

To Play, To Imitate, To Embody. On Acting in a Biographical Film

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What does an actor do in a biographical film? This question may seem inane, or at least less than serious; however, the terms frequently used to describe and assess the actor’s work in general – to embody a character, to play them, to play a role – suggests the existence of a certain *designatum*, which is the point of reference for the role. In the case of a fictional story, we may ignore the semantic multivalence of such terms. In a biographical film, however, the existence of a real originator of the role gives additional, almost ontological meaning to phrases such as “embodying a character” or “playing a role”.

In my reflections, I use as my starting point the assumption that the actor’s performance in a biographical film and the “conception of a character” result from two basic components:

1. Interpretation of the role – constituting a proposal to analyse the hero’s character. It is usually supposed to extract more profound meanings and senses out of the biography. To put it more simply, the interpretation of the role is supposed above all to help the viewer to answer the question of who the hero was (what they were like) and why?

2. Adaptation – this includes the physicality of the character: their appearance, body language, facial expressions, voice (the tone, modulation, accent, phrasing, dialect – if the authentic person used one, etc.)

In my article I try to answer the questions: Where should we seek the essence of biographic acting? How can we avoid exaggeration and falsehood, which could kill the role?

KEYWORDS: biographical film, actor

*For a regular viewer, the actor is
the most expressive representative of the film,
and for many it can stand for its very notion*

Skrzypczak 2009, p. 7

What does an actor do in a biographical film? This question may seem inane, or at least less than serious; however, the terms frequently used to describe and assess the actor’s work in general – to embody a character, to play them, to play a role – suggests the existence of a certain *designatum*, which is the point of reference for the role. In the case of a fictional story, we may ignore the semantic multivalence of such terms. In a biographical film, however, the existence of a real originator of the role gives additional, almost ontological meaning to phrases such as “embodying a character” or “playing a role”. What was it then that Helen Mirren did when she played the role of Elizabeth II or Elizabeth I of England? What was happening to Philip Seymour Hoffman when he played Truman Capote? How did Tomasz Kot con-

struct the role of Polish iconic cardiac surgeon Zbigniew Religa? What and why influenced the screen portrayal of Charles Chaplin by Robert Downey Jr.? How convincing, if convincing at all, were those roles for the viewer? I purposefully use the word “convincing” instead of writing about the extent to which the viewers believed that Hoffman was Capote and Helen Mirren was indeed Queen Elizabeth. After all, it is not a matter of blurring the boundary between what is real and the screen reality, but rather of convincing the viewers about “one’s own conception of the character of the original” (Skrzypczak 2007, p. 201).

In my reflections, I use as my starting point the assumption that the actor’s performance in a biographical film, that “conception of a character,” results from two basic components:

1. The interpretation of the role – constituting a proposal of an analysis of the hero’s character. It is usually supposed to extract a more profound meaning and senses out of the biography. To put it more simply, the interpretation of the role is supposed to help – the viewer, first of all – in answering the question who the hero was (what they were like) and why.[1]

2. The adaptation – which includes the physicality of the character: their appearance, body language, facial expressions, voice (the tone, modulation, accent, phrasing, dialect – if the authentic person used one, etc.)

In his book, Piotr Skrzypczak, referring to Stanley Cavell’s opinion, claims that “on the stage, the actor so to speak ‘only puts the role on’; in film, the actor ‘puts it inside himself or herself’” (Skrzypczak 2009, p. 17). These interesting and accurate terms, functioning in the quoted work in describing two different media systems, may be used to characterise acting in biographical pictures (“biopics”) after specifying and adjusting their meanings for the purposes of biographical performance precisely in the context of interpreting and adapting the role. Thus, interpretation will refer to the very “putting the role inside oneself” and adaptation – to “putting it on”.

One of the basic elements adapted for the biopic by means of the actor’s physicality is appearance. The filmed biography is a type of story that prioritises appearance as few genres do. Obviously it is not an issue of beauty, being photogenic or physical attractiveness as such, but rather of features of appearance that are specific to the character. Biographical films prove how important appearance is in the process of identifying the character and the screen reality, especially if appearance was relevant to the biographical legend of the character. I dare say that it is frequently one of the first reflections appearing in the perception of any film biography (Kołos 2014). How would a viewer react if Adolf Hitler was to be played by a blond man without the distinctive mous-

[1] The interpretative component is, obviously, essential to every role, regardless of the genre and theme of the film.

tache, or Princess Diana – by a short, corpulent brunette? The similarity between the actor and the character they play is an entirely natural expectation of the viewers and an obligation the filmmakers need to fulfil. I write about the filmmakers because, naturally, the fulfilment of that obligation depends not only on the actor, but also the makeup artists, and even earlier, casting specialists[2], and ultimately the choice of the actor made by the director and producers.

