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Television biopics: Questions of genre, nation, and medium

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Deborah Cartmell and Ashley Polasek (eds), *A Companion to the Biopic* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 45-60.

Television Biopics: Questions of Genre, Nation, and Medium

Jonathan Bignell

The term "biopic" is rarely used to denote television programmes, so on the face of it this chapter should be short and simple. But when thinking about why it is that the term is hardly relevant, a fascinating array of questions and problems emerges. Working through them illuminates what is at stake in using "biopic" to refer to a kind of television text, and reflects on how the television medium has been conceptualized. While cinema has narrowed to focus on one-off fictional narratives alongside a few outliers such as documentary features, television has a much wider range of genres and forms, and this chapter argues that aspects of biographical drama occur across many disparate kinds of television output. Although there is no clearly identifiable television biopic genre, programmes resembling biopics can be identified in many television forms, formats or cycles of production. Like cinema, television is international and is traded transnationally, and although its history is shorter than cinema's, there are over 80 years of broadcasting for this chapter to consider. It is organized around three main problems, namely the question of textual grouping, television's national specificity, and the changing medial identity of television over time. The programme examples derive mainly from recent British and American production, though the chapter notes that some of them are co-produced with other partners or are screened in other territories. The first section is on genre, and considers how the rarity of the

designation “biopic” for programmes depends on differences from and similarities to other forms like television documentary, movie-of-the-week television melodrama, and television historical drama. It also considers why the term seemed to become more common from the mid-2000s, because of changes in the ecology of the television industry. The section on national identity draws attention to the prevalence of television dramas based on the lives of historical and political figures, who are often of national relevance because television has historically been organised through national institutional structures. As the chapter proceeds it takes a metacritical approach, and argues that in various ways the biopic seeps unacknowledged into many kinds of television, where its simultaneous presence and absence indicate aspects of the medium’s specificity.

Problems of Genre

Television screens a much broader range of genres than mainstream cinema, so the problems with genre that film studies have faced are even tougher in the analysis of television. As Rick Altman (1999: 14) outlines, in film studies genre has been used to refer to four things, each of which captures a different and potentially misleading aspect of how films make sense. Genre can mean a blueprint or formula for making a film, a narrative structure used in a group of films, a label used in the distribution of film products, and a contract between films and audiences that organises ways of viewing. Jason Mittell’s (2014) work developed similar ideas about how genre works in varied and confusing ways in television. The world’s first broadcast television service began in 1936 in Britain, and television has always carried programmes in the genres of news, entertainment performance, sport, quizzes, documentary and drama, for example. These genres have been blended and hybridised to address new audiences, and to refresh existing television

formats by introducing variation. Genres change and have shifting relationships with each other, so a programme cannot be tested against a set essence of a genre or the boundaries of a genre, because texts break the rules for creative, economic and political reasons. Generic hybridity includes the recognition of genres that combine conventions and techniques, such as docudrama, dramedy or the gamedoc, for example. But the genres from which such hybrids are composed are not as consistent as they might seem. Some television genres that seem stable, like the sitcom, for example, undergo significant changes when more closely investigated. Genres are historical phenomena, existing at a certain time and in relation to each other. Genre mixing to appeal to new audiences is common in television, and although the broadcast of many similar programmes might lead to the recognition of a genre, each genre is in process at any one time. Programme genre may be retrospectively constructed, and both producers and audiences repudiate genre as much as adopting it. The kinds of factual storytelling in television that connect to the notion of the biopic include dramatization of lives from many different historical periods, undertaken using the conventions of the costume drama, arts documentary, melodramatic TV movie and fact-based celebrity profile, for example. Rather than finding the television genre of the biopic ready-made, it needs to be hunted-down.

When I was invited to write about television biopics, my first action was to find out how commonly the term was used to designate a kind of programme. I searched BBC Genome, a very large dataset covering all genres of television over a long period of time, in which programmes are listed and described. The website contains the searchable text of all the weekly issues of the BBC's listings magazine, *Radio Times*, totaling 350,622 pages of text. There are about 5 million records, documenting radio since 1923 and television since 1936, up to the release of Genome in 2009. There were 128 results of my search, but all except three of them referred to cinema films

shown on BBC television, or items in arts programmes about cinema biopics. This seemed odd, since many programmes have some of the characteristics identified by, for example, Carolyn Anderson and Jonathan Lupo (2008: 50) in their overview of the biopic's history and continuing presence in cinema and television. Among other trends, they found that biopics were more often about men than women, were often about creative artists, and showed a rather sentimental approach to telling the life-story including an emphasis on psychology and the significance of childhood trauma to the subject's later life. A chronological approach, assuming a meritocratic culture that enabled the subject's rise to distinction, was combined with a frequent use of flashbacks to demonstrate the significance of early life events. Many biopics told the life-stories of people who were still living.

