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United We Stand.

The Role of Biopics in Contemporary American Cinema 2002-2011

ABSTRACT

9/11 è stato il primo avvenimento storico nell'era della comunicazione globale. Al di là della sua dimensione tragica, l'atto terroristico ha coinciso con la consapevolezza che il villaggio globale, smaterializzato e digitale, era ormai diventato una realtà.

Già l'avvento della postmodernità aveva segnato una discontinuità profonda rispetto al passato, in primis depauperando le grandi cornici di riferimento, una volta in grado di guidare il singolo nelle sue scelte e nel riconoscimento della propria appartenenza sociale, culturale ed ideologica; ed in secondo luogo ri-allineando il soggetto in tanti nuovi possibili modi, offrendo risorse identitarie che non erano più necessariamente costituite dalla località e dalla nazione, ma che già iniziavano ad articolarsi a livello globale.

In un momento storico in cui tutto sembrava convergere verso l'omologazione, l'11 settembre ha indotto non solo gli Stati Uniti, **ma tutto il mondo occidentale,** ad una **profonda riflessione** sulla propria identità in tutti i suoi aspetti.

Anche per questa ragione, la complessità di un evento com'è stato quello dell'11 settembre segna una cesura storica che ha comportato e allo stesso tempo incorporato una serie di cambiamenti e di **tendenze che erano già in atto, agendo come detonatore di una serie di processi maturati nel secolo scorso e che si connotano per dislocazioni spazio-temporali di origine plurima ed eterogenea**.

In questo scenario il genere biografico sembra riemergere con forza nel cinema del nuovo millennio, più incline alla rielaborazione simbolica dell'evento, piuttosto che alle sue rappresentazioni documentarie.

In particolare, la peculiare capacità del genere biografico di assorbire e rielaborare le problematiche legate alla soggettività contemporanea, ma anche di offrirne simbolicamente nuovi punti di riferimento, fanno del biopic uno dei generi maggiormente frequentati dal cinema contemporaneo.

The New Scenario

Paradoxically, the Cold War had at least had the advantage of generating an ordinate and stable category through which to conceive worldwide environments. It was basically a war fought on equal terms, in which America and its allies (the West, in effect) were to face a similarly strong enemy, but fairly predictable in following conventional criteria of action and therefore similar to those of their opponents.

The bipolar world order produced by the two nuclear states constituted so much a limitation as a clear and certain frame for contingent strategies and political outlines.

This state of affairs allowed to reconcile – only to some extent and for a limited time – different orienta-

tions of foreign policy, allowing «[…] a policy that was neither militarist nor pacifist, neither isolationist nor imperialist, but a policy of containment and deterrence» (Fontana 2008: 243); a kind of strategy essentially aimed at defining a multilateral policy with European allies.

Hereinafter, the Berlin Wall collapse – and the consequent end of the Cold War – produced a historical caesura during which the United States lived the thrill of a solo power allowed by the new unilateralism and characterized by a disproportionate confidence in self-sufficiency and trust in their capabilities. However, this new global scene began very soon to replay old dynamics that the bipolar order had frozen for at least two decades.

The disappearance of a traditional enemy, of a definite and predictable enemy, produced both the disappearance of reference frames and limits, as well as that of the discipline to which these ones compelled.

The new political order produced, as first consequences, a significant widening of available options and a great unpredictability of consequences.

The Clinton years were marked by a multilateral approach able to reconcile pragmatism and idealism in order to govern globalization and thus to support worldwide markets and democracy.

However, globalization began very soon to show the other side of the coin: traditional identities and local belongings soon revived through a movement christened as *glocal.* During this phase, the U.S. military commitments run into several difficulties in trying to stabilize the so called "hot spots" (that is Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus, Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa) where old ethnic, religious and national conflicts were strongly coming up again.

First of all, a huge gap emerged between techno-military supremacy and the substantial inability to exercise a significant political influence.

9/11 radically changed this scenario, producing for the second time in U.S. history a serious and real external threat within National borders.

However, the complexity of an event as has been that of 9/11, cannot be reduced to a mere ellipse, to a *before* and an *after* that usually characterizes historical caesuras, even though the event at issue has been.

A historical caesura, that yet involved, and at the same time incorporated, a series of changes and trends that were already in place, acting as a detonator of a series of processes already worked out during the last century and characterized by their multiple and heterogeneous space and time dislocations and origins.