However, it should be emphasised that the need to confront the appearance (enhanced by makeup) of the actor with that of the character they are creating on screen, may manifest to a different degree, depending on how their appearance influenced the life of the character, how distinct it was and finally – when the character lived, what time the film presents. The problem seems to be less central in cases of characters whose appearance quite simply was not recorded by means of reliable media, namely – in photographs or on film. It is more difficult to consider iconography in the form of paintings, drawings or sculpture, regardless of respect for realism which may have been evinced by the creators, to be reliable. This iconography in itself, much like biographical films, constitutes an interpretation or an artistic transposition of the character's appearance. It may also happen that the number of depictions of a particular person is simply too small, due to the time they lived in or due to a biographical mystery involving their appearance that fascinates the filmmakers as well. Such a situation made it possible for the director to cast Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare (who was considered to be very handsome) in *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. by John Madden, 1998) and to cast Rupert Everett, whose film and advertising career highlighted him being a dandy and a gay man, as Christopher Marlowe. The viewers accept as natural such decisions on the part of filmmakers; the story takes precedence. We do not protest when Queen Bona Sforza has the noble face of Aleksandra Śląska (*Królowa Bona*, dir. by Janusz Majewski, 1980, a television series) and Queen Elizabeth is played by Bette Davis (*The Virgin Queen*, dir. by Henry Koster, 1955), Glenda Jackson (in *Elizabeth R*, prod. by Roderick Graham, a television series, 1971, and *Mary, Queen of Scots*, dir. By Charles Jarrott, 1972), Cate Blanchett (*Elizabeth*, dir. by Shekhar Kapur, 1998, and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, dir. by Shekhar Kapur, 2007) and Helen Mirren (*Elizabeth I*, dir. by Tom Hooper, 2005, a television miniseries), even though the resemblance between these actresses is doubtlessly minimal. Makeup serving to emphasise a few features of the famous queen's appearance, as determined by her portraits, was enough to make the viewers consider the resemblance to be sufficient. When good acting skills and an interesting interpretation of

[2] Casting specialists may have different expectations of actors and do not always look for a double of the film character, although that is also something that has been known to happen. An interesting example of such a situation of “twin” casting was present in the search for an actress to play in the film about a late Polish actress Anna Przybylska, which is to be directed by Radosław Piwowski. Tabloid press was involved in the search, and informed their viewers that “Super Express has found yet another ‘twin sister’

of the prematurely deceased Anna Przybylska (who died at the age of 36). It is Dominika Ochońska (age 30) from Kraków, who resembles the star not only in looks but also due to her low timbre of voice. It is her who wants to perform in the biographical film about the actress” (“Super Express”, January 27, 2015. The article available at <http://www.se.pl/rozrywka/gwiazdy/super-express-odnalazl-kolejna-sobow-torke-przybylskiej-ona-tez-chce-zagrac-w-film-ie-o-ani_516263.html>, DOA March 20, 2015.

the character are added to this equation, there are no grounds to oppose the casting decisions of the filmmakers. There are also biographical films in which the resemblance to the original is not taken into consideration at all, since hardly anyone remembers what Goya or Klimt looked like. We remember their paintings, not their faces, and thus whether the Spanish painter should be played by Stellan Skarsgård (*Goya's Ghosts*, dir. by Milos Forman, 2006) or Francisco Rabal (*Goya*, dir. by Carlos Saura, 1999) has little relevance for the viewer[3]. (Kołos 2014)

According to the author of *Aktor i jego postać ekranowa*, “[i]n a filmed story (or, to be more precise: in its narrative structure), the actor fulfils the role of producing the filmed character, by realising through their individual physical features the abstract and amorphous function of the actant [...]” (Skrzypczak 2009, p. 26). In a biopic, the actor, by producing the filmed character, takes on the character’s physicality and substitutes it with their own, taking charge of it. The screen character[4] becomes the successor of the original image (the real person). The relationship between the authentic person and the screen character is close to the theory of intericonicity (Kołos 2014).

Intericonicity (German *Interikonizität*) [...] is based on intertextuality with regard to the term and the notion. At the basis of intericonicity there is the reference structure, namely referring of the successor images to derivative images. The most basic type of such a reference occurs when one image refers to another, however, it is possible to broaden this to mean multi-image references which constitute a visual discourse. A characteristic feature of intericonicity is its presence in multimodal texts of an informative-appellative character, i.e., wherever the image is intended to draw the viewer’s attention[5].

The authentic person, together with all the captured images of their appearance and established information about the way they looked, is – in the context of this theory – the pre-image, whereas the actor constitutes the iconic, screen representation of this character. The creators by constructing the appearance of the screen representation of the character establish a particular visual (iconic) meanings (signs), which make it possible for the viewer to recognise the particular person known under a particular name. The comparisons of the screen and authentic images are a basic, common and natural process, which may be the most important and even determine the value of the biographical film for the viewer. The most basic Internet query proves the importance of the comparative reflection for the viewers and the media at various stages of the development of biographical films. A comparative verification – more or less critical – occurs in cases of screen representations of completed films but also casts of pictures that are yet

[3] All quotations translated by NS unless indicated otherwise.

[4] The term “screen character” (Polish: *postać ekranowa*) used after P. Skrzypczak.

[5] Roman Opiłowski, on the basis of his paper “Między obrazami. Interikonizacja w niemieckiej

komunikacji wizualnej”. The paper was read at the Ogólnopolska Konferencji Naukowej „Obrazy kultur świata” – Toruń, April 2011. The conference was organised by Nicolaus Copernicus University, Faculty of Languages, Culture Studies Department.

to be filmed or whose shooting has only started. Numerous websites and articles are dedicated specifically to these comparisons between the person and their screen representation. To name but a few, these include “100 Side by Side Comparisons of Biopic Actors and the People They Portrayed” (Roosevelt 2014), “Do These Actors Look Like the Real Thing?” (Do the Actors... 2015), “20 Biopic Actors And Their Real-Life Counterparts” (Galindo 2015), “Take Two: Biopic Stars and Their Real-Life Counterparts” (Take Two: Biopic... 2013), “Looking the Part: Top 10 Biopic Transformations” (Dyce 2015), “More Biopic Actors and Their Real-Life Counterparts” (More Biopic Actors... 2015), and “Biopic Actors and the People They Played in Real Life” (Stopera 2015). The characteristic content of these sites and articles points to the importance of appearance and similarity (and only that), as they only consist of the photographs of the actor and the authentic person, usually placed side by side, and only sometimes attributed with brief commentary[6]. Sometimes the authors invite the Internet users to participate in the game of comparison and ask them to fill in a poll consisting of the question “Does (Douglas, Kutcher, Murray, Day-Lewis, Hopkins, Lohan, Streep... etc.) look like (Liberace, Jobs, Roosevelt, Lincoln, Hitchcock, Taylor, Thatcher?” with three possible answers given: „Yes, a perfect mach”, „A little bit”, „No, not at all” [7].

