

Stories of exemplary lives. Biographies

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines typologies of biographies, especially the televisives ones.

Keywords: biographies, television narratives, exemplary lives

“Unhappy the land that breeds not heroes”. Andrea Sarti
The Life of Galileo, by Bertolt Brecht

ANTI-HEROIC SOCIETY

In many Western countries the word *hero* in public parlance – in the media as in everyday conversation – has gone back to being associated almost invariably with tragic events, involving for example individuals who have died while undertaking a difficult task or a dangerous mission. In this connection I should like to cite a relatively recent event involving Italians, from which it should not be difficult to draw analogies with similar events elsewhere. In September 2009 six soldiers forming part of an Italian contingent in Afghanistan were the victims of a terrorist attack¹; in the almost unanimous headlines in newspapers and newscasts, in comments by ordinary people who were interviewed by reporters from radio and television, the six who were killed were acknowledged and honoured as *the heroes of Kabul*.

An event needs to be tragic enough to engage the emotions of a large proportion of the national community at a relatively deep level, for expressions that have fallen into disuse (or have even come to be used in a critical or derisory sense) to resurface, if only fleetingly, in journalistic language and common sentiment. *Hero*, like *sacrifice* or *courage* (and other words that gravitate into the same semantic area as heroism) is just one of such words in disuse that can nevertheless be dusted off when necessary. But since the event often forms a part of very disturbing and fearsome realities such as war, death and

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¹ The six soldiers were paratroopers of *Folgore*, an élite unit of the Italian army engaged in peacekeeping missions. On 17 September 2009, while they were escorting a Nato convoy towards the centre of Kabul, they were blown to pieces by a car bomb hurled at the convoy by a suicide bomber.

bereavement, resurfacing soon gives way to dismissal. Within a few days, the heroes are destined to leave the media stage and retire into the indistinct depths of human memory.

We are, or so it seems, right in the middle of an age which – following a widespread intellectual trend of conceptualizing the times in which we live as *post-something* – has been defined in a recent book (Sheehan, 2009) as *post-heroic*. Testimony of a post-heroic age in which Western, especially European, societies are immersed can be found in particular in the shift of collective attitudes towards war: today it is rejected and opposed as never before in history, whereas almost up to the middle of the 20th century it was ennobled and exalted as the scenario of choice for the flowering of heroic gestures and the achievement of hero status.

Whether or not you believe in the current transition to a post-heroic age, it cannot be denied that the pre-eminent identification of the hero with the warrior or military commander, handed down to us by mythology and by classical and medieval (and other) epics, helps in considerable measure to make heroism suspect, to say the least, in the present-day pacifist *Zeitgeist*; still more so, in all probability, in countries like Italy that have lived fairly recently under authoritarian regimes and have experienced the negative consequences of bellicose politics that were perhaps imbued more with rhetoric than the heroic ethos (*Greetings, O nation of heroes* run the pompous first line of the Fascist hymn *Giovinazza*).

Yet it seems that the supremacy of the armed hero had already begun to decline before the “obsolescence of war”² (Sheehan, 2009: XVII), according to the interesting and plausible hypothesis of a close correlation between heroic typologies and the different ages of communication (Strate, 1994). To go back to the distinction between orality and literacy propounded by Walter Ong (1986), the warrior hero figure flourished mainly in ages and cultures where the predominant means of communication was the spoken word. The prodigious deeds of heroes who were armed mainly with outstanding courage and physical strength were in fact endowed with that high degree of *memorability* which is indispensable for the transmission to future generations of oral cultures, consigned to the volatility of the spoken word.

Writing, and above all the crucial role of movable type printing in forming a *lettered* society, went on to create the conditions for a more diverse heroic typology, in which the criterion of outstanding and intrepid action (now understood in the mental and intellectual sense, not only in the physical) remained paramount. Thus ever since the arrival, many centuries earlier, of an age of printing (Eisenstein, 1997), the warrior figure had started to share heroic status (if not conceded it to them) with scientists, inventors, discoverers, creators and artists; the military commanders themselves were raised to

² However Sheehan is at pains to specify that the phenomenon of the obsolescence of war is not worldwide, but is more a peculiarity of 20th-century European history.

hero status more on account of their strategic skills than because of their achievements on the battlefield. In the age of electronic communication, and of collective opinion's pacifist switch, the warrior has of late been pushed to the sidelines of the heroic world.

Heroes are not what they once were; and perhaps, to put it simply, they no longer exist. In syntony with the concept of a post-heroic age, a fair number of scholars and commentators have maintained in recent times that the West has now become *a world without heroes*, to quote the title of an American study published in the 1980s (Roche, 1987) that sees in the absence of heroes the worrying symptoms of a *modern tragedy*. In the "growing corpus of contemporary literature decrying the loss of the traditional heroes" (Drucker and Cathcart, 1994, p. 3), the authoritative precursor should probably be identified as Joseph Campbell. Campbell is the author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2008), a celebrated and influential study on the mythical hero and a *sapiential* work of symbolic anthropology enriched and made more complex by psychoanalytical approaches originating from Jung - in truth, the analysis of the narrative structures of myths that Chris Vogler (2007), with Hollywood-style pragmatism and a nose for success, has made out of Campbell's work for the benefit of authors and screenwriters, is now universally better known. In the closing pages of the book, originally printed in 1949, Campbell noted how far removed from the present day was the symbolic universe that had produced the legendary heroes, the fabled characters, the godlike personalities of the ancient myths. Human society has become estranged from and inhospitable towards traditional heroes and these heroes don't live here anymore. In the words of Nietzsche, quoted by the author: "Dead are all the gods" (Campbell, 2008, p. 387).

Some time later at the beginning of the 1960s, Daniel Boorstin - in a book (1961) that is still capable nearly half a century later of illuminating our awareness of the cultural phenomena that are endemic in our present-day mediatized society - was to maintain that erstwhile heroes were being dethroned by the *celebrities* created by the media. I shall turn later to the theme of media celebrities; but my concern right now is to take my cue from some of the author's observations on the suspicious and disenchanted attitudes, sometimes demythologizing to the point of defamation, that inform our present-day sentiments and common opinions concerning heroes and heroism. In fact the marked element of criticism and social apprehension, emerging in the writings of those who deplore or denounce the advent of a world without heroes, corresponds to a diametrically opposed (if not necessarily elaborated) critique, a widespread self-distancing from heroic worlds and figures on the part of hegemonic opinion and prevailing collective attitudes.

