

[14] *Faking What? Making a Mockery
of Documentary*

This volume is predicated on a category, the fake documentary, that the editors have chosen over and above the term mockumentary, for reasons they have amply delineated. It is considered that mocking is only one possible stance that the fake documentary can take. It can also copy, mimic, gimmick, play with, scorn, ridicule, invert, reverse, repeat, ironize, satirize, affirm, subvert, pervert, convert, translate, and exceed documentary style (see Juhasz' introduction to this volume). For all of that range of "play" available to them, the editors have chosen predominantly to focus on fiction films that mimic documentary style while somehow announcing themselves as Not Doc. Although I realize this specificity can serve to contain multiple and proliferating categories, thereby positioning the films more clearly in opposition to their supposed referent—the documentary—this particular form of containment is not my aim.

To some extent, the distinctions between different kinds of "faking" are not crucial, and no amount of conscious or intentional "faking" can undo the fact that documentary is itself already a fake of sorts, insofar as its claims to capturing reality have never yet proven fully authentic, definitive, or incontestable.¹ For my present purposes, I am equally interested in films that pass effectively as documentaries, films that never announce themselves as anything in particular, neither "pure doc" nor "pure fake," those that parody the form as well as those that lovingly and faithfully abide by it. The films that attempt some formal or conceptual distinction from the venerable documentary are in some senses the least challenging of all of the mockumentary modes, in that they can efficiently serve to authorize documentary as the proper nonfictive model, from which they then depart. I am less optimistic than is Juhasz about the ideologically subversive effects of the fake documentary, though I do agree that the potential for subverting the authoritative discourses of documentary through

mimesis does exist. Subversion is simply not inherent in the project of faking, as Lerner duly affirms in his introductory remarks.

One further note: I tend to prefer the term *mockumentary*, even while availing myself of the many valences implied in Juhasz's panoply of "attitudes" of the fake documentary. I believe the term "mockumentary" more effectively works to signal a skepticism toward documentary realism, rather than to reauthorize documentary's "truth" against the fake doc's "false." Like "fake doc," the term "mockumentary" incorporates and implicates *documentary* into its referent while still implying some distinction from it. But with *mockumentary* the distinction remains productively undefined, whereas, I believe, the term "fake doc" too eagerly accepts and reconfirms the binary (fake vs. real) from the outset. Fake doc needlessly concedes that documentary itself is "real" or at least authentic (the genuine article, i.e., not fake), while my hope is that *mockumentary* might more successfully attenuate, if not ultimately destabilize, the credibility of documentary by, if you will, mocking the very concept at its core.

With a title like mine, I am clearly taking a polemical position vis-à-vis documentary studies and the nascent interest in what seems to be presented of late as a spin-off discourse about the *mockumentary*. I offer this essay as an inoculation against overinvestment in the factual pretensions of documentary and overdependency on the stability of the categories themselves. I find problematic the assumption that underpins *mockumentary*: namely, that it depends and responds to the "real" or "true" original, documentary. The idea that the category of documentary supports and sustains *mockumentary* as its "straight" or "upright" other—that documentary in effect props *mockumentary* up—is troubling to me. What an unreliable pedestal upon which to construct a claim. Is there an objective or superior rendition of the actual—or better yet, the "real"—that documentary can possibly claim that would enable a *mockumentary* parody? Who is parodying whom, I want to know.

Couldn't it be *mockumentary* that is doing the propping, setting a stage by which documentary may finally appear as a stable and coherent category? Certainly the burgeoning field of *mockumentary* studies seems to incline us toward this position. This process of propping, *anaclysis*, has its psychoanalytic implications. A drive, which, as psychoanalytic theorists maintain, is always sexual, must have its prop, its antecedent, which is a nonsexual or presexual instinct.² The oral drive, for instance, is predicated on, or propped up by, the hunger instinct. This position implies that there is a presymbolic urge lurking behind the staging of fantasy, which here might be said to be the fantasy of representing reality: so with the

relationship between documentary and mockumentary, where one "urge" presupposes and depends on the other.

