



## 'Mattering' Women's Lives on Screen: An Introduction

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### Abstract

The aim of this introduction is to provide a context for the articles that follow in this cluster on *Women's Lives on Screen*. Starting with some reflections on how biopics can matter to audiences, I propose the use of 'mattering' as a concept for the study of women's biopics which helps consider their objectification of women as biographical 'material' on screen in tandem with their emancipatory refiguring of women as biographical subjects that are made to matter. The introduction also offers a brief overview of biopic studies as they relate to the subject of women's lives on screen. It ends by sketching the breadth of topics covered in this cluster with a summary of the eleven articles.

*Keywords:* women's biopics, 'mattering', gender, genre

### Zusammenfassung

Ziel dieser Einführung ist es, die Artikel dieser Spezialausgabe zur filmischen Darstellung vom Leben historischer Frauen (*Women's Lives on Screen*) in einen größeren Kontext zu setzen. Ausgehend von Überlegungen darüber, wie biografische Filme auf unterschiedliche Art und Weise für Zuseher\*innen von Bedeutung sein können, stelle ich in diesem Artikel den Begriff 'mattering' als Konzept zur Erforschung von Filmbiografien über Frauen vor, um die Spannungen zwischen der Objektifizierung von Frauen als biografisches 'Material' und der emanzipatorischen Thematisierung von Frauen als biografisches Subjekt in solchen Filmen zu veranschaulichen. Darüber hinaus vermittelt diese Einführung einen kurzen

Überblick über Studien zu Filmbiografien, insbesondere über Theorien und Erkenntnisse in Bezug auf biografische Filme über Frauen. In einer abschließenden Zusammenfassung der elf Artikel in dieser Spezialausgabe soll dann noch die große Bandbreite der behandelten Themen veranschaulicht werden.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Filmbiografien über Frauen, ‚mattering‘, *gender*, Genre

In October 2020, the US-American entertainment website *Deadline* announced that one of the most legendary women in history, Queen Cleopatra VII, would receive the biopic treatment for the fifth time.<sup>1</sup> The production will be helmed by Patty Jenkins, whose directing credits include the biopic *Monster* (2003) about serial killer Aileen Wuornos and superhero blockbusters *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020). The choice of Jenkins raises certain expectations, fuelled by the director herself who describes Cleopatra as ‘a pretty bad-ass, incredible leader’ and links the upcoming film with her ‘history of looking at complicated characters’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite this promise of a departure from traditional representations of Cleopatra as a seductress and the love interest of Julius Caesar and Marc Antony,<sup>3</sup> *Deadline’s* announcement of the film provoked considerable controversy over the casting of its lead role. After Theda Bara, Claudette Colbert, Vivien Leigh, and Elizabeth Taylor, the Israeli actress Gal Gadot is set to become the fifth actress to don the crown of the Queen of Egypt on screen – a choice that film critic Hanna Flint branded ‘a backwards step for Hollywood representation’.<sup>4</sup> Critics and social media users engaged in a debate about Hollywood ‘whitewashing’, accusing the filmmakers of failing to cast an actress of colour and perpetuating the underrepresentation of North-African actors.<sup>5</sup> Another line of criticism focused less on Gadot’s skin colour and ethnicity and more on her Jewish-Israeli upbringing. The actress is a vocal supporter of the Israeli Defence Forces, where she served two years of mandatory military service, and is also reported to have commissioned the Cleopatra biopic.<sup>6</sup> In light of this, Gadot is viewed, especially by Middle Eastern writers, as an egregious *body too much*.<sup>7</sup> For them, Gadot represents an extension of the Zionist project,<sup>8</sup> which for Nadine Sayegh involves the ‘stealing [of] Arab film roles, land, and culture’.<sup>9</sup>

What the controversy surrounding Jenkins’s Cleopatra film aptly demonstrates is that biopics – even those that are yet unmade – matter to people. Famously theorized by George Custen as participating in the construction of ‘public history’,<sup>10</sup> biopics matter as narratives of nationhood, selfhood, and Otherness. As the adversarial reactions to Gadot’s casting and accusations of ‘stealing’ highlight, biopics often

entrench binaries of *us* and *them*, *ours* and *theirs*. Especially when they centre on the lives of women, who tend to be defined by their gender prior to their talents and accomplishments,<sup>11</sup> biopics also matter as narratives of gender and womanhood. Inexorably entangled in the values and ideologies of their production and reception contexts, biopics mediate not only which historical women matter but also what makes women matter at a given point in a society.

