CINEMATIC PERSPECTIVE: DECODING AND INTERPRETING THE LIFE STORY OF HÉCTOR LAVOE FROM THE MUSICAL BIOPIC EL CANTANTE

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ABSTRACT: Stemming from the long tradition of biographical writing, cinema has communicated history by means of re-enactments of the lives of significant public figures through time (Landy 1996). It can be argued that film biographies or ‘biopics’ possess a more personal, graphic and emotional vividness as opposed to professional historians chronicling the subject’s life work (Tibbetts 2005). The musical biopic in particular is a biographical film that focuses on individuals such as musicians, composers, singers and performer/entertainers and has had resurgence in contemporary cinema since 2000 with films such as Walk the Line (James Mangold, 2005), Ray (Taylor Hackford, 2004), De-Lovely (Irwin Winkler, 2004), I’m Not There (Todd Haynes, 2007) and Beyond the Sea (Kevin Spacey, 2004) released in Hollywood alone. Rather than exploring the musical individual’s life history through one linear narrative, films in the twenty-first century have become more complex, connecting past and present, merging truth and fiction, to create multilayered perspectives on one life. El Cantante (Leon Ichaso, 2006) is a contemporary musical biopic that represents the life story of Puerto Rican singer Héctor Lavoe from the 1960s through to his untimely death in 1993. The film is narrated from the perspective of Lavoe’s wife Puchi (Nilda Georgina Perez) which, according to the film, is based on an actual interview with Puchi after Lavoe’s death. Through decoding and interpreting Lavoe’s life story through the film, this paper will argue that El Cantante, amongst contemporary Hollywood musical biopics, is a self-reflexive film in terms of how the biopic represents multiple perspectives of the salsa singer. The film creators acknowledge and audio-visually reflect that El Cantante is a dramatic, not an accurate portrayal of Héctor Lavoe’s life.

The biopic (biographical film) boomed in the Hollywood studio-era and over three hundred biographical films were released that focused on various famous individuals including scientists and politicians, but more so with musical individuals such as musicians, entertainers, composers and singers.1 These biopics in general delivered a simple linear narrative structure of the individual’s life story that was utilised as a guideline for subsequent attempts at representing a star persona on film during the studio-era. More recently, there has been a resurgence of musical biopics that have been released cinematically over the last decade. Currently these contemporary biopics (particularly those that have been released from 2000 onward) have taken on a self-reflexive approach through the film’s mode of audio-visual representation. In other words, these recent films rely on the audience to be aware that the biopic is not a completely accurate representation of a life story; it is a

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culmination of perspectives regarding one individual. In terms of this audio-visual representation Williams emphasises that, ‘there is... no true representation. That is, there is no representation of how or what things ‘really’ are irrespective of human consciousness’ (Williams 2003, 103). Hence, there is a fabrication of characters and events within the narrative of the musical biopic that arise from differing perspectives which are apparent particularly through music and dialogue.

**Case Study: El Cantante**

The following case study is a musical biopic titled *El Cantante* (Leon Ichaso) which was released in 2006. The film is inspired by the life of salsa singer, Héctor Lavoe, and features Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez in the leading roles. In order to interpret information the film provides about Lavoe’s life the following paper will discuss the film narrative and its impact on the audience, the mystification that may arise from casting popular star personalities in the film and finally, the audio-visual representation of musical numbers within the film. Upon concluding it will be argued that *El Cantante* is a dramatic, not an accurate portrayal of Lavoe’s life which is highlighted through the film’s self-reflexivity. In other words, the makers of *El Cantante* (including director, Leon Ichaso) acknowledge that the film offers simply a viewpoint or perspective on the private life of Lavoe and how the events of his life could possibly have influenced his stage persona and music style. This paper principally argues that the filmmakers of these contemporary musical biopics are consciously aware that they are presenting a fabricated image of the star individual. Therefore in decoding information imparted by these films, the viewer obtains knowledge only about how the individual is perceived by the public; not providing any truths concerning the star’s personal life.

