; *Hemingway and Gellhorn*, 2012). Meanwhile, with Jean-François Richet's ambitious two-part *Mesrine: Part One: Killer Instinct* and *Part Two: Public Enemy Number One* (both 2008) – a four-hour saga of 1960s and 1970s French celebrity criminal Jacques Mesrine released in France concurrently with the American premiere of Steven Soderbergh's 269-minute *Che* (2008) – and with Olivier Assayas's international and multilingual *Carlos* (2010) – a 330-minute TV mini-series that played theatrically in many markets (including the Cannes Film

Festival) – soon to follow, the end of the twenty-first century's first decade gave an unexpected tryout to the long-form biopic.

At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality. The genre's appeal lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in public life being transformed into a character found in all his or her dimensions. Private behaviors, actions, and public events as they might have occurred in the person's time are brought to life in sound and image and interpreted dramatically. The genre's charge, which dates back to its salad days in the Hollywood studio era, is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology and to show why he or she belongs there. The greatest objections to the biopic have been that biopics apply one or more of a small set of formulae to almost any biographical subject. However, similar points could be raised about any film genre. The pleasures of genres often lie in the artful ways in which they use a vocabulary of conventions, which, while familiar, appeal to us because they tap into cultural myths about the individual, about personal vision, about ambition, destiny, chance, and our desire to be validated. If movie stars and characters appeal to us, as numerous film scholars have said, because they provide idealized mirror images for our identification, we share the successes and setbacks of biopic subjects.

Note

- 1 *Bright Star* is analyzed in Hila Shachar's contribution to this volume.

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