This cluster of articles on *Women’s Lives on Screen* arose out of the international conference ‘Herstories Re-Imagined’, held on 16-17 December 2019 and hosted by the King’s College London Centre for Life-Writing Research, which shed light on how women’s lives have been re-imagined as narratives of history, or *herstories*, in biographical fiction and film.<sup>12</sup> In historiography, the notion of ‘herstory’ commonly evokes a revaluation of the domestic spheres to which women were often relegated, directing the scholar’s gaze towards women’s support function and reproductive roles in relation to the ‘masculine’ work of public action and production. And indeed, Kanchanakesi Warnapala’s article in this cluster examines just such a traditionally feminine role (in both the filmic and metaphorical senses). However, for the editors, the ‘her’ in herstory by no means signals a monolithic view of female subjectivity. Resignifying the term, especially in its plural form, we use ‘herstories’ to refer to life narratives about individual women, including the famous and mighty. Rather than considering such illustrious subjects as incompatible with a feminist approach to history, we recognise the value of canonical women’s lives as occasions for negotiating and re-inscribing ideas about gender on screen. Furthermore, we understand ‘woman’ as a capacious term that encompasses diverse forms of gender identity, including trans women such as Lili Elbe, who featured in the 2015 biopic *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper). Although the film was criticized for its ‘transface’ casting of cis-gender male Eddie Redmayne in the role of Elbe,<sup>13</sup> its celebration of a transgender pioneer marked a timid step towards mainstream acceptance of gender self-identification.

The articles published in this cluster focus on the retelling of herstories in biopics (a term here used to refer to biographical films and series).<sup>14</sup> They explore how herstories are *mattered* within the aesthetic, medial, and institutional conditions of cinema and television. The title of this introduction evokes women who matter, alluding to the role of film and television in attributing cultural and historical significance to certain lives. In its alternative semantic function, ‘mattering’ signals, at the same time, how women ‘are mattered’ on screen: how their life stories become physically manifest – and charged with significance – in scenic re-enactment. The term ‘mattering’ thus helps capture the tensions between objectification (women *materialized* on screen as bodies to be consumed) and emancipatory ideals (women

*made to matter* as biographical subjects) in women’s biopics. The films and series studied by our contributors ‘matter’ women from a wide range of countries, professions, and communities, allowing for an analysis of life narratives that places gender at the intersection of other dimensions of difference like race, ethnicity, class, age, and sexuality. *Women’s Lives on Screen* thus aims to contribute to the study of women’s biopics as an international and intersectionally complex genre. The contours of this growing body of research shall briefly be outlined in this introduction.

George Custen’s pioneering, book-length study, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, has served as a cornerstone in biopic research. Despite the limited spatial, temporal, and medial scope of Custen’s work, which focuses on Hollywood films from 1927 to 1960 (what Custen terms the classical period of the genre), the study identifies tropes and trends that have persisted as tried-and-tested formulas, even beyond Hollywood. Custen acknowledges the biopic’s casual relationship to facts, describing the genre at one point as being ‘from its earliest days [...] minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used’.<sup>15</sup> Yet, he is also careful to stress its real capacity for constructing a ‘public history’ accessible to mass audiences: ‘Hollywood biographies are real not because they are believable. Rather, one must treat them as real because despite the obvious distortions ranging from the minor to the outright camp, Hollywood films are believed to be real by many viewers.’<sup>16</sup> This capacity for popular historiography is even more pronounced and critical when biopics deal with historical groups who have been marginalized by traditional historical accounts, as is largely the case for women, and especially women with intersecting experiences of discrimination. In classical Hollywood biopics, women are relegated to the margins far more often than men, being typically confined to supporting, domestic roles,<sup>17</sup> and those who appear in protagonist roles are usually entertainers, paramours, or queens.<sup>18</sup> As these trends in Custen’s sample demonstrate, unless they are born into royal privilege, women’s power to matter beyond domestic confines appears to hinge on their capacity to stage themselves as spectacle and please men.

