



## “The Untold Stories of Film Directors: Hollywood’s Depiction as Metacinematic Mythmaking”

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### Abstract

*In the Hollywood metafilm, from the Studio System period to the present day, only a few film directors have been tackled on screen. Also, whereas the biopic of Hollywood stars is usually simply a “rags to riches” tale and/or vice-versa, the film director biopic is foremost the evidence of an authorial discourse, although presented with some sentiment. In other words, what moves some filmmakers (especially directors) to approach the life and art of their famous peers is a wish to reflect on the nature of their common medium and on the quality of their own output. This article focuses on two films: “Chaplin” (1992, directed by Richard Attenborough) and “Ed Wood” (1994, directed by Tim Burton). From very early in his cinematic career, Charlie Chaplin was as famous as he was infamous, whereas Ed Wood was never famous and barely infamous. Still, the best and the worst film directors are portrayed in a style not entirely dissimilar to one another in their respective biopics, and in compliance with the rules advocated by Aristotle for tragedy in the “Poetics.” These two films manage to portray, from beginning to end, the essence of the charismatic celebrities they depict. With that aim, they de-mythicize both the men and the medium they worked for, but only in order to re-mythicize the directors and cinema in a new splendour.*

**Keywords:** Hollywood biopics, Film directors, Film Chaplin, Film *Ed Wood*, Greek tragedy.

### 1. A life in moving pictures, or a *moving life* in pictures?

As stated by Alex Barris (1978, 141), film biographies about American show business celebrities were rare until the end of WWII. In the fifties, however, when the *exposé* trend entered the movies, biopics became a staple of Hollywood cinema. The trend began in 1946, following the success achieved by *The Jolson Story* (1946, Alfred E. Green), a film about the vaudeville performer who was the first to be heard singing on the big screen. The late fifties saw the demise of the Studio System, which resulted, in the next decade, in a boom of biographies of famous cinematic characters. As Margaret Tarratt points out, “The decline of Hollywood as the nerve centre of the world’s film industry has been accompanied by a marked growth in the mythology surrounding it” (1970, 4). The industry embraced these “disclosing” depictions either for their potential box office value, which most of the films in question, however, never realised in full; or as a sort of tribute to eras gone by, produced in accordance with an updated ideological position (e.g. the silent

era seen from the perspective of the “talkies” under threat from their nemesis, television). One way or another it was not the educational value that mattered for the Hollywood business people involved in such undertakings; the life of the chosen celebrities was subject to all kinds of historical abuses. “For most of these movies are so untruthful, so false to the memory of the deceased, and so unfair to the living that it is almost beyond morality” (Meyers 1978, 12).<sup>1</sup> The modern Hollywood celebrity biopic was born out of a mixture of melodrama and nostalgia.

This tendency follows the general paradigm of Hollywood-on-Hollywood films as determined by P.D. Anderson in his important book on classical metacinema (Patrick Donald Anderson 1978). The paradigm is twofold. On the one hand, there is the positive view of successes achieved in Hollywood by hopefuls of all over America attracted there as by a magnet.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there is the misery of failure inflicted by the industry, the nightmarish life of stars who fall from grace into addiction, descending the stairs of fame into oblivion and solitude. Film audiences responded well to both formulas, either considering the rise to fame as an incentive for future action and, therefore, a possible alternative to their dreary lives, or delighting in the decay of others apparently more fortunate than themselves. According to Anderson, then, it was either through identification or vengeful “compensatory illusion” that the viewers adhered to these films (331-332).<sup>3</sup> However, Hollywood-on-Hollywood films are not biopics *per se*; they merely represent fixed *possibilities* of success or failure for any character. Usually, in such films only the social environment is true, not the protagonists themselves. Mostly, the Hollywood movie biopic about celebrities further differs from the usual Hollywood-on-Hollywood films in that the people depicted in the former are, supposedly, real. Not only did the biopics’ heroes exist biologically, but their story was supposed to be true. However, Richard Meyers reminds us that not much separates the fictional accounts from the real ones: “These movies [biopics] are rarely made as anything but a backhanded compliment to the [usually dead] subject” (1978, 12). Therefore, of the two principles I have just mentioned – biological existence and real life stories – only the first one can be considered undisputably accurate in the classical biopic.

