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**HIJACKING FACTUALITY**  
**AN ATTEMPT AT MAPPING OUT THE MOCKUMENTARY**

**BY**  
**ERIC SCHOCKMEL**

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**Abstract**

During the last few decades, a form of filmmaking has appeared and been developed, which unites a heterogenous collection of works under what has become the umbrella term of 'mockumentary'. What this portmanteau of 'mocking' and 'documentary' designates is not clear. It implies a confusion or juxtaposition of fact and fiction, but why can certain films be deemed mockumentary while others can not, yet all belong to an immensely broad spectrum that spans extremes, from drama documentary to reality TV?

The present dissertation sets out to examine the discourses of mockumentaries, reveal the boundaries of this discipline and draw personal conclusions in relation to analysed examples. In order to

properly establish a context for analysis, this text starts off with a historical approach in chapters one and two, drawing out the evolution of documentary film and its surrounding media landscape. The observed changes will enable me to argue that mockumentaries are a form of communication that exists out of fairly recent developments and are possible only in such a context. Chapters three and four will define the typical documentary and mockumentary discourses and compare them to a certain extent.

After analysing certain case studies in chapter five, the conclusion will argue how Mockumentaries can be seen more as a critical discourse than a genre. Furthermore I will contend that mockumentaries, as a form of parody of the documentary genre, can be interpreted as symptoms of how deeply internalized the latter's conventions really are by audiences.

## **Introduction**

The last two decades have seen an immense increase in film productions which either merge fact and fiction, depict drama in a naturalistic documentary look, or form any hybrid form within that spectrum. Classic mockumentaries such as *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) or *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) have made their way into the general pop-cultural perception. And although some antecedents exist throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is only recently that this phenomenon has taken the magnitude of a potentially autonomous discourse in film. Works such as the US television series *K Street* (2003), which features actors alongside actual political consultants and pundits to depict a realistic glimpse into the Washington DC lobbying process, or Werner Herzog's *Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), which uses actual NASA space shuttle footage combined with an imaginary narrative to tell a tale of fantasy science fiction, are much too ambiguous in their nature to be classified easily.

With this dissertation I set out to clarify the issue somewhat. It is the stated objective of this research to try and determine the boundaries of these hybrid forms, located between documentary and

regular drama. The impact and validity of their respective discourses will be a focus of my work, whether they constitute a mere side-product of broader changes in broadcasting and cinema, whether they create a critical discourse about documentaries and drama or if they constitute an entirely new and valid genre. But most importantly the goal is to find out what the specificities of these productions are in terms of film theory. This puts me in a challenging position.

Since this phenomenon is relatively new in the history of film and continues to develop and mutate, not much research has been made into this precise issue. Publications about documentary films abound on the other hand, as do analyses of drama-based film. I found only one text about mockumentaries proper, which is the very thorough and consistent analysis by Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, entitled *Faking It: Mock documentary and the subversion of factuality* (Roscoe & Hight 2001). The book manages very well to outline the nature of the phenomenon in great detail. The challenge for me is to find a balance between using valid information from this and other more diversified sources, and injecting them with my personal approach, thus trying to go further. Roscoe and Hight manage to denominate and define different categories of mock-documentary films and their position vis-à-vis audience and creator, mainly through sporadic references. Their approach though starts out mainly from the point of view of the documentary proper and evolves towards evaluating mock-documentaries. I will build upon their findings by assimilating and explaining their thoughts, and then, via case studies, try and establish the status of these movies in terms of drama theory, as opposed to the documentary point of view.

In the first two chapters, I shall examine the historical background of documentary film production and parallel developments of the broader media landscape. This will provide an instructive context

for analyzing the sources and the impact of our stated field of study. The third chapter takes an in-depth look at the approaches within documentary filmmaking, to see what the actual foundation of mockumentaries are. This chapter, as well as the following one, draws persistently on Roscoe and Hight's research. The fourth chapter addresses the core issue of this text, namely the analysis of mockumentary discourses and corresponding examples. Concluding the fourth chapter with an interim conclusion of theoretical findings, the argument continues with the treatment of the mentioned case studies throughout chapter five. Divided into three parts, this chapter explores very different types within the mockumentary boundaries and bridges their relation to classical narrative. This practical questioning will then provide us with the necessary material to draw a definitive conclusion in chapter six.

## 1 | Brief history of the documentary

At first glance, current productions of mockumentaries and other movies that merge facts with fiction seem to result from an appropriation of the objective, documentary look and feel by the creators of traditional drama, as a new way of conveying a narrative. This is definitely more often the case than, say, a documentarist who would choose to deliberately infuse fictive elements into his work, for purposes of forgery. There are rare occurrences of this practice, but the reason why the majority of mockumentaries function the other way round, stems from the danger of immediate professional disgrace for the documentarist if revealed only by a third party. This particular fear, in turn, has its roots in the contemporary public perception of what a documentary in fact is, and what it supposedly represents.

Several scandals around this very issue occurred in the UK a few years ago, notably around a documentary entitled *The Connection*

(1996), about the transatlantic drug trade (Winston 2006, p.10). In these cases, parts of the public, and foremost the broadcasting regulation organ ITC, revolted against the alleged reenactments of observed facts, without them clearly being labelled as such, and claiming that they had thus misguided the public. One scene which caused notable controversy depicted a 'drug mule', a person ingesting containers of illegal drugs for the purpose of smuggling, on a flight from South America to Europe. Although this is known to be common practice in the trade, it was later revealed that the scene had been reenacted, that the mule wasn't a real smuggler, and that the flight included a connection stopover and wasn't a direct flight as contended.

In the case of *The Connection*, the broadcaster was subsequently fined without any damage to any member of the audience being proven (Winston 2006, p.13). Technically, this was a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, specifically the clause about Freedom of Speech, but without going into the legal and regulatory details of these cases, it is interesting though to point out that these proceedings clearly mirror the wider audience's perception that anything labelled 'documentary' must at all costs be an impartial and objective representation of reality, in a way that journalism ideally would.

A brief history of documentary practice will help us to expose this confusion, more clearly define our area of study, and at the same time give valuable tools to situate mockumentaries in the broader context of cinematographic creation.

### 1.1. | Beginnings

The invention of the film camera first saw the production of images that could be deemed documentary, in the sense that they were mere observation of events, and arranged in a comprehensive way (the Lumière Brothers' footage of *Workers leaving the Lumière factory*, *Bathing in the sea*, Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* series and John Grierson's pioneering works). The arrangement factor is essential in our train of thought. Because the film equipment at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century way heavy, bulky and, above all, noisy, it was almost impossible to film entire 'reportages' on-location, without proper lighting or synchronised sound. At least parts of these films had to be restaged, and the sound re-recorded (Winston 2006, p.136).



Figure 1: Still from 'Workers leaving the Lumière Factory'



Figure 2: Still from 'Nanook of the North'

Out of these technological shortcomings resulted a fundamental documentarists' approach, as most notably in Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* ('Cinema of truth') case, that, out of the naked-eye observations, a higher and concealed truth or lesson be learned, through the editing of the material into a comprehensive *exposé* of the facts. On one hand, this certainly produced some rather naïve attempts to recreate the real, as in some instances of anthropological cinema, notably Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), where Inuits, regardless of their contemporary habits, were made to restage the lifestyle of their ancestors, for the sake of the film (Winston 2006, p.20). On the other hand, it evolved into the presumption that documentary filmmakers could, out of observations of the real, synthesize poetic views and narratives. The facts could be summed up through artistic freedom,

without being relegated to the realm of fiction. In the words of Brian Winston (2006, p.20):

Thus documentary encompassed the use of images of the real world for the purposes of personal expression. It allowed for poetic image-making, essays, polemics; and, at the level of production, it clearly permitted the reconstruction of prior witnessed events, commentary, non-naturalistic dubbed sound, editing to produce a point of view and all manner of interventions and manipulations. Documentary was not journalism; rather it claimed all the artistic licence of a fiction with the only constraints being that its images were not of actors and its stories were not the products of unfettered imagining.

