

The biographical genre in an antiheroic society and the happy anomaly of Italian fiction

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Abstract

The article opens with a critical discussion from a sociological standpoint of the concept of the post-heroic era and anti-heroic spirit which appear to characterise modern western society. It focuses on the role of the media, particularly television, in promoting and giving rise to new concepts of heroism and fame (of which media celebrities are the emblem), more in tune with the current entertainment era. The historical development of the biographical genre both in cinema and television provides empirical evidence for this theoretical discussion. However, a kind of “heroic television” in the traditional sense can still be found in the unexpected case of Italian fiction.

Key words

Antiheroic society, media celebrities, fame, biopic, Italian fiction.

Resum

Partint d'una discussió crítica, en clau sociològica, del concepte de l'era postheroica i de l'esperit antiheroic que semblen caracteritzar la societat occidental moderna, l'article se centra en el paper dels mitjans de comunicació i, en particular, de la televisió, en promoure i donar cabuda a nous conceptes d'heroisme i de fama –dels quals són emblema les celebritats dels mitjans (media celebrities)– en sintonia amb l'era de l'entreteniment actual. L'evolució històrica del gènere biogràfic, ja sigui al cinema o a la televisió, aporta evidències empíriques a favor de la discussió teòrica, mentre que, d'altra banda, encara existeix avui dia un tipus de “televisió heroica” en el sentit tradicional, que es manifesta en el cas inusual de la ficció italiana.

Paraules clau

Societat antiheroica, celebritats dels mitjans (media celebrities), fama, biopic, ficció italiana.

“Unhappy the land that has no heroes”

Andrea Sarti

The life of Galileo, by Bertolt Brecht

1. A post-heroic society

In many western countries the word “hero” is being heard again in public discourse, both among media writers and in the words of ordinary people. But this is almost solely confined to certain tragic and heartrending events, as when someone loses their life on a difficult mission.

There must be a fatal event to act as an emotional draw for public opinion for words which had stopped being used to fleetingly surface in journalistic language and common sentiment. *Heroes* (like *sacrifice*, *courage* and other words which focus on the same semantic area as heroism) is a term in disuse which can still be dusted off if required. But given that this possible need often involves inconvenient or rejected realities like war, death and the pain of loss, emergence quickly gives way to removal. In just a few days, these heroes are destined to depart the media scene, taking their place in the vague backdrop of popular memory.

It seems that we are in the midst of an age which, in line with a generalised intellectual inclination to define contemporaneity as “post-something”, has been defined in a recent work as “post-heroic” (Sheenan 2009).

Whether or not we believe in this transition to a post-heroic age, it cannot be denied that the principal identification of the hero with the figure of a warrior or military leader handed down to us from myth and classical and mediaeval epic (among others) greatly contributes to making heroism at the very least suspect to our pacifist contemporary Zeitgeist. All the more so, and understandably, in countries like Italy, which have fairly recently emerged from authoritarian regimes, and others which have experienced the negative consequences of warmongering politics imbued more with rhetoric than heroic ethos.

But it seems that the supremacy of the armed hero had already begun to decline even before the “obsolescence of war”, in an interesting and plausible hypothesis on the strict interrelationship between heroic types and the different periods of communication (Strate 1994). To resume the distinction between orality and literacy established by Walter Ong (Ong 1986), the figure of the hero-warrior is particularly prone to flourish in eras and cultures where orality is the dominant medium. The

prodigious actions of heroes who are armed and, most importantly, show courage and extraordinary physical strength, have a high degree of the “memorability” which is indispensable if oral cultures, which rely on the volatility of the spoken word, are able to pass them down through the generations.