The *compliment* paid to the subjects in these classical biopics (Meyers 1978, 12) is achieved through high impact situations and personal grandeur: these people are seen rising meteorically to stardom, suffering the pangs of hell, or both. Whatever it is they do, these celebrities must excel at it, being notable artists, absolute martyrs, or both. In American



cinema, grandeur is synonymous with glamour, the very foundation of the Hollywood myth and the basis of its El Dorado reputation. Biographical “facts” were blatantly forged by the studios’ publicists in order to instigate the consumption of the *star personae* of the actresses or actors and, consequently, results in theatre attendance by the audiences. Celebrity was, therefore, one of the forms in which Hollywood advertised itself and capitalized on the Hollywood myth. By preying on the viewers’ desire to watch Hollywood, the industry fed on a kind of non-intellectual cinephilia: an urge to be part of that world and its corresponding perceived magic. Like the Hollywood-on-Hollywood films in general, the biopic of Hollywood celebrities (covering all entertainment activities within the scope of “showbusiness”) may portray stories of success or failure, but in this sub-genre the “narrative” is more complex because the films may contain a mixture of both paradigms, combining them for dramatic effect. The films turn out as a sort of “rags to riches” tale but not without obstacles along the way.

These biographical accounts were simultaneously toned down, as far as addiction and misconducts were concerned, and spruced up, so as to underline the talent and the mystique of the depicted artists. The liberties taken with the truth in biopics of showbusiness personnel were due to legal as well as industrial reasons. During Hollywood’s classical period the Studios had to proceed with caution in order to avoid liability suits, either from the depicted celebrities themselves, if they were still alive, or from their heirs. Also, entertainment calls for dramatic tension and likeable characters. By changing facts and adding happy endings where they did not exist, or by stressing melodrama in some tragic cases where the subjects were victims of their own destiny, Hollywood made sure that these people were re-written as legends. Even the most flawed among them were portrayed as fallen angels and provoked a blend of pity and admiration.

## 2. The imitation of life actions

By specifically addressing the issue of star quality through biopics, Hollywood creates a powerful mode of spectatorial engagement, which is actually twofold. Firstly, viewers can relate to the frailties of the celebrities, who are made very human and, therefore, worthy of being liked. Secondly, due to the classical narrative identification evoked by the storytelling devices, viewers position themselves alongside the hero or heroine, which makes them feel a little special. Indeed, when all is said and done, stars are not common people. Consequently stars (and viewers) are taken to be both ordinary and extraordinary (Ellis 2003, 95).

Actually, film stars present many of the characteristics of ancient Greek tragic heroes. Some of them, who died prematurely, live on as the object of a real cult: Marilyn Monroe and James Dean are the two examples that immediately come to mind. Aristotle, in *Poetics* (1902 [circa 335 B.C.]), defines the Hellenic tragedy as an imitation (*mimesis*) of actions of a higher type (11) which excite pity and fear in the audience

and which are committed by someone who does not excel much in virtue or justice (45). If this person falls upon misfortune, that is due not to an evil or wicked disposition on his or her part, but due to a single error or frailty (47). This person has to enjoy great reputation and fortune as a distinguished representative of an illustrious family (45). The misfortune presents itself in the guise of catastrophe, that is, a disastrous and painful action, such as death and physical injury. Clifford Leech (1981) helps to clarify the actions undertaken by the so-called higher type. It is not so much a matter of moral exaltation, since Greek tragedy has cases of sons killing their fathers and their own offspring; it is a question of intrinsic naturalness, whereby the hero or heroine acts according to his or her own nature, revealing a personality *bigger* than that of other mortals (who, by comparison, are considered “common”). Elevated characters belong to a high social rank; they are kings, princes and so on. When they fall into misfortune they preserve their honour, which causes them to maintain the viewers’ admiration (because the audience feels inferior to them). Although Leech does not mention it, in Greek tragedy the existence of the Chorus prevents all identification between the viewers and the fallen heroes, as a result of which catharsis, i.e. the emotional purging of the audience, ensues through other related but not coincidental means.

Aristotle places great importance on the characterization of the hero or heroine so as not to endanger the tragic effect of the play. As terror and pity are triggered in all situations, Aristotle advocated that the hero or heroine should not be particularly bad or especially good. Pity could only ensue if the protagonist’s destiny was undeserved; terror would only be activated if there was a spectatorial empathy with the hero or heroine (the audience would consider the hero an unfortunate equal because he or she was human like them). Therefore, tragedy as advocated by Aristotle evokes a mixture of admiration and commiseration. The audience is amazed in the face of the distinction evinced by the hero or heroine and mourns his or her fate. The hero’s destiny is unavoidable, hence the pervasive atmosphere of doom that tragedies have. However, the hero or heroine’s behaviour (when he or she commits the Aristotelian “error”), serves as a catalyst that brings about the fated end, the catastrophe, which, in turn, brings about the main goals of the tragedy – terror and pity. This is how, in Greek tragedy, the free will of the protagonist is reconciled with the inevitability of fate.