Logically, we may assume that documentary is the urge that props up mockumentary, documentary being the drive more directly oriented toward its object. Mockumentary adds a layer of fantasy, "sexing up" documentary and detaching it from its supposedly straightforward relationship with its "natural" object. Conversely, we may deduce that mockumentary is bringing documentary back to life, as it were, at least at the level of documentary studies. If this is so, then mockumentary is working in the service of documentary's self-preservative instincts, performing an anaclitic reversal whereby the supposed derivative is actually doing the propping, taking over the life-sustaining task. Mockumentary, by making the field of documentary studies sexy, is actually revitalizing and reorienting what might otherwise be a withering subject. Again, the question of who is propping whom emerges. Clearly, with doc/mock/umentary, it is difficult to know which urge comes first.

This is a false conundrum, since both practices may be said to be propped up by a more primal urge: the urge or instinct to gaze upon the Real.³ Documentary's quest for reality, and mockumentary's complex and often cagey reproduction of documentary realism, may both be seen as strategies to approach the ever-elusive Real. "Unmediated reality" then constitutes the limit of the sayable or the representable, i.e., the *Real* of both documentary and mockumentary. Although the real in this case is neither genre's privileged province, I do want to argue that it may be both genres' motivating "instinctive" urge.⁴

In what follows, I will loosely trace the genealogies of documentary and mockumentary, fused as they are historically and conceptually; I will discuss the problematic generic status of both, and I will attempt to devise an approach that circumvents, if not transcends, the specious fact/fiction divide (some would say continuum) that dominates so many debates on the topic. In the process, I will be searching for some useful distinctions between the two rhetorical modes that are not reducible to the unrewarding questions of objectivity or facticity. It should be noted here that I depart from conventional documentary theorists in that I will argue, using a Lacanian paradigm, that the documentary form (as seen in both documentary and mockumentary) implies and is motivated by a kind of *psychic investment* that cannot be characterized in terms of a slavish wish to faithfully represent *reality* (which in any event only accounts for some documentary practice); rather, this quest for reality (however that term is understood) constitutes the *Real* of documentary, and it is this promise or possibility of revealing the Real that drives both documentary and mockumentary practices.

In other words, I am not entering this debate to decide which form, documentary or its supposed replica, can claim the greater degree of indexicality to reality, or even which one is better situated to critique such a claim. I am more concerned with what undergirds both endeavors that is not simply, in the case of documentary, to see reality represented with the greatest fidelity, or, in the case of the fake documentary, to merely problematize the notion of fidelity, authority, and/or indexicality. I am suggesting that both forms, in different ways, train their sights from various angles in an effort to glimpse the nebulous, vertiginous, ever-elusive Real. I make this bold assertion because I strongly suspect that animating the desire to document or mockument is a drive to see "something more." Hence, the truth claims that are made in either register (and it is important to acknowledge that mockumentary makes truth claims as well) aspire beyond ideology and beyond reality to the ultimate, though also ultimately unrepresentable, truth, the "hard kernel" up against which all quests for true reality must come—i.e., the Real.

The field of documentary studies has made great strides in the last twenty years, with an accelerated development in the last ten. Theorists have done much to, at once, elucidate and problematize the practice, thus relativizing its attendant meanings. There is not one documentary critic who has not had to negotiate the problematic status of documentary as a genre, even as most try to sidestep implications of their claims. Eager to establish and consolidate a discipline, most documentary theorists, like documentary practitioners, have chosen to overlook the stubborn refusal of documentary to be properly disciplined. The category of documentary has always been an elusive one. Every definition of the term has proved partial and of limited use, whether Bill Nichol's "discourse of sobriety," Brian Winston's "scientific inscription," or Paula Rabinowitz's "instruct[ion] through evidence."

We are no closer to consensus now than we were ten years ago as to an adequate working definition of documentary.⁵ Is documentary the filmic apotheosis of realism, or is it not? Does it or does it not have a special indexical relationship to reality? And if it does, as so many theorists and filmmakers claim, what is the nature of this seemingly objective reality that is reputedly available to indexical representation? Is or is not reality (let alone *the Real*) ultimately representable? Clearly the answers vary greatly, depending on which documentary theorist one asks, though none would venture to say that reality (much less the Real) is ever representable in any complete or unmediated way.

Whether documentary has a more intimate relationship to reality or history than fiction has never been sufficiently established. In fact, what

would constitute such an “intimacy” in representational terms? More to the point, indexicality to something (reality) that is always already mediated through the same symbolic system as that which purports to indexically represent it (documentary), is an infinitely repeating house of mirrors—always already at a distinct, if unquantifiable, remove. It is not that documentary practices must be seen as synonymous with fiction: of course there is a difference. But that difference cannot be deciphered based on documentary’s “cozier” relationship to reality—i.e., that which is always already at a distinct remove.

