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### What Will They Do Next? Documentaries Within Mockumentaries

Nichols supposes that the documentary, even to this day, still remains without a concrete definition, and that the closest explanation to best articulating its form would be that offered by Grierson in the 1930s; that being, the “creative treatment of actuality,” which acknowledges that the documentary is as much a creative piece as it is a journalistic and historical one grounded in ethical responsibility (6). Whilst the documentary can stand on its own accord, its supplement, the mockumentary, cannot be considered by itself, but, rather, always in the light of its counterpart, for it is the qualities and trademarks of the documentary that, when twisted, parodied, satirised, or the like, inform the mockumentary and afford this new platform its popularity and livelihood. Where the documentary is independent to the extent that it has established its own self, the mockumentary is dependent upon the works and characteristics of its superior in order to carve out for itself its own standing and legacy amongst film genres. Larry Charles’ *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) and Casey Affleck’s *I’m Still Here* (2010) are but two mockumentary features that inherently do that which their genre requires of them: mock. But they also exist within the boundaries belonging to the documentary insofar as they record, report, and comment on real-life events and situations as they unfold or have unfolded. The only difference is that both films are, by and large, responsible for creating the events and

situations that they then frame within the tropes of the documentary, affording them a unique place within the genre's catalogue of works.

Perhaps the strongest component of both Charles' *Borat* and Affleck's *I'm Still Here* in regards to documentary-making is both films' ability to *make documentaries*, by which we mean that *they* present the real events as *they* create them for depiction in *their* mockumentaries. They simultaneously poke fun at the documentary form whilst creating one themselves, with the world around them unaware that they are the subject of commentary. Whereas other mockumentary works, such as television series *Parks and Recreation* and *The Office*, mock the documentary form in a controlled environment by way of a scripted format in which their actors are completely aware of their cues and lines, *Borat* and *I'm Still Here* act and record their respective unknowing and unaware publics react. The films' performers, be they dinner party guests or a nightclub audience, are, as one is led to believe, not in on what the makers of the respective films believe to be a joke. The filmmakers construct situations that they anticipate will induce a noteworthy response, such as when Borat (Sacha Baron Cohen) sings a fictional Kazakhstani national anthem to the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a rodeo visited by some of America's most patriotic, who boo at, and almost riot because of, his antics. Similar situations include Borat humorously disrupting a television news report, inviting a prostitute (Luenell Campbell) to dinner to the disgust and shock of his fellow guests, deriding and offending a feminist group, and attempting to kidnap Pamela Anderson.

*I'm Still Here* played out on an even more widespread public scale, with media outlets, ranging from television networks to blogs, reporting on and actively playing a role in what appeared to be the mental decline of actor Joaquin Phoenix as he proclaimed his retirement from making films in order to navigate his way through the American hip-hop

music scene, albeit with little success. Where success did come from, however, did not lay within Phoenix's prowess as a musician, but, rather, the way in which he performed this contrived downfall before the unknowing public eye—who then, through social media and sheer interest, proceeded to publicise and escalate the grandness of Phoenix's alleged fall from grace, which seemingly reached its lowest point when he appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* in 2009. However, this was arguably his performance's highest achievement, as it epitomised everything *I'm Still Here* was about: it created a stir that the filmmakers then used for their own purpose. The fact that this whole scenario played out on a public platform not only made his demeanour and actions all that much more intriguing and gripping, but it drew audiences in, included them, and made them play a part in this whole scenario. The downward spiral of Phoenix would, if true, have been the subject of many prime time documentaries. The fact that his decline was all a fabrication and generated events worthy of a documentary only went to serve the purposes of the mockumentary: Phoenix and Affleck created an event (a star's downfall), the world reacted to that event (personal responses and the media), the world contributed to that event (social media commentary, the nightclub fight), and then they the filmmakers recorded all that which occurred throughout the experiment and presented it in the light of commentary and humour.

From this, both pictures are able to say something about those they provoke and then proceed to report on. These films offer criticisms on American culture, prejudices, social norms, expectations, celebrity worship, humour, patriotism, pop culture, masculinity, and the media, among other topics that the filmmakers deem worthy of consideration, ridicule, parody, and the like. Swartz considers *Borat* to be less about making fun of stereotypes and more about the violation of cultural norms that exist and are enforced upon a given society ("The Meaning of Borat"). It is in these scenes where Borat subverts expectations and norms

