

The Biographical Narrative in Popular Culture, Media and Communication: An Introduction

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The decision to devote a special issue of *Networking Knowledge* to the biographical narrative is timely because of the genre's exponential increase. The genre endures in traditional formats like film and television while new media platforms channel it in other directions. This leads to new ways of telling life stories which circulate faster, wider and cheaper and which blur the boundary between first and second person life narratives in ways that invite the articulated term, auto/biography, to be used. The introduction of *Blogger* in 1999 stimulated a rapid increase in the production of online diaries, and *Facebook* now has over 850 million users, of whom 50% log on daily¹, with each featuring a profile page through which auto/biography is constituted. Reality television, stemming from *Big Brother* and continuing through programmes which follow the lives of celebrities like Katie Price, purports to be 'behind the scenes', as the camera follows these figures' daily lives. These reality formats raise questions regarding the immediacy of new biographical types, as lives appear to unfold on screen rather than being a completed story, and their chosen subjects highlight how the cultural definition of fame shifts. Websites for such programmes frequently feature live video stream so we can watch lives unfold by the second. Despite the technological sophistication of these new formats, they reflect a longstanding cultural desire to understand the lives of others, both historical subjects from previous periods as well as our contemporaries. New technologies and forms extend and transform this tradition by producing a sense of immediacy drawn from observational documentary traditions that ostensibly capture the events as they occur. The documenting of lives is now frequently open-ended, and audiences experience people's lives in real-time, while elevating the ordinary person into the realm of celebrity.

This issue of *Networking Knowledge* addresses these new directions, and contributes to an increasing field of biographic scholarship. The biographical genre, with its attendant desire to represent the lives of subjects on screen, is older than the medium because of its literary precedents which were quickly adopted by cinematic pioneers. In the same year that the Lumière brothers' train arrived in Paris, Thomas Edison produced a short film which depicted the beheading of a famous monarch in *The Execution of Mary Stuart* (Alfred Clark 1895 US). Yet the genre's contemporary relevance is reflected in recent Oscar awards and nomination which testify to the popularity of biopics and the cultural capital afforded to the genre. Since 2000, over 25% of those nominated in either the Best Actor or Best Actress category portrayed actual historical subjects. In 2011 Meryl Streep won the Oscar for an Actress in a Leading Role for her performance as Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd 2011 UK/France), while Michelle Williams was also nominated for her portrayal of Marilyn Monroe in *My Week with Marilyn* (Simon Curtis 2011 UK/USA). In the previous year *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper 2010 UK/USA/Australia) and *The Fighter* (David O. Russell 2010 USA) achieved enormous praise and other biopics received nominations and awards, suggesting the successes of biopics are not an isolated occurrence. Furthermore, the actors involved hint at the special significance the genre holds as a chance for 'serious' actors to stretch themselves; the

reception and debate circulated around Streep's performance as Margaret Thatcher recalls that of Charles Laughton's performance in *The Private Life of King Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda 1933 UK). But the biopic is not merely an 'actor's genre', regularly receiving that most highly regarded of Oscar prizes – Best Picture. Since 1927 the biopic has won this award eight times. The endurance of the cinematic genre has recently been addressed in academic scholarship through Dennis Bingham's study of the biopic in its contemporary state in *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*² This acts as a timely complement to George F. Custen's landmark study of the classical Hollywood biopic in *Bio/Pics*³. Further interest is reflected in recent conferences focusing on the Biopic specifically, with events at Southampton University and Bristol University taking place in 2010⁴. Meanwhile on the small screen, HBO continues to invest in quality television drama, and its budgets fund large scale 'epic' programming that focuses on historical lives; *The Pacific* (Home Box Office 2010) was released to great acclaim in 2010 and its executive producer Tom Hanks is now in the midst of making *Parkland*, a film on the Kennedy assassination.

While global stars like Hanks become attached to biographic narratives, the advent of reality television and DIY websites has contributed to the blurred distinction over what constitutes 'worthy' fame. This celebrity culture has expanded into academia, journalism and politics, becoming the contemporary site in which we debate the meaning of selfhood, and how we construct it. Graeme Turner utilised the 'demotic turn'⁵ to refer to the increasing visibility of ordinary people who, through platforms like websites and reality TV, turns themselves into media content. The popularity of reality TV through shows like *Big Brother* has increased television's need for ordinary people craving celebrity status, which in turn impacts on how culturally we define the contours of fame and who is worthy of elevation. In addition to the 'quality' productions by HBO and the 'reality' stories told, *The Biography Channel* began broadcasting in 2000 and is dedicated to telling life stories.

DIY websites and blogs may be appealing precisely for the anonymity they allow, offering a chance for people to anonymously document their family lives. The phenomenon of 'Mommy blogging', in which the experience of contemporary motherhood is written about, shared and distributed through internet blogs, is a case in point. Informative, confessional accounts are shared widely and quickly, a form of auto/biography written in real time, where communities are created through the sharing of intimate confessions. *Facebook* and other social media sites continue to shape the biographical form through templates and scroll-down options which guide and impact upon the structure, inclusions and exclusions of the life history written.