Writing, and above all the crucial role of movable type system of printing in the education of a “literate” society, went on to create the conditions for a more diversified heroic type, still ruled by criteria of extraordinary and courageous action but also in the mental and intellectual and not only the physical sense. So since the advent, so many centuries ago, of the age of printing (Eisenstein 1997), the figure of the warrior has begun, if not to lose force then to at least share its heroic status with scientists, inventors, discoverers, creators, and artists. Military leaders themselves have risen to hero status more for their strategic abilities than their deeds on the fields of battle. Now in the age of electronic communication and with group attitudes shifting towards pacifism, the warrior has been edged out of the heroic world.

Heroes are not what they were –perhaps they are not even heroes, to put it bluntly. In tune with the idea of a post-heroic age, many scholars and observers have, in fairly recent times, argued that the West has become “a world without heroes”, to quote the title of an American essay from the 1980s (Roche 1987) which, in the absence of heroes, recognises the worrying symptoms of “a modern tragedy”. Of late, there is a “growing body of literature decrying the loss of ‘traditional’ heroes” (Drucker and Cathart 1994, 3), of which Joseph Campbell is probably the most valuable precursor. Campbell is the author of a famous and influential study on the mythical hero, *L'eroe dai mille volti* (Campbell 2008), a wise work of symbolic anthropology enriched and made more complex by the use of psychoanalytical approaches from the Jungian school. In the final pages of the book, first published in 1949 [under the title *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*], Campbell noted the distance from our age to the symbolic universe which had given life to the legendary heroes, fabulous figures and divine personalities of ancient myths. Human society has become a strange and inhospitable place for traditional heroes and they no longer live here.

Then, in the early 1960s, Daniel Boorstin wrote a prescient book (Boorstin 1961) which, in spite of the distance of almost half a century, can still enlighten our knowledge of the endemic cultural phenomena in today's media-dominated societies, claiming that the heroes of yesteryear were being toppled by media celebrities. We will return to the subject of media celebrities later. Here I am more interested in using some of the author's notes on the distrustful and sometimes debunking or even denigrating attitudes which inform our general feelings and opinions about heroes and heroism. “We see greatness [of heroes] as an illusion”, wrote Boorstin (Boorstin 1961, 51). Or as the burden of an imperfect and unhappy society, he might add, particularly in view of the disproportionate and persistent fortune which has merely confirmed the words of Galileo Galilei

in Bertolt Brecht's work: “Unhappy the land that has no heroes” (Brecht 1970).

It is surprising, but above all highly symptomatic of the trend to expel heroism from the horizon of contemporary sensitivity how this sentence, extrapolated from its theatrical context, has become a kind of mantra whose repetition is triggered at every opportunity, like a reflex. Particularly in the case of Italy, where what we might call a revised and corrected version of the sentence has been proposed –“Blessed (or happy) are the people that have no need of heroes”. Although this does not substantially affect the meaning of the original, it adds a sense of liberation and euphoric lightness by evoking blessedness and happiness. Conversely, in Bertolt Brecht's play, these are bitter, pained words. Galileo replied thus to his disciple Andrea Sarti who, in the opposing statement “Unhappy the land that has no heroes”, forcefully expressed his disillusion with and condemnation of the antiheroic behaviour of his master before the court of the Inquisition. But Galileo was also a profoundly disappointed and tormented man and remained so for the rest of his life. In agreeing under threat of torture to renounce his views, he had not only betrayed the faith of his disciples but the ethics of science (he himself admitted “I have betrayed my profession”) and the “heroic” concept of scientific practice itself. “I do not think that the practice of science can be separated from courage”, he said later, during a long, self-accusatory monologue. Galileo was therefore right when he said: “Unhappy the land that needs heroes”. This is not (or not only) the expression of a utopian longing for an idyllic society but the bitter discovery of someone who, familiar from his own experience with human fragility in the face of the rallying cry of heroism, knows that the need for heroes can, unfortunately, remain unattended and unsatisfied.

