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**Reflexivity, satire and
a call to play**

Craig Hight



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Dedicated to David Brent

Introduction

Mockumentary has emerged as a common and distinctive part of the contemporary mediascape. Comprised of a corpus of texts across a variety of media that do not quite make a genre it has reached a point where it is an accepted part of the mainstream, particularly for cinema and television. The proliferation of mockumentary texts range from the banal and quickly forgotten to those which generate critical interest for their apparent insight into the contemporary zeitgeist. Where once *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) was invariably listed as a key influence by mockumentary filmmakers, now film and television producers have a broader and richer vein of innovative texts from which to draw inspiration. From popular cinematic exemplars such as horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and the satiric comedy *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) to critically acclaimed television series such as the British and American versions of *The Office*, the mockumentary has arguably come of age, achieving a degree of prominence and often sophistication that deserves greater critical appraisal.

Mockumentary appropriation of documentary aesthetics has a long history. Depending on how one defines mockumentary, the form could be seen to date from the beginnings of the documentary genre itself. As Lebow notes, in reference to the easy integration of reconstructed and dramatised scenes by early practitioners,

If the histories of the nonfiction film are to be believed then *all* of the most exemplary early documentary films, whether those of Flaherty, Grierson, Verity, or even Edison's and Lumière's actualities, are also exemplary mockumentaries. (Lebow, 2006: 232)

Winston notes an apparent early use of the label 'mockumentary' in reference to Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) by at least some members of Flaherty's own crew (Winston, 1999: 73). More definitively, however, mockumentary is a term that identifies a deliberate blurring of an assumed fact-fiction dichotomy, and cannot be usefully applied to a context and time before there were discourses and conventions that rigorously demarcated the modes of fact and fiction. Sobchack has argued that 'documentary is primarily indexical, fiction primarily iconic and symbolic' (Sobchack, 2004: 245), a distinction that implicates mockumentary as playing somewhere in the spaces in between. Such a dichotomy suggests how mockumentary challenges theorists with issues of how to identify, define and position such texts, given the impulse to develop categories that provide a safe haven for documentary itself from the encroachments of fictional manipulation and artifice.

It is more fruitful to instead consider fact and fiction as poles on a continuum, to recognise that there are a variety of 'in-between' forms distinguished by an often complex divergence of agenda, collectively exhibiting the full range of techniques of audio-visual construction, and often asking audiences to engage in layered modes of reading. Mockumentary can be seen as a key example of 'documentary hybrid', a term which encompasses a variety of fact-fiction texts which are closely or loosely associated with the broader concerns and aesthetics of documentary culture. The label 'documentary hybrids' could include early forms such as nature documentary (Bousé, 2000) and drama-documentary (Paget, 1998; Lipkin, 2002) which tend to either draw explicitly from documentary aesthetics and associated discourses or identify with key parts of the documentary agenda. These hybrids have always been central to the development of documentary as a genre, despite the efforts of some theorists to position them outside documentary proper (as does Bousé in discussing the factual claims of what he terms 'wild-life films').

More recent documentary hybrids include the explosion of globalised television formats which integrate documentary aesthetics with more established entertainment formats, and occasionally pay lip service to a documentary agenda. Reality gameshows (or 'gamedocs'), docusoaps, video diaries, reality sitcoms, situation documentaries, documentary musicals and the plethora of lifestyle programming which incorporates some aspect of documentary

aesthetics could all come under this broader label. Corner has usefully grouped these more recent television hybrids according to their primary function of 'documentary as diversion', to denote their departures from the more conventional politics and aesthetics of documentary practice (Corner, 2002a). Mockumentary's relationship to all of these developments is often dismissed as a parasitic one, although it does not simply draw from but comments upon and contributes to changes within this broader documentary culture. As documentary aesthetics, discourses and practices have continued to broaden, so too have mockumentary forms.

Mockumentary has also easily adapted to more fundamental changes within the contemporary mediascape, particularly the increasing dominance of digital platforms. These include digital video disc (or digital versatile disc or DVD), the World Wide Web, and a variety of mobile platforms. The convergence between these digital platforms and the more established mass media of film and television has initiated an apparently inevitable transformation of documentary culture as whole. Both the expansion of mediations of the real which is associated with digitality, as new media forms appropriate the culture and forms of documentary, and their convergence (and divergence) across digital platforms effectively provide new space for mockumentary to freely roam. Conversely, the task of defining mockumentary becomes much harder within digital media that offer more contingent and fleeting support for the assumed dichotomy between fact and fiction that still drives documentary culture.