The resemblance between the screen character and the person may be something more than a simple rule, a bait for the viewer who will provide a positive response to the question of whether the resemblance is there and make the decision to watch or not accordingly. As I have previously stated, visual originality as a relevant component of the character’s biographical legend may contribute to the analysis of its very phenomenon. This is the case especially with people famous for their attractiveness or those whose appearance did not conform to classical standards of beauty. Moreover, this second aesthetic option, from the point of view of the actor, appears to be even more appealing to artists. Even the most beautiful actresses (this, interestingly, is much more frequent in cases of female characters) undergo appearance-altering transformations by means of make up so as to look less appealing in order to diversify their repertory and showcase their acting skills.

[6] By that I mean authorial commentary; readers’ comments are usually placed under the listicle.

[7] See “Do These Actors Look Like the Real Thing?” op.cit. The poll concerned fifty biographical films. The results concerning the characters mentioned in my article were as follows: 1. **Kutcher – Jobs** a). Yes, perfect mach – 32.33%, b). A little bit – 52.52%, c). No, not at all – 15.15%; **Douglas – Liberace** a). 51.97%, b). 42.39%, c). 5.64%; **Murray – Roosevelt** a). 7.89% b). 44.53%, c). 47.58%; **Day-Lewis – Lincoln** a). 87.87%, b). 11.16%, c). 0.97%; **Hopkins – Hitch-**

cock a). 45.61%, b). 46.85%, c). 7.54%; **Lohan – Taylor** a). 15.79%, b). 44.4%, c). 39.81%; **Streep – Thatcher** a). 58.39%, b). 37.03%, c). 4.58%. DOA May 21, 2015. (Films: *Jobs* (dir. by Joshua Michael Stern, 2013), *Behind the Candelabra* (dir. by Steven Soderbergh, 2013), *Hyde Park on Hudson* (dir. by Roger Michell, 2012), *Lincoln* (dir. by Steven Spielberg, 2012), *Hitchcock* (dir. by Sacha Gervasi, 2012), *Liz & Dick* (dir. by Lloyd Kramer, 2012), and *The Iron Lady* (dir. by Phyllida Lloyd, 2011) DOA May 21, 2015.

Let us take a closer look at two spectacular examples that confirm this tendency, Charlize Theron in the movie *Monster* and Nicole Kidman in *The Hours*, while simultaneously paying attention to the significant difference in perceiving makeup and its importance for interpreting a role and the importance of ugliness itself. Indeed, the creators of *Monster* (and, most of all, the lead actress, Charlize Theron) prove that ugliness does not constitute only something that can be seen, an element of a movie which can be said to be removed from the canons of beauty. Above all, Jenkins's movie talks – next to love and crime – also about ugliness, and not only due to the fact that the actress looks particularly unattractive, but because she uses her onscreen ugliness to act, treats it as a tool to create meanings significant for the portrayal of characters and events. The makeup that made the beautiful actress look similar to the true person was only one of the elements of creating the character, and not its most important component, as it happens in many cases.

How often does it happen that makeup which makes a beautiful actress appear ugly is mistaken for good, mature acting – as, indeed, the critics kindly use this very adjective to describe such acting accomplishments. It is difficult to establish why an actress becomes “mature” when she decides to sacrifice – for the time being – her beauty for the role.

The most spectacular example of such an effort undertaken by an actress in the first decade of the new century was Nicole Kidman's role in Stephen Daldry's movie *The Hours* (2002), in which she played Virginia Woolf. Nicole Kidman, a moderately talented actress who had played one truly good role in *To Die For* (dir. Gus van Sant, 1995), undertook an extremely difficult task – that of playing an icon of European culture, a leading intellectual of her times, a schizophrenic, a woman who was talented, complicated, unfulfilled, bi – or homosexual (depending on the version of her biography we choose to accept) and unattractive... Or, at least, this is how we are used to perceiving the famous writer. It was truly a huge challenge, especially for the favourite of the glossy press, the actress who is famous mostly for her looks and her divorce from Tom Cruise. For her role in *The Hours* the actress received the Academy Award for Best Actress, an award that was more of a courtesy than a tribute to the value of actress's work. The very nomination in the “Best Actress” category raises some reservations. The storyline of the movie was precisely composed for three equal roles for women, none of which was the leading one. The episodes from Virginia Woolf's biography and her work were the elements that set off the plot of the movie, but by no means did they make Nicole Kidman its leading actress.

