Birds, *Borat*, and Two Thousand Dozen Eggs: Mockumentary as a Mode of Reception

by

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Abstract

In my thesis, I extend the idea, introduced by Vivian Sobchack in "Toward a Phenomenology of Non-Fictional Experience," of documentaries as a mode of reception or 'way of watching' rather than a 'cinematic object,' or set of conventions or qualities, to the mockumentary genre, arguing that the mockumentary can be best understood as a mode of reception. The mockumentary mode of reception is predicated on a skepticism of anything claiming to be a representation of reality, or what Bill Nichols calls a 'discourse of sobriety.' Within this mode, audiences are encouraged to approach all texts as mediated and, due to their necessary origin from a human source, emplotted, and therefore something one step removed from the real world. Entering into the mockumentary mode of reception does not happen automatically, however, and viewers respond to a text based on their own expectations of it and predispositions towards it. This means that misinterpretations can be made, and films can be received as a documentary when filmmakers intend them to be seen as a mockumentary, or vice versa. Due to the documentary genre's assumed connections to reality, this error can have material consequences. I argue that the initial audience's reaction to the film *Forgotten Silver* (Jackson and Botes, 1995) proves there is, indeed, a mockumentary mode of reception. The film, constructed and intended as a mockumentary, was viewed as a documentary by some audiences, whose understanding of history was (briefly) altered as a result. Meanwhile, Tim Heidecker and Sacha Baron Cohen each integrate their understanding of the mockumentary mode of reception into their work, creating false realities to entertain particular audiences that are aware of what they are doing though their subjects - and certain other audiences - may not. The implications of understanding the mockumentary as a mode of reception are wide-ranging, potentially allowing us to comprehend the growing disconnect between modern political and cultural groups regarding what constitutes basic facts or accepted realities.

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*not proposal. Allusion

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Introduction: Mockumentary as a Mode of Reception

It was a sad day indeed when a news outlet reported the grisly finding of fifteen dead hobbits in the attic of Peter Jackson, famed director of *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (2001-2003), at least for several aghast Facebook users, who quickly wrote posts expressing their dismay. Some even voiced the desire to "make some kind of example of this guy."[1] For whatever reason, they did not appear to consider the rather relevant issue of the fictionality of hobbits, nor did they seem to note the source: satirical news site *The Onion*. The article was written by people intending to be funny, and, luckily for hobbit-kind, Jackson was not guilty of any real crime. Despite the staff of *The Onion's* best efforts, however, there were people who appeared to believe the article after its release, even with the addition of what many would consider to be obvious markers. These people seemed to see the source as legitimate, perhaps noting only the journalistic tone of the headline or the accompanying image, which appears to be a conventional newspaper photograph of a crime scene, complete with a miniature head shot of Jackson in the bottom right. The headline, "Grisly Remains of 15 Hobbits Discovered in Peter Jackson's Attic,"[2] however, was intended to be a joke, and the 'tragic' photograph has several indications of its creator's humorous intentions, such as the large, hairy feet (a recognizable feature of hobbits for a knowledgeable audience) sticking out of the bottom of a row of miniature body bags. For some, though, the article appeared to provide one more tragic reminder of the cruelty of humanity. For others, the existence of those who apparently believed the article to be real became another joke in and of itself, an illustration of the gullibility of particular demographics.

[1] Gerda, "30 Funny Responses By Gullible People That Believed These 'The Onion' Articles Were Real," BoredPanda, Last modified March 25, 2019, https://www.boredpanda.com/people-believe-onion-articles-real/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic.

[2] Gerda, "30 Funny Responses."

Publicly sharing the reactions of these presumed fools became a new punch-line for people in the know. How, the latter asked, could anyone believe such an obviously false premise? Perhaps, though, those publicly posting about their dismay had the last laugh, as they later claimed their posts were intended ironically, and it was in fact they who were part of a superior group of knowledgeable jokesters who laughed at the people laughing at them. Whatever the case and whoever told the jokes, this one fake news article created epistemological uncertainty about who believed what and who could be believed. Ultimately, the scenario provides an example of the nuanced and often imperfect ways people construct their conception of reality; it also suggests that the process of designating what is true – and what is perceived as true by others – is complicated and dependent on a variety of factors.

This was not Peter Jackson's first involvement in such a scenario. A film he and Costa Botes directed, *Forgotten Silver* (1995), was met by some with a similar reaction to those who believed the hobbit story (or at least appeared to). This was not entirely an accident. Before the first screenings, audiences were shown advertisements on television and read essays in 'serious' magazines about the important documentary that Jackson and Botes created.[3] Viewers then tuned in to learn about the newly legendary New Zealand filmmaker Colin McKenzie, whose many contributions to cinema were cruelly forgotten over time but rediscovered by intrepid modern documentarians. This new reality was, unfortunately for those who became invested in the narrative, fantasy. McKenzie never existed, and Jackson and Botes, who intended to share a laugh with their audience, ended up having to justify the obvious (at least to them) jokes they made throughout the film, jokes which were supposed to undo any verisimilitude it created.

[3] Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver: A New Zealand Television Hoax and Its Audience," in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 174.

Some viewers approached the initial screenings of *Forgotten Silver* very seriously, however, and so enjoyed a very serious film. *Forgotten Silver* shows that audiences can completely misread humour that is written into texts if they are firmly entrenched within a particular mode of reception. In this case, viewers who believed claims made within the film assumed it was a documentary, and so viewed it as an example of that genre. Due to their previous experiences with and assumptions about documentaries, many did not register the humour Jackson and Botes attempted to insert into the text, humour that was intended to have very different results from the construction of concrete historical truth. The ironic style favoured by Jackson and Botes slipped so seamlessly into the narrative that some audiences missed it, believing in the truth of what the filmmakers considered obviously absurd. Jackson and Botes' mockery of recognizable conventions within documentaries were read by some as straightforward deployment of those conventions, with intended humour being usurped by received verisimilitude.

Forgotten Silver and its reception therefore highlight two very different processes of approaching and viewing texts that appear to belong to the documentary genre. One takes the genre very seriously indeed, believing documentary texts to have a unique and direct connection to what is real; the other recognizes tropes of the documentary genre as constructed and therefore may enjoy an ironic laugh at a text with no such link to the real world. Each has a different foundational epistemology serving as the basis for the viewing experience. This hints at some of the underlying and evolving interactions between an audience's mode of reception and their perception of reality that other filmmakers, such as Sacha Baron Cohen and Tim Heidecker, integrate into their own mockumentary texts. Skepticism of traditional sources of 'fact' like the documentary is an important element of each of these artist's work, and both use humorous irony

and absurdity to highlight the potential pitfalls of relying entirely on these sources - while also encouraging viewers to remain active participants in discerning what is true. Despite the work of the creators, however, audience members view these texts based on their own preexisting beliefs about the nature of the text, establishing a relationship with them that may or may not align with the filmmaker's intentions. In short, the meaning of the text depends on how viewers watch it. I will argue in this thesis that, collectively, texts created by these artists prove the existence of a particular mockumentary mode of reception. This defines mockumentary as a way of watching and experiencing, rather than strictly as a cinematic object or set of conventions. The mockumentary mode of reception incorporates skepticism of any text claiming to represent the real world. It happens when cues connected to the mockumentary genre within a text, such as an absurd style of humour coupled with the use of documentary conventions, are picked up on by viewers. Similar to documentary films, texts that an audience believe are mockumentaries are then considered in a manner befitting their presumed relationship (or lack thereof) to reality. A viewer's position within this mode of reception is contingent upon her or his own belief about the nature of what they are watching, however, meaning that there is always a potential for misinterpretation. Heidecker and Baron Cohen frequently highlight this potential within their texts by creating deliberately confusing depictions of the world that appear to be 'real,' but are based on untrustworthy or false sources.

Documentary as "Discourse of Sobriety"

In order to understand the full implications of what *Forgotten Silver* and reactions to it can illuminate about the mockumentary mode of reception, it is important to fully define the term

documentary and examine what 'experiencing' one entails. An analysis of the documentary experience is necessary to define the mockumentary experience, as the essence of a mockumentary is its distortion of documentary conventions (the 'mock' in the genre's name, for example, being a product of this specific relationship). In "Towards a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," Vivian Sobchack argues for a shift from the traditional view of a documentary as a "cinematic object."[4] She suggests that the definition of a documentary is not completely anchored in a set of qualities within the films themselves, but can be seen as "a subjective relationship to a cinematic object,"[5] or a mode of reception. This relationship is constituted before, during and after the viewing process, and can, as Jaimie Baron observes, "evoke a particular kind of consciousness in the viewer."[6] As Bill Nichols states, the reception of documentary is "the product of previous experience rather than predispositions conjured on the spot."[7] For instance, the viewing experience can stem from the viewer's expectations of the film's genre and their understanding of particular conventions. As theorists of the mockumentary form Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe argue, for a viewer "a documentary comes into being at the point of reception that is, when the viewer recognizes within herself a feeling she associates with past documentaries."[8] The viewing process ultimately begins with a viewer's predisposition towards how to watch a documentary film. An important element of the documentary viewing experience, for example, is the viewer's attitude towards the genre as a purveyor of reality. If viewers believe the genre is a direct representation of reality, they adjust their viewing to that assumption. Audiences prepare for the interpretation and consumption of a

[4] Vivian Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 241.
[5] Sobchack, 251.
[6] Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 9.
[7] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 24.
[8] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver: A New Zealand Television Hoax and Its Audience," 174.

particular set of codes and conventions based on an understanding of the nature of the text they are viewing.

There are various styles of documentary, but for many the genre as a whole occupies a privileged position granted by the claim that documentaries "can present the most accurate and truthful portrayal of the socio-historical world."[9] In *Representing Reality*, Nichols labels documentaries as kin to the 'discourses of sobriety,' a group of "non-fictional systems" that are assumed to have "instrumental power"[10] and a direct impact on the world. People often assume that the discourses of sobriety have a relationship to reality that is "direct, immediate, transparent,"[11] and they reflect "a faith in facts and in the ability of science to solve social and individual problems."[12] When the output of these discourses is recognized, through whatever media, the dominant response is acceptance of whatever data is contained within that output as fact, and therefore as a reflection of how the world and reality operate. A discourse of sobriety, in other words, is viewed by many as a building block in the construction of the 'real' world. Many predicate the documentary genre's capability of presenting reality on the "essential integrity of the referential image"[13] or the assumption that cameras produce images with inherently and necessarily honest representations of their subjects. People implicitly trust that what is shown in the documentary can be considered a direct trace of what 'actually' happened.

The documentary, or particular modes of the documentary (discussed below), is often viewed as structured around specifically scientific assumptions and beliefs. This approach to a

[9] Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe, *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality* (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2001), 6.
[10] Nichols, *Representing Reality,* 8.
[11] Nichols, 4.
[12] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 28.
[13] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It*, 8.

documentary text generally stems from the foundational idea that "facts and evidence"[14] constitute truth. This outlook establishes a philosophical framework for many works within the genre. Some documentary films even "[follow] the structure of a scientific experiment,"[15] providing a hypothesis and then supporting a conclusion with evidence gleaned through assorted styles of experimentation that are depicted to the audience. The documentary *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004) is one example of such a text. In the film, documentarian Morgan Spurlock presents a hypothesis regarding the low quality of McDonald's food, and then positions himself as the subject of a scientific test by eating only McDonald's for a month, with resultant health issues serving as 'evidence' of the accuracy of his predictions. Documentary filmmakers also prioritize the importance (and possibility) of 'knowing' something. As Nichols states, "knowledge, as much or more than the imaginary identification between viewer and fictional character, promises the viewer a sense of plenitude or self-sufficiency."[16] These connections link the documentary genre to the discourses of sobriety, leading people to associate examples of the genre with reality, which, in turn, grants discourses of sobriety and their affiliates a position of authority. Or, at least, they can. However, views on what (and who) creates truth can and do shift.

Distrusting Documentary

Along with a "generalised loss of trust in social institutions,"[17] faith in traditionally trustworthy sources of fact deteriorated in the early 21st century. Many have altered their view of history, for example, no longer regarding it as a close relative of scientific thought due to its

[14] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It*, 10.
[15] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 11.
[16] Nichols, 31.
[17] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It*, 28.

presumed objectivity and use of seemingly inarguable 'data' but rather as something involved in the same processes of construction as fictional narratives. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White defines history as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining* what they were by *representing* them."[18] He observes that the tendency among 'master' historians to have "radically different conceptions of what the 'historical work' should consist of"[19] suggests that histories are necessarily emplotted and constructed, rather than objectively conveying data that represents events exactly as they were. As they are written by people, and therefore necessarily involve an act of creation, rather than a spontaneous and exact recording at the time the event is happening, accounts that claim to represent historical moments begin with their creator's perspective on how to represent history. This means that very different histories can be written about the same historical 'data.' One historian, for example, may see a particular event as indicative of history's tendency towards "change and transformation," while another might see that same event as evidence of history's "structural continuity."[20] People must, argues White, approach representations of history critically, and in a manner that acknowledges the artistic and subjective processes involved in their creation. Many people have, therefore, shifted their view of history from a collection of essentially neutral scientific data points to a very human construction (albeit with varying degrees of corroboration).

The discourses of sobriety, with their connection to "beliefs in science"[21] and their establishment of facts as the foundation for reality, are at odds with more modern conceptions of

[18] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination In Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2.
[19] White, 4.
[20] White, 5.
[21] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 8.

truth as "ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained,"[22] as Linda Hutcheon states in *Poetics of Postmodernism*. Like White, Hutcheon questions the possibility of absolute truth gleaned from the examination of 'data.' The basis for her interrogation is a "concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture."[23] Any narrative claiming to convey a historical truth is, Hutcheon argues, necessarily designed by an individual, and every individual operates within an ideological context that influences their output. It is therefore important for people trying to conceptualize reality to "seriously question who determined and created [the] truth"[24] that they are being shown. In the wake of the insights of theorists like White and Hutcheon, certain modes of the documentary genre, with their assumed faith in characteristically scientific historical 'facts' and an interpretive framework being "founded on an understanding of a fact/fiction dichotomy,"[25] have lost their aura of irrefutability and are increasingly acceptable targets of criticism and mockery. That being said, philosophical shifts are rarely universal, and many still grant the documentary its traditional authority. It is in this context that the filmmakers behind mockumentaries like *Forgotten Silver* operate, questioning the traditional view of documentaries as purveyors of reality.

As a discourse of sobriety, many viewers did not think to question documentaries as reliable representations of reality for some time. The writings of scholars like White and Hutcheon, however, represent an evolving awareness of representations of history that changed how many people view documentary films, which may have - for some makers- released the

[22] Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 112.
[23] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 108.
[24] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 116.
[25] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 181

genre from its traditional position of grave authority. The desire to question traditional sources of 'fact' progressed to a willingness to mock them, and so texts that can be considered mockumentaries became more prevalent. This is not to say that historiographic and literary theory were the direct catalyst for the mockumentary genre's creation, but these theories led to a shift that created an ideal atmosphere for experimentation in processes of reflecting the real world. Mockumentary scholars Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner state, for example, that a crucial element of creating a mockumentary is "a self-criticality about claiming power through history and its documents, [and] a self-awareness about history's deceptions,"[26] coupled with "the desire to say and hear something true through words and images that are fragmentary and even false."[27] These 'words and images' are often used by filmmakers as cues to signal to an audience that they should adopt a mockumentary mode of reception. Mockumentaries can therefore be seen as a symptom or crystallization of an increasing awareness of the nuances of historical representation, providing filmmakers with new ways of encouraging viewers to think about modern experience. Not every viewer, however, watches texts with this awareness.

The mockumentary mode of reception happens when viewers believe they are watching a mockumentary text. However, when the status of the text as mockumentary is not clearly specified, people's own predispositions towards what they see dictate how they watch the film. As Vivian Sobchack states, "our personal embodied existence and knowledge give our consciousness an existential "attitude" or "bias" toward what is given for us to see on the screen and how we will take it up."[28] Despite this being a largely subjective process, the mockumentary

[26] Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, "Introduction" in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentaries and Truth's Undoing*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 15.
[27] Juhasz and Lerner, 18.
[28] Sobchack, 242.

mode of reception has several foundational elements. Importantly, it incorporates a modern critical consciousness and skepticism regarding anything claiming to be a reflection of reality. This positions the documentary genre as a potential target of humour, so an audience in the mockumentary mode of reception looks for jokes or potentially humorous moments at the documentary genre's expense to signify a text's status as a mockumentary. This use of humour by filmmakers can cause the mockumentary mode of reception to be exclusionary, as audiences often require prerequisite knowledge in order to see something as funny. As one of the primary sources of humour in mockumentaries is the misuse of documentary conventions, for example, finding them humorous often necessitates a preexisting awareness of issues within the documentary genre. Absurdity and irony are two of the most commonly used styles of humour by mockumentarians, and each of these also requires a specific position in relation to the subject of the joke in order for humour to resonate. However, once viewers enter into the mockumentary mode of reception - once they believe they are watching a mockumentary - they do not expect any direct connections between what is happening on the screen and reality.

Recent history shows the potential danger of blindly incorporating skepticism into one's mode of reception when viewing established sources of truth such as televised, online, or printed news. 'Fake news' has become a charged and politicized term, generally used to devalue texts that an audience believes misrepresent the truth. The perception of news as fake begins when a viewer enters into a mode of reception that, like the mockumentary mode of reception, is predicated on a person's "prior opinions" on the nature of a text, but is often "undeterred by the actual truth of an article."[29] 'Actual truth' becomes contingent upon the mode of reception and pre

[29] Patricia L Moravec, Randall K. Minas, and Alan R. Dennis, "Fake News on Social Media: People Believe What They Want to Believe When It Makes No Sense at All," *MIS Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 2019): 1344. doi:10.25300/MISQ/2019/15505.

existing opinions of the audience rather than the text itself. So, for example, there are a variety of differing responses to the coronavirus pandemic depending on how parties approach sources of information. Popular scientific and medical opinion supports the wearing of face coverings or masks to prevent the spread of the virus. Scientific organizations like the WHO[30] and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[31] regularly release statements to this effect. Despite continual urging from these traditionally trusted sources, however, many people, motivated in part by US president Donald Trump's dismissive attitude towards the efficacy of masks, have protested laws making mask wearing mandatory. This attitude towards masks is probably one of the primary factors that disables the United States, at least at the time of writing, from containing the virus.[32] Although, like the mockumentary mode of reception, this dismissive mode of reception began with a skeptical predisposition towards traditional sources of fact, it has become increasingly politicized, conspiratorial, and reactionary, and has stretched the disbelief associated the mockumentary mode of reception into new territory. However, while the phenomenon of some viewers declaring what they do not want to believe “fake news” remains an important context in which to understand the mockumentary mode, it is not the focus of this thesis, which seeks to reframe our understanding of the mockumentary form from the perspective of the viewer’s experience.

Defining Mockumentary

The term 'mockumentary' generally, according to scholars Hight and Roscoe, refers to a text that "[makes] a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes or conventions

[30] "When and How to Use Masks," World Health Organization, Last modified June 19th, 2020, https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks.
[31] "Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Last modified June 28th, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html.
[32] Stephen Collinson, "Trump's Anti-Mask crusade is coming back to bite him," CNN, July 2nd, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/02/politics/donald-trump-coronavirus-masks-politics-joe-biden-election-2020/index.html.

to represent a fictional subject."[33] Mockumentary filmmakers owe much to modern ideas of truth and conceptions of how human beings construct reality. This is not to say that mockumentaries are a recent phenomenon, as many older examples of mockumentary exist. Luis Bunuel's *Land Without Bread*, released in 1932, for example, adopts a documentary style to represent a real Spanish village in a remote region of Spain but includes elements in the film that suggest that it is not entirely objective or truthful. Indeed, as James Lastra notes, despite "all its extremity and seriousness," the film essentially "is a series of gags - very, very dark gags, but gags nonetheless,"[34] making it a prescient example of a kind of nascent mockumentary. The genre as a whole, however, formed more cohesively around its own set of conventions and consistencies in the 1970s. The term became popularized by the mainstream success of the mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap* (Guest, 1984),[35] but, as aforementioned, examples of the genre certainly existed before then. Mockumentaries are often connected to humour. Films such as *The Rutles* (Idle, 1978), a false music documentary, and *Take the Money and Run* (Allen, 1969), about an inept fictional gangster, provide early examples of humorous mockumentaries. That being said, mockumentaries such as *David Holzman's Diary* (Mcbride, 1967), about a filmmaker's struggle to capture his reality, contain few jokes. Humour is therefore one feature among many that can be part of the mockumentary mode of reception. One thing all mockumentaries share, however, is the incorporation of documentary conventions to establish a fictional story.

Mockumentary filmmakers work with an awareness of the latter genre's structuring issues and the problems documentarians and their audiences face within "a culture in which the association between factual discourse and factual means of representation is increasingly

[33] Hight and Roscoe, 2.
[34] James Lastra, "Buñuel, Bataille, and Buster, or, the Surrealist Life of Things," *Critical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (July 2009): 29.
[35] Jason Middleton, *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship,* New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, 10.

tenuous."[36] Humour in mockumentaries often reflects the genre's skeptical, postmodern origins. Mockumentary filmmakers, note Juhasz and Lerner, employ "disingenuousness, humour, and other formal devices to create critical or comic distance"[37] from the documentary genre they parody. Jokes can be used to attack conventions with the intent to reveal their (perceived) foibles. However, the success of mockumentary humour relies on audience members' awareness of the filmmaker's intentions. Humour involves three parties: the joke teller, the subject, and the listener. In order for a joke to 'work,' the teller and the listener need to share a similar context and interpretive framework. Mocking the documentary genre's imperfections through humour, for example, requires an audience with preexisting familiarity with documentary films. Often, in order for humour to resonate, an audience is not only required to have extratextual knowledge, but must also align themselves with the joke teller's position on the subject of the joke. Multiple scenes in Sacha Baron Cohen's works that ridicule Donald Trump, for example, would generally not be considered funny by Trump supporters. Viewers, then, in the mockumentary mode of reception generally need to be part of a 'savvy audience' - a term that implies both the possession of knowledge and alignment with a particular point of view.[38] Irony is a regularly deployed tool of mockumentarians that illustrates the nuances of relationships between the parties involved in a joke, and is an important part of the mockumentary mode of reception.

