

Digital Lives: Refiguring the recent and distant pasts in new biographical forms

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade digital media have progressively become the major forms of memorialising figures and events of the past. Memory itself, in the manner by which it is encoded, stored and accessed, has developed into an increasingly digitised medium due to advancing technologies and the proliferation of digital archiving. This article considers the impact of digital filmmaking and digital media forms on contemporary biographical narratives, as well as how digital filmmaking practices have been applied to the biographical film for unique aesthetic, thematic and narrative purposes. The examination of divergent applications of digital techniques in the representation of both recent and distant pasts will allow for greater insight into the modern biographical subject.

I focus on *The Social Network* (2010) in order to investigate the framing of a biographical subject within events of the recent past. I consider the manner in which the film exploits its pastness for unique aesthetic and narrative purposes, highlighting particularities of the generational zeitgeist through its non-linear narrative structure and its employment of what I describe as an “internet aesthetic” that serves to memorialise a previous technological era. This approach examines the film’s emphasis on visual composition and engagement with technology in its representation of its biographical subject. In this manner, the digital can be viewed as adding further forms of stylistic expression as well as having the potential to involve viewers more directly with figures and events of the past. This article also examines how digital representational strategies allow for a more temporally-specific engagement, reflecting the development of new ways in which audiences access and interact with history through biographical narratives. Viewing *The Social Network* alongside films such as *Che* (2008), *Public Enemies* (2009) and *127 Hours* (2010) I illustrate how contemporary biopics construct different ways of experiencing their historical figures, with digital aesthetics lending qualities of presentness and propinquity to past events. Digital is frequently employed to enhance the immediacy of the past in order to align the spectator more closely with the experiences of a film’s subject(s), and the issues raised by these representational strategies need to be considered when looking to the future of the biographical film.

KEYWORDS

Biography, biopic, cinema, digital, film aesthetics, film style, history, Hollywood, internet, *The Social Network*, technology.

Digital histories

In debates about the historical nature of biography the biopic has traditionally been identified as a cultural object, thus bringing into question its relevance as a form of historical discourse or as a mediation of history. Biopics are customarily derived from a variety of source materials: short stories, memoirs, autobiographies, plays, biographies, novels, and through original research directly for the film itself. Cinematic narratives are used as texts because film presents a remarkable resource for observing social definitions, myths, and cultural scripts about American society. On account of this proliferation of materials across multiple media, George F. Custen (1992: 80) states:

Audiences, exposed to the construct figure through cultural forms, approach a film version of the life with a certain degree of prior knowledge. What makes a cinematic mediation of the already famous life at all tenable is the extent to which a particular bricolage of these known facts contains either a new slant on a life or else “classically” organizes what is already known.

Biopics are products of particular societies at particular moments of their evolution, an arrangement of images and sounds that give us a perception of the features and details of those societies. Traditionally their role is to show the morals and machinations that comprise the success narrative in terms of such archetypes as social mobility (the rags to riches tale), hard work and fortune (understanding power through the duality of effort and luck), as well as setting out with the purpose of entertaining, enlightening and educating.

In working through a series of ideas concerning the impact of digital filmmaking on biographical forms, this argument is constructed around two central principles. Firstly, I examine an aspect of the biographical picture that is often overlooked: the effect that aesthetic and stylistic choices have in the telling of a figure’s life. Film style can be central in imparting biographical material and communicating extra-textual information by addressing more complex thematic concerns. Secondly, and in order to contextualise this, I explore how digital technologies, as modern storytelling tools, have been applied to a genre that is often seen as traditional or classical in both its form and structure. This is reinforced by the fact that biopics, as narratives of people who have lived (or those who are still living), are consistently set in the past. This has the potential to create a tension between the modern and the classical, and impact on the relationship between the past and the present.

The digital offers a challenge to traditional views of the biopic in that it can often distort or subvert the relationships that viewers establish with the biographical figure in question. In his book, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* Dennis Bingham (2010: 10) describes the function of the genre as such:

The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person.

But the digital complicates issues of biography by challenging the boundaries between viewer and subject through stylistic intervention. There is a significant paradigm shift here in the very nature of the biographical film at the level of spectatorial experience and engagement. There is a move from a genre model based around the imparting of factual information and enlightening the viewer as to “what it would be like to be this person” to one that immerses the viewer within these period events. This is achieved by positioning them alongside or proximate to the biographical figure in question in order to experience their actions. This sets up a binary between the representation of the *materials* of history that lead to a passive viewer response, and a biographical approach that emphasises the *experience* of history in order to trigger active spectatorial participation, a process complemented by the stylistic traits enabled by digital forms.

“Now we’re going to live on the internet”: biographic convention and non-linear narratives in *The Social Network*

David Fincher’s *The Social Network* provides an expedient case study for exploring concepts of temporality that frame the biographical nature of the subject, and the way it engages with recent historical events. As a biographical drama, *The Social Network* deviates from both veracity and the biopic tradition, with the film concerning the founding of the social networking website Facebook

by Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) and a group of young men at Harvard University in 2003-2004. It also details the corporate dealings and legal battles that followed as Facebook expanded over the next few years, including lawsuits brought against Zuckerberg by former friend and Facebook co-founder Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield) and Harvard rivals Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss (Armie Hammer and Josh Pence).