In brief, it seems that the reason to maintain documentary as a conceptual category has more to do with cultural capital than it does with any necessary intimacy, indexically or otherwise conceived, to reality. Documentary is a culturally sanctioned performance, wielding an authority built up through what genre critics have called “intertextual relay” (i.e., promotion and context of exhibition) that create “horizons of expectations” for the spectator.⁶ These expectations play upon an almost irresistibly strong force field of the desire to know (epistophilia), or rather the desire for the illusion of mastery through knowing. Here I am only rehearsing the arguments of several prominent documentary theorists, Brian Winston, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Elizabeth Cowie among them.⁷

The highly disputable distinction between documentary and mockumentary rests upon this fragile fulcrum of expectations and the desire to know. The much-celebrated documentary spectator’s epistophilia shifts—in the case of mockumentary, but also in the case of an “educated” documentary spectator—to a different kind of knowingness. Mockumentary, in particular, fails to please precisely when this knowingness is withheld and expectations of unadulterated epistophilia have already been induced. Yet these disappointments are predicated on a prior disavowal, which the documentary enacts (and which I would not like to see documentary theory reproduce): namely, of the documentary genre’s failure to produce anything more than the (normative) codes of reality, i.e., realism, not the real (thing) itself. In her article, “The Spectacle of Actuality,” Cowie reminds us of the pleasures, as well as the aporias, of this disavowal, and warns that in the end it is a violent and repressive disavowal.⁸ Cowie suggests that documentary is a prosthetic device, extending the spectator’s perceptual abilities (through the superior optics of the camera) while simultaneously admitting the deficiencies of the human power of sight and the scopophilic drive.⁹ Perhaps we can see documentary as striving for “something more” as well, desiring to bionically extend the viewer’s abilities beyond that which can be seen, to the unseen. This would imply that documentary seeks and simultaneously disavows (covers over) that which

it seeks but is impotent to capture: the Real. But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself.

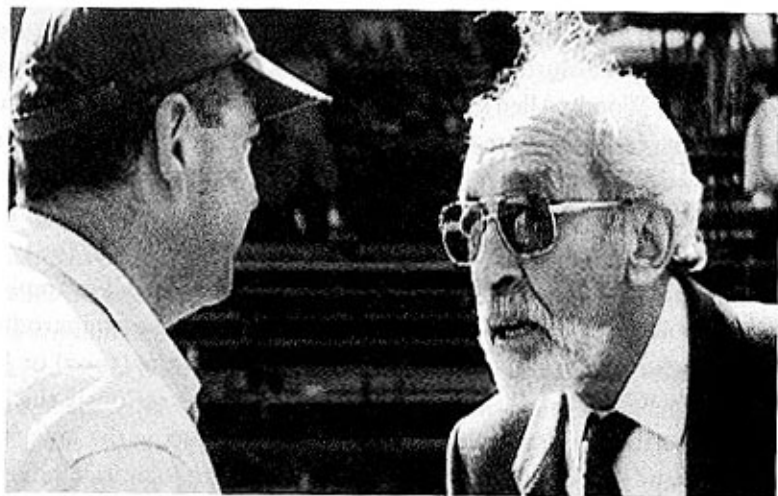
Having outlined documentary's problematic ontological status, I want to now elaborate on the position against the legitimation of the category of mockumentary as distinct from documentary. Such a legitimation only serves to affirm the impression that documentary is a discrete and defensible category. I want to suggest that this construction of mock versus real doc relies on a fallacy (a *fake*) and that if the notion of mockumentary mocks anything at all, it is the very viability or sustainability of the documentary category. Paradoxically, this undermining mockery will only come to light once we have questioned the range of mockumentary practices and whether they are necessarily subversive.

