Early in Hannah Andrews’s *Biographical Television Drama*, she notes that the theme of “transference,” an emotional bind between biographer and biographee, is a common object of analysis in biography studies. In a way, her approach performs a similar kind of transference between biography and television. Recognizing that the two match in their commonly depicted premise as groundings to the real (biography for the narrativization of an actual life, and television as an authentic mode of display), Andrews works to unfurl this complex interplay by applying themes from both fields to British biographical television. While the “biographical turn”[1] has certainly influenced media studies in various ways (works from Simone Natale, Frédérik Lesage, and Aleksandra Kaminska come to mind for their use of biography as a frame for media history), this book represents the most deliberate attempt to understand the practices of biography with the precepts of a specified media form.[2] In her words, “I want to explore the result when the medium of television and the practice of biography converge” (p. 23).

Throughout the text, Andrews balances a synthetic mixture of analytical components—aesthetics, institutional operations, production techniques, and narrative structures—that effectively chart this ontological collision, emphasizing that television can “reconstruct, represent and restructure human lives, in the process becoming a moving-image biographer” (p. 1).

This priority in mind, Andrews identifies a cluster of themes drawn from the literature and brings them to the surface as a conceptual framework comprising “issues of truth, ethical and cultural value, the public/private dichotomy, and biographical legacy” (p. 10). These work as waypoints for six chapters that cover mostly familiar topics for biography studies—genre, representation, narratives, adaptations, reputations, and biographical television beyond drama—with the stated intent of convergence. This lens and organizational scheme create a genesis, which starts with a reinvigoration of previous discussions and proceeds to
open new possible frontiers for research. A mixture of archival research, interviews, and discourse analysis defines the approach that is fronted by a corpus of collected televisual content (260 biographical dramas from 1936 to 2019) (p. 13).

Starting with the traditional topic of biography as genre, Andrews reads the biopic, the docudrama, the melodrama, and the period drama for the generic features that are frequently used to classify televisual biographical dramas. However, she then argues that biography and television fundamentally work differently than biography and film. A helpful method of differentiation is offered with the treatment of public versus private life. This dynamic is best displayed through the comparative analysis of several televisual adaptations of Alan Turing’s life with Morten Tyldum’s film The Imitation Game (2014). By considering them together, Andrews evaluates each amongst the theorizations of the biopic (The Imitation Game), drama (Breaking the Code, 1986) and docudrama (Britain’s Greatest Codebreaker, 2011), thus enabling a clear view of how “a single identity can be reinterpreted across medial lines as well as through generic convention” (p. 37). In general, the television versions maintain interest in the didactic components of Turing’s life and work, while the film skews toward the more unknowable dimensions of his life through an aesthetic centering of the affective realm. This argument is well developed through an examination of similar scenes that appear across mediums, with attention to the content of the writing alongside shot length, camera angles, and other techniques of visual style.

While this analysis aims to demonstrate difference, Andrews also flips this and contends that there are also several cross-genre similitudes. The drama crosses over into accurate holistic expression, while the docudrama features some intense dramatization, both of which are traits taken from the other. Both cinematic and televisual versions also share the professed call to action at the end, which seeks to comment or intervene in the public discourse on the individual. However, these statements—typically a final line of text—obtain different contextualized meanings through the different approaches to private (identity and individuality) versus public life (achievement and contribution to society).

The issue of truth in biography is tackled through the prevalence of realist aesthetics as a supposed authentic representational form. The embedded figural aim of biographical dramas becomes reified through the affordances of visual storytelling. This is explored both through the material (set and costume design) and performative (acting) aspects of television production. Accurate recreation as an ideology has created what Andrews calls a “judicious” use of mis-en-scène, where perfect mimicry of the real orients production design towards a research mode geared at the elicitation of familiarity to the known referent (p. 63). This can elevate into the entire mode-of-being for a show, such as The Crown (2016-23), with the promotion materials and public narrative revolving around expensive art-meets-life materialities. Tracking this into the more empirically challenging terrain of acting, Andrews demonstrates that the same can be said of embodied performance. Biographical drama engenders expectation, one that maps out ideals for physical likeness, facial expression, and voice. While scholars have previously recognized that verisimilitude has long been an aesthetic goal of biographical screen media, Andrews uncovers the ways in which these aims clash with the mode of television. Both forms of recreation are variously colored by the normative and financial conditions of television that define “production practices, technologies and schedules” (p. 71). This influences the ultimate perception of constructedness in biographical drama, from the excesses or minimalisms of set design and the supernatural look of fabricated biographees.