The Social Network, in its treatment and exploration of a very contemporary biographical subject, can be read alongside another unconventional biopic, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). As a generic antecedent, *Citizen Kane* operates on similar thematic, narrative and representational levels in light of biopic conventions; these include narrative devices such as the trial setting and introductory title cards, as well as character archetypes regarding the roles of friends, family, and women as supporting figures for the male "hero." Similarly, the internet and online visual sensibilities of *The Social Network* (discussed later) reflect its subject matter while also speaking to specific audiences, paralleling *Citizen Kane*'s basis in radio, newsreel, and print aesthetics.¹ These representational strategies support the notion that films represent socially produced images from which a multiplicity of meanings can be extracted. Facebook itself, as a cultural phenomenon, has had a major impact on contemporary society and communication. As the most ubiquitous of the social networking sites, it has become part of everyday life for millions of people within a global community.

Both *Citizen Kane* and *The Social Network* are success narratives that allude to the great American male tradition. They are fictional, symbolic re-creations of real people turned into mythological figures; both were produced despite the objections of their respective subjects, and they share a non-linear narrative that plays with both time and perspective. As with *Kane*, the latter film's structure is not a narrative of action, rather an examination of character, contrasting several different perspectives and opinions concerning the nature of a single personality. This approach is commensurate with the film's complex and ambiguous subject – until the film's release Zuckerberg's private life was notoriously guarded – and also stimulates a response by encouraging audiences to debate these characterisations and question the reliability of subjective accounts.

It seems almost paradoxical to make a film about a person's life when they are so young (Zuckerberg was born in 1984), with his singular accomplishment being the creation of a website whose full social and cultural repercussions have yet to be measured or fully comprehended.² The film's approach to its subject aligns it with the form of the antibiopic, defined by David Scott Diffrient (2008: 95) as "a discursive reversal and undermining of the traditional eulogizing, hagiographic, and totalising impulses in biography forms." With this in mind, the non-linear narrative can be seen to be a metaphoric expression of thematic concerns, introducing ruptures that provoke mentally active, rather than passive, spectatorial involvement. Reflecting on Dennis Bingham's summary of the purpose of the biopic – "to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person" – the emphasis here is on seeing a real-life figure transformed into a character, placing together their actions, behaviours and events and expressing them through dramatic interpretation. In this manner of dramatic formation and formal interpretation biopics have a tendency to find "a version of the truth" rather than the truth itself.

While *Citizen Kane*'s interviewer/interviewee technique gives a clear impression of the differing perspectives that the characters offer in regard to the life of Charles Foster Kane (Welles), *The Social Network* subtly and incrementally shifts both perspective and audience sympathy as the film progresses. The individual legal testimonies of the characters establish their version of events, and are used as a framing device for the action and drama at the centre of the creation of Facebook, contextualising rather than merely introducing it into the narrative. The testimonial accounts provided by the characters lack consistency with respect to memory and temporality, and the

prismatic, fragmented structure serves to highlight the partial, incomplete nature of human understanding and perception. As the legal associate, Marylin Delpy (Rashida Jones), says at the end of the film, “When there’s emotional testimony I assume 85% of it is exaggeration,” with the remaining percentage being perjury.

While *Citizen Kane* is structured around solving the mystery of Rosebud, a narrative device that represents the memory of an old man, a memento of the remote and distant past, *The Social Network* does not offer such a connection with the protagonist’s childhood. In fact, no explanation for Zuckerberg’s emotional withdrawal or social ineptness is presented from his past. The lack of parental figures or family members in the film means they are neither set up in support of nor in opposition to the ambitions of their children. Not only does this give the characters an additional paucity of personal relationships, but it also removes any insight or evidence of childhood, and therefore any indication of the characters’ pasts. The focus of both films on complex, idiosyncratic, and invariably megalomaniacal men is the clearest point of comparison, particularly in the depiction of their business worlds and the extraordinary measures taken to become giants of their technological worlds. Their treatment of those around them, their friends and (in *Kane*) family, reveals a great deal about the protagonists, with their callous behaviour and the manner in which their relationships with others begin to disintegrate painting them as the ultimate monster of each story. Both films take a powerful American icon and recycle them as American myths, each with its own complex design, but whereas Welles’s film openly points to the solution of a mystery, *The Social Network* is a narrative concerning invention and the nascent stages of American business. Although the conclusion of this story is not shown, the origins of Facebook suggest that perhaps the start is more important than the ending.

In narrative terms, the film is divided into two concurrent strands created by the two separate lawsuits filed against Zuckerberg that take place simultaneously. The non-linear narrative device of inter-cutting between different points of the legal depositions allows the film to consider the different perspectives that the characters put forth, but also builds towards a conclusion that appears to be deliberately anti-climactic as neither case is settled on-screen. However, the depositions do follow the conventions of the trial setting familiar to the biopic as they allow for an abbreviation of events, with narrative deviations being instigated by the legal testimony of the characters. The depositions also provide the structure for parallel narratives encased within a central narrative, and the balancing of these strands gives the film its narrative momentum. The non-linear, flashback structure is typical of the classical biopic, a framing device whose function, as described by George Custen (1992: 183), is “to retell history from the vantage point of a particular narrator,” a privilege that allows the narrator “to frame the life not just in terms of order and content of events, but to frame its significance.” The practices of flashback and montage work synchronously to characterise this life, but are used in *The Social Network* to underscore the fact that the film is refuting rather than asserting qualities traditionally associated with “greatness.” The film is also less concerned with the creation and development of Facebook itself in relation to the archetypal inventor/invented formal structure.³ While the characters of *Citizen Kane* are unable to provide a reliable means of access to the enigma of Kane, the testimonial accounts of Zuckerberg and his peers also lack consistency. The contradictions and discrepancies of the accounts in *Kane* mark the interviewees as unreliable as credible sources of truth, factors which Laura Mulvey (1992: 23) views as forcing the spectator to relate to these unreliable accounts and negotiate the information for themselves to deduce their own meanings and interpretations.