As mentioned earlier, definitions of documentary are notoriously weak. Tellingly, theorists more often proffer inevitably flawed descriptions of what documentary film is not (not fiction, not acted, not scripted) than of what it may actually be. I say "flawed" because many, if not most, documentaries do contain scripted sequences, do employ or engage (perhaps nonprofessional) actors and acting, and partake, at the very least, in the narrative imperative (telling stories), no less than do fiction films. The positive ascriptions for documentary turn out to be no less problematic ("sober," "based on actual events," "essayistic," etc.).¹⁰ For every definition offered, one can think of notable exceptions that, rather than prove the rule, effectively disprove the definition. On the other hand, the term mockumentary remains poorly defined as well, never having entered the lexicon as a formal description or clearly defined genre of filmmaking. For example, the authors of *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* have chosen to locate what they call mock-documentaries in yet another series of unstable and overly constricting categories, such as drama documentary and docudrama.¹¹ For them, the mock documentary is that film that is clearly demarcated as a fiction film yet utilizes documentary techniques to (usually) comic and parodic effect. This seems an unnecessarily limiting definition and, with all due respect to the authors of this groundbreaking text, their taxonomy seems based more on the desire to identify that which may be subversive in these practices, excluding or disregarding those mock-doc practices that do not conform to the hopes and expectations of subversiveness.

At the very least, mockumentary is generally assumed to take its inspiration derivatively from the documentary film. To mock can mean, of course, to mimic (usually, but not necessarily, in a parodic sense) or to ridicule (though not necessarily in an imitative vein). Mockumentaries may be said to include parodies of documentary, the humor being based in either

the deception of the audience (Peter Jackson and Costa Boles's *Forgotten Silver*, 1996) or the absurdity of the premise (Nick Park's *Creature Comforts*, 1990, or Woody Allen's *Zelig*, 1983). However, I believe we should conceive of the category more broadly still, including mimetic fiction films that borrow documentary realist techniques to avail themselves of the authoritative verisimilitude that documentary films attempt to inspire so as then to subvert that authority (Mitchell Block's *No Lies*, 1975, or Michele Citron's *Daughter Rite*, 1979, being two archetypal examples). I would also include the far less recognized practice of the nonparodic mimetic mockumentary, such as Elisabeth Subrin's *Shulie* (1997) or Jill Godmillow's *What Farocki Taught* (1998), which take seriously the lessons of the scribe, painstakingly and lovingly reproducing the images, if not the sounds, of a model text in order to reaffirm its initial value in a new temporal context. This type of mockumentary is a form of translation, producing differences and excesses (or *differance*) not through language or enunciation per se, nor through parody, satire, or irony, but through representation and reiteration *in time*.¹²

There are also mockumentaries, such as docudramas, that are devoid of any hint of parody or irony and may easily be received in the same epistemic register as a straight documentary. This practice is as old and well-established as documentary itself. Yet mockumentaries (and those who study them) seem to bear the cachet of the new, raising expectations of the disruptive potential of the subversive maverick. It is important to remember, though, that, although the term may be new, the practice is not (see Jesse Lerner's discussion in the introduction to this volume). Moreover, there are no necessarily ideologically subversive implications to the endeavor. Availing oneself of the authoritative rhetorics of documentary can be an effective maneuver in the circulation of discursive power. In fact, Cowie reminds us that documentary's realist pretension, its verisimilitude, is subject to highly conservative, normative codes of reality. As Cowie states, "verisimilitude is . . . central [to] the documentary film—just as much as and perhaps more than for the fiction film. The world presented must be believable, it must be like what we expect the world to be, in order for the film to sustain our belief in its claim to reality."¹³ Mockumentary, even in its parodic variations, participates in the normative coding of reality, insofar as it compels audience belief in its veracity as a documentary. As Juhasz states in the conclusion to her introductory remarks, "fakery is an inherently conservative practice, even at its most explicitly political." Mockumentary may even attempt to outdo the outmoded codes of documentary realism—as the better, more truthful, verisimilar address—much as reflexive documentary has done.



Happy Birthday, Mr. Mograbi (Avi Mograbi, 1999). Photograph courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films.

I am reminded here of a mockumentary by Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi, *Happy Birthday, Mr. Mograbi* (1999). In it, Mograbi plays a filmmaker obsessed with videotaping all aspects of his life, which include working on a video project for an Israeli producer about Israel's fifty-year "jubilee" celebrations, while simultaneously shooting footage inside Israel for a Palestinian production about "Al Nakba"—the fifty-year "disaster" mourned by the Palestinians. These events, which are of course two interpretations of the same event, coincidentally occur on the filmmaker's forty-second birthday. When not working on either of the two projects, Mograbi narrates a story in direct address (complete with flashback reenactments and "hidden" camera sequences) about himself and a plot of land he bought several years earlier as an investment for his retirement and his children. The video is shot in *vérité* style, documenting the process of building a house on the plot of land, which erroneously includes an extra, unpaid for, parcel. He sells the house to an old, irate Israeli, but the neighbors figure out that the new house has been built on property that was properly theirs. There is a conflagration, where it becomes clear that the neighbor is acting irrationally, as is the buyer. The seemingly decent, upright filmmaker/Israeli is caught in the middle of this rapidly devolving dynamic through a mistake not entirely of his own making, yet one that he was willing to (reluctantly) capitalize on and only belatedly willing to amend.

