LITR 2813: Introduction to Film  
Research Paper

Overview
Your assignment is to choose a non-documentary biographical film—a biopic (one that focuses on and dramatizes the life of a particular real person, not just an historical event); watch it carefully (take notes); research the life of the film’s subject, the historical context of the subject’s life, and critical reviews of the film; and write an essay that analyzes the film in light of that research. Your essay must include properly cited references to this material (including quotations), which you will use to support your claims and analysis.

Due date: Friday, March 28, both a hardcopy (in class) and on Turnitin.com

Requirements
Paper length: 1400+ words: to be eligible for a passing grade, your essay must be at least 1400 words.
Formatting: Your essay must be formatted (including in-text citations and a properly formatted Works Cited page) in MLA style. Papers that don’t will be penalized 10%.
References: This is a research paper, and you are required to draw on outside research in your analysis. Your essay must include the minimum following in-text references (that is, properly cited quotations or paraphrases from the following)—adding up to 5:
1. One book (biographies are best, but I will accept a reference book)
2. One article (magazine or journal)
3. One published critical review (newspaper or magazine is preferable, but online is acceptable as long as the review is associated with a publication or a professional critic; in other words, IMDB member reviews do not qualify as published critical reviews, nor do personal blogs)
4. Two other references (for a total, including the three above, of 5); one good source of information might be the extras that accompany many DVDs
5. You may NOT use/reference Wikipedia in your essay (or other user-generated content websites like Ask.com and Yahoo), though you may find it useful to lead you to acceptable primary sources.

Research Question: Is this film a successful biography?

At the heart of this essay, I want you to consider how successful the film is as a biography—not just in your opinion, but in the opinion of the critics as well. This is not a simple question, however, as the word “successful” can have different meanings, and in answering it, you will need a clear sense of how you define “successful” in this context. What follows are several questions you might want to consider in researching and shaping your analysis, but when composing your essay, be careful not to lose focus or sacrifice depth by covering many subjects inadequately. Depth in your essay (how thoughtful, how “deep” your analysis is of those things you focus on) will be more important than breadth (how much ground you cover). Here are some questions to consider:

- How well does the film represent the subject’s life? How accurate is it? Does it “capture” the essence of the person or the public persona of that person?
- How well does the film represent the context of the subject’s life (e.g., time period, culture, important historical events the subject may have played a role in)?
- What choices (events, casting, mise-en-scene, lighting, etc.) does the director make? What are the benefits and drawbacks of those decisions?
- Is the film entertaining? If so, in what specific ways? If not, why not? Is this an important dimension to the film’s success as a biography? (When answering these questions, you might want to think about the function(s) of biography)
- What was the critical reception of the film? Are the critics generally in agreement, or do they differ on significant points? Do you agree with some/all/any?
- If the filmmaker’s story deviates from reality, why (in your opinion or those of the critics) does s/he do so? What is gained? What is lost?

**Is this film a successful biography?** Your thesis should include an explicit response to this question (e.g., “A Beautiful Mind is a successful biography”). I highly recommend, as a way of focusing your discussion, that you put this thesis statement in your introductory paragraph.

Your thesis (your argument) will likely be based on a consideration of several elements: historical accuracy, critical reception, and film quality (an assessment of which will take into account all the elements of film that you have been learning about). Your essay, then, will be your focused, structured consideration of the different reasons why your thesis is to be accepted or believed.

Each claim that you make (e.g., “One reason why this film is successful is because the cinematography evokes precisely the tense environment in which the subject lived most of his life”) must be supported by examples (like an analysis of elements of the cinematography) and/or supporting evidence (like a quote from a critic who comments on the artistry or accuracy of the cinematography). Do NOT make unsupported claims.

**Resources**

**Looking at Movies:** On page 145 is a list of several recent biopics you might consider writing about. There are, of course, many others, and you can find lists of them online.

**Hinkle Library:** Plan to use the library. You cannot do all of your research on the Web alone. Start early, and ask the librarians if you need help doing your research—that’s why they are there!

**Herrick Memorial Library:** You have borrowing privileges at AU’s libraries, so search for resources in their catalogs as well.

**The Writing Center (SDC 237):** Free tutoring in writing! Tutors will help you at any stage of the writing process. Call or sign up for an appointment, or just drop in.

**Writing About Movies:** This is the thin booklet that was bundled with your text, and it offers useful suggestions for writing about film.

**MLA guide:** Any composition handbook will help you format your essay, and there are great MLA format guides online (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01).

**Me:** I’m in PHS 103. My office hour and location are posted on the course syllabus and Blackboard, and you can also make an appointment. I can help you at any stage of this assignment—at the research stage, the thesis stage, the outline stage, or the draft stage. Again, plan ahead—don’t wait until late Thursday morning the day before the paper is due to try to meet with me, as I can’t guarantee that I’ll be available on such short notice.