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Visual Characteristics of the Mockumentary Format

By

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In terms of comedic filmmaking, one mode has proven to be steadfast in both its popularity and relevance: the mockumentary. A style of filmmaking that blends the narrative structures and story of fiction film with the style and presentation of non-fiction film, mockumentary remains one of the most prevalent forms of satire in the filmmaking world. The format is utilized in both long-form and short-form styles, feature films and television. Understanding the mockumentary seems like a simple task at first, due to the format's status as comedy. As a result of this format's status as "low-culture", film academia tends to not focus on these types of films. However, there is far more depth to this format than one would first guess, and approaching this depth reveals a great deal not only about mockumentary, but documentary and narrative filmmaking as well. As a blend between these two modes of filmmaking, mockumentary represents a fascinating insight on how the visual style of documentary films offer audiences a sense of reality, and how narrative films can take advantage of these techniques.

When approaching this topic, a simple literature review seemed inappropriate given that the curriculum of the film program at Portland State University focuses on both film production and studies. This led to decision to opt for a creative thesis instead, a short mockumentary film I wrote and directed entitled *The Race Walker*. The film, centered around the fictional second best competitive race walker in the country, was an opportunity to demonstrate my understanding of the format through a more professionally relevant means. This essay serves as a companion to the film I made, and is written as a reflection on the knowledge I have gathered on the mockumentary format, and I how utilized this knowledge in the production of my film. The first section of this essay will focus on the evolution of the mockumentary format, and its key visual

components, while the second section focuses on my reflections on the production of my thesis film, *The Race Walker*.

## SECTION 1: Analysis

Mockumentary, and its distinct visual style, retains a number of consistent elements across various examples. These visual elements almost universally do not originate from mockumentary, and instead come from a variety of different sources. Perhaps the most obvious path in terms of a visual style of the mockumentary is the French New Wave of the late 60's, and the cinéma-vérité style. Cinéma-vérité was a style of documentary filmmaking where filmmakers sought to “use reality as a means to their various ends” (Graham 30). Cinéma-vérité sought to depict reality in its truest form, by foregoing many of the standards of filmmaking. In attempting to create this sense of reality, cinéma-vérité filmmakers often used techniques such as handheld camerawork, natural lighting, and location shooting. As described by documentary filmmaker James C. Lipscomb, these filmmakers “are attempting to capture what happens, to move with our characters without interfering in what they are doing” (Lipscomb 62). This style is perhaps the most often imitated by mockumentary. Most mockumentaries choose to utilize this style as a means to emulate reality, just as the cinéma-vérité sought to present reality in its most objective form. The major difference here, is the distinction between the non-fiction stories of cinéma-vérité, and the fictional stories of mockumentary. Mockumentary uses the audience's familiarity with the conventions of documentary filmmaking, particularly cinéma-vérité, to fool audiences into thinking the film they are watching is entirely truthful. To this end, mockumentary represents almost the polar opposite of cinéma-vérité in terms of end goal. While cinéma-vérité seeks to show an objective truth, mockumentary seeks to show a completely

fictional story disguised as reality. While the goals for these films are vastly different, what they share lies at the core of their existences.

Cinéma-vérité is not the sole inspiration behind the mockumentary, however.

Defining what constitutes a mockumentary is best done through example, and the history of how the format has evolved. The origins of mockumentary is difficult to pin down, as many early examples do not fully commit to the style. Perhaps the earliest notable examples come from the United Kingdom. The 1964 film *A Hard Day's Night*, also notable for its influence on the birth of music videos, presents a (somewhat nonsensical and bizarre) depiction of a day in the life of The Beatles. The style of the film is noted as creating a sort of “reality effect” through its style (Schlotterbeck 575). This reality effect would later be utilized as the basis for mockumentary in the future.. The first true mockumentary is often identified as Woody Allen’s *Take the Money and Run*, released in 1969 (Randall-Clark 343). While *Take the Money and Run* remains an influential film, and essential for the early development of the mockumentary, the format would not truly enter the limelight and gain attention until the release of *This is Spinal Tap* in 1984. This film, a parody of musical documentaries, follows the fictional British band Spinal Tap on their tour through the United States of America. The film initially fooled many filmgoers into believing that Spinal Tap was a real band, partially due to how realistic its depiction of touring life was (Yabroff). To create the same “reality effect” as *A Hard Day's Night*, *This is Spinal Tap* utilized techniques such as “hand-held traveling shots, available lighting, off-the-cuff interviews, and the fabrication of dated screen grains” (Doherty 23). The film remains one of the most popular and respected examples of mockumentary, and is the most obvious source for the popularity of mockumentary as a format today.

