Biopics as Postmodern Mythmaking

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A few years ago, my research on biopics was inspired first of all by a vague sensation, which by now, after a short time, has become a certainty corroborated by empirical data[1]: in the last twenty years we have witnessed a production increase of biographical movies which has maintained a constant rate during the last quinquennium.

Every epoch develops its own way to tell its myths and its heroes.

Myths usually refer to stories shared by members of a society. They usually include supernatural forces, gods and heroes able to explain the nature of the universe and the relationship individuals entertain with it.

These narratives express the rituals, the institutions and values of a society. Originally transmitted orally and then through media, myths have been incorporated into popular culture and have come down to our days.

Although postmodernity at one point seemed to have decided to do without them (even proclaiming the end of ideologies and meta narratives – Lyotard, 1979), screens are nowadays the main vehicles of contemporary myths; and cinematographic genres, through repetition and variations on themes, are widely recognized as the first instances of modern mass media mythmaking.

Filmic experiences, regardless of whether complying, violating or subverting gender conventions, have a sort of "mythical abili-

ty", which consists in proposing values "expendable" in cultural dialogues, by involving their audience in shared discourses able to test, change or reaffirm identities and cultural values.

Genres are therefore based on archetypes, but also on items taken from a closer reality including historical and social factors which work through the same logic of myths: they filter and describe reality always and inevitably from the historical period's perspective in which they are produced and are always reified in characters, environments and situations that have meaning for the culture that brings them on stage. At a glance, they are nothing but an attempt to understand and to stage the world through specific configurations with the aim of finding equilibrium points just as myths did in the ancient world. This is why in a given society will prevail myths and genres able to grasp dilemmas, conflicts and problems distressing it on that time.

Therefore, on the one hand, movies pick up the strains of their time and give back a portrait (always mediated by a specific point of view) of the society in which they are produced, while on the other hand, movies are able to symbolically resolve these contradictions, or at least to reveal their more recondite queries and concerns. In this sense, filmic texts are first of all essential documents to understand how a culture represents itself, and to understand which could be alternative answers to questions emerging from time to time.

Questioning about our myths has much to do with questioning about ourselves.

Against this background and given the late overbearing return on big screens (but not only!) of a genre that accompanies cinema from the beginning, namely the *biographical* one, the object of this analysis will be at least threefold.

First of all, it will be that of understanding the reasons of its renewed prominence on big screens: which are the socio-cultural issues it seems agreeing to and how does this genre rework them? Which have been and *are* the more or less intrinsic changes and trends of this genre that have led to rank current productions under a label (namely that of *biopic*) absent or at least infrequent until a few years ago?

The hypothesis I advance here is that **biopics** inasmuch crystallizations and reifications of others' lives stories, ***can be a privileged***

narrative formula to leverage on spectators' subjectivities. Reworking, thematizing, and somehow resolving in symbolical means the many and problematic issues related to the inconveniences and losses of the postmodern subject (that seems to have lost its traditional identity references and values in an increasingly fragmented and displaced context) seems to be a predominant feature of this kind of narrative.

At a glance, others' lives stories always appeal on ours.

To throw bridges between epistemological reality and its symbolical representations by placing the film against the backdrop of wider cultural processes, will therefore be the ground assumption of this research.

This interdisciplinary journey we will travel along seeks to understand how biopics' symbolical universes, conveyed through precise thematic, narrative, and stylistic choices peculiar of this genre, are able to thematize, reflect and rework social, political and cultural identity uncertainties that have invested postmodern subjectivities. Moreover how contemporary biopics' imaginaries may constitute a recognition term and, at the same time, a resource able to advance coherent and unifying identity references and values to a subject which seems to be more and more displaced and lost.

Movies read and feature reality through various forms. From the repetition of specific situations, themes, characters and genres on, as in our case, the cultural apparatus that is set in motion on each selection favors an option rather than another depending on the scenario it is called to represent, and on the main social, cultural and ideological issues of a particular historical moment (and therefore term of comparison for the subject / spectator). On the one hand, cultural dynamics are sources that feed expressive practices, and on the other hand they go through them featuring a slice of contemporary society. While movies lead audiences to get away from the "real" world in building a fictional one, they also provide data able to be reinvested in it (the real world). In so doing they bring spectators back to epistemological reality. Movies allow spectators to get an idea of what is around them and to position themselves within this view: in short, to get an idea of themselves and the world around them.