Hollywood celebrities are subject to the same drives and consequences as their illustrious fictional Greek ancestors, awakening similar feelings of fear and pity in cinematic audiences. They are not bad or good, only human; however, they possess “star quality,” which sets them apart from other people. Even though some biopics of film celebrities actually reveal aspects of practical filmmaking, it is ultimately the chosen people’s celebrated status as Hollywood icons that matters the most to the viewers. As mentioned by Rudy Behlmer and Tony Thomas, “in almost all Hollywood pseudo-biography there is too much about the generally





invented personal life and too little about the actual career" (1975, 5). What this means is that it does not pay to endanger the Hollywood myth by revealing its trade secrets. Maltby claims that "Hollywood and its critics proclaim together that movies, like stars, are born and not made, and that the secrets of the womb are not to be delved into" (1983, 5). When depicted, the professional aspects of filmmaking work as a patina to further embellish and mythicize the celebrities as extraordinary people. At the same time, however, such practical and apparently laborious scenes provide truthfulness, a much needed ingredient in a biography.

All that I have mentioned so far is understandable when the celebrity is a star, an actress/actor or a performer who earns a living due to her or his image. What about the film director, whose face, life and character stay pretty much out of the limelight, behind the camera? Not unsurprisingly, the film director has been almost ignored in Hollywood biopics, especially during the classical period. Even when endowed with charisma and genuine talent, under the Hollywood system he (it is always a he) is never a luminary.

### 3. Behind the camera: the film director as maestro

Significantly, of the twenty-four biopics addressed in the first chapter of the book *Movies on Movies: How Hollywood Sees Itself* (Myers 1978), only one is partially about a director – Buster Keaton –<sup>4</sup> and the biographical facts are inaccurate beyond belief. The list did not grow formidably in the years after the fall of the Studio System, but in more recent years some biopics of film directors have, indeed, been produced by American film companies (USA and Canada). However, most of them do not focus on their subjects' careers. Here is a short list, organized by production year: *Chaplin* (1992, Richard Attenborough, USA/JAP/FRA/ITA); *Ed Wood* (1994, Tim Burton, USA); *Kabloonak* (1994, Claude Massot, CAN/FRA); *Gods and Monsters* (1998, Bill Condon, USA/UK); *RKO 281* (1999, Benjamin Ross, USA/UK, TV film produced by HBO); *The Aviator* (2004, Martin Scorsese, USA/GER); *The Girl* (2012, Julian Jarrold, UK/South Africa/USA/GER); *Hitchcock* (2012, Sacha Gervasi, UK/USA); *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013, John Lee Hancock, USA/UK/Australia); *As DREAMERS DO* (2014, Logan Sekulow, USA); *Walt before Mickey* (2015, Khoa Le, USA).

All of the directorial celebrities that can be considered for this purpose were depicted after their death and most of them were very influential in their time (Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, Howard Hughes, Alfred Hitchcock, James Whale, Robert J. Flaherty). They form the *crème de la crème*, except for one, who I will be dealing with in detail later (Ed Wood). They were also, as artists and men, flawed geniuses, or so the biopics would have us believe. Chaplin was attracted to female teenagers, James Whale was gay, Howard Hughes was certified insane, and Ed Wood was an eccentric. All of them shared one trait: they were obsessive about their work. However, only seven of the biopics are taken up entirely by the

subject's work, three of which focus on the production of controversial cinematic master-pieces indicated in parentheses: *Citizen Kane* (*RKO 281*), *Psycho* (*Hitchcock*) and *Nanook of the North* (*Kabloonak*). Whale's biopic is more of an obituary as it takes place during Whale's final years, when he had retired from filmmaking. *The Aviator* alternates between the eccentricities of Hughes in the film industry, the pioneering work he did on aviation and his downright lunacy; being a cinematic director and a tycoon was only a part of his life, in contrast to Charlie Chaplin and Ed Wood who are depicted as being filmmakers above all things. Predictably enough, none of these biopics portray a woman director, mainly because none had achieved the mythical status of their male counterparts. Biopics trade mostly in the "star images" of famous people. It just so happens that no woman director has ever been given that acknowledgement in American cinema, unlike the female star, who was very much at the centre of public attention.<sup>5</sup>

As far as the depiction is concerned, the qualities of tragedy set out by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, which were used by the Hollywood system in regard to performers, can also be applied to film directors. This type of celebrity can also trigger dramatic tension, devotion (attachment to the celebrity), adoration (the begetting of intense feelings), worship (positioning the celebrity above ordinary mortals), inspiration (taking the celebrity as a role model), and the cult effect that the star generates among his or her followers. One condition must, however, be met: the director must be a star himself. In other words, the director must exert a particular fascination. Notwithstanding, a film director's biopic, contrary to the actors' filmed biographies, may appeal to a more clearly cinephilic audience, one that is at least familiar with the director's name and reputation and is interested in his working methods. A director's life can also appeal to a general audience, if the plot has enough dramatic tension and the director is a well known and loved figure or has a questionable private reputation. This is why only cult directors have been addressed by Hollywood film biopics: either their followers are interested in their life and art (which is the case with Walt Disney) or the celebrity has iconic value, either in himself (like Alfred Hitchcock) or due to his infamous character (Hughes and Whale).