Ironic Humour and Mockumentary Reception

As a source of humour, irony is complex but also consistent in that, like the documentary experience, as Hutcheon argues, "irony isn't irony until it is interpreted as such."[39] Irony's

[36] Hight and Roscoe, 3.
[37] Juhasz and Lerner, 1-2.
[38] Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v. "savvy," https://www-oed-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/Entry/171503?rskey=YazOTg&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid.
[39] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 6.

acceptance of the potential for multiple interpretations and ability to imbue output with multiple meanings makes it an ideal source of humour for the mockumentarian. In *Irony's Edge*, Hutcheon examines the many sources and potential impacts irony can have, and attempts to expand the more traditional view of irony as strictly semantical inversion. Rather than considering irony a rhetorical trope or attitude towards life, Hutcheon acknowledges that it is a product of the "dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation."[40] Hutcheon sees irony as a "discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)."[41] Essentially, anything labelled or intended to be ironic is imbued with "meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid."[42] This ironic content does not exist in a vacuum however, as an inherently ironic 'thing,' but needs for someone to construe a second meaning within it in order to become ironic. Due to this inherent complexity within the interpretive and creative processes of irony, Hutcheon states that it 'happens' rather than exists in a concrete form. 'Happening' is reliant upon a connection being formed between the ironist, the text, and the interpreter. As irony happens when a person interprets it as such, there can be a variety of potential interpretations of the same text. Many of the interpretive processes that must occur in order for irony to 'happen' are a part of any joke, as jokes, like irony, do not exist in and of themselves. In order to be interpreted as humorous, a joke "requires a certain category of information processing involving most of the faculties of thought, including memory recall, inference, and

[40] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 11.
[41] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 10.
[42] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 11.

semantic integration"[43] on the part of both audience and joke teller. In short, jokes require someone to 'get' them in order to be jokes. Often, understanding jokes necessitates "savvy" possession of specific knowledge and awareness of context.

Importantly, Hutcheon connects irony to semiosis, or "the attribution and production of meaning," which is a necessarily "social activity."[44] The ways people create meaning out of ironic jokes is influenced by their surroundings and past experiences, which can dictate how the subject of a joke is considered. Hutcheon believes that irony happens within and because of pre-existing "discursive communities"[45] that stem from people's "different experiential and discursive contexts."[46] These communities form the "basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse."[47] This insight can be extended to humour in general: an audience needs to understand what the joke teller is referring to. As a result, a person's ability to understand the intentions of a humorist often relies upon their belonging within a particular discursive community, or communities. With the right knowledge, "incongruities or seemingly inappropriate details are not interpreted as signaling deception or error...but as marked ironies to be inferred."[48] Conversely, without the right knowledge information can be entirely misinterpreted. This means that there is also the potential for humour to not happen at all if the interpreter is not part of a discursive community that provides the context required for understanding the unsaid elements of the text. An ironist can create content intended to be ironic, for example, only for it to be taken literally by an audience,

[43]Matthew M. Hurley, Reginald B Adams, and D. C Dennett, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 5.
[44] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 57.
[45] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 18.
[46] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 18.
[47] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 89.
[48] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 21.

as was the case in the initial reception of *Forgotten Silver*. Hutcheon emphasizes that irony has a range of affective impacts, from feelings of anger caused by being the punchline of a joke, to feelings of delight stemming from 'getting' a joke. Mockumentarians often operate with an acute knowledge of this element of irony, and their use of humour reflects an understanding (or sometimes misunderstanding, as was the case with *Forgotten Silver*) that discursive communities shape a person's interpretive framework and mode of reception. 'Getting' ironic humour, then, is often a matter of belonging to a particular group. Ironic humour then stems from the previous understanding and context that group provides.

A potential consequence of ironic humour is the creation of a power dynamic among the joke's subject, teller, and audience. There are a number of complex relationships and potential misunderstandings or manipulations possible among this trio, but each of them is necessary in the process of a joke happening. Interpreting and understanding a joke can stem from or lead to a "unity in group opinion"[49] between teller and audience, and, indeed, that is what Matthew Hurley, Reginald Adams, and D.C. Dennett argue is one of the foremost aims of humour in general. This can establish a power dynamic as well: by understanding a joke, an audience and the joke's teller can experience a sense of superiority over the subject of that joke caused by "the recognition or sense that [they] have some level of superiority or eminency over some other target, the butt of the joke."[50] Ironic humour in mockumentaries, for example, often shows the changing status of documentary films because of the genre's willingness to play with some of the more recognizable elements of the genre. Hence, when an audience laughs at the misuse or mockery of documentary conventions within a mockumentary, they align themselves with the

[49] Hurley, Reginald, and Dennett, 38.
[50] Hurley, Reginald, and Dennett, 41.

filmmakers in treating the documentary as something imperfect and problematic, not to be (fully) trusted. As a result, the butt of the joke of many mockumentaries becomes the people who believe them to be documentaries, whether they appear in the film or in the audience. For filmmakers like comedian Tim Heidecker and Sacha Baron Cohen, this "improper," non-ironic form of reception becomes part of the humour.

Jokes have a complicated role in any text. Nancy Rhodes and Morgan Ellithorpe discuss how making jokes about a subject signifies that "it is acceptable to make light of and trivialize the...topic."[51] They suggest that, on television, social norms, specifically what should be taken seriously, can be communicated and manifested through the conventions included within a program and its audience rather than solely the program's content. The use of a laugh track, for example, communicates to the audience through a recognizable convention that what is on screen should be considered amusing, and also serves to augment the viewing experience in more complex ways. Rhodes and Ellithorpe outline a study in which participants watch a television broadcast about a serious matter (reckless driving) in a comedic show. The audience was split into two groups, and in one the laugh track was removed, while for the other it remained inserted. The test found that there was a "significant"[52] connection between people hearing a laugh track and subsequently reacting flippantly towards a supposedly dangerous behaviour. The study concluded that audiences adjust their viewing experience according to conventions within programs they view. A viewer's pre-existing knowledge or experience, in this case of a recognizable convention in the shape of a laugh track, informs their viewing experience and interpretation of a television show. If a program is assumed to be serious, viewers consider its

[51] Nancy Rhodes and Morgan E. Ellithorpe, "Laughing at Risk: Sitcom Laugh Tracks Communicate Norms for Behavior," *Media Psychology* 19 no. 3 (July 2016): 361.
[52] Rhodes and Ellithorpe, "Laughing at Risk," 371.

subject seriously. Humour signifies that the content of the program is dismissible, or at least not worthy of sincere respect. This correlation impacts how an audience interprets humour within mockumentary films, especially if viewers believe what they are watching possesses the grave authority of what Nichols calls a "discourse of sobriety."[53]

In her analysis of one of Baron Cohen's works, film scholar Maggie Hennefeld suggests that a willingness to "[refute] pandering disinformation, not with cold hard facts or evidence-based argument, but with absurdist exaggeration and revelatory parody"[54] is a technique employed by comedians that gained increased popularity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This style of comedy flourished in an era characterized by "a broader decline of belief in evidentiary images and traditionally refereed sources of expertise and knowledge."[55] Viewers were becoming more cognizant of the danger of placing their trust in what had previously been considered unassailable sources of truth. In efforts to reveal potential consequences of this modern skepticism, comedians use absurdity because of its ability to noticeably operate outside of logic, reason, and expectation. Absurd humour can be defined as "a mode of humour premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning."[56] By definition, then, absurd humour is unrealistic. Like any kind of humour, though, it relies upon a viewer's predisposition towards the subject of the joke to work. Revealing and exaggerating the absurdities surrounding the subject of a joke, a frequent comedic technique of Baron Cohen and comedian Tim Heidecker, make that subject and what they represent appear humorously out of sync with reality. This means that the entire premise of such a joke may not resonate with an

[53]Nichols, 8.
[54] Maggie Hennefeld, "*Who is America?* On Truth, Lies and Laughter," *Film Quarterly*, October 23, 2018, https://filmquarterly.org/2018/10/23/who-is-america-on-truth-lies-and-laughter/.
[55] Hennefeld, "*Who is America?* On Truth, Lies and Laughter."
[56] Nicholas Holm, "Humour Without Reason: The Nonsense of Absurd Humour," *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy*, Palgrave Studies in Comedy, 2017, 149.

audience member whose understanding of "reality" is not aligned with the joke teller. This is increasingly a political matter; Heidecker and Baron Cohen often emphasize the absurdity they see in Donald Trump, for example, whose actions and words would likely not be considered absurd by Trump supporters. Conversely, to people who agree with the subtexts of absurdist humour, it can be comforting, as "it preserves the integrity of a prior norm while lending a humorously pleasurable lens to the spectacle of its transgression."[57] It allows one idea of what is 'true' and realistic to be emphatically contravened, and that breach of logic becomes a humorous spectacle. If an audience member disagrees with the position the joke teller initially takes on what is 'true,' though, absurd humour can be missed entirely.

Misusing Documentary Conventions

Mockumentary filmmakers generally (mis)use documentary conventions in a manner that requires an understanding of (or at least familiarity with) the different modes of documentary. Mockumentaries parody, imitate, question, and attack these conventions, along with many of the assumptions an audience needs to make in order for the modes to 'succeed' in their attempts to convey reality. In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols states that modes are "basic ways of organizing texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions,"[58] but that documentary modes are in a constant state of flux, with established modes serving as catalysts for the creation of new ones while still changing themselves. As this perpetual evolution is occurring, conventions of each mode can appear in the others. Nichols provides a general description of

[57] Hennefeld, "*Who is America?* On Truth, Lies and Laughter."
[58] Nichols, 32.

four modes nonetheless, each of which are replete with qualities that become regular targets or tools of mockumentary filmmakers.

The "expository mode" shares many qualities with a news report, attempting to "advance an argument about the historical world"[59] while giving the impression of being "value-free and objective."[60] Audiences expect expository documentaries to "take shape around the solution to a problem or puzzle" and "[build] a sense of dramatic involvement around the need for a solution."[61] The mode uses a variety of strategies to strengthen the filmmaker's argument and so bolster the apparent authority of the text, such as interviews with experts or photographic evidence of the events under discussion taking place. Expository documentaries often use a 'voice of god' narration, or a voice-over that tells the audience what a particular scene depicts, or what it means. Generally, if humour is used within an expository documentary, it is used "in service of its persuasive needs,"[62] or used in relation to the central argument, furthering central ideas the filmmaker wishes to establish as truth. Expository documentaries are notable in the visual absence of the filmmaker, who generally appears only through "commentary and sometimes the (usually unseen) voice of authority,"[63] which can be seen as an attempt to make the film appear more objective and 'naturally' occurring, rather than the product of distinctly human practices like editing. Filmmakers displace authority onto the texts themselves, and it is often due to this quality that expository documentaries can seem so convincingly 'real' to audiences. Mockumentaries often undermine the detached objectivity that defines expository documentaries by depicting absurdity while aping conventions of the mode such as the use of interviews with

[59] Nichols, 34.
[60] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 18.
[61] Nichols, 38.
[62] Nichols, 35.
[63] Nichols, 37.

presumably knowledgeable figures or primary sources to bolster a film's believability. The mockumentary *7 Days In Hell* (Syzmanski, 2015), for example, includes a number of characters very seriously discussing the impact the sudden (and impossible) appearance of magician David Copperfield on the shoulders of the protagonist in the middle of a tennis match has on that character's quality of play. The characters are positioned in 'talking head' style interviews, facing the camera with no visible interviewer, and as they speak clips of the actual event 'occurring' are shown on the screen. This obviously fictional occurrence is matched with traditional conventions of the expository mode that connect the mode to truth, emphasizing the potential for those conventions to be connected with the construction of a false reality. This is also the case in *The Falls* (Greenaway, 1980), a mockumentary about a fictional and mysterious event that becomes more obviously false as the film progresses without changing in its deployment of the expository mode. So, for example, a running joke in the film involves people suddenly becoming obsessed with birds after exposure to a mysterious event. This becomes increasingly absurd as the film progresses, with some people even showing signs of turning into birds. All absurd details, however, are delivered by a sombre voice-of-god narrator who seems unperturbed by the nature of what is being depicted. This effectively juxtaposes the increasingly absurd content with the serious style, making the expository mode's conventions into a joke.

Mockumentaries, however, are no kinder to the 'observational mode' of documentary filmmaking. Nichols states that what he calls "observational documentaries" were first created in the 1960s because of the new "availability of more mobile, synchronous recording equipment and a dissatisfaction with the moralizing quality of expository films."[64] They are based around

[64] Nichols, 33.

the “the nonintervention of the filmmaker”[65] and the idea of the camera as an objective observer. In this mode, filmmakers record scenarios and depict them in an effort to provide a “template of life as it is lived.”[66] The essential role of the filmmaker is to serve as a 'fly on the wall,' not intervening in what occurs but presenting it all as it happens. As a result, many of these films take shape around “typicality,”[67] and everyday life as it is experienced by individuals. The people appearing in films of this mode are shown as “social actors,”[68] and so observational documentaries have much in common with fictional films in that there are generally plots and character development. The goal of the observational mode is to provide a “sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world.”[69] Film scholars have often criticized this goal as inherently impossible due to the influential presence of the camera apparatus. As Nichols states, "the presence of the camera and filmmaker [inflects] events they appear to record."[70] Filmmaker Emile de Antonio summarizes the issue more bluntly: "as soon as one points a camera, objectivity is romantic hype."[71] Likewise, mockumentaries that ape the observational mode tend to directly attack the idea of the camera as objective, and suggest that cameras have an inevitable impact the moment they are introduced into a scenario. In Heidecker's *Mister America* (2019), for instance, characters frequently show noticeable behavioural changes due to the presence of a camera.

An attempt to include the filmmaker directly as a mediator of and participant in events within the text defines documentaries of the 'interactive mode.' Far removed from the

[65] Nichols, 38
[66] Nichols, 43.
[67] Nichols, 40.
[68] Nichols, 42.
[69] Nichols, 43.
[70] Nichols, 25.
[71] Emile de Antonio, quoted in Barbara Zheutlin, “The Politics of Documentary: A Symposium,” In *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 158.

non-interventionist basis of the observational mode, filmmakers within interactive documentaries visibly provide a "situated presence and local knowledge."[72] The filmmaker can act as "mentor, participant, prosecutor, or provocateur"[73] within these texts, essentially drawing out the action and ideas within the documentaries from their surroundings. Interactive documentaries attempt to "draw their social actors into direct encounter with the filmmaker,"[74] and the dialogue and actions of people appearing in the film, revealed through their interactions with the filmmaker, becoming the evidence for any argument made. This means that, unlike the expository documentary, there is a movement away from "an author-centered voice of authority to a witness-centered voice of testimony."[75] When mockumentaries parody interactive documentaries, they usually use the filmmaker's presence as either a serious, deadpan counterpoint to humourous surroundings or characters, as is the case in *Forgotten Silver* (1995) or *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). Conversely, the filmmaker may operate as the comedic element within an otherwise serious context, as in *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit the Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Baron Cohen 2006). Either of these methods can destabilize the relationship between subject and filmmaker, revealing that even self-reflexive interactivity is not a guarantee of a reflection of reality.

Like the documentary genre, there are few examples of mockumentaries that strictly adhere to one mode or the other, and many, such as *Forgotten Silver* (1995), use elements of different modes for their ability to create different effects. Often, mockumentaries make use of conventions from the different modes to shift the butt of the joke. *Borat* (2006), for example,

[72] Nichols, 44.
[73] Nichols, 44.
[74] Nichols, 47.
[75] Nichols, 48.

occasionally shifts between an interactive mode that emphasizes the protagonist's absurd behaviour to an expository mode that, more often than not, ridicules the backwardness of his fictionalized home country, changing the object of humour. Baron Cohen uses the interactive mode's inclusion of the filmmaker to insert an absurd character, Borat (played by Baron Cohen himself), directly into a variety of scenarios, generating humour out of that character's behaviour. One moment, for example, focusses on the protagonist's obnoxious behavior during a driving test, in which he regularly misbehaves and appears to drink alcohol out of a flask.[76] The situation, focussing on a 'filmmaker's' interactions with a subject, mirrors the interactive mode. Baron Cohen also uses the expository mode's traditionally serious and legitimate conventions, like the use of archival footage, to portray something obviously false and exaggeratedly farcical, such as the "Running of the Jew,"[77] a fictional nation-wide event intended to emphasize his home nation's anti-Semitism. Audiences receive these shifts depending on their mode of reception: those watching within a mockumentary mode of reception would likely perceive the adept parody of different documentary techniques while those watching within a documentary mode of reception would likely consider them simply as varied approaches to the real.

Reception of the mockumentary genre depends on viewers' perceptions of how 'truth' is created. Increasing awareness of representations of reality as reflective of time, place, and author rather than any objective truth is a foundation of the mockumentary genre. Mockumentary relies on an audience's willingness to examine reality as a construction rather than a given. Mockumentary filmmakers deploy jokes to highlight or emphasize the fictionality of a text's content, which they can then twist to reveal elements of how we construct our reality. How

[76] *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, directed by Larry Charles, (2007; Beverly Hills, Calif: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment). DVD.
[77] *Borat.*

individuals react (or fail to react) to a mockumentary's humour, however, can highlight pre-existing elements of their own understanding of what constitutes 'reality.'

In my first chapter, I will discuss the film *Forgotten Silver,* which provides an example of how, simply by believing what they are viewing is a documentary, viewers can ignore frequent attempts by filmmakers to create humorous situations and the overall fictionality of a film. Despite Jackson and Botes inserting what they believed to be increasing levels of absurdity and irony into the film, some audiences simply did not get the joke, and believed that they were witness to the discovery of a genuine New Zealand hero. The film and its reception show how, for many, the conventions of the documentary are so aligned with seriousness that this expectation of seriousness overrides intimations of humour and seemingly overt instances of absurdity. I will argue that the film shows how important an audience's mode of reception is in the impact of a text, and how, in the case of mockumentary or documentary films, this can change an audience's perception of reality. By theorizing the mockumentary mode of reception, I contend, we may come to better understand how viewers' perceptions of reality depend as much on their preexisting beliefs, experiences, and assumptions as they do on the actual content of the film.

My second chapter will illustrate how comedian Tim Heidecker uses humour to mimic the processes of constructing 'reality' prevalent in modern society, creating a gargantuan, intermedial mockumentary 'text' with an uneasy relationship to the real world in order to probe the limits of the mockumentary mode of reception. His efforts culminate in an effect which I call 'shaky verisimilitude,' that he occasionally tests by interacting with non-actors who are unaware of his humorous intentions. He also uses the creative potential of 'inside humour' to enter into a

constructive relationship with his audience. A savvy audience plays along with his constructions, augmenting the reality he creates by interacting with him online and adopting an ironic documentary mode of reception. I argue, however, that Heidecker manipulates and plays with the mockumentary mode of reception, deliberately placing much of his audience in a position where they cannot know whether what he is depicting is real or false.

Finally, my third chapter will examine how filmmaker Sacha Baron Cohen uses the trust many people place in documentaries in order to alter the behaviour of subjects on his various programs. By mimicking a variety of documentary conventions, Baron Cohen often works with dramatic irony to turn his guests, rather than the documentary genre itself as other mockumentaries do, into targets. His work provides an excellent example of how documentary conventions can be used (or misused) to shift a person's perceptions. Occasionally lingering on the fringes of unethical behaviour, Baron Cohen's programs often try to evoke political truths through humour by forcing his unwitting guests into situations wherein he and his audience can laugh at them. I will argue that his work uses the mockumentary mode of reception as a political tool to illustrate the different 'realities' his subjects and audiences occupy. His guests' willingness to endorse absurd suggestions and behave ridiculously stems from careful manipulation of their predispositions regarding the nature of the text they are appearing in. Thus, his texts enjoy a 'dual' mode of reception, in which the savvy audience watches two kinds of texts simultaneously: the mockumentary Baron Cohen establishes and the elements of reality it can reveal.

According to scholars Juhasz and Lerner, watching a mockumentary is like watching a "documentary film with a twist."[78] I would argue that the mockumentary mode of reception has gradually evolved into more than just an extension or response to the documentary form. Although it certainly begins as a skeptical reaction to documentaries and their traditionally presumed epistemological and ontological legitimacy, the genre has evolved and become its own entity with its own set of conventions. Viewers of mockumentaries ideally employ a way of watching that anticipates the variety of techniques used by mockumentary filmmakers. This involves expecting and recognizing irony, remaining aware of the actual context of what one is viewing (as opposed to the ostensible one), and applying that knowledge to an interpretive process. Ultimately, though, the mockumentary mode of reception depends on the viewer. The existence of the mockumentary mode of reception means that the 'reality' that is conveyed through a mockumentary text is the result of the interaction between subject, filmmaker, and audience, so that no one of the three has total control. When their points of view are misaligned, fictions may be mistaken for truth. The mockumentary mode of reception can therefore result in more than missed jokes, and can in fact provide a false framework for perceiving the real world. The work of the artists discussed in this thesis show that how the mockumentary mode of reception - or its absence- may contribute to constructions of reality. The facts that a particular mode of reception cannot be guaranteed and that mistaken perceptions can be induced (intentionally on the part of the filmmaker or not) underscore the importance of understanding not only what we watch, but how we watch it.

[78] Juhasz and Lerner, 8.

Chapter 2: *Forgotten Silver* and the Instability of the Mockumentary Mode of Reception

Peter Jackson and Costa Botes's film *Forgotten Silver* (1995) is a mockumentary about a fictional filmmaker from New Zealand named Colin McKenzie. Centered around McKenzie's life and work, the film highlights McKenzie's numerous contributions to the film world, claiming that they needed to be 'discovered' by Peter Jackson in order to be brought to light. Part of the filmmakers' promotional strategy was to establish the film as a real documentary with pre-released materials such as television advertisements. Having set up false expectations about the film, they imagined that audiences would gradually come to understand it as a comedic text during their initial viewings, filled with ironic and essentially harmless humour. The filmmakers believed jokes would undo any verisimilitude attached to the film. Despite this, many watched the first screening expecting a documentary, and so that was exactly what they experienced. Instead of jokes, they saw historical representations of reality, and walked away with a new understanding of New Zealand's enormous impact on filmmaking history. McKenzie's story, however, is entirely fictional. The similarities the film had to a documentary, however, meant that, for many viewers, Jackson and Botes turned a "fiction into an authentic and plausible truth."[79] As such, the film problematizes some of the "natural discourses"[80] surrounding documentaries, namely the assumed legitimacy of anything claiming to be a representation of reality. However, the actual reception of *Forgotten Silver* also revealed how little control the filmmakers actually had over the audience's interpretation of their text; some of the audience, expecting a particular kind of truth associated with the documentary genre, ignored jokes and comedic markers, and built a "reality" out of what they saw. Jackson and Botes' positioning of jokes within a text that

[79] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 116.
[80] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 180.

includes recognizable conventions of the documentary pitted those jokes against expectations of truth, which doomed the jokes to mistranslation, at least for some. The film, in short, shows that mockumentary is not only a mode of reception but also that the mockumentary mode of reception is highly unstable.