“We see greatness [of heroes] as an illusion”, wrote Boorstin (1992, p. 51). Perhaps even as a burden on an imperfect and unhappy society, one could add – especially in the light of the exorbitant and persistent good fortune that smiles unceasingly on the witty remark made by Galileo in Bertolt Brecht’s play: “Unhappy is the land that needs a hero” (Brecht and Bentley, 1994, p.115).

It is astonishing (but above all highly symptomatic of the tendency to drive out heroism from the landscape of present-day sensibility) how a phrase extrapolated from its dramaturgical context, reinterpreted and not least reformulated, should have become a sort of mantra that is rapped out like a conditioned reflex whenever the opportunity presents itself. In the case of Italy in particular, the sentence is generally stated in a version that is, so to speak, revised and corrected – *blessed (or happy) is the land that has no need of heroes* – which, although it does not substantially distort the meaning of the original, adds an extra sense of freedom and euphoric lightness by virtue of the blessedness or happiness evoked by the opening words. But in Bertolt Brecht’s play, by contrast, we have a remark that is embittered and sorrowful; Galileo replies in this way to his follower Andrea Sarti, who in the opposite statement – *Unhappy the land that breeds not heroes* – forcibly expressed his disillusionment and condemnation of the anti-heroic behaviour of his master before the tribunal of the Inquisition. Yet Galileo for his part is a deeply disillusioned and tormented soul and will remain so for the rest of his life. By agreeing, under threat of torture, to recant his theories, he has betrayed not only the faith of his followers but the ethics of science (he will admit “I have betrayed my profession”, p. 124) and his own *heroic* conception of scientific practice; *the practice of science would seem to call for valour* he will say in the course of a long self-accusatory monologue. Galileo has thus good reason to declare *unhappy is the land that needs a hero*: this is not (or not only) the expression of a utopian yearning for an idyllic society, but the bitter pronouncement of one who, aware from his own experience of human frailty when faced with the exacting summons of heroism, knows that the need for heroes can unfortunately remain ignored and unsatisfied.

Brecht’s Galileo is not an admirable character, still less an exemplary one; the playwright wanted to make him into an anti-hero figure, so as not to concede any margin of uncertainty as regard his condemnation of a science that was enslaved to power and averse to assuming moral responsibility towards humankind³. The saying *unhappy is the land that needs a hero* acquires its complex yet not unequivocal meanings solely in the context of the drama of Galileo’s guilt (and his sense of guilt): which

³ As everybody knows, Brecht was less interested in the conflict between Galileo and the Church in the 17th century than in the relationship between science and power in the 20th: the Nazis use and abuse of scientific research, the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki...

Brecht regards as the *original sin* of physics, the first step along a path destined to lead to nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, if this saying has entered everyday language and the quotations repertoire of people who are unaware of its source – the author is generally recognized, the text very much less so – this is clearly because, especially in its *reformulated* version (*happy is the land...*) it captures and translates back in an effective, simple and populist way (in the form of a proverb or motto) a concept of anti-heroic life that has been progressively making its way in Western society since the second half of the 20th century.

THE CRITICAL ANTI-HEROIC

Nevertheless there is room for discussion on the advent of a post-heroic era. Clearly we cannot deny the existence of gaps and discontinuities between the present and the past concerning conceptions and practices of heroism (those who denounce the loss of traditional heroes or point out the obsolescence of heroism in today's world sometimes go too far with deprecating tones, but they cannot be accused of being merely grim-faced nostalgia-obsessed polemicists). Rather we should observe how the definition of the post-heroic era, in being limited to characterizing the present in terms of temporal succession and cultural overcoming in relation to a previous heroic age, completely sidesteps the true break and turning-point in the passing of an epoch. What truly characterizes the world in which we live is not so much the fact of coming later and leaving behind the heroic worlds of the past (as is implied by the prefix *post*), but the occurrence of a particular set of conditions that have favoured, and continue to nourish, cultural trends of hostility towards heroism (which requires us to have recourse to the prefix *anti*).

In other words: however far they may be along the road to a possible eclipse, heroes (real or imaginary) still inhabit the present; and it is not such a rare occurrence to come across lives, deeds and personalities that are truly heroic, provided that one knows how to recognize them. Therefore it is not entirely true that we live in a world without heroes. On the contrary, it is true that the small or large amount of heroism, traditional or modern, that still exists in our times is exposed to the tensions of an anti-heroic critique, more strident and widespread than ever before. Intolerant and demythologizing voices have not been slow in the past to make themselves heard: Voltaire admitted to having little love for heroes (“ils font trop de fracas/they make too much noise”)⁴, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that “every hero becomes a bore at last” (Gumpert, 1994, p. 61); but what we are seeing today is the apparently

⁴ ‘J’aime peu les héros, ils font trop de fracas’ (“I don’t care for heroes, they make too much noise”) is the beginning of a letter in verse sent by Voltaire to Frederick II of Prussia on 22 May 1742; cited in E. Cassirer, 1973, p. 304).

irresistible advance, in public opinion and common sense, of an anti-heroic rejection of huge collective proportions. Rather than post-heroic, the present age lends itself better to being defined as *anti-heroic*.