"Star quality" is a matter of image. Film directors do not have a screen *persona*, because they are usually not inscribed in films as characters, but they do have a social *persona*. They can be *personalities* (celebrities) in their own right and, as such, subject to a cult, acquiring a "larger than life" status. Incidentally, this is an expression usually applied to Orson Welles which he recurrently used to his own advantage.<sup>6</sup> They may have a star image in media other than film, just as actors are said to have (Dyer 1979): advertising (ads, fan clubs, public appearances), publicity (uncovered information, scandals), criticism and analysis (profiles, obituaries), and so on. The problem is that in the biopics which depict their life, it is an actor who plays their role and therefore their own aura is filtered through another person with his own *persona* and





screen presence. This calls for good casting: that is, the choice of a protagonist who is talented enough to express the semblance of the chosen celebrity and his peculiarities without letting his own character overwhelm that of the subject. In other words: a good actor who is not a star himself or a star actor who has a less flamboyant personality than that of the star director he is impersonating. This is another reason why, in Hollywood cinema, the biopics of film directors concentrate on sheer luminaries, some of them with expressive titles: James Whale, the “king of horror”, and Edward D. Wood Jr., the “World’s Worst Director”. Nothing and no one can top (or lower, in the latter case) the aura of the celebrity being depicted in the filmic biography.

Frédéric Sojcher (2007) claims that film directors are more often portrayed metaphorically as creators than depicted as the subject of biopics. This is true, especially in Europe, where the concept of the *auteur* is still very much in place, in part due to the film festival circuit. Nevertheless, he also asserts that directors themselves, at a given point in their careers, are often led to ponder the essence of cinema as their own personal art form. In Hollywood-on-Hollywood films this is done through the portrayal of the behind the scenes of filmmaking or through cinematic allegories (141). The most famous case in point would be *Rear Window* (Aldred Hitchcock, 1954, USA). I contend that some directors also do it through film biopics on other Hollywood directors, as if they could shed some light on themselves through the lives of others by simply sharing what they have in common: a great love for the medium. Martin Scorsese, Richard Attenborough, and Tim Burton all made metacinematic films before trying their hand at the biopic of a(n) (in)famous peer.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on *Chaplin* (1992, directed by Richard Attenborough, with screenplay by William Boyd, Bryan Forbes, and William Goldman) and *Ed Wood* (1994, directed by Tim Burton, with screenplay by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski). From very early on in his cinematic career, Charlie Chaplin was as famous as he was infamous, whereas Ed Wood was never famous and barely infamous. Still, one of the best and the worst film directors are portrayed here in a style not entirely dissimilar to one another and in compliance with the norms of Greek tragedy.

#### 4. From the best to the worst case scenario...

Attenborough’s film was adapted from two written biographical sources: Chaplin’s own account, *My Autobiography* (published by Simon & Schuster in 1964), and David Robinson’s *Chaplin – His Life and Art* (published by McGraw Hill in 1985). These sources serve to validate the “facts” portrayed. The presence in the film of an intradiegetic interviewer, who proves to be Chaplin’s editor visiting him in his Swiss home, also reinforces the (auto)biographical nature of the filmic account. Indeed, the editor states: “This is your book we’re talking about. It’s up to you”.<sup>7</sup> From a merely structural point of view, this comment ties together all

the loose ends that unavoidably occur when a long story is shortened through the ellipses that slice the narrative in historical chunks. The fragmentary and episodic nature of the film is thus made to appear as an editorial *choice* taking into account the presumed interests of an audience: “You shouldn’t be afraid that the readers [or film viewers] share your emotions and your feelings”. The result is effective, since what comes through in the film is less the chronology of the events, in whose linear order Chaplin’s life story is told, than the *essence* of being Chaplin: the myth associated with him, and his character as a human being. Although the main facts are correct, Chaplin’s life and personality have been scanned for dramatic effect. The “emotions” and “feelings” that the filmmakers wished to awake in the viewers were taken into account in the selection.

