The Subversion Of Documentary Expectations In Forgotten Silver

Most would agree that the traditional idea of documentaries is that they are objective beacons of truth. This essay will focus on the idea that documentaries have evolved into more than this by exploring and critiquing Peter Jackson's documentary Forgotten Silver (1995). The critique will examine the modes employed within the film as well as discussing its clear exhibition of the mockumentary genre, and the subjective construct of its authorial voice. The documentary recounts the life of imagined filmmaker Colin McKenzie, analysing his "lost" work and characterising him as an innovative genius who made many cinematic technological advancements long before they had been recorded. The film received a controversial response, many applauded its subversion of the documentary norm whilst others criticised its blatant intention to mislead and deceive the audience. Overall, this essay will work to demonstrate how documentaries have developed into more than simple factual reports.

Most documentarians employ one or more modes in their films in order to communicate their message to audiences in a specific way. Nichols (1991) explains that modes of representation are ways in which we categorise texts in relation to their conventions, and in documentary film the core modes are expository, poetic, observational and reflexive, as well as performative and participatory (32). Forgotten Silver employs the expository and reflexive modes. The expository mode is utilised when its purpose is to convince the audience of a certain idea and addresses the viewer directly with either voiceover or title screens as well as the typical inclusion of talking heads. The narration in Forgotten Silver provides much of the exposition which helps the documentary appear authentic, as it was a traditional convention of documentary. The film flourished in beguiling viewers by the inclusion of interviews with trustworthy people from the film industry at the time such as Harvey Weinstein and Sam Neill, as well as endorsement from credited historian, Leonard Maltin. This element of the expository mode makes the story appear to be more credible. In a short documentary about the making of Forgotten Silver called Behind the Bull (2000), Peter Jackson stated "when you see somebody who you recognise, who isn't an authority on a particular subject […] talking with authority and conviction, it becomes difficult for people to believe that this couldn't possibly be true" (Jackson 2000), which is why Sam Neill's presence especially increased the authenticity of the story. Even the framing and lighting of Weinstein's talking heads give an impression that his interview is on-the-fly, adding to the realism. Despite classic elements of the expository mode being traditionally used in documentary to convince viewers of a film's genuine authenticity, Peter Jackson shows that they can be used to apply said authenticity to a film that is entirely fake.

The reflexive mode is employed when the constructed nature of the documentary is acknowledged within the film. Forgotten Silver is entirely reflexive in that the documentary itself is fake, so viewers are obliged to take on a reflexive outlook as the fabricated nature of the film becomes progressively more obvious. Chapman (2009) discusses how the viewers' task of having to discern what parts of the film are true and what are not makes them self-conscious of their role as an audience, and it is through this idea that reflexivity is employed (126). In a review of the film, KC Durrant said "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" (Durrant 1995). By way of its reflexivity, the film

completely subverted largely held expectations that a documentary should be completely fact-based. The way a faux documentary like Forgotten Silver is received depends on the audiences' ability to recognise its use of reflexivity. Many viewers had been largely conditioned to believe that documentaries should be strictly fact and were not accustomed to having to discern what is true themselves, thus they became angered by the realisation of the film's fictitiousness. Ultimately, through its employment of the expository and reflexive modes, Forgotten Silver challenges the long-established view of documentary as complete truth.