In a very fine essay that appeared at the beginning of the 1990s, Mike Featherstone did not hesitate to state that “Western modernity ...has led to an *assault* [my italics] on the heroic life” (1992, p. 173). Among the principal *assailants* he included feminism, with its critique of the masculine and male chauvinist values that were held to constitute the framework of heroic conceptions; but ultimately Featherstone, like Alvin Gouldner before him, maintained that if heroism had become a contentious concept in Western societies, this was due above all to the growing preeminence of everyday life, in conformity with the present-day culture of consumption and leisure. Everyday life and heroic life seem in fact like two poles of an antinomy that cannot be reconciled: it is not by chance that the legendary hero’s journey ritually starts with his abandonment of the ordinary world. Everydayness is the province of ordinary existence, of common sense, regular habits and at the same time (more and more) the immanent horizon within which to carry out the search for well-being and personal self-achievement; the heroic life is instead the realm of unique experiences, of undertakings that are out of the ordinary, where great individual virtues made sensitive to the appeal of transcendence are put at the service of objectives aimed at the common good. Furthermore, heroism demands courage, entails suffering, exposes to dangers and exacts the supreme test of facing and overcoming the fear of death; whereas everyday life embraces aspirations for a happy existence, lightened by the pleasures of ludic and consumerist practices, rewarded by the satisfactions of loving relationships and sociable activity and above all sheltered as much as possible from the risky events that remind humans of their intolerable condition of mortality. In the conception and modern experience of everyday life, therefore, there resides a potential for criticizing the heroic life, pointed out by Gouldner over thirty years ago: “I have suggested repeatedly that EDL (everyday life) is a *counter-concept*, that it gives expression to a *critique* of a certain kind of life, specifically, the heroic, achieving, performance-centred existence” (Gouldner, 1975, quoted in Featherstone, 1992, p.164).

Featherstone proposes in his study a useful analytical distinction between heroic society, heroic life and the hero; this distinction is worth considering briefly. Heroic societies, on the model of those described in Homer’s poetry or the Nordic sagas, are those that make the heroic ethos and behaviour – founded on courage, total dedication to the community and striving for excellence in everything that is done – into an inescapable *social prescription* for its own members. In these societies the individual is required to be a hero; and in behaving like one he or she assumes a role that is socially constructed, legitimate and binding. It is not difficult to see how, at least in the Western world, the eclipse of the

heroic society in imitation of the Greek ideal took place quite a while ago (and perhaps from this perspective one could agree on the idea of a post-heroic age). Despite this, the heroic life still exists and persists. It is the prerogative of those who – in the most diverse fields of action and expression, from science to art, teaching, defence of law and order, sport and religion – organize their own existence in accordance with the demanding principles of ethics, heroic ones indeed, that encourage and value sacrifice, self-discipline, dedication to a cause or a mission, the capacity to confront arduous tests (though not necessarily deadly ones), including the disapproval and hostility of a predominant anti-heroic culture.

Just as individuals, or particular circles, can cultivate and adhere to an heroic ethos even within an anti-heroic society, “it is of course possible for anyone to become a hero, to perform a heroic deed without being a member of a heroic society or having a commitment to the heroic life” (Featherstone, 1992, p. 167). Nathaniel Hawthorne’s statement, so often cited, that “a hero cannot be a hero unless in a heroic world” (quoted in *Time* magazine, June 24, 1966)⁵ is shown to be untrue each time someone (to her own surprise and that of others) crosses without hesitation the boundary between ordinary daily life and heroism through an extraordinary act, in most cases saving the life of another, not infrequently at the cost of her own.

The many *accidental heroes* (according to the superficial cliché reiterated by the media) who inhabit our world speak to us, among other things, of the ambivalence of everyday life towards heroism: it is a polarity that is alternative to, and critical of, the heroic life but also a potential humus of new typologies of heroes who are fused and confused with common people. They are *the ordinary everyday heroes*, as they are customarily defined: the only ones whom present-day anti-heroic culture seems to recognize and praise except that it thwarts this recognition by bestowing the heroic virtues so widely as to actually belittle them – since if nearly everyone is a hero, even if only an everyday one, then obviously nobody is a hero.

Defining as *accidental heroes* those individuals whose actions (often, it has to be repeated, sacrifices and in any case unquestionably courageous or altruistic) are unequivocally inspired by conscious and value-based choices; and, by contrast, trivializing the meaning of *everyday heroism*, attributing it in an entirely conventional manner to behaviour which, although admirable and praiseworthy, is not in itself heroic (like, for example, carrying out one’s own job honestly and

⁵ The quotation from Hawthorne opened a long article *On the difficulty of being a contemporary hero* (author’s name not available), published in *Time* magazine on 24 June 1966. The piece can now be found at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835781,00.html> (Retrieved Aug 23, 2010).

scrupulously): in both cases what emerges is a disregard or a refusal to identify, anywhere, that distinct difference – in terms of values, objectives and motives – which properly marks out heroic life and action.

A comparable disregard for criteria and distinguishing factors, made up of both a facile egalitarianism with its negation of differences and a currently-fashionable relativism with its rejection of standards of comparative evaluation, is to be seen at work in a field of phenomena that are directly correlated to the presence and influence of the media in present-day societies. I am referring to the so-called *media celebrities*, that is to those personages whose fame is generated and nourished mainly by modern means of communication, in particular by television. This reference is entirely appropriate in the context of the present discourse if we accept as valid the observation, widely supported in the works I have cited, that media celebrities represent the heroes of our times and have taken the place of traditional heroes in their function as role models for individuals and in particular for today's young people.

As Mark Rowlands (2008) convincingly maintains, media celebrities testify to and benefit from a radical cultural shift in the concept of fame. Whereas at one time fame was a relatively scarce good and constituted the acknowledgement of and reward for a special talent or an outstanding achievement, or a demonstration of excellence, it has nowadays become a commodity that is almost universally available and, above all, “unconnected to any achievement or excellence in any recognized form” (Rowlands, 2008, p. 25). Coining a very effective expression that was destined to be widely cited, Daniel Boorstin had already in his day diagnosed the tautological nature of this contemporary variant of fame, the possessor being in most cases purely and simply “a person who is known for his well-knownness” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 57).

It is obvious that only in an anti-heroic age and culture can those who are merely *known for their well-knownness* rise to the rank of heroes and enjoy the benefits of fame. But if it is very hard to accept that media celebrities have even a tenuous connection with the heroic life and personality, one could not say the same about *ordinary everyday heroes* – on condition that we firmly maintain expectations and demands for a transcendence *in any recognized form* of the anti-heroic averageness cultivated in the shadow of daily life. The great popular story-tellers know better than anyone the hidden and unappreciated heroic potential of ordinary people, and know how to activate it with the eruptive force of the imagination. J.R.R. Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), has created an astonishing hero in the gentle character of Frodo: not a brave and indomitable warrior like Aragorn or a magician with extraordinary powers like Gandalf, just any little man (or rather hobbit), with no resources yet capable of deploying an amazing commitment in carrying out his dreadful heroic mission at all costs .