9/11 has been the first historical event in the era of global communication. Beyond its tragic dimensions, the terrorist act coincided with the awareness that the global village, digital and dematerialized, had become a reality. In a historical moment in which everything seemed to converge towards homologa-

tion, 9/11 induced not only the United States, but the whole Western world, to a profound reflection on every aspect of its identity.

The symbolic valence of the terrorist act was amplified by the knowledge that it dealt with a challenge that was – and still is – played not only on a geopolitical stage, but also – and even more – on an ideological one, primarily through the absolute rejection of a part of the world to conform itself to a western way of life model.

An awareness that fueled among the social interstices the idea of a hostile, threatening and unpredictable world.

A threat that, unlike the previous ones, was being more and more framed and perceived as multi-faceted and increasingly ubiquitous, global and devious, driven by an asymmetric warfare conducted through non-conventional weapons and therefore unpredictable.

A threat to which the United States replied with a new mission: heading up the fight against Islamic terrorism through pre-emptive wars, conducted even unilaterally and without necessarily having to respond to traditional allies as well as to the international community.

A declared war against Afghanistan and a second war in Iraq proved all the limits of this kind of political strategy.

(a) First of all, the inability to ensure stability and internal security through a foreign war.

There was already molding a widespread perception among the public opinion that the solution to terrorism was not to be found in a war being waged on the other side of the world, and the awareness that the risk and the threat of terrorism were already deeply infiltrated into the interstices of American social life. Anyway, the Twin Towers' attempters boasted American citizenship, just like the London attacker would have boasted the British one, a few months later.

(b) Secondly, the by now unpopular war in Afghanistan had raised an unavoidable matter of legitimacy in the face of world's public opinion.

(c) Finally, the awareness' maturation, already ushered at the end of the previous decade, that military supremacy did not necessarily tantamount to moral, cultural and political influence.

It is in the light of this cultural climate that we can read some of American mainstream film production trends since 2001.

American Cinema after 9/11

Although contemporary cinema, as anticipated, does not constitute a clean break with the past one, it recounts a reality that has lived 9/11 and which cannot disregard the changes that this event has carried on social, political and economic planes, and it does it almost always without re-staging its image.

As we are going to observe during the data analysis, the biopic boom in post-9/11 cinema – and particularly from 2004 onwards – is closely related to the deep ruptures determined by the event, both in terms of ideology and of representability.

(1) 9/11 turns out to be, from the very beginning and by its ontological nature, an event that undermines every traditional paradigm of cinematographical representation (see Carboni M. 2007): worldwide live telecast of Twin Towers' collapse depauperated Hollywood's canons of spectacularity forever.

A first issue that inevitably arises, but we will not go into here, has been that of how Hollywood would have reclaimed the catastrophical image in the post-9/11 scopic regime (see Baudrillard J. 2003).

The point at issue is that the Twin Towers' attacks were conceived from the outset as a media event, an event that already contained by itself all the sensationalism to which we spectators are used to attend at the movies.

In front of this excess, the cinematographic image is literally

> [...] crushed between the possibility offered by television, that is that of just showing what had happened [...] and the other one, that of other art forms which leave 9/11 in its blind spot, simply not showing it, rather transferring it directly to the symbolic regime (Gandini L.-Bellavita A. 2008: 10).

(2) Secondly, 9/11 created a deep rupture of the American dream among the collective imagination, and therefore of many certainties associated with its conceptual pillars: post 9/11 cinema reverses many deep-grounded postulates of American gigantism, such as unassailableness, strength and internal cohesion.

Therefore, the key issues for the topic that concerns us, are at this point broadly two: (a) representability, but also, and consequently (b) the possibility of trauma working-through at least on a symbolic level.

9/11 seems to be on the one hand an unrepresentable event, but on the other it requires a parallel need of representation to be worked through, that is a need of *collective narrative reconfiguration*, as it has been defined by Bellavita and Gandini (Gandini L. – Bellavita A. 2008).

In this scenario, the role of cinema – since ever privileged place of reflection on historical contingencies – could not be but that of bringing 9/11 consequences back to a horizon of meaning through symbolical elaborations of the event.

Therefore, post 9/11 cinema seems to be right from the outset divided between two attitudes:

> 1. A first one – actually not widely practiced – is that of **event's diegetic thematization in its present context,** either in a *documentary* as well as in a *fictional* form. Under this macro category we find among best-known works documentaries such as *11/9* (2002), shot by French brothers Jules

and Gedeon Naudet, and edited to commemorate the first anniversary of the tragedy; and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) by Michael Moore.

