

## SUGGESTED EXERCISES for Analysing Mockumentary

Any mockumentary can be analysed in terms of the reasons for its production, the ways in which it appropriates familiar codes and conventions of reality-based media (including documentary), and how audiences are encouraged to read it.

### THE INTENTIONS OF THE MOCKUMENTARY FILMMAKER

1. Compare mockumentary with **April 1st news reports**. Why are April Fools fake news stories produced, and how are they used in news bulletins? Are mockumentaries made for the same reasons?
2. Compare mockumentary with **news hoaxes**. Is a journalist who deliberately fakes footage or information, then pretends that it is real, the same as a mockumentary filmmaker?
3. Choose a mockumentary text, and make an assessment of the **agendas** behind its production – what is the filmmaker or television producer trying to achieve in using mockumentary?
  - a. create a novelty or stunt event (e.g. the 1997 season premiere of television series *ER* staged a live television event in the form of a mockumentary)
  - b. create a parody or satire (e.g. comedic feature film *This is Spinal Tap* uses mockumentary to mock the rise of 1980s heavy metal music, *Forgotten Silver* plays with a number of New Zealand stereotypes and myths)
  - c. use an innovative storytelling approach, often through mimicking contemporary reality forms (e.g. *The Blair Witch Project* combines documentary and video diary forms to create a convincing horror story, *Cloverfield* uses a similar device to revitalise a conventional science fiction narrative, and *Zero Day* pretends to be a video diary of two high school students planning a Columbine-style massacre)
  - d. offer a detailed critical commentary of a subject (e.g. the satire of American conservatism represented through the main character of *Bob Roberts*, while *Death of a President* critiques the foreign and domestic policy of the George W. Bush administration)
  - e. critique the documentary genre (e.g. *Man Bites Dog* has a documentary crew which treats serial killing as just another occupation)

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MOCKUMENTARY TEXT

Choose a mockumentary text (such as a feature film or television programme) and consider the following questions:

1. How successful is your mockumentary in looking and sounding like a documentary (or reality-based media)? Could an audience easily mistake this fictional text for a documentary, or current affairs programme, or reality gameshow, or video diary...?

2. What kinds of documentary (or other) **codes and conventions** does your mockumentary appropriate? How many of the following does it fake:

- on-screen presenter or voice-over narrator
- archival documents or photographs
- 'fly-on-the-wall' footage
- interviews with eyewitnesses
- interviews with experts
- video diary
- other codes and conventions?

3. How are each of these (faked) codes and conventions used? What kinds of information do they convey? How might the same information usually be given to the audience in a fictional text?

- *Forgotten Silver* uses black and white family photographs to give its main character, Colin McKenzie, a credible personal history.
- *The Blair Witch Project* features interviews with residents of a small town to suggest a local history of witchcraft
- *Brass Eye* takes the familiar conventions of television news and uses them to present a caricature of news production itself.

4. Are there any aspects of your mockumentary that are real? (And how can you tell?)

5. Consider whether there are any overlaps between mockumentary and documentary. Is a documentary that uses humour the same as a mockumentary?

- where would we place a feature film such as *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* which has a fictional documentary filmmaker staging encounters with real people?

## AUDIENCE READINGS OF A MOCKUMENTARY

1. Debate the following issues relating to audience readings of mockumentary:
  - Why do we tend to read documentary in different ways to fictional texts?
  - Should mockumentaries make it obvious to their audiences that they are fictional? Why / why not?
  - Do different audiences read mockumentary in different ways? How?
2. Use different examples to assess when the fictionality of a mockumentary is flagged to its audience: in promotional material, during viewing, or are audiences left to determine this themselves?
3. How do mockumentaries encourage their audience to reconsider their assumptions and expectations of documentary and reality-based media?

Look at the reactions to *Forgotten Silver* included on this site, and consider the following questions:

- What kinds of responses did New Zealand viewers have to this mockumentary?
- How did these responses differ in their assumptions about:
  - the role of documentary
  - techniques used within dramatic fiction
  - the responsibilities of television broadcasters?