The allegory in this modern parable becomes ominously clear: Mograbi's character represents the typical Israeli, well-intentioned but caught in a no-win situation. The buyer represents the irrational Jewish

settlers who refuse to renegotiate an agreement even once they learn it was made in bad faith. The neighbor represents the justifiably angry yet inexplicably violent Palestinians, who act so “primitively,” so “barbarously,” that whatever sympathy one may have had for them initially is lost in the end. The identifications constructed through the first-person direct address, and the playful mockumentary style, are clearly meant to be aligned with the filmmaker’s character, and thus with the poor, hapless, self-interested yet generally ethical, average Israeli—over and above the “extremists” on either side. This disingenuously naïve portrayal is insidious, refusing as it does its own complicity, and indeed instrumentality, in the mechanisms of oppression. Ironically, the sincerity of this mockumentary—its reflexivity, its humor, its intelligence—serves the author’s self-exculpating position seamlessly.¹⁴

As this example attests, there is no necessary political or ideological subversiveness of the mockumentary mode as such. However, neither is mockumentary a more degraded practice than documentary: a poor imitation of the shining original. Whether to deceive, amuse, challenge, propagandize, or reenact, these films do much more than merely adopt documentary techniques for their own mischievous (or even conservative) purposes. Insofar as mockumentaries mimic documentary, they implicitly contaminate it at the level of its generic status, revealing the impurity of the category itself. If there can be said to be any necessarily subversive implication of mockumentary practice, it would be this: as with all effective imitations, it reveals the performative limits of the original. To adapt and loosely paraphrase the insights of such thinkers as Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha, mockumentary mimesis inevitably reveals the impossible ideal of the purported real thing (i.e., the documentary “original”).

Several years ago, I wrote an article, with my friend and colleague Marcos Becquer, on an obscure video that thematized transvestism and transsexuality “borrow[ing] the wisdom” of drag and mimesis (known as “realness” in the African-American and Latino drag community) in its chosen mockumentary form. It was a documentary about drag as much as a documentary in drag. We thought then, and it may be worth reiterating now, that the model of gender mimesis had some unexpectedly compelling parallels to that of genre mimesis, specifically with reference to mimicking “the real.” To adapt a quote from this prior paper, “[mockumentary] prompts us to see documentary realism, like drag and transsexuality, as an attempt to imitate and embody the codes and the ontology of the real; to construct the real through its adaptive embodiment; to see it, that is, as a form of realness . . . ”¹⁵

Bhabha reminds us that mimesis always entails excess. No mimesis or

adequation is ever complete. At least, for it to be effective, it must always produce its "slippage, its excess, its difference."¹⁶ And those who make this discomfiting fact of incompleteness apparent (women, the colonial subject, transvestites, and, here, mockumentaries) are subject to regulatory practices meant to contain the threat (why else would the editors of this volume invoke the specter of "movie jail?"). What is threatening is not that the subaltern, in Bhabha's example, and the mockumentary here, is revealed to be an inadequate replica, a poor imitation, of the true authoritative model, but rather that the authoritative model itself is implicated in this inadequacy. There is no effective originary model that stands apart, independent and assured. Here it becomes clear that the original is already a poor, or in fact an impossible, replica of an ideal. The alleged replica, in its stipulated performativity of the very idea of originality and even authority, only serves to compromise further the integrity of its alleged original. Reality is itself implicated as a poor rendering, an unconvincing rendition of the unattainable ideal (of the Real).

Arguably, one key problem at the core of the discussion of mockumentary is precisely that of origin, i.e., which form precedes the other? Is the documentary historically prior to the mockumentary, as is commonly presumed, or is it quite the other way around? Who imitates whom, and further, who imitates whom, imitating what, we might ask. If the histories of the nonfiction film are to be believed then *all* of the most exemplary early documentary films, whether those of Flaherty, Grierson, Vertov, or even Edison's and the Lumières' actualities, are also exemplary mockumentaries. In fact, with Flaherty's "cinema of romantic preservationism,"¹⁷ Grierson's "creative treatment of actuality," and Vertov's "higher mathematics of facts," prompted as that arithmetic was by an albeit ideologically laden conception of "truth" or "pravda," we have a veritable set piece for mockumentary (*avant la lettre*) as the foundational discourse of documentary itself.