With regard to feature films, after a period of moral reticence that had taken the tones of censorship after the attacks, five years after the fact – in 2006 – were realized, and not far from each other, *World Trade Center* (2006) by Oliver Stone and *United 93* (2006) by Paul Greengrass.

2. The second approach, far more practiced, is that which considers the event in a less explicit way, transferring unrepresentability into an **intratextual theme on a symbolic level** through a subtle dynamics of absence-presence not only of the event, but also of its traumatic consequences.

Furthermore, movie's ability to filter social unrest through its symbolic elaborations uses different moments of temporal contextualization, as we will take on further.

Symbolic Elaborations of Trauma and the Role of Biopics in Post 9/11 Cinematographic Landscape

Cinema seems to deal with terrorist attacks' trauma and its consequences in contemporary America through various forms of symbolic transposition. We are going to briefly summarize these peculiar narrative modes in order to understand their roles in the contemporary cinematographical landscape. This analysis will let us finally grasp the reasons of biopics' second most successful season. As we are going to see, the genre in question is in fact crosswise present in every post-9/11 cinema trend.

Precisely because of its versatility, the biopic seems to become indirectly the more frequented mode of symbolic elaboration of post 9/11 social climate. Thanks to its intrinsic qualities, and especially to its peculiar ability to interpret and re-shape contemporary subjectivity at different levels, biopics seem to constitute the more coherent and symbolically dense answer to contemporary social unrest within the current cinematic landscape.

(1) A first immediate reaction to wtc attacks has been that of certain places, or rather **non-places** – as Marc Augé calls them (Augé M. 1992) – **demonization**: first of all obviously airplanes and airports, through obsessive, paranoid and fearful connotations. It should be mentioned here that to feed this state of paranoia in social life's substratum concurred to a remarkable extent the USA PATRIOT ACT. This fact, linked with the existing state of paranoia generated by a destabilizing sense of control loss – not only on a large scale, but also within the microcosm of private lives – greatly contributed to increase obsessions and suspicions already present in social life after 9/11.

Red Eye (2005), and even more *Flightplan* (2005), well represent the social climate of that period

through the diegetization of uncontrolled spread of paranoia and claustrophobia experienced by the main characters.

Non-places often become nightmares, characterized by a sense of claustrophobia well thematized in *The Terminal* (2004), movie based on the true story of Mehram Karimi Nasseri, alias Viktor Navorski, Iranian refugee who lived in the terminal 1 of Charles de Gaulle Airport –Paris- for eighteen years (from August 1988 to July 2006). Although disguised as comedy, the movie describes well the sense of claustrophobia experienced by the protagonist during his "imprisonment".

Moreover, the story problematizes the concepts of threshold and border: body and space is all what remains to a man who has no longer a nationality (neither, therefore, identity). However, Viktor is a historical subject that is not afraid of reality and that is able to change himself and his environment, both in concrete terms (through manual work) and in relationally ones.

(2) A second form of trauma symbolical outworking is constituted by those that Bellavita and Gandini have defined as *movies of the present* (Gandini L. – Bellavita A. 2008), movies that thematize **evil** through its incarnation in foreign bodies. In particular the horror genre seems to politically reflect on the immediate sense of closure to the outside, essentially on the sense of siege, which seems to connote the present political situation, through movies like the remake, in 2004, of Romero's 1978 movie, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) by Zack Snyder, as well as *Land of the Dead* (2005).

Unlike movies such as *Inside Man* (2006), which make any enemy's identification impossible – situation often generated by the overlap between victims and perpetrators – this kind of movies stage tangible and identifiable foreign bodies as in the case of *Collateral* (2005), *300* (2006) and *Cloverfield* (2008). These are works that symbolically respond to the real indeterminacy and elusiveness of the enemy through tangible representations of evil.

Although biopics usually tend to celebrate the subjects staged, there are two examples that can be attributed to this category in post-9/11 biographical cinema: *Downfall* (2004), movie which tells of the Nazi dictator's final days in his Berlin bunker at the end of WWII, and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), biopic on the two decades of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin's government.

(3) The third cinematographical back-kick in front of this state of loss seems to be that of a **bewilderment** in front of the collapse of certainties which until then had always been the essential and constituent cornerstones of American way of life, but that by now throw many of big screen's characters in a state of bewilderment: lives torn from the custom, who experience a state of disorientation and uncertainty with which they suddenly find themselves to put up with. *Movies of the after*, because future-oriented; often contenting with the mere survival, such as *Gerry* (2002), or *Into the Wild* (2007), biopic on the young Christopher McCandless' life.