As the mockumentary format evolved, the visual conventions of it became solidified. Each of the aforementioned aspects from *This is Spinal Tap* became some of the most prominent features of the medium. Most modern mockumentaries utilize some, if not all, of these techniques in their construction, as well as a number of others. While each of these elements are used for the purpose of creating a sense of reality in a completely fictional story, the ways in which they achieve this goal are wholly different. First, there is the frequent use of natural lighting and location shooting. By avoiding the use of pre-designed sets and soundstages, mockumentaries avoid the look of standard narrative films, opting for the more "in the trenches" style of documentary filmmaking. In accounting for this, most mockumentaries tend to be shot in such a way to utilize the most natural lighting possible. The use of natural lighting requires camera operators and directors of photography to be more aware of the changing light conditions, which can lead to many mockumentaries choosing to shoot in consistent lighting scenarios. An obvious example of this would be the 2014 film *What We Do in the Shadows*, which is shot almost entirely at night. While this is obviously useful for narrative purposes, as the main characters are all vampires who cannot enter sunlight, it also serves another purpose by allowing the filmmakers to have consistent lighting throughout. Lighting and set design are not essential for the mockumentary style, however. Many sitcoms which utilize the format, such as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* tend to have more traditional sets and lighting. In these cases, other aspects are more important for contributing to the aesthetic, such as the handheld camerawork present across almost every mockumentary. Handheld camerawork is perhaps the most notable feature taken from cinéma-vérité by mockumentary. Camera movement tends to be marked by quick pans and zooms. With these quick pans and zooms, the filmmakers give the

illusion of not knowing what will happen next; they move to new subjects as they appear, with the occasional jerky movements to give a sense of surprise. In most of these cases, the camera is moving with the characters as they go through a scene. To support this, many mockumentaries utilize longer takes than most narrative films. Cuts tend to happen less frequently, with pans and zooms acting as a means of changing shots and presenting new information for a scene.

Handheld camerawork and long takes also support the improvisational humor many mockumentaries implement, as they allow for camera operators to follow action that is unplanned. Genre conventions are the last of the major visual elements of the mockumentary, but are perhaps the most important. As mockumentary often falls into the category of satire, the genre of their plots often informs their visual aesthetic as well. The utilization of genre conventions obviously differs wildly from film to film. While *This is Spinal Tap* may use a rhythmically driven style and a great deal of performance footage, *What We Do in the Shadows* opts instead for chase sequences and shaky camerawork evocative of horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project*. Utilization of genre conventions is important for the satire mockumentary attempts to create, but it can also be difficult to achieve. Recognizing the necessary pieces of a genre, and implementing them alongside the necessary pieces of the documentary style, requires a great deal of planning. In order to create an aesthetic that appears unplanned, mockumentaries rely on a number of visual elements that require both intense planning and quick thinking.

For a style of filmmaking that has only truly existed for fifty years, mockumentary has gone through a great deal of evolution. Pulling inspiration from numerous sources in both fiction and nonfiction filmmaking, the medium represents a unique blend of film styles. Due to the fact that narrative constructions of these films vary on a case by case basis, specific visual elements

have been essential for solidifying the format and its identity. These elements are necessary for establishing the medium's "reality effect". As a medium that relies on (somewhat) convincing the audience that fiction is truth, the aesthetic of mockumentary is one that need to appears unplanned. Handheld camerawork, natural lighting, and long takes are among some of the many consistent elements that make up what the mockumentary is. Mockumentaries are one of the most unique approaches to filmmaking, and offer a wide range of opportunities for the evolution of both narrative and documentary filmmaking.

## SECTION 2: Reflections

When creating my thesis film *The Race Walker*, many of my creative decisions were driven by the prior research I had done on the subject of mockumentary filmmaking. My initial plan for the film differed a great deal from the final result, although I do not consider this to be a negative. Initially, the film was going to be a parody of sports documentaries such as the ESPN "30 for 30" series, but as the pre-production phase moved forward, I shifted away from this idea. I felt that that style of film, while appropriate for the narrative of the film, would not fit well with my goal of exploring the visual style of mockumentary. As these documentaries are almost entirely centered around archival footage and interviews, they lack the resemblance to cinéma-vérité filmmaking that most mockumentaries employ. I felt that utilizing this style would be the correct choice based on my desire to center this project around the more common style of mockumentary filmmaking. Once I had decided on the overall vision for the project, moving forward on the pre-production and production became much easier.

In the earliest pre-production stages, I realized that this short film would require a slightly different approach from my prior projects. The writing process did not differ too much; some parts of my script were designed to accommodate for potential improvisation from my actors, but this was about the only major difference in my approach to writing. When planning out the actual filming of the project, my plan to create the visual style of the mockumentary demanded both certain equipment and certain techniques. Most of the film was done in handheld, and to prevent intense camera shaking, a steadicam had to be used. The usage of a steadicam was also helpful for the panning and moving with characters that I wanted for this project. In terms of utilizing natural lighting and location shoots, some issues presented themselves early. Shooting in Portland meant that utilizing natural lighting and on location shooting might prove difficult to the frequency of poor weather conditions. Despite this, most shoot days proved rather easy to work around. When it came to utilizing genre conventions, I realized that the most essential convention to utilize from the sports film would have to be the usage of montage. Training montages, as well as competition montages, are a mainstay of almost every sports film. Including at least montage was a priority for this project, as I felt this was the best means to pay homage to the genre of sports film. Creating the visual style of this project was perhaps the most important goal for me, and the process provided a great deal of experience in filmmaking.

Mockumentary represents many things that can only be achieved through the medium of film. The format's unique blend of both narrative and documentary techniques give it a style that is unmistakable. It gives opportunities to explore the medium of film in fascinating new ways, and question the nature of objectivity in filmmaking. Film is a unique medium of art that blends

features of numerous different artforms, and mockumentary takes that concept to its fullest potential.

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