The film adheres to biopic convention by opening *in medias res*, with a formative moment in Zuckerberg’s creative trajectory as his girlfriend, Erica Albright (Rooney Mara), breaks up with him due to his persistent condescension and lack of basic social skills. Plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events is a common strategy that assigns particular significance to the context and form of the first scene.⁴ This seminal moment for Zuckerberg is

implicitly connected to the creation of Facebook, as well as his subsequent (if unrequited) fame and fortune. However, unlike the rise-and-fall structure typical of the biopic that centres on a turning point (such as Kane's defeat by Jim W. Gettys [Ray Collins] in his campaign for Governor), *The Social Network* has a rise-and-rise composition, informed by the introduction of Sean Parker. Parker's sycophantic interpolation encourages Zuckerberg to think of his company on a grander scale, resulting in the transformation of Facebook (evinced by a locational shift to California) and the eventual ousting of Saverin from the company's future as his shares become increasingly diluted. The initial dramatic parturition of Facebook is a result of Zuckerberg's desire to both undermine and prove himself to a girl, whereas the escalated rise of the second half is conducted by Parker as Zuckerberg's new mentor, business partner and, essentially, object of desire.⁵ This practice divides the film into two distinct formal structures, a construction that operates in terms of Zuckerberg's personal focus and reflects his personal narrative. Significantly, however, the film concludes with the lasting expression of his failure to resolve issues with Erica.

Technology and temporality

The coupling of the non-linear narrative of *The Social Network* with such an ambivalent, reluctant (though culturally significant and dominant) figure in Mark Zuckerberg calls into question the certainty of events surrounding the creation of Facebook, more so given the lack of a definitive story for its creation or an established account of Zuckerberg's personality. This also chimes with the notion that the film is suggesting an intensified nostalgia for the recent past, one newly lost. A similar line of enquiry can be taken to that of Richard Sherwin (1994) in his analysis of the Errol Morris documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), depicting the conviction and sentencing of an innocent man. Sherwin (1994: 69) suggests that the film presents two plots, one an easy-to-follow narrative (though told in a non-linear fashion), and the second an example of "postmodern skepticism" in which the "acausal" plot is left unresolved, a cultural preference that "denies the possibility of truth, authority, and history." This assertion of impossibility within a postmodern media landscape reflects Jean Baudrillard's (1990: 8) assertion that conversational dialogue is too slow for current media:

Looking is much faster; it is the medium of the media [...] Everything must come into play instantaneously. We never communicate. In the to-and-fro of communication, the instantaneity of looking, light and seduction is already lost.

Similarly, in acknowledging the inconsistencies and flawed nature of personal histories, *The Social Network* is suggesting that the truth does exist but can be both subjective and unknowable, yet no less worthy of being both sought and explained. The recentness of events forces their contextualisation within a present narrative, encouraged by the persistent media attention around Zuckerberg and his company. This present challenge to modern history manifests itself through the film's focus on the nature of communication and modern media, further informing its thematic and narrative ambiguity.

Zuckerberg increasingly becomes a victim of his own technology, expressed through his social exclusion at the end of the film, and it recalls events in relation to these themes of time and perspective. Indeed, Kent Jones (2010: 35), writing in *Sight & Sound*, sees the creation of Facebook as only being possible at this particular historical moment, "when the word 'communication' has acquired a strange aura of self-parody." The film seems to be inspired by these new and potentially conflicting states of mind more than by time-honoured narratives. In the film, Sean Parker delivers the self-conscious line, "We lived on farms, then we lived in cities and now we're going to live on the internet." One can find objection in this system of reductionism whereby Facebook condenses individuals down to specific sets of data they provide, but the film

also stimulates a longing for this recent past by encouraging the viewer to think back to a ‘simpler’ time when our social interactions were more genuine and material. The creation of an internet aesthetic, achieved through the film’s employment of digital cinematography and formal composition, serves to venerate an earlier technological era, and could be seen to create a sense of nostalgia for certain audiences by displaying earlier, more basic iterations of Facebook. The film’s representational strategies construct it as knowingly generation-defining, engaging with temporally-specific technologies to reflect the new ways that audiences not only interact with history, but can identify themselves within it. Concomitantly, the film’s aesthetic, in its concern with surface and solipsism, memorialises technology as a way of dealing with societal and cultural issues that have derived from it, highlighting generational particularities as well as functioning as a way of dramatizing something potentially very tedious: the invention of a website.