In this same category we also find a kind of choral movies which have as their barycentre the idea of destiny, that is the idea that each other's lives are inextricably tied to the fates of others.

A movie trend launched by *Crash* (2004) and successfully continued by *Babel* (2006); movies that cleverly portray the psychological social distress following the attacks.

The narrative architecture of this kind of movies stands on a multiple story line that articulates movie's discourse through a crystallization and tightening of social relations that seem to dominate American multi-racial society after the shock of the attacks, but also on their spatial dislocation, as a symptom of a general malaise that has affected not only the United States.

In both cases, this kind of movies well reflect the state of isolation, solitude and closure which seems to connote more and more American social condition (and not only) after September 11.

The biopic *Bobby* (2006) on the death of presidential candidate Robert Kennedy is certainly emblematic of the way. The movie not only establishes a parallel between disillusionment of the present and projectuality of the past, but returns to the big screen – through the biographical pretext – a fresco of the events that had changed American history.

(4) A fourth way of trauma outworking on the big screen is represented by the so called *movies of before* (Gandini L. – Bellavita A. 2008). Sense of guilt and responsibility for what has happened are inextricably linked to the **theme of justice**. To pay for one's own mistakes becomes the necessary narrative resolution for these kind of movies that are as much about the questions as about the awareness of many historical developments that led to the current state of affairs. As remarked by Gandini

> […] by the time when the attack on the Twin Towers was not claimed as a pure and simple terrorist attack, but as a form of retaliation against a nation guilty of serious crimes, remaining however unpunished until that moment, the ethical landscape changed radically (Gandini L. 2007).

Given this state of affairs, the most serious trauma was not that of aggression, but rather the sudden awareness of the relativity of the notion of justice, and therefore the rise of issues of legitimacy of those who hitherto claimed to act on its behalf.

Mainstream cinema has therefore approached this kind of issues through different perspectives. Primarily through facing historical past – in such a dense, heterogeneous and decidedly stratified way – as source of political and historical responsibility for the present situation.

The historical outworking of guilt finds in *Gangs of New York* (2002) a critical qualification; set in the age of American civil war, it deeply calls into question many of the clichés at the base of American democratic tradition.

Likewise *Open Range* (2003) retraces the historical stages that led to American national formation, first

founded on freedom without borders and then more and more obsessed by private property, as well as *Lord of War* (2005), where the explicit self-critical dimension is the one that condemns the United States as world's leading supplier of arms trade.

The positive outcome of guilt recognition in this kind of movies basically consists in the recognition of an ethical reference code that permits to re-impose socially shared parameters of good and evil.

(5) This latter trend is not far from a certain process of **critical revisionism** of (the not too far!) political and historical past. This approach has generated, not only in cinema, a copious and still operating reflection by historians, political scientists, sociologists, but also and more generally by opinion leaders, who are engaged in critically investigating the causes of Twin Towers' attacks and international terrorism.

These studies have favored the emergence of historiographical truths about military approaches and United States' foreign policy so far untold, or just unknown to the public opinion.

This aspect, associated with the more general disillusionment with justice and the awareness of the many flaws of the judiciary as well as of the political system, generate a widespread lack of confidence in the apparatus, itself represented (but also constantly fed!) by critical works on the way of doing politics and on the system in general, as in *Lions for the Lambs* (2007), and even before in *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004). The actual remake of homonymous John Frankenheimer's movie – played by Frank Sinatra in 1962 – severely criticizes politics as a whole, through the wise calibration of reality and dream, mind manipulation and political exploitation.

Condemnations of unhealthy ways of doing politics in contemporary world is also the main theme of movies that openly blame entire historical epochs, like *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005), accusing both the era of McCarthyism, as the role of media in supporting, or rather denouncing, certain ideologies.

There are many biographical productions that can be included in this trend, from **The Good Shepherd** (2006), which tells the birth and growth of CIA through the gaze of its chief Edward Wilson alias James Jesus "Gray Ghost" Angleton from 1954 to 1974, to **W** (2008), story of a mediocre man which becomes President of the United States. These are movies that retrace country's political history and the international dynamics to it related, through its very protagonists. The recent biopic on the life of Edgar Hoover, FBI's Chief during the last fifty years, **J.Edgar** (2011), is truly emblematic by the way it exposes – not without a certain degree of criticism- the backgrounds that have accompanied the major events of American history in the latter half of the last century.