## 1.2. | Evolution

Then, by the end of the Second World War, documentary film came to be clearly associated with the newsreel and evolved towards the format of television broadcast and its audiences (Winston 2006, p.21). Still, economic factors acted as incentives for studio-produced films, with post-production sound. Interviewees would come onto the set, and editing would combine them with independently shot imagery of locations. Documentary further nudged towards journalistic practice at the beginning of the 1960's. Handheld lightweight cameras with 16mm film and live sound-recording on location gave birth to the Direct Cinema style. This term came to designate the practice of 'fly-on-the-wall' filmmaking, an expression which its originators came to loathe (Wikipedia.org, *Direct Cinema*). It originates from the French-Canadian 'Cinema Direct', a denomination used by filmmakers such as Michel Brault. It allowed a purely observational stance towards subjects, thus merging with the 'journalistic ethic of non-intervention' (Winston 2006, p.22). Subsequent technological advances, via analog tape and easy

portability, reinforced this and enabled documentarists to further lay claim on the real, through limited mediation (Winston 2006, p.22).



Figure 3: Typical Newsreel of the 1930s - 1940s

That, of course was an illusion, since editing begins at the moment where the camera is switched on, and the subjective point of view is being determined by the choice of the shot. Some filmmakers realized that nobody can claim absolute objectivity, so it was around the same time that another current of documentary filmmaking appeared, one which also found its defining characteristics in the new equipment and which is largely being confused and assimilated with Direct Cinema today (Winston 2006, p.22). This variation was to be called *Cinema Vérité*, meaning truth-cinema, and consisting of the directors and crews actively engaging with the filmed action, thus revealing this presence to

the audience in the process (Winston 2006, p.220). It lays no claim on any pure objectivity, as Direct Cinema does. Instead, by providing the spectator with a benchmark on the depicted realism, the latter is able to evaluate himself to what degree the documentary seems truthful.

The issue around the gap between Direct Cinema and Cinéma-Vérité illustrates up to what point the actual veracity of a documentary was being debated among filmmakers. Contrary to popular perception, absolute objectivity was felt to be correlated best with literary naturalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In theatre, as in literature, naturalistic works, such as Zola's, tried to recreate an illusion of reality, unmediated and truthful, with the reader or spectator being purely observational. This marked the creation of the Fourth Wall concept, the transparent window upon the stage where life unfolds, the spectator peeping into this world from outside, unnoticed. This concept, which will prove invaluable in our analysis of the mockumentary, has its origins in the creation and prenotation of fiction, but it is easy to understand why Direct Cinema purists might have believed it to be possible to emulate this neutral and observational gaze within the documentary.

Traditional journalism has upheld this claim of observational objectivity, but we will see shortly how the New Journalism of the 1960s challenged this view, and created an enabler for the mockumentary.

### **1.3. | Present**

Within the setting of broadcast television, the two opposed currents of Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité have been increasingly impurified and, ultimately, fused with each other, resulting in current practices such as Reality TV and Soap Operas. Indeed, by the 1990's,

the event has become more important than the actual act of filming (Winston 2006, p.55) and the perspective of the 'auteur'. Increased financial pressure in the private broadcasting sector has played a major role in the fact that a large part of factual programming now puts less focus on the process of filmmaking, while still claiming strict reliability towards 'the truth' and 'the real'.

Cinema and film, however, have seen a new wave of documentary production during the last two decades. This is due to several factors. First of all, video tape equipment, made available to the general public at low prices since the early 1980s, has started a process of familiarization of the medium by its users. Digital technology has considerably amplified this trend. At the same time, VHS and later DVD, have rendered documentary production more financially viable. Since their production costs are now relatively low, they can be profitable even with limited or no theatrical release (Wikipedia.org, *Documentary Film*). The acceptance and legibility of the genre by the audience have been greatly enhanced.

In the next chapter we will explore additional factors that have brought about change in the broadcasting culture, which eventually paved the way for mockumentaries to become a valid cinematographic discourse. Indeed, contemporary documentary finds itself in a challenging situation, previously unwitnessed. Its coexistence with the digital world, allowing mass-access to the tools (for video activism for instance), as well as opportunities for manipulations, prompt a reevaluation of the status of documentary and factual visuals. In an age where fiction film, through special effects, starts to rival the verisimilitude of reality, the documentary in particular is assigned a new role. Although the subject of this text isn't the documentary proper, we cannot neglect its importance. A helpful outlook on this new paradigm is provided by Brian Winston (2006, p.167) as he states:



Digital potential could be quite liberating for the realist image because it could free it of a burden it could never carry, that the image “could not lie”.

Documentarists would finally be left with the creative treatment of reality unfettered by the burdens laid on them by the undigitalised realist image.

## 2 | The media landscape

### 2.1. | New Journalism & Gonzo Journalism

At around the same time of the appearance of *Cinema Vérité*, a current in literature emerged, which used this approach of including the author in the story. During the 1960's and 1970's, several authors, which primarily started out as journalists, introduced narrative techniques previously known only to fiction, in order to tell their stories. People like Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote published writing which would take their origin in current events, except that they largely abandoned journalistic rigour, to allow for more intuitive narratives. These techniques would include: Scenes rather than linear accounts of events; full dialogues, including their own instead of quotes and statements; often a third-person perspective; and a pronounced focus on everyday details, to include a certain naturalism and portray characters within their social setting (Wikipedia.org, *New Journalism*). In this respect, New Journalism can be seen as an extension and elaboration of the much older genre of Fiction, the literary practice of weaving together factual historic events through fictional plotlines. New Journalism acts as a literary parallel to the reflexive documentary in film and thus is relevant to the development of mockumentaries. Despite the artistic liberties that the authors claim in their writings, they cannot be labeled as fictitious, since they are still rooted within observational facts.

One author who went further though, and can sincerely be considered a mockumentarist in literature is the late Hunter S. Thompson. His writing style, which became widely known under the term 'gonzo journalism' profoundly challenged existing conventions by deliberately using, to certain degrees, his proper journalistic assignments (such as the covering of the 1970 Kentucky Derby or, more famously, his 1971 trip to Las Vegas rendered in the novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) and infuse them with fictive elements, characters and even drug-induced hallucinations (Thompson 1979, p.29 & 1993). The first proper gonzo piece, which includes himself as the protagonist, a practice equivalent to the Interactive Documentary (chapter three), entitled *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, largely exaggerated the facts in order to make a personal point (in this case the depravity of excessive alcohol consumption among spectators of the event), without even covering the event itself. Throughout the following years Thompson's narratives progressively distanced themselves from observed facts and became increasingly liberated from journalistic constraints while at the same time preserving the format of reporting. His guerilla-style narratives always served a very specific point: to synthesize an opinion or point of view that was thoroughly genuine in nature, whether it be aesthetic or political. As such, Thompson embraced and often quoted a paradigm coined by William Faulkner which is the idea that "the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism".

The final and utter equivalent to mockumentary in Thompson's gonzo writing is probably the piece *Fear and Loathing in Elko*. Published in the volume of collected writings *Kingdom of Fear*, the piece reads as a factual account, faithful to journalistic standards before slowly deteriorating and exposing itself to the reader as utter fiction. The story involves Judge Clarence Thomas of the United States Supreme Court in a narrative around a booze-fuelled rampage around the desert, peaking

in the abuse of dangerous firearms and eventually resulting in a murder, supposedly committed by Judge Thomas himself, over a drug-related dispute (Thompson 2003, p.285). As we will see later on, the conventions applying to mockumentaries vis-à-vis documentaries almost identically fit this piece of gonzo journalism in relation to regular reporting. As stated above, the journalistic codes are always savagely hijacked in Thompson's writing, in order to serve the purpose of making a point, most often his exposing of political figures which he perceives to be corrupt ('fatbacks'), militaristic ('war-mongers') or otherwise despicable.