An integral part of putting viewers into a documentary mode of reception is establishing a film as a documentary before an initial viewing. With *Forgotten Silver*, Jackson and Botes used extratextual output (such as commercials on television and articles in magazines) and the cultural milieu of New Zealand at the time of the film's release to establish a false context for the film's reception. In their article about *Forgotten Silver*, Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe discuss the film's prerelease, noting how the "filmmakers clearly intended that viewers approach the program in its first screening as though it were a documentary."[81] The publicity of the film began with the publication of an article in the New Zealand *Listener* describing the finds of Jackson and Botes that "is written in the same tones as the discourse of Forgotten Silver itself."[82] These are defined by an overarching (but actually ironic) seriousness. The article summarizes Jackson and Botes's 'discovery' of Colin McKenzie, and excitedly outlines the filmmaker's importance to New Zealand and the whole world. No hint of the film's fictional nature is given. The film's release also coincided with a nation-wide search by the New Zealand Film Archive for rare home movie footage in an attempt to "uncover material of historical importance."[83] According to Hight and Roscoe, *Forgotten Silver's* appearance in the midst of such a search represented a potential fulfillment of that desire. Both the *Listener* article and the cultural context connect *Forgotten Silver* to the 'finding' of footage and information, reflecting a recognizable element of the

[81] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 174.
[82] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 174.
[83] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 172.

documentary genre. The New Zealand Film Commission also sponsored the film,[84] linking it to an entrenched authority, which legitimized *Forgotten Silver* and further cemented it as a documentary with connections to matters of national interest. Overall, pre-release materials emphasized that *Forgotten Silver* was an important, historically accurate documentary - even though it was not. Advertisements for the film provide further glimpses into how it was established before its release.

Film advertisements ideally serve to represent a given film in microcosm. Audiences assume they can safely predict what their viewing experience will involve based on what is included and emphasized within a preview. Television commercials advertising *Forgotten Silver* identified the film as a documentary with a tone befitting the genre. One begins with text announcing the film's production company and its connection to two established institutions (The New Zealand Film Commission and New Zealand on Air), then proceeds to show Peter Jackson telling the story of his 'finding' the old chest filled with Colin McKenzie's films. This quickly cuts to a shot of Jackson opening the door to a 'tomb' discovered later in the film, and the words "discover the most extraordinary pionner [sic] of cinema"[85] quickly flash across the screen. This invitation, coupled with the process of discovery the viewer is subsequently shown, in which Jackson and Botes search through the ruins of a lost city and then carefully remove detritus from a film canister, reinforces the film's credentials as a documentary by linking it to "the rhetoric of science and in particular of scientific discovery"[86] through the visualization of the process of finding "primary source material."[87] Due to the rapidity of the shot containing the

[84] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 173.
[85] "Forgotten Silver Trailer," The Big Movie House, last modified July 23, 2016, accessed December 5th 2018, http://www.thebigmoviehouse.com/2016/07/forgotten-silver-trailer.html.
[86] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 116.
[87] Nichols, 52.

words with a purposeful misspelling of 'pioneer,' this subtle hint at humour can easily be lost in the first viewing. The remainder of the advertisement consists of hyperbolic adjectives describing the film's qualities (eg. "EPIC," "AMAZING," and "WONDERFUL"[88]) between black and white clips of film footage, further establishing *Forgotten Silver* as a documentary through the presentation of what an audience can assume to be legitimate primary source images intercut with suggestions of that footage's importance. The advertisement is clear in its suggestion that, not only is this a documentary, but it is a documentary of overwhelming importance. No hint of the film's 'true' humorous nature is explicitly given. Jackson and Botes consciously worked through media such as this to make the film appear serious, believing that the "audience would realise the joke while viewing the programme."[89] Their success in cementing the film as a documentary before it was released, however, meant a large percentage of their viewers went into their initial viewing with a misinformed relationship with *Forgotten Silver*. As a result, this section of the audience saw a very different film from what Jackson and Botes intended.

In its content, *Forgotten Silver* itself is replete with carefully imitated documentary conventions. The film begins with a direct insertion of Peter Jackson into the narrative of Colin McKenzie in the style of the interactive mode as defined by Bill Nichols, in which the "filmmaker does intervene or interact"[90] with people and artifacts within the film. Jackson tells the story of 'finding' a chest filled with 35mm films and subsequently feeling compelled to tell the world about the genius filmmaker who created them. The documentary then reverts to a more

[88] "Forgotten Silver Trailer," The Big Movie House, last modified July 23, 2016, accessed December 5th 2018, http://www.thebigmoviehouse.com/2016/07/forgotten-silver-trailer.html.
[89] Qtd. in Baron, 54.
[90] Nichols, 44.

expository mode for a time, expanding upon the legend of Colin McKenzie by interviewing film experts and, true to a convention of the expository mode, "[making] extensive use of photographic stills, often black and white, as well as various types of film and video footage"[91] featuring him. In these beginning stages, Jackson often appears as an interviewed film expert and enthusiast rather than someone directly involved in developing McKenzie's legacy, reflecting the expository mode's use of experts to "present us with material and knowledge we might otherwise not have access to."[92] The film outlines McKenzie's early films and projects, outlining his constantly foiled desire to film a biblical epic, the variety of inventions (including the close-up, candid-camera programs, and colour film) he was responsible for, and his involvement in a number of major historical events.

Interspersed throughout the more expository first half of the film and becoming more prevalent as it progresses, however, is an interactive narrative involving Jackson's attempts to 'unearth' a forgotten film set of McKenzie's, and so discover a physical representation of McKenzie's body of work that proves his filmic achievements. After this discovery, Jackson narrates the restoration of McKenzie's master-work, a film called *Salome*, again with the suggestion that the process provides a tangible manifestation of McKenzie in the modern world to supplement his recent rediscovery and Jackson's insistence on the urgency of bringing his achievements to light. This recreates the "encounter of filmmaker and other"[93] associated with the interactive mode. Viewed with knowledge of Jackson and Botes' intentions, it seems unlikely that an audience could possibly take these scenes seriously, but considering the context of its release, an audience's potential predisposition towards jokes in a documentary film, and Jackson

[91] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 16.
[92] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 16.
[93] Nichols, 44.

and Botes' expert reproduction of recognizable documentary conventions, it is not surprising how many viewers believed *Forgotten Silver* was a real documentary.

For much of the initial audience of *Forgotten Silver*, the viewing process came with "an expectation that there is a clearly demarcated line between reality-based [texts] and fictional programs."[94] Jackson and Botes, however, intended humour to serve as the primary signal for the audience to adjust their viewing experience towards interpretation of a fictional text. In other words, the audience was supposed to move from a documentary mode of reception to a mockumentary mode of reception. Humour was to provoke this shift. According to Jackson, they "wanted the audience to start out believing it and although by the time it was finished they no longer believed it they would still have had a good time."[95] The audience was supposed to "realize the joke"[96] after witnessing what Jackson labelled "more and more outrageous gags."[97] Many viewers watching within the documentary mode of reception, however, did not watch the film expecting ironic or absurd humour, and so removed any expectations of their inclusion as part of their interpretive framework for the text. Rather than shifting into a mockumentary mode of reception, they experienced a documentary.

Certain audiences may have been more susceptible to this mistaken mode of reception. One oversight of the filmmakers behind *Forgotten Silver* was making New Zealand's history and "various cultural myths within New Zealand society"[98] a primary target of the humour of the film. Learning that these historic events, particularly the legendary New Zealand first manned flight and the nation's involvement in World War I, were to be included in the 'documentary'

[94] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 147.
[95] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 149.
[96] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 176.
[97] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 176.
[98] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 115.

firmly resonated with more nationalistic viewers. They also echoed a familiar focus of many documentaries. Many of the complaints leveled at *Forgotten Silver* after its revelation as a 'hoax' decried the audacity of "filmmakers who would play with some of the more treasured popular New Zealand legends."[99] As the film relies on humour to communicate its fictionality, Jackson and Botes failed to consider the interpretive danger of linking humour to matters that resonate on a level of national pride. Speaking many years after the release of the film, Botes acknowledged the impact of the film's connection to these national myths, saying that New Zealand is "a small nation and we like that we punch above our weight and we like to jump onto the coattails of the heroes we see emerge."[100] By connecting to these national stories, the film takes a step away from the possibly funny, placing itself within a space generally occupied, not only by documentaries, but by matters considered untouchable by jokes.

Yet, even viewers who were not invested in Kiwi nationalism may be forgiven for being duped by the formal elements that enhance the film's verisimilitude. Moments in the film that 'prove' the connections between Colin McKenzie and these important historical events also generally take the familiar form of an expository documentary, using footage ostensibly shot by McKenzie himself as evidence. Jackson and Botes add details to reinforce false verisimilitude at these points, such as adding visual blemishes in footage shot by McKenzie to suggest realistic physical decay of the film due to age. The footage of the fictional first manned flight sequence, for example, shows signs of aging and eventually becomes almost impossible to see. The filmmakers believed humour would separate these instances of careful reconstruction from actual real footage like what is seen in actual documentaries.

[99] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 180.
[100] Costa Botes, "Forgotten Silver | Costa Botes," *Costa Botes* (blog),October 29th, 2016, https://costabotes.com/forgotten-silver/.

Moreover, any viewer looking for confirmation of the film's status as a trustworthy documentary could easily find it, as the filmmakers use the "language, practices, and conventions that define documentary"[101] to great effect. Ironically, for viewers expecting these conventions, each of these parodied moments lent the film an increasing level of verisimilitude. Some viewers, for example, were so inspired that they attempted to unearth additional information about Colin McKenzie. After conducting considerable research, one viewer genuinely believed she had "located a young woman who was almost certainly the daughter of either Brooke or Colin McKenzie."[102] For many, documentary conventions were therefore more successful than humour in dictating the viewing experience of the film. Those who remained within a documentary mode of reception neglected comedic aspects of the film that the filmmakers included as signals of its fictionality.

Yet, *Forgotten Silver* was intended to be funny. The film's status as a mockumentary means that the filmmakers employed "disingenuousness, humour, and other formal devices to create critical or comic distance"[103] from the documentary genre it parodies. Whether it is the subtle additions, such as the carefully placed carved bull (for 'bullshit) on the chest containing Colin McKenzie's lost films, or the more overt slapstick elements, such as the invention of candid camera programs leading to the Prime Minister of New Zealand getting pied, humour permeates the film. There are moments when the jokes are so subtle that they blend seamlessly into the overall narrative, and audiences can therefore be forgiven for overlooking them, but there are also points where it is unsurprising the filmmakers expected jokes to resonate. It is a testament to some viewers' entrenchment in the documentary mode of reception that they did

[101] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 173
[102] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It*, 147.
[103] Juhasz and Lerner, 1-2.

not. Examining the kinds of jokes within *Forgotten Silver* provides an idea of why the humour within the film failed to shake so much of the audience out of the documentary mode of reception.

The use of irony within *Forgotten Silver* results in a potent subtlety in much of its humour. Joke tellers and their audience need to have similar "expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that [they] bring to the complex processing of discourse, of language in use,"[104] however. This meant that Jackson and Botes often told jokes to an audience who did not occupy a mode of reception in which they were responsive to those jokes. The ironist and the audience did not always have the "preexisting shared assumptions"[105] necessary for ironic humour to 'work.' Simple awareness of the fictionality of the text would often have granted viewers a context in which they could both look for and understand the subtext necessary to understand the jokes, but some took what was said at face value, and so any intended humour stemming from "both the said and the unsaid working together to create something new"[106] did not happen. The necessary inclusion of the 'unsaid' causes many ironic jokes to have a particularly subtle quality, as a required element of getting the joke is to understand something that is hidden. Ironic humour therefore relies on an understanding between joke teller and audience, an understanding that failed to materialize in this case for some viewers.

Attempted ironic humour, however, pervades *Forgotten Silver*. The film's claim that the "biggest man-made structure ever to be built"[107] in New Zealand, for example, was lost until Jackson 'discovers' it juxtaposes a suggestion of extreme visibility with an unrealistic lack of

[104] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge,* 89.
[105] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 95.
[106] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 63.
[107] *Forgotten Silver*, directed by Costa Botes and Peter Jackson (1995: New Zealand, WingNut films). DVD.

discovery. Many viewers, however, only considered the literal 'level' of the detail provided and so did not see the subtext required to generate humorous irony. An audience aware of the fact that the scenario is a joke understands the situation is deliberately impossible, with that impossibility being the source of irony in the joke. Viewers who believed the film to be real, however, completely ignored that layer of subtext. As a result, the unlikely lack of discovery was apparently read by some as a (slightly mystifying) oddity of history rather than a joke. Another example of irony in the film is a carved bull appearing on a chest containing all of McKenzie's 'lost film.' The humour in this scenario comes from the symbol representing the word 'bull,' with its ties to the term 'bullshit,' which is a potential label for the film itself, considering its fictionality. The irony of such an image adorning a chest filled with a fictional filmmaker's fictional masterpiece while surrounded by people exhorting the historical implications of such a find is rich, but easily missed for audiences who do not believe the film is fictional to begin with. In this case, the 'unsaid' is extremely easy to miss.

The potential for missed irony in the film is compounded when considered in light of its use of documentary conventions. The jokes are generally couched in serious tones and framed by familiar elements of expository documentaries such as voice-of-god narration and black and white photographs as primary sources. For those in the know, "incongruity arises between the traditional serious intent of the documentary form and the absurd quality of the dialogue and action."[108] For those still watching within the documentary mode of reception, however, the absurdity is disregarded. In *Forgotten Silver*, a voice-of-god narrator regularly outlines the more absurd events of McKenzie's life in the traditionally serious tone used in documentaries. This

[108] Middleton, 35.

occurs, for example, when the narrator describes McKenzie's invention of the close-up, an accident caused by McKenzie's infatuation with an actress compelling him to, as the narrator states in sober tones, "move his camera nearer and nearer to her."[109] This is potentially absurd to those who expect the film to be fictional and amusing (or who know something about film history), but, for those who occupy the documentary mode of reception, the absurdity is lost. Any humorous incongruity or irony involved is subsumed in the name of creating a new historical understanding. As absurdity requires a savvy audience to generate humour, many viewers ignored the deliberately unrealistic elements involved in these jokes.

Indeed, the reception of the film depends greatly on a given viewer's perception of what is plausible. Mockumentaries can simultaneously occupy a position that is both potentially possible and impossible, and so, according to Jason Middleton, a mockumentary "viewer's primary perception of a scene's implausibility is tempered by a minor implication of plausibility."[110] A mockumentarian often adds absurdity to provide departures from plausibility, but in order for it to be effective, "a viewer must be aware that the film is a fictional construct in documentary form."[111] Absurd humour in this context is what Nicholas Holm calls the "humour of unreality," or humour that "breaks from rules and logics that are typically understood to be true and immutable."[112] This can generate humour because of absurdity's distance from reality and the documentary genre as a representation of reality. The heightened plausibility many mistakenly attributed to *Forgotten Silver* because of their adherence to the documentary mode of

[109] *Forgotten Silver*.
[110] Middleton, 29.
[111] Middleton, 29.
[112] Holm, 149.

reception, however, meant that these viewers extended their belief of what was possible due to their implicit trust in the genre - as well as, perhaps, their desire to believe.

As a result, even extremely improbable moments or events, such as McKenzie's heist of "2000 dozen eggs"[113] in order to make a film in colour, failed to resonate as absurd, and therefore shake some viewers' mode of reception. The possibility of one man stealing 24,000 eggs is patently absurd, and maintaining a belief in such an event requires considerable entrenchment in sobriety, but many audiences remained steadfast in their view of the film's status as a representation of reality despite such inclusions. This acts as further proof of the solidity of their positions within the documentary mode of reception, despite all the evidence that this was not a documentary. Another example of extreme exaggeration within the film is the overall number of technical innovations McKenzie contributed to the art of cinema. According to *Forgotten Silver*, Colin Mckenzie invented the tracking shot, the close-up, colour film, and sound within film, and he also created the first feature length film, among other achievements. Such an enormously influential figure being forgotten is implausible to the point of absurdity, and the absurdity grows with each additional 'accomplishment.' Still, however, some audience members remained in the documentary mode of reception, and the exaggerated list of achievements became reality rather than distancing the film from it.

Fallout from misunderstandings caused by *Forgotten Silver* was often vehement and suggested that most audiences who misinterpreted the film did not appreciate being duped. Some were overtly hostile, with one viewer claiming that Jackson and Botes "should be shot."[114] These negative reactions suggest that some of the tricked audience members saw themselves as the butt

[113] *Forgotten Silver*.
[114] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 180.

of the joke and believed the function of much of the humour in the text was to make them look foolish. They also refused to see that documentary "techniques are themselves conventional forms of representation, rather than tools capable of revealing some preexisting reality."[115] Their betrayal was often accompanied by anger "at the willingness of the filmmakers to play with some of the more central aspects of the discourses of objectivity...that serve as the wider frames of reference for television documentary and news tests."[116] Other audience members possessed a continuing uncertainty about "whether *Forgotten Silver* was in fact a documentary."[117] For these viewers, the viewing experience resulted in an unexpected epistemological stalemate between traditional faith in the documentary conventions of the text and its fictional, fictional qualities. The subtlety of the humour, and the inside knowledge required to understand it, meant that these audience members were left questioning many of the jokes that had meant to serve as interpretive guides. After the revelation of the hoax, however, the entirety of the initial audience was provided an opportunity to reflect on the importance of questioning anything claiming to be a reflection of reality.

When commenting about the variety of reactions, Jackson and Botes generally express approval of their contribution to the increased awareness of some of their viewers. Botes, for example, states his favourite response to the text was a viewer who said that "all credibility has gone down the tubes - [he] won't be believing in TVNZ's news anymore."[118] Jackson claimed that "if *Forgotten Silver* causes people never to take anything from the media at face value, so much the better."[119] Numerous viewers expressed gratitude for the lessons learned through

[115] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 180.
[116] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 180.
[117] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 179.
[118] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 179.
[119] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 149.

viewing the film, with one saying that "the producers have done us all a service by showing how easy it is to hoodwink a viewing public that has been conditioned to believe that anything labelled 'documentary' is necessarily the truth."[120] These reactions from both filmmaker and audience reflect a shift in perception away from trusting traditional discourses of sobriety, and of, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, "[interrogating] their relation with experience."[121] For these viewers, the release and reception of *Forgotten Silver* revealed the importance of reception context, and the fact that viewers bring their own subjective experience and knowledge to the text. *Forgotten Silver* therefore "constructed a position for viewers through which they can take up an at least potential critical stance towards"[122] any text claiming to represent the truth. Many people who had not considered issues highlighted by the mockumentary were suddenly, perhaps rudely, awakened to their presence. This is, at its base, a "contesting of authority,"[123] in that it represents a rebellion against the authority of the documentary genre, a discourse of sobriety. It also illustrates the skeptical foundation of the mockumentary mode of reception. Other texts released prior to *Forgotten Silver* attempted to motivate audiences to achieve the same reflexivity, albeit through a different media, and without the addition of humour.

The War of the Worlds (1898) is a science fiction novel written by H.G. Wells that shares some unlikely similarities with *Forgotten Silver*. The novel's general content is quite distinct from the mockumentary's, as it depicts a martian invasion of Earth, but the text's interactions with the mockumentary mode of reception provide interesting connections between the two. Contrary to Jackson and Botes's text resulting in increased reflexivity in some of their viewers

[120] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 147.
[121] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 57.
[122] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 31.
[123] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 57.

essentially by accident, Wells deliberately wrote his text as an intervention into what he saw as the problematic "use of the sensational techniques of fiction"[124] in ostensibly objective newspapers and magazines. According to Jennifer Malie, Wells believed such qualities were a departure from the "rigours of science"[125] that he expected such publications to adhere to. The narrator of the novel embodies this criticism, as he repeatedly "lets his lust for sensation affect his narration,"[126] delving at several points in the text into impossible and distracting speculation based off of nothing but his own excitement and a vague familiarity with the topics under discussion. These moments integrate into the 'trustworthy' journalistic tone of the novel, and often Wells adds scenes after these interjections that prove them to be incorrect. Ultimately, Wells wrote *The War of the Worlds* "not only to draw attention to journalistic unreliability but also to warn the reading public to be cautious and skeptical of their information sources and to understand the motivations and goals of print media."[127] Both filmmakers of *Forgotten Silver* expressed their appreciation of the fact that many viewers of their film had viewing experiences that taught them a similar lesson, albeit by accident and through a different medium. Wells, Jackson and Botes therefore value the same outcome, and share the same belief: increased reflexivity on the part of the viewer regarding traditional sources of fact is required in order to avoid incorporating falsities into reality. Although they did not label it as such, this prioritization of an audience's active participation stresses the importance of being in a mode of reception that correlates to a text's ontological position. Ironically, considering this aim, a radio adaptation of

[124]Jennifer Malia, "'Public Imbecility and Journalistic Enterprise': The Satire on Mars Mania in H.G. Wells's The War of the Worlds," *Extrapolation* 50 (1): 82.
[125] Malia, 83.
[126] Malia, 82.
[127] Malia, 82.

the text created many years later provides another connection to *Forgotten Silver*: it was widely believed to be true, and caused considerable panic.