This volume is partly a necessary updating and extension of the theoretical work first developed in *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Roscoe and Hight, 2001), a book co-authored by Jane Roscoe and this writer. The current volume addresses the problem of identifying and positioning mockumentary within a greatly expanded and more dynamic realm of the mediation of the real across analogue and digital media. The chapters below extend our original arguments on the nature and significance of the mockumentary form.

Faking It outlined a definition of mockumentary as those fictional texts 'which make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject'. We discussed patterns within mockumentary as broadly falling into three overlapping tendencies, defined in terms

of the degree of reflexivity which their appropriation of documentary aesthetics constructed toward factual discourses. These three 'degrees' of mockumentary were illustrated through discussion of key mockumentary texts, particularly classic mockumentaries such as *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), *The Falls* (1980), *Zelig* (1983), *This is Spinal Tap*, *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (*Man Bites Dog*) (1992), *Bob Roberts* (1992) and *Forgotten Silver* (1995). There was some discussion of the difficulties of identifying mockumentary as a genre in its own right, and we concluded instead that

it is more productive to think of mock-documentary as a *discourse*: informed and shaped through the particular relationships it constructs with documentary proper, with the discourses of factuality, and especially through the complexity of its engagement with viewers. (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 183, original emphasis)

Our grading of patterns within this discourse serves adequately as an initial framework, but confused some readers who assumed that it offered a taxonomy of texts, rather than foregrounding the dynamic interplay between different senses of intertextuality within specific texts, and especially the variety of positions afforded to viewers of mockumentary.

In our concluding remarks, we made much of the apparent subversive potential of the mockumentary form toward documentary, as it appeared then:

We argue that all mock-documentary texts contain the potential for critical reflexivity, as an inherent part of their appropriation of documentary aesthetics, and that it is this role constructed for the viewer that consistently marks the mock-documentary out from other fact-fiction forms. (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 184)

As noted above, mockumentary has broadened to include references to the full range of factually based texts, mutating into a myriad number of forms across different genres and media. It is no longer sufficient to define mockumentary largely through its reflexive potential toward documentary as a (cinematic and televisual) genre.

As discussed in the following chapter, the complexity of the audience's engagement with mockumentary is still crucial, and the discourse still 'offers the audience an opportunity to reflect on the wider cultural acceptance of factual and sober discourses and potentially to move towards a position of critical awareness, distrust

or even incredulity of such discourses' (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 185). Instead of mockumentary retaining a distinctive subversive edge, however, it has become just one part of a broader reflexivity toward factual forms within visual culture as a whole. Arguably the most common and naturalised forms of reflexivity have been in the incestuous and highly competitive realm of television documentary hybrids, themselves a key spark for the emerging variety and sophistication of the examples of television mockumentary which are the primary focus of this volume.

Such changes mean that some of the more sweeping predictions from *Faking It* have not come to pass:

In the next few years, we suggest that there is likely to be continued exploration of mock-documentary. One possibility is that this form will eventually become exhausted, with audiences tiring of its irreverent stance towards factual aesthetics, and filmmakers moving to explore other modes of expression. Mock-documentary might be considered as a transitional discourse, a form that takes full advantage of technological developments and our insecurities concerning factual discourse. Having pushed those issues to their logical endpoint, the form itself could easily give way to new configurations within the fact-fiction continuum, alternatively, the continued emergence of mock-documentary could lead to a more fundamental reappraisal of the essentials of documentary proper. In the near future, might we conceivably think of mock-documentary as the offspring of documentary, a member of the 'next generation' that emerges and is inspired by the exhaustion of the documentary genre itself? (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 189)

Lebow makes a similar argument, suggesting that this is a relationship in which mockumentary is not necessarily merely an irritant and inferior form:

