

William H. Epstein, R. Barton Palmer, eds.. *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity*. Horizons of Cinema Series. New York: State University of New York Press, 2016. vii + 344 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-6079-6.

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William H. Epstein and R. Barton Palmer's edited collection *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity* seeks to contribute to film history and theory and to the study of nationalism. In his introduction, Epstein states that the book has two main goals: to rethink an "important but neglected biographic sub-genre" and to argue that the genre has wider social and political importance for national identity (p. 2). Each of the thirteen essays that follows present a close reading of a biopic (a biographical film), offering new takes on the genre as modernist, reflexive, and fundamentally transformative. In terms of film history, most of the essays share a clear understanding of what a biopic is; they build on or revise George Custen's seminal work on the biopic, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992). When it comes to intervening in scholarship on American national identity, however, the essays are less consistent. Surprisingly, few of them explicitly address how the biopic (both the genre as a whole and specific examples of it) relates to national culture and national identity; other chapters offer only cursory comments and several others make no mention of national identity at all.

Some of the volume's chapters reflect primarily on the biopic genre's history and suggest a new

theoretical interpretation. Murray Pomerance's chapter looks at the historical figure of Erich Weiss/Harry Houdini, Tony Curtis who portrayed him in the 1953 film *Houdini*, and Houdini's various representations in biographies and in the biopic, arguing for a rethinking of the link between the historical figure, various other biographical portrayals, and the biopic. Dennis Bingham's chapter on *Bound for Glory*, a 1976 Woody Guthrie biopic, explores the history of the biopic genre and examines why, in the 1970s when other genres were rethought as entertainment with a more socially responsible message, the biopic remained "directionless" and resistant to modernism (p. 51). Homer B. Pettet's chapter on Wyatt Earp and the West paints a broad picture of cinematic portrayals of the Wild West, the western film narrative, and the western hero and antihero from the silent film era to the present through the figure of Wyatt Earp.

The other group of chapters discusses how changing ideas about gender, race, and sexuality—all crucial for the construction of American national identity—affect the biopic genre, and how, in turn, biopics challenge accepted notions of American masculinity/femininity, racial identity, and sexuality. Claire Perkins's chapter on *Sylvia* (2003), about the life of Sylvia Plath, argues that

biopics, and this “badaptation” in particular, are critical and reflexive genres/forms that serve as “concentrated sites for the assessment of cultural value” and are, therefore, significant for the construction of “national culture” (pp. 183, 197). Gabriele Linke’s excellent chapter on *Kinsey* (2005) and American sexual identity is an example of how film theory and studies on national identity can be effectively combined to offer new insights into both. She argues that the life and work of Alfred Kinsey received a lot of attention both in the 1950s and in the 2000s and that “the battle over Kinsey and his legacy has been, in both eras, a metaphorical battle over the American character” (p. 241). Monika Pietrzak-Franger’s well-executed essay asserts that *Fur* (2006) seems to erase Diane Arbus’s art, presenting instead a “fairy tale ... about an adventurous ... ’50s housewife ... discovering her bohemian side” (pp. 202-203). Pietrzak-Franger states that paradoxically, the film also offers a “metareflection” on the limitations of the biopic genre (p. 203), especially with regard to portraying women, and challenges the mythology surrounding the figure of the (male) artist. Julia Erhart’s piece on Gus van Sant’s *Milk* (2008) notes that, whether intentionally reflexive or not, the film has been read by critics (and, presumably, by audiences) as a commentary on contemporary political and cultural realities.

In terms of race, James Burns and Abel A. Bartley’s chapter on *The Great White Hope* (1970) about Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion and the first de facto black film star, argues that the film’s “commercial and artistic failure illuminates important shifts in the nature of black identity as it was being reconstituted by Hollywood during this turbulent political era” (p. 224). More broadly, the essay offers insights into Hollywood genres and American race relations. Also excellent is Palmer’s chapter on Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012). Palmer maintains that the more interesting biopics “embrace public history’s troubling contradictions or conflicts.” A popular cultural representation of a central national icon

such as President Abraham Lincoln can challenge the way we remember national history. “The film reverently perpetuates the Lincoln legend, performing the work of creating/sustaining a national identity in which he is inarguably the central figure” (p. 282). But at the same time, most importantly by placing Thaddeus Stevens, a political opponent of Lincoln, at the center of the narrative and contrasting the public with the private spheres, the film is like the best biopics that “deconstruct ... the very myths they perpetuate, promoting a new, often challenging version of whomever they simultaneously honor” (p. 298).

Overall, the volume is successful as an attempt to rethink the biopic genre, but it would have benefited from a more thorough overview of the current state of scholarship on the biopic genre, preferably presented at the outset rather than in the individual essays. This would have helped nonspecialists assess the significance of the claims the essays make regarding the genre and would have situated the essays’ arguments in the theoretical and historical scholarship. Its contribution to the study of nationalism is more limited, though many of the essays are insightful and highlight the potential of film studies to contribute to the study of nationalism. Most problematic from this regard is the lack of engagement, in the introduction and in most of the essays, with the fairly extensive scholarship on popular nationalism, as well as cinema and nationalism. Although the introduction states that American national identity is in itself a large and complex topic and lists the wide range of issues nationalism studies is concerned with, the chosen quotations from Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith do little to convey where the book fits into the field. In fact, almost all of the essays do have relevance for national identity. But too often the reader is left wondering how exactly the biopic in question reflects on and/or constructs national identity, indeed what the latter even means and how it works in society.

Nevertheless, it is clear from almost all of the contributions that popular films can be fruitful sources for understanding how a shared national culture is contested and negotiated in the public sphere. Reflecting the contributors' varied disciplinary backgrounds (African studies, film studies, art history, English, cultural studies, literature, history, and British and American studies, among others), the essays offer a wide range of successful examples of how popular films can be approached and analyzed to offer insight into various aspects of national identity. Even without expressly mentioning the scholarly literature on nationalism, many of the essays give examples building on the theoretical interventions by those working on popular nationalism, such as Rogers Brubaker, Tim Edensor, and Michael Billig, who have highlighted the importance of popular culture, and the banal, mundane, and everyday representations and exchanges in sustaining and constructing national identification.

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