According to McConnell (1979), the reasons for this dual path would reside in the fact that film stories activate archetypes always interpretable on a phenomenological level through genres, and by virtue of this ability they are able to offer explanations, models and policies patterns to the audience.

Defining a genre is a problematic and essential necessity, which requires taking into account different narrative, aesthetic, and cultural parameters, that contribute to its definition and its construction through precise semantic and syntaxic processes whose functions are to build up a horizon of expectations for the viewer.

Biopics have often been excluded from the large gender debate and have never enjoyed such a privilege until recent times because of their chameleontic nature: they seem to be in fact rather *functional structures* (Bourget, 1999-2001) than genres, able to be framed through various and diverse discursive frames.

Without taking into account all the aspects of the theoretical debate on genders that dominated the seventies and eighties, and which would require a treatise by itself, the most interesting solution to define biopics may well be that of *formula*, as theorized by John Cawelti (2003). The term *formula* emphasizes the genre's conventional structure which guarantees its stability, while on the other hand, it highlights its provisional nature and plasticity. *Formulas* refer to the universal through patterns, myths and archetypes which are available to be translated into concrete and contextual configurations.

Analyzing a genre allows us to grasp broader underlying dynamics as it highlights the tacit pact between who tells the story and who watches and listens to it, the audience. This contract between filmmakers and audiences is based primarily on the promise of the first ones to tell something new on the matrix of something known and familiar. In the case of biopics, real life stories of more or less known characters.

During the Classical Cinema Age, the main major studios' modus operandi was that of staging the lives of real existed / existing characters bending them on successful and consolidated narrative formulas. George Custen named this process *Normalizing genius* (Custen, 1992), a process that necessarily implies the reduction of life stories' intrinsecal complexity and problematicity through a process of simplification usually dictated by canonical narrative structures.

This strategy worked by emptying the staged character of its features and by transforming it into an iconic vehicle of global tales such as *believe in yourself* and *it's good to be famous* etc…

Specifically, the point was that of conferring a set of significant values *a posteriori* (in most cases absent even in life itself!) through global tales (conveyed by the new media system) that were joining new American Popular Culture and thus legitimized by the staging of positive heroes belonging to *that* real world.

A strategy not at all disappeared, that still survives in contemporary biopics which but seem to experiment new and more realistic alternatives, especially in recent productions, which have allowed the entry to never entirely positive characters, but more often problematic and ambiguous ones, as more often life is.

(a) The first peculiarity that distinguishes contemporary biopics from the classical ones, lies in fact in the **subjects' modes of representation.**

As **contemporary biopics**, I propose to consider the productions from the eighties onwards. It is in fact from then onwards that biopics begin to develop a new awareness as film genre, through the development of new and alternative narratives and aesthetic modes and over all through the crucial focus shift from the subject as *pretext* to the subject as *text*[2].

In many cases, we are faced in fact with new *imperfect* *characters* that are disassembled and recomposed through typically postmodernist aesthetic and narrative modes such as fragmentation, pastiche and bricolage in accordance with much of contemporary mood.

Biopics not only stage problematic issues concerning postmodern subjectivities, identities, and their re-construction on screen but they do it through the staging of *not at all linear* *characters* (as instead were those of the '30s Warner Bros. biopics!). Contemporary biopics tell us of split, problematic and never entirely positive subjects. For example *Raging Bull* (1980), depicts a less than positive portrait of Jake la Motta, as also does the more recent *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (2004) in depicting the complicated subjectivity of the famous actor, the same did *Le grand bleu* (1988), *Nixon* (1995), *Ray* (2004), *Flash of Genius* (2008) and many others.

Most of the time we are faced with *enigmatic* characters, analyzed through prolonged close-ups that scrutinize their faces trying to grasp their deepest secrets (*The Queen*, 2006; *W*, 2008 …). Other-

wise we are faced with attempts of piece by piece characters' reconstructions on screen, even at the cost of charisma losing, in accordance with a postmodern idea of subjectivity that can never be considered as linear, consistent or unambiguous, but instead always difficult, diverse, heterogeneous and sometimes kaleidoscopic (ex. *I'm not there,* 2007), a subjectivity constantly changing and never given once and for all.

(b) Moreover, we are almost always faced with subjects depicted as ***cultural mediators*** between conflicting demands. For example *Gandhi* (1985) mediates between peace and violence*, Malcolm X* (1992) between equality and racism*, The Queen* (2006) between tradition and renewal*, Goodbye Bafana* (2007) between black and white, *Amelia* (2009) between conservatorism and emancipation, and so on. This intermediary peculiarity brings us back to the previous reflections on myth and thus to the definition of biopics *as genre*.

