

# Is This the Real Life? Is This Just Fantasy?

A Musicological Research on Authentic Representation in Musical  
Biopics

Name: Rinske Lerk

Student Number: 4251970

MA Applied Musicology, Utrecht University

MA Thesis MCMV16014

Supervisor: Dr. Michiel Kamp

Date: June 14, 2019

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## Abstract

Lately, many musical biopics have been released and are set to be released in the coming few years. Despite the controversy surrounding it, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) has become the most successful biopic of all time. The controversy mainly has to do with the idea that there are many mistakes in the film. This has not stopped the audience of seeing the film and shows a dichotomy between the opinions of critics and audience. This dichotomy leads to the main question of this thesis: ‘What is the importance of authentic representation in a musical biopic for critics?’ In musicological research, reviews are mostly ignored, even though they are an important part of how people perceive films and music. In order to answer this question a theories by, amongst others, Philip Auslander, Allan F. Moore, and Stuart Hall are used on authentic representation and an analysis of several reviews on musical biopics is done. A musical biopic is described as a biographical film that depicts the life of a historical, musical person, past or present. First, the thesis gives a short overview of the history of musical biopics. Secondly, authentic representation is explained by giving several definitions of authenticity. These definitions are related to each other to give general ideas of authenticity that can be used in analysing reviews, which is the third part of the thesis. Based on the general ideas of authenticity and representation, quotes from reviews are discussed and figured out to what extent they are thought of as important to critics. As expected, a lot of the elements that have been discussed about authentic representation can be found in the reviews, showing the importance of it to critics.

## Introduction

Since the release of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) there has been a lot of discussion about the quality of the film, and since the release of *Rocketman* (2019) the two films have been compared countless times. The discussion on *Bohemian Rhapsody* mainly has to do with the portrayal of Freddie Mercury by Rami Malek and the representation of biographical events.<sup>1</sup> Critics are rather negative about this, and comparing it to the reviews of *Rocketman* it seems like the latter gives a truer representation. This is also something that Elton John mentioned in a post on his Instagram account: “Paramount Pictures have been brave and bold partners in allowing us to create a film which is a true representation of Elton’s extraordinary life, warts and all.”<sup>2</sup> Allegedly, *Rocketman* succeeded in giving a proper representation of Elton John. Despite all the negativity, *Bohemian Rhapsody* won several awards, amongst which multiple Oscars, a few Golden Globes, and some BAFTAs,<sup>3</sup> and broke box office records.<sup>4</sup> This shows a dichotomy between the opinions of critics and of the audience, and the intentions of the artist him- or herself. It seems like critics find an accurate representation in *Bohemian Rhapsody* more important than the audience does. Since critics have a clear opinion that can be found in reviews, I want to find out more about their side of this dichotomy. *Bohemian Rhapsody* is just one example of many more biopics.<sup>5</sup> Do other biopics receive similar critiques?

According to John C. Tibbetts, critics and historians have consigned biopics on composers to the margins of the cinema discourse. As an example he quotes film critic Graham Greene: “There is a hideous vulgarity, indeed, about all these pictures based on composers’ lives, [t]he human melodrama belittles the music all the time like programme notes so that . . . [the] music becomes only a sentimental illustration to sentimental dialogue.”<sup>6</sup> Tibbetts also mentions that “the lives are bent, adjusted, manipulated to achieve the desired

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance this review by Richard Roeper in the Chicago Sun Times: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/bohemian-rhapsody-review-freddie-mercury-queen-rami-malek-richard-roeper/>.

<sup>2</sup> Elton John (@Eltonjohn), Instagram photo, June 1, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByJK11rjpVW/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Bohemian Rhapsody (2018) awards,” IMDb, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1727824/awards>.

<sup>4</sup> “Queen Movie ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ Is Highest-Grossing Music Biopic Ever,” Grammys, last modified December 14, 2018, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/queen-movie-bohemian-rhapsody-highest-grossing-music-biopic-ever>.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance these websites for lists of musical biopics: <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls069101453/> and <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-music-biopic-movies/>.

<sup>6</sup> John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies, Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 3.

effect.”<sup>7</sup> Combining these two points of view leads me to think about the thoughts of critics on this subject. While Tibbetts does include reactions from reviews on biopics, he does not relate the remarks to the facts he either found correct or incorrect in the biopics. Neither does he relate them to for instance issues of authenticity. Thus, this is something I will delve into in this thesis. Film criticism is not used often as a source for musicological research, but “criticism *deepens* our interest in individual films, *reveals* new meanings and perspectives, *expands* our sense of the medium, *confronts* our assumptions about value, and *sharpens* our capacity to discriminate.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, reviews that the audience come across in newspapers, on Facebook or hear discussed on the radio shape the way that they view and make sense of the film. This shows why it is important to discuss reviews and leads me to the following research question: ‘What is the importance of authentic representation in a musical biopic for critics?’ Because of the remarks about *Bohemian Rhapsody* I expect to find that critics find authentic representation an important aspect in musical biopics. I also expect to find some general comments on authenticity by critics and comments that may not explicitly mention authenticity but are related to it.

In order to answer my main question, a few other questions need to be asked and answered. First of all there is the question ‘what is a musical biopic?’ The book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* is one of the most cited works on the subject of biopics.<sup>9</sup> In this book, George F. Custen gives a historical overview of the biopic and defines what a biopic is.<sup>10</sup> Custen writes that “a biographical film is one that depicts the life of a historical person, past or present.”<sup>11</sup> For this thesis, I will use this definition of a biopic. To consider a biopic as a musical biopic, it has to depict the life of a musician. The most recent additions to the musical biopic genre include *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*. These musical biopics are very popular and seem to be popularising the genre as a whole. I will give a short overview on the history of musical biopics to show how the genre has evolved and what its current status in the film industry is.

The next question is ‘what is authentic representation?’ This question is quite broad and can be split up into a few sections. First, there are different ways in which representation

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>8</sup> Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, “Introduction: The language and style of film criticism,” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Belén Vidal, “introduction: the biopic and its critical contexts,” in *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, ed. Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 4.

<sup>10</sup> George F. Custen, “Introduction: Clio in Hollywood,” in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 1-31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

can be found in a musical biopic. I will start with defining these kinds of representation. The following section focusses on the matter of authenticity. Within music, there are many kinds of authenticity, such as rock authenticity, pop authenticity, and country authenticity. These mainly describe the ways in which a specific genre can be identified. However, there may be some elements that are present in not just one genre. Perhaps there is such a thing as biographical authenticity, for biographies can be made about musicians from any genre. Or, as Allan F. Moore mentions, there are first-, second-, and third-person authenticities, which extend beyond the genre of rock.<sup>12</sup> I will give an overview of different viewpoints on authenticity and try to relate them to each other. This will give me some general ideas that I can use in the next part of my research.

Lastly, to be able to answer my main question, biopics will be analysed. These biopics are all musical biopics, but from different musical genres. This will give me as broad a spectrum as possible. For instance, there is *Bohemian Rhapsody* for rock music, *Walk the Line* (2005) for country music, and *Impromptu* (1991) for classical music. Since I address reviews on biopics, it is not necessary for me to have seen the biopics myself. Where having seen the film gives me an image of what the critic is saying, when I have not seen the film I can similarly distinguish comments on authenticity and representation.