I find problematic the assumption that underpins mockumentary: namely, that it depends on and responds to the 'real' or 'true' original, documentary. The idea that the category of documentary supports and sustains mockumentary as its 'straight' or 'upright' other – that documentary in effect props mockumentary up – is troubling to me [...] Could it be *mockumentary* that is doing the propping, setting a stage by which documentary may finally appear as a stable and coherent category? (Lebow, 2006: 224, original emphasis)

Unfortunately for such arguments, there has been a distinct failure of mockumentary to date to centre on truly transgressive examples

of popular deconstructive form which operate as a direct critique of documentary either by design (*Man Bites Dog*, *The Falls*, *David Holzman's Diary*) or through context (*Forgotten Silver*). The failure of mockumentary to fulfil its full subversive potential suggests not only the limited ways in which such forms have tended to be explored by filmmakers and television producers, but also a rapidly changing context for documentary and audio-visual non-fiction. It is a measure of the complexity and paradoxical nature of wider documentary culture that examples of mockumentary discourse have proliferated, together with other hybrid forms, at the same time as there has been a rise in the popularity and appreciation of feature film documentary itself.

This book, then, addresses a variety of developments which prompt the need for a revision of our initial framework. In the chapters that follow the definition of mockumentary as a discourse is expanded upon. A key focus here is the variety of ways in which mockumentaries generate, both in isolation and collectively, a commentary on the nature of the transformation of documentary genre by the plethora of television documentary hybrids. Mockumentaries are exploring the new terrain of hybrid agendas, distinctive aesthetics, forms of participation and interaction by participants and audiences, together with the variety of representational and ethical issues associated with these developments. Crucially, however, such hybrids typically incorporate a high degree of self-reflexivity themselves, and this begs the question of whether television mockumentary offers any kind of challenge to such texts that they do not already make themselves. Does mockumentary have any special status as a 'subversive' discourse within television, or has it evolved into another naturalised style within the broader hegemony of television aesthetics?

What has become obvious is that there is an increasingly incestuous playing field of hybrid forms, to the extent that the matter of identifying and assessing mockumentary discourse is no longer a trivial or straightforward task. Such a task has now become one of identifying how various hybrid traditions are utilised in a given text, rather than of attempting to rigidly apply a taxonomy, an exercise that always risks missing the more innovative and problematic texts in favour of praising the formulaic as exemplars of an assumed canon of texts. The need for a revised and updated treatise on mockumentary is partly in response to the emergence of film and

especially television examples which suggest less of a rigid division between mockumentary and other hybrids, and even between mockumentary and documentary proper (in the case of reflexive documentary and documentary comedy). Such new texts challenge the certainty of existing simplistic definitions of mockumentary and require greater subtlety in our theoretical approach.

This book contributes to a small but vital literature on mockumentary. Apart from the occasional critique of specific texts, early theoretical exploration of mockumentary includes Nichols' collapsing of mockumentary patterns into his discussion of the reflexive mode of documentary representation (Nichols, 1991) and Jacobs' analysis of an odd combination of the 'pseudo-documentary' and the neo-western in the same volume of *Studies in History and Criticism of Film* (Jacobs, 2000). After *Faking It*, the major volumes on mockumentary have been the edited collections *Docufictions: Essays On the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking* (Rhodes and Springer, 2005) and *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Juhász and Lerner, 2006). The *Docufictions* collection looks primarily at examples of mockumentary and drama (Lipkin, Paget and Roscoe, 2005), and attempts to use such fact-fiction categories to re-examine the complexity of patterns within documentary itself. The book brings together a variety of perspectives, but perhaps most chiefly demonstrates the confusion and lack of consensus on how to define and apply notions of mockumentary. The Juhász and Lerner collection in comparison is very much focused on avant-garde and independent examples of 'fake documentary' and it consequently deals almost exclusively with feature and short film, largely ignoring television. The editors seek to escape any trivial or popular associations of the label 'mock-documentary', insisting that such texts play a distinctive and subversive role within documentary culture.

