*The Lady*. Dir. Luc Besson. Perf. Michelle Yeoh, David Thewlis, Jonathan Raggett. EuropaCorp / Left Bank Pictures, 2011. Film.

As a subject for a biopic, the life of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is surely among the most worthwhile, making a refreshing change from the monarchs and right-wing ideologues of other recent offerings. The daughter of the anti-imperialist revolutionary, Aung San, who led Burma's light for independence from the British in 1947, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma from Britain in 1988. Arriving amidst the brutal repression of student protests and popular demonstrations, she quickly came to symbolize the democratic movement against the military regime which had ruled the country since the 1960s. In 1989, following the popular success of the political party that had formed under her, Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, a condition in which she would remain for fifteen of the next twenty-one years. Despite her party winning 82% of the elections in 1990 and her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, her incarceration continued and she was denied access to her family even when her husband, Oxford academic Michael Aris, was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer in 1997. When Aris was refused a visiting visa, the couple resisted the government's efforts to tempt Suu Kyi out of Burma and he died in 1999, having not seen her since Christmas 1995. The military remains in power to this day, although Suu Kyi was eventually released in November 2010.

Cue Luc Besson's slick Hollywood-style dramatization of these events. Despite starring Michelle Yeoh as Suu Kyi and David Thewlis as Aris, the film is full of tired stereotypes, awkward clichés and patronizing cinematic strategies. Of course, Besson is an experienced filmmaker working with quality actors and, for the most part, these stereotypes and strategies are effective enough to deliver an assured if unremarkable film. Yeoh's performance of Suu Kyi is excellent, at times uncanny, and Thewlis provides capable support when not slipping into caricature of a bumbling Oxford scholar. Moreover, given the half- century covered in the film and that its plot requires running two parallel narratives alongside one another - Suu Kyi's in Burma and Aris' in England - *The Lady* in fact holds together very well. Nevertheless, for anyone with even a passing familiarity with the topic and this tiresome mode of representation, the film has little to offer.

This is Besson's second attempt at historical biopic, his first being the considerably more action-oriented *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999). While *The Lady* offers considerably less opportunity for battle scenes, elements of the trademark visual style present in Besson's films since *Nikita* (1990) and *The Professional* (1994) are nonetheless in evidence. The cutesy opening sequence, for instance, consists of Suu Kyi's father telling his little girl "the story of how we became poor" (curiously without reference to British imperialism) before waving goodbye to her in slow motion. This then prefaces the depiction of his assassination, complete with more slow motion, quickly edited close-ups of sweaty, snarling gunmen, machine-gun fire and dignified death, all set to a score of contrapuntal pan-pipe music. Furthermore, as in much of Besson's other work, with the exception of Suu Kyi and her husband, the rest of the characters are also typically two-dimensional, from earnest pro-democracy activists to the evil General, his faceless ministers and their obedient henchmen (the scene in which Suu Kyi arrives at the airport in 1988, for instance, only to be shadowed by a host of glowering goons, is one of many which verges on the ridiculous).

Never mind that such intensely standardized modes of storytelling, leavened with moments of aestheticized violence and tasteless slow-motion, are entirely inappropriate for conveying the realities of political struggle. That does not matter here, the filmmakers would argue, since this is ultimately a love story in which politics provides only the context. Indeed, criticizing a biopic for focusing on individuals instead of their socio-political context may appear unfair. Yet the danger that the representation of the former will result in the misrepresentation of the latter is precisely the trap into which *The Lady* falls. Thus, Suu Kyi is frequently depicted as some sort of magical savior, facing down the guns of the oppressors, while Burma's pro-democracy activists are rarely credited with an intelligence of their own. 'That was incredible, huh?!' exclaims one of her team after a rally, only to be reminded by the wise Western scholar that "a quarter of a century of brutal oppression will not be undone in one day." Unfortunately this kind of condescension is never far away. Combined with the sentimental score of Besson's regular composer, Eric Serra, who works hard to ensure we are never in doubt as to how or what we should be feeling or thinking at any given moment, *The Lady* renders even Aung Sung Suu Kyi's inspirational story a largely tedious one.

Steve Presence
University of the West of England