Of all these films I have collected reviews in which I looked for remarks on authenticity, representation, performance, and factuality. These can then be related to the types of authenticity that I have defined and based on this I can find out whether critics find these authenticities important or not. I define a review by using what Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan mention is the most used definition of film criticism, “something by an opinionated journalist, a film critic, who tells you whether a film is worth seeing.”<sup>13</sup> By reading as many reviews concerning musical biopics as possible I tried to find a coherence, or incoherence, in the opinions of critics with regards to authentic representation. On the website rottentomatoes.com many reviews can be found. Since Rotten Tomatoes is an American website, all the reviews I have found on there are in English. This also means that reviews from a large part of the world are excluded. I am aware of the exclusion of many critical opinions, but in order to demarcate the scope of my research I focused on the reviews that can be found in the large database of this website. The reviews that I will discuss I randomly picked from the available reviews. This way I am not making any distinctions between the

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<sup>12</sup> Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001), 200.

<sup>13</sup> Clayton and Klevan, “Introduction,” 1.

kinds of reviews. For instance, they can be written by both a professional and an amateur. The way I picked the reviews is as follows: on Rotten Tomatoes I will look for all the critical reviews of a film. A list of all the reviews shows up and I can browse through multiple pages of 20 reviews each. I can then think of a certain number which will lead me to a page and another number which will lead me to a specific review. Unfortunately, not all the reviews that are mentioned are available. Some websites do not store all their history so the link will lead me to the homepage of a website. Other sites I cannot access because I live in The Netherlands instead of The United Kingdom or United States. Also, some biopics have more reviews than others. This may have different causes, such as that it is an older film of which reviews cannot be found online. Another reason may be that the film is not released yet or is very new and has not received many reviews yet. This might make it harder to find the same amount of reviews to discuss for each film, but I have been able to collect many reviews that show certain patterns.

## A Brief History of Musical Biopics

The film genre of biopics originated in the early 1930s with films such as *Queen Christina* (1933), *Affairs of Cellini* (1934), and *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and with its arrival many different subgenres appeared. As Dennis Bingham sums up, “[t]here are musical biopics, sports biopics, gangster biopics, biopic thrillers, literary biopics, artist biopics, and historical biopics.”<sup>14</sup> The biopic that caused the musical biopic to take hold was *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) about American artist George M. Cohan.<sup>15</sup> So far, the biopic had been about idols of production, such as statesmen and scientists. After the musical biopic *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and in the 1950s, the focus of biopics shifted towards entertainers and sport figures.<sup>16</sup> According to Bruce Babington, in the 1960s there was a decline of the classical song and dance musicals, but the biopic genre survived. Although the biopic survived, it started to focus more on rock (*The Doors* (1991)), jazz (*Lady Sings the Blues* (1978)), and country music (*Your Cheatin’ Heart* (1964) and in 2015 *I Saw the Light*, both about Hank Williams), rather than mainstream popular music and classical music.<sup>17</sup> There were some biopics released in the 1970s, but the development of the genre came to a halt, only to be picked up again in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Although the musical biopics were not focusing on mainstream popular music, since the 1990s, many musical biopics about very famous musicians have been released. Most of these are about musicians that have passed away or have had their fame a few decades before. For instance, there is *La Vie en Rose* (2007) about Édith Piaf, *Nowhere Boy* (2009) about John Lennon, and *Love & Mercy* (2014) about Brian Wilson.

Even though there are many biopics, the status of the biopic in general is much debated. As Dennis Bingham mentions, “[i]f it’s a bad movie, it’s a ‘biopic,’ but if it’s doing something interesting or different, it’s something else.”<sup>19</sup> Even though a biopic is a general description of a film, it is only used when the film is bad. According to Bingham, this attitude has changed in the early twenty-first century and the label biopic is now used as an objective term. However, there are still examples where this is not the case. *Rocketman* is for instance

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<sup>14</sup> Dennis Bingham, “The Lives and Times of Biopics,” in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 247.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis Bingham, “Woody Guthrie, Warts-and-All: The Biopic in the New American Cinema of the 1970s,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 26, no. 1 (2011): 69.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Babington, “Star Personae and Authenticity in the Country Music Biopic,” in *Film’s Musical Moments*, ed. Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>18</sup> Bingham, “Woody Guthrie, Warts-and-All,” 69.

<sup>19</sup> Bingham, “The Lives and Times of Biopics,” 237.



described as a ‘musical fantasy.’<sup>20</sup> This is a little odd since it follows the release of *Bohemian Rhapsody* which has identified itself as biographical film and has become the most successful musical biopic of all time. Despite the success of the genre, it is still not generally accepted. However, it must be acknowledged that *Rocketman* features several scenes in which the actors suddenly start singing, like in a musical. Thus, *Rocketman* is unlike musical biopics such as *Bohemian Rhapsody*, but it still is a biopic.

In 2007, Jake Kasdan released the film *Walk Hard*, a parody on the musical biopic genre that underlines the status of this genre. When it came out, it was based on the two most successful musical biopics of that moment, namely *Walk the Line* and *Ray* (2004). *Walk Hard* shows the general and expected storyline of musical biopics. Scholars Bruce Babington and Peter Williams Evans have divided the storyline into four movements.<sup>21</sup> The first movement describes how the protagonist is discovered and reaches success, the second movement shows conflict and/or affection, there are issues which affect his/her family and/or marriage. The third movement shows the protagonist who gives up on music and then makes a comeback. In the last movement the protagonist regains success. As can be seen later, critics compare biopics to each other, but also to the ‘standard’ musical biopic. This standard is what I have just described and is followed by many biopics, but there are also exceptions, which I will point out later.

When trying to find musical biopics, it is noticeable that they are mostly about popular musicians rather than classical music and composers. There is a well-known musical biopic about Mozart, *Amadeus* (1984) which, despite its historical inaccuracies, has won eight Academy Awards.<sup>22</sup> Since there are some musical biopics on classical composers (such as *Amadeus* and *Impromptu* (1991), I will address these in my thesis. However, the most biopics that will be discussed are about popular musicians.

It seems like the success of *Bohemian Rhapsody* has been the starting signal for the making of many new musical biopics. Ultimate Classic Rock has put together a list of five classic rock biopics following and even comparing them individually to *Bohemian Rhapsody*.<sup>23</sup> At the time of writing two of them have been released already, *The Dirt* on

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<sup>20</sup> “Rocketman (2019),” IMDb, accessed May 29, 2019, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2066051/?pf\\_rd\\_m=A2FGELUUNOQJNL&pf\\_rd\\_p=2413b25e-e3f6-4229-9efd-599bb9ab1f97&pf\\_rd\\_r=7VGFSNVB6P52C6NKCSYD&pf\\_rd\\_s=right-2&pf\\_rd\\_t=15061&pf\\_rd\\_i=homepage&ref\\_=hm\\_otw\\_t1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2066051/?pf_rd_m=A2FGELUUNOQJNL&pf_rd_p=2413b25e-e3f6-4229-9efd-599bb9ab1f97&pf_rd_r=7VGFSNVB6P52C6NKCSYD&pf_rd_s=right-2&pf_rd_t=15061&pf_rd_i=homepage&ref_=hm_otw_t1).