There is however a movie in particular which seems to be emblematic in revealing the mechanisms of movie's symbolic outworking of post 9/11 historical juncture in a revisionist key: **Charlie Wilson's War** (2007).

True story of the Texan congressman who funded in the Eighties, through the dispatch of weapons, the

Afghan resistance against the Russian invasion; the biopic becomes a pretext to promote the thesis that William Blum had already been arguing since 1995 (Blum W. 2003), namely that it was the U.S. to subsidize Afghanistan – mainly through the supply of weapons – to defend itself against the Soviet invasion during the Eighties and that it was still the U.S. to subsequently support the Taliban government in 1996.

Biopics' strength and popularity resides largely in its ability to interpret social unrest according to actual models through the involvement of past figures.

Not surprisingly *Charlie Wilson's War* was realized in 2007, during Bush's second term complete and final defeat, in a period when his presidency had already been condemned as one of the worst in American history. The main reason for the general social unrest at that time was the increasingly unpopular war against Afghanistan. No better way, then, of redeeming American people from this sin than to represent the paladin who liberated the Afghan people from Russian oppression during the Cold War!

(5) Briefly summarizing, it seems that American cultural production (and beyond) is working to restore ideal touchstones through which concretely re-setting up the nation.

In this scenario, a far more proactive trend that connotes transversely and in a decisive way a great part of post 9/11 Hollywood cinema, is the **mythopoeic narrative** of American homeland. After the WTC attacks, patriotism as well as the search of national core values and the tales of national cohesion, had taken on particular importance, demonstrated by the success of two different genres, both strongly oriented to national cohesion's symbolic reconstruction, of which they become most emblematic: (a) **sports movies**, such as *Miracle* (2004), which is actually a *biopic sport movie*, since it is based on the true story of hockey team coach Herb Brooks; and (b) **biopics** which, through the staging of national exempla, seem to play a real mythopoeic function in national narratives' reconstruction.

Examples here are many: ***The Aviator*** (2004), that we are going to deepen further; Cole Porter's biopic ***De-lovely*** (2004), already mentioned ***The Good Shepherd*** (2006) until ***Bobby*** (2006) and ***I'm not there*** (2009) and many others: biographical productions look to the historical, political and cultural past in a self-celebratory form, but also in order to re-impose points of reference in present times.

To strengthen political and social cohesion around a core of shared values and symbols seems to be a priority for the mainstream biographical production.

(6) Finally, movies seem to focus on **archetypes** that concern the Western culture throughout as a whole, not only the United States. It is understood: in the Western mind are enclosed so much those elements of its greatness, as those of its own destruction. U.S.A have been victims of their own system of reality spectacularization.

(a) A first trend seems to be the **reflection on technological progress** and especially on the aeronautical

industry development which, of course, is the first to break down borders. Three biopics thematizing this aspect have been shot at a short distance from each other: ***Catch me if you can*** (2002); ***The Aviator*** *(2004); **Amelia*** (2009).

Especially ***The Aviator*** (2004) seems to compound reflections on technological progress with a second trend, (b) that of those movies which question **the role of cinema** in trauma outworking and reflect on their role in recounting and explaining their own time in the light of a diachronic analysis of their own position in society.

No coincidence that ***The Aviator*** (2004) is set during the two decades (1927-1947) that witnessed the maximum development of aviation technology as well as that of image reproduction.

The movie in some way synthesizes Hollywood cultural colonization with the air ones (cinema and aviation are almost contemporaries), structuring the whole story on the religious sentiment of Catholic matrix of guilt-expiation-redemption, a trend of post 9/11 cinema we have already analyzed.

(c) Furthermore, the reconceptualization of current times cannot disregard the renewed **recognition of cinematic image's status and role in contemporary media landscape**.

The last years have witnessed an increase of works in which the movies have become tools for revealing "directly" the real through the means offered by new technology. *Redacted* (2007), *Rendition* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), are all movies that hardly attack the post-9/11 management policy through a critique of the system supported by a strong hybridization of languages, and therefore by the mixture of real and fictional, that steadily emphasize the role of cinema in relating on contemporary reality.

No shortage of critics. *Flags of our fathers* (2006) is part of this type of movies, in the way it criticizes image exploitations in order to favor specific historical-political situations. Just as it happened with the famous photograph of American soldiers raising the American flag after the battle of Iwo Jima, it happened with the images of 9/11. Once again the role of media constitutes the problematic core through which the narrative is structured.