Relating this back to the earlier question of how the digital challenges traditional forms and views of the biopic, in each instance the film’s style – informed by its production context – has served to push the spectatorial boundaries and provoke the viewer into a more direct response to the material. While shifting from presenting the materiality of history to exploring the experiential aspect of it, there emerges an additional challenge to the idea of the verifiable. One might speculate that the depiction of recent events are more likely to be closer to ‘the truth’ given that they have yet to be clouded by the judgmental distancing of time, and yet *The Social Network* underscores the general notion that it is subjectivity itself that indelibly impacts on the comprehension and memorialisation of any and every historical event.

Contrary to the traditional sense of progress and continuity in linear developments of mythological figures in the traditional biopic, often achieved through a flashback framing device, *The Social Network* actively challenges this ideological template while utilising a similar mode of address. Zuckerberg does not grow as a man, nor does the film offer with any certainty his motivations for starting Facebook, but the film’s connection to its recent history emphasises how the actions of conflation and compression are used to shape public history, a more causal connection to the event and its transmission. Concurrently, the recent turn to focusing on living subjects stresses both a renewed urgency granted to contemporary events and a technologically-enabled ability to record and memorialise them as such, demonstrating how the digital can be applied to present another mode of biographical narrative that retains its rhetorical effectiveness.

The Social Network, in dealing with the recent past, reflects not so much a rewriting of history but a refutation of it that makes it such an interesting expression of the current zeitgeist – of online media saturation of “personalities” instead of people, the augmented isolation of social networking, and what Jones describes as “the comforting solitude of a computer screen” (Jones 2010: 35). In this, the film is more irreverent toward historical record than the majority of biopics, adopting an adversarial stance toward the laudatory cult of personality. While the use of temporal shifts allows the film to explore the indeterminate and incidental nature of Zuckerberg’s success, the framing of events in the recent past encourages the spectator to question its representation of the biographical subject and evaluate for themselves the veracity of events being shown. Despite offering “a slice of intensified history,” the key historiographical ambiguities and concerns arise – those of selectivity and interpretation on the part of the historian (both social and individual), quantifying the accuracy or validity of the historical fact, and the nature and value of historical narrativity. Yet the increased emphasis on both immediacy and involvement serve as a provocation for a more active engagement with both the text and its subject, an engagement from which greater and more significant personal meaning can be derived.

Digital aesthetics and temporal engagement

By looking at a range of digital biopics that have been produced over the last few years, two key distinctions can be identified that comprise a structure of four particular aesthetic approaches to a biographical subject: the temporal period covered by the narrative, and the particular style of digital filmmaking employed, i.e. the technological and aesthetic decisions made by the filmmakers. From this a distinction can be made between those films that deal with the *distant past* and those that deal with more contemporary events of the *recent past*. Secondly, it is possible to distinguish between the employment of a cinéma vérité style of *documentary realism* that provides an engaged perspective of subjectivity, and a more formal, *classical film style* that is more objective in its distancing of the biographical subject. This delineation therefore allows for an examination of the stylistic intentions and effects produced by the approaches categorised in the table below.

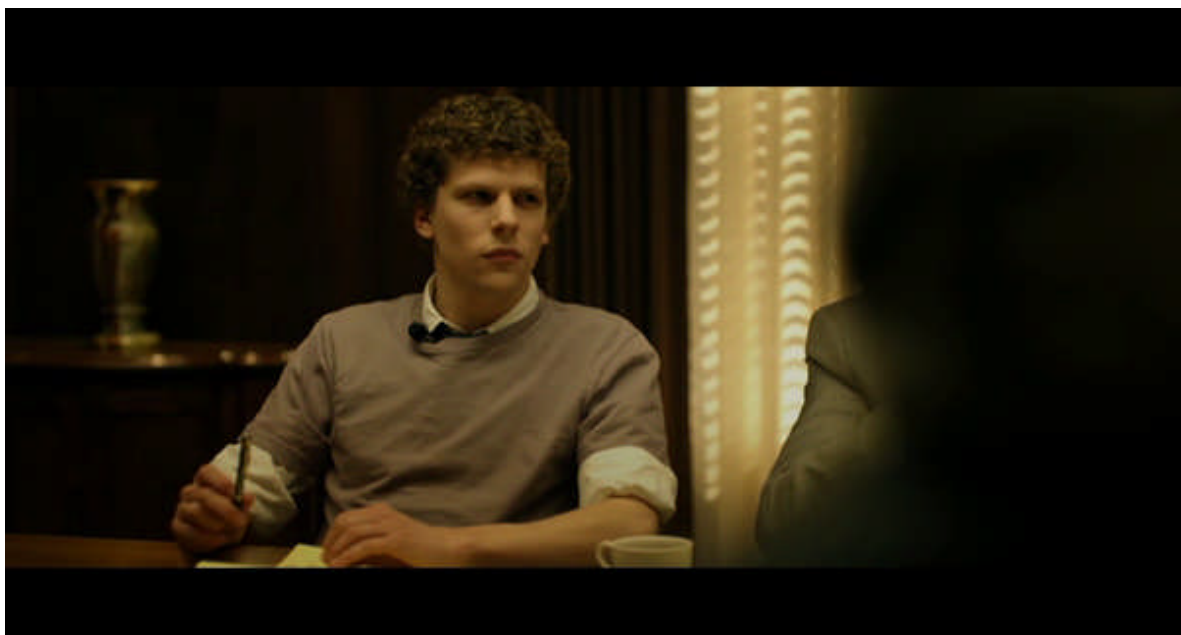
	Distant past	Recent past
Classical film style (objective)	<i>Zodiac</i> (2007) - 1969-1991 <i>Che: Part One</i> (2008) - 1955-1964 <i>Argo</i> (2012) - 1979-1980 <i>Hitchcock</i> (2012) - 1959-1960	<i>The Social Network</i> (2010) - 2003-2006
Documentary realism (subjective)	<i>Che: Part Two</i> (2008) - 1966-1967 <i>Public Enemies</i> (2009) - 1933-1934	<i>127 Hours</i> (2010) - 2003