*Chaplin* is definitely a sentimental film, but one which manages to deal with complex biographical material while further magnifying the celebrity it addresses. In the end, the viewers are left with a terrible feeling of nostalgia, which only serves to perpetuate the Chaplin myth. This mood is present from the start, sustained by John Barry’s melancholic overture, played over some black and white close-up shots of Chaplin removing the make-up – his filmic *persona* of The Tramp – and revealing a very sad individual underneath. As Béla Balázs contends in *Visible Man* (1924), the close-up of a face is the lyrical essence of the entire drama and should therefore, be used only at the climax of an important scene (Carter 2010, 37). His comment that the facial close-up is the “higher art of the film in general”, (37) leads Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen to advance that it is a means of getting hold of a unique personality (1998, 190). Chaplin’s Tramp was mute, but he was able to communicate a myriad of feelings. In the opening credits scene, just as the viewers perceive their idol up close, the aura of both the character and the artist underneath are revealed, along with his humanity, which is a key part of the film’s strategy: to play the man against the myth. As Richard Schickel observes: “A godhead is supposed to be inscrutable. It is not expected that he speaks directly to us. It is enough that his image be present so that we may conveniently worship it”. (quoted in Dyer 1979, 24). The extreme close-ups of *Chaplin* demonstrate right away that we are in the presence of star material. Balázsian transcendence apart, the close-up was the mark of the star in classical cinema, being reserved only for the protagonists, especially women.

The opening sequence may be poignant, but the film alternates between this sad tone and another more joyous one, a reminder of the early days of comedy when Chaplin made his cinematic debut. This is not altogether disconnected from Chaplin’s own cinematic practice, since his own films combine sentiment with slapstick. In order to convey the importance of this man, Attenborough engages at times in the *maestro*’s own directorial mode. For instance, when Chaplin’s first wife divorces him, Chaplin and his team of close friends have to run away with the film negative of *The Kid*, for it had been considered by the divorce lawyers as part of the estate to be divided. Bits of the sequence





are shot in fast pace imitating a slapstick chase, with real policemen replacing the Keystone Cops. The essence of “Charlie” resides precisely in the mixture of the director as illusive individual and his films as enduring objects. The film recording speed is also used for another moment of confrontation between illusion and reality in this biopic. When Charlie is talking about how he came up with the idea for the attire of the Tramp, the viewers are presented with two versions of the same event, one admittedly more real than the other. Firstly, the hat, a topper, is seen sparkling in slow motion as if beckoning for Charlie to pick it up. In the second version, seen in fast motion, Charlie tries three different attires in front of three mirrors (all the mirrors are contained in one single film frame and reflect the images simultaneously). The latter version depicts the correct facts, but is no less mythic than the former, because it looks like one of Chaplin’s gags (although he rarely used optical effects) and because it is not *boring* as truth is supposed to be. This implies that Chaplin’s films, although dealing with real emotions and situations, were not dreary like the reality was at the time of their making.

Ed Wood achieved cult status only after his death, but, ironically, as the Worst Director of All Times, a dubious honour for somebody who considered himself a twin spirit of Orson Welles. Wood was, indeed, like The Boy Wonder, Welles’s nickname in the film industry, a writer-director-producer-actor. This delusional belief on the part of the amateurish filmmaker, along with Wood’s unorthodox and extremely unprofessional methods, have made him an obvious choice for Tim Burton, known for liking eccentric subjects. The screenplay of *Ed Wood* is only indirectly based on previously written material – the underground biography by Rudolph Grey, *Ed Wood: Nightmare of Ecstasy (The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.)* – but it rings true. The major facts in the film are, indeed, correct (including Béla Lugósi’s engagement in his projects and Ed’s transvestism), as if Burton was making a creed out of one of the lines spoken by Ed Wood in the biopic: “Filmmaking is not about tiny details. It’s about the big picture”. The rest, however, is all re-written and revamped in a topsy-turvy way. After all, *Ed Wood* is a comedy, a true satire of B-movie and exploitation films, exuding much of their characteristic atmosphere and lack of quality. The homage to the exploitation genre and to the cult personality of Ed Wood, as the essence of vision without the necessary talent, is ingenious and intentional. In this spirit, the worst in Ed Wood’s career is turned into the very best in his biopic. Burton is not trying to cheaply exploit some sensational topic; he is conveying a discourse on creatorship. If nothing else, Ed Wood was very creative. Therefore, rather than adulterating the truth for dramatic effect with no respect for the celebrity depicted, Burton and the scriptwriters actually falsify facts to better convey the essence of Edward D. Wood Jr. and to transmit a noble discourse on filmmaking. This is why the film has a half-fictional Orson Welles saying “Visions are worth fighting for. Why spend your life making someone else’s dreams?”