Brecht's Galileo is not an admirable or in any way an exemplary character. The author wished to create an antihero so as to leave no room for doubt of his condemnation of a science which allows itself to be dominated by power, renouncing its moral responsibilities to mankind. The words “Unhappy the land that needs heroes” express its complexities, and also meanings which are not univocal, only within the context of the drama of guilt (and the feeling of guilt) of Galileo: what Brecht considered to be the “original sin” of physics, the first step on a path destined to lead to atomic weapons. In spite of this, if these words have entered the common language and repertoires of quotations of so many who do not know their source, it is clearly because they sum up and translate in an effective, simple and popular way a concept of antiheroic life which had been gradually growing in western societies from the second half of the 20th century onwards.

2. Antiheroic criticism

We may or may not agree about the advent of a post-heroic era. Obviously, this does not mean we deny the existence of gaps

and discontinuities between present and past concerning the concepts and practices of heroism. Quite the opposite: it means witnessing how, by limiting itself to describing the present in terms of chronological succession and cultural progress from a preceding heroic era, the definition of post-heroic era totally eludes the real turning and breaking point for the change in era. What really characterises the world we live in is not so much the situation of having come afterwards and having left behind the heroic worlds of the past, as the prefix *post* indicates, but that conditions have arisen which favour and continue to nurture cultural movements against heroism, which will soon lead to the prefix *anti*. In other words, however far down the path of their eventual disappearance we may be, there are still heroes (real and imaginary) in the present. Even today it's not unusual to find authentically heroic lives, actions and personalities, on condition, of course, that we know how to recognise them. Therefore it's not quite true that we live in a world without heroes. On the contrary, what is true is that the small or large amount of heroism (traditional or modern) which continues to survive in our era is exposed to the tensions of a vibrant and pervasive antiheroic critique which had never been seen before. Intolerant or demystifying voices had also often been raised in the past (Voltaire said that he detested heroes because they were too "noisy" and Ralph Waldo Emerson found them unbearably "boring"). But what we see today is the apparently irresistible progress in public opinion and common sense of an antiheroic rejection of vast proportions. Rather than *post-heroic*, the present age could be better defined as *anti-heroic*.

In a fine essay appearing in the early 1990s, Mike Featherstone did not hesitate to state on this subject that "western modernity [...] has made an *assault* [our italics] on heroic life" (Featherstone 1992, 173). Among the main "*assailants*" he includes feminism with its critique of male and *macho* values which it accuses of constituting the framework of the heroic concept. But basically Featherstone believes that the fact that, in western societies, heroism has become contested ground is due above all to the growing value given to ordinary life, in tune with the modern culture of consumption and leisure time. In fact, everyday life and heroic life seem like the opposite poles of an irreconcilable antinomy. It should come as no surprise that the journey of a mythical hero ritually starts with his or her abandonment of the everyday world. Everydayness is the territory of ordinary existence, of common sense and routine practices but, at the same time (and increasingly), the immanent horizon within which the search for well-being and individual self-realisation must take place. Conversely, heroic life is the realm of unique experiences, extraordinary gestures, in which great individual virtues that have become sensitised by calls for transcendence place themselves at the service of objectives directed at the common good. Furthermore, heroism requires courage, involves suffering, exposes its possessors to danger and demands the supreme test of confronting and overcoming the fear of death. Everyday life, on the other hand,

aspires to a happy existence, leavened by activities involving entertainment or consumption, gratified by the satisfaction of affective relationships and sociability. But, above all, protected as far as possible from situations of risk which remind humans of their intolerable condition as mortals. In the modern conception and experience of everyday life resides a potential for criticism of the heroic life, appropriately pointed out by Gouldner more than thirty years ago: "I have often suggested that daily life is a *counter* concept, which represents a criticism of a certain type of life, ... the heroic one in particular" (Gouldner 1975, quoted in Featherstone 1992, 164).

In spite of this, heroic life still exists and persists. This is the prerogative of all who, in the most diverse fields of functionality and expressions of science, art, teaching, defence of law and order, sport, religion, among others, organise their existence according to the demanding principles of an ethic, specifically a heroic ethic, which encourages and values sacrifice, self-discipline, dedication to a cause or purpose and the ability to face difficult (although not necessarily fatal) tests, including the disapproval and hostility of a predominantly antiheroic culture.

