



BIOGRAPHICAL

No longer to write about people's life, but only about life, life itself.

Jean-Luc Godard, *Pierrot le fou*

The writing of individual life has been a decisive moment in the artistic, cultural, and theoretical course inner to the public dimension of Western societies. Biography – of heroes, sovereigns, saints, notables, celebrities, or ordinary individuals – has always accompanied the processes of self-awareness of national communities, closely intersecting contemporary reflections about the relationship between history and memory, the meaning of existence, the system of values of a given group, as well as about narrative as a decisive hermeneutic resource for understanding reality. More recently, individual life has become one of the main objects of the forms of (self) representation – even beyond reality shows and selfies – transforming personal biography into a discriminating and legitimizing condition for a wide range of practices and activities, from political struggle to academic research.

Cinema was born in close proximity to biography: reconstructing the life of past personalities was in fact one of the declared goals of the emerging film industry, as well as one of the main reasons of fascination for the audience of the time. Despite the success of public, at least until the 1960s, the biographical trend has always encountered little attention from critics – who considered it a conventional and not very innovative field – and from authors themselves, reluctant to try their hand at biographical works for the several limitations imposed, despite exceptions such as Gance, Ejzenštejn, Ford, Rossellini up to Truffaut, Herzog, and Jarman. In recent years, however, biographical cinema has become a hugely successful trend, catching the interest of producers, authors, audiences, and critics, as testified by prizes won, tickets sold, and personalities involved.

Several reasons are involved in its current fortune, showing how cinema and audiovisual in general are a privileged place for questioning the “biographical turn” characterizing contemporary culture. Besides the history of biopic, still to be written and of enormous interest for a critical reconsideration of the genre, three areas particularly display the current relevance of the biographical both as a space and as a tool for critically investigating present visual culture.

Biography as a film genre. The recent proliferation of biographical works has shown how telling life is a need that crosses cultures and forms of expression, cinema and literature above all. A sort of autonomous and ever-changing trend has emerged, however characterized by a heterogeneity that still prevents the identification of precise genre boundaries. The identification of these characteristics – formal and thematic – then becomes one of the main objectives for academic research interested in this trend. How can we think together very different works such as *I am not there* by Haynes and *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Singer, or *The Iron Lady* by Lloyd and *The Sun* by Sokurov? Is it possible to outline the characteristics of a personal and authorial approach to the biographical, as in Scorsese, Greenaway, Bellocchio or Larraín, compared to a more conventional production? Framing contemporary production with precision also pushes us to inquire the relationship with the works of the past and to ask ourselves if there is a modernity of the genre as opposed to its classicism, in Deleuzian terms, for example within national cinemas and television productions. In the Italian context, for example, are there elements in common between the Risorgimento epic of the origins, the Roman mythologies during fascism, the “counter-biopic” of Rosi and Montaldo, the committed biopic such as Giordana’s *One Thousand Steps*, Rai’s filmed biographies, and Sorrentino’s postmodern variations? Or, what relationship exists between the reconstruction of the Great History in Hollywood’s biographical golden age between the 1930s and the 1950s and Eastwood’s recent poetics of “lesser lives”? Furthermore, the concept of biographical is a useful criterion for rethinking the history of national cinemas, especially those that have never adopted it as an interpretative category. However, is it capable of articulating an alternative history to be placed side by side with more established interpretations? Through the lens of the biographical, is it possible to enrich our interpretation of the history of these cinemas and in general of national audiovisual productions? Finally, given its transversality, the biographical can be a term capable of disclosing a comparative perspective between different film industries, keeping together different times, geographies and media. Thus, is there a biographical tension that runs through the history of cinema and highlights similarities and differences between these multiple cinematographic and television practices?

The biographical as a political trend. From its etymology, the life (*bios*) that is subject of writing is politically determined. The ever-closer relationship between individual life and politics has made it clear how narrating life is also and above all dealing with the pressures of power on bodies and behaviours, as well as with the biopolitical strategies that capillary regulate our contemporary societies. From this point of view, the biographical is therefore a doubly political field. On the one hand, power and its figures continue to constitute an area of primary interest from which to draw. If studies on biographical cinema (Custen) had shown how at the end of the last century the so-called “production idols” had been supplanted by “consumer idols” (Lowenthal), thus showing a preference for a look over present time at the expense of history, on the contrary in recent years the story of lives linked to power and politics prevails over other biographical types, as evidenced by very different films such as Amelio’s *Hammamet*, Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*, or Wright’s *The Darkest Hour*. Is there a relationship between the capillary presence of political figures in the daily news and this renewed centrality of idols of production in biographical works? Also, how has the representations of these figures changed over the years? Are functions the same, compared to past decades? On the other hand, telling the life of a figure who historically existed is as such a political choice that concerns a more general right to biography (Lotman). Who has this right? What are the historical and cultural conditions that determine access to this right? Finally, classical biography has conceived individual life as a homogeneous and coherent totality, both internally in its course and externally in its relations with a community of reference. Today, on the contrary, the right to biography cannot be distinguished from a right to difference and metamorphosis as a condition for a full subjectivity. How does biographical narrative change in relation to this new conception of life?

The biographical as an aesthetic condition. The growing presence of technical devices in the management and strengthening of individual life has made it clear that life itself is a continuous place of mediation. Narrating life thus can open fruitful possibilities for investigating the changing aesthetic conditions of relationship between the subject and the world. Individual life is therefore not detachable from the forms of (self) representation that situate it in a shared imaginary. At the same time, life is always built through mediation structures and apparatuses. The case of Queen Elizabeth II in *The Queen* by Frears or in the series *The Crown* is emblematic: in both cases, the protagonist’s life is directly defined by the media frames that from time to time grant the effectiveness of her public image. From this point of view, the biographical can go beyond the narrow limits of an individual life to access the writing of an indeterminate life, a life as pure immanence (Deleuze), where the biographed becomes an

intercessor through which to reflect on aesthetic questions that involves the contemporary. Ferrente's *Selfie* is a meaningful example on this respect; here, the dynamics of self-representation developed by the two protagonists exceed the perimeter of their lives to become a general discourse on the practices of subjectivation through the means of technical reproduction. Thus, is there a biographical cinema capable of "bringing the individual biography out of its idiocy" to "find the political element that is hidden in the clandestinity of individual existence" (Agamben) and question the aesthetic conditions that define our common existences today?

Deadline for the submission of the abstract (150 words): October 17, 2021

Deadline for the submission of the essay: January 9, 2022

Essays should be expressly written for the journal and should strictly respect the following word limit:

***Focus*: Min 5000 Max 6000 words (including spaces and footnotes)**

***Rifrazioni*: Min 2000 Max 3000 words (including spaces and footnotes)**

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