Paul Ward's brief but useful overview of contemporary documentary production, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, includes an interesting take on documentary and comedy, referring to these as distinct but intersecting modes, and consequently positioning mockumentary as 'one of the more prevalent forms of comedy documentary' (Ward, 2005a: 72). And there are a number of useful volumes focused on individual mockumentaries, the most substantial of which are the edited collection *Nothing That Is: Millennial Cinema and the Blair Witch Controversies* (Higley and Weinstock,

2004), focusing on a variety of perspectives on *The Blair Witch Project*, and Ben Walters' excellent discussion of the UK series of *The Office* (Walters, 2005). Other shorter, but still worthy, pieces include Thomas Doherty's brief overview on the history of the mockumentary (Doherty, 2003), Ethan de Seife's online history of mockumentary, Carl Plantinga's excellent piece on the archetypal mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap*, detailing how it operates as both a parody of rockumentary and a satire of heavy metal masculinity (Plantinga, 1998), John Caldwell's efforts to delineate various kinds of 'docu-real' television programming (including texts which can also be categorised as mockumentary), and Brett Mills' discussion on *The Office* (UK) as an exemplar of sitcom innovation he terms 'comedy vérité' (Mills, 2004).

Despite, or because of, this increased interest in the form, however, a clear critical consensus on mockumentary or its significance has yet to emerge. There is no singular sense of where to position mockumentary: either inside of documentary itself and grouped with reflexive documentary and documentary comedy or a distinctive subgenre (Bayer, 2005: 169); as purely fictional texts, or operating in a blurred boundary between fact and fiction. The popularising of the term 'mockumentary' seems to date from critical responses to *This is Spinal Tap* (Doherty, 2003: 23), although this term is often rejected by theorists in favour of labels such as 'pseudo-documentary' (Jacobs, 2000), or 'fake documentary' (Juhász and Lerner, 2006) as a means of more clearly distinguishing a particular corpus of texts, or avoiding the implication that such texts' primary agenda is simply to 'mock' existing cultural forms.

In *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Roscoe and Hight, 2001), we favoured the term 'mock-documentary' largely for theoretical reasons, to emphasise the discourse's relationship to the documentary genre and its implicitly reflexive agenda toward factual culture as a whole. 'Mockumentary', however, has become the more definitive and favoured term among both practitioners and audiences. It is also a label which usefully moves us away from a simplistic relationship with documentary itself. Mockumentary does not exist simply to 'mock', in either of its senses, documentary. It has evolved into a more subtle and more complex discourse, in part because of the now much broader series of intertextual references which mockumentary forms make, outside of simply replicating familiar documentary representational styles.

Within popular commentary the term 'mockumentary', however, is often misused. The label is frequently thrown at a documentary by critics because of their frustration with its arguments, as a means to dismiss a text as a polemic which has moved outside of a fidelity to the truth in order to score political points. Michael Moore's popular political documentaries such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) seem to attract the most opprobrium on these terms, not least because they appear capable of reaching and persuading a wide audience. In a more general sense, however, this kind of casual use of the label derives not only from an inadequate understanding of the potential subtlety and complexity of the best examples of mockumentary, but from an undervaluing of satire and other forms of comedy. As noted above, there is the common assumption that mockumentary is merely a parasitic form (Jacobs, 2000: 2), both feeding off the much more valuable and worthy genre of documentary (which partly also explains its relative neglect within documentary theory) and propagating a suspect postmodern sensibility (McClure and McClure, 2001).

There are three parts to this book, and these also form a useful summary of its objectives: Part I defines mockumentary discourse and outlines some of its key patterns across different media; Part II positions mockumentary within the wider spectrum of televisual space, in particular in relation to traditions of documentary, dramatic and comedic forms; and Part III assesses the aesthetics and agenda of specific television mockumentary programmes, with a particular focus on television mockumentary series.

In a broad sense, mockumentary always involves a 'call to play', but this has been manifested in a number of often contrasting ways, reflecting the complexity of audience readings which they prompt. As outlined in chapter 1, mockumentary practitioners have employed the discourse for a variety of reasons, at some times for novelty or promotional purposes, at other times for dramatic ends or incorporating the complexity of parodic and satiric agendas. The discourse has been used within diverse genres, serving as an experimental and innovative form within long-established generic traditions across a variety of different media.