## 2.2. | Mediatic Perceptions and Transitions

Since the early 1990's, several changes in media perception and accessibility have facilitated the rise of hybrid film genres, and permitted documentaries to expand their expressional means.

When on January 17<sup>th</sup> 1991 the army of the United States, together with coalition partners, invaded Kuwait to repel Iraqi troops from the country, in what was codenamed Operation Desert Storm, the whole world was watching as events unfolded, in front of their TV screens. In America, audiences were following the start of the war in prime-time. But the coverage was in no way like the ones of previous wars or conflicts. The lessons of Vietnam were learned by the government's PR people and they went to great lengths to avoid the potential public opinion disaster which might have accompanied traditional war-time reporting. Through meticulous censorship, the footage made available to the press lacked all the grim details inherent in combat. Missile-mounted cameras, grainy infrared shots and abstract views of anti-air defense in Baghdad were looped on western and worldwide screens, interwoven with experts, consultants and official

Pentagon spokespersons. An impression was to be given of clean, surgical attacks, avoiding any mention of potential civil casualties, or 'collateral damage' as it has come to be known ever since.



**Figure 4: CNN footage of 1991 Baghdad Bombing**

All of this is important because this new way of covering war, efficiently tested on a small scale two years earlier in Panama, was instantly picked up by CNN and effectively became current practice among news outlets, hungry for any available coverage from the conflict zone, within a short period of time. Consequently, public perception gradually accepted the fact that footage was passed off as news, footage which had not been recorded by journalists with state of the art cameras, but by low-quality wireless footage, which was being released through a third party, the government. Eventually, the broadcasts would include plain amateur videos, recorded on cheap cameras by bystanders, often from impractical or deeply subjective points of views. Of course this had been done before, as the famous sequence of the

John F. Kennedy assassination, filmed by Abraham Zapruder, has shown. At that moment, no press coverage was available at all because that particular stretch of road with its limited crowd was deemed to be of no journalistic interest (Wikipedia.org, *Zapruder Film*). But the surge in privately-owned video equipment throughout the early 1990's made these occurrences much more frequent.



**Figure 5: Still from the Zapruder film of the Kennedy Assassination**

In addition, thanks to Moore's Law (Wikipedia.org, *Moore's Law*), the cost of digital technology has plummeted massively throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus swarming news outlets with availability of amateur footage and CCTV recordings. Obviously, images like the first cellphone pictures of passengers being evacuated through tunnels from the bombed underground carriages on 7/7 immediately springs to mind, pictures which made it onto television almost in real time (Wikipedia.org, *7/7 Media Response*).



Figure 6: 7/7 survivor's phonecam picture

The film industry made a partial shift towards the digital medium as well, enabling independent production companies to create with cost-effective means. Dogme 95, which we will mention later in this text, was an attempt at installing the precedent of getting funding for feature films shot on digital tape, a privilege that had been exclusive to film.

The reason why these changes are so important for the development of my argument is being summed up in a series of articles by Jean Baudrillard, collectively titled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. His interpretation of events concludes that this particular war, in public perception, was so remote from what the actual experience of war is like, that the constant display of maps, radar graphics and 'smart bomb' imagery masqueraded an occurring atrocity behind a screen of informative showcasing, subsequently to be accepted as the true events constituting this particular conflict (Wikipedia.org, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*). This example elaborates on his concept of 'Simulacrum'

(Wikipedia.org, *Simulacrum*), the representation, or a copy, of an event which in itself is merely a copy, thus losing any grounding in reality and severing the link between the representation and the represented. The military action, perpetrated almost unilaterally by a high-tech superpower, mostly from the air, commanded by officers in far-off command centers, in front of videoscreens and not on the battlefield, against an opponent trying to fight a traditional ground war, was in itself already detached from reality in a sense (Wikipedia.org, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*). In addition, the view of the public operated on a level which was even further alienated: the war's fragmented and heavily filtered representation and propaganda.

This concept of 'Simulacrum' will be extremely useful in my later exposition on mockumentaries and hybrid fact/fiction film genres. As we will see more in detail later on, through examples, the usage of imagery without a clearly discernable message is entirely dependent on the process of editing and superimposed comment. As with the abstract greenish nightvision depictions of explosions in central Baghdad in 1991, which could very well have originated in a videogame, much footage of this kind made its way into accredited journalistic sources and started to become a valid form of narrative vector. This phenomenon at least partly explains, in my opinion, the gradual acceptance and integration of alternative media sources into the general visual vocabulary deemed factual.

The latter argument mainly focuses on the established media and their willingness to use and re-use new types of visual material as well as indirectly related archival material, where only years earlier they would provide merely vocal comment on events. As several generations of audiences have been exposed to this development, there is clearly the potential for both approval and criticism. But above all it has created new venues and tools for fiction to be conveyed, where it had

previously been applied exclusively to summon representations claiming factuality.

As we have seen so far, the media landscape has undergone drastic changes, some of which, it can be argued, have provided a fertile breeding ground for the production and surge in what we may call mockumentaries. It is now time to properly define the term, before attempting to continue our analysis of actual examples. I shall continue to refer to our object of study as mockumentary even though Roscoe and Hight call them mock-documentaries. Their use of the term 'mockumentary' refers to real documentaries that are satirical or ironic in nature, such as most of Michael Moore's works, and specifically his 1989 film *Roger and Me* (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.2).

### 2.3. | Not a Mockumentary

The film community as a whole uses the term 'mockumentary' on the other hand to designate the sort of films which form the subject of this dissertation, namely the cinematographic technique which uses the documentary look and feel to portray fictive themes, and it is under the the same term, mockumentary, that the corresponding article is listed on Wikipedia. What we are certainly not concerned with, as Roscoe and Hight aren't, whatever the denomination, are fakes (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.2): alleged UFO footage, or transgressions against journalistic ethics, such as Reuters journalist Adnan Hajj's digital manipulation of photographs from Beirut during the summer of 2006 bombings by Israel (Wikipedia.org, *Adnan Hajj Photography Controversy*). Hoaxes such as April Fools Day's reports issued by news outlets themselves are not being considered either, although the

Flemish Secession Hoax (Wikinews.org, *Fictional Documentary about Flemish independence causes consternation in Belgium*) of the Belgian channel RTBF deserves some credit because it is rather similar to Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation (Wikipedia.org, *The War of the Worlds (radio)*) of H.G. Wells' 1898 play *The War of the Worlds* (Wikipedia.org, *The War of the Worlds*). False claims within docu-soaps and manipulations in Reality TV are discarded as well because they stem mainly from increasing financial pressure of the broadcast entertainment industry to deliver spectacular material, and not from the intention of a media-related critical discourse. Indeed, the intentional factor is essential in our considerations because the creators' agendas partly determine the very nature of mockumentaries. In this spirit, we will further discard any kind of government propaganda with or without media complicity, as was the case in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion, where self-serving (and fictive) information was fed to the public through news channels, such as the WMD allegations or Saddam Hussein's 9-11 complicity, which all turned out to be knowingly false.