The biographical narrative exists in a much wider web of discourses regarding celebrity culture, social media innovations and the cultural importance and capital afforded by historical lives in film and television. It continues to adapt and be adapted to suit new cultural climates in response to technological innovation, while maintaining its popularity as a cinematic genre. Formats like *Twitter* and *Facebook* allow lives to be digitally narrated as they unfold, through status updates and tweets. Biography raises issues of authenticity and verifiability, while frequently courting controversy: consider the debates in early 2012 regarding the representation of dementia in *The Iron Lady* and how this sparked interest in the wider social discourse of aging and its representation in the media.

It is in this context that I introduce these papers, many of which highlight and expand upon the issues I present here. These papers showcase the emerging scholarship in this area, cutting through diverse disciplinary fields and employing different methodologies.

Hanna E. Kyllönen examines how the celebrity autobiography of Russell Brand and authorised biography of Robbie Williams reflect the increasing use of the confessional discourse, traditionally located as feminine, in the auto/biographies of male subjects. She argues that shaping the lives of these males through this discourse has the effect of feminising them, telling their lives as stories of personal distress and emotional anguish. However, their masculinity is re-established through the countering of this discourse with that of the myth of the creative genius, which routes these feminine associations of emotion through the deeply masculine myth in which the male genius is vulnerable to mental illness and the emotional outbursts this can entail.

Examining the effect of digital media and digital filmmaking on biographical forms, Adam Gallimore observes an 'internet aesthetic' in *The Social Network* (David Fincher 2010 USA), the biopic of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, citing an emphasis on screens and surfaces within the visual imagery of a biographic narrative concerned with a technology of on line biographies, before extending his argument to the digital aesthetics encountered in a range of other films.

In a different vein, Derek Johnston compares the two biopics of composer Cole Porter. *Night and Day* (Michael Curtiz 1946 US) and *De-Lovely* (Irwin Winkler 2004 US) were produced 58 years apart and Johnston examines their different treatment of their subject matter and what this tells us about how we define an artist and, by extension, creativity in different eras. The remaining papers focus on the British form of the genre, through films based on the lives of Beatrix Potter, David Hockney and Caravaggio.

While Johnston uses George Custen's pioneer study of the American biopic in his comparative study of the Cole Porter biopics, Carolyn Ellam deploys the more recent work on the American biopic by Denis Bingham. She adopts Bingham's formulation of the genre's historical stages, by applying his idea of a 'deconstruction' stage to Chris Noonan's *Miss Potter* (2006 UK/USA/Isle of Man), the biopic of writer and illustrator Beatrix Potter. Ellam then draws on Ron Howard's film of mathematician John Nash *A Beautiful Mind* (2001 USA) and Marc Foster's account of author J. M. Barrie, *Finding Neverland* (Marc Forster 2004 USA/UK), in order to question if the use of fantasy elements is contributing to an established aesthetic or whether it represents a new, unexplored stage of the genre.

Keeley Saunders paper is focussed on Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman 1986 UK). While artists' biopics have been considered to be formulaic in their narratives trajectories of the tortured genius (a discourse Kyllönen observes in play within the celebrity biography, also in this issue), Saunders sees Jarman as breaking with this tradition, through his experimental style and historical speculation. Drawing on André Bazin to discuss the use of tableaux within the film she considers how Jarman recreates the artist's work within the diegesis, blending the fictional world created with the artists own work, foregrounding the film as representation.

David Bovey similarly draws on *Caravaggio* in his examination of the queer artist biopic. Like Kyllönen and Saunders, Bovey recognizes the prevalence of myths surrounding the mad genius which have grown in biography offering explanations for success. He cites the emergence of the 'queer artist' as a new socio-pathological category for the artist biopic. Tracing this subgenre over time through the reception, tropes and innovative techniques of nine films, Bovey argues it is possible to see the shifting of attitudes in wider society towards the gay artist.

Each of these papers marks new contributions in a field that, like its object of study continues to grow apace. When taken together, they form a formidable statement about the contemporary position of the biography in popular culture. It gives me great pleasure to introduce them.

References

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¹ McNeill, Laurie (2012) 'There Is No "I" in Network: Social Networking Sites and Posthuman Auto/Biography'. *Biography*, Vol. 35 No. 1, Winter 2012, 65-82.

² Bingham, Dennis (2010) *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*. London: Rutgers University Press.

³ Custen, George (1992) *Bio/Pics*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

⁴ Biopics Workshop', organised by Bristol University and UWE 2010; 'The Biographical Narrative in 21st Century Film and Television' seminar series, organised by Victoria Kearley, Southampton University 2010.

⁵ Turner, Graeme (2004) *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage Publications.