In fact, "it is possible for anyone to become a hero and perform a heroic deed without being a member of a heroic society or being committed to a heroic life" (Featherstone 1992, 167). The oft-quoted statement of Nathaniel Hawthorne, that "a hero cannot be a hero unless in a heroic world" is disproved every time that, for example, forced by the urgency of unexpected circumstances, some people unexpectedly (perhaps even surprising themselves) and without a second thought cross the border between everyday life and heroism by making an extraordinary gesture, mostly to save a life and often at the cost of their own.

The many "accidental heroes" (in the superficial cliché repeated by the media) who live in our world teach us, among other things, about the ambivalence of everyday life to heroism. An alternative and critical polarity of heroic life, but also potential creator of new kinds of heroes who mingle with and are mistaken for ordinary people. These are "the everyday heroes of everyday life", as they are usually defined. They are the only heroes who today's anti-heroic culture seems to recognise and accept. Except when such recognition is cancelled out by heroic merit being granted indiscriminately and is therefore substantially trivialised. Obviously, when everyone or nearly everyone is a hero, even if they are ordinary people, the concept loses its meaning.

To take two cases: defining individuals as "accidental heroes" whose actions (often selfless and always highly courageous or altruistic) are unmistakably inspired by conscious choice and, conversely, trivialising the sense of "everyday heroism", totally and conventionally attributing it to highly admirable and praiseworthy but not necessarily heroic behaviour (for example, honest and scrupulous attention to their job): in both cases, what we discover is the disinterest in or refusal to identify the distinctive trait, whether in values, objectives or motivations, which really marks heroic action and life.

A similar disinterest in the criteria and factors of distinction exists in a field of phenomena which is directly related to the presence in and influence of the media in contemporary societies. I refer to so-called media celebrities, in other words figures whose fame is created and nurtured by the modern media, with television at the head. The reference is totally apt within the context of this discourse, if we accept the consideration, widely accredited in the literature, that media celebrities are the heroes of our time and have replaced traditional heroes as role models for individuals, particularly for today's youth.

As Mark Rowlands very convincingly claims (Rowlands 2008), media celebrities are witnessing and benefiting from a radical cultural mutation. While, in another era, fame was a relatively scarce resource comprising recognition and award for special talent, or an exceptional event, or a proof of excellence, nowadays it has become an almost universally available good and, above all, is "associated with any success or excellence in any recognisable form" (Rowlands 2008, 25). With the creation of an expression of great effectiveness, destined to be long remembered, Daniel Boorstin in his day had already diagnosed the tautological nature of this contemporary variant of fame, the possessors of which, in most cases, are purely and simply "famous for being famous".

It's clear that only in an antiheroic era and culture can the "famous for being famous" ascend to the tanks of hero and enjoy the benefits of fame. But if media celebrities seem difficult to accept due to their very weak conception of the heroic life and personality, the same cannot be said of the "ordinary heroes of everyday life", provided we keep strictly to the expectation and demand for transcendence "in any recognisable form" from the average anti-heroism cultivated in the shadow of everyday life.

The great popular narrators know better than anyone the hidden and little-known heroic potential of ordinary people, and how to activate this with the explosive force of the imagination. John R. R. Tolkien, in "The Lord of the Rings", converted the humble Frodo into an unexpected hero. Not a valiant and indomitable warrior like Aragorn, nor a magician with extraordinary powers like Gandalf, but just a little fellow (or hobbit), with no resources and, in spite of it all, able to deploy a stupefying dedication to accomplish, at all costs, a terrible heroic mission.

3. Narrating heroes. The biographical genre

With this reference to a great popular narrator we have entered the territory of fiction. Popular narrative is traditionally full of heroes, and although not totally exempt from the antiheroic influences of the present, continues to feed our imaginations with stories of truly heroic lives and figures, both invented and drawn from real life. Life stories, bibliographies: we should now take a look at the biographical genre.

