The Theory and Practice of Mockumentary

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"In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice, while in practice there is!"

- *In theory*:
  - *Documentaries* are films which (aim to) represent reality through:[1]
    - "traces" (Currie 1999);
    - or "assertoric acts" (Carroll 1997);
    - or both (Plantinga 2005).
  - *Mockumentaries* are films which present *fictional events* using a documentary format:
    - In a nutshell: they are fictions which lie about their logical status, misleading the audience into thinking they are documentaries (Wallace 2018).

[1] More abstractly: it is a *genre* whose relationship with truth is particular (Terrone 2020; Friend 2021; Slugan and Terrone 2021).

- *In practice*:
  - *Mockumentaries* contribute to a "post-documentary experience" (Corner 2002) which arguably:
    - thwart the fact/fiction distinction,
    - and (aim to) subvert the norms associated with the two genres (Macdonald and Cousins 1998; Nichols 2001; Roscoe and Hight 2001; Bayer 2005; Juhasz and Lerner 2006).
  - *Documentaries* are also fraught with:
    - performative aspects (Waugh 2011): people "play themselves" in front of a camera;
    - fabricated content (Wallace 2018; Terrone 2020): docudrama, (digital) re-enactment;
    - fiction film techniques (Wallace 2018): narrative editing, heterodiegetic music.