Building on Custen’s pioneering work but challenging his assertion that the studio system’s demise heralded the biopic’s decline in importance after 1960, Dennis Bingham published another landmark study of biopics, titled *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, in 2010. With his survey of mostly Hollywood films ranging from the studio era to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bingham aims to cement the biopic’s status as a genre that has undergone different cycles, each defined by a different approach to the biographical subject. In addition to the ‘classical, celebratory’ cycle extensively

studied by Custen, Bingham identifies a ‘warts-and-all’ cycle; ‘the transition of a producer’s genre to an auteurist director’s genre’; an investigatory cycle; a parodic cycle; a cycle characterized by minority appropriation; and the neoclassical biopic, which combines elements of all the other cycles.<sup>19</sup> Women are a more prominent presence in the sample studied by Bingham, who has divided his case studies into two books, one focusing on men’s biopics and the other on women’s biopics. With this division, Bingham reinforces his claim that biopics of men and women are ‘essentially different genres’,<sup>20</sup> structured around fundamentally different values, which translate into different characteristics, tropes, and cycles. His approach allows for a more in-depth study of women’s biopics that accounts for a greater variety of tone, styles, and professions (although the selection of women biographees featured is still overwhelmingly white). Bingham argues, however, that this variety is somewhat curtailed by the persistence of the standard tropes of female suffering and victimization that weighed down the female entertainer biopics of the studio era. So, following Bingham, biopics appear to suggest that for women mattering in the eye of the public usually comes at a higher price. As such, the premises of Bingham’s work display parallels to feminist biography studies that outline how women’s claims to fame and historical visibility have been troubled by both societal expectations and genre conventions.<sup>21</sup>

Tom Brown and Belén Vidal took the baton from Custen and Bingham with their edited volume *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, published in 2014. Rupturing the hegemonic focus on Hollywood (and Eurocentric) films in biopic studies, the volume includes case studies from British, French, Indian, Italian, Russian, and South Korean cinema. While Vidal’s introduction acknowledges the lasting impact of the Hollywood studio-era biopic as ‘a blueprint for the genre as a popular film form’ and the pervasiveness of the American founding myths that have moulded the genre,<sup>22</sup> the articles in the volume expand the boundaries of biopic studies by showing how this American model has evolved and adapted to the aesthetic, cultural, and institutional demands of other cinemas. Not only does the diversity of case studies in Brown and Vidal’s volume offer fertile ground for new theoretical approaches, it also puts into relief the historical and cultural contingency of the biopic’s modes of ‘mattering’ women’s lives. These become particularly visible in the case of canonical biographical subjects whose lives have given rise to multiple treatments. The Queen of France in Herbert Stothart’s studio-era *Marie Antoinette* is ‘mattered’ – that is, made manifest and significant on screen – differently than the Queen in Sofia Coppola’s New Auteurist *Marie Antoinette*.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* is ‘mattered’ within a matrix of aesthetic, cultural, and institutional conditions that are vastly

different to the conditions that have shaped the portrayal of designer Coco Chanel in the French biopic *Coco avant Chanel/Coco Before Chanel* (Anne Fontaine, 2009).<sup>24</sup> This is not to say, however, that different versions of the same life come into existence independently of each other. Stothart’s lavish MGM biopic can easily be understood as an intertext to Coppola’s portrayal of Marie Antoinette as a pop princess reigning over Versailles to the tunes of 1980s New Wave bands while wearing candy-coloured shoes designed by Manolo Blahnik. These intertextual relations confirm Vidal’s diagnosis of the biopic as ‘a flexible form continuously reinscribed in the shifting space between historical fact, previous representations, and contemporary pressures’.<sup>25</sup>

Vidal’s scholarship on biopics, which receives a new chapter in this cluster of articles, should also be highlighted here for her pioneering work in centring biopics about women’s lives. In her 2007 article, ‘Feminist Historiographies and the Woman Artist’s Biopic’, Vidal casts light on how the woman artist’s biopic, with its concerns about gender and authorship, is entangled in a tug-of-war between feminist politics and the commercial demands of mainstream filmmaking. She unpicks the controversial reception of Agnès Merlet’s *Artemisia* (1997), which was condemned by the likes of Gloria Steinem and feminist art historian Mary D. Garrard for reframing the abuse that Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi suffered at the hands of Agostino Tassi as a romance that fuelled Gentileschi’s creative practice. Vidal reveals how the film’s ‘mattering’ of Gentileschi as a proto-feminist artist rising up against the patriarchal establishment is complicated not only by accusations of historical inaccuracy but also by its perceived allegiance to postfeminist discourses of sexualized female empowerment, which adapt – or distort – the ideas of second-wave feminism to narrative cinema’s imperative of visual pleasure.