<sup>21</sup> Penny Spiro, “*Walk Hard*: film parody, biopics and music,” 5, no. 1 (2014): 55.

<sup>22</sup> Tibbets, *Composers in the Movies*, 266.

<sup>23</sup> “After ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’: The Next Five Classic Rock Movies,” Ultimate Classic Rock, last modified January 8, 2019, <https://ultimateclassicrock.com/classic-rock-biopics-movies/>.

Mötley Crüe (March 2019) and *Rocketman* on Elton John (May 2019), but others still have to come. In addition to this, on May 30, 2019 MGM announced that they will be making a biopic on the life of Boy George.<sup>24</sup> Adding to these biopics, there is also talk about biopics about David Bowie, Aretha Franklin, and Madonna.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “About a boy: Boy George biopic in the works,” The Guardian, last modified May 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/30/boy-george-biopic-culture-club>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

“Bowie biopic Stardust ‘won’t have any of dad’s music’ says son,” The Guardian, last modified February 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/01/david-bowie-biopic-stardust-wont-have-any-of-dads-music-says-son-neil-gaiman>.

“*Rocketman* and *Bohemian Rhapsody* Director Would Do a Madonna Biopic Next: ‘She’s Extraordinary,’” Movies, People.com, last modified May 29, 2019, <https://people.com/movies/rocketman-bohemian-rhapsody-director-would-do-madonna-biopic-next/>.

## General Ideas on Authenticity

Authentic representation consists of two elements: authenticity and representation. Where authenticity is a concept that is quite complex, representation is comparatively easy to explain. The most used definition of representation is that it uses “... language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.”<sup>26</sup> Here, language is a broad term that can describe both language and non-language media. There are two ways in which a musical biopic represents. On the one hand it is the portrayal of a historical person and on the other hand the portrayal of biographical events of said person. As biopics tell the stories of real-life people, it can be assumed that the portrayal of the person and the events in the biopic are based on facts. This is why I call it ‘representation’ rather than for instance ‘presentation,’ real-life people and events are again presented, but then in a film. As such, biopics represent the world of a musician to other people. However, as Tony Barta mentions, “[n]ow it is acknowledged, if not widely pursued, that the presentation of history, the re-presentation of the past, have been decisively changed by the screen media.”<sup>27</sup> In the introduction of his book *Screening the Past*, Barta shows that there are a lot of historical defects in films about historical people or events. This remark shows that there might be a relation between representation and authenticity. In this thesis I will examine if I can find this relation and find out to what extent representation is of importance to critics.

Authenticity can be explained in many different ways, it is a discursive concept, and consists of different elements. According to Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, authenticity is “an absolute, a goal that can never be fully attained, a quest.”<sup>28</sup> There are ideas on authenticity belonging to specific music genres. Even though it can be interesting to look at the differences and similarities between genre authenticities, I am more interested in crossing those boundaries and identifying more general ideas on authenticity. In order to do this, I will make use of authenticities such as rock authenticity, country authenticity, and classical music authenticity. The general ideas on authenticity I identify will be connected to musical biopics and looked for in the reviews.

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<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 15.

<sup>27</sup> Tony Barta, *Screening the Past* (Westport, Connecticut; London: Praeger, 1998), x.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Barker & Yuval Taylor, *Faking It*, x.

Allan Moore discusses authenticity in relation to rock music. According to him rock music is based on authenticity rather than commerciality.<sup>29</sup> The same is argued by Philip Auslander when he explains the importance of authenticity for rock music: “The ideological distinction between rock and pop is precisely the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the sincere and the cynical, the genuinely popular and the slickly commercial, the potentially resistant and the necessarily co-opted, art and entertainment.”<sup>30</sup> This would imply that commercialised forms of rock music or artists would not be authentic. Are biopics not commercial stories of musicians? John C. Tibbetts mentions that British producers and supervisors in the 1930s were “shaping their pictures to be as commercially attractive as possible to the American market.”<sup>31</sup> These biopics are the basis for contemporary biopics. Apparently biopics indeed are a commercial way of representing musicians’ lives, but this could mean that all biopics are inauthentic. However, there are many ways in which authenticity is constructed and so even though a biopic may be commercial, it does not have to mean that it is inauthentic. Also, artists create music and merchandise to get known, this is also commercial, but the music is not inauthentic because of it. In the reviews I hope to encounter remarks on whether the biopics are inauthentic as a whole or whether the artist is represented in an authentic way rather than that the whole biopic is automatically construed as inauthentic. This also shows the connection between representation and authenticity.

To continue with the ideas of Moore, he makes a distinction between first-, second-, and third-person authenticities. These authenticities are not found in a performance, “but in the reading of the performance.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, authenticities can be found by looking at what a performer conveys in a performance. The first-person authenticity means that “an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience.”<sup>33</sup> As quoted by Auslander, Susan Douglas describes authenticity in rock music as that it “features instrumental virtuosity, original songwriting, social criticism, a stance of anger and/or alienation.”<sup>34</sup> This idea relates to how Moore describes first-person authenticity in the sense that the elements Douglas mentions can all be part of the integrity of the

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<sup>29</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Auslander, “Tryin’ to Make It Real,” 81.

<sup>31</sup> Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 200.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Auslander, “Tryin’ to Make It Real,” 81.

performance. Biopics can be used to show how musicians use their own feelings and experiences in their music. Can this be found in reviews?

Second-person authenticity is also called “*authenticity of experience*.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than being about the musician this authenticity is about the reception of the music. The musician succeeds in representing the feelings of the audience, the audience can identify themselves in the music.<sup>36</sup> As musical biopics are about the lives of the musicians and not of the audience, it would be hard to find this authenticity in a biopic. It could be that a biopic shows how fans identify with the artist, but is this also something critics pay attention to? The last authenticity, however, is especially interesting in relation to musical biopics. Moore’s description of the ‘third-person’ authenticity is as follows: it “arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the presence of another.”<sup>37</sup> First of all, there is a connection to representation straight away: the entire concept is about representing someone or something. Secondly, since biopics tell the story of an artist and the artist is played by an actor/actress, it can be of importance to see whether this actor/actress portrays the artist accurately. When the artist is portrayed accurately the biopic might be seen as authentic. However, it is also possible that the biopic represents the third-person authenticity of the artist by showing how the artist represented another. Relating to this definition, Richard A. Peterson mentions ‘authentic reproduction.’ This is “intended to suggest that the site is recently built or restored to be exactly what it was like at some specific point in the past.”<sup>38</sup> Musical biopics give the idea that the story of a historic person is told exactly the way it was, but is this true? Also according to Peterson, “[t]he authentic in this sense may, but usually does not, accurately represent some object, person, or performance in the past.”<sup>39</sup> In the reviews I hope to find out to what extent the musical biopics actually tell the true story of the historic person and if critics find this important.

Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor explain that authenticity “seems to be defined primarily in opposition to ‘faking it.’”<sup>40</sup> Moore explains this opposition in showing a difference between authenticity and intertextuality. “The authentic is what we trust because it issues from integrity, sincerity, honesty. Intertextuality, however, foregrounds borrowing, the use of material from other sources. As such, it implies fakery and simulation.”<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>35</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 201.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>38</sup> Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 208.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Barker & Taylor, *Faking It*, viiii.

<sup>41</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 199.

distinction between authentic and intertextual can also be found in one of the six definitions Peterson gives in *Creating Country Music*. Peterson mentions that “The *authentic* is identified as the *original* and is set off against the *copy*, or when the intention is to mislead, the *fake* or *fraudulent*.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, it seems that one way of explaining authenticity is that it is original opposed to fake. Comparing this to biopics, however, leads me to think that perhaps biopics are intertextual, or the copy, rather than authentic. Biopics borrow someone’s story, they use material from different sources that tell that story. However, fakery may not be entirely relatable to biopics, since most biopics try to tell a truthful story and not a fake one. This again makes me wonder what critics think of biopics in general. Do critics focus on the entire story or do they describe specific parts of the biopic, such as specific events or chronology, which may or may not be true? In other words, do they look at biopics as a whole or just at the specific content?

As I have already mentioned, Auslander also sees authenticity as an important aspect of rock music. The term he introduces in “Tryin’ to Make It Real” is ‘liveness.’ With liveness Auslander means to describe the importance of a concert being live, there is no lip-syncing and all the instruments are being played right then and there. This is not only of importance in rock music. For biopics this would be an interesting matter, because they are films that have been recorded, so nothing is live when watching a biopic. How do musical biopics deal with this? A musical biopic could feature scenes that have been recorded live rather than separately from the music. Yet, there are also biopics which feature original recordings but an actor is playing the role of the artist, this would not be live. By reading reviews I hope to find out whether this is something critics pay attention to. Another fascinating element of this is to see what biopics focus on: recorded music or live music? And on which of these parts do critics focus their opinions?

In classical music, authenticity and performance works slightly differently. In classical music there already is the matter of the performer not being the composer.<sup>43</sup> Where in pop music the musician often performs their own music, and can thus be perceived as authentic, classical music is now known to the audience through performances by others than the composer. As such, to create authenticity for a composer in a biopic, it is not strange to have a contemporary artist play the music. Another aspect of classical music authenticity worth mentioning, is that literature on this matter mainly focusses on the performance of a piece, not

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<sup>42</sup> Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 207.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Kenyon, “Introduction: Some Issues and Question,” in *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.

on the composers themselves. This makes it harder to distinguish what authenticity is in musical biopics about classical music. However, the classical music biopics can still be judged by the elements I have previously explained and I will see if critics find the same elements of importance.

The most important aspects of authenticity seem to be that it is original, not commercial, it shows signs of integrity, it has accurate representation, and that it is live. These elements will form the basis of how I am answering my main question. In the following chapter I will relate these elements to remarks in reviews.

## Review Analysis

As mentioned, I have read many reviews on musical biopics and watched several of them. In the appendix an overview can be found of the reviews I read and discuss in this chapter. The overview shows of which films I have read reviews, whether I have seen the film or not, links to the reviews I have read, quotes from the reviews, and to what theories the quotes might be linked. The reviews feature links to authenticity and representation in several ways. In this chapter I will be discussing these links and analysing the presence of notions of authenticity.

### *Content of Musical Biopics and Their Originality*

The first striking element of the reviews is that they all have a similar structure. They start with a broad statement of what the critic thought of the biopic, followed by a short summary of the biopic and details on the characters and the actors that play them, and finish with a concluding opinion on the film. Because of this structure, I was able to understand what the biopics I had not seen were about and how they portrayed the musicians. This review structure gives the critics the possibility of both discussing the biopic as a whole and specific parts of it. Not only do critics talk about the protagonist, they also discuss the supporting cast. A musical biopic tells the story of a historical person, but many other people appear in the life of a musician. The result of this is that the authentic representation in a biopic does not limit itself to discussing the main character, but should include the supporting cast as well.

One of the questions I raised in the previous chapter is whether critics look at biopics as a whole or just at the content. Critics do give an opinion on what they think of the biopic in general, but these opinions are based on arguments about the content. I related the question to seeing a biopic as either authentic or intertextual. Since all reviews relate the biopic to the actual person, either for the portrayal of the musician or the factuality of the events, it can be seen as a copy and so intertextual. The story that is shown has already happened and is now recreated. Critics find it important to recognise the musician on which the biopic is based, hence, they emphasise the copy-element. However, it is also essential to keep in mind that a biopic is a film, not a documentary. Andrew O’Hehir illustrates this in his review of *Love & Mercy* (2014), “[b]ut then again this is a movie, not a critical biography.”<sup>44</sup> This shows that

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<sup>44</sup> ““Love & Mercy”: Brian Wilson’s life as a gorgeous, tragic fable of pop genius,” Salon, last modified June 5, 2015, [https://www.salon.com/2015/06/04/love\\_mercy\\_brian\\_wilsons\\_life\\_as\\_a\\_gorgeous\\_tragic\\_fable\\_of\\_pop\\_genius/](https://www.salon.com/2015/06/04/love_mercy_brian_wilsons_life_as_a_gorgeous_tragic_fable_of_pop_genius/).



most critics acknowledge the difference between the actor and the original artist and that a biopic does not feature the original artist. Even though the general opinion on the biopic is shared by critics, it is mainly the content that they focus on. So, although there are remarks that show that a musical biopic is a copy and thus may be intertextual, the content and way in which the story is told might still be authentic.

The commercial aspect could relate to the general idea of biopics as well. In the reviews I have not found explicit mention of biopics being commercial, but critics do compare biopics to each other and recognise patterns in the content of biopics. For instance Rachel from Rachel's Reviews mentions about *Love & Mercy* that a side of her "wishes we could have stayed with young Wilson but then it would have been more of a standard biopic, so I'm torn."<sup>45</sup> About *Bohemian Rhapsody* similar remarks have been made, such as that "it becomes clear that *Bohemian Rhapsody* is that most conventional of biopics, the kind that moves smoothly and efficiently from one greatest hits moment to the next."<sup>46</sup> Apparently critics recognise certain standard patterns in biopics, such as showing the highlights of the career and it being a rise-to-stardom tale.<sup>47</sup> Patrick Willems explains the formula of biopics in a YouTube video in which some of the aspects that I have just mentioned come to light as well.<sup>48</sup> Even though the critics do not say it, it does implicate that musical biopics show the lives of musicians in certain ways so the audience will enjoy watching it. This relates to the idea of John C. Tibbetts who said that biopics are made to be attractive to the audience. It appears that a standard biopic formula has been created because of this. Critics mention it when a biopic features standard aspects and criticise this. As can be seen in the example of Rachel's remark, there is also a dichotomy to be found. On the one hand she wants the structure of *Love & Mercy* to change, but it would change it to a standard biopic which apparently would not be positive either. This leads me to think that biopics that follow this standard are not as well appreciated by critics as biopics that feature more original aspects. Maybe this would mean that the standard biopics are seen as more commercial and thus less authentic than biopics that are not standard. This leaves the question of what a standard musical biopic is. I am not able to give an entire definition of the standard biopic, but the standard that I have described in the overview of musical biopics might be applicable here.

