

(I) The Prague School in the Contemporary Context

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## Conceptualizing the Hollywood Biopic

Despite the allegedly minor status of the genre, a very high number of Oscars have gone to actors and actresses engaged in biopic performances in recent years.<sup>1</sup> These biographical reenactments are regarded as the highest exercise of acting virtuosity according to the aesthetic norms validated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Since 1998, at least one of the four Oscars for acting, in leading or supporting roles, has been awarded to a biopic performance. Even more significant is the fact that, since 2000, up to 38 biopic performances have been nominated for Best Actor and Actress, and of those, fifteen of them have won an Oscar. And between 2000 and 2011, Bob Fischbach estimates, “65 of the 220 acting nominations honored depictions of actual people” (FISCHBACH 2011). The list of actors and actresses who recently received the Oscar after interpreting biopics is extensive. Examples of these awards for performance of an actor in a leading role range from Jamie Foxx (*Ray*, 2004) and Philip Seymour Hoffman (*Capote*, 2005) to Colin Firth (*The King’s Speech*, 2011) and Daniel Day-Lewis (*Lincoln*, 2012). Julia Roberts was awarded the Oscar in 2000 for becoming the iconic lawyer Erin Brockovich – her padded bra being a crucial aspect of her ‘earthly’ impersonation – and biopic performances were so popular in the past decade that they monopolized the category of Best Actress in Leading Role for three consecutive years between 2005 and 2007: the otherwise forgettable actress Reese Witherspoon obtained the award for interpreting Johnny Cash’s wife June Carter in *Walk the Line*; a year later, Helen Mirren was recognized for transforming herself into Queen Elizabeth II in *The Queen*; and in 2007 the Oscar went to a French actress for the first time in history,

1 I want to acknowledge the support of the Charles Phelps Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati.

after Marion Cotillard became Édith Piaf in *La Vie en Rose*. In this paper I approach contemporary biopic fever from two different but complementary theoretical perspectives: the Prague School research on acting and Lubomír Doležel's theory of fictional worlds.

The concept of *herecká postava* (literally 'figure of the actor,' but frequently translated into English as 'stage figure') was first formulated by Otakar Zich in his *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (1931). Instead of adopting the dichotomy actor/character as equivalent to Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, Zich developed a tripartite model by adding the intermediary concept of the stage figure. Jiří Veltruský applied this concept for the first time in his essay "Man and Object in the Theatre" (1940), pointing out that the stage figure inevitably contains traces of the actor's physicality, even if that is not the actor's or the director's intended purpose. Paraphrasing Zich and Veltruský, the stage figure is the product of the actor's technical work - the visual and acoustic signs that the actor presents to the audience - while the dramatic character is the result of the phenomenological operation that corresponds to the spectators.<sup>2</sup> These three elements (actor-stage figure-character) do not follow one another in simple lineal succession since they are to be understood as the result of perceptual accumulation. Mukařovský applied Edmund Husserl's phenomenological stance to the study of literature and art in "On Poetic Language", published in *Slovo a slovenost* in 1940 (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1976: 51) and an essay recently revisited by Emil Volek precisely in his discussion of Zich's theatrolgy (VOLEK 2012).

If the biopic "dares a spectator to compare the authenticity of its performers to the actuality" (BINGHAM 2010a: 82), then we must account for an outside world previous to the artwork and whose factual presence becomes the gold standard to interpret the success or failure of a specific acting work. The events portrayed on the screen are to be perceived as re-enactments of real events<sup>3</sup> lived by well known historical figures (how Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood*, how Margaret Thatcher ruled the United Kingdom, and so on). Be-

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2 I argue that the triad actor-stage figure-character can be transferred from drama to film despite the obvious fact that theatre is a live art while film necessarily relies on technological mediation. The fact that the actors are not really 'there' when we are in the cinema does not invalidate this application. I am following Jon Erickson who, in an essay on the concept of "presence" (performative charisma, in very simple terms), and before drawing from such examples as Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* and Alanis Morissette's music video "Head over Feet," makes the following statement: "I do think that the experience of presence as a characteristic of a performer or individual is limited to co-present 'live' performance, and thus the argument for mediatization or technical reproduction does not affect my characterization of it... One can detect an individual's presence on film and in television. In fact, an accomplished film actor can easily elicit more of a sense of presence than an unaccomplished live actor. Presence, or at least the presence shown in what one sees transpire, has to do with the being-present of the performer-actor to the material at the moment the performer is captured on tape, film, or digital system" (ERICKSON 2006: 148).