One of my three Genome "biopic" results was *Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa!* (2006) a fact-based drama on the minority digital television channel BBC Four. Although Williams was not living at the time of broadcast, he died fairly recently in 1988. He was a comedy actor, a closeted homosexual when for most of his lifetime gay sex was illegal, and he was beset by health problems and abrasive professional relationships. He became very successful through regular roles in BBC radio comedy, then parts in 25 of the ribald *Carry On* cinema comedies from the 1950s to the 1970s and numerous television appearances on panel shows and entertainment specials. The *Radio Times* listing archived on Genome does not actually use the term "biopic", so strictly speaking the programme should not have been found by my keyword search. But the listing does say "Michael Sheen plays Williams in a dramatisation of his diaries", and somehow Genome's algorithm identified the drama, quite plausibly, as a biopic because it recounts part of its subject's life.

Similarly, Genome had found *Simon Schama's John Donne* (2009), broadcast on the

BBC2 channel, though again the word "biopic" does not occur in its listing. *Radio Times* explains: "Actress Fiona Shaw joins the presenter and historian [Schama] in exploring the life of John Donne, the 16th-century contemporary of Shakespeare's who has become one of Britain's most celebrated love poets." This looks like a biopic, although despite some short sequences of historical reconstruction, it is a presenter-led arts documentary and not a biographical drama. Its subject is the best-known of England's Metaphysical Poets and an important historical figure in the religious establishment in the Renaissance period, so he was a male creative figure whose life could be presented as a chronological rise to power. The *Radio Times* listing noted that the programme was structured by Schama's and Shaw's discovery of how "Donne rose from being a notorious lyricist to Dean of St Paul's", the most important church in London. But Donne is long dead, and his life had to be reconstructed via Schama's tour around significant locations in Donne's life, examining archival documents and consulting academic experts, with his poems read out along the way by Shaw. The reason that Genome identified the programme as a biopic is probably that it was a single feature rather than a series, and was organised around the life-story of a canonical writer and important figure in English cultural history.

Anderson and Lupo's discussion is deductive, based on examining how the term biopic has been used and building a definition of the screen genre from that. There is some consonance between their approach and my own empirical experiment with Genome to see how it uses the designation, which is why I am comparing its and their definitions. Both the Genome website and Anderson and Lupo's academic approach to biopics centre on the characterisation that such dramas are fictionalised narratives of (most of) the life of an individual, told primarily in chronological order, about a significant person who made a contribution to present culture or who lived recently enough to be familiar to the audience. *Simon Schama's John Donne* is not a

biopic, yet it was identified as one and fulfils the spirit of the definition while not meeting some of its crucial strictures, most crucially not being a scripted dramatization. *Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa!* fits rather better as a biopic, despite not being called one.

My third search result was the six-part series *Desperate Romantics* (2009) running weekly on BBC2. The listing for the first episode explains: "Drama charting the tumultuous lives of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the iconoclastic art movement that railed against the Victorian art establishment. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Millais and William Holman Hunt discover their muse when they are introduced to Lizzie Siddal." Again, *Radio Times* never uses the term "biopic", but these dramatisations of the lives of great English painters match many of Anderson and Lupo's criteria, though not all, and Genome categorised it thus despite the word never appearing in the *Radio Times* text. The multi-episode dramatization adopted some of the narrative structures of the biopic, such as the struggle to make a success, told in chronological order, with events explained partly by exploring the artists' psychological motivations. The men are the protagonists, adopting women (the artists' model Lizzie Siddal in particular) as tools to develop their aesthetic philosophies and exercise their bohemian sexualities. They are presented as angry young rebels, outraging social convention and pushing against the constraints on the cultural elite of their day. But there are several main characters, rather than one protagonist, and only a relatively brief segment of their careers is shown. The serial is a kind of costume drama based on historical fact, though clearly different from a Hollywood biopic.

The few television biopics that Genome identified were all from the period immediately following 2006. In the mid-2000s, economic, regulatory and aesthetic pressures in Britain and the USA led to a massive expansion of airtime that broadcasters wanted to fill, and the waning of some established genres and forms urgently required programme-makers to find new stories and

new ways of telling them. Fact-based drama of various kinds was one of the key responses to this demand (Bignell 2011), achieved through the hybridization between genres that is an important motor for generating new programme ideas. This led to a spate of programmes that have something in common with the biopic. Anderson and Lupo (2008: 8) note the larger number of US outlets in the 2000s for television biopics, because of the significance of cable television and new broadcast channels, and something similar happened in Britain too. Television "added considerable subject variety, new ways of connecting with audiences, and structural innovation to how life stories are told." Television biopics in the single drama format were accommodated within themed anthology series, and many life-story documentaries and profiles were made, some of them using dramatised sequences. Programmes targeted specific audience niches, defined either by gender or age. The Lifetime network addresses an adult female audience while VH1 aims at teens and younger adults, for example, and television biographies could also be categorized by subjects that suggest a genre, such as cultural and political history, entertainment stars or people in the news, for example.