It is, however, important to acknowledge the fact that these films fit into other generic frameworks, (for instance, *Public Enemies* is a gangster film, *Che* can be read as a war film) but, essentially, they stand as narratives that concern the life of a particular individual: while all these films are biographical, not all are biopics. However, it is also necessary to point out that this selection of films fits into Robert Rosenstone's (2007: 15-16) categorisation of "the serious biofilm," which he defines as films "in which the director has either worked closely with a historical consultant and/or adhered faithfully to events as recounted in one or more written biographies, and in doing so has indulged in a minimal amount of invention with regard to characters and events." These films represent important interpretations of a life, and demonstrate the expressive potential of the digital as a biographical tool.

Part of the significance of *The Social Network* in its approach to the past and its biographical subject relates to the way technology is used to reflect temporality. The employment of digital cinematography is central to the creation of the film's internet aesthetic, together with its formal and symmetrical shot composition and its use of colour and tone. The employment of high definition RED One digital cameras allows for a level of stylistic distinction from the other digital films, such as the recent work of Michael Mann or Danny Boyle, in that the camera is utilised in a more deliberately classical manner. A range of characteristics here contribute to what I describe as an "internet aesthetic" in terms of recognising and replicating the presentational style and experience of online browsing. The high resolution cameras give the film less of a grainy or blurry quality than less sensitive digital camera systems, particularly in motion, with far greater clarity and consistency. Moreover, motion is minimised altogether, eschewing the flexibility and mobility offered by lightweight digital cameras by shooting with simple tracking shots, slow pans or static camera positioning rather than incorporating handheld camerawork or quick-motion zooms and pans. In this way the film conforms to more classical camera practices that create fluid movement, and places greater emphasis on editing and montage to create momentum. There is a rich, immaculate quality to the image that marks it as something other than celluloid but not recognisably "digital," given the potential of digital imagery to create spectatorial dissonance by placing the viewer *between* the spaces of reality and unreality where the image is neither like real life nor appears as it would if presented on film.⁶

The Social Network also displays a much shallower depth of field than most digital films, given the ability of digital cameras to extend focal lengths to far greater extremes, thereby adopting elements from both the soft and hard styles of cinematography of the classical paradigm described by David Bordwell: the shallow depth of field and use of filters from the soft style and the sharp focus, high resolution qualities of the hard style that are inherent to digital cinematography.⁷ The steady, fluid nature of the camerawork makes it less intrusive than handheld cinematography, and the film opts for crispness and clarity over frantic motion and unfocused imagery. This lends itself most aptly to create the smooth digital sheen that exemplifies the film's internet aesthetic, but this shallow depth of field also creates a certain flatness concerning image composition that is once again analogous to the computer screen; no matter how dynamic the content that internet users encounter may be, it is ultimately viewed on a flat display with definitive, non-transgressable margins.

Distinct colour palettes allow each scene's locality to be identified and distinguished from each other within the non-linear narrative (Figs. 1 and 2). This feature is consistent with online visual representation as websites are branded and coded in specific colour terms to create distinctness and trigger brand recognition. In this way the film is divided into manageable, identifiable sections, with shot compositions emphasising the fact that characters are frequently surrounded by a great deal of extraneous information, underscoring the solipsistic, self-affirming position that the internet allows for attention to be focused solely on the information that interests the user. The symmetry and emphasis on even composition further evokes a visual display that internet users may be familiar with, indicating a convergence of classical and modern filmmaking styles.



The Social Network displays distinct colour palettes for each deposition:
Winklevoss vs. Zuckerberg (Figure 1) and Saverin vs. Zuckerberg (Figure 2)



In contrast, a film such as Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* pushes for a deep level of immersion within its period diegesis, placing greater emphasis on immediacy and hyperrealism in its aesthetic. The film details the last few months in the life of Depression-era outlaw John Dillinger (Johnny Depp) as he is pursued by agents of the newly-formed Bureau of Investigation in 1933-34. The presentation of the visual world of the 1930s is conveyed through the use of handheld, lightweight, high-definition video cameras that capture Dillinger's subjective experiences of bank-robbery, gunfights, and prison breaks. The film was largely shot using the Sony CineAlta F23, together with other low-end Sony cameras, lending itself to a more deliberate and noticeable digital aesthetic. This is due to the sharpness of the image and an increased depth of field. Despite a slight loss of resolution, the cameras also responded well to shooting in low-light situations.⁸ Cinematographer Dante Spinotti (quoted in Holben, 2009) commented that the filmmakers were looking to "have a high level of realism, not an overt period feel" and achieve "an immediate feel." There is an important change of emphasis here in this shift from celluloid to digital, with the desired effect of a definitive sense of immediacy rather than a temporally-distanced period sensation. The film's digital production thus creates a tension between the modern storytelling tools and the biographical nature of the narrative.

