

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

Introduction

The American Meme is a documentary that films the lives of iconic figures in pop culture, such as Paris Hilton, Hailey Baldwin, and Kirill

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

the structure of the documentary, and the ways in which the style of the documentary pays tribute to the subject matter it offers. Finally, I bring attention the fact that, as a mass audience, there arises a tendency to sensationalize celebrity culture, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of inauthenticity. This creates a link to the idea of hybrid documentary, for the line between reality and fiction can be read as blurred between the subjects themselves

The interactive, the mock, and the hybrid

The American Meme may be understood within the framework of an interactive documentary, which is defined as “[providing] not only for a comprehensive observation of and reflection on culture, politics, ideology, and people, but also allows the user to directly interact with the reality”; and filmmakers are given further liberty in participating during the filmmaking process when constructing their narrative (Dvorko, 2018). The style of documentary for filmmaking is chosen when filmmakers want to disclose a focused aspect of reality, providing a creative interpretation through codes and social terms. The addition of an interactive component is to break down the barrier between the subject, filmmaker, and intended viewers. This subgenre has become increasingly popular with the rapid development of the Internet, as it has become the most successful way of creating a digital narrative (Dvorko, 2018). Filmmakers who utilize this

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

based on social media influencers/personalities: by representing those who falsely present themselves, the documentary itself becomes semi-fictitious.

With the framework of both an interactive documentary and mockumentary, it may be seen that *The American Meme* bares a level of montage within its classification; by bringing together two different filmmaking aesthetics, a new lens is created. The documentary thus becomes an example of a hybrid documentary, with a focus on interactive codes combined with element of mockumentary. As defined by Landesman, a hybrid documentary is “an aesthetic strategy by which a filmmaker can choose to indicate familiar notions of authenticity or solicit the viewer to embrace a documentary mode of engagement” (2008).

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

understood that creating an idealized self-representation is driven by the intention to stimulate the development of a large user following, with behaviour being self-corrected in response to audience reaction. Moreover, the discourse of social media being a place of contested reality versus fiction plays into the structure of *The American Meme*, for the entire subject matter of the documentary are people who created their frame through different digital platforms. The framework of hybrid documentaries is supported by the idea that filmmakers “embrace the aesthetic of hybridity as a formal strategy meant not so much as to dupe, mislead or mock, but to offer a different documenting tactic” (Landesman, 2008). What may be interpreted as codes of fiction is in fact an alternative perspective on a subject, which is further applied to the conventions of the documentary in question. With the theme of social media, the documentary itself encloses a level of self-representation, for it is based off “the process of selecting and packaging information about one’s self in order to create intended impressions upon audiences”; like digital communication, the documentary relays its message with the intention of high viewership reaction (Stefanone et. al, 2019).

On a structural level, the documentary explores the lives of selected popular accounts and reveals their path to popularity, as well as what is required in maintaining it. With the focus on popular influencers, a level of performativity may be read into the subtext of social media behaviour, as well as the structure of the documentary itself. A facet of documentary as a genre is that “it is clear that right at the heart of the series is the idea of observing what is a mode of “real” behaviour,” meaning filmmakers are provided the means in which to present what they want seen as “real” (Corner, 2002). The documentary follows the cultural anxiety of social-media as a potential site of digital communication corruption, with the interest lying with the inner stories developed. Corner offers that this level of performativity within documentary

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

requires extensive use of interview and minimized part-dramatization, which lends itself to the reading of *The American Meme* as a hybrid documentary (2002); the blending of fact and fiction is further established through interviews with the subjects. Therefore, the theme of fame through social media platforms creates a sense of speculation toward the truthfulness of the documentary as a whole, for due to the semi-fictitious quality of self-representation, the viewers may be left questioning how authentic can the documentary be, if the content itself holds connotations of inauthenticity.

Understanding authenticity on social media platforms

Social media platforms can be seen as sites of facilitating inauthenticity in the portrayal of its users, for it both provides the tools in which users may alter their self-representation, while encouraging branded personality as an aesthetic. Thus far *The American Meme* has been situated within hybrid documentary, showing elements of interactive and mock documentary through its representation of the clash between reality and fiction. As well, the framework of self-representation on social media platforms is seen in the construction of the documentary, as the subjects are major influencers on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram; creating a narrative based purely in reality becomes questionable when those being studied exist in space which embraces hybridity. Thus, the way in which the documentary represents the subjects themselves

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

which ties in with the assertion that the legitimacy of the documentary itself must be put into question (2018). The intention of documentary filmmaking is to provide a creative lens onto a particular social issue with the implication of truthfulness unless otherwise stated. However, as Radulvoc offers, the content and subjects of the documentary dispute authenticity; the subjects create their image as the documentary provides a secondary level of audience-based interpretation. An in-film example of this discourse is with party photographer Kirill, who is most critically acclaimed for portraying the dark side of social media fame in the current digital era of communication. His segments in the documentary include high energy club scenes featuring intoxicated women being photographed in overly-sexualized poses; the origins of the “champagne facial” originated at a Kirill party, which includes having a bottle being opened

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

presence is based off a sensationalized lifestyle, which he creates through his photography; however, if the documentary is meant to be taken as nonfiction, the authentic Kirill is the one interviewed, with his persona acting as the backdrop of his narration. The meta interpretation comes from Kirill’s assertion that his “authentic” representation was in fact manipulated by the film’s editing, thus offering that *The American Meme* is itself becomes a platform for inauthentic representation. The question of whether a self-representation is authentic, or an act is impossible

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

Works Cited

- Corner, J. (2002) “Performing the real: Documentary Diversions,” *Television and New Media*, 255- 269
- Dvorko. (2018). “Interactive Documentary and its Potential for Cultural Heritage Mediation,” *Matters of Telling: the Impulse of the Story*, 116-126. DOI: 10.1163/9789004387683_013
- Landesman, O. (2008). “In and out of this word: digital video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary,” *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2(1), 33-45. doi: 10.1386/sdcf.2.1.33/1
- Radulovic, P. (2018, Dec 10) *Netflix’s doc The American Meme challenges the reality of social-media stars*. Retrieved from <https://www.polygon.com/2018/12/10/18131141/netflixs-the-american-meme>
- Roscoe, J., Hight, G. (2001). A Cousin for the Drama Documentary: Situating the Mock-Documentary and Building a Mock-documentary Schema. In *Faking it* (pp. 42-75). Manchester: Manchester
- Stefanone, M., A., Yue, Z., & Toh, Z. (2019). “A social cognitive approach to traditional media content and social media use: Selfie-related behaviour as competitive strategy.” *New Media & Society*, 21(2), 317-335

CAPTION IT “IS THIS THE REAL LIFE, IS THIS JUST FANTASY”

Filmography

Bert, M. (Director). (2018). *The American Meme* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81003741?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C67d8b3026584206eb036020aa17ba3aa925c858b%3A677609d65dee360e9c6157685ca1e6c21501488c%2C%2C>