Figure 7: Still from the Flemish Secession Hoax footage

## 2.4. | Antecedents

Precursors to the mockumentary include works which involve the real world, under some form or other, in a broader fictional setting. As such, many of the examples listed above, which aren't proper mockumentaries, but operate in the vast grey zone between fact and fiction can be considered antecedents (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.78). *The War of the Worlds* radio play is one of the very early examples. It was not technically a hoax, since the intention merely consisted of adapting for the radio a previously written novel, although the effect it had on the public was very hoax-like in its perceived effect and ensuing panic. Instances of the Monty Python's Flying Circus, which occasionally included bystanders in their pranks can be accepted as precursors, as well as the final scene of their feature film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), where the entire cast and crew are suddenly depicted as being arrested by police, thus breaking the medieval setting of the storyline.

Another Welles film can be deemed pioneering in this aspect. *F for Fake* (*Vérités et Mensonges*, 1974) starts out as a stated documentary about a real life art forger who is prominently featured in the film (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.86). As the movie goes along, it becomes increasingly clear that the director's editing style progressively alienates itself from the documentary conventions. Towards the end, fakeness takes over when the alleged involvement of Pablo Picasso, through manipulated still photographs, is presented, and Welles finally reveals this to be fake in the end. Peculiarly, he also tells the truth throughout the film, in a way, since the title (*Vérités et Mensonges*) and the subject matter (a forger) are consistent with both approaches.

Slightly less obvious, but still a pertinent example of mockumentary precursor can be found in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr.Strangelove* (1964), which effectively combines the techniques of drama documentary with bitingly comical satire (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.84). Docudrama being the faithful reenactment of historical facts by actors, Kubrick instills a great deal of realism into the general setting of the film, such as realistic military procedures, language and newsreel-style camerawork (Wikipedia.org, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb*). The main characters, however, turn out to be exaggerated caricatures of real-life persons.



Figure 8: Still from 'Dr. Strangelove'

Many further directors can be cited, who adopted a verité-style shooting, among which Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese and even Steven Spielberg (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.88). Robert Zemeckis made use of digital technology to specifically alter historic imagery to convey some of the plotlines in *Forrest Gump* (1994). Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave movements all employed techniques close to Cinema Vérité and essentially broke with many established filming



conventions and hence can be considered instrumental in the shaping of approaches that ultimately led to the appearance and evolution of mockumentary films (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.97). A contemporary movement, heavily influenced by these traditions, and which persists today, is the Dogme 95 initiative (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.93): a set of rules, postulated by directors Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen in 1995. The Dogme collective's stated goal is the purification of filmmaking through rejection of expensive post-production special effects, superficiality and conformity to genres. This results in much more 'naturalistic' pieces, focused on narrative, acting performance and their proper inherent discourse. Since this implies shooting on original locations, synchronised soundrecording, using handheld cameras and only natural lighting, the basis for mockumentary potential is inherently present in this approach.



Figure 9: Still from 'Festen'

Several more recent productions claiming to conform to the Dogme rules have indeed adopted the mockumentary procedure, such as the Argentine production *Fuckland* (2000) where a handful of professional (Argentinian) actors travel to the Falkland islands and confront the local population on-screen, the latter being unaware of their starring in a feature film (Wikipedia.org, *Fuckland*). The plot is deeply cynical though, the Argentinians attempting to reclaim the islands through a sexual invasion, by trying to impregnate local women. Dogme thus provides an important formal enabler for the mockumentary logic.

## 2.5. | Situating the genres

Having enumerated several antecedents to mockumentary filmmaking, it becomes increasingly clear how vast the area between documentary and fictional drama really is, and how many niches there are for hybrid forms to inhabit the landscape of film. The task at hand consists of the delimitation of genres or types of discourse in relation to the established boundaries, the latter being documentary and drama. Roscoe and Hight provide an analysis of these circumstances through four distinct particularities of a given work (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54):

- (a) the intention of the filmmaker
- (b) the construction of the work referred to as text in the sense of discourse
- (c) the role constructed for the audience
- (d) the implications for factual discourse

For the traditional documentary, these can be summed up as follows. The intention is the representation of an 'argument about the social-historical world, in order to inform or entertain' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54) through a more or less 'rational and objective' (id.) application of the 'codes and conventions of documentary filmmaking' (id.). This reveals itself to the audience as a 'relatively unmediated reflection of reality' (id.). The implications for factual discourse are that a specific film can either conform to these rules, triggering an 'explicit reinforcement of [the] factual discourse' (id.) or, if it deviates but still serves the same purpose, it can put forth the 'possible expansion of the documentary genre' (id.) by challenging its boundaries.

In the realm of fiction, these considerations translate very differently. Here, the intention of the author is 'to construct a dramatic story which focuses on fictional characters and events, primarily for the purpose of entertainment' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54) which includes drama. To this end, 'classic realist narrative with conventions of character and action' (id.) are applied, and which 'draw upon a variety of cultural and intertextual resources' (id.), meaning that the narrative environment is at least to some degree anchored in the real world, to make itself understood. This might include, for example, a setting of utter science fiction, but with human characters and recognizable roles and surroundings, to make the storytelling process possible. For the audience, this involves the willing 'suspension of disbelief, with the assumption that the parameters of reality are determined by the text itself' (id.). The concept of 'willing suspension of disbelief' entails that the spectator, for the duration of the film, suspends part of his critical judgment, accepting the conventions of a particular genre and the laws of a specific universe or fiction canon, in order to be able to enjoy the display of fiction (Wikipedia.org, *Suspension of Disbelief*). The term itself was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his famous remarks about poetry (Ashton 1997, p.141):

[...] so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient as to prove for these shadows of imagination, that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

In a later chapter we will examine how this applies to specific mockumentaries in some detail. Consequently, what drama does, is the 'implicit reinforcement of the fact/fiction dichotomy' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54) as long as it conforms to those broad rules.

## 2.6. | Drama Documentary

There is one genre which draws upon both documentary and fiction, but which cannot be considered to be mockumentary. The so-called drama documentary, or short docu-drama, is a type of drama, consisting entirely of actors restaging or portraying documented events (Wikipedia.org, *Docudrama*). It is either a film of historical setting, entirely reenacted, or combined with archival footage, and is, under the latter form, incorporated into documentaries or television shows. Very often, *National Geographic* documentaries use this format to illustrate past events for instance. Docu-dramas are characterized by their strict focus on known facts and avoidance of overt commentary, but employing literary and narrative techniques to render themselves more accessible to a wider audience. This narrative factor distances itself somewhat from traditional documentaries while at the same time being clearly distinct from dramas that merely use a historical setting as backdrop for dramatic plotlines. It also acts as reinforcing the traditional documentary's hold on the claim of complete factuality, since docu-dramas are considered a genre apart (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54).



From the filmmaker's point of view this translates into the effort to 'construct a dramatised representation of the social-historical world' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54), while assuming 'that they are able to represent reality, rather than directly record reality' (id.), which might be impossible, if no camera was present or even invented at the time of the event. The inherent discourse is that of 'a fictional text, which offers an argument about the social-historical world in the form of a narrative' (id.). It 'draws upon the expectations and assumptions of factual discourse' (id.) while abandoning 'the sustained appropriation of documentary codes and conventions' (id.). A borderline example of a film which bifurcates into drama-documentary and mockumentary is the Peter Watkins film *Culloden* (1964), faithfully reenacting said battle of 1764, but with the clear look and feel of a documentary (even including fictive interviews with participants of the political and social struggle), as if cameras had been present (Wikipedia.org, *Culloden (film)*). On one hand this movie sticks to the historical facts, but on the other hand diverges from the docu-drama genre by maintaining the documentary's visual integrity. From the audience's point of view though it has the same effect, in that it includes 'factual assumptions (accuracy, objectivity) combined with some latitude for fictional representation' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54). In general, it can be said about drama-documentary that it 'reinforces the factual discourse, by allowing for forms of expression outside documentary codes and conventions' (id.) to serve as informative vehicle.