The narrative genre of biography is currently undergoing a kind of "status imbalance" concerning not so much its presence in

literary or historiographic fields, but in the area of the great popular media: press, cinema and, of particular interest to us here, television. The imbalance resides in the contradictions between the relative pre-eminence which the genre has acquired in film and television production and, at the same time, in public preferences for consumption and conversely, the apparently widespread disinterest of scholars and critics. In this respect, two qualified witnesses can be quoted who are in complete agreement, in spite of a distance of more than half a century between them. In the opening of his famous essay on biography in the American popular press of the first half of the 20th century, Leo Lowenthal observes how "rather surprisingly, hardly any attention has been paid to this phenomenon" (Lowenthal 1944, 109). And Steve Neale places biography (in common terms *biopic* or biographical film) among the great genres of the Hollywood cinema. He emphasises the "lack of critical consideration" (Neale 2000, 60) which with very few exceptions (among them the important work of Georgian Custen, discussed further below) has historically accompanied the genre.

This absence of critical and academic attention is surprising due to its incongruence with respect to two facts: the consistent presence of the *biopic* in current and past cinematographic and television production, making it a component of popular storytelling which is not to be underestimated; and, in general, the good and often excellent reception given by the public to biographical stories.

Apart from brief phases of decline, biographies have constantly helped Hollywood films gain conspicuous box-office triumphs and prestigious acknowledgements. These include Oscar nominations and awards: we need only mention *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Gandhi* (1982), *Schindler's List* (1993), *A Wonderful Mind* (2001), *Capote* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005), *The Queen* (2006) and *Milk* (2008). Similarly, the biographical film has been and continues to be, within and through the transformations of television systems, a resource of creativity and popularity for TV networks, and even more so for narrowcasting. In the US, for example, there has been an operation aimed at the recovery and use of telefilm and miniseries formats as instruments of channel branding (Lotz 2009). Basic and premium cable networks have started to invest regularly in the serial production of biographical fiction. In Great Britain, the new networks created by the BBC for the digital terrestrial system, BBC3 and BBC4, are also choosing biographies to bulk up the small audience niche of selective broadcasting. Nor are the larger networks turning their backs on a genre to which they have contributed many classics, as well as contemporary masterpieces of English television, from *I, Claudius* (BBC 1976) to *Miss Austen Regrets* (BBC 2008).

4. The definition of fame

Within the context of a discourse originating in the antiheroic orientations of contemporary culture, my interest mainly focus-

es on the *type* of characters who are biographed. Who are they? Not in the sense of recording each individual detail but rather the sphere of action in which the figures the popular media have considered worthy of being narrated have exercised their excellence and obtained their fame, if that is what it is.

In effect, to go back to my earlier point, this is exactly what we are dealing with: *fame*, of figures in whose biography we find the proof and consecration of a fame already acquired because of special talents, heroic deeds, whole lives, all in some way exceptional. Every narrative genre – detective, hospital, family- creates its own heroes and, if they gain great and prolonged success, leads them to a popularity sometimes very similar to fame. Or perhaps rather a form of “glorious recognition”, according to dictionaries traditionally “associated with respect, and not simply respect, but deserved respect” (Rowlands 2008, 9). In spite of this, the biographical genre is the only one whose very existence and *raison d’être* is sustained on the exemplary value, cultural recognition and social consideration of the fame acquired by men and women, architects of great things and heroic achievements in the most diverse fields of human action.

