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The Documentary's Weird Cousin

If you were to walk into a room with ten people and ask, “Who here knows what a mockumentary is?” there is a good chance a little over half of them, so let’s say six for this example, will raise their hands. Then you question further, asking, “Alright, which one of you wants to tell me something about them?” Good job. Three more people crossed off the list on the basis of their dumbfounded stares. Now you are left with a few people who have either seen *This Is Spinal Tap* or people who are trying to guess the meaning of mockumentaries through the name. But where does this leave you?

During my research, I was surprised to find that this time around, I was not the only one who had very limited knowledge on the topic, and it did not seem like I would be getting very much help from those around me. The theoretical situation above reflected my experiences trying to gather information from both my family and my classmates. But I still questioned, what *is* a mockumentary? I later realized that this was too simple of a question. Technically speaking, a mockumentary is quite similar to a documentary, however the focus is usually fictional or portrayed in a comedic or satirical manner. Essentially, a mockumentary is the documentary’s funny cousin. The basics of this film genre are quite simple and easy to comprehend, but the

definition does not explain how to produce something noteworthy as an aspiring director or writer.

The following will be a cultivation of evidence to explain how to create an interesting and captivating mockumentary through the analysis of prominent films, satire, and the basic laws of filming mockumentaries.

A Look at the Greats

A central part of any film is the main character, subject, or topic. This primary rule applies heavily to mockumentaries. The fictitious focus of a mockumentary can make or break the story. Writers often need to choose topics of great interest or of controversy to the general population in order to capture the attention of the people and the media, and what topic is better than classic rockstars? The extremely successful mockumentary, *This is Spinal Tap* by Rob Reiner, paved its own road to fame.

The diverse set of characters in this film are all perfect puzzle pieces which work together to create a complete picture. *This is Spinal Tap* succeeds with its employment of exaggeration within the characters' designs. One of the most appealing aspects of the mockumentary is the wonderful job done at capturing their characters' sincere idiocy (Maslin). The exaggeration of idiocy within certain characters has, at all times, been a tool in comedic writing, however this tactic only applies so effectively given the type of characters created for this story specifically. Exaggeration is a largely important aspect and comedic device of the film as it is related to the typical rockstar stereotype that has been naturally instilled within our minds. As the media so often portrays, rockstars are supposed to live lavishly, outrageously, and most of all, ridiculously.

As the topic is one of wide recognition, jokes were not too difficult to produce for easy understanding.

Another example which successfully employs the use of exaggeration and stereotyping is the film *Fear of a Black Hat* by Rusty Cundieff. “. . . Plot, character development and logic are banished from the script to make room for more jokes, the results remain chaotic, electric and hilarious to this day” (Kang). This mockumentary is largely popular due to its hilariously absurd depiction of the hip hop identity and culture. Again, a large part of the comedic strategy within this film relies on the exaggeration of a stereotype. *Fear of a Black Hat*, however, uses the classic, moderately racist, rapper persona over rockstars. “They have an album they wanted to call ‘Don’t Shoot ’Til You See the Whites.’ An interviewer asks, ‘Of their eyes?’ and Ice Cold asks, ‘Whose eyes?’” (Kang). This exchange of dialogue reveals a few comedic strategies within the film. However, the two most prominent and repeating jokes happen to involve the idea of rapper names and ‘subtle’ racist quips, both of which provide ample comedic material.

Finally, *Borat*, by Larry Charles, brings up another highly successful but risky mockumentary. A film such as this, one filled with exaggeration, idiocy, and racism, retains a certain level of risk when creating, as many of the topics and jokes are based on quite controversial issues. The risk involved with this type of mockumentary involves critical acclaim from groups that have a stricter sense for comedy. “. . . Some people are too stupid and too racist to understand that the joke is on them” (Dargis). A film like *Borat* usually attracts a more specific audience. The intended audiences for such films are usually a mix of those who are well informed on current domestic or international issues, and those who retain a much less strict

sense of humor. Some of the comedic strategies of the film can be considered distasteful or carefree.

These three successful mockumentaries all have at least one important detail in common. That detail is the use of over-exaggerated stereotypes. Exaggeration itself is a very popular comedic device. Many people enjoy its use as people tend to be a fan of blatant ridiculousness. Stereotypes are also great foundations for comedic character creation as many people naturally become aware of these personas throughout their own lives. One is never actually institutionally taught about stereotypes, but one usually discovers a variety through listening to adolescent peers. One tends to learn about stereotypes early on in life, thus, stereotypes tend to be easier to understand and naturally become a great basis for the comedic aspects of specific stories. However in relation to the overall story, racism and stereotyping are technically not tools for comedy, but work hand in hand with satire like nails to a hammer.