Lifetime's *Intimate Portrait* (1995-2004) series profiled female entertainers and public figures, largely of the recent or current period, focusing on their achievements, inspirations and private life. It was not scripted drama, and was fronted by a presenter (most often Meredith Vieira) who introduced archive footage, photographic montage and interviews. The featured women included the First Lady, Laura Bush, singer-songwriter Sheryl Crow and actress Farrah Fawcett, for example. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) network's affiliate WGBH produces *The American Experience* (1988-), also a documentary series rather than dramatization, about historic American events or people. Many of its episodes have had a biographical focus, for example on the aviator Charles Lindbergh (1990), poet Walt Whitman (2008) or

entertainment mogul Walt Disney (2015), as well as several former Presidents. Similarly, *Biography* is a documentary series originally produced for syndication (1961-4), which was then broadcast on the CBS network (1979), and finally produced for the cable channels A&E (1987-2006), The Biography Channel and its successor FYI (2006-). The episodes are documentary features using archive footage, interviews, and photographic montages of their subjects. The subjects have been historical figures from the arts, entertainment and politics, not all of them American, and the series occasionally profiled the lives of fictional characters. *E! True Hollywood Story* (1996-) was initially an umbrella title for one-off specials focusing on actors, musicians and other celebrities, but also with episodes about the story of Hollywood films or television series. It has a much less serious focus than other biographical features, with an interest in scandal, crime, the biographies of porn performers and former child stars. Alongside conventional documentary material such as interviews and archive footage, some episodes use dramatic reenactments. The music channel VH1 has two biographical feature series about individual musicians and bands, *Behind the Music* (1997-) about the triumphs and struggles of well-known artists, and *Legends* (1995-2001) that profiles the much smaller number of acts considered to have made the greatest impact on popular music. These programmes are not biopics, but they share an interest in life-story narratives about (relatively) well-known individuals who make their mark in a specific cultural field.

Scripted dramatizations of life stories more closely equate with generic expectations of the biopic, and some TV movies based on the lives of famous or notorious people are described as such. For example, the American listings magazine *TV Guide* (Vick 2016) announced that the Lifetime network was "continuing its run of '90s nostalgia biopics" with a TV movie about the singer Britney Spears. *Britney Ever After* (2017) "cast Natasha Bassett as the pop princess in a

new biopic". The programme is a scripted drama based on a substantial part of Spears's life including her teenage fame, love life, mental breakdown and subsequent return to public life. *TV Guide* reminded readers that a few days earlier Lifetime had announced a "new TV movie based on the life of suspected murderer Robert Durst." Both dramas belong to the US television format of the made-for-television film (Paget 2011: 212-5), and it is not unusual for these to be based on the lives of famous people or people who have become publicly known as the victim of a trauma or perpetrator of a crime. Lifestyle channels and daytime network slots are filled by problem-of-the-week melodramas, single films that tell a story based on a single, suffering protagonist, often a woman, and draw attention to the story's basis in real events by naming the subject in the title. These are biopics, but that designation is hardly ever used to refer to them. The programmes appear almost exclusively on channels targeting adult female viewers, and contribute to the branding of channels such as Lifetime by characterising women's experience via suffering, emotional fortitude and a project of self-care and affirmation.

In the UK, some similar issues of channel branding and audience targeting also affect the kinds of biographical drama produced, and how it is made. The BBC Four channel broadcasts only in the evenings and caters to relatively upmarket tastes for extended news analysis, foreign-language drama serials, documentaries, and features about cultural heritage, some of them based on repackaged material from the BBC's huge archive. The channel has a tiny annual budget, and its occasional drama commissions are made quickly. For the actor Phil Davis in *The Curse of Steptoe* (2008) for example, this meant four days rehearsal before shooting in just two weeks (Davis 2010), in contrast to the eight months' development time before shooting that he enjoyed when starring in Mike Leigh's fiction cinema film *Vera Drake* (2004). In *The Curse of Steptoe* Davis played the actor Wilfred Bramble, one of two actors in a long-running BBC television