There are at least two ways of myth understanding: as *semiological system*, cultural myth, or as *structure*, natural myth.

The first meaning is the one developed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1957) in terms of semiological structure. He shows through a series of artefacts (as well as cultural events such as wrestling) how their meanings derive from the culture that produces them (and therefore not by nature!) and secondly the fact that popular culture inevitably contains in itself and reflects the dominant culture of a society. Myth's function is to make certain social meanings as resulting from common sense and in this way preventing alternative readings.

As symbolic constructs, whose meaning is not inherent at all, but instead produced by culture, myths are objects that act as signs used to convey social and political messages that exclude alternative possible meanings. By virtue of this, he argues that the power of myths lies precisely in their ability to transform history into nature. This means that myths support dominant values of the society that produces them just as naturally, marginalizing and delegitimizing alternatives.

Of course, myths generated within a culture change over time and from time to time they acquire their strength from their current contextualizations.

The mechanism on which myth's structures are based is that which empties the signs it uses, leaving only part of their meaning.

Thanks to their recontextualizations, signs will be deciphered in precise manners, which tend to exclude other possible meanings.

George Custen, in his pioneering study on biopics (Custen, 1992), illustrates this process through the sampling of biopics released in U.S. between the thirties and the sixties, at a time when European Courts' kings and queens were gradually leaving the big screen to kings and queens of entertainment!

Most of the 'biographed' subjects belonged in fact to the emerging star system that was already finding wide acceptance and popularity in that period. Biopics did nothing but legitimize them, producing a real cultural shift in American values through the staging of global tales such as *it is good to be famous*, *life should be fun*, *you'll succeed*, tales exemplary embodied by the lives of show business protagonists already socially accepted as positive!

There is also a second notion of myth that seems to be even more relevant for the study of contemporary biopics, it is the one developed by Claude Lèvi-Strauss (1964). The anthropologist states that all myths have significant structures able to resolve logical contradictions. In his theorization, myths are nothing but constructions which seek to tackle living oppositions in a given society at a particular historical moment. All culturally based myths are structured through binary oppositional pairs; this double articulation translates and organizes those aspects of social life that are in antithesis (for ex. male / female, nature / culture, life / death, soul / body etc.). This is even more interesting if we try to transpose it not only to genre theories, as it has often been done, but specifically to the biographical genre, which embodies such conflicts and oppositions in real characters.

Oppositional dialectics try to resolve contradictions. While antithesis still remain, myths are able to turn insoluble oppositions into something concrete and accessible thanks to narrative: a cultural hero mediates every time through various oppositions, and by virtue of their dialectic ability, myths are able to logically mediate between oppositions and to restore unity and coherence to what is split.

For example, in *The Queen* (2006), Queen Elizabeth is set up as real mediator between instances of renewal and tradition; in *Bobby* (2006), Robert Kennedy is the mediator *par excellence* between people and political institutions, and so on.

Myths do not talk only about the world as it is, but even about how it could be and offer wider horizons of thought. Myths suggest alternatives that Lèvi-Strauss considers usually impracticable (Lèvi-Strauss, 1964). On the contrary, *historical vocation* and *dramatic declination* appear to be the very communicative instances of biopics that allow them to stage viable alternatives to *our* world.

Goodbye Bafana (2006), one of the many Nelson Mandela's biopics, is nothing but an attempt to dialectically mediate between black and white through a global tale of reconciliation, figuratively embodied by a cultural icon, Nelson Mandela, a global symbol of pacifism and nonviolence, an emblematic figure of mediation that is symbolically revived.

In front of biopics, we are faced with the staging of cultural heroes, genuine mediators able to mediate between opposing demands through a dialectic capable to restore unity to what is normally perceived as heterogeneous. However, this is not to be intended as a linear and closed mediation at all. The subjects staged are cultural activators at *high symbolical density*. They are cultural life's protagonists able to recall an entire universe of values only by virtue of their presence.

For this reason, **iconography** plays an essential role in biopics for conveying a consistent universe of values through the characters staged. Transposed to cinema, the concept of iconography tells us that there are familiar symbols able to convey meanings that transcend the cultural context of the work in which they appear. Therefore iconography is of specific relevance in biopics. Since they stage the life of a really existed / existing character, this fact alone has the strength to leverage on a whole universe of meanings that have already value by themselves outside and beyond their specific filmic representation. For example, a biopic on Nelson Mandela immediately evokes values related to racism, nonviolence, social justice etc.