Biography has a stressed relationship with forms of cultural value, which seems to mostly
stem from the perceived incompatibility between human life and narrative structure. It is here, perhaps, that the dynamics of television are at their most impressionable on biographical storytelling. The televisual form is understood to always impart some form of artificiality to biography by virtue of structure. Adopting the lens of narrative theory, Andrews sees a set of near-universal dependencies built out of the two forms. A “centrality of existents”—echoing the realist aesthetics discussed earlier—is required to recognize the biography, whereas television necessitates the rhythms and emphasis of events (p. 96). This makes the specific televisual style (be it single drama, serial, or episodic series) highly deterministic of how biography occurs on television.

Single dramas are essentially the televisual equivalent of the biopic, self-contained dramatic units that “do not often innovate around plotting or attempt to replicate the complexity of lives in narrative structure” (p. 97). They tend to deal with their temporal constraint through hyper-specificity of event (creating a character story through “a moment of rupture or crisis in the life of the biographee”) or creating a journey (using events to structure plotting and character development) (pp. 100-101). This premise may be concretely understood as life stories told either in events or through events.

Serials—two or more episodes—use their temporal flexibility to entertain versions of narrative that enable life stories. In comparison, this eases some of the pressure on the pedagogical or historical workings of biography, but the episodic requirement insists upon a consistent scaffolding. The typical “rise and fall” arc of biography can operate overall, but each part also contains this internally, which may ultimately force certain feigned dramatizations (p. 103). The most common trope, the cliff-hanger, works to garner attention, but forces an uneven stitching in the life-event narrative scheme. This is most visibility attached to the form of the serial, which may be commonly envisioned as a miniseries.

At this point in the text, Andrews provides a well-conceived discussion of television’s nomenclature in different geographical settings. In this instance, as is the case throughout the book, she provides an abundance of definitional clarity that will make the language work for any reader. Andrews explains that, from a narrative standpoint, a serial differs from a series (despite a considerable amount of blurring) as the former focuses on making “strong links between episodes,” while the latter “maintains a consistent storyworld and characters” through privileging “internal narrative coherence” (p. 106). This may seem like a definitional splitting of hairs, but Andrews makes clear the value of attending to these subtle differences, since the conditions of the series present themselves as the most natural fit for biography.

It is generally understood that the television series, with its temporal affordances, prioritizes long-gestating character development and a cyclical narrative tract (p. 107). The underlying rationale is that this structure generally mimics most of the features of actual life. In turn, all the challenges of the televisual format for biographical narrative—chiefly, the imposition of narrative structure on messy life—shrink when episodic sequence is elongated. The Crown again may serve as prime example, which establishes an importance of “viewer memory and attention” to operate two connected planes (p. 108). The first plane is an episode with an event working an internal narrative function, and the second plane is the entire series’ overarching thematic throughline (especially as the planes cohere to character relations). Andrews observes that the bigger the series, the more distance the plotting tends to put between the central subject and subplots or various other areas of exploration. The processes of enlargement can even delve into intense fictionalization, creating new characters and settings for narrative projection. This may share some founding theoriz-
ation with the composite characters of the biopic, in that the conditions of the medium give rise to new ways of telling biographical stories.

Andrews’s book speaks the loudest in its analysis of narrative, due to this line of considered theoretical argumentation, and conversely, offers the most amount of theoretical uncertainty when entering adaptation studies. Are all human lives source material, meaning all biographical dramas are technically adaptations? Andrews seems to envision the spiraling into various levels of abstraction possible from the “biography as adaptation” prompt and—accurately, in my view—deems it more productive to explore the types of materials that inform biographical dramas.

