

**The Musical Biopic:
Representing the Lives of Music Artists in
21st Century Cinema**

Penelope Spirou
BA (Hons)
University of New South Wales

A thesis submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of
Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies
Macquarie University
April 2011

DECLARATION

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *The Musical Biopic: Representing the Lives of Music Artists in 21st Century Cinema* has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Penelope Spirou

Student Number: 41289137

Date: April 2011

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the contemporary musical biopic (biographical film) examining theatrically released feature films from the years 2004 to 2007. Focusing on selected case studies, each chapter discusses the representation of actual musical artists including musicians, composers and singers. The musical biopics; *El Cantante* (2006), *Control* (2007), *Beyond the Sea* (2004), *De-Lovely* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005), *Ray* (2004) and *I'm Not There* (2007) are analysed in depth. This thesis examines the text (the film itself) and context of the musical biopic. Through consideration of media representations of the respective music artists portrayed, the filmmakers and cast, significant factors are discussed including the omission and inclusion of certain biographical details, star/celebrity identities and cinematic elements such as visual imagery, narrative and musical integration; which shape the public perception of the persona.

The musical biopic demonstrates that biography is a subjective interpretation of a life history. There can be no 'truth' or accurate re-telling of an actual life narrative. The contemporary musical biopic represents the public memory of the popular musical artist through exploring their various public/private identities, while focusing on a certain attribute or persona. The filmmaker unavoidably conveys a biased perspective of the protagonist, effectively re-interpreting and re-representing media sources. Through unique styles of depiction in musical integration, audio-visual representation, storyline and narrative, the contemporary musical biopic attempts to present an exclusive view of the popular music artist. Hence, the contemporary musical biopic re-mythologises the music artist, creating a fabricated account of a life history.

Contributing predominantly to the discipline of film studies, this thesis is also significant to the areas of popular music studies, screen sound, biography and cultural studies. This thesis will draw attention to the undervalued scholarly study of the biopic, establishing new analytical tropes for further development in the field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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On a more personal note I would like to thank my immediate family: My mum Maria, my dad Steven and my brother George. I appreciate your love and support, not only through my PhD candidature but also through my life. I love you all very much and couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for your patience, your generosity, your time and space and for always being there whenever I needed someone to talk to.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the absolute love of my life, my future husband, Greg Lancaster. Words cannot express how I feel about you and how amazing you are. Without sounding too soppy, I love you with all my heart and thank you for being so darn perfect.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary biographical film termed ‘biopic’¹ (a feature film based on or inspired by an actual person) has been a popular genre of film to produce and consume, confirmed through box office revenue and industry recognition. Since 2000 (and often in the decades preceding) biopics were nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture almost every year. These films include *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Pianist* (2002), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Hours* (2002), *Seabiscuit* (2003), *The Aviator* (2004), *Finding Neverland* (2004), *Ray* (2004), *Capote* (2005), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *Munich* (2005), *The Queen* (2006), *Frost/Nixon* (2008), *Milk* (2008) and *The Blind Side* (2009). According to *Box Office Mojo*² since 1978 the top 34 musical biopics (a feature film based on or inspired by an actual music artist) have combined box office revenue of over \$724 million. Of these, *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are the top two in box office rankings (over \$119 million and \$75 million, respectively) and are the two musical biopics discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. The remaining films that are analysed in this thesis are *De-Lovely* (over \$13 million revenue), *El Cantante* (\$7.5 million revenue), *Beyond the Sea* (over \$6 million revenue), *I’m Not There* (\$4 million revenue) and *Control* (\$872,252 revenue).³ To further exemplify the biopic’s popularity, The Internet Movie Database (*IMDb*) suggests there are over 12 Hollywood biopics currently in development to be released between 2011 and 2013. There are rumours in the industry of negotiations for musical biopics of Janis Joplin,⁴ Freddy Mercury,⁵ Kurt Cobain⁶ and Frank Sinatra.⁷

¹ The term ‘biopic’, readily used in contemporary media, was arguably coined by *Variety* magazine. It now appears on the list of unique words they deem ‘slanguage’ (<http://www.variety.com/static-pages/slanguagedictionary/>, accessed 31 December 2010). Although it is unknown when ‘biopic’ was first used, it is estimated to have been published in 1951 (the current editors “don’t recall” in a 1998 interview, <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/aug/23/entertainment/ca-15628/3>, accessed 31 December 2010).

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⁵ Sacha Baron Cohen has signed to play Mercury in a musical biopic that will be produced by Robert De Niro’s Tribeca Productions (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni4373824/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/51942/218987>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁶ Courtney Love has agreed to the musical biopic of her late-husband, Cobain, on the provision she has a substantial amount of creative control (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni2043657/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.spin.com/articles/kurt-cobain-biopic-moves-forward>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁷ Martin Scorsese intends to direct a Sinatra music biopic and is considering Al Pacino for the starring role alongside Robert De Niro as Dean Martin (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni2575806/>, accessed 27 October 2010).