Analysis of Satire

Comedic devices are an author's tools for hammering out humorous screenplays and films. Along with hyperbole and parody, satire is one of the most highly used comedic devices of the last couple of centuries. Satire has been a strong part of many famous works belonging to Voltaire, Plato, and George Orwell. It must be noted that often satire does not have to be directly linked to comedy and humor, but can also be solely for the sake of bringing an issue to light or shining ridicule upon a topic. This means that not all satires require a comedic undertone. So then, an important question must be asked, is satire an essential part of writing mockumentaries? If so, what form of satire?

Throughout history, satire has made its mark. This device has had a prominent role in many texts and famous manuscripts. Self-aimed or self-deprecating humor has even been a large part of Roman satire (Gold). Apparently, time does not seem to alter our comedic devices but simply the topics which we consider to be of relevance. An argument can be made that satire is welcome in any comedic situation if the subject is familiar or well known. Local and national media coverage are exemplary sources for gathering information as the media acts as a ‘gatekeeper’ of info that they deem to be important for the public.

Another question to be raised is whether or not satire itself is important. Given satire’s nature to ridicule and exemplify ridiculousness through comedy, it might be a fantastic device for addressing domestic or local issues. “. . . There is a strong correlation between satire and the improvement of individuals and society. . .” (Sisk). The purpose of creating a mockumentary is sometimes as simple as just wanting to mock a certain topic. For one to publish a mockumentary, one is essentially giving others the opportunity to view certain topics in a new light, or in a way that matches your own opinions, beliefs, and ideals. Well known television shows such as Saturday Night Live use satire to mock politics or people of temporary importance in the public’s eye. Using film as a medium to connect the people to topics of importance can be seen as direly important for the wellbeing of society as film then starts to act as a general informer.

Satire is sometimes defined as “A literary work in which vices, follies, stupidities, abuses, etc., are held up to ridicule and contempt” (Weisgerber). If incorporated into mockumentary writing, the film may essentially become an outlet for criticizing a certain topic of interest such as common focuses like politics, fame, or drama. Opportunities to share criticism

and beliefs allows for the casual but prompted sharing of ideas. If anything, satire is a tool to simply teach or cause one to think deeply.

To bring up a prior example, *Borat* is a mockumentary in which satire is used effectively to criticize cultural ignorance in America. “. . . *Borat* might be thought of as a way for one extended set of ethnicities. . . to make fun of another extended set of ethnicities” (Condee). Surprisingly, this simple idea is a major point in the story.

Essentially, satire is meant for the plain criticism of a chosen topic. It is the choice of writers and authors to use satirical elements in a humorous way when trying to convey a point or raise an intellectual question. Satire is, however, essential for creating a mockumentary. The point of satire and the basics of mockumentaries align in such a way where the two go hand in hand.

Going Back to the Basics

With the origins of mockumentaries only spanning back a few decades, the practice has been refined. Mockumentaries have recently become a large part of the television industry. TV directors are taking their own spins on portrayal and are creating mockumentary based television series. The art of mockumentaries has even assisted in the innovation of television sitcoms, changing the program since the mid 1990's (Hight). A highly recognizable television show, *Saturday Night Live*, is a prime example for the evolution of mockumentaries to late-night television. Shows such as *Saturday Night Live* tackle numerous issues and topics every week. The advanced writing team usually takes a clear and biased stance on a specific issue of controversy and makes their point rather clear through a series of skits.

The Mockumentary is a unique cinematic form that utilizes parody and subversion. Mockumentaries manage to affect our beliefs, ideals, and assumptions about certain topics of interest despite the fact that every author differs in his or her motivations and strategies (Miller). Mockumentaries are designed to make you think. Entertainment relies on the personal taste of the true author. But what really matters is the message.

A mockumentary serves a purpose. Authors and directors want to send a message and ask a question at the same time. The question is one which seeks for your opinion. Whether or not the mockumentary takes light of political mishaps or racial rifts, the purpose remains somewhat the same.

The name of 'mockumentary' is a little controversial itself. "In fact, [some reject] the term 'mockumentary' as too glib and condescending. . ." (Doherty). The fact that the word contains 'mock-' can give off the wrong impression. Although some of these films are created for the purpose of painting a negative image on a certain subject, not all mockumentaries follow in that path.

Realistically, many mockumentaries may hold the same significance as official documentaries. The only major difference between the two film styles is how the information is presented. A large part of presentation for a mockumentary involves entertainment; unlike a documentary, a mockumentary has a few bells and whistles to keep you interested.

So now, what is a mockumentary? A mockumentary is a documentary's funny cousin. A mockumentary should make you think, question, and wonder; however, most notably, it should put a smile on your face.

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