If we analyze verisimilar representational techniques, we have little choice but to concede that some key strategies currently associated with "mockumentary" (scripting, acting, reenacting, staging, etc.) have antecedents in the earliest days of so-called actuality or documentary films (before and after 1926, when the term "documentary" was coined), and came to signify documentary practice itself for at least half a century, without any apparent contradiction. In this sense, documentary cannot be said to be historically prior to mockumentary; at the very least, their origins are coeval. I want to underscore not this temporal simultaneity, but rather a formal equivalence. Mockumentary and documentary are not merely coincident—identical twins separated at birth—they are, in their origins, if no longer in their present-day effects, one and the same.

Beyond the question of origins, precedence, or propping, even more pressing is the question of the “original”¹⁸ object that both documentary and mockumentary aspire to represent, and that is, I contend, the “Real” itself. As laid out earlier, I refer here to the Lacanian Real, as distinct from reality—indeed, as that which constitutes reality’s radical resistance to full representability, even as it is structured by this representability. The Real (as ever-elusive event), in other words, is the ostensible terrain of documentary film. In *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek sets out to prove that any notion that we may have about the Real is essentially a fake. The more we grasp at the elusive Real, the more likely we are to come up empty-handed. The Real eludes or resists direct representation—faking us out, we might say, at every attempt to grab hold of it. As that which is foreclosed from incorporation into the symbolic, the Real nonetheless structures our semblance of reality. Yet it only appears as disturbances or illusions in this reality. In this Žižek is pointing to the Lacanian insight that the Real exceeds the bounds of representability and can only be the unattainable substance of our fantasy. He claims the Real is the “pulsing of the pre-symbolic substance”¹⁹ that only attains meaning and form once we as subjects enter the symbolic through the subjective web of our desires. Clearly, once meaning is ascribed to the Real, it is no longer a thing in itself, but rather a projection to which we can have no direct access. The hard kernel of the Real cannot be penetrated by the symbolic system; it is in fact defined by its inaccessibility.

Žižek argues, following Lacan, that the Real cannot be glimpsed head on, that it defies the forthright gaze. From the straightforward view (the angle to which documentary aspires), rather than seeing the Real, clearly and without distortion, we see *indistinct confusion*.²⁰ I am thinking here of Benjamin’s analysis of Atget’s fin-de-siècle documentary photographs of deserted Parisian streets, which were said to have been photographed “like scenes of crime”—evacuated, desolate, and activating the anxiety of witnessing an unmediated yet ultimately unrepresentable event: in short, the Real. Tellingly, Benjamin notes that simultaneously “picture magazines begin to put up signposts for [the viewer]; . . . for the first time, captions have become obligatory.”²¹ This demand for captions precisely reflects the desire or need to submit the Real to a symbolizing procedure, to tame and contain it—not in fact, to effectively represent it. A more prosaic example may be Winston’s claim that “at its best, at its most observationally pure,” ethnographic film is something only an anthropologist could love—something totally indecipherable to the average spectator without the benefit of interpretation (captions).²² To the degree that documentary narrates, i.e., symbolizes, the event, documentary renders

it at once decipherable and radically removed from the possibility of ever glimpsing the Real.

This point might be best exemplified in relation to documentary's limit case: death. Death is typically invoked as the definitive arbiter of documentary's indexicality to reality. Everyone knows that when human death is recorded in a documentary, an actual person in the world has died, whereas, in a fiction film, an actor will resume breathing as soon as the director yells "Cut." Yet, think of the archetypal shot of death in documentary, where a cameraman "records" his own death in Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile* (1974). What do we see of this death? A wild shot gone out of control and then darkness as the filmmaker cuts to black. Certainly we do not "see" death. What we see is ultimately Žižek's "indistinct confusion." Even when a camera records another's death, we cannot "see" (let alone "know") that death. For example, in Mark Massi and Peter Friedman's *Silverlake Life* (1992), Tom Joslin's death can never be made apparent to us in direct visual representation. We are reminded through a number of conventionalized codes that a life has been lost, but death itself remains elusive, radically defying representation; i.e., it refuses to yield its secrets, to make itself knowable to the *direct gaze*.²³