3 I am aware that there is always a *story* behind every *history*. Teleological narratives of history have been extensively criticized by postmodern thinkers. However, the impossibility of a totally neutral or objective historical narration does not imply the non-existence of some sort of consensual truth, a notion I embrace here, after Jürgen Habermas' "pragmatic epistemological realism" (HABERMAS 2003), to contest postmodern epistemological skepticism. For the particular goals of this article, I refer to a real or empirical world that can be easily reconstructed, for example, when we assemble the hundreds of visual and oral documents around such historical figures as Truman Capote and Elizabeth II.

cause the crucial element of judgment is the truth of a certain sequence of events on the screen, this reality that is 'out there' has to be recreated according to a strictly mimetic logic. To put it briefly, spectators will judge the copy in relation to a preexisting original.

As noted earlier, 38 biopic performances have been nominated for Best Actor and Actress, and 15 of them have won the Award, since the year 2000. Angelina Jolie, to name an acting celebrity, obtained her only nomination for Actress in a Leading Role for her work in Clint Eastwood's *Changeling*, in 2008. In this biopic of a real event that happened in 1928, Angelina Jolie played the role of a mother who struggles to reunite with her missing son, only to realize later that he is an impostor. As irrefutable evidence of the authenticity of this film, the scriptwriter J. Michael Straczynski claimed that 95% of his script has come out of the 6,000 pages of documentation he had collected. "It's all a true story. Every bit of it," he explained in an interview with *Time's* Gilberto Cruz (2008). Jolie's public persona was also a central element in her obtaining public recognition, to the extent that, in the introductory speeches to the Best Actress Award, presenter Nicole Kidman praised her for being a "brave woman" and "brave mother" (81st Academy Awards 2009). One year after *Changeling* we can find another interesting example in Sandra Bullock, an actress only known for action movies and average comedies before committing to *The Blind Side* (2009), a film promoted as "based on an extraordinary true story." Indeed, the 82nd Academy Awards ceremony, held in 2010, constituted the peak of the biopic fever in Hollywood to date. Four of the five nominated actresses interpreted real life roles: Sandra Bullock (Leigh Anne Tuohy, *The Blind Side*), Helen Mirren (Sofya Tolstoy, *The Last Station*), Carey Mulligan (Jenny Mellor, *An Education*), and Meryl Streep (Julia Child, *Julie & Julia*).

A typical response to the biopic is Estefan Ellison's praise of Philip Seymour Hoffman's acting work in *Capote*: "The entire film is brilliant from Bennett Miller's direction to Dan Futterman's script. However, the centre of the whole set piece has to be Philip Seymour Hoffman's spectacular portrayal of Truman Capote. He manages to get the voice of the famed author, but also the mannerisms. In essence, he becomes Truman Capote." (ELLISON 2005) In recent years, as Guy Lodge notes, the Academy Awards have gone to performances that have been "ostentatiously advertising their 'degree of difficulty'" (LODGE 2012). The American mainstream film industry has therefore embraced the concept of acting as transformation that the Russian ethnographer Petr Bogatyrev developed in dialogue with the Prague School in the interwar years, an idea that he had derived from his research on folkloristic forms in Central and Eastern Europe. One may wonder if the impersonations so celebrated by Hollywood are the closest we can get to an aura in today's cinematic art, some sort of magical leftover not too different to what Bogatyrev observed in folkloric rituals (JAKOBSON 1976). The way Hollywood understands the idea of transformation is literal, since the highest aesthetic value is allocated in the reproduction of physical and vocal mannerisms of the person to be impersonated. In this context, the use of prosthetic makeup is not only accepted but converted into a central element carrying the value later assigned to the acting work. A good example of this practice is the out of proportion fake

nose that made Nicole Kidman almost unrecognizable in her Oscar-winning role of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (2002). Translating the contemporary phenomenon of the biopic revival to the terminology of Zich and Veltruský, the biopic formula consists in constructing a stage figure as faithful to the original model as possible. The viewer's attention focuses on the assimilation of the actor's body to the stage figure, while the third phase, that of the character formation, is secondary, or even non-existent in the case of biopics that present themselves as dramatized documentaries. In this last case, if the viewer is simply facing 'virtual' reconstructions of real people, one can question if the concept of fictional character is present at all here.