In 1938, Orson Welles released a radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* that, Welles claimed, caused "mass panic and hysteria across" the United States to such an extent that the "episode became embedded in national memory"[128] due to many listeners "[treating] it as a news report of an actual alien invasion."[129] Similar to *Forgotten Silver*, although on a much larger scale, people believed the fictional program to be true, and this had very real repercussions. Some people "took flight" while others "phoned the police, government departments and the media for information and help."[130] Welles created false verisimilitude in the program by "simulating the style of contemporary news reporting familiar to radio audiences"[131] (adding such elements as a "weather forecast provided by the Government Weather Bureau"[132] at the beginning of the show), and, like *Forgotten Silver*, using "context to give the play a strong modern-day resonance."[133] Similar to *Forgotten Silver*, the broadcast's unexpected reception came from an audience mistaking the genre of text they were listening to as a representation of reality, causing them to enter into a documentary mode of reception. As a result, each added detail in the program provided more information about reality. An obvious difference between the two texts is the less extreme reaction of the viewers who believed *Forgotten Silver* (there were no riots on the streets in Auckland after its initial screening, for example), but their experiences align nonetheless. The texts were received as true because of the audience's mode of

[128] Peter J Beck, *The War of the Worlds: From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Waynes, Steven Spielberg and Beyond,* London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 211.
[129] Beck, 213.
[130] Beck, 211.
[131] Beck, 222.
[132] Beck, 218.
[133] Beck, 218.

reception, despite the involvement of elements each text creator thought would distance their work from reality.

One important element of *Forgotten Silver* is missing from the radio adaptation and the novel: humour. This was the key feature of *Forgotten Silver* that its filmmakers believed would gradually allow audiences to divine the nature of the text they were watching and enter into a mockumentary mode of reception. Welles included different markers of fictionality, however, such as the inclusion of three announcements that "the play was 'an original dramatization' of Wells's classic novel," and the fact that "the broadcast was performed as an event occurring in the future."[134] Interestingly, Welles also claimed that "Martians have always been treated as synonyms for make-believe...almost a synonym for fantasy."[135] This suggests Welles believed the extraterrestrial content possessed a similar function to absurdity in mockumentaries: a fantastical addition to the program that should have undone its verisimilitude. Just as no one could believe the possibility of stealing twenty-four thousand eggs, no one could believe the presence of martians in the middle of the United States. Like Jackson and Botes, however, Welles miscalculated how powerful the use of conventions attached to traditional representations of truth could be, and how anchored his audience was in their documentary mode of reception. The result was therefore the same for both texts: the establishment of a new 'reality,' replete with nearly unbelievable truths, created because of how an audience experienced a text.

A final ironic possibility of the panicked reactions to Welles's radio broadcast is that there is a possibility that they never happened, at least to the extent that Welles later claimed. There are several reasons this is becoming an increasingly popular theory: one being Orson

[134] Beck, 220.
[135] Beck, 221.

Welles's "skills as a self-publicist,"[136] which provided a keen awareness of the potential benefits of being the (self-labelled) "man who scared America."[137] Welles was notorious for being enthusiastic regarding self-promotion, and exaggeration was one of his primary marketing techniques. Another element to consider is that although "six million people tuned in to 'The War of the Worlds' broadcast… a much larger audience of approximately thirty million were listening to NBC's comedy programme, 'The Chase and Sanborn Hour.'"[138] Although six million people is certainly enough to stir up a panic, Welles's near apocalyptic descriptions of the nation after his broadcast could hardly have been accurate without a larger crowd. Like *Forgotten Silver*, Welles also used entrenched authorities to legitimize his claims, continually citing a scholarly study about the public hysteria conducted by "Hadley Cantil, a researcher based out at Princeton University"[139] as incontrovertible evidence of the impact of his work. This study, however, is imperfect support, as it does little to "question whether or not the panic and hysteria reported by the media actually occurred," taking the fact of mass hysteria as a given. It also states "that not all listeners panicked,"[140] acknowledging that several of the 135 people interviewed "soon related the story to H.G. Wells."[141] So, in a final twist, reports of the reactions to the radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* possibly provide an example of the deliberate misuse of traditional sources of truth to create a sensationalized misrepresentation of reality, or, in other words, an example of the very thing Wells had written the original text as a warning against. The documentary mode of reception is implicit in the construction of the myth, as Wells used traditionally trustworthy sources to build it, resulting in people's willingness to approach his

[136] Beck, 223.
[137] Beck, 227.
[138] Beck, 213.
[139] Beck, 227.
[140] Beck, 229.
[141] Beck, 229.

story without skepticism. In the end, *The War of the World* in its many forms proves or stresses the potentially fraught relationship between how people construct their reality and the tools they use. Like *Forgotten Silver*, each iteration of the text connects to the potential impact of an audience inhabiting a particular mode of reception, and the very real impact that can have.

Like documentary, mockumentary is a mode of reception. As a result, the meaning of a text can spiral beyond the control of the maker(s). A joke can become, for some, a reality. The release and reception of *Forgotten Silver* illustrates the importance of considering the audience's mode of reception in understanding how a mockumentary text functions. It shows that using the language and conventions of a documentary, for some, can create a 'reality,' whether true or not. The filmmakers' faith in the humour of the film being absurd enough to alter the audience's mode of reception was betrayed, whether by subtlety in the jokes, the predisposition of the audience, or both. This reveals the instability of the mockumentary mode of reception, and the resulting potential for audiences to misinterpret a film's true relationship with reality. Since the film's release, an increasing number of artists have incorporated these elements into their work.

Chapter 3: Tim Heidecker: Shaky Verisimilitude and the Exclusionary Mode of Reception

Tim Heidecker exists in a strange fringe of the comedic world. His texts span a multitude of different media and are generally considered "adventurous,"[142] "unclassifiable, [and] weird."[143] Although his output is difficult to place in any particular genre, it is characterized by Heidecker's willingness to play with established notions of what makes something amusing. Heidecker seems to thrive on distorting recognizable techniques of humour, and rarely (if ever) creates a traditional joke, with a set-up followed by a clear punchline. Instead, he crafts elaborate parodies or absurd scenarios that hide or contort jokes, sometimes to the point where only those familiar with Heidecker find them funny. This is often due to his complex intentions: rather than just creating individual humorous scenarios, he attempts to build entire multimedia universes for his audience to enjoy, each with their own unique internal 'reality.' Each of these 'realities' is constructed through media in a manner that mimics and critiques how people build their perceptions of the actual modern world. These universes weave in and out of actual, external reality, and so have a shaky relationship with what most people understand as 'real.' Even more so than *Forgotten Silver*, Heidecker's works successfully "blur fact and fiction to the point where it is not possible for viewers to either trace the [text's] references in the sociohistorical world or to clearly identify the narrative within the realm of the imaginary."[144] However, Heidecker's disruption of the dichotomous relationship between reality and falsity is a deliberate effect of his humour rather than - as it was with *Forgotten Silver* - an unexpected accident of his audience's reception. In doing so, he generates the effect of what I am calling "shaky verisimilitude."

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[142]Jason Zinoman, "Tim and Eric Figure Out How to Do the Wrong Thing, Perfectly," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/23/arts/tim-and-eric-awesome-show-great-job-tour.html.
[143]Colin Groundwater, "Tim and Eric: The Last 7 Things That Made Us Laugh," *GQ*, March 24, 2020, https://www.gq.com/story/tim-and-eric-the-last-7-things-that-made-us-laugh.
[144] Hight and Roscoe, "Forgotten Silver," 182.

Shaky verisimilitude happens when a filmmaker continually connects a text in recognizably 'legitimate' ways (such as through documentary conventions) to the real, external world outside of the fictional world in which the output is set with little to no cues to suggest any kind of fictionality. The savvy audience, however, is aware that the text is either entirely false or has fictional elements. This destabilizes moments that appear to suggest a text is real, and even savvy audiences can become confused regarding the text's true ontological position. The audience's mode of reception becomes uncertain, oscillating between the mockumentary and documentary modes. Savvy audiences, though, see the use of verisimilitude itself, rather than the specific content of the scene, as a joke. Such an effect essentially mocks the miscommunication that occurred with the first screenings of *Forgotten Silver*, or the accidental incorporation of a false text into reality, by purposefully recreating scenarios that invite a similar response. With Heidecker's work, a savvy viewer adopts an ironic documentary mode of reception to acknowledge this. As a result, an audience's mode of reception is a vital element of Heidecker's output.

In Heidecker's texts, the punch-line to many jokes is the amplification and manipulation of what Jason Middleton calls a "minor implication of plausibility,"[145] generally achieved through direct involvement with a discursive community that understands what he is trying to achieve. Heidecker uses humour to build a universe that is a consistently believable but fictional extension of reality. As part of his process, Heidecker creates characters that operate between the realistic and the absurd. He then places them in situations in the external real world with real people who are not aware they are interacting with a fictional character. Alternatively, he creates

[145] Middleton, 29.

scenes that appear to be between Tim (Heidecker's fictional persona who shares his name) and 'reality,' but then reveals that this ostensible reality involves artificial elements like actors portraying 'real' people. Savvy viewers wait for moments of direct confrontation or integration between the fictional character and elements of reality, and punchlines often arise from the dramatic irony of the real world people not knowing they are interacting with a fictional character and attempting to make sense of a character who, in a subtle way, is too absurd to be authentic. At other times, savvy viewers simply look for moments of what I call shaky verisimilitude, which is when a scene has no markers of fictionality but involves elements a savvy audience knows to be false, and laugh at the potential for other viewers to be duped. Much of the humour of the character, then, comes from the uncertainty he creates regarding whether or not he is operating within the real world or a fictional one, and the way he blurs the line between these two realities. The community possessing this awareness amplifies and augments the joke by responding to texts posted online as if they were viewers of a show based in reality, and so savvy viewers and the character exist in a reciprocal relationship based on ironic humour. Considering this combination of shaky verisimilitude with humour, it makes sense that one of Heidecker's most recently released texts is a mockumentary film. His character that stars in what he calls the “OnCinema Universe” best exemplifies this element of his output. Heidecker uses the sheer number of texts in the universe, their multimedia interconnectedness, and imperfect connections to reality to create shaky verisimilitude.

OnCinema

The OnCinema Universe is an ever expanding source of content from Heidecker that stars a fictionalized version of himself generally working alongside Gregg Turkington, the

co-creator of the series who also plays a fictional character also acting under his 'real' name. Despite maintaining that the premise of the OnCinema universe is the discussion and critique of film, most output starring the two characters – whose fictional personas I will refer to as Gregg and Tim – focusses on Tim's life and numerous struggles instead. This infuriates Gregg, who plays a self-professed 'movie-buff' but who, in fact, possesses only cursory knowledge of the field. The deplorable nature of Tim's character (who is continually connected to Donald Trump, an important detail I shall discuss below), generates much of the absurd humour of the series, as well as his (and Gregg's) absolute lack of self-awareness, corresponding with Middleton's observation that "comic figures, then, are often characterized by their "unsociability" - their cluelessness to the world around them and, especially, to how others see them."[146] This allows each character to behave in a manner that constantly threatens but never overwhelms the verisimilitude of the show, this tension generating humour, as I will also discuss later in the chapter.

Part of the overall joke of the texts is their sheer volume, which adds a high level of complexity and detail to the fictional world, as well as numerous links to reality, and has essentially become a gargantuan mockumentary 'text' about the fictional Tim's life. Beginning as a podcast host, since 2012 the character Tim has been involved with eleven seasons of a YouTube series dedicated to 'movie criticism' (including seven live 'Oscar special' episodes, which are broadcast live over YouTube and generally last approximately four hours), has 'directed' and starred in three seasons of a fake spy television program, has performed deliberately mediocre stand-up comedy in real venues under Tim Heidecker's name, has released

[146] Middleton, 25.

several songs, and has starred in an approximately five hour-long news-reel style depictions of a murder trial, among other appearances. Tim and Gregg also both incorporate their actual appearance in different films, *Ant Man* (2015) and *Fantastic Four* (2015), into the universe. Heidecker tweets as the Tim character from his own Twitter account at seemingly random intervals, and he interacts on the platform with other characters in the show in character. The most recent release starring the character is a full-length mockumentary entitled *Mister America* (2019), discussed below.

The predominant source of OnCinema content is through YouTube releases structured to resemble a movie criticism program, which generally consists of Tim and Gregg sitting and having a discussion. Although the ostensible purpose of these texts is the criticism of film, they consistently focus on Tim discussing his personal life instead. Through these videos, details about the OnCinema universe are provided and happenings are outlined. These videos essentially provide the "raw data"[147] that the rest of the output revolves around. Gregg and Tim describe events to viewers that become canon, allowing for multiple storylines to be compressed into individual ten minute episodes. One episode, for example, begins with a very somber Gregg announcing that Tim has accidentally burned Gregg's "film archive"[148] (a storage unit filled with VHS tapes) down, and is in the hospital. The actual event is not shown on screen (although there is a very brief clip of a burning building edited to look like newsreel footage) and Gregg's descriptions of the fire and its consequences take up the majority of the episode. The fire has multiple repercussions in the universe, resulting in Tim's absence from the remainder of the season and Tim and Gregg's relationship souring. Despite its significance, the fire and Tim's

[147] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It,* 8.
[148] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "'Solace' And 'The Light Between Oceans' | On Cinema Season 8, Ep. 7 | Adult Swim," September 6th, 2016, YouTube video, 12:03, https://youtu.be/Qb3kMeOxCAQ.

involvement in it is mostly described by Gregg rather than depicted. This invites audiences to adapt the documentary viewer's tendency to "take as true what subjects recount about something that happened"[149] to the depiction of a fictional universe, in essence mocking the faith in spoken testimony associated with the documentary mode of reception.

These videos do not, however, constitute the only OnCinema output, but serve as an important foundation for an ever-expanding multimedia universe. Further detail and humour is added to the OnCinema universe by the regular release of texts 'created' by characters within it. These include a fake spy program released onto YouTube called "Decker" and musical releases from the variety of bands Tim is involved with. These serve as amusing evidence of the two main characters' lack of self-awareness, hearkening back to Middleton's observation about the foundation for many comedic characters, as every release is purposefully poor quality. "Decker," for example, consistently involves amateur looking computer generated graphics and the finale of one 'season' of the show[150] ends with a poorly choreographed fight in which the protagonist Decker, portrayed by Tim, defeats an opponent with amateurish stage combat, complete with punches and kicks that miss his antagonist by a considerable margin. Despite these deliberate inclusions, having this kind of content also adds potential verisimilitude to the universe because of the unusual nature of having texts by fictional characters without any clear suggestion of their fictional origins released through the same channels as legitimate output from real people. The "Decker" videos, for example, are uploaded on a YouTube channel with no direct connection to the OnCinema universe, and savvy fans ironically discuss the output as if it were legitimately released by a real person without connections to OnCinema in the comment

[149] Nichols, 21.
[150] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "DECKER: Port Of Call: Hawaii – Episode 20 | Decker | Adult Swim," April 3rd, 2015, YouTube video, 14:59, https://youtu.be/XeNMMrPy0Gs

sections. Music is released on a similarly obfuscated webpage run by a fictional member of Tim's 'band' as if it were legitimate.

Audiences react to these texts depending on their level of preexisting knowledge regarding the universe, and therefore their mode of reception: those who understand Tim's fictionality look at them as humorous, and those who wish to engage in the texts as Heidecker seems to desire adopt an ironic documentary mode of reception mocking those who are not aware of the texts' true origins, and might view the releases as legitimate but misguided attempts by real people at creating art. This scenario and the others mentioned above emphasize a foundation of shaky verisimilitude and its consequently uncertain mode of reception: the 'in-joke' and an audience that is part of a knowledgeable discursive community.

The Exclusionary Mode of Reception

The necessity of understanding both the said and unsaid elements of humour often means that it can create groups divided between "those who get it and those who don't."[151] An important part of 'getting it,' or understanding the variety of unsaid elements placed within a text by a humorist and so avoiding the fate of the deceived members of *Forgotten Silver's* audience, is being a member of a specific discursive community. As Gary Fine and Michaela Soucey observe, these groups provide knowledge and context for "known humorous themes that are returned to repeatedly throughout group interaction."[152] For many, then, inside jokes can serve as "an expression of unity in group opinion"[153] that "reinforce already existing connections within a

[151] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 54.
[152] Gary Fine and Michaela Soucey, "Joking cultures: Humor themes as social regulation in group life," *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 18, n. 1 (Apr 2005): 1.
[153] Hurley, Adams, and Dennett, 38.

community, ”[154] and their humour stems from the development of “shared knowledge and common history.”[155] An example of this is the "Decker" program outlined above. The show could be seen by someone without inside knowledge as genuine, and therefore a legitimate attempt at creating a program by someone who has not had experience in that field, or is simply incompetent. Savvy audiences, however, know the ‘truth’ and see the program as representative of the efforts of a fictional character, and so react accordingly. In the OnCinema universe, the savvy audience's reaction is generally to ironically suggest they view the texts in the same mode of reception as someone who does not know of their fictional origins. As inside “joking involves a call-response sequence, or a dialogue”[156] between the joker and the audience, “joking remarks build on each other” to “create a continual humorous response.”[157] With the OnCinema universe, Heidecker not only relies upon this as a source of humour, but integrates it into his savvy audience’s mode of reception and uses it as a vital part of his construction of a false reality. Part of the humour in any OnCinema text comes from incorporating or referencing elements from previous releases, and audiences have come to expect this feature and respond to it through social media. In this way, self-referentiality itself has become an inside joke in OnCinema material, to the extent that savvy audiences have become an integral part of the generation of the universe through their interactions with it.

A significant part of understanding the humour of Heidecker’s OnCinema work relies upon the viewer being a part of a discursive community that is aware of the fictionality and qualities of the OnCinema universe, and knows about Tim’s continual and deliberate obfuscation

[154] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 26.
[155] Fine, Gary and Soucey, Michaela, 2.
[156] Fine, Gary and Soucey, Michaela, 3.
[157] Fine, Gary and Soucey, Michaela, 3.

of what constitutes 'reality.' This has become a reciprocal relationship, as Heidecker and Turkington often add content geared specifically towards this discursive community, interact directly with fans, or change content based on their response. As Heidecker states, “we create problems for them to argue about.”[158] Turkington goes one step further in his assessment of the relationship between the universe and its audience, saying that their discursive community has “become a character as well.”[159] Turkington’s analysis seems particularly apt, as the community often fully integrates into and embellishes the fictions of the OnCinema universe. As a result, interactions between audience and creators can be considered part of the joke, and therefore part of the output of the overall universe itself. Tim and Greg communicate constantly with their audience over social media, and often discuss how previous output was received by audiences within texts from the OnCinema universe based on these real world conversations. The audience can become a source of extreme tension between the two, which viewers can choose to exacerbate or resolve depending on continuing real world interactions with the characters. Gregg regularly refers to fan's opinions to help win arguments with Tim on Twitter, for example, such as one instance where, after bickering with Tim about the quality of James Bond films, he quotes a user tweeting that Tim has "no respect for classic cinema," saying it is "another [example of] one who feels this way."[160] A signal of a viewer's involvement within this community that becomes involved in this process, and one Heidecker and Turkington actively encourage, is an ironic feigning of ignorance of the entire universe’s fictionality and of not ‘getting’ the joke; the

[158]Robert Lloyd, “‘Decker,’ ‘On Cinema’ and the various, intertwined universes of comedian Tim Heidecker,” *Los Angeles Times,* June 9th, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-ca-st-tim-heidecker-20170609-story.html.
[159] Lloyd, “‘Decker,’ ‘On Cinema’ and the various, intertwined universes of comedian Tim Heidecker.”
[160] Gregg Turkington (@greggturkington), "you asked about it, well @timheidecker here's another one who feels this way," Twitter, June 29th, 2020, https://twitter.com/greggturkington/status/1277749197500854272?s=20.

viewer therefore performs as a humourless 'character' from the OnCinema universe. This occurs regularly in any medium where interaction is possible between the text and the fans.

One example of these interactions occurs on a YouTube episode of OnCinema in which Gregg mistakenly suggests that filmmaker Woody Allen has too many Oscars to count, stating that his "house is sinking into the ground under the weight of all that Oscar gold."[161] A comment on the video reads "i googled to see how many oscars woody allen has and google says he has 4, which i'm sure is incorrect as Gregg absolutely knows his stuff and wouldn't get something like that wrong. thinking about sending google an email to let them know of this error. anyway, great episode!"[162] In this instance, a commenter signals belonging to the discursive community by ironically supporting one of the more central premises of the OnCinema universe: Gregg's self-proclaimed expertise despite a consistent lack of overall knowledge of film. To a savvy audience, general ignorance of cinema is a known element of Gregg's character, so the suggestion of faith in Gregg's consistent claims to film expertise is an ironic performance on the part of the YouTube user, mimicking the lack of skepticism associated with the documentary (rather than mockumentary) mode of reception.

This is also the case with a comment on another episode that focuses on Tim's involvement with a number of 'business pursuits' that essentially amount to a variety of scams and pyramid schemes. He generally participates in these ventures because of a penchant for 'get rich quick' schemes that never succeed, a trait born out of overpowering greed. In the episode, Tim discusses his newfound appreciation for a company called "MoneyZap,"[163] a transparently

[161] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "'Café Society' And 'Jason Bourne' | On Cinema Season 8, Ep. 2 | Adult Swim," August 3rd, 2016, YouTube Video, 13:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2YyYQfZetk.
[162] Heidecker and Turkington, "'Café Society' And 'Jason Bourne' | On Cinema Season 8, Ep. 2 | Adult Swim."
[163] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, 'Joker' & 'The Current War' | On Cinema Season 11, Ep. 2 | adult swim," October 9th, 2019, YouTube Video, 12:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5vfOMSA-H8.

problematic business that loaned Tim a considerable sum of money at extremely high interest rates (that eventually bankrupt him) to help alleviate some of the poor financial decisions he made during a previous season of the show. The introduction of the episode involves Tim delivering a short lecture on the helpfulness of MoneyZap, claiming that "access to capital is vital in keeping your business in operation."[164] In the comment section, one user observes that "Tim is slinging a lot of words around like capital, investments, & CEO. This man must know a lot about business!"[165] This user – claiming to have faith in Tim's business expertise despite literally almost every single text in the OnCinema universe providing evidence of its nonexistence – feigns adoption of a mode of reception that trusts the 'reality' Tim presents.