Custen was right when he said that “publicly defining fame” (Custen 1992, 215) is the “cultural role” of the biographical genre. In any event, as well as offering many spectators an accessible version of history, the biographical genre offers cultural observers and analysts privileged access to the interactive concepts of heroism and fame which find expression at any particular time in the texts and the discourses of the media. Leo Lowenthal, as we saw above, was the first to analyse biographies by taking this line. And although his pioneering work is on the press rather than cinema or television, it also constitutes an essential reference because it illustrates and sometimes anticipates trends that are destined to be seen in the cinema too and subsequently on television. Lowenthal’s study, carried out on a vast corpus of biographical articles published over forty years (1901-1941) in two popular newspapers in the USA, is too well-known to require more than a brief mention. It is sufficient to recall how the results of his research clearly show a progressive and decisive reconfiguration of the typical composition of biographed figures. In the first twenty years of the century, these came mostly from the political and military elites, professionals and businesses people, but were soon replaced in subsequent decades by popular figures from the world of art and entertainment. On this point, Lowenthal distinguishes between the “serious arts” (painting, music, dance, etc.) and the popular arts, and emphasises the gradual disappearance of the former from the spheres of activity which provide the heroes of the press. In the definitions of Lowenthal, “heroes of production” (an aristocracy of individuals with outstanding qualities and virtues, taking their inspiration from high ideals) finally gave way to “heroes of consumption” (emblematic figures of a society which places leisure time and entertainment at the centre of its interests).

You do not have to share the disdain of Frankfurt de

Lowenthal for “the idols of the masses” (or, conversely, a certain idealisation of the “heroes of production”) to recognise the merit of his having diagnosed, accurately and for the first time, a cultural shift which has not taken long to leave its mark on the evolution of the biographical genre and also on the creative and productive context of other media.

In the cinema of Hollywood, we have learned this through Custen’s study. Biographical films made up to the early 1940s dealt above all with the sector of the traditional elites; sovereigns, famous men of politics and economics, illustrious personalities from art and science. There were also quite a few biographies of entertainment stars themselves (Hollywood celebrating itself) but these formed a relative minority. It was in the next two decades when the change of direction was observed by Lowenthal in popular newspapers. During the 1940s and 1950s, the constant advance of “heroes of consumption” re-wrote the “agenda of fame” of cinema *biopics*. Entertainers, who originally contributed less than 10%, rose to 28% of the total biographies produced in the 1950s, as did sporting champions, while representations of the decision-making elites and artists decline, albeit not disappearing completely. A new elite was emerging, whose fame is based on the entertainment professions.

In spite of this, the advent of the new paradigmatic figure of contemporary fame did not in itself change the basic requirements, the necessary (though not sufficient) condition that makes a life worth narrating. The *biopic* effectively continues “demanding” from its subjects themselves, whether political leaders or entertainment personalities, a (certain) dimension of greatness: a heroic inclination, admirable behaviour or, in short, evidence of a personality and an existence that is at least to some extent extraordinary, and who have already found public recognition in the tribute of fame.

This condition diminishes, says Custen, when, with the changes of the 1960s, the biographical genre like many others switched to television. Fairly soon, in fact, television (and we must remember that the author is analysing the American scene) re-wrote the code of biographical films, fundamentally altering the primary component by destroying the agenda of fame. Now there were to be no figures hailed or respected for accomplishing great achievements in a specific field of action. Ordinary people become protagonists of television biographical films (*biopics*), plucked fleetingly from the anonymity of everyday life by any unexpected and disruptive event. It was understood that normal people could not completely take up the whole of centre stage. Entertainment celebrities continued to occupy a great deal of space, and not all biographies of famous figures disappeared. But undoubtedly through this form of the apparent democratisation of fame, increasingly measured less in terms of excellence and heroism, the biographical genre has transformed the cultural role itself to make it comply with the purpose embraced by most contemporary television, namely giving everyone their moment of glory.

Custen wrote in the early 1990s. His data, as well as his

comments on the television *biopic*, were influenced (although the author does not make this explicit) by the heavy presence in the American networks of *tefefilms* (The Movie of the Week: Rapping 1992). Often with the hectic timescale of the instant movie, these brought to the screen events and characters from stories featured in newspapers, preferably sourcing narrative material from the sensationalist press.