sitcom. Just as the premise of the sitcom was that the characters of junk dealers Harold Steptoe (Davis) and his son were unable to separate from each other, Brian Fillis's script showed the increasing tensions between the actors playing them, who were trapped together by the show's success, typecast and unable to progress in their careers. As Davis (2010) saw it, it "was a drama with a point, it had something to say and in order to say it in the best way possible they mucked about with the facts a bit." *The Curse of Steptoe* was a biographical television dramatization about actors in a television fiction, exploring behind the scenes of a sitcom well-known to British audiences and part of the national cultural heritage that the BBC Four channel evaluates and represents. The metatheatricality of the drama was a good fit with the channel identity of BBC Four, addressing the cultural knowledge of its middle-class adult audience and reflecting interestingly on the flow of broadcast material around it in the television schedules. As I shall argue further below, biographical drama on television has the potential to thematise the medium's conventions for looking into others' lives in factual and fiction genres, telling life-stories to reflect and evaluate national life.

Television and National Identity

Television is made for the present, addressing current concerns and working over ways of understanding them, and that requires histories to be told and re-told. Biographical dramas about historical and political figures tend to focus on people perceived to have national relevance because television "takes part in the construction of a national culture of public memory" (Ebbrecht 2007: 37) and television is organised in national institutional structures. In Britain and other north European countries, the concept of Public Service Broadcasting developed in the period between the First and Second World Wars with the aim of drawing

together the nation's social classes and geographical regions by showing how other people lived. This adherence to breadth and diversity of representation, and faith in communication as a means for social unification, generated evidence of the need for institutional and constitutional change at national, governmental level. Documentary programmes explored people's material circumstances and asked how intervention by professional experts and legislators could contribute to the public good. Television biographical drama is based around the single protagonist, so although the form connects with documentary it does not necessarily participate in the heritage of policies of social intervention. Deregulation and privatization, and new multi-channel distribution technologies have eroded Public Service Broadcasting, however, so there are many more competing programmes and channels, splitting the national audience. The breadth and prominence of factual programmes about unfamiliar cultures have reduced, alongside a surge in unscripted programmes about ordinary people including the various forms of Reality TV. These television formats lack the extended linear narrative or whole-life structure in biographical drama, but fact-based drama has taken over some of the territory hitherto occupied by investigative current affairs and documentary programmes reflecting on current and recent national political figures and events (Paget 1998: 61). *The Deal* (2003), for example, dramatized a key political strategy meeting between Tony Blair (played by Michael Sheen) and Gordon Brown, later to become Britain's Prime Minister and Chancellor respectively. It was one among many fact-based dramas about well-known figures in British politics, sport and entertainment that included *The Last Hangman* (2005) about Britain's last official executioner, and *The Special Relationship* (2010) featured Michael Sheen playing Prime Minister Tony Blair again with Dennis Quaid as Bill Clinton. *See No Evil: The Moors Murders* (2006), focused on the notorious serial killer Myra Hindley, and *Longford* (2006) was about an aristocratic legal reformer

involved in her case. The dramas were based on real events, but often ones that lacked corroborating witnesses or documentation. On-screen captions were used to alert the viewer to their status as fictionalised truth. *The Deal*, for example, opened with the caption "much of what follows is true", a quotation from the opening of the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), thus alluding to a fictional comparator. Viewers were invited to look both at the performer playing a real person and also through him or her to other kinds of comparable representation, such as news coverage, interviews and analogous fictions that the drama might allude to.

Recent biographical dramas about British entertainment stars have only tangentially addressed issues of concern to the wider public sphere of politics and culture. Their contribution to public benefit has largely been in dramatizing the psychological and especially sexual lives of celebrities in the years before more liberal laws on personal conduct were introduced in the late 1960s. A rash of biographical dramas on BBC television in the mid-2000s was sparked by the success of three dramas about celebrity cooks. The protagonist of *Elizabeth David: A Life in Recipes* (2006) is famous for introducing Mediterranean cooking to British cuisine in the early 1950s. *The Secret Life of Mrs Beeton* (2006) told the story of the Victorian middle-class writer of a bestselling cookbook of 1861, and *Fear of Fanny* (2006) dramatized the life of Fanny Cradock, one of Britain's first television cooks, based on a 2003 theatre play. At the same time, BBC commissioned *Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa!*, and Jane Tranter, Controller of Fiction (not factual or documentary programmes) commissioned further biographical dramas about television stars. In 2008 Tranter's commissions appeared under the collective title *The Curse of Comedy*, recounting periods in the lives of British light entertainment stars of the 1960s and 1970s, for example *The Curse Of Steptoe* centred on the relationship between the actors in the celebrated

sitcom *Steptoe and Son* (1962-74, the basis of the US series *Sandford and Son*, 1972-77) mentioned above. The drama not only received the Royal Television Society's award for Best Single Drama but also drew the biggest ever audience for the BBC Four channel. *Frankie Howerd: Rather You Than Me* (2008) dramatized the off-screen life of a veteran comedian and comic actor. *Hancock & Joan* (2008) was about the relationship between the comedian Tony Hancock and his wife, while *Hughie Green Most Sincerely* (2008) centred on a presenter and compere of television quizzes and talent contests.