However, the fact that acting-wise, the film *Virginia Woolf* loses with the characters played by Meryl Streep (Clarissa Vaughn) and Julianne Moore (Laura Brown)[8] is more important in assessing her

[8] Julianne Moore was nominated in the Best Supporting Actress category.

performance. Where can we then look for sources of the very positive reception of Kidman's role? It is difficult to resist the impression that it was precisely the actress's appearance and her makeup that influenced the success of the role. Here we have the beautiful Australian playing a writer whose ugly nose is as known as her writing. The attractive celebrity and favourite of the photographers allows herself to be made ugly for the role. A long nose, ink-stained fingers and a partially burnt cigarette are the basic elements of the film's portrayal of Virginia Woolf. In fact, the actress did not go beyond presenting them, sometimes breaking through to draw something in a theatrical manner. However, the audience, as well as the critics, took the role to be particularly dramatic and true. One could ask why the famous writer was not played by Meryl Streep, an excellent actress, in whose case makeup, for obvious reasons, would not constitute an element that determined the role so much. David Hare, who wrote the screenplay of the movie, says that giving Kidman the role of Virginia Woolf was a deliberate measure, which was aimed at a specific reaction of the British public opinion, especially its more conservative and snobbish members, for whom a Hollywood star playing Virginia in the film seemed to be a joke. For the movie's creators this choice was, in turn, an opportunity to make the famous writer's image more contemporary[9]. This, however, could not include her appearance. Virginia Woolf with Nicole Kidman's face would have had little credibility. The actress herself stressed that her face was her main tool in the movie. And in order for it to be a credible tool, she spent on average two and a half hours a day being given her makeup, whose main element was her nose. However, she also paid attention to the expression of her mouth, the way it was set. Still, she did not hide that she was afraid of the transformation. She was afraid of the reaction of the audience, who had been used to her appearance for years. Thus, as Kidman herself claimed, she had to play in such a way that the audience would believe the character with a characteristic profile, that they would see Virginia Woolf and not a funny-looking actress with a fake nose[10].

The problems connected with such creations have yet another dimension to them, strictly film-related, if not an image-and-movement dimension. In the case of artists, their film attractiveness is confirmed not only by a complicated, controversial life story, but also the kind of art they make. Not by chance do painters enjoy the highest popularity among the characters in biographical movies. The reason is simple – in this case the creative process is visually attractive. In turn, in the case of musical artists music constitutes an added element to their film storylines. The dynamic and auditory character of film art aids in building and interpreting onscreen biographies. What, then, about the writers, whose work seems to be particularly unfilmable when

[9] See <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/film/hours_daldry&co.html> DOA August 2, 2011.

[10] See <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/film/hours_daldry&co.html> DOA August 2, 2011.

compared to painters and musicians? One of the most spectacular examples of a director's struggles with a character's profession is *Death in Venice* by Luchino Visconti, who, when undertaking to make the famous film adaptation of Thomas Mann's short story, created a film about a musician, and not a writer, as it had been in the literary original. Alicja Helman writes that

A viewer of Visconti's movie tries to answer the basic question: why does Gustav von Aschenbach – a writer – become a composer in Visconti's movie? A direct answer, given by Visconti himself in an interview, is very simple. A movie about an artist should presumably show not only the person, but also their art. In the case of a film character who is a writer we could only be aware that he writes, see the activity itself; the writing would have had to remain absent, since neither reading the text in the diegesis nor an off-screen voice constitute satisfying solutions. (Helman 1998, p. 51)

Obviously, in the case of Daldry's film such a change was impossible. However, the basic assumption of the movie was that Virginia Woolf's writing and its contents would find their on-screen embodiment in the fates of the remaining two characters: Clarissa Vaughn and Laura Brown. Nevertheless, it was her actions that were supposed to generate the drama of the entire story. Moreover, writing and the person of a writer remain absolutely fundamental for the movie. Everything begins with the work of art and the death of the famous writer, but her fate finds its transposition also in the story of another writer character (played by Ed Harris) in the contemporary part of the movie^[11]. Nevertheless, playing a writer and reproducing the creative act which led to the creation of one of the greatest works of European literature in a believable and convincing manner turned out to be an extremely difficult challenge. First of all, the actress and the movie creators had to deal with the static character of the work, obvious to any writer. The creators made the fragments depicting the creative art dynamic in the way most obvious for movie art. They used quick transitions from distant to close shots, they focused the viewer's attention on the details: the pen in the writer's hand, her ink-stained fingers, a partially burnt cigarette. The simple act of dipping the pen in the inkwell would grow to the dimensions of a dramatic event, especially given that the screenplay constantly highlighted the creative crisis that the writer was struggling with. Thus, the character's statement "*Leonard, I believe I may have a first sentence*"^[12], followed by the reconstruction of the moment when the famous sentence is written on paper seems to constitute an event comparable to the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet*. Nicole Kidman frequently emphasised her sacrifice and hard work that the scenes of writing demanded from her, since – unlike Virginia Woolf – she is left-handed and had to learn to write with her right hand... Kidman's

[11] Ed Harris's character is undoubtedly the equivalent of the character of the suicidal writer from *Mrs. Dalloway*.

[12] Film dialogue.

confession appears to be a failed joke when we compare her work on the role with other examples of an actor's commitment, familiar from the history of cinema. Still, similar statements draw even more attention to the specificity of a writer as a film character.

However, it is impossible to talk and write about *The Hours* without mentioning its excellent editing. Indeed, it is difficult to resist the impression that it was also due to the editing that the imperfections of Nicole Kidman's acting could be hidden and her role be made more dynamic. One of the most important elements of the film's storyline consists in showing repetitiveness, the parallelism of the actions of the female characters, which actions existed as parts of a continuum of actions began by one character and completed by another in a different place and time within the filmed story. The momentum of the image and narration focused our attention on the actions rather than characters, drew attention to space and time rather than acting. This time and space mobility of the film dramaturgy meant that after each editing cut we would simply forget about the Virginia Woolf-Nicole Kidman that we had just seen on screen, especially if our attention was then drawn to the distinctive face of Meryl Streep. In this respect as well, Kidman loses the screen "rivalry" against the great actress. Shown without makeup, Meryl Streep's face becomes the reflection of a broad spectrum of emotions, shown naturally and without stage exaggeration that at times determined Kidman's performance. The film version of Virginia attempts to "hypnotise" the viewers by means of her stormy face, drawn eyebrows, the correct set of the mouth, all of which – as she mentioned in interviews – were prioritised in her acting (other than the nose).