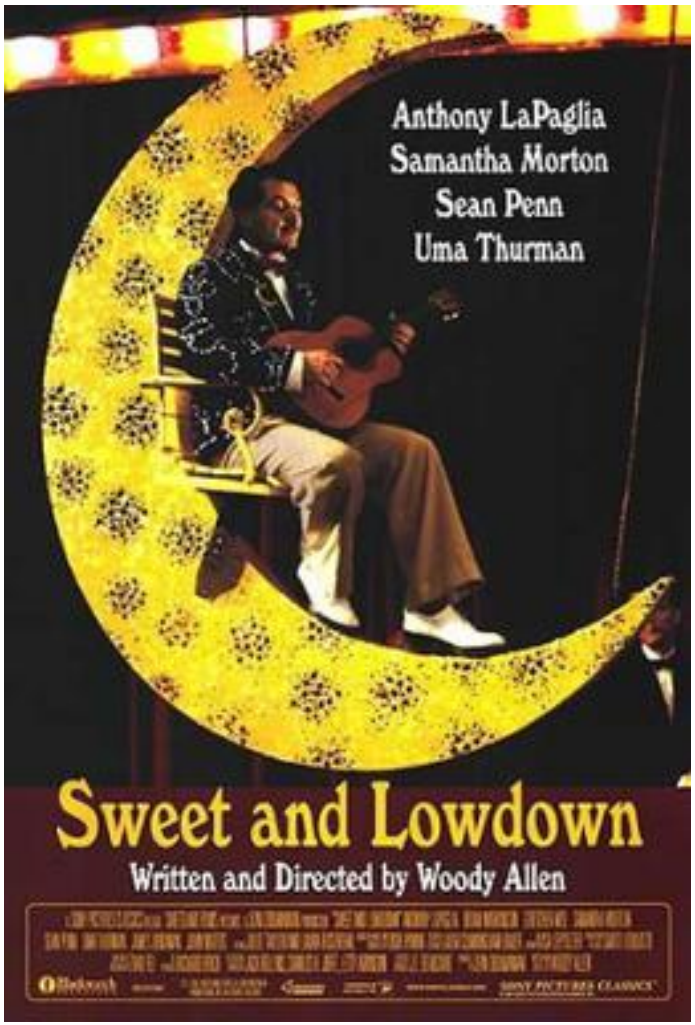
Aim of this talk

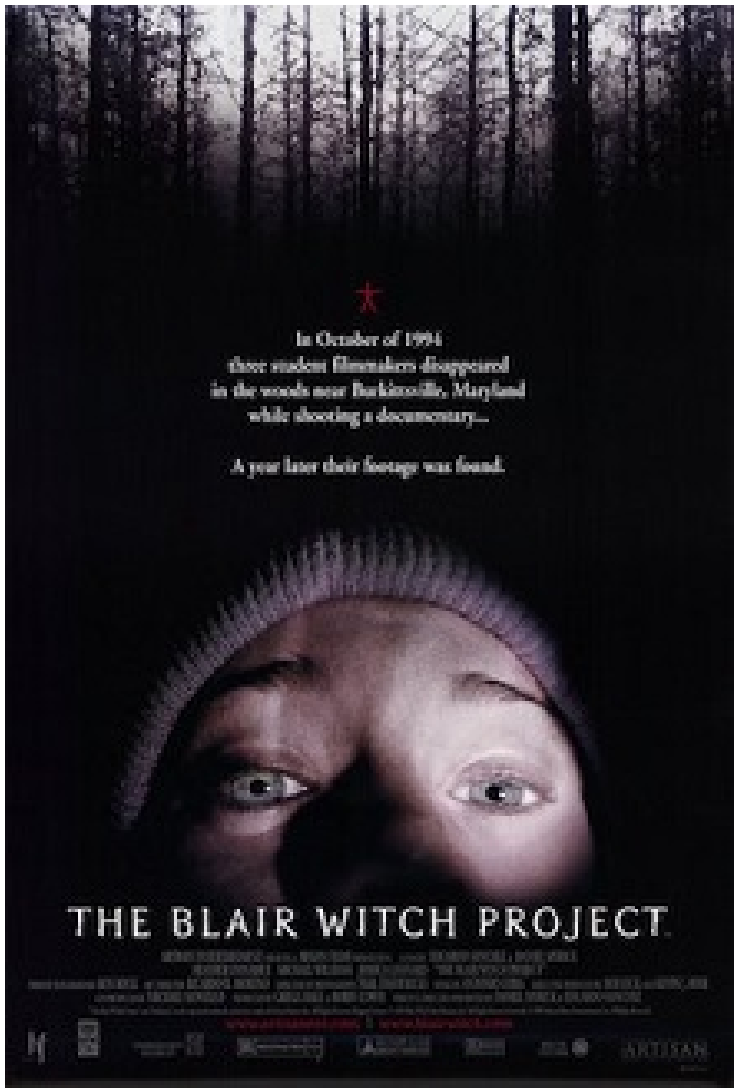
- Making a case for "super-generic ambiguity":
  - Genre $=_{def}$ classification + norms of appreciation;[2]
  - "Super-genre" here means fiction/non-fiction following Friend (2012);
  - **Def**: a work is *super-generically* ambiguous whenever it is ambiguous between fiction and non-fiction.[3]
- These super-generalically abiguous works are interesting because:
  - they contribute to the vagaries of classifications,
  - and they provide a limit case for appreciation: as *both* fiction and non-fiction.
- My case is Banksy 2011 *Exit through the gift shop*.
  - But before I build up my case, let us first warm up with a tour of mockumentaries.

[2] In Genettian lingo, we are talking of the relationships between "archi-textualité" and "le pacte de lecture" (ou l'horizon d'attente) (Genette 1992; Schaeffer 1986).

[3] In a recent blog-post Nele Van de Mosselaer calls these "ambiguous (non) fictions".