*Ed Wood* is not considered by most film critics

and historians as a real biopic, but it should be.<sup>8</sup> The liberties it takes with truth are no greater than those of the forties’ and fifties’ biopics. Just as Attenborough does in *Chaplin*, Burton appropriates the style of the depicted directorial celebrity. The logo of Touchstone Pictures, the production company of Burton’s film, is customized<sup>9</sup> and the phantasmagorical overture looks like a bad horror movie, with the main actors’ names written on gravestones in a nocturnal rainy scene. This procedure emulates the opening of Wood’s own *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. The lettering is typical B-movie style as is the presence of a man in a coffin, the real character of Criswell, played by Jeffrey Jones. The strange television presenter delivers the following tirade from inside the coffin: “[...] And now for the first time we are bringing you the full story of what happened. We are giving you all the evidence, based only on the secret testimony of the miserable souls who survived this terrifying ordeal. The incidents, places [...]”. The speech seems to confirm the truthfulness of the facts, but the filmic style immediately contradicts this impression and the presenter’s assertion. The real Edward D. Wood Jr. may have wanted realism, as he claims in Burton’s opus (“I want this film to tell the truth”), but all that the creators of *Ed Wood* are interested in is the *essence* of being Wood. The recurrent use of Dutch angles, night scenes, *chiaroscuro* lighting, wide angle lens and the framing of ceilings transform the film into a stylized horror movie, fitting to the terrible life and career they are depicting. Just as in *Chaplin*, the intention is reinforced by the musical talents of a reputed Hollywood film composer (in this case, Howard Shore).

## 5. ... And back again

The films *Chaplin* and *Ed Wood* depict figures who were profoundly controversial in their time. Their director’s intention is to mythicize the film creator as an artist, whether as an absolute genius or downright awful. Both biopics depict the protagonist as a human being, even though they use very different narrative modes. The flaws of the celebrities portrayed are made more apparent precisely because their humanity is highlighted (“I wasn’t a communist, I was a humanist”, says the character Charlie Chaplin in his biopic).

Chaplin is correctly portrayed as a cockney vaudevillian, on a meteoric rise to stardom in the new continent. Stock footage of real immigrants arriving in America is used in Attenborough’s film as a historical ratification of Chaplin’s humble beginnings and the life-changing experience that moving to the United States was at that time. In fact, the first half hour of the film deals with Chaplin’s life prior to his arrival in California. By the age of 30 (in the year 1918), however, he had already acquired his own studio. He was totally work-driven and obsessive about the quality of his artistic output. Ed Wood, on the other hand, was a real nobody at the age of 30 (“Orson Welles was only 26 when he made *Citizen Kane*. I’m already 30”). He is depicted as a freak, surrounded by misfits and drug addicts,





as his girlfriend Dolores says, and instead of shooting countless takes on his films, as Chaplin did, he would be content with just one, despite the fact that a second cover shot is always advisable when making non-digital movies. In Burton's film he states: "All I want to do is tell stories. The things that I find interesting". Therefore, it was not the *what*, but the *how* that distinguished these two directors. Despite being perpetually rejected as an artist, Ed Wood never gave up, pursuing his dream of being an independent producer, a true entrepreneur by today's standards. In contrast to the narrative strategy on *Chaplin*, Ed Wood's biopic jumps straight to his Hollywood career – or his real lack thereof –, despite the fact that in real life Edward D. Wood Jr. was already by that point a decorated war hero, had ingeniously made an incomplete 30-minute film prior to *Glen and Glenda* and became a member of the Screen Actors' Guild in 1951. These facts were probably considered too serious to merit recounting in Burton's satirical opus.

Nevertheless, both men were highly flawed in real life. Chaplin was a womanizer who liked young girls. Were it not for the fact that he actually, and voluntarily, married them, he might have been convicted of statutory rape. Ed Wood liked to dress in women's clothes, although he was not gay. In the fifties, a very puritanical era in the history of the United States, this was considered downright immoral. He also cast real transvestites in *Glen or Glenda* (1952), a film which is a very personal account of his own quirk. However, both men are depicted as being very honest about their own peculiarities and flaws. Chaplin is shown as having married his first wife because he thought he had gotten her pregnant and wanted to do "the right thing" (as it turns out, he was being fooled by her). Ed Wood confesses his transvestism to his second wife, Kathy, before their marriage, because he does not want to keep anything from her. They are their own men and quite unconstrained. They behave as most other people would not under the same circumstances. Although they are flawed, they excel in their humanity, thus rising above mere mortals. Besides, both celebrities were men of conviction.