In doing so, her chapter picks up a thread in adaptation studies that may consider all biographical films and television programs adaptations because of their diverse use of source texts as generators of accuracy and authentic representation. However, since “one of the defining features of adaptation analysis is to provide frameworks or taxonomies to account for the relationship between ‘original’ and adaptation,” biographical dramas are prickly due to their highly selective and synthetic use of source material (p. 126). Televsional biographies are nearly always adaptations of unclear origin, with over two-thirds of the corpus studied in the book having no publicly listed source texts (p. 130). This is what makes Andrews turn to interviews with screenwriters, where it becomes apparent that “text research” is the most common overarching norm in the genre. Usually, a biography or autobiography precedes the televisual equivalent, which—despite serving as the most authoritative source text—is rarely outwardly adapted. While this phenomenon may be related to financial conditions, screenwriters also demonstrate a propensity for a holistic understanding of the individual through a multiplicity of textual representation. From here, some go further into “live research,” which consists of conducting interviews or consulting the biographee and acquaintances (p. 134). Importantly, these practices impart a distinctly televisual influence on biography, as biographical dramas aim to achieve accuracy by leaving marks of intertextual and paratextual references to source texts.

The reputational dynamic of biographical televsion may be commonly conceived of as a singular relationship between biographee and biographer, but Andrews acutely conveys the ways in which the issue of reputation interlinks all parties in an ethical skirmish. Reputation is referred to as a “publicly exchanged sense of self,” which immediately binds together the right to privacy, public interest, visibility, and many forms of responsibility (p. 151). While the legal issue of defamation exists as an analytic in this arena, the biographee, the author, and the institutions of television all have different moral stakes in dramatizing life stories. Of these, the author(s)—used here to refer to those involved in the creative aspects of televisual biography—seems to have the middling role of catering to both, while also maintaining a healthy skepticism of other interests that figures to allow for a less directed rendering of the truth. Evocative of both the public/private dichotomy and the adaptive textual research of screenwriting, biographers weigh their duty to a truth-seeking public and to the subject for honest representation. This manifests in a trend toward a meta-dimension of narrative, as authors sometimes situate the biographee as concerned about their image. In this case, the biographical drama chooses the person over the public persona, a choice often taken in biographical dramas (p. 155). Andrews contends that this choice gets compounded with fictionalized elements and creates controversy. Verifying views of the person is difficult when approval of the biographee or closely related individuals does not equate to truth, and disapproval from this crowd is likely to hurt the reputation of the biography or have legal consequences. As with the other theoretical tensions, Andrews uses an array of cases—in this context, the work of Ken...
Russell and the BBC— that convincingly echo the conceptual elements.

_Biographical Television Drama_ is specifically about British television, but Andrews has resisted a narrow study. For instance, while Channel 4 has received much attention in scholarly discourse, even from Andrews herself, she mostly avoids revisiting this ground. This is to the book’s benefit, as Channel 4—with its history of unusual attentiveness to the biographical form—is somewhat unique. Granting more attention to the distinctive aesthetic or institutional approaches present here would risk losing the generalizability developed elsewhere in the text, which effectively draws out biographical televisual structures and norms most broadly. Indeed, in the later stages of the text, Andrews applies some of what was learned studying biographical dramas to nonfiction television, which has varied uses of biography in different contextualized forms. This shows a clear extension and relevance of the text beyond exclusively biographical drama. The demonstration that “television has created new ways of ‘knowing’ about individual lives” will serve future research well (p. 2).

In short, Andrews’s highly developed conceptual framework should be commended for its regard of complexities that arise at the messy harmonies of both biography and television. The book is primarily intended for researchers working with biography and screen media, who will find it appealing. But owing to its broad analysis, sound theorization, and detailed empirical examinations, biography scholars of all mediums will find this work immensely valuable.

Notes


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