Simple cases



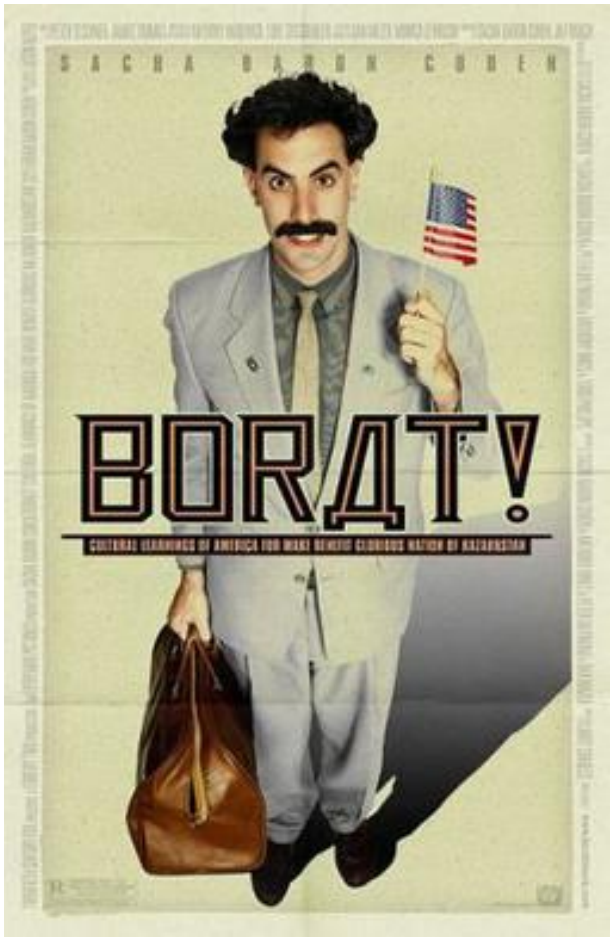


- Simple cases are the borrowing of documentary techniques:
  - Allen 1999 *Sweet and Lowdown*: fake interviews;
  - Myrick & Sánchez 1999 *The Blair Witch Project*: found footage technique.
- Appreciation here includes suspicion:[4]
  - "Is this real?" is a question one should consider in watching the film;
  - it should raise the interest and emotional involvement.
- In the case of the *Blair Witch Project* the suspicion was even manufactured through a marketing campain based on a hoax:
  - same name for actors and characters;
  - a rumour at The Sundance Film Festival that the actors are missing and deceased;
  - a website containing additional material (fake police reports, etc.)[5]
- These cases are simple, because the intended effect presupposes the fact/fiction distinction to operate.

[4] It deliberately triggers "paranoid reading" (Sedgwick 2003).

[5] The website went viral (before social media), and is arguably the first instance of this phenomenon.