Each of these people was a celebrity most famous for their television work, and the dramas could also be seen as celebrations of a television "golden age" before the advent of multi-channel digital and cable systems. Well-known and oft-repeated moments from television of that period were recreated in the dramatisations. Phil Davis recalled, when taking on the role of Harold Steptoe in *The Curse of Steptoe*, "I grew up with it, y'know, I watched it, it started I think in 1962 and I was 11, so I was ripe for it, …even before I read the drama I could quote some episodes. …. I did feel slightly that we were treading on hallowed ground". The 1960s and 1970s were when a new group of stars arose who had not had substantial earlier careers outside of broadcasting, and before British television celebrities were discovered in the 2010s to have been repeatedly committing sexual abuse offences (BBC Trust 2016) against fans and audience members from their shows. Ironically, the dramas were advertised, and their scripts were most interested in, melodramatic aspects of the protagonists' personal and sexual lives. The BBC press release (2007) announcing them, for example, described how Hughie Green's "serial womanising ultimately produced an explosive celebrity secret" that he fathered an illegitimate daughter. The drama about comedian Frankie Howerd presented him as "riddled with professional doubts, conflicted by his homosexuality and wracked with depression." The Steptoe

drama was especially controversial because of the dramatist Brian Fillis's condensation of events and the unifying theme that there was an acrimonious off-screen relationship between the actors in *Steptoe and Son*. Complaints from relatives of the people portrayed, and a consequent series of BBC investigations, led eventually to revision of the BBC Editorial Guidelines (2010) relating to real people represented in dramas. New rules required biographical dramas to be approved by their subjects or their surviving relatives, unless producers could show that the drama was fair, based on substantial evidence, and in the public interest. *The Curse of Steptoe* was re-edited but nevertheless withdrawn from sale on DVD, and has not been repeated on television. Nevertheless, the cycle of dramas continued with *Hattie* (2011) about comedian Hattie Jacques, which became BBC Four's highest-rated programme since *The Curse of Steptoe*, and BBC2's *Eric and Ernie* (2011) about the television comedy duo Morcambe and Wise. Each of these subjects is well-known to adult British audiences, but they are not names that travel much beyond the UK. *The Curse of Steptoe* and *Frankie Howerd: Rather You Than Me* achieved Australian distribution, probably because the real people whose stories they told had television series broadcast in Australia during their heyday, although none of the other dramas about comedians was available internationally.

The forces of individualization and depoliticisation of television were already much more dominant in US broadcasting. Its history is dominated by broadcasting networks that use television as an advertising medium, rather than a universal service (Brown 1998). Until the advent of new cable and digital channels from the 1980s onwards, the networks had an over 90 per cent share of the audience (Anderson 2005). The imperative of social engagement was only marginally addressed by regulatory rules and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) network, even after the US Congress imposed a levy to fund it in 1967, was always under-resourced

(Boddy 1998: 34). These economic, institutional and ideological factors led to a much lesser provision of documentary or social analysis in US programmes. It is PBS, rather than the commercial networks, that debate national histories and national social concerns through documentary. PBS has for a long time imported British biographical drama as one of its main planks of programming, and there are numerous examples from *Elizabeth R* (1971) to *Victoria* (2016) that often appear in its *Masterpiece* slot. Drama is expensive to make, so prestige biographical drama of only national relevance is rare, compared to productions that focus on the lives of people known to a potentially global audience and thus suitable for international co-production or pre-sale to overseas channels. International media corporations, like Netflix or Amazon, use biographical drama as a marker of prestige, since it is only recently that they have commissioned original drama and begun to compete against the major national broadcasters. Netflix's *The Crown* (2016-), made by British companies but financed by Netflix's American money, was tipped by the American listings magazine *TV Guide* for a Golden Globe award, which identified it as a biopic: "This Queen Elizabeth II biopic exposes the private lives of England's most public figures." However, it is notable that Netflix advertises the drama by promoting its creation by the screenwriter Peter Morgan who made the cinema film *The Queen* (2006), associating the television series with a cinematic heritage and stressing its epic scale. It is also notable that *The Crown* is not titled *Elizabeth*, and its multi-season, multi-episode format allows scope to dramatise the lives of a wide range of figures including the Queen's sister, Princess Margaret, politicians and other members of the Royal Household.