However it is not a linear and closed information passage which passes from the text to the viewer; there are several factors that undermine a linear and unambiguous reading of these kinds of texts.

A first risk of short circuit is generated by the overlap between values and qualities ascribed to the subject put on stage and the actor playing him. For example, most of us will consider Morgan Freeman more appropriate to play Nelson Mandela's character rather than Will Smith. In this attitude the risk is to attribute the

actor's qualities to the character staged. The choice of Mexican actress Salma Hayek to play Frida Kahlo (*Frida*, 2002) works obviously according to this logic.

Moreover, in most cases, these biographical narratives convey values that require specific stances by the audience, which may also differ with respect to the text's project.

The filmic text never represents a duplicate of reality, but rather transcribes the real through modalities such as scraps, exemplifications, rearrangements. It acts through metaphors, but also through realism, along an imaginary continuum that goes from reality to illusion, but which is always the result of a discourse, with contents evermore available to different reading levels.

In every text there is always a dominant meaning, but next to it, we can also find several alternative meanings. If the relationship between social actors and symbolical configurations is shaped as a process of appropriation, that is as articulation of the cultural proposal with our own worldview, then the staging of a life, more often forces the comparison with our own lives!

For example, the biopic *Frida* (2002), allows a positive articulation not only for female spectators who will see a model of emancipated femininity in her, but also for groups that perceive themselves as weak: Frida Kahlo is portrayed as a nonconformist independent woman, determined and stubborn, which overcomes several serious physical injuries through her own forces. At the same time audiences more closely linked to traditional values will articulate the same values in less favorable terms.

Similarly, the choice to shoot Nelson Mandela's biopic, *Goodbye Bafana* (2006), using the jailer's autobiography as main source is quite ambiguous and raises several issues not only of truth, but most of all of articulation.

Finally, the opportunity to take part as spectators (or witnesses?) to the intimacy of the characters staged on screen, breaks down all barriers between what Goffman defined as *scene* and *background* (Goffman, 1959), which is one of postmodernim's and popular culture's fundamental hallmarks. The chance to peek into the lives of the characters staged offers the opportunity to express a renewed opinion on events that are often already known, but on which is shed a new light. In this way the viewer is led to evaluate, justify or condemn certain actions on the basis of conjectural background

reconstructions of determined events we already know (as in *W,* 2008!) and that we are moved to re-evaluate in real life.

Conclusions

Who are the characters staged in contemporary productions, and how can we talk about them as myths?

During the twentieth century and especially in the last quarter of it, identities become more and more shaped through media representations and popular icons, than through traditional institutions.

It seems that the postmodern *I* has lost his anchors and his frames of reference useful not only in relation to identity construction, but as subjectivity guides in all areas of personal, social and political life.

In this general climate of confusion and dispersion, fragmentation, and dislocation, we need them to be returned, we increasingly need a coherent set of reference values to re-impose existential guides able to give meaning and coherence to our actions and choices, it is to our social and personal identities.

Given that values, policies and identities are passing nowadays through channels which are no longer the institutional ones, movies pick up these needs by returning on screen the exemplary lives of those people who once have been, each one in its own way, the protagonists of last century's cultural life and epochal changes. Contemporary biopics' characters are taken from a not too distant world. They are, in many cases, characters which once have been safe references, as well as moral, political and spiritual leaders, which seem to have faded at the millennium turn and that somehow can be considered the true protagonists of the epochal change we have witnessed.

Biopic's symbolical production does nothing more than resuscitate them, often nostalgically, and in so doing it seems to finally break down many of the barriers between high and low culture.

Therefore we are more and more often faced with characters on screen that could be considered as the major promoters of our contemporary culture, or better as its very actual emblems: *Charlot* (1992) biopic on the cinematographical myth par excellence, *Frida* (2002) biopic of Mexican painter and feminist idol Frida Kahlo, *Bobby* (2006), kaleidoscopic biopic about Robert Kennedy, *The Queen* (2006), *Milk* (2008), which tells the story of Harvey Milk political activist for gay rights; *Amelia* (2009) biopic on Amelia Erhardt, the

first woman pilot, two biopics for Che Guevara: *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) and *Che* (2008), *I'm not there* (2007) and many others[3].