Theories of fictionality and fictional worlds offer us a second angle from which to tackle Hollywood's contemporary industry of the biopic. Among the first-generation of Czech Structuralists, only Mukařovský discussed the issue of referentiality, albeit not in great detail. As Lubomír Doležel notes, Mukařovský "accepted the concept of poetic reference but relegated it to the margin of poetics" (DOLEŽEL 1990: 165). In "Art as a Semiotic Fact" for example, Mukařovský referred to a universal or "infinite" reality composed of "the total context of so-called social phenomena – for example, philosophy, politics, religion, economy, etc." (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1978: 84). In order to accommodate the aesthetic function to the threefold linguistic model designed by Karl Bühler (PÉREZ-SIMÓN 2011: 5-7), Mukařovský dispensed with the question of referentiality in poetic language, and then distinguished poetic from standard/communicative language. This idea of "total context," later theorized by Felix Vodička<sup>4</sup> as "context of the external world" (SLÁDEK 2006: 212), would be the closest version of the concept that Frege and Doležel define as reference. However, Doležel explains, "the domination of Saussurean nonreferential semantics prevented [the Prague scholars] from appreciating the importance of the reference relation which links literature to the world" (DOLEŽEL 1990: 167).

Mukařovský's take on fictionality participates in one-world theories, which consider the existence of only domain of reference, the actual world, and two languages: the cognitive-referential, subject to the proof of truth; and poetic language, which denotes entities but has no reference (DOLEŽEL 1998: 2). Models containing one fictional world and two languages rely on the distinction established by the German logician and philosopher Gottlob Frege, who separated sense (*Sinn*) from reference (*Bedeutung*), to eventually establish that poetic language (*Dichtung*) lacks reference and, in consequence, truth-value. Saussure's semiology became the historical link that made possible the adaptation from Frege's logical semantics to the interartistic semiotic agenda of the Prague School, in particular Saussure's take on the conventionality of the pair signifier–signified. After Saussure, it was possible to define sense independently of reference since the signifier was assigned a sense by convention (DOLEŽEL 1998: 5). Because the Swiss linguist focused on this internal antinomy of

4 In *Occidental Poetics*, Doležel observes that Vodička "is consistent in using the phrase construction of a world... which indicates his deep conviction about the autonomy of literature. This 'nonmimetic' position is consistent with the general conception of the 'extra-literary' world as providing material, rather than a model for literary worlds, a conception which Vodička shares with the formalists and with Mukařovský" (DOLEŽEL 1990: 118).

the sign, without paying attention to the axis that connects the work and the referential world, he ended up producing a set of “theories of poeticity, not of fictionality” (DOLEŽEL 1998: 5).

Doležel maintains that fictional worlds have both sense and reference, unlike Frege, who postulated the impossibility of referentiality in art, as noted above. Of special interest for the purposes of the present essay is the Fregian description of acting as a practice devoid of sense (truth), what John L. Austin would call a discourse without illocutionary force half a century later. Frege observed that it would be convenient “to have a special term for signs which have to have sense only. If we call them, say, images [*Bilder*], then the words of an actor of the stage would be images; indeed, the actor himself would be an image” (FREGE in DOLEŽEL 1990: 91). In his late writings, Frege returned once again to the idea that “a stage thunder is only apparent thunder and a stage fight only an apparent fight” (FREGE in DOLEŽEL 1990: 94). Of course, this notion of acting can be easily disputed with multiple examples from physical theatre, but the reason why I bring it into discussion is to contrast Frege’s one-world logic against Doležel’s theory of multiple, self-sufficient fictional worlds in the context of acting. On the one hand, Frege neglects the question of referentiality in acting by confining it to some abstract space that produces only sense. On the other, Doležel proposes a general theory of fictional worlds in order to challenge “mimetic readings” of art. He defines “mimetic reading” as converting,

fictional persons into live people, imaginary settings into actual places, invented stories into real-life happenings [...] one of the most reductive operations of which the human mind is capable: the vast, open, and inviting fictional universe is shrunk to the model of one single world, actual human experience. (DOLEŽEL 1998: x).

None of these two approaches, however, renders a complete explanation of the contemporary biopic. Frege’s take seems insufficient because referentiality plays a key role in the perceiver’s evaluation of each biopic film; also, the viewers’ response operates within the strict confines of the mimetic paradigm that Doležel rejects.