A recent example of drama-documentary is the Michael Winterbottom film *Road to Guantánamo* (2006) about the incarceration and detention of three British citizens (the 'Tipton Three') at said detention camp in Cuba, by the American military. The narrative is based on their oral testimonies and includes them as 'talking heads' and combined with reenactments of the events by professional and non-

professional actors on location. Further footage consists of archived news items for increased realism of the backdrop. The sole deviation from the detainees' accounts were the softening of the torture scenes, for the actors' sake, due to their allegedly extremely painful nature (Wikipedia.org, *The Road to Guantánamo*). It can be argued whether the unquestioning acceptance of the testimonials was used as a political statement by the director, which would technically deviate from the docu-drama standard, but on the other hand it is my view that any changes to their narrative would then have resulted in a directorial intervention even more so, bordering on censorship. Besides, a film of this nature is political anyway. Hence, the guidelines of docu-drama seem to have been respected in this case.



Figure 10: Still from 'The Road to Guantánamo'

### 3 | Documentary discourses

As our scope gets narrower towards defining the boundaries of mockumentaries, we should quickly examine some types of documentaries whose discourses treat the fact-fiction continuum in different kinds of ways. Roscoe and Hight use Nichols' model of five documentary modes (Roscoe & Hight 2001, pp.18-20). Let's take a summative look at those different forms:

**The Expository Documentary** builds up an argument and presents it to the viewer from the filmmaker's position as an objective outsider. He achieves a synthesis of the facts through rhetorical continuity while abandoning the strict spacial-temporal integrity of events. The truth claim around the issue is obtained by lending a voice also to alternative views. This procedure relies heavily on editing and is therefore prone to subjectivity, even though the practices of journalism are employed.

**The Observational Documentary** mainly consists in what we encountered earlier under the umbrella term of Direct Cinema. A non-interventionist stance seeks to convey an exhaustive depiction of everyday life and puts the viewer in an idealistic/voyeuristic spectator position. The images are meant to be speaking for themselves, without

overt comment, thus maintaining a direct relationship between image and referent.

**The Interactive Documentary**, or Cinema Vérité, constructs itself out of the encounter between the filmmaker and his subject. At the heart of this approach lies the author as an integral part of the action, while at the same time allowing ample space and time for eyewitnesses and verbal testimonies to be addressed to the viewer. These statements directly respond to the questions, comments and issues raised by the author, on camera.

**Hybrid forms** such as Docu-soaps and Reality TV (Roscoe & Hight 2001, pp.37-38) basically portray much staged content, involving participants directly addressing the camera and the viewer and allowing for the illusion of insight into their private sphere. These forms take their credibility and legitimation from the mere documentary aesthetic but ultimately contain fictional and purely visual narrative devices as vectors for tabloid-style sensationalist experiences, thus not engaging in a critical or reflexive argument about the medium. This is the reason why they do not qualify as mockumentaries.

Roscoe and Hight go on to differentiate the **Reflexive Documentary** from the Mockumentary, where Nichols would have developed only the former (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.18). Essentially, the Reflexive Documentary, instead of treating solely a specific subject within the social-historical world, really concerns itself with this very background as its main focus. Although precise issues are addressed, it is done in an often ironic or satirical way which is meant to expose the constructed nature of representation in general (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.32). Fictional codes and conventions are borrowed, thus giving the viewer some choice as to what can be deemed truthful. The direct association between the documentary as genre and the real as its

subject is treated as the central point of the filmographical discourse, while never abandoning its being firmly grounded in reality. An example of a reflexive approach to documentary is the body of work of director Michael Moore. *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) for instance, illustrates this by its parodical stance. There is a very clear point being made about real-life issues, such as gun-control, juvenile and institutionalized violence, or social paranoia, but at the same time apparently unrelated footage is being introduced into the narrative, to comedic effect, or contradictory statements are being exposed through confrontation which defies chronology for example. Their juxtaposition allows overt comment about the documentary genre itself by challenging conventions and bastardizing facts with drama-driven narrative.



**Figure 11: Still from 'Bowling for Columbine'**

According to Roscoe and Hight, this practice acts as forerunner to the mockumentary but stops short of radical criticism because ultimately the Reflexive Documentary can only deconstruct the genre from within by 'making [the] issue of representation central to their

text' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.36). It can only go so far as to 'challenge the notion that there is only one Truth to tell' (id.), since it is itself still firmly rooted in the reality whose portrayal it puts in question. The mockumentary however, since it abandoned any fact-bound argument and retains only the visual convention of the documentary, can radically question the genre from without. Going all the way from there, the question really is whether there is 'any truth to tell at all' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.182). It effectively contests any factual claims to the real 'made on the basis of the power of the image' (id.). Referentiality itself is being put in jeopardy.

#### 4 | Mockumentary discourses

In the light of these findings, the fourfold approach can now be revisited and applied to the mockumentary. From the filmmaker's point of view, the intention is the presentation of 'a fictional text, with varying degrees of intent to parody or critique an aspect of culture of the documentary genre itself' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.54). Concretely, this is obtained by providing fictional content conveying a dramatic narrative through the appropriation of documentary codes and conventions. The piece subsequently 'draws upon the expectations and assumptions of factual discourse' (id.) from the audience which is confronted with a tension between said 'factual expectations (documentary) and suspension of disbelief (fictional text)' (id.). The mockumentary's core dynamic, which is its reflexive capacity vis-à-vis the documentary can take on varying degrees. Again, still according to Roscoe and Hight, these degrees range from the lowest, Parody, to the highest, Deconstruction, and cover the middle ground, dubbed Critique (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.73).

As a **Parody**, the mockumentary implicitly reinforces, through a shared understanding, the conventions of the documentary because no real questioning of the underlying codes is obtained, only a playful treatment. It is a 'benevolent or innocent appropriation of documentary

aesthetics' and 'the Classic Objective Argument [is] accepted as a signifier of rationality and objectivity' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.73). What this approach entails for the audience can be summed up as the appreciation of said parody around an item of popular culture, thus 'reinforcing a popular myth' (id.) of the proper documentary's factual accuracy and a summoning of 'Nostalgia for traditional forms of documentary' (id.). The 1984 mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap*, satirizing the pretensions and behaviours of rock band members, can be viewed as a prime example of the Parody Mockumentary (Wikipedia.org, *This is Spinal Tap*). The film amounts to portraying, largely according to documentary conventions, a fictional rock band on their presumably last tour. Heavily humour-laden, this 'rockumentary' only implicitly addresses the conventions as such. The filmmaker is involved in the plot, but at no point is there a doubt about its non-authenticity since the characters all show exaggeratingly ridiculous behaviours. The main aim of the film is to entertain, and in successfully doing so, it only reinforces the paradigm of the proper documentary solely pertaining to the depiction of reality.



Figure 12: Still from 'This is Spinal Tap'

Moving towards a more critical approach, the second degree, accordingly entitled **Critique Mockumentary**, although engaging in a parody of the notion of documentary as well, is defined by its ambivalent nature. In this case, the appropriation of factual codes and aesthetics serves to create a tension between the latter and their acceptance in public perception. These generic codes are more overtly exposed in order to create a reflexive argument around them. The audience is still meant to appreciate the parody entertainingly but the fact/fiction dichotomy finds itself not reinforced but progressively weakened. This approach is exemplified in the BBC series *The Office* (2001), where the premiss is the arrival of a documentary crew at the office of a Slough-based paper merchant. The series features mainly (then) little-known actors, and actively involves the fictional camera crew in the plot's developments and the characters' behaviours. It thus mimics the Interactive Documentary and includes interviews and 'talking heads' to convey the story arc. As part of the case studies later on, this particular instance of mockumentary will undergo more detailed scrutiny, but we can already state that the tension emanating from the exposing of documentary convention, combined with a scripted plot, in this case results in shifting degrees of reflexivity and critique towards the established genres.