TELLING STORIES ABOUT HEROES: THE BIOGRAPHY GENRE

Mention of a great popular story-teller brings us back to television drama. Popular narrative is traditionally full of heroes; although it is not totally exempt from the anti-heroic influences of the present age, it still inspires our imagination today with stories of lives and personalities who are heroic in the true sense of the word, whether they are invented or are drawn from real life.

One should on no account undervalue the telling of stories of heroes; it is a constituent part of their very existence. Nobody earns the status of hero without a decisive contribution by a story (oral, written or audiovisual) that reveals his or her action and its heroic value. The paradox that says *If a tree falls in the forest and the media say nothing about it, the tree has not fallen*, has its counterpart in the saying ‘an *unsung hero* is an oxymoron’. Or more analytically: “Without the story and the storyteller there can be no fame, and without fame individual acts, no matter how courageous, become part of the passing parade” (S. Drucker, R. Cathcart, 1994, p. 10). The hidden heroes of daily life must be brought out into the open and become the protagonists of news stories or television drama, if they are to be recognized and possibly remembered.

The television drama, past and present, of every country is populated by a large and varied body of imaginary heroes whose supposedly heroic characteristics reproduce among other things specific traits of various national identities (Montanari, 1995) – if it is permissible to use such a controversial concept. However, I am now considering real-life heroes: historical figures, characters who have existed and whose lives, in their entirety or in part, have been recounted in the very large number of televisual biographies produced by RAI and Mediaset in the past 20 years (1989-2009). By assembling an opulent gallery of portraits of heroic personalities, many of whom belong to the civic and religious history of the country, Italian television drama has developed a prerogative that is as special as it is rewarding: this genre of biographical stories has become widely popular and in the course of the television seasons of the 2000s has almost invariably provided the most watched TV drama of the year.

It is worth seizing the opportunity to bring in some reflections on the biography genre. In the context of a discourse that focuses on stories about heroic lives and characters, it is obviously important to pay some attention to the genre that takes charge of such stories: primarily, in order to assemble the elements of a spatial-temporal and inter-medial comparison that permit us better to discern, in the map of similarities and differences, the distinctive peculiarities of biography in contemporary Italian television drama. A genre, as is known, exists in permanent tension between its codified structures and the more or less extensive and profound processes of metamorphosis that are triggered by factors of change and differentiation operating in time and space: in particular the evolution of institutional

systems and cultural orientations, the variability of the geographical contexts of supply and consumption and the appropriation of the genre by other communication media. So we need both to identify continuities and discontinuities in televisual biography (just as it has found form and expression in the past 20 years in relation to previous phases in the history of Italian television drama, in which biography has regularly featured as well) and to verify in what respect its present configuration diverges from the tendencies that have characterized the evolution of the biography genre in other geo-cultural contexts, especially in the displacement from cinema to television.

The narrative genre of biography suffers from a sort of *imbalance of status*, which affects its presence not so much in the literary or historiographical sphere as in popular media communication: press, cinema and, of particular interest to us, television. The imbalance rests in the inconsistency between the relative pre-eminence that the genre has enjoyed – if only sometimes, in fluctuating phases – in cinematic and televisual production and, in parallel, in viewers consumption preferences and, on the other hand, the widespread neglect⁶ that it appears to suffer from scholars and critics. In this connection I could cite various authoritative testimonies that entirely agree with one another, despite a distance of more than half a century between them. In the opening of his famous study on biographies in the popular American press in the first half of the 20th century, Leo Lowenthal observed that “surprisingly enough, not very much attention has been paid to this phenomenon” (Lowenthal, 1944, p. 109). For his part Steve Neale, in placing the biopic among the *major genres* of Hollywood films, emphasized the lack of “critical esteem” (Neale, 2000, p. 60): a lack that, with very few exceptions – George Custen’s (1992) study, to which I shall refer shortly, is indispensable – has been a feature of the course of the genre’s history. Finally Dennis Bingham, in his very recent and impressive work, makes a point in his introduction of emphasizing the “low repute” of this “respectable genre” (Bingham, 2010, p. 3).

The lack of attention from critics and academics⁷ is however not relevant to us here, were it not for its disparity with two phenomena: the consistent presence of the biopic in yesterday’s and today’s cinematographical and televisual production, which forms a sizeable component of popular story-telling; and in general the good, often very good, reception given by viewers to biographical stories.

Apart from brief phases of decline, biographies have regularly achieved outstanding success in the box office and prestigious acclaim, in the form of nominations and Oscars, for the Hollywood film

⁶ If not intolerance. On 29 January 2010 an article appeared in the English daily paper *The Independent* with the eloquent title “Bored with biopic”. Retrieved Jan 29, 2010, From: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/bored-of-biopic-1882227.html>

⁷If one can speak of a lack of attention to the cinema biopic, one must note a complete lack of interest in televisual biography.

industry. I need only cite *Lawrence of Arabia* (D. Lean, 1962), *Gandhi* (R. Attenborough, 1982), *Schindler's List* (S. Spielberg, 1993), *Amadeus* (M. Forman, 1984), *Erin Brockovich* (S. Soderbergh, 2000), *A beautiful mind* (R. Howard, 2001), *Capote* (B. Miller, 2005), *Walk the Line* (J. Mangold, 2005), *The Queen* (S. Frears, 2006), *Milk* (G. Van Sant, 2008), *La vie en rose* (O. Dahan, 2008). At the same time the biopic has been and still is, within and through the transformation of televisual systems, a resource of creativity and popularity for broadcasting networks and still more for narrowcasting. In the United States, for example, within the move to recover and re-use of the formats of the TV movie and the miniseries as instruments of “channel branding” (Lotz, 2009), basic and premium cable networks have started to invest regularly in the production of biographical television dramas: for example *Georgia O’Keeffe* (Lifetime, 2009), *The Reagans* (Showtime, 2003), *Johnny Cash* (A&E, 2005), *House of Saddam* (HBO/BBC, 2008), *Into the storm: Churchill at War* (HBO/BBC, 2009). In Great Britain, the new channels created by the BBC for the terrestrial digital television, BBC3 and BBC4, are relying on biographies to increase the small niches of audiences for narrowcasting (even at the cost of boring and displeasing the critics⁸). For their part the major networks are content to make use of a genre that includes numerous classics, as well as contemporary masterpieces, of English television, from *I, Claudius* (BBC, 1976) to *Miss Austen Regrets* (BBC, 2008).