The combination of this form of digital aesthetic with a more recent biographical figure is less problematic, however, with a film such as Danny Boyle's *127 Hours* demonstrating a more conventional marriage of form and content.⁹ The film, a biographical survival drama based on the events of adventurer Aron Ralston (James Franco) who became trapped in a canyon in Utah for several days in 2003, utilised Canon EOS camera systems.¹⁰ These small, lightweight single-lens reflex cameras with HD video functionality have become an affordable alternative to digital cinema cameras, and capture the vibrancy and kinaesthesia of his activities. For instance, having met a pair of hikers (Kate Mara and Amber Tamblyn) on his trail, the characters discover a hidden underground pool and there is a particularly vertiginous shot that follows their dive into it. While the film seems to involve the spectator in his perilous activities in this manner, the agency is further adopted by Ralston as he films himself partaking in them – such as when he straps the video camera to the handlebars of his bike – thus presenting the personal gratification he takes from challenging and exerting himself.

The dynamic, upbeat quality to the action in the first section of the film (before Ralston becomes trapped), expressed through music, editing and camerawork, is sharply contrasted with the stylistic presentation once he becomes trapped in the canyon by a falling rock. The style comes down to a

question of intimacy rather than immediacy (or immersion) that the film is working towards, tying in thematically with the shift from kineticism (and the subject's hyperactive overconfidence) to the abrupt immobility of the character when trapped under an immovable object. While employing a highly mobile, documentary styling similar to that of *Public Enemies*, this film style is integrated within the actions of the protagonist by the camcorder that Ralston uses to document his experiences of being trapped in the canyon. This takes a declarative form as he lapses into confessional moments of frankness, often talking to himself or his family, and serves to enhance both the claustrophobia of his environment and the gravity of his predicament. The subjective realism of the camcorder, together with the spatial proximity it offers, allows the viewer to understand and experience his delirium and moments of high emotion. Through these forms of personal disclosure and the directly affective style, the digital context of the film thus seems to be affording a greater intimacy with its subject.

In both cases, digital is utilised to complement the immediacy and thematic principles of the narrative, and the scenes of action in the films demonstrate, through the camera positioning, movement and the lack of establishing shots, the effect of locating an audience within the subject's experiences in a highly detailed manner. This is a form of realist style achieved through the emphasis on point of view, frantic motion and focus on specific details that is closely associated with the probing camera and cinéma vérité look of documentary. The proximity of the camera to the actors is apparent, with focal shifts to particular details providing a sense of the character's awareness, and this handheld, proximal approach provides a sense of real-time immediacy and the witnessing of events taking place (Figs. 3 and 4). The digital aesthetic allows the depth of field to extend further, opening out the image to subjective focus, while action and movement can appear rather jarred or fragmented.



Figure 3: Aligning perspective with the bank-robbers during a firefight in *Public Enemies* through proximity and movement.

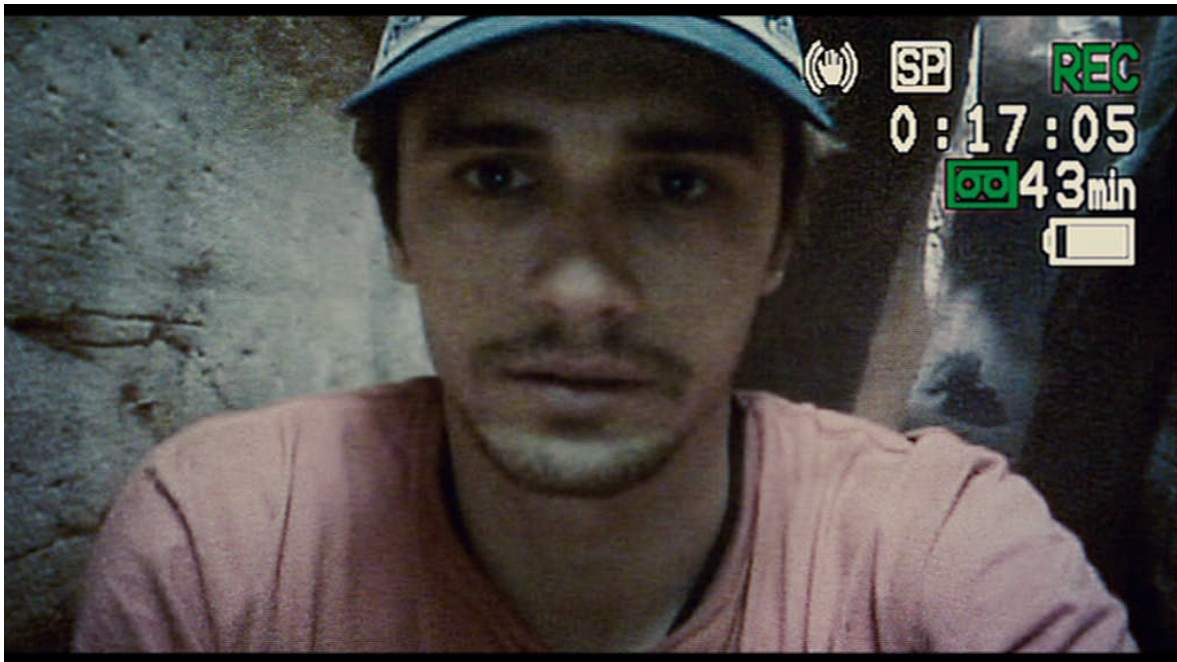


Figure 4: In *127 Hours* the documentary-style use of the camera captures the claustrophobic setting and creates a sense of intimacy through Ralston's narration of his experiences.