Even though the popularity and public value of the biopic (and musical biopic) is justified above, the study of the (musical) biopic is incredibly undervalued in scholarly analysis.⁸ Its primary function is the representation of the (musical) star identity. The seminal work of Richard Dyer (1979, 2004) will be discussed at length in this thesis as stars (both the music artist portrayed and actors cast in the musical biopic) are of great importance when interpreting and understanding film. Only two book-length studies of the biopic have been published and no equivalent study of the musical biopic has been accomplished at the time of writing. George F. Custen set the groundwork for the study of the biopic, analysing the state of the biopic in the Hollywood studio era in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992). In *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, Dennis Bingham states:

the biopic is an endlessly fascinating genre. Even its neglect raises issues about the values and preferences of scholars and journalists who dismiss the importance of the genre, as compared to the continued enthusiasm for biopics shown by the film artists who keep making them (2010: 27).

This thesis will confirm the contemporary musical biopic as a valid area of scholarly study. The following study will analyse how these films represent the life of the music artist, shaping the public perception of these stars.

This first chapter of the thesis will provide an overview of biography from its early forms in literature to its appearance in newer media such as television and cinema. This chapter will contextualise and frame the musical biopic as it stems from a history of biographical writing, commonly referred to as 'life narrative'. As the musical biopic will be framed in terms of the musical film genre, the work of Rick Altman (1987, 1992, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2004) and Jane Feuer (1977, 1982, 1986, 2002, 2004) will be applied. Analysis of the contemporary musical

and <http://www.billboard.com/news/scorsese-to-direct-frank-sinatra-biopic-1003972860.story#/news/scorsese-to-direct-frank-sinatra-biopic-1003972860.story>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁸ The literature review and methodology of this thesis (Chapter One) will define the relative properties of the biopic and musical biopic, differentiating between the two terms.

biopic will be presented in the form of case studies divided into four analytical chapters. In postmodern and post-structural critical theory Philip Smith asserts that “Attention is given to the local. This encourages the study of specific research sites and issues rather than sweeping general theories” (2001a: 246). Hence the following thesis will examine films on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to generalising large groups of musical biopics, akin to the methodology adopted by Bingham (2010: 22). Instead of providing general claims on the state of the musical biopic, it will be suggested that the genre is constantly evolving. The following thesis will address the 21st Century musical biopic in reference to previous eras including the Hollywood studio era. David Bordwell argues that “despite the diversity that American movies have displayed since 1960, nearly all of them depend on storytelling principles established in the studio era” (2006: 21). Hollywood films (and others internationally) have remained formulaic in narrative approach, appealing to genre conventions. Custen (1992, 2000, 2001) has covered studio era biopics effectively and his findings will be utilised throughout this thesis. Comparisons will be drawn between these eras as there are similarities and differences in narrative structures of the musical biopic through time.

The methodology of this thesis is an analysis of the audio-visual representation of the music artist in the musical biopic. The analysis will involve discussions surrounding various media representations of the artist as these musical biopics are highly intertextual. The first analytical chapter of this thesis discusses the films’ focus on personal perspectives of the musical individual, drawing upon *El Cantante* (2007) and *Control* (2007), narrated through the perspective of the long-term partner (the wife, in both films). The second and third analytical chapters deal with genre, history and the self-reflexive musical biopic in reference to *Beyond the Sea* (2004) and *De-Lovely* (2004) in Chapter Three and *Walk the Line* (2005) and *Ray* (2004) in Chapter Four. *Ray* and *Walk the Line* seek to represent the various identities of the music artist and reinforce the subjectivity inherent in presenting a version of their life story. The fifth chapter discusses self-reflexivity and the future of the musical biopic in an analysis of *I’m Not There* (2007). This final chapter will discuss certain musical biopics that are targeted at the fan of the musical individual and depart from classical Hollywood narrative structure. Classical narrative includes the element of closure, as Bordwell suggests:

The fundamental premise of the classical model is that the narrative must cohere. All questions asked in the course of the narrative must be answered by the end; all events

must take their course; nothing may be introduced that will not contribute to the narrative's denouement (1981: 25).

This is commonly referred to as 'cause and effect'. Although many contemporary musical biopics maintain this classic structure, some purposefully steer away in order to self-reference: an idea explored in more detail in the context of the musical film genre.