Although hypnotising the viewers might not have been successful, many of them perceived the role of the Australian actress as remarkably true-to-life. The reason for that seems very obvious. The unappealing makeup perfectly fit with the personal tragedy of the actress who, at the time of shooting Stephen Daldry's film, suffered from depression after her divorce from Tom Cruise – as she naturally shared with journalists during a press conference at the Berlin Film Festival^[13]. Elsewhere, the actress described her participation in the film by referring to her personal problems at the time and drawing direct parallels between her situation and that of the famous author: "I tried to [pull out of the film], but they wouldn't let me. I just didn't really want to make films at that particular stage [...] I lived in this cottage in the middle of the woods like a madwoman, and [Daldry] would come and sit on a Sunday. [...] And I was surrounded by all of Virginia's letters and books" (Caro 2003). The viewers are thus informed how the personal tragedy became a point of reference for interpreting the role by the actress, making it all the more difficult to separate the story in

[13] <<http://film.onet.pl/wiadomosci/nicole-kidman-chcialabym-sie-znowu-zakochac,1,4027188,wiadomosc.html>> DOA July 2, 2011.

the film from the actress's real life experiences. Moreover, authentic, personal experience is commonly regarded as absolutely essential for the performance, for the so called "embodying of the character". The fuller the experience, the truer the performance. As the actress states in her Berlin interview, for her "it was cathartic to enter [Woolf's] psyche. Delving into the things that she was dealing with, the lines of life and art were so blurred" (Chien 2003). The complex personal situation of the actress was emphasised by the director Stephen Daldry as well. In his interview for *The Observer*, the director pointed out the fact that Kidman's personal tragedy influenced the interpretation of the role, particularly in the scene where Virginia is abandoned by her beloved sister^[14]. The emotions were reportedly so high that shooting the scene took the whole day^[15].

Thus, it seems that the role benefitted from context of the divorce as much as it did from the necessity to use appearance-altering makeup. It led a large section of the audience and the critics to think that the role was truly exceptional.

A similar case of failure of an actor in a biographical film is the role of Salma Hayek in Julie Taymor's 2002 film *Frida*. The starting point was also similar: a beautiful actress was supposed to play an unattractive but exceptionally talented artist. The role, however, was based on a somewhat different set of priorities than those that guided the creators of *The Hours*. Namely, in the case of *Frida*, the makeup took a back seat. Subtle changes in the actress's appearance were mostly limited to the characteristic unibrow of the painter. Such a decision may of course be considered highly original in the times when film criticism glorifies unappealing makeup and the actors who undergo transformation to look less attractive, confusing it with good acting. But was it the right decision in the case of Frida Kahlo? The phenomenon of Frida and her biography are much more rooted in her appearance than that of Virginia Woolf. Her looks become especially important in those parts of the film in which the script focuses on non-artistic elements of her life. In Julie Taymor's film these elements are as important as the character's works. We need to remember that Frida was a woman with a unibrow and a moustache, who was passionately pursued by both men and women. She was an erotic phenomenon, and this phenomenon would constitute a challenge to the filmmakers. Or it would have if the filmmakers had paid attention to the – therefore necessary – careful imitation by means of makeup, and wanted to answer the question how it could have happened and why Frida had had such an enormous influence on lives and feelings of others. What did she do that made both men and women succumb to her charm? While looking at Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* means looking at a person

[14] The relationship between Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa constitutes a separate issue, merely touched upon in Daldry's film, and a subject deserving its own film. So far, only literary biography has

devoted attention to this aspect of the writer's life; see Dunn 1990.

[15] "The Observer", 8.12.2002. The interview conducted by Kate Kellaway.

resembling Virginia Woolf, watching Frida means seeing only Salma Hayek. It is as though the filmmakers were afraid that the viewers will not believe in the protagonist's exceptional erotic power without the actress's beauty. This is one of those cases where the creators should have realised how important makeup is to the role and should have wanted to analyse and give credence to the phenomenon of Frida's appeal. Obviously, the appeal of the famous artist appears believable on screen as lack of typical attractiveness is only implied. The connected brows of the protagonist may constitute a certain deviation from the set standards of beauty, but the expressive attractiveness of the face of the actress means that this one small element that was supposed to make her look more like Frida is not too relevant. Perhaps the filmmakers, somewhat naively, thought that Salma Hayek's Mexican heritage and appearance would, so to speak, do the job, and make the viewers see her as the famous Mexican painter. Still, what we see on the screen is a good looking woman whom we are supposed to perceive as ugly. Nonetheless, the press published such accounts as well:

The transformation of Salma Hayek into Frida Kahlo – one of the most well-known female faces in the world – required the cooperation of an entire team. The actress and the artist have much in common: they are both petite, with large dark eyes and long black hair, but the work of an entire team of costume designers and makeup artists was necessary in order to magnify the resemblance between the two. To recreate Frida's beautiful braids and sophisticated hairdos, the stylist Beatrice DeAlba combined Salma's real hair with hair extensions which she braided and wove together. Makeup artist Judy Chin added single hairs to Salma's ample brow arcs to make them look less regular and more like the painter's purposefully unplucked eyebrows.[16]

