*Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*

Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia (eds.) (2014)

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On browsing the contents of this collection, I realised that, without consciously setting out to research the celebrity biopic, I’d seen most of the films under discussion. The celebrity biopic had accidentally become a Saturday night viewing staple in our house, and Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia’s skilful dissection of the genre’s attractions, in the introduction to this collection, helped to explain why that might be. The celebrity biopic mixes the new and the familiar in seductive ways, especially when a celebrity actor plays a historical celebrity in a story we already know. In many cases, the celebrity biopic inhabits crossover territory between the heritage film, the costume drama, and social, cultural and political history: the sort of generic hybridity (6) that is perhaps especially hard for the middle-aged, middle-brow consumer to resist. The celebrity biopic’s further appeal, in an age of distractions, is that it can be engaged with on a range of levels. We can surrender to the pleasures of the period setting, or alternatively – in opposition to the genre’s rhetoric of authenticity (18) – set ourselves the task of spotting anachronisms: the domestic items out of place, the wrong model of period car parked on the street. This particular mode of viewing might include listening for jarring language: the modern idiom of the dialogue frequently pulls us back with a jolt to the present, as characters fails to speak entirely, or convincingly, 'in period’.

Yet, despite its commercial appeal – and its potential to bestow career-enhancing BAFTAs and Academy Awards on its practitioners – as Liz Jones points out in this volume, the biopic has traditionally not been well liked in film studies, and is only patchily recognised as a genre at all (132). *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic* builds on the theorisation of the biopic as developed by Custen (1992), Bingham (2010) and others, and brings these ideas into contact with other interpretative frames, for example that of the heritage film, or heritage mode, as developed by scholars like [Andrew](file:///%5C%5C%5CNadrew) Higson (2003) and Claire Monk (2011). The combination makes for a cohesive collection that also forces a further reconsideration of what we mean when we speak of adaptation.

At the outset, Minier notes, in her section of the book’s introduction on ‘The Biopic as Adaptation’, that ‘it may come across as a slightly unorthodox proposition’ to approach the biopic as an adaptation (7). Such a model of intertextual adaptation provides an antidote to the ‘source and adaptation dichotomy’ (9); the sources of the biopic may be single or multiple, and may comprise autobiographies, memoirs, interviews or collections of letters. Pennacchia, in her section on ‘Intermediality and the Biopic’ (14-19) goes on to explore the relationship between the ‘elastic’ film genre of the biopic and the equally ‘elastic’ and controversial literary genre, biography (14). Hence, the collection’s focus on the case of the biopic – a screen adaptation, usually based on non-fiction sources – allows it to demonstrate that no adaptation really has a single source text. Even direct biography-to-film adaptations will include historical details, ideas or scenes that won’t be present in that one ‘source’ biography. And biography itself is a sewn-together tapestry of documentary record, interpretation, conjecture, hearsay and techniques borrowed from fiction.

These complex interrelations are, for me, most clearly laid out in Matteo Fabbris’s chapter on the Regency dandy Beau Brummell, where the BBC Four biopic *Beau Brummell: This Charming Man* (2006) is ‘a hybrid product conflating different texts and voices’ (146), the real and the fictional. As Fabbris explains, the Ian Kelly biography of Brummell, which substantially influenced the biopic, itself mixed aspects of ‘the cultural/historical and the novelistic’ (148), and indeed, the biography itself is constructed from myriad sources about Brummell, documentary and otherwise, from fictional in-jokes to reported table-talk and gossip. In its blend of biographical facts with ‘critical and theoretical sources on dandyism’ (148), Fabbriss pleasingly observes, this biopic represents ‘an act of “tailoring” of the dandy’s real and entire life to the expressive needs of writer and director’ (149).

One refreshing aspect of this collection is its willingness to investigate casting, performance and performativity, and the complex interaction when actors – some, like Helen Mirren in *The Queen* (2006), themselves celebrities – undertake performances of public figures, celebrities and/or members of the royal family, whose behaviour or role is often theorised as a performance itself. Since, as Minier proposes, adaptation sources may include ‘photos, pictures, video footage or other sorts of semi-documentary materials’, the actor can be conceived as a kind of adapter when shaping a performance around the image and footage of a celebrity (8). This act of reframing justly credits actors’ performances in such roles with rather more creativity than they are usually given in the media’s responses to biopics. Isobel Johnstone’s chapter in this volume on Mirren as Elizabeth II, is a particular highlight in this regard, exploring the differences between a performance that is perceived as ‘interpretive rather than merely imitative’ (69), and the ‘dynamic interchange’ between what Johnstone calls ‘invisible’ and ‘visible’ acting (70). To return to the thought of the genre’s middlebrow attractions, it might be said that the biopic opens up a space for the possibility of viewers being able to discuss acting performances, by providing a reference-point or target (the celebrity herself) that makes the actor’s effects or techniques more open to evaluation.

Despite the contributors’ evident pleasure in interpreting the biopic, its clichés and problems are frequently highlighted: the tendency of the biopic to confer a false unity on events, or to assert a celebrity subject’s unalterable ‘essence’; the frequent attempts of biopics to locate the source of their subject’s genius, almost always in childhood or adolescent experience. Inevitably, one of the most persistent of these habits is the artist biopics’ treatment of the relationship between the art and the life. Monika Pietrzak-Franger remarks on the pernicious tendency of the biopic to ‘(mis)read the artistic oeuvre in terms of the artist’s biography’ (161), while Lucia Esposito concludes that Sam Taylor-Wood’s *Nowhere Boy* (2009) ‘makes Art and Life coincide rather stereotypically […] and thus keeps feeding the same insatiable mythology’ (211). As Anja Müller aptly describes it in her chapter on screening the lives of children’s authors, ‘With its almost naïve illusion of a correspondence between author’s life and work, the biopic has thus become a powerful residue for biographical approaches to literature against all poststucturalist and postmodernist claims about the death of the author’ (185). There is an irony here, of course, in that by emphasising the primacy of the life, the biopic can seem to erase, or ignore, the reasons for the artist’s fame in the first place. In the process, the biopic downgrades itself as a work of art – making art secondary to the life story – and instead makes its claim to our attention on the basis of documentary ‘truth’, not aesthetic achievement. Perhaps that is one definition of middlebrow: art that is slightly embarrassed about its status as art, and that seeks to cover its traces.

This lively collection should hold broad appeal for scholars of a range of disciplines, from adaptation and intermediality to acting for film, celebrity studies, and heritage and nostalgia studies. It is a book that continues to offer surprises right to the end. Lucia Esposito’s chapter on *Nowhere Boy*, a biopic of John Lennon’s early life, posits Lennon as ‘the primary hypotext’ for a network of biographical hypertexts, and goes on to explain that as a source, Lennon has ‘been continually adapted and appropriated’ and in so doing himself ‘becomes a construct’ (204-5). But, in a further twist, Esposito concludes by observing that Lennon himself in *Nowhere Boy* constructs his look and attitude as an adaptation of the public persona of Elvis Presley (210). The idea of Lennon, that 1960s icon of originality and authenticity, himself adapting his teenage persona from the intermedial textual construct of Elvis, is a particularly arresting one: a pop-cultural *mise en abyme*.

**References**

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