Coherently with postmodern philosophy that breaks down the barriers between high and low culture there are also less lofty, but very popular biopics as *Larry Flint* (1996), biopic on the man who cleared pornography on magazines during the seventies, GIA (1998) movie based on the life of Gia Carangi, a top fashion model from the late seventies, *8Mile* (2002), biopic on American rap superstar Eminem, *Kinsey* (2004), pioneer in the area of human sexuality research, whose 1948 publication "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" (Kinsey, 1953) has been one of the first recorded works that saw science address sexual behavior.

Finally, if, as we have seen in the first part, film genres have a sort of "mythical ability" and are recognized as vehicles of contemporary myths, from *Gandhi* (1995) to *The Social Network* (2010) contemporary biopics trace a real ***iconographic topography*** intended to legitimize and give "institutional" strength to the ideological social and cultural forces who have estabilished a proper cultural shift in values finally conducing to our contemporary western culture, and it does it through the staging of its social, cultural and political promoters and myths. The strenght of biopics lies in that their ultimate referent is always real, which means that ideas and values, conflicts and resolutions evoked by the characters staged are possible in *our* world. They literally act as ***bridges between the real and the symbolic*** through the staging of cultural myths that have the power to convene universal values already shared and experienced in the real world.

In this way, biopics emerge in contemporary world cinema as a genre able to consolidate a shared memory and a certain kind of shared history and stories through the deployment of postmodern narrative, aesthetic and scopic modes and codes who have taken hold in contemporary culture.

Graph n.1 MAINSTREAM BIOPIC PRODUCTION 1930-2010
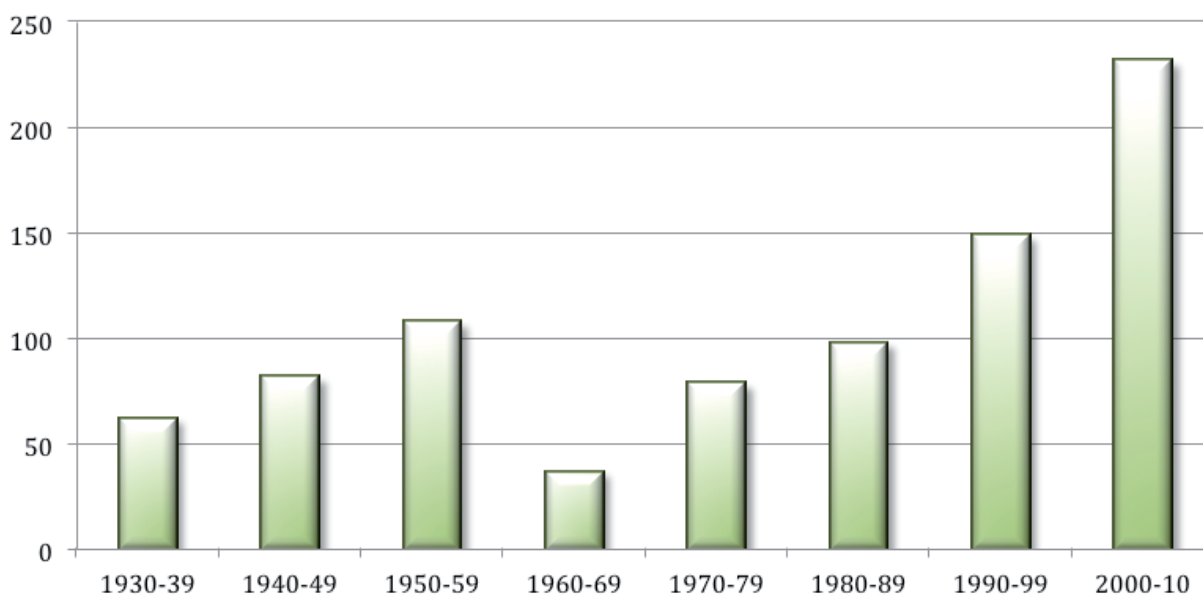
Data Source: www.Imdb.com

Notes

1 See graph n.1 attached (*Biopic Production 1930-2010*)
2 This awarness also emerges gradually among other things from clas-sificatory criteria which seem to finally recognize the genre's maturity by ranking it as such and no more as simple "drama" (the References list only a brief and summary index of the most known mainstream biopics).
3 See References