Diana: Her True Story (1993), a three-hour long dramatisation of Lady Diana Spencer's romance with Prince Charles and their marriage and estrangement, keys into well-known representations of Diana from international television news and press coverage (Bignell 2010),

and documentary programmes like *Diana: The Making of a Princess* (1989), *Diana: Progress of a Princess* (1991), *Diana: Portrait of a Princess* (1994), extended live coverage of her funeral in 1997, and many memorial programmes such as *Diana: A Celebration* (1997). Serena Scott-Thomas, playing Diana, adopted physical traits such as the princess's characteristic glance from under the fringe of her hair, and specific shots were staged to recall media reportage of her. The journalist Andrew Morton, author of the eponymous biography on which the drama was based, presented an introduction describing it as the "story of a girl who became a princess …, and a woman who found herself". This melodramatic narrative form draws on biopic conventions including the rise to fame and the struggle against adversity (Paget 2011: 219-22), structured as what Morton calls "a dream marriage that turned into hell for Diana: it's a story of a fractured fairytale". The public life of Diana was contrasted with her private life of psychological and emotional turmoil, often expressed through physical, bodily behaviour such as the symptoms of her eating disorder. Although the life-story centred on a British aristocrat and aired on Sky television in the UK, it was distributed internationally by Sky and the American NBC network, and was dubbed or subtitled into at least four languages: French, Italian, Hungarian and Greek.

The point of view adopted towards an historical figure in internationally financed factual television drama is affected by the interests of the co-production partners, since they will wish to target the interests and knowledge of their own national audiences. The British actor Timothy West has played numerous historical figures, including the British Prime Minister during the Second World War, Winston Churchill. West appeared as Churchill in *Churchill and the Generals* (1979), *The Last Bastion* (1984) and *Hiroshima* (1995), for example. While Churchill is a very well-known figure to British audiences, each production focused on his relationship to a specific national history and in two cases these were not British histories. The BBC's *Churchill*

and the Generals dramatized his relationships with the different Allied generals during the Second World War, and explored how these personal relationships affected strategic and political decisions. *The Last Bastion*, made by Australia's Network 10, was about Churchill's decision to station Australian troops in Singapore to defend it against Japanese attack in the Second World War. It was a controversial decision because it left the coast of Queensland with almost no defence against invasion by the Japanese. The drama addressed Australia's national identity in the context of this tension between the nation and its former colonial master, Great Britain. *Hiroshima* was a co-production between the US HBO and Showtime networks and the BBC, telling the story of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan by American bomber aircraft at the end of the Second World War. It included dramatised sequences featuring Churchill because his attitude towards bombing civilians with nuclear weapons influenced Allied strategy. As a co-production, the drama could be presented to British audiences as about their own wartime past, and also to American audiences whose interest in America's wartime role had already been dramatized very successfully in the fact-based co-production *Band of Brothers* (2001).

Reflecting on his portrayal of Churchill, West (2008: 1) described these dramas as "history told in three different ways … but based on character and the foibles of a particular person in power." The three dramas were not publicly identified as biopics, but rather as historical dramas. Yet it was the significance of personal agency in public affairs, and how that individual agency depended on the psychology and character of a single important figure, that was key to their commentary on past events. Whether biographical dramas are made about national figures or internationally known ones is key to their exportability, and co-productions or dramas made by international companies provide the owners of broadcasting rights with income from distributors worldwide, who either contribute to production costs up-front or purchase

licences to screen the completed programme in their own geographical territory. Georgina Born (2004: 167) reports that at the end of the 1990s, BBC factual dramatizations co-produced with HBO could attract US investment of up to £1.5 million, triple the average cost per hour of screen-time for a BBC drama series. Factual dramas about familiar people have audience appeal, and reduce financial risk for their producers because they are "rootable", "relatable" and "promotable" (Lipkin 2002). In this regard, the political economy of television biographical drama is similar to that of international cinema, where films that can be marketed to multiple national audiences and distributed across multiple territories are more profitable than properties of purely local interest. This means there is convergence between cinema and television production on larger, more costly projects, designed either for global television distribution or distribution to cinemas, or both.