As regards the significant contours of the biography genre proves to assume on the international television (and cinema) scene, an important peculiarity of the Italian case can be observed straight away from the quantitative perspective. In the twenty years under consideration, the production and supply of biopics in the field of domestic television drama has reached substantial levels: this is testified by the high total number of biographies, nearly 100 titles (97), and still more significantly their weighting in prime time programming, equal to a generous 10%. In other words, one in ten of the television dramas shown in the evening is a biopic. That this is a remarkable proportion, in all probability unlikely to be emulated in the present or the past, can be established by the fact that a very minor share was enough to include the biopics among *major cinema genres*; in the 33-year period 1927-1960, covered for example by Custen’s study, fewer than 3% of more than 10,000 films produced by the big Hollywood studios were biopics – and nonetheless the period is regarded as having seen the greatest expansion of the biography genre. The history of Italian television drama itself offers a further standard of comparison; here also we are considering a phase of more than 30 years (1954-1988), which covers the entire timespan preceding my present survey and coincides in good measure with the *age of the sceneggiato*, for its part notoriously well disposed towards the biography genre. Indeed the biopic has proved itself to be one of the

⁸ Cf note 6.

fundamental genres of that era, with a significant incidence on total supply (8%) yet below the levels reached in contemporary television drama.

To emphasize the quantitative dimension is obviously not to pay homage to the cult of numerical data; it is above all intended to remind us that we are facing a *corpus* whose relative expansion, as well as signifying the importance assumed by the genre in recent years, is likely to confer greater substance and visibility on the articulation of its constituent parts.

THE DEFINITION OF FAME

It is worth specifying at this point that I shall not bring aesthetic or professional, nor indeed historiographical, value judgments into this analysis of biographical television drama. In other words, I am not here concerned – although these are clearly issues that may assume great importance in more appropriate discursive contexts – with the expression of critical judgments on the production values or artistic quality of Italian biopics (often attacked by the critics, who find them hagiographic and didactic); nor do I wish to enter into the merits of their greater or lesser fidelity to the *true lives* which they claim to recount in a truthful or at any rate a plausible fashion, or which they more prudently say were only a source of inspiration. We can be content to agree with Custen that “biographies are real not because they are believable. Rather, one must treat them as real because ... [they] are believed to be real by many viewers” (Custen, 1992, p. 7): some of whom, I should add, know no other way of getting a vision, even a distorted one, of the *human interest story*.

My concern, in the context of a discourse that started from the anti-heroic stance/ethos of contemporary culture, bringing in the role played by the media and in particular by television in going along with and modulating such a stance in accord with their own logic, relates primarily to the typology of the subjects of the biographies. Who are the personalities whose lives Italian television drama has deemed worthy of narrating during the past 20 years? I ask the question in relation not to their personal details but to the spheres in which they demonstrated their excellence and in consequence earned their fame (this is exactly the point). And which changes in the hierarchy of cultural values that govern, consciously or otherwise, the dignifying selection of chosen people, are likely to be observed in present-day typology, in comparison with the typology constructed by Italian television drama in the past? And more important still: which possible deviations can be detected in regard to the ways in which, in the US and elsewhere, televisual biography has tampered with the heritage from the cinema by adopting different criteria for identifying subjects who deserve of being *narrated*?

In fact, to go back to the parenthesis introduced just above, this is exactly what we are concerned with: fame, and personalities who in a biography receive the seal and the consecration of a fame already acquired by virtue of special talents, heroic deeds, entire lives that are exceptional to some extent; or more rarely (but it does happen; in Italy we had the case of Giorgio Perlasca⁹) equally remarkable people who happen to remain partially or entirely unknown until a biopic makes them emerge to general awareness and admiration. Every narrative genre, whether police drama or hospital or family series, creates its own hero-protagonists and, if it achieves huge or prolonged success, confers on them a popularity which is sometimes very similar to fame: this is to be understood as a form of *glorious renown*, according to what the dictionaries say, traditionally “associated with respect, and not just respect but deserved respect” (Rowlands, 2008, p. 8) (in this sense, imagined characters such as Inspector Cattani or Inspector Montalbano have a good right to be considered famous). Nevertheless the biography genre is the only one whose very existence and *raison d'être* rests on exemplary courage, cultural acknowledgement and the social esteem of fame acquired by men and women, creators of great things and heroic achievements in the most diverse fields of human action. Among other things, we have perhaps not enough reflected on the fact that in a biography the return of the already known (a fundamental principle as well as the main resource of attraction of artistic and narrative popular forms: Buonanno, 2007) finds its greatest fulfilment – fame being in turn the apex of well-knownness.

Custen is right in maintaining that “publicly defining fame” (Custen, 1992, p. 215) is the *cultural role* of the biography genre; but to this should be added a half-concealed normative function. A biography, or still better a *corpus* of biographies, is not limited to defining the area, nature or the very idea of fame in specified circumstances of time and place through a selective choice of lives worthy of narration; but it tends to bear out that definition as *legitimate*, thus conferring on it some normative value.