In fact, the achievement of the costume designers are of the highest order – unlike that of the makeup artists. The effects of their work in case of *Frida* are decidedly over-praised (perhaps with the exception of the hairstyling), although there is hardly any thorough criticism of this aspect of Julie Taymor's film to be found in the press response to the film. Perhaps the visual attractiveness of the film is so overwhelming that the viewers do not quite focus on the character's appearance, or, considering the script-level complexity of the character, focus on other aspects of the role, or rather, of the interpretation of Frida Kahlo. I specifically emphasise the issue of interpretation of the character and the initial idea to present the story of the painter on the level of the script. Next to the problems with makeup, whose lack made it impossible to fully analyse the exceptional personality of the character, the very performance of Salma Hayek evokes reservations. To be blunt, it is a very average if not mediocre role, in spite of the Oscar nomination. The dramaturgical construction of the film

[16] <<http://film.onet.pl/wiadomosci/sal-ma-hayek-drugie-wcielenie-fridy-kahlo,1,3802766,wiadomosc.html>> DOA August 11, 2011.

and the staging of the subsequent phases in the life of the protagonist draw attention to a complex interpretation of the character proposed by the director of the film and its screenwriter, Clancy Sigal. Their story presents an artist, a lover, a feminist, a person with disability, a talented, passionate, unfulfilled, eccentric and proud woman. Salma Hayek fails to manage to convey this complexity. It seems that, among other things, the aesthetic sensibility of the director, particularly the collage-like structure of the film which she proposed, in a way drew the viewers' attention from the main role, which in a sense blends into the intoxicating images (Cf. Smith 2003). Moreover, the filmmakers spaced the biographical and narrative accents very evenly, including those that make it possible to overlook some elements of the character's makeup. Even a basic acquaintance with Frida Kahlo's biography means knowing how essential her disability was to her life and art. Importantly, it does not become the major theme in the film, but rather constitutes an issue that coherently, in combination with art, motherhood, love and politics, constructs the film biography of the artist. Disability is one of its themes but also the building blocks of the image. The body, and particularly Frida's suffering body, is the litmus test of all the filmed emotions, in a way, a screen within the screen, on which we can observe what the protagonist feels and how she reacts (Cf. Nyman 2010). The same body, undergoing painful procedures, imprisoned in corsets and bandages, draws our attention away from Frida's face and from what she says. It may seem a trite observation, but an important one in the context of the role – the weakness of the performance can be found in the serious issues with text, and namely, with its verbalisation. Otherwise good lines are pronounced in an artificial and frequently pretentious way. In this respect, Hayek's performance is no better than a school play one. Nevertheless, the character's disability, visualised in different ways – whether by means of filmed images or by screen transpositions of the paintings as they “come to life” – facilitates overcoming the acting shortcomings of Salma Hayek. I dare claim that aesthetic concepts and the treatment of the protagonist's disability (Cf. Nyman 2010) which emphasises her subjecthood fulfil the same role as dynamic camerawork and editing have in Daldry's film. In both cases, as inappropriate as it may sound, the filmmakers were forced to find visual, aesthetic substitutes for actors' performance.

However, the problem with both roles appears on yet another level of constructing a role, which is difficult to describe and analyse. The intellectual sphere constitutes a fundamental issue for the image of such characters as Virginia Woolf or Frida Kahlo. Especially in the case of the former, we are used to equate the moniker “an intellectual” and the writer's name. Unfortunately, Nicole Kidman proved that it is impossible to play intelligence, that in the case of such characters the statement “ugly but intelligent” is not fully realized on the screen only because the actress had makeup put on. Indeed, makeup does not substitute credible – and credibly intellectual – acting. The shots which

present the character with a pen in her hand and her brows furrowed in anger, supposed to prove that the character is thinking (!), do not necessarily need to be interpreted in such a way. When watching similar fragments of the movie we can sense the falsehood in the acting. We see that the actress playing Virginia Woolf is pretending.

The fact that such a role is a huge challenge is evidenced by Virginia Woolf's onscreen inexistence, of a kind, in biographical cinema. Are filmmakers afraid of this challenge? Indeed, it is even difficult to call *The Hours* a typical biographical movie (see Kołos 2007, pp. 39–48). The fascinating life story of a remarkable person and a famous writer is thus – paradoxically – a “neglected plotline” of biographical cinema (see Kołos 2007, pp. 43–44).

In Frida Kahlo's case, the director of the movie – as it would appear, very conscious of the actress's abilities – had an easier task. Both the complex visual side of the film and the dynamics of the character make it possible to omit the intellectual and cultural issues which are still significant for the artist's biography. The film's creators constructed it in such a way that the protagonist should act instead of thinking, or, anyway, so that the process of thinking would not need to be particularly analysed as the plot developed. Even emotions so easy to play for an actor – moderately well prepared in terms of their skills – as suffering found their transposition into images on the screen. In this case, undoubtedly, Frida Kahlo's art is more credible than Virginia Woolf's writing and Kidman's role. In a sense, the superiority of painters over writers in biographical movies was confirmed yet again. However, this does not mean that Salma Hayek won, as an actress, with the actress Nicole Kidman. Both failed professionally, even though the Academy Award nominations (in both cases) and the Academy Award for Best Actress in Kidman's case seem to deny that.