Postfeminist readings of herstories are at the centre of Bronwyn Polaschek’s *The Postfeminist Biopic*. In her study, Polaschek theorizes the postfeminist biopic as a category of women’s biopics that emerged as a response to the rising number of women directors entering mainstream Hollywood in the 1990s and the need to appeal to expanding female audiences who had already internalized some of the lessons of second-wave feminism. Taking a more sympathetic approach towards postfeminism, which she regards as ‘the product of feminism’s encounter with theories of postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism’,<sup>26</sup> Polaschek argues against dismissing the postfeminist biopic as part of a mere backlash against feminism. Rather, she posits it as an alternative to the polarity between two positions, questioning both the patriarchal narratives of classical female biopics and the second-wave feminist theories and methodologies informing feminist biopics.

In a similar vein, Karen Hollinger identifies conflicting impulses in women’s biopics in her more recent book, *Biopics of Women*. Hollinger’s study is primarily conceived as a challenge to Bingham’s assertion that women’s biopics are typically weighed down by regressive narratives of female victimization and downward trajectories. Through a careful consideration of four of the most common and oft-discussed subgenres – queen biopics, entertainer biopics, writer biopics, and headliner biopics – Hollinger reappraises women’s biopics as ‘a complex hybrid of progressive and regressive ideas about women [...] mix[ing] portraits of female victimhood with affirmation of women’s accomplishments and endurance under a patriarchal system’.<sup>27</sup>

What emerges from the theoretical discourses outlined above is an image of women’s biopics as a dynamic assemblage co-constituted by historical records, artistic and commercial demands, and discourses on gender and intersecting inequalities that – in the words of Raymond Williams<sup>28</sup> – may be dominant, residual, or emergent at any given point in a film’s production and reception contexts. The constellation of these elements is re-negotiated differently with each contingent articulation of women’s lives on screen, continually injecting new relevance into the critical study of this genre.

With their expansion in recent years, which has also brought critical attention to biographical dramatization on television in a book-length study by Hanna Andrews,<sup>29</sup> biopic studies have grown increasingly diverse, specialized, and complex. And yet, up to and including Hollinger’s 2020 monograph, scholars in the field seem haunted by the need to justify the object of their study. In his introduction, aptly titled ‘A Respectable Genre of Very Low Repute’, Bingham calls for a reappraisal of the term ‘biopic’ despite its ‘pejorative odor’<sup>30</sup> – and by extension, of biopic studies, which scholars have justified not least on the grounds of the biopic’s capacity for popular historiography,<sup>31</sup> its multi-cyclical longevity as a genre,<sup>32</sup> and its mediation of complex historical information through affective narratives.<sup>33</sup> To return to the initial premise of this introduction: it is the opinion of the editors that biopics matter as objects of critical reflection because they matter to people. Their capacity for ‘mattering’ historical lives and the discourses entangled therein can produce real, material effects, such as the feminist campaigns against Merlet’s *Artemisia* biopic and the social media protests and petitions condemning Gal Gadot’s casting as Cleopatra. As Alison Landsberg observes in her study *Engaging the Past*, which explores affective modes of representing history, ‘[p]eople are most motivated to action by those issues in which they feel a personal stake’.<sup>34</sup> On the affirmative side, such actions can reach from being