that the film begins to offer subtle commentaries on a variety of the topics listed earlier. Almost front and centre in the picture is American nationalism, which plays out over the course of the film to frequently reveal a lack of knowledge about other countries and other cultures. A vast number of Americans who Borat converses with do not doubt for one second that he, as a foreigner (and one not of the West), is uncivilised, rude, misogynistic, homophobic, xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic. It is in these moments and scenes that Lack considers to be the essence of what makes *Borat* a documentary: as the eponymous character travels across America, “his encounters with others provides evidence that Americans do indeed believe foreigners act this way, and that Americans themselves are often just as ignorant as Borat himself” (2014). Indeed, Baron Cohen himself elaborated on the fact that the Borat character acted as a vehicle so as to have others reveal their own opinions and viewpoints: “Borat essentially works as a tool. By himself being anti-Semitic, he lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudices, whether it's anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism” (Akbar 2006). By way of mockumentary, the film provides a documentary about Americans and their ignorance and dislike of other countries, nationalities, and cultures. Borat the character is the starting point, as much a mirror as he is a punching bag: embodying all the characteristics these Americans deny they have so as to reflect these ugly traits back upon their ignorant selves whilst taking a beating for doing so, one scene after the other. Nichols notes that “many documentaries make frequent use of poetic and narrative storytelling techniques as well as rhetorical ones” (Lack “Essay Day”). In *Borat*, the rhetorical device is Borat himself, whose antics and escapades inadvertently comment on the social landscape he finds both himself and ourselves in whilst simultaneously affording the film something of a narrative structure. It is this same narrative structure that is reflected in and inherent to the success of the experiment as a documentary

and the governing film as a mockumentary; Borat acts, those around him react and, in doing so, reveal something telling about themselves and American society and culture, and the filmmakers observe, record, and share. Aufderheide states documentaries to be “portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material,” notably making the distinction that the form is not real life, but “about real life” (23–24), which Lack applies to *Borat*, observing that the film “uses real people and manipulates genuine scenarios to craft a larger fictional narrative about how a man unfamiliar with our culture reacts and is reacted to” (“Essay Day”).

The theme of a performer who is in on the joke informing and inciting an audience and culture who aren't is explored in *I'm Still Here* to great effect. Where Baron Cohen and Charles explored non-Western foreigners within American culture, Phoenix and Affleck delve greatly into celebrity worship, self-indulgence, and the importance of and aura surrounding mental health, and how each of these three, to an extent, informed the others. To better ascertain how this was achieved, it is helpful to apply to our consideration of the film the agendas of mockumentary (novelty, promotion, dramatic style, and parody and satire) that Craig Hight presents (206–208). Taking the film as novelty, audiences within the film—such as concert guests, paparazzi, and bloggers—are thrilled at the rare chance of witnessing firsthand the poetic and humorous meltdown of an icon, so they contribute to the narrative via both sharing the story on and through various mediums and baiting Phoenix, such as when he is heckled during his live hip-hop performance, resulting in him diving into the crowd and fighting his opponents. The whole experiment can be framed as a promotion, an advertisement for Phoenix, as well as bringing awareness to mental health and how the audiences *want* to consume more of the actor's bizarre behaviour irregardless of his own personal health and safety. The mockumentary as dramatic style here emphasises the film's low budget and lack of clear narrative, with our attention drawn to Phoenix's erratic

behaviour, from his excessive swearing and smoking to his constant fighting with his companions and a wild party involving prostitutes and drugs. As parody and satire, the film recalls the washed-up, struggling, and/or reclusive artist stereotype and draws upon works, such as Oliver Stone's *The Doors*, that explore such a character's relationship with fame, material excess, their friends, their craft, and their legacy and place in the world. Through these four tendencies, we can begin to piece together what is at the core of the mockumentary: by observing just one man we see the whole world. We see and hear people chanting his name but without any particular affection: they want more of him for themselves, they want his lowest failures to bring them to their highest satisfaction. Phoenix knows that this audience thinks that he thinks they love him, when, in fact, they do not, as it is revealed to us through the mockumentary. As Affleck noted in an interview with critic Roger Ebert: "we obsess about celebrities. We create them, build myths around them, and then hunt them and destroy them. I don't know where its taking us or what it means but I know we do it" ("Casey Affleck Levels"). If Borat is a punching bag and a mirror, then Phoenix the washed-up artist archetype is a stress ball that's players project and enact their own worst inclinations upon. They use him for their own self-indulgent pleasures. They pull him down to push themselves up. They don't care about his mental decline, they care about laughing at his bushy beard, sunglasses, and distant personality; they don't care about his music career, they care about deriding him for stumbling through the lyrics; and they don't care about his smoking, swearing, drinking, drug-taking, and eating, they care about scolding his loss of talent. Phoenix's portrayal of declining mental health was but the means for some consumers to worship him just to get him to be more "out there" for their own entertainment.

Much has been written about the complex, committed craftsmanships of *Borat* and *I'm Still Here*, but further consideration needs to be allotted to the ethical side of the actions

taken, especially those involving the exploitation, manipulation, and incitement of unwitting participants, some of whom have been affected in the filmmaking processes. To accomplish their respective goals, these films needed to keep audiences in the dark, so this dilemma raises the issue of whether or not it is permissible to conceal one's purposes so as to illicit honest responses, thereby hopefully contributing to a greater good. More study can be done in this area, and should prove fruitful in regards to the ethical standards of journalism that the documentary form is imbued with; however, this would not necessarily always relate to mockumentaries, as it is only that Charles' film and Affleck's film were unique cases that both involved documentary approaches and results. For now, though, it can be said that *Borat* and *I'm Still Here* were successful in creating documentaries within the mockumentary form, of which they have created for themselves an indelible place within its spectrum of works.

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