

File 1 p. 20 • The success of biopics explained

True events can be much more fascinating than any fictional story. [...]

The life stories of great people have inspired filmmakers since the birth of the medium. The reason biopic has garnered¹ more attention of late is due to its dominance in the awards landscape. The ascendance of biographical films at the Oscars is a result of the critics' recognition of the more demanding nature of the roles and a surge² of ambitious actors who are willing to take on these challenges.

Eddie Redmayne's role in *The Theory of Everything* won him the Best Actor award at the 2015 Oscars. Redmayne played English physicist Stephen Hawking and walked the audience through Hawking's life, starting with his time at Cambridge University to his diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), the pinnacle of his career and the fall of his marriage.

The 33-year-old actor was applauded for expertly demonstrating the effects of a deadly neurological disease on a victim and those around them. Redmayne captured the subtle and dramatic aspects of Hawking's illness.

Playing Hawking, or any other real person, is difficult because there is the pressure of accuracy³. By having a real person or scenario to compare the film to, the audience will judge harsher. [...]

The pressure the cast and crew feel does not just end with audience expectation and comparison to reality. Taking on the role of a real person is also demanding because actors want to do justice to the person they are portraying.

The obstacles of retelling a true story are recognized by viewers and critics. Eight of the last 11 winners for Best Actor won by playing real people. It is due to this acknowledgement⁴ of arduous research, audience expectation and stellar performances that faithfully represent true characters, that biopics are receiving the credits they've earned during this year's award season.

Neontommy, March 30, 2015

1. collect 2. sudden rush 3. precision 4. recognition

File 1 p. 22 • Celebrities comment on their own biopics

While it might seem fun to be the subject of a feature film, not every person-turned-character has loved seeing his or her life played out on the big screen.

Mark Zuckerberg on *The Social Network* (2010)

There aren't a lot of college students whose exploits would be interesting enough to sustain a two-hour running time. But Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg wasn't your typical co-ed¹. [...] In an interview with *60 Minutes*, he noted that: "It's pretty interesting to see what parts they got right and what parts they got wrong. I think that they got every single T-shirt that they had the Mark Zuckerberg character wear right; I think I own all of those T-shirts. And they got the sandals right and all that. But... there are hugely basic things that they got wrong. [They] made it seem like my whole motivation for building Facebook was so I could get girls, right? And they completely left out the fact that my girlfriend, I've been dating since before I started Facebook."

Winnie Mandela on *Winnie* (2011)

Winnie Mandela [...] had a point when she complained to CNN that she felt it was irresponsible of the filmmakers to not consult her on the project. "I have absolutely nothing against Jennifer [Hudson]², but I have everything against the movie itself," she said. "I was not consulted. I am still alive³. And I think that it is total disrespect to come to South Africa, make a movie about my struggle, and call that movie some translation of 'The Romantic Life of Winnie Mandela.' I think it is an insult. I don't know what would be romantic in our bitter⁴ struggle."

Madonna on the *Blond Ambition* project (2017)

As the old saying goes, "You're not really famous until you have to contest a biopic about you." So is the case for Empress of Pop [...] Following the news that Universal was developing the project, titled *Blond Ambition*, Madonna

wrote on Instagram: “Nobody knows what I know and what I have seen. Only I can tell my story. Anyone else who tries is a charlatan and a fool. Looking for instant gratification without doing the work. This is a disease in our society.”

Jennifer M. Wood, *mentalfloss.com*, 2017

1. school mate
2. the actress who played Winnie Mandela
3. She since died in 2018.
4. *amer*

Marco Rubio (Republican Senator)

This is total lunacy. And a disservice at a time when our people need reminders of what we can achieve when we work together. The American people paid for that mission, on rockets built by Americans, with American technology and carrying American astronauts. It wasn't a UN mission.

Ted Cruz (Republican Senator)

Really sad: Hollywood erases American flag from Moon landing. This is wrong, and consistent with leftists' disrespecting the flag and denying American exceptionalism. JFK¹ saw that it mattered that America go to the Moon—why can't Hollywood see that today?

Mark & Eric Armstrong (Neil's sons)

The filmmakers chose to focus on Neil looking back at the Earth... This story is human and it is universal. Of course it celebrates an American achievement. It also celebrates an achievement for all mankind...

File 1 p. 29 • Why it is nearly impossible to make a good biopic

Today's inquisitive and critical viewers expect some semblance of authenticity [...]. This is especially true if it's a film based on a public figure with a well-documented history. The digital age of readily available and *free* information in any place with a wifi connection has made it virtually impossible to tell a life story and not be questioned on its validity if supposed vital details are left out.

Irrespective of any expected stumbling blocks¹, the Hollywood machine has continued to market biopics as glossy, money-making, blockbuster productions. In recent years, however, some of the best life stories have been told in documentary format, namely *What Happened*, *Miss Simone?*, *Cobain: Montage of Heck*, *The Imposter*, and *Grizzly Man*. These documentaries covered the real life experiences of people whose lives were anything but ordinary, and owe their success to simple storytelling and fact-based research. Documentaries are rarely ever looking to be anything other than a visual medium for an understood truth, and so their stories offer a veracity not corrupted by ill-fitting performances or a desperate desire for award-circuit success. In their case, less is definitely more.

On the question of whether documentaries are a more feasible way of portraying a life story, [the film Producer Chris] Sumpton believes it comes down to a question of taste and financing. "All audiences want high-quality images and sound, but of course are accepting of lower quality, historical imagery as in the case of documentaries, which are also the cheaper way to go." The 2003 documentary, *Tupac: Resurrection*, was monumentally more critically successful than the recently released film [*All Eyez on Me*, 2018]. The success of *Amy* on Amy Winehouse, is also a positive testament² to the notion that the single camera focus of a documentary is the best vehicle to deliver as honest a retelling of a life as possible.

vice.com, August 2017

1. obstacles

2. Tribute