inspired to pursue certain careers (for a more detailed discussion of the so-called ‘Scully Effect’ in connection with Theodore Melfi’s 2016 biopic *Hidden Figures*, see the contribution of Timo Frühwirth et al. in this cluster) to feeling invested in heretofore little known or underappreciated figures, like Chinese silent-screen actress Ruan Lingyu in *Ruǎn Língyù/Center Stage* (Stanley Kwan, 1991), Ugandan chess champion Phiona Mutesi in *Queen of Katwe* (Mira Nair, 2016), Canadian folk artist Maud Lewis in *Maudie* (Aisling Walsh, 2016), and Swedo-Finnish Moomins creator, Tove Jansson, in *Tove* (Zaida Bergroth, 2020) – figures who, thanks to the biopic’s capacity for mass circulation, attain fame beyond the national boundaries of their home culture.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is the biopic’s potential to rile people into various forms of opposition, as illustrated also by the hostile reactions to certain members of the British Royal Family aroused by the Netflix series *The Crown* (2016-). Following the third season, which invites sympathy for Prince Charles by portraying him as a sensitive college thespian burdened by his role as heir to the throne, the fourth season centres on the marriage between Charles and the newly introduced character of Diana Spencer, with the narrative focalized around Diana’s experience of their crumbling marriage and her mental health struggles for long stretches of the season. This shift in focalization seems tantamount to a shift in allegiance, pushing Diana to the centre of the show’s ‘mattering’ economy at the expense of Charles. The result, upon the season’s release in autumn 2020, was a fierce backlash against the real-life Prince Charles and his wife and former mistress, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. The persistent harassment from viewers on social media forced the operators of their official Twitter account to disable comments from the public<sup>35</sup> – a reaction which seems all the more significant in light of the Royal Family’s ‘don’t complain, don’t explain’ mantra. A debate ensued as to whether Netflix should add a disclaimer alerting viewers to the fictionalized content of the series – calls which simultaneously make and miss a point. The biopic’s melding of fact and fiction seems as much common knowledge as Prince Charles’ infidelity towards Diana. But in an intellectual disavowal akin to the ‘I know, but yet I see’ response theorized by Tom Gunning in connection with early films’ aesthetic of astonishment,<sup>36</sup> what remains is the biopic’s capacity to move and matter beyond the limits of fiction: I know very well, and yet it matters.

This cluster of articles aims to push the study of women’s biopics in new directions by considering the genre as a dynamic and malleable frame ‘mattering’ herstories in multiply contingent ways. For this purpose, it has brought together a cross-disciplinary ensemble of eleven articles looking at a diverse range of cinematic and



televisual biopics from France, Great Britain, Sri Lanka, United States, and the Iranian diaspora, which lend themselves to critique from an intersectional gender perspective.

The first three articles explore various aspects of gender performance and challenges to gendered expectations. In ‘New Women’s Biopics: Performance and the Queering of Herstor/ies’, Belén Vidal starts from the intriguing premise that all screen biographies are forms of metabiography, to then read women’s biopics as performances articulating herstories as filmic events. Through a close analysis of *Colette* (Wash Westmoreland, 2018), which foregrounds the performative dimensions of the biographical image by various motifs of female performance, Vidal constructs a compelling argument about how this shift from representation to performance brings to the fore a self-reflexive emphasis on biographical practice that is conducive to a queering of women’s histories. Bethany Layne zooms in on the figure of Queen Elizabeth II to examine gendered expectations of grief in her article “‘Full cause of weeping’: Affective Failure in *The Queen* (2006) and *The Crown* (2019)”. Layne offers a side-by-side reading of Stephen Frears’ *The Queen* and the ‘Aberfan’ episode of *The Crown* as double portraits from which Elizabeth II emerges as a figure caught in the tensions between her performance of gender and her performance of royalty. The section closes with Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska’s analysis of ‘American Poverty and Social Rejection in Craig Gillespie’s *I, Tonya*’. Interweaving insights from studies of poverty and sports movies, Korzeniewska-Nowakowska demonstrates how the biopic of working-class figure skater Tonya Hardy exposes athletic performance and the figure-skating rink as contested sites of gender and class politics.

The next four articles revolve around filmic efforts to give visibility to marginalized women and reclaim their place in history. In their paper “‘For better or for worse, there is history, there is the book and then there’s the movie’’: Foregrounding and Marginalizing African American Women in the Film *Hidden Figures* (2016)’, Timo Frühwirth, Philipp Bechtold, Elisabeth Güner, and Marie-Theres Krutner undertake an intersectional analysis of Theodore Melfi’s acclaimed group biopic about black female mathematicians in the early US space program. Through a close analysis of the critically contentious ‘bathroom sequence’ and comparisons with Margot Lee Shetterly’s eponymous group biography *Hidden Figures*, the authors unpack the film’s strategies of selection and fictionalization to highlight its contradictory representation of African American women. In ‘Giving Voice to a Portrait: The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Law in *Belle*’, Kate Sutherland turns to Amma Asante’s spotlighting of Dido Elizabeth Belle, the illegitimate biracial daughter of an English aristocrat of whose existence there is little surviving evidence. Drawing on her expertise as a legal scholar, Sutherland queries the film’s (mis)representation of the Zong case and use of