Finally, the concluding portion of this thesis will focus on the production and reception of the musical biopic. A summary of the relationship between narrative and musical elements will be discussed and how they assist the film audience to assess and (re)construct the music star's identity. The function of the musical biopic is primarily for entertainment; however, it is also an important way of preserving the music artist in history. Even though the contemporary musical biopic often re-represents biographical detail relating to the music artist, these films remain a significant and compelling area of academic study as they offer new insights into the various identities of the protagonist. The contemporary musical biopic is a culmination and interpretation of all previous representations of the music artist, reflecting and constructing how the media and audiences interpret the individual.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the contemporary musical biopic (biographical film) examining theatrically released feature films from the years 2004 to 2007. Focusing on selected case studies, each chapter discusses the representation of actual musical artists including musicians, composers and singers. The musical biopics; *El Cantante* (2006), *Control* (2007), *Beyond the Sea* (2004), *De-Lovely* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005), *Ray* (2004) and *I'm Not There* (2007) are analysed in depth. This thesis examines the text (the film itself) and context of the musical biopic. Through consideration of media representations of the respective music artists portrayed, the filmmakers and cast, significant factors are discussed including the omission and inclusion of certain biographical details, star/celebrity identities and cinematic elements such as visual imagery, narrative and musical integration; which shape the public perception of the persona.

The musical biopic demonstrates that biography is a subjective interpretation of a life history. There can be no 'truth' or accurate re-telling of an actual life narrative. The contemporary musical biopic represents the public memory of the popular musical artist through exploring their various public/private identities, while focusing on a certain attribute or persona. The filmmaker unavoidably conveys a biased perspective of the protagonist, effectively re-interpreting and re-representing media sources. Through unique styles of depiction in musical integration, audio-visual representation, storyline and narrative, the contemporary musical biopic attempts to present an exclusive view of the popular music artist. Hence, the contemporary musical biopic re-mythologises the music artist, creating a fabricated account of a life history.

Contributing predominantly to the discipline of film studies, this thesis is also significant to the areas of popular music studies, screen sound, biography and cultural studies. This thesis will draw attention to the undervalued scholarly study of the biopic, establishing new analytical tropes for further development in the field.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary biographical film termed ‘biopic’¹ (a feature film based on or inspired by an actual person) has been a popular genre of film to produce and consume, confirmed through box office revenue and industry recognition. Since 2000 (and often in the decades preceding) biopics were nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture almost every year. These films include *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Pianist* (2002), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Hours* (2002), *Seabiscuit* (2003), *The Aviator* (2004), *Finding Neverland* (2004), *Ray* (2004), *Capote* (2005), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *Munich* (2005), *The Queen* (2006), *Frost/Nixon* (2008), *Milk* (2008) and *The Blind Side* (2009). According to *Box Office Mojo*² since 1978 the top 34 musical biopics (a feature film based on or inspired by an actual music artist) have combined box office revenue of over \$724 million. Of these, *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are the top two in box office rankings (over \$119 million and \$75 million, respectively) and are the two musical biopics discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. The remaining films that are analysed in this thesis are *De-Lovely* (over \$13 million revenue), *El Cantante* (\$7.5 million revenue), *Beyond the Sea* (over \$6 million revenue), *I’m Not There* (\$4 million revenue) and *Control* (\$872,252 revenue).³ To further exemplify the biopic’s popularity, The Internet Movie Database (*IMDb*) suggests there are over 12 Hollywood biopics currently in development to be released between 2011 and 2013. There are rumours in the industry of negotiations for musical biopics of Janis Joplin,⁴ Freddy Mercury,⁵ Kurt Cobain⁶ and Frank Sinatra.⁷

¹ The term ‘biopic’, readily used in contemporary media, was arguably coined by *Variety* magazine. It now appears on the list of unique words they deem ‘slanguage’ (<http://www.variety.com/static-pages/slanguagedictionary/>, accessed 31 December 2010). Although it is unknown when ‘biopic’ was first used, it is estimated to have been published in 1951 (the current editors “don’t recall” in a 1998 interview, <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/aug/23/entertainment/ca-15628/3>, accessed 31 December 2010).

² <http://boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=musicbio.htm>, accessed 27 October 2010.

³ All figures are total lifetime domestic gross.

⁴ Amy Adams is confirmed to play the role of Joplin in a musical biopic directed by Fernando Meirelles (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni3334637/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/aug/07/janis-joplin-biopic>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁵ Sacha Baron Cohen has signed to play Mercury in a musical biopic that will be produced by Robert De Niro’s Tribeca Productions (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni4373824/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/51942/218987>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁶ Courtney Love has agreed to the musical biopic of her late-husband, Cobain, on the provision she has a substantial amount of creative control (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni2043657/>, accessed 27 October 2010 and <http://www.spin.com/articles/kurt-cobain-biopic-moves-forward>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁷ Martin Scorsese intends to direct a Sinatra music biopic and is considering Al Pacino for the starring role alongside Robert De Niro as Dean Martin (<http://www.imdb.com/news/ni2575806/>, accessed 27 October 2010).