The difficulties of defining mockumentary partly stem from the fact that, as the discourse has become more established, it has widened to incorporate and reflect changes in the nature of the mediation of reality itself. The discourse has focused on the full set

of codes and conventions associated with non-fiction-related media; it has grown to reflect the full continuum of fact-fiction forms. There is a consequent difficulty in identifying the 'boundaries' of mockumentary, or trying to state what is and is not a mockumentary text. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce these arguments and they are returned to throughout the following chapters. From one perspective the 'core' examples of mockumentary are those which reference documentaries, while the more problematic in terms of a coherent definition of the discourse are those that reference documentary hybrids such as docusoaps and reality gameshows. Each of these reality-based forms involves an often quite distinctive intersection of production practices, aesthetics and forms of audience engagement, interaction and participation. As the nature of the genre has broadened and been remediated, particularly across digital-based media, so mockumentary has broadened its set of textual strategies in response.

The key focus of this book is on a mapping of the range of applications of mockumentary within a specific medium; the explorations of mockumentary form by often innovative television producers and programme makers. Television is relatively neglected in critical traditions, often dismissed as a medium increasingly governed by a commercial agenda favouring a spectrum of disposable spectacle, exploitation and trivial entertainment over the possibilities of quality informative and educational programming. Such attitudes have certainly informed the approaches of most documentary theorists toward the medium until relatively recently.¹ While the more established traditions of cinematic studies are able to draw upon both a wider critical appreciation of the medium and a more sustained set of discourses supporting the academic study of cinematic texts, there is a lack of a strong, sustained tradition of critical appraisal of television programming (Geraghty, 2003: 30–1). As Jacobs argues, however,

The continued sense that the television text is mostly inferior to the film text and cannot withstand concentrated critical pressure because it lacks 'symbolic density', rich *mise-en-scene*, and the promotion of identification as a means of securing audience proximity, has to be revised in the light of contemporary television. (Jacobs, 2001: 433)

There is a need to reiterate that television is capable of being viewed as a site for artistic expression as well as communication

(Jacobs, 2001: 429). Such a claim is best demonstrated through the discussion of the aesthetics of particular texts, rather than relying on the broader narratives of television (Geraghty, 2003: 29), which is as ridden with contradictions and banalities as any aspect of popular culture. As outlined in chapter 3, television provides an environment uniquely designed to foster mockumentary. Televisual space is partly defined through a high degree of intertextuality, with television forms constantly commenting upon themselves and other cultural forms, in the process repeatedly foregrounding themselves as acts of mediation. Television mockumentary provides distinctive forms of play within this frame in relation to television representations of the real (see chapter 2). Despite the higher profile accorded cinematic mockumentary, the televisual medium has served as a key site in the genealogy of the discourse. Mockumentary has some of its origins in the constant experimentation within particularly comedic television forms, although typically initiated for commercial reasons rather than a commitment to experimentation for its own sake.

The discourse has intersected with a number of key televisual generic traditions, including recent transformations of television documentary prompted by the proliferation of hybrid formats, and their influence in reshaping the expectations surrounding television documentary itself (see chapter 4). The challenges of addressing television documentary hybrids have preoccupied documentary theory since the mid 1990s, and there is no doubt that mockumentary discourse as a whole has responded to and added to the aesthetics, practices and commentary over this part of the fact-fiction continuum. Mockumentary also intersects with specific aesthetic traditions within the broad spectrum of television drama (chapter 5), including drama-documentary, and the rich variety of comedic forms based on parody and satire (chapter 6).

The remaining chapters address detailed analyses of television mockumentaries, focusing especially on the more extended forms of mockumentary available in television series within different national contexts. The emergence of these series, where a mockumentary premise is central to the aesthetics and agenda of a sequential and layered narrative, suggests that the discourse has become naturalised within the mainstream of television narrative styles, rather than lapsing as an occasional gimmick or stunt style. Some of the richer examples of mockumentary discourse as a whole are

in fact to be found in television serial form, generating a number of layers of meaning at a textual level, and prompting overlapping modes of reading and appreciation by audiences. A discussion of any television mockumentary series consequently offers insight into distinctive aspects of the medium, revealing the centrality and complexity of hybridity as an everyday programming and production strategy and suggesting one way of discussing the transformations of the relationships between mediations of the real and other forms within television programming.

Note

¹ My thanks to Derek Paget for suggesting this discussion.