Trickier cases

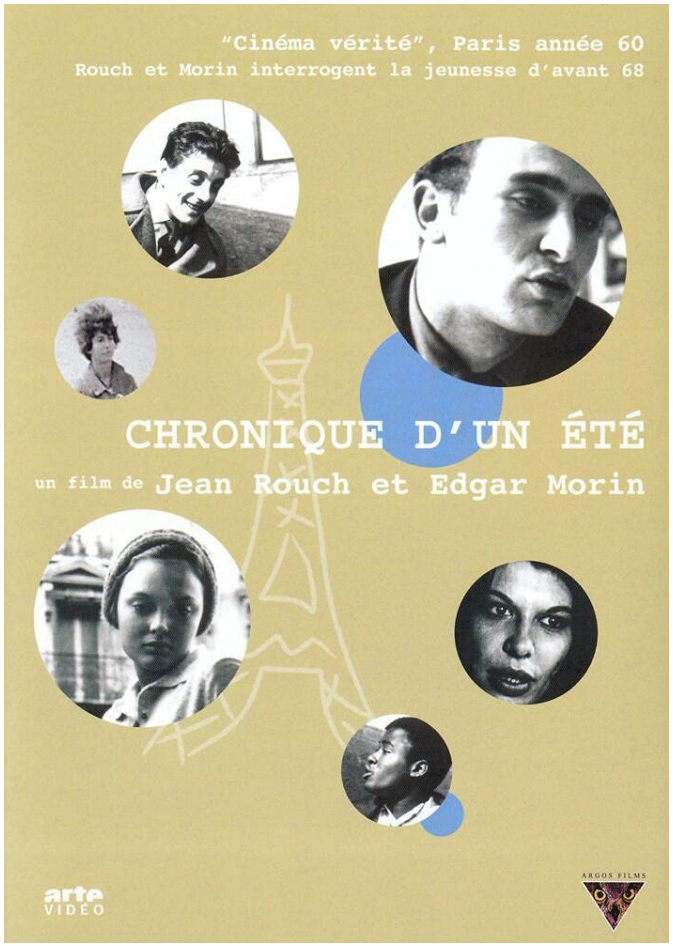


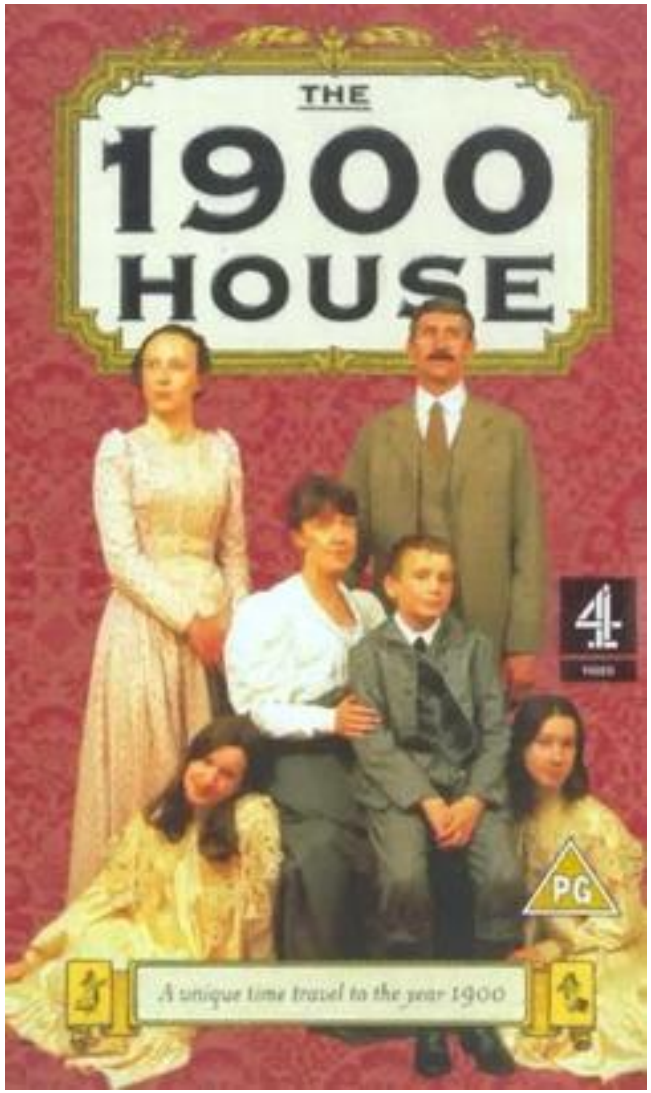


- Recorder pranks (*Borat!* 2006) and performances (*The Yes Men* 2003) offer a tricker case:[6]
  - Typically, the film shows a fictional character (or an impersonation) interacting with real people;
  - particiapents do not know they are fooled, but the spectator knows;
  - the point is to document real people's genuine reactions.
- This is reminiscent of Currie (1999)'s embarrasment with promotional videos in which a cartoon figure guides the spectator into a firm.
  - Terrone (2020)'s "filter-out mechanism" to the rescue:
  - we can see these documentaries as genuine documentaries inviting perceptual beliefs but filtering out the beliefs about the fictitious individuals.

[6] The Yes Men call their performances "identity correction": they borrow the identity of some bad guys to make them better publicly. Sacha Baron Cohen uses the technique of "caméra visible": the effect is similar to that of a hidden camera (tricking people to get genuine reactions) but with a highly visible setup.

From Ciné-vérité to Reality TV





- The move from *cinéma vérité* (direct cinema) to *reality TV* is conceptually very relevant (Corner 2002):
  - From *observation* to *display*: a "new ecology of the factual" within films;
  - Reality TV is factual films aiming at entertaining:
    - vs. previously regonised functions of documentaries (publicity, reportage, analysis)
  - Paradigmatic example: game frame (*ex*: a family back in 1900)
    - The viewers should adopt both the position of a voyeur and a talent-show judge;
    - the participants are both game players and actors, "performing themselves" or "performing authenticity" (Wallace 2018).

One might use the term "selving" to describe the central process whereby "true selves" are seen to emerge (and develop) from underneath and, indeed, through, the "performed selves" projected for us, as a consequence of the applied pressures of objective circumstance and group dynamics. (Corner 2002, pp. 261–2)

- This sets up the stage for the "post-truth" political era we now live in.

Bansky's case



- *Exit Through the Gift Shop* presents itself as a documentary about Thierry Guetta, aka. Mr Brainwash.
  - In the first part of the film, Thierry Guetta is simply a camera addict who films street art being done in Los Angeles and around the world;
  - in the second part of the film, Thierry Guetta becomes an artist himself, and prepares a big exhibition in Los Angeles (*Life is beautiful*), which becomes a huge success.

Appreciation

- All the works and events shown really happened: the shows, the works, the artists, etc.[7]
  - Besides, the film crew repeatedly claimed that the film is a genuine documentary.[8]
- *Yet*, questions arised from the start about whether *Exit* is a genuine or fake documentary.
  - See this LA Times article, and this Reddit thread.

[7] Including Banksy, who appears masked and with a changed voice. Or is he?

[8] When asked "Is Exit Through the Gift Shop real?" Banksy replied "Yes" in 2012 in an interview.

Mockumentary?