We do not have systematic data for recent years, but information from a great variety of sources –specialist journals, the television networks, other resources accessible online– confirms the “demotic turn” (Turner 2010), as Graeme Turner defines the growing visibility of ordinary people on television of the biographical genre. But it seems that there can be no doubt about the abundant presence in contemporary television of *biopics* of celebrities from the worlds of entertainment and show business. Stars of cinema and television, singers, dancers, authors and actors from any musical genre. These figures, as well-known exponents of artistic careers, require a minimum of talent and commitment to earn the gratifying benefits of notoriety. But recently they have been joined by new celebrity figures who, although still not numerous and probably representing the beginnings of a very small corpus of *biopics*, indicate by their presence a significant change in the *modus operandi* of contemporary television. This is effectively, in the real sense, that of television celebrities who belong to the category of “famous for being famous”, to quote Boorstin. Or more precisely, famous for having taken part in any of the many reality shows through which today’s television produces its own ephemeral celebrities or *celetoids*, to use Chris Rojek’s definition (Rojek 2001). Like *factoids*, which are unauthentic facts manufactured by the media, *celetoids* are false celebrities, manufactured by television in the absence of the requirements of authentic fame. Individuals “with no particular talents that might encourage expectations of work in the entertainment industry, no special career except beyond the achievement of media visibility” (Turner 2010, 14) achieve a notoriety which raises some of them to the rank of figures to be biographed.

Taken as a whole, entertainment content now occupies very large spaces in the networks of the current multi-channel environment. Its omnipresence and influence on the models of consumption often make it the dominant television genre. Although it only produces a fraction of the immense corpus of programmes on contemporary television, the biographical genre is both re-writing its agenda and helping to confirm that we have entered the “age of entertainment”.

5. A heroic enclave in Italian fiction

I have reserved the last part of this article for a short exploration of biography in contemporary Italian fiction, using the cognitive elements accumulated during the earlier part of the text to put this case within a comparative context.

As regards the important profiles which the biographical genre

claims to address in the international television (and cinematographic) scene, the first and most striking aspect of the Italian case is its sheer quantity. In the last twenty years (nineteen-nineties and early decades of the 21st century), the production and offer of *biopics* in the field of Italian fiction has reached conspicuous levels. This is witnessed by the high total number of biographies, almost a hundred titles (97) and still more eloquently, their weight within programming at peak audience time, an impressive 10%. In other words, one fiction out of every ten at peak audience time is a *biopic*. That this is a substantial proportion and probably not easy to emulate in the present or in the past, is proved by the fact that a much smaller proportion was enough to make *biopics* one of the great cinematographic genres. In the thirty-three year period (1927-1960) covered Cusien’s study, for example, less than 3% of the remaining 10,000 films produced by the major Hollywood studios were biographical but, in spite of this, this is considered the period of greatest expansion of the biographical genre. By producing a fine gallery of portraits of heroic personalities, Italian fiction gained a prerogative as peculiar as it is praiseworthy: this genre of biographical stories has won great popularity, and throughout the television seasons of the early 21st century has been the greatest success of the year (Bechelloni 2010).

The strong presence of the biographical genre in Italian fiction of the last twenty years poses an interesting question about the specific mode in which domestic storytelling has gained ground, so to speak, with respect to questions of heroism and fame involved in the definition of the genre and its cultural functions. We have followed the evolution of the *biopic* on the international horizon, in its move from cinema to television and its adoption of the “demotic turn”, and in the growing importance of television entertainment. Now we will turn to the similarities and differences between the Italian *biopic* and international trends as regards the type of personalities biographed, by the area of activity in which they have won public recognition.

Anyone with even a superficial knowledge of Italian fiction may not be surprised by the pre-eminence in the corpus of *biopics* of the last twenty years of religious figures (saints, popes, the blessed, priests of the Catholic church) and figures from the Old Testament (Abraham, Moses, Solomon etc.) and the New Testament (Christ, Mary, the Apostles). From the start, the religious trend which began to take off in the early 1990s (Buonanno 2009) has effectively found almost exclusive expression in the biographical genre. In total, religious and biblical or evangelic figures make up 43% of the corpus. In other words, more than 2 out of every 5 biographies are dedicated to what could be defined as “heroes of the faith”.