These kinds of comments can be found on every text released onto a platform in which communication between creator and fan is possible. By entering into a reciprocal relationship with the OnCinema content, the community in general shows a willingness to help establish the characteristics of a completely fictional internal universe that 'behaves' like external reality. The viewers play the role of dupes, fooled by the overall verisimilitude of the OnCinema texts. They consciously and ironically perform the same misinterpretation that much of the audience of *Forgotten Silver* legitimately made, simultaneously affirming their own awareness and mocking those who would be fooled. In Turkington's words, the series benefits from having an audience that is "willing to play along."[166] These audience members mimic the documentary mode of reception. They then create their own additions to the series in the form of comments, which Tim and Gregg regularly incorporate into their programs. Much of the humour is therefore created by

[164] Heidecker and Turkington, 'Joker' & 'The Current War' | On Cinema Season 11, Ep. 2 | adult swim," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5vfOMSA-H8.
[165] Heidecker and Turkington, 'Joker' & 'The Current War' | On Cinema Season 11, Ep. 2 | adult swim," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5vfOMSA-H8.
[166] Lloyd, "'Decker,' 'On Cinema' and the various, intertwined universes of comedian Tim Heidecker."

ironically adopting this interactive mode of reception and the resultant "enjoyment that can come from creative participation in meaning-making."[167] Audiences delight in their ability to join in the process of contributing to a 'reality' through humour, and their inclusion affirms their position within a group. As so many jokes in these scenarios come from understanding the artificiality of the universe, one of the more potent sources of humour for a discursive community such as this is when people do not 'get' the inside joke, or even the potential of such a person existing.

For much of the content, this subterfuge is possible because of the nature of its primary point of dispersal: the internet. Most of the releases and the majority of interactions between fans and content creators in the OnCinema universe occur online, and take advantage of the internet's unique features as a purveyor of information. Tim and Gregg use the internet's ability to attach additional 'content' such as comments extensively, for example, by arguing with fans in comment sections of YouTube videos. Viewers' opinions then add further detail to the overall universe. This can even be incorporated into video content, such as one episode of a cooking show Tim 'created,' which begins with Tim verbally confronting a YouTube user named "deluge88" for making rude comments on a previous episode. Tim states that "what [he] is doing is helpful, but what [deluge88] is doing is just pure negativity,"[168] and is then noticeably shaken during the beginning of the show. This online output (mis)uses one modern method of conveying information that can impact a person's perception of reality: social media. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are increasingly becoming important sites of "news production and consumption."[169] Users can use these platforms to "break news,

[167] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 42.
[168] Tim and Eric, "Tim's Kitchen Tips -- Episode 3," July 8th, 2013, YouTube video, 9:14, https://youtu.be/VFlcO9J9b0Y.
[169] Dhiraj Murthy, *Twitter: social communication in the Twitter Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 69.

comment on larger political issues, local concerns, and fads,"[170] granting them a user-generated impact on people's perception of reality. However, social media contains information that "can be misleading, incorrect, or even fraudulent."[171] Heidecker and Turkington highlight the potential for being duped by misleading information on social media by creating shaky verisimilitude in their released OnCinema texts.

Tim, in particular, enacts some of the ways in which people try to control their image online at the expense of honesty. He tries constantly to control his image by manipulating or attempting to reframe previously released OnCinema texts, and one continuing joke in the series is that he does so in an attempt to appear either as a good person or on trend, despite his 'real' personality essentially being a "vile, delusional, beer-swilling dimwit."[172] One example of this involves an incident in which Tim burns Gregg's prized VHS collection out of spite during the filming of an episode of "Decker" he directs and stars in. Then, in a subsequent episode of OnCinema released onto YouTube, he claims that he "believed in [his] heart that what [he] was setting aflame was dubs of those movies,"[173] or copies made from the originals. This is false, as it is shown in the television program that Tim knows exactly what he is doing, which means that both Tim's original action and his apology cause tension that lingers for many future episodes between him and Gregg. Gregg shows doubt regarding Tim's sincerity during his apology, but Tim redirects the focus of the video immediately back to his own life, cutting his protestations short. Similar attempts to control his image happen regularly throughout the series, and such instances become humorous due to how they exemplify Tim's 'true' character. Tim's

[170] Murthy, 69.
[171] Murthy, 72.
[172] Scott Tobias, "Boor Fest: All Politics Is Local, And Lowly, In Satire 'Mister America,' *NPR*, October 10, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/10/10/767248775/boor-fest-all-politics-is-local-and-lowly-in-satire-mister-america
[173] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "'Ant Man' And 'Fantastic Four' | On Cinema Season 7, Ep. 1 | Adult Swim," September 9, 2015, YouTube video, 12:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgoanR8BAMA&t=102s.

incompetent nature generally prevents him from being successful at altering his image, but their presence highlights the potential for any text, even one claiming to represent reality, to undergo manipulation. This becomes more politicized in later output, which I shall discuss below.

Heidecker also extends – or tries to extend – the shaky verisimilitude of the OnCinema universe to elements of the external world so that they, too, become part of the epistemological uncertainty. An example of this would be an ongoing, entirely one-sided 'feud' between the OnCinema universe and George Lucas, the director of the *Star Wars* series, based on Gregg's belief that Lucas stole one of Gregg's characters and "folded it into the Star Wars world."[174] Part of the humour in this situation is that the 'character' Gregg believes Lucas duplicated co-stars in the deliberately terrible spy program 'Decker,' and his only real quality is that he is a "code breaker."[175] Generally Gregg voices his displeasure offhand within episodes, but occasionally the audience is given examples of the true depth of Gregg's 'distress.' In one episode, Gregg stages a "trial of George Lucas,"[176] in which he hires a George Lucas look alike actor to 'admit' to Lucas's crimes, and then lectures him for his deceit. The apparent injustice of the scenario is a constant source of despair for Gregg, and is an example of how the universe involves elements of external reality as part of its overall story while maintaining its own internal reality. Lucas has never acknowledged the animosity, and, outside of the OnCinema universe, it is absurd. However, this 'relationship" further blurs the lines between the fictional and the real, the mockumentary and the documentary.

[174] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "'Solo: A Star Wars Story' | On Cinema Season X, Ep. 10 | adult swim," May 31, 2018, YouTube video, 8:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1a1sLe1W3w&t=251s
[175] Heidecker and Turkington, "Solo: A Star Wars Story."
[176] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "The 5th Annual Live On Cinema Oscar Special | On Cinema at the Cinema | Adult Swim," March 6th, 2018, YouTube video, 2:23:04, https://youtu.be/MIAttlFcO6g.

The relationship between Heidecker, the maker, and Tim, the character, also blurs these lines. In a sense, Tim is sometimes similar to the fictional rock band that stars in mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap* (Guest, 1984). Hight and Roscoe argue that the filmmakers "[confuse] the ontological status of the band" by making them appear to "have an existence outside of the film."[177] The band, Spinal Tap, performs in 'real' concerts and releases 'real' albums, despite being a 'fictional' group. This means that there is "some question over how the audience views the fictional status of the subject of the film."[178] Heidecker creates similar uncertainty with his appearances in reality. For example, he rarely, if ever, gives any signals to differentiate between interviews where he is appearing in character (as Tim) and those where he is not (as Heidecker), allowing the audience to decide for themselves if he is being his 'real' self. In 2012, the character Tim took the idea of the interview one step further, claiming to have been accepted as the new editor-in-chief of *Rolling Stone*, which seemed unlikely until the magazine itself 'confirmed' his leadership via Twitter. Following this, several 'legitimate' news sources published articles that seemed genuinely confused regarding the veracity of Tim's claims, but most joined in on the joke, with some claiming that "that this is a very real thing,"[179] and others welcoming 'Tim' to the publishing world. An article in *The Atlantic* provides several congratulatory tweets from high ranking people within the magazine's administration as well as representatives from other magazines welcoming Tim to the position (including the outgoing editor-in-chief, who begrudgingly congratulates him). Tim was not, however, the new editor of *The Rolling Stone*. He did manage to bring the magazine itself, several publications, and many people in on his stunt,

[177] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It*, 123.
[178] Hight and Roscoe, *Faking It*, 123.
[179] Connor Simpson, "Tim Heidecker Is the New Rolling Stone Editor, for Serious," *The Atlantic,* December 4, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2012/12/tim-heidecker-rolling-stone-editor/320837/.

though, making the confusion it caused a joke. People familiar with Heidecker's previous comedy and the existence of the 'Tim' character were also aware of the ruse, and, as much as possible, tried to bolster the joke through their own expressions of false belief, again creating humour through the false adoption of the documentary mode of reception.

To a certain extent, Tim's use of real people and entities from external reality reflects the use of interviews in *Forgotten Silver* with 'real' recognizable figures from the film industry (such Johnny Morris and Leonard Maltin) playing fictionalized versions of themselves. The interviews in *Forgotten Silver* serve to connect the history being presented to entrenched authorities in a related field, which, depending on an audience's mode of reception, can either legitimize what is being said, or provide humorously ironic moments based on an absurd fiction being linked to traditional elements of representations of reality. Tim's interactions with reality can certainly create either of these, but one important distinction separates his work: these moments are purposefully uncertain, and deliberately preclude any avenue for easy verification regarding the legitimacy of the parties involved unless an audience possesses preexisting knowledge. A truly savvy audience therefore occupies a mockumentary mode of reception that is specifically exclusionary. This audience bases their reception of a text entirely on preexisting knowledge, and humour then becomes a matter of possessing knowledge an outside audience does not.

Internal and External Realities

There are many examples within the savvy OnCinema universe of Heidecker catering to the savvy OnCinema community and their specific mode of reception by unleashing Tim onto unsuspecting citizens of external reality. In these moments, the people Tim interacts with are not performing, and do not know he is acting as a character. Humour can emerge in these scenes for

the savvy audience through dramatic irony, knowing something the real people in the scene do not: generally that Tim is a fictional character. Savvy audiences have a different understanding of the context of the scene, and so, as Linda Hutcheon states, "incongruities or seemingly inappropriate details are not interpreted as signaling deception or error - these are our normal "default assumptions" - but as marking ironies to be inferred."[180] It is a form of irony that can "change how people interpret,"[181] and for a savvy audience, according to Lewis MacLeod, relocates all of Tim's behaviour and utterances "secretly in ironic quotes."[182] Often, this means that 'normal' behaviour from Tim can be potentially amusing to those aware of the OnCinema universe.

Importantly, the object of laughter varies in these circumstances. Sometimes, the butt of the jokes are the actual people interacting with Tim, such as one instance where Tim asks to display signs that he claims are attack ads against a political opponent in a number of restaurants. The signs read "WE HAVE A RAT PROBLEM" in extremely large text with a minimal amount of actual content related to Tim's (actually fictional) political campaign. Business owners believe the character Tim is a real, serious person, and so do not consider the humourous potential of his behaviour. Tim introduces himself as a politician making a documentary, and they respond accordingly. Many believe Tim's political story, which clouds their interpretation of the signs to the point where they remain oblivious to the fact that they could be read as warnings regarding a rodent infestation. The result is humorous dramatic irony. To an audience aware of Tim's fictionality, this is a joke on the people who accept these signs without realizing the potential

[180] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 21.
[181] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 32.
[182] Lewis MacLeod, "'A Documentary-Style Film': Borat and the Fiction/Nonfiction Question," *Narrative* 19, no. 1 (January 2011): 121.

misinterpretation they offer. Importantly, however, the people getting duped are rarely actually shown on screen. Only one store owner is actually shown, and the rest are depicted through audio only while the camera focuses on the front of their store. Although there is an argument to be made that these scenarios present potential ethical concerns, Heidecker's use of shaky verisimilitude means that in most scenarios, the simple fact he is interacting with people in the external reality in character becomes the primary joke, rather than whatever is being done to the people. The actions of Tim are generally relatively banal. The 'rat problem' gag is possibly the most potentially damaging for the non-actors involved, and, significantly, often the fact that the people he is duping do not have a presence on screen makes their presence secondary to the bit itself.

Another continuing example of Heidecker's use of shaky verisimilitude in the OnCinema universe is the continuing production of recognizable people from external reality playing fictionalized versions of themselves for the show. These people do not create dramatic irony; they are in on the joke. This is best exemplified by the recurring presence of the real actor Joe Estevez. Estevez plays a fictional version of himself, a character I shall refer to as Joe, who has somehow been caught up in Tim's circle, and whose presence is often used as a source of humour. Joe appears in multiple different OnCinema texts, is often visible in the background of scenes and 'acts' in several episodes of "Decker." Joe's status as a 'known' figure in external reality, or at least an actor that can be seen in a number of roles, means that his appearance in the OnCinema universe is inherently funny to savvy audiences because it represents an absurd "breach of common understandings of logical behaviour and probability."[183] Joe's presence is

[183] Holm, 150.

absurd: he is a ‘real’ person ‘appearing’ in a fictional program, illustrating the permeability of the border between OnCinema reality and external reality. He is also someone who has appeared in film and television roles in external reality appearing on a show run by two people without any rational connection to such a figure in any reality. For a savvy audience, the humour generated by Joe's presence in the series stems from shaky verisimilitude, as he continually but imperfectly connects OnCinema to external reality. Joe plays the President of the United States in "Decker," for example. His position in that text can be confusing, as, like Joe Estevez in external reality, the character Joe is an actor. Despite appearances to the contrary, however, Joe is not Joe Estevez. A savvy audience is aware that Joe is fictional, even if he 'behaves' like his externally real counterpart. Once again in this scenario, the butt of the joke in part becomes a theoretical section of the audience who, like some of the viewers of *Forgotten Silver*, might mistake Joe or anything Joe does for a representation of reality. Hence, the exclusionary mode of reception itself is the source of humour, but in this case it is not those onscreen who are excluded but rather those audiences who do not 'get it.' This is also the case, for example, in many of the jokes in the mockumentary about Tim running for district attorney, *Mister America*.

The Exclusionary Mode of Reception and *Mister America*

Mister America is a mockumentary about Tim’s attempt to run for the district attorney of San Bernardino. He is motivated entirely by his petty obsession with getting revenge on the current district attorney, who served as the prosecutor for a trial in which Tim was accused of multiple murders. Although this was eventually declared a mistrial, Tim’s fury towards the district attorney results in a spiteful attempt to replace him. The film follows him during his campaign and documents his struggles to succeed in gaining any kind of support from voters.

These ‘voters’ are generally actual citizens of San Bernardino with whom Tim interacts in character. They generally appear unaware of the fictional nature of Tim's character. The political campaign itself is fictional; Heidecker himself never ran for any political office, and any other political figures in the film, including the district attorney, are portrayed by actors, as are a handful of other characters. These characters are all placed into the external real world, however, and interact with real people.

An audience with specific extra-textual knowledge regarding Heidecker’s previous output related to his OnCinema character will have a different comprehension of the film, to the point where the entire mockumentary more or less necessitates at least a cursory perusal of those texts. For example, there are many scenes of Tim explaining his political beliefs and experience with the law to potential voters, with one repeated line from Tim casually referencing the fact that he has “tremendous experience in law” from “representing himself”[184] in a court case. Tim uses his ‘victory’ against the district attorney, Vincent Rosetti, as a pivotal element of his entire campaign. A savvy viewer familiar with his 'legal history,' however, knows it consists of a single fictional court case, released as a five hour long YouTube video. Tim ‘won’ this case because of a mistrial caused by a single uncertain juror, and his ‘defense’ of himself was often absurd (a considerable amount of his efforts were given to blaming the murders he was convicted of on China) and ineffectual (his frequent outbursts towards the judge, witnesses, and prosecutor meant that he rarely actually performed any legal duties at all). His boasts, therefore, provide evidence of Tim’s less than reputable character for an audience aware of his legal history, and this makes them a joke. The generally respectful reactions of the people Tim is speaking to create humour,

[184] *Mister America*, directed by Eric Notarnicola (2019; United States; Magnolia Pictures). DVD.

as a savvy audience sees them as moments of unlikely integration in which Tim's duplicitous and absurd character successfully performs in reality. Again, the non-actors in these scenarios represent a potential ethical concern, as Heidecker's manipulations cause them to appear foolish. The focus of these moments is often on Tim's dishonesty, however, making him the primary butt of the joke. Savvy audiences likely assume people would react differently if they knew Tim's true character, as they do. Their inside knowledge, claims Jason Middleton, creates humour "rooted in [differences] in perception and affect among filmmaker, subject, and spectator,"[185] but generates humour specifically from the non-actors being unaware of Tim's true character. In other words, through the exclusionary mode of reception. Succeeding at keeping the non-actors involved in these jokes unaware of the fictionality of the program they are appearing in, and therefore creating dramatic irony in these interactions, requires a particularly careful approach on Tim's part.

Tim lack of self-awareness and thuggish conduct reflects a "breach of common understandings of logical behaviour and probability, social function and good sense,"[186] which Nicholas Holm claims is a hallmark of absurdity. A quality of absurdity that complicates this feature of his character, however, is that Tim must present these absurdities without "[rupturing] the verisimilitude"[187] (a common side-effect in mockumentaries, according to Jason Middleton, of the presence of absurdity) that sustains and defines the OnCinema universe. Tim must behave in a manner that creates an "absurd rendering of everyday life,"[188] but is still specifically believable within everyday life. This requires a careful application of absurdity, that, like other

[185] Middleton, 26.
[186] Holm, 150.
[187] Middleton, 28.
[188] Holm, 155.

absurd humour must, according to Holm, "stretches the bounds of coincidence, probability and behaviour,"[189] but must do so without risking the overall consistency of verisimilitude of the series. In short, he is required to "[suture] the madcap to a stretched, but still sturdily realist, context."[190] Heidecker mitigates potential risk by basing the character on a real world, recognizable source, Donald Trump, and then emphasizing the absurdities in that source without deviating too much from its origin. This politicizes Tim, as it suggests the real life figure of Donald Trump is absurd.

Indeed, *Mister America* can be read as a satire of politics in the Trump era. Much of the humour in the film stems from Tim's absurd obliviousness to his inevitable failure. Tim is neither a lawyer nor a constituent of the area he is running in, disqualifying him from even potentially winning, something pointed out immediately within the film. Heidecker has stated this use of failure is deliberate, and that one of his goals with the mockumentary was to use it to comfort an audience made despondent by the contemporary political climate by showing them a "Trumpian clown run for office and being so obtuse and racist and horrible and not appropriate to be in any kind of elected office and seeing him fail,"[191] suggesting Tim's failures and shortcomings result from 'Trumpian' attributes. Heidecker then uses failure to create, as Jason Middleton puts it, "a sensation of psychological relief and humour based upon a sense of incongruity with the object of laughter."[192] In a sense, the mockumentary is a humorous acknowledgment of how unamusing Heidecker finds modern politics. Other OnCinema texts certainly suggest Donald Trump's impact on Tim's character, but the mockumentary foregrounds

[189] Holm, 153.
[190] Holm, 156.
[191] Build Series, "Tim Heidecker Breaks Down His New Political Comedy Movie, "Mister America," October 9th, 2019, YouTube video, 42:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsRAg9W4P3A.
[192] Middleton, 24.

it. Although Heidecker claims he never intended the mockumentary to be "all political,"[193] he specifically and obviously connects Tim's exaggerated personality and behaviour to the rise of Donald Trump. Tim's repeated claims that he is an "outsider" that can "shake things up,"[194] for example, echoes Trumpian political rhetoric. Heidecker designed the character as someone "who would see Donald Trump as a panacea to all the problems in his life,"[195] and Tim continually mimics Trump's behaviour or mannerisms. The character Tim has also 'publicly endorsed' Trump in a YouTube video,[196] providing the OnCinema universe another shaky connection to reality. That this is not how Heidecker himself feels is apparent from interviews he has given in which he expresses his disdain for Trump, as well as an album of protest songs he released in 2018 entitled *Too Dumb For Suicide: Tim Heidecker's Trump Songs*. This humour is transparently political, as much of the absurdity generated by the character's behaviour (the 'object of laughter') is caused by his inability to be a decent person, and this inability is born out of attributes specifically crafted as a commentary on Donald Trump.

Tim also links absurdity, with its deliberately unrealistic and illogical foundation, to Trump through his behaviour. His consistent attempts to manipulate previous events from the OnCinema universe by tampering with the footage or reframing it, such as his attempt to reframe his burning of Gregg's prized VHS tape collection outlined above, can be seen in a new light considering this connection. Due to Tim's connections to Trump, however, this element of the series becomes a specific commentary on Trump's own continued calls for vigilance despite being willing to provide outright lies and manipulations when the truth does not suit him.

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[193] Build Series, "Tim Heidecker Breaks Down His New Political Comedy Movie, "Mister America."
[194] *Mister America*.
[195] Build Series, "Tim Heidecker Breaks Down His New Political Comedy Movie, "Mister America."
[196] Tim Heidecker and Gregg Turkington, "Official Endorsement | On Cinema | Adult Swim," July 28th, 2016, YouTube video, Adult Swim, 2:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjOkff24kGs.

Heidecker points towards the hypocrisy in the president's stance by having Tim echo Trump's behaviours by consistently trying to use texts to manipulate those around him while accusing others of doing the same thing.

In contrast to *Forgotten Silver*'s parody of the conventions of expository and interactive documentary, *Mister America* apes the observational mode as defined by Bill Nichols, in that it "stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker."[197] Heidecker chose this style of documentary specifically, as he says he wanted the film to provide an "outside perspective"[198] on Tim, as so much of the other content in the OnCinema universe is 'controlled' by the character. The goal for the film, according to Heidecker, is to depict what would happen "if another guy came in and observed these people" in a manner that "[feels] holistically believable."[199] One exemplary moment involves a glimpse into Tim's character without the assorted affectations he adopts when he believes cameras are filming him, as the documentarian 'forgets' to take his camera out of a room after Tim requests privacy. The previous scene involves Tim discovering his failure to accrue the required number of signatures to be considered on the ballot for district attorney, and once the documentary crew leaves, the camera, which has been hidden and left on, records Tim and his campaign assistant gleefully forging a list of false signatures. Considering Tim's established connection to Trump, there is also a real world political dimension to the scene, in that it suggests Trump is capable of similar political deviance when the cameras are not rolling. This dishonest and illegal act serves as proof of Tim's despicable character, the true extent of

[197] Nichols, 38.
[198]Netflix is a Joke, "Tim Heidecker Recalls Where He First Met Eric Wareheim | What A Joke | Netflix Is A Joke" October 22, 2019, Youtube video, 10:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vi2f_9vBbjw.
[199] Netflix is a Joke, "Tim Heidecker Recalls Where he First Met Eric Wareheim."

which is rarely seen in other texts in the OnCinema universe due to Tim's diligent and consistent manipulation. For savvy audiences, the 'documentary' confirms these 'truths.'