When American documentary filmmakers began to pursue the *direct cinema* approach, what is it they hoped to achieve, if not to "capture the 'real'" on celluloid—without bias, unmediated by interpretation (i.e., gazed at forthrightly)?²⁴ Even though I concede Juhasz's point, made in an article about strategic uses of direct cinema techniques, that many direct cinema practitioners were not as naïve as such an assertion would make them seem, even today rhetoric about the unmediated *real* of documentary is prominent in production circles.²⁵ Filmmakers and producers tend to speak unselfconsciously about documentary's unique relation to reality and also (albeit without Lacanian intentions) to the real. HBO documentary impresario Sheila Nevins extols the virtues of the new compact digital cameras and their ability to deliver "purer" documentaries. Legendary documentarian George Stoney can claim that what keeps documentaries fresh and interesting is "the combination of real footage and reenactments." Barbara Koppel exuberantly celebrates the singular advantage of documentaries over fiction films by claiming that "nonfiction films *are real*."²⁶

These filmmakers and producers are, of course, talking about "reality" per se, but the recourse to discourses of purity and superiority indicate a type of transcendentalism ascribed to the documentary mode that implies a higher aspiration than merely the faithful recording of actuality (were that even possible). Documentary theorists are subject to such slippages, as well. Without any apparent need to problematize the term, Winston calls his

revisionist history of documentary film *Claiming the Real*.²⁷ The authors of *Faking It*, theorists who, like Winston, can be expected to be familiar with relevant distinctions between the terms “reality” and “the real,” make reference to documentary’s pose as the only representational medium “that can construct . . . a *direct* relationship with the *real*.”²⁸ Given these contemporary claims and postures, it is not unreasonable to assume that documentary aspires (both through the efforts of the filmmakers and through those of the spectator) to the status of an unfettered, i.e., direct, representation of the Real.

Although it is not so much Žižek’s “indistinct confusion” one sees with *vérité* and direct cinema approaches, clearly it is also not unmediated reality, let alone the Real. When we look closely at realist documentary, we see the techniques of dissimulation at work, no less than in the seamless continuities of narrative fiction films. The wizard is working overtime behind the curtain—even, maybe most especially, in “straight” documentaries—to make us believe in the illusion of the reality represented. In this, documentary realism can be said to disavow its fantasy, and, according to Žižek, it is precisely fantasy that is necessary to achieve a glimpse of the Real. In its imaginative flights of fancy (or more precisely fantasy), mockumentary may be just different enough from documentary to achieve such a glimpse. It is here where mockumentary (in some forms) may distinguish itself most effectively, mocking documentary’s continued, head-on quest to pass itself off as the forthright gaze onto the Real.

If the direct gaze can reveal nothing of the Real, then it follows that the satirical, that is to say *wry*, look of at least some mockumentaries may just create the proper context to catch a glimpse of the Real. One must look askance at mockumentary (i.e., not be fooled by it) in order to apprehend, enjoy, or see what it has to reveal. This implies a doubling irony, the knowing gaze at a satirical parody (or some other kind of mocking mimesis)—a double awry—which allows for a defamiliarization effect or an estrangement, that may in fact be the path to that which is truer than fact, to that which even subverts the very illusion of facticity, pointing the way to a miasmatic, vertiginous, yet somehow exhilarating possibility. This may indeed be the more interesting and useful distinction to be made between documentary and mockumentary, if one is ultimately to be found. The double awry look produced by the mockumentary opens up the possibility of the best we can hope for: a glimpse at the elusive Real.

The combined insights of Bhabha, Butler, and Žižek might lead us to conclude that reality itself is a mockumentary, for which there is no “doc.”²⁹ If we concede my point that the true objective of both forms lies beyond (the nonetheless impossible goal of) representing reality, to actually

achieving a glimpse of the Real, there is some credibility to the assertion that documentary is a failed project—or, better yet, that mockumentary is perhaps the truer documentary form.