The second largest group of biographed figures (13) is made up of men and women who have shown exceptional courage in the service of great ethical and civil ideals. Who have combated the political evil of the 20th century in the form of Fascist and Nazi totalitarianism and the social evil of Italy identifiable in its Mafia culture and criminality. These “heroes of freedom and justice” are very often hero-martyrs, in a tradition of heroism, going

Table 1. Type of biographied figures (1989-2009)

Biographied figures	Rai	Mediaset	Total
Religious figures (saints, popes, priests)	14	10	24
Biblical-evangelical figures	13	5	18
Hero-martyrs (Nazism, Mafia etc.)	9	4	13
Governors and politicians	8	3	11
Artists (creative)	7	2	9
Artists and sports persons	5	3	8
Figure close to the political elites*	5	1	6
Scientists, inventors	2	1	3
Business persons	1	1	2
Criminals		2	2
Other		1	1
Total	64	33	97

* These are female figures whose biographies are closely linked to the private domain, as lovers, wives, daughters etc. of governors and politicians. Equivalent, in part, to what Custen defines as *paramours*.

Source: Own creation.

from Christian martyrdom to the martyrs of the Renaissance and others, deeply rooted in Italian history and culture.

We go back to Lowenthal's definition of "heroes of production" to describe the category of the political and business elites, as numerous as the preceding category (13 biographies, with the political and few business figures grouped together). In this group we find great historical figures like governors, legislators, conquerors (Caesar, Augustus, Charlemagne), political and trade union leaders of Republican Italy (De Gasperi, Moro, Di Vittorio) and ground-breaking businessmen (Ferrari, Mattei). Often controversial, but with the aura of a hunger for power, surrounded by a fame drawn from respect and admiration for the influence they had on the history of the world or the country.

Not much smaller (12 biographies) is the group formed by creative artists (Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Puccini etc. and quite rightly including revolutionary stylists like Coco Chanel) and scientists and inventors (Maria Montessori, Einstein, Meucci). Individuals linked by the gift of talent, ingenuity and rare intellect which has allowed these "heroes of art and science" to shine in their fields.

Greatness, certainly, is also the prerogative of sporting champions (Coppi, Bartali, Carnes). Along with some popular figures from the field of light music, these make up the category of "heroes of entertainment". Creators of only 8 biographies, entertainment figures are in fifth place in the agenda of fame of Italian *biopics*, very distant, therefore, from the influence that they seem to have assumed in other places, as a "pole of attraction" of celebrities narrated by the biographical genre.

The biographies of female personalities close to the elite in power are worthy of separate evaluation, given the present failure to classify them in a more relevant way. But this would not

change the overall findings, shown in Table 2.

The mission and testimony of religious faith, the ideals of freedom and justice, the responsibilities and triumphs of power, the expression of creativity and ingenuity: over 80% of the biographies produced by Italian fiction over the last twenty years fall into these demanding categories in which, throughout the distant and more recent historical past, the fame of characters who could legitimately be seen as examples and models to inspire human greatness was created. In these biographies we therefore find few coincidences with the advent of an age of entertainment, a position radically different from a considerable part of the content of Italian television itself.

The corpus of biographies from the last twenty years is quantitatively insignificant, a tiny boat in the vast sea of television content which is exponentially amplified by the multichannel environment. In spite of this, Italian fiction should be recognised for having harvested a "happy anomaly" of a small but valuable enclave of "heroic" television within the context of this prime time for entertainment and an antiheroic society.

Table 2. Heroic types

Types	
Heroes of the faith	43.30%
Heroes of freedom and justice	13.40%
Heroes of production	13.40%
Heroes of art and science	12.40%
Heroes of entertainment	8.20%
Other	9.30%

Source: Own creation.

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