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<sup>45</sup> "Love and Mercy Review," Rachel's Reviews, last modified June 6, 2015, <https://rachelsreviews.net/2015/06/06/love-and-mercy-review/>.

<sup>46</sup> "Bohemian Rhapsody," QNetwork.com, accessed May 10, 2019, <http://www.qnetwork.com/review/4112>.

<sup>47</sup> "The Same Old Song," Pajiba, last modified October 12, 2010, [http://www.pajiba.com/film\\_reviews/nowhere-boy-review-the-same-old-song.php](http://www.pajiba.com/film_reviews/nowhere-boy-review-the-same-old-song.php).

<sup>48</sup> "The Broken Formula of Music Biopics," YouTube, last modified February 16, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3q3LEaK7\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3q3LEaK7_U).

This way of looking at the originality of biopics is more about the general way of telling a story. However, it is not only related to the way in which a biopic tells a story. Originality can also be found in the content of the biopic, the way in which the artists is represented for instance. This relates to ways in which music can be seen as original, which has to do with integrity, sincerity, and honesty. Biopics are a way to show that a musician has/had integrity. For instance *Nowhere Boy* (2009) “helps us understand the underpinnings of Lennon's music as well as his idealism and life-long desire to rebel against social strictures.”<sup>49</sup> In a way musical biopics can be used to establish authenticity for the musician the biopic is based on. When the artist is said to have a lot of authenticity and this is shown in the biopic, perhaps the biopic can be called authentic as well. I do think this is closely related to the factuality of the biopic. Some biopics may portray an artist with more or less integrity and originality, and so authenticity, than they have been perceived to have. However, I have not found in the reviews that there are such cases.

### *Liveness in Musical Biopics*

Another question I posed in the theoretical framework concerns the liveness in biopics. Do musical biopics focus on the live or recorded aspect of the music and artist? Most musical biopics feature at least some sort of live aspect. *Walk the Line* and *Bohemian Rhapsody* start with famous performances in the history of respectively Johnny Cash and Freddie Mercury. *Love & Mercy* actually pays quite some attention to the creating process of the music. “The entire creation of Pet Sounds is in the movie and it is amazing to see them bring in animals and strange instruments and build layers of sound. It felt like it might be close to the way it actually happened.”<sup>50</sup> Since David Rooney mentions that the screenplay of *Rocketman* “spends too little time on the actual making of the music,”<sup>51</sup> it seems like critics find it important to see the creation of music in a musical biopic next to live performances. Not a lot of reviews actually mention either the live or recorded aspect of the biopics. What they do pay attention to is whether the actors sing the music themselves or not.

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<sup>49</sup> “‘Nowhere Boy’ is so much more than a Lennon biopic,” USAToday, accessed May 10, 2019, [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2010-10-15-nowhere15\\_ST\\_N.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2010-10-15-nowhere15_ST_N.htm).

<sup>50</sup> “Love and Mercy Review,” Rachel’s Reviews.

<sup>51</sup> “‘Rocketman’: Film Review | Cannes 2019,” Movies, The Hollywood Reporter, last modified May 16, 2019, [https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/rocketman-cannes-2019-1211566?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=THR%20Breaking%20News\\_now\\_2019-05-16%2016:59:18\\_drooney&utm\\_term=hollywoodreporter\\_breakingnews](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/rocketman-cannes-2019-1211566?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=THR%20Breaking%20News_now_2019-05-16%2016:59:18_drooney&utm_term=hollywoodreporter_breakingnews).

For instance, in the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, you hear the voice of Freddie Mercury to which Rami Malek lip synchs. Also Marion Cotillard in *La Vie en Rose* (2007) lip synchs throughout the film: “Although Cotillard has perfected Piaf’s mannerisms and exhibits flawless lip-synching, there’s more to her acting.”<sup>52</sup> However, these are the only biopics of which the lip synching is addressed in the reviews. There are also a few cases in which the actors do their own singing. When this happens, it is often addressed in reviews. This means that for many biopics the liveness of it is not addressed at all, it is unclear how the music is brought to the audience. It is interesting to see what critics say when the actors did the singing themselves. For *Walk the Line* Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon have recorded the music that is used in the film, thus their own voices can be heard rather than Johnny Cash’s voice. “The incalculable bonus is not just having the leads do their own singing but doing it convincingly.”<sup>53</sup> All critics seem to be pleased by the fact that they do their own singing. It adds to the authenticity and integrity of the film, especially because they do a good job at it. Also Taron Egerton in *Rocketman* and Tom Hiddleston in *I Saw the Light* (2015) did their own singing. Hiddleston “has the tall, lean physical resemblance but, amazingly, he also inhabits the persona, the drawl, the lazy hillbilly charm and even his singing, where he gives an impressive rendition of Williams’ hits.”<sup>54</sup> Since these performances are mentioned in multiple reviews it seems like critics find that it adds to the authenticity of the biopic when the actors do their own singing.

However, it may not actually be authentic within the biopic. As for instance Richard Corliss mentions, Johnny Cash has his own authenticity through his baritone voice, and Joaquin Phoenix cannot live up to this voice.<sup>55</sup> Maybe there is a difference between the authenticity of the original artist and the authenticity of the portrayal of the artist in the biopic. This also relates to the idea of ‘authentic reproduction.’ Whereas it may not be authentic in the sense that the actor wrote the music and sang the music him- or herself and has the integrity that the artist has, it may give an accurate representation of the musician. It is also impossible to recreate an event or person the way it was in the past. Often the biopics are about people who are now dead, such as Freddie Mercury, Jim Morrison, and John Lennon. In

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<sup>52</sup> “La Vie en Rose (France/United Kingdom/Czech Republic, 2007),” Reelviews, accessed May 28, 2019, <http://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/la-vie-en-rose>.

<sup>53</sup> “Keep a close eye on ‘Walk the Line,’” Movies, USA Today.com, last modified November 17, 2005, [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2005-11-17-walk-the-line\\_x.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2005-11-17-walk-the-line_x.htm).

<sup>54</sup> “I Saw the Light (2016),” Dog and Wolf, last modified May 6, 2016, <http://www.dogandwolf.com/2016/05/i-saw-light-film-review/>.

<sup>55</sup> “A Phoenix in the Ring of Fire,” TIME, last modified November 18, 2005, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1132428,00.html>.

order to make a film about them actors have to be used, otherwise it would probably result in something more like a documentary. Not all biopics are about musicians who are not alive anymore. Take for instance *Rocketman* about Elton John. However, casting Elton John as himself probably would not have made the film as much of a success as it is now. This is simply because Elton John is not an actor. An example of how a biographical film might turn out when the original characters are playing themselves is *The 15:17 Train to Paris* (2018). In this film three Americans who stopped a terrorist played themselves. As Josephine Livingstone mentions: “they are not actors. And so, even as they try to reproduce a relaxed banter between them (hungover after a night out), none of the three main characters can deliver their own lives—that is, replicating things that they have already done—up on screen “naturally.”<sup>56</sup> So in order to make an attractive film, actors are necessary.