Mass media system's critical thematization is also one of contemporary biopics' thematic nodes. We've already mentioned ***The Aviator*** (2004), which summarizes the criticality of technological progress in its various declinations through its narrative thematization; in ***Bobby*** (2006) the editing of television images with the cinematic ones, either in their found footage form than as fake found footage, it is the linguistic device that allows to support the narrative, but to also profoundly criticize its role at once.

In truth this is the most practiced language strategy in contemporary biopics. The admixture between factual and fictional through the montage of video footage with reconstructed images constitutes not only a stylistic brand of the gender, but it becomes somehow an expedient capable of supporting in any case a metadiscourse (often critical) on images' role in contemporary reality.

The Biopic Boom of the New Millennium

As discussed in the previous section, biopics' presence in post-September 11 cinema seems to cross almost all categories that we've already identified as macro trends of contemporary cinema. These macro trends are set up as intertextual motifs, in order to shift the unrepresentable on a symbolic level through a subtle dynamics of absence/presence of both the event and its traumatic consequences.

Summarizing the issues so far emerged, it can be stated that in the light of the need for a collective narrative reconfiguration of the trauma, but also and in great part to symbolically re-impose at least the certainties related to those that were considered to be as the conceptual pillars of American ideology, biopics seem to be the most popular genre in post-9/11 cinema for several orders of reasons:

(1) The first and most immediate reason to allow the genre's resumption lies in the temporary *crisis of sensationalistic* cinema, which had dominated mainstream cinema for at least the previous two decades, and that had been a determining factor in biographical genre decline during the seventies and eighties. 9/11 is an event whose symbolic and iconic range has contributed in an unavoidable way to the redefinition of representation and representability canons, reshaping to some extent contemporary collective imaginaries. The crisis of American gigantism has been a key factor for returning to a kind of anthropocentric cinema, of which biography represents in some sense the genre par excellence!

(2) Secondly, a fundamental aspect closely related to biographical movies' production in the last decade is *time setting*. Historical periodizations that contextualize the plot assume each time heterogeneous values and functions. If on the one hand American cinema seems to have some difficulties to face up the current historical situation through contemporary settings, past and future seem to be the privileged and most helpful timeframes available for symbolic reworkings of post-9/11 American historical, political and social reality.

Future is to some extent always a kind of present anxieties and obsessions projection. It is for this reason that science fiction often constitutes a favored channel for current social tensions reworkings. Science fiction, as well as in large part also the horror genre, build alternative universes which are nothing more than reflections on contemporary historical and political contingencies and on the obsessions that mark them out.

The Past, understood both in its historical reality and in its most mythic-nostalgic dimension, allows the historical analysis and offers at the same time a utopian refuge from the present.

Biopics' revival since 2004 is a clear answer in this sense. Therefore, biopics seem to be the preferred narrative mode of the new millennium cinema in thematizing and symbolically reworking both needs imposed by historical past representation.

Critical revisionism of the recent past, re-construction of national identity and representation of Western archetypes, seem to be the main cinematographical declinations to employ this peculiar gaze at the past, as well as the most popular conceptual issues of new millennium's biographical movies.

As we've already pointed out from the outset, 9/11 does not constitute a historical caesura by itself; instead, the event complexity seems to have carried and incorporated a series of changes and trends that were already under way. These changes were essentially dealing with the awareness that the global village had become a reality with which the individual had to come to terms. The advent of Postmodernism, as well as the globalization processes had already marked a profound break with the past.

The Breaking down of geopolitical borders, the consequent decline of the Nation-State and the pervasiveness of new technologies, are just a few of the changes that had occurred during twentieth century's last half, but that by virtue of their extent breadth and of their relapse on every aspect of society, had already led to significant consequences on the person in every respect.

If on the one hand the new postmodern epistemological scenario was providing the individual with new tools and more opportunities to spend in various processes of identity construction, it is also true that faced with the dispersion and fall of great frames of reference, once able to guide the individual in his choices and in the recognition of its own social, cultural and ideological membership; these definitions are nowadays gradually becoming more and more problematic, complex and difficult to manage.

Postmodern society re-aligns the subject in many potential ways, it offers identity resources that are no longer necessarily constituted by references such as locality and nation, but which are structured at a global level: decentralization and relativism deprive the contemporary subject of stable and consistent references.