Regarding the stylistic intentions of *Public Enemies*, Michael Mann (quoted in Prokopy, 2009) talks about locating an audience within this experience in the most detailed manner possible:

I look for where or how to bring the audience into the moment, to reveal what somebody's thinking and what they're feeling, and where it feels like you're inside the experience. Not looking at it, with an actor performing it, but have an actor live it, and you as audience, if I could bring the audience inside to experience.

Whether this proximity works to bring the audience into the moment, to get inside the experience, is entirely subjective, but these examples employ a deliberate form of stylistic expression. The digital aesthetic of the film not only has a historical purpose but also an expressive one, in connecting the audience with the characters by conveying their internal processes. While reaction to this style has been ambivalent,¹¹ the unconventional emphasis of artifice (the digital) to convey the life of historical figures has a dramatic purpose by giving a sense of hyperrealism to the world in which they lived, evidenced through the vivid nature of images that accentuate the movement through historical space and provide an added sense of perpetual forward motion. Together, these represent a rejection of particular notions of genre convention and classical film style, and the reformulation of new aesthetic conventions that attempt to enhance spectatorial engagement with its biographical subject.

The aesthetic approach of *Che*, Steven Soderbergh's two-part biopic of Ernesto Guevara, perhaps best exemplifies the variability of digital approaches to visual storytelling due to the fact that both classical film style and documentary realism are incorporated within a single narrative. While *Public Enemies* highlights the manner in which new styles can be applied to traditional genre models, *Che* addresses alternative attitudes to a biographical subject, with particular semantic traits being associated or identified within the syntactic frameworks of its two parts. *Part One*¹² tracks Guevara's (Benicio Del Toro) role in the Cuban Revolution, from doctor to commandante to revolutionary leader, as he works alongside Fidel Castro (Demian Bichir). *Part Two* details Guevara's Bolivian campaign and his attempt to kick-start the great Latin American Revolution. This film is more focused on his leadership, showcasing his particular brand of guerrilla warfare through which he became a symbol of idealism and rebellion around the world. Soderbergh utilised

a prototype of the RED One, the same digital camera used on *The Social Network*, a high performance digital camera with the quality of 35mm film convenient in both its flexibility and its functionality, being very lightweight and adaptable. In keeping with the figure's Marxist notion of advancement through dialectics the film is divided into two parts, setting up a contrast of two narratives, two colour schemes, two aspect ratios and two approaches to chronology.

On a narrower scale, this is also reflective of Soderbergh's own production practice; writing in *Film Comment*, Amy Taubin (2008) states that "Contradiction determines the shape not only of Soderbergh's individual films but also the relationship of one to another. [...] What Soderbergh terms 'the call and response' relation between [*Part One*] and [*Part Two*] is intrinsic to their form and meaning." While both parts used the same digital camera, *Part One* utilised anamorphic lenses, creating a widescreen image that has more of a filmic look. This is combined with the distinct shooting styles of the two parts: *Part One* is composed in a more classical manner, with the camera either fixed or moving on a dolly. Of this style Soderbergh (quoted in Guillen, 2009) says: "I was looking for a more traditional Hollywood frame, [...] with classical compositions, a steady camera, vibrant colors, [and] a warm palette." This section is seen from Che's perspective as he demonstrates his tactical skills, resulting in the ultimate success of the July 26th Movement. Viewing events through the eyes of the victor is an archetypal biographical approach, with the more conventional style adding to its generic conformance.

Taking a divergent approach, *Part Two* used spherical lenses that produce more of a recognisably digital video quality: the images produced by digital cameras are often almost unnaturally sharp, and anamorphic lenses soften the image to reduce this sharpness. This section was shot more simply with a much smaller crew, opting for handheld or tripod camera placement rather than dollies or cranes. The film's focus on guerrilla warfare informs the film's shooting style in its handheld, pseudo-documentary styling. Of this the director (quoted in Guillen, 2009) says: "I wanted a sense of foreboding, a [...] bit of a jagged quality [and] uneasiness that comes from having the camera on your shoulder and the taller frame, [...] and a color palette that was muted." The digital imagery of the second part is more pronounced and, as with *Public Enemies*, this seems to foreground the immersive quality of the form by positioning the spectator alongside the protagonist. There is a shift here from *inviting* an engagement with the central figure to *pushing* the viewer closer to him in a more confrontational manner. This is evident in the first part's general avoidance of close-ups that reflects Guevara's belief in the collective so as not to isolate one man from the many, but as the second part progresses and his personal situation worsens the camera gradually moves in tighter to the protagonist, thus accentuating his isolation (Figs. 5 and 6).



A contrast of styles: “Che” surrounded by his fellow revolutionaries in Cuba (Figure 5); and increasingly isolated in Bolivia (Figure 6). Also note the different colour schemes and aspect ratios.