There is also another issue regarding liveness in musical biopics. Since musical biopics are films, the music that you hear cannot be live at the moment of watching it. It could be performed live during the filming of the biopic, but this is hard to gauge when you watch the film as the audience. This could be described as ‘virtual liveness’ in which a performance is shown as live, but “electronic technologies are an integral part of fashioning a performance of liveness that otherwise would not be possible.”<sup>57</sup> A biopic that features a live performance is most likely to be edited, so electronic technologies influence the performance. By showing live performances of artists in biopics, this might be a way to try to convey liveness in the biopic. It does show that the artist is a live performer which may help in creating authenticity.

### *Explicit Remarks of Authenticity*

So far, I have discussed elements that might be described as points of authenticity within the reviews, but these were all implicit remarks. Do critics also make the importance of authenticity explicit? To answer this question, I tried to find the specific word ‘authenticity’ in reviews. In the reviews I read I found a couple mention authenticity. I expected these remarks to be about the authenticity of the biopic, but remarkably one of them is not actually about the authenticity of the biopic: “The authenticity in his quavering baritone attested to a life of bitter experience.”<sup>58</sup> This comment is about the real Johnny Cash rather than Joaquin Phoenix as

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<sup>56</sup> “*The 15:17 Train to Paris* Is a Strange, Strange Journey,” *The New Republic*, last modified February 14, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/147076/1517-paris-strange-strange-journey>.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Sanden, “A Theory of Liveness in Mediatized Music,” in *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 43.

<sup>58</sup> “A Phoenix in the Ring of Fire,” *TIME*.

Johnny Cash. As such, it does not show anything about the relationship between authenticity and biopics. It does show that the critic finds the authenticity of Johnny Cash important, although he does not mention it again. He only mentions that Joaquin Phoenix cannot live up to the voice of Johnny Cash, which would be a negative comment, but the critic is positive about the film. So even though the voice is not good enough, the rest of the representation is. It surprises me that the authenticity of the voice is not that big a matter to influence the critic in his opinion on the representation of Johnny Cash. Since a musical biopic is about a musician and his/her music, it would seem that the way in which the music in the biopic can be heard is of importance. Yet it seems like this is not what critics pay attention to. In looking for remarks about authenticity and the music in the biopics, a relatively small amount can be found.

The remarks that can be found approach authenticity in different ways. They are about the factuality of the events, the authenticity of the biopic in general, or the performance of the actors. Thomas Caldwell says about *La Vie en Rose* that “[r]ather than being authentically biographical, *La Vie en Rose* contains an episodic, non-linear narrative to focus on key moments of emotional upheaval in Piaf’s life.”<sup>59</sup> Apparently *La Vie en Rose* does not follow the biography of Édith Piaf closely and changes some aspects of it. This relates to the factuality of the events and is one way of ascribing authenticity to a biopic. Manuela Lazic remarks: “If *Bohemian Rhapsody*’s success and critical (not-quite) failure have proved anything, it’s that artistic quality, authenticity, and respect for the real person are not necessary for a biographical musical film to be profitable.”<sup>60</sup> This remark concerns the biopic in general. It also shows a link to the commercial aspect of biopics and to the importance of authenticity that I am trying to define. According to Lazic in the film industry it is not important for a biopic to be authentic. However, the way she formulates it makes it seem like critics do find the authenticity important. It just does not matter for the profitability of the biopic and for the audience. In the introduction I already mentioned the dichotomy that seems to exist between audience and critics. Lazic confirms this dichotomy by making this comment. Lazic also uses authenticity in the sense of how the actor portrays the musician.

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<sup>59</sup> “Film review – *La Vie en Rose* (2007),” *Cinema Autopsy*, last modified July 24, 2007, <https://blog.cinemaautopsy.com/2007/07/24/film-review-la-vie-en-rose-2007/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Such a Timeless Flight: The Fantastical but Formulaic Charm of ‘*Rocketman*,’” *The Ringer*, last modified May 17, 2019, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/5/17/18629719/rocketman-elton-john-review-biopic-taron-egerton>.

“Taron Egerton’s performance fluctuates between realism and clownish exaggeration, while his singing is just good enough for the evocative, theatrical interpretations that the script requires of him. Unlike Rami Malek, he can’t be accused of cheating, but neither can he be praised for acting just like his model because that’s not his goal; he is at once authentic, and not really to be compared with the incomparable original.”<sup>61</sup>

As such, Lazic uses authenticity in different ways, one is related to the biopic as a whole and commercialism, while this second one discusses the performance of the actor. The second remark can be seen as third-person authenticity. Egerton is able to show who Elton John is and what it is like to be him. At the same time, according to Lazic, Egerton is nothing like John, which would lead to think that he shows who he is himself. Thus relating to the idea of third-person authenticity even more. However, the idea of the biopic is to show who Elton John is, not who Taron Egerton is. As such it seems out of place for Lazic to make a comment like this.

Since authenticity is such a discursive concept, it is hard to understand what a critic means exactly by calling something authentic. For instance the comment on *La Vie en Rose* seems to concern the factuality, but does he mean that there are mistakes in the biopic or that parts are missing or is it also about how authentic Édith Piaf is said to be and how this is maybe wrongly portrayed? The same goes for the comments on *Rocketman*, if Taron Egerton is authentic does it mean that he shows the authenticity of Elton John rightfully or does he give an authentic performance as Elton John that is not related to Elton John himself? Possibly, this is a reason that critics do not use the word ‘authenticity’ in their reviews. It is a hard concept to grasp and there are many different definitions for it.

### *Authentic Representation*

When scrolling through the quotes I have gathered from the reviews, noticeable is that a lot of reviews connect the portrayal of the musicians by the actors to the actual musicians. Words like “[h]e just gets Cash,”<sup>62</sup> “perfectly capturing Ray’s inflections and directness,”<sup>63</sup> and

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<sup>61</sup> “Such a Timeless Flight,” The Ringer.

<sup>62</sup> “Review: A brilliant ‘Walk the Line,’” Entertainment, CNN.com, last modified November 18, 2005, <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/Movies/11/18/review.walk/index.html>.

<sup>63</sup> “Soulful Foxx Shines as ‘Ray,’” On Screen, washingtonpost.com, last modified October 29, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A6092-2004Oct28.html>.