Grace of Monaco (2015) is an interesting case of this convergence and transnational marketing, though there is room for disagreement about whether it is a biopic. The drama recounts the six-month period in 1962 when Alfred Hitchcock offered the former film star and then wife of Prince Rainier of Monaco, Grace Kelly, the opportunity to act in his film *Marnie* (1964), at the same time as Monaco's taxation status was being disputed by the French government. The production, starring Nicole Kidman, was being prepared for cinema release in 2012 when a legal dispute arose that used the question of what constitutes a biopic to potentially prevent the film from being completed. The royal family of Monaco made an official statement of complaint, declaring that "the royal family wishes to stress that this film in no way constitutes a biopic" because it contained "major historical inaccuracies and a series of purely fictional scenes" (Waterfield 2013). Because of disagreements between the producer Harvey Weinstein and the director Olivier Dahan over its editing, the film was released in three versions. The

distributor's cut for US cinemas is a fairytale of a film star becoming a princess, the director's cut for cinema audiences outside the USA portrays Kelly as a victim of royal disdain, and Lifetime's made-for-television version was described as a drama/romance, instead of a biopic (Beyondgracekelly.com 2017). The advent of digital distribution in the form of premium download services like Netflix makes the issue of relevance to multiple markets and the significance to companies of owning worldwide rights even more important. Netflix distributes the Lifetime television version of *Grace of Monaco*, categorising it by genre as a Biographical Drama, Drama based on Real Life, 20th Century Period Piece and Showbiz Drama, matching key designators of the biopic genre, but leaving obscure the question of whether it is a television programme or a cinema film. The boundaries between the media, like the separation between genres and between fact and fiction in biographical drama, are porous.

The borderline status of *Grace of Monaco* between cinema and television is possible because the predominantly Naturalist form of television dramatic fiction is similar to that of mainstream cinema. The film was a melodrama centred on a woman's struggles in the public world and also behind the scenes with her family, so it aligned with Lifetime's television melodrama format, with the strong women of US prime-time soap opera (Geraghty 1991) and more broadly with television biographical drama and documentary about famous people such as pop stars, actors and other public figures. For actors playing real people, approaches to performance deriving from the dominant Stanislavskian tradition and its development into Method acting, for example, are suited to screen performance for either mainstream cinema or prime-time television drama. The actor Timothy West (2008: 5), for example, used explicitly Stanislavskian language to explain that in the context of a script dramatizing the actions of a real person, for the actor "You are playing a moment-to-moment truth. What is this person concerned

with as a superobjective? And what is he concerned with at this moment?" What is at stake in this set of conventions is the credibility of character in combination with recognizability. The audience is invited to believe that the character might reasonably behave in the ways represented, and that the actor is portraying the person recognizably. West (2008: 4) commented,

> it's always good to know the *real* facts and measure them against what the writer is saying. Mainly because if you're playing an unsympathetic character, it's terribly important not to play them with a comment of being unsympathetic. You know, if you're playing Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot or Saddam Hussein, Margaret Thatcher…you've gotta see things from *their* point of view. Otherwise you're commenting on them and the performance doesn't work.

West assumes that the actor should merge with the character as much as possible, in a performance that need not be illusionistic (which could become mimicry or parody) but which should be credible. As Jean-Louis Comolli (1978) argued, the actor's body is a "body too much" that detracts from the viewer's ability to believe in the version of Churchill that West portrayed on screen. But credibility takes different forms in different national contexts, as West noted about his three different Churchills. National expectations are reflected in the script the actor is working with, and are affected by the different inflections the actor brings to the role (over and above the presence of his or her body) through the detail of performance choices.

Actors playing a historical figure, as well as viewers watching them, have to contend with other media representations of the person they are representing, and those pre-existing representations place television biographical drama in a textual field that is shared with numerous other factual and fictional representations. The actor, Phil Davis (2010), who played the British comedy actor Wilfred Bramble, criticized biographical dramas about former

Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and pro-censorship campaigner Mary Whitehouse for being over-sympathetic: "I think there's quite a lot of revisionism going on… Y'know, about Mary Whitehouse, for instance." *Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story*, he thought, showed that "she was charming in the way that Julie Walters played her and Julie Walters is a brilliant actress. But all the same…I think there were nasty aspects to the Mary Whitehouse that I remember that weren't really…in that play and…the same to a certain extent with the Thatcher one." Davis refers to *The Long Walk to Finchley* (2008) in which Andrea Riseborough played the young Thatcher, rising through the ranks of the Conservative party to become its first woman leader and Britain's first woman Prime Minister despite being, in Davis's view, "the most hated political figure in a century, and there she was, y'know, being really rather lovely and likeable". Documentaries and factual dramatizations about Thatcher have included *The Thatcher Factor* (1989), *Thatcher: The Final* Days (1991), *Thatcher: The Downing Street Years* (1993) and *Thatcher: The Path to Power - and Beyond* (1995), for example, as well as numerous comic impressionists' take on her including the puppet satire programme *Spitting Image*. Because of their adoption of television's Naturalistic and melodramatic conventions biographical dramas adopt performance modes that link them to other factual and fictional television forms in a national television culture. This potentially undercuts the authority of any specific dramatized life-story, because it is just one among many representations in different genres and forms, but also simultaneously multiplies the available frames of reference and means of access that the audience has to the person portrayed, potentially enriching the interest of biographical drama (Paget 2011: 251-8).