Figure 13: Still from 'The Office'

The third and strongest degree in terms of critical discourse can be found in the **Deconstruction Mockumentary**. The aim here is to overtly address, 'examine, subvert and deconstruct [the] factual discourse and its relationship with documentary codes and conventions' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.73). This challenging stance seeks to expose the myth of documentaries as factual representations of the social-historical world via 'the hostile appropriation of documentary aesthetics' (id.). Being the most radical form of mockumentary, there is no doubt about its profoundly reflexive nature. Parody or satire might possibly be part of the discourse but cease to be self-serving narrative tools. The 1999 independent film *The Blair Witch Project* falls under this category in that the illusion of factuality is being sustained throughout the entirety of the piece. Unknown actors, an alternate marketing strategy (Wikipedia.org, *The Blair Witch Project*) (almost exclusively internet-based advertising was uncommon for feature films in 1999) and consequent adherence to documentary aesthetics radically address the foundation of the genre. Improvisation instead of scripting and the active involvement of the camera as an artefact in the storytelling (famously remembered in the scene where Heather addresses the

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camera directly to record her apology for putting her friends in this desolate situation) thoroughly challenge the factual discourse. Whether all of this has actually made this horror movie scarier or less so is a wholly different question, and answers vary widely among spectators.



**Figure 14: Still from 'The Blair Witch Project'**

In a spirit similar to *The Blair Witch Project*, Rémy Belvaux's 1992 mockumentary *Man Bites Dog* (orig. *C'est arrivé près de chez vous*) portrays a group of young documentarists reporting on the activities and private life of a serial killer, played by Benoît Poelvoorde. Apart from its consequently naturalistic look and feel, faithful to the visual conventions of factuality, it is deconstructively relevant for featuring the filmmakers actually befriending the killer and his social circle, eventually to become accomplices in his deeds by helping him to dispose of the bodies. In the final emblematic scene, the crew gets killed together with the killer, in front of the rolling camera, by a group of rival mafiosi.



**Figure 15: Still from 'Man Bites Dog'**

The gruesome depictions of violence serve as a backdrop to the metaphor of the manipulations that may lie at the heart of the documentary effort itself. From the point on where Ben The Killer starts slaughtering people for the sake of the movie being made about him, the audience and the filmmakers as observers become accomplices in anything that might potentially fill the screen. Also, to what point is the motivation to 'keep filming for the world to see' ethical if the violence becomes justified solely for the sake of said testimony? The audience faces a dilemma. The illusion that any kind of recording whatsoever, especially a cinematographic one, could be objective, that switching the camera on wouldn't be a manipulation and intervention itself, is shattered.



The deconstructive mockumentary tears down the wall from which the proverbial fly pretends to observe, unseen. Injustice and violence portrayed in drama cannot fully expose the complexity of the viewer's situation as the mockumentary can, because the suspension of disbelief is much stronger in fiction. It's-just-a-movie ultimately preserves the audience from too much guilt. But if the realism temporarily removes the mental fiction barrier and the imagery takes on a snuff-film-like appearance, viewer and filmmaker share the same imaginary guilt.

#### **4.1. | Interim Conclusion**

To sum up these findings, let's proceed to a quick overview of possible definitions for the mockumentary. As a hybrid form of fact/fiction amalgamation, the first thing the mockumentary does, is challenge the compartmentalized perceptions of drama versus reportage. In this aspect it clearly belongs within the 'border genres' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.181), alongside docu-drama, Reflexive Documentary, docu-soap and Reality TV. Among these it is the only one though to actually subvert the fundamental underlying conceptions that form the basis of the documentary genre. The mockumentary's discourse is definitely oriented towards doubting referentiality, the documentary's perceived privileged position as maintaining the direct relation between image and referent, although we have also seen that, throughout its history, this claim has been somewhat forcefully imposed on it. The mockumentary goes further than the drama-documentary, which, while acknowledging the filmmaker's intervention for structural purposes, never abandons its direct referencing of the real world. The same can be said about the Reflexive Documentary. It also questions how truth is perceived and represented, but doesn't manage to critique

the supposed truth itself. Only the mockumentary's discourse takes this final step, to appropriate the supposed power of the image and its referentiality, and to question the very existence of the underlying reality, finally breaking the discourse of factuality, the traditional documentary's pedestal. This is achieved by its engagement with the viewer above all. The audience is confronted with the complexity of the ensuing paradox and, notably in the case of the Deconstruction Mockumentary, is left to resolve the tension themselves. The resolution is provided only under a limited form, in the case of the Parody Mockumentary. The result is 'the construction of a new set of relationships between audience and factual discourse' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.185), with the viewer '[reflecting] on the wider cultural acceptance of factual and sober discourses' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.181), hoping to 'potentially move towards a position of critical awareness, distrust, or even incredulity of such discourses' (id.).

Roscoe and Hight further argue that, since the mockumentary mainly acts from without of the documentary's sphere of factual referentiality, and acts upon it, and due to its shifting forms and constant innovation, it would be preferable to classify it rather as a 'form of discourse' (2001, p.183) than as a proper genre, the latter, as an umbrella term, implying more consistent rules and specificities (id.). Out of this can be deducted that the mockumentary defines itself only vis-à-vis the documentary as a screen form, and propels the audience towards the heart of the discourse.

themselves' under their real names and following their genuine behaviour.

## 5 | Case Studies

### 5.1. | *K Street*

The first work that I shall analyse in a case study is the 2003 American series *K Street*, named after a street in Washington, DC which is home to a particularly large concentration of legal and lobbying firms, think tanks and political advisory groups. It is often referred to as being the fourth branch of government (Wikipedia.org, *K Street (Washington, D.C.)*), due to its huge influence on daily political life in the US. It is the focus of this series, directed by Steven Soderbergh and co-produced by George Clooney.

Its particular setup as a hybrid film form makes it relevant for our analysis, especially since the broadcasting format is a weekly series. Each episode was filmed within the week preceding its airing date and the plots were largely improvised to be able to directly respond to the political news of the week. Parallel to several independent plotlines, major developments for the characters would either directly involve current topics or serve as backdrop for the show, as did the initial manifestations of the Valerie Plame leak scandal. What made its portrayal of political lobbying life so extremely realistic was the fact that actors would be cast alongside political professionals all 'playing



Figure 16: Still from 'K Street' featuring pundit James Carville

Although the presence of the camera as such wouldn't be involved, as in an Interactive Documentary for example, real politicians starred in the plot, often seemingly unaware of their being included in a TV production (Wikipedia.org, *K Street (TV Series)*). *K Street* shows all the hallmarks of the observational documentary and its innovative stance results from containing dramatic fiction within the setting of the same social-historical world of the audience. The narrative as such only allows for very limited suspension of disbelief though. It basically isn't necessary since the show's realism, and its naturalistic portrayals unfold according to the real world. The show's discourse regularly assumes journalistic qualities, more broadly in the instances of current events, or more specifically on particular occasions. One of these merits to be brought to attention: In one scene, the famed consultant and protagonist of the show, James Carville, provides Vermont Governor Howard Dean with a rethorical line during an actual debate prep, a line



that the latter would actually go on to use a few days later in one of the debates of the 2004 Presidential Race. It is hard to know whether the debate prep was part of the show, with Dean agreeing to appear and later on deciding to stick to the line he was given, or if the production team of the show happened to be around when the prep happened, independently.