In any case the biography genre, just as it gives many viewers an accessible version of history, offers observers and cultural analysts privileged access to the shifting conceptions of heroism and fame that find expression, at a given moment, in the texts and discourses of the media. Leo Lowenthal, already quoted, was the first scholar to analyse biographies in this sense; and although his pioneering work relates to magazines, not cinema or television, it constitutes an indispensable reference point for

⁹ Giorgio Perlasca has been called the “Italian Schindler”. A livestock dealer and a former Fascist, he saved thousands of Hungarian Jews in the winter of 1944-1945, under the false identity of a Spanish diplomat accredited to Budapest, from being exterminated by the Nazis. Perlasca and his “heroic imposture” remained unknown in Italy for nearly half a century, until his story was reconstructed in a book and later in a very successful televisual

illuminating and in part anticipating tendencies that were destined to manifest themselves in films and later in television. Lowenthal's study, carried out on a vast *corpus* of biographical articles published over a timespan of 40 years (1901-1941) in two popular American magazines, is too well-known for me to need to give more than a brief summary. It is enough to bear in mind that the results of his research throw light on a progressive and decisive reconfiguration of the typological composition of the biography subjects, who in the first 20 years of the century were chosen primarily from the political and military élites, professional people and businessmen, but were rapidly replaced in successive decades by popular figures of the world of art¹⁰ and entertainment. In Lowenthal's definition, *idols of production* – an aristocracy of individuals of outstanding qualities and virtues, inspired by and the potential inspirers of elevated ideals – have definitely given way to *idols of consumption*, emblematic figures of a society that puts leisure and entertainment at the centre of its own concerns.

It is not necessary to share Lowenthal's disdain, reflecting his association with the Frankfurt School, towards *mass idols* (or by contrast a certain idealization of *idols of production*), to recognize his merit in having acutely diagnosed for the first time a cultural shift that was soon to put its stamp on the evolution of the biography genre in the creative and productive context of other media.

In Hollywood cinema, as we learn from Custen's study, the biopics created up to the beginning of the 1940s preferred to draw their subjects from the traditional élites: monarchs, famous politicians and businessmen, celebrated personalities from the worlds of art and science; there was no lack of biographies of stars of stage and screen, through which Hollywood celebrated its own, but these were a relative minority. It was in the next 20 years that the shift already noted by Lowenthal in popular magazines became evident. In the course of the 1940s and 1950s the constant advance of *idols of consumption* reshaped the *fame agenda* of film biopics; the proportion of entertainers, initially fewer than 10%, rose to 28% of the total of biographies produced in the 1950s (Custen, 192, p. 169), drawing in their wake the sporting champions, while the representatives of the decision-making and artistic élites declined in number, but without disappearing altogether. A new élite was emerging that built up its own fame in careers of entertainment.

But the advent of the new paradigmatic figure of contemporary fame does not of itself alter the basic prerequisite, the necessary (if not sufficient) condition that makes a life worthy of being narrated:

biopic (*Perlasca. Un eroe italiano*,/*Perlasca: A Italian hero*, Raiuno, 2002). Perlasca has been recognized by Israel as a *just man among nations*.

¹⁰ Lowenthal is at pains to distinguish between the *serious arts* (painting, music, dance) and the popular arts; and he notes the progressive disappearance of the former from the spheres of activity that provide the heroes of periodicals.

the cinematographic biopic continues to require from its own subjects, whether they are political leaders or show-business personalities, a certain dimension of greatness, a heroic inclination, admirable behaviour and, in short, evidence of a personality and existence at least in part outstanding, that have already received public acknowledgment in the tribute to their fame.

This condition was lacking, maintains Custen, when the biography genre (along with others) migrated to television in the course of the 1960s. Quite rapidly, in fact, television (we should bear in mind that the author is considering the American scene) rewrote the biopic's rules, changing its main component fundamentally by completely overturning the fame agenda: it was no longer the people who were fêted and respected for having achieved great things in a particular field, but ordinary people who became the protagonists of TV biopics – *unremarkable* individuals who were suddenly and fleetingly pulled out of the anonymity of their everyday lives by some unexpected and disruptive event. It should be understood that the ordinary people did not occupy all of the protagonistic limelight; show-business celebrities still took up a lot of space and the biographies of famous personages did not entirely vanish; but there is no doubt that through this form of apparent *democratization* of a fame that is less and less predicated on excellence and heroism, the biography genre is changing its own cultural role into fulfilling the mission – embraced by a large proportion of contemporary television – of giving everyone his or her 15 minutes of fame, as predicted by Andy Warhol.

Custen was writing in the early 1990s and his data, as well as his considerations on the televisual biopic, were influenced (though he makes no explicit mention of this) by the substantial presence of TV movies (Rapping, 1992) on American networks; these, often in the rushed days of the *instant movie*, brought facts and personalities from the newspapers to the screen, drawing narrative material for preference from the sensational press. To confine ourselves to one of the best-known examples: the biopics produced by ABC (*The Amy Fisher story*, 1993) and CBS (*Casualties of Love*, 1993) on the case, quite sensational at that time, of the so-called “Lolita of Long Island”¹¹. Sometimes the sensational deed was connected to a problem of social importance: *The Burning Bed* (NBC, 1984), starring Farrah Fawcett, focused on domestic violence and drew on the true story of a Michigan housewife who killed her abusive husband by setting fire to his bed.

We do not have organized collections of data at our disposal for more recent years; but the information that we can gather from a range of sources – specialized magazines, the sites of TV networks, other online resources – confirms the *demotic turn* (Turner, 2010), as Graeme Turner defines the growing visibility of ordinary people on television, in the biographic genre. Lifetime, a cable network