In Chaplin's case his convictions were ideological. He did not behave cautiously, as a foreigner should do. Rather, he made fun of Immigration officers in his film *The Immigrant* (1917); satirized Fordism in *Modern Times* (1936); poked fun at Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940) in a period of WWII when the USA was still officially neutral; made a professed enemy of J. Edgar Hoover, the future director of the FBI; defended the Jewish cause, although he was not a Jew himself, and never became an American citizen. In Attenborough's film he is depicted as never being afraid of saying what he thought, no matter what the consequences might be. He knew he was treading on dangerous ground but decided not to take heed: "At least, I'll go out saying something I believe in". He is portrayed as being ashamed of his golden status as a film star and as being attuned with the misfortunate to whose ranks he once belonged: "I've done nothing. Shame on me." For all the above reasons he was forbidden to re-enter the United States. His honesty, social conscience and

bravery were his tragic errors in Greek tragedy fashion and the result was his *catastrophic* exile in Vevey, Switzerland. Ed Wood is depicted by Burton as an innocent and childish adult, very loyal to his friends, and, although idiotic, a well-meaning individual. He is not a man of ideas; he simply has a big heart. Despite usually being broke, the film conveys the idea that he would give away all his money to pay for Lugosi's drug rehabilitation in a specialized clinic. Although he made artistic compromises in order to obtain financing for his films (including giving the lead role to another woman rather than to his girlfriend at the time), he is not portrayed as being shamelessly exploitative of Lugosi. Actually, he behaves like a son to him, helping him try to shake his drug addiction; shooting some final footage with him just to make Lugosi think he was taking part in another film; and keeping his much cherished little dogs after his death. Too much heart and too little brains are his tragic error, for which he was punished with lack of financial and artistic success.

As aliens, in the sociological and metaphorical sense, both Chaplin and Ed Wood were ostracized and, consequently, lived a lonely life, either in the midst of fame (the former) or oblivion (the latter). Chaplin was loved by audiences everywhere, but also experienced a lot of resentment from Americans (District Attorney in a courtroom scene: "This cheap cockney cad. This little tramp.") and envy from the British (Drunkard in pub: "Charlie fucking Chaplin!"). He felt stateless – a citizen of the (movie) world, but a man without a country. For not wanting to compromise his principles, he found he had compromised his home instead ("I knew then I had no home"). The scene in which Chaplin arrives in England on holidays and is received in apotheosis at the train station reverberates with sheer melancholy. Chaplin steps out of the train, towards a crowd of fans, but the soundtrack has no ambient sound, except for the sentimental music of John Barry's score. The pathetic nature of Ed Wood is never embellished in Burton's film, quite the opposite. Johnny Depp's acting is usually exaggerated, between the comic and the tragic, and Dolores, Wood's first girlfriend, shouts out the truth that none of the other misfits, including Wood himself, seem to realize: "You people are insane! You're wasting your lives making shit! These movies are terrible!" Ignorance is bliss, but all the ignorance in the world cannot prevent the fictional character Wood from writing Béla Lugósi the most poignant speech of the entire film, and one that resonates not only with Lugósi's life but Wood's as well: "Home? I have no home. Hunted. Despised. Living like an animal. The jungle is my home. But I shall show the world I can be its master [...]".

## 6. The essence of the aura or the aura of the essence

Not only is the aura of these two celebrities transformed into something mythical by a reworking of their professional status and their human qualities and faults (or rather faults turned into qualities), but this is done through the mythical nature of cinema itself. Both films are very explicit about the filmmaking





practices of their directors, showing more than is usually recommended to avoid giving away the secrets of the activity. In classical Hollywood metacinema suggestion usually trumps revelation. The directors of both films negotiate this paradox in that they manage to be faithful to the spirit of classical Hollywood (the presence of Béla Lugósi in *Ed Wood* helps to convey this sense), without avoiding that for which they were most famous (or not): their actual filmmaking. Thus, both films reveal as much as they hide. They are very traditional in this respect.