Biographically, the film works as a portrait of Guevara as a leader through depicting his military campaigns rather than approaching the subject through providing of a sense of his psychology or focusing on his formative years. Soderbergh’s aim is to understand the man and his ideas through his actions – the processes of jungle marches and small-scale military tactics that form parts of a larger revolutionary movement – but he also saw the difficulties of a biographical approach to this character: “I was drawn to Che as a subject for a movie (or two) not only because his life reads like an adventure story, but because I am fascinated by the technical challenges that go along with implementing any large-scale political idea” (quoted in *Festival de Cannes program* (2008)). The digital shooting of the film provides greater stylistic flexibility in terms of how to depict such a culturally significant figure, thereby not forcing the filmmakers to distort history or compromise the character due to the compression of time. This allowance for certain biographical principles is combined with two divergent aesthetic approaches that make for a richer and more discursive text,

one that is more objective in the depiction of its subject by positioning him at a pronounced remove and thus reinforcing the film's thematic framework.

Conclusions

In addressing the difference between digital and film one must acknowledge how digital filmmaking has been employed to get closer to these figures and gain access to significant locations where events took place, be they the remote jungles of Puerto Rico (standing in for Cuba) in *Che* or the real-life locations of *Public Enemies* (Little Bohemia, the Biograph Theater) that add to the sense of historical re-enactment. Moreover, it is the clarity of the digital image, in its scope, depth and mobility that grants a greater and more detailed impression of the world in which these people lived, re-created in an immediate form. To paraphrase John Reed's comment on his historical account of the October Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, these films offer "a slice of intensified history" in that they foreground a narrative immediacy that makes the viewer a vicarious participant in the historic event. The extent to which these films are able to create and shape historical or biographical worlds has advanced through the use of digital technologies, but while they can be seen to have achieved a richness of detail in recounting events there is a diminished emphasis on the depth of analysis of the subject. *Che*, for instance, while demonstrating an increased flexibility and acceleration of the filmmaking process, takes a narrow approach to its subject that is invested in both a spatial and temporal specificity. This focused rather than closed-off approach positions the subject at a pronounced remove: thus it is plausible for the film to be read as more ethically objective than conventional examples within the biopic tradition.

The expressive potential of the digital lies in its ability for engagement and confrontation through its employment in the biographical film, involving and relating viewers more directly with figures and events of the past. Concomitantly, it is impossible to ignore the long-standing historical debates concerning what version of the past is being conveyed, what is being omitted, or what concessions have to be made in order to conform to generic conventions or cultural regulations. The styles and approaches taken by this set of films demonstrate the significant role that the digital (and technology more generally) can play in the biographical film, and in a greater context, within historical cinema. The expressive potential of the digital can be applied in a variety of ways for divergent purposes through these representational strategies. Not only does this allow for audiences to *interact* with these biographical figures, but it also enhances their ability to *identify* themselves within these historical periods and events. The digital also offers a further stylistic option for filmmakers, one which could be compared to black-and-white or different types of film stock, and has the potential to be an enhancement tool that provokes a more active engagement with a historical text. These texts suggest that digital should be viewed in this way, as another mode of framing a life by providing new, expressive ways that work thematically and narratively to refigure these individuals, serving to revivify them in order to discover new meanings for new audiences.

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¹ For more on the aesthetics of *Citizen Kane* cf. Altman (1994).

² This also underscores a larger cultural shift whereby young celebrities play a more direct role in the cultivation of their media personalities, including their participation on social media websites and the publication of autobiographies with increasing frequency.

³ This focus on financial and social success rather than the invented product is in contrast to “the myth of noncommodification” that Bingham (2010: 52) identifies as pervading the thirties biopic: “The creator – the artist, the inventor, the life scientist – is ensconced in a myth of helpless destiny, of a natural drive to create.”

⁴ Custen (1992: 151) says of this practice: “By opening life *in medias res*, the biopic allows the famous figure to invent his or her own future, just as many a powerful figure in Hollywood had erected a new persona and fabricated an

invented life history for him or herself.” Accordingly, this means that “The great man can literally write – or rewrite – history.”

⁵ This can be read in contrast to the structure of *Citizen Kane* in which there is a separation of male and female narration, the dramatic rise being told by Bernstein (Everett Sloane) and Kane’s disgrace and withdrawal conveyed by his wife, Susan (Dorothy Comingore).

⁶ The genealogy of this work can be traced to avant-garde digital films, most notably the Dogme movement and its manifesto which signified an engagement with new production practices and provoked visual discord in questioning the relationship between representation and reality.

⁷ See David Bordwell, ‘Deep-focus cinematography,’ (341-352), and Kristin Thompson (287), ‘Major technological changes of the 1920s,’ in Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger (1985).

⁸ Approximately 95 per cent of the film was shot using the Sony CineAlta F23, but it also made use of the Sony HDC-F950 and the Sony PMW-EX1.

⁹ The film can also be seen as a dramatic reconstruction as it was based on Ralston’s personal documentation of events, similar to the re-enactment of the climbing sequences in the documentary *Touching the Void* (Kevin MacDonal, 2003).

¹⁰ Boyle used the 1D, 5D and 7D series, which are all digital single-lens reflex cameras capable of recording high definition video and are also flexible enough to be operational with a range of cinematographic equipment.

¹¹ Cf. reviews of *Public Enemies* by Richard Corliss (2009) and Todd McCarthy (2009).

¹² In other territories, such as the US, the films were titled separately as *The Argentine* and *Guerrilla*, but for greater clarity I will use the names *Part One* and *Part Two*, the titles of the UK releases.