“Rami Malek as Mercury has the onstage moves”<sup>64</sup> indicate the importance of an accurate representation. These quotes are examples of the *authenticity of execution* or *authentic reproduction*.<sup>65</sup> Critics often mention to what extent the actor looks like the musician and there are many cases in which the actor does not look like the musician. For instance, on the portrayal of Johnny Cash by Joaquin Phoenix, Andrew Urban says that “[h]e is a very good actor and he does a great singing job, but he doesn't match my mental image of Cash.”<sup>66</sup> Also the portrayal of Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody* is up for debate: “Malek moves like Mercury, and has his mannerisms down pat, but it seems like the camera focused too much on the prosthesis that gave him Mercury’s trademark overbite.”<sup>67</sup> Rami Malek seems to show a caricature of the appearances of Freddie Mercury, rather than what he actually looked like. These are examples of how there are two sides to the accurate representation of the musicians themselves. On the one hand there is the physical aspect, on the other the way in which the actor acts like the musician. Rami Malek apparently moves and acts like Freddie Mercury, but his physical appearance does not match the looks of Freddie Mercury. The same goes for the other band members of Queen. Chuck Yarborough mentions that “Gwilym Lee looks more like Brian May than Brian May does, too, and Ben Hardy’s resemblance to Roger Taylor is just about as remarkable. Joe Mazzello bears a slightly less likeness to John Deacon, but it’s close enough to work.”<sup>68</sup>

Besides this portrayal, there is another aspect to the authentic representation in a musical biopic. As mentioned earlier, in order for a biopic to be authentic it would have to tell the story of a musician the way it actually happened. This seems to be a big issue for critics. A lot of the reviews discuss whether the biopic is realistic or not, and to what extent it is true what is being shown. According to Jeffrey Anderson *Nowhere Boy* “cares more about the characters and their relationships than it does the factual or historical context of it all.”<sup>69</sup> He also mentions that these choices are related to dramatic impact. It seems like it is alright for

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<sup>64</sup> “Strutting and Stomping Like a Queen, a Nutcracker at War, Seven Million Geeks, and a Stunner from South Korea, Our Wired Animal World and Madame President Goes it Alone,” Entertainment, What She Said, last modified November 2, 2018, <http://www.whatsheaidradio.com/what-she-said/snammov22018/>.

<sup>65</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 200.

Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 208.

<sup>66</sup> “Walk The Line,” Urban Cinefile, last modified May 9, 2019, <http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=11422&s=Reviews>.

<sup>67</sup> “‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ suffers from all the shortcomings of a made-for-TV movie: Chuck Yarborough,” music, Cleveland.com, last modified November 2, 2018, [https://www.cleveland.com/music/2018/11/bohemian-rhapsody-suffers-from-all-the-shortcomings-of-a-made-for-tv-movie-chuck-yarborough.html#incart\\_river\\_index](https://www.cleveland.com/music/2018/11/bohemian-rhapsody-suffers-from-all-the-shortcomings-of-a-made-for-tv-movie-chuck-yarborough.html#incart_river_index)

<sup>68</sup> “‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ suffers from all the shortcomings of a made-for-TV movie,” Cleveland.com.

<sup>69</sup> “Mama Don’t Go,” Combustible Celluloid, accessed May 8, 2019, <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/2010/nowhereboy.shtml>.

directors to change certain historic facts if it adds to the drama of the story. However, another critic, Mick LaSalle, contradicts Anderson strongly. He mentions that “[t]he film was made with respect for the historical record.”<sup>70</sup> So who is right? And why do these critics differ so much in opinion? You would think that the factuality of a film is something that cannot be up for debate. A possible answer to this might be that critics do not do their research that well before they write a review. An example of this is that K. Austin Collins mentions that John Deacon is the drummer of Queen,<sup>71</sup> while he is actually the bass player. These observations make it hard for me to trust the critics in what they are saying. Though the critics might be wrong and contradictory, it does show that they find authentic representation important. Otherwise they would not mention aspects such as factuality. Not only the stories of the protagonists are changed, also the supporting cast sometimes has different roles than how they actually were. Sometimes this results in changes perceived negatively. An example of this is the portrayal of Vivien, the wife of Johnny Cash, in *Walk the Line*. “‘My mom was basically a nonentity in the entire film except for the mad little psycho who hated his career,’ Vivien and John's daughter Kathy Cash told AP this week. ‘That's not true. She loved his career and was proud of him until he started taking drugs and stopped coming home.’”<sup>72</sup>

### *Genre Comparison*

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are many musical biopics from different genres. Are there differences or similarities between the importance of authentic representation in different genres? I tried to give a broad overview and statement in this thesis, but since musical genres are so different, I wonder if this can be traced back to biopics of different musical genres. The genres that appear in the biopics I discussed are rock, country, pop, jazz, and classical music. Since Auslander coined liveness in relation to rock music, it can be expected that more comments on liveness can be found in reviews on rock biopics. However, there are not necessarily more comments on liveness that can be found about rock biopics than about the other genres. *Rocketman* is a biopic that received a lot of comments on its liveness, but also on a country biopic such as *Walk the Line* comments such as “the fact that both Joaquin Phoenix and Reece Witherspoon sing the Cash/Carter songs, adds a particular

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<sup>70</sup> “Review: ‘Nowhere Boy,’” SFGate, last modified October 15, 2010, <https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Review-Nowhere-Boy-3170921.php>.

<sup>71</sup> “*Bohemian Rhapsody* Will Not Rock You,” movies, Vanity Fair, last modified November 2, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/11/bohemian-rhapsody-film-review>.

<sup>72</sup> “A Phoenix in the Ring of Fire,” TIME.



resonance” can be found.<sup>73</sup> This indicates that even though liveness is based on rock music, it extends beyond one specific genre and is of importance to musical biopics in general. There is a difference in the presence of liveness between classical music biopics and other genres. Not a lot of comments are made about the way in which composers perform. This possibly has to do with the fact that there is not a lot of original footage of these musicians that tell us something about how they performed. In a review about *Amadeus* there is one remark on Mozart as a performer, which also points out the difficulties of portraying a composer: “Since Mozart cannot be shown composing, the film tries to make the most of him as a performer. But this is also doomed, since no one is able to execute rhythms and embellishments, let alone improvise, as he would have done.”<sup>74</sup>

Not only is there a difference in the way liveness is treated in classical or pop music biopics, also the remembrance of the stories of musicians is different. Many of the biopics that I have discussed are about musicians who are still well-known to the audience, people have seen the artists alive and know about their lives. This is different for biopics about classical music such as *Impromptu* and *Amadeus* (1984). By the time these biopics were made, the musicians had been long dead and their music is what is mostly known to the audience, not their stories. There is no one alive now who was alive during their existence. Does this influence the way in which critics look at the biopics? It seems like critics are just as concerned about the accurate representation of composers as they are of rock stars. For instance Robert Craft mentions about *Amadeus* that “[y]et any attempt to make a “factually accurate” film about “the real Mozart” could only result in an even worse movie than this one. The main obstacle is that the face of the man who wrote *The Magic Flute* cannot be “portrayed” by an actor.”<sup>75</sup> Apparently there are not enough sources on the looks of Mozart to know what he really looked like and be able to cast an actor to look exactly like Mozart. This is a difficulty for biopics about classical music in general. There may be sources that describe the looks of the composer, but they are not as accurate as a photograph. However, the audience of the biopic will not know the looks of the composer either, so it could be overlooked. Yet, Craft does mention this in his criticism, indicating that critics do find it important that attention is brought to this.

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<sup>73</sup> “Walk The Line,” Urban Cinefile.