- The main argument in favour of Banksy's film to be a mockumentary is that the story is too good to be true:
  - The argument is weak, given that the genre classification is never inferred from content, and the film has all the standard features of a documentary.
- However, it is true that there are a lot of shifty elements to consider:
  - Thierry Guetta's obsession with filming is indeed very, very strange (and it is justified in a very lame fashion);
  - when he decides to follow Banksy's advice and make art, his wife takes on the camera (which is barely credible);
  - the hype around Mr Brainwash is fueled by Banksy and Shepard Fairey, despite their claim to the opposite;
  - *Mr Brainwash* is the superficial artist *par excellence* – a sort of Andy Warhol radical adept for whom nothing matters in art other than being talked about.
    - Is it really possible to be *that* superficial?[9]
    - Isn't he the *perfect*, *larger than life* fake artist?

[9] Can you still be Dalí after Dalí?

- Moreover, Banksy is Banksy:
  - the film is a radical criticism of the art world, at the time when street art gets institutionalised:
    - the main "message" of the movie is to unsettle entrenched intuitions about art.
  - Toward the end Mr Brainwash is heavily reflexive:
    - he claims to be Bansky's "biggest work of art": should it be undertsood *literally* or *metaphorically*?
  - Banksy is a reflexive artist in general, and that would be weird to see him making a traditional documentary at a time when:

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the mockumentary has become one of the most pervasive audio-visual trends, and has been embraced by film-makers, broadcasters and audiences worldwide as 'an accepted part of the mainstream' (Wallace 2018, p. 13)

- Besides, how much do you want to appear as a fool by deciding wrongly?
  - so you have all the reasons to opt for a "paranoid reading" on this one (Sedgwick 2003).

Interpretive stakes

- As a documentary, the main interpretative question is: *is Thierry Guetta an artist or not?*
  - Thierry Guetta self-describes as an artist, and has been recognised as such by the art world, so according to the institutional definition of art, he is an artist.
  - however, the film builds up scepticism about this definition of art:

[Shepard Fairey:] I do think that the whole phenomenon of Thierry's obsession with street art, becoming a street artist, a lot of suckers buying into his show and him selling a lot of expansive art very quickly: it's anthropologically, sociologically, it's a fascinating thing to observe. And maybe there are some things to be learned from it. [...]

[Banksy:] I don't know what that means, Thierry's huge success in the art world. I mean, maybe Thierry was a genius all along, maybe he got a bit lucky, maybe it means art is a bit of a joke.

- As a mockumentary, the main interpretative question is: *is Thierry Guetta a work of art?*
  - the putative work of art is Mr Brainwash: Thierry Guetta's alter ego,
    - it would have been designed by Banksy and Fairey;
    - It would follow that Thierry Guetta is an amazing performer, which is also hardly credible!
  - Banksy's artistic intentions would not be so clear, unless he wanted us to wonder about the authenticity of street legends...[10]
- The argument for super-genre ambiguity from reception:
  - super-genre ambiguity in this case yields a richer appreciation;
  - discussions about the ambiguity being part of the experience.

[10] Banksy himself being a street legend.



Shoden commented on **post**

reddit

I think that the most amazing part about the movies is that either way it is brilliant.

If it was real, it is a wonderful documentary and ridiculous story about how something like Mr. Brainwash could be created.

If it was a hoax then it is a biting indictment of the art worlds obsession with branding.

It works great both ways, and the debate about it is fun too. It's the INCEPTION of documentaries with all it's layers and interpretations. I think it's one of the best movies I have seen years.

30 upvotes 0 replies

View more on Reddit

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Definition of mockumentaries

- First definition:

  fiction films that make use of (copy, mock, mimic, gimmick) documentary style and therefore acquire its associated content (the moral and social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance. (Juhasz and Lerner 2006, p. 7)

- Wallace (2018) argues that this definition should be extended:
  - films like *A Hard Day's Night* (or sitcoms like *The Thick of It*), where there is no explicit camera crew within the diegesis;
  - and any scripted or performed shows.

  Broadly, I consider the mockumentary to include texts where the immediate subject matter is fictional, but where the visual style is one that resembles a pre-existing mode of non-fiction media, or, significantly, where this style resembles other mockumentaries. This definition is deliberately wide-ranging and includes fake radio news, fake documentary films, fake television documentaries and the imitation of non-fiction television programmes such as chat shows, game shows and adverts. To be truly classed as a mockumentary there must be some level of intentionality involved in the fiction looking like it is factual, though this does not necessarily have to extend so far as to include the presence of a diegetic documentary crew. (Wallace 2018, p. 8)