aimed mainly at female viewers, continues for example to tell cases of women who have survived breast cancer (*Why I wore lipstick to my mastectomy*, 2006) and of girls who have mysteriously disappeared on tropical islands (*Natalee Holloway*, 2009). Yet there are no doubts about the overwhelming presence in today television biopics of celebrities from the world of entertainment and show-business: film and television stars, singers, ballet dancers, authors and performers of every musical genre. These personalities, famous exponents of artistic careers that in any case demand some degree of talent and commitment for the gratifying benefit of fame to be bestowed on those who pursue them, have more recently been joined by new celebrity figures. These, although in all probability they are the source of a very restricted *corpus* of biopic, nevertheless indicate by their presence a significant change in the *modus operandi* of contemporary television. In fact we have here *TV celebrities* in the true sense, belonging to the category of the person *who is known for his well-knownness*, to quote Boorstin; and, more precisely, known for having participated in some of the many reality shows through which television today produces its own ephemeral celebrities, or *celetoids*, according to Chris Rojek's definition (quoted in Turner, 2010, p14). Like *factoids*, which are inauthentic facts, fabricated by sources of information, *celetoids* are sham celebrities, fabricated by television in the absence of the prerequisites for genuine fame. "The individuals with no particular talents that might encourage expectations of work in the entertainment industry, no specific career objectives beyond the achievement of media visibility..." (Turner, 2010, p. 14) acquire by this means an ephemeral notoriety that can cause some of them to reach the rank of personalities who merit a biography. Witness *The Fantasia Barrino Story: Life is Not a Fairy Tale*, about the winner of an edition of *American Idol* (Lifetime, 2006), and the predicted biopics about Susan Boyle (a competitor in *Britain's Got Talent*) and Jade Goody (a participant in the English version of *Big Brother*, who died for cancer)¹².

Entertainment programmes now occupy an enormous amount of space in the networks schedules of multi-channel environment; their pervasive nature and influence on models of consumption make entertainment in many cases the dominant genre on television. Although it provides only a fraction of the immense *corpus* of programmes on today's television, the biography genre helps to sanction our entry into the *age of entertainment* (Turner, 2010) by syntonically remodelling its own agenda.

¹¹ Amy Fisher earned notoriety by attempting to kill the wife of her lover Joey Buttafuoco in 1992.

¹² Along with television, the video-sharing websites such as YouTube and the social networks like Facebook and Twitter have for their part become powerful vehicles for the creation and maintaining of ephemeral celebrities and *celetoids* thus the teenage Canadian pop singer Justin Bieber, whose video on YouTube was accessed nearly 250

A HEROIC ENCLAVE

The lengthy route that has brought us thus far is also the one which, having supplied the elements of knowledge that are indispensable for placing the Italian case in a comparative context, now allows me to come to a rapid conclusion. It is worth recalling my preliminary remarks: the increased presence of the biography genre in Italian television drama in the past 20 years raises an interesting question concerning the specific way in which domestic story-telling has, so to speak, taken a position on matters of heroism and fame that are deeply implicated in the definition of the genre and its cultural role. We have followed the evolution of the biopic in an international landscape, in its passage from the cinema to television and in its flexible adhesion to the *demotic turn* and the growing importance of televisual entertainment. At this point it is a question of individuating the similarities and difference between the Italian biopic and international trends, after having specified that I shall confine myself in this context to examining the typology of biography subjects according to the area of activity in which they acquired public renown, without dwelling on the merit of the dramaturgical quality and the psychological and historical credibility of the stories. It will suffice therefore to indicate some correspondences between Italian and Hollywood televisual biographies, based on trends pointed out by Anderson and Lupo in the introduction to a recent special issue of *Journal of Popular Film and Television* on biopics (Anderson and Lupo, 2008, p. 50); namely an emphasis on the lives of men; use of the genre as a vehicle for stars; increased use of flashbacks in the narrative; and increased emphasis on contemporary lives.

Subjects of biographies (1989-2009)	RAI	Mediaset	Total
Religious figures (saints, popes, priests)	14	10	24
Biblical or Gospel figures	13	5	18
Heroic martyrs (Nazism, Mafia...)	9	4	13
Government and politicians	8	3	11
Creative artists	7	2	9
Entertainers and sportspeople	5	3	8
Figures close to political élites ¹³	5	1	6
Scientists and inventors	2	1	3
Entrepreneurs	1	1	2
Criminals	–	2	2
Others	–	1	1
Total	64	33	97

million times in the first half of 2010, was deemed worthy of biographical treatment by Paramount Pictures in a 3D movie to be released on St Valentine’s Day in 2011.

¹³ This includes female personalities whose biography is closely intertwined in their private life (as lovers, wives and daughters) with that of rulers and politicians; from such a close relationship they derive the privilege of a public position, in which it is sometimes possible for them to affirm their own personal worth by obtaining a fame that is not merely reflected glory.

The pre-eminence of religious figures in the *corpus* of biopics in the last 20 years will come as no surprise to anyone who is even superficially acquainted with Italian television drama: saints, popes, the beatified, Catholic priests; characters from the Old Testament (Abraham, Moses, Solomon) and the New (Jesus, Mary, the Apostles). The religious trend generated in the early 1990s in fact found from the start pre-eminent expression in the biography genre – which, as is very clear, it provided with a wide repertoire of subjects. Altogether the religious, Biblical and Gospel figures account for 43% of the *corpus*; in other words, more than two out of five biographies are dedicated to people who could be defined as *faith heroes*.

The second most numerous group of biography subjects (13) is made up of men and women who gave proof of their exceptional courage in the service of great ethical and civic ideals, by fighting the 20th century's political evils that were incarnated in Fascist and Nazi totalitarianism, and Italy's social evils, identified in the culture and criminality of the Mafia: personalities such as Giorgio Perlasca, Salvo D'Acquisto¹⁴, Ada Sereni¹⁵ (anti-Nazi heroes), and also the judges Falcone and Borsellino, General Dalla Chiesa, Don Puglisi (anti-Mafia heroes). These *heroes of liberty and justice* were very often hero-martyrs, following in the wake of a tradition of heroism (from Christian martyrology to the martyrs of the Risorgimento and beyond) that is rooted in Italian history and culture.

I take from Lowenthal the definition (though in truth it is not entirely convincing) of *idols of production*, in order to single out the category of political and entrepreneurial élites, just as numerous as the previous category (13 biographies, if you add the very small number of entrepreneurs to the politicians). We find in this group great historical figures of rulers, law-makers, conquerors (Caesar, Augustus, Charlemagne), political leaders and trade unionists of republican Italy (De Gasperi¹⁶, Moro¹⁷, Di Vittorio¹⁸) and innovative entrepreneurs (Ferrari¹⁹, Mattei²⁰). These figures are not infrequently controversial; but the fascination of power gives them an aura, and the fame that surrounds them is

¹⁴ Salvo D'Acquisto (1920-1943), staff sergeant of Carabinieri, sacrificed his life to save a group of civilians from a nazi retaliation.