Conclusion: Television's Visible and Invisible Biopics

Biopics have the potential to link structure and agency, namely the vexed problem of how subjectivity is shaped by cultural environment but can also impact on larger structural, historical forces. Debates about the value of television historical drama have centred on this issue (Panos 2011), but its television forms derive from those of the nineteenth-century novel and popular theatre. The Naturalist novel, tracing the life of an individual and his or her progress against a background of social and political change, was championed in Marxist literary criticism (Lukács 1978), because the form could dramatize a life at the confluence of ideological forces. Theatrical melodrama approached similar issues by charting the emotional and moral struggle of individuals against archetypal characters representing class and gender privilege (Brookes 1985). Television draws on this heritage in historical ensemble drama such as the British serial *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971) spanning the first decades of the twentieth century in the lives of an upper-class London family and its servants, and the more recent *Downtown Abbey* (2010-15). In the USA, *Roots* (1977, remade 2016) adopted a similar long-form episodic format to trace generations of enslaved black people and their eventual emancipation. Although these are not biopics as such, they are partially based on real historical events, and sometimes real people, telling the life-stories of a small group of main characters. They use long spans of time and multiple characters to allow the audience to reflect on the forces impacting on individuals and how individuals respond to those forces. Biographical narratives on television draw on a range of forms, such as the melodrama, documentary profile, Bildungsroman or teleological Great Man (and Great Woman) discourse charting a rise through adversity to success, depending on their subject, production circumstances and intended audience. The kinds of life-story programmes that are made respond to the pressures and opportunities in contemporary television culture, for example lavish historical biopics contribute to channel branding, discourses of quality, the rise of

international co-production, practices of binge-viewing and the diminishing importance of real-time scheduling.

Looking for the biopic has entailed thinking about how television works both as a window and a mirror, looking both outward and inward (Gripsrud, 1998). The medium's engagement with the present, with the national and the socially extended means that it continually seeks new ways to show and explain the self and the real, especially through the form of narrative. It offers stories that open a window on the world, and its factual genres like news, current affairs and documentary claim to bring the public world into the viewer's living-room. Ideas about how television is constituted as a medium are associated with the notion of reflecting society to itself, because its socially extended form constitutes a public sphere of entertainment, information exchange and debate. This involves working over the relationships between biography and society: television is interested in how individuals and families constitute a society. Life-story narratives on television are linked to the documentary tradition, developing the function of the screen as a window bringing representations of the world outside into the viewer's domestic space.

But television is also a mirror, representing versions of the domestic, private worlds of individuals and families, in various kinds of drama, lifestyle and observational programmes. A focus on an individual life implies intimacy, the revelation of character, psychology and motivation. Moreover, the embedding of television in the rhythms of national life means that there are extended weekly formats that enable long-duration storytelling, and this makes television suited to narrating the everyday detail of life-stories. The temporally extended forms of some continuing episodic programmes lead to the moulding of factual biography into an episodic narrative shape that is reminiscent of the drama serial, blending fact-based drama on

television with related fictional forms. Television offers a mirroring, comparative relationship between the viewer and the people whose lives it follows, often in lengthy, multi-episode serial formats. It is an intimate medium in the sense that it is broadcast into the viewer's private space, and many programmes offer insight into the detail of others' experience. Dramatised biographies focus on action that expresses motivation and emotion, made visually engaging by the use of close-up on individuals' modes of expression and the patterning of the drama to emphasise moments of character revelation. I have argued that the biopic is not a television genre, and whereas the theoretical discourse of genre might seem to bring a welcome discipline to the boundaries between television biopics and other kinds of programme like the historical serial, docudrama or soap opera, this chapter has argued the contrary. Although television biopics scarcely exist as such, there is significant convergence between television and cinema because film biopics are often in the television schedules and are also available on-demand for home viewing on domestic screens. The question of genre in the biopic foregrounds television's perpetual transgression and hybridity of genre, and I have argued that this is a much more interesting conclusion than arriving at a rigid definition of the television biopic. Analysing the reasons why the biopic is not a television genre leads to a greater understanding of how lives recounted in programmes fit within and across the range of broadcast output, at the conjunction of the interdependent cultural functions of the television medium.

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