While Doležel’s theory of fictional worlds postulates that fictional characters enjoy their own status of “nonactualized possibles” (DOLEŽEL 1998: 16-7), my view is that the logic behind such cultural artifacts as *Capote* and *The Queen* consists in subjecting the artwork to the parameters of a world that is experienced not as possible but as historical (real). According to Doležel, a hybrid world containing both fictional and fictionalized characters cannot qualify as historical. The Czech theorist makes this clear in his recent book *Possible Worlds in Fiction and History*: “A possible world in which counterparts of historical persons cohabit, interact, and communicate with fictional persons is not a historical world.” (DOLEŽEL 2010: 36) This is because of the irreconcilable logic governing both worlds, for while fictional discourses can “alter all, even the basic, individuating properties of the actual-past persons when transposing them into a fictional world” (DOLEŽEL 2010: 36),

historical constructions are necessarily “constrained by the requirement of truth valuation” (DOLEŽEL 2010: 42). I will not claim that biopic films do not contain newly created dialogues or scenes, nor fictional characters that were invented for artistic purposes and thus do not correspond with historical counterparts. Yet I argue that despite the hybrid condition (historical-fictional) of the biopic, something that would automatically cancel its truth condition according to Doležel, this film genre is perceived in referential terms and evaluated precisely in light of its adequacy to an empirical world – the more faithful the recreation, the more artistic the film is.

There are in fact multiple elements that ‘anchor’ biopic performances to historical figures and events against which they are to be measured (exhaustive duplication of scenes immortalized in famous photographs or videos, accents, hairstyles, costumes, etc.). Doležel defines fictionality as “primarily a semantic phenomenon” (DOLEŽEL 1998: 2) but in the case of acting, and more specifically in the biopic film, my take is that the aspects of pragmatic nature are the ones dominant. This means that the visual and auditory signs that the actors create are highly dependable on a particular context of production and reception, and in the particular case of Hollywood productions I distinguish two main lines of flight: first, from the point of view of artistic language, naturalism is still regarded as synonymous with truth (Stanislavsky still well alive, in view of the relevance of the idea of a physical and psychological transformation that the actor experiences); second, there is a strong ideological foundation that makes biopic films recognizable (and enjoyable) by millions of spectators in the Western world, as titles such as *Erin Brockovich* and *The Blind Side* perpetuate and reinforce certain ‘mythical’ ideas we identify with Western democracy (social mobility no matter gender or race, the individual’s ability to challenge unfair practice by heartless corporations, and so on), this constituting the ultimate pleasure we can find in imitation.

To conclude: it is by bringing the attention to a varied group of pragmatic elements surrounding the production and reception of the biopic film today that I propose a partial revision of Doležel’s theory of fictional worlds, one that is semantic at its core. It is surprising the extent to which contemporary theorists of drama and film have neglected the relevance of this massive and well orchestrated branch of the Hollywood industry, while privileging postmodern historical fiction that engages in a playful and often inconsequential rewriting of the past (Hitler is killed by American soldiers in Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Bastards*, etc.) as the only filmic art that can be ‘relevant’ in today’s society. The biopic may mean profits for producers, prestige for actors, and pleasure for audiences, respectively, but it falls outside the interests of scholars of film studies and self-declared experts in popular culture, with the few exceptions that have appeared in this essay.

## Epilogue: Good copies, bad copies<sup>5</sup>

Our age of simulacra, Jean Baudrillard argues, cannot be explained in terms of original vs. copy, for now images weightlessly float in a space of hyperreality open to potentially infinite syntagmatic connections in the absence of a final reference. Andy Warhol's photographic sequences have been often described as the epitome of an era in which autonomous artworks stand for nothing but themselves. Dennis Bingham relates the biopic to the postmodern episteme when he asserts that it is "no accident that the biopic performance would reach a point of perfection in the postmodern world when the simulacrum, the synthesis, becomes the standard" (BINGHAM 2010a: 78–9). My claim is the opposite: that Hollywood has privileged the copy over the simulacrum in a very Platonic fashion. If film scholars have silenced this massive industry it is in great part because the biopic resists the straightjacket of the postmodern rhetoric of the simulacrum while generating a reality effect that is very different to the erasure of borders between history and fiction that characterizes postmodern rewritings of history. Behind this reality effect there is an ideological agenda at work, of course, which in my view makes the lack of scholarly interest on the biopic even more surprising.

It is well known how, in *The Republic*, Plato restricts mimetic operations to a narrow range of contents tailored to educate the guardians of the ideal State, while he condemns a broad notion of mimesis for constituting an operation that it is doubly removed from the Ideas. When I define the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as a Platonic body, however, I do not have in mind his take on mimesis in *The Republic* as much as his approach to this issue in his later dialogue *Sophist*. In *Sophist*, Plato adopts an intermediary stance in order to navigate Parmenides' monism and the relativism of sophists. Plato acknowledges that those copies that maintain a relation of resemblance to the original, products of what he terms as figurative technique (*techné eikastiké*), participate in some degree in the essence of Being. But the counterpart to this positive gesture is his plan to track and hunt down – the hunting metaphor is central in this passage (235a–236d) – those who are makers of simulacrum (*phántasma*), the result of a technique that produces appearances (*techné phantastiké*). We are thus presented with what Gilles Deleuze defined as 'good' and 'bad' copies based on the criteria of similarity and dissimilarity.