¹⁵ Ada Sereni (1905-1997) was in late 1940s the organizer and commander of the operation aimed at helping thousands of Shoah survivors to immigrate to Palestine.

¹⁶ Alcide De Gasperi (1881-1954), founder and leader of the Christian-Democrat party, was one of the founding fathers of Italian Republic, and the European Union as well.

¹⁷ Aldo Moro (1916-1978), president of the Christian-Democrat party, five time Premier, was kidnapped and killed by the Red Brigades.

¹⁸ Giuseppe Di Vittorio (1892-1957) was a charismatic leader of CGIL, the trade union confederation close to the Italian Communist Party.

¹⁹ Enzo Ferrari (1898-1988), the eponymous founder of the wordly famous car industry and racing stable.

²⁰ Enrico Mattei (1906-1962), head of the Italian oil industry after World War II, died in a probably fraudulent plane crash.

nourished and sustained by the admiration and respect engendered by their influence on the history of the world, and indeed of Italy.

The group comprising creative artists (Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Puccini and – rightly – a revolutionary couturier like Coco Chanel) and scientists and inventors (Maria Montessori²¹, Einstein, Meucci²²) is slightly smaller (12 biographies). They are individuals who have in common the *gift* of a talent, a flair, an out of the ordinary intellect which has allowed these *heroes of art and science* to tower above others in their own field.

Greatness, truth to tell, is also the prerogative of some sporting champions (Coppi, Bartali, Carnera)²³ who along with well-known personalities in light music (Dalida, Gaetano)²⁴ make up the category of *entertainment heroes*. With only 8 biographies, entertainment (in the wider sense, including sport) occupies fifth place in the agenda of the fame of Italian biopics: that is to say, a good way short of the importance it has assumed elsewhere as the *reservoir* of celebrities who may become the subjects of biographies.

The biographies of female personalities close to the power *élite* would merit a careful individual appraisal in order to be classified and, so to speak, *sorted out* in a pertinent way. One could for example discuss whether the figure of Maria Josè of Savoy should be included in the category of rulers and politicians as the last queen of Italy (if only for the very short period of one month, May 1946); or whether ex-Queen Soraya, who after her separation from the Shah of Persia embarked upon a disastrous career in Italian films and was an inexhaustible source of inspiration for newspaper gossip columns during and after her unhappy marriage, should not instead belong to the entertainment category. But such a reassignment, to be postponed to another time and place, would not modify the result expressed in the following synoptic table:

²¹ Maria Montessori (1870-1952), physician and pedagogist, founder of an innovative educational method based on acknowledging and supporting the natural development of children's potentialities.

²² Antonio Meucci (1808-1889), Italian immigrant to the United States, was the real inventor of the telephone, as lately recognized by a resolution passed by the US House of Representatives in 2002.

²³ Fausto Coppi (1919-1960) and Gino Bartali (1914-2000) were the greatest Italian cyclists from the 1930s to the 1950s; the rivalry between the two champions has for years been one of the most debated issue in the sport milieu and among the cycling supporters. Primo Carnera (1906-1967), world heavyweight champion in early 1930s, was an almost legendary man for his exceptional height and physical strength.

Faith heroes	43,30%
Heroes of freedom and justice	13,40%
Heroes of production	13,40%
Heroes of art and science	12,40%
Heroes of entertainment	8,20%
Others	9,30%

The mission and testimony of religious faith, the ideals of freedom and justice, the responsibilities and conquests of power, the expression of creativity and ingenuity: over 80% of biographies created by Italian television drama in the past twenty years were drawn from these exacting arenas, where the fame of people who can legitimately be regarded as exemplars and inspirational models of human greatness was created in the course of recent and distant history.

A similar heroic *tension* has spread across Italian television drama from its very beginnings. But it is interesting to compare contemporary biographies with those produced over a timespan of more than 30 years, from the appearance of television in Italy to the second half of the 1980s. In fact one finds in this historically important *corpus* a significant analogy with the present – in the central position occupied by *traditional* élites, by no means threatened by the new élites of *heroes of consumption* – and at the same time a marked divergence in the construction of the agenda of fame, which gives pride of place to the group of writers, artists, thinkers and scientists. The *heroes of art and science*, who inspired fewer than 12% of contemporary biographies, were the protagonists of 50% of the televisual biopics produced during the whole period of public television’s monopoly and, at a rough estimate, in the first decade of the advent of commercial television.

Biography subjects (1954-1988)	
	RAI
Writers and artists	16
Scientists, philosophers etc	9
Rulers and politicians	9
Figures of the Risorgimento and Italian unity	6
Religious figures	5
Heroic martyrs	2
Entertainers	2
Others	1
Total	50

This list of people who devoted themselves to forming a *cultured and well-read society* (from the age of writing, as I have suggested earlier) is clearly in full syntony with the ideals of a humanistic and

²⁴ Dalida (1933-1987), Italian singer naturalized French achieved immense popularity on the international scene of the pop and disco music between the 1950s and the 1980s. Rino Gaetano (1950-1981) was an original and

literary culture, as well as with the pedagogic mission of the public television of yesteryear: just as the sub-group of figures of the *Risorgimento* and Italian unity, within the more comprehensive category of political personalities, helped to speak for the process and the protagonists of the *birth of the nation*. In contemporary biographies, by contrast, we find scarce syntopies, indeed *felicitous disharmony*, with the advance of an age of entertainment, to which Italian television itself is by no means impervious or averse in regard to a substantial part of the contents of its programming. The *corpus* of biographies of the past twenty years is quantitatively not very impressive, a drop in the ocean of televisual supply that is exponentially enlarged by the multi-channel environment. It should nevertheless be acknowledged that Italian television drama has created and cultivated, in the midst of the age of entertainment and in the context of an anti-heroic age, a small, resistant (and rewarding²⁵) enclave of *heroic* television.

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innovative singer and musician, who died prematurely in a car crash.

²⁵ And, not least, lucrative. The biopic may account for 10% of prime time television drama (in the number of titles), but its presence in the 100 most-watched programmes of the 20-year period is over 30%.

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