In any case, this has profound implications for the series' diegesis, the concept of the narrative space, the fictive world in which the action takes place. Diegesis is a proper literary and theatrical term and includes every shown and unshown event leading up to, during, and after the narrative action (Wikipedia.org, *Diegesis*). For *K Street*, this represents a paradox. Since it is not a documentary (too much of the plot is still scripted) and it includes dramatic narrative, it does have a proper diegetic space. At the same time, this space is the same as the audience's space, since many of the performers could become part of the audience while inhabiting or continuing to inhabit the very same world. Accordingly, it can be argued that those characters' performances (and not the actors') constitute a self-reference, or, in this case of dramatic narrative, a kind of meta-reference, where a character (usually fictional) displays an awareness of being in a work of fiction. Literary antecedents of this narrative device are to be found in the works of Berthold Brecht or Italo Calvino for example. Traditionally, this meta-reference occurs when actors break characters in front of the camera. In a sense, though, in the case of *K Street*, this potential act has been preempted even prior to the beginning, the show constantly finding itself in the space of meta-diegetic 'broken' characters.

## 5.2. | Wild Blue Art of Dark Graffiti Moon

As we have seen above, the third category of Mockumentary defines itself through its Deconstruction discourse. As a second case study, I shall take a look at three films which adopt this technique to varying degrees to aggressively hijack factual discourse. These are extremely sophisticated forms of mockumentaries and violently expose the problematic inherent in the entire documentary effort as such: Werner Herzog's *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2006), Matt McCormick's short *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* (2001) and William Karel's 2002 *Dark Side of the Moon* (orig. *Opération Lune*).

Herzog's film consists of three types of footage: the most frequently featured type are documentary-like shots, from the inside of a space shuttle in Earth orbit, produced by NASA, and footage recorded by divers of the ocean beneath the arctic ice-shelf. Inherently devoid of comment in themselves, they are purely observational, even scientific, in nature. The second type of footage is archival material from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, depicting some of man's first attempts at flying airplanes. The third kind of material is a monologue of the actor Brad Dourif. He is either shown directly addressing the audience, looking into the camera, or his voice is being superimposed on the rest of the footage. Further minor scenes include NASA scientists discussing their research and astronauts in training. Throughout the movie, all of the footage is being employed with largely artistic freedom, with Dourif's monologue, in order to tell the story of his alien race fleeing their dying planet, arriving on Earth, and humans subsequently fleeing theirs, and arriving on the alien planet, called the Wild Blue Yonder. Herzog himself has called the film a science fiction fantasy, which is consistent with the narrative, but paradox in relation to the scientific footage.



Figure 17: Still from 'Wild Blue Yonder'

*The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* consists of shots taken all over Portland, Oregon, McCormick's home town, basically recording instances where graffiti was painted over by city workers. Interspersed with more generally ambient shots of the town, this wouldn't evoke much if it weren't for a female voice, off-screen, which describes, in detail, how the covering up of graffiti is an artform in its own right. Before long, the viewer realizes that this theory is fictional, nevertheless the voice goes on and differentiates among various patterns of painting, different colour combinations and so on, labeling them with theoretical terminology, constructing an entire art history around said phenomenon. Amazingly, the audience can't help but realize that this theory of pseudo art history, as ridiculous as it is, makes perfect sense in the ontological space of the narrative. The argument is constructed exactly like a perfectly logical documentary of the expositional sort. The flowing narrative very subtly hovers over this ambiguity, all along the movie, seemingly nothing being left to chance, covering each aspect of

the indeed subconscious art of graffiti removal. And despite its completely fictive comment, it still makes a point about how 'the process of destroying one art form unwittingly creates another' (Rodeofilmco.com, *Biography*).

Our third example in this case study, *Dark Side of the Moon*, comes close to bordering on a hoax. Directed by William Karel, it was prominently produced and premiered on the French and German TV station Arte (Wikipedia.org, *Dark Side of the Moon (Documentary)*). It starts out as a documentary exposing minor facts, such as the collaboration of Hollywood and NASA at the time of the first moon landing. The tale goes on to claim that director Stanley Kubrick was hired to fake the Apollo moon landings for television, eventually being killed decades later by the FBI to cover up the truth, and that several technicians involved in the scam threatened to go public, subsequently fled to Vietnam to protect their lives, the country which the United States then evaded for the sole purpose of silencing them, thus triggering the Vietnam war. What is remarkable about this crescendo of fake claims is the fact that, all along the way, high-profile witnesses, including Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Stanley Kubrick's wife, all back them and lend them credibility. When the end credits roll, the staged nature of this conspiracy theory is revealed and outtakes of the interviews are shown, where the famous participants muse over the absurdity of their lines.



Figure 18: Still from 'The Dark Side of the Moon'

What combines these three examples is the procedure of appropriation of documentary-quality imagery, and imposing a narrative upon them which not merely distorts reality, but radically fabricates an alternative one. In the case of *The Wild Blue Yonder* and *Dark Side of the Moon*, some elements are staged, but the majority of visuals are genuine in all three works. This might lead to the interpretation that they are mere reflexive documentaries. But I would argue that, even though much is visually rooted in the real world, ultimately none of it remains so in the diegetic space of the respective movies. It has to be agreed though, that we are walking an extremely thin line here. There is no way of possibly defining precisely how much fiction needs to be imposed on a visual in order to make a mockumentary. The spectral nature of our area of study commands that each work be assessed individually.

Returning to our cited examples, I would contend that, considering the sheer fantasy worlds created through naturalistic aesthetics, the imposed narratives lead to such a radical détournement (literally: hijacking) of factual language, that they slam it right into the very structure of objective discourse, tearing it down along the lines of the sole agendas of the filmmakers.

In this sense, as mockumentaries, they render instances of simulacra, in the Baudrillardian sense, like we saw earlier in relation to the Gulf War. The imagery (a representation of its referent) gets robbed of its referent, which is replaced by a fantasy, thus containing nothing but a copy without a model (Wikipedia.org, *Simulacrum*). These mockumentaries can thus be seen as entering the realm of hyperreality as Guy Debord or Baudrillard would define it, the world of symbols without originals (Potolsky 2006, p.154). They act as truly postmodernist, a variation of reality and on reality. Signs are being treated, recycled and enhanced until they form a fantasy-reality of their own. In this sense, the Mockumentary might effectively illustrate the semiotic concept of the hyperreal.

Additionally, I would argue that, through excessive realism of the aesthetics, the audience is put in a situation where their reality virtually equals the reality of the mockumentary's discourse. In a sense, this would draw them on the other side of the Fourth Wall, practically amounting to an inverted breaking of the convention as such. Thinning the borderline between diegetic space and real world in this way would thus be achievable only by a mockumentary of this kind, where real-life people would 'break character' (whether it be Don Rumsfeld or the members of the audience). This, of course, is only possible in a system where representation and referent have lost their absolute values. Real-life character and archival footage stop representing the respective

person or event, but stand merely for their presence on film and on the screen, dissolving the traditional mimesis of the medium.

### 5.3. | *The Office*

As I pointed out before, these examples are extremely ambiguous in their nature. Despite our theoretical considerations of the Fourth Wall in these cases, practically, the phenomenon of the suspension of disbelief is strongly present to the spectator, to varying degrees. It is possibly present the most in the case of *The Wild Blue Yonder*, since the mere mention of an individual claiming to have travelled billions of lightyears through space to address an audience, acts as alienation effect to most people, especially when Brad Dourif's antics so closely evoke a madman. In *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, the disbelief sets in more gradually, and its suspension does so parallelly for the viewer to enjoy the obvious fiction. In *Dark Side of the Moon*, doubt probably takes longest to set in, mainly because figures with authoritative credentials back the claims, but in each of the cases the fundamental basics of factual discourse as found in documentaries and journalism are effectively challenged and exposed through each particular critical discourse.