On a general level, the Academy of Arts has embraced the Platonic distinction between good and bad copies by continually awarding the Oscars to a series of acting performances that privilege actuality over any sort of critical distance. Additionally, the Hollywood Academy has constructed an archive of Western (mostly Anglo-American) celebrities, a centripetal movement that reacts to the exposure to Eastern films that has characterized international film festivals lately. Thanks to this cultural and historical archive, the specta-

<sup>5</sup> This last section first appeared as part of an independent short essay entitled "The Platonic Academy (On the Oscars and Contemporary Biopics)" in the blog Feedback, a community project of Open Humanities Press, in 2013.

tors can learn, for example, about Abraham Lincoln, who overcame partisan politics to eventually pass the thirteenth amendment shortly before his assassination; King George VI of England, who humbled himself to the point that he accepted the unconventional methods of an Australian speech therapist, and was eventually able to broadcast on the radio England's declaration of war on Germany in 1939; Queen Elizabeth II, who apparently lost the support of her subjects after her refusal to display sorrow for Lady Di's death; and the American author Truman Capote, who developed a personal relationship with two murderers sentenced to death in Kansas in order to obtain first-hand materials for his revolutionary novel *In Cold Blood*. In these films the viewers can enjoy the presence of real footage (the English royal family in *The Queen*, for example) as well as scenes containing literal reproductions of iconic photographs, such as the pictures of Capote with Perry Smith, one of the murderers, taken by the fashion photographer Richard Avedon.

Besides the construction of a pantheon of celebrities, the Hollywood biopic can also crystallize in narratives of redemption that acquire meaning in a context of celebration of the virtues of the American democracy. Julia Roberts, for example, obtained the Oscar for embodying Erin Brockovich in the homonymous film (2000), the story being that of an environmental activist who, despite her lack of formal education, wins a historical anti-pollution lawsuit against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. The ideological implications of these alleged slices of reality are obvious: the more transparent the medium is, or seems to be, the more the ideological message can be conveyed as a naturalized entity. While the good copies are publicly celebrated, as shown above, the false imitations are obviously more difficult to trace. There are cases in which the bad copy is condemned for replicating a fragment of reality that we are not willing to see re-enacted. This is the conviction behind Bingham's negative evaluation of Geoffrey Rush's impersonation of Peter Sellers in *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (2004): "The brilliance and truthfulness of Rush's portrayal and of the film's concept are almost wrecked, however, by moments in which Rush competes with Sellers in movie scenes that many fans know by heart, such as President Muffley's phone call to the Soviet premier in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) or Inspector Clouseau's 'Fact!' speech in *A Shot in the Dark* (1964)." (BINGHAM 2010b: 90) When Bingham affirms that "to have Geoffrey Rush try out alternate line readings on a universally known Peter Sellers performance is simply ill-advised mimicry" (BINGHAM 2010b: 90), he is clearly echoing Plato's criticism of the copy that is doubly removed from the original.

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## Summary

The biopic has been traditionally regarded as a minor, audience-limiting genre. As a consequence of this, producers, directors and actors have tended to avoid this term when referring to their work. This paper discusses how, despite the allegedly minor status of this genre, in recent years a fair amount of Academy Awards ('Oscars') has been awarded to actors and actresses engaged in biopic performances that are celebrated as the highest exercise of acting virtuosity. Since 1998, at least one of the Oscars has been awarded to a biopic performance. In this respect, the film critic Guy Lodge notes that the Academy Awards have gone to performances "calculated as bait, ostentatiously advertising their 'degree of difficulty'". Today, the American academy understands the idea of transformation in literal terms, since the highest aesthetic value is allocated to the reproduction of physical and vocal mannerisms of the persons they impersonate. I approach the contemporary biopic fever from two different but complementary theoretical perspectives, the Prague School research on acting (Zich, Veltruský) and the theory of fictional worlds (Doležel). Finally, because of the cultural and ideological implications of the apparently transparent biopic industry, I engage in a brief philosophical reflection and argue that Hollywood privileges the copy over the simulacrum in a very Platonic fashion.

## Keywords

mimesis, biopic, Hollywood, Plato, Zich, Doležel

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