In addition to criticizing Trump, the film also interrogates the issues inherent in observational documentary's stated goal of representing unmediated reality. Despite never appearing on camera and only being temporarily involved in a single scene, the 'director' of the film is a character named Josh Lorton (the actual director's name is Eric Nortornicola). Making the director a character in the universe acknowledges and emphasizes his active influence over the film being created, demonstrating an awareness of the filmmaker's potential distortion of the 'reality' being conveyed, reflecting Linda Hutcheon's "concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s)."[200] In the film, Lorton "has his own wishes and point of view,"[201] and can therefore manipulate the audience while claiming to represent reality. These issues have become a considerable part of the OnCinema universe, as Tim has taken an extremely oppositional stance to *Mister America* in subsequent OnCinema episodes, calling it a "real hit job" and labelling the character Josh Lorton as "up there on the high list of rats." Tim's critique is based on a belief that the entire film is "out of context,"[202] and that Lorton's eventual film is a complete misrepresentation of Tim's actual campaign.[203] Tim's criticisms mirror the most common critiques of the observational documentary, specifically foregrounding the problematic assumption that observational documentaries provide "unmediated and unfettered access to the world."[204] Obviously, Tim believes a director has an impact on their film, and, in this case, that

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[200] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 108.
[201] Netflix is a Joke, "Tim Heidecker Recalls Where he First Met Eric Wareheim."
[202] Adult Swim, "'Mister America' & 'Maleficent: Mistress of Evil' | On Cinema Season 11, Ep. 4 | adult swim," Oct. 24, 2019, YouTube video, 13:26, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAMs41nvta8.
[203] One interesting example of shaky verisimilitude that resulted from this situation appears on the film's Wikipedia page, in which the negative 'reviews' provided by Tim and Gregg are placed alongside reviews from real critics without any indication that they are false.
[204] Nichols, 43.

Lorton exercises his impact to besmirch Tim's name. The ironies pile up, however, as Tim uses them in a characteristic attempt to control his image. A savvy audience has seen consistent evidence of Tim's terrible character throughout the OnCinema universe's existence, so *Mister America* serves to confirm this. The critique of the documentary genre is therefore used in the mockumentary to also create inside humour.

The final scenes of the mockumentary begin with a particularly sombre scene involving the (fictional) judge of Tim's fictional court case lamenting Tim's character, saying that Tim represents a "style over substance"approach to life, and that he has "no character,"[205] relying instead on tricks and low cunning to create a representation of a personality rather than something genuine. Seeing this caused the judge to "[lose] his heart for the courtroom,"[206] and to retire. This scene is unique in the film, as it suddenly shifts its tone. There are no markers of humour for audiences (savvy or otherwise), as the judge baldly states his beliefs regarding Tim's character rather than leaving it as a subtext. The scene also involves a sudden incursion of conventions from the expository mode of documentary: it is shot as a 'talking head' style interview unlike the rest of the film, and "[advances] an argument"[207] that frames the text rather than moving its plot forward. Previous interview scenes generally include the off-screen interviewer asking questions, or integrating into and attempting to continue the 'plot' of the overall film. This scene, however, occupies a different level of verisimilitude, which is augmented by the judge's very convincing acting (he is one of the few characters portrayed by a professional actor).

[205] Notarnicola, *Mister America*.
[206] Notarnicola, *Mister America*
[207] Nichols, 34.

Notably, the scene also involves the use of background music in the form of a sombre piano instrumental. Up until this point the film generally aligns with the observational mode's use of "sound created from within the filmed world rather than sound-effects added in postproduction"[208] to create a "reality effect."[209] The inclusion of music here is a step away from this convention, amplifying its impact and potentially, as Holly Rogers suggests, "fundamentally [changing] the reception of the unfolding images,"[210] causing viewers to adjust based on the rather subdued mood of the song. To a certain extent, the scene attempts to recreate the narrative fictional film genre's use of music as a "paradoxical...tool with which to add verisimilitude to moving images" by making viewers "less aware that what [they] are watching is fiction and [allowing them] more readily to empathise with the characters."[211] The addition of music connects the audience to the judge's emotional state, which is specifically a reaction to the depressing nature of Tim's 'Trumpian' character. In short, the humourless atmosphere appears deliberate, an attempt by the filmmakers to allude back to Tim's troubling real world origins. This scene provides a temporary and sincere depiction of the true nature of Tim's character. Introducing new elements and a new style is jarring, causing a sudden rupture that could potentially cause the audience's mockumentary mode of reception to falter. The addition of elements from a different mode of documentary frames the scene differently from the rest of the film, and the collisions between reality and fiction become more of an occasion for reflection than a source of humour. The scene demands the audience acknowledge the origin of Tim's qualities in the real figure of Donald Trump, and its rather chilling implications. The scene is

[208] Holly Rogers, "Introduction," in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, (Hoboken: Routledge, 2014), 2.
[209] Nichols, 41.
[210] Rogers, 11.
[211] Rogers, 12.

unique in that it largely foregoes the exclusionary mode of reception. The deployment of more conventional film techniques recognizable to a wider audience means that, at this point in the film, no audience member is really excluded from connecting to the general intention of the filmmaker. Whether an audience connects to the commentary on Trump depends on their preexisting opinions, but the overall implications of the scene, the quality of Tim's character, is blatant and seemingly presented without subtext.

The last scene of the film provides a final affirmation of the true quality of Tim's character. Music from the previous scene continues, providing a thematic "connective web"[212] between the two. Tim begins the scene by breaking into the site of the fictional music festival that resulted in the murders he was charged with, which occurred due to Tim's sale of a poisonous 'medicinal vaporizer' to a number of youths at the festival (and there is substantial evidence in the OnCinema universe to suggest Tim was aware of the potentially harmful nature of the drug). He describes the scene of the murders, and then states that, despite it being a "horrible tragic event," it allowed him to "come out and get into the ring and get into the [political] arena," and concludes, in a Trumpian manner, that he "wouldn't change a thing."[213] Tim then cermoniously places a flower he finds in the crime scene next to a rock while performing an elaborate dedication to the murder victims in which he completely deflects any potential he was responsible for their deaths, saying that he is "sorry [he] was a bystander to the massacre here."[214] Following this, he sits down next to the rock and looks off in the distance, an apparently reflective moment ruined by him suddenly asking "how does this look" and then providing instructions to the film crew on how best to depict him, saying that this is "probably

[212] Rogers, 11.
[213] *Mister America*.
[214] *Mister America*.

your end shot." He then stands up and immediately adopts a businesslike demeanour, repeating that the shot would "play nice as your ending" and asks for "a rough cut" of the film so that he can "give [the filmmakers] notes."[215] This final moment of characteristic selfishness and attempted manipulation takes on a disturbing rather than humorous quality. The 'reality' that Tim's character murdered a number of people and his desperate attempts to avoid any kind of repercussion, something played for dark humour throughout previous output, points darkly to the potential real world consequences of utterly selfish and uncaring people like Tim. The result is a deliberately stark reference to Tim's real world referent, Donald Trump, who likewise refuses to take responsibility for his mistakes, failure, lies, and crimes.

Heidecker is not the first person to concoct this kind of political commentary. A similar plan, albeit one that actually occurred in a real political election, involved an artist named Bruce Conner. In 1967, Conner ran "for a seat on the board of city supervisors"[216] in San Francisco. Conner, an artist known for absurd works and counter-culturalism, ran an untraditional campaign. Unlike Heidecker, his campaign was a genuine movement promoting 'sweetness and light,' qualities he saw as lacking in the politics of the time. He used the platform afforded to him by running for public office to give speeches that consisted of "a list of candies and desserts" and handed out campaign brochures in which he "went through the Bible, probably the New Testament, picked out all the verses in which light was mentioned"[217] and copied those verses verbatim into the text. Conner took the election seriously, lecturing friends for not voting, but ultimately was aware his campaign stood very little chance of success. He favoured suggesting

[215] *Mister America*.
[216] David Platzker, "Specific Object - Project - Bruce Conner for Supervisor," SpecificObject, https://specificobject.com/projects/conner/#.Xp3phlNKhTY, accessed April 16th, 2020.
[217] Platzker, "Specific Object - Project - Bruce Conner for Supervisor,"

trajectories for the political movement over criticism (Heidecker's preferred technique), and any absurdity involved with his run for office was intended to be more generative than critical or humourous. Like Heidecker, Jackson, and Botes, absurdity was used by Conner due to its deliberately illogical qualities and its resultant ability to provide a tangible break from reality. Specifically, the genuine quality of Conner's political goals meant that the absurdity of his artistic output (such as the literature) was meant to represent a conscious departure from traditional political styles. Conner involved incongruity in an attempt to force the reader to consider a new way of doing things by showing them a familiar political tool (such as a brochure) being used in a new way. This means that although the brochures may have initially elicited laughter due to their unusual nature, their goal was more to inform than amuse. Conner wanted to essentially model the manner he thought others should behave, showing that there are alternatives for topical political circumstances. His audience, ideally, approached his work in a documentary mode of reception, looking at it without skepticism and applying Conner's ideas to reality. Politically, Heidecker is more critical. Conner used absurdity to generate enlightenment through defamiliarization rather than laughter. Heidecker uses absurdity to illustrate the potential for falsity in order to exemplify the importance of questioning representations of reality. Conner desired that people connect to the message of his political work, and used absurdity to encourage a new set of priorities for the political arena, especially in the era of Trump and his endless cries of "fake news" even as he constructs his own "reality" out of lies.

Heidecker keeps savvy audiences consistently amused by creating texts that can appear entirely different to an audience without specific knowledge regarding their true origins. This exclusionary mode of reception underscores much of the OnCinema output, and in *Mister*

America, it takes a distinctly political turn. In the film, Heidecker invites an audience to laugh at Donald Trump, necessitating a pre-existing alignment with his anti-Trump politics for viewers to become fully integrated into his preferred viewing experience. Hence, the exclusionary mode of reception in the film has political implications, as it involves a very real political critique. Heidecker situates the savvy audience politically, in effect actively excluding those who align themselves with Trump. Unlike much of the less political OnCinema texts, then, *Mister America* shows that there is ideological potential in the exclusionary mode of reception, as it can form around very distinct discursive communities.

Chapter 3: Sacha Baron Cohen: The Dual Mode of Mockumentary Reception

Depending on who you are, the English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen can entertain or infuriate. There is rarely a middle ground. His most recognizable work began with *Da Ali G Show* (2000-2003), in which a variety of characters played by Baron Cohen interviewed, investigated, and often simply annoyed a collection of real people appearing as unwitting guests. The show established Baron Cohen's technique, in which his guests believe they are speaking to a 'real' person for a reality-based program, but in fact speak to Baron Cohen in character. Baron Cohen's expertly crafted characters interact with reality, but they themselves are entirely fictional. Thus, like much of Tim Heidecker's work, Baron Cohen's works occupy a space between reality and fiction. Baron Cohen tailors his fictional personas to their very real surroundings, optimizing them for the provocation of specific elements of the places and people they encounter. For Baron Cohen, integrating his fictions into reality ideally has two, connected results: humour and the revelation of truth. Two texts in particular, the film *Borat* (2006) and the television series *Who Is America?* (2018), use Baron Cohen's talents as a performer along with a number of documentary conventions to produce this revelatory humour. These mockumentaries purposefully tamper with some of the documentary genre's established relationships between filmmaker, subject, and audience, and, unlike *Forgotten Silver*, do so deliberately to force the subjects of the text into unstable positions between reality and fiction. From this uncertain space, Baron Cohen draws out information from his subjects that ostensibly reflects their real opinions and qualities, a goal shared by many documentaries. A savvy audience therefore occupies two modes of reception simultaneously when watching his work, garnering information about reality while remaining aware that elements of what they are watching are fiction. This audience also

looks for jokes stemming from real people within a scene interacting with one of Sacha Baron Cohen's characters from a documentary mode of reception, which is to say, seriously. Humour created by dramatic irony, absurdity, and hyperbole is an integral element of Baron Cohen's technique, as he relies on it to instigate and emphasize his guests' real opinions and behaviour.

The focus of Baron Cohen's work is often political, and he specializes in criticizing what he sees as the more detestable elements of American society. The film *Borat* attempts to show the United States through the eyes of an other, who is designed as a distorted mirror of those Baron Cohen uses the film to critique. *Who Is America?* takes this concept to an even greater extreme, ruthlessly using the same methods to illustrate the fundamental indecency of a number of American politicians and public figures. Regardless of the ethical issues arising from deceiving his subjects, Baron Cohen clearly understands that documentary is a mode of reception, not only for audiences but also for his subjects. Hence, he creates a specific seemingly documentary environment for those appearing in his texts, with the goal of revealing truths about these unsuspecting subjects to his audience, while also making some viewers laugh. Indeed, I argue in this chapter that Baron Cohen's work relies on a dual mode of reception in which the viewer simultaneously inhabits a documentary and a mockumentary mode or oscillates between these two modes. This allows them to perceive both truth and fiction, as well as humour and seriousness, simultaneously while they watch.

Dramatic Irony and The (False) Invocation of Documentary Conventions

Like Heidecker, Baron Cohen relies upon the subjects of his mockumentaries being ignorant of the humour in the situations he creates, but to a much greater extent. Dramatic irony is therefore an integral part of the viewing experience for his films and television programs. In

very broad terms, dramatic irony happens when the audience of a text knows something that someone in that text does not, and so, as Claire Colebrook suggests, "plays on a disjunction between character and audience point of view."[218] In many cases within Baron Cohen's work, the 'character' is the real person, or subject, involved in the segment. This form of irony creates, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, "meaning in addition to and different from what is stated"[219] through the context of a scenario. In Baron Cohen's work, the meaning of scenes is changed because the scenarios and characters he manufactures seem, as Leshu Torchin puts it, "perfectly real to the unwitting participants."[220] More specifically, subjects of his mockumentaries believe they are speaking to a real person filming a real documentary, when the exact opposite is true. Lewis MacLeod claims that, like Heidecker, this places any utterance of Baron Cohen's character "secretly in ironic quotes"[221] for an audience aware of the character's fictionality, making his presence in any scene an ironic marker in itself. Subjects' behaviours are interpreted by a viewer with this deception in mind, and often their inability to discern the fictionality of their situation despite absurdity and vulgarity in Baron Cohen's character's behaviour becomes a joke. Alternatively, subjects behave differently from how they would if they were aware of the reality of their scenario, generating potentially humorous incongruity. Like Heidecker, then, Baron Cohen relies on an exclusionary mode of reception; however, in this instance, the ones excluded are not primarily the audience members who don't get it but, rather, the subjects on-screen.

In the majority of his potentially humorous scenes, Baron Cohen uses dramatic irony's ability to isolate a subject, creating an 'us versus them' scenario that, as Jason Middleton

[218] Claire Colebrook, *Irony,* London: Routledge, 2004, 180.
[219] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 11.
[220] Leshu Torchin, "Cultural Learnings of Borat for Make Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary," *Film & History* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 53.
[221] MacLeod, 121.

suggests, serves to "align the perspectives of viewer and filmmaker-performer at the expense of the duped"[222] subject. This anchors humour "in [differences] in perception and affect among filmmaker, subject, and spectator, sometimes fostering a sense of superiority in the spectator."[223] Baron Cohen's characters operate flexibly within this equation. On some occasions, "his own character's shortcomings"[224] become the joke; in others, they facilitate it at the expense of the guest. He performs for an audience aware of the 'real' (which is to say, fictional) circumstances of his texts, and positions those appearing on his program outside of this relationship, creating an inside joke composed of "those who laugh at this matter in some way, in contrast to those whose acts and circumstances are the occasion for the laughter."[225] Laughing then "[implies] membership in an elite group,"[226] who possess a full understanding of the scenario. Jokes can be integrated into these situations differently, depending on the impact Baron Cohen wishes to create with the scene, and which person in the interview (his character or the subject) he wishes to be the target of humour. However jokes manifest, they begin with dramatic irony, the creation of which begins with Baron Cohen's understanding of the documentary viewing experience.

The assumption of sobriety within documentaries is a foundational element of Baron Cohen's work, and therefore of many of his jokes. A subject's belief of and occasional enthusiastic support for some of Baron Cohen's character's more absurd ideas, a significant source of humorous incongruity in his texts, requires him or her to remain unaware of any exaggerations and irrationalities taking place. Subjects need, therefore, to be locked into a

[222] Middleton, 93.
[223] Middleton, 26.
[224] Middleton, 96.
[225] Hurley, Adams, and Dennett, 41.
[226] Hurley, Adams, and Dennett, 41.

humourless mode of *performance* that mirrors the mode of reception many members of *Forgotten Silver* occupied during its first viewings.

As opposed to *Forgotten Silver*'s creators, who genuinely desired their entire audience to integrate humour into their viewing experience but failed in some cases, Baron Cohen's films and television programs establish comedic scenarios that appear humourless to the real people appearing in them. The audience is most likely aware of the comedic nature of these circumstances. This 'comedic nature' stems from a collision between fiction and reality, and so the savvy audience moves between the documentary and mockumentary mode of reception, laughing at the seriousness of the non-acting real people and their interactions with a fictional character. Baron Cohen establishes these scenes extremely carefully. The subjects of Baron Cohen's mockumentaries are told through assorted channels that the text being created is a documentary prior to filming, and then Baron Cohen's character maintains the facade of being part of a documentary throughout every encounter with the subject.

People appearing in the film *Borat*, for example, believe they are appearing in a documentary, but *Borat* is in fact a mockumentary starring a character named Borat Sagdiyev, played by a well-disguised Baron Cohen. According to the film's entirely fictional premise, Borat has been hired by the government of his home nation of Kazakhstan to create a documentary about the United States. Upon arriving, however, Borat's newfound love of American culture, coupled with his romantic nature, cause him to neglect his documentarian duties and drive across America in an attempt to court celebrity Pamela Anderson (one of the few other people appearing in the film who are in on the joke). Along the way he interacts with actual, unwitting American citizens, and the patience, confusion, and kindness of many of them,

born out of a genuine misunderstanding about the nature of the film in which they are involved, becomes a joke for the audience to enjoy. This is emphasized, for example, in a scene in which Borat visits a supermarket and, for several minutes, asks an employee to identify foods. The joke of the scene stems from the fact that Borat only points at different varieties of cheese. The employee's patience rarely wavers, however, and he diligently repeats the words "that's cheese" [227] throughout the process. This goes on for a full four minutes, and then Baron Cohen provides another punchline at the end of the scene by moving to a section of the store with a variety of butter products and beginning the process again. Like many of the viewers of *Forgotten Silver*, this supermarket employee suspends his sense of humour, dismissing Borat's actions as a potential source of humour due to a belief that Borat is a real person, filming a documentary. As a result, he maintains a sense of seriousness that Borat, even at his most unreasonable and 'obviously' fake (possibly after the fourth minute of pointing to different packets of cheese), is unable to shake. Viewers aware of the fictionality of the overall text watch the scene with the knowledge that the non-actor is interacting with a false character, and can find humour in the clerk's continuing ignorance of Borat's fictionality, proven through his politeness in the face of Borat's impossibly obtuse behaviour. This could also potentially foster a sense of superiority in a viewer who might feel incredulous that such an 'obviously' false character has not been figured out. As such, this is an example of the dual mode of reception Baron Cohen's texts can evoke: the viewer laughs at a fictional character in a false documentary successfully integrating into the real world and interacting with a real person responding to the character as if he were real. A viewer could also laugh at the simple absurdity of Borat contrasted with the clerk's consistently

[227] Sacha Baron Cohen, *Borat: Deleted Scenes,* directed by Larry Charles (2006; 20th Century Fox). DVD.

respectful manner. The joke, however, necessitates the clerk continuing to behave as if he is in the serious production of a documentary.

Before appearing in one of Baron Cohen's texts, potential subjects receive carefully worded "detailed legal releases" that appear to be from sources that would believably create documentaries. In the case of *Borat*, for example, these documents were "presented to people as if they were permission forms for being interviewed by a Kazakh TV show."[228] The language on these forms clearly labels the text these people are agreeing to appear in a "'documentary-style film.'"[229] This marks the beginning of Baron Cohen's process, and one of the more integral steps in creating dramatic irony in his texts: the establishment, to the subjects, of the work as a documentary. Baron Cohen's dedication to maintaining this ruse is absolute, and he expends an extraordinary amount of energy making sure his guests remain unaware of the fictional elements of his texts before they appear on his programs. The ruse extends to other people working on his films, as, in the case of *Borat,* his producers used "bogus names and cell numbers when they called potential interviewees, to whom they described a nonexistent relationship with 'a Belarus TV station.'"[230] Baron Cohen attaches his texts to supposedly credible sources like foreign television stations, like material about *Forgotten Silver* released before its first screening, in order to bolster the verisimilitude of his 'documentary.' After this initial subterfuge, subjects' assumptions are carefully maintained through the initial meetings between Baron Cohen's character and his guests before cameras are involved.

[228] Jumana Farouky and Joel Stein, "BORAT MAKE FUNNY JOKE ON IDIOT AMERICANS! HIGH-FIVE!," *TIME Magazine* 19, no. 168 (2006), 63.
[229] Randolph Lewis, "Prankster Ethics : 'Borat' and Levinas," *Shofar* 30, no. 1 (2011): 77.
[230] Lewis, 80.

The efforts of Baron Cohen and his team to make the text believable before filming continue in the establishment of characters that, despite appearing as obviously exaggerated caricatures to savvy audiences, are laboriously attached to reality. In a manner similar to Heidecker's creation of Tim, Baron Cohen says that he meticulously creates a "voice, and a physicality, and a body shape and an entire backstory"[231] for each of his characters, and then acts in character when interacting with his guests at all times. The importance he places on this step is shown by the extensive construction of these characters' backstories.