The possibilities of makeup, both with regard to the actors and to meanings, were not utilised in either of the films. Both actress heroines, placed in charge of the film faces of actual persons, appear very distinct on the screen, even if we take into account the differing approaches of the creators to makeup, but the appearance means little. In Salma Hayek's case, in her role as Frida Kahlo, both the adaptation and her interpretation of the character were disappointing. “Putting the role on” turned out to be only partial, although the careful transposition of the appearance could have been precisely the key to a deeper interpretation of the phenomenon of the famous artist's biography. Adapting Virginia Woolf's appearance in Daldry's movie undoubtedly constitutes a success of the makeup artists; however, further stages of constructing the role, embodying the character, point towards Kidman's capitulation as an actress, as she created more of a portrait of the character than an on-screen persona – she did not develop the role sufficiently to create a character on the screen. The image of Virginia Woolf that was preserved on the film tape (and then presented on the screen) is a record of that role (Cf. Skrzypczak 2009, p. 26), which lacks a full transformation into a screen

character (Cf. Skrzypczak 2009, p. 27)[17]. While I am willing to agree that in a feature film that presents a fictional story every actor (person) playing their role transforms into a screen character, a biopic makes this – as it would seem – natural progress from a role to the final stage of the on-screen transformation more difficult through the existence of an external reference point – an authentic person. On the other hand, every attempt at playing an authentic person is simultaneously an attempt at creating a screen character. For the purposes of a biographical movie I would supplement the scheme proposed by Piotr Skrzypczak with one more element: actor-medium, who would appear between the record of the role and the screen character and who would be a carrier of information about physical and psychological features of the actual person (and through whom there would take place some kind of an emotional and aesthetic transfer from the real world to the screen). The quality of communication between the viewer, the authentic person and the world presented in the movie would decide whether the actor in such a role can become a screen character or not. It would be the credibility of an actor as a mediating instance between reality and the story told on the screen that would verify their status of a screen character.

I have presented the critique of roles played by Salma Hayek and Nicole Kidman not in order to prove that the two famous actresses lack talent, but in order to emphasise the level of difficulty in playing actual people in front of the camera, as well as what constitutes the source of those difficulties. Obviously, the simplest answer would be: the necessity to deal with a legend, and often with a Legend, and thus expectations – sometimes very diverse – of the audience and the critics, sometimes also of the families and friends of the people the film is about. The lack of access to credible sources which may aid in shaping the movie image of the person. Or, perhaps, too many available and credible sources pertaining to the life of the person played on-screen? The last question is not without merit. Indeed, one can ask further questions. Whose role was more difficult: Cate Blanchett's, who, playing Queen Elizabeth I, had at her disposal countless academic and popular publications about the character she was playing and about the Elizabethan period, Elizabeth's image as preserved in iconography, and a whole lot of suppositions, conspiracy theories, interpretations, more or less shocking hypotheses regarding her rule, her private life, even her gender (sic!), none of which, however, provide information about the way the queen moved, how her voice sounded, the gestures she made, etc. Or, perhaps, was it Robert Downey Jr. who had a more difficult task? After all, when playing Charlie Chaplin, he had at his disposal movies with Chaplin, archive materials that showed the famous comedian at work and in private. Downey Jr. knew how Chaplin moved, how he spoke, how he acted. Does such knowledge make an actor's

[17] The author of the book suggests a following scheme of relations between the actor as a person and their on-screen actions: a person – human – > a person – actor – > the role – > the record of the role – > screen character.

work on the set of a biographical movie easier? What determines one's acting choices more: the fact that the actor has something to refer to and model their performance on, or the lack of materials that would help to shape the on-screen characters with regards to movement and aesthetics? Is it easier to impersonate Cleopatra or Marilyn Monroe? It is not without reason that I mention two icons of film culture: Charlie Chaplin and Marilyn Monroe. Indeed, it seems that in the case of biographical movies, the need to impersonate another actor constitutes a particular challenge.

The acting task that Downey Jr. had to perform went far beyond the limits of acting in a conventional biography. First of all, he had to deal with the myth of "the most famous man in the world", as the creators of the movie termed Chaplin. Not to take away from actors playing rulers, politicians, scientists, artists, and even virtuosos, the role of an actor playing an actor creates a challenge of an increased level of difficulty. In addition to recreating the other actor, their appearance, gestures, way of speaking, and recreating familiar fragments of roles, [the actor] is also subject to merciless confrontation, observed by the viewer, of the image preserved on the screen with their own concept of the original person. And this does not pertain to such a confrontation we deal with when the actor plays the gestures and the way of speaking of a politician who is known from film chronicles, but who does not have professional acting skills. It is a confrontation of an actor "encroaching on the territory" of another actor, interpreting their own interpreting tools. There is, in the decision to undertake such a task, something akin to an arrogant annexation of another person's acting personality, an annexation that can be felt stronger than in the case of playing other actual people. (Skrzypczak 2007, p. 201)

The author of the quotation clearly sets the gradation of the difficulty of biographical acting due to the character's profession. And that makes much sense. However, it should be remembered that contemporary biographical acting functions in a particular media reality. The common availability of audiovisual materials results in the fact that similarity – not only of the person's appearance, but also the way they move, the way they speak, the construction of an event, the quality of space – can be constantly verified by the viewers. This especially pertains to people who are still alive (or who are still well remembered) and events that took place within the last few decades. What was then the acting challenge that Helen Mirren had to undertake when playing Queen Elizabeth II, especially in the scene where she was giving one of the most important speeches of the late 20th century? The creators of *The Queen*, aware of the fact that they are bringing to the big screen a media situation unprecedented across the century^[18], decided to reproduce the speech verbatim^[19], so that every sentence spoken by

[18] The speech by Queen Elizabeth II was broadcast by BBC 1. The speech is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVBNwJwegso>> DOA March 20, 2015.