Attenborough's and Burton's strategy of stressing the aura of cinema itself catapults Chaplin and Ed Wood to new legendary heights, in that they are presented as excelling at being either very good or very bad. In *Chaplin*, the eponymous character is allegedly in awe of the "flickers", when he catches a glimpse of them in a nickelodeon. A little later, when learning his trade, Chaplin holds on to a discarded piece of film left on the cutting room floor, saying "Nothing quite like it, the feeling of film". Actually the photogrammes he is looking at here were his first, inadvertent, appearance in the movies.<sup>10</sup> Above all, Chaplin does not want The Tramp to speak for fear of ruining "the magic". In *Ed Wood* it is the presence of a fictional Orson Welles who, sitting in a bar like an unknown individual, gives advice to a young follower, thus fulfilling not only Ed Wood's secret dream but also, possibly, every film student's fantasy. Welles, after all, is Wood's exact opposite: a sacred figure in the gallery of American cinematic art, the most mythic of all star directors. Another thing in common between Chaplin and Ed Wood is their professional self-doubts. In Chaplin's case these were brought about by perfectionism: "It's when you feel you're getting really close but you can't make it the rest of the way. You're not good enough, you're not complete enough. Despite all your fantasies, you're second rate". In *Ed Wood*'s case they were a glimpse of a logical outcome: "I'm just scared that it's not gonna get any better than this". Despite their differences, both men were passionate about films.

Christopher Ames observes that "Hollywood-on-Hollywood movies [of which these Hollywood biopics are an intrinsic part] cannot truly take us behind the cameras, behind the screen, or behind the myth" (1997, 13). I contend that they do not really want to. Unlike written biographies, film biopics are limited by the duration of the film during projection, by the desire of the viewers to be entertained, and by the audience's secret wish to partake of their favourite medium. These expectations have to be met and in *Chaplin* and *Ed Wood* they are, without compromising the artistic quality of the result. These two films manage to portray, from beginning to end, the *essence* of the charismatic personalities they depict, revealing the most important facts (along with some occasional lies, especially in the case of Burton's film) about their subjects' existence and filmmaking practices. In other words, they both demythicize the men and the medium they worked for, only to re-mythicize the directors and cinema in a new splendour. Ultimately, the viewers of Hollywood films do not appreciate reality in movies; it is fantasy they

wish for. As mentioned by a character in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): "When the legend becomes fact, *print* the legend".<sup>11</sup>

This is why both films are built into a climax, a visually and emotionally memorable closing sequence. In *Ed Wood*, after a montage sequence worthy of the making of a masterpiece, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* premieres for a distinguished adult audience – something very unlikely to happen in the sci-fi genre in the fifties, and very inaccurate in strictly biographical terms. Ed Wood, seated in a box at the theatre, lighted by the beam of the house projector, proudly claims: "This is the one I'll be remembered for". He actually was, although in the worst possible manner.<sup>12</sup> The utopian nature of this last scene is in keeping with the tone of the entire film and its satirical nature, but Wood's remark constitutes a true fact. In *Chaplin*, the story ends on a montage sequence of Chaplin's film clips put together for the Academy Awards Ceremony of 1972, when the actor-writer-producer-director received a special Oscar for his career. Chaplin awaits onstage, in the dark, silently crying over the sounds of the audience adoringly laughing *with* his films, thus proving his own previous judgement to be completely accurate: "At the end of the day, you're not judged by what you didn't do but by what you did. If anything, I made them laugh". This is followed by stock footage of The Tramp walking away with his back to the screen, next there is an iris effect, and the inevitable concluding title: THE END. For Chaplin that night of acclaim was not the end, just a stage in a life-long recognition process. For Ed Wood, the end of his cinematic career was actually a new beginning, the birth of a cult he was denied while working.

## End Notes

1 It would also have been problematic to depict celebrities who were still alive, since they probably would not like to lend themselves to an unsympathetic portrayal (Barris 1978, 141).

2 Anderson calls this sub-paradigm "Merton of the Movies" because of the eponymous film directed by James Cruze (1924), of which there would be a later version (in 1947). *Merton of the Movies* served as a model, with occasional variations, for all the tales of people arriving from the deep provinces with nothing but dreams and a hope of "making it" in Hollywood.

3 Edgar Morin, in his very emotionally biased study of the Hollywood star, has an altogether different opinion (1972).

4 *The Buster Keaton Story* (1957, Sidney Sheldon, USA).

5 Patterns of female spectatorship and women's fascination with female stars have been well documented, namely by Jackie Stacey (1994, 138-159).

6 For instance, in "Interview with Orson Welles (II) (1958)", he says it to André Bazin, Charles Bitsch and Jean Domarchi (Estrin 2002, 51).

7 This and all other quotations of dialogue are taken from the original English subtitles of the DVD versions consulted for this article.

8 In all fairness, Dennis Bingham, focusing solely on



biopics, does see it that way and dedicates a chapter of his book *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* to it (2010, 146-168).  
9 It is struck by a lightning bolt.

10 This situation of entering the frame inadvertently was used for comic effect in *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914, directed by Henry Lehrman, produced for the Keystone Film Company).

11 My emphasis. In film stock film strips are also printed.

12 The film was considered the turkey of all "Turkeys," the worst film ever made.

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