This is not limited to *Borat*. *Who is America?* is a television program based on interviews in which Baron Cohen adopts a variety of characters and speaks to notable American figures. Each character stars in a fictional documentary style program, and the show rotates between these. Like Heidecker, Baron Cohen's goal is to relay a sense of the culture and politics of the United States in the Trump era, and, as in *Borat,* he tricks guests into believing they are appearing in a serious documentary program before filming. In one particular scenario, Baron Cohen interviews former vice-president of the United States Dick Cheney in character as Colonel Erran Morad, an "Israeli army character,"[232] and, knowing that Cheney, a noted military history enthusiast and someone interested in the region, would likely ask questions about the character's past before filming, Baron Cohen interviewed a legitimate "Israeli special ops guy"[233] before the two met. When Cheney did indeed wish to discuss the character's military history prior to filming the interview, Baron Cohen repeated many of the stories he learned in that interview verbatim. Baron Cohen considers these moments before filming, when he, in character,

[231] "Conversations with Sacha Baron Cohen of WHO IS AMERICA?," May 29, 2019, YouTube video, 51:13, SAG-AFTRA Foundation, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_cZB-k058o.
[232] "Sacha Baron Cohen on Pranking Politicians," November 7th, 2018, YouTube video, 8:01, ABC, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgepxyAAnps.
[233] "Sacha Baron Cohen on Pranking Politicians."

meets the people he is going to interact with, as pivotal, and attempts as much as possible during that time to solidify his character's traits in his subject's mind. By doing this, he naturalizes his character's behaviour during interviews, minimizing the risk of subjects discovering the deceptions surrounding them during filming. This can be accomplished through bolstering the character's back story through research, as in the Cheney scenario, or, in the case of more obnoxious characters like Borat, by, in Baron Cohen's words, "[trying] to convince [subjects] that he is an idiot before the cameras are rolling."[234] However he accomplishes it, the goal is to convince the subjects they are in a documentary before filming begins, and speaking with a 'real' person rather than a persona. This puts guests into a position wherein they are more likely to disregard evidence that reveals their actual position in a mockumentary and to suspend any skepticism about the text's relationship to reality.

Absurdity and Corrective Humour

Like Tim Heidecker, Baron Cohen often appears to reproduce "the actual encounter of filmmaker and other"[235] that defines the interactive mode of the documentary. This relationship is artificial, however, and thrusts the unknowing subjects into situations that mirror this style of documentary but that, in fact, centre around a fictional, absurd character. Hence, Baron Cohen's characters must operate in two registers simultaneously, appearing to onscreen subjects as real and serious and to audiences as funny due to the absurdity of his behaviour. In other words, Baron Cohen elicits two different modes of reception – the audience's and the subject's – simultaneously. This is not a simple balancing act, as the very nature of absurd humour makes it

[234] "Sacha Baron Cohen on The Jonathan Ross Show | 13th Feb. 2016," February 14th, 2016, YouTube video, 14:51, ITV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdsOUsmQszI.
[235] Nichols, 44.

difficult. Nicholas Holm defines absurd humour as "a mode of humour premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning"[236] that "arises in the breach of common understandings of logical behaviour and probability, social function and good sense, and even aesthetic form and narrative consistency."[237] By definition, then, absurdity is "a sudden incursion of something that ruptures… verisimilitude,"[238] or at least should. Part of Baron Cohen's humour, however, is the disconnect between the inherently unbelievable absurdity displayed by Baron Cohen's characters and subjects' sustained belief in the behaviours as authentic. In Baron Cohen's work, then, absurdity "pushes the limits of the believability of the text, but, crucially, does so in a way that does not completely compromise the diegetic world of the text,"[239] or the apparent reality of the text to those appearing within it. This requires consistent effort on the part of Baron Cohen to present his character's absurdities 'realistically' to the person appearing on the show. This also means that his savvy viewers, those aware of his fictionality, enter into an entirely different mode of reception compared to the subjects of his programs, who react to his character as a real person. At the same time, "witnessing how the duped social actors buy into a ruse that is legible reinforces the viewer's intended alignment with the filmmaker-performer's perspective."[240] This means that the more absurd a scene becomes while still appearing real to the guest, the more potentially powerful Baron Cohen's subtexts, political and/or humorous, can become.

Baron Cohen uses a variety of techniques to make his work funny. Almost every scene carefully establishes one person appearing in it as the butt of the joke. Some scenarios create

[236] Holm, 149.
[237] Holm, 150.
[238] Middleton, 29.
[239] Holm, 156.
[240] Middleton, 86.

humour out of Baron Cohen's character's erratic behaviour, such as in the supermarket scene in *Borat*. In these circumstances, the 'other' people involved in the scene, such as the supermarket employee, add to the overall joke because their actions are incongruous with the situations they are in. They also generate humour because of what Henri Bergson calls "inelasticity," or continuing to behave 'incorrectly' when they "ought to be shaping [their] conduct in accordance with the reality which is present."[241] In other words, like Tim in OnCinema, subjects do not behave how they 'should' considering their true circumstances, and the audience is aware of the distance between how they should behave and how they are behaving, and this is humorous because it presents "a pair of simultaneous schemas that just don't logically match."[242] Their sobriety in the face of Borat's extreme conduct becomes an important part of the joke, as well as their continuing incomprehension of their true position.

Real people in these scenes are a source of humour, but only insofar as they reflect and augment the absurdity of Borat's character. Unsuitable behaviour also elicits laughter in Baron Cohen's work because of what Bergson suggests is one aim of humour: "the threat of correction."[243] To Bergson, laughter performs a vital social function, as it has the capacity to humiliate and therefore correct unsociable behaviour. Laughter represents a desire to bring someone "into accord with society"[244] and rectify their "'unsociability' – their cluelessness to the world around them."[245] In *Borat*, for example, Borat repeatedly shows people nude photographs of a woman he claims to be his wife, despite them generally only having expressed a vague, conversational interest in Borat's family. This act is so flagrantly at odds with what most

[241] Henri Bergson, Cloudesley Brereton, and Fred Rothwell, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic,* New York: Macmillan, 1911, 42.
[242] Hurley, Adams, and Dennett, 46.
[243] Bergson, Brereton, and Rothwell, 135.
[244] Bergson, Brereton, and Rothwell, 138.
[245] Middleton, 25.

audiences would consider 'polite' or 'acceptable' cultural behaviour, especially considering Borat shows these images to real, unsuspecting people, that many viewers laugh in part to display an awareness of its perceived impropriety.

At other times, Baron Cohen uses laughter to repudiate the subjects of his programs rather than his own character. This distinguishes him from Heidecker, as the primary butt of the joke in the OnCinema universe is almost always the character Tim. Baron Cohen, however, often uses scenarios in his texts to attempt to have subjects "reveal their true selves"[246] by "[expressing] offensive viewpoints meant to align with those of the dupes in order to goad them into revealing their prejudices on camera."[247] In these circumstances, Baron Cohen's character behaves inappropriately, and a subject is forced to "confront his [the character's] noxious views" [248] or appear to agree with them through either inaction or encouragement. In Baron Cohen's words, "you can stay in the room...or you can get up and say I'm not putting up with this and I'm leaving."[249] Staying suggests a tacit agreement with whatever views are being represented. So, for example, the character Borat regularly expresses anti-Semitic sentiment, which Baron Cohen (who is Jewish) has stated "lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it's anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism."[250] When faced with Borat's prejudices, people in the text are given the opportunity to either ignore them or act, generally with "apathy [being] as pernicious as open bigotry."[251] Due to the fact that these are real people, not actors, who believe they are in a real situation, the audience can assume that their behaviours on screen reflect their real beliefs and character. This positions the texts as, to a certain extent,

[246] Lewis, 77.
[247] Middleton, 96.
[248] Lewis, 77.
[249] "Conversations with Sacha Baron Cohen of WHO IS AMERICA?."
[250] Lewis, 77.
[251] Torchin, 58.

representations of reality, a reality that may usually be hidden. Audiences in a mode of reception that expects this may therefore make conclusions about the real nature of the real people appearing on the program despite the fictional elements involved.

Due to laughter's potential function as a social corrective, when subjects of Baron Cohen's programs behave in a manner that mirrors or shows alignment with some of his character's unacceptable behaviours or stated opinions, audiences often laugh at them because they perceive a real behaviour that needs correction. Laughing at a specific negative behaviour also forces an audience to reflect on the behaviour and its implications. Baron Cohen often uses interviews to generate this reflection.

According to Nichols, subjects of interviews in interactive documentaries provide "primary source material"[252] for supporting the argument or central logic of the text. In these conversations, and despite an appearance of normalcy, "what topic the social actors address and the general drift of what they say has been prearranged"[253] by the person conducting the interview. This means that interviews always occur within a power structure, generally with the interviewer in control, simply because "the interview's structure and content are a function of the person holding the microphone."[254] This is generally hidden, however, as interviews ideally appear to foreground what the interviewee, or person being interviewed, is saying. An effective interviewer is "revealed by his or her ability to appear at the service of the interviewee whose speech he or she actually controls."[255] By this metric, Baron Cohen is a wildly successful

[252] Nichols, 52.
[253] Nichols, 52.
[254] Torchin, 55.
[255] Nichols, 52.

interviewer, even though he uses the format in mockumentaries. He apes the interview using his fictional persona, but retains the format's power structure, albeit with adjusted goals.

An interview in *Borat* between Borat and a comedy 'expert' named Pat Haggerty provides a good example of Baron Cohen's technique. Notably, Borat's behaviour during the interview makes both the character and the interviewee objects of laughter, but the primary object of humour is Borat himself. Haggerty remains serious throughout the interaction because of his belief, stemming from conversations before filming with Baron Cohen and his associates, that he is in "a benign documentary"[256] about America. That Haggerty chose the word 'benign' in particular to describe the 'documentary' is significant, as it suggests he genuinely believed it to be solely for the purpose of education, without any specific political or cultural argument. The scene is established in the film as a lesson for Borat in the American style of humour, a necessary education considering, as his fictional producer Azamat Bagatov explains, a (false) "UN survey say[sic] Kazakhstan have[sic] ninety eighth lowest humour"[257] in the world. Haggerty's disposition in the scene is reflective of a patient teacher: he continually tries to redirect Borat towards his educational ideas regarding American humour and patiently explains why Borat's continued attempts at jokes would not be considered amusing in America. By assuming a position of authority, Haggerty reflects the expectation that, within interactive documentaries, "textual authority shifts to the social actors recruited,"[258] an indication of his erroneous belief in his position within a serious documentary. He believes, reasonably, that he is the expert in the scene. His behaviour and attitude is therefore immediately amusing because of

[256] "Humiliation, Job Loss for 'Borat' Victims," *Associated Press*, Nov. 13th, 2006, https://www.today.com/popculture/humiliation-job-loss-borat-victims-wbna15698520.
[257] *Borat*.
[258] Nichols, 44.

dramatic irony's ability to make a knowledgeable audience laugh at the disconnect between a subject's perception of his or her surroundings and reality. Borat also behaves inappropriately throughout the interview, providing an alternate potential source of humour. He makes deliberately provocative jokes about incest, intellectual disabilities, and rape within two minutes of beginning the scene. Each of these jokes is met with light repudiation from Haggerty, who politely attempts to inform Borat of their inappropriate content. In this scenario, Borat's crassness potentially causes audiences to laugh, and his lack of decorum is highlighted by Haggerty, who emphasizes it by acknowledging and attempting to correct it. Haggerty's awareness that Borat's conduct is unacceptable is palpable, but he earnestly continues to try to guide him nonetheless. The sincerity of Haggerty's rebukes provides any savvy audience with continuing evidence of his disconnection from the real context of the scene, something they might find amusing, as the tone is so incongruous with the reality of the overall scenario. Correction has little role in the scene, as Haggerty himself shows no inappropriate behaviour, and Borat's behaviour is more absurd rather than realistically inappropriate.

Throughout this process, Baron Cohen uses the imbalanced power structure of the interview to maintain Haggerty's belief that he is appearing in a documentary while simultaneously escalating Borat's behaviour to increasingly obnoxious and absurd levels. Baron Cohen continually redirects the scene back to Borat's indecency by asking questions that seem to confirm Haggerty's belief that he is educating a curious Kazak who needs his guidance while actually serving as jokes to a savvy audience. This allows Borat's inappropriate conduct to remain a focal point without risking any rupture of the verisimilitude established to keep Haggerty unaware of his real situation. When Borat asks Haggerty, for example, if people "make

a laugh on retardation,"[259] the offensive qualities of the question, which are amplified enough to potentially risk the segment's verisimilitude, are apparently lost on Haggerty, who answers seriously in the negative. Borat then tells a story designed to amuse through its inappropriateness, during which Haggerty provides continuing criticism of the story's content, again without faltering in his seriousness. Baron Cohen uses the interview format here in conjunction with the falsely established context to control the scene using a familiar documentary convention. However, this scene does not serve as corrective humour since Haggerty's only "error" is thinking he is participating in a real interview – and the audience knows that Borat is a persona.

In *Who Is America?,* however, Baron Cohen uses interviews more aggressively to criticize the people appearing on the show. Baron Cohen says he felt compelled to create a text with explicitly political aims after Donald Trump's election, stating: "I felt very very angry and I have to do something about this."[260] His intent for the show to function as predominantly political intervention means it has a different tone than *Borat*, and often calls for a different mode of reception in order for a viewer to align with Baron Cohen's aims. This demands the dual mode of reception that separates the real from the fictional elements in a scene, and watches the 'real' aspects within the documentary mode of reception, considering the real world implications of the subject's response to Baron Cohen's fictional character's behaviour. The program amplifies criticism of subjects' behaviour, and is often more assailing than comedic. Baron Cohen's characters still behave inappropriately, but this is generally more directly tailored to draw out certain expected behaviours from his subjects. Essentially, his goal is to have the audience laugh

[259] *Borat.*
[260] "Conversations with Sacha Baron Cohen of WHO IS AMERICA?."

less at his own characters and increasingly at the repugnant nature of people he is interviewing. Thus, humour is created in the show by "the recognition of a failing or a piece of ugliness."[261] The failing in question is, again, generally what Bergson labels "inelasticity of character,"[262] or the subject remaining firm in an opinion or belief despite the emphasis and exaggeration of the absurdity and unacceptable nature of that position by Baron Cohen's behaviour. Of course, audiences generally have to be aligned with Baron Cohen politically to get the joke. Otherwise, viewers risk being part of the punchline rather than the amused party. This means that the show's viewers are presumed to agree with Baron Cohen's politics and worldview (generally left-leaning, staunchly anti-racist, and anti-Trump) before they watch the program, and their beliefs frame their viewing experience. If their conception of what is politically 'rational' or 'acceptable' is largely in alignment with Baron Cohen's, the corrective humour in the program is established around admonishing behaviour that is contrary to that worldview. When an audience of *Who Is America?* witnesses any of the behaviours performed by guests on the show, then, part of their laughter is a recognition of a behaviour that *they* deem unacceptable, and is an attempt to correct the people behaving so inappropriately.

One section in *Who Is America?* involves Baron Cohen in character as Colonel Erran Morad, the former member of the Israeli military who interviewed Dick Cheney, and Philip Van Cleave, president of the Virginia Citizen's Defense League, a staunchly pro-gun collective. The character Morad is presented as the center of a documentary following his efforts to educate people about how to fight terrorism, with Morad being nicknamed the "Terrorist Terminator."[263]

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[261] Hurley, Adams, and Dennett, 41.
[262] Bergson, Brereton, and Rothwell, 51.
[263] *Who is America?*, "Episode #1.1," 1. Directed by Sacha Baron Cohen, and Felder, Nathan, Written by Sacha Baron Cohen et. al, Showtime, July 15th, 2018.

This particular scenario begins with shots of Morad explaining that the only way to prevent school shootings in America is to "get deadly weapons into the hands of America's school-children,"[264] and so provide them with an important means of self defense. This is an absurd extension of the oft repeated slogan by pro-guns activists, including many of the guests appearing in the segment, that the "only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."[265] Morad provides his own rephrasing of the expression based on the premise of the sketch, stating that "the only thing that stops a bad man with a gun, is a good boy with a gun." He exaggerates this idea, claiming that in Israel, children as young as three are trained with guns through a program called "Kinderguardians."[266] The irresponsibility and irrationality of arming three-year-olds, presumably obvious to many viewers of the program, is not apparent to the program's guest. Van Cleave's easily garnered agreement and, eventual open and gleeful support of such an irresponsible exaggeration of his core beliefs can suggest that the foundational mentality of his pro-gun movement is dangerously misguided to the point where his bias overcomes common sense. The segment implies this through the use of several documentary conventions, including the interview.

Before meeting with Van Cleave, Baron Cohen spoke to him in character over the phone and said that "their conversation would focus on security and how gun proliferation could promote American safety."[267] Once this was established, Van Cleave agreed to meet for an interview. Footage of the interview itself is preceded in the program by a clip from a news show that provides a short political biography of sorts for Van Cleave, in which he calls one model of

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[264]Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[265] Melanie Arter, "NRA: 'Only Thing That Stops a Bad Guy With a Gun Is a Good Guy With a Gun,'" *CNS News*, December 21, 2012, https://cnsnews.com/news/article/nra-only-thing-stops-bad-guy-gun-good-guy-gun.
[266] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[267]Laura Bradley, "One of *Who Is America?*'s Suckers Claims He Knew He Was Being Conned," *Vanity Fair*, July 17th, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/07/who-is-america-sacha-Baron Cohen-toddler-guns-psa-philip-van-cleave.

gun used in several school shootings "a blast to shoot with"[268] and remains unapologetic about his staunch advocacy for unlimited guns rights. The show then cuts to a scene with Van Cleave and Morad that resembles a traditional interview scenario, with the two men sitting across from each other and engaging in a conversation. Morad starts the interview by asking Van Cleave "what the Liberals say"[269] about school shootings in America. Van Cleave answers that "They blame it on guns," and Morad responds by laughing incredulously and showing disbelief, shouting "they blame it on the guns?"[270] Immediately, then, Baron Cohen positions his character as an ally to Van Cleave, providing Van Cleave with a comfortable atmosphere in which he can share his more extreme opinions while feeling free from judgement. Morad then describes the 'Kinderguardians" program, and Van Cleave responds very positively, saying that he "[thinks] it would be a good idea" and that his organization has "been pushing something along those lines for years."[271] Morad then mentions that his son was in the first program, and that he died in the process, saying that "he died doing what I love."[272] Without responding to any underlying subtext in this statement or showing sympathy, Van Cleave states that young children have yet to "learn right and wrong," and that, at that age, they therefore have the potential to be "very effective soldiers."[273]

Baron Cohen uses the interview format to gradually escalate the irrationality of Morad's expressed ideas by asking what he calls an "incremental series of questions."[274] Morad initially expresses support for Van Cleave's views, and then introduces the more unreasonable elements

[268] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[269] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[270] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[271] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[272] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[273] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[274] "Comedy Actors Roundtable: Sacha Baron Cohen, Jim Carrey, Don Cheadle & More | Close Up," July 1st, 2019, YouTube Video, 1:15:34, The Hollywood Reporter, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz0bjLk9rUo

of the Kinderguardians program, allowing for Van Cleave to agree with each newly stated premise that he builds upon. The initial questions in this interview work to solidify Morad as someone who shares Van Cleave's beliefs, the next questions are tactfully structured around Morad introducing a 'solution' to the issue, and the last questions risk verisimilitude by taking the expressed solution's absurdity to its logical conclusion. Morad's son's 'death' serves as a finale of sorts, an exaggeration and illustration of the logical fallacies necessary to arm three year old children through a government program. Van Cleave's apparent ignorance of this is humorous, but in contrast to the scene with Haggerty, it produces dark humour.

Once Van Cleave states his support for Morad's (false) program, Baron Cohen further proves his perceived illogicality by having Van Cleave appear in what is called an "instructional video for three year olds."[275] The segment attempts to illustrate the immaturity of its 'target demographic' by juxtaposing childish language and imagery with the inherent violence of the weaponry. By remaining ignorant to this (increasingly emphasized) fact, Van Cleave reveals the extreme and persistent irrationality of his beliefs. As Jason Middleton puts it, this humour stems from people who "continue the same movement when circumstances...should have demanded otherwise."[276] This is an extension of the corrective feature of humour, as it suggests the butt of the joke has a "cluelessness to the world around them."[277]

Van Cleave states in the video's introduction that it is for teaching young children how to "stop...naughty men, and make them take a long nap."[278] The metaphor of death, or at least significant injury, as a 'long nap' here serves as an example of the nature of critique Baron

[275] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[276] Middleton, 25.
[277] Middleton, 25.
[278] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."

Cohen is providing: three year olds are obviously wholly unprepared for understanding the real world ramifications of using this weaponry. Just explaining the purpose of a gun to a child requires an evasion of reality through language: the replacement of death with sleep. Van Cleave does not appear to realize this, and his continuing involvement in the segment suggests a severe lack of rationality on his part to those who already disagree with his politics. After these initial explanations, Morad and Van Cleave introduce a number of guns that are specifically modified to be used for young children called "Gunimals."[279] One is a "Puppy Pistol," a handgun with a small stuffed dog attached to the top. Van Cleave explains the operation of the gun by comparing the process to feeding a dog, stating that "you take his lunchbox [the ammunition clip] and push it into its tummy...remember to point Puppy Pistol's mouth right in the middle of the bad man. If he has a big fat tummy, point at that!"[280] Again, the use of childish language is juxtaposed by the deadly nature of the weapon. Weapons being introduced become increasingly unsafe and unreasonable, with the final two under discussion being a "Rocket-Ship RPG," or rocket propelled grenade, and a "BFF," described as a "starter gun for infants twenty four months and under."[281] Throughout these introductions, Van Cleave is pictured with each weapon, simulating their use and describing each weapon's potential for self defense. He then ends the segment by singing a children's song standing next by Morad, who aggressively yells "fire"[282] at regular intervals. This moment is potentially the strongest point of juxtaposition, as Morad's interjections are specifically militant and violent, removing the possibility that the childish

[279] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[280] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[281] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."
[282] Baron Cohen, "Episode #1.1."

language Van Cleave adds to the song diminishes the violent reality of the weapons under discussion.