law as a tool for giving a voice to the historically silenced. Kanchanakesi Warnapala’s ‘The Reluctant Wife: *Ginnen Upan Seethala* and Gendering Revolution’ centres on Chithrangani Wijeweera, a Sri Lankan rebel wife who has been relegated to the shadow of her husband’s celebrity in historical records. Warnapala’s close analysis of *Ginnen Upan Seethala*, which focuses on rebel Rohana Wijeweera, offers a nuanced understanding of how the biopic makes space for Chithrangani and troubles traditional conceptions of the rebel’s wife as uncritically committed to her husband with its empathetic reimagining. Sylvie Pomiès-Maréchal studies ‘The Enduring Influence of Female *Special Operations Executive* Agent Biopics on Cultural Memory and Representations in France and Great Britain’ by focusing on two influential postwar biopics – *Odette* (Herbert Wilcox, 1950) about Odette Sansom and *Carve Her Name with Pride* (Lewis Gilbert, 1958) about the life of Violette Szabo. Relating these films to historical scholarship on female SOE agents and to the postwar media industry’s efforts at shaping public perception of Britain’s and France’s role in the Second World War, she uncovers the gendered tropes that lie at the heart of a continuous cultural fascination with the female SOE agent. She demonstrates how the two biopics gave rise to an archetypal figure that has informed, but has also been modified by, more recent historical films such as *Charlotte Gray* (Gillian Armstrong, 2001) and *Les femmes de L’ombre* (Jean-Paul Salomé, 2008). As such, Pomiès-Maréchal’s article concludes this section on (in)visibility and builds a bridge to the following section.

The third trio of articles in this cluster is dedicated to national stars and cultural icons – women whose claim to fame was sealed long before their biopic treatment. In ‘Beyond the Voice of Egypt: Reclaiming Women’s Histories and Female Authorship in Shirin Neshat’s *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017)’, Marija Antic examines Shirin Neshat’s metabiopic about an Iranian woman’s struggle to direct a biopic about legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum. Through a post-colonial feminist analysis of the film, Antic explores its reclaiming of Kulthum’s stardom, ‘accented’ aesthetics, and combination of biography and authorial self-inscription. It is this innovative blending of biographical and autobiographical elements in Neshat’s biopic, Antic contends, that opens a space for alternative discourses on female authorship and gender politics in the Middle East. In ‘What’s Whitney Got to Do with It: Black Female Triumph and Tragedy in the 2015 Lifetime Biopic *Whitney*’, Jaap Kooijman considers *Whitney* (Angela Bassett, 2015), a Lifetime biopic broadcast three years after the death of pop icon Whitney Houston, as part of a larger tradition of black female entertainer biopics. By connecting bell hooks’s theories on the representation of black women in American cinema with Richard Dyer’s notion of utopian sensibilities in musicals,

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Kooijman analyses *Whitney* alongside *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972) and *What’s Love Got to Do with It* (Brian Gibson, 1993) to shed light on how these biopics negotiate the chasm between black female triumph and tragedy. The subject of Christina Schönberger-Stepien’s ‘Making Her Case: Dramatisation, Feminism, and the Law in the Ruth Bader Ginsburg Biopic *On the Basis of Sex*’ is Mimi Leder’s staunchly feminist biopic about late Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a woman famous enough to be recognized by her initials. Schönberger-Stepien’s close analysis of *On the Basis of Sex* reveals a woman’s biopic that, rather than succumbing to the common pitfall of eclipsing professional achievement by overemphasising personal relationships, is concerned with feminist activism as a multi-faceted endeavour where the domestic sphere figures, alongside Harvard and the court room, as a significant site of emancipation.