According to Bordwell and Thompson, "genre is a category best used to describe and analyse films" (Bordwell & Thompson 2019, 330). Most documentaries fall into one of the following categories: docu-drama, mockumentary, cinema verite, travel documentary or digital storytelling. Forgotten Silver is an example of mockumentary, that according to Sapino (2011) is a genre that takes on the conventions and stylistics of documentary in order to communicate false information (16). Factual discourse refers to a documentary's claim to represent reality through specific conventions and codes, which mockumentary simulates in order to create a fictional world. Documentary modes and genre are inextricably linked, and this is especially true of reflexivity and mockumentary. "It is essential to emphasise that [reflexivity] is sometimes perceived as mock-documentary" (Roscoe & Hight 2001), as reflexivity exposes the artifice of the documentary, and mockumentary is built off of said artifice. Some elements of this genre can include characters, narrative, cultural myths and humour, all of which are at some point utilised in Forgotten Silver to perpetuate the illusion of truth. Most mockumentaries tend to create an imagined subject as they depict a narrative from a socio-historical world, relating to the cultural and historical "events" that supposedly took place. The whole documentary is focused on imagined subject, Colin McKenzie, whose life story is unravelled throughout the course of the film like a typical narrative. The filmmakers test the extent to which they can fool audiences by making various details about his past appear unbelievable or amusing, especially when it is suggested that he built an entire city on his own. The old newspaper clippings, photographs, and testimonies all appear in order to further confirm Jackson's findings, being typical examples of how traditional documentaries would establish their authenticity. One of the major characters in the film is Colin's widow Hannah, a character they created to appeal to the emotions of viewers and attest to the legitimacy of the story. Her character propels the story forward as she continuously reveals new information, and "the programme builds tension and drama by pacing these revelations at regular intervals" (Hight 2011, 270), keeping viewers attentive and focused on the narrative. Costa Botes, co-writer and co-director of the film said that "if Forgotten Silver causes people to never take anything from the media at face value, so much the better. Our film was better researched and, on the whole, more "true" than most products of the "infotainment" industry" (Botes 1995). The goal of the mockumentary was to engage audiences in discourses about fact and fiction and turn them into active receivers of information rather than passive, undermining and challenging the purpose and conventions of traditional documentaries. The genre of mockumentary itself is a subversion of the expectation that all documentaries should be true factual discourse.

Authorial voice is evident in almost every film and documentary with varying levels of intensity. According to Corner and Rosenthal (2005), authorial voice indicates what a documentary is saying and what comment it is making on the world (8). The manner in which authorial voice is expressed in a documentary determines whether the film is objective, subjective, or somewhere in between. Objectivity refers to a having a lack of bias or judgement, where the creator tries to stay as close to the truth as possible, trying to refrain from allowing outside influences to tarnish the integrity of the film. Subjectivity is employed when the conveyance of information is

influenced by external factors such as the director's opinions or personal values. A director can intervene with a documentary in various ways, whether that be through the voiceover, being on camera, or in the construction of the story. The primary purpose of voice is to draw the audience into the reality of the situation in the most effective way possible, and authorship tends to emphasise the subjectivity and artificiality of documentary. Peter Jackson's authorial voice in Forgotten Silver is subjective due to the fictitiousness of the documentary's narrative. He is both writer and director, and so takes part in encouraging the audience to believe in the story that he has written. His voice is evident mainly in his on-screen appearances throughout the documentary as he is a constant presence in the film from start to finish. The opening scene of the film shows him taking the camera down to a shed, saying that it holds the lost films of the fictional innovative filmmaker that the documentary focuses on. The subjectivity of the film is already evident as soon as the film begins as we are being literally directed to where we are supposed to go and what we are supposed to think by Peter Jackson himself. Nichols says that "the sense of subjectivity arises from the expressive dimension of what [the camera] observes" (Nichols 1992, 122), so even if the story of the film was true, as soon as a director makes a choice to turn on the camera and begin shooting a specific area and not another, we are subjected only to what they want us to see. In the case of Forgotten Silver, Peter Jackson reveals his intention to show us only what he wants to us to see very early on. Jackson's voice is ever-present and authoritative due to his continuous presence throughout the film, both by literally being on-screen and by the story he created being the sole focus of the documentary. It is in the reliability of his voice that viewers are led to believe the story. Jackson's authoritative presence throughout the film as a seemingly trustworthy source of information contributed to getting viewers to become active participants of the content they were receiving, as opposed to assuming everything they hear is true.

In conclusion, Forgotten Silver demonstrates the idea that documentaries have evolved into more than the factual reports they were traditionally expected to be. This evolution of the documentary genre is evident through the film's employment of the expository and reflexive modes, and the way it uses elements of the mockumentary genre. Finally, the subjectivity of the authorial voice challenges typical audience expectations of documentary to tell them the complete truth. Overall, the lesson to take away from Jackson's documentary is to not believe everything you see or hear, because in our modern era, the truth is hard to find.