The purpose of this segment is not simply to mock Van Cleave, however, though it certainly does that. Baron Cohen foregrounds the obvious dangers and impracticalities of arming three year olds throughout by emphasizing the potential practice's logical conclusions: increased death and violence. The audience is essentially shown how dangerously unhinged advocates for unlimited gun rights may actually be. The subject matter of the scene locates it within the realm of dark or black humour, as it involves "disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare, [which] are treated with bitter amusement."[283] Dark humour is "humour which, using cruelty, bitterness, and sometimes despair, underlines the absurdity of the world."[284] Part of the overall impact of the scene is calculated to deliberately probe the distressing concept of school and other mass shootings, having audiences consider the terror and darkness implicit within the subject matter. This scene in particular is relatively extreme dark humour, in that the subject matter is so definitively disturbing and tangible to many viewers that it "produces less amusement than horror or disgust."[285] It is possibly because of this that many audience members did not find the segment amusing.

Indeed, *Who is America?* demonstrates that mockumentary is not necessarily a comedic form. When it was uploaded to YouTube, many comments on the video suggest that there is nothing humorous about the implications of the sketch, and that it is more concerning than funny. Two of the most liked comments, for example, state that "This is the scariest thing I've

[283] "Black Comedy," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed., ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford University Press, 2008_. https://www-oxfordreference-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-132?rskey=uvytRq&result=132.
[284] Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby, *Dark Humor.* New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010, 81.
[285] Bloom and Hobby, 84.

ever seen in my life," and that "The fact that this is the most powerful country in the world sends shivers down my spine."[286] Appropriately, both reflect feelings Baron Cohen stated were his motivation for making the show. His increased emphasis on exposing the worrying side of the culture and politics of the United States results in a segment that powerfully represents the reality he perceived. This is, traditionally, a task associated with documentaries, specifically: the establishment and support of a "representation, case, or argument about the historical world,"[287] which Bill Nichols believes is necessary for a text to be considered a documentary. In these circumstances, some members of the audience are not amused, and instead view the program as revealing the terrifying irresponsibility of Van Cleave and his political allies. Baron Cohen's use of documentary conventions manifests an apparently real reflection of Van Cleave's character, allowing audiences to adopt a mode of reception more closely aligned to the documentary genre. Other members of the audience see the sketch as a combination of terrifying and amusing. One user states that "I'm taking turns laughing hard and then vomiting when i realize they are actually serious,"[288] reflecting the duality in the segment's content. This illustrates the program's dual mode of reception: to have an audience notice both the fictional and very real elements of what is being revealed, and to realize the horrific implications of these attitudes existing in real life. In this way, Baron Cohen can express his opinions on tragic realities through a (supposedly) comedic, and fictional, lens.

Nevertheless, Baron Cohen's techniques, although widely praised for their humour and ability to reveal some of the more antisocial natures of his guests, have not been universally

[286] ShowTime, "Kinder Guardians | Who Is America? | Sacha Baron Cohen SHOWTIME Series," July 15th, 2018, YouTube video, 10:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkXeMoBPSDk.
[287] Nichols, 8.
[288] "Kinder Guardians | Who Is America? | Sacha Baron Cohen SHOWTIME Series," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkXeMoBPSDk.

accepted as ethical. Specifically, the careful way he establishes his films as documentaries to those appearing in them means that some see him as manipulative, "a filmmaker who relies upon comic entrapment of a high order."[289] Jason Middleton observes that it could be argued that, despite this, Baron Cohen's texts "[serve] the greater good and 'society's right to know.'"[290] Randolph Lewis, however, believes that the scenarios generated by Baron Cohen ignore the tradition of documentaries "generally [relying] on the principle of informed consent."[291] To critics, then, Baron Cohen's tendency to "[sheathe]...documentary elements (the interviews are perfectly real to the unwitting participants) within a fiction"[292] only creates a fictional text that behaves and resonates as if it were real. Baron Cohen's guests' behaviour is not real, but adjusted and controlled by their host without their awareness. This implies that some view the dual mode of reception as more or less incapable of providing a straightforward, reliable truth, and believe the mockumentary mode of reception is the only way to approach Baron Cohen's works. Baron Cohen himself responded to this criticism by stating that nothing prevents the people on his show from leaving, or even just repudiating him for his actions. His control of the subject is limited, and he makes no explicit demands of them. And in fact, some subjects have walked out on him. Pop star Paula Abdul, for example, left one interview after deciding Baron Cohen's character's request that they use humans as furniture was unacceptable.[293] Some of his interviews also fail to achieve whatever goals Baron Cohen has for them, illustrating his lack of complete control. His interview with American football player O.J. Simpson in *Who Is America?*, for example, was established so Baron Cohen could attempt to get Simpson to confess to the murder of his wife, a

[289] Lewis, 77.
[290] Middleton, 92.
[291] Lewis, 80.
[292] Torchin, 53.
[293] *Bruno*, directed by Larry Charles, (2009; Universal Pictures, 2009). DVD.

crime he was famously acquitted of in 1994, on camera. Despite Baron Cohen's best efforts, however, Simpson did not take the bait, making the interview[294] more awkward than confessional, proof that Baron Cohen has limited control over his guests. Another criticism levelled at Baron Cohen is that his use of dramatic irony and inside jokes is a rhetorical strategy that manipulates an audience's desire to be part of a knowledgeable group. Being seen as understanding jokes is appealing cultural capital, as it is a "privileged sign of knowledge and understanding."[295] Some believe that Baron Cohen manipulates this desire to make audiences more likely to agree with his political subtexts. As laughter in Baron Cohen's work necessitates the joke to be on a particular person, this also means that that person is necessarily made to look foolish and irrational, and therefore incorrect.

Many of the critiques levelled at Baron Cohen imply the manipulation of power dynamics. Baron Cohen establishes situations that rob subjects of any level of control over the scenario, and therefore deprives them of "discursive potency."[296] As Lewis MacLeod suggests, subjects appearing on Baron Cohen's programs are "positioned and produced by a force with surplus knowledge in order to produce specific narrative results."[297] Randolph Lewis states that although many believe that the "the ends justify the (extremely funny) means,"[298] this represents a serious ethical breach.

Whether the ends justify the means, however, depends on the power dynamics at work in the scenarios Baron Cohen creates. Baron Cohen's use of dramatic irony often operates most successfully with audiences when the subjects are perceived as "as reprehensible enough to

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[294] *Who is America?*, season 1, episode 7, "Episode #1.7," Directed by Sacha Baron Cohen, and Felder, Nathan, Written by Sacha Baron Cohen et. al, Showtime, August 26th, 2018.
[295] Middleton, 11.
[296] Middleton, 97.
[297] MacLeod, 117.
[298] Lewis, 85.

warrant their public flogging."[299] Van Cleave and Dick Cheney, for example, both have substantial political and social power. Comments on the Van Cleave video like "Laugh all you want but these people run our country" and "NO NEWS JOURNALIST IN THE HISTORY OF JOURNALISM HAS EVER EVEN COME CLOSE TO BRINGING OUT THE REALITY OF THE PEOPLE WHO RULE THEIR COUNTRIES AS AN ACTOR HAS DONE !!!"[300] suggest that viewers react strongly to the impact these interviewees are seen to have on their society. Conversely, there are moments where "many interviewees seem to have been victimized more for sadistic laughter than sociological insight"[301] due to the powerlessness of the sources of humour. These scenarios generally involve people without the power of public figures like Van Cleave, but use the same techniques to control the eventual representation on film. Humour might falter in these scenes due to people believing that making powerless people the butt of the joke is unethical. In *Borat*, for example, one scenario involves the character staying for a night at a bed and breakfast. Upon learning that the elderly, friendly couple who run the bed and breakfast is Jewish, Borat's anti-Semitism causes him to flee in terror. An upload of the scene on YouTube includes several comments expressing sympathy for the couple, such as "The Jewish American old couple by the way were so nice lol. I feel bad."[302] The joke of the scenario is potentially nullified by Baron Cohen's selection of a less powerful subject, possibly replacing intended humour with sympathy.

Baron Cohen's work effectively employs documentary conventions to provoke reality with deliberate and carefully controlled lies. He misuses the same sober conception of

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[299] Lewis, 82.
[300] "Kinder Guardians | Who Is America? | Sacha Baron Cohen SHOWTIME Series," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkXeMoBPSDk.
[301] Lewis, 82.
[302] "Borat inside the nest of the jews," Jun. 4, 2017, YouTube video, 1:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ki8gMNPcqk.

documentaries that caused some audience members to miss jokes in *Forgotten Silver* to lull his guests into a belief in a false context, and then, through humour, attempts to reveal real elements of the guests that he believes are illogical. His work is not always political, with much of it being primarily focussed on entertaining an audience, occasionally at the cost of an unknowing participant's dignity. Baron Cohen does reveal, however, the political potential of humour in a mockumentary by using the genre to reveal what he claims to be the unspoken reality behind some troublesome political figures. Whether or not this resonates with his audience, however, depends on how they watch the texts.

The savvy audience of Sacha Baron Cohen's works watch his fictional characters with one eye on reality. Meticulously crafted meetings between Baron Cohen's fictional personas and real people can, for those watching in a dual mode of reception, provoke documentary style knowledge from artificial situations. Savvy viewers consider characters in *Who is America?* as conduits to truth, with each instance of absurd or unrealistic behaviour being an opportunity for very real information to be revealed about the real people in the scenes. This requires subjects of Baron Cohen's programs to treat him seriously and as a real person, a reception he painstakingly manifests through careful establishment of characters and contexts. Savvy audiences therefore consider Baron Cohen's works on multiple levels at once: as mockumentaries capable of reflecting reality, and as humorous scenarios being handled seriously by people who do not understand their true circumstances. This is a foundation of Baron Cohen's texts, and the dual mode of reception that they engender.

Conclusion: Birds Aren't Real

The works of Peter Jackson and Costa Botes, Tim Heidecker, and Sacha Baron Cohen, are related in a number of ways. Each uses humour steeped in a subversive willingness to mock traditional representations of reality as a potential source of falsity. Each uses their social and cultural moments, misrepresented or not, to provide context to their programs. Each uses absurdity to provide a deliberate break from reality. For their work to 'succeed,' each requires an audience that is aware of what they are trying to do. Each uses a specific kind of humour that grants their audience a level of potential agency in determining what, exactly, they are being shown. The artists' use of the mockumentary allows them to combine these features and create something that, potentially, results in an enlightening and enjoyable experience, at least for a savvy audience that inhabits a mockumentary mode of reception. By using the mockumentary genre, these artists employ a style of truth telling that warns against fully trusting established documentary techniques. Yet the mockumentary mode of reception can be taken too far, a fact demonstrated and deconstructed by a fake social 'movement' called Birds Aren't Real.

Crafting deliberately impossible hoaxes and then ironically clinging to their reality is an increasingly popular comedic technique. The Birds Aren't Real movement ironically calls for a complete rewriting of American history. It claims that between 1959 and 1971, the CIA killed every bird in the United States with "specially altered B-52 bombers stocked with poison."[303] After this initial wide-scale avian destruction, motivated in part (possibly, the Birds Aren't Real website suggests, entirely) by the frequency with which birds "would often poop on [CIA official's] cars," every bird in America was replaced by a surveillance drone intended "to watch

[303]Fernando Alonso, "Are Birds Actually Government Issued Drones?" *Audubon*, November 16, 2018, https://www.audubon.org/news/are-birds-actually-government-issued-drones-so-says-new-conspiracy-theory-making.

and survey tens of thousands of Americans suspected of doing communist things."[304] The movement's output is always delivered in an extremely sincere tone, and includes a detailed website, billboards, and multiple social media accounts, all claiming to represent the absolute truth. Many humorous markers, however, suggest anything related to it is intended to be received as a joke. The official website of the 'movement,' for example, includes falsified 'quotes' from historical figures such as Richard Nixon and doctored black and white images of absurd fictional events, like John F. Kennedy celebrating the completion of the first "robot bird prototype."[305] An aside on the rewritten history of birds on the site mentions that the project to eliminate birds was codenamed "Operation Very Large Bird" after the original codename, Operation Big Bird, was rejected because "the individual in charge of naming the program didn't want to get into any copyright trouble with the popular PBS show Sesame Street."[306] After being asked by an interviewer what the movement is satirizing, Peter McIndoe, the public representative of Birds Aren't Real, rebuked the increasingly confused woman for asking such an offensive question with seemingly genuine pain in his voice while claiming he is a normal, serious American who simply has "an avid disbelief in avian beings."[307] People seem to enjoy the joke: the movement has approximately seventy thousand followers on Twitter and an Instagram account with two hundred and forty one thousand followers. Like Heidecker, the majority of these 'audience members,' predominantly people who interact with the Birds Aren't Real movement online, react with an ironic feigning of absolute, sober belief. McIndoe encourages this through his own

[304] "How?," Birds Aren't Real, accessed June 7th, 2020, https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/the-history.
[305] "How?," Birds Aren't Real, accessed June 7th, 2020, https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/the-history.
[306] "How?," Birds Aren't Real, accessed June 7th, 2020, https://birdsarentreal.com/pages/the-history.
[307] Mitchell Koch, "'Every Tweet Is A Lie': Birds Aren't Real campaign spreads message with new Memphis billboard," *WREG New Channel 3*, July 18, 2019, https://wreg.com/news/every-tweet-is-a-lie-birds-arent-real-campaign-spreads-message-with-new-memphis-billboard/.

behaviour, ironically claiming that people laughing at the movement "pains [him]."[308] Also similar to Heidecker, this response is not limited to individuals: the real scientific institution Ducks Unlimited Canada posted a video of their chief scientist (who, based on the Ducks Unlimited website,[309] appears to legitimately be the person in that position) watching an interview with a member of the Birds Aren't Real movement and responding with apparent concern, stating that he has "always wondered about this." He ironically concludes that the fictionality of birds "has important strategic consequences for Ducks Unlimited."[310] This circumstance, and the reactions from audience members, is similar to the one Heidecker creates with his output, but differs quite significantly in its more tangibly absurd foundation.

Regardless of impassioned (false) pleas to the contrary from its founder, the claim that birds are not real has no verisimilitude, shaky or otherwise. Birds exist. Humour is generated by the movement through the absurd but stubbornly persistent claims of people claiming to be 'bird-truthers,' making them the butt of any joke involved. Absurd humour in this case comes from an "abandonment of less tightly held but more stringently obeyed laws of science and nature"[311] that, traditionally, serves to "generate humour through defiance of the credulity of the viewer"[312] due to the impossibility of such beliefs and the inelastic nature (in the Bergson sense of the term as the ability to "adapt ourselves in consequence"[313]) of the people who hold them. Birds Aren't Real differs from more traditional sources of absurdity because of the many fans who, like the audience of the OnCinema universe, adopt an ironically sincere mode of reception

[308] WREG New Channel 3, "'Birds Aren't Real' Campaign," Jul 18, 2019, YouTube video, 4:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNtr0RahRqM.
[309] "Q & A with DU Chief Scientist Tom Moorman," PhD, Ducks Unlimited, accessed June 8th, 2020, https://www.ducks.org/q-a-with-du-chief-scientist-tom-moorman-phd.
[310] Ducks Unlimited, Inc, "DU's Chief Scientist Addresses "Birds Aren't Real" Movement," July 19, 2019, YouTube video, 1:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnfkWb9H-oQ.
[311] Holm, 149.
[312] Holm, 153.
[313] Bergson, 28.

to respond to it online, essentially mocking, not the absurdity itself, but people who would believe it - or, by extension, any absurd conspiracy theory. This is a performative failure of absurdity, as it ironically suggests a viewer's credulity of the text has been maintained despite the extremely unreasonable nature of the content. This transfers the butt of the joke to those who would perform the epistemological gymnastics necessary to believe that birds aren't real, or that Hilary Clinton was running a child sex-trafficking operation out of a pizza shop.[314] The absolute absurdity of the movement therefore suggests the foundation for its humour: the changing face of what people believe constitutes truth, and how few connections modern 'truths' need to reality in order for an audience to accept them as truth. McIndoe's work (it is likely that he is not the only person behind the 'movement,' but he remains its most visible proponent) critiques how people construct their ideas of what is true, and the sources they trust, particularly in the contemporary moment.

The stakes of Heidecker, Jackson and Botes, and Baron Cohen's works are highlighted here. All of these artists work with the question of how 'realities' can be generated through falsity. The creators of the Birds Aren't Real movement take a more nihilistic approach than these artists, however, by not attaching it, at least publicly, to any real world source, political or otherwise, and exaggerating the joke completely out of the realm of believability while modelling an apparently unshakable belief in everything said. This makes its commentary a primarily epistemological one. It could be argued that some of the language McIndoe uses (such as referring to his followers as "bird-truthers,"[315] an echo of the label used by the assorted,

[314] Amanda Robb, "Pizzagate: Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal," *Rolling Stone*, November 16th, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/.
[315] WREG New Channel 3, "'Birds Aren't Real' Campaign," Jul 18, 2019, YouTube video, 4:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNtr0RahRqM.

generally right-leaning or libertarian conspiracy theorists that claim several widely accepted narratives are fabricated) situates him politically. Ultimately, however, his commentary is about the shaky ground onto which contemporary realities can apparently be built, and the audiences who believe them.

McIndoe occasionally provides evidence as to what, exactly, he is critiquing when he claims that birds do not exist. He positions his satire temporally, discussing the importance of the "internet era"[316] in allowing for ideas that previously would have been censored or disbelieved to promulgate. In his particular case, this opens up the possibility that, when it comes to the existence of birds, "the other side of the argument [can] be treated with equal respect."[317] McIndoe riddles the Birds Aren't Real website, however, with provable fictions and 'obvious' jokes, attacking the idea of all ideas being treated equally regardless of lack of evidence by stretching it to its absurd conclusion. Birds Aren't Real therefore bluntly declares what the other artists like Heidecker and Baron Cohen use as a subtext: absurdities, the specifically exaggerated and unreal, can become 'truths' if an audience occupies a particular mode of reception. Like these artists, the Birds Aren't Real movement uses humour as a conduit to this truth, trusting its audience will pick up that it is, not so subtly, inventing a false, absurd reality. Like the texts discussed in previous chapters, the movement therefore encourages its audience to laugh at the erosion of traditional sources of truth but maintain an awareness that this erosion can also be dangerous in its encouragement of false beliefs. The overall lack of subtlety of Birds Aren't Real as compared to Heidecker or Baron Cohen's work is a potential side-effect of this becoming an

[316]WREG New Channel 3, "'Birds Aren't Real' Campaign."
[317]WREG New Channel 3, "'Birds Aren't Real' Campaign."

increasingly pressing topic in the modern world, and one that might also mean mockumentary humour may be becoming ineffective as a tool for critical and positive cultural change.

Baron Cohen's work in *Who Is America?* serves as an effective example of this, as it exists within a "grey zone between invigorating surprise and destabilizing upheaval, frequently mixing enjoyment with discomfort."[318] The show itself, however, achieved relatively little political impact, with a fallout limited to one shamed politician's retirement. Other politicians that appeared on the program emerged relatively unscathed, as most had "said or done far worse things on the news than they did for Baron Cohen."[319] Many audience members already knew what subjects of the program believed, and therefore approached them influenced by preexisting political beliefs and occupied a specific mode of reception. This might suggest why the warnings in programs like *Who is America?* or the exaggerations of the OnCinema universe may not be effective tools for political change in the contemporary era: the inside humour they rely upon begins and works only for an audience that already has views similar to those of the creators.

The lukewarm reaction to *Who Is America?* suggests that absurdist comedy may suffer in a time when what constitutes as absurd can shift depending on a viewer's context. By definition, absurd humour is based off of a transgression of logic and reason, but, increasingly, logic and reason are not universal. The use of inside humour as a source of political or social change is therefore often doomed to failure by the very collectivity it requires in order to exist. This impacts the shaming function of laughter as well: comedy intending to shame someone for being unreasonable will resonate imperfectly if the butt of the joke is acting reasonably according to

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[318] Hennefeld, "*Who is America?* On Truth, Lies and Laughter."
[319] Stuart Heritage, "Who is America?: Why Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy failed to land a punch," *The Guardian*, 28 August, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/28/who-is-america-why-sacha-Baron Cohens-comedy-failed-to-land-a-punch.

their own logic and reason. People with views that already align with the text creator's will have their ideas confirmed, and people who disagree will merely see the behaviour as the manipulative hijinks of a trickster. Many of Baron Cohen's subjects in *Who is America?* and Tim from OnCinema are funny precisely because they have lost "[their] grip on reality,"[320] but the impact of humour depends on the 'reality' to which a given viewer already subscribes, true or otherwise. Ironically, then, political warnings within the programs are potentially ignored by viewers who do not trust them as a reliable source of information since they contradict those viewers' preexisting beliefs.

When an audience watches a text from within a mockumentary mode of reception, they detach the text from reality. Whether or not what they view is actually false, however, is a separate matter. The existence of the mockumentary mode of reception, as demonstrated by the variety of initial interpretations of *Forgotten Silver*, is now an observable element of the cinematographic landscape. Filmmakers possess an increasing awareness of how to use cues to hint at their work's relationship to the genre. Some audiences look for these cues, and, once perceived, adjust their mode of reception accordingly. Although much of the mockumentary mode of reception is about anticipating particular styles of humour, humourless texts like Orson Welles' radio broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* show that often serious texts can also require being in a mockumentary mode of reception to interpret as per their actual relationship with reality. The mockumentary mode of reception can also be manipulated by artists possessing knowledge of its nature, such as Tim Heidecker or Sacha Baron Cohen, who create texts that are not precisely mockumentary or documentary, but rather inhabit a space between the two. These

[320] MacLeod, 123.

deliberately confuse an audience, as viewers are purposefully placed into a position in which discerning the true ontological status of what they are watching is complicated, or, in the case of some of Heidecker's work, irrelevant. The artists' goals vary, and can involve anything from simple entertainment or, as is the case of Sacha Baron Cohen, providing an audience with a glimpse of troublesome ideas that require correction, at least according to one set of beliefs. All of these tasks are accomplished through an awareness of the mockumentary mode of reception. This way of watching begins with, and generally laughs at, the idea of implicitly trusting the documentary genre, and, by extension, anything claiming to be a representation of reality. Beneath the accumulating jokes, though, the subtext remains. Colin McKenzie's temporary existence as a historical reality for some viewers of *Forgotten Silver* is proof that an audience's mode of reception can turn absurd fiction into fact. There is a reality out there and it does matter, so we had better watch carefully. How we watch is as important as what we watch in a world where hobbits get murdered and birds aren't real.

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