<sup>74</sup> “B-flat Movie,” The New York Review of Books, last modified April 11, 1985, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/04/11/b-flat-movie/>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Most biopics receive similar kinds of critique on the authentic representation except for classical music biopics. Besides the element of liveness there is also the idea of originality and integrity that is much more present in genres other than classical music. About Mozart is being said that in *Amadeus* he is portrayed as a musical genius, but there are no comments on how this is shown. There are comments on this in reviews of for instance *I Saw the Light*, about which is said that “[t]hough we hear his hits, as interpreted by Hiddleston, there’s not enough insight into him and his talent, the sources of his inspiration and what made him such a ground-breaking musical icon.”<sup>76</sup> That a biopic shows the originality and integrity of an artist is supposedly more important for recent artists than for composers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, this again can have to do with that the composers lived long before biopics were made instead of at a time when the audience actually knew the artist. However, there are a lot of sources to be found on composers, which is also addressed in reviews on *Amadeus*, which might help in creating a better portrayal of a composer. Yet, critics do not pay as much attention to it in classical music biopics than in other biopics.

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<sup>76</sup> “I Saw the Light (2016),” Dog and Wolf.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to answer the question ‘What is the importance of an authentic representation within a musical biopic for critics?’ To answer this question I divided my thesis into a few sections which together form an answer. By starting with a short overview of the genre of musical biopics and its current status in the film industry I have shown that my thesis discusses a very contemporary topic which is changing a lot. In my introduction I already gave a definition of a musical biopic which I used throughout the thesis. My research question mainly concerns authentic representation and what this is. Since authenticity is a discursive concept with many aspects, I am not able to give a definite definition on what authentic representation is. I did manage to collect some general ideas on the subject which I summarised in the second chapter.

While collecting different ideas on authenticity I discovered several questions relating authentic representation to musical biopics. I answered these questions by reading reviews and discussing quotes from these reviews. The first question that appeared in the theoretical framework on authenticity was if biopics are not commercial stories of musicians. Even though it is not often explicitly mentioned, critics refer to commercialism in their reviews. This is mainly done by comparing biopics to each other and relating the biopics to the ‘standard’ biopic. Biopics that are described as more original are also seen as less commercial and thus more authentic. I related this to whether biopics are inauthentic as a whole, which theoretically might be the case, but it cannot be found in reviews.

The next question I raised is whether it can be found in reviews that biopics can be used to show how the musician uses their own feelings and experiences in their music. There are examples of reviews that mention the way in which the musician is portrayed that shows the integrity of the artist. This question also addresses issues of factuality in biopics, since the biopic can represent authenticity of an artist and the viewer will assume it to be true. However, the reviews do not pay attention to this as much as I had expected.

Thirdly, I asked whether critics look at the whole biopic or just at the specific content of it? This turns out to be both. On the one hand critics give a general opinion on the biopic, but on the other hand they go into detail about the biopic and discuss specific elements that they (dis)approve. The reviews also show that even though the musical biopic can be seen as a copy, and thus as intertextual, the content can still be shown in an original way and may

therefore be authentic. Unfortunately, I have not found any reviews that would call a biopic (in)authentic as a whole.

The next question relates to liveness which has two sides. The first is whether biopics focus on the live or recorded aspect of a musician's life. After having read the many reviews, not a lot of comments have been made about this. There is the 'standard' musical biopic which is supposed to show live performances, but these performances are only discussed in relation to how the actor portrays the musician. Whether it is important that these scenes are in the biopic is left out, although the amount of attention brought to the performances does indicate that critics appreciate these scenes to be there. The second side of liveness is whether the music that can be heard has been sung or played by the actors or by the original musician. This is something that is especially of interest in biopics about popular music, rather than about classical music. Of classical music there are not always recordings available, while of popular artists it is the original version of a song that everyone knows. Apparently, critics find that it shows integrity and authenticity when an actor sings the music him- or herself rather than lip synching. However, there are not a lot of cases in which this happens and when it does not happen it is not mentioned how the music is brought to the audience instead. As such, it seems that it is not always known if the actor has sung the music themselves or not, which debunks the argument that it is of importance.

Another question I tried to answer was to what extent critics explicitly make comments on authenticity. I found several comments, but not as many as I had expected. The comments relate to the factuality of the events, the authenticity of the biopic in general, or the performance of the actors. As I already explained in the analysis, the discursiveness of the concept of authenticity might be a cause for this.

Even though I wanted to find an answer to my main question that would be applicable to any musical biopic, I realised that there are differences between genres. These differences mainly appear between classical music biopics and other musical biopics. The way in which classical musicians are discussed is quite different from other musicians. Especially in terms of liveness and originality there is a difference. However, all genres do pay attention to the accurate representation of the musician.

Lastly, I get to the crux of this thesis. I wanted to find out to what extent critics find it important how the historic person is portrayed in musical biopics and if they actually tell the true story of this person. The reviews show that factuality is an important aspect to critics. As expected, this concerns both the portrayal of the musician and the factuality of the events.

Critics find it important that the actor looks like the musician or, if this is not the case, gives an ‘authentic’ performance. However, it turns out that this is also something that is very subjective. Not all critics agree on the same aspects of a film. As I mentioned in my analysis, there are critics that have an opinion on the factuality of the biopic, while not giving accurate facts themselves. Nonetheless, it is also possible that certain events have been retold in different ways. This could lead to different interpretations of facts.

In the next couple of years many new musical biopics will be released on which a lot of reviews will be written. Since the musical biopic is gaining new attention and is possibly changing from its ‘standard’—the Broadway musical-style in *Rocketman* for instance is quite different from a regular biopic such as *Ray*—the future reviews might contain different elements than they do now. Because of this, the answer to what extent critics find authentic representation in musical biopics of importance might not be the same in a couple of years. It would be interesting to see how musical biopics and their reviews evolve and what new elements might become important. For now, authentic representation takes quite a big place in the reviews of critics, albeit implicitly. As can be deduced from my research, there are a lot of different elements that all connect to authenticity and representation. Of course, I have not discussed every review on every musical biopic, there might be a lot of reviews that do not pay attention to authentic representation. However, of all the reviews I read, 56 in total, there were only two of which I was not able to retrieve any useful comments for my research. Together with the results that show that there are not many differences between reviews for different musical genres, it can be concluded that critics find authentic representation an important aspect of musical biopics.

In the introduction I mentioned the dichotomy between the opinions of critics, the audience, and the intentions of the producers. On June 13, 2019 Brian May posted a photo on Instagram with an extensive description in which he talks about the intentions they had while making *Bohemian Rhapsody* and discussing what “‘accurate’ means in the context of a biopic – rather than a documentary.”<sup>77</sup> This description confirms the dichotomy between critics and producers and would be interesting to delve into further. It also touches the subject of biopic versus documentary which I touched upon in the review analysis, but could be explored more in future research.

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<sup>77</sup> Brian May (@brianmayforreal), Instagram post, June 13, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BypBoeDFDys/?igshid=s8f0o2xenc5j>.

A question that came to light throughout my research that is still left unanswered and might be interesting for future research concerns the ‘standard’ biopic. It seems like there is a standard formula that musical biopics abide by, but recently it also seems like this is changing. *Rocketman* is the most recent musical biopic and it is more described as a ‘musical fantasy’ rather than a biopic. What will happen to biopics in the future? Will it change drastically so future biopics will be more like *Rocketman* or is *Rocketman* an exception? And what does this mean for the authentic representation in musical biopics? The many musical biopics that are coming up not only show the relevance of this genre at this moment, but also that the musical biopic will enter new stages in its existence.

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## Appendix

The attached Excel-document features a list of musical biopics and their reviews I used for this thesis.