**Narrative Construction and Audience Interpretation**

The structure of the narrative is imperative to how the film is interpreted by the audience. Judgement of the effectiveness of the film is also dependant on what type of audience watches a film like *El Cantante*; whether it is a Héctor Lavoe fan searching for accurate details about the star’s private life or a Marc Anthony/Jennifer Lopez fan keen on being entertained by the celebrities ‘acting’ skills. According to the film, the story of Héctor Lavoe is narrated from the perspective of his wife, Nilda Roman Pérez (nicknamed Puchi) and is based on an interview with her after Lavoe had passed away. Even though the audience is guided to interpret the film narrative as solely based on the interview, the role of the filmmakers must be taken into consideration as their creative input also plays a significant part in the construction of *El Cantante*. Therefore, the film is created by the filmmaker’s interpretation of the interview.
In discussing the narrative of film in particular, Staiger states that, ‘the experience consists of an absorption into an illusion’ (Staiger 2000, 12). However, in this self-reflexive film (amongst other contemporary musical biopics), the film depends on the viewer not to be fully immersed in the text but to become more critical of the way Héctor Lavoe’s life is represented. An example of this self-reflexivity is in a scene where, in the interview, Puchi states that she was never involved with the drugs/scene that Lavoe was immersed in. To highlight what the filmmakers believe is a lie; the interview scene is juxtaposed with images of Puchi inhaling lines of cocaine and flirting with another woman in front of Lavoe. Various other scenes throughout the film contain events that Puchi could not have possibly had first-hand access to which highlights the fabrication and illusory nature of the biographical representations.²

It is also important to discern which biographical details were omitted from the final cut of the film, why the decision was made and how it inevitably alters the film viewer’s perception of Héctor Lavoe. An interesting biographical misdirection of the film is that Lavoe only has one child by Puchi, a son, who dies at the young age of seventeen after being accidentally shot in the stomach. In reality, Lavoe had a son with another woman he was romantically involved with, previous to his relationship with Puchi. Neglecting to mention this fact in the film implies the filmmakers (and perhaps even Puchi) wanted a focus on the one son because of the dramatic outcome. Leon Ichaso, the film’s director, also wanted a focus on the relationship between Héctor and Puchi to reaffirm her commitment to him and her influence over him which apparently assisted in Lavoe coping with his rapid rise to fame.

**Star Status of the Singer/Actor**

It is difficult to decode information about the individual in film when the actor that plays the role is just as popular in music culture. As Butler notes, ‘The star’s image dominates movie posters and appears on dozens of magazine covers, it is clearly one of the principal commodities that is used to market a film to an audience’ (1998, 342). Casting the star entertainers Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez in the leading roles of *El Cantante* also adds to confusion for the film viewer in identifying what truths correspond to which star persona. For example, there are several similarities between Marc Anthony (the actor) and Héctor Lavoe (the character).

² Events include scenes where Lavoe is in recording studio meetings with Fania Records and scenes where Lavoe is in Puerto Rico before he met Puchi.
Similarities include the fact that they are both of Puerto Rican decent, they are both salsa singers, and both performed ‘sold out’ shows at Madison Square Garden. Marc Anthony’s decision to play the role of Héctor Lavoe may be what Barry King calls ‘personification’. King suggests that, ‘in playing any character, the ‘real’ personality of the actor should disappear into the part or, conversely, that if the range of the actor is limited to parts consonant with his or her personality then this constitutes ‘poor’ acting’ (1991, 168). Furthermore, ‘it is necessary to qualify the view that personification arises solely out of the actor’s adaptation to his or her conditions of employment’ (King 1991, 180). It is possible that Marc Anthony has poor acting skills because of his choice to play Héctor Lavoe in El Cantante but it is also significant to mention here that Marc Anthony’s current star-power crosses over to Héctor Lavoe’s past star-power. The film merges both personae into one star identity, blurring the distinction between reality and fabrication.

Jennifer Lopez’s presence in the film as a Hollywood star personality also affects how the film viewer reads Puchi as an individual. It is difficult to detach or dismiss Lopez’s star personality from her onscreen role, especially when her onscreen husband is her real life husband. It is also essential to note that in preparing for her role as Puchi, Jennifer Lopez discloses in her interview that to research for her role and gather information on the character she was cast as she came across eight CDs of audio interview recordings that were administered for the film. Furthermore, as well as acting in a lead role in El Cantante, Jennifer Lopez owns the production company, Nuyorican Film Productions, which launched El Cantante and hence became one of the producers of the film. Therefore, in creating the film and its characters, Lopez had a higher level of power and control over the representations of Héctor Lavoe’s life onscreen.