The final word is given to screenwriter Maria Hinterkörner. In ‘“The Great Scene That Never Happened” – A Screenwriter’s Techniques of Blending Fact and Fiction in Creating a Compelling Character Arc in Biopics’, Hinterkörner details the development of her screenplay *Ushba* about Austrian alpinist Cenzi von Ficker, who closely failed to be among the first mountaineers to climb the southern summit of Mount Ushba in Georgia. Hinterkörner’s article offers rare insight into the mechanics of women’s biopics from the perspective of a creative practitioner who must navigate between the aesthetic and commercial demands of an industry keen on putting ‘bums on seats’ through tried-and-tested formulas while pursuing her aspiration of ‘mattering’ a neglected herstory.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fleming Jr, Mike, ‘“Cleopatra” To Re-Team ‘Wonder Woman’s Gal Gadot & Patty Jenkins; Paramount Wins Wild Auction’, in: *Deadline* (11 October 2020), <https://deadline.com/2020/10/cleopatra-gal-gadot-patty-jenkins-movie-deal-paramount-pictures-wonder-woman-reteam-laeta-kalogridis-writing-1234595246/>, date accessed: 5 July 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Reimann, Tom, ‘Patty Jenkins Shares What “Cleopatra” Has in Common with “Wonder Woman” and “Monster”’, in: *Collider* (24 December 2020), <https://collider.com/cleopatra-patty-jenkins-wonder-woman-gal-gadot/>, date accessed: 5 July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the four Cleopatra biopics that have been released at the time of writing – the lost *Cleopatra* (J. Gordon Edwards, 1917) starring Theda Bara, *Cleopatra* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1934) starring Claudette Colbert, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (Gabriel Pascal, 1945) starring Vivien Leigh, and *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor – see Hollinger, Karen, *Biopics of Women*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020 (56-63).

<sup>4</sup> Flint, Hanna, ‘Gal Gadot as Cleopatra Is a Backwards Step for Hollywood Representation’, in: *The Guardian* (14 October 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/oct/14/gal-gadot-cleopatra-backwards-step-for-hollywood-representation>, date accessed: 5 July 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Flint; Bateman, Tom, ‘Gal Gadot’s Cleopatra Film Sparks “Whitewashing” Claims’, in: *BBC* (13 October 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54529836>, date accessed: 5 July 2021; ElGenaidi, Deena, ‘Whiteness Reigns: Our Cultural Obsession with Cleopatra’, in: *Bitch Media* (15 December 2020), <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/gal-gadot-cleopatra-history-whitewashing-egyptian-figures>, date accessed: 6 July 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Fleming Jr.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of *a body too much* has been coined by Jean-Louis Comolli to describe the tension between the body of the historical figure and the body of the actor embodying that figure in a historical film. See Comolli, Jean-Louis, ‘Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much’, in: *Screen* 19:2 (Summer 1978), 41-54.

<sup>8</sup> ElGenaidi; Fernandez, Belen, ‘Gal Gadot as Cleopatra: Hollywood Whitewashing in the ‘Woke’ Era’, in: *Middle East Eye* (18 October 2020), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/gal-gadot-cleopatra-hollywood-whitewashing-woke-era>, date accessed: 6 July 2021; Sayegh, Nadine, ‘It’s Not Gal Gadot’s Ethnicity That’s the Problem’, in: *TRT World* (14 October 2020), <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/its-not-gal-gadot-s-ethnicity-that-s-the-problem-40567>, date accessed: 6 July 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Sayegh. Cinema’s ideological role in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also evident in the more recent controversy surrounding the screening of *Let There Be Morning* (Eran Kolirin, 2021) at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival. The film was directed by Israeli filmmaker Eran Kolirin but is based on a novel by Palestinian author Sayed Kashua and stars actors who are Palestinian citizens of Israel. When festival organizers categorized the film as ‘Israeli’, the Palestinian cast boycotted the festival, publishing a statement that says: ‘Each time the film industry assumes that we and our work fall under the ethno-national label of “Israeli”, it further perpetuates an unacceptable reality that imposes on us, Palestinian artists with Israeli citizenship, an identity imposed by Zionist colonization to maintain the ongoing oppression of Palestinians inside historic Palestine; the denial of our language, history and identity’. Like Sayegh’s condemnation of Gal Gadot’s casting as Cleopatra, this statement of the Palestinian cast of *Let There Be Morning* frames cinema as a site of Zionist theft. ‘Palestinian Cast Refuses to Take Part in Cannes Film Festival over Inclusion as “Israeli Film”’, in: *Middle East Monitor* (9 July 2021), <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210709-palestinian-cast-refuses-to-take-part-in-cannes-film-festival-over-inclusion-as-israeli-film/>, date accessed: 14 July 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Custen, George F, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed History*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992 (12).

<sup>11</sup> Idem (106).