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Filmography

The Elephant Man, David Lynch, USA 1980

Raging Bull, Martin Scorsese, USA 1980

Coal Miner's Daughter, Michael Apted, USA 1980

Another Country, Marek Kanievska, UK 1984

Gandhi, Richard Attenborough, USA 1985

Frida - Naturaleza viva, Paul Leduc Rosenzweig, Mexico 1986

Prick up, Stephen Frears, UK 1987

Le grand bleu, Luc Besson, France/USA/Italy 1988

Bird, Clint Eastwood, USA 1988

Great Balls of Fire!, Jim McBride, USA 1989

Born on the fourth of July, Oliver Stone, USA 1989

Good Fellas, Martin Scorsese, USA 1990

An Angel At My Table, Jane Campion, UK/Australia/New Zeland/ USA 1990

Vincent & Theo, Robert Altman, Netherlands/UK/France/Italy/ Germany 1990

The Doors, Oliver Stone, USA 1991

Malcolm X, Spike Lee, Usa 1992

Charlot, Richard Attenborough, UK 1992

Schindler's List, Steven Spielberg, USA 1993
What's love got to do with it, Brian Gibson, USA 1993
Dragon, Rob Cohen, USA 1993
Ed Wood, Tim Burton, USA 1994
Nixon, Oliver Stone, USA 1995
Michael Collins, N.Jordan, GB 1996
Larry Flint, Milos Forman, USA 1996
Evita, Alan Parker, USA 1996
Kundun, Martin Scorsese, USA 1997
Gia, Michael Cristopher, USA 1998
The Hurricane, Norman Jewison, USA 1999
Erin Brokovich, Steven Soderbergh, USA 2000
A beautiful Mind, Ron Haward, GB 2001
Alì, Michael Mann, USA 2001
Callas Forever, Franco Zeffirelli, Italy/France/Spain/UK/Romania
     2002
Painted Fire, Kwon-taek Im, South Korea 2002
Catch Me If You Can, Steven Spielberg, USA 2002
The Hours, Stephen Daldry, USA 2002
Antwone Fisher, Denzel Washington, USA 2002
8 Mile, Curtis Hanson, USA/Germany 2002
Frida, Julie Taymor, USA/Mexico 2002
The Life and Death of Peter Sellers, Stephen Hopkins, USA 2004
Ray, Taylor Hackford, USA 2004
The Aviator, Martin Scorsese, USA/Japan 2004
The Motorcycle Diaries, Walter Salles, Argentina/Chile/Perù/
Brasil/USA 2004
Kinsey, Bill Condon, USA/Germany 2004
Downfall, Oliver Hirschbiegel, Germany/Italy/Austria 2004
Kinsey, Bill Condon, USA 2004
Beyond the Sea, Kevin Spacey, USA 2005
Cindarella man, Ron Howard, USA 2005
Truman Capote, Bennett Miller, Canada/USA 2005
The Queen, Stephen Frears, UK 2006
Bobby, Emilio Estevez, USA 2006
Marie Antoniette, Sofia Coppola, USA/Japan/France 2006
Miss Potter, Chris Noonan, USA 2006
The Good Shepherd, Robert DeNiro, USA 2006
Fur, Steven Shainberg, USA 2006

Goodbye Bafana, Billie August, Belgium / Southafrica / Italy / France / Germany 2007
I'm not there, Todd Haynes, USA 2007
Charlie Wilson's War, Mike Nichols, USA / Germany 2007
Control, Anton Corbijn, UK / USA / Australia / Japan 2007
La Môme, Olivier Dahan, France 2007
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Julian Schnabel, France / USA 2007
A Mighty Heart, Michael Winterbottom, USA / UK 2007
Persepolis, Vincent Paronnaud-Marjane Satrapi, France 2007
American Gangster, Ridley Scott, USA 2007
Coco avant Chanel, Anne Fontaine, France 2008
Che, Steven Soderbergh, USA / France / Spain 2008
Flash of Genius, Marc Abraham, USA 2008
Milk, Gus Van Sant, USA 2008
Cadillac Records, Darnell Martin, USA 2008
Changeling, Clint Eastwood, USA 2008
Maradona by Kusturica, Emir Kusturica, Spain / France 2008
W, Oliver Stone, USA 2008
Amelia, Mira Nair, USA 2009
The Damned United, Tom Hooper, UK 2009
Gifted Hands: the Ben Carson Story, Thomas Carter, USA 2009
Into the storm, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, USA 2009
Invictus, Clint Eastwood, USA 2009
Julie&Julia, Nora Ephron, USA 2009
Notorious B.I.G, George Tillman Jr, USA 2009
The Last Station, Michael Hoffman, Germany / Russia / UK 2009
The Solist, Joe Wright, UK / USA / France 2009
The Social Network, David Fincher, USA 2010
Serge Gainsbourg-vie heroique, J.Sfar, Francia / USA 2010
The King's Speech, Tom Hooper, UK 2010