Audio-Visual Representation of Musical Numbers and the Function of Subtitles

The last element of the film to be discussed is perhaps the most significant part of the film: audio-visual representation of the musical numbers. The musical numbers in El Cantante are simply when Lavoe is in the recording studio or performing his music to his fans, sometimes at a concert hall, at a festival or a nightclub. Generally, in the performative numbers, Lavoe is on stage, on spotlight, singing his music to his fans. The reason why these scenes are significant is because his music is what he is known for and why he became such a prominent figure in Latin American culture. Also, how his music is visualised onscreen also aids the film audience to interpret how and why he created the songs that he did and if indeed they were inspired by his own life experiences.

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3 Interview from The Sound and the Heat of El Cantante (a behind-the-scenes documentary of the film included in the DVD features of El Cantante).
Although all of the songs performed by Lavoe in *El Cantante* are sung in Spanish, some musical numbers in the film offer translations to English which are placed as subtitles across the screen. Egoyan & Balfour suggest that ‘subtitles are only the most visible and charged markers of the way in which films engage, in direct and oblique fashion, pressing matters of difference, otherness, and translation’ (2004, 21). Hence, whenever there are subtitles on the screen (which occur during some musical numbers and also in dialogue with Lavoe and other Spanish-speaking characters), the non-Spanish speaking viewer is distanced from the subtitled sequences and is almost forced to become a foreigner in attempting to engage with the films characters. However, the subtitles do provide the viewer with a further understanding of the music which is usually linked to or integrated in the film narrative. In other words, the musical numbers with subtitles suggest that the lyrics have a direct reference to what is occurring in the plot of the film and assists in driving the narrative forward.

An example of subtitling in a musical number is Lavoe’s song titled ‘Aguanile’, which he performs after he visits a woman who tells him to wear a beaded necklace to ward off evil spirits. As he is seen performing onstage, the camera cuts to scenes where he is seemingly under a healing chant. The subtitles state, amongst other lyrics, that Lavoe is singing ‘for those judging me, I got Aguanile’. The dancer’s onstage link to the film narrative as they provide salsa-style interpretive choreography of the ritual that Lavoe went through which is visually apparent in the juxtaposed sequences. Overall, this song marks a point in Lavoe’s life when he needed help and consulted religion and the saints in order to get through some of his darker times.

Songs that do not offer any sort of translation for the English speaking viewer are not meant to be interpreted literally. They provide an audio-visual function that demonstrates Lavoe’s impact on his audiences, singing to packed crowds of fans who salsa dance in the aisles and sing along to his music. Dancyger states that, ‘When we add the lyrics of a song, which tend to be poetic, we are given a direction for the emotion of the music. If there is a sense of narrative, it yields from those poetic lyrics. But... the purpose of music and lyrics is to give a defined emotional state to the feeling state that is created’ (1997, 187). Therefore, the musical numbers in *El Cantante* that do not contain subtitling are supposed to create a feeling state. The music that does have subtitles also provides a defined emotional state that functions as a part of the narrative. All in all, the musical numbers in *El Cantante*, along with the narrative and overall audio-visual representation of Héctor Lavoe’s life requires some form of response by the film audience derived from the feeling generated by watching the film.

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4 The way in which the subtitles are displayed onscreen assists the non-Spanish speaking viewer to further engage in the musical number as the subtitles are not a simple addition to the film placed as a small white text at the bottom of the screen, the subtitles are integrated into the audio-visual representation of the music and fade in and off screen as Lavoe sings each line.
To conclude, *El Cantante* is an important case study in understanding the construction and audio-visual representation of contemporary musical biopics. Taking into consideration narrative structure, music, dialogue, visual imagery, the star image of the actor and musical individual, and how these elements can be interpreted by the film viewer, these contemporary biopics provide a self-reflexive view of the dramatic representation of a life story on film. The contemporary musical biopic perpetuates the previously constructed myths concerning the musical individual presented through differing perspectives, forms and styles.

**REFERENCES**