[19] In the film, we watch Queen Elizabeth's speech interspersed with the reactions of the viewers (the royal family, Prime Minister Tony Blair and his wife). See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQmC2G-Vb3pQ>> DOA March 20, 2015.

the queen would sound out. The British queen's speech, as registered by BBC 1, and its film counterpart, function on the Internet and make it possible to compare simultaneously not only the contents of the speech, but also the appearance of Queen Elizabeth and the on-screen character, the tone of the speech, the space in which it took place. Thus, the audience members have full knowledge regarding what the scene should look like, what it should contain. And thus, is playing the most famous woman in the world in the multimedia reality of the 21st century not as complicated as impersonating the most recognisable film comedian?

How did Julianne Moore create the role of Sarah Palin, preparing to act as one of the most colourful and the most frequently criticised – if not derided – personalities of American politics in recent years? Did she only take into account Palin's own appearances, or did she also look at the parodies of her, so popular on the Internet? In this case we are dealing with multiplicity of adaptations of an actual person's image, characteristic for contemporary media, which can also become a significant reference point in the process of creating a character^[20]. Julianne Moore admits that she looked for inspiration among various versions of Palin's public appearances and interviews on YouTube, and she spent many hours in front of the computer screen (See Malone 2012).

Did the recognisable and very distinct image of Professor Religa help Tomasz Kot in imitating him? It seems that **imitation**^[21] is precisely the rudiment of shaping a character in a biographical film. In one of the interviews, the actor playing the role of the famous cardiac surgeon said "It is difficult to play someone who people still remember" (Adamczyk 2014). The memory of a person, their popularity and common availability of the image in a way force the actor to undertake imitation exactly because the viewers, as Kot later says, "compare, assess the similarity, appearance, way of walking, gesticulation – everything" (Adamczyk 2014). Tomasz Kot's role is an example of an actor's struggles against the expectation of the public that is very typical for a biographical film, as it confirms the thesis regarding the fundamental significance of the similarity between the character on the screen and

[20] It is necessary to differentiate between media multiplication of the image of the true person and their popularity in biographical films. There is a difference between the popularity of Sarah Palin (her actual image and its various adaptations / parodies on the Internet) and, for instance, the popularity of Queen Elizabeth I in movies.

[21] I am consciously rejecting the idea of "**pretending**", which, in my opinion, has a pejorative resonance in the context of biographical acting. Pretending implies other meanings undesirable in this case, including falsehood, deception, fooling someone. The

task of the actors in a biopic is to convince the viewers to the screen characters they create – the on-screen embodiment of an authentic person. Obviously, contemporary acting also needs to face the essence of "pretending." However, this is an issue connected with the evolution of contemporary film acting, conditioned by technological changes, and, as follows, the need to introduce new analytical tools (including the theories of performance art), which will aid in analysing the status of the actor and their work in front of the camera. See Skrzypczak 2009, pp. 42–45.

the real person. The question: similar or not? appears long before the shooting for the movie begins. Moreover, the question is asked not only by the viewers, but also by the actors. The reaction of potential viewers to the news of Tomasz Kot receiving Religa's role was symptomatic. The actor reminisces that "When I got [the role], there were immediately voices of disbelief, such as: Why should he play the professor? He doesn't have the posture, doesn't resemble [Religa], what kind of an idea is that anyway? But when the first pictures were published, there were immediately opinions that it was quite alright" (Adamczyk 2014). Significantly, he also had doubts regarding precisely his appearance: "When I first got the offer, I thought: 'Damn, I see no resemblance, but we'll see what can be done'" (Adamczyk 2014). The subsequent stages of his working on the role carry out the scheme of working on the role characteristic for biographical acting.

In such circumstances it's worth being a bit of a detective. You need to look for materials on which you can base [your role]. Films, pictures, radio interviews. Still, it's different to impersonate a rock musician, where the skeleton of the portrayal is ready – I go on tour, I have a guitar, cords, huge speakers, there is a stage – everyone has seen all of this dozens of times. And it's different to impersonate a particular person, the only, unique one, who had his own facial expressions, gestures, habits. (Adamczyk 2014)

However, imitation also carries certain dangers. Natural movements of the character imitated by the actor may turn into a grotesque copy on screen. The actor reminisces:

Initially, I had a problem with the posture. Religa walked slightly stooped, but it was easy for it to become a caricature when I imitated him. Especially since you sometimes work 26 hours on the movie set without stopping, and you are also brought down by tiredness. I was afraid it would look grotesque. I spent a lot of time in front of the mirror, practising this kind of slight stoop I had seen in the pictures. (Adamczyk 2014)

Exaggeration in imitating appears to be the basic danger in the process of shaping the role, as it gives the impression of pretending, which always implies falsehood and that, in turn, is always detected and rejected by the viewer of a biographical movie. Caricature discredits the instances of the actor-medium (about which I have written above) and the emotional and aesthetic transfer for which the actor is responsible.

What could then be the conclusion? Where should we look for the essence of biographic acting? How to avoid exaggeration and falsehood, which could kill the role? Probably by ensuring the honesty of the acting creation and a well thought-out interpretation of the character on every level of creating the role, from appearance to the psychology of the character, so that the actor could get the viewers interested not in their ability, but in the character they play and their history.

Translated by Nelly Strehlau

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Fot. Justyna Sulejewska