The absence of unifying centers able to guide individual's value orientations, the inability to produce coherent values nor symbolic references, the plurality of voices expressing thoughts, values, and identity references are heterogeneous and make individual's resources inadequate for coping and regaining some kind of anchorages in this renewed landscape.

Given this scenario, the biographical genre seems to strongly reemerge in new millennium cinema. Its peculiar ability to absorb and rework issues and questions related to contemporary subjectivity, but also to offer them new symbolical points of reference, make the biopic one of the most popular genres of contemporary cinema.

It can therefore be stated that biopics constitute in many respects a kind of translation of identity's recovery debate on the cinematographical front.

(1) This last issue is closely related to what we have seen to be one of the major contemporary cinema macro trends, namely that of offering some kind of main and solid points of reference to American cul-

ture. One of the genre's most significant features lies in fact in its peculiar faculty and ability to deploy a series of *topoi* whose historical, cultural and iconographical matrix is strongly rooted in American and Western culture in general.

Let's see then, data in hand, which seem to be the main trends within the genre, both in quantity and quality of the subjects staged.

(a) First, it can be noticed a considerable increase in the amount of biopics realized since 2004 (see AN-NEX 1 – chart A); furthermore subjects taken from the national context are prevalent (see ANNEX 2 – chart B). These data are not surprising given the considerations made so far and particularly those on biopics' role in national history and identity mythmaking.
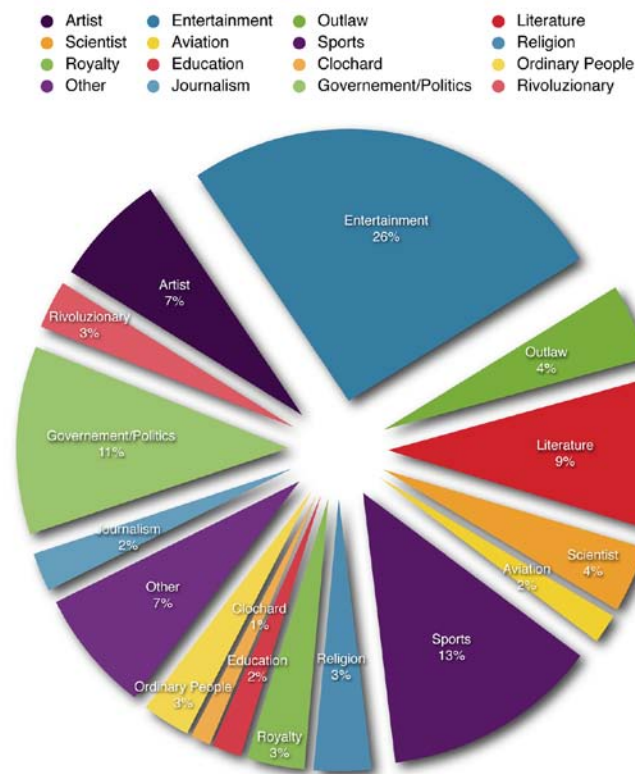
ANNEX 1 - CHART A Biopic Production 2002-2011
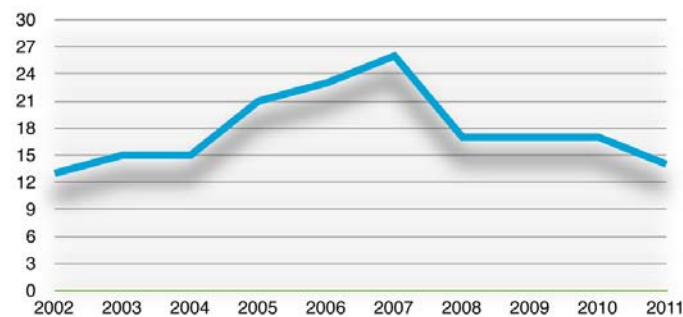
ANNEX 2 - CHART B
Biopic Production 2002-2011-nationality
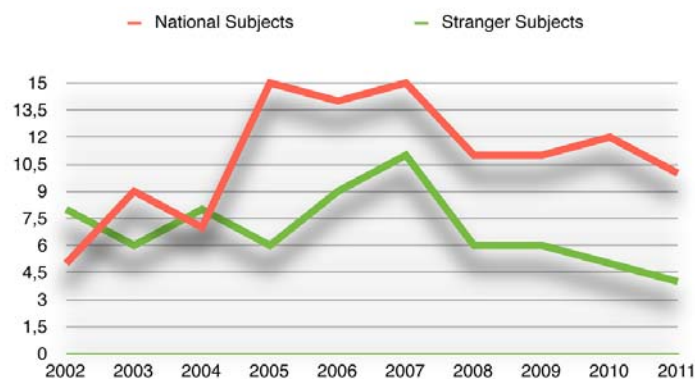
(b) Entertainment is the most represented rating, but sports and politics are also quite copious (see ANNEX 3 – CHART C). Sports biopics more often unfold life stories whose main character is represented according to homeland's values, particularly in the case of team games. At a closer look, in fact, lonely heroes emerging from such narratives, and especially from stories on baseball teams, like *Moneyball* (2007) or *Dummy Hoy* (2007) or on hockey teams like *Miracle* (2004), do not actually play for themselves nor for their own glory, but for homeland's glory and pride. Both on the narrative and on the figurative level, it is the story of the nation that prevails in this kind of movies. A clear example by the way is *Miracle* (2004), biopic on former player and then coach Herb Brooks, who coached the national hockey team at the Olympics 1980. National flag's glorifications emerge both from the diegetic level – it is in fact repeatedly invoked as a kind of action motivation – as well as from the figurative one – the biopic is literally dotted by visual references and evocations of national symbols.