Even though the popularity and public value of the biopic (and musical biopic) is justified above, the study of the (musical) biopic is incredibly undervalued in scholarly analysis.⁸ Its primary function is the representation of the (musical) star identity. The seminal work of Richard Dyer (1979, 2004) will be discussed at length in this thesis as stars (both the music artist portrayed and actors cast in the musical biopic) are of great importance when interpreting and understanding film. Only two book-length studies of the biopic have been published and no equivalent study of the musical biopic has been accomplished at the time of writing. George F. Custen set the groundwork for the study of the biopic, analysing the state of the biopic in the Hollywood studio era in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992). In *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, Dennis Bingham states:

the biopic is an endlessly fascinating genre. Even its neglect raises issues about the values and preferences of scholars and journalists who dismiss the importance of the genre, as compared to the continued enthusiasm for biopics shown by the film artists who keep making them (2010: 27).

This thesis will confirm the contemporary musical biopic as a valid area of scholarly study. The following study will analyse how these films represent the life of the music artist, shaping the public perception of these stars.

This first chapter of the thesis will provide an overview of biography from its early forms in literature to its appearance in newer media such as television and cinema. This chapter will contextualise and frame the musical biopic as it stems from a history of biographical writing, commonly referred to as 'life narrative'. As the musical biopic will be framed in terms of the musical film genre, the work of Rick Altman (1987, 1992, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2004) and Jane Feuer (1977, 1982, 1986, 2002, 2004) will be applied. Analysis of the contemporary musical

and <http://www.billboard.com/news/scorsese-to-direct-frank-sinatra-biopic-1003972860.story#/news/scorsese-to-direct-frank-sinatra-biopic-1003972860.story>, accessed 7 December 2010).

⁸ The literature review and methodology of this thesis (Chapter One) will define the relative properties of the biopic and musical biopic, differentiating between the two terms.

biopic will be presented in the form of case studies divided into four analytical chapters. In postmodern and post-structural critical theory Philip Smith asserts that “Attention is given to the local. This encourages the study of specific research sites and issues rather than sweeping general theories” (2001a: 246). Hence the following thesis will examine films on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to generalising large groups of musical biopics, akin to the methodology adopted by Bingham (2010: 22). Instead of providing general claims on the state of the musical biopic, it will be suggested that the genre is constantly evolving. The following thesis will address the 21st Century musical biopic in reference to previous eras including the Hollywood studio era. David Bordwell argues that “despite the diversity that American movies have displayed since 1960, nearly all of them depend on storytelling principles established in the studio era” (2006: 21). Hollywood films (and others internationally) have remained formulaic in narrative approach, appealing to genre conventions. Custen (1992, 2000, 2001) has covered studio era biopics effectively and his findings will be utilised throughout this thesis. Comparisons will be drawn between these eras as there are similarities and differences in narrative structures of the musical biopic through time.

The methodology of this thesis is an analysis of the audio-visual representation of the music artist in the musical biopic. The analysis will involve discussions surrounding various media representations of the artist as these musical biopics are highly intertextual. The first analytical chapter of this thesis discusses the films’ focus on personal perspectives of the musical individual, drawing upon *El Cantante* (2007) and *Control* (2007), narrated through the perspective of the long-term partner (the wife, in both films). The second and third analytical chapters deal with genre, history and the self-reflexive musical biopic in reference to *Beyond the Sea* (2004) and *De-Lovely* (2004) in Chapter Three and *Walk the Line* (2005) and *Ray* (2004) in Chapter Four. *Ray* and *Walk the Line* seek to represent the various identities of the music artist and reinforce the subjectivity inherent in presenting a version of their life story. The fifth chapter discusses self-reflexivity and the future of the musical biopic in an analysis of *I’m Not There* (2007). This final chapter will discuss certain musical biopics that are targeted at the fan of the musical individual and depart from classical Hollywood narrative structure. Classical narrative includes the element of closure, as Bordwell suggests:

The fundamental premise of the classical model is that the narrative must cohere. All questions asked in the course of the narrative must be answered by the end; all events

must take their course; nothing may be introduced that will not contribute to the narrative's denouement (1981: 25).

This is commonly referred to as 'cause and effect'. Although many contemporary musical biopics maintain this classic structure, some purposefully steer away in order to self-reference: an idea explored in more detail in the context of the musical film genre.

Finally, the concluding portion of this thesis will focus on the production and reception of the musical biopic. A summary of the relationship between narrative and musical elements will be discussed and how they assist the film audience to assess and (re)construct the music star's identity. The function of the musical biopic is primarily for entertainment; however, it is also an important way of preserving the music artist in history. Even though the contemporary musical biopic often re-represents biographical detail relating to the music artist, these films remain a significant and compelling area of academic study as they offer new insights into the various identities of the protagonist. The contemporary musical biopic is a culmination and interpretation of all previous representations of the music artist, reflecting and constructing how the media and audiences interpret the individual.