*The Office* is a TV series written by Ricky Gervais and Steve Merchant, and produced by the BBC between 2001 and 2002. Since then the concept has been adapted for American television (*The Office*), in Canada (*La Job*), France (*Le Bureau*) and Germany (*Stromberg*) (Wikipedia.org, *The Office*). Basically it is meant to be a sitcom, entertainment being the primary aim. But it is also a mockumentary of the second degree, which is Critique. The conventions of documentary are appropriated by the show and consistently being enforced. Much of the plot depends on the presence of the fictional documentary team being present, as illustrated by the talking heads and the numerous (inappropriate) jokes that the office's manager, David Brent, makes especially for the camera. In fact the show's entire concept of humour depends on this presence, since most of the time, the victims of either Brent's or Garreth Keenan's antics rescue themselves from the horrifyingly awkward ensuing silences only through a desperately deadpan look at the viewer.

The tools of the documentary production play an important role in the show's discourse, as they are frequently being addressed by the narrative. One particular instance merits a deeper consideration. In a key scene, the character Tim, after closing a (semi-transparent) door behind him and Dawn, thus shutting the camera team out, actually unplugs his microphone to make a private confession of some sort to her. The audience, although the characters remain slightly visible, can only guess what is going on in their voyeuristic position. The contents of their conversation are never revealed, not even in a subsequent interview with Lucy Davis, the actress portraying Dawn, now out of her role, where she refuses to disclose the 'private' discussion, effectively bridging the actor-role gap. In terms of reflecting on the documentary

convention, *The Office* as a mockumentary goes a long way, especially in this scene which illustrates that, however objective the fact-bound genre might treat its observations, ultimately everything happens as the camera is switched off still forms part of reality. However strongly the grasp on truth or the real might be executed, there are always facts left that elude the effort.



**Figure 19: Still from 'The Office'**

This particular scene with the unplugged microphone also has implications for the narrative's diegetic environment. The fictive world, for a moment, is being cast beyond the limits of theatrical performance. One could argue that the Fourth Wall is being involved, but in an utmost peculiar way. As it normally would be broken by characters addressing the audience, thus providing the Alienation effect (in a Brechtian sense (Wikipedia.org, *Alienation Effect*), the 'Verfremdungseffekt'), it is actually being reinforced. The spectator is made aware of its presence, not via its piercing, but its opaquification. Instead of stepping out of their roles to face the viewer, they radically shut the viewer out and evade the prying scrutiny of the documentarist glance.

Beyond these considerations, *The Office* finally portrays archetypal characters (the annoying boss, the nerdy co-worker, the impossible office romance and the dull workplace) in an archetypal setting, which to some degree contain truthful parallels in real life through the realist presentation of fictive figures. Individually they may be simulacraesque, but overall and collectively they result in a representation true to the real world.

## 6 | Conclusion

We have observed throughout the text that the mockumentary acts as critical discourse, challenging the conventions of the traditional documentary, and specifically the perceived dichotomy between fact and fiction. It moves beyond any form of proper documentary, including the reflexive type, to address several levels of the 'Classic Objective Argument' (Roscoe & Hight 2001, p.73) facing the viewer. It can do so by implicitly reinforcing said conventions via the Parody, to act upon them reflexively, pointing them out for the audience to scrutinize through Critique, or finally, to Deconstruct the foundations of factual discourse, leaving the viewer to resolve the problem.

Depending on the form of the piece, the mockumentary can comment on all the other forms, from the proper documentary, via docu-drama and other hybrids, to the purely fictive narrative. The evolution of documentaries exposed their inherent problematic issues, notably pointed out by the mentioned antecedents to mockumentaries. Sub-genres like Direct Cinema tried to claim journalistic accuracy regarding the observed facts, a general (mis?)conception that largely

prevails today. At the same time, Cinema Vérité, New Journalism (and especially gonzo journalism) enabled more critical approaches to face the factual discourse. They allowed for the artistic and poetic vision of the filmmaker to reassert itself and give back a certain editorial freedom in creation.

The more recent changes in technological availability and mediatic perception, such as the 24-hour news culture, dubbed 'CNN effect' (Wikipedia.org, *CNN Effect*), gradually opened up the possibilities for conventions and codes to be reappropriated, critically dissected, and creatively recycled.

In addition to Roscoe and Hight's classification of Parody Mockumentary, there is another way of interpreting the mockumentary in general as parody. While it is true that parody as a discourse in literature, theatre, music and film retains a certain degree of respect for the original text, as Roscoe and Hight point out, it does however inject a very critical point of view into its imitation. Going beyond a merely humorous effect, parody can be seen as a sign of the evolution of a genre. Especially among film genre theorists, parody is seen as following the classical period (Wikipedia.org, *Parody*). The latter marks the stage where genre conventions are defined, refined and elaborated, while the former takes on these very conventions, in order to ridicule, invert and question them.

In this respect, I would argue that the mockumentary is an indicator of how deeply the conventions of documentaries have been internalized by audiences, since this familiarity is a prerequisite of any parody discourse. It should be noted that it is only then, when conventions are relatively clear, and their relative transgressions can actually be noticed and interpreted, that mockumentaries as a parody of the documentary conventions, can extend their reach into the domain of

satire. A contemporary and very controversial example would be the character of *Borat*, created by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, who can mime and expose socially debatable behaviour in a given society, through the medium of a fake documentary.

Today the growing and ever-shifting nature of various forms and discourses of mockumentary shows that its inherent potential is far from being measurable. Above all its discourse is extremely valuable and as urgent as ever. In the age of digital manipulation and aggressive political spin, the need for a critical discourse on factual representation is indispensable, not only regarding cinema and broadcasting, but also the all-pervasive information presence of the Internet. Politicians know how to respond to the media, how to represent themselves favorably and how to use the press to their advantage. Political and other current events, even natural disasters, increasingly look staged, because of their elaborate presentation.

Within the entertainment industry, the push to make fiction look ever more convincingly real keeps putting pressure on the producers and the special effects sector. These symptoms of the social appropriation of communication technology might even have played their part in allowing for the most naturalistic of representations, the documentary aesthetic, to be adapted as vector for fictional narrative. In a way, mockumentaries thus keep on reasserting the need for a definition of authenticity, an issue that has pervaded mimetic discourse since Antiquity, they imply and illustrate 'the need for a new social understanding of the evidential status of the image' (Winston 2006, p.166).

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- Bowling for Columbine*, 2002, motion picture, Alliance Atlantis Communications, USA
- C'est arrivé près de chez vous (Man Bites Dog)*, 1992, motion picture, Les Artistes Anonymes, Belgium
- Culloden*, 1964, motion picture, BBC, UK
- Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 1964, motion picture, Hawk Films Ltd., UK
- Festen*, 1998, motion picture, Danmarks Radio, Denmark / Sweden
- Forrest Gump*, 1994, motion picture, Paramount Pictures, USA
- Fuckland*, 2000, motion picture, Atomic Films S.A., Argentina
- K Street*, 2003, television series, HBO, USA



*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975, motion picture, Michael White Productions, UK

*Nanook of the North*, 1922, motion picture, Criterion Collection, USA / France

*Opération lune (Dark Side of the Moon)*, 2002, motion picture, Point du Jour, France

*Road to Guantanamo*, 2006, motion picture, FilmFour, UK

*Roger & Me*, 1989, motion picture, Dog Eat Dog Films, USA

*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999, motion picture, Artisan Entertainment, USA

*The Office*, 2001-2003, television series, BBC, UK

*The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, 2002, short film, Rodeo Film Company, USA

*The Wild Blue Yonder*, 2005, motion picture, Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, UK / USA / France / Germany

*This is Spinal Tap*, 1984, motion picture, Embassy Pictures, USA

*Vérités et mensonges (F for Fake)*, 1974, motion picture, Janus Film, France / Iran / West Germany

*Zapruder Film of Kennedy Assassination*, 1963, film reel, USA

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