<sup>12</sup> See also the forthcoming collection by conference organisers Caitríona Ní Dhúill and Julia Lajta-Novak (eds.), *Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction*.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, Dominick, ‘Not Quite Good Enough... How Movies Like The Danish Girl Use the Trans Community’, in: *Dominick Evans* (7 January 2016), <https://www.dominickevans.com/2016/01/not-quite-good-enough-how-movies-like-the-danish-girl-use-the-trans-community/>, date accessed: 14 July 2021;

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<https://www.indiewire.com/2015/12/regressive-reductive-and-harmful-a-trans-womans-take-on-tom-hoopers-embarrassing-danish-girl-213499/>, date accessed: 13 July 2021; Lang, Nico, ‘“The Danish Girl” Hypocrisy: If You Want a Major Award for Playing a Trans Woman, Better Make Sure You’re up for Best Actor’, in: *Salon* (23 February 2016), [https://www.salon.com/2016/02/23/the\\_danish\\_girl\\_hypocrisy\\_if\\_you\\_want\\_a\\_major\\_award\\_for\\_playing\\_a\\_trans\\_woman\\_better\\_make\\_sure\\_youre\\_up\\_for\\_best\\_actor/](https://www.salon.com/2016/02/23/the_danish_girl_hypocrisy_if_you_want_a_major_award_for_playing_a_trans_woman_better_make_sure_youre_up_for_best_actor/), date accessed: 13 July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> While not dismissing the medium-specific differences between biographical film and television series, the editors have chosen to extend ‘biopic’ to biographical television drama to acknowledge the relevance of previous biopic scholarship to television formats and also account for the convergence between cinema and television. Netflix films like the Hermann J. Mankiewicz biopic *Mank* (David Fincher, 2020), which was a contender for the Best Picture Academy Award but only released on Netflix (aside from a very limited, Academy Award-qualifying theatrical run in the United States), trouble traditional boundaries between cinema and television. So do so-called ‘quality television’ shows like

*The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), which remediate cinematic conventions, such as high production budgets, spectacular visual effects, and star casts, in a serial format. Another case in point is the biographical series *Fosse/Verdon* (2019), where musical duo Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon are played by Sam Rockwell (a recent Academy Award winner) and Michelle Williams (a four-time Academy Award nominee, including for her role as Marilyn Monroe in Simon Curtis’s 2011 biopic *My Week with Marilyn*), respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Custen (6).

<sup>16</sup> *Idem* (7).

<sup>17</sup> *Idem* (29, 103).

<sup>18</sup> *Idem* (66, 103).

<sup>19</sup> Bingham (17-18).

<sup>20</sup> Bingham, Dennis, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010 (10).

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Heilbrun, Carolyn G, *Writing a Woman’s Life*. London: The Women’s Press, 1989; Wagner-Martin, Linda, *Telling Women’s Lives: The New Biography*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Vidal, Belén, ‘Introduction: The Biopic and Its Critical Contexts’, in: Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds.), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, London: Routledge, 2014, 1-32 (4).

<sup>23</sup> See Cook, Pam, ‘History in the Making: Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* and the New Auteurism’, in: Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds.), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, London: Routledge, 2014, 212-226.

<sup>24</sup> See Vincendeau, Ginette, ‘Chanel on Screen: Female Biopics in the Age of Global Branding’, in: Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds.), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, London: Routledge, 2014, 176-194.

<sup>25</sup> Vidal, ‘Introduction’ (7).

<sup>26</sup> Polaschek, Bronwyn, *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (4).

<sup>27</sup> Hollinger (4).

<sup>28</sup> Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 (121-127).

<sup>29</sup> Andrews, Hannah, *Biographical Television Drama: Real Lives on Television*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Bingham (13). His words echo Steve Neale’s previous remarks on the biopic’s lack of esteem: ‘The target of historians and of film critics and theorists alike, it has been the butt of jokes rather more often than it has been the focus of serious analysis’. Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000 (54).

<sup>31</sup> Custen (13).

<sup>32</sup> Bingham (10, 17-18).

<sup>33</sup> Hollinger (26).

<sup>34</sup> Landsberg, Alison, *Engaging the Past. Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015 (18).

<sup>35</sup> Johnston, Harriet, ‘Clarence House Turn OFF Comments on Twitter Post About Camilla’s Charity Work as She Faces Barrage of Hate After *The Crown* Portrayed Her and Prince Charles Having an Affair Throughout His Marriage to Princess Diana’, in: *Daily Mail* (25 November 2020), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-8985299/Prince-Charles-Camillas-Twitter-account-turns-comments-latest-post.html>, date accessed: 6 July 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Gunning, Tom, ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator’, in: Linda Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995, 114-133 (117).