NOTES

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1. Clearly not all documentaries claim to represent reality, or at least they don't all claim to represent it in the same way, yet there is something that can be said to link documentary practice across the board, and that is perhaps the arrogation of authenticating discourses that have aspirations to represent reality, even if there may be a knowing stance projected (in self-reflexive documentaries, for instance) of the impossibility of that claim.
2. See Jean Laplanche on *análisis in Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mohlman (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 20. See also Mary Ann Doane's discussion of Laplanche's definition in her 1981 article, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," reprinted in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 90.
3. The "Real" here is distinct from "reality" in the psychoanalytic sense, though both doc and mock forms do also partake of the fantasy of representing reality, albeit in different ways.
4. I am not trying to somehow anthropomorphize documentary here, but rather to suggest that the drive to make documentary films, as well as the drive to watch them, may be motivated by a psychic mechanism akin to a presymbolic, instinctive, urge.
5. Like all genres, documentary conventions have changed over time and differ, too, from one cultural iteration to another. However, documentary seems to be particularly resistant to adequate definition, even provisionally conceived.
6. See Steve Neale's summary of the uses of the terms "intertextual relay" and "horizons of expectation" in literary and film genre studies in *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 39–40 and 42 respectively.
7. See Brian Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentary* (BFI, 2000); Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Documentary," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90–107; and Elizabeth Cowie, "The Spectacle of Actuality," in *Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19–45.
8. Cowie, "Spectacle of Actuality," 23.
9. Freud makes the link between the camera (among other modern mechanical apparatus) and prosthesis in *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961 and 1989), 43–44.
10. Must a documentary be "sober"? Hopefully not. Would that make its opposite "drunk" (as Vertov claimed, calling all fiction films, "film vodka")? Aren't biopics and historical dramas also "based on actual events"? Isn't the essayistic form only one possible approach to documentary (think of lyrical or experimental documentaries, for instance)?
11. See *Faking It*, ed. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2001).
12. There are other possible interpretations of the conceptual project of these nonparodic, mimetic mockumentaries. Homage is clearly one, recontextualization is another, but there is also the appropriative urge, whereby the artist must put her stamp on the earlier work, make it her own. Clearly, whether in painting, photography, film, or any other reproductive art, the project of conscious mimesis is also a commentary on the nonoriginary nature of the medium.
13. Cowie, "Spectacle of Actuality," 30.
14. An alternate and more charitable reading, which actually aligns better with Mograbi's own critique of Israeli society and its well-protected sense of innocence, allows that Mograbi's character is meant to parody and thus expose the untenability of such naïveté in the face of the gravity of the political situation. However, this does not discount the fact that Mograbi plays his character so sympathetically that the critique of mainstream Israeli society is all but obscured.
15. Marcos Becquer and Alisa Lebow, "Docu-drag, or 'Realness' as a Documentary

- Strategy," in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, ed. Chon Noriega and Ana Lopez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 143-70. The video in question was Felix Rodriguez's *One Moment in Time* (1992). The term "realness" can be used to denote any kind of effective passing, usually with regard to gender, but also class, age, race, sexuality, professional status, etc.
16. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.
 17. This is Fatimah Tobing Rony's phrase. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and the Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 102.
 18. The scare quotes around "original" here are meant to signify a difference, for this is no ordinary original, of the kind that Bhabha and others would have us question. This "original"—the Real—is merely a structural placeholder with no substance of its own. It is paradoxically a limit (Žižek's "hard kernel") and an empty signifier, available to be filled by any kind of content, which is always already an inadequate substitute. It is an ontological impossibility: simultaneously inimitable and infinitely (though always inadequately) imitable.
 19. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 14.
 20. *Ibid.*, 11; emphasis mine.
 21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 226.
 22. Brian Winston, "Documentary: I Think We Are in Trouble," in *New Challenges for the Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 29.
 23. This is hardly a new or novel position. In her article "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," Vivian Sobchek argues this point at length. She declares that "the representation of the event of death is an indexical sign of that which is always in excess of representation, and beyond the limits of coding and culture. Death confounds all codes." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Fall 1984): 287.
 24. See Lerner's discussion of these early claims "for the technology's ability to provide an unmediated, objective, and truthful transcription of the real," in the introduction to this volume.
 25. Alex Juhasz, "They Said We Wanted to Show Reality, All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of Feminist, Realist, Documentaries," *Screen* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 171-90.
 26. See *The Independent*, October 2002: 51, 54-55.
 27. Winston, *Claiming the Real* (BFI, 1995).
 28. Roscoe and Hight, *Faking It*, 181; emphasis mine.
 29. Of course I am aware that Butler and Žižek are engaged in an ongoing debate over the interpretation of the Lacanian Real and its beneficial relationship to the project of the political, but here I think it is not too far of a stretch to imagine them at least in this regard to be provisionally compatible. See *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 187-208, for Butler's challenge to Žižek's interpretation of the Lacanian Real as delineated in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).