ANNEX 3 - CHART C
Subject's occupations in biopics 2002-2011

- Artist
- Scientist
- Royalty
- Other
- Entertainment
- Aviation
- Education
- Journalism
- Outlaw
- Sports
- Clochard
- Governement/Politics
- Literature
- Religion
- Ordinary People
- Rivoluzionary

Entertainment 26%
Artist 7%
Rivoluzionary 3%
Governement/Politics 11%
Journalism 2%
Other 7%
Clochard 1%
Education 2%
Ordinary People 3%
Royalty 3%
Religion 3%
Sports 13%
Aviation 2%
Scientist 4%
Literature 9%
Outlaw 4%

(c) With regard to the political area, not surprisingly, given the uncertainties that we have seen emerging on every front after 2001 (but widely anticipated by the previous decade …) and in particular given the difficulties, demonstrated to a large extent also by institutions, in dealing with this hard situation,

the cinematic apparatus starts operating in order to question government's policies that have to some extent contributed to the current crisis. The critical discourses forcefully emerging from biopics such as *The Good Shepherd* (2007); *Charlie Wilson's War* (2006); *A Mighty Heart* (2007); *Milk* (2008); *W* (2008), *Into the storm* (2009); *Casino Jack* (2010); *J.Edgar* (2011), and many others, are emblematic by the way.

Given the difficulties and uncertainties that characterize the historical and cultural post 9/11 context, we have seen how Hollywood seems to struggle in order to reintroduce points of reference, certainties and securities which were represented in the past by American's Way of Life conceptual pillars. In this struggle, we have seen biography emerging as a genre capable of returning in the round personalities, as well as cultural models of reference.

Models that seem to be largely taken from a specific historical context, a context in which trust and confidence in future as well as in progress and in founding national values and milestones had not yet been disillusioned, that is the American reality before and immediately after the assassination of President Kennedy.

Every nation is unavoidably marked by collective traumas. These can be considered as moments of caesura taking over time the value of veritable watersheds, historical caesuras that punctuate national history each time by opening new perspectives and new socio-cultural reference scenarios.

For U.S.A., the end of the sixties represented a period of national mourning and thus of disillusionment with the enthusiasm that had connoted the first half of the decade. The assassination of JFK in 1963, that of Malcolm X in 1965, those of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968, mark the final disenchantment of all ideals that the protagonists of American political and cultural debate had strongly supported up to that time. And it is precisely to this time that a great portion of contemporary biopics seems to turn the gaze for at least two reasons:

(1) A first reason resides again in what we had already defined as critical revisionism of those events which have brought to the current state of things, and to the consequent attempt of national identity reconstruction. As we have widely argued, the use of key-characters who have inspired the cultural and political debate until the sixties is meant to offer a precise kind of values and cultural references in present times.

(2) A second reason lies in what we had already identified as the difficulty of articulating a discourse on present culture by direct representations: discourses on contemporary crisis are better supported by representations of past events.

No coincidence then that *Bobby* (2006) had been released in 2006, that is at the time when the war in Afghanistan was becoming increasingly unpopular. And no coincidence that the movie opens with voice of Senator Kennedy, who utters the words "they made a desert and called that peace" in front of coffins' procession returning from Vietnam.

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