

Is it factual? Not really. Is it entertaining? Hardly. But the biopic is back

Can you really tell the true story of a famous life in a two-hour film? If not, what is supposed to be the point? Kevin Maher mourns the return of the biopic.

Once upon a time, when people became famous they were written about in books. These books were called biographies. Then came the movies. Then came biographical movies. Big mistake.

In 1993 film scholar George F. Custen produced the first authoritative, and subsequently "definitive", book on the biographical movie. He called it *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. After tracing the development of the genre through the likes of *Lust For Life* and *Amadeus*, he announced that, since the late Eighties, the biopic had been mainly consigned to the doldrums of quick-fix made-for-TV projects. It was a dead genre.

Unfortunately for Custen, and for some of the rest of us, the biopic is back! This is a genre that writer and film historian David Thomson aptly describes as "an excuse for pious lies", that has always paid lip-service to facts while daring to flirt with fiction. It's back with such a vengeance that 1998 may yet become known as the Year of The Biopic.

As the production gates of 1998 swing open, we have over thirty biopics trembling in the blocks. These include movies about political figures like Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata and Adolf Hitler; films about movie stars such as Montgomery Clift, James Dean and Robert Mitchum; pictures about musicians like Brian Jones, John Lennon and Jacqueline Du Pre. There are plans for two Janis Joplin, two

Joan of Arcs, and two Dean Martins. Other projects range from the sublime, like James Joyce, Christopher Marlowe and Alexander The Great, to the ridiculous including Michael "Riverdance" Flatley. I kid you not.

This biopic resurgence is happening right in the middle of the Century of Cinema's most prosperous period. Last year, a record-breaker for movies worldwide, Hollywood made \$6.24 billion dollars in the USA, while indigenous films also triumphed across the globe - see Brit-film, Jap-film, Iti-film etc. Movies were, and are, everywhere. They permeate our news, music and fashion, their stars fill up our TV channels, and their products define our recreation. They also have a rapacious appetite for new material. It is this hunger for subject matter, in the midst of a movie-led culture of fame and celebrity, that the re-emerging biopic is aiming to satisfy.

The new biopic ignores its perjurous TV Hell connotations - like America's current A&E Network TV series *Biography* (sketchy documentaries about famous people). It also ignores the less than inter-stellar performance of last year's *Surviving Picasso*, *Michael Collins*, *Basquiat*, *Larry Flynt*, and *Wilde*. Yet it also mistakenly ignores the underlying reason for this sense of critical and commercial snubbing - the biopic simply doesn't work. Neither real biography nor real movie, the biopic is an abject lesson in "the middle ground." Even its name, 'bio/pic,' suggests a spliced-together mutant movie, a monstrous directionless oaf. Generally, that's exactly what it is.

David Thomson muses: "A movie is a story. And people in stories tend to have the confidence of their own actions,

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whereas people in biographies (and life) are hedged in by doubt and boredom – both things we put up with in life, yet not in story.”

The biopic, then, is in conflict with traditions of story-telling from Aristotle to the Coen Brothers. Its job, hampered by facts, is to tell you a “life” and not a story. Its failure is in attempting to do so. *Wilde* producer Marc Samuelson says that the challenge of the biopic is to see your way around this: “You have the essence of the story you’re trying to tell. You can’t show every instance in a life, and you’re constrained by the fact that you have a two hour cinematic unit. Therefore some tough choices are made. You often end up telling the bigger story by omitting smaller parts of the factual story.”

Yet the great anxiety of the biopic

is that, restricted by time and unable to show us the life, it opts for a story. But, restricted by a half-hearted adherence to facts, it is unable to engage fully with that story. The biopic falls between two stools and presents us with ambivalent, unconvincing sludge like *Basquiat*, *Hof-fa*, and *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*.

In showing us the specially chosen “story” of the “life” – Wilde’s hubris or Picasso’s caprice – the biopic is at once telling us that the truly biographical film is impossible (Samuelson admits that a 12-14 hour TV series on Wilde would have been easy). What we’re getting is an abridged digression, a fraction of a story. And so, at the end of last year’s bunch, we knew, shock horror: Wilde was indeed gay, Michael Collins liked wrestling with his friends, Picasso liked women (hardly a shock), Andy Warhol

was shy, and Larry Flynt was brash. As David Thomson says: “Reality is precise, local and private – movies are for all of us.”

Even at their most basic level, when these biopics are telling us nothing, they’re telling it badly. They ask us to bring a suspension of disbelief that’s more appropriate to the theatre. They’re crippled by the need to represent characters that we’re usually familiar with already. Rather than asking us to believe that Anthony Hopkins is, say, a character from a fictional screenplay, they ask us to believe that he is Picasso – which he clearly is not, as Fry is not Wilde, and as Stephen Dorff is not James Dean (coming up). “It’s a terrible challenge to an actor and to our memory of the subject,” says Thomson.

What we’re left with is the effect of

watching a performance – we watch Hopkins’s wonderful ticks and inflections and we marvel at him “doing” Picasso. And yet we never really believe, which is the one great trick that real movies can offer. We’re left watching a performance that we don’t believe, acting in a story that doesn’t really exist.

Perhaps the most glaring oversight of the biopic, and of those behind it, is its failure to recognise that some of the greatest movies in the history of cinema are, yes, biographical – but, more than that, they are entirely fictional. Thus *Ben Hur*, *Citizen Kane*, even *Forrest Gump*, *Rocky*, and *The Godfather Trilogy* (the life of Michael Corleone) have been epoch-defining movies. But they’ve done this without being restricted by facts and exposition, and they’ve succeeded by embracing that

same dramatic freedom of story that eludes and forever torments the slavish biopic.

Where does this leave the crop of 1998? One can only hope that some of the fact-free inspiration of *Kane* and Co and an entire history of wonderful fictional cinema seeps its way into this year’s pantheon of would-be bum-numbers. What a joy it would be to see Emily Watson’s Jacqueline Du Pre involved in a coke deal that goes sour, or to see Ewan McGregor’s James Joyce having a fist fight with Gertrude Stein outside a Parisian Cafe, or to see Michael Flatley cut the red wire instead of the blue.

If not, and failing the redirection of the biopic back into the bowels of TV Hell, 1998 may yet become known as the Year of The Flop.